Marsha P Johnson

Marsha “Pay-It-No-Mind” Johnson was a performer, a sex worker, and a mother figure to the Gay Liberation movements that erupted after the much discussed 1969 Stonewall Riots. Johnson is often credited with “throwing the first brick” at Stonewall which, if true, would be the first of many acts of civil disobedience that have lifted her name to the status of icon amongst LGBT activists and organizers.

Johnson was involved in many political activities throughout her life, participating as a member of the legendary AIDS advocacy organization ACT UP, and event founding STAR (Street Transvestite Action revolutionaries) alongside good friend and fellow activist Sylvia Rivera. STAR’s mission was to advocate for and at times house, clothe and feed young transgender people in New York City.

Throughout Johnson’s life she was often homeless, always poor and lived with mental illnesses in a time when doctors were ill equipped to diagnose and serve the privileged populations, let alone someone of Johnson’s social and economic means. And regardless, Johnson approached her activism and artistry with a joy and spirit that was infectious to those around her.

Johnson’s body was pulled from the Hudson river in July of 1992. At the time her death was deemed a suicide by NYPD who failed to do any investigation into the matter. Though her community protested this ruling, her death remains unsolved.

Amelio Robles Ávila

Amelio Robles Ávila was born in Xochipala, Guerrero, Mexico. Assigned female at birth, his wealthy family allowed him opportunities to become educated. From an early age he expressed interests, talents and skills that were not commonly associated with his assigned gender. In 1912 he joined the Mexican Revolution as part of the Adelita forces from his hometown. It is not known at exactly what point Ávila began presenting as male during the war, but he lived the remainder of his life as a man. During the war he gained the title Zapatista Colonel Amelio Robles and became a key leader in many revolutionary battles. A charismatic man, Ávila was known to hold his pistol in one hand and his cigar in the other during battle. After the revolution, he was known to pull his pistol on anyone who dared to misgender him until they corrected themselves. In 1970, Ávila was awarded a medal as Honorary Legionnaire of the Mexican Army, and in 1973 the Merit Revolutionary honor, becoming one of the highest profile and earliest cases of a contemporary government recognizing a transgender individual as a national hero. He died in 1984 at the age of 95.
Audre Lorde

“I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain.”

“My sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds... Jesse Helms’s objection to my work is not about obscenity... or even about sex. It is about revolution and change.”

Audre Lorde was a self-described “Black, Lesbian, Mother, Warrior Poet.” Born in New York City to parents who immigrated from the West Indies, Lorde went on to become one of the defining voices in the fields of feminist theory, critical race studies and queer theory. She put practice to what others would come to call “intersectionality,” by showing in her writings and activism that the personal is political and the political is personal.

Whether it was her poetry, fiction or essays, Lorde’s work reveals her commitment to collective liberation. Overcoming many struggles and championing many causes, Lorde found herself in the role of activist until her death in 1992. She overcame breast cancer. She carved a place for herself in racist, sexist American academia. She founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, dedicated to uplifting the voices of Black feminists. She was an active organizer in Civil Rights causes, Black Arts movements, early LGBTQ rights movements, and South African Anti-Apartheid causes.

Bayard Rustin

“We need in every community a group of angelic troublemakers.”

Known as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s “right hand man,” Bayard Rustin was a leader in the American Civil Rights movement known for his organizing genius. Rustin was born in 1912 and was raised in a community of “Quaker values,” believing in one human family and that all members were born equal. Rustin began writing in his teenage years and eventually moved to New York City where he attended college and became active in the Young Communist League.

A rising star, Rustin was ordered out the League for protesting racial segregation in the US Army, which landed him on then President J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI watch list. Rustin served 3 years in prison for being a conscientious objector to the draft, and while incarcerated was transferred to a maximum-security prison for his out status as a gay man and consistent protests in the face of prison security.

Rustin then participated in early demonstrations of the Freedom Rides, studied under Mahatma Gandhi shortly before his assassination and began working with the movement Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had emerged as the face of. Rustin quickly became a key leader in the movement, due to his ability to quickly and effectively mobilize supporters. Throughout this time, Rustin was repeatedly used and then fired by leaders of the movement under pressure from both other anti-gay Civil Rights leaders and white opponents to the movement. Rustin was considered both the movements biggest asset and biggest liability. Rustin continued a life of politics and protest, organizing with unions across the US, fighting for economic justice for sanitation workers, and eventually bringing the AIDS crisis and LGBT liberation to the attention of the NAACP.

Rustin died in 1987 of a ruptured appendix. He was survived by Walter Naegle, his life partner of over a decade. President Barack Obama posthumously awarded Rustin the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013.