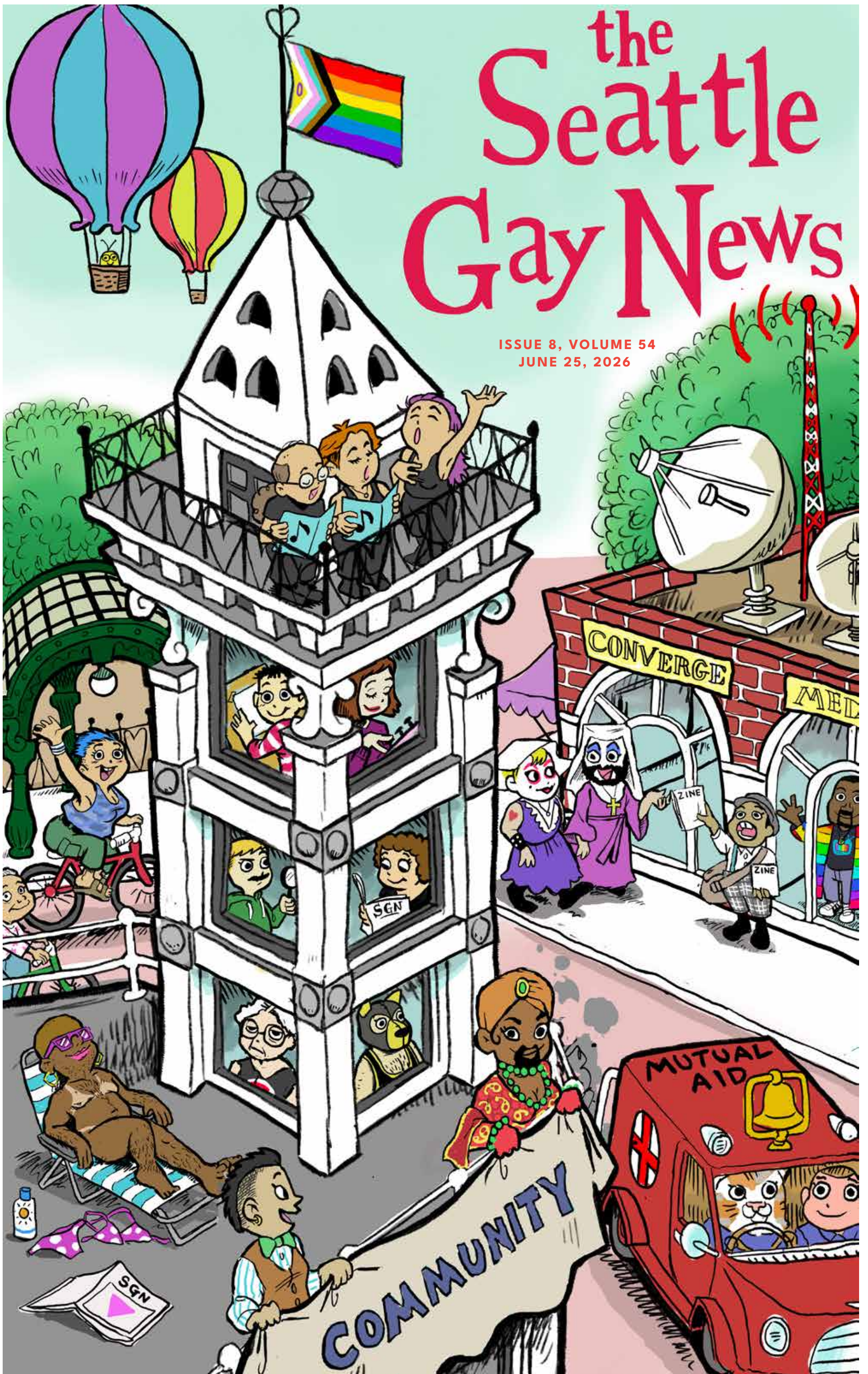


# the Seattle Gay News

ISSUE 8, VOLUME 54  
JUNE 25, 2026



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# POCAAN provides medical care and housing assistance for those in need

BY AISHA MISBAH

POCAAN TEAM  
JEHLANI WHITE

During the 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS crisis swept across the world, killing more than 44 million people as of today. Marginalized people, especially Black/Brown, LGBTQIA+, and impoverished people afflicted with the disease, were largely ignored by the government and society during this time, denying them the care that they required.

In 1987, the People of Color Against AIDS Network was founded in Seattle to bridge the gap by meeting people where they were. POCAAN began as an organization to provide marginalized communities with resources and contacts that could help them during the epidemic. But over the years, it has grown to encompass various other issues that these groups struggle with today.

Dr. Manaye Utaile has worked for POCAAN for the past four years as the medical director and as a provider. While POCAAN has been around since

the 1980s, providing education around HIV/AIDS, counseling, and case management, it didn't provide on-site care until four years ago.

POCAAN is now able to provide medical care, having built the Mocha PrEP Clinic in Federal Way, a safe space to treat people ignored for too long. Utaile is the on-site doctor offering a wide range of treatments: HIV/AIDS prevention care as well as treatment, substance abuse care, mental health services, immunization, etc.

"We provide wraparound services, medical as well as social services," Utaile said. "We address the social determinants of illnesses, including insurance applications, enrollment, transportation assistance, housing, and nutrition."

Currently, POCAAN works with pharmacies to obtain medications for its patients; however, it will soon construct an on-site pharmacy at the Mocha PrEP Clinic, which should

open at the beginning of next year.

Chris Porter, the human resources director at POCAAN, explained how mental health is an important part of treatment. "One of the standout things in COVID was that there was a lot of talk about mental health," he said. "Yet, underneath that, finding providers of color as mental health experts and clinicians was very difficult. Even if you could find them, access was not guaranteed."

POCAAN now has some strong affiliations with mental health providers and will offer more comprehensive mental health treatment sometime in the summer. Porter said they hope to continue addressing the stigma around Black people and mental health.

The Mocha PrEP Clinic accepts all insurance, and if someone doesn't have insurance, POCAAN helps them obtain coverage.

The current executive director,

Ernest Walker, stated that POCAAN relies heavily on federal government grants. However, recent funding cuts have reduced its \$5.4 million grant budget to \$3.2 million, causing losses throughout the organization.

To bridge the funding gap, Walker said, "We're really looking ... to become a part of programs to develop, equitable, easy, and affordable housing for folks."

Despite the losses, POCAAN continues to expand its resources. It also partners with Thrive Seattle to address housing for those seeking help. Jason Simpson, a case manager with POCAAN and Thrive, helps connect people to community resources, including help with rent, connecting them with an attorney, and utility assistance. Simpson is currently working on the Urban League Project, which helps provide housing for people of color.

"[POCAAN is] always in the community, you're meeting people right where they are, and then you get to see them evolve," Simpson said. "I can see you from being under the bridge, dealing with substance abuse issues, to getting you in here, to getting you into counseling, to getting you to see the doctor, and then I can house you. You see it from point A to point Z."

Just a few weeks ago, a woman approached Simpson, telling him that she lives outside, behind a library. He described POCAAN's mission and services, and seeing that she might need their help, invited her back to POCAAN's office. With her essential documents in order and Simpson's expertise, he helped her apply for housing.

After being homeless for seven years, POCAAN's help completely changed her life, as her application was accepted and she finally had a home.

POCAAN has helped more than 5,000 people in the past couple of years through its various resources, according to Walker. Countless people with stories just like that woman's pass through POCAAN's doors every day, finally getting the essential treatments and housing that every human being deserves.



POCAAN CLINIC  
JEHLANI WHITE



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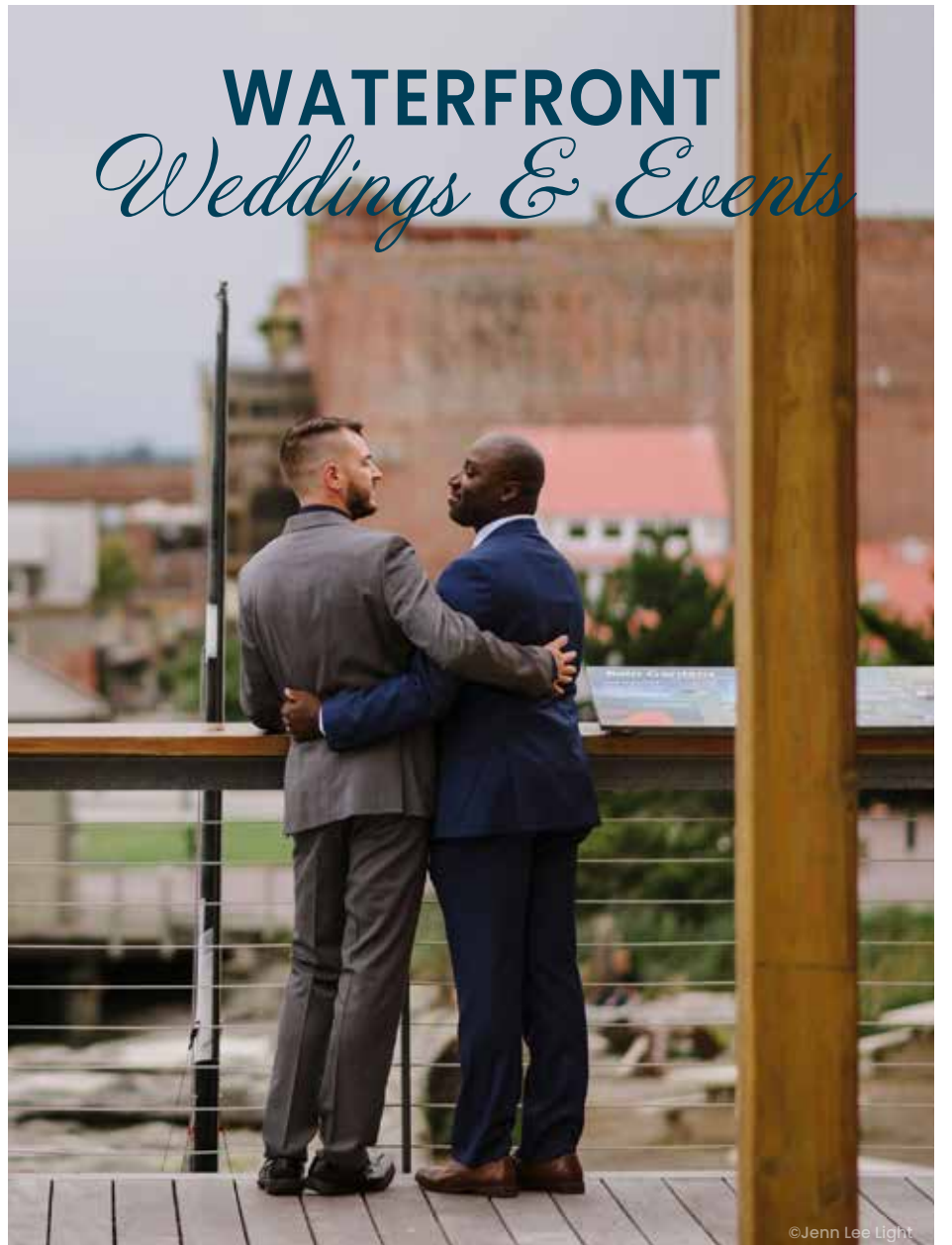
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# Pride ASIA: Breaking down expectations between Asian identities and queerness

BY AISHA MISBAH

PRIDE ASIA FEST 2025, ALEKSA MANILA

As humans, we all crave a sense of belonging. Seattle has been that refuge for LGBTQIA+ people for decades, a place where they can find safety and understanding.

