***Lecture Notes*  
Fighting Back: The Stonewall Riots  
  
By Michelle Stonis  
**

***This lecture and all supporting OER materials are dedicated:  
  
To Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Lauren Monroe – Your bravery and perseverance inspire all of us to be the best versions of ourselves as we take a stand to fight for a more just world*  
  
  
Play to Open: “A Boy Named Sue” by Johnny Cash, San Quentin – February 1969**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOHPuY88Ry4> **(Bullying; Made him stronger; Relocated often; wouldn’t wish his name on his kid;** The gender-bending implications of the title have been adapted to explore issues of sex and gender, another use of the popular song title that goes beyond its original scope.) **Opening:**From African Americans and women to Native Americans and Latinos, we see that many marginalized groups were finding avenues of protest in the 1960s America. Today we are going to discuss homosexuality in America and the 1969 event that started the modern gay rights movement: the Stonewall Riots. (Albeit less frequently, this event is also called the Stonewall Uprising. Mention how language frames ideas: What is the difference between calling it a “riot” and an “uprising?” See the [article](https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/04/30/403303769/uprising-or-riot-depends-whos-watching) posted under the Enrichment Resources list that discusses this.)

**Every Illness Has a Cure** (slide) **The Worst Deviant Behavior -** During the 1970s, the sexual revolution passed from the counterculture to the mainstream. The number of Americans who told public opinion polls that premarital sex was wrong plummeted. The number of divorces soared, reaching more than 1 million in 1975, double the number 10 years earlier. The age at which both men and women married rose dramatically. As a result of women’s changing aspirations and the availability of birth control and legal abortions, the American birthrate declined dramatically. Yet, with the sexual revolution and cultural upheaval swirling about American cities, there was still a cardinal sin that most could agree upon: the majority of Americans and state laws at this time agreed that homosexuality was deviant behavior and should be punishable by law.   
  
  
**Homosexuality as a Disease -** The study of gays and lesbians had previously been dominated by psychologists and psychiatrists who believed that homosexuality was pathology, meaning a disease.  In 1952 the American Psychiatric Association published the first edition of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders (DSM-I).  This first edition listed homosexuality among the socio-pathic personality disorders.  When the DSM-II (the first revision of the manual) was published in 1968, homosexuality had been moved to the category of “non-psychotic disorders,” which included fetishism, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sadism, masochism, and pedophilia (Miller 1995, 249). This promoted a pseudo-scientific basis to undergird homophobia as popular culture and many Americans falsely correlated that homosexuals were more likely to be pedophiles.  
  
  
**Diseases Have Cures –** Since homosexuality was defined by the medical community as pathology, meaning a disease, doctors and psychologists sought medical cures. The illness of homosexuality was thought to be curable. At a minimum, medical leaders sought to prevent the acting out of homosexual behavior. Lesbians were forced to submit to hysterectomies and estrogen injections, although it became clear that neither of these had any effect on their sexual orientation. Gay men were subjected to similar abuses, which usually meant castration or aversion therapy (meaning behavior modification: see this picture, think this thought, get shocked or slapped). In the 1940s, lobotomies became the extreme “cure” for those judged to be mentally ill, including LGBTQ individuals. A PBS documentary, Changing Our Minds, incorporates a film clip from the late 1940s, now slightly muddy, of a young gay man undergoing a lobotomy. We see a small device like an ice pick inserted through the eye socket, above the eyeball and into the brain. The pick is moved back and forth, reducing the prefrontal lobe to a hemorrhaging pulp. The documentary also includes a grainy black-and-white clip from a 1950s educational film produced by the U.S. Navy. A gay man lies in a hospital bed. Doctors strap him down and attach electrodes to his head. "We're going to help you get better," says a male voice in the background. When the power is turned on, the body of the gay man jerks violently, and he begins to scream. None of these medical treatments could be shown to change the sexual orientation of the people involved. **Show: PBS’s American Experience The Lobotomist (Walter J. Freeman) (1 min.)**  
<https://www.pbs.org/video/american-experience-the-lobotomist-preview/>  
In the 1940s Dr. Walter Freeman gained fame for perfecting the transorbital lobotomy, which was hailed as a miracle cure for the severely mentally ill. But within a few years, lobotomy was labeled one of the most barbaric mistakes of modern medicine.  
        
