

CounterPunch October 5, 2002

Class War in the West Village:

FIERCE! Youth vs. "Residents in Distress" and other Gentrifiers

by BENJAMIN SHEPARD

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On September 7th, a gender-variant crowd of West Village Street youth, drag queens, anarchists, and local vagabonds, led by FIERCE! and the Radical Faeries, pounded drums and paraded in platform shoes in support of the continued presence of young, multiracial queers in the neighborhood. Global justice and other public space activists joined jugglers, students and hundreds of colorful people dressed as flames in bright oranges, reds and yellows and "flamed through the streets," dancing in solidarity with these young people who have recently been profiled by 6th Precinct cops and harassed by other Village residents. The carnival roamed the Village in support for those most targeted by the "Quality of Life" campaign initiated by Guiliani and perpetuated by Bloomberg. The action was a part an eight-year battle between those in favor of "quality of life" for the rich and activists helping preserve New York's colorful street life. In many ways their clash amounted to a sex panic.

Sex in the City: Panic and Repression

"During a sex panic, a wide array of free-floating cultural fears are mapped onto specific populations who are then ostracized, victimized, and punished," notes Eric Rofes. Historian Allan Bérubé defines a sex panic as "a moral crusade that leads to crackdowns on sexual outsiders." Stereotyping used as a political tool turns prostitutes into "fallen women," street youth into "Bloods vs. Crips," and cruisers into "vagrants" and "drug dealers." By the mid 1990s, New York City had fallen into the grips of a sex panic neutralizing opposition to a war on

public sexuality. Those who owned apartments sought to "clean up" their neighborhoods, purging the area of a vital pulse which has always been part of public culture in New York City. The City's war against sex pitted land-owners against those who filled the streets in front of their homes. The real estate land grab was painted as a morality campaign. During the fall of 1995, the New York City Council passed a XXX Zoning Law. "We changed the rules," the mayor argued:

...by adopting the same laws that apply to drug dealers and zoning regulations, we have cut the number of sex shops drastically. We made sure that no sex shop could operate within a set number of feet from schools, churches and community centers. Basically, with the tight new regulations, it will be nearly impossible for a sex shop to open in this city. In my opinion, one is too many (Shepard, 2002).

Mayor Giuliani hoped to shut down nearly every adult business which dealt with sexual materials--strip clubs, bookstores, video stores, movie houses, and others. The zoning turned 98 percent of Manhattan into a censorship zone, squeezing New York City's sexual cultures--its arcades and clubs, and Christopher Street's T-rooms out of existence.

The backlash against public sexual culture in New York unfolded as New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani began his "quality of life" campaign to clean up New York. To stabilize the city, the mayor argued civil liberties would have to be sacrificed. On May 17, 1994, he told the *New York Times*: "Freedom is about the willingness of every single human to cede lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do and how you do it." Welfare moms, promiscuous queers, street people, strippers, and artists became targets of this cleansing. To the extent that undesirable communities embodied the city's decline, they were driven from public view as chain stores took their place. The result was an expanding blandification of a place considered one the most colorful in the world. The goal: to make the city welcoming for tourist dollars. And it was working.

In 1998, Eric Rofes wrote: "Among the most effective ways of oppressing a people is the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatizing of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies." The criminalization [HYPERLINK "http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1859843565/counterpunchmaga"](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1859843565/counterpunchmaga) of the public expression of sexual intimacy and the policing of public sexual culture were all part and part of the project. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Wilhelm Reich posits that ideological repression is best produced "by the embedding of sexual inhibitions and fear in the living substance of

sexual impulses." Repression keeps masses from developing a consciousness about social disarray. Anti-sex ideology "inhibits the will to freedom," Reich explains. "Those forces that comply with authoritarian interests derive their energy from repressed sexuality." To a certain extent, this process Reich describes was unfolding in New York City. Vast majorities of New York's public sexual cultures were shut down, boarded up, and cruising grounds fenced off and privatized.

