
Toward a FIERCE Nomadology: Contesting Queer Geographies on the Christopher Street Pier¹

RACHEL LOEWEN WALKER



Figure 1: Richard Renaldi (photographer), “Youth on the pier,” Pier 45-1, 2005.²

I. Introduction

My intention has been to convey the unique character of this urban space as well as the faces which populate it: dog walkers and joggers, drag queens and dropouts, muscle boys on roller blades, homeless veterans, Stonewall survivors, elderly couples out for a Sunday stroll, sunbathers, and curious tourists – black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, and every category in between (Richard Renaldi, regarding his photos of the community of the Christopher Street Pier, NYC).

As non-native of New York, I had heard about the Christopher Street Pier (Pier 45) by way of folklore and word-of-mouth, and though I knew little about its politics, it held an interest for me as an important part of New York's gay and lesbian rights movement. Along with the Pier, names such as the "Stonewall Inn," "Christopher Street," and "Greenwich Village" are all part of the cultural discourse that make up gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender histories in North America. However, as an unsuspecting tourist in June of 2006, I was surprised to find, in place of Pier 45, the pristine Hudson River Park with its manicured lawns, a concession booth, and a picture-perfect fountain—a glaring contradiction to what I expected from the site. Later, I had the opportunity to meet Rickke Mananzala, then co-director of FIERCE—Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment—who explained to me that Pier 45 had been redeveloped in 2003 in a municipal effort to revitalize the space as a city park for public use. However, as Mananzala went on to describe, the revitalization of the Pier was much less about the provision of public space, and much more about pushing the LGBT youth of colour who frequented the Pier, out of the site.

Although Pier 45 is no longer at the forefront of the organization's operations, FIERCE remains focused on the politics of space in the West Village—particularly the intersections between gentrification, displacement, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Recently, with the continuous expansion of the Hudson River Park along Manhattan's west bank, FIERCE has focused its efforts on the development of a 24-hour LGBT youth drop-in center to be located on the neighbouring Pier 40. Teeming up with such organizations as Right to the City (RTTC),³ Peoples' Justice Coalition, and Grassroots Global Justice, FIERCE connects queer rights to the right to geographical space; space where queer youth of colour are able to safely express

themselves according to a myriad of sexual, racialized and gendered subjectivities, and space where they are free from tactics of surveillance and control, such as those that have now come to characterize the Christopher Street Pier.

In light of the changing geography of the Pier and its relationship to the West Village, I aim to explore the processes of gentrification that have re-appropriated the once *queer public* space of Pier 45 into a *regulated* space, and by doing so have exposed an underlying agenda which seeks to keep non-normative sexualities, ethnicities, and cultures confined to private spaces, or at least under surveillance. Further, through exploration of the social and cultural context of Pier 45 and its relationship to New York's queer community, one can begin to flesh out a queer *nomadology*. Rosi Braidotti describes the nomad as "shifting, partial, complex, and multiple" (*Metamorphoses* 86). The nomad—or rather the process of becoming-nomadic—represents the transitive flows of embodied subjects, that is, the movements, behaviours, and practices of individuals who resist the discursive and material limitations of normative identity categories. Like Braidotti's nomad, the youth that have used the Pier as a safe space, and those that continue to mobilize around a right to queer public space, exemplify the transience, in-process and "becoming" of the nomad. As such they accomplish political resistance in the face of not only the heteronormative geographies and ideologies of the city, but also in relation to fixed and essentializing conceptions of gender and sexual identity, both inside and outside so-termed *queer publics*. However, the actions of the City demonstrate that the *nomad*, although theoretically hopeful, is still a fragile experience for those who embody such a subjectivity. This fragility requires that in the appropriation of any theoretical concepts (i.e. nomadic subjectivity), we must always remain aware of the lived experiences of those to whom we apply such

constructs, and so with this in mind, I find it important to read Braidotti's nomadology alongside an ethics of sustainability: an ethics of material location, experience, relational responsibility.

Through a careful balancing of historical and contextual realities and feminist analysis, I intend to show how the nomadic subjectivities of queer youth not only work as sites of resistance in the face of gentrification and neoliberalism in New York's West Village, but also engender a movement, a critique, a *queering* of space. Influenced by Natalie Oswin's evaluation of queer geography as continuing to view queer space as merely a "concrete space that is carved out by sexual dissidents," and therefore unable to represent the intersections of race, class, sex and gender that characterize *any* space, I argue that a queer nomadology tends toward a continued remapping, unfixing, and transforming of the subjectivities of New York's West Village (90).

II. Creating Space: Building Queer Community in the Village

Aside from the Castro in San Francisco, New York's West Village is one of the most well-known queer neighbourhoods in the United States. In fact, the slang term "gay village" developed as a result of the high percentage of gay-friendly and -operated bars, restaurants, bookstores, and other businesses the area housed. The Village is home to the famous Stonewall Inn where the Stonewall riots erupted on June 26, 1969 in response to a police raid on the predominantly gay-frequented bar and it is said these events contributed to the rise of the gay rights movement in the United States. As publicly recognized queer spaces these areas challenge the heteronormative standards that organize many other spaces, offering sites of community-building, as well as safety for the explorations and developments of queer identities.

