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Title

QTGNC Resistance, Neoliberalism, and Social Memory

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Bio: Che Gossett is a graduate student in the History Department at the University of Pennsylvania, interested black, queer and transgender liberationist history as well as the politics of mourning, resistance and survival.

My paper focuses on the memorialization of Stonewall through the 2009 “Rainbow Pilgrimage” campaign and the ways in which it serves to preserve and construct social memory. I am interested in the ways in which inclusion is mobilized as a technology of governance and domination, enclosing radical spaces and dreams into the fold of the state, while failing to address the needs of the communities out from which those acts of resistance and desires emerged. Finally, I plan to explore the affective responses to Stonewall and Compton's Café uprisings and how the monumentalization of sites of resistance coincides with teleological narratives in which queer insurrection and trauma are seen as vestiges of the past.

A close reading of the Rainbow campaign’s description of the “event” of the Stonewall riots raises questions about the politics of memory and memorialization; the archive and history. In *Archive Fever* Derrida analyzes the violence of the archive, or “archival violence” that imposes a structuring law and order upon memory, domesticating and institutionalizing history, while also homogenizing and flattening its topography of difference and heterogeneity.

It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place...In an archive, there should not be absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together.¹

In order for the archive to be constructed information must be economized. Some information must be preserved while other documents are discarded. This privileging of certain forms of evidence, or documentation, is a form of violence. “An economic

¹ Derrida, Jacques, *Archive Fever*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), pgs.2-3.

archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say that in making the law (*nomos*) or in making people respect the law.”² The archive has its roots in the “archons,” or authorities – those who monitored documentation, protected it and held hermeneutic and interpretative power over it. One of the forms the violence of the archive takes is the violence of this policing: the violence of the archive as police violence. What can this figure of the law, of the policing of the archive, of its securitization, and of its violence tell us about the history of homonormativity and the homonormativization of history? If Stonewall was one site, of many, of queer and transgender resistances to police violence, how is it that this violence resurfaces in the construction and preservation of its memory, as “archival violence”? How does this archival violence, this policing of the archive, policing of history, operate in relation to state violence against and invisibilization of queer and transgender bodies (especially those of color), through the mass incarceration of queer and transgender life (via the prison industrial complex) and the perpetuation of queer and transgender death?

In the predawn hours of June 28, 1969, a handful of City police descended on the Stonewall Inn, a popular neighborhood gay bar. Such raids were commonplace during that era due to strong anti-gay bias, the enforcement of arcane local laws and the connection that some establishments had with organized crime. The bar’s patrons, perhaps emboldened by the civil rights movement, refused to disperse peacefully, holding a series of protests during the next few days. In the wake of the Riots, the gay pride movement took hold as groups of New Yorkers formed the Gay Liberation Front, launched the newspaper *Gay* and organized the Gay Activists Alliance. The first Pride March was held to mark the event’s one-year anniversary.³

² Ibid, p. 7.

³ Sokol, David. nyc rainbow pilgrimage, nyc gay history

What happens when we submit the Rainbow Pilgrimage description of the Stonewall uprising to a historically minded deconstruction? What, in the Derridian sense, is “the event” of the Stonewall uprising?

Let us return to the value of the event. The event affects the ‘who’ and the ‘what.’ It affects and changes singularities of all sorts, even as past event, inscribed or archived. Irreducible eventness of the event in question, which, then, must be retained, inscribed, traced, and so forth, can be the thing itself that is thus archived, but it must also be the event of the inscription. Even as it consigns, inscription produces a new event it is supposed to retain, engram, consign, archive.⁴

The event of Stonewall is determined by and recorded through “inscription,” while it is also sanitized and naturalized in the process of its archivization. Derrida draws a distinction between the “event one archives” and the “archiving event.”

