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Promoting Dissident Collectivities: Celebrating Alan Sinfield Lynne Segal

Alan has been my friend for twenty-five years, my mentor as well, throughout all those years. I have never written anything without wondering what Alan would think about it, seeing him as one of my most sympathetic, supportive, and yet most critical and incisive, of readers.

I started reading Alan's work in the 1980s (the decade before we met), when I was researching literature on the 1950s for my book on masculinity, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1990).¹ Such a sharp observer of his fellow men, I soon learned that Alan had been carefully scrutinizing masculinity from his childhood, in that charitable boy's boarding school to which he had been sent at age eleven, following advice to his mother from a well-meaning primary school teacher. Soon enough, he was exploring its manifestations all the way back to at least Shakespearian times – when those thespians slipped so happily into feminine attire and identifications. Thus Alan was acutely attuned to the shifting cultural affectations and performative pretences of manhood, its oppressive dynamics doggedly policing the behaviour of men, even as they restricted or coerced the lives of women. The book he first edited on post-war British writing, *Society and Literature: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1983), was my perfect guide to the dire misogyny of the 1950s, fanned by those male soldiers, the survivors, returning home from the intense comradeship and homosociality of wartime excitement, anguish, and loss.² Safety installed in hearth and home – if they were lucky – these erstwhile soldiers all too often found themselves living unadventurous lives, often daily confronted by bored wives and resentful children, in the ever-expanding, acquisitive ambience of suburbia.

Post-war masculinities

The distinct misogyny of that era intertwined with a heightened, almost hysterical, homophobia – necessary to keep men from delaying their entry into conventional (ideally bourgeois) domesticity, or from straying too far or remaining too long outside it. I stole Alan's vivid discussion of Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, those writers who so chillingly captured the noxious sexism of the day. It was often sharpest in the alleged radical voices of the era, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, and all the rest of them – those ever-so-Angry Young Men who revelled in their apparent detestation of women, those creatures they portrayed always scheming to trap them in the treadmill of domestic conformity. As Alan noted, it was the huge success of Osborne's triumphant play *Look Back in Anger* which was 'hailed as most representative "in every nuance" of the context of the mid-fifties'.³ They were electrifyingly unsettling, the productions this man, John Osborne, as we now know a person with so many

secrets around his own sexuality and ‘manhood’ (not least his relationship with his one-time collaborator, Anthony Creighton),⁴ this ambitious dramatist, whose relentless homophobia made him determined to drive gay playwrights such as Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan off the British stage, this writer who managed to capture so energetically the pathological hatred these particular ‘rebels’ harboured towards that new ‘tyrant’, the wife and mother. The perpetually irate protagonist of *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter, systematically torments his more refined wife, comparing her to a gorging python – devouring men, and draining them of all vitality: ‘Why do we let these women bleed us to death?’, Jimmy laments, ‘No, there’s nothing left for it ... but to let yourself be butchered by the women.’⁵ The man, butchered by the woman, laugh if you can; meanwhile, a deadly silence ruled over who exactly was being beaten, raped and butchered, and by whom. These were truly the days of the ‘captive wife’, as Hannah Gavron wrote the following decade, though it would take another decade again, and the rebirth of feminism, before domestic violence could be properly seen, named and, finally criminalized; much later still till marital rape would be declared illegal.⁶ Only very few cases of extreme domestic violence ever went to court in those post-war years (usually ones involving men’s murder of partners or servants), since routine beating of wives and children was acceptable ‘discipline’.

