

“So, what was Stonewall?”

By Cristan Williams

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Abstract

In the wake of the President Obama’s historic speech referencing Stonewall, NPR ran a piece asking and purporting to answer the question, “So, what was Stonewall?” The article calls upon Martin Duberman, now 82, to retell the story of Stonewall. Martin Duberman published the first history of Stonewall in 1993. His history significantly featured trans folk. Bizarrely, the NPR author Liz Halloran [...]

Article



In the wake of the President Obama’s historic speech referencing Stonewall, NPR ran a piece asking and purporting to answer the question, “So, what was Stonewall?” The article calls upon Martin Duberman, now 82, to retell the story of Stonewall. Martin Duberman published the first history of Stonewall in 1993. His history significantly featured trans folk. Bizarrely, the NPR author Liz Halloran seems to rewrite Duberman’s history, spending many lines minimizing the trans aspect of Stonewall:

“I liked the mix of people,” he said. “It was not filled, as some accounts have it, with drag queens and street hustlers -- it was a nice mix of young and middle-aged, prosperous and not prosperous.”

Bouncers at the door screened patrons, but they couldn’t keep out police, who with some frequency would “raid” the bar, roust the patrons, and perhaps charge them with infractions ranging from loitering to specific regulations that at the time targeted gay men.

“They were using any excuse,” Duberman said. “For example, you had to be wearing at least four pieces of ‘gender-appropriate’ garb.”

The night of June 28, 1969, was different.

When police raided the bar, and pushed customers outside, Duberman said, the men began to throw things back at the police -- coins, bricks; eventually, a parking meter.

This leaves you with a certain impression. Let's look at how Halloran's reporting of Duberman's account differs from what Duberman himself wrote:

[Sylvia's] lover, Gary, had come along; Tammy, Bambi, and Ivan were there; and rumor had it that Marsha Johnson, disgusted at all the no-shows for her birthday... when the cops came barreling through the front door.

The next thing she knew, the cops, with their usual arrogance, were stomping through, ordering the patrons to line up and get their IDs ready for examination. "Oh my God!" Sylvia shouted at Gary. "I didn't bring my ID!" Before she could panic, Gary reached in his pocket and produced her card--he had brought it along. "Praise be to Saint Barbara!" Sylvia shrieked, snatching the precious ID. If the raid went according to the usual pattern, the only people arrested would be those without IDs, those dressed in the clothes of the opposite gender, and some or all of the employees.

Sylvia tried to take it in stride; she'd been through lots worse, and with her ID in hand and nothing more than makeup on, she knew the hassling would be minimal. But she was pissed; the good high she'd had was gone, and her nerve ends felt as raw as when she had been crying over Judy earlier in the evening... She was sick of being treated like scum: "I was just not in the mood," was how she later put it. "It had got to the point where I didn't want to be bothered anymore." When one of the cops grabbed the ID out of her hand and asked her with a smirk if she was a boy or a girl, she almost swung at him, but Gary grabbed her hand in time...

Some of the campier patrons, emerging one by one from the Stonewall to find an unexpected crowd, took the opportunity to strike instant poses, starlet-style, while the onlookers whistled and shouted their applause-meter ratings. But when a paddy wagon pulled up, the mood turned more somber. And it grew sullen when the police officers started to emerge from Stonewall with prisoners in tow and moved with them toward the waiting van. Jim Fouratt at the back of the crowd, Sylvia standing with Gary near the small park across the street from Stonewall, and Craig perched on top of the crowd--all sensed something unusual in the air, all felt a kind of tensed expectancy.

... a few people started to boo, and others pressed against the waiting van, while the cops standing near it yelled angrily for the crowd to move back. According to Sylvia, "you could feel the electricity going through people. You could actually feel it. People were getting really, really pissed and uptight." A guy in a dark red T-shirt danced in and out of the crowd, shouting "Nobody's gonna fuck with me!" and "Ain't gonna take this shit!"

Sylvia spotted Tammy Novak among the three queens lined up for the paddy wagon, and along with others in the crowd started yelling "Tammy! Tammy!"--Sylvia's shriek rising above the rest. But Tammy apparently didn't hear, and Sylvia guessed that she was too stoned to know what was going on. Yet when a cop shoved Tammy and told her to "Keep moving! Keep moving!" as he poked her with his club, Tammy told him to stop pushing, and when he didn't, she started swinging. From that point on, so much happened so quickly as to seem simultaneous.

Jim Fouratt insists that the explosive moment came when “a dyke dressed in men’s clothing,” who had been visiting a male employee inside the bar, started to act up as the cops moved her toward the paddy wagon. According to Jim, “the queens were acting like queens, throwing their change and giving lots of attitude and lip. But the dyke had to be more butch than the queens. So when the police moved her into the wagon, she got out the other side and started to rock it.”

