

All Cops Are Bastards, Even The Gay Ones

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The Stonewall riots kicked off in protest against a police raid on the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969. Especially after Orlando, we should resist the co-optation of Gay Pride and instead remember the revolutionary spirit of the queer and trans militants who fought against oppression and violence against them.

In Juliet Jacques' beautifully honest work, *Trans: A Memoir*, she references the 2015 feature film *Stonewall*. In this whitewashed movie, the defiant queer, trans and PoC radicals who fought police repression during the Stonewall Riots, risking life and limb, enduring humiliation and shame, are absent:

Stonewall didn't feature Sylvia Rivera or Marsha P. Johnson, who were at the riots and then set up the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries to advocate for homeless queens and queer youths; it was only years later that I found out how central they had been to the struggle of July 1969. This story belonged to Miranda, originally from Puerto Rico. She was at the bar, explaining to Matty Dean, a young gay man who had just arrived from the southern states, that he had to keep his identity secret. 'We 're all Smiths in this place,' the queens told him – just before the police broke in and demanded 'ID', targeting anyone not 'wearing at least three items of clothing appropriate to their gender as ascribed by nature'. The police were smug, arrogant and cruel. During the first raid, a cop walked up to Miranda, sarcastically saying, 'So classy and dainty it is' before taking off her glasses and ordering her to the washroom. They dunked her face in dirty water to ruin her makeup, laughed at her and called her a 'sissy'; when she put her lipstick back on and Matty Dean stood up for her, they were both arrested, along with the other queens.

— Juliet Jacques, *Trans: A Memoir*

In the summer of 1969, The Stonewall Inn, an underground bar in New York City, was one of few gay bars where dancing was allowed. Gay bars were criminalized and the queers and queens who wanted a space to exist free from the violence and harassment experienced in everyday life would be subjected to regular police raids. The state repression was immense: LGBTQ people were routinely attacked, humiliated by the cops, and often arrested. Trans people, particularly trans people of colour, drag queens and lesbians were often subjected to police brutality for committing "moral crimes".

Tensions swelled, and finally, in the morning of June 28th 1969, the queers and queens fought back against a police raid that took place in the early hours at the Stonewall Inn: a 4-day long battle

between the LGBTQ community and police ensued. The resilience and resistance of the riots breathed fresh life into movements that had been further marginalized by state repression, such as the Black Power movement and burgeoning militant feminists. The first of the Gay Liberation Marches took place in New York City a year later in July 1970; these later became to be known as Pride. These annual demonstrations were in their very nature militant and met with state resistance from the start. The police were hostile and violent. The demonstrations grew each year in protest against the systematic inequality the LGBTQ community endured, with increasing recognition of the links between the subordination of queers, trans people and poverty.



(Police raids mount LGBTQ community in New York)

Colouring Herstory: The Real STARS of Stonewall

It was on the muggy evening that started the riots where Sylvia Rivera, a Puerto Rican drag queen, watched Marsha P. Johnson, a black trans woman and sex worker, fight back against the police. Rivera, moved to act, hurled a glass bottle at a riot cop. One of the first arrests was that of Stormé DeLarverie, a bi-racial, butch lesbian. DeLarverie was known as the “Guardian of the Lesbians” in Greenwich Village because she would regularly patrol the streets with a baseball bat ready to protect gay women from violence and harassment. During her arrest she complained that her cuffs were too tight and the police responded by hitting her in the head with a baton. The police brutality was relentless, but met with incredible resistance.

Marsha P. Johnson was popular in the gay art scene and revered for her extravagant and bold dresses (researching her life, I came across numerous stunning photographs of a truly proud, beaming woman). During the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic devastated the LGBTQ community and Johnson began campaigning with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). ACT UP used militant tactics, such as marching on Wall Street to protest the high cost and inaccessibility of HIV treatment drugs. Later, Johnson and Rivera would co-found Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) that began as a caucus of the Gay Liberation Front. STAR advocated for civil rights for the LGBT community and sought to tackle the systematic abuse of queers and queens, which led to homelessness and precarious living.



(Marsha P. Johnson)

As a survivor of sexual violence, Sylvia Rivera campaigned on such issues as well as transphobia. But an increasingly liberal gay community was assimilating to wider society as they slowly won more rights, leaving behind the more marginalized within the community, such as trans people, queens and LGBTQ black and brown people of colour. In a 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally, Rivera spoke about the complacency she saw after queer and trans people were arrested and incarcerated for their activism, and assaulted by male inmates in the years after the Stonewall Rebellion. “Do you all do anything for them?” she demanded of the crowd. “No! You all tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit!”



(Sylvia Rivera addresses the LGBTQ community in Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally)

During the 1950s and 60s, Stormé DeLarverie had toured the black theatre circuit performing the Jewel Box Revue as the only drag king act. After the Stonewall riots, DeLarverie remained heavily involved in the LGBTQ liberation movement. In a fantastically striking tribute to her memory, DeLarverie’s *New York Times* obituary remembered her as:

Tall, androgynous and armed — she held a state gun permit — Ms. DeLarverie roamed lower Seventh and Eighth Avenues and points between into her 80s, patrolling the sidewalks and checking in at lesbian bars. She was on the lookout for what she called “ugliness”: any form of intolerance, bullying or abuse of her “baby girls.” (...) “She literally walked the streets of downtown Manhattan like a gay superhero. ... She was not

to be messed with by any stretch of the imagination.



