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Through the Looking Glass

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Empire State Pride Agenda

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*

*Carmen Vazquez***

The Right has shot a hole in the heart of America. On November 3rd, 2004, I woke up deeply saddened and deeply enraged. But I also woke up humbled by the knowledge that millions of Americans heard the call of democracy and responded to it. Progressives did not win this national election, but thousands of us fought tooth and nail to end the Bush/Cheney nightmare, to not succumb to spin and cynicism. I am proud of us for the long, long days of work we put in, and the faith that keeps us coming back.

Like Alice in Wonderland, I find myself terribly confused. I find it impossible to trust what I see through the looking glass of the government of the United States. When I look to our leaders, the people I hope will help guide me, I find them confused as well. They are worse than confused. Like Alice, they are lost.

This is me post-election. I am tired. I am tired of the campaign, of the colossal conflation of reality and spin fed by politicians to a media that giddily and shamelessly promotes the spin. I am tired of the horrible lack of generosity of spirit that is eating away at the core of our democracy. I am furious at the success of the Christian Right in transforming how they organize to defeat us with wave after wave of ballot initiatives that put our civil rights up for a vote. I am furious at the inability of the liberals and the Left to resource and amplify a message of justice and equality or to provide progressive activists with the tools necessary to thwart the fascistic Christian Right and its very overt intention to circumvent the courts and the Constitution and set up a fundamentalist Christian government in the United States.

I am tired of living the crossroads of racism and sexism and heterosexism and class in my body. I am tired of the thirty or more years I have spent trying to explain these crossroads to my white

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sisters and brothers in the queer world while so little change occurs in the structures and visible leadership of our movement.

I need hope. I need political change. I NEED REAL POLITICAL CHANGE.

I am not the only one. Millions are lost in the helter-skelter, corporate-dominated, and winner-take-all political system we have created in the most technologically advanced capitalist democracy on the planet. It doesn't have to be this way.

Before burrowing any further into that depressing rabbit hole, I must tell you that I AM NOT A PESSIMIST. What you hear is anger, not pessimism. I am the oldest daughter of Puerto Rican migrant parents who never gave me reason to doubt in the promise of America. I am connected by birth and by choice to people who have spent more than 500 years resisting the yoke of colonial oppression and refusing the bitter cup of hopelessness. I love this country. I love the country that can create the cultural genius of Emily Dickenson, Walt Whitman, George Gershwin, Billy Holiday, Cole Porter, James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, Michael Cunningham, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldua. I love the country that invented baseball and its fields of perfect symmetry and endless summers of dreaming. I love the country that immigrants and migrants keep re-inventing. I love the country promised by the evolving Constitution. I love the country embraced by Martin Luther King, by the Dixie Chicks, and, God bless him, by Ray Charles. I fear terrorists less than I fear losing this country that I love by the hand of our own government.

I want us, I beg us, to take our country back.

I am angry because year after year we keep squandering the legacy of Stonewall, Audre Lorde, Harry Hay, and all the fairies and lesbian feminists who founded this movement and gave it a name in history and a vision for its inclusion in the progressive tradition of the movements for racial equality, for women's liberation, for reproductive rights, and for economic justice.

From the beginning of the United States experiment in democracy, we have faced the same enduring contradictions: the yearning for fulfillment of idealist claims to individual liberty and prosperity, versus the reality of inequalities of race and of gender, of those with property and those without; the fierce determination to make secular values of equality and justice the heart of our national character and therefore of our morality and national conscience, versus the Christian imperial march to make of America a reflection of the White God and his son; the continual social evolu-

tion of sexuality and individual relations that allows people to separate reproduction from sex, versus the ancient western cultural dictate that insists on sex as weakness and evil.

Those contradictions have yet to be fully resolved. We have made progress in matters of political representation, racial and gender equality, separation of Church and State, and the status of sexual and gender deviance in American society that includes the emergence of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender or LGBT people as a distinct and oppressed minority. But we cannot say the contradictions have been resolved.