- Stonewall by Martin B. Duberman, 1993

Gee... Does Halloran’s reporting of Duberman’s account sound a bit different than Duberman’s own words to you?

Here’s another historical account of that night by trans history blogger Zagria:

One of the first reported actions that started the riot on the 27th, was that a cop hit a butch female/trans man and that he hit back. It has been debated whether this was Stormé DeLarverie, who was previously the sole male impersonator in the Jewel Box Revue. Deputy Inspector Pine has testified that the first significant resistance that he encountered in the bar was from the transvestites. Allyson Allante, then 14, was arrested, as was Maria Ritter who was there with her friend Kiki to celebrate Maria being 18 and legally able to drink for the first time. Street queen, Birdy Rivera was also there. Diane Kearney was in the area and for a time joined the crowd that was observing events. Tammy Novak had persuaded Sylvia Rae Rivera, then only 17, to come down to the Stonewall Inn for the first time. Tammy was arrested and put in the paddy wagon for drag queens, but escaped in the confusion and ran to Joe Tish’s apartment where she holed up for the weekend. A police officer putting Maria Ritter into the paddy wagon had commented that he couldn’t believe that she was a boy. She said that she wasn’t. As some more trans women were directed in, Maria stepped around them and walked away. The same policeman went to intercept her, but as she broke into tears, waved her to go away. Marsha P. Johnson and Zazu Nova were also active in the riots, and Michelle, Dario Modon and Christine Hayworth were present. Marsha was observed dropping a heavy weight onto a police car. Wayne County (who would later become Jayne) met Miss Peaches and Marsha P Johnson on arrival and realized what was going on. He joined an impromptu march up and down Christopher Street shouting “Gay Power!”.

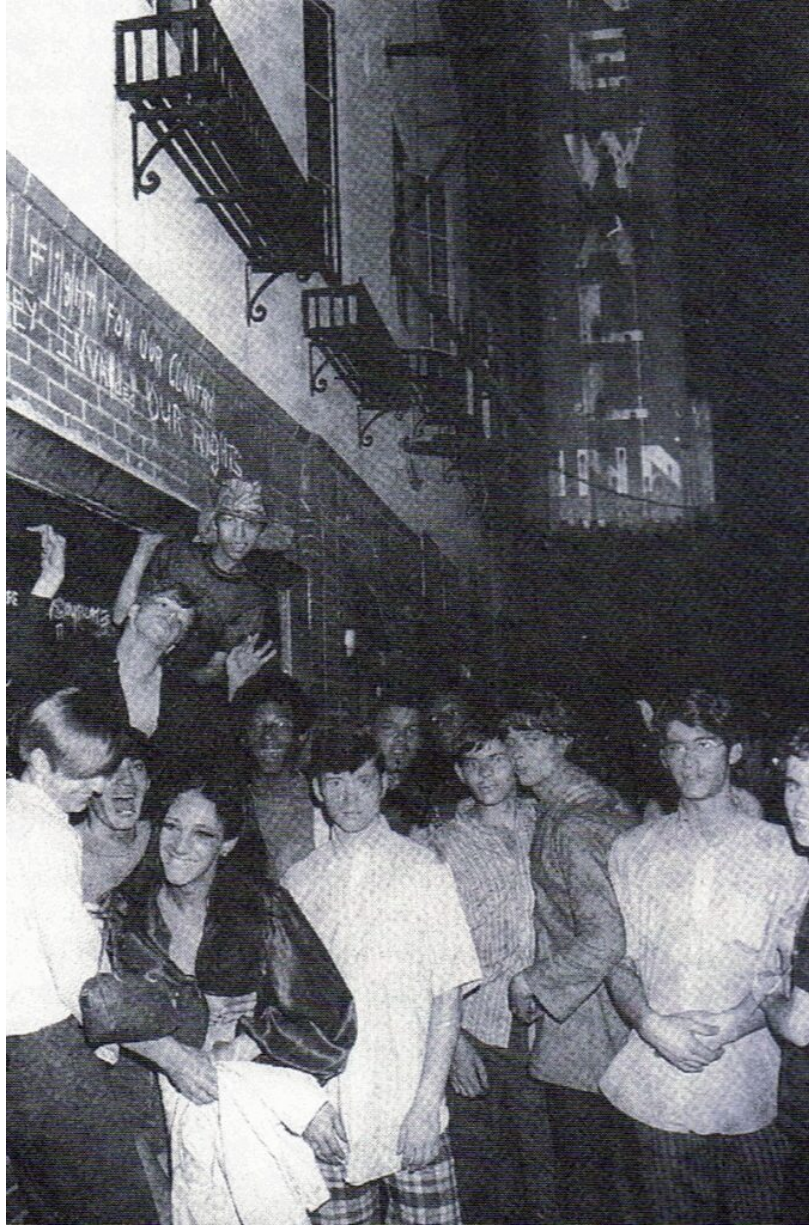


Figure 1. One of the most famous Stonewall photos has Michelle Parkerson - popular Jewel Box drag queen and genderqueer (3rd from left) - in it.

