

Sample Paper II: GSWS and History

[EXCERPT]

Transgender Movements and Activism in the 1960s and 70s⁷

As with all social justice movements, there are many vehicles of activism and awareness through which oppressed groups are able to reach the mainstream; it was no different with the transgender rights movement. There were an exceptional number of actors involved, all of whom were involved on a variety of levels. One thing that shows clearly at every level of activism is the fact that transgender and transsexual individuals themselves (particularly transgender and transsexual women) were at the forefront of the movement, and doing the brunt of the work. We see activism carried out in three distinct ways—through individual means, through organization formation, and through public demonstration and activism—but all three of these methods worked to reinforce, inspire, and drive one another.⁸

[EXCERPT]

In a similar but slightly larger-scale incident at Compton's Cafeteria (another eating establishment, not so coincidentally), drag queens and other gender-non-conforming people in the restaurant were targeted by police and ended up staging another resistance. According to one telling of the story, someone at the restaurant who was annoyed at a “noisy young crowd of Queens” (Stryker, 64)⁹ called the police to take care of them, and when the police attempted to violently physically handle

⁷ An informative title that gives context to the text that is about to follow. This is a necessity in just about any Humanities discipline. Because this is a paper written for a history class, it has a more analytical historical tone.

⁸ This is my thesis/focus statement. Although it makes an argument, it is a fairly weak one. This paper did not get an “A,” and the main reason, according to the professor, was that it did not make a deep enough argument about greater trends in gender theory of the time within transgender activism. A stronger thesis might have had something to do with a broader definition of gender identity and expression that was simultaneously developing at the time within multiple movements in such a way that these new ideologies reinforced, supported, and encouraged one another to deepen their activism efforts.

⁹As is very often the case in GSWS classes that are cross-listed with other departments, the professor for this class gave students the option of using whatever method of citations they were most comfortable with. I most frequently use MLA.

one of the queens, they threw their coffee into the police officer's face, causing a full-blown conflict to erupt in the restaurant. Police were beating patrons, patrons were fighting back, and amidst the extended chaos, a newsstand was burned completely to the ground, and a police car was vandalized. Stryker¹⁰ does a very good job giving context to this riot, relating it the specific neighborhood location, the time period, and the culture of the area in which the riot took place. Two of these things, the time period/cultural consciousness of the time, and the location, are particularly crucial to understanding what brought this conflict into being and made it so significant. With regards to the first of those two, a large element of this conflict and others like it was the prevalence of social rights movements in general at the time. The civil rights movement and other connected movements were both the result of a more public consciousness, but in turn they fueled movements further, and each had the effect of reinforcing others.

More significant even than the consciousness of the time period, though, was the area in which this occurred: the Tenderloin district in San Francisco¹¹. At the time, the Tenderloin was known to be one of the “seedier” neighborhoods in the city, and was home to many illicit social behaviors such as prostitution, drugs, and gambling. In spite the existence of these activities being public knowledge, police would often turn a blind eye to these sort of things in exchange for a cut of these various businesses (Stryker, 66). Transgender people, gender-non-conforming people, and drag queens¹² were

¹⁰Just for the sake of giving context to the assignment, this was a short paper assignment for a History of Sex class in which we were asked to discuss one of four questions pertaining to a book we read and discussed in class, Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*. The question that this paper was answering had to do with different types of activism that were occurring during the time period. We were allowed to draw upon other sources if we wished, but were only required to draw upon and cite Stryker's book.

¹¹This entire passage goes into a fairly detailed historical context for the events that I go on to discuss in greater detail. This is a signifier of this being a specifically historically-based paper, as opposed to a gender-studies paper centered in another discipline, because of the clear emphasis on historical context. Some gender-related papers will be much more heavy on the theory and/or personal development of opinions, but this paper is intended to have a strong focus on capturing a particular time period in history and formulating an argument about it.

¹² Even though this is a historically-based paper, it is still necessary to have the tools and terminology to effectively and inclusively discuss the topics at hand. Examining gender and sexuality identity throughout history can be a tricky thing, since there have not always been names for the categories we understand in the present day, or the names have changed to mean different things or become more or less acceptable, so it is necessary to be really conscious of the language you are using and whether or not it accurately reflects what you are trying to talk about.

particularly targeted and vulnerable in this area, and were often victims of police profiling and brutality. According to Stryker, transgender women potentially engaged in sex work were more likely to be treated with viciousness and brutality by the police. Even if they weren't actively engaging in sex work, they would often be picked up by police and either raped by the officers or brought into prison where they were humiliated or raped and assaulted. The visible and visceral oppression and violence these people faced was immense. As a side note, Stryker notes that this is an explanatory factor for why the transgender rights movement was predominantly driven by trans women: they were predominantly affected by discrimination and violence and thus had the greatest stake in changing the culture.

While the culture of violence against transgender folks and trans* sex workers in the Tenderloin explain the police response to the situation, what is truly interesting is to think about are the social and political forces that were motivating people to fight back on such a genuine and significant scale. One suggestion that Stryker offers is with regards to increasing medical access becoming available to transgender people wishing to biologically or medically transition. Stryker writes, very aptly: “When people struggling against an injustice have no hope things will ever change, they use their strength to survive; when they think that their actions matter, that same strength becomes a force for positive change.” (Stryker, 74). Increasing medical access validated many transgender people's existence and identity, and increasing research and support for this medical access illustrated that transexuality was a legitimate and valid space to inhabit in the world. This belief in themselves, their identities, and their community explains, at least in some part, what gave this community of people the strength to actually fight back against the oppression they were facing.¹³

¹³ This is another place that is directly drawing an argument from historical context, as is going to be the objective in most history-based papers.