2. The Lead In

> When they ushered us out, they very nicely put you out the door. Then you're standing across the street in Sheridan Square Park. But why? Everybody's looking at each other. … Suddenly, the nickels, dimes, pennies, and quarters started flying. I threw quarters, and pennies, and whatnot. … To be there was so beautiful. It was so exciting.[1]

With these words, the activist Sylvia Rivera described her personal impressions of the Stonewall Revolution of 1969 in New York City. In an interview given in 1998, just four years before her death, she provided a more precise account of what had happened:

> I was a radical, a revolutionist. I am still a revolutionist. … I'm glad I was in the Stonewall Riot. I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought, "My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!" I always believed that we would have a fightback. I just knew that we would fight back. I just didn't know it would be that night. I am proud of myself as being there that night. If I had lost that moment, I would have been kinda hurt because that's when I saw the world change for my people and me.[2]

1 Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History, The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 138n.

2 Leslie Feinberg, "Youth of color form STAR – Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, Lavender & red, part 73," article from 1970, cited in: *Workers World*, September 24, 2006, www.workers.org and in *Workers World*, March, 2021: https://workers.org/2006/us/lavender-red-73/.

Until her death, Sylvia Rivera was unquestionably a critical and nonconformist activist in the US LGBTIQ movement.[3] Her experiences as a drag queen—the category through which she self-identified—on New York's streets in the early 1960s certainly left their mark. Harassment and physical assaults from the police, and indeed, from almost anyone else, were the order of the day. The utter lack of respect in police custody has been described by other protagonists in equally bad or even worse terms: the danger of being raped during a prison sentence constituting just one form of thoroughly abusive treatment.[4]

An eyewitness of events, Rivera described the decisive night in late June 1969 as warm and close. The police first entered the bar, and then turned off the music. After that, those who had been socializing in the bar were led outside, then cooped up between a fence and police vehicles. Then suddenly things kicked off: coins were flying through the air, soon followed by bottles:[5]

> We were not taking any more of this shit. We had done so much for other movements. It was time. It was street gay people from the Village out front: homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar-and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us.[6]

After her death in February 2002, Riki Wilchins' obituary introduced Sylvia Rivera with the following words:

> She may have been the prototypical Angry Queen. Unbowed, unbought, and virtually indigestible by a gay movement she helped birth, Stonewall warrior Sylvia Rivera died on February 19 of end-

3 LGBTIQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter, queer people.

4 Ehn Nothing, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* (New York: Untorelli Press 2013), available as PDF: https://untorellipress.noblogs.org/files/2011/12/STAR.pdf, 12.

5 Nothing, *Street*, 12.

6 Nothing, *Street*.

> stage liver disease aggravated by too many years on alcohol and city streets.[7]

Critically, and entirely in the spirit of the woman who died, Wilchin noted:

> In 2002, butches, queens, fairies, high femmes, drag people, tomboys, and sissies have all but vanished from official gay discourse. They are rarely mentioned in the public pronouncements of major gay organizations. Federal gay rights legislation pending in Congress doesn't mention gender expression or identity, nor does the gay rights bill pending in Albany. In effect, gender has become the new 'gay,' the thing you don't talk about in polite or political company.[8]

Sylvia Rivera fought a long and exhausting struggle to have her issues—and at times even her own person—recognized. Both within and beyond a queer community, Rivera often had a hard time of it, even decades after the occurrences centered on the Stonewall Inn. She wanted people to take notice of her as an activist, and to be recognized as a human being from a specific community. In one scene captured in Randy Wicker's documentary footage, this becomes all too evident: even when homeless, and in her temporary shelter on the pier of Manhattan's meatpacking district, Rivera squares up to difficult questions.[9] Despite her catastrophic living conditions, Rivera's enthusiasm is tangible, as is her passion for her own activist narrative. She casts herself as perhaps *the* elementary figure in a queer movement, which developed from the fires at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 to become an efficacious force in its own right. Amidst all of life's impasses, her version of the story appears to have become more important than life itself for Rivera. Moreover, it's made to function as an explicative formula for a lived past, and for a present that still must be overcome.

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7 Riki Wilchins, "A Women for Her Time," in *The Village Voice*, February 26, 2002.

8 Wilchins, "Women."

9 "Randy Wicker interviews Sylvia Rivera on the Pier," viewed at Vimeo.com, https://vimeo.com/37548074.

