**Queer Kinks and the Arc of Justice: Meditations on Failure, Persistence and Public Education[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Introduction**

In 2012 rumors began to circulate that Chicago’s Ames Middle School would be “converted” into another of the city’s then-five Department of Defense-run public schools. In Chicago’s menu of educational choices, these schools are public—receiving tax dollars—but “privately” operated by a branch of the military. Ames was located in prime real estate in Humboldt Park, a predominantly non-white Latinx community touted in 2014 as the “10th hottest real estate market in the nation” (Latrace, 2014) adjacent to the already gentrified neighborhoods of Logan Square and Wicker Park. The Ames school facilities, constructed in 1998 after extensive community engagement, were in relatively good condition. A perceived key barrier to Humboldt Park’s gentrification were the neighborhood public schools, full of unruly nonwhite bodies (not “normal,” as a resident commented on a “neighborhood news and talk” webpage) and rated poorly on online real estate sites. For those seeking to wrest profit from the area’s land, questions loomed: How could this neighborhood be fully opened up for the new “urban pioneers” (Smith, 1996)? How could realtors and other investors project an image of orderliness, safety, and most importantly, familiarity, to lure homeowners into venturing farther west and south from established, and whiter, strongholds? Chicago Public Schools, attuned to these concerns, first announced that a majority of Humboldt Park’s schools were “underutilized” and then followed with a plan to close five (Johnson & Hauser, 2013).

While this tale, too familiar to many in urban school districts, does not on its face easily translate as a pivotal example of *queer* justice work, we argue that Ames offers a perfect window to explore the nuances of how struggles for justice and liberation are *queer* and how a queer lens is necessary to building meaningful resistance, over the long term. Without this analysis, important locations of resistance might be overlooked and queer histories erased, not only weakening movements for liberation for all, but erasing how intersectional mobilizations are, and how central a queer lens is to building freedom. To note, throughout this article we use queer to signify a politic and organizing focused on, in Cathy Cohen’s (1997) words, “struggles that...disrupt dominant norms of sexuality” and developing “truly radical or transformative politics” (437-8).

We have always named counter-recruitment and demilitarization organizing as queer justice work. Prior to the 2012 struggle at Ames, as two academics and active community members we participated in early grassroots mobilizations against the establishment of Department of Defense public schools in Chicago, and continue to protest the privatization of education in many forms, and to support varied movements for queer justice. For example, we started Teachers Against Militarized Education almost a decade ago to build on the work of communities and young people to focus attention on the Chicago Public School’s partnerships. As activists and scholar Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and others remind us, not all queers are white, or able-bodied, or wealthy, thus LGBTQ liberation necessarily includes struggles against racism, ableism, capitalism *and militarism*. Queer, therefore, signifies a political stance that our struggles for freedom and self-determination are one. This is critical; as Audre Lorde (1982) noted, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives” (Para. 14). And, as the push towards the militarization of young Black and Brown bodies is -- blatantly -- about disciplining unruly bodies, how can this not be a queer struggle? This article and the engagements it reflects is thus radical queer study involved with identifying and refusing “intertwined sexual, racial, gender and class norms” (Hobson, 2016, p. 194).

Public schools have long been both a proxy, and a clarion call, for housing markets. In Chicago, as in many urban centers, any engagement with educational reforms—school closures, “turn-arounds” or “conversions”—requires an analysis of the linkages between public schooling, race, labor, housing markets, and geography. The 2008 mortgage and housing crisis stalled the last wave of gentrification which reshaped Chicago’s formerly Latinx and/or poor white neighborhoods. Yet repopulating and whitening schools continues to be key to restructuring neighborhoods. If prospective (white) homeowners perceive a public school to be affluent and white enough for their children, the prices of the houses in that neighborhood increase. Whiter and more affluent parents demand and receive more resources. When one of the largest vertical housing projects in the country—the Robert Taylor Homes—was dismantled in 2005, the young black and brown students who used to live there were not able to move from their decrepit existing school, which had no functioning bathrooms or playground, to the fancy new incredibly well-equipped school that was built to accommodate the new (white) homeowners. As the community surrounding Ames Middle School in Humboldt Park knew intimately, school restructuring is about real estate and race, resources and containment.

The community did not support this “conversion” without resistance.

