

Queens, Hookers, and Hustlers



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organizing for survival and
revolt amongst gender-variant
sex workers, 1950-1970

Text stolen from Mack Friedman's *Strapped for Cash*

Cover image of queens at Compton's Cafeteria stolen from
Susan Stryker's documentary *Screaming Queens*

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ties as prostitutes.” Glide Memorial’s Urban Center cited similar difficulties among young male hustlers, who were marginalized by “lack of education and work experience.” A hustler could also face discrimination because of “his age, his sexual orientation, or in some cases, the years of his life spent in the Tenderloin area, for which he [couldn’t] account on job application forms.” He couldn’t exactly enter “hustler” in the work experience box.

In 1971, Compton’s Cafeteria closed, supplanted by a peepshow club that catered to the straight population. Over the next three years, the Hyland, El Rosa, and several other trans-friendly hotels closed their doors to the transgender population. Displaced from their own ghetto, trans prostitutes went wherever they could, continuing to work and gather, if not live, in their historic haunts. Despite the energetic efforts of organizations like Louise Ergestrasse’s, another trans advocacy group named Conversion Our Goal (COG), and the Gay Activist Alliance (a radical outgrowth of Vanguard and a lesbian youth group called Street Orphans), the Tenderloin’s vast drag network was completely disrupted.

The sorry ranks of homeless trans sex workers in the Tenderloin ghetto of the 1980s and 1990s were the legacy of transphobia behind the city’s redevelopment scheme, gay political backpedaling from sex worker issues, and the exclusionary attitude of Castro residents during the 1970s.

Certainly “mainstream,” economically comfortable gay men and lesbians had a part in the Stonewall insurgency: They held their ground with everyone else and bravely joined the fray. But we must remember who started the riot: gender-queers and street hustlers with nothing to lose. To say that gay men co-opted Stonewall implies that they were not a part of the wreckage. A more apt conclusion to make is that gay men caught the riot’s momentum and harnessed it for the purposes of political gain and liberation. Distressingly, the gay liberation movement would leave its most valiant instigators-- street queens and teenage hustlers-- at the side of the curb.

The gay community’s neglect of its trench fighters is most apparent in the pattern of post-riot development in San Francisco’s Castro district. In the early 1970s, gay men began moving en masse to the Castro. Old gay neighborhoods like the Tenderloin were disregarded by a newly liberated generation. In establishing the gay Castro, young middle-class baby boomers siphoned off the economic and social support networks that had sustained marginalized groups in the Tenderloin. The Castro of the early 1970s was homogenous: a primarily gay, white, male community that excluded poorer, non-gay-identified male hustlers and transgendered women of color. A microcosm of the gay liberation movement, the Castro community thrived by ignoring the plight of the politically cumbersome street community that had contributed to its success.

As support gravitated toward gay liberation in the Castro, Tenderloin street rats were left to fend for themselves. Developers began to transform Market Street into a tourist zone filled with high-class hotels, restaurants, and office space. Sex workers faced growing discrimination in the one neighborhood where they felt relatively safe, and the only one they could really afford.

During Driscoll’s field research, all of the girls in his study were engaged in prostitution. Why was this? As previous research indicated, it was a question of proper documentation. “Prostitution is quite common in the lives of transsexuals,” wrote Driscoll. “By their insistence on dressing as women they are denied many kinds of jobs. Identification, at least a Social Security card, is required for a job today.” He observed that trans girls could only work in trans-friendly spaces, such as bars and coffee shops, where the pay was so low that “the major inducement is that girls are able to contact possible customers in their activi-

Introduction

The history of the resistance of gender-variant misfits and rebels is incomplete without understanding the central role of hooker networks that united hustlers, queens, hair fairies, and radicals during the 1950s and ‘60s, a pivotal era that led to the first gay riots that had the police fleeing the streets in San Francisco and New York. Yet most published accounts of “transgender” history neglect a thorough examination of street queen and hustler culture. We know vaguely about the admirable radical exploits of Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, yet few authors have situated their projects (opening houses for trans kids on the street, hustling for rent and for raising funds for the radical wing of Gay Liberation) within a history in which these practices were regular occurrences among the informal networks of queens and hustlers turning tricks and defending each other from violence in many urban areas across the United States.

