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Thoughts on Pride: No Coal Dug

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Thoughts On Pride: No Coal Dug

Pride tells the story of a group of London lesbian and gay activists who offer their support to the striking miners in Dulais, South Wales. I love an inspiring weepy film. I love films about the 80s. I love Lesbian and Gay Men Support the Miners. I love Bill Nighy and I'd developed a researchers crush on LGSM activist Mark Ashton throughout my Phd research on gay men and the left (Robinson, 2003). The song 'Bread and Roses' resonates with me so much that I have the symbols tattooed on my hand, and our daughters read the lyrics at our wedding. But I'm going to start with a confession. I avoided seeing the film *Pride* for nearly 16 months and only eventually watched it because I had to.

In the end I watched it because Catherine Grant very kindly invited me to speak at the event that she organised with Diarmaid Kelliher, on 'Pride and its Precursors' and I was too honoured, and too embarrassed, to say no. When the film first came out I ducked and dived out of press requests to comment on it. I had toyed with the idea of presenting at the symposium without actually having watched the film, maybe as a sort of thought experiment. I'd floated the idea over drinks with Dr Ben Jones, a talented and creative historian from UEA, but I'd lost my confidence after he described some of the scenes I might have missed out on (the film does end with an alien invasion and massive shoot out right?).

In a massive act of generosity Catherine Grant encouraged me to use my resistance as the starting point to my contribution to the symposium and to this collection. My reticence about watching the film was two fold, fittingly, these were both personal and political. One issue related to the politics of uncovering lost stories. When *Pride* came out it was heralded as an inspiring lost story perfect for our troubled times. My first thoughts about the importance, and perhaps my resistance to, the power of *Pride* to inspire, related to which stories do get remembered, and how wilfully others forgotten. I had researched and written about about LGSM and the intersections between gay activism, trade union solidarity, popular culture and the Communist Party in my Phd and then in my first book *Gay Men and the Left*. (Robinson, 2011)

I suppose it isn't surprising then that I was resistant to the idea of LGSM as a forgotten story to be rediscovered in a moving inspiring film. Of course, overly wordy analysis in an

academic book doesn't constitute a central role in popular historical memory. However, it did rather rub my nose in the moat around the ivory tower that something I had spent most of the nineties researching, writing and talking was apparently completely unknown. Take that Impact Agenda! – I wrote a book and no-one noticed. But this isn't sour grapes. It is the point. University agendas encourage us to uncover the covered. On top of the drive towards ever more originality, our politics might also encourage us to uncover marginalised voices from the past. But we, the academy, are not in charge of what gets to count as history or what gets remembered. We are not Indiana Jones searching for the lost story of solidarity. Rather than searching for hidden treasures, as a historian I find myself more and more interested in how stories got lost in the first place. I've got no interest in whether the film is accurate or not, but I am interested in how it wields its stories, and its sense of authenticity and the power of its memory. Something interesting happens when stories are designated forgotten or lost, and then re-designated as remembered or found.

It goes without saying that I was not alone in remembering LGSM, even indirectly. Even before the film came out, my reading list for the topic was already a decent size. The events were videoed at the time and then later digitally shared in two short documentaries available on YouTube, *All Out: Dancing in Dulais*, and a video of the Hacienda gig in the 'Pits and Perverts' tour. LGSM is discussed at some length in books about gay history and politics, particularly those that emphasise the importance of personal testimony, *Radical Records* edited by Cant and Hemmings for example in 1988. Gay Left analysed LGSM at the time and Simon Watney had written about LGSM in two edited collections since. (Watney, 1996 & 2000, Gay Left Collective, 1980) Ray Goodspeed, LGSM activist, wrote a long article about LGSM in 1989. Hefina Headon's daughter, Jayne Francis-Headon describes telling the story of LGSM 'many times over the years'. (Tate, 2017; 277) Participant and activist Nicola Field documented LGSM in her book *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia* in 1995 (and in the wake of the film successfully crowd sourced funding for the very timely republication of her book.) The new edition reflects back on the remembering of LGSM post-Pride. Its new preface brings together the stamp of authenticity through an endorsement by both Jonathon Blake and Gethin Roberts, and its current utility via the LGBTQ+ curriculum campaigners Educate and Celebrate (Field, 2016; 10-11). In fact in 2008 LGSM was described as 'the most famous' example of unity between gay activism and workplace organisation. (Fannin, 2008) Diarmaid Kelliher, 2015) groups *Pride* with other cultural representations of the strike around the same time, such as Micheál Karrigan's play *Pits and*