However, for a Queer person of color, it can be a struggle to find a community to belong to. Pride ASIA, founded in 2012 by Aleksa Manila, a drag performer and therapist, seeks to create a space to celebrate and empower those with Asian and Pacific Islander identities. The volunteer-run organization hosts events and provides resources especially for Queer Asian and Pacific Islander people.

Manila recalls that in the 1990s and 2000s, some Queer organizations in Seattle did focus on Asian identities, but they seemed to fizzle out. She felt there was a need for a formal and visible group where Asian LGBTQIA+ people could come together beyond personal social networks and friendships.

One of the main events the organization hosts every year is Pride ASIA Fest, usually before Pride Month, with dancing, music, speakers, etc. It is a traditional Pride celebration but specific to Asian cultures, heritages, and histories.

“Part of the reason why we do it in Seattle’s Chinatown International District is to remind our ancestors, our families, our relatives, our Asian

American communities that LGBTQ Asian Pacific Islanders do exist,” Manila said. “Simultaneously, it was also a reminder for LGBTQ folks that we aren’t just LGBTQ, we’re also Asian Americans, we’re also Pacific Islanders, so we just wanted to remind them about the diversity.”

Dimsum Dialogue, Pride ASIA’s educational arm, hosts community panels, presentations, trainings, and book readings featuring LGBTQIA+ authors, among other events.

“What’s the Tea?” is Dimsum Dialogue’s weekly social support group,

every Thursday at Oasis. Primarily funded by the gender-based violence referral program at the Filipino Community of Seattle, the group provides a safe space for Asian and Pacific Islander LGBTQIA+ people to connect and build community. Speakers are invited to discuss various topics, such as domestic violence, legal support for AAPI communities, or coming out. Manila serves as the group’s licensed social worker.

One of these invited speakers was Maya Mem Saab, a South Asian drag queen and member of Pride ASIA.

Mem Saab came out at the age of 39 while married to a woman with whom she had a son. She was invited to speak about her experiences of coming out later in life and Queer parenting.

“There were other people [at the event] who could relate to that,” Mem Saab said. “There is a Queer child wanting to talk to their parents, or there was a parent who had a Queer child. That is one of the great things that Pride ASIA does.”

Dutchess Manila Starr, Seattle’s first Bollywood drag queen and the reigning empress of the Imperial Court of Seattle, is also part of Pride ASIA. (She is also Manila’s drag daughter and Mem Saab’s drag mother.)

Manila Starr explained how she was the first South Asian member to join Pride ASIA: “I’ve been doing drag now for almost 12 years, and when I first started, there were no other South Asian or Bollywood drag queens [in Seattle].”

She described how, particularly in South Asian cultures, being Queer is taboo, and it makes people reluctant to break into Queer spaces. Pride ASIA has given her the opportunity to represent other South Asian Queers, and she hopes they know they can truly be themselves and find a community and support in the organization.





# Charlie's Queer Books is a bookstore for everyone

BY FRANK GAIMARI

CHARLIE HUNTS AND MADELINE BURCHARD  
JO SISODIA

In the heart of Fremont, one of Seattle's most colorful and creative neighborhoods, there's a bookstore that's redefining what it means to be a Queer community space. Charlie's Queer Books, which opened its doors in late 2023, is more than just a place to buy books — it's a celebration of LGBTQIA+ stories, culture, and resilience.

From the moment you step inside, it's clear that Charlie's Queer Books is something special. The space is alive with personality, from its bright pink accents to its cozy children's reading nook and an attic reading room that feels like a literary hideaway. Every corner of the store invites exploration, offering a sense of warmth and belonging that's hard to find elsewhere.

The shelves are packed with a carefully curated selection of books that span every genre imaginable. Whether you're looking for a heartfelt memoir, a gripping sci-fi adventure, or a beautifully illustrated graphic novel, Charlie's has something for everyone. But what sets this bookstore apart isn't just the variety — it's the intention behind the selection. Every book on the shelves is chosen to amplify Queer voices and celebrate stories that have often been overlooked or marginalized.

But Charlie's Queer Books isn't just about the books. Co-owned by Charlie Hunts, it's a true community hub, hosting events like book signings, LGBTQIA+ awareness celebrations, and even a Trans Rights Readathon. These events bring people together, fostering a sense of connection and solidarity that extends far beyond the pages of a book. The store also offers a range of quirky merchandise, from stickers and tote bags to hats emblazoned with cheeky slogans that celebrate Queer culture with humor and pride.

What makes Charlie's truly unique is its ability to make everyone feel welcome. Whether you're a lifelong member of the LGBTQIA+ community, an ally, or simply someone who loves

a good story, you'll find a space that's open, inclusive, and full of heart.

## Frank Gaimari: What inspired you to create a bookstore dedicated to Queer literature?

Charlie Hunts: When I started working in print and marketing, I began collecting every LGBTQ+ book I came across. As a Trans man, I was especially drawn to books centered on Trans characters with stories I never had growing up in Arizona.

At the same time, I watched as anti-LGBTQ bills passed, and book bans accelerated. So, I decided to test the waters with a disco-tiled mobile cart I brought around Seattle. The response was so overwhelming that we decided to open our brick-and-mortar store in Fremont.

There was also a gap I really wanted to fill. There aren't many third places for Queer people that aren't centered around alcohol. This store can be that space, whether you're under 21, don't drink, or just like going to sleep early.



Everyone deserves a place to just be.

## FG: How do you go about curating the books and merchandise for the store?

CH: We source our books from a variety of places, including customer recommendations, librarians' suggestions, working with publisher representatives, and, of course, reading as much as possible. It's the most fun part of the job! Especially in the beginning, we collaborated with customers to build out genres that weren't necessarily my forte.

## FG: What has been the most rewarding part of running Charlie's Queer Books?

CH: Seeing the community coming together organically at the bookstore has been the most rewarding part. Our goal was to provide the space and make people feel comfortable, but I'm only one guy. I can't represent the entire community or drive its mission



alone. Watching others take the space and run with it lets me know we built a solid foundation that can support so much as a collective.

## FG: What role do you think Queer bookstores play in today's cultural landscape?

CH: Queer bookstores are doing something essential right now, especially given the moment we're living in. These stores aren't just retail spaces. They're an act of resistance.

But more than that, they're about joy. We've had people brought to tears in our kids' nook because they wish they had these stories when they were growing up, or because they find them so healing now. People thank us every day just for existing. That's bittersweet to me. It's the reason we're here, but it also shows how much work still needs to be done.

So, I'd say Queer bookstores are currently functioning as community centers, safe harbors, and cultural preservers all at once.

## FG: How do you envision the future of Charlie's Queer Books in the next five to ten years?

CH: We've already outgrown our little house! I hope we can expand our reach to communities that need access to Queer stories. Who knows? Maybe we could open an additional location or even add a fun book truck.

In a time when Queer spaces are more important than ever, Charlie's Queer Books stands as a beacon of hope and resilience. It's a place where stories are celebrated, identities are affirmed, and community is built. Fremont is lucky to have it, and so is Seattle.

Visit Charlie's Queer Books at 465 N. 36th St., Seattle, WA 98103, or shop online at <https://charliesqueerbooks.com/>.



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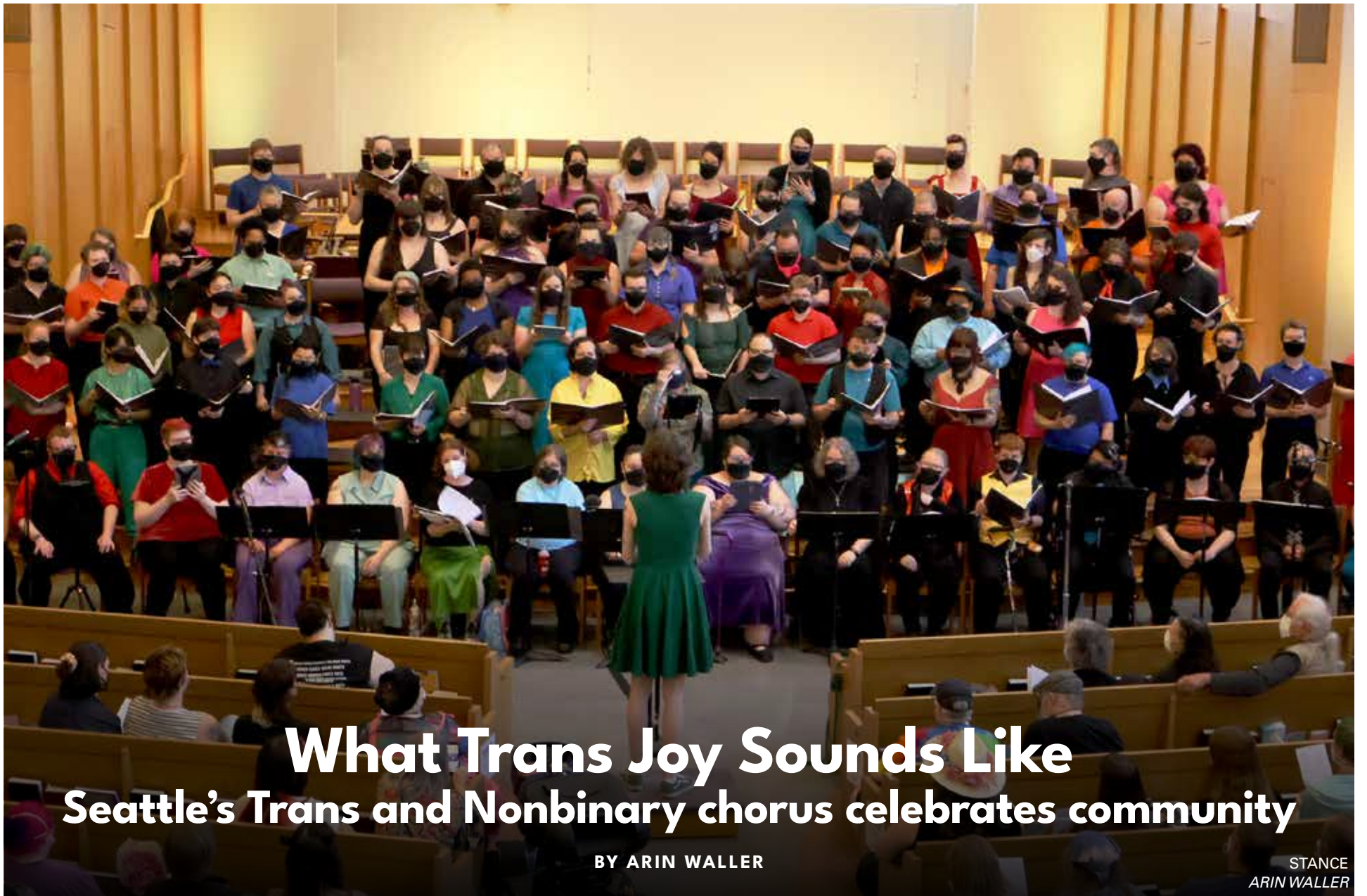
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# What Trans Joy Sounds Like Seattle's Trans and Nonbinary chorus celebrates community

BY ARIN WALLER

STANCE  
ARIN WALLER

On June 12 and 13, the Seattle Trans and Nonbinary Choral Ensemble (STANCE) hosted a concert at University Congregational Church of Christ in the U District, described as a celebration of Trans joy in hard times, when violence against Trans people is too common. Entitled "What Trans Joy Sounds Like," the concert's goal was to remind people of reasons to stay positive in these tumultuous times and not give in to despair. (Another performance is scheduled for June 25 on Vashon Island.)