In 2012 then-CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), David Vitale, initially publicly denied rumor (Joravsky, 2013), but in 2013 plans emerged confirming that Ames was indeed slated to be converted into a military academy. The Mayor claimed an increased demand for military education, and thus a “need for seats”, but more likely it was the whim of an alderman who saw the school as a way to control students he observed “flashing gang signs” and “using profanity” (Johnson, 2013; Joravsky, 2013). Military schools are a clear way to signify that unruly Black and Brown bodies are being “straitened” and “straightened” (our words). In any case, the new military school was touted as just one option among others in the “choice” system promoted by CPS, which purported to offer families an array of educational options, from career and tech, to arts and college prep. Whatever the stated goal, what has resulted is a system in which racialized youth are contained in a host of ways, including geographically divided offerings, with “rich curriculums” like performing and visual arts, provided in largely whiter and wealthier city areas, and schools explicitly focused on discipline and control offered more often within predominantly Black and brown communities, as was the case with Ames (Lutton, 2014). With support from a local community organization, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, town hall forums were organized and resistance spread. While non-binding, a community referendum rejected the idea of a military-themed school. Despite widespread opposition and protest, in the fall of 2014, Marine Leadership Academy at Ames opened as a military school for grades 8 - 12.

Fast forward to 2017 and, according to the CPS website, 823 students, some as young as twelve-years-old, are swimming in their military uniforms in Humboldt Park, where housing prices continue to accelerate (Bookwalter, 2016) and the local paper has shifted to market Latinx food and culture as a “valued” “spice” to the neighborhood (McGuire, 2017). The 2017 CPS website reports that 96% of the school’s students are low-income and 92% are Hispanic (and 6.6% are African American).These conditions are not unique to Chicago. Across the nation, educational reforms are linked to and accelerate real estate markets, and, unsurprising to the many directly impacted, the communities most affected are also those that generate the most bodies for our military/prison industrial complex.

On the heels of this local school conversion, other facets of the military industrial complex also transitioned. In 2011 the law prohibiting openly gay and lesbian people to serve in the military, known as Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT), was repealed. In 2015 then-President Obama lifted the ban and made it possible for transgender people to serve openly in the US military (Crabtree, 2015). In fact, it appears that trans people serve in the military at twice the rate of others in the US, and transgender people who have served are three times as likely to have experienced homelessness as the general population (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2017). Despite the evidence that complex factors shape decisions to participate in military service and the challenging post-service experiences of trans veterans, the *Washington Post* highlighted a positive effect lifting the ban would have, quoting transgender Army Capt. Jacob Eleazer, “Basically, it means I’m going to have an opportunity to have a career I never thought I would,” he said. “This is really good news” (Somashekar & Whitlock, 2015, Para. 21).

And then November 8, 2016 arrived. The results of the election reminded us of what some have known for centuries – from Sojourner Truth to Sylvia Ray Rivera: there is no one or given “community” of women or LGBTQ folks. The mainstream media expressed surprise that 42% of all women voted for Trump – how could women vote for the self-proclaimed pussy grabber? But, *women* didn’t choose the president, financially comfortable white women did: 53% of white women voted for Trump, and the median income of his supporters was $70,000 (Roberts & Ely, 2016). 94% of Black women did not vote for Trump (Rogers, 2016). And approximately 45 % of the total population couldn’t muster it up to vote for any candidate (Taylor, 2016).

The new administration wasted no time establishing its military industrial foundations. The proposed 2017 federal budget, which decimated funding for the arts, libraries, public education, and more, included a $54 billion dollar increase in military spending (Shear & Steinhauser, 2017). Retired and active military personnel are key and active components of the new Administration and Trump himself boasts: “I am really good at war” (Kroll, 2016).[[2]](#footnote-2)

And on the queer[[3]](#footnote-3) front, in a U-turn from the previous administration, despite the purported behind-the-scenes LGBTQ champion Ivanka Trump (Karni, 2017), the new administration moved quickly to signal its lack of support for LGBTQ lives by pursuing a decidedly anti-gay agenda. Unlike his predecessor, the Trump White House did not issue a proclamation in support of Pride month, June 2017 (Stafford, 2017). Categories related to sexual orientation (and as this article goes to press, potentially related to citizenship status) will be removed from the next Census. Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education, states she will not sanction schools that discriminate against transgender students, and may not block federal funds going to schools that discriminate against LGBTQ students and staff. Employment protections for LGBTQ federal workers are deleted. Religious exemptions, the back-door route to homophobia and other forms of discrimination, are enshrined through Trump’s so-called Religious Liberty executive order of May 2017 (Scott, 2017). In the summer of 2016 Trump used his Twitter account to announce a ban on transgender individuals serving openly in the military; this was followed by guidance for implementing his tweets, which was blocked by the courts in late 2017. And this is just a gloss of anti-queer news from the first few months of the new Administration.

