

BLACK QUEER TRAILBLAZERS: PAST AND PRESENT

By The Pitzer Queer-Trans+ Alliance

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Intersectionality isn't just important to the queer liberation movement and for the safety of all queer people, it is vital. Simply put, there is no queer movement or safety without the consideration, involvement, and prioritization of people of color. The same systems that police the movements, expressions, and sexual activities of queer bodies have long done so to Black bodies through the added traumas of enslavement, dehumanization, and brutality. Individuals of color are subjected to constant scrutiny of their sexuality and gender expression based on white supremacist constructions of masculinization and feminization. The road to liberation has been paved by queers of color, with Black women at the forefront of the most pivotal moments, theories, and initiatives in queer history. BIPOC are not a subsection or concession of the white-dominated mainstream LGBTQ+ movement to be marginalized or tokenized; they are and have always been at the center of the fight for queer justice, and any queer collective that does not center their concerns or go up in arms for Black liberation is therefore illegitimate. This issue seeks to honor Black History Month by providing short (and admittedly incomplete) snippets of the lives of some of the most influential Black queer figures in American history. Black queer history must be honored and engaged with every month, and the Queer-Trans Alliance graciously welcomes any feedback and suggestions on how to make Pitzer's queer club more engaging, safe, and welcoming for queer students of color.



Marsha P. Johnson

Marsha P. Johnson is perhaps the most well-known and talked-about Black queer historical figure in dominant culture, particularly for her perceived role in the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Born (AMAB) to a working-class family in New Jersey in 1945, young Marsha was reportedly not shy about expressing her feminine identity through her clothing but was forced to hide it after being bullied by her peers and sexually assaulted when she was 13. After graduating high school in 1963, she moved to New York City with only “a bag of clothes and \$15” in search of freedom and acceptance, to be found amid a marginalized yet vibrant subculture of divas and deviants. There, she began to wear gender-affirming clothes once again and officially named herself Marsha P. Johnson; the P stood for “Pay It No Mind,” Marsha’s motto and radically elusive response to questions about her gender and sexuality.

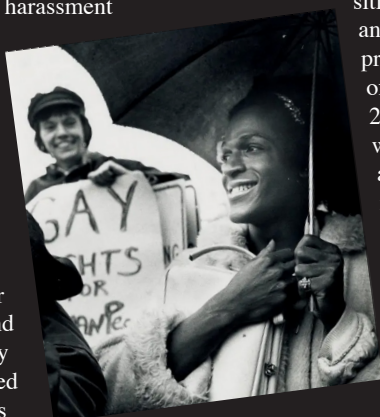
NYC was a very socially and legally hostile place for queer people at the time in spite of its lively underground scene, which for Marsha and others meant a life of unemployment, eviction and homelessness, police brutality and routine arrests, and various forms of harassment and physical violence.

Circumstance forced her into sex work, a highly criminalized labor then dominated by often deadly for trans women of color (highly demanded and typically sustained by closeted white married men in high positions of political or economic

power, such as Wall Street businessmen, seeking to live out their fetish fantasies in private while using their daytime activities to further endanger the lives of the women they used in effort to hide their shame).

While she continued to live this way, she also found her passion and rose to fame in the drag scene and was known in the queer community for her flamboyant eccentricity, relentlessly positive attitude, and commitment to uplifting and encouraging other young queers to accept themselves and their identities. It was through this disposition that she became a mentor and a mother of sorts to another prominent queer historical figure of color, Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002), a Puerto Rican trans woman known for her tireless activism surrounding low-income queer communities of color in the latter half of the 20th century.

On June 28, 1969, Marsha arrived a gay bar (often run by the mafia, they were some of the only places considered safe enough for queer people to



power,

considered safe enough for queer people to

gather) called the Stonewall Inn to find that the police had initiated one of their routine raids to rough up and intimidate queer people—and this time, the patrons were fighting back. Many different accounts have created confusion around the events of the riots as well as Marsha’s role in them; while she is often said to have “thrown the first brick” at the police thus starting the riots, her responses in later interviews indicate that she arrived after the riots had already started. What we do know for sure is that she was on the front lines, regardless of when she joined them, and played a great physical role in the revolt and disruption of police business that night. Including Marsha, the strongest force of the uprising came from young trans women who felt they had “nothing left to lose” and were beyond exasperated with the oppression and harassment they experienced on a daily basis.

Her life and legacy live on in the communities she touched. Brick by brick, she built the foundation of the queer liberation movement we know today. Her radical philosophy of self-acceptance, “happiness as a political tool,” and taking up space as an act of resistance are ever so important in the fight for trans survival.