Perverts which was produced in Derry in 2013 and Owen Gower's documentary *Still the Enemy Within* from 2014.

The film has, in turn, heralded a new set of work looking at LGSM and its history, as well as work on representation in *Pride* itself. Both Kelliher (2015) and Daryl Leeworthy (2016) have produced impressive articles in the wake of the film. Both of which move far beyond an account of 'what happened' to think about why it matters instead. More recently still Daisy Payling (2017) has used the film, alongside contemporaneous archival research to break down popular understanding of Thatcher's Britain as a simply divided society, and draw out the complexities of changing layers of solidarity through the life of the strike. Having always felt I'd done a bit of a half arsed job of researching LGSM in its own terms, rather than for the overall argument of my book, I was delighted to read the new and exciting work around LGSM. I had been an unfunded Phd student, juggling parenthood and research with paid work (and breastfeeding). The journey deep into the archives to immerse myself in the documentation and experiences of LGSM, had been beyond me. I had worked through the minutes of leftist organisations, gay organisations, the Hall Carpenter Archive, mountains of pre digitalised newspapers and the secondary literature it became clear to me that LGSM was an important story for gay history, but it was only part of the story I was telling. LGSM, after all, helped connect gay politics to the tools of production. The miners have a special significance, after all Thatcher didn't pick on them for no reason. They produced the fuel for the engines of industrialisation, so valued that their work was understood as war work. They bring with them fantasies of masculinity. Their labour marked on their bodies risking their lives to keep the nation moving. What better proof could there be that the third stage of gay liberation, 'to change the world', was still possible?

I have been deeply appreciative of the later careful archival work on the campaign. Because even if my work on LGSM didn't matter, I knew that LGSM mattered. Scholars like Kelliher, Leeworthy and Payling, have followed in the LSGM activists' footsteps; they have got on the ground, connected with the stories, and thought about the most fabulous ways to get the message out there. Even more importantly we can now read the words of those who were there. Tellingly jointly credited with LGSM as authors, Tim Take (2017) has woven together a set of oral histories, with original press representation and only gentle editorial interventions to nudge on the narrative. Together these voices provide an over-riding account of the campaign, that keeps their individual experiences intact. It feels very right that

histories of LGSM should shake up ideas of 'us' and 'them', and who 'we' are to tell 'their' stories.

Why then was it so important that *Pride* was seen as remembering the lost story of LGSM? Rediscovering lost stories from the past is a political act, a way of redressing an imbalance in the present, utilising ghosts from the past to enact justice today. There is a long history of writing our own cannon, replacing stories and heroes with our own. When we uncover our heroes and heroines from the past we also uncover the process through which they have been forgotten, or silenced. We get to make a double move, we get to prove that 'we' have been oppressed, marginalised, silenced, forgotten in the past. And we also get to show that we can do something about it in the present and use these heroes to imagine a better future. The importance of rediscovering lost, silenced and marginalised heroes and heroines is a tactic that has deep roots in both the women's, black and gay liberation movements. Gay, black and feminist historians have long understood that uncovering the past and documenting contemporaneous struggles were important forms of activism. The stories from the past inspire us and allow us to imagine ourselves into a new collective community tied together by the stories we share. If, their forgetting demonstrates our oppression, the remembering unpicks the processes through which we were oppressed.

