

Queer love economies: Making trans/feminist film in precarious times

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In this essay, the authors, all experimental filmmakers, discuss the impact of *Born in Flames* on their own work, as well as the ways their various projects pick up, extend, or change the political questions raised by the film. The relationships of experimental film to political community and community building are explored, particularly in the context of queer, feminist, trans, anti-racist politics and media.

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WU TSANG: Can you start off with talking a bit about both your films, *Homotopia* and *Criminal Queers*? Specifically can you talk a bit about their relationship to *Born in Flames*?

CHRIS VARGAS: *Homotopia* is a 26-minute movie we made in 2006. It's a really simple story of love at first sight: the protagonist Yoshi anonymously hooks up in a public restroom then stumbles upon this same person at a café planning his gay wedding. The film ends in chaos after Yoshi and his friends bust in on the wedding with water balloons and squirt guns attempting to divert yet another gay from walking down the aisle. It was our attempt at highlighting an age-old critique of the institution of marriage. *Criminal Queers* is the sequel and is a prison-break story with a queer prison-abolitionist politic at its center. Both movies are heavily influenced by *Born In Flames* in both narrative and form.

ERIC A. STANLEY: *Homotopia* was made at the height of the gay marriage frenzy which was and still is dramatically foreclosing much possibility. It was intended to open up space critical of not only marriage but many other institutions as well. As Chris said, *Criminal Queers* is a sequel, but it is much more grand in scale, ambition, and length than *Homotopia*. Both our films and *BIF* seem to share a similar affect landscape, a sense of a wounded hope and a frenetic sense of possibility, even in the most desperate of times. I think this is also the case with your most recent film. Wu, can you tell us a bit about *Wildness*?

WU: *Wildness* is an unconventional documentary set in Los Angeles, which is narrated by a fictional “talking bar” called Silver Platter, who is home to many generations of the local queer community. MacArthur Park is predominantly Central American and Mexican immigrant, so the bar clientele reflects such, but the neighborhood is changing. Some

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adventurous young QPOCs (including me) find themselves at the Silver Platter one night, quite naturally fitting in, despite some obvious class and cultural differences. It's hard to describe, but basically we were intelligent, multi-ethnic creative types (artists & DJs). In any case, the film documents the creativity and conflict that transpires as these two communities meld and implode at a Tuesday night weekly party, thrown by the artists. I tried to tell the story from a deeply personal perspective, because needless to say, this film is riddled with complicated representational issues.

It was great to see *Homotopia* together with *Criminal Queers* as the sequel, because the combined journey is so epic! I'd love to talk about them together for this interview.

ERIC: Although I think they can stand on their own, talking about both films together is a good idea because they are in ways both part of the same extended project. Chris and I made *Homotopia* in the spring of 2006 and we have been working on *Criminal Queers* for about the last six years. We made both films with absolutely no budget and we did not receive the only grant we applied for. We have relied on the amazing resources of friends, lovers, and strangers who have given labor, costumes, food, criticism, music, emotional support, and much more, which have all helped make these films happen. We also wanted to think about how we might make our film without further taxing our already strapped communities, so we chose not to have any benefits or crowd-sourcing funding campaigns. This lack of material resources has stalled the project – that and people's chaotic schedules. However I think the slow pace of the process has been important. We have tried not to feel like we had to produce a finished product but have given the film time to evolve and transform. We inherit this process from other feminist film/video makers who are both constrained by capitalism and committed to making film in spite of these conditions.

WU: I think I had a different experience that was particular to this project. With *Wildness*, I wanted mass distribution because my idea of movement building was about coming in contact and into conflict with a lot of dominant forces such as hipster culture, gentrification, immigration policies, etc. The film is set in a bar, which is a small business that has been owned by several generations of a family. The *Wildness* party was free, but the bar generously shared profits with us, ultimately providing the support our party needed to function. I was always interested in these inner workings of money/exchange, especially as I transitioned into making the film. I wanted to engage with the capitalist system of film production, and since my end goal was mass distribution, production values and commodification were inevitable concerns. I had to navigate between achieving an end product, while still keeping the process and dialog open. Our budget was US\$60 K over four years, and we did a successful Kickstarter, back when that fundraising vehicle had just started out. Not to mention the countless hours of donated labor and services from literally hundreds of people. So it took a combination of these strategies to get the project done.