This political moment, like too many before, gives us pause. With our queer lens, the speed with which the Trump administration rescinded some of the limited protections made available to some gay, lesbian and transgender people, in conjunction with the doubling down on a military agenda and supporting the continued erosion of public schools, functioned as an alarm and a wake-up call. Within this framing, it is important that to name the resistance to a militarized Ames School as a critical *queer* struggle aimed at refusing the containment of Black, brown and low income youth. We propose that it is essential to study continuities between this moment, and administration, and previous ones, as we strategize our movement and survival. What can be learned from the shift from the neoliberal “gay friendly” military-lite and “choice school” affirming Obama regime to a more nakedly visible endorsement of structures of oppression? As now-seasoned, yet always learning initiators and supporters of many justice efforts, it seems to us that this moment of transition is yet another juncture in what historian Saidiya Hartman (2007) has termed the “afterlife of slavery,” marked by “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (p. 6). These moments, while painful, illustrate the importance of continuing to identify the contours of our extensive military industrial complex (MIC), and also of keeping queer—that is, liberatory, in Cohen’s (1997) phrasing, “transformational”—social and political movements alive for the long haul (p. 442).

While many are quick to cite Martin Luther King’s dubious maxim, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (and it is frequently quoted by former President Obama), less ink and airtime has been dedicated to showing us how to *stay the course,* queerly, as we continue organizing toward what often feel like increasingly distant ends. We want to know: What does it mean to continue to learn, to work, and to stay on the arc, for the long haul? And, is this arc offered to distract us into participating in a narrative of progress—it always gets better!—rather than bolstering us through the hard slog of putting our “queer shoulders to the wheel,” as Allen Ginsberg (1956) urged. Centered in our ongoing work against the privatization of public education via the militarization of schools, this meditation maps struggles against the MIC in schools and with LGBTQ justice movements, offering thoughts about the long haul, and what it means to approach our organizing queerly.

By using the word “meditation” in our title we aim to signify that this analysis and writing is explicitly tethered to our political movements and also tenaciously framed as a traditional academic product; we want to use this space to reflect on our organizing, and offer our analyses to others similarly invested. And because we are both academics and participants in movements, this writing reveals both standpoints.[[4]](#footnote-4) Grounded in our context and our local work in Chicago, this paper begins by identifying the role that the racialized and heterogendered conception of “discipline” plays in the contested national history of the establishment of Department of Defense schools and in the privatization of public education. Second, we explore concurrent historical shifts in LGBTQ movements—the rise of a politics of assimilation and muting of a liberatory and queer agenda—and the implications of this shift for K-16 anti-militarization campaigns in educational contexts. Finally, this article steps back from the ruins of this political moment to assess potential pathways and what difference a queer lens might make, both now and in future tense.

**Part 1). The long haul: Resisting militarization, queering discipline**

Today, public military schools and programs are an established part of the schooling landscape. While there is no data available about the number of Department of Defense-sponsored public schools across the United States, data is available about the number of students in each branch of the military’s Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC). The Army JROTC reports, as of 2017, that they work with “314,000” cadets, operate in “1,700 public and private high schools, military institutions, and correctional centers throughout the United States and overseas” and fifty percent of their students are minorities. As well, 88,719 students participated in Navy JROTC programs in 2017.

While militarized public education settings are now ubiquitous, resistance to these schools, which were promoted in the early 1990’s as a way to regulate difference and stem the nation’s “moral rot” and solve the “social problems” of immigration and labor organizing, is also well-established (Bartlett & Lutz, 1998, pp. 122-23). The National Education Association rejected universal military training at its 1915 meeting, and parents, students and educators organized in the 1920s to protest school-based military education (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). Interest in military schools dwindled after the Vietnam War (Tugend, 2005). And a decade ago communities in our home base, Chicago, organized to push back against the imposition of Department of Defense-sponsored schools on the public education system (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). The city’s then-mayor, Richard M. Daley and Arne Duncan, then the Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools endorsed these schools as useful additions to the “choice” system of schooling already in place in the city (Schmidt, 2007). In addition to claiming that the military academies expanded college preparatory seats for Chicago’s high school students, nearly all low income and of color, echoing the arguments of the past, Daley and Duncan stressed the disciplinary benefits of attending public military schools. For example, describing the Marine Military Academy, Duncan offered this:

We’ve combined a rigorous college-prep curriculum with the order and structure of a military academy to create a high quality high school that gives its students the skills they need to excel in college and the discipline that will help them throughout their entire life. (Schmidt, 2007)

By the mid-2000s Chicago was home to more public military high schools than any other city in the United States, with three Army schools and one representing every other branch of the military, and thousands of children were enrolled in military-supported programs beginning as early as middle school (Martin, 2007; McDuffee, 2008). In the 2016-2017 academic year, according to the CPS website, the total enrollment for these six schools was 2,958, almost exclusively Latinx and Black students.

In Chicago, the initial move to establish military “choice” schools faced significant local opposition. Many educators and community members, as well as others, including veterans’ groups and the American Friends Service Committee, mobilized a wide range of actions against the schools, from protests to supporting the election of activists to Local School Councils. (One of the authors served as a community representative on a local school council for six years, working to oppose a Naval academy installed against community wishes in the building of Senn High School, a community school, and to support efforts to develop an arts education focus at Senn). As two examples, Iraq Veterans Against the War initiated a “Truth in Recruiting” campaign that developed and distributed counter-recruitment materials, and the grassroots community organization, Committee Against Militarization of our Youth, coalesced to educate Latinx students and families about military recruitment, and to promote non-military options (Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2017; *Comite Anti-Militarizacion*, 2017).