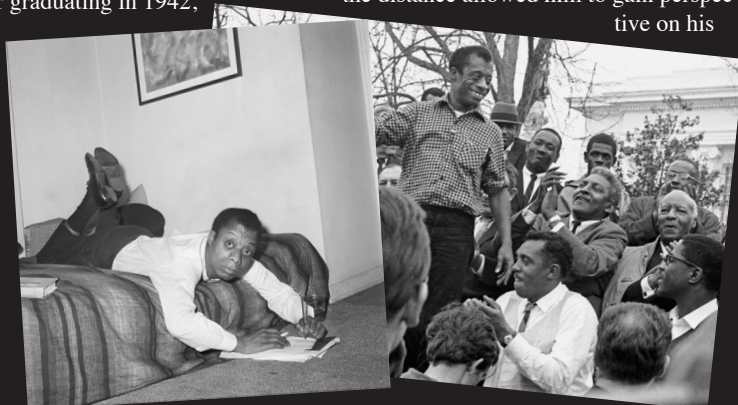
James Baldwin was and remains a central figure in black queer literary history, bringing an intersectionality into the American consciousness that was in many ways ahead of its time. A groundbreaking playwright, novelist, and essayist during the Civil Rights Era, his writing on the Black experience in America was a monumental contribution to the social and intellectual revolution taking place and continues to shape societal attitudes toward Black Americans today. Baldwin was born in August 1924 to a single mother in Harlem, New York. He developed a passion for reading and a gift for writing at an early age, displaying an ability well beyond his years, and he put his skills to work on his school magazine at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx.

As the eldest of nine children, he felt a serious responsibility to help take care of his family; after graduating in 1942, he put college on hold and worked in various jobs to support them.

In 1945, his friendship with writer Richard Wright landed him a fellowship through which his essays and short stories were first published in national

James Baldwin

magazines and newspapers. In 1948, he moved to Paris for another fellowship, and the distance allowed him to gain perspective on his



identity and position within American history:



It explores themes of sex and sin, religious morality and misogyny, poverty, abuse, and the persistence of pain and violence as a legacy of slavery and racism. In a critical moment, it focused on the complexity of identity and spiritual development in a system founded on oppression.

In the following years, Baldwin got to work incorporating depictions of homosexuality into his writing, exploring love between men and the complexity and

fluidity of human sexuality in works such as *Giovanni's Room* (1954) and *Just Above My Head* (1978). Homosexuality was extremely taboo at the time, and Baldwin was taking a huge risk in exposing himself to homophobic discrimination in addition to the blatant racism he already faced.

He often commented on his beliefs that rigid categories of sexuality and gender were another way of limiting freedom.

Through this philosophy, he drew a parallel between the queer and Black liberation movements that were unfolding on the basis of autonomy; in doing so he articulated, made visible, and became primarily through intellectual means, Baldwin emerged as a leader and architect of the Civil Rights Movement, to be considered along with MLK, Bayard Rustin, and other activists with whom he had friendships.

His experience of being Black and gay in America, then Black and gay in Europe, gave him a consistent "outsider status" and a unique experience of never "fitting" the assigned boxes of the dominant narrative; through essays on dehumanization and oppression of Black people, his openness about his relationships with men, and his ideas about the fluidity of human sexuality, he was able to write his own which has persisted long after his death in 1987. His complexity and legacy of "complicating" existing attitudes around Black American lives and sexuality live deep in the American consciousness and the fight for queer and sexual liberation today. a crucial point of intersection where few had dared before.

"Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I see where I came from very clearly... I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both."

In 1953, he published his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a deep and provocative semi-autobiography that speaks partly to his complicated relationship with his Harlem community, religion, and his father.

Bayard Rustin

Bayard Rustin, the main organizer and gay mastermind behind the 1963 March on Washington, was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1912. Raised by Quaker grandparents, he grew up with a pacifist philosophy that would help develop his emphasis on nonviolence as a means of achieving justice for Black Americans.

In his early adult life, he was active in organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Youth Communist League, formed and led anti-colonialism and anti-racism initiatives including the Free India Committee and the Committee to Support South African Resistance. He helped plan the Journey of Reconciliation or the "First Freedom Ride," during which African American and white riders bussed through the South together to protest segregation of public transportation.

Everywhere he went, he rallied for the liberation of people from oppression and against segregation, economic exploitation, and apartheid. By the time he met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he had already proven himself a formidable activist.



of the march, Rustin took the microphone to read a list of demands from civil rights

In 1953, Rustin was arrested for having sex with two men in a parked car in Pasadena, California. Same-sex sexual activity, under the crime of "sodomy," was illegal at the time and was not decriminalized nationally until 2003; for his crime, he spent 50 days in jail and was forced to register as a sex offender.