On a warm summer day, as people began to fill the pews, with the Transgender flag draped behind the stage, it had all the markings of an eventful evening. The concert began with a few speeches and poems about per-

severance and self-discovery. Among the notable speakers was Seattle City Councilmember Dionne Foster.

The selection of songs was rather diverse, including a variety of newer musical numbers and some more widely recognizable compositions, including by composers such as Dale Trumbore, Mitchell Grassi, and Christopher H. Harris. Before intermission, the chorus offered a nice rendition of "What It Sounds Like" from the Netflix series *K-Pop Demon Hunter*, preceded by a personal story by one of the singers, Mira Deacon, in which she shared the difficulties of trying to be herself before transitioning, when the person you're living as is not authentically you.

In the second half, the audience was encouraged to participate in "You

Created a Song," by Timothy Takach. A majority of the solo performances were also in the second half, with the last song being purely a solo piece.

It was a joyous recital that accomplished its goal of celebrating Trans joy and uplifting the community through song.

### Background

STANCE was founded in 2022 by Haven Wilvich as a gender-free chorus, fueled by her growing frustration as a feminine-presenting bass singer in traditional choruses. Wilvich wanted to create a space for Trans and gender-nonconforming people to experience their love of singing and explore their vocal ranges, free from being categorized. Since its incep-

tion, it has grown and performed at various events, including Trans Day of Remembrance last November at the UCCC, when over 90 Trans and Nonbinary singers performed in honor of those in the Trans community who are no longer with us, drawing an audience of almost 600 people.

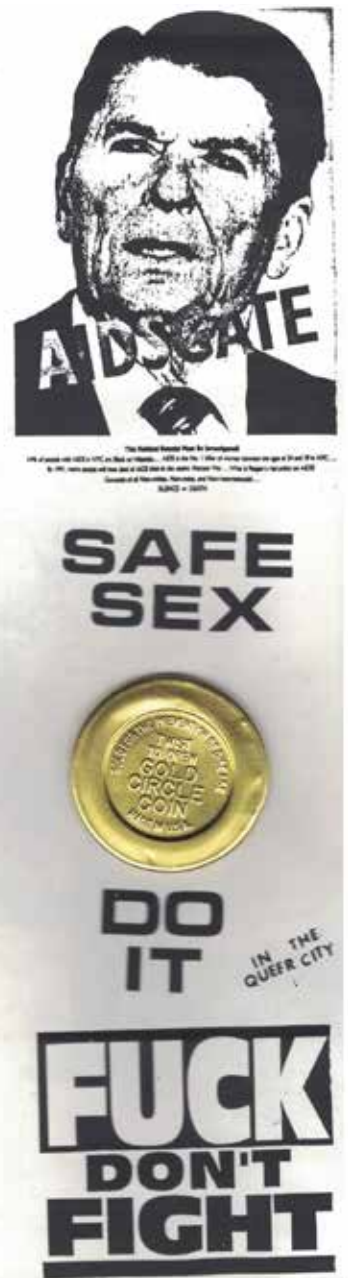
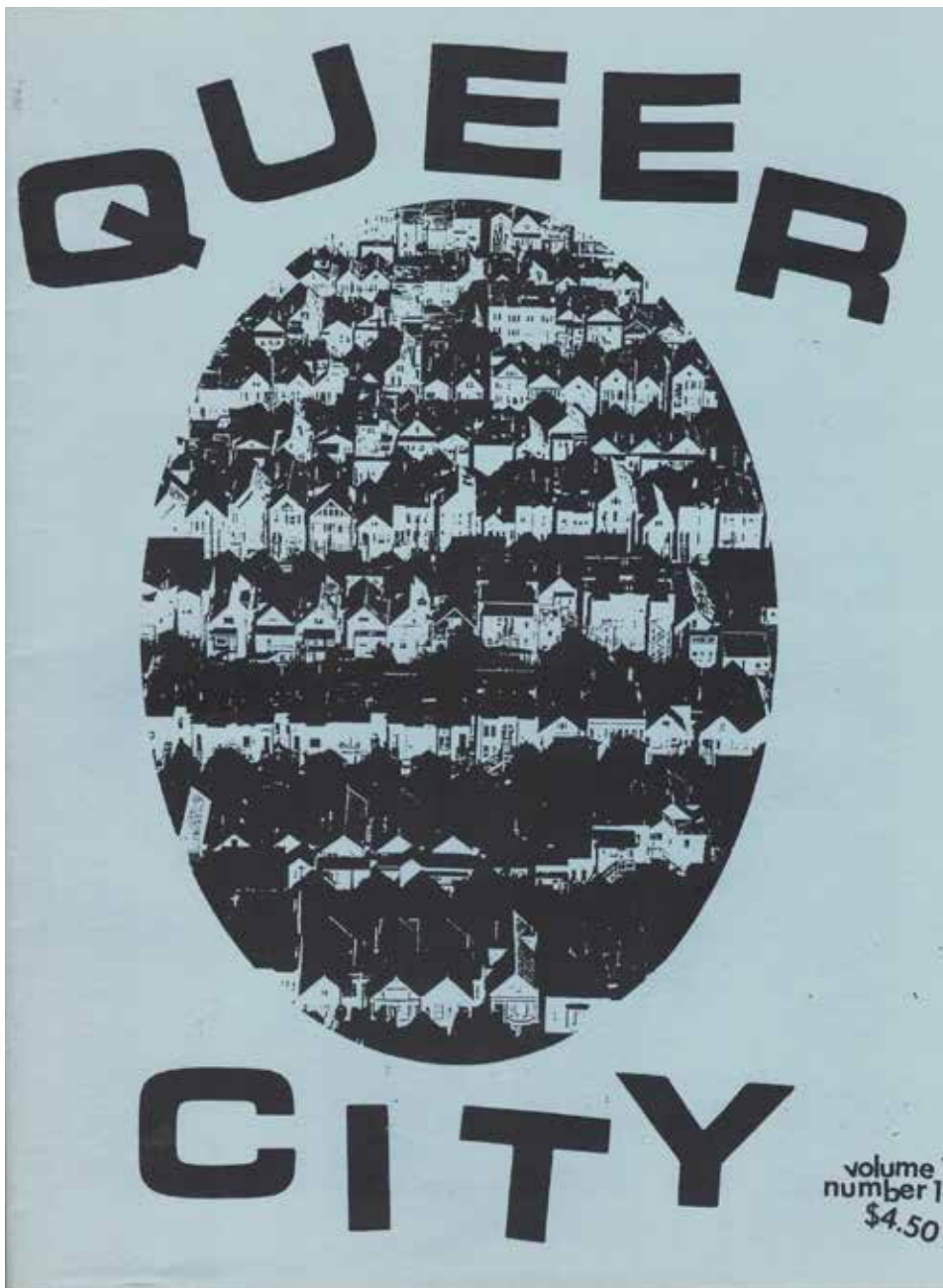
In addition to performances, STANCE provides other community resources, such as a biannual clothing swap, allowing Transgender people to pick out free clothing that aligns with their gender presentation. STANCE also offers music lessons, since the learning curve can be a bit daunting when joining a chorus.

More information is at [www.stanceseattle.org](http://www.stanceseattle.org)

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COVER AND INNER PAGE FROM QUEER CITY #1

# Queer zines making a comeback in Seattle

## A history of counterculture, connection, and liberation

BY MADISON JONES, SGN MANAGING EDITOR

Before social media and the internet dominated nearly every facet of modern life, Queer people had very few outlets to express themselves authentically. In the realm of print media, there weren't many public forums in which to discuss queerness besides the *SGN* and other LGBTQIA+ publications (that had op-ed and classified sections).

Today, in line with Gen Z's emerging neo-luddite movement, many younger Queer and Trans people are turning away from algorithmically curated and monitored digital spaces (that are also becoming increasingly more hostile and dangerous toward them) in favor of a tried-and-true, more analog means of self-expression, connection, and creativity: the zine.

### Queer zine history

The origin of zines can be traced back to the Harlem Renaissance and science fiction fandoms of the 1930s and 1940s, but with the advent of punk movement and greater access to copy machines in the late 1970s, zine culture began to take shape.

*Punk Lust* was a Seattle-based zine started by Wilum Pugmyre in 1981 that reviewed venues, punk bands, and other zines with an irreverent, rebellious attitude befitting the moniker. In the first issue, Pugmyre critiqued another punk zine called *Inaudible Noise*: "These wankers think they publish Seattle's 'only real fanzine' — so you know they're full of shit."

He also has complained about the venue of the first live punk show he attended: "I don't like the Showbox. It's too big, depressing, the sound system sucks. But thanks to three exciting local bands, I had a great time."

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, consciousness-raising among AIDS activists led into the new Queer move-

ment — which took on its own forms in influencing the medium of zines.

In the 1992 FDC Seattle Pride Week program, an article by Dennis Cooper titled "Zines from a Mall" opens with how Queer zine culture sought to challenge conventional thinking around sexuality and gender expression.

"As a recent *QW* cover story ("Give Up to the Ghetto!") pointed out in its own funny way, there's a snowballing movement underway made up of Queer zine editors, writers, artists, performers and other anti-assimilationist types," he wrote. "What they're after is nothing short of a radical new culture."

Cooper goes on to define this new, Queer zine manifesto as "promoting the high ideals and promiscuous interests that make being young such a state of grace, and adulthood, with its myriad compromises, such as disappointment."

Queer zines began to sprout up in communities all across the country. *Queer City* was created in 1991 by Rachel Pepper and Alexander Chee, who worked at the Gay and Lesbian bookstore A Different Light in San Francisco, as a direct response to more corporate Gay publications.

"So just who is *Queer City* written for?" Pepper wrote. "Well, *Queer City* is not necessarily written for the typical, gay white male establishment hurry up and wait for me I'm important kind of customer I see too many of in my store. Nor is it necessarily written for the kind of overly politically correct dyke who assumes that every dyke with dyed hair who likes to hang out with boys can't possibly be a feminist. No, *QC* is meant specifically for the new co-sexual queer generation."

*OutPunk* was a zine (and also eventually record label) dedicated to the Queer punk scene of the 1990s. In its

June 1995 issue, Matt Wobensmith wrote a review of Olympia-based rock band Team Dresch's album, *Personal Best*.

"They've polished their sound to become a mean lesbionic rock machine," Wobensmith wrote. "They

also got dyke bashed at one of their first shows. And you know what — they fucking kick ass through and thorough."

