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Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson: Listen to the Newly Unearthed Interview with Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries

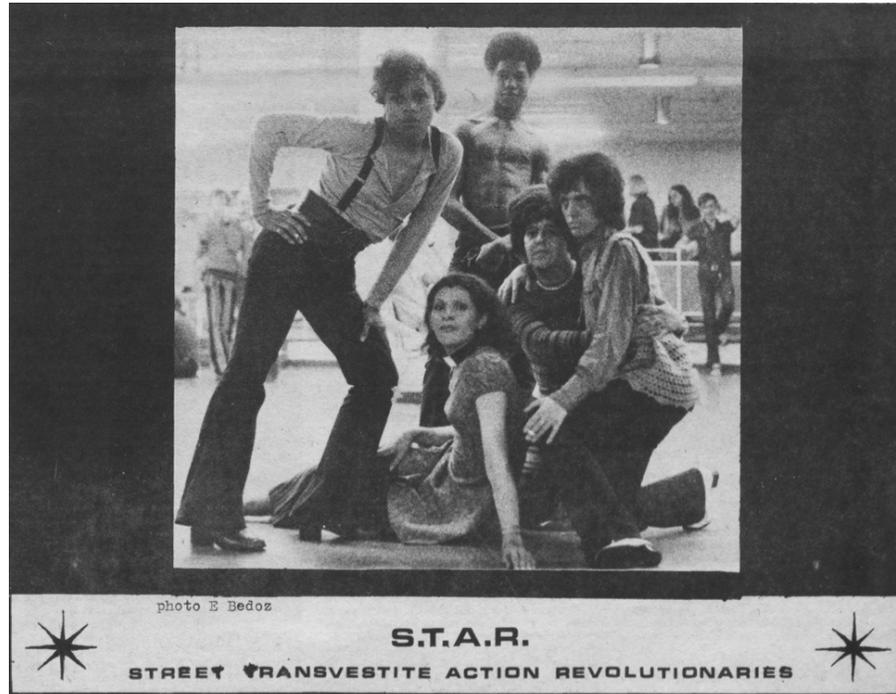
June 26, 2019 by [Women at the Center](#) [1 Comment](#)

The blog of the Center for Women's History at the New-York Historical Society highlights exhibitions, programs, and education while promoting women's history through original research, interviews, and guest posts.

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In December 1970, Liza Cowan of WBAI sat down with members of the newly formed Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (or S.T.A.R.) for an interview. Three months before this interview, the initial idea for S.T.A.R. came out of a sit-in at New York University's Weinstein Hall. On September 20, 1970, a coalition of radical lesbian and gay organizations, which proliferated in the immediate wake of the 1969 Stonewall uprising, occupied the hall to protest the cancellation of a gay dance. After five days, the police forcibly removed the activists from the building, though a smaller protest continued on the steps outside.



Ellen Shumshy's photograph of S.T.A.R. from *Come Out!* (Dec-Jan, no. 7, page 5). The [full issue](#) of *Come Out!* is available from [OutHistory](#). Additional photographs by Shumshy are on display in the New-York Historical Society's [Stonewall 50](#) exhibition.

Sylvia Rivera—the soon to be founding president of S.T.A.R.—emerged as a vociferous force during and after the occupation. At 19 years old, Rivera had already spent nearly half her life “hustling in the streets,” after running away from home at the age of 11. Her frequent encounters with the NYPD

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radicalized her, as did the growing movements for racial, economic, gender, and sexual liberation. After the occupation, Rivera helped organize a rally led by the newly named Street Transvestites for Gay Power, a precursor to S.T.A.R. Street Transvestites for Gay Power also issued [a flyer](#) (penned by Rivera), which chastised activists for dispersing from Weinstein Hall after the police arrived: “[A]ll we fought for at Weinstein Hall was lost when we left upon the request of the pigs,” she fumed. “So now the question is, do we want Gay Power or Pig Power[?]”^[1]

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Su Negrin, graphic designer; Suzanne Bevier, artist; Peter Hujar (1934–1987), photographer. Gay Liberation. New York: Times Change Press, 1970. Graphics Collection, The Lesbian Herstory Archives.

