Write, Sing, March, and Fight for Freedom

Welcome to volume 2, issues 3-4 of Digging up the Past. Spring and Summer bring with them a number of critical historical events. June is the month of Juneteenth, the Stonewall Riots, and the birth of Gwendolyn Brooks. Here at WSU, we celebrate with educational events such as movies, lunch-time quiz-outs, and more. As historians, of course we are excited to commemorate June 29th, the day when Carter G. Woodson, the founder of Black History Month, was awarded the prestigious Spingarn Medal.

It was in the spring month of April, 1910, that the National Urban League (NUL) was founded. Among its founders was George Edmund Haynes, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Columbia University. Throughout the Great Migration, the NUL helped newcomers to northern cities find housing and jobs; in the twenties and thirties, under the direction of Eugene Kinckle Jones, it expanded its social work and fought Jim Crow in urban areas and the nation at large. By the twentieth century, it had become one of the strongest voices for racial justice in the U.S. Today, the NUL continues to work for a more just society. You can find its reports online at https://nul.org/.

It is not a coincidence that the NUL and the NAACP were both founded in the early twentieth century, for the early twentieth century was a time of flourishing for Black political and cultural organizing. The rise of Harlem, as a cultural center, also occurred at this time. Like the political movements of the era, the Harlem Renaissance grew in visibility from the nineteen-teens into the nineteen-thirties, as more Black citizens moved north in what is now known as the Great Migration. As will be addressed in Minerva Hayes’s article at the close of this issue, a Black LGBTQI+ culture emerged from this space of activism. That culture included drag balls and flourished until, as we moved into the mid-twentieth century, a more conservative politics of respectability came to dominate national Black and white political organizing. Yet the rights that so many of us have today


came from the very difficult struggles of the generations of people who came before us. This, of course, makes their histories fabulous.

To celebrate the fabulous Black and LGBTQI+ political and cultural organizing that, historically, took place throughout the U.S. in summers past, we bring you two fabulous articles celebrating LGBTQI+ history, and Black political history. We open this issue with a study of Black political organizing in California—political organizing that took place before Juneteenth, in fact before the Civil War. African American political organizing has deep roots in the U.S. We hope that “Long Before Juneteenth” will inspire increased interest in this early and vibrant history. This issue’s closing article addresses LGBTQI+ history; it excavates the origins of modern drag, pointing out that the first organized drag balls we know of, took place in Harlem, New York, and were developed by Black performers. The balls grew to include Black and white performers and patrons. As always, we include our sections of “This Day in History,” and “History Abstracts” (by undergraduate students at WSU).

Because June is a month of liberation and hope for a more just future, we end our opening letter with a poem by that fabulous queer Chicana poet, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, crafted in the last century:

We are the holy relics,
The scattered bones of a saint,
The best loved bones of Spain.
We seek each other.

In these months of liberation, dig into your past. Whose scattered bones remind you of your rich history? Where are your favorite places for digging? Wishing you a productive semester—and don’t forget to complete the quiz on the backside of Digging. Bring it to the history department at WSU (Wilson-Short 301) to collect your loaded coffee mug.

L Heidenreich Zuñiga
Department of History, WSU
Summer, 2023
Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004): Poet, Scholar and Activist

June (and on the Palouse, where WSU is located, August) brings with it multiple celebrations of LGBTQI+ rights and accomplishments. Thus, our quotable historical figure for the Spring/Summer Issue of *Digging* is Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa was a queer Chicana poet/activist/historian who grew up in the borderlands of South Texas and fought fearlessly for the rights of all human beings. Her most famous work is *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, but she was also co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back*, and authored over a dozen critical articles. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa used history and poetry to help readers re-envision the past, and to imagine a more just future.

> A misinformed people is a subjugated people (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 86).

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3).

> We have to be queer because queer is always at odds with the status quo. Instead of buying in as lesbians that we’re just like all the other guys, we’re just folks, the only difference we have is our sexual preference, we have to say that we are not normal. Who wants to be normal? Normal is those ***** that are polluting the world, the oppressors. We have to “queer” the world in a lot of different ways (*Color Lines*, interview, 1999).
Undergraduate Abstracts: College-level history courses enable you to explore aspects of the past that are important and interesting to you. The field of history allows you to … “dig up the past.”