So Alan helped me relive and depict the 1950s, his early books already deploying the ‘cultural materialism’ he would soon outline in *Political Shakespeare* (1985), with his friend and then companion Jonathan Dollimore. This meant expanding the work of Raymond Williams (who first used the term) to insist upon the importance of analysing historical and political contexts when bringing philosophical tools to bear upon the textual practices of literature:⁷

Culture is political. That is the key axiom of *cultural materialism* – Raymond William’s term for analytic work which sees texts as inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history; as involved, necessarily, in the making of meanings which are always finally political meanings.⁸

Alan’s gay, feminist-inflected, socialist outlook was attuned to all the silences, hypocrisies, cruelties and miseries experienced in so many homes in those early post-war years, whether it was their harsh condemnation of homosexual desire, disdain for the isolation, boredom and domestic frustration of wives, or the routine cultural enjoyment, the background buzz, of men’s taunting of women, their teasing disparagement and near-ubiquitous contempt for the ‘feminine’ – ‘No man regards his wife with pleasure, save twice: in her bridal bed, & in her grave’; ‘Here lies my wife: here let her lie: Now she’s at rest/and so am I’. A laugh a minute one could find, in the murderous humour of those days, and nights.⁹ I recall it all so well from my own childhood:

'better luck next time!', my father would say to any woman giving birth to a daughter', and we, his daughters, were supposed to laugh.

The Politics of Pleasure

I turned to Alan again, and often, when I was writing my next book, *Straight Sex*, something Alan obviously knew all about – even though none of the women who had always pursued him ever succeeded in seducing him. (As he once explained to me, his tactic when in the company of women at the height of his youthful beauty was to always fall asleep with his guitar on top of him, for protection). Anyway, as it turned out, we were both thinking along very similar lines in exploring the politics of pleasure. I was trying to understand the oppressive dynamics of straight sex, without rejecting its pleasures, at the very same time as Alan was examining those heterosexual presumptions that had always weighed so heavily upon the sexual practices and pleasures of gay men. My *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure* and his *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* were published the very same year, in 1994. But somehow, and this is odd, I had again managed to steal a few of his thoughts, since they appear (yes, happily acknowledged) in my text.¹⁰

Thus Alan's pondering of 'passivity' or 'effeminacy' as deployed in relation to gay men proved an excellent parallel to my rethinking of the contradictions of straight sex. Post-feminism, I presume we all know that it is the maintenance of gender hierarchy, and its ties to misogyny, which informs homophobia. This means that it is precisely men's fearful imagining of themselves as 'object' of another man's desire, their horror of the supposed 'passivity' of being 'penetrated', that so threatens the resolute identifications of straight men – their fantasized rock-solid manhood quite as fragile and vulnerable as the member that symbolizes it. Think of Martin Amis, and his screaming terror of ageing when, as he wrote in his memoir *Experience*: 'Youth has finally evaporated, and with it all sense of your own impregnability'.¹¹ Recall all the recent writing of Philip Roth, so savagely depicting the older man, his *Everyman*, who can no longer whistle up erections as he chooses, distraught that he may be turning into a woman, now that he possesses only a useless 'spigot of wrinkled flesh' between his legs.¹²

In his study of 'effeminacy' Alan noted that historically 'effeminacy' was not necessarily read as indicative of homosexual passion, rather 'the feminine boy' was deemed 'despicable', simply because 'he is girlish'.¹³ Related to this, was the idea of the 'active' male homosexual as superior to a 'passive', 'feminized' partner, which so often appeared in gay life, widely documented across times and place. Moreover, again underlying the ties between homophobia and male domination, the more pronounced the gender hierarchy in any society, the greater the tendency to despise the supposedly 'passive' or 'effeminate' male homosexual partner. Yet the distinction between presumed activity and passivity was as forced in gay male sex as in straight sex. Thus, for instance, Alan reported in *The Wilde Century* that a survey amongst men in Mexico found that most men engaging in homosexual sex liked to present themselves as *activos*, yet 74 per cent in one sample admitted privately that they were 'insertive *and* receptive in intercourse'.¹⁴

Moreover, as I too was similarly arguing in *Straight Sex*, it is the very conception of the polarity between active and passive that is the problem. Thus Alan was expressing his well-grounded irritation of that polarity, deploying tools usually attributed to Derrida, to suggest the permeability of all binaries, and the violence of maintaining them. 'For lesbians and gay men', Alan wrote, 'the situation is indeed perverse: a model of how heterosexual men and women are supposed to be, which is tendentious, inadequate and oppressive in the first place, is twisted into bizarre contortions in order to purport to describe us. Who is active, who passive, in fellatio?' He continued in this book to express his concern, shared by feminists and some other gay men, that these cultural prejudices were being expressed in the contemporary exaggerated macho-shift in Western gay culture. Were they rejecting the old toxic depictions of the 'effeminate' homosexual only by colluding, still, with the most oppressive assumptions of 'masculinity': 'Macho-man may be reproducing aspects of heterosexual male dominance'. But are "real" men the people with whom we want to associate ourselves?'¹⁵ From our distinct positions then in the stakes of desire, Alan and I both hoped not!