Rustin met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott. Over several years of friendship, it was Rustin's insistence on pacifism that had the greatest influence in the development of Dr. King's ideology of



to discredit his demands for the social, political, and economic liberation of Black people. Even some Civil Rights activists protested his involvement in the March on Washington, partially in fear that his presence

leaders for President John F. Kennedy.

Rustin was discredited by segregationists for being a "communist, a draft-dodger, and a homosexual." His sexuality was weaponized time and time again by his political enemies, who cited his "immorality" in attempt

nonviolence. Enamored by Rustin's emphasis on pacifism and his strategic genius, Dr. King asked him to be his advisor. It was in this role that Rustin organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of 1963 where King would give his famous I Have a Dream speech, all in the span of two months. At the end

as a gay man could hinder the legitimacy of the anti-segregation movement in the eyes of the public.

Rustin continued to take on more forms of activism, finding hope for economic equity in socialism and advocating for collaborations with white people to create jobs and political opportunities for all. In 1968, he published an amended version of the Economic Bill of Rights that demanded specific legislative actions to support labor unions, job creation, welfare, affordable housing and urban development, and equitable education. He later met the love of his life, Walter Naegle, and became more involved in the gay rights movement in his final years.

According to Naegle, “He saw this as another challenge, another barrier that had to be broken down—a larger struggle for human rights and individual freedoms.”

Rustin remains a slightly lesser-known figure in queer and Civil Rights history, partly because he



was sometimes hidden in order to shield the anti-segregation movement from the stigma around his sexuality. We must remember him for his pivotal role

in integrating the political, social, economic, and personal and breaking down barriers in more ways than one.



A promo poster for the 2023 Netflix biodrama Rustin, which explores the partially-hidden life and legacy of the openly gay Black Civil Rights leader and the racism and homophobia he endured while devoting his life to racial justice.

Audre Lorde (1934-1992)

Audre Lorde was a self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” librarian, academic, and activist whose writing offered a scathing emotional critique of a wide range of social and civil injustices. Born in NYC in 1934 to immigrants from the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, Lorde grew up reading and memorizing poems, often reciting them as a means of expressing her feelings when she was otherwise unable to articulate them.

Her complicated relationship with emotional expression was likely influenced by a difficult relationship with her parents, who were generally cold or distant. Her mother’s lighter skin and the fact that she could “pass as Spanish” was a source of family pride, and Lorde was regarded with a certain distaste and suspicion for being darker than her mother.

By age 12, Lorde was having experiences beyond the recitable, and she began writing her own poetry to fill the gaps. Her first poem was published in Seventeen magazine after it was rejected by her Catholic school’s literary journal for being “inappropriate.” She participated in poetry workshops throughout high school, but felt like an outcast because of her queerness.

In 1954, Lorde took classes at the National University of Mexico, where she accepted

and confirmed her identity as both a lesbian and a poet, in her personal life and art. She then attended Hunter College in NYC, where she got engaged in working-class lesbian (bar) culture in Greenwich Village while keeping her identity hidden in the academic setting. In 1961, she gained a master’s degree in library science at Columbia.

In 1962, Lorde married a white gay man named Edwin Rollins. Apart from the taboo of interracial marriage, this was a common arrangement, as it was safer for lesbians and gay men to be each other’s “cover” during this time of heavy persecution and violence against queer people. They had two children together, while each continued to pursue same-sex relationships.

They divorced in 1970, just after Lorde began her position of poet in residence at a college in Mississippi where she continued writing and teaching.

Lorde’s experience in academia can be described as “outsider” at best. Most professors in the 70s were straight white men, a combination of 3 identities of which she shared none. This influenced her work and inspired several provocative essays on queer feminist theory, rage, racism, and their various intersections.

In 1980, after more than a decade of writing and teaching civil rights-engaging workshops to her young Black undergraduate

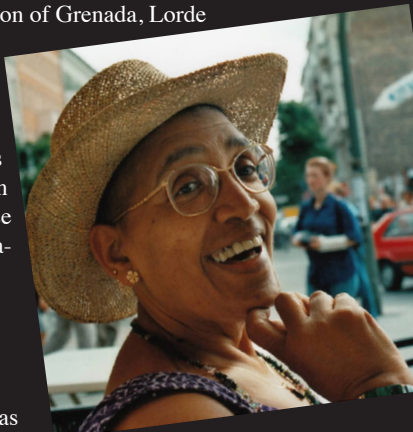
students, she co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the first American publisher for women of color. In 1981, she was a co-founder of the Women’s Coalition of St. Croix, dedicated to helping female victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Her commitment to intersectional feminism continued to shine in the late 80s, when she helped establish SISA (Sisterhood in Support of Sisters) in South Africa for Black female victims of apartheid and its manufactured injustices.