A 18th Century Zoo for the Mentally Ill Taught You Everything You Think You Know About Mental Illness, by Amya Dahl, History 105

If one was not insane going into Bedlam- an insane asylum ran in the 18th century in London, they were driven to insanity by the time they got out. That is, if they survived the horrid treatments within. In the 18th century, Bedlam opened its doors to the public and promoted false ideas about mental illness. This had a negative effect on patients but also created the idea that people with mental illness were a form of entertainment for the masses. Beldam hospital was basically a torture institute, that treated patients worse than many zoos treated their animals. During the 18th century the definition of mental illness was so loose that anyone could be deemed mentally ill who did not fit social norms and/or embarrassed their family. Patients were chained to their cell walls or locked in cages for days on end with no heat, and the comfort of straw for a bed. They were subjected to being bled out and purged regularly to ‘cure’ their insanity. To make matters worse, Bedlam opened their doors to entertain the public. Articles by J.B. Spence and Peggy Pyke-Lees highlight the mistreatment of the patients in Bedlam. Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage by Robert Rentoul Reed provides insight as to how Bedlam started a public fascination with mental illness as a form of popular entertainment.

Audre Lorde: From Silence to Strength, by Padget Callan, History 369

Audre Lorde was a Black lesbian poet who inspired poetic activism for generations, fighting against racism, and homophobia. As a Black woman during the revival of feminism, Lorde found that women of color were often left out of conversations that largely addressed the needs of all women. Lorde witnessed the lack of inclusion in white feminism and, thus, amplified the voices of women of color by publicly addressing the importance of incorporating perspectives of all women, especially queer women of color. In her work she incorporated intersectional analysis (how race and gender and class work together) to explain why certain groups experience discrimination differently. Lorde’s career largely focused on amplifying the voices of women, which was clearly demonstrated in her article, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” published in 1977, that emphasizes the power that poetry grants women. Poetry provides women with an honest and creative outlet to express the need for social change, share individual and community experiences, and to take a stand in the fight for equality. One of my main sources was the biography Warrior Poet, by Alexis De Vaux. The biography elaborates on Lorde’s analysis of social inequality, and recounts her activism and crucial life events. Lorde was a monumental and inspiring individual who influenced people to actively contribute to the betterment of society through forms of self-expression, creativity, and activism.
Undergraduate Abstracts (Continued)

Digging up Portugal's War on Drugs, by Taryn Beck, History 105

My topic was how Portugal approached the war on drugs. I have always had an interest in the war on drugs. My dad used to be a prosecuting attorney. I grew up in Idaho, where my dad was trained to not be lenient on the people. As my dad grew in his career, and studying information and statistics, he saw that by incarcerating people, he was trapping them in their addiction. He began to feel that our government should provide them with more resources to escape addiction and become a contributing part of society again. My dad had a career change shortly after coming to this realization, but I grew up in a household that stayed up to date on the war on drugs, and I feel a close connection to the topic, seeing how addiction has trapped a few of my relatives, and the legal side of it all from my dad.

Throughout this project, I have learned many critical research skills, such as the difference between sources and how to format in the Chicago Manual Style. I learned many things I did not know about the war on drugs, and how beneficial decriminalization can be. I highly recommend people take time to learn about how Portugal went from one of the highest countries with overdoses to one of the lowest, and how it has benefited their society.

Marsha P Johnson: The Iron Wall Against the AIDS Epidemic, by Joshua Ejiogu, History 105

Marsha P Johnson was more than just a trans icon and a revolutionary who fought for LGBTIQQ rights. She was also a caretaker whose work with ACT UP led to significant improvements in AIDS/HIV treatment. Marsha P Johnson is commonly known for her incredible activism regarding gay rights and sex work. Her influence as a drag queen and as a co-founder of the STAR organization led to large steps in the recognition of LGBTIQQ youth as well as material benefits for those parts of LGBTIQQ community suffering homelessness. Even with all this important work, I believe an important part activism is overlooked—the efforts she made in progressing accessibility for AIDS treatment. Marsha P Johnson was instrumental in the fight against AIDS as she worked as a participant within the ACT UP movement commonly engaging in protests and acting as a caretaker to those who had contracted the AIDS virus. ACT UP’s influence in the accessibility to AIDS medication is well documented; ACT UP started a large protest in Wall Street with the purpose of lowering the cost of AZT treatment. This led to a lowering of the cost of AZT for patients.