        
**Gay Isn’t Sick -** By the 1940s homosexuality was discussed as an aspect of psychopathic, paranoid, and schizoid personality disorders. The first psychologist to challenge the “gay is sick” mentality was Evelyn Hooker, a professor at UCLA. When teaching in the UCLA extension division in 1943-1944 Hooker met a gay male student, Sam From, in one of her classes.  Later on the two became friends.  Through Sam From, Evelyn Hooker met many other queer students who became her friends.  Sam From began to encourage Hooker to study gay men.

He said to her (primary source quotation):  
  
“Evelyn, we have let you see us as we are.  We have hidden nothing from you.  You probably know more about people like us…than any psychologist in this country.  Now it is your scientific duty to study us” (Humphreys 1978, 195 as quoted in Boxer and Carrier 1998, 7).  
        
        
In 1953, Hooker was awarded a grant to study gay men. The project compared a group of 30 heterosexual men to a group of 30 non-clinical gay men.  The use of non-clinical participants was crucial since all research on gay men up to this point had been done on gay men living in clinical settings or in jails. Reflecting back on her work in the study, she stated, "It was the first time [homosexuals] had been studied outside a medical setting or prison," she says. "I was prepared, if I was so convinced, to say that these men were not as well adjusted as they seemed on the surface."   
  
  
Hooker administered psychological tests to her sixty subjects, including the Rorschach (ROAR-SHACK) ink-blot test, producing sixty psychological profiles. She removed all identifying marks, including those indicating sexual orientation, and, to eliminate her own biases, gave them for interpretation to three eminent psychologists. One of these was Bruno Klopfer, who believed that he would be able to distinguish gay men from straight men by means of the Rorschach test. As it turned out, none of the three could differentiate the men’s sexual orientations. In side-by-side comparisons of matched profiles, gay men and straight men were indistinguishable, demonstrating an equal distribution of pathology and mental health.  
  
  
After using a variety of assessment tools, it was found that no significant differences existed between the two groups in terms of mental well-being and psychological adjustment.  What’s more, the psychologists and psychiatrists who administered the tests were blinded to the sexual orientation of the men and they were not able to correctly identify which men were gay and which were heterosexual.  The findings were presented at the 1956 meeting of the APA (American Psychiatric Association) and were published in 1957 in the Journal of Projective Techniques.  Hooker conducted several other studies about homosexuality after this, though the findings from her first study are the most often cited (Boxer and Carrier 1998).  
  
  
Hooker’s work and the work of Alfred Kinsey played a large role in the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness in the DSM-III, which was published in 1974.  Homosexuality was removed as a mental disorder, but it was moved to a newly created category: “Sexual Orientation Disturbance.” This new classification was developed for those individuals who were attracted to members of the same sex and were disturbed by, or wished to change, it.  It was not until 1986 when the APA published the manual of mental health diseases (the DSM-IIIR) that all references to homosexuality were removed (Miller 1995, 256-257). This does not mean, however, that all references to sexual identity and sexuality have been removed from the list of mental diseases. For example, DSM-5, which was published in 2013 and is the current edition, describes [Gender Dysphoria](https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria) as “a conflict between a person’s physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify.”  
  
  
**Double Life –** As recorded in a modern history book called *Sunshine and Rainbows* (secondary source), an astute observer noted what life was like for gays in mainstream society:   
  
“Many gays before the 1970s lived a double life. There were very few gay friendly bars until the 1960s. Friday night was the gay night out, but Saturday night was the big movie-going and dance night. You would see guys acting straight, going out with a real girl. They had to do this for appearances sake; for the sake of their jobs, particularly teachers and public servants. Remember in the 1950s that homosexuality was still looked upon as a psychiatric illness. Coming out meant you could lose your job or be locked up in the mental asylum. Lobotomies and electric shock therapy were part of the ‘cure’ for homosexuality. There was always the threat of police and medical intimidation.”  
  
  
**Sources on Screen:**- A Rorschach Test  
- A portion of Evelyn Hooker’s study that became her 1957 published paper “The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual”  
  
 **Take Away Point (TAP) #1 –** Between the 1940s and 1960s, mainstream American culture regarded homosexuality as an illness that desperately needed to be cured.  
  
  
**Gay Rights** (slide) **Early Beginnings –** There was gay rights activism in the 1950s, a period known for conformity and idealized pictures of married life with kids in suburbia.Gay rights activist Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Society, the first gay rights organization, in Los Angeles officially in 1951. However, it really began informally the year before (1950) as a discussion group with 5 men who originally got together to discuss the Alfred Kinsey studies (1940s-1950s studies – Gender is a spectrum, not a binary; the Kinsey reports served as significant benchmarks in the quantitative study of sexuality in U.S. society and their findings contributed to an era of more relaxed attitudes concerning sexual behavior.)  
  