How do you see the role of camp in this project? The ending of *Homotopia* is especially camp when they bomb the wedding – but wait, do they bomb the wedding?? That part is absurd and funny, but then in *Criminal Queers*, it becomes unclear whether it actually happened. The storyline seems purposefully not cohesive.

CHRIS: We wanted to make the ending of *Homotopia* slightly ambiguous. We might have done it for the purpose of leading into a sequel, perhaps. But mostly we did it to withhold the visual satisfaction of violence and destruction. In screening *Homotopia* we used the end scene a lot to re-shift conversations about sites of violence. Many people were concerned about our suggestion of violence as a political strategy, but then we'd ask why water balloons, squirt guns, and a campy time bomb signified violence more heavily than say, institutional homophobia and transphobia, systemic violence waged against poor people, people of color, addicts, disabled people, the mentally ill, etc.

WU: I did have a guttural response to the ending of *Homotopia* – I think it was the sound of the ticking bomb. I was disturbed but in a good way, because it forced me to reflect on things more intellectually, to question my immediate emotional responses. I was lulled out of my usual passivity of watching movies.

ERIC: In *Criminal Queers* we find out that only a DustBuster and a fondue set were harmed in the bombing.

CHRIS: For *Homotopia* we were thinking more formally about film (than we were in *CQ*) so our intention was to disrupt expected modes of viewing and identifying with characters. We didn't want to show the destruction of the bomb, and we didn't want to create a protagonist that one could easily identify with and understand. We wanted the viewer to constantly reflect on what and how they are watching.

ERIC: Like in *BIF*, the relationship between violence and resistance is central to our films. Thinking with people like Frantz Fanon, we are unwilling to call for a politics of pacifism when the State is still the major arbiter of harm. At the same time, we are critical of how violence, even revolutionary violence, can reproduce a kind of masculinist force (not unlike the State). This is a critique that Françoise Vergès has also made of Fanon. For example, in the final scene of *Homotopia* we had the radicals use water guns and water balloons as their “weapons” which intended to disrupt the use of the bomb. We are aware of the dangers of this violence/non-violence line, but instead of turning away from it, we attempt to think about how we might inhabit it ethically and hold it open as a question, which under the current regimes of power, is unanswerable.

WU: When I think of *Born in Flames*, I see the main conflict as being between the “compromisers” – the privileged, white socialists who want to intellectualize everything – versus the underground punks and queers of color who want a grass-roots movement . . . which your film also incorporates a lot of! *Born in Flames* is campy in the way that scenes either feel improvised or purposefully scripted, with actors being “themselves” as well as playing characters.

ERIC: There is that infamous final scene in *BIF* where they blow up the World Trade Center, or more precisely, the antenna on top of it. It could also be argued that this “compromise” you are talking about is itself a form of violence more often than not enacted against women of color and/or trans/queer people. To this end, I think one of the major tensions in *BIF*, which we also use to animate our films, is this antagonism between a belief

that the State can be reformed and an understanding that it is fundamentally produced by racist, ableist, trans/queer phobic violence. In *BIF* it is staged as a Marxist/socialist vs. an anarchist understanding of post-revolutionary life. In our films we remain critical of the State form but are also unsure of what might, or ought to come from its ashes. It is also interesting to return to the white socialist feminist in *BIF* as their leader was played by Kathryn Bigelow, the director of *Zero Dark Thirty*: the recently released CIA celebratory torture porn. Thinking through that genealogy is more than we can do here.

But yes, formally our films are saturated in a camp aesthetic. For our work, and camp in general, Susan Sontag got it all wrong. In her often-cited *Notes on Camp* she argued that camp is style against content. However, I think we actually collapse the two together in our attempt to think about the potentiality of queer form as central to the politics of our films. Camp as a tactic is a vital way we can work against such crushing forces as prisons without adhering to the same types of austerity they demand. In other words, we try to think about what modes of address might work against normative viewing expectation, and camp is one of the most powerful. While both Chris and I love documentaries, we were interested in what a prison-abolition narrative film might look like; *Criminal Queers* is the materialization of that curiosity.

