BE GAY DO CRIME. The mantra resounds through time and space, but I remember this phrase being an oft- repeated feature of gay culture a few years ago, both online in meme form and irl (1). In itself, it requires little explanation: we're gay (or queer or trans or whatever), and sometimes the things we want to do are illegal, and sometimes the government makes us or our bodies or our relationships themselves illegal.

This meme, however, carries connections that might be missed by many observers. One of the early manifestations of this meme was a skeleton carrying a banner emblazoned with those iconic words, wearing a sash reading "COMMUNES," and carrying a torch labeled "ANARCHY." At the bottom of the image:
"Many blame queers for the decline of this society—we take pride in this. Some believe that we intend to shred-to-bits this civilization and its moral fabric—they couldn't be more accurate. We're often described as depraved, decadent, and revolting—but oh, they ain't seen nothing yet." (2)

These searing sentences come from the essay Criminal Intimacy, written by the Mary Nardini Gang. They were an informal group of criminal queers involved with the Bash Back! network—and Bash Back! were the faggots being gay and doing crime long before it was cool.

A Brief History of Bash Back!
Bash Back! was a queer insurrectionary anarchist network that existed from 2007-2011. It was initially formed to organize a queer anarchist presence at the protests against the Democratic National Convention and Republican National Convention in the summer of 2008, both of which involved anarchists and others from around the country. The network quickly grew afterwards, as it provided a previously-lacking organizational framework to connect queer anarchists at a national level. There were two subsequent national Bash Back! convergences, in 2009 and 2010, with some participants already declaring the death of Bash Back! in advance of the 2010 convergence (3). After that it petered out, but the beautiful damage was done. Queer excess oozed into many facets of the anarchist scene and beyond.

It's difficult to make sweeping statements about what exactly Bash Back! did, since each local chapter was fully autonomous, and there was no centrally-decided strategy or even ideology beyond some brief points of unity regarding diversity of tactics and opposition to assimilation into hetero-capitalist society. (3) Some of the most spirited communiqués submitted under the Bash Back! name mention attacking gaybashers, fighting Nazis, protesting corporate Pride events, disrupting service at homophobic churches via many tactics including queer making out, vandalizing said homophobic churches, vandalizing police cars, taking part in riots, and hosting illegal gay dance parties. (4) In addition to those dramatic examples, Bash Back! made lasting cultural shifts in both the North American anarchist space and, I would argue, society at large.

I talked with some older comrades who were around then, one a participant in Bash Back!, the other an admirer from afar and a participant in other queer struggles at the time, who provided some perspective. Anarchism before Bash Back! was patriarchal, stuffy, and stiff. Bash Back! forced the issue of

queerness, of addressing misogyny and rape culture, of engaging in conflictual street action as a matter of passionate desire rather than sad duty. By the time I entered anarchist spaces, it was already the case that the majority of comrades were queer. That was not always the case. Bash Back! was a huge reason why things shifted. The social landscape when Bash Back! existed had a more omnipresent, but at the same time less openly genocidal, form of homo- and transphobia, compared to what we deal with today. (5) One comrade tells me of queer friends expressing a fear of weirding-out straight comrades, like "I don't want them to think I'm hitting on them." Something unthinkable today, at least in my experience—if anything, I think anarchists might tend to fear not being queer enough! Bash Back! pushed an intense, in-your-face, publicly affectionate and joyfully militant form of queerness in a time where, more than today, any visible queerness could lead to some very real social consequences.

Bash Back! also anticipated, even prefigured, the wider acceptance of queerness in broader society, exemplified by the "transgender tipping point" of 2014 (6) and gay marriage's legalization in 2015. This is a little sacrilegious to say, because the last thing Bash Back! wanted was acceptance into mainstream society. God forbid! These were the fags and dykes who explicitly protested against queer struggle being confined to advocacy for the legalization of gay marriage and the repealment of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. (7) Not because they didn't desire freedoms for gay people, but because they desired freedoms far more profound than inclusion in the traditional institution of marriage and complicity with American empire. But something we forget is that even woefully insufficient rights and milquetoast societal acceptance are won through struggle. LGBTQ+ politicians, pronouns in corporate email signatures, the vast proliferation of commodities marketed towards queers, more and more people knowing what "transgender" even is, for better or worse—none of these is liberation, but neither are they evidence of unequivocal defeat. The line between cooptation—the phenomenon of the dominant society absorbing characteristics of or partially satisfying the demands of a radical social movement in order to ward off deeper societal transformation—and the partial victory of a real cultural shift, is not as clear-cut as some might claim (8).

It is true that if in the 2010's we reached a "transgender tipping point" and mainstreaming of gay culture, the weight has once again shifted and plunged us into the slowly boiling pot of social cleansing. As I would imagine most Bash Back! faggots already knew then, and anyone else can see clearly with hindsight, visibility is a trap. Still, Bash Back! contributed to a wave of forceful queer self-assertion, of queers carving out a place in society. The most visionary of them were carving to cleave this society apart entirely—we're not there yet, but the cuts are going deeper and deeper.

