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History or Myth? Writing Stonewall

Lambda Book Report (2004, August/September) , pp.12-14

“If I had known that that Judy [Garland] died that night, we wouldn’t have had the raid,” Inspector Seymour Pine, former Deputy Inspector of Manhattan’s First Division of Public Morals, explained to the somewhat awestruck crowd at the New York historical society on June 2nd. The room filled with laughter. It was the first time most any of us had witnessed the man responsible for leading the June 1969 raid on the Stonewall Inn credited with sparking the Gay Liberation Movement. And few knew what to make of the scene. Pine was speaking on a panel for David Carter’s new book, *Stonewall: the Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*. Introduced by moderator Eric Marcus as a man “who holds a special place in gay history,” the short 84-year-old former cop won over much of the crowd. “I don’t know why they are clapping,” I whispered to Bob Kohler, another Stonewall veteran and local activist, sitting next to me. “I guess time heals old wounds,” Kohler responded. (He would later describe Pine’s performance as “borscht belt schtick”.) I have often wondered what it was like to witness the aging Civil War soldiers, who once fought violently, embrace fifty years later during the re enactments of the Battle of Gettysburg. That’s what it felt like that night at the New York historical society.

While former Mattachine president Dick Leisch and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, both of whom witnessed the raid, were also on hand with the author David Carter, the audience was clearly fixated with Pine.

“What did police think of homosexuals in 1969?” Eric Marcus, the evening’s moderator, asked.

“Prejudice,” Pine explained. “No idea, no knowledge. To this day, I have no idea how to identify a homosexual...When clubs opened and were controlled by the Mafia, the Mafia was the focus.” A core contention of Carter’s new work is that Stonewall was controlled by the Mafia; thus homosexuals and the Mafia fell into the same criminal swatch. “During my two years in Manhattan, raids were common,” Pine elaborated, suggesting, “Laws that pertain to clubs and bars were in line with what they were looking for.” For Pine, gay bars offered an easy route for police to meet their required quotas. “The people were easy and quiet,” Pine continued, laughing to himself. “Man was measured by his arrests. He earned his clothes by arrests.”

“Why did the raid take place after midnight,” a skeptical audience member inquired.

“That wasn’t late. You have to understand that the gay population doesn’t come out till after midnight,” the cosmopolitan inspector explained to roars of laughter. “I would have loved to have gone to bed by 10 PM.”

At the event’s apex, Pine was complimented for his role in inspiring Gay Liberation’s birth. “If what I did helped liberate gay people, then I am happy I did it,” Pine reflected, wiping his eyes.

While some in the crowd could be tolerant of curiosity, praise for the man was an

entirely different matter.

“To hear you be praised when you hurt so many gay lives is very difficult,” exclaimed gay journalist Andy Humm, standing up and pointing to inspector. Humm seemed to be speaking for those who felt the crowd was more obsequious than necessary with a vice cop who bragging about raiding some of the few spaces where homosexuals could congregate in a world which outlawed queer identity.

“What changed after Stonewall?” author and transgender activist Leslie Feinberg asked.

“Nothing. We still proceeded to close after hours bars... We did succeed in closing Stonewall but had no effect on other places.”

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As the panel concluded, some wandered back for drinks at the reception; yet a significant number of people lined up to meet and have the inspector sign their books. I started to do the same, but had second thoughts. It might be fun to say I met him, but to what end? This was a man who had just explained that police successfully maintained their arrest quotas by busting gay bars, whose patrons were “were easy and quiet.” Would it be like shaking the hand of a former SS officer who had rehabilitated himself in the German Democratic Republic? The opinion of those who remained was mixed. One local activist suggested that having experienced the cold chill of the bust during a moment of contact, such as took place at the Stonewall, was enough for him not to forgive the man responsible. After all, to be arrested for a public lewdness, as was the police practice at the time, was enough to have one lose a job and have a family fall apart.

Randy Wicker, a former member of the New York Mattachine Society, who fought police entrapment and arrests at gay bars, suggested the raids were less severe in New York than in Chicago or other towns. And they had to be distinguished from the entrapment.

