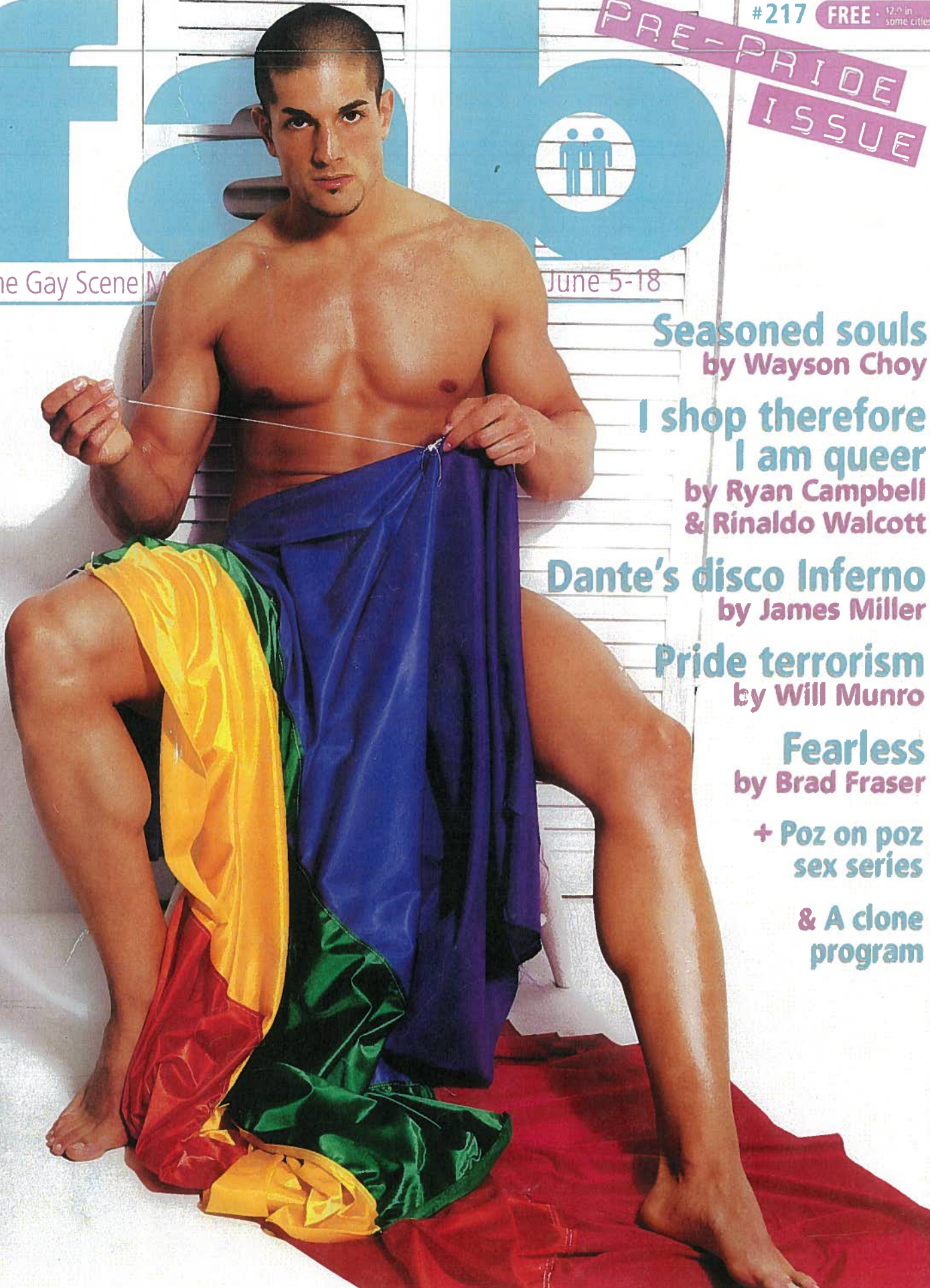


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PRE-PRIDE  
ISSUE



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# I shop therefore I am queer

by Ryan Campbell  
and Rinaldo Walcott

Illustration by Liam Thurston

Dear Ghetto Fag (you know who you are):

Pride celebrations across North America have become a welcome and expected summer experience for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders and heterosexuals alike. In major cities the world over, such celebrations represent the diversity and difference of queer populations. It is the one time of the year when, at least superficially, queers seem to be most at home with themselves.

Revisiting the history of Pride and Stonewall has recently become a kind of mantra each June as Pride celebrations kick off across North America. Despite this, it is assumed that increasingly fewer queers are currently familiar with the history of Stonewall. Each progressive summer, fears arise about losing a quite recent queer past. These fears are not entirely unfounded. It is true that fewer and fewer queers know fully or understand the struggles that have been waged on our behalf for queer sexual liberation and thus queer life in the last 30 years, not to mention even earlier. Remember E and K do affect one's memory!





