

the Saint of Christopher Street: Marsha P. Johnson and the social life of a heroine

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abstract

This article analyses the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson as a heroine through the notion of labour, emphasising how heroine narratives are both a product of labour as well as a form of labour. After offering a short account of Marsha P. Johnson's role in the Stonewall riots and STAR, we explore the development of trans communities' ability to create, sustain and disseminate heroine narratives, emphasising Tourmaline's pivotal archival role in establishing Johnson's legacy. Then, we elucidate the role of heroine narratives in creating and sustaining a collective identity. We argue that community attachment to Marsha P. Johnson reclaims the place of trans communities in LGBTQ+ history but is often done in a manner that obscures the whiteness of mainstream trans advocacy. We suggest that the recent increase in interest towards the life-sustaining labour of STAR House reflects the evolution of trans collective identity in the post-visibility era.

keywords

transgender; history; LGBTQ+; heroine; collective identity; narrative

The Saint of Christopher Street, Marsha P. Johnson. More than anyone else, she sits atop the pantheon of trans heroines. We know her name, her face and her reputation as the instigator of the Stonewall riots, a watershed moment in LGBTQ+ history. As a heroine, she is undeniable.

In this article, we seek to pay homage to Marsha P. Johnson by revealing the labour that operates in the background of trans heroine stories and reveals their collective nature. Heroine narratives are a product of labour and a form of labour. First, we offer a short account of Marsha P. Johnson's life and reputation from the 1960s onwards, focusing on her role in the Stonewall riots and in founding and co-leading Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Second, we explore the labour of creating, sustaining and disseminating heroine narratives, emphasising archivist, filmmaker and writer Tourmaline's pivotal role in unearthing Johnson's legacy. Third, we critically analyse the labour of heroine narratives as a form of collective identity construction and attempt to identify what the narrative deployment of Marsha P. Johnson as a heroine teaches us about contemporary trans communities' values and aspirations.

the Saint of Christopher Street

Marsha P. Johnson is a Black *mad* trans woman who worked as a sex worker, an artist and an activist.¹ Known for her generosity and exuberance, Marsha P. Johnson earned the title of Saint of Christopher Street, the street at the heart of New York's LGBTQ+ community. She had a reputation for being ready to give everything to others. According to her close friend, Sylvia Rivera (2013d, p. 45), 'Marsha would give the blouse off her back if you asked for it. She would give you her last dollar. She would take off her shoes. I've seen her do all these things'.

Strolling down Christopher Street, her forehead oftentimes adorned with a crown of flowers and found objects. She would get the flowers from a florist who would let her sleep under his table, lending to her saintly mystique (Kasino, 2012). According to her friend Bob Kohler, she could sometimes be found on the banks of the Hudson River commemorating her father's memory or praying to Neptune, casting her clothes in the current as an offering (Ellison and Hoffman, 2019). She would then walk back up Christopher Street naked and be arrested, institutionalised and medicated with antipsychotics for a few months. As a Black, *mad*, trans sex worker, Johnson was accustomed to police harassment and violence. Her divine reputation earned her the status of a veritable icon when, in 1975, Andy Warhol included her in his silkscreen portrait series *Ladies and Gentlemen*—for which Warhol was paid US\$900,000 while the fourteen Black and Latinx models, including Marsha, were paid US\$50 (Art Gallery of Ontario, 2021). Characteristically, she is portrayed smiling.

¹We write '*mad*' in italics to emphasise its reappropriation and conceptualisation within Mad Studies in contradistinction with popular, pejorative uses of the term (Costa, 2014; Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2019; Beresford, 2020). As scholars Robert Menzies, Brenda A. LeFrançois and Geoffrey Reaume (2013, p. 10) explain, 'madness talk and text invert the language of oppression, reclaiming disparaged identities and restoring dignity and pride to difference'. The label '*mad*' calls into question the limits and negativity of conceptualising mental illness in predominantly biological terms. We do not know whether Marsha P. Johnson would have welcomed the term, although her use of the term 'crazy' is reminiscent of madness' reappropriation (Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2019, p. 54). By naming her as *mad*, we aim to situate her in a genealogy of resistance against psychiatric control and invoke a philosophy of community and strength from difference that we believe better reflects her character.

In the contemporary mind, Marsha P. Johnson is best known for her involvement in the Stonewall riots. She and Sylvia Rivera are frequently named together as instigators of the multi-day Stonewall riots that galvanised the New York LGBTQ+ movement and, one year later, inspired the very first Pride march under the name of Christopher Street Liberation Day. Many cities still celebrate Pride on the date of 28 June, the first day of the riots.

