

FROM STONEWALL TO THE PUERTO RICAN PRIDE PARADE: THE EPIC ROLE OF TRANSVESTITES

by Frances Negron

The Stonewall Rebellion of June 29, 1969 marks the mythic origin of the contemporary Gay and Lesbian movement in the US. A sterilized Stonewall (avoiding any mention of the “real” Stonewallers) served as an attractive origin myth because it was a “clear” and spontaneous (some would say “macho”) confrontation between a group of non-”politicized” gays and the repressive state embodied by the police. Questions regarding the appropriateness of this mythic origin have also been raised in relation to its “uncharacteristic” violence (the organized gay and lesbian movement has been “primarily” a non violent movement) and to the absence of lesbians. (See Maida Tilchen, “Mythologizing Stonewall,” *Gay Community News*, 6/20/89)

The people who had enough that night at the illegally run and “sleazy” Stonewall Inn were the transvestites (the “stereotypical” gay), young and probably homeless gays, working class gays and gays of color (*New York Newsday*, April 13, 1989, p. 22). And among the drag queens of color, at least one, Sylvia Rivera, is a Puerto Rican. Yet, Puerto Rican gays and lesbians in New York and Puerto Rico have rarely claimed the Stonewall of Puerto Rican drag queens, but rather the mythic one, the one invoked and cleansed by the modern “straight-looking” American gay and lesbian movement. Thus, when the *Comunidad Orgullo Gay* (COG) writes about Stonewall in *Pa’Fuera*, there is no mention of the presence of the “stereotypes,” although the COG considered itself an “echo”

of Stonewall. [The COG, founded in 1974, was modeled on the then National Gay Task Force and dedicated to bring gays into the mainstream.]

However, a raw account of Stonewall as a mythic origin poses other interesting questions about the participation of gays of color and transvestite gays in both the US and Puerto Rican-based gay and lesbian movements. In fact, the “uncharacteristic” violence of Stonewall may be in itself a middle-class gay and lesbian myth—for both of these other groups, violence is part of everyday living. Sylvia Rivera comments on the rebellion:

“So when I was there the night of Stonewall, it was this wonderful thing. and the queens were ready to be in the front lines because we didn’t have too much to lose and we knew about violence. so the drag queens knew how to fight and were early members of the Gay Liberation Front. Miss Marsha and me started our own organization called STAR: Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. We had a STAR house, a place for all of us to sleep.” (Interview in *Stonewall Romances, A tenth Anniversary Celebration* pamphlet, pp. 2-4)

Identical to the mainstreaming US gay and lesbian organizational discourse, all Puerto Rican groups in San Juan and the Latino groups in New York had, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards transvestites. Sylvia Rivera provides an example of the extent to which these “symbols” were marginalized in the US:

“Around that time, the street queens were being drummed out of the gay movement; ‘stereotypes’ and ‘bad role models’ we were called. At the 1974 rally they tried to stop me from speaking. My gay brothers wrestled me down three times from the platform, so I looked a little roughed up in my dress, standing at the mike. I was booed. But no one was going to stop me from talking. I’m a loudmouth queen and if you fuck with me you don’t get away with silence. But that whole incident took me way way down and I left the movement.” (*ibid.* p. 4) [eds. note: lesbian-feminists were a significant opposition to transvestites. They analyzed “queens” as representing a degrading imitation of women, a male embrace of female stereotypes and a view of women as a ‘piece of meat.’]

In 1989, the Latino Gay and Lesbian Coalition in New York City declared their participation in the Puerto Rican Parade as “our” Stonewall, claiming that through participating in the Puerto Rican Pride Parade, they were celebrating Stonewall. Again, there is no claiming of Stonewall itself as a point of departure for minority gay liberation, including Latinos and Puerto Ricans, perhaps because the identity discourses of nationality and ethnicity are the most privileged sites of identity construction in the US. At the same time, it is difficult to assert symbolic primacy in a culture that denies your worth and/or existence.

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