CHRIS: It's true, we wanted to create a fun, seductive film about prison abolition that would be utopian and fantastical, but that would also be contextualized in an urgent present. Like a lot of people, my first encounter with the kind of gay I was interested in becoming was through punk, trash, and camp. I saw so much potential for my life within early John Waters films. I think where we excel at using camp is in humor (which is also not exactly a camp tenet). We approach potentially polarizing subjects with humor and it becomes an entry point for people to consider and talk about these subjects without feeling too self-conscious.

WU: I've been wondering a lot lately – like in a really basic way – what do films do? They communicate through sound, image, and music to provoke an emotional experience. That whole darkened-room/screen thing is about leaving your body on a journey into cinema. I've been wondering about that in terms of content versus style. For example in your films, your subjects pose reading radical texts (Frantz Fanon, Barbara Smith, Achille Mbembe) – and Angela Davis even literally makes an appearance! These elements disrupt the viewer into a space of critique. Camp humor also does this. So the effect is kind of like watching half-analytically, and half-subconsciously. The plot/narrative lulls you into the story, but the ideological stuff forces you to think critically about what you are imbibing. Would you agree with that?

ERIC: That is a really interesting way of thinking about what we are trying to do. We pack our films with so many historical and contemporary references in the hope that they can, and will be, read in multiple ways. The names of characters, the placement of books, set design, locations, and events all work to index the multiple histories of radical struggle. This extra-diegetic excess of our films demands that the viewer do some homework and we see this demand as a way for the film to live beyond or after the viewing.

From the beginning both Chris and I have thought a lot about how film is consumed and how we might make an intervention into these practices. While we know there may in fact be no outside to capitalism, or the kinds of fetishistic practices that structure the ways film is viewed, our intervention is primarily at the level of exhibition. More or less, we only show our films when we are there to give a talk to contextualize it and have a Q and A after. This helps to produce a different consumptive viewing public (but surely does not negate consumption). Our hope is also that local organizers can (and many do) use our screenings as places to connect folks in their area and that our screenings will be but one node in a continuum of resistance. We want more than the aesthetization of abolition; we want its materialization.

CHRIS: While we want the films to engage a pleasure of watching, I think we also wanted to assign a bunch of homework for the viewer in the hopes of possibly pushing them into action.

WU: That reminds me of something Fassbinder once said: “Revolution doesn’t belong on the cinema screen, but outside, in the world.” He was talking about revealing the flawed, even despicable mechanisms of life through his characters – as a way of provoking people to wanna change their own realities. You’re talking about doing something different, more in the vein of Brecht or Goddard. What does that mean to you, to push the viewer into action?

CHRIS: Push the viewer into action, as in: go read something about prison abolition or decolonization, research the current state of prison and jail construction in their local communities in general, and then connect with people struggling against this. Ultimately I think camp and humor is a great approach, but in the early days of our showing our films it still did not diffuse a lot of volatile conversations that we had early on about gay marriage. I’m specifically talking about our screening *Homotopia*. Many people were upset about our suggestion that the struggle for the right to marry might not be a worthy fight. We ended up doing a lot of educating and citing of feminist, anarchist, and women-of-color critiques of marriage.

WU: I’m pretty schooled in gay-agenda critique, but when I was watching these films I was reminded that, while your positions may be familiar to some of us, they’re probably challenging or even upsetting to the majority of liberal people who are pro-gay marriage. What were those volatile conversations like?

ERIC: These more volatile conversations go in a few different, but consistent directions. With *Homotopia* people could not believe that queer people would actually work “against gay civil rights.” We got yelled at a lot, mostly by professors. I think that experience spoke to the importance of *Homotopia* and all the activist work that it is in conversation with. With *Criminal Queers* we usually get the question around prison abolition, “what are we going to do with all the rapist and murderers hiding outside the door?” This happens at pretty much every screening and really points toward the work we collectively have to do.

WU: Do you think of these films as activist films? And are they defined as activist because, like we were saying earlier, they disrupt the viewing bubble?