Lorde believed that language was a more powerful form of resistance than violence, and this became crucial in 1980s Berlin. Her voice and mentorship of black women activists there gave rise to the Black movement in Germany, while her critiques helped place the events in a broader historical and systemic context.

During this time, her ideas became distinctly anti-capitalist and socialist, and her poems and essays offered a whole world of criticism against capitalist democracy, imperialism, and Western influence.

Lorde’s passion for queer liberation and depictions of her experiences as a Black lesbian are ever-present in her poetry and activism. As she got older and became more confident in her sexuality, she opened her work and activism to include the issue



of gay rights and personal experiences of queerness more publicly. Throughout the 70s and 80s, her words helped develop the emotional heartbeat and rhetorical strength of the gay rights movement. In 1979 alone, she gave pivotal

speeches at the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights—which echoed in part the organization and demands of the Civil Rights March in 1963—and the National Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays, also in Washington.

She advocated for the acceptance of queer people until she died of cancer in 1992, but not before speaking out about the lack of representation for Black women or lesbians in the medical advice and literature she was given.

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy b. 1940

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy is an iconic Black trans activist and Stonewall veteran who has been fighting on the frontlines for trans liberation since the late 50s. Miss Major was born (AMAB) and raised on the South Side of Chicago in the 40s, an area with a historical legacy of ethnic diversity, rich music creativity, and being a hub for unions, immigrants, and migrant workers.

Growing up, she always felt more like a female and reports trying on her mother's clothes whenever she was out to look and feel more like a woman. As a teenager, she met a drag queen named Kitty who taught her how to do makeup and became involved in the underground Chicago drag ball scene. Inspired by



the riot squad came in, Miss Major fought back with the others until she was kicked unconscious by a police officer, waking up in custody the next morning with a broken jaw.

However, Miss Major has stated that as far as Black trans folks are concerned, “Stonewall never happened.” The gays and lesbians in the scene then wanted nothing to do with trans women, and they still “want [them] erased.” Even in the Pride march to

sations in prison radicalized her, and she began to “politicize” her experience and take action following her release in 1974.

Since her incarceration in the 70s, Miss Major has built a 50-year career as a fierce advocate and organizer for queer and trans liberation, centering trans women of color survivors of police brutality and incarceration in men's prisons.

After her partner died of AIDS in the late 80s (an epidemic that was helped along by government and medical negligence and malignance toward the affected communities), Miss Major began working in HIV prevention and San Francisco.

Miss Major faced much discrimination in her teens and young adult years. Her parents were unsupportive and thought her interest in womanhood was just a phase; when she expressed her feelings (“came out”) to them at age 12 or 13, they responded by taking her to church and psychiatrists, while her sister reportedly burned pictures of her. She was then disowned, losing her family and home.

While she had always presented as male and wore men's clothing in public, she was outed and expelled from two colleges in a row after her dresses were found in her room. After being incarcerated in a mental health facility in Chicago (she said this in an interview but there is little information on the cause or charge), she moved to NYC where she made money as a sex worker and was embraced by a supportive drag community.

Gay bars were some of the only places queer people could convene in NYC, and they generally did not allow entry to trans women—one of the only places that did was the Stonewall Inn, where Miss Major became a regular patron. She was there on the iconic night of June 28, 1969, when the police raided it and this time, “sick of their shit,” the patrons didn't budge. When

commemorate the Stonewall Riots one year later, the trans women who had fought on the front lines were invisible. While most see Stonewall as the epic symbol of gay liberation, Miss Major knows that progress has been minimal for trans women who are still being killed in horrific numbers year by year, and even slower for Black trans women.

In 1970, Miss Major was arrested for robbing one of her clients and was sent to Sing Sing prison, a men's facility. Several months later, she was released on parole but sent back to prison for wearing makeup when meeting her parole officer. Her treatment in prison was nothing short of atrocious, as she was constantly violated and humiliated by correction officers.

While in prison, she was mentored by another prisoner named Frank “Big Black” Smith, who had been a leader of the historic Attica Correctional Facility riots of 1971. Smith taught her about the prison industrial complex, urged her to learn more about African-American politics and history, and inspired her to get to organizing. These conver-

outreach in Going against the grain and protocol, she took to the streets to provide resources for the unhoused, and eventually started street clinics.