But Rivera's own biographical narrative took a tragic turn, when leading historians had no choice but to confirm there were discrepancies in the accounts she had given of events. Graver still, evidence accumulated that Rivera hadn't even been present on the day of the events in and around the Stonewall Inn. David Carter, the renowned author and expert on the Gay Revolution of 1969, has spent years painstakingly researching the incidents of that period, and recording them in his book on the subject in minute detail. In his article on the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, he arrives at the following conclusion:

> The evidence, when looked at as a whole, suggests that Rivera was not at the Uprising [i.e. the Stonewall Revolution] but became involved with GAA [Gay Activist Alliances – a queer organization in that period] in early 1970, as the beginning of a long career of activism. Over time, as she came to appreciate how celebrated an event Stonewall was and how much credit her friend Marsha P. Johnson [an equally well-known female activist in the revolution] received for setting everything off, Rivera began to say that she too had been there, tying her account to the already existing narrative about Johnson, who had woken her up on the first night of the Uprising to tell her about it.[10]

Based on the facts before him, David Carter, who died in 2020, raised valid doubts about Rivera's personal narratives of events, through working together with the historian Martin Duberman. Rivera's statements were contradictory, and, what's more, it was possible to prove after the event that Rivera herself had attempted to be incorporated into factual histories of the Revolution.[11] It was unbelievably important for her to gain assurance that her personal narratives had been recognized as part of queer history in general. At the very least, she wanted to know that she, as an individual human, had been added to the revolutionary experience.

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10 Cited in: David Carter, "Exploding the Myths of Stonewall," in: *gcn* [Gay City News], June 27, 2019, https://www.gaycitynews.com/exploding-the-myths-of-stonewall/.

11 David Carter, "Exploding."

Sylvia Rivera's achievements were exceptional. Her role as a groundbreaking fighter for queer recognition is incontestable. These achievements remain, even though, after initial successes, marginalized groups were too rapidly forced back to the edges of society, and into renewed societal invisibility. Her life was shaped by deep psychological lows, but also by rebellion. Her urge for the kind of recognition that people took seriously was all too understandable, as was her desire to become visible, along with her issues. This was what had connected her to others, and to herself. Moreover, Rivera is exemplary for how forms of recognition in a queer community have great difficulty expressing themselves. Her whole life long, Rivera was torn between her wish for a broader and more valued sort of visibility, and the resistance displayed against queer abbreviations. The processes by which certain queer subcultures became invisible made her furious, but motivated her concurrently to kick back against such pressures. The ways in which her person was perceived were no less ambivalent: she met with a great lack of understanding, but also, at times, with respect. Rivera built up her own mental memorial—often through actions that drew much attention, but which she didn't always consider so important—and knocked it down at the same time, by searching for specific forms of recognition. While many of her stories and reports should be treated with caution from today's perspective, especially considering the historical research that's now available, the queer postmortem cult of Rivera the activist is more lively and visible than ever. It would have been a great joy if she could have experienced it.

Are we talking here about one's own story as an act of political revolution, or merely about a spontaneous, coincidental revolt of frustrated party guests? About practices of showing esteem for queer variety and complexity, or just about same-sex desire and various gender-based imitations? Sylvia Rivera is only one example in a multitude of better-known and less well-known human destinies, who, in the course of their lives, have experienced many recognizing but also disqualifying structures, imposed by both queer and non-queer communities. To be more precise: subcultural communities—like societies in general—produce forms of communicating esteem and visibility, which feed into a concept of vis-

ibility. This concept can be similar to, or in line with, a general societal majority, but it's just as possible that it displays differences or specialties.

These introductory insights should fuel curiosity, in both its historical mantle, and in its social and cultural anthropology guise, to uncover more of substance about forms of autonomous and heteronomous recognition in a queer community, operating in a queer community located in a world of economic well-being.

The question of exclusion within the queer community remains on the agenda even now, midway through the twenty-first century. Grindr, for example, the largest dating platform for gay men, has set up the initiative "Kindr Grindr"[12] to combat accusations of racism that have been brought against it:

> Dating and hook-up service Grindr has announced its intention to remove the "ethnicity filter" from its popular app. The controversial function allowed paying users to filter out prospective partners based on ethnicity labels such as "Asian," "Black," and "Latino." Long criticized as racist, the filter also helped to create a culture where users were emboldened to express their racism. … Alongside other dating apps, Grindr has a reputation for sexual racism – the exclusion of potential partners based on race. In 2017, Grindr tried to amend this perception with the "Kindr Grindr" initiative. This move banned the use of exclusionary language such as "No Asians" and "No Blacks" in user bios, and attempted to explain to users why these statements are harmful and unacceptable.[13]

This demonstrates, to pursue one line of argument, that this platform's users are offered the opportunity of inserting themselves into ethnic categories. Concurrently, it evidently has been and continues to be possible