ERIC: Yes, I guess I would see them both as activist films, however that might be defined. And part of the disruption is in the viewing space but also the formal and narrative aspects of the film. We also see them in a much longer and transnational genealogy of feminist/queer/anti-colonial films.

CHRIS: Absolutely. A balance between those two modes of viewing would be ideal.

ERIC: We often say our films are a mix of *BIF* and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* with a little old John Waters.

CHRIS: And with some *Showgirls* references thrown in for good measure.

ERIC: We are also committed to screening them in public, accessible, and free spaces, which is why and how we end up at so many schools. This opens up another set of problems, but it's the best we can figure out for now ...

CHRIS: We have been quite intentional about how this work is viewed, like Eric said. Schools are also in positions to offer money so we can travel with the work, be present to contextualize it, and answer and ask questions to the audience about it afterward. It's incredibly satisfying to engage with audiences, to hear their responses and reactions to the films.

WU: That makes sense, because I was thinking they must have a live dimension to provoke these discussions. Screening events – where people have to gather together in a dark room – are a special kind of viewing experience. Filmmaking can be a kind of organizing – not only because you bring so many people together for production and collaboration, but because you create a *mise-en-scène* in the film that documents a living community. I believe “community” actually only exists through representation, through the lens of what's caught on camera. But that transportable world/dialogue/space has the potential to generate other communities, as it becomes absorbed by different audiences over time. *Born in Flames* definitely inspired me to think about the potentiality of film as an organizing tool.

ERIC: It seems film works in multiple ways and I think its ability to expand our collective radical imagination is really important. However, I'm always thinking about how film can contest normative politics at the same time it reproduces them. It's an impasse, in ways, but it's one we try to inhabit. We are really lucky to get to meet and talk with so many people. Especially with *Criminal Queers*, the local LGBT university group is usually who brings us to a campus not exactly knowing what the film is actually about, then we are able to offer something really different to the normal university Dan Savage-style event. The old bait and switch.

WU: It's interesting that you gravitated towards community/academic sites as "free," as opposed to, say, digital platforms such as Hulu, which is also free. That's where my brain went with *Wildness*. To me "free" meant video-on-demand platforms including YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, be it commercially driven or not. It's terribly impure logic for sure, but then academia and community orgs have different specific audiences that limit the accessibility too, don't you think?

ERIC: I think every space calls upon a specific audience to fill it. However, we are often surprised that when we do a screening at a school, many and sometimes most people don't actually have any relationship to the school. When thinking about outreach we try to stress the importance of reaching beyond the walls of whatever "community" the film is being shown through, which requires much more labor, but produces really interesting and unexpected audiences.

When we started touring with *Homotopia* we screened a lot more in "community spaces" (info shops, living rooms, warehouses), but so many of them were not accessible for folks with mobility issues and so we have turned away from those spaces more and more. We are always trying new things, but we are really committed to them at least being free and physically accessible in our attempt to build the kinds of worlds we want to inhabit.

WU: So it ends up being primarily schools, because they are more equipped in that way. I know what you mean about community spaces being physically limited, because they are often *ad hoc*.

CHRIS: Outside of universities, we've found that not many other exhibition spaces offer the accessibility as well as the funds to bring us and our audiences [together]. Big LGBT film festivals are another option but we haven't had much luck with them. We are not shopping around for commercial distribution, so it doesn't make much sense for us to work the circuit.

ERIC: Oh, yeah, shocking, that they did not love us! Ha. When we screened *Homotopia* at Frameline a visible number of people left during our screening in "disgust" which was a bit amusing to watch.

CHRIS: And Outfest, remember? Ugh.

ERIC: Oh yeah, ha.

WU: Film festivals can be very conservative, I agree. They also definitely create specific audiences, which tend to be predominantly "insiders:" industry and other filmmakers. People are gathered there to "get" something out of the film world. Winning the Jury Prize at Outfest did feel like a major achievement in the sense that I expected the festival to go for something with a more conventional narrative structure, or a more hot-button "issue," so I appreciated that *Wildness* seemed to shift the consciousness of that space, at least a little. I've learned from working the festival circuit with *Wildness* that – just like

in any other creative zone – there is no such thing as neutral viewing. Everybody’s experience of watching a movie is affected by who they know, who made it, their personal connection to it, what they read, what is the “buzz” around it, etc.

