



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

Rivera, Sylvia

Sylvia Rivera's Talk at LGMNY, June 2001 Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York
City

Centro Journal, vol. XIX, núm. 1, 2007, pp. 116-123

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

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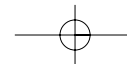
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CENTRO JOURNAL

VOLUME XIX NUMBER 1
SPRING 2007

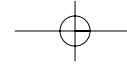
Sylvia Rivera's Talk at LGMNY, June 2001 Lesbian and Gay Community Service Center, New York City

SYLVIA RIVERA

*Introduction by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes
Transcribed by Lauren Galarza and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes*



Latino Gay Men of New York (LGMNY), a social group established in 1991, invited the Bronx-born, Venezuelan/Puerto Rican Stonewall veteran, transgender activist, and Young Lords member Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002) to be a guest speaker at its monthly “First Friday of the Month” meeting in June 2001. This meeting was organized as a celebration of LGBT Pride month, in commemoration of the riots of 1969, a landmark event in the history of gay liberation. The meeting took place at the temporary building that the Lesbian and Gay Community Center was occupying near Gansevoort Street while its main building on 13th Street was being renovated. Since Sylvia was banned from entering the Center (see transcript), she had to secure a special permit in order for her to gain admittance. She came with her life partner Julia Murray. The meeting began with small group discussions of the history of Stonewall, followed by Sylvia’s talk. The gathering concluded with a surprise rendition of “Happy Birthday” and the eating of cake and strawberries, an ad hoc celebration of Sylvia’s 50th birthday, which was to occur in July. Sylvia passed away from liver cancer several months later, in February 2002. The recording of Sylvia’s talk unfortunately does not include the very beginning of her presentation. Particularly interesting, in addition to Rivera’s recollection of the Stonewall riots, of her early activism, and of the 1973 schism regarding the inclusion of drag queens in the gay liberation movement, is her discussion of current trans politics in New York and of her participation in World Pride (Italy, 2000), her critique of gay normalization and marriage, and her comments on the activism generated by the murders of Matthew Shepard (1976–1998) and Amanda Miller (1972–2000).



Note on the editing: We have attempted to limit editing solely to clarify meaning and eliminate redundancy. Some (minimal) rearrangement of phrases in sentences has been done, to simplify syntax. Otherwise, we have respected the talk as it was presented. We have also attempted to maintain Rivera's distinctive grammatical usage, such as the use of you (yous) and her occasional use of double negatives. Also please note that the Stonewall Inn and Gay Community Services Center was renamed in July 2001 and is now known as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center.

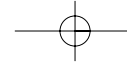
[Sylvia is explaining the antecedents to and the context of the Stonewall riots.]

We did have connections with the Mafia. You must remember, everyone was doing drugs back then. Everybody was selling drugs, and everybody was buying drugs to take to other bars, like myself. I was no angel. I would pick up my drugs at the Stonewall [Inn] and take them to the Washington Square Bar on 3rd Street and Broadway, which was the drag queen third world bar. Even back then we had our racist little clubs. There were the white gay bars and then there were the very few third world bars and drag queen bars.

The night of the Stonewall [riots], it happened to be the week that Judy Garland had committed suicide. Some people say that the riots started because of Judy Garland's death. That's a myth. We were all involved in different struggles, including myself and many other transgender people. But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts. The only reason they tolerated the transgender community in some of these movements was because we were gung-ho, we were front liners. We didn't take no shit from nobody. We had nothing to lose. *You* all had rights. We had nothing to lose. I'll be the first one to step on any-

on, we knew what was coming; I was out there. This is the second time in one week that the bar was raided. Common practice was, says the police from the 6th Precinct, they would come in to each gay bar and pay them their payoff. Routine was, "Faggots over here, dykes over here, and freaks over there," referring to my side of the street and the transgender community. If you did not have three pieces of male attire on you, you were going to jail. Just like a butch dyke, you had to have three pieces of female attire on you, or *he* was going to jail. If you goes on, you know, they proof you, you know, back then you could get away with anything. Fake IDs were given out then (*audience laughter*), because I was even 18 yet; I was gonna turn 18 in a few days. I was led out of the bar. The routine was, the cops get their payoff, they come in and take the liquor, if you were a bartender, they would snatch the money as soon as the lights went on because you would be able to see that money again. A padlock was put on the door. What we did, back then, was disappear to a coffee shop or a bar in the place in the neighborhood for fifteen minutes. You come back, the Mobs are there cutting the padlock off, bring in more liquor, and back to business.

