

Voices From OUT/LOOK

Jeffrey Escoffier: “We Created a Magazine That Wasn’t Like Anything Else”

by Gerard Koskovich

The founder of *OUT/LOOK* magazine and the Out/Write conference, Jeffrey Escoffier was born to a working-class family in Baltimore. He grew up on Staten Island in New York City and attended St. John’s College in Annapolis, Md. During his undergraduate years in the early 1960s, he discovered the work of philosophers Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse. In his book *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (1998), he notes the impact of their “bold vision of sexual revolution.” These new ideas, Escoffier recalls, “reassured me that, as a queer, I was not destined for a socially meaningless life.”

Receiving his bachelor’s degree in 1964, Escoffier went on to graduate school at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. Already involved in gay life in New York City in the years before Stonewall, he welcomed the arrival of the gay liberation movement and the social transformations it inspired. Fascinated with ideas, Escoffier set becoming a public intellectual as his goal. He took a significant step in assuming that role in 1972, when he founded a cultural journal, *The Gay Alternative*, which continued publishing into 1976.

Moving to San Francisco in 1977, Escoffier continued his work as an independent scholar, joining Allan Bérubé, Eric Garber, Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin and others in cofounding the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project in 1978. That same year he joined the editorial board of the journal *Socialist Review*, where he served as executive editor from 1980 to 1987. Not long after leaving that position, he started developing the idea for *OUT/LOOK*, a project he recounts in detail in this interview.

When *OUT/LOOK* ceased publication in 1992, Escoffier turned the page on his 15-year sojourn in San Francisco. Returning to New York City, he took on marketing and copywriting jobs and joined the board of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York. He ultimately settled into a career with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where he held the post of director of health media and marketing from 2000 until his retirement in 2015.

During those years, Escoffier continued writing and editing books. In addition to *American Homo*, he has published a biography of economist John Maynard Keynes (1995); *Mark Morris’ l’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration* (2001); *Sexual Revolution* (2003), an anthology of the most important writing about sex from the 1960s and 1970s; and *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema From Beefcake to Hardcore* (2009).

In partnership with E.G. Crichton, a cofounder of *OUT/LOOK* and the curator of “OUT/LOOK and the Birth of the Queer,” Escoffier is now developing the Q-Public initiative, a book series conceived to link academic and community writers and readers and to advance a wider critical discussion of LGBTQ issues. Q-Public will be published by Rutgers University Press.

Who developed the idea to launch OUT/LOOK and what factors went into that decision?

It was pretty much my idea. I left *Socialist Review* in '87 without having anything really definitely to do. I did do some freelance editing and direct-mail copywriting at that time to make a living. The idea for OUT/LOOK emerged from conversations between Michael Sexton and me. He had sat in on a course I taught at Berkeley, and I fell in love with him. Though he wasn't in love with me, we remained very close and used to take these long walks around San Francisco. And in the course of the conversations during those walks, we talked about a new journal.

I had been very enamored, while I was at *Socialist Review*, with a journal called *Marxism Today*, which was published by the Communist Party in Britain. Stuart Hall was one of the editors. I liked it because it was theoretical, intellectual, but it also had art and popular culture—and it had a mix of different kinds of content. And I thought there was nothing like that for the gay and lesbian community (this was before we thought of it as LGBTQ). So it was in the course of having those conversations, Michael and I talking about *Socialist Review*, about this idea of *Marxism Today*, that I said, “Okay.”

I also had a personal motivation: I thought this would be a way of continuing to work with Michael and have him in my life. So I contacted the other founders: Peter Babcock, who had been the graphic designer we used at *Socialist Review*, and he was interested in the whole idea when I talked to him. I contacted Debra Chasnoff (whose nickname is Chaz). I knew her because she had been the editor of a left publication called *Dollars and Sense*. I think that's how I knew her. And I think I didn't know Kim Klausner (now known as Mimi) before then, but Kim had been very involved with nonprofit businesses, so she brought a certain set of skills that people may not have.

Michael was our computer person, a software writer. And you have to remember, this is 1987–88 we're talking, and it was just really in the first time that people started publishing using computers. And then E.G. Crichton was a person who had done some occasional illustrations for *Socialist Review*. She and I had been very good friends for quite a long time. I think that's it. There were just six of us.

