

# From grief to power: We are stronger together

Orlando is more than an incident, it exposes a landscape of violence

Our hearts break in two directions.

One heartbreak is the violent deaths and injuries of so many young, Latinx, Puerto Rican, and Black gay, queer, trans, lesbian, and bisexual people who were massacred at the Pulse nightclub's Latin Night in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016. That heartbreak is bound up in the horror that a place of sanctuary and culture was marred and twisted into a place of fear and death. We mourn as part of the queer community and as part of movements that organize for racial and immigrant justice, movements that organize with Muslim families, movements contending with displacement and colonialism in Puerto Rico, and movements inspired by young people fighting for their lives.

The other heartbreak is because we know, from every crisis we have weathered thus far, that this crisis, this disaster of hate and violence will be manipulated to expand agendas for profit, political power, and deeper oppression during a moment of collective grief and outrage. Rather than making swift moves toward real public safety, healing, or access to care, the political landscape shifts to reinforce violence, economies of scarcity, and global warfare.

This massacre is more than an incident that can be compared or contrasted with other horrific massacres. This massacre is not an aberration, and these are not isolated incidents or random tragedies. Part of our heartbreak is realizing that this massacre is an obvious extension of the historic roots of this country and the relentless reality of the current landscape in which we live.

**The heartbreak of this moment exists because we know Orlando is not an isolated tragedy. In order to rise in strength from this pain, we have to understand the political and social terrain. The terrible reality and aftermath of this massacre was a direct result of a combination of an economy based on surveillance, security, and militarized violence; a heightened social hostility and aggression; and a fifteen-year War on Terror that ushered in a permanent state of racist militarization and preemptive prosecution.**

## When the only employment is violence

More telling than any ambiguous ties the Orlando shooter had to ISIS, he was employed by G4S, one of the largest private security firms and largest employers in the world. With 600,000 employees worldwide, G4S runs youth detention facilities, border patrols and deportation operations, and armed security for corporations, governments, and gated communities.<sup>1</sup> The shooter was trained by this privatized global security conglomerate that represents two of the few growing edges of the global economy: social control and risk management.

George Wackenhut invested in mass incarceration early and founded a privatized security firm in 1954 in South Florida with several FBI agents. He bought them out a few years later and changed the name to Wackenhut Corporation. Wackenhut provided armed security services to nuclear power plants, weapons manufacturers, and prisons. By 1984, Wackenhut became the second largest for-profit prison operation in the U.S.

Wackenhut prisons were exposed in 2000 for rampant abuse, when the national media highlighted the sexual abuse of young inmates in Jena, Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> After 62 federal court appearances for human rights abuses and diversion of public money intended for drug treatment, Wackenhut was sold in 2002 to a transnational company

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.g4s.us/en-US/Who%20we%20are/Key%20Facts%20and%20Figures/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/16/us/privately-run-juvenile-prison-in-louisiana-is-attacked-for-abuse-of-6-inmates.html?pagewanted=all>

that eventually became G4S Securities. G4S has faced similar abuse scandals as recently as January 2016 in a juvenile facility in the UK.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007, G4S hired the man who killed 49 people and injured 50 more in a few terrifying minutes in a gay nightclub in Orlando. That same year, G4S signed a contract to operate Israeli prisons, checkpoints, and interrogation centers. Also in 2007, Jena, Louisiana, a town of 3,000 people, made national news again when six Black students were charged and convicted with attempted murder and faced 100 years in prison for protesting racist attacks at their high school where nooses were hung from a tree and Black students were intimidated and provoked into a fist fight.

A desperate economy cultivates a culture of violence when it trains people to either produce and reinforce mass incarceration of Black and Brown bodies or protect rich bodies behind gated walls or borders. In the immediate wake of the Orlando attack, U.S. political leadership called for increased surveillance, security, and even increased air strikes in other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> It is quite probable that G4S will be contracted to provide parts of that increased militarized security in our neighborhoods, cities, public gathering spaces, gay Pride events, and across the world. When a violent culture is legitimized by lawmakers, hateful and racist backlash is inevitable.

## The backlash is armed to the teeth

Florida represents a specific cauldron of Southern Republican supermajorities, District Attorneys gone wild, and the highest number of civilians carrying concealed weapons in the country. Sanford FL, 27 miles north of Orlando, was where another armed civilian murdered a young, unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin. District Attorney Angela Corey, who has a record of harsh prosecution targeting Black and Latino youth and women, somehow did not secure a conviction of that murderer. The acquittal of George Zimmerman sent a signal of legitimized racist aggression that catalyzed social movements into action in 2013.