Well, it just so happened that the night it was muggy; everybody was out there. I guess, probably a lot of us were



started outside by throwing change at the police. We started with the pennies, the nickels, the quarters, and the dimes. “Here’s your payoff, you pigs! You fucking pigs! Get out of our faces.” This was started by the street queens of that era, which I was part of, Marsha P. Johnson, and many others that are not here. I’m lucky to be 50 in July, but I’m still here and I’ll be damned if I won’t see 100 (*laughter*).

One thing led to another. The confrontation got so hot, that Inspector [Seymour] Pine, who headed this raid, him and his men had to barricade themselves in our bar, because they could not get out. The people that they had arrested, they had to take into the bar with them, because there was no police backup for them. But seriously, as history tells it, to this day, we don’t know who cut the phone lines! So they could not get the call to the 6th precinct. Number one, Inspector Pine was not welcome in the 6th precinct because he had just been appointed to stop the corruption and, you know, what they called back then, we were a bunch of deviants, perverts. So he was there for that purpose, so who knows if one of his own men didn’t do it, that was, you know, taking a payoff himself.

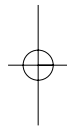
The police and the people that were arrested were barricaded inside this bar, with a *Village Voice* reporter, who proceeded to tell his story, in the paper, that he was handed a gun. The cops were actually so afraid of us that night that if we had busted through that bar’s door, they were gonna shoot. They were ordered to shoot if that door busted open. Someone yanked a parking meter out the floor, which was loose, because it’s very hard to get a parking meter out of the ground (*laughter*). It was loose, you know, I don’t know how it got loose. But that was being rammed into the door.

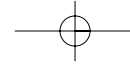
Molotov cocktail by many historians. I always like to correct it; I threw the first one, I did not throw the first one. And I didn’t even know what a Molotov cocktail was; I’m holding this thing, it’s lit and I’m like “What the hell am I supposed to do with this?” “Throw it before it blows!” “OK!” (*laughter*).

The riot did get out of hand, there was Cookie’s down the street, there was The Haven, there was Christopher’s End. Once word got around that the Stonewall had been raided, and that there’s a confrontation going on, people came from the neighborhood. But we also have to remember that it was not just the gay community and the street queens that really started this riot; it was also the help of radical straight men and women who lived in the Village at that time, that knew the struggle of the gay community and the trans community.

So the crowds did swell. You know, it was a long night of riots. It was very exciting cuz I remember hearing through the streets, “The revolution is here!” (*laughter*), you know? Cars were being turned over, windows are being broken, fires are being set all over the place. Blood was shed. When they did finally get there, the reinforcement, forty five minutes later, you had a chorus line of street queens kicking their heels, singing their famous anthem that up to today still lives. “We are the Stonewall girls/ we wear our hair in curls/ we wear our du-rags above our nelly knees/ we show our nelly hairs,” and so on and so forth.

At that time, there were many demonstrations. They were fierce demonstrations back then. I don’t know how many people remember the riot or how many people read of the





evening, was that the more that they beat us, the more we went back for. We were determined that evening that we were going to be a liberated, free community, which we did acquire that. Actually, I'll change the 'we': *You* have acquired your liberation, your freedom, from that night. Myself, I've got shit, just like I had back then. But I still struggle, I still continue the struggle. I will struggle til the day I die and my main struggle right now is that my community will seek the rights that are justly ours.

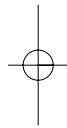
I am tired of seeing my children—I call everybody including yous in this room, you are all my children—I am tired of seeing homeless transgender children; young, gay, youth children. I am tired of seeing the lack of interest that this rich community has. This is a very affluent community. When we can afford to rerenovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about your homeless children from your community, and I know this for a fact, because the reason that I have to get clearance every time to come into this building is because I saw many of the kids before the building was being renovated up the street, many of the children are sleeping on the steps of that church. I went in there with an attitude. I raised hell. Yes, maybe I did try to destroy the front desk, but I did not attack anybody. But what did this community center do to me? My thanks for everything I have done for this freakin' community? Had me arrested and put in Bellevue! So I'm supposed to kiss their asses? No, I don't kiss nobody's ass cuz I haven't lived this long, because I don't kiss nobody's ass.

