

“History isn’t something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities.”

-Marsha P. Johnson

Viewpoint Essay

Dr. O'Donnell

21 March 2022

Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera: Pioneers of a Queer Revolution in New York- The Stonewall Riots

How two notable transgender women of color fought for LGBT+ equality in the 1960s

By R. C. Lynne

Introduction:

When people hear the word “revolution”, they often think about the history of wars against other nations. However, revolutions are more than just wars. They are moments of change started through people. In the 1960s, anti-queer legislation enforced by the police backed many LGBT+ Americans into the closet. However, trans women like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera refused to sit back act as bystanders. These women stood against the police and are credited with starting a queer revolution against bigotry. Though more members of the LGBT+ community were involved, it is still important to honor the trans women who put their lives at stake for future members of the LGBT+ community.

Transgender women, especially women of color, are more likely to be overlooked in history. Trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) refuse to view transgender women as actual women. Other times transgender women are only viewed as gay men performing in drag, as opposed to female drag queens. These opinions can erase important queer history, so it is important to remember the transgender women who paved the way for equality for everyone in the LGBT+ community.

Background:

In order to understand the bravery of the trans women, it is important to know what led up to this revolution. Without a doubt, the leading causes for the Stonewall riots was the anti-gay legislation combined with police brutality. Just one example of this was the state laws that prohibited public displays of homosexual affection in public. Though Stonewall occurred in New York, anti-gay laws were all over the U.S.

Since the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declared homosexuality a mental illness in the 1950s, this declaration was used as fuel to justify homophobia from lawmakers and the police (Baughey-Gill). Essentially, the only way to remain safe was to find a secretive queer-friendly safe space, or an LGBT+ individual needed to remain closeted. Any sign of same-sex affection displayed in public led to legal, and sometimes violent, repercussions. Safe spaces were scarce due to constant police raids against queer hangout locations.

In the Greenwich Village, located in Manhattan, NY, the Stonewall Inn rose to popularity. This club attracted drag queens, gay youth, and people struggling with housing and identity. One of the best features of this club was that it allowed dancing for same-sex couples, as most other clubs prohibited such actions. Needless to say, this was a hot spot for LGBT+ people. This club was run by the Genovese mob, a notable mafia organization from New York City (Pruitt). The mob leaders gained control through threatening to out any of the club employees as homosexuals. Since the mafia controlled the club, they obtained intel about potential police raids. With that knowledge, they hid alcohol since liquor was prohibited to sell without the proper license.

Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera:



Figure 1: Figure 1: Marsha P. Johnson

As a queer person myself, I am incredibly grateful for everything these women did to start a revolution despite the repercussions of the law.

One of the most notable individuals from the Stonewall riots was Marsha P. Johnson, a trans woman of color born in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Marsha was a prominent queer figure in New York City. Her pride was even apparent in her name. Marsha declared the “P” in her name to stand for “pay it no mind” (WAMS). No matter how society viewed her, she lived her life openly queer. She was known for her participation in the art of drag. Outside of performing, she helped homeless and struggling queer youth in the city (UCNJ). She advocated for queer people who were too scared to advocate for themselves.

Marsha played a big role in the Stonewall Riots as she was one of the first people to retaliate against the police. Though people cannot exactly pinpoint who threw the first brick, it is speculated from interviews with other Stonewall Veterans that Marsha was one of the first people to do so. However, there is no unified agreement on who threw the first bottle or brick (O’Neill).

Unfortunately, Marsha passed away in 1992 from taking her own life. However, she fought for queer liberation until she died. She worked with other trans women to form organizations to further fight for LGBT+ equality. As an HIV positive trans woman, she spread awareness for the disease to break the stigma (WAMS). She also continuously helped trans

women find housing and financial support. Anytime Marsha found a queer person in need, she lent a helping hand.

Sylvia Rivera was another prominent trans woman who advocated for gay liberation alongside of Marsha Johnson. She was a big advocate for trans women, especially trans women



Figure 2: Sylvia Rivera

of color. Sylvia was extremely close to Marsha thanks to the drag scene they both participated in. Like Martha, many suspect that she was also one of the first people to resist arrest at the Stonewall riots and throw bricks and bottles at the police. Before the events at Stonewall, Sylvia also participated in

protests for African American equality and the peace movement (Rothberg). Throughout Sylvia's life, she always advocated for justice and revolutionary change. Post Stonewall, she continuously stood up for trans women until she passed away in 2002.