I spoke with David Carter, the author, who sided with Wicker’s view.

"I think Andy Humm was wrong. I think people were mistaking their villains," Carter explained. "Entrapment ruined peoples' lives. Pine did not want to move to Manhattan or into the morals police," Carter continued, speaking specifically about the conditions of the raids at the time. "Gay men were generally not arrested at the raids on clubs. The police were going after the Mafia. Morty Manford and Vito Russo, major figures in the gay liberation movement, personally liked Pine. I think people were confusing their villains. The people who entrapped gay men were villains. I'm certainly not about to say that Pine was a hero, but the evidence is that he was not an active persecutor of gay people." Different people have different opinions about raids vs. specific entrapment by police officers throughout the era. In his 1993 work on Stonewall, Martin Duberman explains: "If the raid went according to the usual pattern, the only people who would be arrested would be those without IDs, those dressed in the clothes of the opposite gender, and some or all of the employees." Pine was actively involved in these raids. Whether he was a villain or merely following orders, we know he successfully fought to shut down the Stonewall Inn at the end of June, 1969. As famously questioned by Hannah Arendt, should we expect history to forgive those who merely followed orders?

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Over the ten years between Stonewall twenty-five when Carter first took on the project and 35, the meaning of Stonewall has shifted as the assimilations in favor of a 'we're just like them' gay politics have struggled against the radical activists over the legacy of the riot and the broad, multi issue based activism which accompanied it. A case in point involves the record of who was involved with the riot. Throughout the reception for Carter's book, many filed through the index for the new *Stonewall* to find no reference to Stonewall legend Sylvia Rivera, the local transgender activist said to have thrown the first brick during the riots. Rivera was recognized as the 'Grand Damme' of the Gay Liberation and international Transgender Rights movement, at the time of her death in 2002. Having spent her final years dividing her time between working in a kitchen providing food for the homeless and successfully fighting for the City of New York to recognize the rights of transgender people, Rivera was considered a bit local hero.

Yet, her activism can be traced back to the days of Stonewall. Rivera worked with Gay Activist Alliance in the early 1970's to push New York City to pass an anti discrimination bill through City Council for gay people. In the final years of her life, she focused on getting the same done for transgender people. New York's transgender rights bill was passed within weeks of her death in 2002. Rivera lobbied for it from her deathbed. Throughout her career, Rivera looked to the legacy of Stonewall.

But was she there? Well, that's the sticky part. Martin Duberman wrote that Rivera was there. As does a thirtieth anniversary *New York Times Magazine* article on the raid (if that says anything. And Duberman was certainly blasted by Jack Nichols for what he considered a hasty and incomplete view of the events). David Carter told me he was not able to find a single credible witness who saw Rivera at Stonewall. "Marsha [P. Johnson, Sylvia's long time friend told Randy Wicker that she found Sylvia passed out on a park bench in Bryant Park and told her about the raid at the end of the first night," Carter explained. "I know of three credible witnesses from the era to whom Marsha stated that Rivera was not there." Whether she made an appearance on any of the other nights is open to debate. As far as Carter is concerned, "There were 1,000s of people there over the course of those six days..." Yet, Carter locates no witness who located Rivera at the scene on any night (Duberman sites two: Jeremiah Newton and Ivan Valentin, who worked at the Stonewall). While Carter collated 52 pages of stories about Stonewall from 1969, the first reference he could find for Rivera was a fading copy of the newspaper *Gay Power* (Vol. 1, No. 17) from May of 1970. "The first time we see Rivera that I know of is in this article," Carter explained, showing me the story, "Gay and Proud and Busted on 42nd Street," with photos and a story about Rivera by Arthur Bell (writing under the pseudonym of Arthur Irving). In it, Rivera says that in March she first became an activist by joining the Gay Activists Alliance, not with the Gay Liberation Front as is often reported.