Now many might ask why I chose Marsha P Johnson as a research topic and my answer to that would be that the history of LGBTIQQ rights within institutions across the country is severely lacking especially when it comes to covering significant actors who made LGBTIQQ rights as prominent as it is today. The research I use in my project was largely from the National Woman’s History Museum on Marsha P Johnson’s life and an article from the *New Yorker* detailing the organization ACT UP and its achievements. Most high school students are only familiar with Stonewall rather than the multiple movements and actors that existed prior to make that event happen and the activism of Marsha P Johnson can help show that many people and events made possible human rights for LGBTIQQ people today.
A short article by L Heidenreich Zuñiga (because once at the university, you get to choose your history topics...)

The history of Black California is deep and rich. Mexican citizens of African descent lived in California for generations prior to the U.S. Invasion (1846-48). Prior to the invasion, Black and mixed-race Mexicans held office, could testify in court, and passed property on to their children. Once California became part of the United States, they lost many of their rights. As noted by Douglass Henry Daniels, “The English-speaking newcomers who made California a state behaved according to the practices prevailing in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century; those practices included slavery and Jim Crow laws.” Yet Black Americans as well Black immigrants continued to move to the state. Between 1850 and 1852, the Black population of California doubled. The new Californians were diverse, arriving from Latin America and Jamaica, as well as from northern and southern states. Initially, most newcomers were male, and like other migrants and immigrants, they came to California for land and gold. By 1860, however, the gender ratio began to level out and women comprised 30% of the population. Many of the newcomers brought with them organizing and political skills, which would prove critical in the struggle for civil and human rights.

When, in 1850, California was admitted to the union as a free state, the freedom of African Americans remained precarious. At California’s constitutional convention, southern representatives, such as Senator Gwin, fought hard to have California admitted as a slave state. Once they failed, they actively worked against basic human rights for African Americans. In 1852, the state legislature passed its Fugitive Slave Law. The law was so draconian that it even counted, as fugitives, people who escaped to California when it was still part of Mexico (Mexico outlawed human slavery years before the U.S.). With the passage of the 1852 law, some southerners found judges willing to bend the law in their favor and brought enslaved people to California to work in the mines. African Americans who immigrated to the state risked entrapment by


Southerners who might claim them as escaped slaves. For Black Californians, life in the State of California was one of danger and struggle.

Building a Community:

Despite the dangers brought by the 1852 law, African Americans were able to create community and opportunities for themselves in California. Black miners labored alongside Latin American, Chicanx, Chinese, and European and Euro-American miners. They avoided mines where southerners labored, and most institutions, including businesses and restaurants, were integrated. Unfortunately, by 1860 this changed as Euro-Americans established segregated institutions, a race-stratified labor force, and unequal access to resources. African Americans, in turn, began networking with other racialized minorities to create safe spaces. Equally important, by networking with African American communities throughout the U.S. West, they were able to engage in local, state, and federal legal battles. The diverse class, education, and skill backgrounds that African Americans brought with them enabled them to challenge the racial barriers Euro-American imposed on them.


4 Taylor, 85-87; Lapp, 89.
In 1851, in Sacramento, for example, the Reverend Bernard Fletcher founded the first African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in the U.S. West. Other churches soon followed in San Francisco and in smaller cities such as Napa. All of the churches held Sunday schools, and many of them grammar schools and libraries. With the rise of Black institutions in California’s cities, most Black families preferred to live in urban areas; single men remained in rural districts and mining areas – as did mixed-race families.

A Matter of Civil and Human Rights:

Just four years after the founding of the first AME church, a small handful of Black businessmen organized the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California. By then the Rev. Daniel Blue was the minister at AME and welcomed the convention to use the church. While the convention excluded women from voting, it did not exclude them from influence. As will be discussed below, the convention’s accomplishments proved formidable. The convention was a response to violence and discrimination against African Americans in the West. Increased violence and discrimination convinced Black leaders that a statewide convention could not be delayed. In 1851, in San Francisco, a Black businessman by the name of Lester was assisting a white customer at his shoe store. The white customer had a disagreement with Lester and brutally beat him with a cane, then fled the store—stealing a pair of boots.

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5Taylor, 87-88; Lapp, 89-91.
6Lapp, 86-87.
The thief, perhaps, knew that he could act with impunity, because there were no other white customers in the store. *In the 1950s African Americans, because of California’s Criminal Proceedings Act, could not testify against white residents in a court of law.* The same year Lester was attacked at his business, another Black professional was attacked, also in San Francisco. This time the victim, a barber, did not survive; his attacker got away with murder. Two documented and public attacks against their colleagues in one year sent a clear message to San Francisco businessmen that their class status did not protect them from white violence. And so, they began to coordinate efforts to work for the repeal of Section 14 of the Criminal Proceedings Act—the law that prevented them from testifying in court.