The Disney Company had successfully lobbied New York's mayor to shut down Times Square's red light district in exchange for Disney's business there. In Mayor Rudy Giuliani's New York, small-town family values were set firmly against burlesque. Either you were for the redevelopment program. or you were for decay. This dichotomy, in turn, reinforced norms of white, procreative heterosexuality. Times Square's queerness was seen as a threat to a cultural heterosexuality, the normative power of which sought absolute hegemony. There would be very little room for those who lived less than "straight" lives in the new Times Square and New York's other formerly public,sexual spaces.

While the powers that be have mastered the art of prohibitive policies, demand never quite disappears. While much of its public sexual culture was profoundly restricted over the last decade, street life continued to thrive, with the inevitable clashes between those who supported the Disney-fied Times Square and those who preferred a little character which are part of NY political culture. One such flurry or panic occurred during the Spring of 2002.

Still a Queer Mecca

For over 30 years, homeless queer youth and queer youth of color have been congregating in the West Village, seeking refuge in the historical heart of the modern queer revolution where the streets reverberated in 1969 with the Stonewall Riots. "This is their boulevard of broken dreams," explained long-time resident and Stonewall veteran Bob Kohler. The equivalent of a town square for these marginalized youth, the Christopher Street Piers have traditionally provided a space for them to gather, build communities and create kinship networks. Despite the attacks on public space in queer New York, Christopher Street has remained a mecca, with queer runaways who'd decided not to hitch their way to San Francisco, still arriving at Port Authority every night. Consider this: If the choice at hand is life on New York City Streets or life with parents who think a daily beating will cure their child of his or her abominable queerness, the streets of New York are remarkably

appealing.

Two things have happened to New York City over the last decade. As crime has gone down, rents have gone up, and demographics have shifted. An influx of wealthy residents and merchants moved to the Village in droves when the AIDS epidemic wiped out many of the area's longer-term residents. At the same time, the funkier types without rent-stabilized apartments have been forced to move to the outer boroughs because they couldn't otherwise afford rent. At the same time as the funkier types were moving out, the street kids who kept moving to the city looked less and less like the "little orphan Andy," the hyper masculine gay clones with hiking boots and handle-bar moustaches of the 1970s, and more like the gender-insubordinate Black and Latino drag queens, transgender folk and street youth of the 1990s. And while rents may have risen, Christopher Street remained a place for gay/queer kids to walk, meet, and cruise. The problem was, most of the public spaces where queer youth had historically cruised--the peers, the ramble, the clubs--had been fenced off or shut down. Bars were too expensive. What was left were the street corners, the vestibules, Sheridan Square. For those turning tricks, the process could be a little riskier. What followed was a crackdown on the neighborhood's queer youth. Misdemeanor arrests of queer youth began to grow. Vigilante residents began patrolling the streets, throwing ice and urine from windows at the kids below, while preventing social services vans from entering the neighborhood. A class war was brewing.

Cultural Anxieties and Conservative Politics

In the weeks after Rudy Giuliani left office, many New Yorkers got nervous. For many, including those who had recently moved to the city, the former Mayor represented all that was good and safe with New York's revival, particularly since 9/11. And then he was gone. The overall crime rate in New York City declined by 7 percent during the first four months of this year, compared with a year earlier, sustaining a long term trend. Statistics showed that overall crime in the Sixth Precinct, covering Greenwich Village, was down nearly 10 percent compared with the same months of the previous year. Nonetheless, residents remained anxious, particularly as the news reported budget cuts would reduce the numbers of police on the street. Fear of a return to the "rotten apple" days of the mid 1970s through the early 1990s persisted. Early in March, an engineer was murdered in a manner that harkened back to that earlier era. Subway riders complained they were witnessing an increase in panhandlers, prostitutes and homeless people.