With this in mind we have decided to publish this selection from Mack Friedman’s *Strapped For Cash: A History of American Hustler Culture*. This section of Friedman’s broader exploration of hustlers in the United States tells many forgotten stories of the hookers and hustlers in the streets and clubs of the 1950s and 1960s. It is a tale of how informal networks of self-defense and mutual aid allowed for gender-variant hustlers to survive and revolt against the society that was killing and imprisoning them, of the complicated feelings of hookers themselves about their work, and about how the counterinsurgency of the police, social services, and redevelopment smashed these networks to recuperate these struggles and convert them into paltry reforms and ‘transsexual advocacy.’

We, of course, have problems with certain elements of Friedman’s text (his generalized use of “transgendered” for all gender-variant people during this time and his reading of post-Compton’s growth of “advocacy” as a positive

development and not the State's appropriation of struggle, amongst other things) yet he is one of very few authors that has dared to thoroughly interrogate and tell the stories of the kinds of organization and revolt amongst gay street culture that resonates strongly with the networks of gender rebels and hookers that have attempted to create networks of rebellion across today's metropolises. I hope this text provides fertile historical ground for critically engaging with what contemporary radical projects can look like, and brings to light that it is often the most 'informal' forms of organization and revolt that has been utilized by our predecessors.

-valerie queen, *nycp*

There were numerous small insurgencies at bars and clubs in the years between 1966 and 1969. But none achieved the mythic status of Stonewall. If the East Village in 1969 was New York's equivalent to Haight-Ashbury, then Greenwich Village was its Tenderloin. John D'Emilio wrote that the Stonewall Inn "brought an 'unruly' element to Sheridan Square," with its steamy go-go boys and rumored Mafia connections. "Patrons of the Stonewall tended to be young and nonwhite. Many were drag queens, and many came from the burgeoning ghetto of runaways living across town in the East Village." Duberman states that 53 Christopher St. was one of two trans-friendly downtown bars, known for its racial diversity and its tolerance of drag queens and hustlers, who "went there for relaxing nightcaps and gossip after a hard evening of hustling."

When detectives raided the Stonewall in June 1969, they herded patrons into the street and began to arrest those flouting the masquerade law. Storme DeLarverie, a cross-dressing butch lesbian, punched a cop and incited the riot. "The cops hit me, and I hit them back," said DeLarverie simply. In this star turn, DeLarverie combined elements of Joan of Arc and Calamity Jane. "Noses got broken, there were bruises and banged up knuckles and things like that, but no one was seriously injured," DeLarverie recalled. "The police got the shock of their lives when those queens came out of that bar and pulled off their wigs and went after them."

Sylvia Rivera screamed the name of a street queen being herded into a paddy wagon. Inside the van, a pantyhosed leg flexed to kick a cop in the chest, flinging him to the ground. The prisoner then helped her entourage to the cop's handcuff keys. William Wynkoop recalls the street queens' part in inciting the old guard to fight:

I stuck my head out the window and I saw a big crowd over on Christopher Street. It was two o'clock in the morning. I had to get out and see what was going on... he more I heard about this, the more exalted I felt... it was amazing! And I think it's wonderful that the ones who started it were drag queens. Young, young, tender drag queens. Flaming faggot-types... And I think maybe this is ordained because those who had been most oppressed were they.

owed future street-based revolts. The riot did not deter police, who continued to arrest hustlers en masse. It did, however, spark advocacy. It took less than a year for the police to establish a stronger Community Relations Division to focus on the transgender community. And local social service groups expanded to offer Tenderloin trans hustlers basic healthcare and other forms of support. Transsexual sex worker Louise Ergestrasse brought the police and Harry Benjamin to the same table, surely no small feat. Ergestrasse then started her own small trans advocacy organization, CATS.

