

Constellating Trans Activist Histories

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Abstract: The narrative that the 1969 Stonewall Riots were the origin of queer and trans liberatory movements is common in queer and trans communities and institutions. This emphasis on Stonewall, however, has come at the price of minimizing or erasing other queer and trans activist histories and legacies. I propose using the framework of 'constellating' as a means of thinking about multiple points of trans activist histories and how they relate to one another. Such a reading enables us to see trans brilliance in and beyond Stonewall.

I want to begin with a story. Requesting a show of hands, I ask the students in my Feminist/Queer/Trans Disability Studies class if they are familiar with Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera. *The majority of students proceed to raise their hands.* I then ask them if they are familiar with Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.). *Only two students raise their hands.* Finally, I ask my students if they know of Johnson and Rivera as part of the Stonewall riots. *Nearly all my students raise their hands once more.* We discuss how Johnson and Rivera are remembered in queer and trans communities as part of a spark that “ignited” queer and trans organizing because of their involvement at Stonewall, and then we shift the conversation to how Johnson and Rivera’s many years of organizing in its aftermath is minimized.¹ I share this story not to shame my students for knowing only certain trans histories; on the contrary, I do so to illuminate the single moment that is often repeated, memorialized, and enshrined in trans and queer activist histories: that Stonewall was the beginning, and, often, the isolated origin of trans and queer activism.

I see this narrative rhetorically deployed all the time in both queer and trans communities, as well as in popular media.² As evidenced by my second question to my students, such a narrative obscures other trans activist histories, including those that directly

¹ See Niamh Timmons, “Towards A Trans Feminist Disability Studies,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 17 (2020): 46-63.

² For example, this is evident in popular press spaces such as *National Geographic’s* “What was the Stonewall Uprising” or the *History Channel’s* description of the riots. These are not the origins of such discourse, rather a popular continuation of rhetoric embodied in many communities about Stonewall and queer/trans activism. This is part of the larger “Stonewall Myth” or “Stonewall Exceptionalism” narratives.

followed the momentum of Stonewall. In this critical commentary, I wish to illuminate how the dominance of the Stonewall narrative risks eclipsing not only activism that followed the riots but also regional histories of trans activism throughout the U.S. and Canada around the same time. I do not believe we should minimize the importance of Stonewall; rather, I want to imagine what it would look like if we began to ‘constellate’ trans histories. Constellating is an intrinsically relational framework which enables readings within trans histories, as well as what Kyles Gemmell, Kobe Natachu, and Dharmakrishna Mirza call “pre-binary” gender histories.³ My focus on “trans” activism here includes some Two-Spirit activist histories as part of what I call a “trans activist constellation,” but with the acknowledgment that “Two-Spirit” itself is its own distinct constellation that is, at times, in relationship with a trans constellation. Thus, the trans activist constellation I conceive of here intrinsically highlights relationality between trans and pre-binary genders. Further, “trans” as a gender category is relatively modern, so a trans activist constellation also includes histories predating the usage of the term and recognizing the dynamics of gender terminology in these histories. Constellating the abundance of regional trans activist histories and their importance alongside that of Stonewall allows for opportunities to view the

³ The notion of “pre-binary” reflects gender systems that predate the introduction of the colonial gender binary. This concept comes from the work of Kyles Gemmell, Dharmakrishna Mirza, and Kobe Natachu. “Pre-binary” is not limited to Indigenous gender systems, but is inclusive of them and other genders such as khwaja sira, hijra, and others that predate the colonial gender binary. Kyles Gemmell, “haʔł k^w(i) adsəslabcebut/Watch Over Yourself Well: (Re)writing Two-Spirit Coast Salish Bodies through Canoe-Based Practices,” June 12 2022, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.

dynamism and brilliance of trans organizing.

Rhetoric scholar Malea Powell (Miami and Eastern Shawnee) describes the potential of centering constellations within the scope of cultural rhetorics:

A constellation [...] allows for all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding the subject captive.⁴

Constellating differs from a linear or intersecting path in that it speaks to multiple points of emergence that operate in conversation with one another. There is no defined point of center, much like a constellation in the sky; rather, all points are in flux, allowing for the possibility of new generative meanings and conversations. Writing about constellation approaches in trans U.S. history, Andrés López (Mayan) and Qwo-Li Driskill write:

Constellating is a way of weaving histories and stories together that do not focus on one particular center. In this case, we move away from the idea of what being ‘transgender’ or ‘gender expansive’ means. Instead, we put multiple stories together as part of a larger type of storytelling. Through

⁴ Cultural Rhetorics Lab, “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, October 25, 2014.

constellating we can change our storytelling from the traditional ways we narrate history and shift it without the pressure of fitting into preconceived notions or ideas of what any of the categories we use (e.g., trans, community, history) might mean.⁵

As López and Driskill describe, constellating as a practice enables readings that acknowledge the relationality between points that are in constant dialogue with one another. In other words, as applied to trans activist histories and Stonewall, we may decenter Stonewall and read it alongside countless other points of trans activism in a constellation of people, events, and radiance.

