



Complex World

Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and the Fight for Trans Rights

Historical Context

Gay, lesbian, and trans people (often identified by outdated terms “transsexual” or “transvestite”), engaged in forms of protest and community-building in the first half of the 20th century, but actions were often insular or involved isolated incidents, due to the pressures of anti-gay laws and prevailing social restrictions. During the 1960s and 70s, a time marked by civil rights struggles and growing LGBTQ+ activism, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson emerged as two of the most courageous and outspoken advocates for transgender and gender-nonconforming people. Both Latine and Black trans women, they played critical roles in the Stonewall Uprising of 1969, a landmark event in LGBTQ+ history sparked by police violence against queer people at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. In the aftermath, Rivera and Johnson co-founded STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) to support homeless trans youth, sex workers, and people rejected by mainstream gay rights organizations. At a time when trans people, especially trans people of color, faced daily violence, criminalization, and social exclusion, their activism challenged not only the legal system but also the narrow boundaries of inclusion within the broader LGBTQ+ movement. Some newly formed gay rights groups excluded trans people, and progress related to anti-discrimination laws, visibility, and acceptance did not always extend to the transgender community. At the 1973 Pride Parade in New York, organizers tried to prevent Rivera from speaking; she spoke anyway and was booed by the audience. Johnson and Rivera’s legacy is a reminder that the fight for justice must center the most marginalized, and that trans liberation has always been intertwined with racial, economic, and gender justice.

Connection to Habit

The activism of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson reminds us that history is shaped by people navigating uncertain and often hostile environments. In the 1960s and 70s, they could not predict how their resistance would shape future movements, but they acted with courage in a world that offered them few protections. Using the Complex World habit of mind helps students recognize that Rivera and Johnson made bold decisions in a time when their identities were criminalized, even by other activists. Their fight for trans rights was not straightforward, it required challenging systems of power within and beyond the LGBTQ+ movement. By examining their story through multiple perspectives, we see the layered complexities of identity, resistance, and belonging, and are reminded that history is never simple or singular.

Discussion Questions

- What risks did Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson face by publicly standing up for trans rights in the 1960s and 70s?
- How would their fight for trans rights have been seen by law enforcement, the government, or the media in that era?
- How might Rivera and Johnson's experiences as trans women of color have shaped their view of justice differently than white gay activists or politicians of the time?
- Why do you think mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations often excluded them? What does this tell us about divisions within social movements?
- What does their story teach us about the challenges of working for justice in a world that doesn't always recognize your humanity?
- In what ways are the uncertainties they faced still relevant to activists today?
- How can the Complex World habit of mind help us better understand the decisions Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson made?
- What does their legacy reveal about how social change often comes from the most marginalized voices?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Highlighters, pens, sticky notes, chart paper or whiteboard
- [Marsha P. Johnson Quotes on Gay Liberation and Trans Rights](#)
- Excerpt from Sylvia Rivera's 1973 Pride Rally Speech:
 - [Video of Speech](#) (5 mins 28 secs)
 - [Speech Transcript](#)
 - [Speech Transcript \[Redacted Version\]](#)

Teacher Note: Sylvia Rivera's 1973 speech includes explicit language. Consider previewing the video and preparing students for mature language that reflects the raw emotion and frustration of marginalized activists. Encourage respectful discussion focused on historical context and the power of voice.

Step 1: Introduction [3 mins]

Introduce Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, co-founders of STAR and key figures in the early fight for trans rights. Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were pioneering trans activists in the 1960s and 70s. They were instrumental in the Stonewall Uprising. They advocated for those most marginalized, trans people of color, sex workers, and unhoused LGBTQ+ youth, often being excluded by mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations. Explain that students will analyze primary sources from both activists and engage in interactive activities to explore their contributions and the complexities they faced.

Step 2: Primary Source Analysis [15-20 mins]

Have students answer the following questions after watching or reading the excerpt from Sylvia Rivera's 1973 Pride speech and the quotes from Marsha P. Johnson.

- What similarities do you see in Rivera and Johnson's messages?
- What contradictions are they calling out within the LGBTQ+ community?
- How do their words challenge us to understand history through multiple perspectives?
- What can we learn about the complexity of human experiences within community groups?

Step 3: Think-Pair-Share [10 mins]

In pairs, students discuss their responses and prepare to share insights from their analysis. Encourage students to cite phrases and reflect on emotion, resistance, and marginalization.

