

Sylvia and Sylvia's Children: a Battle for a Queer Public
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Recently, I saw a strange listing in the *Village Voice* Choices:

“Spring for some brioche, some chocolate, and a bottle of Beaujolais, and picnic at one of these divine destinations: Downtowners should bus it to the West Side’s Hudson River Park, where the benches at a series of seriously seaworthy piers afford views of that old French gay, the statue of liberty...”

Strange to read about Manhattan’s Christopher Street piers promoted as a tourist destination in the City’s “alternative weekly,” yet that is what they have become. Its hard to imagine the queer street kids who used to use the space being free to drink a glass of Beaujolais on the water without drawing the attention of the Quality of Life police. Only a couple of years **ago** the piers had been considered very specific queer space, a mecca. Pier users often called them ‘the Trucks’ because of all the trucks lined up for men to meet and have sex inside. Few straight people or tourists crossed West of Hudson Street, to go to this “Casbah” by the Bay, where generations of gay men had created a free zone for sexual contact and community. In recent years, much of the radical possibility of the space has

been white washed away - a victim of gentrifiers, politicians, and urban planners on the right and a blandification of gay culture on the left. Still, the malling of Manhattan and of queerdom is not without its opposition and resistance. What emerges in the following essay is the story of a flashpoint in a class war between corporate control of public space and a burgeoning do-it-yourself public space activism aimed at unleashing a new liberatory urbanism where queer difference is honored over assimilating sameness. To tell this story, the following essay is divided in two parts. Part one considers the legacy of one grand activist who first fought for queer spaces, while part two offers stories the ways her legacy continues.

Sylvia

The “Grand Dame” of the gay liberation movement, transgender activist Sylvia Rivera, actually lived and helped built a series of enduring queer family networks on the pier. “As a Stonewall veteran, I feel its my responsibility to make sure these kids have place to come,” Rivera explained when she was living on the pier (quoted in Mateik and Gaberman. 2002). As one of the most famous of the street youth to fight back during the police raid at the Stonewall, Rivera came to personify the aspirations and flaws of the modern gay liberation movement. Born as Ray Mendoza on July 2, 1951, Rivera spent her career fighting for a solidarity between transgender people, queer people of all colors, the homeless, sex workers, and human rights advocates. As the years distanced activists from

the riots, Rivera often clashed with mainstream gay groups that advocated for assimilation and redevelopment of the piers. Her voice spoke for the counter public of queer youth who frequented the piers.

While Rivera is credited with throwing the “first brick” during the Stonewall Riots, she claimed she threw a molotov cocktail, declaring, “This is the revolution.” For Rivera, that revolution meant fighting back against the police, who had harassed her since her days as an eleven-year-old transvestite child prostitute working the streets of Times Square. Rivera was on hand for the first gay pride parade, the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in 1970. With no roadmap, Rivera worked with the founding members of Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and later the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). GLF’s vision was a politics of global solidarity with liberation movements around the world, while GAA focused more on specifically “gay” issues. As part of GAA, Rivera involved herself in campaigns such as the fight to pass New York City’s first gay rights bill. For a number of years, Rivera straddled these competing streams of the gay liberation movement. A willingness to engage in direct action was her claim to fame.

“One of my first organizing campaigns with the political aspects of the gay liberation movement was petitioning for the gay rights bill,” Rivera reflected during an interview in 2001 assessing her career. Arthur Evans (2002), who worked with her on the bill, recalled, “My favorite memory of Sylvia Rivera was in early 1970 in New York City. The Gay Activists Alliance was collecting petitions for a bill in the city council that would

outlaw job discrimination against gays and lesbians... We took our petitions to a meeting of the Village Independent Democrats in Greenwich Village... Carol Greitzer, the liberal councilwoman from Greenwich Village, was present at the meeting. Greitzer refused to take, or even look at, the petitions. Sylvia Rivera grabbed the petition-laden clipboard, marched up to the front of the meeting, and hit Greitzer over the head with it. The liberals started to listen up...GAA leader Marty Robinson called the process ‘climbing up the liberals’.” Rivera was ever-present, doing whatever it took for the passage of the bill, including getting arrested with Evans and Marty Mumford. She explained, “I was the only drag queen that got arrested for petitioning for gay rights. We were included in their bill. All of a sudden, I started becoming more and more an organizer and a front-liner... Drag queens could be out there. What did we have to lose?”