Francis-Headon, told the LGSM story often, 'to as many people as would listen' but people just couldn't believe it was true. (Tate, 2017; 277) Stephen Beresford, the film's writer, described it as a 'lost story'. (Tate, 2017; 279) Those involved, cautioned by the loss of so many of their generation through HIV and AIDS, thought that their story would die with them. Jonathon Blake referred to photographic evidence to prove LGSM hadn't been a 'fantasy' in an interview with the *Independent*. (Nianias, 2015) The work that went into forgetting LGSM made me think about the idea of perpetual novelty. The need for claims of originality when pitching a film, or evaluating research, encourage us to market ourselves as the discoverer of a lost or uncovered story (for both film producers and historians). For me the issue of the lost story is not that some parts of history have been forgotten, but that when they are remembered, when they do come into the light, it is always as if for the first time and at the cost of other stories. According to most of *Pride's* coverage press LGSM and the striking miners were an 'unlikely alliance'. Yet, gay men and women are woven through our histories of struggle, in and beyond the workplace. (Thomson, 2014, Nelson, 2014) My own work positioned Mark Ashton in a story populated by Colin MacInnes, George Melly,

Anthony Grey, Graham Chapman, Ken Livingstone, Peter Tatchell, Holly Johnson and Billy Bragg. Gethin Roberts draws a line of radical inheritance through LGSM. He is part of the radical queer heritage; Edward Carpenter, Harry Hay, Stonewall rioters, Brixton Fairies and has in turn fed into current campaigns for adequate health provision, disability rights, refugee support and against racism and Islamophobia. This is a long established queer class conscious radical tradition. (Field, 2016; 13) Yet every time it is remembered it is as if for the first time.

Media memory is at the heart of how we have remembered, or been haunted by, the miners' strike, and gay politics. Both striking miners and the gay community recognised that they were in the middle of a media war. Cultural representation is an armoury, whether seeing glimpses of yourself that squeeze through the cracks or whether seeing the worst excesses of prejudice in the press, these glimpses are all part of the personal and public struggle for equality. I'm thinking here about the important role of films like *Victim* for the campaign for law reform. As so eloquently explained by Andy Medhurst, Dirk Bogarde's performance as Melville Farr meant something very different for isolated and out gay audiences; it meant that they were seen. *Victim* also shows that film do something. The film was an important part of the public discussion that eventually led to the Sexual Offences Act. (Medhurst, 1984)

Pride knows that cultural representation matters, in the press, in music and the spaces it is enjoyed, in literature, in photography, in broadcast media, in literature and in DIY communication. One of the points of connection in the film between striking miners and LGSM is after all that they are equally hated by Thatcher, the police, and the tabloid press. *Pride* makes use of archive footage of Orgreave, of Scargill, of AIDS information adverts, and of the miners return to work. These archival touches ground the film in a remembered reality, but also remind us how much being seen, matters. The story line around the press leak for example, weaves together representation, self-representation and reclamation; using the headline 'Pits and Perverts' as a tour name. A bookshop, Gay's the Word, not only provides access to literary acknowledgment of gay lives, it acted as a space in which to collect and collectivise, across the past and the present. It built and housed a canon of texts to inspire and equip later generations of activists, and a physical space in which to organise around that inspiration. In a bridge, embodied by Jonathon and his amazing dance moves, Gay's the Word holds the journey between the first growth of the liberation movement, through the 80s and beyond. And it now sells the historical accounts of the campaign.