CHRIS: That’s true, Wu. My watching films at festivals is definitely motivated by personal connection or my investment in the material being created, specifically trans content. I also can’t imagine what a neutral viewing space would look like. But, I’m also generally not impressed with the uninspired shorts programming that big corporate-sponsored LGBT film festivals do. Often, work gets lumped in really arbitrary ways (by gender, by region) and it hurts all the work involved and maintains a rigid gender and race segregation in these viewing spaces, unfortunately.

ERIC: Anything that falls out of the white gay and lesbian mainstream gets grouped into these “special interest” programs, which tends to empty out any of the specificity of the individual films. Also, film festivals exploit the labor of filmmakers, as most of them require a “submission fee.” Then if the film is programmed they offer the filmmaker nothing beyond a few free passes. This is also to say nothing of the politics of the festivals themselves. For example, San Francisco’s Frameline continues to take money from the Israeli Consulate, which breaks the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign called for by Palestinians. This points to how film festivals like Frameline are more interested in sponsorship than they are in taking a stand against apartheid. As of now the boycott is not against Frameline itself; however if they continue their practice I think, and hope, we will push more forcefully against them. This being said, there is something both powerful and pleasurable about seeing a film in an actual theater. We need to think up new venues to show our work because I do love to see movies in theaters!

CHRIS: Me too. There’s nothing like sharing space and time with people in theaters, and observing where and how people respond to particular moments in films. It can be comforting or alienating but either way it’s a great gauge that helps [us] understand different movie-going contexts and publics.

WU: See, this is what I love about making films! It opens up a HUGE set of questions: about audience, distribution, venue, etc. You really have to decide what you want for your project, and that determines the form, which then creates possibilities or limitations.

ERIC: Yeah, there are no perfect options under capitalism, just bad and worse ones at a specific moment.

CHRIS: We’re also not afraid of identifying our audiences and speaking to them directly, either.

WU: I sometimes have trouble identifying my audiences with *Wildness*, because I wanted it to be legible to so many different kinds of people. Queers and LGBT audiences for sure, but also Latina and Latin American peoples, immigrants, students, artists, club kids, and even the random middle-aged straight guy who wandered into the theater and was surprised to be

compelled by the story or characters. But it sets up a difficult situation because not everyone is gonna “get” the film. There have been strong reactions, for example, to the bold formal choice of having the main character be a “talking bar.” But I spent so much time working through these issues that I made peace with whatever the response may be. Doing the party itself taught me the limits of what I could control about how we were perceived, and also taught me not to make assumptions about who would or would not feel affinity. It really comes down to having to trust my intentions. How would you identify your audiences?

CHRIS: Gay all the way. Gay as in queer, or LGBT, or any non-normative sexuality and gender, also encompassing all kinds of political affiliations therein.

WU: Do you also believe that *Homotopia* and *Criminal Queers* enable you to create new audiences, because it’s not always immediately embraced by the existing ones (film festivals, etc.)?

ERIC: Yes, interesting point and I think that is part of the work. Chris and I do think a lot about audience, and how because there is not that many trans/queer films which foreground politics, we are always in the process of helping create it.

In ways we did make these films for those who are already aligned with our politics. Too often we denounce pleasure believing it to always, already be a product of capitalism. While this might be the case, pleasure is important and something we are not all that versed in on the Left. This is something that people like Andy Smith constantly help displace, this belief that radical suffering will produce some kind of mythic liberation. To this end, seeing something familiar and politically affirming is affectively powerful for those of us whose politics are hidden from much visual cultures. However, we also try to implicate our own “communities” to trouble the flattened narratives that the Left often traffics in. For example, while trans peoples and gender nonconformity at large are celebrated in our films, we also have one or two trans “villains” to show the ways that politics are endlessly more complex than we can comprehend.

CHRIS: True, and quite possibly we intersect and appeal to a lot of different communities so I think we draw in people who are aren’t necessary film/art connoisseurs, but who are hungry for queer and trans content.

WU: How do you define those politics?