We will avoid repeating that recent queer history but any self-respecting queer should at least familiarize themselves with Stonewall (and more locally in Toronto, the history of the 1981 bathhouse raids). These kinds of important historical moments would complicate contemporary queer life in metropolitan queer ghettos and beyond. For example, in the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, bathhouses were closed and made illegal in many U.S. cities as a response to the then misunderstood disease. In Canada the same was not true. If younger queers understood this kind of history they might have a different appreciation for our continually evolving liberal attitudes to sexual practices. Thus, regular patrons of, for example, St. Marc and Spa Excess might not take for granted the struggles for those places to exist. Kneeling at the glory holes might offer not only the pleasure of sexual gratification but could yield a deeper understanding of sexual freedom.

So with that context in mind, we want to make some observations about contemporary queer life as it is experienced and lived in North America's queer ghettos. We hope that these observations open up some avenues for experiencing Pride differently this year for some of us. We hope (maybe naively) that these observations extend the narrow borders of what currently constitutes queer life in these ghettos.

What passes for queer life in gay ghettos is a sorry and simultaneously pleasurable excuse for being human. What do we mean by such a harsh yet ambivalent statement? We are chauvinist in that we believe that queers are by and large a unique people. After all, could you imagine a world without Quentin Crisp, RuPaul, Elton John, Margaret Cho or Kevin Aviance?! We think that the queer tribe fills the world with pleasurable moments that would not exist if queers did not exist. But at its most extreme and banal, queer culture can turn into a pale imitation of life and fall into a cartoonish representation of itself. Just watch any episode of *Queer As Folk* for evidence of this. Similarly, films such as *The Birdcage* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* offer mainstream audiences these cartoon images as the norm of queer life. Even network TV has attempted to cash in on our cartoonish lives by offering us characters, like Jack and Will in *Will & Grace*, who epitomize opposite extremes of some of the elements of queer life.

Pride events especially can bring out this cartoonish behaviour in some of its most extreme forms. Look for all the misshapen body types (big arms and chests and skinny legs) from unusual workout practices this year. But unfortunately this cartoonish representation has come to be the dominant form of queer life in the ghettos. Actually, maybe too many of us are watching *Queer As Folk*. But let's be clear. Since we met each other a year ago while partying at the Barn, we don't exempt ourselves from all aspects of this queer *joie-de-vivre*. In fact, for anyone who lives a life connected to these ghetto spaces, some of these over-the-top practices impact who they are. At the most ironic and iconic this carnival approach to life is what sets us apart from the rest of the mundane world.

Thinking about what Pride can mean is really important if it

is going to be more than just a queer carnival. Carnivals are good things, don't get us wrong, but carnivals are at their best when they subvert norms, when they force us to think about things we have not thought about before. If Pride becomes a queer carnival then it has to try to fill those kinds of shoes. Unfortunately, recent Pride celebrations have not forced us to think about much beyond getting high, shopping, dancing and fucking. All those things are pleasurable and we, as a vibrant and young couple, have no bones about engaging in them ourselves. But when that becomes the *modus operandi* of life something has gone awry.

Queer life in the ghetto has also been reduced to consumption, a way of life that at its most basic form reiterates this philosophical approach to gay identity: I shop therefore I am queer. A recent episode of *Absolutely Fabulous* echoes this sentiment when Edina, having just found out that her son is gay, exclaims, "I have a shopping partner for life!" And these days Pride seems to be the primary celebration of our queer consumer ethic. In Toronto, all along Yonge Street and Queen Street and in other select hip shopping areas the queer dollar

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### Kneeling at the glory holes might offer not only the pleasure of sexual gratification but could yield a deeper understanding of sexual freedom

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will be explicitly courted during the week of Pride festivities. Queers will be seen roving shops and laden with shopping bags as evidence of their intense consumer cruise. And, for a week, queers, mainly boys, will venture up and down Church Street wearing their Sunday best (muscle shirts, tight jeans, expensive underwear or none at all, unique sunglasses, etc.) in eager anticipation of the big day.

But when the big day arrives most of the ghetto fags will be at home still sleeping. They will have missed the parade, except the few who are on floats, recovering from the partying and drugs of the night before and resting up for the parties that close a week of continuous celebration. All in all it would have been no different for most of them than any other long weekend. Just another strip in the continuing cartoon of life. So what we have to suggest relates then to Pride's future. It is in keeping with Pride's historic past as a movement that paved the way for some of us to sleep late and miss the parade. For some of us to find the ghetto and live a life, even if somewhat still limited; for some of us to imagine a life unrestricted and fulfilled as queers. When the happy day of full queer citizenship arrives, if it ever does, queers will be in a quandary. We will not know what to do with ourselves, so much of who we are only being meaningful because of our outsider status. That happy day will be more traumatic for some of us than our deepest fears might allow.