### Queer zines today

Even as the internet slowly became



# PINK AND BLACK ATTACK #1



## Bash Back! Communique #666

Greetings an-pirates and carp-munchers.

As we're sure you've already been made aware, the newly elected president of the United States has committed to repealing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and will allow queers to serve openly in the military. In the past, we at Bash Back! have been extremely critical of queer military service. We've been known to refer to DADT activists as "racist, assimilationist fucks" or "imperialist tools" or simply "what fucking slaves". Those familiar with our past position on the issue will be surprised to learn that we have had a change of heart.

We are now completely in favor of queer military service! We have come to several realizations and applaud the repeal of DADT for the following reasons:

The military has BIG weapons. In our efforts to arm queers, Bill crews have been working to obtain mid-size amounts of pepper spray and other self-defense weapons. However, if our operations can infiltrate the military, we will have access to bigger and better toys (not to mention the training that goes with them). We're already fierce as fuck, imagine us with military training. After doing some research on the issue, we've discovered that right wing christians, politicians, and military officials are in consensus on the fact that queers in the military will completely compromise unit cohesion, battle readiness, and the overall strength of the armed forces. Doing that Bash Back! opposes militarism, imperialism and ALL forms of state power, we are ecstatic about the opportunity to destroy the military from the inside!

We've been watching a lot of military porn and reading a healthy amount of "barack's" themed erotica lately. Needless to say we've developed a bit of a collective military fetish. Our walls are already covered in procum at the very possibility of the orgies we can indulge once we're buzzing up with a bunch of sex-deprived milos. In short, thank you, Barack Obama and the assimilationist gay establishment!

Truly yours,  
The birds of a cunning norm,  
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PS: DADT activists are still racist, much of orgies.  
EES: Come to the radical queer congregate in May!



## DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

November 17, 2008

Hello everyone. My name is Saffo and I am trans. Some of you may know me by my birth name, Fokion. As many of you will already know, to many trans people, changing our names is an important rite of passage. Coming out as trans, choosing a new name and transitioning my identity has been a difficult, beautiful, emotionally exhausting, revitalizing and spiritually empowering process. Some of you who have known me for years have struggled to remember to call me by my new name, and by my new preferred pronoun. I assure you that it's been even more difficult for me, adjusting to a new name, to a new relationship with the world. But it is so important and I appreciate the many people in my life who have supported me through this struggle, as well as the countless many trans and gender variant people who have struggled and fought so hard before me—many of whom have sacrificed their lives for the chance to name themselves. After all, today is the day of remembrance, so I must remember with a sense of gratitude and humility those who have fought before me and made the ultimate sacrifice.

So what's in a name? Many of us live our lives with names that were given to us by our parents, which may or may not have any real meaning or significance. Your name is perhaps the most important, most deeply engrained social marker you will have in your life. It claims to define you—and yet most people did not choose their name, or may not feel that it has any real meaning to them. Coming out as trans has given me a sense of solidarity with people everywhere who have chosen to rename themselves. Similarly, it is through this politics of naming that we are also able to name the forces of violence that oppress us. Transphobia, Heterosexism, Racism, Classism, Imperialism, Ableism, Capitalism, Sexual Assault and Violence, the Prison Industrial Complex. The list goes on. Naming the systems of violence that oppress us and those around us is a vital first step in our various struggles for liberation. And so it is through naming both ourselves, our communities, and the forces of violence that oppress us that we are able to fight back.

With that said, we are here today to remember the countless many trans and gender non-conforming people who have been slaughtered by the systemic violence of transphobia. By an interesting coincidence, today happens to be an important day for me both as a tranny and as a greek. Today is the 35th anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic Massacre. Let me explain. In 1967, as part of the cold war, the United States over-

PAGES FROM PINK AND BLACK ATTACK #1

the new place for LGBTQIA+ people to congregate, interact, and express their opinions, some continued to produce zines into the 2000s.

*Pink and Black Attack* was an Olympia-based, Queer, and anarchist collective that created its own zine in April 2009. The first issue features articles on self-defense advice, poems, and political manifestos. It stated: "We proudly join the recent wave of queer organizing and action with this publication, with which we hope to provide news, theory, analysis, and art relevant to queer anarchists."

One article, written by Saffo for the 2008 Trans Day of Remembrance, shares her struggles transitioning and coming out as Transgender.

"To many trans people, changing our name is an important rite of passage," she wrote. She explained how she is half-Greek and that because she was proud of her birth name being from ancient Greek, she chose Saffo to better reflect her queerness but still maintain her connection to her heritage.

Now, in the 2020s, with Gen Z fatiguing from technology and suffering a

loneliness epidemic brought on partially by social media addiction, zines are once again becoming a popular method for Queer and Trans people to express their ideas and connect with one another.

Several zine related-events and workshops are being held around the Seattle area this summer. The Seattle Public Library offers zines in several of branches. And from May 16 to June 27, the ZAPP Zine Collection — with over 30,000 zines — is available to browse at the Central Library. The Paper Pushers Zine Store run by Seattle Printer's Guild holds zine workshop every second and fourth Friday of the month. Their next meetup will be on July 10 from 5-8pm.

### Seattle Zine Fest

Seattle Zine Fest is a yearly event created in 2024, which has featured over a hundred vendors. This year, it will be held on July 26 from noon to 6 p.m. at the Quality Flea Center on Capitol Hill.

Amity Debs told the SGN she was first introduced to the world of zines while living in San Francisco before the pandemic. Before attending her

first SF Zine Fest, she decided to make a zine on a whim, though she didn't consider herself very artistic. But to her surprise, people's responses were very positive and supportive.

"People loved it, and it made me really excited," she said. "[So] I started making zines regularly and sharing them, and I loved going back to the Zine Fest every year."

Once she moved to Washington, she said, there were already great zine fests in Bremerton and Olympia but not in Seattle, which shocked her. "Zine fests are such a critical way of engaging people with art and getting them to create that to me, this was a huge gap that needed to be filled," she said.

Debs explained to the SGN that once Short Run (another festival) changed its focus to all comics, she and her co-organizer Kory began to organize the first Seattle Zine Fest.

Why do zines continue to draw in (especially younger) Queer and Trans people? "I think the accessibility of zines, and their long history as a voice of marginalized communities, helps keep it permanently relevant

for Queer and Trans folks," Debs said. "Especially as many of us have seen how big technology and media actively work to marginalize us and suppress our voices, it makes a lot of sense to me that we would continue to gravitate to expressing ourselves in works that we can make with what we have at home and share directly to others in our community."



LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS

ps - My real name is Vlad but most people call me Bill. I don't know why. Here is my address:  
Vlad Gogov, 2 Glamis Street, Kingsgrove, 2208, Sydney, NSW, Australia.

An excerpt from his neat comic is here - write him directly for more. Keep reading.

**QUEER-DO COMIX**  
presenting  
**Chip Blix**

Dear Outpunk People,  
I'm a 27 year old queer punk guy living in Melbourne, state capital of Victoria, in Australia. I just came across the interview (not literally - I'm not that excited) with Mukiteo Fainos in the September '94 issue of MRRR, and thought I'd drop you a line. (...)

I'd really like to find out what's happening with the homocore/queer punk scene in the States. Whatever the scene is like, it can't be doader than here in Australia. I've seen fuck all on homocore here in Melbourne. I go to plenty of gigs, but seem to be the only out punk I know. It doesn't help that most of Melbourne's punks are simply rednecks with haircuts - just as homophobic as your average job from the suburbs, only dressed a little differently.

With a population of 3 million people, and a flourishing music scene, Melbourne should have a few more queer punks than just me, but I never see any when I screw up the courage to go to one of Melbourne's shit-awful gay bars (bland dance shit, yuppie wankers with attitude and overpriced drinks - blah) and finding someone out on the band/alternative club scene is next to impossible. They're there all right, but so far in the closet that dragging them out kicking and screaming would be more fun than getting to know them. I've got a few queer goth friends, and know one or two other gay guys into indie/alternative music, but no real punks. No one I'd want to have a relationship with either. It gets to be a drag being the only out queer at band venues, and the only punk in the gay clubs. I'd hoped that my being so out would serve to bring a few other queer boys/girls out or together, but so far, no go. I do poetry readings/spoken word gigs with a few Melbourne bands - Headcase being the major culprits in aiding and abetting my public performances - rants against heterosc., sexism, etc. - I also dj at a Saturday night goth/punk/grunge/industrial/techno/alternative club. Both my performances, and my occasional rants over the mike at all the club, serve to guarantee that everyone on the scene knows I'm queer - but do I make new friends? Do I find out about Australian homocore bands (if there are any)? Do I find a boyfriend? No. Still, I persevere. (...)

Yours for anarchy and ass-fucking.

Richard Watts, 6 Council St., Clifton Hill, 3068 Vic., Australia

Yup, those two need to meet each other, don't you think? I've gotten several letters from Australia - you two definitely aren't the only ones. Hopefully, others will write you when (and if) they see this. - Matt

**QUEER LIBERATION ARMY**

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**BAD GIRLS FAGGOT SEX REBELS DYKE ROTTEN BOY!**

INSIDE OUTPUNK: RECRUITS



PUNK LUST 1981 #1 INTERIOR PAGE OSCAR WILDE WITH NOTE FROM WILUM PUGMYRE



# Seattle's Trans mutual aid network brings a community in crisis together

BY ARIN WALLER

GEM SEATTLE RALLY, MAY 2026  
ARIN WALLER

The Mutual Aid Network for Trans and Intersex Individuals in Seattle (MANTIS) is a political organization that has been making itself more known in the public conscience. In February, it held a rally in Cal Anderson Park, addressing issues affecting the Trans community, mainly the homelessness and refugee crisis. Since then, it has organized a march to City Hall in collaboration with the Gender Equity Movement (GEM) to get Mayor Katie Wilson to declare a state of emergency regarding the Trans refugee crisis and free up funds to help those fleeing from states that have passed legislation affecting their rights.

As the name implies, MANTIS isn't one particular organization or group but instead a network whose purpose is to bring organizations that advocate for and assist Transgender and Intersex people in Seattle together to share resources so as to more effectively help provide direct support and develop more organized strategies. The general structure is extremely decentralized, described as a phonebook for Trans rights groups. This is intentional, as the group was formed during a time when the Trans community faces attacks from our own government.

Groups that participate in MANTIS include the Kawaguchi O'Connor Initiative, Project Open Arms, and Seattle Transfeminists.

## The Beginning

The network was started by Jaclyn Brockschmidt after Donald Trump's reelection. Brockschmidt had been doing mutual aid for years before this point, having lost her entire support network after coming out as Trans. She was close to losing everything she owned but had a few people in her life who helped her out. "I've seen in my own life how quickly things can fall apart, especially if you're Trans," Brockschmidt told the SGN. "I have been making good money ever since then, and I figured it's my responsibility... having done well because of other people. I need to pay that forward."

When it became clear that Trump was going to be reelected, Brockschmidt began figuring out ways to help her community and those close to her. She later texted a few friends, asking them to discuss what to do next, and that's where MANTIS was started.