Alan has always been suspicious of psychoanalysis. He did acknowledge that Freud had been one of the first to point out that 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes do not map smoothly onto anatomical difference, as well as to argue that those bisexual, perverse desires of childhood are

never truly outgrown, feeding into all our adult attachments. Yet, as he rightly insists, in Freud's writing, and indeed in almost the whole history of psychoanalysis (at least up until recently), 'the binary structure keeps creeping back, despite Freud's awareness that it involves an unacceptable biologism'. This is why, to take just one instance, he 'designates masochism as "feminine" in the face of evidence that it is manifested at least as frequently by males' (here also citing the interesting work of Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*).¹⁶ Meanwhile, although his engagement with psychoanalysis is a highly critical one, Alan could agree that some of its more recent practitioners had more to contribute to our rethinking of sexual difference and gender categories. Thus, influenced by the work of his friend John Fletcher, Alan turned to some of the thoughts of the late French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche, who argued that desire, though itself active, is built upon a primary non-gendered passivity: 'very quickly the little human tries to turn this passivity into activity', following the erotic stimulation (the enigmatic messages) it receives from the ministrations of another, in the first instance, the person or persons looking after it. Moreover, as he noted, Laplanche is adamant that although Freud had expressed a certain distrust of the active/passive binary, he 'completely' missed the point about activity and passivity: 'Is penetration more active than receiving the penis? Why? After all it is a very superficial point of view to think the male is active and the female passive in coitus'.¹⁷

Strategic principles

However, it was during this decade of the 1990s that the whole notion of 'gender', and its presumed ties to 'sexuality', began to be systematically dismantled with the growth of queer theory. In her quickly iconic study of the Western literary canon, *Between Men* (1985) Eve Sedgwick had written of the 'endemic crisis' of modern sexual definition as founded upon the incoherence of the male hetero/homo divide. In her view, the strong male ties or 'homosocial bonds' that were necessary for maintaining men's cultural entitlements meant that men desired the interest and attention of other men over that of women, but this easily produced a sort of 'homosexual panic' – the fear that such preference might tilt over into homosexual desire.¹⁸ A few years later Jonathan Dollimore expanded upon this key paradox of modern sexuality in his enthralling book, *Sexual Dissidence* (1991). Taking readers from the cultural enjoyment of Oscar

Wilde's subversive wit and wisdom to the savage mockery of Jean Genet and Joe Orton, he pointed to the enduring symbolic centrality of same sex love, but in societies that obsessively denounced it.¹⁹

Such analysis was all soon part of the decade of queer theory and politics, making its cultural impact inside and well beyond its elite beginnings in the Ivy League academies of the USA: *It's Hip to be Queer, It's Hot to be Queer, It's the Gay Nineties*, was just one of the activist slogans of that decade. After reading, or vaguely imbibing, Foucault, sexual dissidents – gay, lesbian or perhaps straight with a twist (other categories had yet to leap from the cupboard) – were all citing Judith Butler, and her definitive naming and challenging of 'the heterosexual matrix'. Butler quickly became the most fashionable feminist theorist at large, as well as the most resented. Her classic analysis in *Gender Trouble* (1990) not only called into question any notion of secure gendered or sexual identities, seeing them as merely repeated performances 'that congeal over time' to produce the *appearance* of stability, but in that text she laid the groundwork for what some came to see as their undoing: '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency.*'²⁰ Her words strengthened the outlook of those of us who had always stressed the cultural grounding of gender, confirming feminist suspicions about the historical contingencies and artifice underlying gender practices. However, it also made subversive, or anti-normative, practices the key to undoing oppressive sexual and gender dynamics.