ERIC: Yes, everything is/has politics. I guess I should say, a kind of politics that works against the normative forces of dominant power.

WU: If there are few trans films working this way – politically as you’ve defined it – are there other/non-trans films that inspire you which achieve that? (Besides *Born in Flames* of course!)

CHRIS: I also have a bit of trouble pulling out/remembering my faves. John Greyson, Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs.

ERIC: Yeah me too, I keep going back and rewatching Marlon Riggs' videos, especially *Black Is... Black Ain't*. I also really love the aesthetics of DIVA TV's. Early AIDS VHS captured a moment in time, and so many people that are no longer here. Pontecorvo's other work like *Burn! (Queimada)* continues to inspire me. Ralowe T. Ampu sampled some of the soundtrack of *Burn!* for the music she made for *Criminal Queers*.

WU: I have a question that is more something I personally wonder, in general: what do you think these kinds of radical queer/trans utopias create as possibilities for women? Because I noticed there was something very faggy about both films. The straight girl was the ditsy wedding-planning sister ...

CHRIS: *Criminal Queers* especially puts forth gender self-determination as necessary for queer liberation which is connected to prison abolition, so there were a lot of decisions about casting in terms of gender, like who plays what, in regards to gender and sexuality. That is also true in *Homotopia*, as well. There is a big attempt on our part to subvert viewers' expectations about gender, and how transgender identities are represented on screen. In both films there's a lot of cross-casting, or people playing genders and sexualities they don't necessarily identify as in their day-to-day lives. Ideally we'd like our viewers to not make any assumptions about the actors in relation to the characters. And ultimately, there's no attempt to accurately, or positively/negatively, represent any one gender. In that way we can avoid constructing stable transgender and queer images. Trans people experience their genders in many ways; some transition from one gender to another and there's a very clear moment when that happens. For others, it's not so clear; sometimes there's more fluidity because that's how one experiences themselves or out of necessity and survival. I think without explicitly saying it, our films allow for those and many other possibilities for people's lived gender experience.

ERIC: Yes, in *CQ* we fill out their world a lot more, and there are a lot more people in it. I think because we don't prescribe gender in our films, meaning we resist the markers of many "transitioning films," we end up with a kind of gender self-determination that is often startling. We have had people at more than one screening ask why there are only "women" in the film, then at other screenings had people ask why there are only "men" in the film. Both these questions point toward the ways people desire positive and clear self-representations on the screen. And while we are careful to never use non-normative difference as an insult in the films (meaning someone's race/gender/ability is never under question, however their actions/politics might be), we also don't invest in the usefulness of "positive representations," which more often than not means some version of dominant culture with a bit of a multi-cultural makeover.

WU: That's funny! I can see how it would read both ways. What's ironic is that as soon as you show any characters outside the box people immediately get up in arms about representation. All of a sudden they want "equal" or "positive" representations – whereas people's

tolerance for fucked-up representations is so much higher, when the expectation is that all the characters in the movie are “normal.”

CHRIS: It’s true. I think these types of reactions also point to the lack of variety of genders represented in media. There’s a culture of scarcity around transgender images so people are invested in making the few images that exist “right.” And rightfully so, because there’s a history of exploitation of trans people’s bodies and identities onscreen. I mean, how many more “hilarious” man-in-a-dress jokes must we endure? But, I don’t think “positive” imagery is much of our concern. We acknowledge that merely inhabiting a righteous queer identity (trans or otherwise) does not make one exempt from being racist, transphobic, misogynist, ableist, etc.

ERIC: Yeah, that’s so true. And the resistance to having multiple identities is so powerful, even at the same time that is what people are calling for. I see this as a real danger in contemporary trans politics and how trans politics is falling into many of the same patterns of the lesbian and gay mainstream. Representation is indeed powerful and produces – and is not simply produced by – culture. However, if we believe that somehow liberation will arrive from only properly gendered trans representation we are just reproducing the violence of exclusion at the expense of all those who cannot and/or choose not to live within those categories of intelligibility.

