



## Pay It No Mind: Marsha P. Johnson

### Introduction

Trans icon Marsha P. Johnson became a beloved figure during the 1970s post-Stonewall LGBTQ+ civil rights movement, and she continues to inspire determined and inclusive activism. Johnson is widely known as a participant in the Stonewall uprising, and her legacy has only grown since her death in 1992—so much so that 26 years later, the *New York Times* published an [obituary](#) about Johnson as part of its “Overlooked” series, which features people whose significance was not appropriately recognized at the time of their deaths.

Over the decades, Marsha P. Johnson’s life story has often been subject to mythologizing, simplification, and romanticising (as her *Times* obituary noted, “Some have called her a saint”). This lesson incorporates a podcast interview with Johnson, which allows students to engage with her authentic voice and explore her life and legacy in a more nuanced way. In so doing, the lesson provides an opportunity to deepen understanding of the LGBTQ+ movement and the complex and varied experiences of those who have contributed to it. And it invites consideration of certain aspects of Johnson’s experience and identity that aren’t often discussed, including mental illness, sex work, drug use, and police harassment.

The lesson is structured to allow student curiosity to drive the conversation and exploration. (The “Background” section below offers prompts to support the conversations that may arise.) This kind of organic conversation fosters greater responsiveness to the students’ interests and levels of understanding.

**This lesson was created as an extension of the Making Gay History / National Education Association Teaching Fellowship.** Each lesson specifically uses a podcast episode and related resources from the *Making Gay History* podcast. These lessons have been created so that teachers across the country have the context and tools to bring archival audio from the *Making Gay History* podcast into middle and high school classrooms.

The *Making Gay History* podcast brings LGBTQ+ history to life through the voices of the people who lived it. We strive to create a world where everyone understands, respects, and honors the experiences and histories of LGBTQ+ people by providing engaging and accessible entry points to their largely hidden history. The podcast is hosted by historian and journalist Eric Marcus, who has been documenting LGBTQ+ history for more than 35 years.

## Grade Level

Grades 9-12.

This lesson has been implemented in a multi-level English learner classroom that includes students from the 9th through 12th grades with varying English language proficiency levels, utilizing the WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework.

## Disciplines / Unit Recommendations

This lesson was created for multilingual learners, embedded into Vista's Engage with Literature and Content Level A curriculum, Unit 1: Choices and Pathways. In this unit, attention to developing listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills is an integral part of the lesson.

**Essential question: How can you discover the possibilities for your future?**

[WIDA](#) English Language Development Standard 2: English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts.

The lesson utilizes a modified [Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol \(SIOP\) Model](#) with specific target WIDA language domains (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) for multilingual learners. The visual and auditory components are comprehensive inputs that create a lesson that all multilingual learners will understand. The final product of the lesson—the Theme Chart graphic organizer—serves as a summative assessment that asks students to make connections to the essential question.

## Estimated Time

Two 90-minute block sessions.

## Preparation

Note: It is recommended that you double-check all links as some may shift since they are not hosted by Making Gay History directly. If you come across any broken links, please let us know at [hello@makinggayhistory.org](mailto:hello@makinggayhistory.org).

- Listen to ***Making Gay History, Season 2, Episode 1: Marsha P. Johnson & Randy Wicker.*** [bit.ly/mgh-johnsonwicker](https://bit.ly/mgh-johnsonwicker)

Note: As the teacher, you know your students and teaching situation best. It is always advised to listen to the full podcast episode individually before playing it for or assigning it to your students, just as you would review any text for classroom use. The *Making Gay History* podcast is produced for an adult audience, and some of the language in the episode (e.g., profanity and stigmatizing language about sex work and mental illness) may require contextualizing.

- Review the [lesson slide deck](#). Make sure you can play the embedded media; backup links are included below and in the presentation notes:
  - Slide 5: Video, [“Marsha P. Johnson: Transgender Activist \(WAMS E19\)”](#) (The New York Historical/YouTube; 2 min.)
  - Slide 9: Podcast episode, [“Marsha P. Johnson & Randy Wicker”](#) (Making Gay History/YouTube; 15 min. without credits; the episode is also available [here](#))
  
- Review and print copies of the following materials for you and your students or prepare to make them available digitally:
  - [Handout 1 \(“Five W’s and H Questions”\)](#)
  - [Handout 2 \(“S-I-T Worksheet”\)](#)

Note: For the purpose of this lesson, “S-I-T” stands for “Surprising-Important-Troubling.” (In some sources, the “I” instead represents “Interesting.”) Information about the S-I-T strategy is available on [this Facing History & Ourselves webpage](#).
  - [Episode transcript](#)
  - [Handout 3 \(“Theme Chart”\)](#)
  - If you plan to engage with extension activity A (“Art As Activism”; see below):  
[Handout 4 \(“SOAPStone Visual Analysis”\)](#)
  - If you plan to engage with extension activity B (“Who Do We Honor?”; see below):  
Article, [“Overlooked: Marsha P. Johnson, 1945-1992”](#) (*New York Times*, March 8, 2018)
  
- This lesson may spark student curiosity in several directions; be prepared to facilitate classroom discussions that touch on a wide range of topics. The “Background” section below provides basic context for some of the historical events and themes your students may want to explore or have questions about, including the following:
  - The Stonewall uprising
  - Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR)
  - Mental illness
  - Sex work
  - Drug use
  - Police harassment

## Background

The podcast episode used in this lesson features two activists who left an indelible mark on the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement, albeit in very different ways. Randy Wicker was a high-profile activist in the early gay rights movement (also known as the homophile movement) during the 1960s. Marsha P. Johnson—the focus of the lesson—was a prominent figure during the more radical gay liberation phase of the movement, which emerged in the years following the 1969 Stonewall uprising.

