Commentary

Welfare Gender Wars

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INTRODUCTION

The November 2002 San Francisco ballot was unusually full of propositions dealing with homeless issues. Most notable this year was the controversial and hotly debated Proposition N, placed on the ballot by city Supervisor Gavin Newsom. Proposition N, aimed at taking away welfare recipients’ cash assistance and replacing it with “in kind” services such as housing, food, and medical treatment, was presented as a solution to homelessness in San Francisco. Proposition N was marketed under the name “Care Not Cash” (CNC). I soon realized that aside from being another disgusting piece of a war that has been declared on poor people in San Francisco, this initiative would have devastating effects for the entire city.

In San Francisco, as in many major cities in the country, the lives of poor and homeless people are criminalized. Without food, shelter, medical care, substance abuse treatment, and mental health treatment, people are forced to do things publicly that others can afford to do in private. The estimated 11,000 to 14,000 people who are homeless on any given night in San Francisco don’t fit into the city’s 1,400 shelter beds, so people sleep in the parks.¹ Businesses and city buildings refuse people who are perceived as homeless access to restrooms, so they use the bathroom outside. Having nowhere to go, they sit on sidewalks. Without space to express themselves privately, they behave “inappropriately” in public. All these behaviors are “quality of life crimes.” People receive citations for sleeping in parks, sitting on sidewalks, public urination, disorderly conduct, trespassing, public intoxication, etc., only because they don’t have a home in

which to do these things. These laws literally make homeless people’s existence illegal. In 1996, over 17,532 “quality of life” citations were given to people who are poor and homeless. The city spent about $7 million on funding the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) and incarcerating people for these offenses. For homeless people, each citation means a fee of $76 that doubles and goes to warrant if it is not resolved within 21 days. People who are homeless are also forced to deal with constant confiscation of their property. Despite how obvious it may be that a shopping cart full of neatly folded items belongs to someone, the SFPD and the Department of Public Works do not hesitate to sweep up an individual’s belongings and take them to the dump.

In addition to all of this, being homeless is a full-time job. Beyond the never-ending search for decent housing, food, medicine, and employment in a city where these things simply don’t exist, people are also forced to try and avoid a constant barrage of court dates, fines, fees, community service, and jail time while having to constantly make sure that the city doesn’t confiscate their few belongings. Enter Proposition N, which would only make this game more absurd and time-consuming. By taking away General Assistance (GA) recipients' cash assistance without increasing support services, CNC would only increase homelessness, crime, and desperation amongst this city’s most vulnerable populations. As such, this initiative warranted a huge response from the activist community.

In this essay, I will first explain the catastrophic dimensions of CNC, and then describe my involvement in the coalition built to oppose it. In particular, I want to suggest that the war on poverty—typified by CNC—is a gender war, and as such must be a focus for queers and feminists. During campaigns dealing with issues of poverty, discourses on money, property, homelessness, and responsibility are all evoked in a way that uses gender as a weapon. Obviously, this has important implications for anyone holding feminist or gender-radical views, as well as the queers, gender deviants, or women who are directly affected by such discourses. Finally, I will discuss the coalitional politics made possible by this kind of analysis, and suggest that such coalitions are integral to combating draconian policies like CNC, which affect all vulnerable communities—poor people, homeless people, women, queers, people of color, immigrants, the disabled—and as such must be opposed by us all.

I. CARE NOT CASH—AN OVERVIEW

General Assistance (GA) is a welfare program designed to help those who fall through the cracks in the welfare system and don’t qualify for any other aid.

3. Id.
4. Id.
People receiving GA must participate in workfare in order to receive their check, unless they qualify for disability and cannot work. They work 32 hours a month to receive up to $395. According to Supervisor Gavin Newsom, this cash grant is far too generous. Other surrounding cities, he says, as well as other major US cities, don’t offer nearly as much cash aid. Gavin claims that because of such “liberal” cash grants offered in San Francisco, people swarm here for this money and use it to buy drugs and alcohol instead of using it to help themselves assimilate into mainstream society.