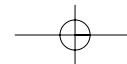
That night, I remember singing "We Shall Overcome," many a times, on different demonstrations, on the steps

back of the bus. My community pulled by a rope around our neck bumper of the damn bus that stood in front. Gay liberation but transgender nothing! Yes, I hold a lot of anger, I have that right. I have that right, that anger. I have fought too damn hard for this community to deal with the disrespect that I have received and my community has received in the last thirty-two years.

And a point of history, you know it took the Gay Rights Bill here in New York seventeen years to pass. [It was approved in 1986.] But I'll go to the beginning. When we were petitioning the Gay Rights Bill, there was one person that was arrested. That was me. Because I had the guts to go into the Times Square area on 42nd Street and petition the people to sign that bill. And the only reason I did it was because that bill did include the transgender community. Two or three years in the movement and the bill is being passed and we're going back and forth to the Hall. They have a little backroom without inviting Miss Sylvia and the other trans activists to this room to deal with these politicians. The politicians say, "You take them out, we'll pass the bill." So, what did nice conservative gay men do? They sell a community that they liberated them down the river, and it took them seventeen years to get the damn bill passed! And I hate to see that but I was very happy. Every time that bill came up for a vote, I said, "I hope it doesn't pass," because they did to me. As badly as I know the community needed that bill, I didn't think it was justified for them to have sweat and tears, or from my back

So Stonewall is a great, great foundation. It began the modern





be what they called themselves the “*normal* homosexuals.” They wore suits and ties. One of the first demonstrations that they had, lesbians who’d never even worn dresses were wearing dresses and high heels to show the world that they were normal. Normal? Fine.

One of my best friends now, who has employed me for the last seven years before I changed jobs, is Randy Wicker. Randy Wicker was a very well-known gay male activist in 1963. He was the first gay male —before any real movement was there—to get on a talk show and state to the world that he was a *normal* homosexual. I give him credit for that. He has done a lot of different things, but he also in 1969 and for many years trashed the transgender community. It took him a lot of years to wake up and realize that we are no different than anybody else; that we bleed, that we cry, and that we suffer.

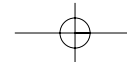
But this has been going on for the longest time. I mean, before gay liberation, it was the same thing: “drag queens over there, we’re over here.” The world came tumbling down in 1969 and on the fourth anniversary of the Stonewall movement, of the Stonewall riot, the transgender community was silenced because of a radical lesbian named Jean O’Leary, who felt that the transgender community was offensive to women because we liked to wear makeup and we liked to wear miniskirts. Excuse me! It goes with the business that we’re in at that time! Because people fail to realize that—not trying to get off the story—everybody thinks that we want to be out on them street corners. No we do not. We don’t want to be out there sucking dick and getting fucked up the ass. But that’s the only alternative that we have to survive

a man. I have been this way since I left home and I have been on since the age of ten.

Anyway, Jean O’Leary started commotion at this rally [Christie Street Liberation Day, 1973]. It was the year that Bette Midler performed. I was supposed to be a featured performer that day. But being that the word was that we were offensive, the drag queens Tiffany and Billy were not allowed to perform. I had to fight my way to the stage and literally, people that I considered comrades in the movement, literally threw the shit out of me. That’s where the silence began, to really silence us. They were saying, “I kicked their asses. I did get to the front. I got my points across.

There was another speaker that was Lee Brewster (she passed a year ago). She was very well known to the trans community and to the cross dressing community. She got up on stage, threw her towel at the crowd and said, “Fuck gay liberation!” But what people fail to realize was that Lee Brewster put up the majority of the money for the Gay Pride March in New York, which was our first one. And it was a success again, out of maybe two or three that we had, of us that started from the Village, from Avenue, up two little lanes of town. We were the visible ones. We were the visible ones, the trans community. And still and yet, if you notice we were always being kept pushing us every year, we’re always being pushed and further towards the back. I want to have the pleasure to march with the transgender community, for the simple fact that I belong to the Stonewall Live Veterans group, I march in the front.