  
**The Mattachine Society** (pronunciation: MATT-UH-SHEEN) was founded by **Harry Hay**, a gay rights activist, labor organizer, and communist.  The name Mattachine originated in medieval France.  It was the name given to a group of unmarried townsmen who performed dances and rituals while wearing masks during the Feast of Fools.  These dances would occasionally turn into protests against the aristocracy.  Hay believed that the gay and lesbian people living in the 1950s were in their own way a masked and anonymous people who were the oppressed minority in American society, and thus chose the name.    
  
  
The Mattachine Society was criticized by some who wanted them to be more radical. However, the group organized protesters for gay rights years before the Stonewall Uprising. Men and women picketed the White House on May 19, 1965, to protest what they called government discrimination against those in the LGBTQ community. The demonstration was organized by the Mattachine Society of Washington, which said it was acting on behalf of “the nation's second largest minority” — 15 million gay and lesbian Americans. **Frank Kameny**, a gay rights pioneer who co-founded the Mattachine Society, protested that day. He was well known amongst those in the gay community because he was fired as a US government astronomer in 1957 because he was gay, and he petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court in 1961 to contest his firing. Though it was denied, Kameny’s was the first petition to the high court for a violation of civil rights based on sexual orientation. He argued that the government’s actions toward gays were an “affront to human dignity.”  
  
  
In 1966, New York’s Mattachine Society had organized a successful “sip in” to eliminate the New York State Liquor Authority’s policy that made it illegal for a restaurant or bar to serve liquor to a group of 3 or more homosexuals.  
  
  
The Mattachine Society grew into a national movement, and in conjunction with the Daughters of Bilitis, became the above ground civil rights organizations for gays and lesbians until the Stonewall riot in 1969. The final Mattachine Society office closed in the 1980s.   
  
  
**The Daughters of Bilitis** (often referred to by members as “The DOB”) (pronunciation: BE-LEET-US) was the first lesbian rights organization. The DOB was formed in 1955 in San Francisco, CA by four lesbian couples at a time when LGBTQ activism focused on gay men to the exclusion, as the DOB would argue, of lesbian issues (note discussion of intersectionality: sexual identity and gender).  
  
  
When DOB was established, there were few opportunities for lesbians to meet, and lesbians were subject to discrimination and public hostility. The organization began as a small, secret social club for lesbians, starting with just eight members. Among the founding members of DOB were **[Del Martin](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1473046/Del-Martin) and** **Phyllis Lyon**, who would become well-known lesbian rights activists. During the late 1950s other DOB chapters were founded across America and in Australia too, although membership numbers remained relatively small.  
  
  
**Show: Trailer – “No Secret Anymore” – Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon/DOB (3 min.)**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97Rp4L4XyUs>  
  
  
Early in the development of the DOB, its role and membership criteria came under scrutiny by its members. Conflicting views led some of the original founding members to leave the DOB. Those changes contributed to redefining the DOB as a political organization focused on lesbian rights, rather than as a purely social organization. That was a radical development, given the social stigma of being lesbian at the time.  
  
  
In October 1956 DOB published the first issue of The Ladder, edited by Lyon, initially under the pen name Ann Ferguson. The Ladder is usually regarded as the first lesbian serial in America, although a short-lived publication titled Vice Versa had existed in the late 1940s. The Ladder ceased publication in 1972, following the 1970 secret takeover of the magazine by its editor, Barbara Grier, and the DOB national president at the time, Rita LaPorte, both of whom favored a stronger lesbian feminist stance than that which the DOB generally advocated. That event reflected one of the core tensions that surrounded DOB: whether it should align itself with male-dominated gay rights groups, such as its ally the Mattachine Society, or whether it should identify itself with lesbian separatist feminists. Those conflicting perspectives led to DOB’s dissolution of its national organization in the 1970s, although local chapters persisted after that for several years.  
  
  
Although it was plagued by tensions that reflected the difficult and politically loaded social climate, DOB is credited with numerous achievements. Socially, DOB facilitated one of the first opportunities for lesbians to meet and share their everyday struggles. Politically, DOB began the long quest to achieve visibility and acceptance for lesbians and to place lesbian rights on the civil rights agenda.  
  
  
**Stonewall Uprising -** The Stonewall Riots, or Stonewall Uprising, marked a major turning point in the modern gay civil rights movement in the United States.  
  