While the ramifications of the Criminal Proceedings Act became increasingly apparent, another statute also pushed Black leaders to action—the Fugitive Slave Law of 1852 was about to expire. With southern factions throughout the state still working to bring the institution of slavery into the California, African Americans feared backlash and the passage of more draconian laws if they did not act. Thus, in 1855 they organized the First State Colored Peoples Convention. Meeting in Sacramento, representatives from throughout the state reported on the status and accomplishments of their communities; they also prioritized challenges to discriminatory laws and institutions. At the close of the convention they published 5,000 copies of their proceedings; they also began collecting petitions to repeal Section 14 of the Criminal Proceedings Act. The efforts of California’s Black leadership succeeded and in 1863 the state legislature repealed the ban on Black testimony.

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9Taylor, 91-92.

10Taylor, 91-92; Beasley, 42; See also Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1993), 16-17.
Beginning in the 1860s, Black newspapers provided yet another site of resistance. As in large cities in the East, California’s Black newspapers served the critical function of uniting communities in the U.S. West. Thus, in 1862, Phillip A. Bell, an experienced reporter and political activist, along with Peter Anderson, another experienced newsman, founded the *Pacific Appeal*. The *Pacific Appeal* soon became an organizing tool for Black Americans in California and the surrounding area. Reporters traveled throughout the region, visited Black communities and reported their status and struggles. When Bell and Anderson later split over political differences, Anderson founded the *Mirror of the Times*; there were then two resources for addressing Black needs, news, and struggles in the U.S. West.

Conclusion:

The history of Black Californians teaches us that if we are to succeed in any of our battles, we must engage in an *oppositional politics* – embracing a variety of strategies with each new battle. Black communities were sometimes successful in their battles when they were able to form coalitions, either across class lines within their communities, or across communities – at times locating allies within the dominant society. They organized through churches, newspapers, and legal venues. Perhaps the most important lesson that we can learn from the diverse histories of nineteenth-century California, is that we need to learn from what our antepasad@s did and from what they “failed to do.” Their histories provide us with maps of resistance. They can teach us the importance of oppositional politics, of coalition, and a number of other lessons, yet to be gleaned from our past.

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11 Taylor, 93-94.
12 Taylor, 93-94.
Further Reading


Before 1865: Black Freedom Struggles

Down:
1. the first Black newspaper in the West
4. The city where the first A.M.E. Church was found in the West.
5. In 1855 this minister welcomed a Black rights convention to his church.

Across:
2. Throughout 1850s African Americans met to fight against this.
3. Before the Civil War enslaved people fled to this country seeking freedom.
6. A political meeting held to achieve specific goals:
April 4, 1968: While in Memphis, Tennessee, supporting a march for striking Memphis sanitation workers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), is assassinated (TBH).

April 5, 1911: 100,000 to 500,000 people march in New York City to attend the funeral of seven unidentified victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire that occurred late March that same year (NWHA).

May 13, 1969: The Brown Berets begin publication of a monthly paper called La Causa. Following the lead of the Black Panthers, they also institute programming that addresses food, housing, unemployment, and education within the barrios (UW).

May 31, 1909: The National Negro Committee (now NAACP) holds its first conference in New York. (TBH).

June 28, 1969: Stonewall Riots begin. At a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn, when police come to harass and arrest gay, transgender, lesbian and bisexual patrons, the patrons fight back. While LGBTQI+ people organized even before this, the riots mark a shift in the struggle for rights.

June 29, 1926: Carter Woodson, founder of Black History Month, is awarded the Spingarn Medal (by the NAACP) for his research in Black history (TBH).


July 3, 1874: Father Patrick Francis Healy, first Black man to receive a PhD, is named President of Georgetown University, 1874 (TBH).


August 24, 1950: Edith Sampson, the first Black delegate to United Nations is appointed by President Harry S. Truman, 1950 (TBH).