Florida leads the nation in gun permits with 1.3 million Floridians registered to carry concealed weapons.<sup>5</sup> Labeled the “Gunshine State” in 1987, the NRA made sure that legislation was loose and easy to secure a gun. The legislation became a national model for concealed-weapon laws<sup>6</sup> not unlike the now famous Stand Your Ground Laws that passed first in Florida in 2005 and subsequently passed in over 23, mostly Southern states.<sup>7</sup>

Social aggression combined with security culture, economic downturns, and reactive political leadership sets the stage for violent backlash against rising movements. As the LGBTQ community celebrated a victory of expanded rights in 2015, Angela Corey’s colleague, State District Attorney Pam Bondi opposed adoption for gay couples and recently argued in a Florida court that gay marriage would impose “significant public harm.”<sup>8</sup> As a visible LGBTQ movement gains ground, queer and trans bodies are being policed in bathrooms, schools, and public spaces in heinous ways that are legitimized by legislation like North Carolina’s HB2 and the sweep of Southern governors refusing to comply with protections for LGBTQ people. Adding fuel to the fire, the current highly covered presidential campaign offers greater permission and encouragement to publically express vitriol, racism, and inaccuracies that then get repeated ad nauseum.

The economy trained the shooter, and the political climate of Florida and the country, authorized him.

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<sup>3</sup> The Telegraph, January 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/supportservices/12088582/G4S-hit-by-fresh-scandal-at-youth-offenders-centre.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2016/06/13/hillary-clinton-and-donald-trump-call-for-more-airstrikes-on-isis-after-orlando-massacre-that-isis-didnt-direct/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2015/apr/15/jeb-bush/which-state-most-gun-permits/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2007-01-28/news/MGUNS28\\_1\\_carry-a-gun-license-to-carry-concealed](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2007-01-28/news/MGUNS28_1_carry-a-gun-license-to-carry-concealed)

<sup>7</sup> <http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/states-that-have-stand-your-ground-laws.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/stateroundup/florida-response-to-lawsuit-gay-marriage-will-cause-harm/2182184>

## The War on Terror deepens

Throwing responsibility for violent attacks within the U.S. towards a distant, unsubstantiated connection to a band of extremists in another part of the world obscures the truth. The mechanisms of the U.S. manufactured War on Terror were employed on Orlando before bodies had been identified or families had been notified. The post 9-11 media frenzy defines an event before the information is clear, and becomes particularly biased and inflammatory if the shooter is not white. The Orlando shooter's actual connection to particular groups is so farfetched that even the FBI did not find substantive reason to follow-up on him after three interviews. The Orlando shooter's allegiance to the U.S. culture of militarization, aggressive hate, and professionalized violence was more at play than any other ideology.

The laser focus on ISIS and Islam as the primary motive fuels the War on Terror machine. After Orlando and other incidents that focus on the religion of non-white shooters rather than the larger context, Muslims, Arabs, refugees, and immigrants once again feel at risk and isolated in their own communities. The backlash of a public assumption that this situation was caused by Muslim immigrants threatens and marginalizes refugee and immigrant communities, like the refugee community in Clarkston, Georgia. Even potential victories on gun control have been limited to expanding government watch lists rather than revising the whole system. The focus on ISIS stokes Islamophobia and white supremacy and lays the foundation to justify militarization and preemptive prosecution.

Anti-terror legislation, Homeland Security Departments, and increased public surveillance leads us closer to an ever-expanding police state. If a young Black woman can be tried, convicted, and jailed using a lynching law in California<sup>9</sup> when she tried to free a friend from a police attack, movement actors that challenge the state, police, or the U.S. government, regardless of who takes office in November, are likely to be defined as "terrorists" or tried in courts using those laws.

Every day the media releases new information about the shooter's motives and the question revolves around hypothetical prevention. What could have stopped this horrific act? The answer leaps to finding ways to legally profile, monitor, prosecute, and incarcerate individuals who have not committed any crimes. Preemptive prosecution and the spectre of "homegrown" terrorists focuses on individuals, radicalization myths, and broad scale targeting of Muslim communities and does not increase public safety. If we focus on the individual rather than the systemic context, we cannot address the root of violence.

## But the illusion is broken

By investigating the layers and making important connections during this difficult time, we contend with reality as we simultaneously contend with our grief. The illusion is broken that we can possibly respond to this overwhelming, pervasive crisis one policy at a time, one shooter at a time, one police murder at a time, or one deportation at a time.