This, sisters and brothers, is the struggle still before us. Racial and gender inequality are not incidental to American society. They are fundamental to it. The exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few and the horribly unequal distribution of wealth in our society are not incidental to American society, they are fundamental to it. The use of sexual taboos, fears, and “morality” as a way of controlling the poor and frightening the middle class is not incidental to American society, it is fundamental to it.

Americans don’t need another King or a better looking glass. We need to overthrow the monarchy. American politics is broke and until we fix it, the contradictions fundamental to American society will continue to fray at the fabric of our democracy until we have lost not just the luster of liberty’s cloak but the cloak itself.

Like women and people of color, LGBT people will not be liberated until we resolve the contradictions. We may have our ghettos, we may have our entertainment triumphs, our *Queer Eyes*, our *Ellen* and our *Will and Grace*, our huddled rich yearning to be called to serve by the elite of the corporate or political world, but we will not be free. Mary Cheney is not free. Andrew Sullivan is not free. WE ARE NOT FREE.

We are still caught in straight jackets of shame and the perennial longing for the mythical “normal” so many of my peers seem to think will protect them or, at least, gain them the right to marry. Why would we think such a thing? For more than forty years, the Right Wing has been organizing a political takeover of American politics and culture of staggering proportions. They have set up think tanks and marketing strategies that total billions of dollars in resources in order to devise messages of fear and loathing, messages about our utter moral corruption for public consumption, messages that have ingrained in millions and millions of people a desperate desire to see us dead or at least back in the closet. Why do we think we can swat all that away by playing nice? Do we

think GLAAD and NGLTF and HRC or all of them combined have the capacity to create and amplify a message that will win the minds and hearts of Americans? Do we think for a second that a message based on, "Excuse me please, but I was born this way and I can't help myself," will make anyone cozy up to the sublime scum FOX News makes us out to be? Let's get serious.

Do you know whose country this has been for the last twenty-some years? Ronald Reagan's country. George Bush's country. The Right Wing's country. Not our country. Not our country. Ronald Reagan's life and the policies he ushered into existence, the same policies George W. Bush ratcheted up another notch these last four years as President, are the culmination of a Right Wing revolution that neither Bill Clinton nor John Kerry nor very few other Democrats have the spine to stand up to. Ronald Reagan was elected by the Right (as was George Bush) as the enforcer of the values and vision of a militantly conservative, racist, misogynist, and homophobic Right wing.

I am enraged and I am heartbroken. Lost to the Reagan hypocrites and the Bush compassionate conservatives are the lives of the young and beautiful gay men and people of color I saw die horrible deaths from AIDS complications after months of sweats and vomiting and shitting and dragging themselves on walkers down Castro or Mission Street in San Francisco, looking like the living dead of concentration camp horror. Lost are the lives of the men and women who still face death from AIDS because the drugs they need to stay healthy are not available to them. Lost are the dirt-streaked and famished faces of the children in poor urban and rural America whom Reagan, and then Bush, willfully and cruelly deprived of education, health benefits, and welfare. Lost are the thousands upon thousands of Nicaraguans who sacrificed all they had for the right to be literate and the right to health care, and the right to clean, running water and electricity that Reagan destroyed with an illegal war financed by the covert sale of arms to Iran against the democratically elected Socialist government of Nicaragua. Lost today are all those Iraqi children and American soldiers blown to bits for a senseless, useless war.

Bill Clinton's eight years in office gave us a modicum of respite from the assaults of the Right, but it didn't end them. It actually gave the Right eight years to regroup, load up, and fire again right at the heart of the poor, the queer, and the woman who has no choice over her reproductive destiny in Bush country. Those eight years gave us "don't ask, don't tell," the Federal Defense of

Marriage Act, and forty states with explicit prohibitions against same sex marriage.

The 2004 election changed none of that.