In the early days, the first MANTIS meetings were held in Brockschmidt's living room. Currently, it meets in a room at Peer Seattle. "It was clear that obviously there were a lot of people out there looking for answers and looking for someone to give them those answers, and we wanted to create a space for discussing these ideas and putting these ideas into action," Brockschmidt said.

Brockschmidt stepped down from her leadership role at MANTIS after becoming overwhelmed with managing the entire organization, but she still does mutual aid on a smaller scale in her spare time.

Since Brockschmidt's departure, the organization has adopted a loose leadership structure to avoid potential targeting from bad actors. Morgan, one of the many organizers, has taken it upon herself to facilitate the monthly meetings. She described how the first meeting she facilitated also happened to fall on Trans Day of Remembrance, at which point she organized a vigil at Cal Anderson Park after the meeting.

"If I was bringing together a bunch of Trans organizers on Trans Day of Remembrance, there probably needed to be [acknowledgment of] that in some way, so that turned into organizing a vigil after that, and that was a pretty intense experience," Morgan said.

## TRACTION (Project Open Arms)

Aspen Coyle, who has been regularly attending meetings, is the program manager for Project Open Arms, a project of Trans Community Action (TRACTION), a small local nonprofit that aims to shift the narrative around Trans people so that more people can hear their perspectives and stories. Project Open Arms helps Trans people fleeing to the Pacific Northwest to escape states that pass legislation limiting Trans people's rights.

"One of the big benefits of MANTIS overall is that it's a place for Trans people who are interested in activism to meet, socialize, and connect with each other, in places that are less based around social connections," Coyle stated.

## Kawaguchi O'Connor Initiative

Violet Kawaguchi is a major force in MANTIS, having organized the rally in February and the march in May with GEM. She is also the co-founder of the Kawaguchi O'Connor Initiative (KOI), which, like Project Open Arms, helps Trans people relocating to Seattle by offering them temporary housing and help accessing resources such as Medicaid and SNAP.

Like many organizations, KOI benefits greatly from MANTIS, through which KOI has gotten volunteers, connections, and a share of informa-

tion from other organizations. While becoming a public-facing organization puts MANTIS at greater risk, Kawaguchi stated that it is necessary, as MANTIS is a coalition of organizations that have experience in organizing events.

"It would be a waste for MANTIS not to be doing what it's doing right now; we need to be publicly visible because this crisis isn't really publicly visible," Kawaguchi explained. "There is only so much we can do internally as a bunch of nonprofits and affinity groups. We don't have infinite resources: we have to make the public aware so they can help out and contribute."

## Seattle Transfeminists

Seattle Transfeminists is a newer group, having formed in October 2025. As the name implies, it is dedicated to combating transmisogyny and improving the lives of transfems around Seattle. The group started in the U District, and one of its main activities includes hosting reading groups around the campus at the UW.

One member, Eden Quah, told the SGN about the organization's involvement in MANTIS: "It's just good to hear from a lot of different organizations and to network and be able to coordinate."

## Gender Justice League

Galaxy Marshall, a board member of the Gender Justice League, has been involved with MANTIS for two years on his own time. According to Marshall, MANTIS has been very helpful for finding out what efforts people are making in Trans advocacy and figuring out which organizations are providing which services.

"One of the things I would see people run into a lot when they want to get involved in mutual aid is either not knowing what already exists or seeing a need and not knowing if trying to fix that need would be duplicating efforts, so I feel like spaces like MANTIS are helpful for going over what everyone is doing," Marshall explained.

"In general it's really useful, helpful, and fulfilling to get involved with mutual aid. I know a lot of Trans people in Seattle have talked to me about feeling pretty hopeless a lot of the time and that mutual aid and helping the community and being tapped in is something that can really help with that."



GEM SEATTLE RALLY, MAY 2026  
ARIN WALLER

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# Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: The Abbey of St. Joan approaches its 30th anniversary

BY SISTER ANNE BROSIA OF THE MOST HOLY FRUIT SALAD, MISTRESS OF PROPAGANDA

"LOVE ONTAP" EVENT  
MAGGIE BLOODSTONE

On Easter Sunday 1979, four men set out into the city of San Francisco wearing traditional nun's habits. By using sincerity and joy mixed with satire to counter the prevailing homophobia and shame, they inspired others to join their cause, thus forming the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Thanks to their focus on service and Queer liberation, and a down-to-earth approach to safer sex education, it

didn't take long for the movement to spread to other cities and become worldwide.

In Seattle, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence had its beginnings on July 14, 1996, when a group of five fully professed sisters and one novice sister got together to form a new house and took the name the Abbey of St. Joan. Driven by the call to promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt, they gath-

ered for their first event: a group baptism at Seattle's Madison Park beach. In a unique Sisterly way, it blended spectacle and sincere action to mark the beginnings of the Abbey's work and service to Seattle's Queer community.

Since then, the Abbey has grown to be a beacon of joy. From carrying the Pride flag during the Seattle Pride Parade to partnering with various organizations throughout the year —

helping to raise money for our granting fund and promoting safer sex practices — the Abbey's commitment to community service and upliftment has never wavered.

This year is particularly special as we are celebrating our 30th anniversary. If you would like to see what we are doing, follow us on Facebook and Instagram, or on our website at [www.theabbey.org](http://www.theabbey.org).



COURTESY MAGGIE BLOODSTONE



COURTESY MAGGIE BLOODSTONE



COURTESY MAGGIE BLOODSTONE



COURTESY MAGGIE BLOODSTONE

# Seattle Dykes on Bikes and raising a Trans daughter

## Wen Cruz shares her journey of parenthood and leadership

BY MADISON JONES, SGN MANAGING EDITOR

Go to any Pride or LGBTQIA+-related event around Seattle or the Puget Sound area, and more likely than not you'll find members of Seattle's official Dykes on Bikes chapter, including providing logistics and support.

The organization has been at the forefront these past few years, from spearheading Seattle's Dyke March and Pride parade to protecting events, attendees, and businesses, such as drag queen story hour at the Brew-house Pub in Renton.

Wen Cruz, president of Seattle DoB, spoke with the SGN recently about her life's journey of coming out, establishing and leading her chapter, and parenting her 14-year-old Trans daughter in the current political climate.

### Discovery and coming out

Cruz described how, while growing up in the Seattle area, she was drawn to riding from a young age. "I spent a lot of time on different family farm-lands," she said. "It was more quads than motorcycles, but I loved fast things."

Cruz reported first hearing of the DoB through family members. "My dad lives in San Francisco, [as did] my grandparents at the time," she recalled. "I spent a lot of time there in the summers as a kid, and over the years, I had some Queer family members that used to talk about the parade and the Dykes on Bikes."

Cruz said that she and her brother both struggled with coming out to parts of their family and in their careers, until about the late 2000s. It wasn't until she met one of the original DoB members, Soni Wolf, by chance at a bar in San Francisco that she found the inspiration to come out.

"After chatting for a bit," Cruz said, "something inspired me to say, 'I'm currently coming out of the closet,'" adding that some family members and her workplace still didn't know about her Queer identity and how she was dying to finally come out to them. "That was a big struggle for me," she said.

That is when Wolf gave Cruz some advice that left a deep impact: "Fuck what everyone thinks, and live your truth. Life is too short — you could go [die] tomorrow."

"And that is the ongoing narrative in my mind that I'm reminded of," Cruz said. "There's no time to waste. You have to stand in your truth and power now."

### Creating Seattle's DoB chapter

Cruz had ridden with members of the DoB in the Bay Area a couple of times and been solicited to join. But, she said, "I was a little hesitant to join because of my schedule. I'm a mom... I was fully out but just didn't have the time to ride."

But years later, she became inspired to start Seattle's DoB chapter after coming across members of the San Francisco DoB while working at an all-women's motorcycle campout retreat near Seattle called Dream Roll. There she noticed one of them wearing a Soni Wolf patch.

"I just hollered out: 'Soni Wolf! That person has a lot of meaning in my life!' And I asked them, 'Is there a Dykes on Bikes chapter here in Seattle? I live here now.' They were like, 'No — you should start one.'"

Cruz described tragically and unex-

pectedly losing her daughter seven months into her pregnancy and still processing the grief.

"One of the ways that I personally handle moving through grief is I pour myself into service," she explained. "I've kind of done that my whole life. I just... I serve, you know? It's a way I can transmute pain into something that might be meaningful to someone else. So I thought about it, and I was like, 'You know what? I think I'm gonna.'"

Cruz said she decided to start the Seattle DoB chapter also because it felt like there weren't any accepting safe spaces already.

"The motorcycle community needs a safe Queer space," she explained. "Every group I rode with was either super hetero, very cisgender, or not Queer-friendly. I didn't see myself represented in these groups, so I couldn't find, like, a riding group that felt like home. I kind of bounced from group to group."

After the pandemic, in 2022, Cruz began the process of organizing and applying for DoB chapter status. She said it also felt like a moment to inspire her Trans daughter, who has been struggling to embrace her identity in the current anti-Trans youth climate.

"I thought about what that might teach her," she said, "that in your darkest moment in life, in the deepest pain you're shattered, you can pull it together and build something for people."

While chatting with San Francisco about chapter status for a few months, inclusivity was a major topic, especially around Transgender members. "That was really important to me," Cruz said.

She submitted the application to DoB San Francisco in November 2022, and the Seattle chapter's application was accepted on May 8, 2023.

### Running Seattle DoB

Cruz explained the process of putting the chapter together, from finding potential members to creating a board and setting up procedures, policies, and by-laws for the new organization.

"You know, I'm just... one person, it was a lot of work," she admitted.

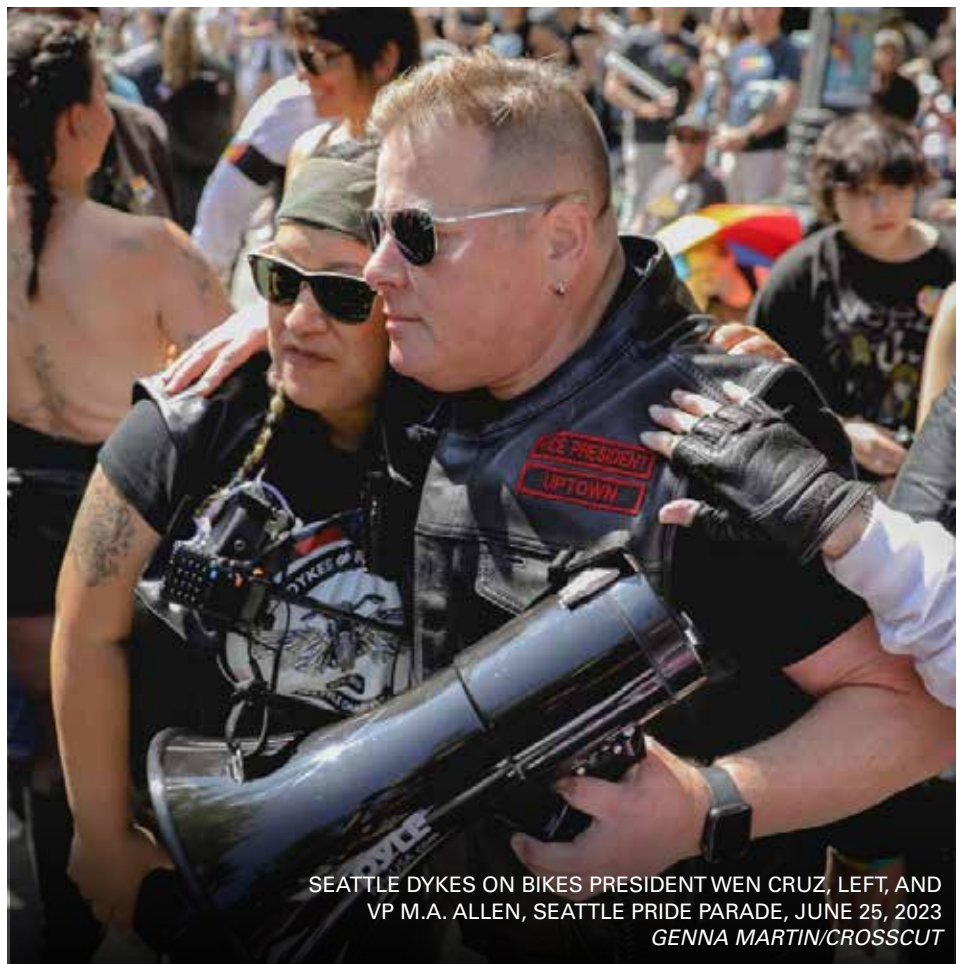
As for what she believed was the core mission and ethos of DoB, she said, "Queer visibility and representation, the loudness of who we are in our presence and what it represents."