Yet, compelling as some of us might find an insistence upon the fraudulence and possible fluidities of gendered and sexual belongings, I shared with Alan, and also Jonathan (by now also a friend), a suspicion of the transformative powers queer theory attributed to its subversion of dominant normativities. Thus, from its very first appearance, Alan suggested it was foolish to imagine that sexual dissidents might manage to dismantle gender and sexual polarities simply by reiterating (or enacting) their conceptual instabilities. The question, as he saw it, was to ask how much work 'drag' could really do? Certainly not all that some hoped. Semiotic warfare on those active/passive; male/female, straight/gay binaries is always possible, indeed it is all-too-easy, perhaps even inevitable, but that hardly in itself dismantles them. Thus Alan, along with

Jonathan, and well before many others hastened along in their footsteps, was among the first to question the effectiveness of queer's theoretical subversions as well as the aggressive provocations of emerging queer activists in ACT UP or Queer Nation. Surveying the dissident potential of queer subversions in *The Wilde Century* Alan suggested that however imaginative its disruptiveness, dominant culture 'is not so easily subverted, so intricately is it installed in the conceptual structures that we inhabit':

I have proposed a strategic principle: when you're coming from the subordinate position, everything you attempt is recuperable ... So if I am not concluding with a straightforward endorsement of ACT UP, Queer Nation and OutRage , it is not because I think we shouldn't upset people, but because I fear we cannot upset them enough'.²¹

Let the queers come out to play, every now and then, let them, for instance, as happened for the very first time in February 1989, have their own programme 'Out on Tuesday' (in that TV series first hosted by Mandy Merck), but just make sure they are forced right back in again the rest of the time. Thus Alan and Jonathan were both stressing the limitations of deconstructive or transgressive inversions as stand-alone political strategies. The articulation of queer politics could not remain detached from wider political struggles for change, Alan said sternly. The 1990s may have been the decade of queer, but it was also the final consolidation of Thatcher's triumph over trade unions and the left, even if the blatant homophobia behind her provocative Clause 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 (forbidding any official 'promotion' of homosexuality in sex education in schools) seemed to have little impact. Her conservative ideological hegemony and monetarist policies, later overseen by John Major, had orchestrated the undermining of workers rights, initiated welfare cut-backs and the asset-stripping of public resources, resulting in soaring levels of inequality, while vastly increasing the insecurity and impoverishment all vulnerable people. Thus, although well aware of his own cushioned position as a salaried academic, Alan wrote in 1994 that he saw little to rejoice in overall: 'I shudder to contemplate how other men and women cope with exposure to a sustained hate campaign, directed not just at our ideas, or actions even, but at our very selfhood'.²² This is why he always stressed the priority that still needed to be given to consolidating dissident subcultures, which I return to below, while also keeping alive hopes for the resuscitation of a renewed socialist project, to try and help sustain the lives of the millions outside the recognition and protection that cultural resources can offer. At much the same time, the Marxist lesbian feminist, Elizabeth Wilson, also argued that 'transformation' not 'transgression' should be our watchword.²³

At the close of nineties, this time in *Gay and After*, Alan provided his own overview of the contemporary state of gay politics, again suggesting that no celebration of dissident sexualities should ever be separated from the preservation of dissident subcultures, while no subcultures should detach themselves from struggles for a more egalitarian world. Before many others, Alan was alert to the possible fit between Queer theory, commerce and neo-liberalism, which became the theme of some of his later writing. He never downplayed either the significance or pleasure for sexual dissidents in celebrating the potential fluidity of the subject, and its possible bodily transformations, even if the all-too-fixed and solid nature of some of those transformations might lead us to query just what is, and is not, thought to be flowing.