“Choice” continues to be one of the most popular public narratives officials use to justify the expansion of these schools—for example, in his defense of converting Ames to a military schools, in 2013 Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel stated “Choice includes those schools, because more parents want to send their kids to school.” (Cox, 2013). Yet, as many scholars and activists have unpacked, neither the rhetoric of choice nor popularity ring true. As our own research has illustrated, many parents, and young people, “choose” these schools because other options—the “good public schools”—are closed off for a range of crucial yet invisible reasons: Students cannot score high enough on standardized exams to even qualify for their wait lists for enrollment. Transportation out of the neighborhood is expensive and challenging. Applying to these schools requires filling out paperwork and meeting deadlines. For these reasons and more, students and their families are shut out of heavily resourced, high performing, restrictive enrollment public schools (see, for example, Galaviz, et al, 2011 and Meiners & Quinn, 2011).

Narratives of discipline and safety underscored these forms of public school restructuring and “choice.” Chicago Alderman Roberto Maldonado, reports indicate, forcefully argued for a military school at Ames because of his belief, apparently on the basis of one visit, that the school was “gang ridden” and the students needed “discipline” (Scipes, 2014). Military-themed public schools run by the Department of Defense are often deemed essential by politicians, among others, because urban racialized youth are identified as undisciplined, unruly (loud, dressed inappropriately), and even dangerous, and in need of control (Quinn & Meiners 2009; Lipman 2003). These youth are thus targeted for enrollment in charters and public military schools so that they can be constrained through military-style discipline, uniform appearance requirements, and strong male role models. While the goal of uniformity is expressed as though neutral, the details make clear that youth of color are the target. For example, the Cadet Handbook of the Chicago Military Academy (2017) bans Timberlands, leggings/jeggings, tight clothes (for girls), and hoodies (pp. 8-10). Especially in gentrifying areas, this push is just one more way to ‘clean up’ a neighborhood.

Even if discipline is a valid goal and not just a code for heterogendered and racialized control, the school-based routes to discipline offered to the children of the most privileged in society involve the acquisition of expertise. Art education (dance, music instruction, theater and performance, visual arts), sports and physical education, after-school activities, and clubs ranging from chess and debate to radio journalism (and many more) all cultivate discipline but are not available equally to all youth. These programs build focus and skills, and teach responsibility, community, and self-motivation and control*.* Yet, in Chicago 20 percent of principals report that their public schools offer no arts programming at all, with children in low-income communities of color less likely to have school art instruction than students in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods (Arts Alliance Illinois 2005, 15). And in 2010, 164 public schools in Chicago had no libraries (Ahmed-Ullah, 2010). As alarming, reports indicate that few—as little as 10%—US schools teach computer science, and only 2% of students learn how to code (Partovi & Partovi, 2013; Wills, 2016). In the end, it’s clear that when promoting the disciplinary value of military education, politicians are imagining, and signaling, *dog whistle*-style, that “other” children—Black, brown, immigrants, poor, queer—need to be “manned up” through drills, uniforms, and a narrow—not music, but military history!—curriculum. White comfort and safety depends on the active suppression of others, Black and brown, through a wide range of institutions and naturalized practices. Military public schools are perhaps the most visceral and visible instantiation of this logic, yet militarization is omnipresent, shaping everything from how we travel and enter buildings, to the ways that concerns for safety and order are triggered and mobilized as governing mechanisms (Graham, 2011).

Indeed, discipline and safety have a specific and complex resonance in all policy discussions tied to schools, including Department of Defense public schools, particularly in recent Chicago history. On September 24, 2009, the death of Derrion Albert, a student at Christian Fenger Academy High School on Chicago’s south side, reverberated across the globe. Albert was beaten to death with boards by other young people, an event that was filmed by peers and posted online. For many, Albert’s death became emblematic of the “brutality common in Chicago’s toughest neighborhoods,” as reported in the *New York Times* (Saulny 2009). Dramatic headlines proliferated. Failing schools, out-of-control youth of color, and lax security often figured prominently in media representations of this “epidemic” of youth violence. Disinvestment in urban communities of color, the history of race and public schooling in Chicago, and unequal school funding formulas were invisible in mainstream media coverage about youth violence. Yet, it is well-documented that school closure destabilizes neighborhoods, engineers conflict, and exacerbates violence (see Lipman & Person, 2007 and Gutierrez & Lipman, 2014). For example, in the 2009 death of Derrion Albert at Fenger Academy, the policy of school closures was partially culpable. Students from the Altgeld Gardens public housing complex were forced to travel from their community to Fenger after their local school, Carver High School, was transformed into a restrictive-enrollment public military academy. According to news reports, “Students that didn't have high test scores were forced to attend Fenger Academy near 112th and Halsted and, for some, that meant two or three buses each day to and from school” (Hill, 2013). While the Chicago Public Schools do not acknowledge that school closures were a factor in Albert’s death (Karp 2009; “Derrion Albert’s Death May Be Rooted in School Closures,” 2009), many attribute the violence at Fenger to the instability of public schools in this region: “Chicago police have acknowledged that Albert’s slaying was related to the mixing of students from different neighborhoods, but they didn’t respond to questions from The Associated Press about whether the violent deaths were related to school closings” (“Derrion Albert’s Death” 2009).