Wayne Myslik discusses the benefits of having publicly determined and recognized queer spaces such that they represent a liberated zone, and a site of "cultural resistance where one can

overcome, though never ignore, the fear of heterosexism and homophobia” (168). In a similar vein, Gill Valentine points to the significant effect of *queer publics*, whether permanent or temporary:

Disruptive performances of dissident sexualities on the street are ... about empowerment and being “in control.” These actions are also not only transgressive, in that they trespass on territory that is taken for granted as heterosexual, but also transformative, in that they publicly articulate sexualities that are assumed to be “private” and thus change the way we understand space by exposing its performative nature and the artifice of the public/private dichotomy. (154)

As a well-known incarnation of a more stationary *gay village*, the West Village provides identity and belonging through visual signifiers. Rainbow pride flags protrude from most shops along its streets, bars and clubs boast gay-themed dance parties and queer musicians, and Greenwich’s Sheridan Square is home to concrete statues of gay and lesbian individuals to commemorate the struggles of those involved in the Stonewall riots. Furthermore, as a public site, it offers a different kind of community space than many other spaces and seems to provide an external home or transitory site where queer identity is the norm.

A particularly significant location in the Village has been the Christopher Street Pier. In an article that discusses the history of queer culture in the West Village, Richard Goldstein indicates that the Pier is an historical monument that will always be known for the particular community it affords. In his vivid description of the pier, Goldstein says:

On a warm night, you'll see banjee-boy realness, post-butcht dykeness, and high trannie 'tude—all on proud parade. You'll see middle-class men of color pop in and out of the bars along this strip. (On weekends, the crowd at Chi Chiz is as energized as gay life in post-Rudy Manhattan gets.) But you'll also see straight white couples scoping the scene from cafés that dot the area, and Village denizens out walking their dogs. The sidewalk is a living Ralph Fasanella painting, bursting with zany vitality ... It flames with the passion of people who don't feel free to be themselves in their neighborhoods and who see this hallowed stretch of pavement as a place where they can *represent*.

Aside from LGBT community centres, bars and lounges tend to be the only places aimed at queer persons, where individuals can show up to socialize without having to negotiate heteronormative space, although due to age restrictions, queer and questioning teenagers are often restricted from these sites. The Pier has therefore served as a hangout for queer and questioning youth for years, providing a venue for socializing, after-bar parties, the dance and performance culture that influenced New York's drag balls (depicted in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, and Wolfgang Busch's *How Do I Look?*), and even providing living space for homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals.



Figure 2: Richard Renaldi (photographer), "Graffiti," Pier 45-15, 2005.



Figure 3: Richard Renaldi (photographer), “Sunbathers,” Pier 45-19, 2005.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldua recounts an experience of one her students, a young lesbian woman, who said that she equated the term “homophobia” with “fear of home” due to the volatile home environment that often results when youth come out to their families. This is just one of many indications of the importance of queer space, and further problematizes the distinction between public/private which argues that *ideal* private spaces are domestic, embodied, natural, familial, a haven, imminent, and personal in contrast to the disembodied, abstract, cultural, rational, civil, and transcendent *ideal* public.⁴ Clearly these distinctions are muddled through the movement of abject identities; specifically the movement of queer youth from the supposed haven of home to the abstract and disembodied Pier. If one’s

family or so-called “private” community was not able to provide a safe and secure space, the Pier acted as a public arena for the personal formulation of selfhood and social subjectivity.

Looking specifically at the politics that surround the municipal geographies of gender and sexuality, Nancy Duncan writes that “the street serves as a metaphor for sites of resistance that are part of a rhizome-like process of deterritorializing and a progressive opening up to the political sphere” (129). At the same time, Duncan recognizes that the privatization of public space is continuously enacted through various social, legal, and economic territorializing processes such as architecture, design, physical barriers, and even police presence. Foregrounding the age-old assumption that sexuality should be confined to private spaces, Duncan demonstrates the way in which the dichotomy between public and private is often employed to “construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures” (128). In response, she discusses the need for greater visibility of sexualities in public spaces, as a way of denaturalizing the heteronormativity of public space. Particular tactics can and have included pride parades, street fairs, rallies against homophobia and other public queer events, all of which work to transgress the taboo of public sexuality.

However, to take a step back, we must recognize that just because a space is marked as *gay* (or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, for that matter) does not mean that it is necessarily *queered*. In fact, disciplinary norms of identity, race, and gender are as much a part of homosexual geographies as they are of heterosexual geographies and West Village residents also operate under systems of gentrification, commercialization and what Lisa Duggan has described as *homonormativity*. Homonormativity, in this context, refers to a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while

promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 50). Hence, Duggan has warned that because a community has queer members, does not mean that such a community is de facto liberatory. This continued policing of identity, even within seemingly radical environments, is easily likened to the “multiple, automatic and anonymous power” of Foucault’s panopticon, such that the pervasive and far-reach of disciplinary power continues to act whether or not it is overtly enforced (Foucault 176). Thus, like any other community, queer communities can align with dominant neoliberal politics, rewarding those who continue to propagate and value normative domestic kinship structures, who maintain uncritical alliances with liberal economic philosophies, and who participate in the continued policing of those gender identities that do not conform to heteronormative forms of femininity and masculinity.