The chronology of that first evening of rioting remains controversial. Many identify Johnson as the one having thrown the first brick but she herself mentioned only having arrived after the riots had already begun (Marcus, 2017). Alternatively, Sylvia Rivera is sometimes credited as having thrown the first Molotov cocktail, but, in interviews, she often spoke of others throwing Molotov cocktails and would at times respond tongue-in-cheek that she only threw the second one (Rivera, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). According to yet another story, Marsha P. Johnson threw a shot glass at a mirror of the bar and shouted: 'I got my civil rights!' The iconic scene was never confirmed by Johnson herself and contradicts her account of having only arrived later, after the bar was set ablaze. The account comes to us through David A. Carter (2004), whose dismissive comments on Johnson are prejudiced at best, and was popularised over a decade after Johnson's passing. Plagued by contradictions and apocrypha, the historical record may never reveal exactly what happened on the night of 28 June 1969. And perhaps it does not need to. As some historians have emphasised, the value of oral testimony—which is pervasive in queer history—often does not lie so much in its adherence to fact as in what it reveals about social significance and meaning (Lewis, 2014; Murphy, Pierce and Ruiz, 2016). Therein precisely lies its richness for our analytical purposes. Without diminishing the importance of the riots, it is rather the Saint of Christopher Street's co-founding of STAR that catches our attention the most as a reflection of her generous spirit. In 1970, Sylvia Rivera and Johnson co-founded the organisation STAR. Though Sylvia Rivera wished to bestow upon Marsha P. Johnson the prestige of the presidency, Johnson declined on account of her nonlinear thinking, saying she tended to 'go off in other directions' (Cohen, 2008, p. 128). She instead became vice president and remained a veritable spiritual engine for the organisation through her kindness and different vision of the world—traits that some attribute to her experiences with mental illnesses such as neurosyphilis and most likely c-PTSD (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019). In Johnson's own words, 'I may be crazy, but that don't make me wrong' (*ibid.*, p. 54). On the contrary, she may have been right precisely because she was *mad*. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (*ibid.*) convincingly reads the Saint of Christopher Street's radical compassion and generosity of spirit as 'crip kindness', a 'refusal to throw people away because of our own experiences of madness and being shunned'. Under this reading, Marsha P. Johnson's *madness* becomes a source of strength, her difference and associated marginalisation blooming into love and care towards others. With STAR, Johnson held protests, engaged in mutual aid and advocated for anti-discrimination protections for queer and trans youth.

Perhaps the most radical of STAR's projects was its refuge for homeless queer and trans youth. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were often homeless, renting hotel rooms using the money they raised through sex work (Nothing, 2013). They would share their rooms with queer and trans youth, and eventually sought out a more permanent option in the form of STAR House. The first STAR House was a trailer truck they found sitting in a parking lot (*ibid.*; Ellison and Hoffman, 2019). The truck housed some two dozen youths, but one morning they woke up to someone driving the truck away. Seeking a more stable living situation, they organised a fundraising dance and used the money to repair a building in the East Village to serve as a more permanent STAR House (Cohen, 2008; Rivera, 2013d). Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia

Rivera continued to pay the rent using the money they made as sex workers, while youths would find food for the house. STAR House operated under a logic of radical mutual aid, often babysitting and feeding the kids of their working-class neighbourhood. STAR House later moved to an apartment (Rivera, 2013e).

STAR and STAR House only operated for a few years. In 1973, a lesbian activist vocally opposed the inclusion of trans women and drag queens in Christopher Street Liberation Day, accusing them of 'parodying' women (Duberman, 1993; Rivera, 2013d; Ellison and Hoffman, 2019). Jumping onstage, Sylvia Rivera (2013e) gave her now-famous speech decrying the gay movement's assimilationism: 'Y'all better quiet down'. In the same breath, she reminded the audience of the revolutionary labour of trans women and drag queens and accused the movement of having abandoned incarcerated people asking them for help. Attacked by those she considered her comrades in struggle, she attempted suicide, Marsha P. Johnson returning home just in time to save her life (Ellison and Hoffman, 2019). The event marked the end of her involvement in LGBTQ+ activism for many years and, with her, the end of STAR. Marsha P. Johnson died a few decades later, in 1992, under suspicious circumstances.

we who create heroines

Heroines do not appear out of thin air, like ghosts emerging from the ether. They are constituted as such and depend on others for their existence. Until recently, trans communities in the United States lacked the organisational capacity required to create and sustain heroine narratives. This phenomenon is closely related to the notion of hermeneutical injustice, which refers to how marginalised groups face systemic barriers to meaning-making and meaning-sharing, limiting their ability to know themselves and make themselves known to others (McKinnon, 2016; Medina, 2017). The historical psychopathologisation of trans people, for example, has long prevented the creation and deployment of words like 'transgender' and 'transsexual' by trans communities to make sense of their experiences, being instead relegated to a social space of deviance, sin and/or illness.