While some mainstream media outlets reported that school closures would further destabilize vulnerable communities and also put students at risk, their coverage did not address the hyper police presence in most of these neighborhoods. The recent conversion of Carver High School to a restrictive enrollment, and according to some research, poorly resourced public military school, was not explored as a factor (Williams, 2005). In other words, low-income youth of color living in some of Chicago’s most segregated, resource-starved, and highly policed and surveilled communities were pushed into schools with more of those constraints—the khakis, the drills, the regimentation—and little evidence of benefits, revealing the lie behind claims that these public military schools are choices, offer a good education, and support youth by providing stability and safety. In fact, they are exposed as primarily agents of control, not education. The long view helps us to understand this, and our work for the long haul is to continue to resist logics that promote suffering here, and in all the places the US military reaches. Our queer imaginings are aimed at the long-term labor of building the richly-resourced schools and other public institutions all our children and communities deserve.

**Part 2). Another queer juncture: liberation or assimilation?**

While discipline was being used as one tool to further privatize and militarize public education, the LGBTQ movement grappled with growing pains, particularly related to the military industrial complex. Counter-recruitment and anti-military organizing formed new alliances with gay rights groups. Gone were the earlier 1970s era anti-war coalitions that included gay and lesbian organizations militant opposition to the military industrial complex, in their wake, gay inclusion. A key argument used to advance counter-recruitment and anti-militarization work in educational, and other, spaces, throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s involved highlighting the anti-gay policies and practices within the military. The Clinton Administration-advanced *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell* (DADT) law, which prohibited openly gay, bisexual and lesbian personnel from serving in the military, was deployed successfully in San Francisco to establish a moratorium on the JROTC Program in 2006 in public K-12 schools (Tucker, 2006). While some universities and colleges organized to remove ROTC programs in the Vietnam era, most visibly with success at Harvard University, DADT was similarly implemented to question, halt and sometimes remove ROTC Programs and military recruiters from college and university campuses (Merrigan, 2011). Subsequently, the “ban” against transgender people serving was also used to question the legitimacy of ROTC programs on campus. Even military higher education program supporters cited concerns about trans exclusion:

Psychology Professor Ewart Thomas, chair of the [Stanford] Ad Hoc Committee on ROTC, said the "most wrenching" arguments he heard against reinstating ROTC came from some of the many supporters of Stanford's transgender students. He said the committee failed to see any good reason for excluding transgender people from service, merely because they are transgender, adding that transgender troops are allowed in Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, Israel, the Czech Republic, Thailand and Australia. (Sullivan, 2011)

Many of these campaigns that flagged institutional sanctions against LGBTQ communities, like DADT, elected to use this tactic, most likely because it was viewed as “low hanging fruit” or an easy and pragmatic strategy for gaining attention and support for the rights of lesbians and gays, if not their liberation, or social justice, more broadly. (How could San Francisco not be incensed about open forms of discrimination against lesbian, bisexuals and gays?).

Yet, when DADT was repealed, and full inclusion offered for transgender personnel, ROTC programs returned. The leadership of many post-secondary campuses, for example, specifically cited the repeal of DADT as the hurdle that had to be overcome before the military programs were reinstated at many universities (see, for example, Dwyer, 2010 and “Agreement allows the R.O.T.C. to return to Harvard after decades away,” 2011).