Natalie Oswin warns that analyses that restrict their focus to the potentialities of “queer space” run the risk of cementing particular incarnations of *gay* or *lesbian* at the expense of a multiplicitous array of gendered and sexual identities, as well as at the expense of those whose experiences are further circumscribed by class and race. To this effect, she writes “homosexuals or queers can be included amongst those who participate in the deployment of sexual normativities” (Oswin 96), and as will be demonstrated a bit later on, it is exactly this dynamic that has contributed to the outcry from the youth that run and support FIERCE regarding the privatization of the Christopher Street Pier. To counter these problems, Oswin calls for a form of “subjectless critique” in any approaches to queer space, a method that abandons the reliance on a radical queer subject, as such, and instead works toward performing a critical analysis of the organizing structures of sexual normativities and non-normativities (Oswin 96). Turning again to Foucault, we see that tactics of surveillance rely specifically on the subjectification of the

subject; that is, the making of normative (and docile) gender and sexual identities (Foucault, 138). Now, if we are to counter such entrenched norms of behaviour, it is necessary to pull apart the foundations on which they rely. Put more concretely, we can challenge both heteronormativity and homonormativity by refusing to rely on the socio-cultural categories of man, woman, gay, straight. Furthermore, we must critique the socio-economic systems of meaning and production that require such categorizations in order for their continued existence.

Of greater issue, then, are the trends of re-appropriation and redevelopment that characterize the municipal use of space in New York City. David Harvey's recent article "The Right to the City" is useful here, as it outlines the effects of a "new urbanism" on the politics of city space, whereby development projects rely on neoliberal ideologies of individualism, political withdrawal, and cosmopolitanism. Within New York this new urbanism has played out in processes of displacement that Harvey describes as "accumulation by dispossession" (35): the poor are persuaded, manipulated, or forced to leave the spaces that they occupy, so that the sites can be transformed into *capital*. Underlying this process is the fact that "quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy" (Harvey 31).

In line with Harvey's critique, the settlement history of New York City illustrates that those who occupy any type of abject identity—due to ethnicity, race, sex, gender, class, or ability—have a recollection of physical dislocation: an imprinted memory that influences their relationship to home, community, and space. Thus, the topography of the city not only maps residential, commercial, and social arrangements, but reveals the economic and political power relations that are deployed through the physical relocation of bodies.

III. Contested Space/s: Policing the Pier, Post- “Revival”



Figure 4: Richard Renaldi (photographer), “Hudson Park,” Pier 45-13, 2005.

In 2001, the Christopher Street Pier was closed down for renovations by the municipality of New York, in order that it be included in the Greenwich Village chapter of the \$330 million dollar Hudson River Park development alongside the Hudson River. Upon reopening in 2003, the Pier represented a prime example of the Harvey’s “new urbanism” with its water fountain, landscaped sitting areas, park benches, and small confectionary. Although the space is still frequented by queer youth, the city’s attempt to make it accessible to a wider—read: heterosexual—public includes a 1 a.m. curfew, enforced nightly by security officials who round up the kids and direct them elsewhere. The particular point of contention, and thus the subject of

much news coverage is that the displaced kids then travel up Christopher Street in large groups, causing disturbances to residents of the Village. Members of the community claim that the youth are loud and obnoxious and that they regularly loiter on the streets until 3 or 4 a.m. after being removed from the Pier. When asked about why there is much more controversy surrounding the Pier post-redevelopment, one resident made the problematic observation that “the crowd has gotten younger, darker, and more likely to hail from the boroughs” (Lombardi). These types of comments reveal the underlying racism of urban development and which informs the implementation of a curfew and the police surveillance on the Christopher Street Pier. As Mananzala of FIERCE argues:

[Policing of the pier] is a tactic to push L.G.B.T. youth out of the West Village. As much as they say this is not a race issue, people are concerned that people are coming from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey. Overwhelmingly, the youth that use the pier are low income and from the outer boroughs. (Mananzala, quoted in Anderson)

It is apparent that any processes of *queering* and *taking up space* which enabled the creation of a publicly recognized *queer space*, have been literally bulldozed through the construction of the Hudson River Park. The youth that once used the broken-down concrete of the Pier as a gathering place, a drawing board, a games-room, and a bed, have been pushed out, and the Pier has ostensibly been neatly packaged for public consumption. In this vein the politics behind the Christopher Street Pier betray an underlying theme of surveillance and control that is not foreign to other marginalized populations within New York City.

