

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

MARSHA P. JOHNSON

activist, innovator

“How many years has it taken people to realize that we are all brothers and sisters and human beings in the human race...we’re all in this rat race together!”

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COURTESY OF NETFLIX

Background Information

Born August 24, 1945; Died July 6, 1992

Marsha Johnson experienced a difficult childhood due to the intersection of her queer identity and Christian upbringing. She was often punished for expressing herself by wearing clothing that wasn't traditionally seen as "masculine." After high school, Johnson moved to Greenwich Village in New York City. In New York, Johnson was sometimes homeless.ⁱ Eventually, she found joy as a drag queen and became a prominent leader in the LGBTQ+ community.

Johnson's Resistance

Johnson was present in 1969 when the police raided the Stonewall Inn, proclaiming, "I got my civil rights!" and throwing a shot glass at a mirror. Some believe this action sparked the riotsⁱⁱ. The Stonewall Riots began in the early hours of June 28, 1969, when New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village. The police raid led to a six-day violent riot, and many people were arrested.ⁱⁱⁱ The Stonewall riots were a catalyst for the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the U.S. and around the world.

As Black trans woman, Johnson has consistently been overlooked, both as a participant in the Stonewall uprising, and more generally, LGBTQ+ activism. As the broader gay and lesbian movement shifted toward leadership from White cisgender men and women, trans people of color were swept to the outskirts of the movement. In 1970, Johnson co-founded the Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries (STAR) with Sylvia Rivera to provide resources for homeless queer youth, which was revolutionary. In 1972, she joined the queer performance troupe Hot Peaches, and in 1974 Andy Warhol painted her portrait as part of his series "Ladies and Gentlemen."

Achievements

Johnson fought for queer rights all her life and later joined ACT UP to advocate for people with AIDS. In 1992, shortly after the NYC Pride March, Johnson's body was found in the Hudson River. The police ruled it a suicide and refused to investigate the death further^{iv}. It is generally believed that Johnson was murdered. Her death is symbolic of the widespread violence against trans women in America.

Essential Questions

1. Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans woman, was murdered, and yet her death was never investigated. Under-investigation of Black trans murders continues today. What can you do to fight against this? Page | 2

2. Despite having her own troubles, Marsha P. Johnson was endlessly kind. How can you emulate Johnson's kindness more in your own lives?

3. ***"How many years has it taken people to realize that we are all brothers and sisters and human beings in the human race...we're all in this rat race together!"***
 - a. Do you agree with this statement? Should all groups be working in coalition or working independently for their cause? Why or Why not?

ⁱ Rosenthal, Michele. "Marsha P. Johnson." Queer Portraits in History. 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.queerportraits.com/bio/griffin-gracy>. Obtained 29 October 2019.

ⁱⁱ Biography.com Editors (2019). "Marsha P. Johnson Biography." Biography.com. Retrieved from <https://www.biography.com/activist/marsha-p-johnson#citation>. Accessed 29 October 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Villet, Grey (2019). "Stonewall Riots." History.com. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>. Accessed 29 October 2019.

^{iv} Tran, Chrysanthemum (2018). "When Remembering Stonewall, We Need to Listen to Those Who Were There." Them.us. Retrieved from <https://www.them.us/story/who-threw-the-first-brick-at-stonewall>.