Nevertheless, there were further issues that worried Alan in the new possibilities for shape-shifting the prosthetic body. The desired body much too easily becomes the latest, enormously profitable, consumer product: whether via cosmetic surgery, drugs, implants, or whatever the roving bio-medical and fashion markets can come up with to accommodate individual fantasy to its latest technologies. This meant, Alan feared, that queer theorists were in danger of becoming 'particularly complicit' with 'the moment-to moment desperation of capitalism', targeting all our insecurities.²⁴ And Alan was writing that two decades ago, when capitalism was just a little less desperate than it seems today.

In recent years a few more voices have become more suspicious of the radicality and significance of queer theories primary commitment to anti-normativity. Indeed, a recent issue of *Differences*, edited by Robyn Weigland and Elizabeth A. Wilson, attempts to rethink queer theory *without* any necessary commitment to the anti-normative.²⁵ As they point out, that icon of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick herself, ended up of expressing some of this scepticism about the significance of queer's ant-normative critique, including her own. Sedgwick began to shift her intellectual outlook after getting breast cancer at the age of forty. In putting together her last collection of essays, *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick clarified her distance from some of her earlier enthusiastic and influential engagement with what she now called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', referring to what I described above as her powerfully nuanced semiotic readings of the hidden, repressive meanings of texts – especially those disavowing dissident sexualities, in their always privileging the 'homosocial' bondings of heterosexuality. In her case it was not any actual dismissal of that earlier work, but rather of her needing and finding other reasons for

keeping herself attached to life, something I discuss more fully in my chapter 'Flags of Resistance' in *Out of Time*.²⁶

Other's engaging critically with queer theory also worried about the limitations of questioning gender and sexual normativities as a way into understanding the ubiquitously market-driven world of neoliberalism, alongside the burgeoning ethnic conflict and new imperial wars taking us into the twenty-first century. Thus in an influential special issue of *Social Text* in 2005, David Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz addressed the problems of what they termed 'queer liberalism', related to the soon more popular concept of 'homonormativity'. Homonormativity was first emphasized by Lisa Duggan to criticise campaigns such as that for same-sex marriage, seeing this as accommodating to a normative formation 'that does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them'.²⁷ Eng, Esteban and Muñoz were suggesting that those now more confidently identifying as gay, lesbian or queer, might remain complicit, or worse, with racist and neo-colonial projects, making it urgent 'to consider how gay and lesbian rights are being reconstituted as a type of reactionary (identity) politics of national and global consequence'.²⁸ Similarly, Jasbir Puar in 'Mapping US Homonormativities', uses the term 'homo-nationalism' to describe 'the collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism' found in the patriotic rhetoric of US gays and queers, separating themselves off from 'racial and sexual "others"'.²⁹ Finally, in Israel, Aeyal Gross and others have been campaigning about what they call 'pink-washing', to describe Israel's assertion of its gay-friendly policies, submerging its destructive colonial presence in [occupied Palestinian territory](#).³⁰

But even on its own terrain, challenging oppressive gender and sexual norms, there was from the beginning certain concerns which some of us shared, Alan, Jonathan and myself included, over the adequacy of the anti-normativity at the heart of queer theory. Most recently, the other leading light of queer theory, Judith Butler herself, in an interview in the *TransAdvocate*, expressed her own worries about anti-normative prescriptiveness on the issue of doing away with gender belongings, noting that if gender is eradicated, so too is an important domain of pleasure for many people, as well as their sense of selfhood. She said there: 'I think we have to accept a wide variety of positions on gender. Some want to be gender-free, but others want to be free really to be a gender that is crucial to who they are'. Indeed, she concluded by revealing that in *Gender Trouble*, 'I only meant to say ... that we should all have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and

criminalization. I join in the struggle to realize such a world.³¹ It takes me back to my conclusions about gender in my book *Why Feminism* (1999): 'After gender theory, after queer theory, after all the flaunting of the inherent instabilities or fluidities of gender and sexuality, the problem remains: we still live in a world haunted by cultural and personal fixations on sexual difference.³² Rather than queer's traditional commitment to anti-normativity, when indeed anything can become norms for the groups we are in (however apparently dissident), the question is surely how to try to keep any norms as open and non-oppressive as possible, as well how to keep them challenging and radical. When it comes to confronting oppressive power relations, Queer has no unique priority on dissidence, when political resistance involves consolidating new collectivities, not just involving critique, but also the rethinking of shared goals.

The Erotics of Power

Nevertheless Alan was not above certain moments of gay chauvinism himself, which I also rather liked – boasting about what gay men could teach straight men and women, and why indeed, in his view, they envied gay men:

'We seemed to have learnt a few tricks that straights had yet to develop. Gay men had organised genial ways of meeting for casual sex, and also loving couples that might manage, even, to evade gendered roles. They knew how to see other men without falling out with their partners; how to go to bed with friends; how to remain on close terms with former lovers; how to handle age and class differences. They were at ease experimenting with kinky games; they were getting the fun back into sex'.³³

Well, sometimes, perhaps, but as Alan knew, the evasion of gender roles, especially their privileges and dangers, was not so easy. It was certainly often challenging for me, in relation to feminist politics.

However, Alan also helped me to think straight, or perhaps a little more askew, when I was trying to surmount some of the conflicts troubling feminist theory around issues of masculinity and power. He tackled the inevitable ties between gender, power and desire in his book, *On Sexuality & Power* (2004), noting that power differentials are not only remarkably persistent, but also remarkably sexy. Indeed, and this is certainly tricky, intimations of power are what keep desire alive. It was altogether at odds with some powerful feminist versions of sexual politics, hoping for parities of pleasure and overall equality in any intimate encounters. This led some powerful feminist polemic into stances of rejection or disdain regarding all heterosexual encounters as ineluctably undermining women's sexual agency.³⁴ In Alan's view (one that I also

expressed in *Straight Sex*), we need to acknowledge the inevitable, though often complex and possibly shifting, power differentials in our fantasies and also our relationships as a necessary part of refiguring any sort of sexual politics – which today people prefer to call sexual ethics. Alan suggested that while, obviously, the political priority of resisting actual oppression must be maintained, power imbalances in personal relations can be refigured as potentially rewarding, if also inevitably troubling:

‘If we don’t acknowledge power differentials in our fantasies and our relationships, we don’t begin to get a hold on exploitation – including that which we perpetuate ourselves ... We should be exploring ways to assess and recombine power, sexiness, responsibility and love’.³⁵

Well yes, that’s clear, but how? That is a little less clear. Alan always poses the right questions, but the answers remain more problematic, more troubling than either of us could easily surmount. Work in progress, especially as we age, become ill, in need care, sometimes considerable care, while still living with desire – for so many, if not for Alan, unacknowledged, unreciprocated desire. In *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Paradoxes of Ageing*, I wrote about all those older people, and especially older women, who long to be enabled to ‘fall in love again’. It won’t happen, usually, whatever our sexual politics, as Doris Lessing mourned in her memoirs, and expressed so sharply in her novel *Love Again*: ‘old women by the thousand – probably by the million – are in love and keep quiet about it. They have to...’.³⁶ Of course, it is not only women who know the perils and prohibitions of falling in love again in old age, and all of us may find this hard to admit. It is why I was delighted to see Jonathan closing a recent inspiring conversation on the significance of his own theoretical work with his thoughts on the enduring nature of desire, even as he feels an ever-present sense of mortality: ‘With that in mind – every third thought on death – I think I’d like to fall in love one last time’.³⁷ He is surely right, holding on to the desire to desire is how we remain attached to life, how else might we creatures of Eros and dust, beleaguered by ‘negation and despair/ show an affirming flame’.³⁸ As we surely know, this also involves, the potential joys of friendship, all the more so as we age, in finding ways, of sharing love, loss and mourning.