We can barely recover from one crisis when another, just as real, just as heartbreaking, comes to bear. We face the truth of this landscape, once again. We faced the truth of racist violence a year ago on June 17, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina when nine Black community members were massacred in Mother Emmanuel Church. We face the truth every time a young Black person is killed by police, another young Muslim is targeted by the FBI, or another young Mexican is deported in ICE raids hitting Georgia for the second time this year.

We recognize that we cannot transform this landscape by focusing on a type of gun, a type of person, or a perfect policy fix. To transform this landscape, we build from our shared strength. We reimagine our public spaces and how to protect them; we produce a functional economy based on common good; we generate a vision for global

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.vox.com/2016/6/6/11839620/jasmine-richards-black-lives-matter-lynching>

migration and universal citizenship; and we deepen our commitment to building organized movements that can and will respond to crisis and disaster with stronger infrastructure, stronger relationships, and community control.

## Our only recourse are our social movements

As organizations that are part of the Southern Movement Assembly, we recognize that our communities are the source of our strength in times of crisis. Our resistance relies on our ability to see who we are to ourselves, not in a momentary false sense of unity but in an understanding of how our realities are all deeply connected. We are proud to be part of movements that refuse to be divided, movements that are lifting up the voices of LGBTQ Muslims, movements that refuse to scapegoat Muslim immigrants and refuse to ignore that the people who were killed were predominantly Latinx, part of a larger Puerto Rican diaspora, Black people, and people of color. We are proud to be part of movements that recognize the strength and resistance of LGBTQ communities. Our hearts begin to heal from the outpouring of love and solidarity in a time of grief.

One week before this shooting, 90 people gathered from all over the South to train together, generate visions for our plans, and kick off the Summer Organizing Drive towards the sixth Southern Movement Assembly. Queer people, trans people, young people, elders, organizers on every Southern frontline gathered in Atlanta. SpiritHouse led a session on safety as part of their Harm Free Zone work in Durham NC. People considered moments where we felt safe. We spoke about trauma, and how it affects us in ways that are not always easy to see.

The trauma of the people inside Pulse, their friends, families, and loved ones cannot be imagined. The trauma of fear, shock, and anger is also a shared experience that is generational, deeply embedded in survivors of oppression, displacement, warfare, and violence. The experience of collective grief, expressed in the recent rallies, vigils, dialogues, art, and social media is overwhelming. We applaud the efforts of Equality Florida and local leadership in Orlando creating incredible response and processes to support, heal, and distribute resources.

We all have unique roles to play, and we offer an assessment of the landscape in order to understand how to protect and defend our communities in times of great crisis. One effect of trauma is hyper-vigilance. When we experience trauma, we become super aware of our surroundings as a defense mechanism. In this time of collective trauma, the SMA calls on movement actors to harness a strategic hyper-vigilance to move from this moment into our collective movement power.

Let us be hyper-vigilant when we come together, not to police one another but to listen. Let us investigate this landscape, thoroughly. Let us take the time for careful reflection and foster a clear understanding of the terrain, forecast how state violence will be reinforced and expanded, and name what is at stake for all of our communities.

Let us also build from our strengths. Investigate and support the existing sanctuary spaces in your own location and community. Create spaces for engagement and dialogue that allow people opportunities to be in alignment, beyond allyship. Let us queer our political work in honor of the ones we have lost. We celebrate queer resistance to state violence and over-policing of our public spaces, Pride events, and nightclubs<sup>10</sup>. Let us participate in organized work to initiate the development of a new landscape.

## The long slow build

Southern communities began building together long before this attack, and we will continue to build a social justice movement powerful enough to contend with this current landscape and fundamentally transform our world. There are thousands of people who are part of the work of the Southern Movement Assembly and have worked to initiate visionary agendas through the Southern Peoples Initiatives that address the root causes of

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-black-lives-matter-sf-pride-20160624-snap-story.html>

violence, poverty, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. We cannot move forward from this massacre without understanding our position, and we believe that we are stronger together.

We honor and carry with us the many we lost on that Saturday night in Florida. We carry with us the movements that walked out of high schools all over the South for the Jena 6 in 2007, the movements that rallied in the hundreds of thousands for Trayvon in 2013, the movements for Puerto Rico decolonization, and the movements of Muslim and Arab families that have refused to be silenced and intimidated every day since 2001. We remember the many we have lost around the world as we begin to craft a better one.