Nascent organizations like Vanguard seized the riot as an opportunity to galvanize their members. As a stogy penitence for the riot, Vanguard organized a street-sweeping party, replete with this press release:

Tonight a "clean sweep" will be made on Market St., not by the POLICE, but the street people who are often subject to police harassment. The drug addicts, pillheads, teenage hustlers, lesbians, and homosexuals who make San Francisco's MEAT RACK their home are tired of living in the midst of filth thrown out onto the sidewalks and into the streets by nearby businessmen.....

This VANGUARD demonstration indicates the willingness of society's outcasts to work openly for an improvement in their own socio-economic power. WE HAVE HEARD TOO MUCH ABOUT "WHITE POWER" AND "BLACK POWER" SO GET READY TO HEAR ABOUT "STREET POWER."

The sweep was a success: Both the AP and UPI picked up the story. And the city had a part in it too, lending Vanguard 50 brooms, which may or may not have been suitable for short flights.

Vanguard's press release also coined the term "Meat Rack," referring to that choice strip in the Tenderloin: Market Street and two side streets, Turk and Powell, where hustlers were most available. The youth's ostentatious act of virtue was pretty heartbreaking-- We care just as much as you do about what the streets look like! For all its showiness, the nonviolent action was as powerful a statement as the spontaneous chaos at Compton's. The teenage hustlers meant well and deserved respect-- something that social conservatives were loath to give them.

Stage Queens and Alleycats: Trannies, 1950-1965

Transgendered hustlers were in a bad spot. Working the streets alone was dangerous, and they operated from a far more socially marginal position than rough trade. Often transgendered sex workers began to hustle casually as queenie boys. As their gender expression became more feminine, many were forced to rely on prostitution as a means of income. It's not easy, even today, for a transgendered woman who doesn't seamlessly pass to gain even a menial "legitimate" employment.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was illegal for biological males to wear female clothing in public. Moreover, trans folk ran the risk of arrest for both masquerading and solicitation, even if they weren't hustling. Though it was terribly unsafe to dress in drag on most city streets, there were transgender-friendly zones in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. These zones naturally flourished where social tolerance for sexual difference was high and police interference with neighborhood life was lax or nonexistent. These edgy, eclectic spaces were dangerous, but they also fostered a sense of community among many of America's dispossessed.

There was also an expanding national circuit of drag cabaret. If a gal was talented, she could make a living going from club to club, performing in the limelight, and turning tricks after-hours with patrons.

In Los Angeles, Pershing Square was relatively nondiscriminatory; in New York, Bryant Park was the designated spot; in New Orleans, the French Quarter let its hair down; and in San Francisco, the Tenderloin sheltered a funky urban family. Impersonator Kenneth Marlowe wrote that, in the 1950s, "the young queens around Pershing Square wore make-up, camped and swished all over the place." In this downtown park, they competed for tricks, banded together with other young hustlers, and went to Clinton's cafeteria after the day was done. "All they needed was \$6 a week or so for a room," Marlowe wrote. "That was a necessity for keeping alive. The rest of the time they'd go to bed for a new shirt, a pair of trousers, or dinner." Marlowe made friends with veterans Candy (who had a record of male prostitution a mile long) and the Duchess. Like novice gang hus-

tlers, transgendered hustlers learned their trade from mentors in relatively safe public spaces. “I learned quickly to make dates,” she wrote, “by watching the other young queens.”

After her parents caught her having sex with young men, Holly Woodlawn ran away, hitchhiking from Miami to Manhattan. She hustled Bryant Park in 1962, at the age of 16:

One day I discovered Bryant Park, which was where all the queens and hustlers used to hang... One afternoon, while sitting on a park bench, I met a Puerto Rican queen who empathized with my situation and took me under his wing.

