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Making Media Studies Perfectly Queer: A Tribute to Alex Doty

This October 12 and 13, my partner and I attended a memorial service for Alex Doty that was organized by his colleagues at Indiana University. Having been a close friend of Alex for more than three decades, this was a particularly emotional weekend for me. It was also a great relief to be in a place where I could feel safe to give outward expression to the grief and seemingly irredeemable sense of loss that I had been feeling since his death during the first week of August. But what was truly inspirational, and also quite comforting, was hearing from so many of his friends (both within and outside the academy), colleagues, and co-workers about how they felt validated by their interactions with Alex. Over this weekend, I re-connected with some friends and met many other people whose lives Alex had changed, and this was the first time that I ever had the opportunity to meet his mother or any of his four brothers and sisters. In some ways, the memorial took the shape of a *Citizen Kane*-like investigation into the life of a recently deceased man who had become a star in his field, except that here, all of the versions of Alex's life that were recounted at the event seemed remarkably in sync and mutually reinforcing. In a testimonial at the conclusion of the memorial event, his brother Art told us how affirming it was to hear that the Alex with whom we had all interacted in various academic and professional capacities over the years sounded so much like the Alex who served as a role model to his siblings, helping his mother to raise them after their father's premature death. In effect, then, whether we knew him as a colleague, a friend, or a sibling, we were all paying tribute to the same man who inspired us with his generosity, his confidence, and his

dedication to having his voice heard, and his equally strong dedication to listening to others.

As a groundbreaking scholar in the then emerging field of queer media studies, Alex demonstrated a strong and passionate devotion to a field of study that was intimately connected to his own self-definition. Alex was a deeply introspective scholar dedicated to living his life out loud, and the ways in which he demonstrated the interconnection between his personal and academic identities was fearless and elegant. As early as 1992 with his first book, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, and even more emphatically with the volume *Flaming Classics* at the start of the new millennium, Alex spoke out profoundly against the forces that threatened to silence and undermine queer culture, starting from the time of the height of the AIDS pandemic. One of his most remarkable contributions was a reminder to himself and to queer scholars with an affective investment in the objects of their analyses that they needed to acknowledge and foreground their identifications, desires, and subject positions in their own critical writing. He did this not as some incitement to confess that might disrupt the integrity of an author's critical stance by marking it as "only personal," but instead because he believed that one's affective investments have such a direct bearing on how we critically examine popular cultural texts. He insisted that to speak of and from one's "personal" experience of identification and desire comprised a form of empowerment, putting one in a position of self-affirmation rather than apologizing for what one thinks, feels or loves.

Certainly, making oneself heard as a queer scholar can be a risky enterprise, especially in the 1990s. Alex, however, acknowledged and confronted these risks as part of

his own critical discourse. As he explains in his controversial piece on *The Wizard of Oz*, he was angry about the blatant, hegemonic attempts to silence and dismiss queer readings such as those that he was setting forth. He was irritated when students or colleagues suggested that, in the process of “claiming” Hollywood stars and the protagonists they played as queer, he was somehow threatening or defaming the legacy of important piece of film history that had itself been claimed by heteronormative culture. Indeed, he was most incensed when his own colleagues and editors ask him to account for his queer readings as “appropriations” so that straight audiences might not get offended by his treatment of films that held such deep personal resonances.

Always firing back and never ready to capitulate, Alex used queerness to offer the heteronormative world no choice but to confront their own “givens” and presumptions. I would not have had the courage to become a queer scholar without the model that he offered to me and so many others.