Even her best friend Bob Kohler does not suggest she was there. But that's beside the point. Kohler, who was a key source for the new work, wrote to Carter shortly after the book release party. "I am not interested in whether she was or was not at Stonewall, Sylvia left behind a tremendous legacy, one that cannot and must not be ignored, for whatever reason. That you chose to do so is, I'm afraid, an injustice and a terrible insult

to someone who's life had already been over-burdened with both. You will say that you were telling the story of STONEWALL and you had deduced she was not there... I would point out that the Stonewall portion was book-ended and there were many opportunities to include her, had you chosen to honor one of gay liberation's fallen warriors. That you didn't is, most certainly, "on you." Sylvia died good, she will forever be remembered by those who loved her and The Sylvia Rivera Law Project, The Sylvia River Food Pantry and The Sylvia Rivera Shelter will remain as testaments to the fact that she was "always there" even though you might not have had the sensitivity to realize it."

Part of what I, like so many other, came to admire about Rivera was her audacity. She was willing to do whatever it took, including participate in direct action, to make a point, either when she was squatting on Manhattan's West Side Piers or organizing for those lost to anti trans violence at the end of her life. When we got arrested together in 1998 during the Matthew Shepard political funeral in New York, a bust came up for Rivera from the early 1970's. Yet, months later when a group of activists spent the night in Union Square in solidarity with the homeless who were losing their right to shelter, Rivara was there, spending the night again. She was neither a careerist or a single identity activist.

I think of Rivera as a Blanche Dubois sort of activist. She did not always tell the truth so much as what should have been the truth. Over the thirty-three years between Stonewall and her death, her life became intricately linked with the story of transgender youth of color, who are said to have first fought the police harassment during the raid. Carter explains that some people have said that "Sylvia came to tell Marsha [P. Johnson]'s story because Marsha, being severely mentally ill, was not able to." Sylvia spoke for many. When Amanda Milan, a trans woman, who was killed on 42nd street in the summer of 2000, Rivera organized two summer's worth of protests over her death and the trial of her murderers. Throughout the process, Rivera linked the violence Milan experienced with a system of anti trans oppression dating back to the Stonewall era. While she may have even embellished a little bit during one or two of the interviews, Rivera never let the truth get in between herself and a good story. Along the way she became an icon for transgender youth who could claim few others of their own. And the legacy of the street youth who fought during Stonewall and continue to struggle found their place in the popular culture.

The treatment of Rivera in the history of activism around Stonewall points to core questions about the historians' craft (dating back to the days of Hesiod and Herodotus). There are those who suggest history should be written as a social science, while others suggest history should be written as a compelling narrative. "Myths have a life of their own," Carter told me. "Its like the Gospels, four different versions of Jesus' life. I don't think it will ever be settled to everyone's satisfaction... So much of the controversies about Stonewall you hear is this great unrecorded oral history, with lots of inconsistencies."

The myths fill in the gaps within the story. Take for example the alleged photos of FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover in a dress at the center of the blackmailing scheme and the Stonewall Inn's Ed Murphy, described in Carter's chapter five. While the rumor of Hoover, the queer oppressor in a dress, is a delicious story, historians have recently suggested, no photograph ever existed (See Dr. David Kay Johnson new book *The Lavendar Scare: the Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the Federal*

Government. University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.11-13).

Yet, for many of us, those inconsistencies are part of the essence of the Stonewall story and myth. By locating our lives and struggles within this narrative, we become part of it. Thus, our struggles take on greater meaning. Within this context, no one is going to be completely happy when the myth is reduced to its inanimate historical details. Jim Fouratt, another Stonewall veteran highlighted by Duberman but not Carter, is known to have said, "If you have the choice between a myth or fact, you go with the myth."

In the last ten years, the story of Stonewall has taken on countless new meanings in terms of the relationship between queers and the status quo. Queer youth fought the police in 1969. Many have spent the last 35 years continuing the skirmish with police. Others have taken different less confrontational approaches. As Bob Kohler and I walked out of the event, we witnessed Jerry Hoose, another Stonewall veteran, putting his arm around Inspector Pine and mugging for a photograph. "So that's what its come down to," Bob moaned.