So once we started meeting and talking about it, because I was a direct-mail copywriter, and Chaz had been a managing editor of *Dollars and Sense*, something like that, we began just writing a direct-mail package, and then we went to the March on Washington in '87 and distributed flyers there to begin collecting names and developing a mailing list. And at some point we probably traded or bought mailing lists from other publications. That's how you did it in those days.

Give me a sense of how the editorial vision of the magazine emerged at the outset.

I think Chaz in particular was familiar with *Marxism Today*. I think everyone else was a little less theoretically inclined than I was, so I don't think anyone was as committed to the idea of an intellectually oriented publication as I was, but we all backed the idea of merging political thinking and culture together.

And we thought of ourselves from the very beginning that we were doing something no one else had done. First of all, it was going to be a national publication; it wasn't only locally based. Also, there hadn't been very many joint lesbian and gay publications for a while. It depends on what city you were living in, but certainly in San Francisco and in Philadelphia, where I came from before I moved to San Francisco, there had been very definitive splits between the gay men and the lesbians. In San Francisco, Sally Gerhart represented the lesbian rejection of gay men—they thought gay men were too concerned with sex and not enough about other things and certainly not enough about women's issues.

AIDS had just surfaced increasingly as a political issue. And a lot of lesbians became involved in that over the course of the mid-eighties, so we saw ourselves as bringing lesbians and gay men back together on all kinds of other issues. And in fact, we used to do little field trips to educate one another on the culture of the other. So I remember one time, Kim wanted to go to a sex show at the local porn theater. So she bought a fake mustache, and she tried to butch up her act—we had to teach her how to walk because she walked so obviously like a woman.

We did manage to get into the theater, and then we actually are sitting downstairs in the live-sex-act area. It's not very sexual, there's not even an erection. And the guy who's doing it gets up and starts bringing a hat around to collect money. And he sort of offered himself up to be fondled—very cute guy. So he gets to Kim and me, and she doesn't touch him, maybe she puts some money in the hat or something. And he kind of urged her to fondle him a little, and she said [high-pitched voice], "Not today!" Then he turned to me and said, "Did you bring her or did she bring you?" That was one of our little field trips to learn about each other's cultures.

Was there a generational connection that brought the founders together?

Except for myself, they were all roughly the same age. I was maybe like 15 years older than the others.

Were they coming with a different perspective than the earlier generation where it was a given that gay men and lesbians didn't talk to each other?

I think they were. Chaz, because she had worked at *Dollars and Sense*, already was working with men as well as gay men. Same at *Socialist Review*, we had lesbian and gay men on the editorial collective. For those of us at that point—men and women on the left as well as lesbians and gay men had begun to work together and increasingly shared a feminist politics. *Socialist Review* was one of the founding journals of socialist feminism.

So you came to the project with a certain feminist critique?

There was a generational ethos. Those men in Michael Sexton's age group—he's fiftysomething now—that whole generation all started out as feminists. So they're the people who really pushed the feminist agenda in gay movement settings. My generation and older was less attuned to feminism.

Given your backgrounds, you and Debra Chasnoff came with a broader political critique. Was there also a sense of a critique of gay and lesbian politics in the group?

I don't think that was very often spoken of at all at the time. I remember mentioning once the term "identity politics," and someone said, "What's that?" Although I do think the term identity politics was circulating earlier, it was a more academic or more theoretical term. And at the time I myself was a big proponent of identity politics, which over the years I've moved away from.

What were the differences of editorial vision between *OUT/LOOK* and some of the other gay and lesbian publications of the time?

The two most prominent publications at the time were *The Advocate* and *Gay Community News*. *Gay Community News* was Boston-based, very much rooted in and very connected to the left in Boston. *Gay Community News* had lots of fine people and they were much more thoroughly left-wing than the *OUT/LOOK* group.

As *OUT/LOOK* was getting started, what readership were you hoping to reach?

It's a question I would ask nowadays, but I think we just thought that people like us were out there. The San Francisco left-LGBT community in those days was relatively close knit and shared a number of social spaces, such as Modern Times Bookstore and A Different Light bookstore where we often ran into one another. I no longer remember what we thought about the intended readership. Because one of the things we did was we created a magazine that wasn't like anything else.

