



MARSHA P. JOHNSON STATUE

New York, USA

40.733641, -74.0043126



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Executive Summary

In 2019, the New York City Council announced the installation of two monuments for Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, which was a seminal moment for gay rights. After being postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some LGBTQIA+ activists, frustrated with the delay, decided to take the matter into their own hands. Among them, Jesse Pallotta, artist and transgender activist, decided to sculpt a statue dedicated to Marsha P. Johnson, which stands in Christopher Park, across the street from the Stonewall Inn, on August 24, 2021, without the City's approval. It is the first monument commemorating a transgender person in New York City Park and depicting a Stonewall riots participant. Pallotta submitted a First Amendment permit through the National Park Service in an attempt to protect the statue.

Introduction

Marsha P. Johnson was a prolific Black transwoman who was an activist for LGBTQIA+ rights and HIV/AIDS treatment. She was most known for her role in the 1969 Stonewall uprising, being a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front and for co-founding, with Sylvia Rivera, the 'Street Transvestite [now transgender] Action Revolutionaries' (S.T.A.R), a street activist organisation which provided housing for homeless LGBTQIA+ youth. She is recognised as one of the most influential people in the modern LGBTQIA+ movement.

Background

Marsha's life



Figure 1: 'Marsha P. Johnson adorned with flowers' Image by petcor80 via Flickr CC 1.0 Public Domain

Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on August 24, 1945, upon moving to New York City in 1963, Johnson became a major figure in the LGBTQIA+ community. For example, she acted as a 'drag mother' to help to struggle LGBTQIA+ youth.¹ She was an activist, a drag artist, a sex worker, and a mainstay of Greenwich Village for three decades. She went by 'BLACK Marsha' before choosing Marsha P. Johnson, with the 'P' standing for 'Pay It No Mind,' which was reportedly her go-to response to questions about her gender.

She is perhaps most well known for her role in the Stonewall uprising, where, on June 28, 1969, she was identified by eyewitnesses as one of the main instigators of the uprising, standing up to the police who had raided the Inn. As such, some have recognised her as the 'vanguard of the gay liberation movement in the United States.'² As a Black, poor, gay and transwoman, Johnson's life illustrates the intersections and diversity of the LGBTQIA+ movement.³

When interviewed for a book in 1972, Johnson said the ambition of her work was 'to see gay

¹ Tyler Born, "Marsha "Pay it no mind" Johnson," *outhistory*, 2015.

² Office of LGBTQ+ Affairs – County of Union, New Jersey, "About Marsha P. Johnson," *Union County*, 2022.

³ Rachel Cohen, "Guerrilla memorial is NYC's first statue of a trans person," *Washington Square News*, September 20, 2021.

people liberated and free and to have equal rights that other people have in America'.⁴ Today's scholars and former friends of Johnson would describe her as a transwoman, but during her life, 'transgender' was not a widely used term. As such, Marsha described herself as a 'gay person, a transvestite and a drag queen.'⁵

Sadly, on July 6, 1992, Marsha's body was found in the Hudson River off the West Village Piers. She was only 46 years old at the time of her death.

Marsha P. Johnson's legacy lives on through organisations such as the Marsha P. Johnson Institute, created by transgender advocate Elle Moxley, which supports and protects the rights of Black transgender people through arts and community organising. In addition, in February 2020, the Mayor of New York renamed the East River State Park in Brooklyn as The Marsha P. Johnson State Park.⁶

The Monument

The bust of Johnson is called 'A Love Letter to Marsha.' The unauthorised bust of Johnson is located in Christopher Park, West Village, New York City, down the street from the Stonewall Inn, a historic safe haven for the LGBTQIA+ community, and has been installed as part of the Stonewall National Monument. It is a few feet away from George Segal's Gay Liberation Monument featuring four white-painted women and men (cast in bronze) which critics consider to be a white-washed depiction of the movement. The bust of Johnson was not created by a single activist or community group, but rather by a group of local trans individuals who believe it to be 'the first statue of a trans person in an NYC park as well as the first to depict a participant in the historic Stonewall riots.'⁷

The bust was erected on what would have been Johnson's 76th birthday (August 24) – more than two years after city officials had announced that they intended to create a monument in honour of Johnson and fellow transgender activist and S.T.A.R co-founder, Sylvia Rivera (2019).⁸ Creator Jesse Pallotta stated, 'We never attempted to go through the city' and that crucially the bust is intended to be temporary with the collective still supporting the city's plans to memorialise Johnson and Rivera.⁹

Description of the monument

The bust features a slightly smiling Johnson in a tiara and pearls intended to give Johnson a stoic presence embodying the 'strength and beauty' in her character.¹⁰ Writer, activist and sculptor coordinator Eli Erlick, Jesse Pallotta and fellow organisers also installed the bust themselves,

⁴ Susan Devaney, "Marsha P Johnson's Activism Matters Now More Than Ever," *British VOGUE*, June 6, 2020.

⁵ Women and the American Story, "Life Story: Marsha P. Johnson (1945-1992)," *New York Historical Society*, 2022.

⁶ BBC, "Pride Month: Who was Marsha P. Johnson and why were they so important?" *BBC*, June 30, 2020.

⁷ Jen Carlson, "Activists Install Marsha P. Johnson Monument in Christopher Park," *Gothamist*, August 25, 2021.

⁸ Scottie Andrew, "A bust of Marsha P. Johnson went up near the Stonewall Inn as a tribute to the transgender activist," *CNN*, August 30, 2022.

⁹ Rachel Cohen, "Guerrilla memorial is NYC's first statue of a trans person," *Washington Square News*, September 20, 2021.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

adorning the head of the bust with flowers. Beneath the bust is a plaque, identifying Marsha as 'Lover of poetry, flowers, space, and the color purple'. The heading states: 'Marsha 'Pay it No Mind' Johnson' and features a quote from the artist, activist and Stonewall Uprising participant Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt stating:

History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities.¹¹



Figure 2: 'The statue of Marsha P. Johnson, decorated in a wreath and flowers, stands in Christopher Park' Image by Elvert Barnes via Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

History of the Contestation

Of the 800 monuments in NYC parks, just seven are statues of historical women, and none, until Johnson, are of transgender women. Since the 1980s, there have been petitions for a statue of Johnson in the West Village to be erected. The arrival of the unauthorised Johnson statue occurs against the backdrop of considerable changes to NYC monuments and monument culture in recent years.

Since 2019, New York City officials had been intending to memorialise Johnson and fellow trailblazer Rivera through the She Built NYC, a public arts group aiming to correct the gender gap in NYC's statues. However, NYC Parks, the city's Department of Parks and Recreation, often takes years to approve a single statue. With the COVID-19 pandemic slowing the process of memorialisation down even further, the project was indefinitely stalled alongside others, and an artist was never chosen. Consequently, local activists decided to take matters into their own

¹¹ Jen Carlson, "Activists Install Marsha P. Johnson Monument in Christopher Park," *Gothamist*, August 25, 2021.

hands, with one creator, Eli Erlick, stating, 'We cannot stay idle and wait for the city to build statues for us. We must create representation by and for our own communities.'¹²

Decision-Making Processes

The delay in the memorialisation process was the primary motivator for the unauthorised statue of Johnson being placed in Christopher Park. The statue serves as a tribute to Johnson, her work and legacy with the unauthorised nature of the statue intended to help to amplify how transgender people, and particularly transgender people from racialised communities, have been omitted from the history of the LGBTQIA+ movement. New York University Lecturer Emmaia Gelman supports this by emphasising the importance of the statue because whilst Johnson was alive,

people were really focused on activism and concerned about respectability and coherence. Not everyone, but many organizers and also the spaces in which people organized didn't necessarily understand people who were breaking the mold as leaders.

Johnson's life as a trailblazing activist sits at the intersection of LGBTQIA+ experiences in the 20th century.

With regard to the motivations of the unauthorised project and its longevity, Pallotta stated

I was hoping that Marsha's beauty is so impactful on its own that people would not mind that it was there — and it actually seems to be working. The bust is intended not only as a testament to Johnson and her work but to 'reimagine the kinds of figures we lift up and celebrate.'¹³

In the absence of a city permit, Pallotta also submitted a First Amendment permit through the National Park Service to protect the statue.

Summary and Conclusions

The bust celebrating Marsha P. Johnson acted as both a subversive piece and as a stop-gap for authorised memorialisation of Johnson in the face of bureaucratic delays. By taking an unauthorised approach, the activists continued the tradition of art and protest within the LGBTQIA+ movement. Johnson is well-known within the history of Greenwich Village and the history of NYC, and her memorialisation is intended as a vital step in redressing the history of the LGBTQIA+ movement by including the stories and experiences of transgender people and people from racialised communities.

The statue was given a temporary permit to stay in Christopher Park until November 2021, after which the grassroots organisation, Black Trans Nation- a local NGO supporting black trans individuals- decided the sculpture should move to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, a non-profit organisation serving the LGBTQIA+ population of NYC, located

¹² Scottie Andrew, "A bust of Marsha P. Johnson went up near the Stonewall Inn as a tribute to the transgender activist," *CNN*, August 30, 2022.

¹³ James Factora, "This New Statue of Marsha P. Johnson Is Fighting the 'Whitewashing' of LGBTQ+ History," *Them*, August 26, 2021.

in the West Village. The sculpture was displayed until August 24, 2022, since, according to its makers, it is meant to be ‘temporary’ and replaced by a monument sponsored by the city officials – as they had promised. Pallotta stated, ‘My end goal is that the city reinitiates the project to give monuments to Marsha and Sylvia.’¹⁴

Research contributed by Rosa Pouakouyou and Zainaab Basil

Last updated December 2024

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¹⁴ Andrew, Scottie. “A bust of Marsha P. Johnson went up near the Stonewall Inn as a tribute to the transgender activist.” *CNN*. August 30, 2022.

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Figures

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat
Bankplein 2
2585EV, The Hague
The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

To cite this publication:

The Contested Histories Initiative, "Marsha P Johnson Statue in New York, USA", *Contested Histories Case Study #407* (December 2024), retrieved from [link], [CC BY 4.0](#).

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.