In June 2002, Gavin began his campaign to cut these benefits by gathering signatures so that his initiative could be placed on the ballot. People were sent out to parks and events to stand on street corners with clipboards. They were paid by the signature. I remember the person who tried to get me to sign it. They made it sound like a progressive measure that would create increases in spending on affordable housing and drug treatment services, and provide homeless people with the “care” they desperately need. I soon found out that “Care Not Cash” was very different from the description I’d received. Instead of increasing homeless services, Gavin wanted to set up a system of surveillance to monitor the activities of people who are homeless. Under CNC, the government decides which services people need. And, if these services are even hypothetically available through government agencies, then the recipient’s GA check is cut to $59 a month, regardless of whether or not such services are actually available or accessible.

Gavin was right when he said that other cities have fewer welfare benefits than San Francisco. Decreases in welfare benefits have been a steady trend all over the nation in the past decade. At the same time, however, homeless populations are increasing at record rates. Gavin cites New York City as a successful example of policy changes like those suggested in CNC. Through intense criminalization of homelessness and bureaucratization of service provisions, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is thought to have effectively re-

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6. Id.
8. I use “they” as a singular pronoun rather than resorting to gender dichotomies.
duced homelessness in Manhattan. Yet, statistically, New York City has had some of the largest increases in homelessness in its history since Giuliani's plan was put into force.\textsuperscript{11} People who are poor and homeless aren't gone—they've been displaced. This is the (desired) result of lifestyle criminalization, property confiscation, and other forms of harassment. By increasing harassment, the city encourages people to leave specific areas of town. These tactics have typically been used by cities in preparation for any event that receives wide attention and draws in money for a city. Presidential visits, sporting events, business conferences, entertainment spectacles, and the like all inspire an upsurge in the prosecution of "quality of life crimes." But this occurs everyday around areas of a city where people tend to spend a lot of money. Business owners, restaurant owners, hotel owners, and other retailers are the typical complainants here. A business owner in a wealthy district of the city merely has to wave a hand, and the SFPD will either force homeless people to "move on" or issue them a citation.

Where are they going to go? Displacement is generally the only achievement of such plans. People are moved to different parts of the city, to different parts of the state, to different parts of the country. While people may claim that fewer homeless people are on the streets, or in the shelters, the numbers are still increasing. Homeless people are now invisible—either in jail or simply shifted around. Even if it were the case that a significant number of people who are poor and homeless were moving to San Francisco to take advantage of our "liberal" welfare assistance (an unwarranted claim), cutting GA would only be taking part in the national displacement of people who are poor and homeless. CNC does nothing to actually address the problems of homelessness. Offering no increase in service provisions, it serves only as another attempt to displace people and to treat poverty as a problem of appearances.

And isn't this just what the business, real estate, and tourist industries want? Such interests lie almost solely in whether or not the image of poverty will deter people from spending their money. People on the streets are "eye-sores" that customers shouldn't have to experience. They make the city dirty and detract from property value. When visibility is thought to be the "problem" of homelessness, and invisibility the goal of homeless programs, death, imprisonment, and displacement become acceptable, if not intentional, solutions. In this view, the victims of homelessness are not the homeless themselves, but rather upper-class individuals forced to look at poor people while they shop.

The CNC campaign was funded almost solely by big businesses, hotel owners, restaurant owners, and tourist interests. Some of the biggest supporters were The Gap, the San Francisco Hotel Council, and the Golden Gate Restaurant Association. Despite its supposedly progressive and caring character, the initiative received very little support from service providers or homeless advocacy

\textsuperscript{11.} \textit{Id.}
CNC is also a logistical monstrosity. If a person doesn’t succeed in reaching a shelter on time, or fails to travel all the way across town to take advantage of some service provision that they need, their benefits are still cut. Besides, despite what Gavin claims, the initiative clearly guarantees no new services. It merely funnels the money taken from poor and homeless folks into the Department of Human Services, where it will most likely end up paying for this new level of bureaucracy. Tracking and identifying people who are homeless and the services they use is expensive, invasive, and time consuming for both people who are homeless and the administrators of such programs. Aside from this, the initiative disregards the fact that people need more than what city-run service provisions can offer them. CNC leaves people only two dollars a day with which they must purchase medicine, personal hygiene products, clothing, and anything else unavailable to them through the city’s few services.