In 2004, she joined the Transgender Gender-Variant Intersex Justice Project, where she served as the long-time executive director; the TGIJP provides support and access to legal and social advocacy to trans people in California prisons as well as formerly incarcerated and police-targeted individuals.

Miss Major now resides in Little Rock, Arkansas where she founded the House of GG's (aka Griffin-Gracy Educational and Historical Center), a retreat center which “creates safe and



transformative spaces where members of our community can heal—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—from the trauma arising from generations of transphobia, racism, sexism, poverty,

ableism and violence, and nurture them into tomorrow's leaders"—particularly trans women of color living in the U.S. South. She is currently focused on a variety of creative projects including the series *Trans*

in *Trumpland* and a 2023 book release on her life's activism called *Miss Major Speaks*. She suffered a stroke in 2019 but has since recovered.

Kylar Broadus

Kylar Broadus is an attorney, public speaker, author, professor, and long-time trans rights activist who was the first openly trans person to ever testify in front of the U.S. Senate.

Broadus was born (AFAB) in 1963 in the small rural town of Fayette, Missouri, he grew up grappling with both race and gender. His parents were the children of slaves and were living under the Jim Crow laws at the time. He was beat up daily for being light-skinned Black, a point of contention in a "color conscious" community.

Growing up, he was introverted and didn't feel right in his skin, but didn't yet have the words to describe his experience. He constantly felt like he had been "dropped into the wrong life that's not [his]". His mother dressed him in very gendered clothing, and he remembers changing his outfits in kindergarten. With no internet, he searched books and other material to try and figure it out but found nothing.

In his teens and young adult life, he identified as a lesbian—it didn't feel right, but it was the closest he could get. His gender expression was more masculine during this time, which made using public bathrooms tricky; men's rooms were unsafe, and he would get confronted by aggressive police when he tried to use a women's room (this remains very much a current struggle for trans people).

Broadus describes wishing he could stay in school forever, since jobs were very gendered and would enforce feminine dress in the workplace. Nonetheless, he graduated Central Methodist University with a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration.

In his mid-20s, he reached a breaking point with "having to dress like someone else everyday in drag to go to work, just to make a living," and in

transitioning. Race informed his decision to come out: he was very close with his POC community which was like a family, so he chose to stay and try to be himself rather than move somewhere else and pretend to be someone he wasn't in the business world.

Upon coming out and starting to wear men's clothes to work at an insurance company, he faced a constructive discharge (an employee's involuntary resignation that is a result of the employer creating an intolerable or hostile work environment, pressuring or coercing them to quit) due to harassment and discrimination. He then developed PTSD from this harassment.

Soon, the Internet became more available, which helped Broadus connect with others like him and more of the movement became recognizable. This exposure and community, including small gender-affirming conferences, helped him feel for once like he wasn't alone or insane.

Being forced to leave his job for expressing himself, unemployed and devastated, Broadus began to get involved with trans advocacy. Facing the idea that it was legal for his company to discriminate based on gender, he began a decades-long and continuing commitment to use the courts to legally change conditions for trans people. As an attorney, he has since helped develop many local, state, and federal protections for regarding gender identity and expression.

Broadus was appointed to the Human rights Commission of Columbia,

Missouri where he began to research small ordinances and protections to find the legal basis to contest employment discrimination and incarceration of local trans people. This paved the way for the first real trans policy a decade later. For 18 years, Broadus worked



at a private law practice in the same city, where he represented LGB-TQ+ clients in family and

criminal cases.

Broadus has also served as the chair of the business department at Lincoln University, teaching business law and workplace discrimination for 20 years. He has served on numerous task forces and commissions working to instate protections for trans people, including the National LGBTQ Task Force and the DC Mayor's LGBT Advisory Task Force Committee. In 2006, he authored an essay called *The Evolution of Employment Discrimination Protections for Transgender People*, the first of its kind, which has been and is studied by law and Gender Studies students at many universities.

Throughout his work, Broadus recognized that many of the trans people of color he talked to in meetings felt isolated despite living in big cities and among communities of color. In 2010, he founded the *Trans People of Color Coalition* to help foster much-needed community and representation. In 2012, he became the first Black transgender delegate to the Democratic National Convention and has since received many awards for his internationally recognized pioneer work in the movement for LGBTQ+ protections.

Also in 2012, he became the first trans person to testify before the U.S. Senate when he advocated for the *Employment Non-Discrimination Act*, which was to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the existing law which outlawed workplace discrimination on the basis of race, skin color, religion, sex, and national origin. The ENDA then passed in the Senate with bipartisan support but was rejected by the House Rules Committee.



1994 he announced that he would be