Dissident Collectivities

I know I need hardly remind Alan of this, or those who love and care for him today with such unique dedication, above all his partner, Vincent. Alan has not written a memoir, sadly, but as we know aspects of autobiography are always encoded in everything we write, whether or not we construct and package it as memoir. Furthermore, in his introduction to the third edition of

Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain, also written in 2004, we can find a beautiful autobiographical sketch: 'Ideology and Commitment: A Personal Account'. Here Alan animates that small boy, himself, up against the world, born into a working-class family mid-war, to a father who would be killed off serving his country by the time his son was two: 'We were poor, and could never forget it'. That affected everything, and that is why class always lurks somewhere in Alan's writing. In this new introduction, Alan writes tenderly about his mother, Lucy. Back in the 1950s, after she was widowed in her early 30s, while pregnant with her second child, Alan's younger brother, Mark, she developed Parkinson's Disease. Shamefully, even though her husband (his father, Ernie) had died gallantly for his country, Alan tells us that 'the disability of not having a husband', combined with her disease, moved Lucy, decisively, to the bottom of the pile ... Her social life shrank almost to nothing'. The 1950s was not a good time to be a lone mother: 'My sense of anger at the injustice in the world is undoubtedly linked with distresses of Lucy's life'. It was the indignities and impoverishment of that life, Alan reflects here, which created his life-long commitment to all who are similarly disadvantaged: 'the elderly, infirm, unemployed, black, queer, lone parents, and more'.³⁹

In the latest introduction looking back on his reflections on post-war British literature, politics and culture, written in the late 1990s, Alan notes that his writing had been fed by a sense of 'disappointment, disillusionment, betrayal' at all that might have been accomplished, but had not been done, towards ending the humiliations and disadvantages of the poor and vulnerable. However, in 2004, observing what 'new' Labour was still *not* doing to remove entrenched inequality, he felt all the more angry, and believed his own sense of betrayal as becoming even more widespread.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Alan also rejected as sentimental the idea that his radical politics came directly from Lucy. As he has stressed in all his writing, this is because, it is political milieu – not just good ideas, or personal experience, and perhaps least of all theory – which makes radical politics possible. Thus he repeats here again his view that political identity grows and thrives only from the possibility of involvement in some form of shared collectivity. It is subcultures, with their 'frameworks for understanding' that make certain stories plausible, it is their absence that foreclose stories that might have been told even from being uttered, let alone heard.

Alan [likes](#) to quote that formidable feminist poet, Adrienne Rich, who also wrote of the difficulty of existence when you do not recognize yourself in the descriptions of others, before you have any subculture to acknowledge you, as here: 'It takes some strength of soul – and not just individual strength, but collective understanding – to resist this void, this nonbeing, into

which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be heard'⁴¹ The task of finding those collective understandings has always been at the heart of Alan's theory and politics, it is the bridge between the two: 'Political identity does not derive directly from class, or gender or racial position, or sexual orientation; or simply from personal choice'. It derives from involvement in a radical political milieu.⁴² It was that collectivity of the different movements, bursting out of the turbulent decade of Sixties' revolt, that really did generate significant transformation for many of us, above all for women and sexual minorities. Knowing that his health makes it unlikely that he will be able to write at length again (short of a medical miracle, not forthcoming), my friend Alan, this uniquely inspiring, pioneering, gay scholar and activist, concludes his long journey along with queer politics with these thoughts: 'Our main narrative tells of success. Inspired by the Stonewall Inn's drag queens and leathermen in 1960s New York, we triumphed over irrational prejudice'.⁴³ Today, it's not automatically gay men and lesbians, or even single mothers, who are most culturally disdained, impoverished or excluded today – although some may well be. 'We triumphed', however, it is the *limits* of that transformation, the market recuperation of much of it, that has been on his mind for many years now, as he lives with the diabolical debilities of his own Parkinson's Disease.