Throughout the campaign Gavin presented himself as a proponent of change; he was a martyr for standing up to homeless advocates and administering a much-needed dose of fatherly tough love to the poor and homeless. The campaign consistently promoted a stereotype of the homeless individual as uncivilized, over-indulgent, drug addicted, alcoholic, lazy, and a threat to our failing economy. Not only do these welfare recipients abuse taxpayers’ hard-earned money goes the argument, but they also are eyesores and threats to money-spending in San Francisco. Gavin ran multiple public service announcements (PSAs) on major television networks, some of which featured homeless people confessing their vices and deceit to those who had given them money. These people told viewers how they had bought alcohol, crack, and speed with their money. One of Gavin’s friends who runs a drug treatment program supplied him with actors for the PSAs. Recovering addicts were taken from the program and made to ask viewers how they felt about where their money had gone. Aside from this obvious exploitation of individuals trying to recover from long-term drug abuse, the heaps of money he spent on the PSAs are equally disgusting. He ran three different PSAs, all on major television networks, and they were run for a total of about two months. Generally these types of PSAs only run for the two weeks prior to election. It seems to me that this money would have been better spent had it gone towards promoting real change, like developing the affordable housing or mental health programs that “Care Not Cash” failed to provide.

The San Francisco Hotel Council should also be recognized for paying ri-

15. Id.
diculous sums of money to promote false stereotypes of homeless folks. They ran a $57,000\textsuperscript{16} billboard campaign all over the city in conjunction with and in support of the CNC campaign. One billboard showed an upper-middle class woman holding a cardboard sign that says, "I want the supervisors to realize that I have rights, too." Others said, "I don't want to have to sweep people off my doorstep," and "I don't want to have to hold my breath past every alley." The billboards attempted to portray their upper class subjects as being alienated from the political process. The people pictured in the billboards suggest that they aren't being listened to; they suggest that the Board of Supervisors caters to the wants and needs of people who are poor and homeless while those who fill "valid" niches in mainstream society are left marginalized and without any rights. These upper class San Franciscans are supposedly so victimized and alienated from the political decision-making process that they have to sarcastically resort to using a cardboard sign to get their message across, mocking homeless people in the process.

II. GENDER, POVERTY, AND THE CAPITALIST PHALLUS

In July 2002, after "Care Not Cash" got enough signatures to be placed on the ballot, and after Gavin threw a big party to celebrate, the Committee Against Increased Homelessness (CAIH) was formed. This was a coalition of low- and no-wage workers, homeless advocates, and activists—a pretty diverse group of people. It was easy to plug in to the CAIH because, at the time, I had recently begun working with the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness in responding to civil rights abuses of people who are poor and homeless in the city. My involvement with CAIH was also spurred by the gendered violence of "Care Not Cash," evident in both its rhetoric and material repercussions. As a young, queer activist, these dimensions both inspired and informed my particular efforts to oppose Proposition N.

I primarily organize with a group called Gay Shame. We're determined to provide a new activism to counter the self-serving and right-leaning values of the gay mainstream and the ever-increasingly complacent left wing. We worked intensely to oppose Proposition N for months. To some, it may seem surprising that a group committed to radical queer political transformation was so passionately involved in a welfare campaign. However, despite appearances to the contrary (thanks in part to the fact that most LGBTI advocacy groups are dominated by affluent white men), queer politics and the war on poverty could not be more intertwined.

The conservative capitalist agenda that Gavin was pushing has many serious practical ramifications for women and queers. As I've said, CNC sets up a

system of tracking the availability of service provisions all over the city. If there is one shelter bed open, an individual receiving GA aid must take advantage of that shelter bed. If they fail to do so for any reason, their welfare benefits are cut and they are left with no money to pay for a bed elsewhere. This specifically becomes a concern for women or members of the queer community who are victims of sexual assault, battering, gay bashings, or tranny bashings. CNC offers no clause to protect these individuals from such harm.