“There is the event on archives, the archived event (and there is no archive without a body – I prefer to say ‘body’ rather than ‘matter,’ for reasons that that I will try to justify later), and there is the archiving event, the archivization. The latter is not the same thing, structurally, as the archived event, even if, in certain cases, it is indissociable from it of event contemporary with it.”⁵

Writing further about the body and the archive, Derrida discusses Paul de Man’s reading of Rousseau and the “textual event,” which changes, through iterations, throughout the body or corpus of de Man’s reading. “How does this textual event inscribe itself? What is the operation of its inscription? What is the writing machine, the typewriter that both produces and archives it? What is the body, or even the materiality that confers on this inscription both a support and a resistance?”⁶ Following Derrida’s inquiries, what is the body upon which the archive and the archivization of Stonewall rests and also resists? In the construction of the Rainbow Campaign’s homonormative history of Stonewall, a site

⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Without Alibi*, (Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 113.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114

of queer and trans resistance to police violence, what bodies are absent, invisible, discarded? What bodies must be sacrificed so that others may live?

Sites of queer resistance are sanitized (cleansed of undesirables – queers of color, trans and gender-non-conforming people, sex workers) and folded into the state as a means of including certain types of bodies and politics. This simultaneous inclusion/exclusion operates at the level of the construction of the political “we” which Judith Butler discusses in “Finishing, Starting,” and it does so at the level of the archive. Yet, as sites of queer and transgender resistance are folded into the state through inclusion and tolerance as technologies of governance, the desires of the communities from which those sites emerged are actively censored, denied, stifled, and extinguished through state and police violence. State recognition in itself, as Jasbir Puar points out in *Terrorist Assemblages*, is not only exclusionary in its privileging of certain queer bodies, it also perpetuates homonationalism.

The politics of recognition and incorporation entail that certain – but certainly not most – homosexual, gay and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the ‘measures of benevolence’ that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. This benevolence toward sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity.⁷

Tolerance discourse functions as a tool for depoliticization, dominance and governmentality while distracting from the state violence and exclusion that underpins it. Nevertheless, gay historian John D’ Emilio heralded the designation of Stonewall as a tourist site on the NYC Rainbow Pilgrimage as a form of multicultural inclusion: “Within

⁷ Puar, Jasbir, *Terrorist Assemblages*, (Duke University Press, 2008), p. xii.

living memory, something has been turned around. People who were seen as an unwelcome presence are now encouraged to arrive.”⁸

In 2006 the Compton’s Café uprising of 1966 was commemorated with a plaque outside the former restaurant in an event attended by local police and activists and covered by local media. Media coverage of the event documented the success of trans-inclusion and hailed narratives of progress that treated transphobic police violence as a past issue instead of a current, pressing problem.

A granite historical marker installed in San Francisco's seedy Tenderloin District this week would be unremarkable if it didn't honor men who dressed in women's clothes and once walked the streets selling sex. The tired travestites who clashed with police at an all-night greasy spoon here in 1966 never would have expected the city's political elite to show up for a dedication ceremony honoring their struggle as a civil rights milestone. Yet there, at the site of the Compton's Cafeteria riot, among a crowd of unusually tall women and noticeably short men were a pair of city supervisors, the district attorney, the police chief, and a transsexual police sergeant. The California Assembly and the mayor sent proclamations.⁹

In addition to the violent characterization of transgender women as morally repugnant sex workers, “transvestites” and “cross-dressers,” and the Tenderloin as a site of corruption, pathos and hypersexuality, the article boasts an almost humorously ironic title: “As Gay Pride hits stride transgenders find more acceptance.” The ostracization of transgender people from the mainstream assimilationist (i.e. HRC and other lobbyist and corporate sponsored institutions) movement for gay rights (i.e. marriage, military and ENDA legislation), has functioned as a way for white, homo-normative gays and lesbians to gain social recognition and state benefits. The formulation of the title should actually be reversed: as gay pride hits stride, transgender people are put on the back of the bus, or the bumper, as Sylvia Rivera said in reference to the HRC in 2001. “One of our [STAR’s]

⁸ Chan, Sewell, “Stonewall Uprising Given Role in Tourism Campaign,” (New York Times), April 8, 2009