While hermeneutical injustice is primarily discussed in relation to concepts, narratives of heroism are also a way in which communities make sense of themselves, pointing to known persons or historical moments as anchors for self-understanding (Decter-Frain, Vanstone and Frimer, 2017). The limits on meaning-making and meaning-sharing tied to marginalisation also impact trans communities' ability to create and sustain heroine stories. Heroines depend on a backstage labour that is often invisible, yet no less important. To breathe life into a heroine narrative, it is necessary to document, preserve, unearth, tell and disseminate. All this labour requires a degree of organising on the part of communities. Without the capabilities within trans communities, cisgender populations are the ones to determine which trans individuals are elevated into icons.

The first major trans figures emerged out of cisgender imagination. We are thinking first and foremost of Christine Jorgensen who was hoisted onto the first page of the *New York Daily News* in 1952 under the sensationalist title 'Ex-GI becomes blonde beauty' (Skidmore, 2011, p. 274). As Emily Skidmore (*ibid.*, p. 273) writes, the phrase 'blonde beauty' aligns Christine Jorgensen's 'desirability as a woman to an assumed male viewer', legitimating her transitude by reference to white ideals of femininity. Christine Jorgensen's discursive alignment with the interest of white male viewers continues through her media persona, which reproduces dominant norms in a way that allows her to be a 'good transsexual' in the

public's eyes. She doesn't dress femininely until her passport changes and emphasises her heterosexuality by mock vomiting at the face of male sexual advances before her transition, thereby distancing herself from any possibility of being seen as a queen, a homosexual, a crossdresser or anything that strays away from the heteropatriarchal ideal. And, above all, she is white. Transitude is just a small bump in the road, to be solved by a 'sex change'.

The *New York Daily News* article mentioned above described Jorgensen as the first to receive a 'sex change', an honour that is now more often bestowed on Lili Elbe. Lili Elbe, of course, also attracted significant interest from cisgender readers and was more recently made the subject of a book (Ebershoff, 2000) and film, *The Danish Girl* (2015), in which she was portrayed by the cisgender man Eddie Redmayne (because of course she was). Steeped in a voyeuristic narrative that transforms the trans subject into a sex-changing object of curiosity, Christine Jorgensen and Lili Elbe's celebrity reflects far more the amusement of cisgender newspaper editors than the interests and values of trans communities (Marvin, 2020). This is not to say that they weren't well-liked or that other heroines would have been chosen had trans communities had a choice. The endless letters that Christine Jorgensen received from trans people seeking support attests to her valuation by trans eyes (Meyerowitz, 2004; Gill-Peterson, 2018). Yet the media frenzy that followed her did not bear the imprint of trans communities, which had few if any other options for heroines and no input on how Jorgensen's story was told.

Christine Jorgensen was certainly not the only trans person to come to media attention in the 1950s. In 1951, *EBONY* published a sensationalistic article on the passing of Georgia Black, a Black trans woman who was beloved by her community (Roberts, 2012). With some exceptions, those around her seemed unaware that she was trans and appeared to resent the journalist's attempt at sensationalising her life and death. Questioned by the journalist, someone who had previously employed her replied: 'I don't care what Georgia Black was. She nursed members of our family through birth, sickness and death. She was one of the best citizens in our town' (*ibid.*). Before her, Lucy Hicks Anderson, a Black trans socialite, had fought for marriage equality in the courts and the trial was covered in a 1945 article published by the *Afro-American* (Snorton, 2017). But the stories of Georgia Black and Lucy Hicks Anderson did not compete with the public's curiosity in Christine Jorgensen and Lili Elbe's so-called sex changes, and their race likely made them unattractive heroines to white trans people, the only ones with a modicum of privilege at the time. Only in recent years have the stories of Georgia Black and Lucy Hicks Anderson become better known, thanks to the writing of Monica Roberts and C. Riley Snorton.

The last few decades have heralded improvements in the living conditions and access to information of many trans people, making room for previously unheard-of levels of narrative labour. Unlike early homophile organisations, trans communities long lacked the kind of middle-class organising that would facilitate the establishment of a collective narrative, and the few middle-class trans individuals who received public spotlight were relatively disinterested in community-building (see e.g., Meyerowitz, 2004, p. 184). The trans people who were interested in community-building were often too busy surviving to document their lives and too marginalised to access platforms where they might have disseminated heroine stories to broad audiences. As Monica Forrester (in Ware, 2017) explains, living as a Black trans sex worker in the 1980s, she was focused on survival and did not think to take pictures and document her life. Living in a deeply violent world where they did not think they would live past thirty, archiving simply did not come to mind for her and those in community with her.