Reagan and Bush policies have eroded the social welfare net, including social security, welfare, and Medicare that allowed so many of us to survive. No one should live under the illusion that the soaring federal deficit is simply a matter of bad fiscal management. It is policy. It was Reagan policy and it is Bush policy. If you bankrupt government, then there's nothing left for the poor, is there? How much can there be left for the old? If the old didn't save and invest wisely, why should government care? If people are too "lazy," as the Right Wing characterizes the poor, to find and keep a job why should government keep them on the dole?

Americans berate "the government" for not doing enough or for doing too much. But government itself is just a structure. Whether or not government thinks it wise to care for its poor and its old people in an advanced capitalist society where the playing field is, by definition, never equal, depends on who is in government. The only check on the rich elite and their thirst for ever-expanding power is a participatory democracy where the people with the political power to create economic policies, to create universal health care, to create affordable housing, and to insist on justice are progressive enough to understand that democracy itself is endangered when people are too hungry, too despairing, too hopeless, too tired to care about who is in office.

And that, my friends, is where most of America's sprawling working class is today. That is what the Right Wing wants. They want us to be too tired, too despairing, too poor, too old to care. They want us to be too divided to care. They want queers to keep deluding ourselves into thinking we can make a separate peace in America. We cannot.

You and I and thousands and thousands more like us, the survivors of McCarthy and Roy Cohn and the assaults of the Right these last forty years, we more than anyone else in America, should understand the dangers to democracy that the legacy of Reagan and Bush represent. We can't just go home and retire. We have a responsibility—as the first generation that brought sexual liberation into the consciousness of the American public, not as whimsy but as political necessity—we have a responsibility to act, to protect and expand the democracy that made that possible. To be queer is nothing new. To be queer (or gay, if you prefer) and insist on

equality and dignity and justice and to do so without denying our sexuality, that is new and good and necessary. It is revolutionary.

I speak of democracy because although what I now understand of democracy in the United States is very different from what I understood it to be as a child, I still have great affection for that dream of democracy which is not completely our reality but must remain our greatest hope. I speak of democracy because somewhere in our journey to "equality," lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people got ourselves so caught up in defining and protecting ourselves that we forgot where our journey started. We forgot that the transformation of queer life as we know it today from what it was fifty years ago occurred in a secular democracy. That democracy is now threatened every bit as much from within the United States as from the enemy outside. We need to understand what it really means to defend our democracy or risk losing everything we have secured for ourselves as LGBT people, as women, as poor people, as people of color, as defenders of reproductive rights, as progressives with a vision of justice these last fifty years. That is too much to lose.

Everything we have worked and struggled for, every hope we ever had for a free expression of that which we knew in ourselves to be both deliciously wicked and also liberating about our sexuality, everything we knew to be possible about the way we nurture each other and invent family with each other—all of that is up for debate and appropriation by the American public as we debate the merits of same sex marriage. How our queerness informs the formation of sexual relations and family in the future, how it might liberate sexuality from the confines of reproduction, how we and our insistence on a sexuality that is only for and about love and pleasure might further free human beings to pursue relationships and family structures that are egalitarian—all of that is entirely dependent upon the strength of our democracy and how willing we all are to defend it. You can't have the kind of profound cultural change necessary to the attainment of equality and justice for LGBT people in America in George W's Texas cowboy theocracy. You just can't.

We need to locate the center of the struggle and that center is not us. It is not our right to marry. It is not our "normalcy." The center of the struggle is those contradictions of class, race, gender, and sex that were there at the birth of our nation and remain there today. At the center of the struggle are those who believe without equivocation or compromise that all people deserve the right to

live a life of dignity, that all people deserve equality and justice, that all people deserve the right to love freely, and that all people deserve the right to self-determination. Standing in opposition to us are those who do not believe all people deserve to live a life of dignity, who do not believe that all people deserve equality and justice, who do not believe that all people deserve to love freely, who do not believe that all people deserve the right to self-determination. It isn't just blue states and red states. There are people standing on both sides of that struggle in the blue states and the red states. The struggle is between a secular democracy with justice and equality at the heart of its consciousness and an intolerant White Christian Fundamentalist Theocracy.