Moreover—and again despite popular appearances to the contrary—in my work it’s become clear that queers constitute a significant portion of the homeless population, particularly in San Francisco. Queers often move to San Francisco to take advantage of the “progressive” atmosphere and its relative willingness to respect different gender and sexual identities in particular. Queer youth, especially, come here from all over the country to escape the oppressive homophobia, transphobia, and gender hegemony that they experience in their daily lives. They come here and realize that San Francisco may not be the best place to pack up and move to. Prices are outrageous and the housing market is a crisis at best. It’s not easy paying $600 a month in rent working a minimum wage job. People often are forced to live on the streets and take advantage of whatever welfare money they can receive. They are often the ones who fall through the cracks in the welfare system and are left receiving GA. It is these individuals that arrive here and realize that what was supposed to be “their community” doesn’t really care about them much at all. The gay “community” is spending money at upscale stores and fancy dance clubs in the Castro—which has been one of the most notoriously anti-homeless areas of the city. During intense gentrification in the 1990’s, poor queers got evicted left and right, and homeless people were criminalized here more than most areas of the city.17 As such, opposing “Care Not Cash” was directly connected to Gay Shame’s critique of dominant gay and lesbian politics.

I’m not content, however, claiming that Gay Shame, as a radical queer group, needed to respond to CNC simply because of these particular implications. For myself, and many others, the campaign was a gender war from the very beginning, irrespective of its particular impact on queers and women.

First, CNC was a gender issue due to our perception of our enemy. Gavin Newsom is the ideal man—he’s rich, politically powerful, big, deep voiced, married to an attractive woman, and lives in a mansion. He represented both a male patriarchal ideal and our greatest misogynist enemy. Gavin is a frat boy’s wet dream, and his paternalistic tough love smacked of the very gender-normative, masculinist oppression Gay Shame seeks to oppose.

More importantly, though, CNC was a gender issue because of the historical origins and discursive representations of the war on poverty more generally.

Many have argued that along with the rise of modern industrial capitalism, gender became a powerful weapon used for social control. Ideas, behaviors, ideologies, and personalities then became battlegrounds of discourse infused with gendered tropes. Modern industrial capitalism relies on such a gendered discourse and has a very gendered meaning. Those values, norms, and virtues that push forth modern industrial capitalism are the same as those attributes archetypically ascribed to males. Hard work, aggression, scientific rationale, self-determinism, physical and mental fortitude, strength, etc. are some of the defining values of modern industrial capitalism. Their opposites only stand in the way of its progression. Weakness, emotionality, submissiveness, and other "feminine" qualities are values that are depreciated and separated from the public sphere and deemed inappropriate for furthering the goals of modern industrial capitalism.

It makes sense, then, that people who are homeless—being victims, enemies, and contradictions of modern industrial capitalism—become feminized. San Francisco author and professor Stephen Ducat explores this as what he calls an "anxious politics of masculinity." Ducat argues that modern mainstream discourse plays off of our gender anxieties by feminizing and emasculating those individuals and behaviors which stand contrary to the ideals of modern industrial capitalism. Those who diverge from the capitalist ideal are indicted as exhibiting incorrect forms of manhood. Thus, those institutions which run contrary to conservative ideals are feminized by mainstream conservative discourse and thus derogated with gendered slurs. Ducat argues that the institution of welfare is feminized and portrayed as an over-mothering government that allows her children to remain in an immature and incorrect state of manhood instead of becoming viable members of society.

C. Kingfisher cites Ruth Smith in claiming that gender becomes a key axis of the poor/non-poor binary in society, where non-poor represent society and civilization, maleness, "good"—that is, controllable—nature, order, autonomy, and freedom, intentionality, independence, universality, morality, and rationality; and the poor represent nature and savagery, femaleness, "bad"—or, uncontrollable—nature, disorder, need and necessity, want, desire, particularity, dependence, immorality, and irrationality.

Similar ideas can be seen in the upsurge of discourse on homelessness that resulted from the CNC campaign. Not only are progressives in San Francisco

20. Id.
22. Kingfisher, supra note 9, at 5.
guilty for over-mothering their children, but the over-indulgent poor and home-
less have not mastered money-spending skills and lead shameful lives that we
must control in a more fatherly and disciplinary way. I heard the term “tough
love” evoked many times by CNC proponents. Gavin purported an image of
himself as a loving and respectable father of the city’s poor and homeless, a mar-
ty for administering a much-needed disciplinary action to the city’s children.
The progressives of the city, he claimed, were doing nothing but upholding the
status quo by rejecting his ideas.