WU: But in another way – by choosing the movie format, with its genres that enforce normativity – then everything is charged. I’ve been thinking about this in terms of LGBT movies in general, and what does that category really mean, besides being a marketing demographic. For example, a lot LGBT films take on all sorts of genres now, such as the lesbian rom-com or the trans “slasher” film, and most of these films are not taken seriously as films. It makes me think about Homi Bhabha’s “Of mimicry and man” essay, the idea that when the colonized imitates the master, it comes off as a joke. I once heard Barbara Hammer say something like, “When I started out, there was no language for lesbian film, so why would my films look like anything that previously existed?” She needed to invent a new language to represent her experience. But on the other hand, if you completely ignore these dominant languages, that’s kind of like saying that you’re only trying to speak to the people who already understand you, which I don’t think you’re just doing.

ERIC: Yes, we have to think about genre as well, and how might we create new filmic language and how these processes are a continuum and not an ending point. I think films like *Born in Flames* as well as many of the films from the Black radical cinematic tradition are really useful for thinking with these questions.

WU: I have one more question: I’d love to know about your writing process and if you co-write, how does that work?

CHRIS: There’s hardly any writing involved in our production, actually, which has been great fun for *Homotopia*, but has slowed us down immensely for *Criminal Queers*. We worked with a few of our more hammy actors, and they wrote their own lines for their scenes.

ERIC: Some people [Angela, Mattilda, Greg] wrote their own lines, others Chris and I wrote together, more or less piece by piece. We did start with a vague plot-map, but it has bent a lot. Yeah, *Homotopia*'s plot is really simple. *CQ* is twice as long, and has a lot of words in it, so it took a lot more time.

CHRIS: We winged so many of those scenes, as in we wrote them the day of or the night before.

WU: I noted this one: "All oppressed people have the right to violence. And the right to defend themselves from epistemic harm." Can't believe that's ad-libbed!

ERIC: I guess I wrote that line. I wrote it in reference to an amazing scene in *BIF* where they are talking about the ethics of armed struggle. Flo Kennedy says that "all oppressed people have a right to violence, it's like a right to pee, you have to have the right time and place." The monologue in *Criminal Queers* takes as its place of departure the question of violence for colonized people and links it together with Gayatri Spivak's idea of "epistemic violence," which she is borrowing from Foucault. I also used the word harm and not violence in that sentence, as harm has been useful in prison-abolitionist thought to re-stage the limits of "violence." So in that sentence we have a lot going on.

WU: There's a scene in *Wildness* that was filmed as a tribute to the opening shots of *Born in Flames*: of women cozied up together in a bedroom, smoking cigarettes, and presumably "talking revolution." That image appealed to me as a subversive queer politic, about the relationship between intimacy and political work. So we restaged that bedroom scene with one of my interview subjects, Erika, and some other participants. It's really fun, but it also came out looking like its own thing; I doubt anyone would get the reference. In the end, that material served to illustrate a very different idea. It was about exposing my own desire of my subjects, to make explicit my position as documentarian, participant observer, and also perhaps provoke the so-called "rules" of documentary. You're not supposed to get in bed with your subjects! But we queers of course come from a different tradition.

Something that your film REALLY has in common with *Born in Flames* is that it feels like a living community. The fact that so much of it was improvised and guerrilla-produced, and that you still managed elaborate scenes with so many locations and extras, it's really a testament to the quality of collaboration and trust you share with your film's subjects/characters.

CHRIS: Yeah, they are all friends and current/ex-lovers. We've been calling it a yearbook. So many people in the movie are still around or have moved in and out of our lives over the years and every time we watch the film we're reminded of these wonderful and terrible moments during production, as well as our personal lives.

ERIC: A living film, I love that. It's true: most of us do political organizing and live many of these lives outside of the film. There are really no "actors" in the film, the primary casting requirement is that you might happen to be sitting on my or Chris's sofa at any given time

before we need to shoot a scene. The films have also worked to document our lives over the past seven years: past, present, and future lovers, roommates, comrades, enemies, and friends are all caught on film.