(Stormé DeLarverie)

We in the LGBTQ community, who will not allow history to erase the revolutionary strength of some of the most militant and effective fighters our movement has seen, cite Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and Stormé DeLarverie as the women at the frontlines of the riots. They put their bodies at immense risk of police brutality and state repression because it was no longer an option to stand back and leave it to those who would have the least to lose. It was precisely because of their oppression that they *had* to fight for their freedom and the rights of LGBTQ people on the streets of New York: an injury to one was an injury to all.

Fuck Your Police Pride

For some, the legacy of the Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and the Stonewall Riots has all but been subsumed in the commercialized, commodified international event as we know it today: Pride.

The LGBTQ movements in the early years after Stonewall were undoubtedly political. As the brilliantly moving 2014 feature-length *Pride* demonstrates, the interests of the queer community in the UK were intimately tied with the interests of striking miners: both were disenfranchised and both were being royally fucked by the state. Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) was a grassroots initiative that deployed solidarity and mutual aid for miners as a weapon against the increasingly exploitative government. And, notably, during the 1980s AIDS epidemic, Margaret Thatcher nearly blocked the 'Don't Die of Ignorance' AIDS awareness campaign because she saw the epidemic as a gay and black issue and feared the wording of the campaign would encourage young teenagers to be promiscuous; the protests in response were heavily politicised and militant. Fast-forward to the present day, and the naked co-optation of these emancipatory forces is nowhere more visible than in Pride, a corporate farce.

In an incisive piece for *Open Democracy*, Huw Lemmey asks:

How did we go from a march of radical social outcasts celebrating anti-police insurrections, and calling for the dissolution of the family, to a parade organized for, and funded by, multinational banks, arms companies, the Tory Party, the Army and the Metropolitan Police, amongst others? Just what are we supposed to be proud of?

Social justice and liberation struggles are at risk of absorption by the dominant ideology when they do not also fight to dismantle capitalism and the oppressive structures it reproduces. Lemmey powerfully invokes what many marginalised queer and trans people thought after seeing off-duty gay policemen, in full uniform, marching with the crowd at Pride London: FUCK THE POLICE.

You might be gay, but you're not my comrade.

The police force is an arm of the state. The interests of the police are aligned with the interests of the ruling class: their job is to first and foremost protect the ruling class and ensure the continuation of the status quo. When the status quo is threatened, when capital is disrupted, the police state will suppress the dissenters. The vicious attacks and degradation by police remains seared in the collective memory of trans and queer activists. State repression continues to be a reality for trans people, particularly trans people of colour, many of whom are systematically excluded from access to affordable mental and physical health-care, social housing and waged work. Transwomen migrants are increasingly at risk of detention, deportation and institutionalised rape. Transwomen are often criminalized and incarcerated in male prisons, making them vulnerable to sexual violence, abuse and death.

Orlando

An attack on a Latinx LGBTQ nightclub in a poor area of Orlando took place during the writing of this article. Omar Mateen took his victims hostage and shot and killed 50 queer and trans people. The victims were predominantly Latinx, black and brown. Described as the biggest mass shooting in US history, the events of the last few days have shaken the world. As reports attempt to piece together what could have driven the killer to commit such a hateful act of violence, many cite motivations such as terrorism, mental illness, America's liberal gun laws, and so on. But the LGBTQ community, and particularly working class, precarious and black and brown LGBTQ people, are all too aware of the pervasive and ubiquitous injustices that terrorize us daily.

The Orlando shootings did not happen in a vacuum: we are being killed every day. We are being killed by a lack of social housing and increasingly punitive welfare reforms. We are being killed by inhumane austerity cuts to life-saving mental health services. We are being killed by regressive regimes that have laws criminalizing LGBTQ people in nations still suffering from the legacy of colonialism, while Western colonialists boast tolerance. Queers and trans people must continue to suffer in silence in a seemingly progressive society, because to speak out would be to fuck with the prevailing ideology — and we all know what happens when you fuck with the status quo. Systematic homophobia, transphobia and racism come from the top. They come from policies ingrained with intolerance, and from right-wing and neoliberal ideologies. Only a grassroots, militant movement from the bottom up has any chance to disrupt it: *the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house*.

Rest in Power

Marsha P. Johnson died on July 6th 1992 aged just 46. Her body was found floating in the Hudson River and the cause of death was treated suspiciously. The case remained unresolved for a decade until a trans activist Mariah Lopez successfully lobbied the New York police department to reopen the case in 2012 as a possible homicide.

Sylvia Rivera died on February 9th 2002 in a New York hospital due to complications from liver cancer. The fight for free health care in the US is still a demand of the LGBTQ movement in the States.

Stormé Delarverie died on May 24th 2014 aged 93 in Brooklyn, New York.

The Stonewall Riots leave a legacy of revolutionary struggle where marginalized people must fight for a different world, not merely to reform our current one. It is in the memory of Stonewall's brilliant and subversive black and brown queers, queens and kings, and in the memory of the LGBTQ people massacred in Orlando, that I wish to invoke the revolutionary spirit of militants on the frontlines of the struggle, and those fighting every day to stay alive.



(San Francisco: The Compton's Cafeteria Riots, August 1966)

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