Although life is still very difficult for trans people and especially trans women of colour, the horizon of possibilities has opened since the 1980s. Trans people are increasingly able to live their lives openly and make a living in the formal economy. The rise of the internet has also had a tremendous impact on trans communities' ability to organise and consolidate a collective identity (Whittle, 1998). The appearance of digital spaces has not only facilitated the dissemination of information about transition and being trans but has also led to a pooling of narrative and historiographic labour. Since the 1990s, websites that relate biographical information and historical moments have proliferated. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Monica Roberts' *TransGriot*² and Zagria's *A Gender Variance Who's Who*³ have been invaluable. When documentation did occur—as attested by *El Archivo de la Memoria Trans* in Argentina,⁴ the *Casa Susanna* photographs (Hurst and Swope, 2005) and the Lou Sullivan Collection⁵—the content of the archives did not fully come to light until digital archiving expanded access to the content.⁶ Digital archives such as the Digital Transgender Archives, the ArQuives in Toronto and the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria have played a critical role in the public availability of trans history.⁷ With the advent of social media, the dissemination of trans history by trans people has entered an unprecedented era. It is in this context that the heroine narrative of Marsha P. Johnson unfolds.

Although Marsha P. Johnson's sainthood was already established in her lifetime, ensuring the documentation of her actions and words, no one is more to credit for her status as a trans heroine than Tourmaline. While working on a documentary about the Saint of Christopher Street, Tourmaline (2017) braved anti-Black and transphobic violence to unearth many of the archival videos through which we now know Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. It was she who widely shared Sylvia Rivera's now-famous speech at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day, 'Y'all better quiet down', on social media. Her work resulted in a magnificent short film, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), which imagines a radiant Marsha P. Johnson in the hours leading up to the Stonewall riots.

²TransGriot, <https://transgriot.blogspot.com/> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

³Zagria, *A Gender Variance Who's Who*, <https://zagria.blogspot.com/> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

⁴El Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 'Fondos documentales', <https://archivotrans.ar/index.php/catalogo> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

⁵Digital Transgender Archive, Lou Sullivan Collection, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/col/j6731380t> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

⁶Despite its content dating back to the 1980s, *El Archivo de la Memoria Trans* was not founded until the 2010s. Its content was initially collected from individuals who voluntarily shared pictures and stories through Facebook (Correa *et al.*, 2019). The 1960s pictures of *Casa Susanna*, a weekend destination in upstate New York for cross-dressers and trans women, were discovered in 2003 and made publicly available in 2005 (Daubs, 2016). The Lou Graydon Sullivan Papers collection is primarily composed of letters between Lou Sullivan, a wealthy trans man known for his trans rights advocacy, and 'various medical professionals, colleagues, and friends'. The materials were donated by Lou Sullivan's estate after his death in 1991 and became more widely known after becoming available in digital archives: Online Archive of California, 'Guide to the Louis Graydon Sullivan Papers, 1755–1991 (bulk 1961–1991)', <https://web.archive.org/web/20121001045647/http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=tf9199n9v3;query=;style=oac4> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

⁷They can be accessed at Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/> [last accessed 4 April 2023]; The ArQuives, <https://arquives.ca/> [last accessed 4 April 2023]; and The Transgender Archives, <https://www.uvic.ca/transgenderarchives/index.php> [last accessed 4 April 2023].

In developing *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, Tourmaline shifted her approach from a documentary to a short fictional film. In 2015, Tourmaline explained that 'so little of the history of Marsha and her friends is documented or in archives', which reflects 'anti-blackness and transphobia, how they influence whose story gets written down, protected, and archived' (Ennis, 2018). This shift can be seen as a move towards counter-archiving, a labour dedicated to questioning 'what acts, subjects, and inscriptions legitimately constitute an archive' (Ware, 2017, p. 173). Butting against the limitations of an archive that distorts and suppresses knowledge of Black trans lives, Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, her co-filmmaker, turned to fiction and critical fabulation to represent the joy and community that trans women of colour found amidst the violence, thereby creating a counter-archive (*ibid.*; Gill-Peterson, 2018b; Buchanan, 2019; Ridley, 2019).

In counter-archiving, Tourmaline and Wortzel's *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* allows us to imagine otherly. As Lavelle Ridley (2019, p. 482) writes in relation to *Tangerine* (2015), a film about two Black trans sex workers named Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra, imagining otherly maintains the possibility for 'black trans people to imagine and express forms of knowledge and ways of existing with systems of domination that do not rely on the binary of resistance and assimilation'. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* not only expands trans narratives beyond Jorgensen-style 'good transsexuality' but also confronts the 'problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand its own power in the present into the future, without letting go of the past or the future' (Ware, 2017, p. 173). Counter-archiving operates in Tourmaline's work not only as a response to archival absences and inaccessibility but also as a critique of the idea of the archive itself. By imagining otherly, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* questions the possibility of addressing the archive's systematic erasure of Black trans, *mad*, poor and sex worker histories through the archive's conventional methods and logics. Even in the internet age, the problem of access nevertheless remains. Tourmaline was never given a chance to complete the documentary she had initially set out to create. Instead, the filmmaker David France used many of the same archival sources, secured funding that was sought out by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel and employed one of their advisors as a producer for his own documentary on Marsha P. Johnson distributed by Netflix (Juzwiak, 2017; Ennis, 2018; Calafell, 2019; De Kosnik *et al.*, 2020). He was further able to pay for copyright licences from the Lesbians Organized for Video Experience Collective, Randolfe Wicker and Tracy Fitz with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Arcus Foundation (Ennis, 2018). In contrast to France's institutional backing, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* was heavily supported by donations from queer and trans communities on crowdsourcing platforms (*ibid.*).