[The Stonewall Rebellion:](#)

The Stonewall Rebellion officially began on the night of June 29, 1969. Initially, the police raided the Stonewall Inn to confiscate liquor because the club did not have the proper certification to serve alcohol. However, the police planned a second raid to shut down the club completely (Pruitt). Later that evening, the police attempted to arrest the people inside of the Stonewall Inn. It was illegal for people to dress up/ impersonate those of the opposite sex, so the drag queens and trans women were targeted. However, these women were not going down

without a fight. As the women resisted arrest, bottles and bricks began to hit the police in retaliation. This was the start of the Stonewall Rebellion.

Once the police realized arrests were not going to be easy, they fled. Queer folk in the club began to barricade themselves. Protestors took items from the street and began to use them against the police force in response. Though the police were gone



Figure 3: Image of the Stonewall Riots

momentarily, this was not the end of the revolution; it was only the first night. The following day, the club reopened. However, the police came back, and they were armed to fight. They began to spray tear gas towards the protestors for hours and hours on end. For the next few days, this pattern continued.

Aftermath:

After Stonewall, more queer people began follow in the steps of the brave people from the riots. A year after the riots, the first pride event took place in New York (Pruitt). Thousands of LGBT+ people joined in on this celebration. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera went on to start the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1971. This organization aided trans sex workers to give them shelter and support. STAR was revolutionary because it was the first organization to be led by a queer person of color. Being led by a trans woman of color made this organization even more of a revelation because they were and still are the most targeted

members of the LGBT+ community, but this does not dismiss the discrimination of other members in the community. Marsha and Sylvia were able to maintain this shelter in the



Sylvia Rivera (center) with other Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.). [From Come Out (Dec. 7, p. 1)] Photographer Ellen Rubin. Reprinted by permission from National History Archives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center

Figure 4: Image of STAR Organization and Some of its Members

Greenwich Village through sex work, a very dangerous way for trans women to obtain income. This organization eventually ceased in the mid-1970s, but it is still an important part of queer history.

Conclusion:

Thanks to the brave trans women who partook in the Stonewall Uprisings, queer people were able to stand up for their right to live proudly. After Stonewall, there was still a long way to go for LGBT+ equality, but this was a critical moment in queer history. It is important to recognize that Marsha and Sylvia were not the only important people who took part in Stonewall. However, this does not mean people should not celebrate the hard work and bravery that these women took part in. They put their lives on the line to make change, and queer history would not be the same if it were not for them.



Figure 5: Transgender Flag

Recommended Readings

Baughey-Gill, Sarah. *Western Washington University When Gay Was Not Okay with the APA: A Historical Overview of Homosexuality and Its Status as Mental Disorder*.

2011. cedar.wwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=salish_pubs.

“About Marsha P. Johnson.” *Marsha P Johnson Memorial Elizabeth Native and Transgender Activist for LGBTQ+ Rights*, Office of LGBTQ+ Affairs- County of Union, New Jersey, 2022. ucnj.org/mpj/about-marsha-p-johnson/.

NSWP. “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries Found Star House.” *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries Found STAR House | Global Network of Sex Work Projects*, nswp.org/timeline/street-transvestite-action-revolutionaries-found-star-house.

O'Neill, Shane. “Who Threw the First Brick at ... - The New York Times.” *Nytimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/us/first-brick-at-stonewall-lgbtq.html>.

Pruitt, Sarah. “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots? A Timeline of the 1969 Uprising.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 13 June 2019, history.com/news/stonewall-riots-timeline.

Rothberg, Emma. “Sylvia Rivera.” *National Women's History Museum*, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sylvia-rivera>.

WAMS. “Life Story: Marsha P. Johnson.” *Women & the American Story*, 5 Nov. 2021, <https://wams.nyhistory.org/growth-and-turmoil/growing-tensions/marsha-p-johnson/>.