Unlike much of the Left's response at the time, when *Pride* came out various different strands of the Left vied with each other to be inspired by LGSM in the here and now. Anti UKIP activists, Solidarity in Australia, *Socialist Review* and *The Morning Star* all found *Pride* 'inspiring'. There was a patchwork of various socialist, parliamentary, communist and Trotskyite parties and factions involved in LGSM. Dave Lewis has described it as a 'Heinz 57 varieties' politically (Tate, 2017; 152), so it's not surprising how many of them can trace their heritage from the group. Left Unity also described the film as 'inspiring' whilst simultaneously claiming LGSM's legacy, as three of the original group are now associated with Left Unity. (Goodspeed, 2014) Similarly, *The Morning Star* can rightly claim Mark Ashton as one of their own. He was the chair of the Young Communist League. *The Morning Star* could also rightly bemoan the forgetting of that particular part of the story. (Frost, 2014) It has been noted that we might be allowed to have out gay heroes now, but not necessarily out gay communists heroes.

In the 1980s the gay press understood the importance of colliery band marching at the front of a Gay Pride march, whilst the leftist press barely acknowledged it. LGSM were hardly present at all in the existing histories of the Left and hardly covered in the left wing press and newsletters at the time. LGSM had it mattered much to gay histories, but seemingly less so to Leftist histories, then. Whereas by the time the film was being made it had been seemingly forgotten by LGBTQ+ cultural memory. Gethin Roberts described the reaction of people at Pride 2014 when they turned up to film with a 'prop', LGSM banner. 'Many young people knew little or nothing about the story' of the miners' strike, let alone LGSM. He remembered being asked if the banner was 'something to do with Turkish or Chilean miners'. (Field, 2016; 12) Awareness of a global context in the present seemingly eroding *Pride's* sense of its own resistant past, perhaps. *Pride* reminds us that Pride used to be political.

So why, does it matter now, to either the Left or to queer communities, (and the intersections thereof)? Whose present is being haunted by *Pride* and for what purpose? What battle is this representation arming? Beyond a few symbolic motifs, such as the red star on Ashton's collar, of the moment that he is heckled as a 'commie', in the gay bar, for example, the formal Left is largely invisible in *Pride*. Unions are there to be bypassed. Despite his significant role in the CP, and ability to traverse the vanguardist in-fighting of the Left at the

time, this part of the story is absent. (I am not criticising a film for leaving out some bits of a complex, messy political history, but I am interested in which bits it remembers and why) Our cultural memory of the struggle against Thatcher through film has been one that has pitted identity politics against class. In the run of films about social issues Thatcher's Britain (*The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot*, etc) women and gay men get to come in after the real struggle has already been lost and cheer everyone up. Like earlier films like *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything* (1995) and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) gay men are really useful at teaching straight couples how to get together. In one of the *Pride*'s musical pivots, Jonathon, calls upon the Gods of disco, to literally own a room. The song he dances to, Shirley & Co' song 'Shame, Shame, Shame', from 1975, takes us back to the pre-Thatcher years, but also reminds us of *Pride*'s rebuttal to shame. It also acts as a nice riposte to some of the miners' concerns, that they didn't want to watch 'two men dancing' together. (Tate, 2017; 171) In the wake of industrial defeat, the identity groups get their consolation prize: Billy got to dance, the women of Dulais got a dildo, lesbians learnt the rules of Bingo, the band played one more time, but the miners lost (or were beaten).

Pride makes us evaluate what constitutes a victory, and question what it is that we would settle for. Although the scene where Sian repeatedly staples the LGSM poster to the notice board sets up the tension between gay London and the Welsh miner, it is a different use of two posters that suggest a much more complicated tension. Two posters, in two different places draw out the tensions between surviving the struggle, and winning the battle. Whilst LGSM put up posters calling for 'Victory to the Miners', in the Miners' welfare centre the slogan is 'No One Shall Starve'. Cultural memory, gender and sexual politics, the pleasure of the ruby slipper, are set up as the consolation for losing the former battle, whilst managing with huge effort, the second. Payling (2017) pins down what ultimately happens when solidarity is pitched at the level of 'generosity' rather than shared context or analysis, 'for some this may reflect an emotional truth but it also cleanses the story of political machinations'. The fear is that we are left with bread and circuses, rather than bread and roses, to fill the gap left by the loss of working class organisation.

