

CRITICAL LESSONS FROM THE NEW JERSEY 7

Re-Thinking “The Norm” In Police/Prison Violence & Gender Violence:

Critical Lessons From the New Jersey 7

By INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence & FIERCE!
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The New Jersey 7 (also often referred to as the New Jersey 4) is a group of seven young Black lesbian friends who were violently attacked in 2006 in New York. They defended themselves from a homophobic sexual assault by a male bystander, Dwayne Buckle, as they walked down the street in the West Village neighborhood in New York City. Buckle shouted “I’ll fuck you straight, sweetheart!” and other verbal assaults, spat on one of the women, and finally got on top of her while he pulled out her hair and choked her. At some point, two men ran over to help the women, and they proceeded to beat Buckle. Their friend released, the women were walking away from the situation when they were stopped by local police. Even though the events were caught on videotape from a nearby store camera, the group of friends was perceived by police to be at fault (the men fighting with Buckle were never looked for). The women were arrested without being told why. They were all prosecuted in a highly disturbing media atmosphere in which they were accused of being, among other things, a “lesbian wolfpack.” Three women plea bargained and now have a criminal record, and the other four women (Venice Brown, Terrain Dandridge, Patreese Johnson, and Renata Hill) were found guilty of gang assault and assault, receiving sentences ranging from 3 ½ to 11 years in prison.

This horrifying event is a stunning crystallization of the intersections of multiple kinds of violence: police and prison violence, homophobic “hate” violence, and sexual violence perpetrated against women. However, there has been relative silence about the case. When we consider the kind of media attention, public outrage, and mass mobilizations that happened on behalf of the Jena 6 boys, for example, it’s hard not to wonder why this story hasn’t sparked a similar kind of national fury.

WHO IS THE “NORM” IN ANTI-POLICE/PRISON & ANTI-VIOLENCE ORGANIZING?

As a young lesbian of color, Terrain has had to endure the many challenges to be “herself” when it is not, as some would say, the “norm.”

*– Kimma Walker, mother of Terrain Dandridge
(one of the New Jersey 7 who was arrested and incarcerated, but recently released), June 2008*

The question of why there is so much silence surrounding the NJ7 case and similar instances of criminalization of women of color and queers of color lays bare the ways in which queer folks of color and women of color do not fit the racialized and gendered mold of who gets to be perceived as legitimately victimized or legitimately resisting oppression. Discussions of criminalization and incarceration of people of color, as well as of police

profiling and brutality - in both mainstream and progressive media - focus almost exclusively on the experiences of young Black and Latino men coded as heterosexual, privileging state violence against straight men of color to the exclusion/erasure of state violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people of color and other women of color. In fact, women of color and LGBTQ folks of color have a long history of being systematically harassed, profiled, strip searched, body cavity searched, raped, beaten, and murdered by law enforcement agents, based on their race, gender, sexuality, and class.



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Similarly, the idealized story of domestic and sexual violence features “innocent” white women — as in women who are both racially and behaviorally non-threatening and do not engage in self-defense, self-medication with controlled substances, commercial sex, gender non-conformity, lesbian sexuality, and other deviation from gender norms — as the primary sympathetic victim. Because the Jersey 7 are Black, lesbian, and gender non-conforming, they are not perceived as legitimate targets of anti-woman sexual violence. Indeed, the jury that convicted the group of friends consisted entirely of women, but the defense attorney faced an uphill battle presenting the women as “average women” who were just hanging out with friends when they were subjected to sexual harassment and the very real threat rape.

Finally, although mainstream gay & lesbian rights organizations privilege the passage of “hate crimes” legislation, none of these groups took up the cause of the NJ7. Perhaps the combination of anti-Black racism, transphobia, and the fact that the NJ7 defended themselves does not lend itself to a sufficiently palatable cause for a movement whose strategy is to show that gays and lesbians are “sympathetic” enough to be protected. It could be that Buckle’s attempt to argue that he was the victim of an anti-heterosexual male “hate crime” (and who is currently pursuing a multi-million dollar civil suit against all seven women to profit from this claim) came too close to exposing a weakness of the “hate crimes” approach — that it can be and is turned against LGBTQ folks, especially people of color, more often than they’d like to admit.

The case of the NJ7 doesn’t fit into any of these boxes, even though it involves racial profiling, criminalization and incarceration of people of color, violence against women, and homophobic violence. However, when we center the experiences of young, low-income, LGBTQ people of color like the women attacked that night, we transform our conceptions of what counts as “police brutality,” “violence against women,” and “homophobic attacks,” which creates opportunities for more strategic cross-movement coalitions and cultivates critical organizing strategies that we may not have considered.

AIN’T I A SURVIVOR? BLACK LESBIANS AS LEGITIMATE SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

Once they pulled up on us, and the guns were drawn, and they told us to get on the way, they never stated what had taken place

– Terrain Dandridge
On the experience of being arrested by police without being told why, June 2008

A critical aspect of the silence around the NJ7 case is the central role played by police in acting on and enforcing myths that portray people of color as dangerous and violent, women of color as incapable of being violated, and queer and gender non-conforming women as both. It is the police who usually serve as the front lines of the prison industrial complex (PIC) by making highly discretionary decisions in terms of profiling, investigation,

arrest, and charging that ultimately drive who goes to prison, for what, and for how long.