On his mind, is the 'real mass of human suffering' that remains, after all this time, from the continuing pressures, and accompanying desires, to conform to gendered models, whether in schools or elsewhere and, especially nowadays, in the military worldwide:

In my view, we have experienced a failure of vision; a disbelief in sexual transformation and in our potential for shared enrichment. We settled too quickly, too cheaply ... Now, in western Europe, we have it all (nearly) – far beyond the imagining of the long 1950s ... However, the available mechanisms did not please our activists, who observed a destruction of comradeship, honesty, commitment and decent fellow feeling ... Coming out (of the closet) is appropriated as a characteristic experience of renewal through disclosure. For myself, I reaffirm my belief in the life of the mind, and in subcultural work: linguistic, literary, social and political. It is my thesis that in Europe, Australia, and even in the United States reform came precariously, yet in retrospect remarkably easily. There can be no reform, no process outside social institutions (so collaboration and competition are necessary), and no time without death.⁴⁴

No time without death. It is so hard, nowadays, not to link the comprehensive pessimism generated by these times of renewed Tory triumphalism and punitive indifference to the needs of the most vulnerable, with our own personal sorrows – here for me, right now, with the thought of losing one of the friends I have loved most. When writing my own political memoir, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (2007), I asked Alan how he saw the outcome of our three decades of militant movement politics, he replied in his characteristic laconic style:

'I think when I turned fifty, it dawned on me that the transformation for which I had been looking was not going to occur in my lifetime. A difference of time scale ... the futility of individual life. It is less a crisis than a disappointment; perhaps I had known all along really.'

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What happens to a dream deferred? It lives on, I think, in our memories of those we have shared it with, which is why I know that neither the dream, nor this particular friend with whom I shared it, will ever fully disappear. Alan's wit, wisdom, courage, compassion, and humanity, will always be with me.

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I would like to thank Vincent Quinn for many things, but here for his careful editorial work and assistance with this piece.

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³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁴ James MacDonald, 'Anthony Creighton and John Osborne', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 2008, vol 28, no. 3:265-266

⁵ John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, [1956], London, Faber and Faber, 1976, p.89.

⁶ Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife*, London, Routledge & K. Paul, 1966

⁷ Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, 1985, London, Methuen.

⁸ Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics, Queer Reading*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p.viii

⁹ *The Man's Book* of 1958, quoted in Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, London, Virago, p.21.

¹⁰ Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*, London, Virago, 1994; London and New York, Verso, 2015; Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London, Cassell, 1994.

¹¹ Martin Amis *Experience*, London, Vintage, 2001, p.64.

¹² Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost*, London, Vintage, 2007, p.103. I discuss the deep fears of men's ageing in both Amis and Philip Roth in my own last book, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, chapter 3, London, Verso, 2013

¹³ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, p.25.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.192, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, London, Routledge, 1992, cited in *ibid*. pp. 169-70; 194- 195.

¹⁶ Laplanche, quoted in *The Wilde century*, p.167, p.169

¹⁷ Laplanche, quoted in Segal, 1994, *op. cit.*, p.243.

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²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990, p.33; p.136.

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²⁴ Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After*, London, Serpent's Tail, 1998, p.163.

²⁵ *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol 26, no.1, May 2015.

²⁶ Eve Sedgwick *Touching Feeling*, Durham and London, Duke Univ Press, 2003; *Out of Time*, *op. cit.*, chapter 5.

²⁷ Lisa Duggan, *The twilight of equality: Neoliberalism, cultural politics and the attack on democracy*, New York, NY, Beacon, 2003, p.50.

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²⁹ Jasbir K. Puar, 'Mapping US Homonormativities', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2006, 13, 1, 67-18, p.67.

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³¹ Cristan Williams, 'Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate interviews Judith Butler' 2nd May 2014, <http://www.transadvocate.com/cristan-williams>, downloaded 16 August, 2015.

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³³ Alan Sinfield, 'Thom Gunn and the Largest Gathering of the Decade', *London Review of Books*, vol 3, no. 3, 13 February, 1992, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v14/n03/accessed> 14 August, 2015.

See ³⁴Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson eds., *Heterosexuality: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, Sage, London, Sage, 1993. This was the position I wrote *Straight Sex* to critique.

³⁵ Alan Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power*, New York, Columbia University Press, p.83.

³⁶ Lynne Segal, *Our of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, London, Verso, chapter 3; Doris Lessing, *Love Again*, London, Flamingo, 1997, p.171.

³⁷Jonathan Dollimore, and David Y.Bayot, *Jonathan Dollimore In Conversation*, Manila, Philippines, De La Salle Univeristy Publishing House, 2013, p.49.

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