In response to their concerns, a small group of village residents got together to form a group called Residents in Distress, or RID. Their goal was to regain control of the village from the runaways, the prostitutes and transgendered people who frequented the their neighborhood. During the early months of 2002, RID organized to get more police into the West Village. On January 19th, the New York Times published an article (Tolerance in Village Wears Thin Drug dealing and prostitution are becoming a hazard in a normally quiet West Village area) promoting RID's calls for more police in the West Village. It specifically referred to quality of life issues related to the presence of "Gay and Black kids" as well as the "transvestites" and related "public safety" issues. By February, RID would sponsor a community forum with Community Board 2 and the 6th Precinct over the problems of street youth loitering, pissing in their vestibules, and prostituting themselves. Local politicians and the police commissioner attended police/neighborhood love fest. Abrie Lees, Chairperson of Community Board 3, lead the proceedings. She outlined her legislative charge to purge the youth that gather at the Piers, currently closed for "renovations."

For queer activists, it looked like another chapter in a long series of battles that had taken place over street youth over the 33 years since the Stonewall Rebellion marked the beginning of the gay liberation movement right there on the corner of 7th Ave and Sheridan Square. It appeared another morality campaign to contain, arrest and displace transgendered and queer folks who are youth, of color, homeless, or sex workers. In response " FIERCE!," an organization for transgender, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (TLGB) youth, drew up a flyer calling for neighborhood members to respond to the attack by stacking the scheduled community board meeting. Their flyer offered the question, "Whose quality of life are we talking about when" continuing:

Block associations are organizing to "clean their streets" (whose streets?!!) of Transgender, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (TLGB) youth of color and homeless youth. Many residents are calling the police "on" us; we have been told that we are not wanted in the neighborhood because we are "lowering their property value."

The flyer noted an increase of police sweeps and harassment of transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, (GLBT) youth of color and homeless youth in the West Village, charging the police with profiling them on the lines on "race" and "gender."

The author attended the community board meeting at hand, watching as the processes discussed throughout this entire paper played out over

and over. At issue was the question of the West Village Piers. Public space activists are painfully aware that when the Piers re-open, these public spaces will be privatized, under constant surveillance and designed for up-scale users. While FIERCE! called for a "Queer Pier," designed by street youth who've been on the street for a generation, concerned citizens called for more policing and arrests of "those people." Self-proclaimed "community members" argued with "interlopers." Code terms with racial overtones such as "those people" were used as other residents suggested the street kids were bringing drugs and crime into the neighborhood. The police said they would do more to "get tough on the problem" using a classic vocabulary of punitive motives. One resident even stood up to proclaim that the neighborhood was becoming like, "the Crips vs. the Bloods" a reference to the LA street gang wars charged with the symbolism of racial violence. Calls to "clean their streets" read as calls for class cleansing of the outsiders. Complaints about permissive behavior resonated as anxiety around sexual libertinism. Other community residents called for increased arrests for quality-of-life crimes, such as public urination. What was driving the anxiety of the "Residents in Distress"? Perhaps the demographic shifts taking place throughout the country, perhaps an anxiety about multiculturalism, or even class animosities between land owners and the homeless, or tensions around sexual politics, or the cultural strain and ambiguity resulting from social change in the Village. As with historic panics, the object of the moral panic was not so much the street youth as the sexual liberation the highly stylized youth represented. It was all part of the discourse of panic. Yet, FIERCE! fought back.

"We're sick of Big Business, wealthy residents, and police using curfew laws, misdemeanor arrests and physical violence to target transpeople, queer youth of color, sex workers and the homeless," said Aries de la Cruz, a 17-year-old member of FIERCE!. "We were here first!"

Waves of Carnival

"Where's the quality of life, and who's it for?" Tim Doody, a Radical Faerie living in NYC, pondered before the rally, cosponsored by FIERCE! and the Radical Faeries, on September 6th. "Bloomberg is continuing Giuliani's priority of profits before people. Community centers face eviction and community gardens face bulldozers. The attempted purge of queer youth of color from the West Village is an odious part of this trend."

The two groups affiliated with the protest were FIERCE! and the Radical

Faeries, a collection of gay men who generally share spiritual and political beliefs, striking costumes that mix and match gender and who share and meet in intentional communities scattered in predominantly wooded areas around the U.S. Tim Doody said, "We're here to show support to this next generation of queer youth and to make a stand for public space. Nothing says resistance like an angry six-foot drag queen in six-inch heels. And we've got at least 60 of them."