Through one lens, the resurgence of ROTC programs on campuses is a homonationalist win. Homonationalism, introduced by Lisa Duggan in 2003 (and amplified by Puar in 2007 and others), refers to the growing inclusion of select gays and lesbians and potentially some transgender people into the folds of the state, which can function as a “barometer by which the legitimacy of, and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated” (Puar 2013, p. 35). Gay marriage or transgender participation in the military, for example, is a marker of progress. These forms of state recognition can even work to cover or “pinkwash” (or, legitimize through a gay rights discourse) other forms of violence or state abandonment (Spade & Willse, 2014; Britt, 2015). For scholars such as Liz Montegary (2015) “homonormative projects transform previously pathologized homosexuals into respectable homopatriotic citizens” (p. 893), while at the same time, as Spade and Willse (2014) note, reinforcing progress narratives that “affirm the role of the United States as arbiter” of who and what can be included in the category of universal and thus worthy of (militarized) attention (p.9). Using the example of a speech by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Spade and Willse (2014) identify how a rights discourse framed as protective of “vulnerable LGBT refugees and asylum seekers” is used to justify US “security operations” world-wide (p. 11-12) while obscuring that “racially subordinated and indigenous populations” in the US have been “left behind by this agenda” (p. 11). Mainstream gay and lesbians organizations fuel this homonationalist logic by placing millions of dollars and massive public relations machines behind pro-same sex marriage campaigns (and not into movements to increase access to affordable housing or to raise the minimum wage) and actively promoting LGBTQ military inclusion. As Montegary (2015) concludes, "the best resourced LGBT organizations strengthen militarized forms of social control in the United States and abroad" (p. 911). Not only has mainstream US LGBT advocacy reinforced militarism and homonormativity, but, as Puar (2007) and others suggest, these forms of pinkwashing (while always resisted) have fortified Islamophobia, white supremacy, empire and war.

While arguing against the exclusion of LGBT people from the military appears to center queer lives, opposing military systems because they discriminate against gay, lesbian or transgender people isn’t an effective tactic to build towards the more just world we know we need. Political theorist Nancy Fraser (1997) argues that social movements frequently shift to the legislative and legal realm, and that this redirection results in recognition, but not redistribution. Justice mobilizations often agitate or settle for recognition. And, it should be said that recognition is not insignificant. Yet, Fraser notes, redistribution demands that power be reorganized. For example, while the legalization of same-sex marriage permits some gays and lesbians visibility and access to limited resources—among them, health-care and parental rights—this move does not radically redistribute access to all the important resources attached to marriage that are desperately needed by many and deserved by all (see Shell, 2013 for an enumeration of federal benefits of marriage). Building a jail for trans or non-gender-conforming folks is a form of recognition, as is permitting gays to serve openly in the military, but these moves strengthen and build systems that continue to harm communities. Assimilation or liberation? Recognition or redistribution? These are old tensions, and old questions raised by too many before us.

As we reflect on the campaigns to halt military recruitment and programs on K-16 campuses that centered demands for LGBTQ inclusion, we are reminded of all the tactics and arguments that were not used: Why not argue for other, peace-focused, structures altogether? Why not remind queer people of the role of the U.S. military in devastating indigenous nations here and elsewhere? Of suppressing democratic dissent? Destroying ecosystems and health? Disabling? Why not a campaign that illustrates the military’s history of endemic sexual assault? And gender-restricting norms? In fact, queer organizations have a long history of coalitional “anti-militarist, anti-imperialist organizing” precisely because of these concerns and goals (Hobson, 2016, pp. 1, 9). Yet, rather than these possibilities, the hard facts remain that over half of all federal discretionary spending in the U.S. is military-related and that *every hour* since 2001 the total cost of wars exceeds $8 million (“Military spending in the United States,” 2015; “Cost of national security,” 2015); and that nearly 4 million veterans in 2014 had a service-related disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (FFF: Veteran’s Day, 2015). Equal access has little value when the outcomes are suffering across generations, geographies, and time, and the promise of mutually assured destruction.

And despite decades of organizations raising these questions—from the Women’s Peace Party (est. 1915) to Iraq Veterans Against the War (est. 2004)—and mountains of research, these arguments, some might argue, are too radical. The move to have a moratorium for the military based on its discriminatory status against gays, bisexuals and lesbians (and, also as public consciousness shifted, its ban on transgender service members) was an easy strategy that many rightly assumed might purchase some short term success in our movement toward justice. In contrast, the demand to keep the military far away from public education, or to shrink or end our reliance on the military industrial complex altogether, might seem to be “too much” or to move “too fast” for some. Yet the demands that are perceived as easier or more workable—narrowly focusing on an end to discrimination against gays and lesbians (so that queers, too, can benefit from the disproportionate share of public funds that maintain the military in all its manifestations, and participate in the destruction of lives and ecosystems around the world)—rely on and naturalize, the underlying logics of the military industrial complex.

**Conclusion: Arcs of persistence, queer kinks, radical imaginations**

Despite years of work in our own neighborhood, including the lengthy stint on the local school council, the Rickover Naval Academy High School continues to enroll students and occupy a third of the Senn High School building. And after years of organizing, the arts education option was finally approved for Senn, only to open as a restrictive enrollment program—including a mandatory portfolio review required prior to admittance—in a system in which many elementary schools offer little or no art preparation to their students. To add insult to that injury, Senn’s principal lost her job after being caught lowering the scores of applicants with Individualized Educational Plans (programs of learning developed to ensure that disabled children receive specialized, appropriate instruction and services), to exclude them from the art program (Rice, 2016). The narrative of choice, with an accompanying mantra of the need for “discipline” for “urban youth” despite years of work by community organizers, scholars and parents, is still deployed by policy-makers to justify many forms of education privatization, including military schools. Despite the work of many, including Iraq Veterans Against the War, American Friends Service Committee, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, and the *Comite Anti-Militarizacion*, Ames was converted to a military program. The five other Department of Defense-sponsored schools in Chicago continue to operate and the JROTC program flourishes. In short, the military industrial complex is thriving in Chicago’s public education system.