WU: I like to call that the “queer love economy.” How much shit would not be possible – creatively, logistically, and resource-wise – if we weren’t all intimately entangled? I’ve been reflecting over the last decade [the ’00s] particularly in light of how differently I feel now about blurring the boundaries between collaboration, love, and sex. But for better or worse, it did inspire me to see things differently. Like the Silver Platter says, “las amistades y los diálogos brotaron / las intersecciones se cruzaron / son reales, los traemos en los huesos” (the friendships and dialogues flourished / the intersections crossed / those were real, they were bone real).

Notes on contributors

Eric Stanley works at the intersections of radical trans/queer aesthetics, theories of state violence, and anti-coloniality. Stanley is currently visiting faculty in Critical Studies at the San Francisco Art Institute and along with Chris Vargas, directed the films *Homotopia* (2006) and *Criminal Queers* (2012). A co-editor of the anthology *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (AK Press, 2011), Stanley’s other writing can be found in the journals *Social Text* and *American Quarterly*, as well as in numerous collections.

Wu Tsang is a Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker. His artworks and performances have been presented at the 2012 Whitney Biennial and New Museum Triennial in New York, the ICA Philadelphia, MOCA Los Angeles, the Gwangju Biennial (South Korea); they will also be presented at the upcoming Liverpool Biennial (UK). Tsang was named one of *Filmmaker Magazine*’s “25 New Faces of Independent Film” in 2012. His first feature *Wildness* won the Grand Jury Award for Outstanding Documentary at Outfest 2012 [World Premiere: MoMA Documentary Fortnight (New York, NY), SXSW (Austin, TX), Hot Docs (Toronto, Canada), SANFIC8 (Santiago, Chile)]. He has received grants from Good Works, Frameline, Wexner Center for the Arts, IFP Labs, Art Matters, Tiffany Foundation, Frieze Foundation, and the Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Chris Vargas is a queer-trans-feminist film-and-video maker from Los Angeles, currently living in Oakland, CA. He has had his work screened extensively in queer, transgender, POC, and feminist film festivals, galleries, and community spaces in the U.S. and internationally. He is currently doing video and media work for Transforming Justice and CR10: the Critical Resistance 10th anniversary conference. Along with Greg Youmans, Vargas collaborates on the queer relationship sitcom-satire *Falling in Love ... with Chris and Greg*.



Figure 1. 'star and joy CQ'.

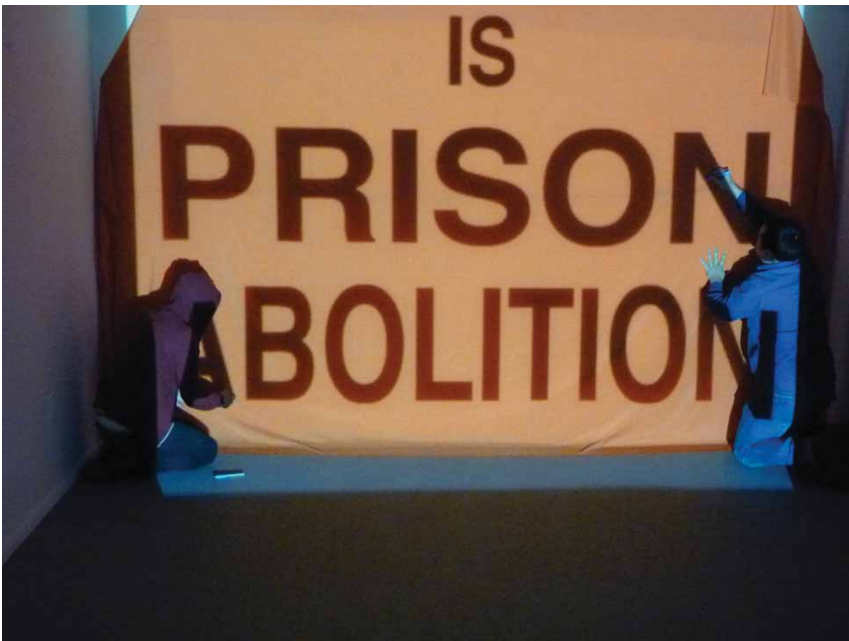


Figure 2. 'prison abolition CQ'.



Figure 3. 'joy safe CQ'.



Figure 4. 'fierce Homotopia'.



Figure 5. 'Wildness film still 6'.



Figure 6. 'Wildness film still 4'.