Marsha P. Johnson was born in New Jersey in 1945. She was assigned male at birth but knew herself to be female from a young age. After high school, she moved to New York City, began to dress according to her gender identity, and adopted the name Marsha P. Johnson; the middle initial, she said, stood for “Pay It No Mind.”

Marsha P. Johnson is best remembered for her participation in the 1969 Stonewall uprising and her fearless activism in the LGBTQ+ rights movement of the 1970s, in the early transgender rights movement, and during the AIDS crisis. In 1970, she co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) with her friend, trans icon and activist Sylvia Rivera.

### **The Stonewall Uprising**

The Stonewall uprising is a pivotal event in the history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. It began in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, when a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village, led to six nights of clashes with law enforcement. The uprising marked a key turning point in the fight for LGBTQ+ equality, ushering in the gay liberation phase of the movement—a period of explosive growth, greater visibility, and bolder tactics. The uprising also inspired annual Pride marches around the world, beginning in 1970.

There are many misconceptions and myths about the Stonewall uprising. For a factual overview of the basics, please review [this factsheet](#).

### **Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR)**

In 1970, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). The organization’s goal was to help homeless LGBTQ+ youth and transgender people marginalized by poverty, racism, and transphobia by providing them with a place to live and peer support.

Although STAR was notable for being one of the first groups dedicated to helping vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth, there is a common misconception that STAR was a formal nonprofit organization that provided shelter and services in a building that Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera called

STAR House. In reality, STAR House was located in an apartment in a derelict tenement building on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City, which was an impoverished neighborhood at the time. Moreover, when Johnson and Rivera founded STAR in 1970, they were young—Johnson was approximately 24 at the time, Rivera was about 18. Both lived on the margins of society: They had grown up on the street, suffered discrimination, and had mental health challenges, including substance use. They did not have the capacity or financial wherewithal to provide much-needed support to young people living in similar circumstances.

In the podcast episode, Randy Wicker paints an unembellished picture of life at STAR House: “They had an apartment, they didn’t have the money to keep up the rent and they began fighting over who was using drugs or who was paying rent or who was taking whose makeup. And, I mean, it got to be pretty low life and pretty ugly...”

Note: The topics that follow are briefly defined for teacher reference. Each of these topics is complex and nuanced, and it is not the intent of the lesson that they be taught comprehensively. Since the lesson lets student curiosity drive inquiry, however, the below aims to offer a starting-point to help you prepare for a wide range of conversations.

### **Mental Illness**

A medical condition that is marked by a mild to severe disturbance in the way a person thinks, feels, or acts and is usually accompanied by distress and problems functioning in daily activities or interacting with others. In the podcast episode, Marsha P. Johnson touches on the time she was admitted to the mental health ward of a hospital.

### **Sex Work**

The act or practice of engaging in sex acts in exchange for pay. To survive in New York City, Johnson engaged in sex work. In the episode, Wicker references the derogatory phrase often used at the time, “drag queen hooker.”

### **Drug Use**

The intake of substances, legal or illegal, that alter how your body or brain functions, with a connotation of use for reasons other than medical or the intended purposes. Drug use may lead to drug addiction. In the episode, Wicker notes there was drug use at STAR House.

### **Police Harassment**

The improper or excessive use of law enforcement authority to intimidate, oppress, or mistreat individuals, often without just cause. Police harassment can take many forms, including racial

profiling, unwarranted stop-and-searches, false arrests, excessive force, and illegal detention. Harassment can occur as a result of systemic discriminatory practices or misconduct by individual officers. The podcast episode includes many mentions of interactions with the police both for Johnson and for LGBTQ+ people more broadly.

*From the author: At the time this lesson was piloted (late 2025), the students particularly wanted to discuss Marsha P. Johnson's response to police harassment. They made connections to ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (U.S. Customs and Border Protection). This brought up the subject of the current political climate in the United States as it relates to immigration and LGBTQ+ discrimination. The structure of the lesson facilitated courageous conversations that helped students to better understand these topics, and offered them the safety of being able to discuss law enforcement actions in a different historical setting rather than just the present.*

