

Marsha P. Johnson: Who Creates the Most Impact?

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Abstract

Marsha P. Johnson was a Black transgender activist and one of the leaders of the Stonewall Riots. As a Black trans woman, who was also a poor sex worker, Johnson was greatly disadvantaged. She struggled with police, white and middle-class queers, and fighting against the European idea of the superiority of mind over heart. Despite this, she continued to try to change the world for the better. Without her, so much of the progress society has made to accept queerness would not be possible. Marsha P. Johnson proves that the most vulnerable members of a community tend to be the ones to create the largest impact.

Keywords

Marsha P. Johnson, trans, activist, Stonewall Riots, queer

Marsha P. Johnson was one of the leaders of the Stonewall Riots and fought back against the institutions that oppress and antagonize Black people, namely the police. Just like most people there, Johnson was a working-class trans woman of colour who fought against the police because she knew that not only did they oppress Black people, they also upheld the oppression of all queer people, Black or not, since they threatened the norm. She understood that the police worked to uphold power to the most privileged of people, and instead of trying to fit into that, she sought to destroy it. Her determination to continue fighting the police, accompanied by the fact that she and the other queer people there with her almost burned the police, caused the police to back off, and therefore "the modern U.S. 'gay rights' movement was born" (Blum). Without Johnson and the resistance against oppressive institutions, specifically the police, the current U.S. gay rights movement would not exist, so queer people would not have the rights they do today. One of these rights is the ability to celebrate pride today. On the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, two pride parades occurred in the same place. The Gay Pride Parade was one of them, being corporately funded and allowing

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politicians and police to attend while not including many trans and working-class queer people. The other was the Queer Liberation march, which was the opposite due to the lack of corporate funding and attendance from politicians and police. The existence of the Queer Liberation march, which fought to continue Johnson's movement for all queer people, especially the most vulnerable, is evidence enough of her impact. Without her, such a march would not have been possible, nor would it have occurred. However, it is also because of her that the Gay Pride Parade was able to occur despite the people involved accepting those she fought against and abandoning part of her values; she had still fought for them to have the right to do so. Marsha P. Johnson's involvement in the Stonewall Riots and resistance of the police, which actively continue to oppress Black and queer people, directly contributed to the rights queer people have today.

Marsha P. Johnson's struggle with police did not begin with Stonewall, but ten years before that. Her social location made her an especially vulnerable member of each of her social identities, and therefore particularly mistreated by police. As a Black drag queen and sex worker, Johnson suffered at the hands of the police and had to go to prison. She was especially targeted as a sex worker due to her queerness and race, as many others were. In Audre Lorde's *The Stonewall Reader*, there is an interview with Eric Marcus where Marsha states that drag queens from Harlem and the Bronx were arrested "... just for wearing a little bit of makeup down Forty-second street" (White 170). Even then, Johnson understood how her social identities interacted to make the police view her as a threat even before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality. Johnson brought awareness to the specific struggles of a Black queer woman in sex work at the hands of police and is referenced today when talking about the specific issues that marginalized women go through in sex work and how that connects to the need to legalize sex work. Unfortunately, this mistreatment from the police continued even after she was found dead on July 9, 1992. Her death was immediately ruled a suicide without much investigation; eventually, it was rediscussed and classified as a case of drowning but "... questions and suspicions remain and the case is still open" (Calafell 27). Not only does this show the lack of shock from the police at the death of a Black trans woman, but it proves that police, which are meant to protect, do not care to protect the people who need them most. It proves that the police were, and still are, the enemy of Black people and queer people. For this reason, many regard Johnson as a martyr and are inspired by her complete devotion to fighting for not just queer people but all people. Marsha P. Johnson's struggle with police inspires people today and helps pave the way for the marginalized poor and sex workers.

Due to how her social identities intersected, she did not only struggle with people outside of said social identities but also with people within them. Johnson was not only a trans woman, but she was also a Black and lower-class woman. Her experience differed from someone like Randy Wicker, a white gay man who was considered a leader of the gay rights movement. At the time, as a white man, he could not comprehend why these

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Black trans drag queens fought instead of trying to appear just like straight people. He could not comprehend why they would go the route of a revolution when they could easily try to just work their way into being accepted. Not understanding that that was not an option for them, not understanding that, unlike him, they were not just one step away from being 'normal', and not understanding that they sought to destroy the idea of a 'normal'. However, Wicker learns from this when he meets Johnson. Johnson befriends him, and he later says that "... [he's] very happy Stonewall happened. [He's] very happy the way things worked out" (White 172), leading to him working alongside her to push forward the movement to become what it is today.

Sadly, unlike Wicker, some queer people, especially gay organizations, never came to accept nor understand Marsha P. Johnson. Johnson and other trans queers of colour like Sylvia Rivera were denied access to other gay organizations. Those gay organizations, like Wicker, wanted to be viewed as just like straight people, and therefore, did not want people who were not only opposing that but were too different from 'normal' people in the first place. Unlike those gay organizations, Johnson opposed not only heteronormativity, but all forms of oppression, such as white supremacy and racism, misogyny and the gender binary, and classism. Johnson and Rivera's exclusion from these gay organizations resulted in the creation of STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries).

Johnson uses STAR to challenge a very European idea of dividing humans into mind, body, and soul, with the mind being seen as the most important, by showing the strength in valuing soul. Johnson understood that "the woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark; it is ancient; and it is deep" (Lorde 36). She understood that allowing her soul to be prominent in her actions is not a sign of weakness in her or other women, but in fact the opposite. She understood that caring for others is a way of strength and that there is strength in allowing others to care for her. Johnson created STAR to show exactly that; to give trans youth an opportunity to be cared for. By creating a home for homeless trans youth, especially trans youth who were the most vulnerable because they are people of colour, she created solidarity between trans youth and trans adults. STAR also allowed her to have a community of people to care for her because Johnson understood that she also needed to be cared for if she wanted to make change. Though STAR ended up disbanding due to lack of funding, Johnson still impacted the lives of those trans youth. She still gave them a home, a community, and a chance of living. Unlike other gay organizations, STAR understood the importance of soul and kindness and therefore ended up helping the people who needed it most, the most vulnerable of trans youth.

Marsha P. Johnson is evidence of how the least privileged of people can create the most change. She was strong; despite the police discriminating against her for her queerness, blackness, and poverty, she fought back and won. She started the current gay rights movement in the United States and created a large impact in the ongoing

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fight between queer people and the police. Johnson challenged the most privileged of people in the queer community. She refused to adhere to fit the norm and continued to try and destroy the idea of a norm, even if it resulted in her being shunned from gay organizations. She even challenged the European idea of soul being a sign of weakness, founding STAR to care for others and strengthen the trans community. It is undeniable that without Johnson, queer people would not have the rights they do now. However, though Marsha P. Johnson created a large amount of change, the fight is not over, and her work must be continued.

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