Before thinking about alternatives to a dominant Stonewall narrative, it is important to trace what happened at the Stonewall Riots and how they became the focal point for queer and trans histories. When the New York Police Department (NYPD) raided the Stonewall Inn in 1969, it was one event in a series of routine police raids on queer gathering spaces. The riots at Stonewall, located in Greenwich Village — a heavily populated queer neighborhood at the time — quickly brought out the queer community in droves to confront the NYPD. What differed Stonewall from other riots across the city and country at the time, however, was the gathering *outside* rather than *inside* the bar. Further, it attracted media sources with national distribution such

⁵ Andrés C. López and Qwo-Li Driskill, “U.S. History,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities* Second Edition, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): 585. López and Driskill trace U.S. trans history in terms of the violence and resistance to settler colonialism and anti-Black structures (including but not limited to chattel slavery).

as *The Village Voice*, *New York Daily News*, and *The New York Times*.⁶ The formation of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade on the one-year anniversary of the Riots began to solidify the narrative of Stonewall exceptionalism.⁷ Yet, trans activists remained at the fringe of these celebrations and in the memorialization of Stonewall. As Black trans revolutionary Miss Major describes in her reflection on Stonewall:

It goes back to the fact that Stonewall, for *my* gurls, wasn't a monumental moment. Especially when it started, it was just another night — cops coming in and raid the place, drag us out of the bar, and you're just hoping it's not your turn to get into the paddy wagon that night. It was just life.⁸

Sylvia Rivera's infamous "Y'all Better Quiet Down" speech at the third Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade in 1973 — first found and distributed by Black trans activist and artist Tourmaline — decried the ways that non-trans queers refused to show up for their trans kin in solidarity.⁹ Often I hear white queer and trans

⁶ Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crage, "Moments and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006): 737. While Armstrong and Crage's study is useful, it is also limited in that it largely doesn't engage race or trans communities and how intersecting identities might challenge readings of these events. These publications on the Stonewall Riots were either homophobic or deeply buried in the newspaper yet they still gave attention to the Stonewall Riots.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 741-742. These parades would then become the foundation for contemporary Pride parades.

⁸ Toshio Meronek and Miss Major, *Miss Major Speaks: Conversations with a Black Trans Revolutionary* (New York: Verso Books, 2023), 38.

⁹ Sylvia Rivera, "L020A Sylvia Rivera, 'Y'all Better Quiet Down' Original

folks claim that Black and Brown trans women fought for queer rights, with little attention to the frustrations of these same trans women with queer communities both historically and in the present moment. This hollow claim also does not account for white queer and trans responsibilities to this foundational activism and how they might be in solidarity with Black and Brown trans women today. I hope that thinking about the pluralities and dynamism of trans activist histories beyond Stonewall can honor these responsibilities and highlight the diversity and brilliance of trans activism.

Of course, I am not the first to think about the limitations of a singular emphasis on Stonewall in activist histories. Emily Hobson, in *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, describes the myth that gay and lesbian activism flared for a spontaneous moment in 1969 at Stonewall as “Stonewall Exceptionalism.”¹⁰ Hobson argues that such a mythologization of Stonewall disregards and minimizes other queer organizing, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the same time, popular depictions of Stonewall such as Roland Emmerich’s 2015 film *Stonewall* perpetuate a whitewashed narrative of the Stonewall Riots.¹¹ While I find these critiques useful and important, they do not consider “Stonewall Exceptionalism” within trans communities, nor the larger history of trans activism, broadly. Given all this, how could the constellating of trans activist histories begin?

Authorized Video, 1973 Gay Pride Rally NYC.” The backlash Rivera experienced from her speech led to the eventual floundering of S.T.A.R. and Rivera retreating from activist activity. The video clip was found and digitized by Tourmaline.

¹⁰ Emily Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Gay Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 6. Hobson describes the term as emerging from an unnamed person in the editing process of her book.

¹¹ *Stonewall*, DVD, directed by Roland Emmerich (Roadside Attractions, 2015).

One starting point would be to think about S.T.A.R. and other trans activism in New York City immediately following Stonewall. S.T.A.R. was founded as a separate group from the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) in order to focus on the needs of what we now call trans communities.¹² S.T.A.R. activists established S.T.A.R. House — a space for houseless queer and trans youth — advocated for the needs of trans people, and called for the end of psychiatric violence. S.T.A.R.’s organizing was a synthesis between the demands of queer organizing and other radicals of the time, such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords.¹³ In addition to local activist histories, there should also be an emphasis beyond New York City. This would include the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot in 1966, as depicted in Susan Stryker’s 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens*.¹⁴ Occurring in the years prior to Stonewall, the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot is part of a larger trans activist history in San Francisco in the Tenderloin neighborhood.¹⁵ In the Midwest, we could look at drag

¹² The GLF was more interested in creating non-queer alliances and was arguably intersectional in its approaches, while the GAA was largely focuses on sexuality as a means of oppression. While S.T.A.R. was established because the failures of these two groups, they still collaborated with them when needed.

