

What we know for sure

15 Years of LGBTQ Living, Loving
& Organizing in the South

**BY MANJU RAJENDRAN
& ALBA ONOFRIO**

*Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that
change, when it comes, cracks everything open.*
-Dorothy Allison

ON SEPTEMBER 19-21, 2008 OVER 150 SOUTHERN QUEERS, TRANSFOLK AND THEIR ALLIES answered the call to convene in Durham, NC for 'What We Know For Sure: 15 Years of LGBTQ Living, Loving and Organizing in the South'. It was the largest grassroots gathering of Southern progressive lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirit, and intersex (LGBTQQTSI) people in the last decade. The letter inviting members to the Southerners On New Ground (SONG) 15th Anniversary Homecoming Weekend announced, "We give thanks for the day SONG was

born because it brought us to each other in a new and crucial way." The celebration exemplified the "new and crucial way" SONG gathers its family home. In the days before the gathering, Durham members posted signs in public places declaring the land "New Ground". Community members housed strangers as they arrived from rural towns and cities across the southern US. A few members even flew in from outside the South, drawn to SONG's "igniting the kindred" political orientation.

Prior to and outside of nation-state structures, people have always relied on kinship networks to meet their needs. SONG resurrects a kindred-centered sense of family, a political home for people the state has marginalized, disposed of as workers, or declared worthless as humans. SONG was

founded by six Black and white southern lesbian leaders in 1993, in order to advance lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer multi-racial, multi-issue education and organizing capable of combating the Right's strategies of fragmentation and division. SONG is a membership-driven Southern regional organization made up of working class, people of color, disabled, immigrant, and rural LGBTQQTSI people who believe that bodies, identities, issues and lives are connected across race, class, culture, ability, gender and sexuality. Left Turn is highlighting SONG's 15th Anniversary Homecoming Weekend as an example of the current re-envisioning of the Queer Left emerging from the US South.

The schedule for the Homecoming Weekend drew its inspiration from the four themes of SONG's traveling organizing school: Body, Land, Work, and Spirit. The themes, which reflect SONG's commitment to intersectionality and wholeness, were used as guides for creating fully engaging events throughout the weekend. These events included the Friday night Queer Quinceañera, the Saturday Studios, the Saturday night GenderFabulous Showcase and Dance Party, and the Sunday Visioning Session. Rather than the typical workshops, at core of the weekend were the "studios", SONG's popular education-based mini-thinktank sessions, which were organized into the four themes. Below we use the Body/Land/Work/Spirit schema to give a taste of the experience of the Homecoming Weekend and list the studios organized around each theme to give a sense of the breadth of SONG's work and vision.

BODY

*Studios: Taking Care of Ourselves: LGBTQQTSI Wellness Skillshare * Interactive Dance and Movement Studios * In Our Own Skin: Discussion of Desire, Sex and Body*

SONG knows our bodies to be the ultimate location of intersectionality, and thus liberation is a process of creating the conditions for our own wholeness. For example, racism, ableism, heterosexism, sexism and classism are systems that impact all of us, but these oppressions come crashing in at once on the very bodies of brown working class queer sisters with disabilities. And for these sisters, unraveling the trauma done to their own bodies may legitimately be where they begin to change society. Desire and longing are central, pleasure is celebrated, and moments of wholeness are harbingers for transformation. Home, for the displaced, is found in your own body, and with your own community.

For the primarily working-class LGBTQQTSI Southern people of color base of SONG who showed up for the gathering, many coming from conservative rural settings, these ideas resonated to the bone. The 15th Anniversary Weekend engaged our bodies as sites of pleasure, learning, and self-

determination as well as sites of resistance to multiple oppressions. Pleasure went bananas at the wildly popular kissing booth at the GenderFabulous Showcase and Dance Party-- people were cheering for each rule-breaking kiss like a victory had been won for the Southern region. Across the four themes, studios involving collage, painting, dance, and capoeira kept all kinds of learners engaged.

Accessibility, broadly defined, was a high priority. Without a big budget to work with, SONG was creative with its resources and communicative and transparent in its process. As stated in SONG's accessibility statement for the gathering, "Lack of access to basic needs is a way to break oppressed people down and keep us isolated." The organization looked to leadership from the disability community about accountability, and stayed in dialogue with SONG members with disabilities

about complicated questions. When a SONG member needed their assistance dog nearby, there were conversations about ensuring other SONG members wouldn't be triggered around their own experiences with police/immigration enforcement dogs.