Yet, rather than *failure*, what we identify in this narrative is a radical imagination coupled with *persistence*. We put our queer shoulders to the wheel every day, but our queer eyes are on a different future. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) writes that “the future is queerness’s domain.” “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.” “We are not yet queer,” he writes, “but we might use its possibility to help us imagine a future, and to make our futures in the present” (2009, 2). Requiring more than a radical imagination, challenging militarization for the long haul asks us to live as if we were already beyond this punishing time. We know that despite the inability of many groups to close the Department of Defense schools, for example, organizing and research in public creates ongoing political education. Building campaigns for closure created and strengthened alliances between local anti-gentrification groups and anti-war veterans, between peace and justice groups and queer activists. These alliances not only produce many valuable “collateral” consequences—organizations and movements grow because of shared analysis—but through these new and deepening connections, a growing ad hoc network of queers, multiracial, feminist, collaborative, tenacious and messy, is forged.

To be sure, a queer lens reframes understandings of success and failure. In the *Queer Art of Failure,* cultural studies critic Judith (Jack) Halberstam (2011) works to dislodge the pervasive progress narrative central to contemporary understandings of U.S. life. Beyond attempting to dispose of the binary “success/failure,” Halberstam argues to inhabit and to explore failure:

Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2)

It is not hard to see what the trouble with success might be for Halberstam and for queers (or others) whose bodies and life paths are incompatible with normal life. For many *failing* at what normative culture has marked as success seems not only more attractive and promising but the only possible path anyway. While “winning” does matter—we believe that strong and safe communities are possible and needed and do not require the military or the prison or the non-profit industrial complex—moving away from dichotomous and linear interpretations of movements (including, for example, top-down definitions of leadership, and undemocratic organizing models) is required to sustain ourselves, support each other, and to build the world we need.

As a caution: asking for less than what we know we need or deserve is not new. Demands that are perceived to be more radical are often met with resistance, even from those who agree, on principal, with these claims. Suffragists demanding the vote, people with disabilities demanding access, queers organizing to decriminalize sodomy were warned, and sometimes told themselves: *We can’t go too far too fast, we must move slowly, don’t make them angry, we can’t ask for that right now...* Yet the prevalence of the response to simply *be practical* illuminates the power of the framework of liberation not assimilation in this political moment. Also, making the claim that something is broken, that we reject the military industrial complex, does not require that we know the best response or the fix. As Elizabeth Povinelli writes, “*Not this* makes a difference even if it does not produce a prepositional otherwise” (Povinelli 2011, p. 191). Asking those harmed to wait, and to then wait more for ends that are inadequate, is characteristic of how we have been shaped by this punishing state.

Asking for less than what we deserve is not simply a failure of imagination, it is also a form of self-preservation. Demands for the radical redistribution of power and resources by oppressed communities are met with accommodation or cooption but also with direct and lethal state violence. Those understood by the state as already less than fully human, and who directly challenge dominant norms and forms of resource allocation, are highly vulnerable to punishment by the state and everyday people who feel justified to enact their perception of the state’s agenda. Post WWII saw a upsurge of anti-communist and anti-left organizing, culminating in the the House Un-American Activities hearings in 1945 and the federal employee loyalty program that instituted in 1947; these led to expulsions of left and queer federal employees from employment, the black-listings of many others, and the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (Heim, 2016; Johnson, 2006). And from 1956 until the early 1970s, the U.S. Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) covertly sought to infiltrate, entrap, and eliminate racial and economic justice organizations and movements, particularly those that challenged endless militarism and white supremacy. COINTELPRO deployed all force available, including assassination, arrest, and imprisonment. And the threat involved to those engaging in power-challenging organizing continues to the present; the torture and imprisonment of Chelsea Manning and the life disrupting exile of Edward Snowden are two recent high-profile examples.