As the publication developed, did the group look to reach certain markets or develop certain ways to get folks to subscribe or buy the magazine?

Partly because both Chaz and I came from these previous magazines—and the irony is that *Socialist Review* is how I learned to become a marketer, because every year we had to do a direct-mail campaign in order to renew subscriptions and get new subscribers. I think how we thought about it was through list-buying. We bought lists of publications that we thought had the people we were interested in. I don't think we had a very sophisticated idea of markets, but we had publications we saw as kindred.

Can you give me a sense of how the magazine was run on a day-to-day basis?

I was the first employee. I was hired to set up the magazine and set up the office. Eventually, we expanded and created other positions, Kim and I were copublishers, and Chaz became the managing editor. We had this little office. Somehow we got interns every year. And we created an editorial board and we began the solicitation process, which basically was the hardest thing at the beginning. We first started with our friends, and that's how the first few issues mostly were made up of various people's friends. And one of the reasons why we launched *Out/Write*—which was my idea—was to build a network of writers across the country, because we weren't getting enough just on our own. So recruiting writers became a really important thing.

Tell me a bit more about organizing the Out/Write conference.

I think at the beginning, nobody was really enthusiastic about the idea. It was originally my project. We started that process in 1989. It took us about six months to organize the first conference. Lisa Hall was my co-organizer for Out/Write '90. It was exhausting, exhausting, exhausting. And literally the night of the conference, I could barely even stay awake for the conference. But it was part of the excitement. Here you had 2,000 or whatever it was gay writers all in the same place, and everyone is excited about meeting all these other people for the first time. Out/Write 90 went so well that we decided to do it every year. We only did it for three years. And the last year, we did it jointly with *Gay Community News*, and then it moved to Boston, and they continued. They were a very good group, we enjoyed working with them.

What more can you tell me about the editorial board and how the content of the magazine came together?

For the editorial board, I think we started with people we knew who would be interested in writing or would know writers. I don't remember exactly who was on the first board.

And then there was the whole art piece of it, so it was a complicated structure. My friend Loring McAlpin, who was later part of ACT UP/New York and the art group Gran Fury was our New York art contact. A lot of the artists who were published in *OUT/LOOK* during that period were artists that he sent to us. E.G. also used her network—I think she was still at CalArts, she wasn't yet teaching—so she mostly used her contacts through that. And she and Peter together created the look and the style of the magazine.

The other unusual set-up we had was for poetry, since none of us thought we were good readers of poetry or trusted our judgment or anything like that. So we got two people who were recognized poets to become poetry editors. And we just relied on those people—Jewelle Gomez and David Groff. They were part of the whole recruitment process, and then when Out/Write got going, they were all part of that.

When it comes to editorial content, what challenges arose beyond getting contributions?

From the beginning, we had decided to deal with the whole question of representation in terms of race and ethnicity much more rigidly than other publications. So we basically had a rule that we would not go to press unless we had a significant number of contributions from people of color—I think it was 20 percent—and also equality between men and women. I don't think we always succeeded, but we tried very hard, and we used a kind of mathematical formula to do that. And we did Out/Write the same way.

Did any editorial disputes arise over the course of the magazine?

I don't think we had big political disputes. We were pretty wide ranging in the kinds of things we felt were acceptable. It was more about particular articles. So we published a short story by David Sedaris before he was well known. It's a very weird story—other people totally loved it. I

remember us talking for what seemed like months—it probably wasn't, but for many meetings—before we decided to publish it.

The other controversy I remember, the biggest thing, was the panel we did on incest. I have to say that panel probably cost us more subscriptions than anything we published. It didn't really cause internal disputes, because we were willing to live with disputes as part of the business of publishing an interesting publication. However, I think I said the most egregious thing. I had learned about incest in my family when I was in college. So in this roundtable, I said, "I would rather have been molested by my father than forced to play Little League." My father never forced me to play Little League, but he did force me to participate in his favorite sport, which was sailing.