The tone of David France's documentary stands in stark contrast to that of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* Instead of emphasising joy, love and community, it voyeuristically emphasises trans of colour bodies and suffering. The decision to place death before life in the title—*The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017)—is revealing. The documentary features graphic descriptions of violence, topless pictures of trans women, briefly shows a photograph of Marsha P. Johnson's dead body and excruciatingly films Sylvia Rivera as she is forced to dismantle her shelter by the police. In so doing, the documentary joins the ranks of countless other works by white cisgender men who turn trans women of colour's lives and deaths into trauma porn, adhering to a centuries-long trope of making a spectacle out of Black pain and death (Hartman, 1997).

The impossibility of securing enough funding for an empowering documentary imagined by a Black trans woman stands in stark contrast to the resounding success of a voyeuristic documentary created by a white cisgender man. May the contrast serve as a reminder that despite the narrative empowerment of trans communities since the 1990s, cisgender and white perspectives continue to be sharply privileged when the time comes to contribute to meaning-making and meaning-sharing on trans realities—as are the perspectives of those who do not participate in the sex trade and do not live with mental illness. As Janet Mock says, ‘to us, [Tourmaline] is the expert’ (Ennis, 2018).

The interweaving of trans and cis labour is also discernible at the level of dissemination. It is on this ultimate level that the Saint of Christopher Street’s reputation as a heroine is ensured. Fewer would have heard of her had Netflix not distributed David France’s documentary. Without public interest in disseminating Marsha P. Johnson’s story by reposting articles and documentaries, sharing them on social media and reminding people of her role in the Stonewall riots, the archival work of Tourmaline and others would have been in vain. Power continues to operate on all levels of heroine narratives (De Kosnik *et al.*, 2020).

Far more than STAR’s radical mutual aid, it was the Stonewall riots that captured the public’s mind and propelled Marsha P. Johnson to broader notoriety. As soon as discussions of LGBTQ+ history come up on social media, someone will almost certainly remind us that gay rights were only secured thanks to the revolutionary acts of trans women of colour, Marsha P. Johnson and/or Sylvia Rivera having instigated the Stonewall riots. Choosing Marsha P. Johnson as a heroine and centring her role in the Stonewall riots cuts down on the disseminative labour required to establish and sustain heroine narratives. Analysing these proclamations through the lens of dissemination, we can see them as an attempt to capitalise on the ubiquity and mythical status of the Stonewall riots and divert its reputation towards trans ends. Unlike the Compton’s Cafeteria riot of San Francisco—no less a riot, no less important to the city it occurred in—Stonewall is already a household name (Stryker, 2008). Stonewall gained its mythical status in part due to the history-making of homophile activists who were ‘mostly white, middle-class, gender-normative older men’ (Armstrong and Crage, 2006, p. 733). These activists shared Stonewall’s space with ‘homeless teens, queens, and others not welcome elsewhere’ (*ibid.*, p. 737). This relatively privileged middle-class clientele was, by contrast, largely absent from Compton’s Cafeteria (*ibid.*). Homophile activists played a critical role in turning the Stonewall riots into a commemorative event, deploying media promotion, organisational mailing, flyers and other forms of grassroots communications towards this purpose. Indeed, it could be argued that Stonewall only became a symbol of gay resistance because white gay men saw commemoration as a political opportunity (*ibid.*). But in the process, the commemoration became focused on gay rights and gay pride politics, obscuring the trans and racialised histories that played an integral role in the riot (Reynolds, 2016; see also Ware, 2017). The political valences of Stonewall engender a selective commemoration that tends to erase within-group differences (Polletta, 1998a).

By attaching Stonewall to the Saint of Christopher Street, social interest in the riots is diverted from its path of solely benefitting mainstream gay movements towards popularising a few trans icons like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Since it is no longer possible to speak of Stonewall without mentioning Johnson and Rivera, cisgender disseminative labour is reappropriated and put to the benefit of creating and sustaining heroine narratives inaugurated by Tourmaline and others in trans

communities. At the same time, this reappropriation depends upon cisgender interest in Stonewall, influencing and perhaps distorting communal storytelling in favour of stories that are already cognisable within the cisgender imaginary. Only after Stonewall is named can the focus be shifted to STAR and STAR House, enriching the revolutionary counterviolence of Marsha P. Johnson with the mutual aid and kindness that lay at the heart of her character. This deferred interest in STAR, to which Tourmaline significantly contributed, is evident in trans community discourses and trans studies (Nothing, 2013; Lewis, 2017; Marvin, 2019; Blanchard, 2020). Claiming their voice, trans communities are seeking to narrate Marsha P. Johnson in a context that transcends Stonewall's momentousness by accentuating the radicality of her loving, everyday self. In the labour of dissemination, we see that the communal capacity to create and sustain is not all-or-nothing and that cis people have an ongoing, often distorting influence on the narrative process. Yet we also see the agency of trans communities as they redirect and divert the cisgender imaginary towards their own ends.