The denizens of the Right Wing throw Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility over themselves and seek to disguise their racism, their misogyny, and their homophobia with claims of compassionate conservatism; but peek under the cloak and there is the same old white guy in a hood burning crosses on lawns. The same guy.

When and if LGBT ever understand the real center of the struggle and how relentless that guy under the hood is in his commitment to politically disenfranchise and economically strangle us, we will understand the real necessity for political coalition. When we understand it, we will have begun the process of attaining not just the right to marry, but justice and equality and a democracy that will enforce and protect those values above all others.

As always, the question before us is "what should we do?" Some of us are seriously considering an expatriate movement to Canada. But for those of us too stubborn or too poor to leave, I say we need to quit hiding under our own Harry Potter cloak of invisibility and step out into the light of the sun, step out into the streets, step into the world of political machinations and be the Left wing of which they are all so frightened. Be the smart Left wing. Be the Left wing with money. Be the Left wing with enough sophistication to make strategic alliances with labor, civil rights, reproductive rights, and the environmental movement. Be the Left wing that takes over the Democratic party without disguise, or dumps it in the hellhole it deserves to be dumped into for having turned its back over and over again on the base that gave it power in the first place. We should wage peace in the streets and in our daily lives. We should form that united Left front we have been missing for fifty or more years. The unending sectarian angst of Left, ultra-Left, and liberal players is killing us. We need the law-

yers, the street people, the poets, and the artisans. We need to embrace ourselves across professions, ideology, and age.

We need to build an intergenerational movement, a movement that understands and values how unique and necessary it is for a people who have never had the comfort of generations of stories and tradition to have one now. Straight Americans may think they don't need their elders to pass on the knowledge and strength of their struggles. We desperately do need them.

We must put an end to the limitations of identity without relinquishing the necessity of autonomous movements for equality and justice. We have to put an end to all the posturing around being inclusive that only means we have a Black or Brown or Trans or young or old face on the program but never really change the agenda. We really, deeply need places of safety to heal. But what are we healing ourselves for? Are we intending to create a safe place for us queers, only to leave the world in the same mess we found it in? What is the point of that?

Personhood and the health of our communities and our democracy won't come simply with more civil rights laws, with more of us in the health professions, with better research or a bigger, queerer army. It will not come with marriage. All of those policy and legal changes will be welcomed and necessary, but they will not be enough.

We will have the dignity of personhood and our communities will be healthy when we have achieved social and economic justice. We will have personhood and we will have health in our communities when we have the political wisdom and moral strength—no matter how old or young we are—to think beyond the confines of our individual identities and needs.

I am not—none of us are—more important than the hope for freedom we all represent. If we don't all of us embrace the hope and possibility that we can still make this a just and fair country, and act on that hope, then it will not be a fair and just country.

As Alice finally understands, illusion and pretentiousness will lead you nowhere. The only real moral value we need apply to our lives is that no one can elevate himself or herself without also elevating those less privileged than ourselves. Take THAT MORAL VALUE and go repair the heart of America. Go embrace the political process—AGAIN. Go demand of your legislators meaningful laws that respect the integrity of our families and our right to have and protect them, including the right to marry. Go shout peace, peace, peace in the streets every chance you get. Go make love to

your girlfriend or boyfriend, or have tea with the one you'd like to be your girlfriend or boyfriend, and then go back out on the streets. Go demand that the news media tell the truth about the Right Wing, the truth about Iraq, the truth about drug benefits for the elderly and a deteriorating health care system. Go to the Capitol and demand funding for HIV/AIDS and safe sex education, universal health care, and repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act. Go wage peace. Go defend democracy as out and proud and queer sons and daughters of America. Go talk to your mother and your father and your neighbors and the cop on the block and the grocery delivery people and your hairdresser about your right to be free and equal, about the on-going nightmare of racism in America, about the war that must cease, about the need to defend democracy from the warlords in the red states. Go now. None of us has the right to assume we will have another chance. We don't. Today is the only moment we have. Go now.