Many readers wrote in, cancelled subscriptions for this outrageous remark. Because all of us felt very vulnerable, we had published the panel under pseudonyms. That caused more trouble. Eventually I felt bad that I had made up this little parable, so I wrote a piece in which I came clean, and said it was me who said that. But the editors didn't want to publish that and said, "You know, we've had enough trouble with this, we don't really want to publish anything more about it."

Another article that created some controversy was one by a straight man who went to gay bathhouses and made the argument that it didn't make him gay. Editorial board member Tomás Almaguer and I both wrote responses to that article. Neither of us thought there was anything wrong with that—I certainly didn't. Later in life, that became my position about gay-for-pay porn stars. Now I'd say I'm not as interested in gay identity as I am in homosexuality.

Do you recall another article that people have mentioned to me as causing controversy: an article by Jan Clausen about lesbians falling in love with men?

"When a Lesbian Falls in Love With a Man." Yeah, I don't think we had any problem publishing it. But our readers did regularly complain about things they didn't like in the magazine. Oh, the magazine's too male; oh, it's too female. That was a standard complaint. And we thought, as long as we got both of those two sides coming in at the same time, we were doing fine. And then different articles had different complaints. I think another one later on was when Eric Rofes did a piece on gay liberation versus AIDS. That was a controversial piece.

What are some of the other ways *OUT/LOOK* approached the question of HIV/AIDS and gay men's sexuality?

Again, I think it was pretty eclectic and open. I don't remember debates around that. There were many more debates around lesbian sex. We had stuff about penetration and dildos, we had a famous picture—I can't remember what issue it was in—of a woman wearing a strap-on, a photograph. And the printer called and said, "The man on the floor"—this was a standard excuse at the time—"the men on the floor refuse to print that."

For HIV/AIDS, was there any discussion about it being something *OUT/LOOK* needed to prioritize?

It was always a priority topic. I don't think there were very many differences over what we published about AIDS. The Eric Rofes article was a bit provocative because he had run, I think it was the Shanti Project. And I guess he really saw what was happening was people were forgetting about gay liberation—the fact the we could still even use that term says a lot. But I think everybody thought most of those issues were legitimate issues and I don't remember any kind of stalemated or blocked editorial meetings.

Another emerging topic in this period was queer politics, critique and approaches to representation. How did the journal address that subject?

Most of the people at the magazine were just a little too old to be ACT UP or Queer Nation people, so that influence came in through younger people and interns. Alex Chee was an intern at the time. He also was working at A Different Light, and on the organizing committee of Out/Write 90, so he was in the right place at the right time—or else we were, I'm not sure.

Initially, there was some ambivalence about the use of *queer*. When I was a young man, I always said *queer* nonpejoratively. I called myself queer. I had never even heard the word *gay* until 1969 as a term for *queer*. Allan Bérubé and I wrote the introduction to the “Birth of a Queer Nation” issue of *OUT/LOOK* partly to work through some of our thinking about that. We both were open to using queer while we had reservations at the same time—partly because queer looked like it was going to become a way of being *odd* whether you were homosexual or not, so we were afraid of losing homosexuality. With AIDS, that same thing kept coming up: Are we giving up on sex? That was under threat because one solution for the epidemic would have been for guys to stop having sex, and that was a live issue at the time.

At some point, we also had gone down to Santa Cruz for the conference that Teresa De Lauretis organized on queer theory. That was interesting and puzzling to us a little bit. There was a panel on “Queer/Lesbian” and then it said “The Problem of the Bar,” and we all thought they meant *bars*. So that was our introduction to the new academic treatment of lesbian and gay life. But again, we were there, and this was the birth of queer theory and the move to lesbian and gay or queer studies. We were always interested in the idea of lesbian and gay studies which we covered in a lot of different places.

What factors led to the end of OUT/LOOK?

Oh, gosh. All of sudden, our new subscriptions had dropped. And they say publishing a magazine—well, it used to be like running a restaurant. All of a sudden, things can change, and you do not have much control over it. It was a little like that. New subscribers were a key economic variable for the health of the magazine. So when they dropped, we couldn't figure out why they were dropping.