Debate was often noisy throughout the early liberation years, as cultural leaders such as Rivera clashed with more politically minded leaders. Lesbians and gay men debated the meanings of male chauvinism, homophobia, and transvestism, and structurelessness tore at GLF’s foundations. By 1970 Rivera co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) with the late Marsha P. Johnston—another Stonewall veteran—as a caucus of the GLF. STAR, the nation’s first transgender rights organization, served as a nudge for the nascent gay liberation movement to pay more attention to the trans issues. “In the beginning, we were the vanguard of the gay movement... We were very well respected for the first four years,” said Rivera.

Yet, Rivera's conflicts with the movement continued on several fronts. Women in the GLF were uncomfortable referring to Rivera—who insisted in using women's bathrooms, even in City hall—as “she.” Pressure mounted. The year 1973 witnessed clash that would take Rivera out of the movement for the next two decades. Her lifelong friend and fellow Stonewall Veteran Bob Kohler recalled, “Sylvia left the movement because after the first three or four years, she was denied a right to speak.” It was during the Pride rally in Washington Square Park after the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. To the dismay of Lesbian Feminist Liberation drag queens were scheduled to perform. As they passed out flyers outlining their opposition to the “female impersonators,” Rivera wrestled for the microphone held by emcee Vitto Russo, before getting hit with it herself. Rivera explained, “I had to battle my way up on stage, and literally get beaten up and punched around by people I thought were my comrades, to get to that microphone. I got to the microphone and I said my piece.” Rivera complained that the middle-class crowd cared little to nothing about the continued harassment and arrests of street drag queens. Bleeding, Rivera sang, “You Gotta Have Friends,” screamed “Revolution Now!” and led the crowd in a chant of “Give me a G, Give me an A, Give me a Y...What does it spell?” Barely audible, her voice breaking, “GAY POWER,” she groaned. Russo later recalled that only the sudden appearance of Bette Middler averted outright violence (Marotta, 1981: 296-7).

“It didn't matter what the issue was or whether she knew anything about it. I can still remember Sylvia winding up with the “Gimme a G.” I have never seen anyone so

lost,” Kohler recalled. “Much of Sylvia’s life was imaginary.”

In the years after STAR’s demise the movement became more and more assimilated. And for many, the transgender legacy of Stonewall was left behind. While the American Psychiatric Association did away with diagnosing homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder in the early 1970s, the term “gender identity disorder,” used to refer to transgender folks, remains a psychiatric classification within the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. By 1987 the New York City Council passed the gay rights bill Rivera and the GAA had fought for, but without language protecting transgender people from employment discrimination.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Rivera lived in Tarrytown, NY before moving back to New York City. For a number of years in the 1980s Rivera, who suffered from chemical dependence, was homeless herself. Yet, she continued organizing – this time a community of transgender squatters who lived on the piers on the West Side of Manhattan. As she had done with STAR House in the 1970s, Rivera played the role of surrogate mother to a community of homeless transgender and queer street kids.

June 1994 Rivera was tapped by the leaders of the Stonewall 25th anniversary celebration to lead the march. She later recalled feeling like she was being recycled from off the shelf. And her relationship with mainstream gay groups remained tenuous. For example, after fighting at the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Center, Rivera was formally banned from the facility and all its trappings. Yet her activism continued. “I

did not leave the movement because I've always felt that this is what they want. They want us to go so that they can hide in their little closets as if we don't exist," Rivera explained.

In 1998 Rivera was arrested with dozens of others during a political funeral for Matthew Shepard. Her presence inspired many to compare the police attacks on that demonstration and the queer response to the Stonewall Riots themselves. Yet Rivera was quick to point out that transgender folks die as result of similar attacks on all too regular a basis without fanfare. By summer 2000, Rivera organized rallies to draw attention to the murder of one such case, the death of Amanda Milan, a transgender woman, in Times Square days before Manhattan Pride March. Over the course of the following year Rivera successfully organized Milan's political funeral and countless other demonstrations.

Through Rivera's linkage with the issue, Milan's memory came to symbolize the unfinished business of a GLBT movement that had all too often, in Rivera's words, "left transgender people at the back of the bus." Transgender issues emerged in the press and Rivera noted, "If things don't pan out, then it is going to be totally the old way. If it takes arrests to bring the media to the plight of this community, I'm willing to take all the arrests that I have to until the mainstream media comes and picks up on these issues... We're not free till everyone is free," Rivera always maintained. "Part of our mission statement is to be out there for all oppressed people..."

Rivera was lobbying for city and state trans rights bills from her bed until the day she died in the winter of 2002. Within three months of her death, the New York City

Council passed and the mayor signed the transgender rights bill for which Rivera had spent three decades fighting.