Community is one of the greatest forms of resistance, she said. "I felt like people need community right now. We don't have enough of that." Among Queer people, she added, "it's chosen family that fills in so many gaps we experience in life... The safety that you get from being in this family is unprecedented. I've never experienced [such] a community that shows up... it's wild."

Seattle Dykes on Bikes engages in various activities, from mutual aid to supporting a variety of events and actions for marginalized people to even community defense, like escorting people home.

"There is a call right now for this collaborative defense of community — collective care — and that is intersectional, interorganizational work I think we have such a passion for," Cruz said.

She also emphasized the impor-



SEATTLE DYKES ON BIKES PRESIDENT WEN CRUZ, LEFT, AND VP M.A. ALLEN, SEATTLE PRIDE PARADE, JUNE 25, 2023  
GENNA MARTIN/CROSSCUT

tance of inclusivity: "Being inclusive has always been one of my number one goals outside of the chosen family aspect and intention. Being inclusive has been everything, so our chapter is very all over the spectrum — if there's some part of the history and culture of being a dyke that resonates with you, that's it. That's all we need to know. Come to the family."

"We take care of each other, and I see it every single day in this group. Nobody's left to be alone. Nobody's left to feel unsafe."

### Raising a Trans daughter

Cruz shared with the SGN her experiences of raising a 14-year-old Trans daughter, who since age 11 has witnessed all of the good work that the chapter has been doing.

"If I leave this earth and have taught nothing but how to build community and mobilize, and the strength in that ability and act of resistance," she said, "I think [it will] a lot to her, and it's something that will help fortify her strength, independence, and confidence throughout life. At least I hope."

She also talked about the challenges of her daughter also being deaf and struggling developmentally with acquiring language. Because of this, Cruz said, they moved back to the Bay Area for a time.

"We moved all the way to California to get her into the best deaf school in the country, and she was starting to catch up," she said. "But as soon as she acquired enough language and understanding, she told me at 6 1/2 years old that she was Trans. She told me she was a girl. And I just listened. And I just think, how powerful is that, to be able to be the mom I never had? How wonderful is that? What a gift, you know?"

Cruz said that at first it had been nice to keep her daughter inside of their Queer-positive bubble, but that "when she was about 11 or 12, I started to realize not telling her the things that are happening around her is doing her a disservice."

She explained how her daughter has struggled in the past to understand the transphobia that is currently so pervasive. "She doesn't understand why Trans people get targeted. It makes zero sense to her. She just wants to exist," Cruz said. "It makes sense why she doesn't understand, because it doesn't fucking make sense. You know, it's completely irrational hatred."

Cruz said it had even gotten to a point where her daughter refused

to go get her puberty blocker shots, because she was afraid to go to the doctor. "There was some conversation at school [that led her to think] someone might hurt her if she walked into the doctor's office," Cruz said. She even offered to send members of the DoB to escort her daughter, but the girl was still too terrified.

"And so we've been having this ongoing conversation about that," she added.

Another challenging moment was attending the Juniper Blessing memorial at UW together. It was particularly difficult to process as the parent of a Trans teenager. But as she has exposed her daughter to these things, she said, "I think she's starting to really understand it."

Cruz added that her daughter now feels confident enough again to go to the doctor for her shots, and that she and her partner will go with her.

"They still offer services for her, what she needs right now, so I'm feeling really grateful that we still have access to that. If we didn't, I honestly don't know what I would do," she said, in reference to Trans youth care programs being shut down across the country.

### Supporting Trans youth

Cruz criticized the anti-Transgender sentiments in the US under Trump, and discussed what advice she'd give to parents of newly out Trans kids who aren't familiar with the process.

"To target a person's belief about themselves so much as to call it a sickness is just deeply disturbing — and how damaging for your child," she said. "Trust that your child knows who they are. Just trust them — they don't have any other agenda."

She said that, as a parent of a Trans child, she has had this conversation with other parents quite a bit, and that sometimes "it blows my mind the lack of information and education some of the parents have. It breaks my heart."

She added that as Queer and Trans kids are figuring themselves out, it may take time to locate their place on the spectrum of gender and sexuality, but that overall the worst thing a parent can do is "not support their growth and evolution, wherever it goes..."

"It is the greatest act of love to just accept a person and love them fully. Call it radical acceptance, call it whatever that is for you. Push through all that noise. And just listen to your child. That's it."

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# The armor we choose

A short story based on the series *The Lost Years*

BY MAIKARU

Harsh fluorescent tubes buzzed an unrelenting 60-hertz hum against the drop-ceiling of Cloud Medical Center. Midnight in the emergency room offered no reprieve. Scrubbing her raw hands with antibacterial foam, 27-year-old surgical resident Iris Min stared at the stainless-steel basin. The water ran hot enough to scald. Bracing her forearms against the sink's edge, she ignored the leaden ache anchoring her lumbar spine.

Her father's timeline demanded absolute perfection. Promotion to attending physician by age 30. Three more years of sleepless nights, then the next hurdle. She shut off the tap with a sharp twist of her wrist. A dull pressure throbbed behind her eyes. The inside of her mouth tasted like stale black coffee and stomach acid.

The tinny beep of her pager cut through her thoughts. Snatching the device from her hip, she read the digital display. *Laceration. Bay 3.*

Pushing through the heavy swinging doors, Iris marched on, squeaking rubber soles into the chaotic triage center. Industrial bleach and iodine saturated the chilled air, a sterile cocktail masking the odor of injury and illness.

Outside examination bay 3, she grabbed the plastic clipboard from the wall rack. The bright overhead lights illuminated the intake form. A minor soft-tissue tear, apparently. Caused by a shattered glass... costume piece?

Sliding the curtain back on its metal track, she stepped into the small cubicle.

Total visual whiplash greeted her. The occupant of the exam table defied every standard clinical parameter. A cloud of aerosol hairspray, cheap vanilla body mist, and the chemical bite of spirit gum overpowered the hospital sanitizers. Sitting under the glaring lamp was an Asian-American drag queen whose caked-on makeup made it difficult to tell age, but Iris guessed early twenties. A gravity-defying platinum wig scraped against the privacy curtain. Clad in a ripped, waist-cinching corset covered in dark glass pieces designed to look like metallic scales, the performer held a bloody towel against their right forearm. A smear of dark crimson — greasepaint or blood, it was hard to tell — cut across high cheekbones.

The contrast between the sterile surroundings and the patient's colorful chaos was jarring. Straightening her starched white coat, Iris locked her facial muscles into a mask of professional indifference. Another data point. Another broken object to repair. She avoided eye contact as she walked to the rolling stainless-steel supply cart.

"Full name and date of birth?" Iris stated in a flat, robotic tone. She snapped on a pair of blue nitrile gloves. "Full name and date of birth?"

"Sheiji," the performer replied as they took a paper from a nearby clipboard and then wrote their birth name privately but refused to say it out loud, then provided a July birthdate. Iris read the paper and understood. Chart verification complete, she held out an expectant hand. "Let me see the arm."

Dropping the stained towel into a biohazard bin, Sheiji extended the injured limb. Dark blood welled from a jagged, three-inch gash cutting through the painted latex of an opera glove.

Leaning close, Iris inspected the severed dermis. Her mind cataloged the required supplies: saline irrigation, synthetic sutures, and a local anesthetic. Pressing a sterile gauze pad against the raw edge, she applied pressure to gauge the laceration's depth.

"A warning would be polite," Sheiji hissed, jerking their arm back a fraction. The baritone voice lacked any

trace of projected stage glamour, harsh and tight with suppressed pain. A pair of dark, hyperobservant eyes narrowed behind theatrical lashes. Gripping the edge of the exam table, Sheiji let their mouth curl into a blistering smirk. "You have the bedside manner of a concrete pillar, doctor. Did they teach you to handle human beings like defective car parts in medical school?"

The insult glanced off Iris's armor, barely touching the hollow stillness within her. Grabbing a bottle of saline, she flooded the wound over a metal catch basin to clear the remaining glass shards. Sheiji sucked in a sharp, splintered breath.

Ignoring the sound of distress, Iris replied, "I prioritize efficiency." She threaded a curved surgical needle. "You suffered minor soft-tissue trauma. Sarcasm does not alter the repair protocols."

Iris glanced at the local anesthetic on the cart, then back at the ticking clock. Speed was the only variable that mattered now. She reached for the needle driver instead.

The metallic click of the needle driver echoed in the bay. Piercing the skin, Iris pulled the first stitch tight. The heavy corset creaked as Sheiji stiffened. "Efficiency," they repeated, tilting their head until their towering wig shifted, sending a shower of glitter drifting down onto the industrial blue paper covering the bed. The bright specks caught the harsh light.

As needle drove through flesh, Sheiji's gaze became a relentless dissection that Iris rigidly tried to ignore. She felt those piercing eyes take in the stiff, inflexible path of her spine, the extreme, coiled tension radiating from her muscles. The scrutiny felt deliberate, as if daring a single strand of her hair to fall out of place.

"You look exhausted," Sheiji

announced bluntly. A cold prickle of defensive irritation traveled down Iris's neck. Tying off the first knot, she reached for the surgical scissors.

"I am working thirty-two-hour rotations," she countered in a deadpan drone. Snapping the excess thread away, she prepared the next stitch. "Fatigue is a standard variable."

Pointing a long acrylic nail coated in dried blood at Iris's chest, Sheiji said, holding her gaze, "冗談じゃないわよ。あんた、人間なの?" (*Jōdan ja nai wa yo. Anata, ningen nano? Are you kidding me? Are you even human?*) You're not just tired, honey. You are suffocating."

Iris froze, the needle driver stalling in midair. A total stranger had bypassed her constructed defenses in under three minutes. Gripping the instrument tighter, she forced her hands to resume the procedure.