In the case of the NJ7, law enforcement officers’ perceptions and roles as enforcers of race, gender, and class systems immediately framed the women as *perpetrators* rather than *targets* of violence — pre-determining how they would be perceived by the press, the public, the courts, and the punishment system. Police characterized the incident as one of “gang violence” by a group of Black lesbians, rather than as one of homophobic and misogynist sexual and physical violence by a straight man against a group of women. Based in large part on the police version of the events, the media constructed and reinforced identities of “killer lesbians” forming “a seething Sapphic septet,” and a “lesbian wolf pack,” before the courts and prison industrial complex took over their enforcement and punishment. How police responded to and investigated this case drove its ultimate outcome.



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Most blatantly, police officers refused to credit the women's and witnesses' statements that there were two men who the women did not know and whose involvement in the incident was documented on videotape, who fought with Buckle. The police failed to pursue any other leads, including conducting forensics on the knife they claimed was the assault weapon. Even when Buckle ultimately said that he had been stabbed by two men, and not by the seven women at the scene, police did not pursue other potential suspects, and the machine of the PIC rolled forward in its systematic punishment of the Black women. No matter what other evidence existed for further investigation, the officers' understanding of the event was already solidified because of their perception of who could legitimately claim the status of "victim of violence." The women did not conform to a dominant notion of legitimate "femininity" because of the ways in which people of color and low-income folks, as well as queer folks, are marginalized by mainstream notions of gender. Black women, trans women, butch lesbians, and poor women are not considered "real women" by dominant standards. Therefore, the police, the media, the judge, and the jury would not perceive or represent the women *as women*, nor as legitimate victims of Buckle's violence, no matter what evidence was available.

GENDER/RACE/YOUTH POLICING AS A MAPPING TOOL FOR NEIGHBORHOOD "CLASS CLEANSING"

**How is it a group (and not a gang)
of friends can't go...anywhere they
choose for that matter, and just be!**

— Kimma Walker, June 2008

Gender non-conformity is not only the justification for the arrest and prosecution of the NJ7, but is in fact the very basis on which a whole system of class marginalization is happening in the West Village where they were attacked and arrested. The arrest of the women is part of a long-term gentrification

process happening in the West Village, which has been identified as a profit-generating tourist destination. The judge presiding over the NJ7 case explicitly made this clear when he commented in court that this type of "incident" creates an unsafe place for tourism." As a result of gentrification, marginally housed queer youth of color experience escalating police violence. FIERCE!, an organization mobilizing queer youth of color to preserve the West Village, recently conducted a survey that found that 70% of LGBTQ youth of color report police targeting and profiling, and 61% report that no reason was given by the police when they were approached or arrested. As gentrification escalates, the question of who is understood as a "legitimate resident" of the neighborhood is continuously raised. For example, during the prosecution of members of the NJ7, some jurists questioned why the women were in the West Village and the DA asked if they could afford to even be there.

Private developers and businesses seeking profit potential in the increasingly expensive neighborhood advocate for intensified policing of young LGBTQ people of color. Because so many queer youth of color are low-income, the *purpose* of simultaneous race, gender, and youth policing is to facilitate "class-cleansing" of the neighborhood. The seven women attacked two years ago were arrested and incarcerated because the *combination* of their identities disrupts dominant ideas about who should be valued, which poses a concrete profit threat to private business interests in the West Village. They were targeted, like other LGBTQ youth of color in the neighborhood, because their very *existence* undermines a larger population control project driven towards profit.



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ORGANIZING FROM THE INTERSECTIONS

Let the justice system call it
I'm a big black dyke
With no fears and not afraid to fight

— excerpt from poem written by Terrain Dandridge

Organizing from the intersections does not suggest add the marginalized identity and stir, but to allow the experiences from the margins transform and drive our political work. We must organize to free the two women of the seven, Venice Brown and Patreese Brown, who are still incarcerated and isolated from their loved ones. (Terrain Dandridge and

Renata Hill, two of the four women who were incarcerated, were recently released from prison. Dandridge was freed having been found innocent for insufficient evidence and Hill won an appeal and will be given a new trial.) **We must also rally around all seven women as they experience ongoing consequences from the entire event, including a civil suit that is just beginning.** Due to the legal context, the best way to donate to the NJ7 is to Venice Brown's Bail Fund. You can send checks to:

attn: Michelle Laidlaw
Gibbons PC
One Gateway Center
Newark, NJ 07102-5310

Checks should be made out to "Gibbons PC Attorney Trust Account." The memo line should state "Venice Brown Bail Fund."

The Bay Area NJ4 Solidarity Committee has engaged in fantastic media justice strategies including launching a website that reports on many of the developments of the case and features information about how to write to the three women still incarcerated. For more info, please visit <http://freenj4.wordpress.com/>. Also, women of color bloggers helped break the story about the NJ7, calling attention to how vital it is to conceptualize violence from the intersections of race, gender, class, and other identities. Visit <http://documentthesilence.wordpress.com/> and <http://www.brownfemipower.com/> for more info.

Through supporting the NJ7 and organizing from the intersections, we can better understand the systematic and intentional ways oppression operates, and use that information to create more innovative and effective organizing strategies. For example, instead of calling for stronger "hate crimes," FIERCE! is engaged in an exciting movement building project, building a base of over 1,000 LGBTQ youth of color in and around the West Village to actively resist gentrification and police violence, and build safe and loving communities in the neighborhood. For more information, please visit <http://fiercenyc.org/>. INCITE! is building cross-movement coalitions across the country by working with prison abolition, economic justice, queer liberation, sex worker rights, and anti-rape/domestic violence groups to sustain a project to end law enforcement violence against women of color and trans people of color. To get involved, please visit <http://incite-national.org>.

The quotes in this article from Terrain Dandridge and Kimma Walker were available as a result of the media justice work done by the Bay Area NJ4 Solidarity Committee.



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