In the weeks after her death Rivera was remembered as an activist who had fought to break down the walls between movements to make the world a better place for everyone. Former activists confessed that they had not seen Rivera's wisdom until she was gone. "You gotta listen to the crazies," Kohler reflected. While those in the movement had not always paid attention to her, Rivera had become an icon to young activists. Many recognized a hero not interested in assimilating into a status quo which consigned transgender youth or anyone else to the margins. "These kids finally had somebody of their own, their own Evita," Kohler explained. "They would see someone from the streets who was theirs. Sylvia changed lives."

Sylvia's Children

In the months after Rivera's death, the attacks on pier kids and the spaces where they converged only intensified – many arrested or told to move along for doing little but occupying public space. "We face constant threats of violence from police and residents," Mervyn Marcano, an organizer for a group called FIERCE!, an advocacy group by and for queer youth of color, explained (Henry, 2002). Fall of 2002, FIERCE organized a rally and speak out about the situation called Reclaim Our Space. Throughout the October 5th rally activists recalled the late Rivera's struggle implicitly linking their struggle with hers. In

many respects, her legacy continues as a new generation of activists who recognize the liberatory potential of a radical queer public not aiming to gain acceptance or be just like them as much as to create politics in which difference is honored and no one is left behind. The rest of this essay features interviews with queer activists, most of color, who maintain Rivera's brashness in the struggle against efforts to cordon off these spaces, including the piers. A central theme of the discussions involves the interplay between queers who build communities in the street and more affluent West Village residents who tacitly condone the use of profiling to "clean up" and reduce the presence of street youth in a once inclusive gay neighborhood.

A New "Problem" in the Neighborhood

Gay men hanging out were once viewed as part of the queer culture of the West Village. Yet within the climate of the Quality of Life crusade, the presence of young Black and Latino queer youth has come to be considered a social problem. Complaints of prostitution, public sex, drug and sexual commerce inspired the Community Board to encourage aggressive policing and street sweeps on the piers.

The new approach to policing the area produced what many view as a socially sanctioned form of police brutality. Leslie Feinberg, who witnessed the original police raid on the Stonewall, described the historic nature of the problem during the October 5th rally, "I'm not talking the New York Times denials, 'there's a few rotten apples in every barrel.'"

The fact is I'm talking the police repression from Selma to Stonewall to Seattle where the police are used against oppressed people who have nothing to lose and everything to gain from challenging the system..."

For others, the aggressive policing is simply part and parcel of the redevelopment.

Long time Pier user, Steve Rodgers explains:

The last 15 years is nothing like what it was like 20 years ago. Now, they rebuilt the pier. Cops are all over the pier. I'd say back, maybe twenty years ago, they were not sort of patrolling the area. It was like free spirited. People came and parked their cars. They knew what was going on there. You'd have people with cars drive down 'cause they could get whatever they wanted when they came there. Whatever it was you were looking for, it was there. Dressed up as a woman or a woman dressed up as a man whatever it was you desired, it was there. (Laughs). And once they knocked down the abandoned warehouse, then the cops started like patrolling and then they started fixing the place up. People were not coming back down there like they used to. Now, you would get picked up for loitering or you're prostituting or you're doing whatever your not supposed to.

Tools utilized within this class-cleansing process include anti-vagrancy, zoning, nuisance-abatement, and quality-of-life statutes, all organized by cities to restrict movement in public space. Mervyn Martano explained, "They disproportionately target queer youth of color. Its resulting in increased prison populations of queer youth just for loitering or urination on the street." Dakota, a long time pier user who first started hussling there in the 1970's, described the current scene for sex workers who work in the city's public spaces. "They are all going to jail. I got 53. A misdomeaners for prostitution convictions."

Adonis Baough, a long term former pier user, elaborated that this police presence shifts the way he understands public space: "Public space is I could stand there wherever I want,

whenever I want. So, its no such thing as a public space. Because if the police come after me, then its not a public space, it's a police space."

Profiling the New "Problem"

FIERCE activists see a clear distinction between their queer counterpublic of youth of color and law enforcement paid to enforce the rules of the dominant public. After witnessing a number of disturbing events, including random sweeps of those on the Christopher Street pier, FIERCE began an organizing against police harassment in the Summer of 2000. "The residents don't want you here," activists were told.