⁹ Leff, Lisa, “As Gay Pride hits stride, transgendered find more acceptance,” USA Today, 6/24/2006

main goals now is to destroy the Human Rights Campaign, because I'm tired of sitting on the back of the bumper. It's not even the back of the bus anymore — it's the back of the bumper.”¹⁰

Through its commemoration, the event of the Compton's Café riot was transformed from an act of queer and transgender resistance to police violence into trans and homo-inclusivity and collaboration with policing and the state. Honoring the legacy of Elliot Blackstone, a police officer who worked with the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis in advocating for trans competency and police sensitivity during the homophile period, the San Francisco Pride Parade saluted his efforts. Blackstone's political commitments were attached to policing but also to social and economic justice. Blackstone “helped establish an anti-poverty office in the Tenderloin that employed transsexual workers,” and when the city refused to pay for hormones for transgender people, he “took up a donation at his church and distributed the drugs for free.”¹¹ Yet, it seems, Blackstone's services are no longer necessary.

The department no longer has a liaison to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. That's just fine with Sgt. Inspector Lea Militello, who is co-chair of the San Francisco Police Officers' Pride Alliance. ‘We don't need one person because we all chip in,’ she said. The pride alliance has 200 members, some retired, and the department also employs a transgender officer. Police Commissioner Theresa Sparks is a transgender woman. The department is an easy place to be open about sexual orientation and gender identity,’ Militello said.¹²

What is the relationship between the memorialization of sites of queer and trans resistance and the politics of loss and mourning? To trauma, violence, and belonging? Through memory work such as the memorialization of these sites of resistance, the

¹⁰ Bronski, Michael, “On the back of the bumper,” *The Phoenix.com*, March 21-28, 2002.

¹¹ Buchanan, Wyatt. “Pride Parade Salute for an unlikely ally,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 23rd, 2006

¹² *Ibid*, p. 1.

trauma and violence that queer and transgender people of color face on a quotidian level is effaced and/or treated as a vestige of an unfortunate past. The memorialization of sites of queer and transgender resistance such as Stonewall and Compton's café invisibilize historical and present trauma and causes questions that Derrida raised about the responsibility of mourning in *The Work of Mourning* to resurface. How are we to mourn for those, such as Marsha P. Johnson, co-founder of STAR, who's body was found floating in the Hudson River in 1992 after the gay pride march?¹³ For Sanesha Stewart? "Ex-Con Slays Transsexual Bronx Hooker" was the title provided by the NY Daily News, which mirrors the transphobic language of the Compton's Café article but introduces racist language of black criminality as well: "Ex-Con..."¹⁴ Why is it that the only time that trans women of color are mentioned in the mainstream media is when they are murdered? In what ways do media and the state corroborate in their violence and in their perpetuation of transphobic death and death(s) – the symbolism of which we see in the "Death(s) of Ronald Barthes," singular but also plural, how plural must they be, how many more will die? "Impossible mourning" indeed. Yet, rather than exclusively gravitating towards death – as in Lee Edleman's *No Future*, where the future's is "kids play," with no place for queers we might focus on the reverse and consider survival and resiliency in the face of violence. In *Cruising Utopia* Jose Munoz, influenced by Agabmen's notion of "politics with end," emphasizes that utopian vision points to an always unrealized, future "to come" (via Derrida's notion of "democracy to come") of queer (and I would add transgender) life.¹⁵ It is this "queerness on the horizon" to which the affective registers that produced sites of resistance such as Stonewall and Compton's

¹³ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Hayes, Elizabeth and Lemire, John, "Cops: Ex-con slays Bronx transsexual 'hooker'" NY Daily News, Sunday February 10th, 2008.

¹⁵ Munoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia*, (NYU Press, 2009), p. 11.

café were attuned. Yet this affective quality has been lost, displaced, and replaced by neoliberal market logic limiting queer dreams and zines. Remembering Stonewall and Compton's café as sites of queer and transgender resistance means attending to the desires that created those spaces and recognizing the need to constantly invoke the potentiality of healing, resilience, and queerness.

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