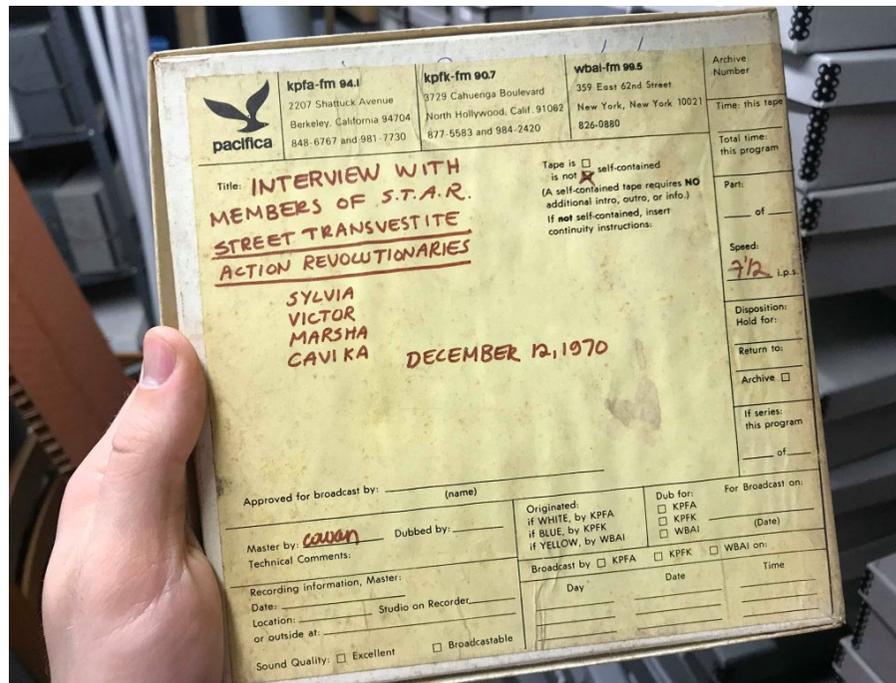
S.T.A.R. was officially founded one month later in November at a meeting attended by a small handful of activists.[2] At the meeting, Rivera nominated her friend Marsha P. Johnson as president in order to “give her prestige” (128). Johnson was part of Rivera’s kinship network of primarily “Spanish” (that is, Latinx) and Black “dykes” and “queens” with whom she panhandled and turned tricks in Times Square (101-2). Six years older than Rivera, Johnson was fiercely protective of her young friend throughout the 1960s. Like Rivera, Johnson also went on to become a key figure in the gay liberation movement as it unfolded after the Stonewall uprising. On June 28, 1969, Johnson was in fact at the Stonewall Inn and by many accounts helped catalyze the collective resistance against the routine police raid of the bar.[3] She also participated in the Weinstein Hall occupation and the subsequent Street Transvestites for Gay Power rally. However, despite Rivera’s respectful deference to Johnson, Johnson declined the presidency of S.T.A.R., acknowledging her tendency to “go off in other directions” (128). Johnson instead assumed the office of vice president, with Rivera as president.

After the formation of S.T.A.R., [Bubbles Rose Lee](#), another founding member, spearheaded the acquisition of a dilapidated building on 2nd street between Avenues B and C, which became the S.T.A.R. house. In keeping with Rivera’s vision to offer a “home for street people” (114), the S.T.A.R. house opened its doors to a “[floating population of 20 street queens, living by candlelight, sleeping everywhere, including the bathtub](#),” until their eviction from the building approximately eight months later in [July 1971](#).



The STAR House was located on 213 E. 2nd street between Avenues B and C. Photograph by Rachel Corbman.

Cowan's WBAI interview with S.T.A.R. in December 1970 was likely recorded in the S.T.A.R. house. Years later, Cowan donated the reel-to-reel recording of the interview to the [Lesbian Herstory Archives](#), along with an extensive collection of recordings from her feminist radio show on WBAI. Not quite lost, but certainly largely unknown, this tape was recently spotted by a researcher at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, while he was sifting through a box of Cowan's tapes. Now digitized, the recording is likely the earliest recorded interview with Rivera and Johnson, as well as possibly the only recorded interview with members of S.T.A.R., during the organization's short existence.