Everyone met at the fountain in Washington Square Park. A man with a beard, red face makeup, and a bright red skirt passed out green flyers proclaiming: "QUEER CARNIVAL OF RESISTANCE, STARRING FIERCE, RADICAL FAIRIES AND YOU!!!" The flyer proclaimed: "As privileged allies, we're hitting the streets today, in the spirit of Stonewall We insist that civil liberties and OUR public space not be compromised for the benefit of the wealthy! Please help us create a just and more caring society." As usual on a Saturday night, the space was bustling. Just to the south of the Washington Square arch, a group sang from the 70s anthem, "Carwash" contributing to the joviality in the air. A crowd of men in feather boas, orange headpieces and high heels met with a "comms" or communications team composed of many anarchists from global justice movement circles. The struggle against the privatization and commercialization of public space is a core task of the movement against corporate globalization. Activists involved with Critical Mass, now in its tenth year, from Times UP!, Reclaim the Streets and the More Gardens Coalition helped marshal the event. Members of ACT UP, the standard bearer for the current activist resurgence, were on hand.

The Radical Faeries began the evening's ritual, ushering the spirits of the East, West, South and North, as East Village activists joined West, creating a solidarity between queer and social justice movements. Activists ate fire and screamed. Many roared with approval as members of FIERCE spoke about the challenge of maintaining the West Village as a "community" which could include sex workers, the homeless, queer youth, transgender people and the like. An ad hoc core of drummers, some playing trash cans, others water buckets, and one particularly effective bald-headed gentleman with a real drum, formed a samba band, setting the beat. Dancers in orange, lavender, and red symbolic flames flared as the march took off into the night.

The Radical Faeries, a number of whom were sporting beards, blouses and 12-inch high heels, led the march West out of Washington Square. "Whose Village? Our Village!!!!" many chanted. We marched up MacDougal to West Eighth, past Seventh Avenue, gradually taking Christopher Street, occasionally contending with two or three police, but

very little difficulty in terms of clashes. We zipped down Christopher, revitalizing, the Greenwich Village night, meandering past the cruisers, converging along the West Side Highway. Once open space, today this place is lined with fences, separating the cruisers who still converge there. As one of the few places in the city where someone can sit without disturbance or entrance fee, the space still draws large numbers who continue to utilize it as a place for cross race and class contact.

That night, the march crowd stopped on West 10th Street for dancing. A speaker noted that queers have used this space for a generation, and now it's being developed into a park designed more for families and entrance-fee-paying tourists than the crowds of nude sunbathers who first made use of the space from 1970s through the early 1990s. In homage to Stonewall Veteran Sylvia Rivera, who had lived in these piers and died earlier in the year, the crowd ate Hershey's Kisses and reclaimed the pier as a queer space, with a mass kiss-in and much dancing. Only when the police arrived did we move again. Feeling more provoked by the police, the crowd became ever rowdier, never once stepping on the sidewalk retracing its steps through the village night back to Sheridan Square. "Whose Village? Our Village!!!!" chants and "Keep the Village Queer!!!!" filled the night air, the drummers tapping on lamp posts, water bottles, and traffic light, with police lights and the Stonewall Inn in the distance. The ubiquitous bearded man climbed up on a street light to gaze into the night as activists blocked with their dancing. For an evening at least, the West Village was queer and gay and joyous yet again.

Note: The next FIERCE action to protest gentrification and police brutality in the West Village will be 1 PM--Midnight Saturday, Oct. 5th Sheridan Square.

Benjamin Shepard is co-editor of **HYPERLINK "<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1859843565/counterpunchmaga>" [From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization](#) (Verso, 2002) and author of **HYPERLINK "<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0304701262/counterpunchmaga>" [White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic](#) (Cassell, 1997). He can be reached at **HYPERLINK "<mailto:benshepard@mindspring.com>" benshepard@mindspring.com.******

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