But until my community is allowed to respect to march in the front, I will march with my community because where I’m needed and that’s where I belong. And yes, I’ll wear my hair



us. You see, I don't pull no punches, I'm not afraid to call out no names. You screw with the transgender community and the organization Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries [STAR] will be on your doorstep. Just like we trashed the HRC [Human Rights Campaign] for not endorsing the Amanda Milan actions, and then when they threw us a piece of trash, we refused to accept it. How dare you question the validity of a transgender group asking for your support, when this transgender woman was murdered? No. The trans community has allowed, we have allowed the gay and lesbian community to speak for us. Times are changing. Our armies are rising and we are getting stronger. And when we come a knocking (that includes from here to Albany to Washington) they're going to know that you don't fuck with the transgender community.

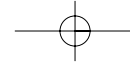
Mainstreaming, normality, being normal. I understand how much everybody likes to fit into that mainstream gay and lesbian community. You know, it used to be a wonderful thing to be avant-garde, to be different from the world. I see us reverting into a so-called liberated closet because we, not we, *you*s of this mainstream community, wish to be married, wish for this status. That's all fine. But you are forgetting your grass roots, you are forgetting your own individual identity. I mean, you can never be *like them*. Yes we can adopt children, all well and good, that's fine. I would love to have children. I would love to marry my lover over there [Julia Murray], but for political reasons, I will not do it because I don't feel that I have to fit in that closet of normal, straight society which the gay mainstream is going towards.

This is why they don't want the transgender people to have rights. This is

(*laughter*) But I'm sure a lot of people would like that, especially the older people because I have actually mellowed through the years. I used to be a person on wheels. (*laughter and applause*)

But these are days that we have to reflect on. This is a month that's important. I may have a lot of anger, but it means a lot to me because after I went to World Pride last year in Italy, to Rome, 500,000 beautiful, liberated gay men, women, and trans people and became the mother of the world's transgender movement and the gay liberation movement, it gives me great pride in my children celebrating. But I just want that—and I've heard a lot of positive things in this room tonight, as far as people realizing that the trans community was your benefactor and that people are opening up their eyes. But you guys remember, don't just say that because we're here; show your support with actions, the things that we plan to do.

I mean, it was a hurting feeling. On May 4th [2001] we had history—civil rights in for city council. On that day, it was finally introduced. Wow! Wow! This long! But where were my sisters? Where were my children? I liberated? Very few allies showed up. But what made me proud was that the trans community showed up in numbers and the girls that work these closets got the nerve enough to come in and go onto something that they had never consider doing, which was to go on City Hall because they are afraid of the police, but they were there. So, that goes to show the rest of the community, that technically when you ask for your support, we want your support. But in the long run, if it's there, we will acquire what we want.



including myself, for Matthew Shepard, and many of us went to jail, I only got to see maybe five minutes of the whole thing because being the person who I am, a front liner, as soon as I sat down in the street, one of the white shirts that has known me for years, the person he says, “When the order goes down, get that bitch right there, get her off the street and into the paddy wagon.” So that’s the way that went.

But it seemed like everybody and their mother came out for Matthew Shepard.

A white, middle class gay boy that was effeminate! Amanda Milan got killed last year, five days before Gay Pride. We waited a month to have a vigil for her. Three hundred people showed up. What kind of a—doesn’t the community have feelings? We are part of the gay and lesbian community! That really hurt me, to see that only three hundred people showed up. And it’s not like it was gonna be a long vigil, I mean we went from 36th Street to 42nd Street. So, when we call people, not only to sponsor our actions, we expect to see bodies there. I mean, but like I said, we’re capable of doing it on our own because that’s what we’re learning now, after thirty-two years, that we cannot depend on nobody, except our own trans community, to keep pushing forward.

But remember that as you celebrate this whole month, of how you are liberated. And I feel so sorry for those that are not able to read the history of the Stonewall around the world. And we have to blame



Stonewall Inn a few weeks after the riots (1969). Photographer Richard C. Wright. Reprinted, by permission, from National History Archives of the Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Community Center.

[*Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1997). But they felt that the book would not sell in Third World countries, in other countries. Which is a lot of crap! the only way that you’re going to learn history, especially if you’re far away from just coming out, is to be able to pick up a book and read about the history of Stonewall and how you were liberated. I know many of our countries are not liberated as the United States, as long as the gays are concerned, especially in American countries, because once you got to remember that we have that big macho role, you know, men, we have to make lots of babies! It is a shame that it has taken thirty-two years for people to finally realize how much we’ve given to you, to realize the history of trans involvement in this movement. And in that note, I hope to see you. I send out the e-mails to you, and you pass that on. That I hope to