A specific image of the poor and homeless was constructed by this upsurge
of discourse as well. Upon being represented as irrational and uncivilized, they
were also feminized. Ironically, despite this discursive feminization, in the dis-
course on poverty amongst the conservative mainstream, people who are home-
less are typically depicted as male. Rarely is a woman used to portray poverty or
homelessness. In my research, the only images depicting women who were poor
or homeless also included images of their male partners. This fact has two im-
portant implications. First, and most obviously, San Franciscans view (or at
least see) homelessness as a strictly male phenomenon. This is completely con-
trary to what many people have called the “feminization of poverty,” referring to
the increasingly apparent phenomenon that women are more susceptible to be-
coming poor. In San Francisco, 30% of all homeless individuals are single
women. Representing the homeless as men erases the fact that different gen-
ders experience poverty differently, and that women are disproportionately prone
to becoming poor.

However, as I’ve said, this presumptively male homeless population is then
feminized, and portrayed as exhibiting an incorrect form of manhood. Feminin-
ity takes center stage even as women are erased. Homeless men are thought not
to have achieved the self-determinism and strength necessary to thrive in society.
Consider how one journalist describes a hypothetical homeless individual:
“[They are] a person—it might be a man or a woman; it’s hard to say—sitting on
a curb, smelly, dirty, muttering unintelligibly.” In an attempt to portray home-
less people in a negative light, the journalist has taken shots at their presumed
gender identities, thus showing the journalist’s own insensitivity to both class
and gender issues.

The Tenderloin police even go so far as to refer to GA check day as

23. Supervisors Matt Gonzales and Gavin Newsom, Debate on Proposition N at Temple
    Shar’Zahaz, San Francisco, California (October 22, 2002).
24. See generally, Ann Ferguson, Think Globally, Act Locally: A Feminist Theory Class, 2
    TRANSFORMATIONS 94 (1999); Lyn Kathlene, The Feminization of Poverty: Only in Amer-
    ica? Edited by Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg and Eleanor Kremon, 12 WOMEN AND
25. COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS, SAN FRANCISCO, WHO IS HOMELESS?, at http://www.sf-
"Mother’s Day." So, not only is the welfare state feminized by the conservative mainstream as a mother who overindulges her children, but her children are likewise figured as mothers themselves—indigent, dependent upon the aid of their benevolent sons. By derisively calling the homeless “mothers,” the police simultaneously attempt to insult the homeless (by calling them women) and women (by calling mothers indigent and dependent).

It is not only people who are poor and homeless who are feminized by the media and other conservative rhetoric, but also those who sympathize with them. Supervisor Tony Hall, during the debates to pass his legislation to criminalize public urination and defecation, was reported to have referred to homeless advocates as “‘little people’ who tell others how to run their lives.” While “little” here does not explicitly connote femininity, it amounts to a masculinist reproach which conjures up ideas of the effeminate man—the wimp, the weakling, the nag. Supervisor Jake McGoldrick responded by claiming that Hall was deriding the “Mother Theresas of the world.” While conservative Supervisor Hall feminized homeless advocates to criticize their politics and actions, the more liberal Supervisor McGoldrick feminized them with a heroic—and literally saintly—female figure.

The CNC campaign was a gender war between men and non-men—a battle between those with social/political phallic power and those who were born without it, reject it, or aren’t allowed to have it. As I mentioned earlier, any enemy of conservative modern industrial capitalism may be feminized or emasculated. Poor people, racial minorities, people with disabilities, and other disenfranchised people have all been discursively dephallicized, thus bringing huge numbers of people into this symbolic gender war. Gender obviously holds a strongly significant place in the enforcement of the ideas and the organization of modern industrial capitalism, and as such must place the war on poverty and homelessness at the center of any queer or feminist agenda.

III. INTERSECTION AND COALITION

By identifying the gendered dimensions of “Care Not Cash” beyond its direct impact on queers, Gay Shame was able to cross the typical boundaries of staunch identity politics and identify the intersections between them. Doing so allowed us to participate in a powerful and empowering political coalition, one which, in many respects, provided an inspiring model for future coalitional endeavors.