It's a shame that some cisgender historians feel a need to excise trans folks from queer history. But, this isn't the first time the Stonewall movement has been retold as being the Ciswall movement:

A strange new myth has arisen about the origins of the gay movement. This myth, fervently endorsed by some trans activists, holds that the gay and lesbian movement was, essentially and pivotally, the work of their group, the transgender people. The transgender folk were in the vanguard, gay men and lesbians followed meekly after. This bizarre claim is the opposite of the truth.

First of all, the term "transgender" is an anachronism, and as such revealing of the present-minded agenda of those who brandish it. To be sure, Christine Jorgensen had made headlines with her Danish surgery in 1953. Jorgensen, and the very few individuals who followed her example at the time, had little

interest in gay matters, because they believed that they had truly become women. Jorgensen dated men and regarded herself as heterosexual. The same was true of Reed (formerly Rita) Erickson, a wealthy oil tycoon who helped fund several social-change organizations.

Let us then be honest. If we are to speak of a "transgender" contribution we must restrict ourselves to drag queens. They were the only transgender folks around in those days. None of them in fact made a major contribution to the movement.

- Author of the Encyclopedia of Homosexuality, Wayne Dynes, 12/16/2009

Here, the cisgender author of the Encyclopedia of Homosexuality makes a number of incredibly cis-bias assertions:

- "Transgender" didn't exist at the time of Stonewall. This is factually wrong. The term did exist but was not widely used at the time of Stonewall.
- Since "transgender" supposedly wasn't yet coined, there was no trans community. In fact, this community was generally referred to the "TV/TS community" or we were simply called "queens" (sometimes we were all just called 'transvestites') and more generically, "gay." The Queens Liberation Front was formed in 1969 by trans folk and it was the QLF who did the post-Stonewall legal maneuvering that led to some measure of post-Stonewall equality for the gay community (though, we trans folk fell on our swords to make this happen for people like Dynes).
- The drag community is not part of the trans community, and besides... drag queens were irrelevant to the equality movement. This flippant dismissal is probably most irksome to me. It's like saying, "You weren't important... And if it's ever found that something you did was important, it wasn't majorly important." The fact is that trans folk were, at the very least, part of the group that instigated the Stonewall riot and trans folk paid for the legal battles that followed Stonewall. On top of that trans folk paid for and organized the national queer meetings prior to Stonewall in addition to bankrolling the Mattachine Society with money raised at trans events. Dynes dismissively refers to Reed Erickson (using his pre-transition name to boot!) as if the fact that Erickson funded practically all significant queer research before, during and after the Stonewall-era was just a minor footnote to queer history!

There are some who, unfortunately, try to ensure that trans heroes are erased from GLBT history. Instead of being regarded as being the tip of the spear - or, at the very least, an equal partner - the narrative becomes that trans folk have been riding on the coattails of the gay community. Though NPR just helped perpetuate that narrative, they weren't the first to try to erase trans folk from the face of Stonewall:

Women in the GLF were uncomfortable referring to Rivera--who insisted in using women's bathrooms, even in City hall--as "she." Pressure mounted. The year 1973 witnessed clash that would take Rivera out of the movement for the next two decades. Her lifelong friend and fellow Stonewall Veteran Bob Kohler recalled, "Sylvia left the movement because after the first three or four years, she was denied a right to speak." It was during the Pride rally in Washington Square Park after the Christopher Street Liberation Day March.

To the dismay of Lesbian Feminist Liberation drag queens were scheduled to perform. As they passed out flyers outlining their opposition to the "female impersonators," Rivera wrestled for the microphone

held by emcee Vitto Russo, before getting hit with it herself. Rivera explained, "I had to battle my way up on stage, and literally get beaten up and punched around by people I thought were my comrades, to get to that microphone. I got to the microphone and I said my piece." Rivera complained that the middle-class crowd cared little to nothing about the continued harassment and arrests of street drag queens. Bleeding, Rivera sang, "You Gotta Have Friends," screamed "Revolution Now!" and led the crowd in a chant of "Give me a G, Give me an A, Give me a Y...What does it spell?" Barely audible, her voice breaking, "GAY POWER," she groaned.