On December 23, 1985, the *New York Times* featured a full-page advertisement that asked “Is Gentrification a dirty word?” The ad was provided by the Real Estate Board of New York, and continued to state that “There are few words in a New Yorker’s vocabulary that are as emotionally loaded as ‘gentrification’” (as quoted in Smith 28). It outlined issues of

gentrification as they face New Yorkers, arguing that it is *merely* the process by which local retail and housing is upgraded through private investment. The ad offered a rosy picture of “rehabilitation” where neighbourhoods were able to blossom and grow as a result of businesses and lending institutions committing to community development. Many hailed gentrification as a movement that could save cities from recession, or lead to “urban revival” and an “urban renaissance” although it did not take long before critics began to see deleterious effects, particularly the displacement of individuals that occurred as a result of gentrified housing only being able to “filter up” and not down (Nelson 15).

A telling example of these processes is found in the shifting social geographies of Harlem, one of the most well-known African American communities in the United States. Harlem is firmly situated within public consciousness as both the home of the influential Harlem Renaissance and as a dilapidated, poverty-stricken “ghetto” circumscribed by race and class. However, today, as a result of targeted processes of revitalization, the streets of Harlem offer only a shadow of the culture they once held, and middle- and upper-class white New Yorkers have infiltrated the housing and retail market making Harlem truly a gentrification “success.”⁵

More critically, gentrification is often understood as

the process by which poor and working-class neighbourhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters—neighbourhoods that had previously experienced disinvestment and a middle-class exodus ... [or rather,] the poorest working-class neighbourhoods are getting a remake; capital and the gentry are coming home, and for some in their wake it is not entirely a pretty sight. (Smith 32)

Through this definition one begins to see how the language of “revitalization” and “renaissance” imply that the communities were somehow inadequate or culturally moribund prior to

gentrification when in reality the process often homogenizes local culture by forcing residents out due to skyrocketing rental costs.

In many cases, such as the development of the Hudson River Park, gentrification is justified by accusing the targeted sites of being high-crime areas, or magnets for homelessness and vandalism, however, such attempts to legitimize revitalization projects deftly conceal the continued political and economic conditions that ensure that homelessness is not erased when the gentry come home. In fact, redevelopment projects rarely, if ever, configure alternative spaces for those that are displaced from their targeted sites:

No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is always the same; the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise from the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear again immediately somewhere else ... The same economic necessity which produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place. (Freiderich Engels, quoted in Harvey 34)

In effect where once Christopher Street and the Pier, themselves represented the “overflow” of disciplinary processes taking place elsewhere in the city, the targeting of the Pier repeated the process of displacement, again pushing out those who have the least property rights (and therefore the least “right to the city”).

Increasingly we can see the role the city plays in creating nomads in the literal sense, whereupon development activities of the city contribute to the formation and maintenance of nomadic identities while at the same time demonstrating the way in which the city responds to those communities which don’t conform to normative models of sexual and racial identity. In most cases these nomadic subjects are the most vulnerable by virtue of their racial, ethnic, and/or sexual alterity and it is particularly these communities which experience the most devastating effects of gentrification. Turning to a discussion of the queer youth who congregate on the Pier, it is clear that the nomadic subjectivity of the “kids on the pier” threatens those who occupy

more secure subject positions—namely those middle to upper-class individuals who can actually afford to *live* in Greenwich Village. Furthermore, the redevelopment of the Christopher Street Pier provides a clear example of municipal attempts take away the strength of a subject position dependent upon its very illegitimacy. Before exploring the embodied and transformative effects of queer youth in the West Village, I turn to a more extensive discussion of Braidotti's *nomad*, including its uptake in contemporary scholarship.

IV. The Nomadic Subject: A Review

Nomadology, as a philosophical project, can be traced to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they describe the nomad in contrast to the state. The nomad exists in smooth, heterogenous space, while the state occupies striated, homogenous space (351-424). What this means is that Deleuze and Guattari's nomad occupies geographic territory that is given meaning and matter through movement; the travels of the nomad themselves make connections, relations, and introduce possibilities to the landscapes. The striated space of the state, on the other hand, is constituted through pre-determined regulations of *who* can occupy space, *how* such space can be used, and *what* function it serves. In moving through smooth space, the nomad is intensely creative, wandering from point to point in processes of becoming-nomadic, rather than being limited by externally imposed spatial sanctions—Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the smooth space of the air, or the sea and the striated spaces of walls, roads, pillars, and enclosures. While walls divide, mark-up, and sanction spaces into categories and uses, the sea represents an expanse of possibility, it indicates “a rhythm without measure, which relates to the upswell of a flow, in other words, to the manner in which a fluid occupies a smooth space” (Deleuze and Guattari 364).

The ethical and political potentialities of becoming-nomadic has been most illustrated through the work of Rosi Braidotti, whose influential text *Nomadic Subjects* develops a cartography of the nomad in relationship to contemporary feminist theory. Braidotti situates the nomad within a postmodern arena that has had its fair share of criticism, one of which centres on the lack of possibility for ethical agency within postmodern theory. In trying to piece together a working, though necessarily incomplete, account of subjectivity, Braidotti claims that the starting point is a new form of materialism that “develops the notion of corporeal materiality by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject” (*Nomadic* 3). By conceiving of this particular subject through the concept of the nomad or nomadic subjectivities, Braidotti (like Deleuze) references the common understanding of the nomad—those peoples and cultures that live nomadic lives, travel from place to place. In effect, the nomadic subject is:

shifting, partial, complex and multiple ... It exists in the shifts and patterns of repetition—the opposite of the tourists, the antithesis of the migrant, the nomadic subject is flows of transformation without ultimate destination. It is a form of intransitive becoming; it is multiple, relational, dynamic. You can never *be* a nomad, you can only go on trying to *become* nomadic. (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 86)