Turning a transphobic trope on its head, we could think of Marsha P. Johnson's status as a heroine in terms of social contagion—albeit a contagion of love rather than transitude. Dependent as it is on the strengthening of trans communities and the development of accessible archives, the recognition of Marsha P. Johnson as a heroine demonstrates the contagious nature of trans love (Adair and Aizura, 2022). Her love inspired the archival work of researchers like Tourmaline, who in turn demonstrated their love for the heroine through their labour. By recognising the heroic life of Marsha P. Johnson, we can perhaps begin to answer Syrus Marcus Ware's (2017) question of what it would look like for the lives of Black trans women to be considered worthy of archiving and remembering.

Heroines are not simply out there, ready to be discovered. Behind every heroine is an invisible labour that, when brought to the fore, has much to teach us about social power. Behind the iconography of the Saint of Christopher Street lies a second story: a trans community long struggling for survival finally beginning to collect and narrate its own stories while remaining under the yoke of financial and cultural powers beyond its control. A second story in which the heroine is just as much Tourmaline as it is Marsha.

we who define ourselves through the heroine

Beyond the labour of constituting heroines, there is a laborious social function in the very tale itself. Heroine stories are not neutral: they do work. A story entertains. It teaches. Or it communicates values. Accepting the suggestion that heroines conceptually distinguish themselves from leaders by their role as symbols, we can analyse 'heroism as a perception in the eyes of followers, one that symbolizes the desires and values of the collective they represent' (Decter-Frain, Vanstone and Frimer, 2017, p. 121; see also Polletta, 1998b). Conceived as a form of labour, the heroisation of Marsha P. Johnson can be understood as labouring to constitute a collective identity. Marsha P. Johnson's elevation into a heroine is therefore a trove of information on the self-narratives of trans communities in the United States,

⁸ By writing this article, we take part in the very form of meaning-making that forms the object of analysis. Our analysis cannot be disentangled from our positionality as authors. The first author is a white, neuroatypical transfeminine scholar who does not experience severe marginalisation due to their mental illnesses. The second author is a latina/x, first-generation, transfeminine scholar. As Kai Cheng Thom (2019, p. 138) points out: 'If you're a trans girl with trans feminine friends, you're probably, at most, two degrees of separation away from sex work'. For many, like us, the degree of separation is even less. We hope that our writing will stand as a gesture of *t4t* love towards our communities, and towards Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and Tourmaline.

where most narratives about her are found. In designating the Saint of Christopher Street as their heroine, trans people project and consolidate their own political attachments. By choosing a heroine, we are choosing ourselves.⁸

What may the glorification of Marsha P. Johnson tell us about contemporary trans communities? The first clue lies in our emotional investment in Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera as instigators of the Stonewall riots despite their testimonials to the contrary. While Marsha P. Johnson was certainly at the riots and played a crucial role in them and in their aftermath, neither she nor Sylvia Rivera likely threw the first brick. It would, on the contrary, be theologically incongruous for the Saint of Christopher Street to have cast the first stone (John 8:7). Yet the myth lives on.

Why are we so attached to this apocryphal tale? As suggested earlier, we surmise that by positioning two trans women at the genesis of gay rights movements, trans communities are (re)placing themselves within the history of a larger LGBTQ+ coalition. This sociohistorical corrective comes at a crucial time when, same-sex marriage having been secured in the United States, much anxiety has arisen as to whether the progressive *establishment* and Gay Inc (Beam, 2018) will back other communities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. So-called gay marriage having been won before the Supreme Court of the United States, conservative religious organisations are turning towards trans communities as their new target of moral panic. Bills to prohibit trans people from gender-concordant facilities and sports, and bills that would criminalise transition-related interventions for minors have proliferated in recent years (Lopez, 2017; De La Cretaz, 2021; Strangio, 2021). Transantagonistic attacks are also proliferating in countless other countries, though we focus on the United States as the prime guarantor of Marsha P. Johnson's legacy. The visibility of trans communities in our era also coincides with a revival of transantagonistic so-called feminist organisations such as the Women's Liberation Front and a rise in homonationalist advocacy to 'drop the T' from the LGBTQ+ acronym. This time is a worrying one, and trans advocates are doubtless aware of many influential LGBTQ+ institutions' long history of rushing to protect the social and legal gains of cisgender gay men, abandoning trans people at the first bump on the road.