## Lesson Plan

1. Introduce the essential question for the lesson (Slide 2 of the [lesson slide deck](#)). Tell students they will be listening to a *Making Gay History* podcast episode featuring two very different LGBTQ+ rights activists: Marsha P. Johnson (Slide 3), the main focus of the lesson, and Randy Wicker (Slide 4).
2. To build background, show students the 2-minute video, "[Marsha P. Johnson: Transgender Activist](#)," embedded on Slide 5 (*WIDA listening domain*).
3. Distribute [handout 1](#) ("Five W's and H Questions") and ask students to complete the graphic organizer (Slide 6; *WIDA writing domain*).
  - a. Allow students to work in pairs or small groups as a scaffold for those who do not have the English language proficiency level to complete the task individually.
  - b. Allow students to compare answers when they've finished.
  - c. Show and discuss the sample answers on Slide 7, if necessary.
    - Who is the person?
      - Marsha P. Johnson
    - What did the person do?
      - Transgender activist
    - When did this person discover the possibilities for her future?
      - 1969
    - Where did this person discover the possibilities for her future?
      - New York City, New York

- Why did this person discover the possibilities for her future?
    - Transgender rights: As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she was marginalized and denied basic civil rights.
  - How did this person discover the possibilities for her future?
    - Being an activist in the Stonewall uprising: By participating in the Stonewall uprising, she realized the power of turning shared anger into collective action.
4. Teach the S-I-T strategy (Slide 8). This will serve as a construct for capturing ideas as students listen to the podcast episode. The loose structure supports student-driven curiosity. Distribute [handout 2](#) (“S-I-T Worksheet”) and ask students to note anything they find surprising, important, and troubling from the episode (*WIDA writing domain*).
  5. Distribute the [episode transcript](#) and play the [podcast episode](#) (15 min. without credits) embedded on Slide 9 (*WIDA listening domain*).  
Note: Slides 10 and 11 present photos of Johnson and Wicker, which may be helpful to show to students while or after playing the episode.
  6. Starting with what students have written on their S-I-T worksheets, facilitate an open discussion using the questions below (*WIDA speaking domain*). Ask follow-up questions so that students can explain their thinking and build on each other’s comments. Listen closely for students’ questions, misconceptions, and what they’re curious about in order to cultivate inquiry and learning.
    - What did you find surprising from the podcast episode?
    - What did you find important for understanding this history?
    - What did you find troubling from the podcast episode?
    - As a culminating question, ask students to connect back to the essential question: What connections could you make to the podcast episode? What lessons could you take for yourself in discovering the possibilities for your future?

Variation: If you conduct Socratic seminars with your students, you could replace the discussion format described above with a Socratic seminar on the episode.
  7. Distribute [handout 3](#) (“Theme Chart”) and ask students to complete the organizer as a summative review/assessment as it relates to the essential question (*WIDA writing domain*).

## Extension Activities

### A. Art As Activism

Slide 13 shows a 2013 poster by artist Micah Bazant that includes a graphic representation of Marsha P. Johnson. It also features text that briefly shares who Johnson was and why she is being honored, as well as a call to action.

1. Have students analyze the poster utilizing [handout 4](#) (“SOAPSTone Visual Analysis”).
2. Invite them to create their own poster—explaining, honoring, and calling for action—for Marsha P. Johnson or for another activist. Suggested prompt:
  - a. Choose or create an image to use as inspiration or illustration for the message you wish to convey in relation to the person you’ve chosen as the subject for your poster.
  - b. On the left, add text that describes the person.
  - c. On the right, add text explaining why that person should be honored.
  - d. Finally, add a call to action at the top.

### B. Who Do We Honor?

1. Have students read [“Overlooked: Marsha P. Johnson, 1945-1992,”](#) the Marsha P. Johnson obituary that the *New York Times* belatedly published in 2018.
2. Use the following questions to facilitate a class discussion:

Twenty-six years after her death, the *New York Times* published an obituary about Marsha P. Johnson as part of its “Overlooked” series. Why do you think she was overlooked at the time of her death? What did the *New York Times* deem most significant to include in her obituary? What has shifted in our society, such that this obituary was created and circulated 26 years later?
3. As a further extension, present the following writing prompt:

Who else has made a difference or is currently making a difference in the fight for LGBTQ+ civil rights and might be overlooked? Write their “Overlooked” obituary utilizing Marsha P. Johnson’s *New York Times* obituary as a model.

### C. Pay It No Mind

In the pilot teaching of this lesson, students were particularly fascinated with Marsha P. Johnson’s adoption of “Pay It No Mind” as her “middle name.” For a bit of creative fun, invite students to think about what “middle name” they would take on to represent their philosophy.

## Additional Resources

- The final page of the [Stonewall factsheet](#) referenced in the “Background” section above includes a list of books and articles for further research.
- [Season five](#) of the *Making Gay History* podcast is dedicated to the Stonewall uprising.
- In the 2017 Netflix documentary [The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson](#) (dir. David France), activist Victoria Cruz investigates the death of her friend Marsha P. Johnson; the film includes interview footage of Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Randy Wicker.

## About the Author: Dr. Alexander Tai

Dr. Alexander Tai is a high school multilingual learner specialist/educator in Columbia, Missouri. He has been a K-12 multilingual learner specialist/educator for 11 years, with international English teaching experience in Taiwan. Dr. Tai hopes teachers who implement this lesson in their own classrooms will appreciate the graphic organizers as furnishing multiple scaffolds for students’ academic success.

—Lesson completed February 2026—