In *Pride* Mark Ashton needs to go to the Welsh hills to be told what socialism is. And the version of socialism he is given, a motif throughout the film, is of two hands shaking. An act that has particular resonance in the light of AIDS where Princess Diana's handshake with patients living with AIDS was front page news. The touching of hands is an act of mutual

acknowledgment, but it is not a shared analysis, let alone an understanding of a shared solution. It is a passing moment of connection. So despite these tensions and ambiguities between identities and collectivities, *Pride* is a film for intersectionality and identity; of friends that never knew they had each other. The political landscape and the collective material conditions have changed, not least due to Thatcher's criminalisation of trade union activity, cranked up more recently still with the latest 2016 Trade Union legislation. It is not as though they have stopped coming for us, so we still need useful stories to organise ourselves. These stories need to be intersectional because our collective identities are. Nicola Field, (2016; 18) looking back at her original work recognised the shifts between class organisation and collective identities in contemporary intersectional politics. She would be, she wrote, be less 'searing' of 'single-issue, cultural, direct-action, and identity politics' if she was writing now.

Here, I suggest, is the work that remembering is doing for us now. It isn't perfect, but it isn't simple either, and it seems to work. Identities and intersections are messy. *Pride* doesn't try to pin them down too rigidly. The contrasting motifs are playful; choux pastry and welsh cakes, push button phones and ring dials but *Pride* does more than designate a hard line between 'us' and 'them'. The film is careful not to wholly set up worldly gay London vs innocent straight Dulais. The quiet solidarity of making sandwiches together intersects differences within the Dulais community. Rather than leaving a choice between supporting the strike, or fighting AIDS, the two threats are mapped onto each other. We see violent homophobia in London, and queer lives in Wales. We see gay men so wounded by the homophobia that they experienced in their Welsh childhoods that they could not extend the hand of solidarity to their homelands, something backed up by the memories in the book version of *Pride*. (Tate, 2017; 147) The community, led by women's voices, singing 'Bread and Roses', is more rousing and moving, than Mark Ashton's speech in the Miners' Welfare (and did not involve standing on the seats, but instead standing together) It is Sian, a straight woman from Wales, driving the LGSM van, who disrupts Bromley's family christening and rescues him from his birth family. It is the supposedly marginalised lesbian, Steph, who offers him her bed and hand of friendship.

So I am suggesting that rather than setting up one group against another, *Pride* sets up personal experiences against an abstract concept of solidarity. The inspiring story left for today's activists is one of a shared sense of individual oppression. Gay men's experiences of

legal defence and police procedure is set up against a trade union structure that seemingly can't offer its striking members adequate legal advice. That is not necessarily the same as solidarity, but it is an emotional connection, a radical empathy perhaps. In the new preface to Field's analysis of LGSM, Elly Barnes, who founded the campaign Educate and Celebrate, pinpoints *Pride*, and LGSM's intersectional pedagogical possibilities. 'Let's apply these arguments' [raised by LGSM and by Field's analysis] and create the beginnings of a cohesive community with people and social justice at its core'. (2016; 11)

At the symposium I talked how LGSM and Mark Ashton had talked to me beyond *Pride*'s contradictions and how LGSM had come to teach me about Solidarity, or at least radical empathy. In many ways Mark Ashton was at the heart of my Phd and I have often used him as the explanation as to how I ended up working on gay men and the left. Two particular objects came to mind when I thought about why LGSM mattered to me, and why it is a useful story to be remembered today. They also remind me of the different way that popular culture shares political stories.

The first is the album *Red* by the Communards which was released in 1987, the same year, aged 17, in which I gave birth to my oldest daughter. On the album the song 'For a Friend' is written for Mark Ashton and the band had performed at the *Pits and Perverts* at the Camden Electric Ballroom gig re-enacted in *Pride*. The album's proceeds were donated to the AIDS charity set up in Mark Ashton's memory. Reading the sleeve notes fused the political connections in my life as a teenage mum, and taught me a life long lesson to take popular culture very very seriously and love it very very passionately.