At the same time, and especially in the context of a discussion of the homelessness and displacement of LGBT youth in the West Village, it is important to note that in her use of the nomad, Braidotti understands its link to such marginalized identities. Nomadic peoples are not always nomadic by choice, and their day-to-day experiences are often far from transformative. Braidotti’s later work responds to criticisms that the nomad dislocates and therefore devalues the very real experiences of many homeless and migrant individuals around the world. She writes:

Being nomadic, homeless, an exile, a refugee, a Bosnian rape-in-war victim, an itinerant migrant, an illegal immigrant, is no metaphor. Having no passport or having too many of

them is neither equivalent nor is it merely metaphorical, as some critics of nomadic subjectivity have suggested. (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* 3)

Instead, Braidotti recognizes the material contingency of nomadic identities, likening the nomad to a *figuration*, or “a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective” (*Metamorphoses* 2). This figuration denies the nostalgia of fixed subjectivity and instead represents identities made of transitions, changes, and movements, rather than those fixated on an essential unity (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 22). Figurations, in this sense, indicate both living maps and alternate subjectivities such as the queer bois or the femme aggressives of the West Village, each of which constitute border crossings which challenge the limitations of the hetero/homo binary, and which multiply differences of sex, gender, race, and class. By exploring the power relations that lie beneath situated identities, nomadic figurations engage with the particulars—the socio-economic experiences and the material locations of bodies in cities—in order to develop “‘micro’ narratives of self and others” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 90) and to enact strategies of resistance.

In Braidotti’s discussion of the nomad, two key themes surface: 1) the transdisciplinarity of the concept of the nomad, constructed through a form of *bricolage*, or the piecing together of thoughts, ideas, and strategies, from multiple sources; and 2) the idea of “theft” or what Deleuze describes as “deterritorialization,” referencing the process of uprooting ideas and concepts from others and using them in ways that are different from their original purpose. Many authors have picked up on Braidotti’s concept of the nomad, and although some have used the concept in a similar manner, others have accomplished a transdisciplinary deterritorialization of the term, much in the same manner as Braidotti intended in *Nomadic Subjects*. Trends in nomadic research include discussions of geography and the gendered locations of bodies, as well as the pairing of

artistic endeavours—literary and visual—with theoretical frameworks of nomadism. Researchers have also invoked the nomad in discussions of adoption and the inhabitation of racialized and gendered subjectivity, claiming that it points toward transformative and alternative conceptions of selfhood in light of restricting conditions.

Maria Tamboukou and Stephen Ball use the lens of nomadology to explore the *becoming* of female subjectivities. While tracing the life stories of four young black women, Tamboukou and Ball piece out a research methodology based on rhizomatics and nomads, which refuses to provide a cogent mapping of identity or experience and rather points to “other ways of travelling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going, rather than starting and finishing” (Deleuze and Guattari, quoted in Tamboukou para. 12). Similarly, Watkins enlists the concept of nomadic subjectivity in a discussion of transracial and transethnic adoption, claiming that nomadic possibilities offer the opportunity for “multiple interconnections, while steering clear of appropriation” in the often difficult process of negotiating multiple cultural contexts in transracial adoptions (“Adoption and Identity” 12). Watkins discusses the way in which Braidotti’s conception of the nomad can be employed when thinking about the identity formation of children growing up in adoptive families, such that it enables the embrace of complexity and multiplicity and furthermore that it may help:

to quell adoptees’ sense of existential homelessness, of mourning for simple and straightforward identity that was never personally possible, and their bearing of vulnerability left by the absence of hard edged exclusionary definitions can work to expose the intertwining root system which is their legacy by virtue of birth and adoption. (Watkins, “Adoption and Identity” 22)

Watkins also refers to the nomad in her article “Notes from a Visit to Chiapas: Toward Practices of Nomadic Identity and Hybridity” particularly using a conception of the nomad as a “border-crosser” and as representative of a process identity. Watkins outlines the political unrest of

Chiapas, Mexico, and the ways in which Indigenous Zapatista communities have circumvented the surveillance of the Mexican government by forming their own autonomous zones called *caracoles*. She believes that in forming these autonomous zones, the Zapatistas' actions exemplify Braidotti's transformative vision of the nomad as resistant to citizenship, particularly when that citizenship requires the sacrifice of difference. Claiming that the zones "reimagine identity by expressing multiple layers of compatible identification" Watkins compares the process to an endeavour undertaken at her home university in California, where the Depth Psychology M.A./Ph.D. program makes a point of nurturing nomadic identity amongst students conducting anthropological or psychological research between Mexico and California ("Visit to Chiapas" 12). In a distinct effort aimed at decolonization, Watson points toward a methodology which strives toward nomadic consciousness and the entrance into encounters that cross borders and boundaries in oneself, between self and other, between communities, and extending to boundaries between humans and the geographical environment (Watkins, "Visit to Chiapas" 14).