A queer lens may help us shed the unhelpful progress narrative in movement-work, by offering an alternate view that there will always be backs-and-forths and twists-and-turns in the path, or bends in the “arc of justice” and still, our resistance and organizing is vitally important. In fact, we suggest that *queer kinks,* or continually turning toward and re-centering the margins, building movement from the needs and views of the most oppressed, are always necessary to justice-work. We can all start where we are, and, with those around us, press for more justice. A communist catalyzed the U.S. gay rights movement with a secret group founded in 1950 (Clendinen, 2002). Trans femmes of color fought for their liberation in San Francisco and New York in the 1960s (Pasulka, 2015). Ames was not “converted” to a military school without resistance. Strong organizing, and documenting the oppressive conditions for transgender people inside all kinds of prisons, particularly the opaque military ones, led to Chelsea Manning’s release in 2016. Patrisse Kahn-Cullors, a queer woman of color, galvanized a generation and built a movement by insisting—sometimes against critiques by both mainstream politicians and elder activists—that Black Lives Matter isn’t “leaderless” or “following an individual” but rather, is “leader-full” (Kahn-Cullors & bandele, 2017; Martin, 2015; Reynolds, 2015; Shear & Stack, 2016). Show up for the work, refuse all injustice, and engage principled tactics for social movement—not reifying the little values, to paraphrase Natalia Ginzberg (2013), of efficiency or consistent messaging, but generosity and building change by nurturing capacities—are some of the lessons we draw from these examples. Our queer lens suggests that we make the future we imagine bit by bit, every day, through persistence, solidarity, and brilliant re-imaginings of a world in which we can all flourish.

This lens has been enormously helpful and sustaining, especially when the losses feel crushing and the exhaustion or pain cannot be understood as finite or generative. The possibilities of radical potential, of becomings and openings, incremental shifts, and the change that results from *collective* praxis, keep us going. While Lauren Berlant (2011) has warned that this focus on possibility may be a dangerously cruel form of optimism, or hope as “an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (p. 24), to us, some days, committing to imagination, engagement, and daily practice seems like the only path away from despair*.* This, as a comrade identified, is “slow work” that, while always collective, can be at the same time exquisitely lonely. Moving our attention from outcomes to processes, from grand changes to everyday life-ways allows us to nurture ourselves as we labor, for the long haul, with others.

While this slow work includes dismantling and challenging policies that target communities, engaging a wider terrain also involves profound affective shifts. People want to feel safe, to feel secure, and these feelings have been effectively funneled into a landscape where borders, military power and prisons, however ineffective, are the dominant, seemingly rational (or at least, normalized), response. Security is conceptualized very narrowly and individually and, most centrally, privately. Problems in the neighborhood? In Chicago, individuals are encouraged to post signs in their windows that warn, “We Call Police.” Other ways of addressing a community’s needs, such as getting to know neighbors, visiting older or frail residents, organizing to share work (clearing sidewalks), tools (lawn-mowers) and care (babysitting cooperatives), are solutions rarely promoted or resourced by local governments. Yet they are among the many common ways people have worked together to create safer places to live outside of policing and other punitive systems. Eliminating the “cops in our heads and our hearts,” as anti-violence organizer Paula X. Rojas (2007) writes, is as challenging as removing the cops that line our schools and neighborhoods (Rojas, 2007, p. 213). The cops in our heads, as Rojas notes, discipline us, narrowing and limiting our views about who merits care and resources, and who does not.

Militarized and carceral structures clearly harm those targeted, and they also shape the rest of us. The cops inside us and in our communities prevent us from understanding the interconnectedness of our fear, comfort, health and safety; until we are all in it together, none of us can ever fully have these and other critical social goods. Queer kinks and radical visions aren’t maps and clear destinations; they may not, alone, evict the cops, and close the jails and military schools today. But they can help us engage in self-reflection and movement assessment, and call the future into visibility. There is no workshop, checklist or course that will support or ensure a win for our movements for justice, but our mobilizations and dialogues, however these transpire, must be ignited queerly, in public, over the long haul.

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1. This is a co-written chapter with no first author; the order of our names represents a publishing rotation. We offer thanks to the journal’s anonymous reviewers for their thorough and thoughtful engagement with our work. The revised paper is better for their attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is important to note that while President Obama didn’t make these flashy statements, he did not shy away from full participation in the military industrial complex. One facet: Drone strikes by driverless aerial vehicles, initiated by the Obama administration and endorsed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, killed thousands, including children, in Pakistan, Yemen, and other parts of the world, in attacks described as a “mass torture” of residents of these and other countries (Olugbemiga, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Throughout this article we use queer to signify identities and politics and organizing focused on a norm-critical stance and social transformation. We also use LGBTQ and queer when referring to non-normative gender and sexuality identity groups. When LGBT is used, this reflects institutional and other prior usage. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While this does not conform to a traditional research essay, we argue that participation in political and social movements, specifically narrative and analysis by people impacted by systemic forms of violence, often produces the most useful tools to understand and dismantle oppression. This proposition is a central tenet of movement-based popular education, shaping the curriculum of the Highlander School from the 1930s to the present; the Civil Rights era Mississippi Freedom Schools; and Paolo Freire’s 1970’s pedagogical frameworks. Particularly related to challenging the military industrial complex, see writings by Chelsea Manning (for example, see Manning 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)