One member with disabilities shared that the gathering was his first time in thirty years, "to truly participate fully in a progressive gathering." Because of SONG's commitment to keep flashbulbs out of collective spaces for those who have seizures, he had the chance to dance. During the closing, he shared, "I'm going through challenging institutionalized ableism, there's much at stake, and I couldn't have been welcomed in a place better." There was

Spanish and ASL interpretation available throughout the gathering. SONG staff worked on questions like bathroom accessibility with the City of Durham, the W.D. Hill Community Center workers and supervisor, prioritizing the needs of gender non-conforming people while also being thoughtful about local working-class neighbors of color who were welcoming SONG into their space.

LAND

*Studios: Mapping Alternative Histories of Southern Lands * This is Where I Be: Creating Art about the South * Longing'n'Motion: Queer Migration story sharing*

SONG's work of creating New Ground in the South is about remembering local histories of colonization, slavery, oppression, environmental degradation, and resistance. New Ground is also about believing in redemption of the South and a belief in the resiliency of SONG's base, those who have been left behind by

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power structures. In a statement on why SONG is committed to the South, they describe the region as "a place where folk reconcile with the past in an honest and painful way, a place where people can stay in lands riddled with pain and remember old traditions, and birth new ways" Building New Ground means planting roots and creating the conditions for our wholeness even on the same land where our ancestors' blood has been spilled, or the land where we have been forced to migrate.

In Durham, this process involved re-claiming unlikely kinds of queer spaces- from holding the SONG Quinceañera celebration in an upscale ballroom at Duke Gardens where participants could dress up for each other (a sort of class-drag) to posting handmade signs on telephone poles and brick walls

Almost a third of the people present during the 15th Anniversary Homecoming Weekend helped co-create it-- it just would not have been possible otherwise. People donated professional services from cooking to studio facilitation to DJing. At the Performance Showcase & Dance, the DJ turned the music off at 2am, and everyone stayed to clean and mop the space--everyone stayed until it was finished. Even folks who didn't volunteer formally pulled their weight by helping out as needed. The values of the organization were reflected in the way people jumped in and took ownership.

Tangible proof that SONG's majority working-class base believes the organization is vital to our survival came when they gave a startling \$21,706 in grassroots donations during the 15th Anniversary, from the Friday night Quinceañera, the solidarity parties, and table donations. On Friday after the founder's chorale performance, half the people in the room



Photo: Zulayka Santiago

presenting SONG history and displaying quotes from queeroes like Audre Lorde or Sylvia Rivera. The majority of SONG's resources for the gathering were spent in Hayti, a working-class historically Black neighborhood, because SONG values supporting our own communities. Most of the weekend's studios and events were held at W.D. Hill Community Center, in the heart of this neighborhood where Black people settled shortly after the Civil War and established a long-time culturally vibrant hub. The 15th Anniversary Homecoming Weekend went beyond Durham as well, with solidarity parties leading up to the weekend in Atlanta, Louisville, Greensboro, and Minneapolis.

WORK

*Studios: Not Giving Up On Each Other: Building Shared Values * Our Legacies of Work drawing studio * Dialogue on Earth, Economic Survival and Our Shared Future*

donated, and a third of those people became monthly donors. The majority of these were monthly \$5 donations. Only five donations were more than \$100. A total of 166 individuals, families, and organizations donated money. People also gave other gifts, time and resources. Forty-four people donated in-kind professional services, and more than thirty people donated two or more hours during the weekend.

SPIRIT

*Studios: "What We Know For Sure" gallery * In the Spirit of Justice: Spiritual Violence & Healing story circle * Bouncing Back: Resiliency Tools for Organizers*

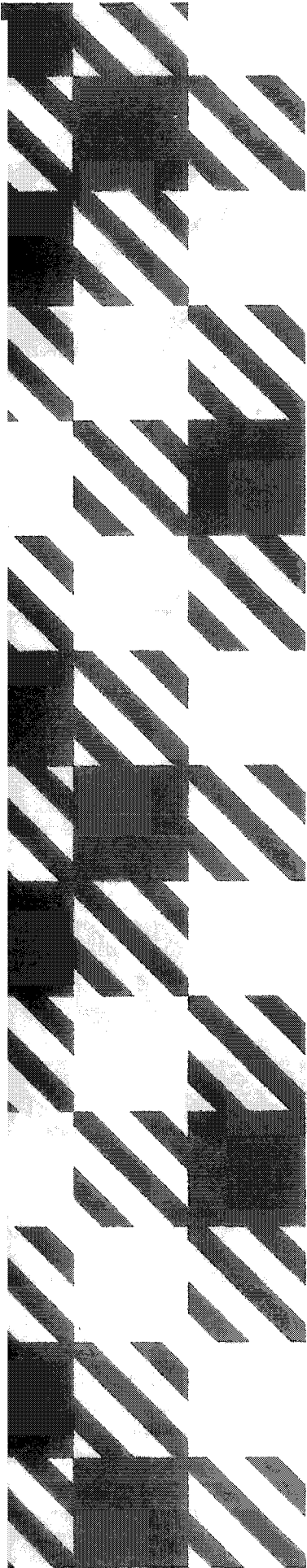
The culture of the 15th Anniversary Weekend was different from typical movement spaces. Song, dance, art, poetry and ritual were key ingredients. The Greensboro samba drum corps, Cackalack Thunder, had everyone on their feet and dancing at lunch. In a public park, after the Sunday morning visioning session dreaming the next fifteen years of intersectional organizing, SONG member Wendy O'Neill led people