The nomad has also proven useful in studies of art and literature as demonstrated by Valerie Orlando's discussion of the nomadic novel. Referencing particularly francophone women's writing, Orlando claims that authors such as Leïla Houari (*Zeïda from Nowhere*), Malika Mokeddem (*Trance of the Rebellious*) and Hajer Djilani (*Et pourtant le ciel était bleu*) all develop heroines who construct nomadic identities through occupying a "third space." This third space acts as both a site of negotiation and as a place of speaking for women, minorities and others who have experience forms of oppression (Orlando 35). Orlando contrasts the nomadic novel with the paradigm of the nationalist novel, which often focuses on a coherent telling of political uprisings and their relationships to the formation of a nationally grounded identity, arguing that the nomadic novel enables a more liberatory effect such that the heroine who adopts

a nomadic identity “is marked by her difference [and so] lives in continuous exile” (Orlando 38); however, this subject position propels the heroine to be in a constant mode of reconstitution where she must “move, explore, and deterritorialize” and work toward a new multiple identity that is “neither here nor there” (39).

Each of the above deployments says something about the potentialities of nomadism in mapping the youth of New York’s west village. Like Watkins’ discussion of the nomad in relation to transracial adoption, the lens of nomadism reads the youth as occupying multiple and complex subjectivities, and rather than relying on standardized research categories such as sex, race, gender, class, it opens the analysis up to embodied geographies, that is, the experiences of travelling to Christopher Street, of forming relationships with others who made homes amongst the graffiti of Pier 45, and of an experience of subjectivity that is inextricably bound to place, space, materialities, and temporalities. Where the nomad is a “cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, rhythmical displacement,” the youth travelling to the Pier reference this cyclical journey to find community day after day (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 22). This daily migration, which is often from the outer boroughs to Manhattan, situates the youth as “in transit” and as “neither here nor there,” (Orlando 39) and furthermore, it accomplishes a continuous and rhythmic creation of the *new*, as in new and different connections, relations, and experiences with others who visit the spaces of the West Village.

The nomadic subjectivity of the youth is also demonstrated by their embodiment of sexual difference and challenge to sexual norms. In an article from *The Villager* Lincoln Anderson interviewed two teenage girls who were leaving the Pier one night. When asked about why she made the long subway trek to the Pier so often, Felicia Hernandez, 14, said that she often came after school because “it feels like home, comfortable” and further “there aren’t many

places we can be ourselves, except for here” (quoted in Anderson). Hernandez points to two things: first the continued lack of safe spaces for queer youth, and second, the importance of physical places and environments in which one is able to express heterogeneous sexualities without being subject to normative models of sexual identity. Such spaces of possibility are particularly important for teenagers who are going through large changes and periods of questioning.

The controversy surrounding the pier is also influenced by racialized news and media coverage which often makes the point of indicating that the youth are predominantly Latino/a and African American. In one news article Kristen Lombardi responds to the escalating debate over whether or not critics of the pier as a youth hangout hold their views because of racism. Lombardi quotes city board official Arthur Shwartz as stating that “It’s important for everyone to deal with the fact that the kids out there on the pier are largely black and Hispanic ... That means they have a different relationship to the area’s white residents than white gay kids would ... as well as a different need for safe queer space” (Lombardi). The racialized discourse surrounding the pier also surfaces in a press release from Indymedia, which states:

The debate over what to do about this is centered on the vilification of LGBT youth, especially youth of color, in an upscale neighborhood that refuses to appreciate their contribution to the vibrant neighborhood. LGBT youth of color, often harassed in their own neighborhoods or homeless with no room in shelters, go to the pier as a non-commercial, historic place of refuge for LGBT youth. (Benedetto)

As these articles demonstrate, the youth that visit the Pier straddle a position that is both subversive and under surveillance, whereby they are restricted by the very structural inequities that threaten their displacement. This tenuous position can be said to exemplify the ways in which “the positionality of the nomad is a fictional terrain, a reterritorialization that has passed through several versions of deterritorialization to posit a powerful theory of location based on

contingency, history and change” (Kaplan 198). At the same time, for queer youth, the necessity of finding an inhabitable geographic location, however contingent, becomes apparent in response to the lack of any other safe spaces in the city.

In more recent work, Braidotti has extended the potentiality of the nomad to an ethics of sustainability, where sustainability stands for a “regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments she or he inhabits” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 137). In calling for a return to material subjectivity, Braidotti maintains her distance from both liberal humanism’s reliance on fixed identity categories and from post-humanism’s entire dismissal of the subject. Instead she wants a non-unitary, nomadic subjectivity: “real bodies” engaged in becoming-imperceptible, that is in becoming other than *Man, Woman, Heterosexual, Homosexual*. The sustainability component of Braidotti’s ethics is comprised of two things: 1) a critical or reactive stage; and 2) an affirmative or active stage (*Transpositions* 8). The critical stage involves the critique of tradition, or in our case, a critique of the habits of thought and behaviour that are complicit in the effects of neo-liberal gentrification (and Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession”), while the affirmative stage includes conscious attention to “how we can cultivate the political desire for change or transformation” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 8): a focus on the fostering of a collective yearning for creative societal change.