Brian Ferree finds "Interview with Members of S.T.A.R." in the basement of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Photo courtesy of Brian Ferree.

The tape opens with Rivera and Johnson describing their coming out process. In Rivera's words:



“ Before my mother passed away, my first two years, my mother used to dress me in girl’s clothes, and my grandmother kept on buying like little blouses and girl’s slacks. I was about 6 or 7 years old before I went in to school and then she started dressing me in boy’s clothes. During that period, that’s when I discovered my homosexuality was, like you know, watching television, and placing myself in the role of the female or just placing myself as another boy in the male’s arm and the man who was playing such a fantastic lover on the television. And I found when I left home at 11 was really when I went into transvestitism and makeup, hustling in the streets, in the games, I guess, whatever you want to call it.

Echoing Rivera, Johnson remembered:



“ As I was growing up, I met a lot of men. They never appealed to me, you know, too much sexually. You know, I tried to keep away from them because in my hometown if you were homosexual you were out of it and they would call you all kinds of names. And then when I first came to New York, I was 17 years old that’s when I started getting kind of— you know— transvestite, more like a transvestite. I started out with makeup in 1963-1964 and in 1965 I was coming out more and I was still wearing makeup. But I was still going to jail just for wearing makeup. In 1969, I started wearing female attire full time.

In these quotes, and throughout the interview, Rivera and Johnson simultaneously understand themselves as gay men (or “homosexuals”) *and* trans women (or “transvestites”)—a constellation of identities that might be

perplexing to listeners in the current moment. In the nearly 50 years since Rivera and Johnson's interview, transgender identification is now most often understood as analytically distinct from sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight. Put differently, a trans person might well be gay (e.g. a trans man who dates men), but a trans person is not gay because they are trans. However, even as this distinction has increasingly cemented its place in our collective common sense, David Valentine's *Imagining Transgender* (2007) persuasively traces the rather short history of this understanding of gender and sexuality. Beginning in the 1990s, the term transgender (or trans, for short) rapidly gained traction in "grassroots activism, social service provision, and individual identification" (4). An umbrella category, trans broadly refers to everyone whose gender identity or expression differs from their assigned sex at birth—a definition of trans that most certainly encompasses Johnson and Rivera. However, at times, our contemporary definition of trans bumps up against how trans people in the past understood their identities and shaped their politics.



Photograph of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera by Rudy Grillo, c. 1989-90. The Rudy Grillo Collection, The LGBT Community Center National History Archive.

Specifically, Johnson and Rivera often regarded trans as one way to be gay, as exemplified by Rivera's iconic [G-A-Y P-O-W-E-R](#) chant or her declaration in conversation with Cowan that "homosexuals have been since the beginning of the world, since people started being born." Without disavowing their place in a broader gay movement, S.T.A.R. nevertheless chose to organize separately as transvestites, partially out of frustration with the political vision of a gay movement dominated by "butch male homosexuals," who in Rivera's estimation "always oppress[ed] transvestites" because "we're threatening their masculinity." Ironically, while Johnson and Rivera maintained an ambivalent attachment to gay politics, they drew a much sharper distinction *between* identities that have since been subsumed into the category of transgender. For example, the interview includes a lengthy discussion of the difference between so-called "homosexual transvestites" and "heterosexual transvestites," with Rivera quipping that she doubted she would "ever understand" heterosexual transvestites.

In listening to this newly unearthed S.T.A.R. interview, we have the rare opportunity to hear trans people from the past speak for themselves. For example, we hear Rivera defending her right to a chosen name and pronoun after being misgendered in a newspaper article.

clip-3

“ This is very oppressive. Everyone calls me Sylvia. I've had this name for nine years- straight or gay, even on my job the girls the women that I used to work with called me Sylvia and it's not just transvestites who call me Sylvia or who consider is or treat me as she. This is what people respect you. This is respect.