¹³ For an extensive account on S.T.A.R.’s organizing see the chapter “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.)” in Stephen Cohen’s *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail.”*

¹⁴ This documentation also needs to be complicated and it also minimizes the contributions of trans people of color.

¹⁵ This particular local history was partially a reason for San Francisco’s reluctance to embrace the national Stonewall narrative via the Christopher Street Day Parade (Armstrong and Crago, 732-733 and 741-742). Parts of the Tenderloin are now recognized as the “Transgender District” (formerly “Compton’s Transgender District”), the first legally recognized transgender district to honor this history of trans activism, specifically by trans women of color, in the neighborhood.

performances and the visibility of early activism of individuals such as Miss Major.¹⁶ In this region, the work of Joy Ellison illuminates the influence of spaces such as the Jewel Box Revue, a drag show at The Apollo Theater in Chicago, which billed itself as “The Most Exciting Deception in the World.”¹⁷ Throughout the mid-twentieth century, its cross-country tours brought visibility to trans drag art throughout the U.S.¹⁸ It is also important to expand the scope beyond just the U.S. Although Canada’s trans activist histories have no direct lineage to that of Stonewall, they share similarities in how they often centered trans women of color sex workers and later organized around HIV/AIDS. In particular, we could look at Mirha Soleil-Ross and Xantra Mackay’s work with trans homeless folks and sex workers in Toronto during the 1990s.¹⁹ Or, during the same time, Sandra Laframboise’s work at the High Risk Project Society, which addressed HIV/AIDS in trans communities and was based in a Native health center in Vancouver.²⁰ These are but a sampling of the many points in the trans activist constellation.

As mentioned, “trans” and its variations is relatively modern vocabulary, so that also means one has to be conscious of the language we use(d) to describe people. This requires us to read

¹⁶ Ellison presented some of this research at the 2023 National Women’s Studies Association Conference in Minneapolis.

¹⁷ Meronek and Major, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Ross and Mackay were involved in providing social services in Toronto for trans people. In 1999, she founded Meal-Trans at 519 Church Street Community Centre, which provided meals and peer support for trans people. They also expanded existing services to provide peer support and other resources for HIV positive and sex workers trans people.

²⁰ Laframboise also is Two-Spirit and her activism operates at the intersection of Indigenous and trans politics.

closely and imagine when historians mention, for example, “men who wear women’s attire,” or vice versa, in their writings.²¹ By doing so, we can begin to think of the temporal nature of gender systems, how they have evolved, and how they might relate to our present moment. Thus, we might further extend the trans activist constellation to consider relational points of activism beyond the scope of “trans,” primarily outside the colonial gender binary. Kai Pyle (Ojibwe and Métis) has argued that the emergence of Two-Spirit organizing coincided with the early stages of trans studies and “transgender” activism during the early 1990s, yet is often dismissed by contemporary trans activists and scholars.²² Kalaniopua Young (Kānaka Maoli) similarly argues how *Māhū* (a pre-binary gender) activists fought alongside other Native Hawaiians against displacement in O’ahu in the same year as the Stonewall Riots.²³ As I described at the beginning of this paper, pre-binary gender activism should be part of the broader conversation with recognition that “trans” as a label does not encompass them but can be constellated in relation to trans activism.²⁴

²¹ See C. Riley Snorton’s work in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* to unpack some of the complexities of Black trans life pre-Stonewall. In addition, see Jules Gill-Peterson’s recent work on Mary Jones. Both scholars show the nuances and messiness of Black “trans” histories in the nineteenth-century US.

²² Niamh Timmons, host, “Kai Pyle,” *Campus to Community* (podcast), August 22, 2022, accessed June 22, 2023. Much of Pyle’s writing engages Two-Spirit histories, particularly in Anishinaabe and Métis contexts.

²³ Tom Boelstroff et al., “Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 430.

²⁴ This is building off a conversation Kai Pyle, Andrés López, and myself had at the “Reimagining the Origins of Trans Studies” roundtable at the 2022 National Women’s Studies Association Conference. Pyle specifically emphasized the notion

It is for all these reasons that I am fond and adamant of a constellating approach to trans activist histories. Constellating allows us to see the dynamism, complexities, messiness, similarities, differences, and brilliance of all those trans and pre-binary activists who came before us. Stonewall will always be a brilliant flashpoint in trans activism, but so much more radiance is missed out on if it is our only narrative of the past. Constellating the countless histories of trans and pre-binary gender activism reveals the resilience and dreams of these communities. And it is by thinking of these histories in relation to one another that we can truly appreciate such resilience and dreaming.

of a “relational politic” rather than a “coalitional politic” in order to think of the relationship between “trans” and Two-Spirit communities.

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