An ethics of sustainability relies on the inherent interrelationality between self and others, as well as between humans and their environments. It is an expanded sense of community which “includes one’s territorial or environmental interconnections” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 266) and it requires attention to the construction of sustainable futures in the form of radical intergenerational responsibility. As Braidotti writes “by targeting those who come after us as the

rightful ethical interlocutors and assessors of our own actions, we are taking seriously the implications of our own situated position” (“The Politics of ‘Life Itself’” 216). This future-directed component is described as a “dreaming forward” (Braidotti 217), a deep and sustained generosity that makes change not necessarily for the benefit of one’s own lifetime, but for the lifetimes to come. This demonstrates the particular salience of Braidotti’s nomadology to the activities of the youth-run FIERCE in the West Village, which works to hold the city accountable for development projects which have negatively affected the Pier’s demographic, and which builds a future that has *space* for not only queer youth of colour, but for those youth that have yet to exist and who deserve to create their own freely chosen subjectivities and communities.

V. A FIERCE Comeback: Youth Organizing and an Ethics of Sustainability

FIERCE—Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment—is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, two spirit, queer and questioning youth of colour in New York. The group was formed in 2000 specifically to help youth find a voice to speak up against harassment, and to organize around issues of homophobia, racism and sexism. With an ethic described as “by us, for us” the group is youth-run and works to train other young people in ways that empower them and teach them how to speak out against the social inequities they experience.

FIERCE’s “Save Our Space” campaign, which began in 2000, prior to the redevelopment of the Christopher Street Pier, targets the displacement and criminalization of queer youth of colour, signalling that anxieties and discomfort around their presence on the Pier and in the West Village were brewing well before Hudson River Park was a reality. FIERCE states that the youth who used the pier as a public space experienced “sharp increases in police harassment, false

arrest and racial and gender profiling—usually for just being in the neighbourhood” as a result of former Mayor Giuliani’s “Quality of Life Policies” which enabled police to treat minor offences—panhandling, loitering, homelessness, and graffiti—as worthy of prosecution. Therefore, more and more young people were being arrested for petty offences, thus escalating the relationship between the police and the youth in the Village. The implementation of the early curfew only accelerated the growing hostility.

Almost immediately after the Pier was reopened, following the renovations, FIERCE mobilized around the 1 a.m. curfew, arguing that it was an inappropriate bylaw and that the curfew should be 4 a.m. instead. As residents became increasingly annoyed with the noise, FIERCE argued that a later curfew would lessen noise by enabling the youth to leave in smaller groups throughout the night. They created information bulletins, organized stand-ins and rallies against the surveillance of queer youth of colour, and even created a half hour, youth-produced documentary called “Fenced OUT” that looks at the effects of gentrification on the pier and in the West Village. By way of these strategic modes of intervention, FIERCE works to hold both residents of the West Village and city developers accountable for the effects of the increased surveillance of the area. Further, their focus on the Pier as a *queer* space demands their right to the city while at the same time remaining nomadic through their practices of *queering* space, via sit-ins, the staging of outdoor festivals and drag shows, and a continued focus on the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and class.

While the transformative subjectivities of the youth who occupy and create *queer space* are consistently trampled on by municipal authorities, thus making social and political change difficult, if not impossible, the activist practices of FIERCE have gained enough municipal and national notoriety that they can work to critique the systems that maintain this divide. However,

this reputation is not so established that the organization cannot continue to work from a position of alterity. Instead, FIERCE holds the city accountable from the position of a non-unitary subject, whether through handing out pamphlets, circulating posters, conducting surveys of the experiences of youth in the area, or by working toward the sustainability of such projects by cultivating “the next generation of social justice movement leaders who are dedicated to ending all forms of oppression.”⁶ Thus what makes FIERCE unique is not only its continued queering of the West Village, but its fostering of ethical responsibility amongst its members and the wider community. As Braidotti writes, a sustainable nomadic ethics must not only perform a critique, but must rally around the claim that “‘we’ are in *this* together”; “we” must “realize and manifest our own social and political power to change our conditions, to shape our futures, and to become effective agents of change in our communities” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 136). These projects demonstrate that such youth organizing has a transformative potential in the face of structural inequity and the policing of sexual identity, and that the voices of those speaking from a position of alterity may have the potential to perform the “subjectless critique” that Natalie Oswin requests, while still focusing on *real* bodies and their *real* experiences.