12 See: "Kindr Grindr," https://www.kindr.grindr.com/.

13 Gene Lim, Brady Robards, and Bronwyn Carlson, "Grindr is deleting its 'ethnicity filter.' But racism is still rife in online dating," *Conversation*, June 7, 2020, https://theconversation.com/grindr-is-deleting-its-ethnicityfilter-but-racism-is-still-rife-in-online-dating-140077.

for certain member groups to apply these same categories in the partner search function. In itself, this is neither basis nor cause for existing processes of recognition being how they are. But it is still a clear manifestation of the same:

> Overall, researchers have found that racialized language and interaction is pervasive in online partner-seeking venues catering to gay/bisexual men and that gay/bisexual men of color are regularly exposed to such language and interactions. Based on the literature, researchers have indicated that both rejection on the basis of race and objectification on the basis of race are frequently encountered by gay/bisexual men of color in a sexualized context. Moreover, researchers have described some facets of RSD [Racialized Sexual Discrimination] that are unique to online settings, such as user profiles that display exclusionary (e.g. "no Blacks") or inclusionary (e.g. "Whites only") race-based preferences. Finally, researchers have described instances in which outright hostile and degrading comments directed toward racial/ethnic minorities are communicated in these online settings. Thus, these four categories (rejection, objectification, exclusionary/inclusionary preferences, and degradation) may capture a broad scope of how RSD is experienced and enacted online.[14]

Well-founded research has demonstrated that the consequences of such behavior are far reaching, for the everyday culture of a queer community, and for the individuals affected. Particular ethnic codes, which can be "read" by looking at images of a person's appearance, determine in both virtual and analogue processes the outcome of interactions—whether and in which form recognition will be expressed:

> The desirability of white men was not limited to other white men. Instead, gay men of color indicated that white men were also preferred by men of color as well. More than simply a preference for white men,

14 Ryan Wade and Gary Harper, "Racialized Sexual Discrimination (RSD) in the Age of Online Sexual Networking: Are Young Black Gay/Bisexual Men (YBGBM) at Elevated Risk for Adverse Psychological Health?" *American Journal of Community Psychology* 65, no. 3–4 (2019): 14. https://doi.org/10.1002/aj cp.12401.

> there was also active exclusion of men of color by white men and by other men of color. When white men did prefer men of color as sexual partners over other white men, gay men of color understood that their desirability was based on largely stereotypical traits associated with their race. For example, Black men were favored for being sexually aggressive and possessing large penises while Asian men were favored for being sexually submissive. … More damaging was the impact that sexual racism had on the self-esteem of gay men of color. Gay men of color often felt marginalized and frustrated in the larger gay community as a result of their sexual exclusion. Thus, sexual racism had both a sexual and social consequence for gay men of color.[15]

Both case studies selected here—Sylvia Rivera's historicized performance and racism in virtual dating racism—reveal the tough struggles that continue to surround queer recognition. That said, it's primarily those affected who are in a position to articulate a critique grounded in societal politics, or indeed a scholarly and scientific critique. Yet demands voiced by those affected for efforts towards inclusion appear to go unheeded, the same fate that has befallen similar demands that the queer community have raised against majorities in society. The strategy of exclusion, which so many people have lived experience of, thus reproduces itself unreflectively, and is merely milled down into finer granules, and tailored to meet the needs of subgroups inside a particular subculture. Whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, and ableism are only three of many social influencing factors that affect human individuals.

Assuming we can ascertain the forms of autonomous and heteronomous recognition of a queer community, in a virtually interconnected world that's currently in a state of economic well-being: which consistencies, or indeed disjunctions, can we identify in today's world?

Responding to this structuring question, attention shall be devoted to six life areas in the chapters that follow, which contain hidden within

15 Han Chong-suk and Choi Kyung-Hee, "Very Few People Say 'No Whites': Gay Men of Color and The Racial Politics of Desire," *Sociological Spectrum* 38, no. 3, (2018): 18n, https://doi.org/10.1080/027 32173.2018.1469444.

them forms of recognizing, but also disqualifying, the lending of prestige: *wealth, success, entertainment, sexuality, beauty, and culture*. These dimensions can exemplify the continuity and adaptability that influential mechanisms have on queer everyday culture. This exact observation reveals not just sociocultural capriciousness, but also, and to the same extent, the widespread readiness of both queer and non-queer people to collaborate—in full consciousness that those who don't follow the stipulations will have to bear the consequences. The same applies for queer escalations, which again, and in a more profound fashion, expose overarching dynamics. The following pages are intended to provide an argumentative terrain in which all these ideas and issues can be given full rein, in order to initialize analysis and reflection. The goal, in so doing, is in no way to articulate a solution but rather to lay bare an existing discourse, and to carry it into the future.