By tying gay rights movements back to their trans origins, the heroisation of the Saint of Christopher Street makes the passage from gay marriage to trans equality as a cornerstone of LGBTQ+ movements seem only natural. If cisgender gay and trans people formed a coalition from the beginning, then it is only natural for our fates to continue being intertwined. Identifying trans women as not only participants but instigators of the Stonewall riots can be understood as a way of ensuring that the contribution of trans people cannot be invisibilised as it long was. It is far easier to ignore participants than instigators, than the very mothers of a movement. Located in this socio-political context, appeals to Marsha P. Johnson's legacy serves as a reminder: 'We are here. We will not be made invisible. Trans people have been there for the gay rights movement. Now it's your turn to be there for us'.

However, we believe we can discern a further motivation for narrating Marsha P. Johnson as the instigator of the Stonewall riots. Our collective, seemingly counterfactual stubbornness is not just about the title of instigator. It may also be about the symbolism of the act itself. Throwing a brick is a violent, revolutionary act of resistance. That investment in radicalness is often doubly underlined by the assertion that we owe Stonewall to trans women of colour—women whose lives are often cast as inherently radical in the contemporary social justice imaginary. By identifying Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera as

the person having thrown the first brick at the Stonewall riots, trans people are rhetorically signalling the radical character of contemporary trans movements and, oftentimes, how they are *more* radical in nature than present and past cisgender gay movements. *More radical than thou*. However, casting trans of colour lives as inherently radical ignores within-group differences and abstracts from the *actual* radical labour of trans women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991; Carbado, 2013; Katri, 2017). Radicalness is an action, not a state of being.

This rhetorical positioning obscures the whiteness of mainstream trans advocacy. By placing Marsha P. Johnson in the genealogy of today's mainstream trans movements and elevating her as a heroic representation, predominantly white trans communities are positioning themselves as heirs to her radicalism, erasing the specificity of her experience and labour as a Black *mad* trans female sex worker. We cannot appreciate Marsha P. Johnson's life and especially not her role in the anti-cop Stonewall riots without understanding how her relationship to the police was shaped by anti-Blackness, whorephobia and sanism—a sanism that swayed between neglecting, incarcerating and institutionalising people living with mental illness at the whim and comfort of the police and the wealthy white people they serve (Rembis, 2014; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019). The Saint of Christopher Street is no more severable from her Blackness, sex work and mental health than her gender and transitude. Only by attending to all aspects of her identity can we appreciate Marsha P. Johnson's radicalism (Crenshaw, 1991).

In the mainstream trans imaginary, the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson is opportunistically invoked. *Elle sert d'icône à géométrie variable*. When it is time to stress the radical and revolutionary character of trans movements, the Saint of Christopher Street is a Black trans female sex worker and, sometimes, *mad*. But when it is time to claim her as a representative of trans communities regardless of race, mental health, profession or class, these identities are most often overlooked. Rhetorical deployments of this kind are far from unheard of in trans discourse; privileged white trans voices having long (ab)used the bodies and suffering of Black sex workers towards a liberal agenda that is unlikely to benefit the most marginalised of trans people (Lamble, 2008; Nothing, 2013; Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013). As C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013, p. 71) point out in relation to Tyra Hunter's death, 'trans women of colour act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject'.

In the last few years, we have seen a narrative progression in Marsha P. Johnson's legacy. Increasingly, trans communities and especially academics are no longer solely interested in her role in the Stonewall riots and now also focus on her contributions to STAR. This narrative shift from a momentous revolutionary act to sustained efforts of mutual aid and community support reveals the evolution of collective trans identity in the post-visibility era. The narrative progression parallels the renewed interest in *t4t* (*trans-for-trans*) ethics, a philosophy of liberation centred on revolutionary love between trans people that sees love as a solution, if only partial, to the violent cisnormativity of the world (Lyle, 2016; Thom, 2018; Malatino, 2019; Marvin, 2019; Ridley, 2019).

In a now-classic passage, Torrey Peters described *t4t* ethics as:

'It's a promise. You just promise to love trans girls above all else. The idea—although maybe not the practice—is that a girl could be your worst enemy, the girl you wouldn't piss on to put out a fire, but if she's trans, you're gonna offer her your bed, you're gonna share your last hormone shot.'

'That sounds like some kind of trans girl utopia.' I'm so rattled, it's not even sarcastic.

She laughs. 'Please. You've met a trans woman before, right? Do you think the words trans women and utopia ever go together in the same sentence? Even when we're not starved for hormones, we're still bitches. Crabs in a barrel. Fucking utopia, my ass.' [...]

'Here's what it is,' she says, a little more gently, 'We aim high, trying to love each other and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for each other. And even if we don't all love each other, we mostly all respect each other.'