Similarly staunch in her feminist critique of gendered divisions of labor, Rivera countered Johnson's assumption that women cook, clean, and sew.

 clip-4

“
I as a person don't believe that a transvestite or a woman should do all the washing or all the cooking and do everything that's forced on by the bourgeois society and the establishment that women have to do this. I don't believe in that. That's all a lot of baloney. If you have a lover or you have a friend that you really care for, you split everything down 50/50. If you don't feel like doing it, you just don't do it. Let him do it because this is what we're all trying to get across. Men are oppressive. They just oppress you in all different ways.

Primary sources like this reel-to-reel recording offer crucial insight into LGBTQ history in its historical complexity, providing a window into Johnson and Rivera's ideas about gender and sexuality and political vision at the dawn of gay liberation.

– Rachel Corbman, Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellow in Women's History, Center for Women's History

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Liza Cowan for permission to publish excerpts of this recording. To learn more about Cowan and her work, visit [Dyke, A Quarterly online annotated bibliography](#). Thanks to Brian Ferree for spotting this recording at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and spearheading the digitization of the tape. Additional thanks are also due to Sara Burningham and Making Gay History for making this blog possible. Check out Making Gay History's Stonewall 50: [episode 3](#) for an additional clip from the S.T.A.R. interview. Stay tuned for season five of [Making Gay History](#)—or stop by the Lesbian Herstory Archives—to listen to the full recording.

[Stonewall 50 at New-York Historical Society](#) consists of two exhibitions **Letting Loose and Fighting Back: LGBTQ Nightlife Before and After Stonewall** and **By the Force of Our Presence: Highlights from the Lesbian Herstory Archives**, as well as **Say It Loud, Out and Proud: Fifty Years of Pride**, a special installation. **Stonewall 50 at New-York Historical Society** will be on display on the second floor of the New-York Historical Society until September 22, 2019.

Top Photo Credits: Photograph of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera by Rudy Grillo, c. 1989-90. The Rudy Grillo Collection, The LGBT Community Center National History Archive (detail).

[1] The full text of this flyer is available on Tourmaline's website. Tourmaline's extensive archival research on Marsha P. Johnson informs this blog post.

[2] The historical narrative and quotes in this and the following paragraph are drawn from Stephen Cohen's *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail* (Routledge, 2007).

[3] Rivera similarly claimed to be present at the Stonewall uprising, but her various accounts of events are [inconsistent and contested by others](#), including Johnson.

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Miriam Frank says

June 24, 2020 at 7:56 pm

Great material. I remember Sylvia Rivera & Marcia P Johnson @ the Alternate U fighting with the feminists over their rights to be at the meeting.

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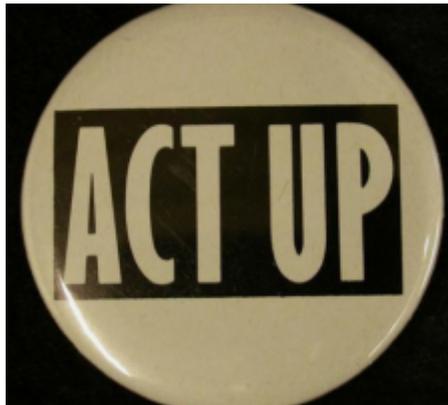
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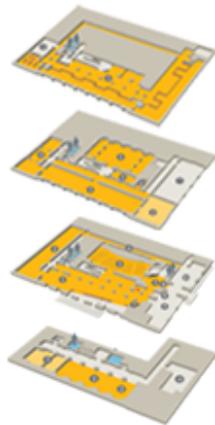
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Herstory Archives' extensive collection is to be overwhelmed by the range of lesbian and queer activism over the past 50 years. From a candidate's name to slogans like "We Are Everywhere" or "STONEWALL MEANS FIGHT BACK! Smash Lesbian & Gay Oppression!" almost all of the buttons commemorate something important to the wearer. Late in February 2019, I went to the Archives in search of a particularly...

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