The Mary Nardini Gang

Throughout Bash Back!'s existence, the Midwest held a particularly high density of active chapters, and from this region hailed the Milwaukee-based Mary Nardini Gang. They were named after Italian-American anarchist Mary Nardini, who lived in Milwaukee in the early 20th century. Milwaukee had a vibrant Italian anarchist community at the time, who were largely influenced

by the legendary proponent of propaganda by the deed, Luigi Galleani; Nardini was said to be their “guiding light.” She received life in prison after being blamed both for inciting a riot that resulted in a shootout between anarchists and police, and for a later bombing that left 9 Milwaukee police officers dead—a bombing which happened when she was already in jail for the aforementioned riot. (9)

I’ll end with some sections from Criminal Intimacy, the text of theirs that adorned the meme at the beginning, because I feel that its words have something to offer us in the escalating repressive climate of 2026. They expand on what is gestured at in the slogan “be gay do crime,” that when we have criminality ascribed to us, there is freedom in embracing it, rather than grasping for respectability:

> “The machinery of control has rendered our very existence illegal. We’ve endured the criminalization and crucifixion of our bodies, our sex, our unruly genders. Raids, witch-hunts, burnings at the stake. We’ve occupied the space of deviants, of whores, of perverts, and abominations. This culture has rendered us criminal, and of course, in turn, we’ve committed our lives to crime. In the criminalization of our pleasures, we’ve found the pleasure to be had in crime! In being outlawed for who we are, we’ve discovered that we are indeed fucking outlaws! […]
> We queers and other insurgents have developed what good folks might call a criminal intimacy. We are exploring the material and affective solidarity fostered between outlaws and rebels. In our obstruction of law, we’ve illegally discovered the beauty in one another. In revealing our desire to our partners in crime, we’ve come to know each other more intimately than legality could ever allow. In desire, we produce conflict. And in conflict with capital, we may have found an escape route from the deadening of our lives. Our gang’s discourse is conflict.”

However, they point out that embracing a criminal intimacy with one another isn’t merely a reaction against our circumstances, but a way of creating relationships that is both a means to intensify the struggle for liberation, and an end in itself:

> “The real power expressed in our crimes isn’t in the damage caused to our enemies or even in the various improvements of our material conditions (though we take pleasure in both). The power we express is in the empowerments and relationships we’re creating. In our sex and our attack—when we pull down our masks and share our cache of bricks—we are expanding the possibilities of our affinity. In our crime, we create dynamic new relationships of criminal intimacies. In these possibilities, we are learning how we might, together, reduce this world to rubble.”

1. https:// knowyourmeme.com/sensitive/memes/be-gay-do-crime

2. a gang of criminal queers [Mary Nardini Gang]. 2009. “Criminal Intimacy.” In Queer Ultraviolence, edited by Fray Baroque and Tegan Eanelli, 53-57.

3. Pink and Black Attack. 2010. “Reflections on the Demise of Bash Back!.” In Queer Ultraviolence, edited by Fray Baroque and Tegan Eanelli, 156-162.

4. See various communiqués in the aforementioned Queer Ultraviolence anthology.

5. “Less openly genocidal” homophobia and transphobia precisely because these institutions were stronger at that time, not yet weakened by 15 years of insurrection, capitalist crisis, and open gender fuckery.

6. “Transgender Tipping Point,” Wikipedia, October 4, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Transgender_tipping_point.

7. Anonymous. 2009. “Washington, DC: Communiqué from the Forgotten, Human Rights Campaign HQ Glamdalized.” In Queer Ultraviolence, edited by Fray Baroque and Tegan Eanelli, 95-96.

8. On cooptation as simultaneously a defeat and a partial victory, David Graeber has this to say in “The Shock of Victory,” his classic post-mortem essay regarding the Anti-Globalization Movement of the late 90’s and early 2000’s: “Revolutionaries hear this line continually. If capitalism is left standing, if it begins to market revolutionaries’ once-subversive ideas, it shows that the capitalists really won. The revolutionaries have lost; they’ve been coopted. To me this entire line of reasoning is absurd. Feminism was surely a revolutionary force: what could be more radical than reversing thousands of years of gender oppressing lying at the very heart of what we think we are and can be and should be as human beings? Can we say that feminism lost, that it achieved nothing, just because corporate culture felt obliged to pay lip service to condemning sexism and capitalist firms began marketing feminist books, movies, and other products? Of course not. Unless you’ve managed to destroy capitalism and patriarchy in one fell blow, this is one of the clearest signs that you’ve gotten somewhere. Presumably any effective road to revolution will involve endless moments of cooptation, endless victorious campaigns, endless little insurrectionary moments or moments of flight and covert autonomy.”

9. “Mary Nardini.” The Anarchist Library. Accessed October 31, 2026. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ mary-nardini-gang-mary-nardini.