(Peters, 2017, p. 54)

Torrey Peters' conception of *t4t* is gloomy and pessimistic, locating it within the aspirational realm of a post-apocalyptic world. Tying Torrey Peters' novella to Kai Cheng Thom's dystopia-inflexed novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* (2018), Hil Malatino (2019) traces in *t4t* aspirations of love and solidarity in survival that are deeply evocative of STAR and STAR House. The narrative thread from *t4t* to STAR is completed by Amy Marvin's (2019) work on transfeminist care ethics, which views STAR as a locus of ethical wisdom. Wedding collective radical action to protective care and on-the-ground solidarity by caring for poor queer and trans youths of colour, STAR comes to stand as an aspirational model of community-sustaining practices. The shift in focus from the Stonewall riots to STAR House in Marsha P. Johnson's legacy can thus be interpreted as a turn to grassroots mutual aid as a community good.

By articulating Marsha P. Johnson's heroine narrative around STAR and STAR House, trans communities position themselves as valuing care, support and love. They are *t4t*—if not in practice, at least in hope. Praise for STAR and *t4t* ethos differs from the glorification of the Stonewall riots on at least one significant point. Whereas the latter seeks to position trans people regardless of their social identities as already heirs of Marsha P. Johnson's radicalism, the former takes on a more aspirational note and does not purport to be a faithful historical description of trans communities in general. On the contrary, descriptions of *t4t* often belong more to hopeful pessimism than anything else, and Amy Marvin (*ibid.*) expressly emphasises how little STAR's caring practices have in common with the mutual aid of more privileged trans people. This recognition of trans communities' failures and flaws better honours the heroism and legacy of Marsha P. Johnson and augurs a promising logic of communal self-improvement. To borrow the words of Christopher Street drag queen Agosto Machado (in Kasino, 2012): 'She is a reminder of what the village was and what other younger people can be'. Marsha P. Johnson, the Saint of Christopher Street, the Mother of STAR, symbolises a benevolence we wish to embody.

Though we describe the turn to STAR as an evolution of collective identity, it is not devoid of ambivalence. There is an ever-present risk of STAR and trans women of colour's lives and labour being decontextualised and exploited (Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013; Táíwò, 2022). Acknowledging their specificity does not equate to respecting it. This turn is not one we can undertake uncritically. If STAR's name only serves to further academic careers, reciting its sociohistorical context cannot but be meaningless. As Ehm Nothing reminds us in the introduction of a collection of speeches and interviews by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera:

If we do not critically engage this history, we not only lose analytical tools that could aid the spread and sharpening of our revolt, but also abandon the dead to vultures who reduce everything to image and commodity. (Nothing, 2013, p. 10)

conclusion

By deploying a social constructionist lens towards heroine narratives, we seek to honour the memory of Marsha P. Johnson and the hard work of those like Tourmaline who ensure its preservation within the heart of trans communities. The Saint of Christopher Street did not appear out of thin air a hero of trans movements. Her heroism reached us only thanks to the sweat and tears of activists and storytellers that were ready to brave anti-Blackness and transmisogyny to bring her legacy to light. The heroine's story is a dual one, as much of heroism as it is one of labour. We will never know the full extent of her heroism, nor the heroism of countless other Black *mad* trans female sex workers whose stories were suppressed by white supremacy, sanism, whorephobia and transmisogyny.

Beyond the labour lying underneath the production of the heroine *qua* heroine, labour can also be witnessed in the social function of heroines *qua* narratives. Rather than emerging as an isolated tale, the story of Marsha P. Johnson plays a central role in the construction of contemporary trans collective identity. Through the Saint of Christopher Street, trans individuals claim their place in LGBTQ+ movements. They demand solidarity from cisgender institutions and activists. They naturalise the shift in advocacy from same-sex marriage to trans rights. They declare themselves the radical branch of LGBTQ+ movements. And, more recently, they promote grassroots mutual aid and revolutionary love among trans people by decentering the historical moment of the Stonewall riots in favour of the sustained care practised in STAR House.

At various points of those disparate tales, trans communities highlight, obscure and claim fragments of Marsha P. Johnson's identity: Black, *mad*, sex worker, poor, trans woman. As mainstream trans movements embark on the same neoliberal path as homonationalism before it (Puar, 2007; Vipond, 2015), we must problematise the racist, whorephobic and sanist practices and philosophies that permeate trans community spaces. In writing this article, we wish to invite a collective reflection on the memorialisation of Marsha P. Johnson's life, STAR and Stonewall. May we question the use we make of archives, centre the voices and needs of those we have marginalised and forever find better ways to express *t4t* love. Perhaps one day we will be able to recognise our gloomy communal reality, abandon logics of identarian self-exoneration and finally embrace a radical ethic of mutual aid and revolutionary love. Only then will we do justice to the memory of Marsha P. Johnson.

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