"We have to fight back..." became a constant refrain of the October 5th rally. Jay Dee Melendez talked about residents, "putting water and piss and garbage out of their windows onto the youth and Guardian Angels and the Christopher Street Patrol - they are not going to be tolerated anymore." Gail from Audre Lorde Project, who does outreach in the area explained that the pattern of abuse was become a city wide problem:

I've been working for about five or six years with the victims of police violence. And we see it all with Giuliani and with Bloomberg now with the Quality of Life campaign. The police say you gotta give up your right to walk. Whose quality of life is this improving? It sure isn't improving mine. And I can't come down to the pier on a weekend with my friends without the police stopping me and asking me what I'm doing, where I'm going, when they start putting curfews on the Piers. And if you're white and you're roller blading that's all right... It might start here in the village. It might involved queer youth and transgenderred people here, but its also happening up in Harlem; its happening in Brooklyn

As Gail notes, the police appear to be selectively enforcing the law. James Place, a 28-

year-old, former hustler and person of color who is constantly stopped by police, elaborated: "When you see those White kids down there they don't ever stop them. Loud, making noise and drinking and smoking like they got licenses for it but they don't get stopped." Yet when people such as Place even walk along the piers police assume, "That I am up to no good or to rob somebody. Often, I go there to just to hang out. And yet they want to stop me. There's a lot of police there. Every other corner you see a cop."

Boo Boo, a 43-year-old trans woman who first started going when she was in her teens in the late 1970's, actually lived along the piers in a tent with two girlfriends in the 1980's. "We had a TV set plugged into one of the electric poles," she recalled with a smile.

She sees a more benevolent motive in the police presence.

I used to think the police were there just to hassle us. Now I think they are there cause they know what the 13 and 14-year-olds who go there face down the road if they stay. They used to find so many bodies there I thought there was a serial murderer there. One of my friends had her implants cut off. Another had her penis cut off and put in her mouth before they threw her in the water. Now, I think I'm the last one left. Most everyone else either died from HIV or the bashings.

Others interviewed suggested the harassment had as much to do with homophobia or difference in and of itself as race. When asked if people of color were being unfairly targeted, LP, a Latino man and long term pier user explained:

I wouldn't really say that because I've seen a lot of my white friends who got it even worse. When they did talk back the police brutalized them harder and more than they did to the minorities. With minorities, a lot of us would fight back. The white kids didn't know how to fight really and they would really get it. But I have to give it to 'em, some of the softest ones were the ones who would chain themselves to something. And they wouldn't let go and they wouldn't give up no matter how much you beat them, no matter how many times you arrested them, no matter how much food you denied them, no matter how much legal process you denied them. When you went into

court, they still screamed about gay rights and transgender rights. That god could go to hell if god didn't like what we were doing. If he didn't like that, then why did he make them that way. And they were truly defiant through all of the black eyes and those stuns with the cattle prod like stun gun things they were carrying in the olden days.

Attacks on Queer Space

All of this is happening within a specific political context of crackdowns on public sexual culture in Manhattan. Throughout the late 1990's, the city tightened the screws on displays of public sexual culture - first shutting sex clubs and then harassing those who use cruising spaces, such as the piers or the Central Park Ramble. Adonis, who frequents both the piers and the Ramble, talked about the increased pressure:

I've actually been told 'get out the park.' No, I'm not getting out the park. I'm on a public path, not in the Ramble in the dirt. I was in public space. You cannot tell me to leave. But they just said, do you want to spent the night in jail? Then I walked away, but that kind of threat might of scared a lot of people. Not wanting to have their business brought out in court. Not having their job find our why they had to go to court. Most times the cases are dropped. I was walking out of Central Park at 1:01 am and the police saw me and gave me a ticket. The judge laughed and tore up the ticket. But you still have to use your energy to go down there or a warrant will be put out for your arrest. You do that and what do you tell your job? What do you tell anyone?

Others are less comfortable resisting the arbitrary harassment. Adonis elaborated: "If two heterosexuals were in the park making out and the police walked by, they wouldn't say anything. Two homosexuals were doing things, they would say something."

It was all part of the Quality of Life campaign designed to privatize, sanitize, and control public spaces, such as the Piers, throughout New York. The Quality of Life Campaign began in 1994 as a cornerstone of a Rudy Giuliani's pledge to clean up New York City. Existing quality of life legislation falls under Article 240 of Title N legislation,

Offenses Against Public Order, Public Sensibilities, and the Right to Privacy. “Offenses” include “rioting, unlawful assembly, criminal anarchy, disorderly conduct, harassment, harassment, loitering, public appearance intoxication, and criminal nuisance in a public space” (McClellan, 2002). Yet, there are countless additional anti vagrancy ordinances, including the ‘Under 20 Rule’ which regulate public space. Further, in 1995, the New York City Council passed a Zoning Law intended to restrict and shut down adult use spaces, such as strip clubs, bookstores, video stores, movie houses. Mayor Giuliani hoped to shut down most every adult business which dealt with sexual materials.