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in a song with three simple words, "I love everybody". She invited participants to center themselves and sing the lyrics with sincerity, which turned out to be quite challenging. As half the group sang the chorus, the other half chanted, "We're here. We're queer. We won't turn back ya'll." while marching in spirals together.

On the invitation for the Homecoming Weekend, participants were invited to share testimonies about Freedom Fighters, honoring visionaries who are not often recognized. The title of the 15th Anniversary Homecoming Weekend, "What We Know For Sure", invokes a poem by Dorothy Allison called "Two or Three Things I Know for Sure". In the spirit of the poem SONG collected short statements from Southern queers about what they truly believe. The story-collecting project was based on the belief that our people already have enough ancestral/ historical/ lived insight to build the world we need and desire.





In the words of SONG member Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Admittedly, this is a very queer theory of knowledge. This approach of collecting two or three things from everyone doesn't ask for agreement, it doesn't demand compromise, and it does not try to distill every impulse, boast, and confession into a clean analysis ready for a grant proposal. SONG's approach to knowledge sharing is queer not just because it is accountable to a diverse set of people who identify as queer but also because it allows for multiple and unpredictable contact points, growing and scattered affirmations and because it is supported by nothing but our faith in our own knowledge and desire." 158 people submitted to the project and their responses were gathered into a zine that was distributed at the 15th Anniversary.

NEW GROUND

If you asked the U.S. public what issues queers care about, they would probably say gay marriage, AIDS, partner benefits, violence, stereotypes and discrimination. But the most well-attended studios at the 15th Anniversary were the economic survival and queer migration sessions. Both studios were profoundly intergenerational. The Economic Survival session, facilitated by three of the six SONG founders, Suzanne Pharr, Mab Segrest, and Pat Hussain, happened the day after the news of the \$700 billion bailout plan was unveiled. The facilitators scrapped the original agenda and invited the packed room to strategize about how to understand and respond to the financial crisis. The Queer Migration session, facilitated by SONG board member Roberto Tijerina, allowed participants to share deep personal stories about their journeys in search of home. Many shared wrenching stories about having to uproot from their communities of origin to find greater safety, visibility and belonging.

The 15th Anniversary Homecoming Celebration closed with a visioning session. The membership discussed the emphasis on relational work, the deepening of our mass-based organizing and the long-haul approach to organizing timelines embedded in the concept of "igniting the kindred". SONG's strategy for building the family is

putting feelers out across the South, having conversations and getting to know communities, and building the base of organizers through the traveling organizing school. Caitlin Breedlove, SONG co-director, said, "This weekend showed what gatherings can be like when we don't just think organizations should be doing things for us, that we do this for ourselves." SONG intern Iimay Ho shared an appreciation for, "collective strength in our knowledge of ourselves."

Throughout the weekend, there were countless reminders that SONG is built on love. Love is the reason people stay and endure the hard stuff, and the politics flow from that love. Attendees expressed exhaustion from years of struggling in social, environmental, and economic justice organizations that required them to be closeted, and LGBTQ organizations that denied their experience with class, race, ability and immigration status. Through practical analysis, intersectionality, and attention to the sacred, SONG is manifesting new ground for the Queer Left with every step.

Manju Rajendran is a Southern Desi queer healer-organizer with Females United For Action, a group of young women and genderqueer youth from Chicago, and a member of Ubuntu. As a card-carrying member and former staffer of Southerners On New Ground, she helped plan SONG's 15th Anniversary Weekend. Alba Onofrio is a Southern femme Latina in Durham, NC working on immigrant justice issues and reconciliation between the Church and the queer community. She was the SONG 15th Anniversary coordinator and currently supports SONG as an Amante through grant writing.

Be in touch with us at manju.ra-jendran@gmail.com and alba.de.onofrio@gmail.com.

*Learn more about SONG:
www.southernersonnewground.org*