I was the only person left from the original group at that point. So we did a couple of things. We tried to see if we could find somebody to buy us. *The Advocate* had just been bought by some group, so we tried to get ourselves bought as the high-brow publication for that group. Virtual networks were just beginning, so we tried looking at that option. Karen Wickre, who has since

then worked for Google and Twitter, was one of our main business advisors at the end, and Tom Reilly of Gay.com also was involved at the end.

One thing that buoyed both *OUT/LOOK* and Out/Write during this whole period and really facilitated us is the gay publishing boom. Publishers had found the gay market for books. All the gay books were being published by St. Martin's and Alyson and all these things. *OUT/LOOK* was totally riding this huge boom and didn't realize it—and that was ending. Once gay studies got institutionalized, the gay publishing boom died out. Academic presses eventually started publishing gay and lesbian books, and the mainstream publishers less and less. We didn't know this was happening, but as the media changed, the market had a shake-out. We were just going through that process.

It also was a kind of zeitgeist effect, partly economic, partly cultural. I only now realize it that *OUT/LOOK*, when we started, we were trying to work with the culture that had been created by Stonewall. By the late 1980s, it was fading, partly through repairing the split between lesbians and gay men—and I think we succeeded at that. But that meant the culture that had been created by Stonewall and then had the split as part of it was not happening anymore. And this newer, younger culture that grew up with HIV to deal with, with ACT UP, with Queer Nation, took over. And then queer studies, once that was institutionalized, that changed things.

At the time, what was your sense of the impact of *OUT/LOOK*—both the journal and the conference?

I always thought—this was very personal—I always thought that Out/Write was my great achievement. Lisa Hall worked with me on Out/Write for two years, and we both were totally destroyed by it in some ways. (Laughs) But I thought it was a huge success, and yet nothing ever came of it. No one ever asked me to be involved in anything like it again, and so I thought it was a bust. And I felt the same way about *OUT/LOOK* because when we folded, it was like, “Well, okay, that's it.” And no one ever talked to me about it or told me that it was important. And until E.G. asked me to work with her on the current project, I hadn't thought about it maybe more than a handful of times.

This whole exhibit process has been a very emotional thing, and brought back stuff I didn't remember and a little I remember, and all the emotions. There were all these writers we published who were well known at the time and who are not known at all now. You can ask a younger gay person who Judy Grahn is, and they will not know. And she was huge, unavoidable. The novelist Mary Wings is not known now. She was a regular participant in the *OUT/LOOK* and Out/Write communities. And all the guys who died of AIDS and all the black gay men who were particularly hard hit. *OUT/LOOK* was almost totally eclipsed until E.G. reopened it.

What do you see as some of the legacy for today that would come out of the journal and the conference?

First, there is no such publication now. There's nothing like it. No LGBT publication that even bridges the academic world and the community. The Q-Public series is one of the results of *OUT/LOOK*'s rediscovery. There still is a need for a dialogue between academic-slash-

intellectuals and the community. Injecting ideas into the queer public space is important. My ambition when I was working on *OUT/LOOK* was to be a public intellectual, I kind of thought of Stuart Hall as my role model. When *OUT/LOOK* folded, I left that world behind, and I ceased to be a public intellectual basically, because I went to work for the New York City Department of Health. I became a marketing person, and that's it.

Fortunately you have reclaimed that public intellectual role and published books for those of us who do read books.

But I no longer played the role of a public intellectual. *American Homo* brought together my work as a public intellectual. Most of the other books represent my personal passions. Q-Public, our new publication series at Rutgers University Press, now has brought me back to play in a role in the queer public sphere.

Anything you'd like to add?

I was just thinking about the ending of *OUT/LOOK*. The ending was sad. The day, maybe the weekend we decided to do Chapter 7 rather than 11—so 11 is restructuring and 7 is closing—I was flying to New York to look for an apartment. And for some reason, I had just read a novel about the last days of the U.S. in Vietnam, about all the madness of everybody trying to jump on the helicopters to get out. And I felt like, I'm on the plane flying out of Saigon. That's how I felt.

Gerard Koskovich is a San Francisco based queer public historian, curator and book dealer. The text of this article is based on an interview conducted with Jeffrey Escoffier on July 20, 2017. The interviewer selected excerpts from the transcript, and edited them for continuity and focus. Jeffrey Escoffier then made revisions to produce the final version.