

Relevant Queer Mythology

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Cooper's Donuts was an all night donut shop on a seedy stretch of Main Street in Los Angeles. It was a regular hangout for street queens and queer hustlers at all hours of the night. Police harassment was a regular fixture of the Cooper's, but one May night in 1959, the queers fought back. What started with customers throwing donuts at the police escalated into full-on street fighting. In the ensuing chaos, all of the donut-wielding rebels escaped into the night.

One weekend in August of 1966, Compton's — a twenty-four-hour cafeteria in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood — was buzzing with its usual late-night crowd of drag queens, hustlers, slummers, cruisers, runaway teens and neighborhood regulars. The restaurant's management became annoyed by a noisy young crowd of queens at one table who seemed to be spending a lot of time without spending a lot of money, and it called the police to roust them. A surly police officer, accustomed to manhandling Compton's clientele with impunity, grabbed the arm of one of the queens and tried to drag her away. She unexpectedly threw her coffee in his face, however, and a melee erupted: Plates, trays, cups, and silverware flew through the air at the startled police who ran outside and called for backup. The customers turned over the tables, smashed the plate-glass windows, and poured onto the streets. When the police reinforcements arrived, street fighting broke out all throughout the Compton's vicinity. Drag queens beat the police with their heavy purses and kicked them with their high-heeled shoes. A police car was vandalized, a newspaper box was burnt to the ground, and general havoc was raised all throughout the Tenderloin.

What began as an early morning raid on June 28th, 1969, at New York's Stonewall Inn, escalated to four days of rioting throughout Greenwich Village. Police conducted the raid as usual; targeting people of color, transpeople, and gender variants for harassment and violence. It all changed, though, when a bull-dyke resisted her arrest and several street queens began throwing bottles and rocks at the police. The police began beating folks, but soon people from all over the neighborhood rushed to the scene, swelling the rioters' numbers to over two thousand. The vastly outnumbered police barricaded themselves inside the bar, while an uprooted parking meter was used as a battering ram by the crowd. Molotov cocktails were thrown at the bar. Riot police arrived on scene, but were unable to regain control of the situation. Drag queens danced a conga line and sang songs amidst the street fighting to mock the inability of the police to re-establish order. The rioting continued until dawn, only to be picked up again at nightfall of the subsequent days.

On the night of May 21st 1979, in what has come to be known as the White Night Riots, the queer community of San Francisco was outraged and wanted justice for the murder of Harvey Milk. The outraged queers went to city hall where they smashed the windows and glass door of the building. The riotous crowd took to the streets, disrupting traffic, smashing storefronts and car windows, disabling buses, and setting twelve San Francisco Police cruisers on fire. The rioting spread throughout the city as others joined in on the fun!

In 1970, Stonewall veterans Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera founded STAR — Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. They opened the STAR house, a radical version of the “house” culture of black and latina queer communities. The house provided a safe and free place for queer and trans street kids to stay. Marsha and Sylvia as the “House Mothers” hustled to pay rent so that the kids would not be forced to. Their “children” scavenged and stole food so that everyone in the house could eat. That’s what we call mutual aid!

In the time between the Stonewall Riots and the outbreak of HIV, the queer community of New York saw the rise of a culture of public sex. Queers had orgies in squatted buildings, in abandoned semi-trucks, on the piers and in bars and clubs all along Christopher street. This is our idea of voluntary association of free individuals! Many mark this as the most sexually liberated time this country has ever seen. Though the authors of this essay wholeheartedly believe we can outdo them.

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