Step 4: Whole-Class Carousel [10-15 mins]

Post three prompts on large paper around the room and have students contribute to one and add symbols/emojis or comments agreeing or disagreeing with another peer's statement:

- What do Marsha P. Johnson's quotes suggest about the importance of solidarity in the LGBTQ+ community?
- What does Sylvia Rivera's speech suggest about the importance of solidarity in the LGBTQ+ community? How might people at the time have misunderstood or rejected her message?
- What connections can you draw to modern-day trans rights struggles?
- Exit Ticket Prompt: Choose either Sylvia Rivera or Marsha P. Johnson. What difficult choice did they make in a complex world, and how did it shape the fight for trans rights?

Primary Sources

Marsha P. Johnson Quotes on Gay Liberation and Trans Rights

#1: "You never completely have your rights, one person, until you all have your rights."

#2: "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."

#3: "How many years has it taken people to realize that we are all brothers and sisters and human beings in the human race?"

#4: "Darling, I want my gay rights now. I think it's about time the gay brothers and sisters got their rights... especially the women."

#5: "I'd like to see the gay revolution get started... If a transvestite doesn't say 'I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite,' then nobody else is going to hop up there and say 'I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite' for them."

#6: "I was no one, nobody, from Nowheresville until I became a drag queen. That's what made me in New York, that's what made me in New Jersey, that's what made me in the world."

#7: "No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us."

#8: "I know people think I'm a stupid little street queen out there begging for change 'cause there's nothing else she knows how to do."

#9: "I'll always be known [for] reaching out to young people who have no one to help them out, so I help them out with a place to stay or some food to eat or some change for their pocket. And they never forget it. A lot of times I've reached my hand out to people in the gay community that just didn't have nobody to help them when they were down and out."

#10: "They call me a legend in my own time, because there were so many queens gone that I'm one of the few queens left from the '70s and the '80s."

Primary Source

Y'all Better Quite Down", Sylvia Rivera's Pride Rally Speech (June 24, 1973)

[Redacted Version]

I may be... You all better quiet down. I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every [redacted] week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a [redacted] thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped in jail? Now think about it. They've been beaten up and raped after they've had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and to try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women's Liberation and they write STAR, not to the women's groups, they do not write to men, they write STAR because we're trying to do something for them. I have been to jail. I have been raped, and beaten. Many times. By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this [redacted]. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What [redacted] wrong with you all? Think about that! I do not believe in a revolution, but you all do. I believe in the Gay Power. I believe in us getting our rights, or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights. That's all I wanted to say to you people. If you all want to know about the people in jail – and do not forget Bambi L'Amour, Andorra Marks, Kenny Messner, and other gay people in jail – come and see the people at STAR House on Twelfth Street on 640 East Twelfth Street between B and C apartment 14. The people are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class white club. And that's what you all belong to! Revolution now! Gimme a 'G'! Gimme an 'A'! Gimme a 'Y'! Gimme a 'P'! Gimme an 'O'! Gimme a 'W'! Gimme an 'E'! Gimme an 'R'! huh— Gay power. Louder! Gay Power!

Primary Source

Y'all Better Quite Down", Sylvia Rivera's Pride Rally Speech (June 24, 1973)

[Original Version]

I may be... You all better quiet down. I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a goddamn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped in jail? Now think about it. They've been beaten up and raped after they've had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and to try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women's Liberation and they write STAR, not to the women's groups, they do not write to men, they write STAR because we're trying to do something for them. I have been to jail. I have been raped, and beaten. Many times. By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck's wrong with you all? Think about that! I do not believe in a revolution, but you all do. I believe in the Gay Power. I believe in us getting our rights, or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights. That's all I wanted to say to you people. If you all want to know about the people in jail – and do not forget Bambi L'Amour, Andorra Marks, Kenny Messner, and other gay people in jail – come and see the people at STAR House on Twelfth Street on 640 East Twelfth Street between B and C apartment 14. The people are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class white club. And that's what you all belong to! Revolution now! Gimme a 'G'! Gimme an 'A'! Gimme a 'Y'! Gimme a 'P'! Gimme an 'O'! Gimme a 'W'! Gimme an 'E'! Gimme an 'R'! huh— Gay power. Louder! Gay Power!"