Working against CNC contradicted my general experience with San Francisco activism in which it is very difficult to cross race, sex, class, and gender lines, even if you are working towards the same goals. For example, queer organizing here is often racist and exclusive. Most queer political groups are pre-

27. SF SUPES BAN PUBLIC URINATION, DEFECATION, KRON 4, at http://www.kron.com (last modified July 9, 2002).
dominantly made up and run by white men whose political projects serve a particular set of interests that often diverge from those of low-income people and people of color.

At the same time, I have experienced pretty unpalatable homophobic and transphobic ideas when organizing with people outside my direct community of queer activists. My perceived gender often elicits unwanted remarks from males when they make attempts to bond with me or confide in me about some misogynist, macho thought or endeavor they have been entertaining. People basing their interactions with me on their perception of my gender; people consistently acting in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles and identities; meetings that are dominated by the ideas of the males in a group—these are all indicative of ideas that I consider to be a main component of the organization and implementation of modern industrial capitalism (which all my activism seeks to oppose) and therefore creates a very difficult environment for me to organize within.

With this campaign, however, something odd happened. People seemed to come together and support each other and cooperate in a respectful and real way that I hadn’t seen before. Everyone seemed to be doing their own thing for this campaign. Kids were going around and liberating billboards put up by the Hotel Council. People went around the city putting on slide-shows about Proposition N on the sides of buildings. Others put on a guerilla theater performance inside one of Gavin’s campaign parties. Almost everyone came together to make and fund a “No on Proposition N” PSA. The PSA, created by a group of people mostly from a publication called Poor Magazine, was funded by a huge dinner and dance party. We raised about $11,000. People made and sold T-shirts, zines, CDs, and patches. Bands performed, people read poetry, people spoke from their work and experience, and DJ’s gave us music to dance to. The party was amazing. We all just kind of sat back together and relaxed for a while. Everyone got together and had fun dancing, eating, talking, and laughing in the midst of this enormous monster of a campaign. It was oddly inspiring that we were able to somehow pull all of our resources together to get a PSA aired for two weeks. What was even better was that at the end we were really able to sit down and have fun with each other. As different groups, communities, and individuals expressed their opposition to CNC with their own particular strategies and styles, this diversity of identity, opinion, and approach was a source of inspiration rather than polarization. My own experience is emblematic.

Gay Shame’s style of activism is sort of scary to some people, and that’s kind of the point. Very often our demonstrations intimidate, frighten, and alienate people since we freely incorporate those aspects of queer culture that people tend to be uncomfortable around. Our festivals of resistance often include sex, drugs, music, dancing, free food, drag, and outrageous behavior as major themes. During the campaign against “Care Not Cash” we did a wheatpasting campaign that placed Gavin Newsom’s face, home phone number, and home address onto what looked like a sex-worker’s ad, sexualizing him and urging people to call his
house and visit him at home. We tried to call attention to the fact that Gavin loves to put his pretty face on almost everything he does. He loves making public appearances and starring in his own commercials. He shamelessly uses his good looks to exploit the conservative mainstream gay vote in San Francisco as well. We also threw a party outside of his campaign office in his wealthy and conservative Marina district. In the streets right outside his restaurant, wine store, night club, and campaign office, we blocked off traffic and rolled a blood-splattered runway down the middle of the road. People dressed up like members of San Francisco’s exploitation and gentrification past, present, and future and walked the runway. Dianne Feinstein, Mayor Willie Brown, and Gavin Newsom himself all made their appearances. Work that gentrification, baby.

While these kinds of political strategies sometimes alienate people, throughout the campaign against Proposition N, members of the coalition seemed to love it. People from all the different groups were genuinely excited about what Gay Shame was doing. People would come up to us and tell us that they were so happy that we were doing this, that this hadn’t been happening in San Francisco for so long. Our creative, outrageous, and excessive performances combined with intense political messaging are what has defined San Francisco activism in the past. Many people say that recently it has been on the decline. Throughout the course of the campaign, people began to borrow different themes and tactics from us, as we did from them. More importantly, though, we went to their demonstrations and had fun, and they came to ours and were just as excited. I remember one guy who had made some inappropriate remarks about a tranny who was walking down the street. At the Gay Shame demonstration two weeks later, the same guy came in full drag with makeup, and he kissed me on the mouth.