Then I met some queens from Miami who were living in a seedy hotel on 72nd Street and Broadway. They were all crammed into one room, and made their living on the street, hustling their young virile bodies for 20 dollars a pop. At the end of the day, they'd pool their funds to make ends meet.

Woodlawn's newfound acquaintances suggested she move in and hustle for rent. Holly tried to hustle as a boy, haunting Bryant Park and Times Square alleyways. Even with her support network, she found it difficult. “I was a nervous wreck,” she recalls. She would catch her breath in Bickford's cafeteria, then “go back out and hustle more, hanging out in dark doorways or on street corners. I was so scared. I hated doing it, but I felt I had no other choice.” Woodlawn moved out of the hotel eventually, and shacked where she could. Like other homeless hustlers, she slept on the subway, in all-night movie houses, or on benches in Grand Central Station. She cleaned up in Grand Central, where there were shower stalls in the bathroom that she could use for a quarter. Then she would make her way back to Bryant Park to hustle.

In Bryant Park, Woodlawn met another transgendered hustler who called herself the Duchess, (not to be confused with the Duchess of LA), whose claim to fame was gumming: the toothless blow job. And she described a park scene as vivid as the eye make-up she applied in the Grand Central bathroom. She also told of an after-hours hustler bar on Eighth Avenue and 52nd Street that was ecstatic with Escatrols and sexy with Seconals. New York hustler culture in the 1960s prefigured the punk music scene of the 1970s.

Individual Rights, and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, among others.) Cheap (and cheapskate) hustlers took the streets to avoid paying for the service charge.

The Compton's Cafeteria riot drew only passing attention. It was more important as an expression of pangender sex worker unity in the face of an affront. In “Young Homos Picket Compton's Restaurant,” Guy Strait reported:

Gays rose up angry at the constant police harassment of the drag queens. It had to be first recorded violence by Gays against police anywhere. For on that evening, when the SFPD paddy wagon drove up to make their “usual” sweeps of the street, Gays this time did not go willingly. It began when police came into Compton's, to do their usual job of hassling the drag queens and hair fairies and hustlers sitting at the tables. This [the police harassment] was with the permission of the management, of course. But when the police grabbed the grab of one of the transvestites, he threw his cup of coffee in the cop's face, and with that, cups, saucers, and trays began flying around the place and all directed at police. They retreated outside until reinforcements arrived, and the Compton's management ordered the doors closed. With that, the Gays began breaking every window in the place, and as they ran outside to escape the breaking glass, the police tried to grab them and throw them in the paddy wagon. They found this no easy task, for Gays began hitting them “below the belt” and drag queens smashing them in the face with their extremely heavy purses. A police car had every window broken, a newspaper shack outside the cafeteria was burned to the ground, and general havoc raised that night in the Tenderloin. The next day drag queens, hair fairies, conservative Gays, and hustlers joined in a picket at the cafeteria, which would not allow the drags back in.

Events of the night are preserved only in legend. Police called the riot “a minor disturbance,” and mainstream homophile groups did not document the melee, staying out of the fray to avoid any association with prostitutes. “While it is not yet possible to determine exactly what happened at Compton's in August 1966,” wrote archivists for the Northern California Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, “the disturbance that erupted there achieved legendary stature within the early gay liberation movement in San Francisco.” More important for its precedent than its actual accomplishments, the Compton's Cafeteria riot foreshad-

inghouses along the waterfront. Poor, working-class citizens were left without affordable housing alternatives; this mix of reshuffled populations provided a pool of ready conscripts for the resistance movements.

The Tenderloin drew strength from its diversity. Compton's Cafeteria, on the corner of Turk and Taylor, was one community hub. During daytime hours, the cafeteria hosted a veritable game of musical chairs in which businessmen, curious tourists, sex workers out for lunch, and working-class folks could get a bite and make a friend. The conviviality of the place engendered in many customers a feeling of ownership. For regulars, Compton's was a second home; for the homeless drifters, it was home. Right above the cafe, the Hyland Hotel catered specifically to transgendered women. According to Stryker:

It was a place for youth-- [Compton's] didn't sell liquor so they could get in. The food was cheap, it was open all night, so people who-- it's foggy and cold here most of the time, people need a place to go at night to go hang out at all these all-night coffeehouses and cafeterias. It was well known as a transgender-friendly place, 'cause it was in the neighborhood that trannies worked in. It was a place that chicken-hawks would go cruising, it was a place where people would just camp and dish all night long... Between 2 and 6 [AM] it was almost entirely gay. Other working people would come in during the day, straights, you know, eat lunch, eat breakfast, it was more mixed. But the later it got, especially between 2 and 6, then it was just queer central... It was really close to Market Street, you would just jump off the streetcar and walk that short block over to Compton's, and you would hang out and just wait for all your friends to show up. And you would go out bar-hopping, you would stay out drinking all night until it was 2:00, and then you would come back to Compton's and get some coffee and oatmeal and sober up, and camp and dish and cruise, and you'd go home and sleep it off.

But the good times didn't last: Compton's instituted a 25-cent service charge on all orders. Mortally offended by this decision, a contingent of transsexuals, self-identified "hair fairies, and hustlers picketed Compton's. The protestors were back by Vanguard, a youth organization that had blossomed with the support of the Glide Memorial Methodist Church. (Glide also facilitated early networking among the Gay Activist Alliance, the Society for

Male and transgendered hustlers developed systems of cooperative protection to shield one another from the more violent elements of New York's mean streets. Sylvia Rivera, left her transphobic Lower East Side neighborhood at the age of 11 and began to hustle on 42nd Street using her boy name, Ray. She was quickly and fiercely protected by Gary, an 18-year-old hustler, and Marsha, a 17-year-old street queen who helped Sylvia find part-time jobs and taught her the rules of Bryant Park. "Marsha played a big-sister role, teaching Sylvia how to apply makeup skillfully (in those years drag was only for special occasions, not for hustling)," writes Martin Duberman.

In the same vicinity, Holly Woodlawn's friend Libra told Holly that "there was a golden rule to follow if you were a 'girl' (an effeminate boy) on the streets. You had to be nice to male prostitutes... The hustlers were the ones who looked after the 'girls' like me, buying us cigarettes, sodas, and candy. Also, they were usually of a rough breed, and if they became angered, they could pull a knife and kill you-- or humiliate you to the point that you wished you were dead." On the other hand, John Reechy (who worked in both Bryant Park and Pershing Square during the 1950s and 1960s) observed that the drag queens were the tough ones: "Even then... the roughest person knew not to tangle with a queen. Because they had nothing to lose."

Trans sex workers encountered more violence from customers than they did when they hustled as boys. Johns had greater power over women than they did with trade, and could be especially rough when women they tricked turned out to have dicks. Writes Duberman, "After [Rivera] started to wear more drag, at about age fifteen, the odds got somewhat worse. People did pull guns on her and did try to rip her off." In even the most regulated work environment, a good support system cannot save everyone. On the isolated and neglected streets, transgendered teens like Little Sheba, who met Woodlawn and Candy Darling in 1964, could meet terrible peril. Despite the veterans' efforts at initiation and intervention, Sheba came to an unfortunate end, stabbed and beaten to death by a trick in a hotel room.

Certain zones in San Francisco fostered many of the opportunities (and dangers) transgendered sex workers found in Pershing Square and Bryant Park. In the 1950s, the Tenderloin, North Beach (home to the Beats), and the Embarcadero were all

trans-friendly zones. The Embarcadero hosted Finocchio's, one of the most extravagant drag revues. All three areas featured drag-friendly bars and plentiful employment opportunities.

Dr. Harry Benjamin, who had established a summer office in San Francisco during the 1950s, dispensed estrogen to prospective transsexuals. (His main office was in New York. In the early 1960s, Holly Woodlawn "went to see him for female hormones shots and within a couple months," she recalls. "I was looking for a damn good tight sweater!") One of Benjamin's summer clients was a keen observer of Finocchio's sex work infrastructure. Benjamin related her story to Bob Masters:

As to Prostitution, she says: "they [female impersonators] are all available or at least 95 percent." Since here at Finocchio's the performers are not allowed to mingle with guests, the dates are made thru the waiters. If a customer gives the waiter less than two dollars for delivering the note, this note is never delivered or remains unanswered. A 5 dollar tip to the waiter means the customer is willing to pay \$50 or more for the date including sex of course.

This arrangement, with waiters playing the middlemen, was somewhat unusual, but had its precedent in the messenger-boy culture in New York and Chicago during the 1950s.

At \$20 to \$50, these "dates" were twice as expensive as a trick with a transgendered street hustler. Why the discrepancy? Most obviously, the environment of a bar tryst was usually safer than the setting of a street exchange. Another factor might have been the performers' appearances: Benjamin noticed that "the impersonator working in the club is typically much more attractive than the homosexual transvestite encountered soliciting on the streets. Some of the professional impersonators rival in appearance all but the most glamorous showgirls in the top-flight nightclubs." Male-to-female (MTF) performers were considered exotic by clientele who were willing to pay extra to fulfill their unorthodox fantasies. Finally, performers achieved a degree of underground celebrity that helped to inflate their sex work fees.

Ironically, the income enjoyed by transgendered workers appealed to young gay hustlers who ordinarily might not have have cross-dressed. For this reason, Benjamin and Masters distinguished between true transsexuals (who expressed themselves as females to fulfill a deep emotional and psychological need) and

clothing, wigs, stimulants, marijuana, glue, speed, or Seconals. Social workers at the Tenderloin's Glide Urban Center listed Benzedrine, Nembutal, Methedrine (crystal), Doridan (goofballs), amyl nitrate (poppers), and LSD as easily available substances. Like the old native *mujerados*², 15 of the 17 trannies Driscoll interviewed were "raised as girls," helping their mothers and sisters cook, clean, and tend younger siblings. All but one had grown up outside of San Francisco. Of those raised in the South, many were "rousted by the police so often that they were in fact run out of town." For others, adolescence marked a time when their parents' tolerance reached their limit. One girl told Driscoll, "My mother wanted a little girl, but not a big one." Prostitution was regarded ambivalently among El Rosa renters. They agreed that passing as a female with a trick made them feel more feminine, but they abhorred the daily grind of sex work, which many experienced as a scary, dead-end road. "I'm not happy as a prostitute," one said. "I don't enjoy it and I'm scared all the time." Another said she hated the life, but "I have enough money to eat, and have a place to stay, and money for makeup and clothes." Tellingly, when the San Francisco Economic Opportunity Council made clerical jobs available to street-based transgendered women, all vacancies were quickly filled, even though these legitimate jobs offered only \$1.35 an hour. That came to \$33.20 for a 32-hour week, less than girls could make "in one night of hustling." Every one of them said that given the choice they would have the sex conversion operation. They just needed a chance.

By the latter half of the 1960s, the Tenderloin was a working class, low-rent residential neighborhood with active commercial and vice districts and a thriving sexual economy. Of course, not all of its residents were sexual minorities who had moved to the Tenderloin because of its higher tolerance; many were straight San Franciscans displaced by urban redevelopment. This diverse community included Japanese-Americans who had been removed from the newly-gentrified Western Addition and interned during WWII, African-Americans from the Western Addition and the Fillmore, and folks displaced when developers razed the board-

2. Ed. note: Earlier in Friedman's text, he chronicles the existence of a gender within indigenous communities in the occupied indigenous territory of the Southwest referred to by anthropologists as '*mujerados*.' We find the use of colonial anthropology to speak about non-European genders to be racist and colonial at its very foundations..

Another Tenderloin bust, in 1967, netted 33 streetwalkers, including a dozen in drag. (When asked why she was on the street, one transgendered woman said, “Not only do you get a chance to give a blow job, but you get a chance to handle a lot of different organs.”) While the police took names, transgendered sex workers took notice. They were increasingly unwilling to take these arrests. It had been a long time coming, but the revolution was about to begin.

The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys, Insurgence: 1965-1970

We know that the Tenderloin was a drag-friendly zone in the mid-1960s, and had been for at least twenty years before that. By 1966, the drag scene had exploded on Turk Street, home to various bars and clubs, including Sound of Music, Chuckkers, the Camelot, and the Hilliard. El Rosa Hotel, at 166 Turk, offered its transgendered tenants an affordable room and convenient location. All you had to do was roll off the couch and start rolling johns. Significantly, El Rosa was incongruously named. The grammatically correct way to refer to “The Rose” in Spanish is La Rosa; El is a masculine article and Rosa is a feminine noun. The linguistic juxtaposition was intentional, a welcoming signal for the transgender community.

El Rosa girls on the street or in hotel bars catering to tourists and conventioners. Sex work occurred mainly in cars or in the safe space of the girls’ rooms. When dealing with clients, they played it by ear, intuiting whether to disclose their biological gender. Some queens referred colloquially to themselves as hair fairies, and would “wear their long hair and tease it.” According to researcher James Driscoll, transgendered women in the Tenderloin hustled in “what seems to be almost a uniform. A little makeup, a bulky sweater, and tight trousers-- as tight as possible.” Until they were able to or ready to access hormones, they simulated voluptuousness using “girdles with built in pads” and “padded towels around their hips and buttocks.” A cradling device called a “gaff” made of denim or canvas, could be worn to “flatten the genitalia or even force it back into the body cavity.” When they got together socially, they would share knowledge with newcomers, pluck each other’s eyebrows, and trade gossip,

female impersonators (whose gender-bending was economically motivated.) “The transsexuals,” wrote Benjamin and Masters “are considerably outnumbered by the homosexual transvestite prostitutes, some of whom are streetwalkers and bar hustlers,” as well as entertainers.¹

Across the country, cabaret clubs instituted different rules for sex work. The Holiday Inn in Calumet City, IL, was typical in encouraging performers to hustle drinks; what they did with their bodies, after hours, was none of the management’s business. Club 52, in Indianapolis, prohibited performers from mingling with the customers until the performers were done with the night and back in male attire. My-Oh-My, in New Orleans not only encouraged entertainers to hustle drinks, but suggested that they also sell pictures of themselves in drag. Curiously, some of My-Oh-My’s younger, wishful patrons offered themselves for money before the club opened:

Boys who were too young to get into the club come very early each night before the first show to watch us dress. They’d say, “We’ll show it you for a quarter.” “My God, what’s that?!” I asked, the first time I heard them out there. One of the cast said, “Give them a quarter and see what happens.” I took a quarter out of my pocket and handed it to one of the boys. He smiled down at me. “Thanks,” he said, “What’s your name?” “Kent,” I said. “Oh, you’re new here.” He dropped his pants and said “Look!” I looked. “Go ahead and play with it, if you want to,” he said. “You paid for it.” He stuck it through the space between the bars.

This inexpensive offering was more homage than hustling; but it does illustrate how thoroughly New Orleans’ legendary sexual commerce had permeated the city’s queer community.

In the 1950s and 1960s, some American cabaret clubs staffed only women, some employed only female impersonators, some mixed female impersonators and real women, and others included male strippers, drag queens, and women. No matter the

¹ Ed. note: Friedman lacks a thorough analysis of the divisions between the categories Benjamin created, which tended to be based on a class-based indictment of women who didn’t pass well, who were employed as hustlers and hookers, who were loud, and those with ties to gay street subculture. More information on these standards can be found in Joanne Meyerowitz’s *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*.

mix, employees bonded like rock groups thrown together on a national tour. This national circuit was a floating playhouse as well as a traveling brothel; performers were reshuffled, but the game remained pretty much the same. And it had to stay consistent; the scene's players could not have endured it, otherwise. Life on the road was sustainable only if there were a few stable elements to anchor a sense of home.

The Club My-Oh-My, located "on the East end of West End, in Jefferson Parish," was strictly drag. "All the cast was really a club," Marlowe wrote. "We got thicker than thieves. We had potlucks together. We had orgies together. We went to the beach together. All of us were always together. I found that when you worked at the My-Oh-My you were a part of the clique." This intense camaraderie hid the sad truth that trans folk were not tolerated by the world outside the clubs; they were drawn together by shared oppression. Cabarets' privately commercial status not only eliminated the risk of police harassment, it often guaranteed police protection: The My-Oh-My was assigned a sheriff who stood "on duty at the front door during all performances to take care of any problems."

In New Orleans, the main trans-friendly zone was the French Quarter. Dusty Evening, a former MC at the My-Oh-My owned a building "on Gravier Street in the Negro quarter." Marlowe wrote that, "there were six apartments and every tenant in the place worked at the Club My-Oh-My." Tenants ate together, hit certain trans-friendly bars, and cruised the Quarter, where "there were always tourists around, to be made." Workers most often took their tricks back to their apartments. No discussion of New Orleans would be complete with mention of the whorehouses, which generally kept one boy in drag among a large number of women. In a letter to Masters, Benjamin wrote:

The female impersonator I spoke to, worked as a "queen" some years ago in the plushiest house in New Orleans. She was pointed out to the customers as a boy (in drag). She drew the biggest prices... \$50-100. That may be exaggerated. Her customers were all homo- or bisexuals, altho many of them claimed to be hetero, Some paid "just for talking."

And Marlowe, after quitting the My-Oh-My, worked first as a hairdresser and then as a resident boy at a very similar New Orleans house. Marlowe claimed the prices were set by time (\$20 for 15 minutes, \$30 for 30 minutes, \$100 for the night) and that the madam instructed workers to keep an eye out for sexually transmitted infections and to take their sweet time. The circuit ended for Marlowe in San Francisco, where she auditioned for-- and was rejected by-- Mr. Finnochio himself.

By the end of the 1960s a geographical shift had consolidated three previously trans-friendly zones into one. City planners decided that the bawdy Embarcadero was ripe for redevelopment, and by 1965, construction had begun south of Market Street. North Beach, meanwhile, was losing its countercultural appeal as the Haight-Ashbury began to beckon young drifters. A dispersed transgender population slowly resettled in the Tenderloin. This increased concentration of queer folk made the sex work scene increasingly visible, which attracted police attention. Susan Stryker, a Bay Area historian, tells the story of Carlos/Carla Lara, a Latin American immigrant who in the early 1960s ran a rooming house above the Checker Club, her coffee-shop-cum-bar. When the San Francisco Police Department raided the Checker Club in 1962, they arrested dozens of denizens, mostly drag queens. Stryker recalled:

Throughout the Sixties and Seventies there would be these periodic street sweeps where a lot of people would be arrested. 46 people busted in one night! The second-largest police raid on a so-called "gay" bar happened at the Checker Club, it was a big tranny hang-out. Also known as a place where people could go to fence anything they'd stolen. The person who owned it (her legal name was Carlos Lara) was an immigrant from Central America who came here and opened the place first as a coffeehouse, it just had like folding tables and folding chairs and a storefront. And Carla sold coffee and anybody could just come in and stay there and sleep, it was a place that catered to the street kids. And then as soon as Carla had enough money to buy a liquor license, she turned it into a bar, the Checker Club. It was still... mostly transgender-oriented. And most of the people arrested in the early 60s bar raid were arrested for female impersonation.