Thus we believe that Pride should be about celebrating the past as much as it should be about celebrating the future. We



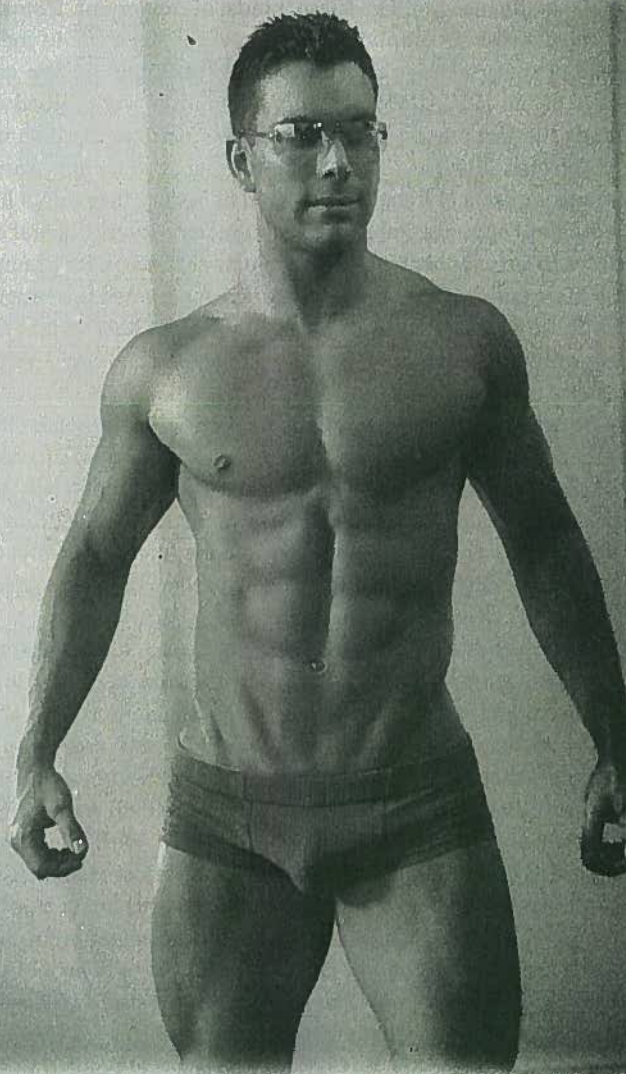
won't be romantic and repeat that Pride should be about celebrating difference and diversity because we are sure you have picked that up already. But someone needs to knock the E, K and G out of our hands so that we can consider the future after the dance and think about a world when the party has ended. What that means is that as queers become more and more normal we have to make ourselves abnormal yet again, by reminding others that liberation has not been achieved for all. This is not just queer liberation – we are talking about the injustices of war, of poverty, of market-driven discriminatory economics. Abstract you say! But queer ghettos exist because discrimination is real. If many ghetto fags could stop imitating the cartoonish figures illustrated in film, TV and music and stop for a moment to consider something beyond the latest party and drugs, maybe our queer acceptance would do more than give us TV shows like *QAF* and *Will & Grace*. We hope that what a potential queer acceptance can give us is an ethical group of political beings who demand more of the world we live in than a good party. After all, who says that politics, or at least being politically aware, is not a good party too? So in respect to the valiant history of Pride's past we say return the politics to Pride.

The very impetus of this essay forces us to elaborate on the ways in which these politics might manifest themselves during Toronto's Pride celebration. To our recollection one of the last times that we can remember an explicit political message of resistance at the Pride Parade was the float that showcased Mike Harris' head on a platter. A picket sign read: "The final Mike Harris cut." This was done in an attempt to protest the policies of the Harris government that went far beyond presumed queer-oriented issues (like gay marriage). Would it be so out of place then to see queers in the upcoming parade marching against the continuing after effects of the war in Iraq? Or marching in support of a national childcare policy? And we don't just mean lesbian mothers and their children! When will we see a large contingent of queers marching in support of affordable housing for the homeless? Should all of us who have ever visited a bathhouse be marching this year in white towels and handcuffs in support of those arrested and dehumanized at Calgary's bathhouse, Goliath's?

We are in no way suggesting that politics have entirely disappeared from Pride celebrations. The persistence of TNT MEN on the issue of nudity is a case in point. However, we believe that queers must become more involved in the much larger global politics. Such an attitude would ensure that Pride celebrations are not just experienced as a queer bacchanalia but rather that queers can be a moral and ethical group of people who are serious participants in attempting to achieve a world of full equality. Perhaps then the queer cartoon images of our lives which are too often exploited by the media (especially following Pride celebrations), will give way to a picture of the globally conscious tribe we know most of us to be.

■ *Ryan Campbell is an Early Childhood Practitioner and is currently pursuing a career in education. Rinaldo Walcott is a professor at OISE/UT and Canada Research Chair of Social Justice and Cultural Studies.*

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