These shared experiences allowed for an important and much-needed cultural exchange in the San Francisco activist community. Maybe, for just a little bit, we experienced our race issues, our class issues, and our gender issues as intertwined in a common struggle. Maybe this common struggle fostered a climate of mutual sensitivity, openness and learning. Maybe, for just a minute, we stopped to honor our differences and build on our commonalities, to treat one another as more than members of a category and to see where the edges of our various categories overlapped. And maybe, as we opened up to other communities and cultures and saw where they were coming from, we toned down our criticisms and judgments. Not that it is bad to think critically about the prejudices each of us harbors, but the climate of trust and openness in this coalition allowed us to express disagreement without being as offensive or abrasive as we sometimes are about things. I know that it is very easy for me to jump on anyone for the slightest linguistic mishap, particularly around issues of gender and sexuality. And I’m not saying this doesn’t serve an important purpose at times—I just think that it was beneficial to live just a little bit outside of that for a minute, to take more in stride because we understood that we all had each other’s
back in this struggle. In this way we could cooperate in a real way without having to spend all of our time worrying about the animosities between us.

I don’t think that it was just the fact that we toned down our judgments, but that when we were working together we began to have a genuine and informed understanding of each other. We began to really interact with people in non-racist, non-sexist, and non-classist ways. The lines we drew to separate ourselves from other groups seemed to disappear for a little while because we experienced the commonality in our struggle and were open to the different ways each of us could contribute to the fight. The coalition lasted just long enough to really experience something interesting that may never happen again and may never happen to many people. It created an exchange and coalition building that I would have never expected.

Now the campaign is over. We lost. Proposition N, Care Not Cash, is apparently going to take away much needed money from people who can’t get it anywhere else. Of course, the results could end up being disastrous for everyone in this city. When Proposition N goes into force, homelessness will increase, more people will spend time in jail, and people will be displaced even further away from the city. The terrifying implications of Proposition N mean that coalescional work around these issues will be needed more than ever, and it is heartening to think of how many different contingents of people this campaign successfully brought together.

CONCLUSION

Of course it was Gavin Newsom, the ideal male, who would pass through an initiative like Care not Cash. Of course the discourse surrounding the initiative was laden with gendered meanings and weapons. Thus, it should not be (but too often is) surprising that radical queers were some of the initiative’s loudest opponents. Poverty is an issue for queers and feminists just as the struggles of women and queers are poverty issues. Separating the two makes each individual struggle weaker and incomplete.

It’s obvious to me that strong coalitions of people will be necessary to fight against future, scary campaigns like Proposition N. This will necessitate that people recognize and understand where their struggles cross over with those of others. Issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality all overlap, and we all use them to police and oppress each other. I feel as though the CNC Campaign fostered an understanding of this, and that was why we were able to work successfully together. We lost the campaign, but something valuable came out of it. For many people, a kind of understanding developed that allowed them to better comprehend and accept the experiences and influence of “different” groups of people. As activists, we can all learn from and build on this lesson. We must allow the links that our own politics have with other oppressed groups to grow and mature. We have to proactively search to comprehend these links and un-
nderstand where our struggles overlap with those of others. It is here that coalitions of people can be strengthened. Our own struggles will remain deficient if we do not make an effort to cultivate and understand how we are connected to others.

Just last week I experienced a stark reminder that the fight against Gavin Newsom and his oppressive political agenda is far from over. I was a member of a group of queer activists that decided to protest an appearance Newsom planned to make at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center. Although we protested peacefully and in no way did anything to elicit such a response, the SFPD bashed us horribly. The police physically injured many of us, including one person who got hit in the face with a police baton. Her tooth was knocked out, and she had to get stitches in her lip. It was cruelly ironic that Gavin’s appearance warranted the bashing of queers outside of their own LGBT Center of San Francisco. A few months ago Gavin Newsom announced that he was running for mayor. I wonder what this new era in San Francisco could look like. I’m scared and I sometimes think I might want to move away from the city if he becomes mayor. However, I take courage from the fact that something good came of the campaign against Proposition N, and I hope that as the political climate becomes increasingly hostile to poor people and other marginalized groups we will see this kind of fruitful collaboration emerge again.