  
Gay bars offered patrons the pleasures of sociability in a society that had criminalized homosexuality. By the late sixties, San Francisco and Washington D.C. finally permitted dancing, but gay bars in Baltimore, Chicago, and Los Angeles risked being raided if their patrons danced. As for New York, police there ignored the January 1968 ruling by a state judge establishing the legality of close dancing between people of the same sex. Despite this, when the Stonewall Inn opened in the spring of 1967, management and gay customers alike behaved as if the dance floor had been won. It quickly developed a loyal clientele because it was the only gay bar in New York City that permitted dancing between men. With a year of opening, it was the Village’s most popular gay bar and a “money machine” for its Mafia owners. Despite the fact that its owners made regular payoffs to the police, the bar was raided in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969. This was hardly the first time that police hit the Stonewall Inn, but it was the first time they hadn’t given advance notice to the management. And it was the first time that queer Americans, angry about being treated like second-class citizens, fought back.  
  
  
**Show: Select Clip – *Stonewall Uprising* by PBS American Experience (5 min. max)**<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/stonewall/>  
  
 **Marsha P. Johnson** was a gay liberation activist and self-identified drag queen who was at the Stonewall Inn that night. She was a transwoman of color that was an instigator at the uprising. In 1970, she co-founded the STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) House with Sylvia Rivera, an organization that sought to provide housing to trans and gay youth plus participate in activism.  
Johnson’s mysterious death in 1992 where she was found in the Hudson River with gunshot wounds highlights issues around the violence and diminished life expectancy that transwomen in general, and transwomen of color specifically, still face in the United States. **Sylvia Rivera** was a Puerto Rican American transgender activist and self-identified drag queen who devoted her life to gay liberation. It was reported that the 17 year-old yelled “I’m not missing a minute of this--it’s the revolution!” and that she was one of the first to throw a bottle as the police swelled around the Stonewall Inn. Rivera joined the Gay Liberation Front, co-founded STAR, and spoke to the LGBTQ community about the issues that trans people faced, such as sexual violence and imprisonment. She died at the age of 50 in 2002 after 30 years of activism.  
  
  
**Gay Liberation Movement -** The backlash and 6 days of rioting that followed have come to be known as the Stonewall Riots or the Stonewall Uprising, which was the militant beginning of the gay liberation movement. Stonewall was a catalyst for the quest and struggle to change the lived experiences of queer Americans, and eventually people all over the world who were inspired by Stonewall.   
  
  
Prior to that summer there was little public expression of the lives and experiences of gays and lesbians. Prejudice against queer Americans persisted, but within 9 months of the uprising 3 gay newspapers began publishing in New York City. In 1969, there had been about 50 local gay rights groups in the United States. Ten years later, their numbers reached into the thousands. The very first gay pride parade was held to commemorate the 1-year anniversary of Stonewall, which in 1970 was called the Christopher Street Liberation Day after the street Stonewall was located on. Within a few years gay pride marches were being held in numerous cities, and now annual celebrations occur in most major US cities and all around the world.  
  
  
Stonewall created a seismic shift in the collective consciousness of LBGTQ Americans who were ready to create organizations and politicized outlets committed to transforming rather than joining American society. Dubbed by writer Tom Wolfe as the “Me Decade,” people in the 1970s wanted the “freedom to choose” their own ideals, own beliefs, and even their own sexual partners. Sexual practice and freedom was one of the rights revolutions of the 1960s that influenced the 1970s. The Stonewall Riots marked the beginning of the gay liberation movement that has transformed the oppression of LGBTQ individuals into calls for pride/action.   
  
  
**Primary Source on Screen:**  
- Left: [Photograph](https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/an-unidentifed-group-of-young-poeple-celebrate-outside-the-news-photo/83599288) - An unidentified group celebrates in front of the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969  
- Right: [Photograph](https://www.masstpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/sylvia-rivera-march.png) – Sylvia Rivera (holding banner) and Marsha P. Johnson march in the Christopher Street Liberation Day, Gay Pride on June 24, 1973

**Take Away Point (TAP) #2 –** As the major catalyst behind the modern gay rights movement, Stonewall created a seismic shift in the collective consciousness of LGBTQ Americans who were ready to create organizations committed to transforming American society.  
  
  
***Highly Recommended:*** Follow lecture with a primary source Team Based Learning activity to have students discover elements of Stonewall by “doing history.” Use a document analysis worksheet from the [National Archives](https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets).