

Street Evangelists and Transgender Saints

Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson,
and the Religions of the
Afro-Americas

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ABSTRACT This article historicizes the religious fervor of the 1969 Stonewall riots—multiple direct actions against the anti-Black and homo- and transphobic NYPD and white-owned bars in Greenwich Village—by examining the political organizing of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, cofounders of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. This article queries and queers the field’s preoccupation with the cisgender and heterosexual regarding religious affiliation and the formation of liberation theologies, and probes at the heart of Johnson’s and Rivera’s critical absences in religious studies on the one hand, and the critical absence of their religious sensibilities in narrations of queer and trans politics on the other.

KEYWORDS Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, trans religion, Black religion, Stonewall

In a conversation with a deputy inspector, or “pig,” named Seymour Pine, Sylvia Rivera—one of the heralded champions of the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969—recounted, “We used to sit around, just try to figure out when this harassment would come to an end. And we would always dream that one day it would come to an end. And we prayed, and we looked for it. We wanted to be human beings.”¹ Rivera, a Latine transgender woman with familial roots in Venezuela and Puerto Rico, reflected on “the gay bashings on the drag queens by heterosexual men, women, and the police” prior to Stonewall.² The irony, however, was that Rivera was in conversation with a man whose professional identification was the literal antithesis of her queer-affirming, Black- and Brown-centered, antipolice political organizing. Their conversation was just one of many included in a 1989 Sound Portraits recording of Rivera, other activists, and the New York Police Department reflecting on Stonewall, twenty years later, to supposedly bridge connections between the police and persons of color—one of many “community policing” initiatives in the last term of Mayor Ed Koch.

Reflecting on how the Stonewall Rebellion started, Rivera stated to Pine, “I remember someone throwing a Molotov cocktail. I don’t know who the

person was, but I mean I saw that and I just said to myself in Spanish, I said. “Oh my God, the revolution is finally here! And I just like started screaming, ‘Freedom! We’re free at last!’”³ Echoing the now historic words from the charismatic man who is often shortsightedly cast by the public as the Black male hero of the civil rights movement—the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—Rivera tapped into an African American jeremiad and effectively queered King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech.⁴ “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” became “Freedom! We’re free at last!” thus disrupting the cisheterosexual freedom dreams of the era and calling into focus how LGBTQ political organizers like Rivera “had done so much for other movements,” and now “it was [their] time.”⁵

Marsha P. Johnson, a Black transgender woman who cofounded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) with Rivera in 1970, also engaged in queer organizing amidst the civil rights and Black Power movements.⁶ Her desire to “save” lesbian, gay, and transgender youth from the streets of New York City, where homelessness, poverty, and the threat of murder were quotidian conditions, is aptly depicted by sociologists Zandria F. Robinson and Marcus Anthony Hunter. They describe her as both political organizer and evangelist, complicating long-standing secularized narratives about radical activism.

Johnson walked and talked with Jesus, prayed to Jesus for strength, knew Jesus heard her pleas and prayers, and had the spirit of Jesus on earth. Adorned with masterfully crafted crowns of flowers, she could be found prostrate in churches, worshipping and meditating at the altar. Out in the streets she spread the gospel of humanity not through a heavy-handed evangelism but through acts of kindness and miracles of survival only queens of color from the Stonewall era know. She greeted folks with that familiar glow and wide smile, gave people her last penny, hustled, and nursed the sick. People called her a saint and knew she was a queen, and they saw her works near the Hudson River like the works of Jesus near Jordan.⁷

Johnson’s religious convictions were not secondary to her political convictions, but indeed her politics were religious, and her religion was political. This might seem like a rudimentary claim, but how often are Black trans women regarded as political strategists, religious thinkers, or theologians in popular remembrances of civil rights activism? Further to this point, trans women like Rivera and Johnson shed light on the inextricable relationship between the religious and the political—two categories that have for a long time worked in the service of their extermination. In this vein, notwithstanding Robinson and Hunter’s Christocentric characterization of Johnson—a practitioner of Santeria and other alternative religious orientations and esotericisms—it is perhaps more fitting to describe Johnson and Rivera in the parlance of feminist theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid’s notion of the “indecent theologian” or “a theologian who has learned to survive with several passports. She is a Christian and a Queer theologian or a minister and a Queer lover who cannot

be shown in public and she is a woman and a worker: the list of the game of multiple representations extends.”⁸ Indeed, as I will show, Johnson and Rivera drew upon a host of diasporic, spiritual modalities both within and beyond Christian churches in their cultivation of their own religious and political commitments in the service of “drag queens, transvestites, transsexuals and other gender variant people.”⁹ Relatedly, Althaus-Reid’s contention that “a Queer theologian has many passports because she is a theologian in diaspora, that is, a theologian who explores at the crossroads of Christianity issues of self-identity and the identity of her community, which are related to sexuality, race, culture, and poverty,” more astutely captures the survivalisms of queer and transgender religionists and practitioners.¹⁰ Both Rivera and Johnson—like the Hebrew midwives Shiphra and Puah, perhaps, who disobeyed Pharaoh’s command and did not kill the male newborns¹¹—used their religious convictions, their lived experiences, and their alignment with a global decolonial ethos to save, house, and nurture a dying generation of queer and transgender youth prior to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s and amidst a worldwide struggle for human and civil rights, and in so doing, they cultivated their own transed liberation theologies and ritual practices.

While the historiography on gender and the civil rights movement has rightly uncovered and reoriented our shared attention to the critical role of Black and non-Black cisgender women of color in the fight for civil and human rights during the twentieth century, much, if not all, of the literature excludes Black and non-Black transgender women of color, despite their presence, political organizing, and institution-building (with the exception of the literature on gender nonconforming Episcopalian priest, the Reverend Pauli Murray).¹² In addition, while both Rivera and Johnson are remembered in contemporary recollections and commemorations of queer and transgender activism in the twentieth century, there is still not an exhaustive monograph or biography that explores their work and lives beyond the Stonewall Rebellion, and many accounts of Stonewall, its tributaries, and its aftermaths tend to ignore religious people and practices altogether, which I argue are untetherable from trans religious innovation.¹³ More to this point, archival collections across the nation mention Rivera’s and Johnson’s names and prize photographs of them, but their written beliefs and ideas have not been uniformly housed or preserved.¹⁴ Thus, this article is not the definitive account on either Rivera and Johnson. It cannot be, given the ways society and the academy have stifled their voices. Nor is it an attempt to comprehensively analyze their connections to the field of religious studies. Rather, this article is about their critical absence in American religious history, and it is about exhuming their stories—or what fragments we can recover—to insert them into discourses in religious studies where queer and transgender people are hidden in plain sight or are erased by the privileging of cisgender, heterosexual, straight-presenting and cis-assumed religious actors.¹⁵ In addition, this article stages a revisitation of these now widely acclaimed (and indeed, mythologized and idolized)

trans activist figures—with a focus primarily on Marsha P. Johnson—in order to challenge secularized narratives of trans history. Questions at the helm of my revisitation—yes, in the way of ancestral veneration—involve probing into the core of what they believed and why they believed it. Moreover, this article takes seriously the historian Heather R. White’s brilliant observation about Stonewall that “professional historians . . . have proved to be a poor match against the history-making power of commemoration,”¹⁶ and seeks to uncover, to the best of my ability, what lies beneath the surface and beyond the veil of fanfare, celebratizing, and the mythologizing of these now prominent activist figures.

To do so, I blend some semblance of an “archival collection” for Johnson and Rivera using interview clips included in the many documentaries on them, along with the anthologizing work of activist Tourmaline on her blog, “The Spirit Was.” She writes, “I unearthed this material thru hustling my way into spaces that are historically inaccessible to black trans women. . . . Most recently when I went to the New York Public Library to try and find STAR’s statement I was accosted coming out the bathroom and scrutinized by security. This isn’t something new, just part of living for me. But that’s also part of the story of how the statement landed on the internet.”¹⁷ Tourmaline’s blog—itsself a site of Black trans scripturalizing and theological inquiry—serves as a portal to taking seriously Rivera, Johnson, and other trans religious practitioners and their complex politics. Bearing in mind Tourmaline’s words, this article testifies to the difficulties that plague historical scholarship—especially in religious studies—on Black and Latino transgender activists before the era of social media, and it is an act of solidarity with the struggles of Tourmaline working to recover and to re/member lives lost to transantagonism.¹⁸ In this regard, I think with Abram J. Lewis, who has argued that “the transgender archive demands a hauntological reading in order to reckon with its contents [and to] name the archive as opaque to historicization insofar as a haunting is a diagnostic of knowledges and experiences that are disavowed within rationalist, positivist, and disciplinary epistemes—the founding epistemes of history.”¹⁹ In short, mainstream history has both invisibilized transgender persons and relied on the hauntings of transgender violence as a historiographical device and hermeneutic, rarely thinking about or considering the realities of transgender living, theologizing, and worlding—central features of the archiving that Tourmaline has done on her blog and in her public work.

Similarly, religious studies scholars often assume that transgender people do not experience or practice religion on their own terms. Yet Melissa M. Wilcox has written about “religion and the sacred [that] are already transed,” even as “religious studies needs to be transed” due to the exclusion of transgender people in religious studies scholarship.²⁰ In this article, I follow Wilcox and the lead of historians of American religion who encourage scholars to read histories of sexuality and histories of American religion as co-constitutive

elements. In *Devotions and Desires: Histories of Sexuality and Religion in the Twentieth-Century United States*, editors Gillian Frank, Bethany Moreton, and Heather R. White contend that racialization, the evolution of science and technology, and state formation shaped a “modern terminology” of race, gender, sexuality, and religion. “Conceptions of ‘true religion’ and ‘good sex’ connected to broader preoccupations about the social order: what countered as ‘true religion’—that is, practices and beliefs perceived to be spiritually authentic and socially beneficial,” they write, “was that which also supported and encouraged ‘good sex,’ or forms of erotic expression and kinship structures that were socially valued.”²¹ In this way, in order to locate the trans religions of Rivera and Johnson, this article attends to the sites where both Rivera and Johnson lived out their religions: in the streets, on the altars of city churches, in bars, and at the Christopher Street pier. While this article largely focuses on Marsha P. Johnson due to the quantity of ephemeral archival materials available that showcase her religious sensibilities in comparison to the number of materials available relating to Rivera, it nonetheless takes seriously how religion also shaped Rivera’s political organizing. Next, the article examines the interconnectedness of various resistance movements and liberationist struggles during the twentieth century, endeavoring to insert Rivera and Johnson into a historiographical accounting of civil rights literature, and it ends with an analysis of the fluidity between Johnson’s myriad religious practices. Throughout the article, I use the terms “saint,” “evangelist,” and “prophet” interchangeably to describe Johnson and Rivera to demonstrate how they have been revered by their contemporaries and by younger generations of queer and trans activists, and also to mark how their political organizing relied on a multiplicity of religious grammars to represent their beliefs and their varied modes of political protest. While it is becoming increasingly difficult to find new things to say about these mythologized trans figures, I hope to demonstrate how attention to their religious innovation—or what fragments we come to know through archival snippets—illuminates how trans women who are not only deemed “deviant” but also inept at the project of theologized world-making ultimately counter the terms of Western theology in robust ways. This bears saying especially because their neurodivergence, mental illnesses, suicidality, and drug use have often been wielded against them as weapons or as proof of their supposed inability to lucidly articulate the core of what they believed.²²

Sylvia Rivera, the Church, and the Forgotten Ones

Yet Sylvia Rivera’s engagement with institutional churches in New York City is a revelatory illustration of the rich theological intellectualisms at the core of her political project. Rivera, who was an active member of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York for many years in which she directed the church’s food pantry, explained in an undated piece, “Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones”: “Many of us have to live by night, because of the lack of laws or

protections. A lot of trans women are standing out on street corners and working clubs. And many of them are highly educated, with college degrees. Many of us have to survive by selling our bodies. If you can't get a job, you have to do whatever it takes to live."²³ The streets were where Rivera and Johnson performed miracles in which they embodied what the historian Robert Orsi has described as a "theology of the streets"; they understood the significance of religion in shaping radical activism and regarded the Divine—broadly construed—as co-laborer in the struggle for justice.²⁴ Indeed, "the Spirit was upon [them], anointing [them] to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."²⁵ Rivera, like Johnson, testified about being "tired of seeing [her] children," namely "homeless, transgender children [and] young, gay children . . . sleeping on the steps of [the] church." She "went [into the church] with an attitude. [She] raised hell."²⁶ Like "Jesus [who] went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers," condemning them for turning "the house of prayer" into a "den of thieves,"²⁷ Rivera, too, "tried to destroy the front desk [of the church] but did not attack anybody."²⁸ She was frustrated with the new buildings and renovations across New York City for the wealthy, which many would later describe as "urban renewal" or, more appropriately, as gentrification. She then staged a clear critique, grounded in righteous indignation, about how "[the city could] afford to renovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about [its] homeless children from [their] community." In response to her organizing against the city and nonprofit organizations that exploited queer and transgender youth and the homeless, Rivera claimed, "they had me arrested and put in Bellevue!"²⁹ Like other queer prophets, street evangelists, and transgender saints of her generation, Rivera was institutionalized for "crying aloud and sparing not, lifting up her voice as a trumpet, and showing the people their transgressions."³⁰

Following the dynamic leadership of Rivera and Johnson and in line with the ethos of liberation theology during the twentieth century, STAR drew connections between transmisogynistic violence in New York City with the brutalities of imperialism. Rivera, while describing the grief that consumed queer and transgender activists following the tragic death of Judy Garland, an actress and singer known as "the Elvis of homosexuals" who died in 1969 due to a drug overdose, once reflected on the conditions that she believed led to the Stonewall riot. "I guess there was tension in the air. It was a hot, muggy night, in the eighties or nineties, like when most riots happen," she stated. "I don't know how many other patrons in the bar were activists, but many of the people were involved in some struggle. I had been doing work in the civil rights movement, against the war in Vietnam, and for the women's movement."³¹ On another occasion, while protesting for "gay rights" (which at the time also included transgender rights), Rivera observed,

There was a “Stop the War in Vietnam” demo and people started coming. The cops had dispersed the demo, and I’m standing out there collecting signatures, and two cops come by, and they say, “You have to move.” And I’m like, “Why? All I’m doing is collecting signatures. I’m petitioning for gay rights.” “It’s against the law.” I said, “What? I thought it said in the Constitution we have the right to acquire signatures . . .” “You don’t have an American flag.” “What does an American flag have to do with my collecting signatures?” “You have to have an American flag.” I said, “It wouldn’t make a difference. I’ve been to jail with poor Rosie over there, who is always being arrested with her American flag and her Bible for preaching the gospel.” Rosie was a right-wing Bible-thumper. Well, I got arrested for petitioning for gay rights.³²

Rivera compared her political organizing for gay rights to “right-wing Bible-thumper” Rosie, “arrested with her American flag and her Bible for preaching the gospel.” Despite Rosie’s embodied American religious nationalism—with flag and Bible in hand—she was arrested, like Rivera, for not following demonstration regulations in alignment with the First Amendment. Unlike Rivera, however, Rosie’s right-wing, conservative theological perspective militated against Rivera’s existence and her petitioning of heaven and the courts for gay rights. In effect, as Rivera stood her ground declaring a liberation theology for gay and transgender people along with those victimized, maimed, and brutalized by the Vietnam War’s inhumane and devastating impact on Southeast Asians, soldiers, and the families of all involved, Rosie declared a fire and brimstone gospel seeking to destroy the nonwhite, nonheterosexual, and non-American.

During these struggles, STAR began as a caucus of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in 1970, which modeled itself after Algeria’s and North Vietnam’s National Liberation Fronts as well as other anticolonial and unashamedly communist movements. GLF developed an antiracist and anticapitalist political platform and stood in solidarity with the Black Panther Party and various third world struggles. “We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished,” they declared in their manifesto. “We reject society’s attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature.”³³ GLF, which began following the Stonewall Rebellion, spread like wildfire throughout American cities and onto a global stage in such places as Canada, Australia, and London. Rivera noted that she “enjoyed [GLF] because [they] concentrated on many issues for many different struggles.” She continued, “We’re all in the same boat as long as we’re being oppressed one way or the other, whether we are gay, straight, trans, Black, yellow, green, purple, or whatever. If we don’t fight for each other, we’ll be put down. And after all these years, the trans community is still at the back of the bus.”³⁴ In this vein, the historian Justin David Suran

has written about the intersection of antimilitarism and homosexuality during the 1960s and has contended, “If a civil-rights ethos and the example of the Civil Rights Movement informed homosexual politics between 1961 and 1966, the late 1960s were dominated by the Vietnam War: after 1966, military service and antiwar protest emerged as the pivotal issues in homosexual politics.”³⁵ Although Suran’s focus is primarily on gay men or men who sleep with men and their subsequent removal and criminalization by the United States military, his insistence on an expressed antimilitarism by gay men and lesbian women during the Vietnam War as a self-described pronouncement of antihomophobic politics is especially prescient. In his discussion of San Francisco’s “homophile” groups in the late 1960s, for example, he observes, “For Gay Liberationists, homosexual acts were revolutionary acts: to claim a gay identity meant to rebel against the very system waging war in Vietnam. Almost universally, ‘liberated’ gays denounced the American intervention as an effect of the same repressive apparatus that alienated homosexuals from their own desires.”³⁶

Indeed, as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, like so many other gay and transgender activists at the time, spoke out against the war in Vietnam, they were also demanding an end to the quotidian violence of homophobia and transphobia. As sex workers and survivors of sexual violence, Johnson and Rivera certainly understood the threat of murder for walking down the street as transgender women brutalized by men and the police, so they most certainly could sympathize with their gay brothers who had been victimized, raped, or kicked out of the military for being “found out” or “outed” as gay. Johnson, for example, often spoke of being raped as she performed sex work to pay her bills and feed her chosen kin. In effect, STAR’s commitment to housing queer youth, with its critique of hegemonic Christian institutions, suggests that these efforts were not only rooted in a race, gender, and anti-capitalist consciousness, but also in the spirit of antirape activism.³⁷ Focusing on the first three decades of the twentieth century, historian LaShawn Harris tells the story of a long-standing history of sex work in New York City, which I argue set the stage for the underground economy that would later fund STAR in the 1970s, and as Harris shows, was especially dangerous for Black and other working-class women.³⁸ While Harris’s focus is exclusively on Black cisgender women of the working class, her attention to the threat of violence for all Black working-class women provides a base to consider how transantagonisms exacerbated the effects of anti-Blackness, poverty, and racial-sexual terrorisms such as police brutality, sexual assault, street harassment, and murder. In 1971, for instance, Rivera observed, “Transvestites are homosexual men and women who dress in clothes of the opposite sex. . . . Transvestites are the most oppressed people in the homosexual community. My half sisters and brothers are being raped and murdered by pigs, straights, and even sometimes by other uptight homosexuals who consider us the scum of the gay community.”³⁹ Notwithstanding the everydayness of the violence that transgender

people experienced, Rivera and Johnson “had the guts to stand up and fight on the front lines for many years” for both “Black Power” and “Gay Power,” and they did so alongside a host of others whose names escape the historical record and commemorative narrations of this rich history.⁴⁰

Marsha P. Johnson and Black Religious Fluidity

For many transgender people during this period, Afro-Caribbean and Latin American religions, which derived from the continent of Africa, allowed them to reimagine their own theologically and socially gendered understandings of themselves and of these global movements altogether, and their transed religious practices also augmented their political sensibilities and organizing. For instance, based on reflections from her contemporaries and her own thoughts on race, religion, and politics, Marsha P. Johnson was undoubtedly a practitioner of African American religious fluidity. In *Pay It No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson* (2012), Johnson is described as “Saint Marsha” by several of her friends from Christopher Street. One person remembered how Marsha, who was reared in the Mount Teman African Methodist Episcopal Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, as a child, would lie prostrate in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary in Catholic churches throughout New York City, never facing the altar but facing the street, engaging in dramatic embodied action like the biblical prophets of old. In her reverent critique of the church’s relics, her true posture of prayer—toward the street—served as an indication of where her heart and moral vision truly lay. Johnson’s ministry, beyond the bounds of ordination or clerical institutionalization, was one that centered “the least of these,”⁴¹ or those discarded by family, the church, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the state for being queer, gender nonconforming, transgender, poor, HIV-positive, formerly incarcerated, an immigrant, non-Christian, or simply for being Black or Latino. Her politics were also reflected in her spiritual practice. “I practice the Catholic religion because it is part of the Santeria religion,” Johnson confessed. “It says that we are all brothers and sisters. We are all the same.”⁴²

Having been raised in the African Methodist Episcopal Church—the first independent denomination founded by Africans in the Americas in 1816, which grew out of the Free African Society in Philadelphia—Johnson’s willful shift to the Catholic and Santeria religions should not be overlooked or diminished, especially by scholars of Africana religions interested in the paradoxes of religio-racial boundaries; gender, sexuality, and deviance; and the queering and transing of theoretical categories.⁴³ As anthropologist Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús contends in *Electric Santería*, “Globally, Santería is a practice associated with racialized criminals and social deviants who practice a putatively backward superstition.”⁴⁴ Beliso-De Jesús further contends, “Santería is a religion that has historically emerged as a solution to problems for marginalized subjects. As an epistemology, Santería is about finding solution through copresences,” which she defines earlier as, “energies of nature and spirit, divinity and

body entangled in diffracted waves of knowledge and power.”⁴⁵ An Afro-Cuban transnational religion, with roots in West Africa prior to colonization and the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, Santería (otherwise known as *regla ocha* by practitioners) was concretized in Cuba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its tenets and belief systems are influenced by “a pantheon of Yoruba-inspired oricha”;⁴⁶ and the historical and contemporaneous usage of the term *Santería* has been used to differentiate “improper worship of Catholic saints” from a more authentic, real, and orthodox Catholicism, which proliferated in the Caribbean and in Latin America due to the religious efforts—withstanding their entanglements with racial-sexual terrorisms—of Portuguese and Spanish missionaries in the colonial period.⁴⁷ However, to date, scholars of Catholicism and of religion in the Americas more broadly, continue to debate the question of what constitutes an “authentic” Catholicism, and as is often the case, African peoples distort, queer, trouble, disrupt, and Blacken religious norms.⁴⁸ However, for the purposes of this article, it is worth thinking about the ways twentieth-century African-descended people in the United States, such as Marsha P. Johnson, continued to embody what Nora Jaffary describes as “deviant orthodoxy” in their religious practices, African rituals, and religiously motivated political organizing.⁴⁹ Indeed, Johnson’s religious practice was “deviant” in the context of her African American Protestant upbringing given the demonization of African-derived religions in such denominations as the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁵⁰ Historian Yvonne P. Chireau, who in her usage of the term “vernacular religion” draws a distinction “between the official doctrines of institutional religions such as Protestant Christianity and the vast territory of behaviors that human beings may invest with religious meaning.”⁵¹ She later deploys the term “magico-religious” to describe what Jaffary conceptualizes as “deviant orthodoxy” in order to amplify African and African American religions that defy sharp, and often, contrarian demarcations. “Many African people of the past, as now, drew few distinctions between the substance of their beliefs and the other aspects of the world in which they participated,” Chireau writes. “A spiritual reality governed human life, within belief systems that were not elaborated as philosophical or speculative knowledge but rather enfolded ways of being and living.”⁵² Johnson’s self-constructed spiritual practice, which included aspects of her Black Protestant upbringing and an intentional engagement with Catholicism and Santería, was rooted in a larger cultural history of the religious innovations of everyday African-descended people in the afterlife of chattel slavery.

While Johnson confessed in 1992, “I practice the Catholic religion because it is part of the Santeria religion,” it is necessary to differentiate between these two religions, as one is rooted in Eurocentric, colonial logics and a history of Christianization and the coerced conversions of the enslaved, and the second is founded in a history of Afro-Cuban resistance to those processes in the Americas. To this end, it is perhaps essential to invert Johnson’s construction

of the relationality between the two, and to consider how Afro-Cubans embodied what the historian Albert Raboteau described as a process of adapting to the demands of the plantocracy and Christianization using the blending of African religious practices and Christianity, thus forming “slave religion.” He writes, “The most immediately apparent innovation that *Santería*, *Shango*, and *Candomble* have brought to African theological perspectives is the identification of African gods with Catholic saints. Initially the veneration of saints must have provided the slaves with a convenient disguise for secret worship of African gods.”⁵³ Indeed, in following the work of scholars of Africana religions, Catholicism is part of *Santería*, even as Catholic authorities have traditionally demonized and policed *Santería*, other non-Christian African diasporic religions, and the religiosity of both Johnson and Rivera.