There is a critical role that is taken up by youth activism and organising, and although I do not have room to make a full case regarding the implications of this argument,⁷ components of this role can be seen in the creativity and wide-reach of FIERCE’s political projects, and the energy and momentum that the organization continues to garner. Their activities can be likened to the movement of Deleuze’s nomad through smooth space such that they build alliances, relations, and networks with other organizations locally and nationally, and as well, they understand the critical role that one’s environment plays in one’s own possibilities to make sustainable connections and build self-confidence. This contrasts with the activities of the city

(Deleuze's *state*) which continually construct striated space, that is, space that is regulated by curfews, surveilled by security guards, and sliced up into antagonisms between the youth and the West Village residents. One of FIERCE's current projects takes up the move toward nomadic-becomings even more pointedly in its call for the development of a twenty-four hour LGBT youth drop-in center on Pier 45's neighbouring Pier. Now, it is more than the creation of a space that encourages and supports heterogeneous sexual subjectivities, but the architectural and material sensibilities that characterize the nomadism of the proposed space. The plans call for a physical place which is made up of "zones that are both large and small, public and private, and interstitial moments that transcend such simple dualities" (FIERCE 14). The irregular geometric design of intersecting triangular rooms are designed in such a way as to allow openings between art spaces and classrooms, and between small event spaces and community recreation zones. In addition, the proposed center opens to views of water and air as it sits on the edge of Pier 40, while also including views of the Christopher Street Pier across the water.

As of 2011, New York City has still failed to give the okay for an LGBT Youth Center on Pier 40, but FIERCE continues to send delegates to municipal meetings, to hold leadership- and activist-building workshops, and to dream up new possibilities for queer youth of colour in the West Village. Through these and other projects what they demonstrate is that a "nomadic ethics is not about a master theory but rather about multiple micropolitical modes of daily activism" (Braidotti, "Politics of 'Life Itself'" 209-210); it is a way of responding to the spatial dislocations of the "kids on the Pier" by turning their materialities into nomadic mappings of *a life*.

VI. Final Thoughts

These are strange times, and strange things are happening. Times of ever-expanding, yet spasmodic, waves of change, which engender the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory effects. Times of fast-moving change which do not wipe out the brutality of power-relations, but in many ways intensify them and bring them to the point of implosion. (Braidotti, Metamorphoses 1)

Braidotti intends the figuration of the nomad to be understood as a site of potentiality: the nomad is the transient border-crosser who destabilizes notions of citizenship and yet, as an embodied subject, it causes anxieties that result in surveillance and control. It is easy to lavish praise on the nomad, as conceived in the literature, but much more difficult to trace the patterns of the nomad in action. New York has a sordid history of shuffling bodies around, it is visible in the pristine tourist buildings on “Ellis Island” where immigrants were interrogated and humiliated prior to being allowed entry, as well as in the ongoing gentrification of Harlem, where a landmark community has slowly been dismantled and washed clean of its history of African American culture and struggle. These examples indicate the ways in which power structures maintain, move, and counter those communities which exist on the fringes, or which resist mainstream society, effectively deterring the potentiality of the nomad.

Through locating Braidotti’s nomad within a material politic, I hope to build a bridge between the dialectical reference to a subversive, alternative conception of identity, and the representations of “banjee-boy realness, post-butcht dykeness, and high trannie ’tude” that embody sexual diversity and include those who *wear* their identity daily (Goldstein). Also, in these “times of ever-expanding, yet spasmodic, waves of change” where theories of multiplicity dominate feminist, media studies, cultural studies and interdisciplinary programs, I feel it is important to keep one foot on the *pier*, so to speak, in order to look toward the real lives that are

at stake at the site where discourse is made flesh (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* 1). As a queer identified individual, I see myself in much of Braidotti's subversive, resistant, and sexually divergent nomad; however, it is those whose nomadic identity continually comes up against the powerful effects of the surveillant control wielded by New York City, who really begin to demonstrate that the *nomad* is not only a self-created term. In some ways it is an enforced identity—within which cracks exist of course—and in other ways it is a chosen identity, albeit far from always chosen critically.

Although this paints somewhat of a dismal picture, it has become clear that organizations such as FIERCE and other radical youth-run, non-profit organizations have the potential to enforce ethical accountability and sustainability. In the case of the West Village, FIERCE has mobilized from the position of the margins, in a manner that has had a significant effect on public policy. It is their work in empowering youth-led activism that opens up a space for future possibilities and for nomadic-becomings to “dream forward” to turn their occupation of the margins into a disruption of the centre.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Marie Lovrod for her helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² All photos are © Richard Renaldi, and are included with the gracious permission of the artist. Figures 1, 2, and 3 were taken prior to the Pier's 2001 closure for redevelopment, while figure 4 was taken after its reopening in 2003. These and other photos of the Pier were published in 2005, in a collection titled "Pier 45" and can be found on Renaldi's website at www.renaldi.com/.

³ RTTC is a national alliance of racial, economic, and environmental justice organizations committed to speaking out against gentrification and its displacement of low-income people, LGBTQ persons, and youths of colour from their urban neighbourhoods.

⁴ See Nancy Duncan, 127-145.

⁵ This of course, is all the more ironic given the fact that Harlem was originally intended to be a locus of high-class and culture for the white middle- to upper-class. When building delays slowed this venture, property owners began marketing to African Americans who lived further south, so that the new housing developments wouldn't be left empty. See James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan*.

⁶ From FIERCE's Mission Statement, < www.fiercenyc.org/index.php?s=75 >.

⁷ For a well-articulated discussion of the potentialities of youth-run activism see Daniel Hosang "Beyond Policy."

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