When quasi private interior spaces targeted by the Zoning Law were shut down, people with no where else to go moved outside. Yet, visible signs of public sexual culture were further targeted with the police carrying out undercover sting operations resulting in increased arrests of men charged with indecent exposure, soliciting sex, and other other "lewd" acts. Some entrapment, others wrongful arrests. During one three day sting by the Port Authority Police in 1997, 90 men were arrested in the men's room in the PATH Station Concourse of the World Trade Center (Shindler 1997). Steve Rodgers recalled, “You know cops started patrolling rows. I guess they must have gotten out of hand so now they closed them.”

'Quality of Life' initiatives appeared to specifically target queers. Selective enforcement of a Prohibition era Cabaret Law, zoning ordinances, a ban on dancing, and fire codes were of a constant flow of legal assaults narrowing the types of clubs & bars

functioning in Manhattan. Before summer of 1997, some seventeen gay businesses, nine theaters and eight clubs, including five in close proximity on 14th street were closed for violations of the state health code banning oral, anal, and vaginal sex in businesses. That summer, 50 queer businesses faced some 1,400 inspections (Shindler 1997). Many clubs could not endure the legal barrage and were forced to close their doors.

Two Potato and the uses of AIDS Fear

One such space was the Two Potato, a bar at the corner of Christopher and Greenwich Streets, close to the piers. Many suggest the current controversy over Christopher Street Piers began with the debate surrounding Two Potato, now called Chances Are. LP and a number of the others I interviewed for this project recalled the Two Potato as a “legendary” gathering place for queer and trans people of color. Like the Village in general, the Two Potato represented a refuge when the AIDS epidemic hit. “At night they could spread out to 14th street and over to Two Potato on the water and just drink and wild out and have sex. And feel like we were still normal,” LP recalled. Yet, the feeling of safety engendered within the queer spaces of the West Village was placed under duress by ongoing phobias accompanying the epidemic. LP explained, “We’d have to do a lot of fighting because there was a lot of prejudice.”

Moral guardians used the crisis to justify restricting access to spaces, such as the piers and the Two Potato, under the cover of the Quality of Life Campaign. The result was simple. “He used the excuse AIDS. He was saying that was a way to spread the virus, but responsible adults who knew about it used condoms. They were consenting adults,”

Adonis Baough explained.

Yet, as spaces for comradeship, these spaces were unique. “Everybody had sex and nobody gave a fuck. You could go into any club and stick your dick through a hole in the wall and there’d be somebody on the other side to suck it,” LP explained. Sometimes, “You could go to any club and literally almost have sex on the dance floor.” Dakota, who no longer goes to the piers, recalls similar scenes. “It was outrageous. It was crazy. They walk out their doorway and find somebody getting a blowjob. It was real.” “Just sex out there. Anyone could join in,” Boo Boo elaborated. One of the most important dynamics of the piers and other queer sex spaces is they break down class and social roles. Charles Shively (1974/2001) specifically notes the “trucks” was a place where “a faggot will make it with someone he will not have to live with the next day.” Within such spaces, “occasionally the vision of luxury, even ecstasy of a mutual faggot sexuality can be found.” The only “decadence” involved in these spaces is if queers leave only to emulate the inequalities of the dominant culture.

Yet, as the AIDS years continued, anxieties about the epidemic coincided countless other cultural phobias and inequalities. LP explained that just getting off the train at 14th street could be an ordeal: “If you got off the train and you looked gay you might get beat up by a group of kids. ‘Faggot, we don’t want you in New York.’ And the police were no help. The cops would stand there and watch because they were in agreement that this was the gay man’s disease and that they didn’t want to get any bodily fluids on them or

involved. Let the faggot get what he deserves.” For LP, navigating the journey from the Bronx to the Village, “was like going through a gauntlet.” Between, the anti vagrancy laws, a social purity crusade described as a quality of life campaign, and AIDS hysteria, LP, like many other queer youth engaged in a struggle against what amounted to a panic over queer space.