While the archive shows no record of Johnson traveling to Cuba or of her being initiated into *Santería*, or even how exactly she personally encountered the religion in New York City, the historian Tracey E. Hucks, while citing Steven Gregory, has observed, “From 1960 to 1970, incidents of convergence as well as of conflict emerged between African American and Cuban orisa communities in New York City.”⁵⁴ In this vein, Johnson’s practicing of *Santería* as a Black transgender woman, sex worker, and political organizer who had critiques of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of her upbringing also substantiates Dianne M. Stewart’s contention that the “spirituality [of women who practice African-derived religions] directly challenges prevailing Christian beliefs that oppress women of African descent while institutionalizing praxes of [women’s] empowerment and authority within the structures of African-derived religions.”⁵⁵ Scholars have also written about the preservation of *Santería* and other Africana religions in New York City by Cuban and Puerto Rican practitioners, and as historians have pointed out, there was much convergence in political organizing among gay and transgender activists, the Young Lords (a Puerto Rican leftist organization based in Spanish Harlem, with which Rivera was also involved), and the Black Panther Party.⁵⁶ Given these details, it is possible that Johnson may have learned about *Santería* from her Latina comrade Rivera or from one of the many youths she housed. It is also probable that Johnson, like so many queer and transgender individuals, found in *Santería* what sociologist Salvador Vidal-Ortiz characterizes as religious and sexual negotiation, especially with regard to traditional Afro-Cuban linguistics for queer gender performance—despite the prevalence of anti-Blackness, what Beliso-De Jesús terms “heteronationalisms,” and legalized homo- and transantagonisms in both Cuba and the United States.⁵⁷ Similarly, Susana Peña observes that the 1970s Transsexual Action Organization based in Miami, Florida, utilized the Afro-Cuban religion *Santería* “to articulate a transsexual identity.”⁵⁸ Carolyn Watson contends that gender fluidity emerged in Afro-Cuban religious organization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following Cuba’s 1898 independence from Spain, as a strategic response to the legal prosecution of cross-dressing and deviant and

queer gendered performances. Watson argues, “Rather than discarding Yoruba gender metaphors for social organization, practitioners wove them into religious praxis so that the *orisha*, not the medium, contravened certain comportments, thereby subverting Cuban gender identities that were believed to follow naturally from anatomical sex.”⁵⁹ While sources do not substantiate these inclinations as Johnson’s personal truth, her shift from a Black Protestant church to Santería does evidence the sorts of gendered and sexual freedoms gained by disavowing hegemonic Christianity, further confirming the observations of other scholars on this subject.

In effect, Johnson’s commitment to the Afro-Cuban religion Santería had meaningful influence on her self-formation, political sensibilities, and her transvestite, drag, and sex-work identities in an ever-changing 1960s to early 1990s New York City where racialized violence, gendered brutalities, poverty, the War on Drugs, the AIDS epidemic, and the incessant murders of Black and Latina transgender women in the streets with impunity were quotidian practices. Beliso-De Jesús contends, “Santería does not offer a utopia. Rather, it assumes the terrors of violence and negotiations with negativities as part and parcel of the everyday. Copresences are haunting conjurings of seething imperfections, partialities that link injustice and marginality.”⁶⁰ In this way, for Johnson, as her friends from Christopher Street observed, making offerings of clothes and coins to “King Neptune, to her father, and to the spirits in the water at Christopher Pier”⁶¹ was a means of recognizing, honoring, and calling upon the protective guidance of copresences, or what writers and Africana practitioners such as Toni Morrison have described as “ancestors [who] are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the [living] are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”⁶² Those ancestors were conjured by Johnson—using what Elizabeth Pérez describes as “religious micropactices,” or ritual experiences that “can be broken down into more minute units of activity”—in order to survive transmisogynistic, anti-Black violence in her twentieth-century world; and to also receive spiritual power from those rebellious Africans and maroons in Cuba and across the Americas who resisted colonial rule by the Spanish and other European powers during the arduous eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶³ Johnson’s attentiveness to copresences is also indicative of an evidence of joint struggle with the oppressed peoples of Cuba, many of whom faced immense queer and transantagonistic violence and incarceration under the tenure of Communist revolutionary Fidel Castro, despite his professed radicalisms.⁶⁴ For Johnson, a Black transgender woman, Santería was African and non-Christocentric in its orientation and thus capable of providing her with strength and direction for her ministry as street evangelist and transgender saint to the many Black and Latino queer and transgender youth she and Rivera pastored, nursed, mothered, protected, served, led, loved, and housed. By turning our attention to Johnson and Rivera’s religious sensibilities, specifically their relationships to Afro-Caribbean

and Latin American religions in their radical activism, it is evident that the religious is political, and the political is religious. Using a queer Africana religious studies approach also allows scholars of queer and transgender experiences to understand how religion and politics are inextricably linked along raced, classed, and gendered lines.⁶⁵ It also allows for critical analysis of alternative liberation theologies in the streets, where LGBTQ persons consistently organize, save the homeless, and speak back to churches that have shut their doors.

Conclusion: “Transed” Afro-Latin Religions in the Americas

Liberation theologies emerged alongside and in conversation with the queer- and trans-led, antipolice actions of the Stonewall Rebellion and the organizing work of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. Rivera saw her political praxis in direct opposition to white supremacist, heterosexist, imperialist, and right-wing Bible fundamentalism, and Johnson intentionally merged her Black Protestant upbringing with Catholicism and the Afro-Cuban religion Santería to enliven her commitments to global, diasporic social movements. As Rivera once observed about her collaborator, “Marsha lived in her own realm, and she saw things through different eyes. She liked to stay in that world.” In another moment, following the death of Marsha’s partner, Rivera recounted how “Marsha came over to [her] house dressed like the Virgin Mary, in white and blue, and she was carrying a wooden cross and a Bible. She came in and started preaching the Bible to [her] and [they] had a few words.”⁶⁶ Saint Marsha and evangelist Rivera, in tandem, with hearts with the dispossessed and with an espoused politics of refusal to white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy, rescued homeless queer and transgender youth off church steps. In effect, they embodied what the historian Lilian Calles Barger describes as “intellectual siblings born of a shared revolutionary history,” such that “[the] Black and feminist theologies that US thinkers developed were not an import of Latin American theology,” but rather, in concert with each other as a practice of joint struggle.⁶⁷ Their Afro-Latin-informed liberation theology and Africana religious sensibilities allowed them to transgress orthodox religious formations, cisheterosexist theo-cultural boundaries, and a rigid gender binary, such that their own personal, lived religion was already transed. It was a transed liberation theology, rooted in the fluidity of Africana religions, which made living the unlivable possible. Yet, though physically dead, Rivera and Johnson—and their work—continue to live through such organizations as the Marsha P. Johnson Institute and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, in which they, as copresences, continue to guide a new generation of organizers in housing queer, transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, two-spirit, bisexual, gay, and homeless youth.⁶⁸

As a copresence, one of Johnson’s questions from 1992 continues to haunt religious studies and social movements more broadly. In *Pay It No Mind*, the only documentary to date which includes footage of an interview conducted

by Larry Mitchell with Marsha P. Johnson just three days before she disappeared in New York City, Johnson reflects on a recently erected monument in her honor in the West Village's Sheridan Square Park. With pure astonishment she asked, "How many people have died for these two little statues to be put in the park to recognize gay people?"⁶⁹ Such a query is a beckoning call, too, to religious studies to take seriously the ways we do or do not historicize and commemorate queer and transgender people in discourses about religion, even when the lives and experiences of queer and transgender people are sacred. By invoking the language of "sacred," and by extension "sainthood," I draw again upon Althaus-Reid's prophetic insight that "the signs of sainthood—decency and the legal sexual order of T-Theology—have become equivalent to the real lives of saints, eliminating gestures of defiance and the contradiction of colonial geographies of sainthood. The purpose of these manoeuvres into sainthood is clear: by de-queering saints, the church has supported social and politico-economic contracts."⁷⁰ Yet Rivera and Johnson and so many other street evangelists and transgender saints remind us of the import of queering and transing sainthood by calling into question the very foundations upon which the church's social and politico-economic contracts have been constructed. Sainthood, then, is less about a normative elocation of "purity" and thus a recapitulation of what Black feminist bell hooks long described as "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" with its cis-heteronormative structuring apparatus.⁷¹ Rather, "sainthood" is a reclamation of what Althaus-Reid describes as "demonology,"⁷² the inchoate space of the rebellious, the dissident, the prophets, the queers, and the stone throwers who raise hell and expose the true *white, cis, het devils* and systems of domination at work in the world as we know it.

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Notes

1. Tourmaline, "Sylvia Rivera and NYPD Reflect on Stonewall Rebellion."
2. Tourmaline, "Sylvia Rivera and NYPD Reflect on Stonewall Rebellion."
3. Tourmaline, "Sylvia Rivera and NYPD Reflect on Stonewall Rebellion."
4. On the African American jeremiad, see Pitney, *African American Jeremiad*.
5. Feinberg, *Trans Liberation*, 107.
6. For a comprehensive history of STAR, please see Cohen, *Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York*, 89–163. In this article, I follow the lead of transgender persons, scholars, thinkers, and activists in using *transgender* when referring to the historical term *transvestite*, which has since been rendered pejorative. As a historian and queer theorist, however, I use *transvestite* when citing Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's words, especially their self-descriptions about their own gender identities and performances in the twentieth century.

7. Hunter and Robinson, *Chocolate Cities*, 68.
8. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 7.
9. Metropolitan Community Church of New York, "Obituary for Sylvia Rae Rivera."
10. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 7.
11. See Exodus 1:15–21.
12. See, for example, Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*; Bell, *Lighting the Fires of Freedom*; Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*; Holsaert et al., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*; Theoharis, *Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*; McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*; Garrow, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*. For work on Pauli Murray and other attempts at "queering" civil rights movement history, please see, for example, Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 87–114; Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*; Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat*; Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses*; Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White*.
13. See, for example, Carter, *Stonewall*; Rutledge, *Gay Decades*; Duberman, *Stonewall*.
14. For a recent collection of documents including Johnson and Rivera, please see Baumann, *Stonewall Reader*.
15. Please see, for example, Greene-Hayes, "'Queering' African American Religious History"; Pennington, "Willmer Broadnax."
16. White, *Reforming Sodom*, 139.
17. Tourmaline has accused David Francis, the white gay cisgender director of *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), of stealing her ideas and plagiarizing her archival labor from *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018). For an examination of this controversy, see Calafell, "Narrative Authority." Much of Tourmaline's archival material first appeared in Untorelli Press's book, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* (2013), without Tourmaline's consent. For more on that, see Tourmaline, "On Untorelli's 'New' Book." Upon the advice of this article's reviewers, I have decided against privileging citations of the Untorelli Press anthology and have prioritized Tourmaline's blog, *The Spirit Was*. This controversy raises a host of questions about the ethics of archival excavation and the politics of citation. A question for queer and trans studies in religion: What do we do with sources, produced unethically or in questionable ways, that offer us insights otherwise unknown about figures too-often overlooked and discarded?
18. I use "re/member" here as a nod to Wells-Oghoghomeh, *The Souls of Womenfolk*, in which "re/membrance was [enslaved] women's response to dismemberment" (6).
19. Lewis, "'I Am Sixty-Four,'" 27.
20. Melissa M. Wilcox, "Religion Is Already Transed," 86. See also Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun, "Incorporating Transgender Experience"; Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, "Trans*/Religion"; and Wilcox, "Theory in the Interstices."
21. Frank, Moreton, and White, *Devotions and Desires*, 6.
22. For a powerful critique of these assumptive logics, see Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Disability Justice/Stonewall's Legacy."
23. Rivera, "Queens in Exile," 84. See also Metropolitan Community Church of New York, "Obituary for Sylvia Rae Rivera."
24. Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*, 219–31.
25. See Isaiah 61:1.
26. Rivera, "Bitch on Wheels."
27. Matthew 21:12–13.
28. Rivera and Johnson, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 34.
29. Rivera, "Bitch on Wheels."
30. Isaiah 58:1.

31. Rivera, "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones," 77.
32. Rivera, "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones," 79.
33. Bateman, "Gay Liberation Front."
34. Rivera, "Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones," 80.
35. Suran, "Coming Out against the War," 458.
36. Suran, "Coming Out against the War," 469–70.
37. For a history of antirape activism in Black communities, see McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*.
38. Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners*, 53.
39. Rivera and Johnson, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 19. While I prefer to follow Tourmaline's lead by not engaging this source due to its problematic production, it is the only source in which I find these words from Rivera.
40. Rivera and Johnson, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 19.
41. Matthew 25:40.
42. Kasino and Morrison, *Pay It No Mind*.
43. For more on the African Methodist Episcopal Church, please see George, *Segregated Sabbaths*; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*; J. Melton, *Will to Choose*; Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*; and Bailey, *Race Patriotism*.
44. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 112.
45. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 104, 77.
46. Although Santería has been primarily linked to Yoruba-inspired religions, there are other African religious traditions from which the religion has historically drawn influence, such as the Ibo of Nigeria, the Akan of Ghana, and the Fon-wew of Benin. For more on "African origins," please see Palmié, *Cooking of History*.
47. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 82. See also, for example, Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*; and Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions*.
48. See, for example, Cressler, "Black Catholic Conversion" and *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic*; Orsi, *Between Heaven And Earth*; Appleby and Cummings, *Catholics and the American Century*; and O'Toole, *Habits of Devotion*. See also Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic."
49. See Jaffary, *False Mystics*.
50. Dickerson, *African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 73–74.
51. Chireau, *Black Magic*, 3–4.
52. Chireau, *Black Magic*, 38, 48–49.
53. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 22.
54. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 143.
55. Stewart, "Womanist Theology in the Caribbean Context," 81.
56. On STAR and the Young Lords working together, see Cohen, *Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York*, 134–35; on the work of the Young Lords, see Wanzer-Serrano, *New York Young Lords*; on Santería, see Schmidt, *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA*; Gregory, *Santería in New York City*; Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*; Murphy, *Santería*; and Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*; on Cuban immigrants and African Americans, see Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 83–87, 153–54.
57. Vidal-Ortiz, "Sexuality Discussions in Santería"; Vidal-Ortiz, "'Maricón,' 'Pájaro,' and 'Loca'"; and Vidal-Ortiz, "'Puerto Rican Way.'" For more on "heteronationalisms," please see Beliso-De Jesús, "Contentious Diasporas." For more on the complicated web of racial, religious, gendered, and sexual politics in Cuba, please see Allen, *¿Venceremos?*; and in Lucumí/Santería specifically, please see Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*.
58. Peña, "Gender and Sexuality in Latina/o Miami," 758. See also Sparks and Conner, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions*; Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*; and Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" and *Ezili's Mirrors*.

59. Watson, "Witches," 426.
60. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 102.
61. Kasino and Morrison, *Pay It No Mind*.
62. Morrison, "Rootedness," 343.
63. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 119–20; Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*, 9.
64. See Epps, "Proper Conduct"; Lumsden, *Machos Maricones and Gays*; and Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 151–54.
65. Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*; Greene-Hayes, "'Queering' African American Religious History."
66. Rivera and Johnson, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 44–45.
67. Barger, *World Come of Age*, 9.
68. Scholars interested in supporting queer and transgender organizing and survival work can make donations to the Marsha P. Johnson Institute (<https://marshap.org/>) and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (<https://srlp.org/>), along with the Audre Lorde Project (<https://alp.org/>).
69. Kasino and Morrison, *Pay It No Mind*.
70. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 141.
71. hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, 4.
72. Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*, 133–53.

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