- Benjamin Shepard, "Sylvia and Sylvia's Children: The Battle for a Queer Public Space," *That's Revolting!* (ed. Matt Bernstein Sycamore)

After the above events occurred, anti-trans RadFems took to the stage:

O'Leary took in the unruly audience as she walked to the front of the open stage. Some men were hissing and booing, drag queens were cursing at her, and she could see men and women jostling each other in the park. Russo, [the event MC] a slight and soft-spoken man, pleaded for calm, his voice quavering: "Listen to her!" he said. "You've listened to everyone else. That's the least we can do for her." The crowd quieted. O'Leary recounted how the Lesbian Feminist Liberation had negotiated for ten days for a chance to speak. "Because one person, a man, Sylvia, gets up here and causes a ruckus," O'Leary noted, the lesbians had finally won their spot. "I think that says something," she said. She proceeded to read the statement, attacking men who "impersonate women for reasons of entertainment and profit," saying they "insult women." There were more hisses and shouts from the audience.

Any hope that giving a moment to Jean O'Leary and Sylvia Rivera would end this squall disappeared the moment Lee Brewster took the stage. He, too, was in full drag, with thick eye makeup, a lush blond wig tumbling over his shoulders and a queen's crown resting on the wig. "I cannot sit and let my people be insulted," Brewster said. "They've accused me of reminding you too many times that today you're celebrating what was the result of what the drag queens did at the Stonewall. You go to bars because of what drag queens did for you, and these bitches"--he gestured to the lesbians--"tell us to quit being ourselves." Vito Russo walked over to Brewster, slipped his arm around Brewster's waist and whispered into his ear, but Brewster pushed him off.

"Gay liberation," Brewster declared, "screw you! I'm going into my closet!" With that, the queen cast his crown into the audience, which by this point was in near-brawl.

- *Out For Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*, 2001, pp 171 - 172

Now mind you, this happened in 1973. By 1973, trans folk had been fighting the LGBT's legal battle in the courts for more than 3 years!

After a three-and-a-half-year battle, a bill to ban discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing, and public accommodations was voted out of New York's City Council's General Welfare Committee.

The measure won approval of seven of the eight committee members on hand after an amendment was approved relating to transvestites. This was the fifth attempt to get the bill out of committee. The amendment stated that nothing in the definition of sexual orientation "shall be construed to bear upon

the standards of attire or dress code." The amendment was key to committee passage and the wording had been worked out carefully by Theodor S. Weiss and Carter Burden.

Bebe Scarpie, Director of Queens Liberation Front, met at City Hall with the sponsors and QLF's attorney, Richard Levidow, a week prior to the voting on the bill. Ms. Scarpie and attorney Levidow submitted to the above wording as an alternative to getting the bill passed. The clause, according to Mr. Levidow is unconstitutional and won't hold up in court because of the "equal rights" protection of the US Constitution. "QLF gave in on being included in this piece of legislation because politicians were using the transvestite as a 'scapegoat' for not passing the bill," says Lee Brewster, former director and founder of QLF.

Queens Liberation Front won't issue a formal statement on the bill until it is either passed or defeated, which looks possible as we go to press.

- Drag Magazine, 1973

And thus did the trans community fall on its own sword so that the gay community could enjoy a little equality. And so began a long and painful tradition of the cisgender GLB community throwing trans folk (of any and all stripes) under the bus, year after painful year.

The above clip is of Ray Hill* talking about the 1979 March on Washington (MOW). Hill had attended the national meetings organized by the NY trans community. These trans-organized national meetings facilitated the birth of the national queer movement that led to the 1979 MOW. Even so, trans folk continued to feel swept aside by their cis brothers and sisters. Hill is referring to this growing sentiment in the above recording.

Hill: Of the 18 people including Rita, David and I that went to the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations in 19 and 68, David and I, and two others survive. That was the national leadership.

Cristan Williams: Whenever that took place - I know the terms have changed over the years - but, was there anyone who might be...

Hill: ... Considered now trans? Yeah! Sure!

- Interview with Ray Hill, Transgender Archive, Houston, Texas

Trans folk, whether you like it or not, have been a significant part of LGBT equality from the get-go. This transphobic cis-washing of queer history has to end. The self-directed communal shame is, at this point, just sad and it must stop.

Crossposted from Ehipassiko

*NOTE: Ray Hill is an early LGBT right national activist from Houston, Texas and was the lead organizer for the 1979 MOW. The Pacifica Radio Archive has a recording of Hill and Harvey Milk discussing plans for the MOW. The recording in this post was made at the 15th Annual (2007) Transgender Unity Banquet in Houston, Texas.

Note the definition of "GAY" in the official 1979 MOW Program:

[Figure] Official Souvenir Program of the 1979 National March on Washington, Page 40

See also: Interview with an actual Stonewall Riot Veteran: the ciswashing of Stonewall must end!

Suggested citation

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