

## **“In Search of Disreputable Heroines”**

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What an exciting moment to be part of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Houston. We are celebrating students who have completed minors in LGBTQ Studies and WGSS, and graduate certificates, as well as our first ever WGSS Major!

Today I want to take the occasion to remind us that though we’re gaining a lot of recognition and good reputation in the University and the city for preparing our students for working in many fields and communities, a lot of what our program is about is people who for ages have been viewed as *disreputable* – and still are.

For those who don’t know, I teach courses about sexuality, including the gay, straight, queer, and heteronormative varieties. In Texas, sexuality is not something that most of us have had preparation to talk about in the classroom. And when I began teaching sexuality studies last year at UH, I was at first nervous about teaching respectability politics. Respectability politics can be defined as the way that marginalized groups—instead of fighting against dominant values, can often police members of our own communities to fulfill those same standards. But I found that UH students not only offered thoughtful critiques of respectability politics but they also taught me about new examples I hadn’t considered. Our UH gender studies students pointed out that respectability politics was the reason that we know the name Rosa Parks but not Claudette Colven or Mary Louise Smith. Claudette Colven and Mary Louise Smith were teenagers also arrested for not giving up their seats on buses, but they were not chosen to be supported by the NAACP because Colven became pregnant soon after her arrest and Smith’s father was rumored to be an alcoholic. They were written out of history because they weren’t “respectable.” So I want to take this as an opportunity to think about how we choose our heroes and heroines.

Today I want to remind us that what “disreputable” people have stood for it is still crucial for us to recognize and honor, especially as we gain more respectability. Though we come from many communities, an important part of what we teach and I hope learn in our courses, is to recognize and respect the diversity of life journeys and choices of others.

Disreputable women, genderqueers, and gender non-conforming people rarely been the figures around which we rally. But I am going to argue that there is so much to learn from heroines of ill repute. I am going to talk about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson—two transwomen of color and drag queens who were among the rioters at Stonewall in New York City in 1969. Learning their histories can give us new perspective to think about the present and future of women, gender, and sexuality studies as well as intersectional feminist and queer activism. Their principles led them to:

- 1) advocate for the most vulnerable members of our communities
- 2) fight against the politics of respectability that excludes some people as not worthy and
- 3) build networks of solidarity and support across generations.

I see many of you embodying some of these principles in your activism and scholarship.

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson lived in a world that was fraught with problems that still plague us today. Rivera and Johnson were both harassed by police, beaten by clients, and were frequently homeless or jailed. Though women and gay people as groups are increasingly being absorbed into the mainstreams of work and culture, rates of job discrimination, unemployment, homelessness, suicide, and homicide are staggeringly high for trans people, especially trans women of color. -We see the hallucinatory misrepresentations of transpeople’s “threat” to society in today’s political discourse. But we know there have been *no incidents in bathrooms* like those we hear extremists claiming to need protection from; instead it’s trans people who have ended up dead, again and again.

Unlike the mainstream LGBT movement, Rivera and Johnson fought for the most vulnerable people in our communities. They were among those who fought back when the police beat them and tried once again to shame them at Stonewall in 1969, starting the

whole gay rights movement. They founded STAR—Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries—which fought for legislation that would benefit homeless queer and trans youth. They also created STAR House—a shelter for queer and trans youth to be housed and fed. Rivera and Johnson both worked as sex workers and used some of the money they made in sex work to pay rent for STAR House. Johnson and Rivera were drug users and heavy drinkers. Clearly they had difficult lives, and they self-medicated. So do a lot of more “respectable” people. They were among the most vulnerable, but they knew their own value and that of those around them, and they bravely stood up in ways that those who were defending their “respectability” dared not.

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson fought to make the world better for many who came after them, but they are often left out of mainstream versions of feminist and LGBT history for complex reasons having to do with whitewashing, respectability politics, and the fear of sex workers. Activist and historian Mindy Chatevert points out that LGBT politics has left out people for gender nonconformity, sexual deviancy, and drug dependency. Chatevert critiques the view that, “Heroes must be noble and virtuous, worthy of acceptance by straight America.” One of the reasons that activists and scholars have not historically fought for the most vulnerable people in our communities is because seeming “normal” or “respectable” is often the path toward gaining rights. But what kinds of hierarchies are we affirming if we leave disreputable people—the people who do not yet seem worthy of respect—out of our movements?

The last bit of inspiration I want to glean from Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who were both drag mothers who cared for queer youth, is about the power of friendship and intergenerational mentorship. When queer people have historically been left out of traditional kinship networks we have built new ones. What remains is a legacy of beautiful intergenerational relationships of mentorship, of care, of new kinship structures involving drag mothers and drag children, and chosen families. Part of this legacy is the intergenerational transmission of knowledge among feminists, activists, and people studying queer theory.

We are happy to have with us the members of the Friends of Women's Studies, and other community members who participate in and fundraise for our WGSS program. The connection of the WGSS program with the Friends can give students and Friends the opportunity to teach and learn from one another. To me, these relations of financial support, mentorship, teaching, and learning across generations, whether they take place in classrooms or artistic collaborations or activist networks, or funding for scholarships, is a form of feminist and queer kinship. These aren't the kinds of kinship relations that are kept track of by the state or the kind that anthropologists would analyze in a kinship diagram. But these relations are transformative. They shape who we become and what we fight for.

I want to end congratulating all of you Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies majors and minors and certificate holders. You come from many parts of the world and the community, and you all have overcome many challenges to get to this place today. You have accomplished something huge and difficult. I hope that you all feel supported, I hope that you feel how proud of you that we are. You inspire me every day. Now go and change the world!