

Inspiring Queer Women

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Alice Walker (1944-)

Alice Walker is a writer and activist. She wrote the novel, “The Color Purple”, a Pulitzer Prize winner. ThoughtCo.com states, “Her work and activism have been inspired by—and served to help inspire—social movements, particularly in the area of civil rights and women's issues. She published "Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Binding of Women" in 1993 as a companion volume to the documentary "Warrior Marks," which chronicled female genital mutilation in Africa and included interviews with victims, activists against female circumcision, and circumcisers, according to IMDb.” Being a queer woman of color, her works have largely affected not only the Civil Rights movements but also LGBTQIA+ movements as well.



https://encrypted-tbn1.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcSUjRPr2SwwJjwqYCaO2ryGfOusyWTm3_nWXiWoEKEQrM4LJLV2

Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002)

Sylvia Rivera was a trailblazer in many movements, including fighting against the exclusion of transgender people, and gay rights in general. She was a transgender woman of color and had a tough childhood, and at 11, decided to leave home. She met Marsha P. Johnson, an African-American self-identified drag queen and activist. The two were actively involved in the

Stonewall Inn Uprising. She was given a place of honor in the 25th Anniversary Stonewall Inn march in 1994. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project continues her legacy, working to guarantee “all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination, or violence.”



<https://www.bese.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/the-crusade-of-transgender-activist-sylvia-rivera-001-1.jpg>

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Josephine Baker (1906-1975)

Josephine Baker was the first African American Woman to star in a motion picture and star in an integrated cast at an American Hall. During WWII, “She aided French military officials by passing on secrets she heard while performing in front of the enemy. She transported the confidential information by writing with invisible ink on music sheets. After many years of performing in Paris, Baker returned to the United States.” (National Women’s History Museum) Baker was even rumored to have a relationship with renowned artist, Frida Kahlo. Today Baker is remembered to be one of the first black sex symbols of the 20th century. Whether or not she was out, the force of her sexuality paved the way for those after her, which was glass-shattering for a woman of color at the time.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0b/Baker_Harcourt_1940_2.jpg/220px-Baker_Harcourt_1940_2.jpg

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Sally Ride (1951-2012)

Sally Ride was an American astronaut and physicist who lived from 1951 until 2012. In 1983, she became the first American woman to enter space as a crew member on the *Challenger* and continued to reach space two more times before retiring in 1987. Throughout Ride's career, she routinely dealt with sexism from media outlets, from interview questions concerning her emotional stability as a woman to personal questions regarding space's impact on her reproductivity. After leaving NASA, Ride went on to encourage young women to pursue careers like herself, pushing against the gender norms of women's involvement in STEM. Though married to Steve Hawley for 5 years, Ride had a private relationship with former Women's Tennis Association player Tam O'Shaughnessy, making her the first known queer person to reach space. Sally chose to keep her sexual orientation private the majority of her life until making a public statement one week before her death of pancreatic cancer about her relationship with Tam. Her sister Bear followed at Ride's obituary when acknowledging Tam's closeness to not only Sally but the entire family.



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Audre Lorde (1934-1992)

Audre Lorde was an American writer and poet who identified strongly as a Black feminist lesbian, referring to herself as a “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” Her poems and prose largely deal with issues related to civil rights, feminism, lesbianism, illness and disability, and the exploration of black female identity.

Lorde was born in Harlem, New York City, to Caribbean immigrants, her father from Barbados and her mother Grenadian from the island of Carriacou. Nearsighted to the point of being legally blind and the youngest of three daughters, Lorde grew up hearing her mother's stories about the West Indies. As a child, Lorde struggled with communication, and came to appreciate the power of poetry as a form of expression, even describing herself as thinking in poetry. While attending Hunter, Lorde published her first poem in *Seventeen* magazine after her school's literary journal rejected it for being inappropriate.

Also while in high school, Lorde participated in many poetry workshops sponsored by the Harlem Writers Guild, but noted that she always felt like an outcast from the Guild. She felt she was not accepted because she "was both crazy and queer but they thought I would grow out of it all." Lorde later said that people's disbelief of her identities and beliefs caused her constant distress as a young person. In 1954, she spent a pivotal year as a student at the National University of Mexico, a period she described as a time of affirmation and renewal. From 1972 to 1987, Lorde resided on Staten Island. During that time, in addition to writing and teaching she co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

In 1977, Lorde became an associate of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP). WIFP is an American nonprofit publishing organization. In 1985, Audre Lorde was a part of a delegation of black women writers who had been invited to Cuba. In 1984, Lorde started a visiting professorship in West Berlin at the Free University of Berlin. She was invited by FU lecturer Dagmar Schultz who had met her at the UN "World Women's Conference" in Copenhagen in 1980. During her time in Germany, Lorde became an influential part of the then emerging Afro-German liberation movement. During her many trips to Germany, Lorde became a mentor to a number of women, including May Ayim, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and Helga Emde. Instead of fighting systemic issues through violence, Lorde thought that language was a powerful form of resistance and encouraged the women of Germany to speak up instead of fight back.

From 1991 until her death, she was the New York State Poet laureate. In 1992, she received the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement from Publishing Triangle. Lorde died of breast cancer at the age of 58 on November 17, 1992, in St. Croix, where she had been living with Gloria Joseph. Lorde blazed a trail of Black female and queer empowerment and continues to inspire younger generations.



Gladys Bentley (1907-1960)

Gladys Bentley in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the daughter of George L. Bentley, an American, and his wife, Mary Mote, a Trinidadian. She was the eldest of four children in a low-income family living at 1012 W. Euclid Ave. in North Philadelphia and always felt unwanted or rejected because her mother desperately wanted her to have been born a boy: "When they told my mother she had given birth to a girl, she refused to touch me. She wouldn't even nurse me and my grandmother had to raise me for 6 months on a bottle before they could persuade my mother to take care of her own baby."

Her career skyrocketed when she appeared at Harry Hansberry's Clam House in New York in the 1920s, as a black, lesbian, cross-dressing performer. She headlined in the early 1930s at Harlem's Ubangi Club, where she was backed up by a chorus line of drag queens. She dressed in men's clothes (including a signature tailcoat and top hat), played piano, and sang her own "riskay" lyrics to popular tunes of the day in a deep, growling voice while flirting with women in the audience.

On the decline of the Harlem speakeasies with the repeal of Prohibition, she relocated to southern California, where she was billed as "America's Greatest Sepia Piano Player" and the "Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs". She was frequently harassed for wearing men's clothing. Some people went as far as to say that she was the reincarnation of Satan coming back to sing his songs and do the "work of the devil". Some spread a false notion that she would put you under a spell if you listened to her music. While Bentley was openly lesbian early in her career, during the McCarthy Era she started wearing dresses, married a man and claimed to have been "cured" and "fixed" by taking hormones. Bentley died of pneumonia unexpectedly at her home in Los Angeles on January 18, 1960, aged 52.



<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/great-blues-singer-gladys-bentley-broke-rules-180971708/>

Emma Goldman (1869-1940)

Emma Goldman dedicated her life to the creation of a radically new social order. Born in 1869 in Kovno, Kovno Governorate, then a part of Russian Empire (modern day Lithuania). Higher education was a luxury that her family deemed unnecessary; her father told her that “all a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare gefilte fish, cut noodles fine, and give the man plenty of children.” As a Jewish girl in Tsarist Russia, her life was perpetually under threat. Bloody pogroms broke out in 1881, and she bore witness to the violent antisemitism that continued to plague Europe and the rest of the world. She immigrated with her family to Buffalo in 1885 before moving to New York to get away from her abusive father.

As an adult, her speeches, writings on workers’ rights, revolution, and women’s oppression struck fear into the powers of state and capital, leading the press to nickname her “Red Emma”. In 1916 her campaigning for contraception resulted in Goldman’s conviction for violation of the Comstock law. The US politician Anthony Comstock (1844–1915) was a fervent stickler for Victorian morals and sniffed out offences everywhere; all information about birth control was therefore deemed illegal, obscene, prurient and lascivious. The law that bore his name was not taken off the statute books until 1936. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover (who was a closeted gay man himself) called her “the most dangerous woman in America.” when he ordered her deportation in 1919. Emma Goldman responded “I consider it an honor to be the first political agitator to be deported from the United States.”

Goldman traveled to Spain during the Spanish Civil War to deliver lectures and give interviews. She enthusiastically supported the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists. She wrote regularly for *Spain and the World*, a biweekly newspaper focusing on the civil war. As the events preceding World War II began to unfold in Europe, Goldman reiterated her opposition to wars waged by governments. "Much as I loathe Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Franco", she wrote to a friend, "I would not support a war against them and for the democracies which, in the last analysis, are only Fascist in disguise." She felt that Britain and France had missed their opportunity to oppose fascism, and that the coming war would only result in "a new form of madness in the world". She was at the forefront of LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, racial justice, freedom of expression, atheism, birth control and abortion rights and prison reform. She continued to fight collective liberation until her last breath at age 70 in Toronto.



Barbara May Cameron (1954-2002)

Barbara May Cameron was a nationally known activist who fought for the rights of gays, women and Native Americans. She grew up on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota, and attended the American Indian Art Institute. In 1973, after college, she moved to San Francisco and in 1975, co-founded [Gay American Indians](#). From 1980 through 1985, she organized the Lesbian Gay Freedom Day Parade and Celebration. From 1989 to 1992, she was executive director of [Community United Against Violence](#), helping victims of hate crimes and domestic violence.

Her essays were powerful and wide reaching, especially the two titled “Gee, You Don’t Seem Like an Indian From the Reservation”, her seminal essay on the schisms and racism within the queer sub-community, and [Frybread in Berlin](#), about finding community abroad. Her 1980 [speech](#) has been called one of the most evocative in San Francisco Pride history.

http://www.thegully.com/essays/gaymundo/020313_barbara_cameron.html

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