Leaning forward, the drag queen seemed to ignore the tug of the sutures. The smell of stale well vodka and sweet setting spray engulfed the space between doctor and patient. Unflinching honesty saturated the drag queen's voice. "Existing under the strobe lights grants me a terrifying view of emotional bankruptcy. Drunken crowds desperate to erase the spreadsheets of their daily lives. Identifying the exact, tragic architecture of a human structural collapse is my specialty."

"「가만히 좀 있어요。」 (*Gamanhi jom isseoyo. Just stay still, please.*)," Iris blurted out, a desperate reflex to Sheiji's intrusion. Her attempt to regain control sounded weak, her authority dissolving into a tired request.

Sheiji let out a loud, mocking laugh. Rolling their eyes, they let their shoulders drop. "You enter with a rigid posture, too scared to meet my eyes. You act like a machine because someone convinced you that machines do not get hurt."

The fluorescent glare seemed to sharpen the lines of their face. Looking up and down the immaculate white fabric covering Iris's frame, Sheiji delivered the final blow: "That is not a uniform." Shaking their head, the performer wore a look of profound, agonizing pity. "It's a tailored prison sentence. And you locked yourself inside."

The air in the room turned to lead. Tying the last knot, Iris cut the synthetic thread. Her pulse was beating fast against her ribs. The truth stung like antiseptic. She peeled off the blue nitrile gloves, the loud snap punctuating the silence. She threw the gloves into the trash bin.

"You are now discharged," Iris snapped. Turning her back, she snatched the plastic clipboard. As she pushed past the heavy velvet curtain, the smell of bleach replaced the performer's heady cocktail of scents but offered no comfort.

She did not look back as she escaped into the cold, empty hallway. The armor felt heavier than ever. She leaned against the tiled wall, pulling her phone from her pocket as it began to vibrate.

\*

Freezing rain drenched the Seattle streets. Iris was staring through the wipers at the fast-flowing channels of First Hill, her hands gripped tight on the wheel of her parked car. Freezing rain drenched the Seattle streets. The glowing red digits on the dashboard clock showed two hours past the end of her shift. Leaving the hospital before shift change defied every ingrained protocol of her residency.

A shudder went through her as she replayed the phone call from her father. A tight knot of panic seized her throat. As much as she hated to admit it, the drag-queen patient had been right. The spreadsheet — it demanded compliance. Jae-Kwong Min's voice had hummed through the receiver, laced with the specific, suffocating disappointment he reserved only for her failures. "You will apologize for your behavior, and you will secure another meeting." The patriarch's demand for immediate course correction hadn't been a request; it was a sentencing.

*Enough.* Shoving the parking brake back on, Iris took the keys from the ignition. The need for fresh oxygen outweighed the frozen terror of disobedience.

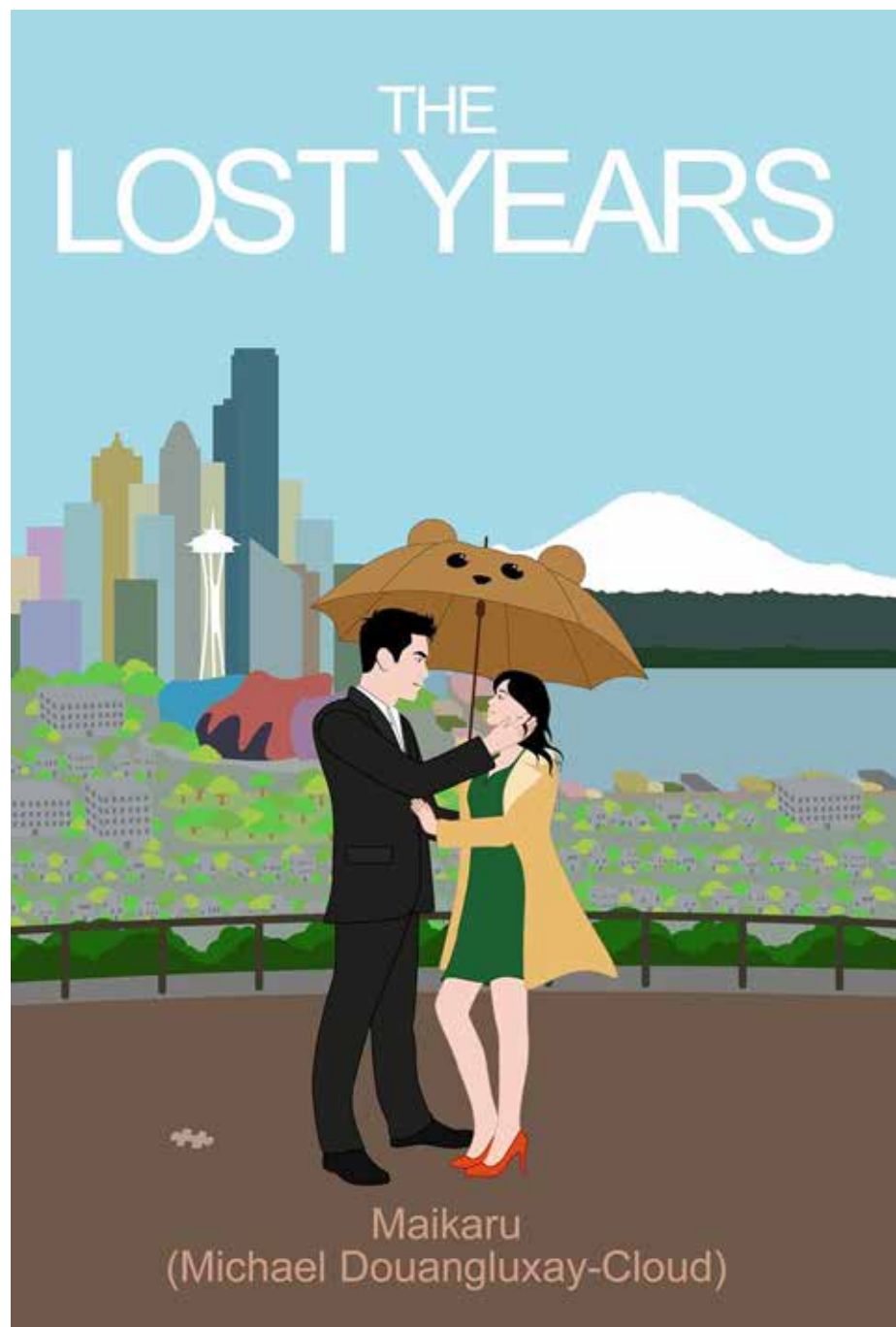
She stepped out. The downpour was a physical weight, icy water soaking through her wool coat in seconds. She moved with a heavy, rhythmic trudge, ignoring the cold puddles filling her sensible shoes. Capitol Hill was a world of chaotic energy, the antithesis of the sterile corridors she had just deserted. Neon lights bled across the asphalt — distorted, erratic, flickering. Through the haze, the diner's sign buzzed with a promise of heat. Iris threw her weight against the heavy glass door.

The stench of old frying oil mixed with the acrid bite of burnt drip coffee hit her senses like a physical blow. Shivering, Iris dripped rainwater onto the scuffed, yellowed linoleum. Escaping the storm outside offered no protection from the hurricane in her head.

Iris's medical gaze cataloged the late-night stragglers until it caught on a figure in the back corner, wrapped in an oversized, pastel-pink fleece hoodie.

As Iris watched, the person pulled the bulky cotton hood back, revealing a bare, unpainted face. Dark, exhausted shadows bruised the delicate skin under their eyes. It was Sheiji.

Iris did not know yet that this was the reigning monarch of the Neon Night Club, looking small, stripped of the



towering wig and shattered-glass corset. Spotting the soaked, rigid doctor hovering by the door, Sheiji raised a hand, waving her over with a knowing smirk.

As she approached the table, the familiar baritone voice scraped against the ambient hiss of the deep fryer.

“The Victorian ghost returns.”

Iris knew she should keep her guard up, but she was bone-tired — so worn down with the night’s failures that her defenses felt like lead weights she longed to finally put down. Without a word, she peeled the soaked wool garment off her shoulders and dropped it onto the seat.

On the scratched laminate tabletop between them rested an enormous plate, laden with french fries. Smothered in dark brown chili and coagulated yellow cheese product, the food presented a terrifying caloric hazard. The rich aroma overwhelmed her, making her dizzy.

Snatching a flimsy plastic fork from the dispenser, Sheiji pushed the heavy porcelain dish across the table.

“Eat the grease, doctor. You look like a stiff breeze might snap your spine.”

The blunt command bypassed the last dregs of Iris’s defenses. Spearheading a saturated potato, she forced the bite past her lips. Salty, complex warmth exploded across her tongue. Swallowing the food, she let her rigid posture collapse against the booth.

“I failed my father’s timeline,” Iris confessed, her voice a hollow rasp. The loud clatter of dishes from the kitchen masked the tremor in her words. Sheiji reached out and pushed their untouched glass of water toward her. It was a small, detached gesture, but it broke the hypnotic pull of the fries.

“Take a breath,” Sheiji prompted, their smirk softening into something almost like a teammate’s grit. “The spreadsheet isn’t here. It’s too greasy in here for that.”

Iris’s nails dug into the laminate. “He arranged a date with a sociopathic corporate lawyer. I walked out. The retaliation is going to destroy me.”

Fear tightened her jaw, yet she couldn’t look away from the sharp, structural perfection of Sheiji’s cheekbones. A merciless, impossible standard that even the dingy diner lighting couldn’t diminish.

“He expects me to fit into this pristine, successful box. If I step outside it, I lose my family.”

Iris raised her eyes at last, feeling the garish diner light strip away the last of her professional mask. Sheiji was watching her with a curious expression, the casualness of their fry-eating belied by their serious, focused gaze. There was no pity in it, which was a mercy Iris hadn’t realized she needed. Silence stretched between them, pregnant and expectant. Pushing the pink fleece sleeves up their forearms, Sheiji leaned forward, revealing the clean white bandage Iris had applied in the ER only hours before.

“You think a white coat protects you from obscurity,” Sheiji stated, the tone devoid of all theatrical arrogance. Then they leaned back, the pink fleece of the hoodie bunching around their shoulders as they offered a genuine, self-deprecating smile.

“Don’t tell my fans, but the glamour is just math in disguise,” they whispered, tilting their chin down slightly as if sharing a trade secret. “The stage is my version of a spreadsheet. I trade your surgical tools for false lashes, but the fear of a rounding error is exactly the same. We’re both just trying not to let the numbers win, aren’t we, ghost doctor?”

Tracing a water ring on the table surface, the entertainer dropped their gaze, as if the admission cost a massive amount of pride. When Sheiji finally continued, their voice was a soft rasp — almost a whisper — as if the words themselves were a weight they were no

longer willing to carry alone.

“Assembling this flawless, invincible monarch offers a temporary escape from my mind. Wielding eighty pounds of shattered glass and aggressive contouring turns my vulnerability into an untouchable weapon. Bending the entire room to my will is a frantic, glittering defense mechanism to keep the world from realizing how deeply afraid I am of disappearing.”

A bitter, self-deprecating smile touched the corners of their mouth.

“We build these cages to survive the people we love and the strangers we fear.”

Meeting Sheiji’s dark, tired eyes, Iris saw her own reflection. Glass boxes. They had both constructed immaculate, transparent prisons.

Reaching across the scratched table, Iris rested her freezing fingers against Sheiji’s bare wrist. The physical contact generated a small, grounding spark of heat against the lukewarm diner air. They sat together in the greasy, starkly lit room, talking well into the night, like two survivors unexpectedly bonding in the midst of wreckage.

\*

Suffocating heat slammed into Iris the second she crossed the threshold of the underground pressurized container that was the Neon Night Club. Pushing through a dense velvet curtain, she stepped onto alcohol-sticky floorboards where the bass functioned as a battering ram, rattling her fillings and vibrating up her shins.

Retreating to the dark periphery, Iris braced her shoulders against a damp brick pillar. Stinging ozone and cloying strawberry fog choked the air. The sea of reaching hands and screaming mouths formed a chaotic scene far removed from the rigid, ordered spreadsheets of her father’s timeline.

Then, strobes fired. Ripping through the darkness in rapid, erratic bursts, they illuminated the reigning monarch of Seattle nightlife. Sheiji strutted down the center line of the platform in six-inch stilettos, their corset covered in thousands of black, reflective glass scales that shot razor-sharp reflections across the spellbound audience. Tilting a contoured chin, Sheiji lip-synched with aggressive precision as the room erupted into a roar of worship and crumpled dollar bills.

The illusion. It demanded total submission. Watching the performer dominate the room, Iris felt a profound shift in her own chest. This was authentic existence stripped of polite corporate boundaries. Unapologetic royalty.

Catching a stack of cash from a frantic fan, Sheiji snapped their platinum wig over one shoulder, owning the neon-soaked kingdom. Every movement projected a fierce, calculated dominance. A sudden, bone-rattling drop sent Sheiji to the floorboards, which groaned under the violent impact anchored by athletic control. Awe swept away the clinical detachment in the young doctor’s mind. This display of unbridled self-expression shattered the glass box of her own repressed ambitions.

Fading into a long, drawn-out synth chord, the music signaled the end of the set. The house lights snapped on, washing the room in an ugly yellow glare. The magic evaporated in an instant.

Abandoning her post at the brick pillar, Iris navigated the dispersing mob. Her rubber-soled shoes squeaked against the grimy wood as she shoved past the bar and slipped behind the stage-right curtain. The backstage corridor was a dark, cramped tunnel smelling of stale sweat and cheap hairspray. Stepping over heavy-duty coils of black electrical cable, she moved with the simple, buoyant intent of finding her new friend. She dodged a stagehand carrying a clipboard.

The isolation back here offered a stark, sobering contrast to the roar-

ing adoration out front. In the hidden underbelly of the neon kingdom, she walked past a rusted ice machine, feeling a sudden drop in temperature settle deep into the marrow of her bones. Shadowy, cinderblock walls pressed inward. A gauntlet of discarded prop boxes. Muffled cheers from the main floor continued to reverberate through the concrete foundation — a phantom vibration that felt like the dying pulse of the set Sheiji had just surrendered.

It was only as she reached the wooden door at the end of the hall that the silence was punctured by a sound that stopped her cold: a ragged, desperate fight for oxygen.

The brass handle was slick with condensation. Iris forced the door open, and a wave of oppressive, stagnant heat rushed out, carrying the strong, medicinal stench of spirit gum and stale alcohol. The inner sanctum.

The sight of Sheiji slumped on a chair transformed shock into a cold surge of adrenaline. The timid observer vanished beneath the unyielding exterior of the surgical resident, who saw only the cyanotic tilt of Sheiji’s chin and the frantic heaving of their chest. Iris was at the performer’s side in two strides, shoes skidding on the floor. Panic flooded the drag queen’s dark eyes.

“You’re not breathing,” the doctor said, her voice a piercing anchor in the stifling humidity as she reached for the restrictive architecture of the corset.

Eighty pounds of mirrored glass and steel boning. The garment functioned as a sadistic medieval vice, squeezing their exhausted lungs. Sweat mixed with foundation slicked the pale skin of Sheiji’s shoulders, pooling at the collar of the agonizing construct.

Kneeling on the tacky plywood, Iris assessed the restrictive architecture of the corset.

A maze of industrial zippers and braided silk laces.

Reaching around Sheiji’s trembling waist, the doctor found the primary knot at the base of the spine. The stiff material strained as lungs, desperate for air, compressed it. Pulling the silk laces free required a brutal, sustained tug. Metal hardware clattered against the plastic chair as the corset split open.

The release was instantaneous. Iris watched Sheiji’s ribcage flare in a sudden, violent spasm as a primitive gulp of air finally clawed its way down the performer’s throat.

Peeling the rigid canvas away from the performer’s ribs, Iris exposed the physical toll of the stage. Dark, angry, purple hematomas mottled the soft flesh of the floating ribs. The bruised tissue swelled, inflamed by hours of crushing pressure. A battlefield of broken capillaries.

Digging into her medical bag, Iris retrieved a chemical cold pack and a tube of concentrated arnica ointment. The freezing pack pressed against the angry welts. A hiss of pain escaped Sheiji’s painted lips, but the violent trembling in their knees seemed to subside.

Applying the soothing gel with steady, clinical pressure, the physician anchored the exhausted monarch to the present moment. The leaden silence of the dressing room settled over the chaotic piles of synthetic wigs and scattered rhinestones. Exhaustion hollowed out Sheiji’s cheekbones, laying bare a stark, unadorned humanity under the vanity bulbs’ glare. Looking down at the damaged skin, Iris recognized the shared architecture of their misery.

The mandate was systemic and absolute: immaculate performances in exchange for the thin mercy of being seen. If the façade faltered, the safety vanished — a ledger that cared nothing for hidden, broken capillaries. A deep ache expanded in Iris’s chest, mirroring the physical crushing Sheiji had just endured. As she met the perform-

er’s dark, tired eyes, the doctor made a silent calculation.

The spreadsheet. It offered zero structural support against the actual weight of the world.

The muffled thump of the club’s sound system continued to vibrate the concrete foundation beneath their feet. Grabbing Sheiji’s icy hand, Iris gripped the long acrylic-tipped fingers with a firm, unshakeable hold. She squared her shoulders, offering an unyielding anchor against the fractious violence of the night.

“I will fix the damage,” Iris swore, the steel in her voice cutting through the dense aerosol fog. A fierce, protective loyalty anchored her words.

Squeezing the doctor’s hand, Sheiji pulled in a deep, unobstructed breath.

“And I will force you to be loud,” they said, a spark reigniting in their exhausted eyes — a reciprocal vow. Sheiji’s roar of a life shattered the silence Iris had lived in for years, two worlds colliding and forming a single, reinforced foundation for future wars for their resistance. Leaning back against the vanity, the drag queen offered a small, genuine smile.

Standing up, Iris hoisted her medical bag over her shoulder. “Can you walk?” she asked, ready to catch them. Sheiji didn’t answer, instead reaching gingerly for an oversized gray sweatshirt. They eased the fabric over their ruined makeup with a low, guttural groan as each inch of bulky cotton dragged across the angry welts on their ribs. The glass armor remained on the chair; a discarded, glittering exoskeleton.

The cool night air waited just down the corridor, beyond the steel emergency-exit door. The second Iris pushed it open, freezing moisture hit their faces, stripping away the club’s heat.

The Seattle rain drummed a steady, cleansing rhythm against the brick alleyway, washing away the medicinal stench of the hospital and the stage. Puddles splashed against their boots; the dark water reflected the distant glow of streetlamps. The cold offered scant comfort, but the sheer gravity of their newly forged bond provided an impenetrable shelter, defying the fragile, conditional contracts of their pasts.

The sharded reflections of flickering dive-bar signs in every rising puddle cast a sickly violet glow against the brickwork. Bracing against the Pacific Northwest downpour, the doctor and the monarch stepped off the curb, their silhouettes dissolving into the electric shadows.

Her future felt to Iris like a structural collapse in progress, threatened by her father’s legal machinery and the unhealed edges of her own past. It was a debt that would eventually come due, but for now...

Walking shoulder-to-shoulder down the flooded street, the duo marched into the storm.

*Maikaru is a Seattle storyteller who survived the “rough edges” of life to find power in the narrative. After his documentary short won at SIFF — and stood at the center of the industry-shifting #OscarsSoWhite conversation — he pivoted to the page to ensure that diverse, inclusive voices aren’t just heard but felt. The Lost Years is more than a series; it is a 10-novel road map for anyone who has ever had to build their own armor. Continue the journey with Iris and Sheiji at [www.maikaru.com](http://www.maikaru.com) or by scanning the QR code and subscribing.*





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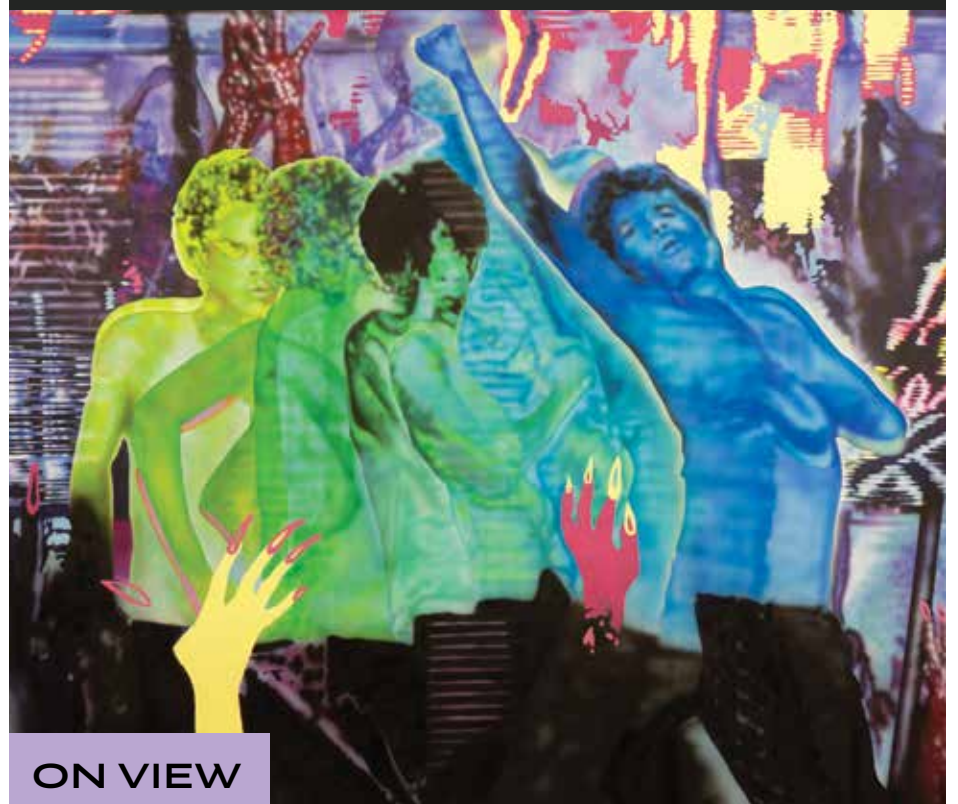
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