Back to the Two Potato, LP explained, “We used to hang out outside. But after the AIDS epidemic, they would come two or three times a night. If we were at the door at Two Potato, they would tell them they have to shut it down.” Police contact only increased. “If the bathrooms were filled and you were going to go take a leak around the corner, they followed you around the back. So, they could pick you up. It was called a lewd act in public,” LP explained. Residents viewed the bar as a site of drug use, prostitution, and violence including slashings. They also complained about patrons, such as LP, who “hung out” in the front of the club. “I went to jail a couple of times because I refused to move from in front of the club.” On one occasion, LP recalled:

I told them I had paid money to be in that club and I had just come out to get a breath of fresh air and it was hot. And I was not going to move just because they was yelling through their loud speakers and they were saying to move. No congregating on the sidewalk and they were blocking the sidewalk.

Other residents objected to the frequent drag shows, some featuring full nudity, which took place there, while patrons maintain that the club was identified because of the Black and Latino transgender crowds which flocked there (McLean, 2002).

As the police contact increased at the Piers, Two Potato, and other spots, Adonis

and LP became increasingly aware of their rights to use public space. LP explained:

I started to learn the law that if there was more than five people that was considered a public gathering. So we tried to break up the groups to threes and stand around defiantly to let them know. And quote the law that if there was no more than five then it was not a public gathering and we had as much right to stand there as anyone else.

The 1999 “Under 20 Rule” LP is referring to was later struck down. Still, pier users were aware that they were being pushed whether doing anything wrong or not. Adonis explains:

Well, most people got arrested because they were doing explicit acts on the pier, sexual. And they got caught. Or drinking a beer, or playing the music too loud, or dancing and not paying the officers no mind and they get mad and they arrest them. Now, if whatever they charged them with didn’t stick but they still had to go through the system. They had to suffer for those three days. The police don’t really care after they do their paperwork.

Most Quality of Life violations fall under the heading of “disorderly conduct,” for fighting, violent, tumultuous or threatening behavior; unlawful assembly; obstructing traffic; congregating with in a public places or refusing to disperse (McLean, 2002).

In August of 2001, after years of quality of life complaints, the Two Potato’s liquor license came up for review prior to renewal. And the bar was closed (McLean, 2002). For LP and countless others, the impact of its and the closure and the fences at the piers was immediate. “It made it very hard for us to function,” LP recalled. “You couldn’t hang out by the water anymore. They were doing construction on the highway so you couldn’t really go down there.”

Gentrification

Along the road, the less affluent felt squeezed out and unwelcome. Tim Doody, a member of the Radical Fairies, worked on the Reclaim Our Space rally. He explained that an emphasis on property and real estate had distorted the values of the space:

Its Giuliani justice - the same thing that is happening with Community Gardens is happening with the West Village – profits over people. It is time and again. A lot of the original people that were in these areas all over New York City have been shuttled out for the new breeds that have disposable income, not much culture, not much of a lot of the things that once made New York City so vibrant...

Imani Henry elaborated on the stages of the gentrification process taking hold:

If you are a rich developer and you want to make sure that this is prime real estate then you are going to do everything in your power to get community boards and the kinds of clientele that can afford to pay \$3000 for a studio. And you are going to get the police to do watches on the streets and harass people and close clubs down, and file phony violations on spaces and literally physically arrest, brutalize and beat people to get them out of that area.

The point is to make those who rent those \$3000 studio apartments feel at home. Those you are not supposed to see are the, “drag queens. God forbid there are no trans women. There are no sex workers. There are no youth. There are no people of color,” Henry explained.

Sylvia and Sylvia’s Children

It took over thirty years for Rivera to force the city to accept and protect the right for trans people to walk or work in public space. In many ways, the children who continue to struggle for queer spaces work from the same vantage point. Queer space is about creating room for the spectacle of difference as opposed to assimilating sameness. While autonomous zones pop up and disappear, the possibility remains.

“There other spots, others piers, yet there will never be anything like the Manhattan West Side piers. Don’t take this wrong but there were a lot of lost souls out there. Some

days I go down there, look at the water, just remember and meditate,” Boo Boo reflected after a recent visit. “That was our fantasy world. But I don’t care how many curfews or arrests or laws the police push, they will never stop the children from going down to the West Side piers.”

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Douglas Crimp (2002) notes throughout this period AIDS was used as justification as, “previously abandoned or peripheral neighborhoods that were home to gay sexual culture were reappropriated and gentrified by the real estate industry, thus making them inhospitable to the uses we’d invented for them.”
No evidence confirms that AIDS is transmitted any more frequently in public sex venues than at home among couples who forgo condom use (see Crimp, 2002).