The second is one of the two squares in remembrance of Mark Ashton in the AIDS memorial quilt. The square combines a ruby slipper from the Wizard of Oz and a hammer and sickle from the Communist Party of Great Britain. The slipper brings with it the possibilities of escape, an unlikely family of choice, the squashing and melting of enemies and Judy Garland herself as the tragic icon whose funeral connected memorialisation and loss with physical resistance and self defence at the Stonewall Riots. The hammer and sickle, reminds us that Mark Ashton was not a spontaneous accidental activist, he was youth organiser for the Communist Party and took his struggle in both the party and beyond it seriously. The two images embrace the politics of pleasure alongside the politics of formal political organisation. They are the bread and the roses and the two hands shaking.

Both of these objects make sense of my own political inheritance, and explain the second reason why I found it so difficult to make myself watch the film. When the film *Pride* was being released my father was dying. My family on my Dad's side were miners at Grimethorpe Colliery. Post-war social mobility meant that by the time I was born my father was a labour Economist who had played a role in the Miners success in the 1974 strike. (Carr, 2014) He brought up my brother, Toby, and myself, in a very different sort of world than the Barnsley miners street where he grew up and that we visited in our summer holidays. I remember one, powerful family story about my Grandfather from the days before the NCB. He had swapped shifts with a friend. On that shift there was a terrible cave in and my Grandfather's friend died. Filled with guilt he, like all of the community, went to the pit to try and rescue who they could and retrieve the bodies of those that they couldn't. The rescue work meant that there would be no coal produced that day. Throughout his life my Dad kept the payslip his father had for that week. Under the amount paid the slip read 'zero' and written across it were the words 'No Coal Dug'. Under their contracts no production, meant no pay. So they dug their comrades out of the mine, on their own time. My Grandfather moved to Grimethorpe, known as a safer but 'strikers' pit, shortly after. The invisibility of his labour on that day changed lives. Although *Brassed Off* made Grimethorpe's Colliery Band the centre of its story, in my Grandfather's case it was a different skill that mattered. He was offered the opportunity to move to Grimethorpe, because one of his brothers was an excellent footballer and they wanted him on the team. The story haunted our family and fed into their drive that my own Dad would not spend his working life underground. The invisibility of my Grandfather's labour that day is partially how I ended up where I am, and why I needed LGSM to help me make sense of the world.

I didn't want to see *Pride* because I would not be able to talk to my Dad about it. My research on the miners' strike had been a useful connection point between us, it bridged my background in queer cultural theory, and his in trade union and Labour relations. Before *Pride* we had already talked about his life as cultural memory. He had been Barbara Castle's political adviser during the Dagenham strike, which inspired the film *Made in Dagenham* (2010). He was, according to my Dad, one of the two civil servants depicted in a scene in Castle's office when she meets with the strikers' representatives. The story in our family story was that Castle didn't have any cash on her to donate to the fund herself, so he lent her some. He also was very pleased to verify the details of the film, and the accuracy of the

clothing. He was, unlike me, a man of quantifiable methods. Authenticity of the story was less important for me. That, he said, was because it wasn't my 'bloody story on the screen'. But remembering Dagenham still mattered to me. The connections between now and then, that puts women trade unionists at the front of the struggle made it a useful story. As the striking miners' wives and daughters had taught us, women are not strike breakers, putting their domestic concerns over class consciousness – they are the drivers of gendered structural change.

The lessons that *Pride* left with me, when I finally did get round to watching it, were useful. *Pride* mattered to me because, LGSM mattered to me, because it made sense to me. Both the 'forgotten story' of LGSM, and the film have offered the possibility of more than a brief handshake of recognition. They suggest a politics between identity and class politics, between the ruby slipper and the hammer and sickle, between the bread and the roses. Although unfulfilled *Pride* reminds me that solidarity is more than a symbol.

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