
From Vulnerability to Insurrection: ‘Joyful Militancy’ and Conflict Spaces, the case of Bash Back!

Laurence Gervais*¹

¹Centre de recherches anglophones (CREA - EA 370) – Université Paris Nanterre – France

Abstract

Bash Back! was a network of queer, insurrectionary anarchist chapters active in the United States between 2007 and 2011.

Formed in Chicago in 2007 to facilitate a convergence of radical trans and gay activists from around the country, Bash Back! sought to critique the ideology of the mainstream LGBT movement, which the group saw as "assimilationist" and favorable to the dominant institutions of a heteronormative society. Bash Back! was noticeably influenced by the anarchist movement and radical queer groups, such as ACT UP, and took inspiration from the Stonewall and San Francisco's White Night riots.

The group arose out of anti-Republican National Convention and anti-Democratic National Convention organizing, and continued up to 2011. Chapters sprang up across the country, including in Philadelphia and Seattle. The organization's model was a nonhierarchical autonomous network based on agreed-upon points of unity, such as fighting for "queer liberation" rather than "heteronormative assimilation", and accepting a diversity of tactics "including an individual's autonomy to participate in actions deemed illegal by the government".

Bash Back! dissolved in 2011 due to a certain number of internal dissensions listed in the book "Queer Ultra Violence", an anthology of texts published and produced by Bash Back!, including conflicts over "identity politics".

Fifteen years later BB! Has re-formed in Chicago, for a convergence on September 8–11, and has also implemented self-help practices, events, gatherings, and sanctuary spaces that are organized on a free or homemade basis in queer neighborhoods that do not fall under mainstream capitalism or neoliberal practices of commodification of spaces. In the face of what they consider "years of intensification intensification - of crisis, alienation, loss, and struggle. The right wing no longer hides behind euphemisms: they want to exterminate trans and queer people. The left offers only false solutions: vote, donate, assimilate. A decade of representation, symbolic legal victories, social media activism, and mass-market saturation has left us worse off by all metrics. Our fairweather friends won't save us from the consequences of their strategy of empty visibility. The inescapable conclusion is that we must come together to protect ourselves. "

*Speaker

Using the idea of a queer praxis, (vulnerability as radical activism) in contemporary activist practices, and the queer theory of vulnerability and subjugation (Butler 2015/2017), I will question queer anarchist movements such as BB! alternative approaches to community and to activism, and the way they have mobilized oppressed queers far beyond the local level, but also the way they dissolved and reformed over more survival than insurrectional strategies after the pandemic.

I am interested in the forms of agentivity in urban space and their capacity to produce not only collective identities, but also spaces, using the theories of Nancy Fraser (1990); Jack Halberstam (2011); Jose Munoz (2009); Gramsci (1974); Kristin Ross (2023); and Judith Butler (2015/2017). According to these authors, the activists of contemporary movements paradoxically use their vulnerability to anchor their citizenship, their right to be there, their appropriation of urban space. They have an original reflection on precariousness understood not as a state but as a differentiated process of exposure to violence, injury and death; a valorization of interdependence in the face of individualistic neoliberalism.

Laurence Gervais is a professor at the University Paris Nanterre, where she co-chairs the research group "Politiques américaines". Her research has focused on understanding the effects of neoliberalism and gentrification on the American urban landscape, and the gendering of urban policy, looking at issues related to the construction of cultural identities and the creation of space in the American city. In 2013, she published *La Privatisation de Chicago, idéologies de genre, constructions sociales, identités et espaces urbains* (PUPS), and in 2020 *Le Sexe de la ville, identités, genre et sexualités dans la ville américaine* (Syllepse). She has co-organized several international conferences, including the recent "Dynamique de genres et sexualités dans les Amériques" (January 2021 IDA Pôle Nord-Est) and "Queering the City, Transatlantic Perspectives" (Université Paris Nanterre, Université Paris 8, Fondation des Etats-Unis, June 2021), a conference that received EUR ArTec funding.