August 29, 1970: The third Moratorium Protest against the Viet-Nam War takes place in Laguna Park in L.A., attracting 10,000-30,000 people. Police breakup the peaceful gathering and use force against the demonstrators. Ruben Salazar, a writer for the L.A. Times is killed when he is hit in the head by a tear-gas canister shot by the L.A.P.D. (UW).
LGBTQI+ History as Fabulous, or, Nineteen-Century Drag Balls as a Culture of Resistance

Minerva Hayes, History Major, Washington State University

Late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century drag balls had a significant and lasting impact on LGBTQ+ culture in the United States. Specifically, they helped to create queer culture. Because drag balls transcended racial boundaries and class boundaries of their time, they created a sense of community and acceptance among LGBTQ+ people despite the discrimination of the time. The culture of nineteenth-century drag balls continues to influence modern drag performers via costumes, performances, and contests. In the nineteenth century, though, when people attended drag balls, they did so defiantly, as an act of resistance; the balls were often raided, because LGBTQ+ relationships and cross-dressing was illegal at the time. This act of protest and resistance laid the foundation for change and growth for LGBTQ+ rights and politics within American society.

When Drag was a Drag: 19th Century to Early 20th Century

Before drag shows and drag ballroom dances became a part of LGBTQ+ culture, drag was a part of popular culture in the form of minstrel shows and vaudeville. Male performers dressed in female-gendered clothing and performed acts where they impersonated women. Initially, with minstrel shows, the drag performances were often misogynistic and racist and created negative images about women and people of color. However, with vaudeville, the performances gradually became entertaining, not because they were an impersonation or caricature of women, but because they were sexy, tailored to each audience, and well executed.¹ As same-sex relationships gradually became more present in the public's consciousness, vaudeville drag performers were able to perform camp, or humorous performances that challenged gender stereotypes. They also began to, at times, celebrate femininity, and embrace glamor.² Still, these performances were different from the drag balls that emerged in the early twentieth century.

The Early Formation of a LGBTQI+ Culture: Moving into the Late 19th Century
Drag balls and LGBTQ+ cultures emerged at a time when it was not safe to be “out.” In the late 19th century medical professionals, and many people on the street, considered “homosexuality” and “transsexuality” mental illnesses. This is a time when cross-dressing and same-sex relationships were illegal in many places in the United States, which made it dangerous for LGBTQI+ people get together. Despite these challenges, queer people did still get together, mostly in large cities like Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. As more people moved into larger cities and gathered together, LGBTQI+ people were able to start forming communities. The Great Migration, when African Americans left southern states to seek safety and opportunity in the North, and industrialization in general, brought a larger mix of different racial groups to cities as well. Eventually, LGBTQI+ people learned that, if it was not safe to be themselves in their hometown, they might find a place to call home in a large city, especially in the North.

The Harlem Renaissance 1910s-1930s
As drag ballroom dances continued into the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the culture of drag balls transformed into much more of a performative event, that is to say, many people who did not identity as LGBTQ+ began to attend the balls to see the drag performances. Starting with the Hamilton Lodge in the late nineteenth century, large drag ballroom dances became annual events, with the largest events happening during the Harlem Renaissance. Thousands of people attended the Hamilton Lodge Ball. Some historians believe that the Hamilton Lodge Ball is where drag contests started. At the Hamilton, the drag performers competed in a lineup where they were judged on costume and poise; the winner took home a prize.

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3 Henry L. Minton, “Community Empowerment and the Medicalization of Homosexuality: Constructing Sexual Identities in the 1930s,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 6, no. 3 (1996): 435–58, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4629618. Minton points out that there were doctors who argued against the theory of mental illness, but until the late twentieth century, they were a minority.


8 Hill, 3; Stokes, 60.
The Hamilton drag ball was part of the flourishing of arts and culture that took place during the Harlem Renaissance. During the Renaissance, Harlem was famous for the number of Black artists and writers, gay and straight, who lived and/or worked there: Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Angelina Weld Grimké, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Alice Dunbar Nelson, just to name a few. But it was also famous for its drag performers.  

**Conclusion: Transcending Race and Class Boundaries?**

Drag balls have a long and rich history in the United States. Records of the balls are found as early as 1867, in New York City. This long history shows that, where there is racial division and gender discrimination, there is also resistance. At the balls, people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds came together in ways that were otherwise not allowed to at the time. People from different social classes also came together and interacted at the balls, even when they normally would not have in daily life. The inclusivity of these events was an important foundation for the emergence of an LGBTQ+ culture. The shared experience of being different helped challenge the racism and classism of the time, even if just for one evening. At a time when it was illegal to be gay or trans, drag ball created space for LGBTQ+ people of diverse race and class backgrounds to come together and be joyful.

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10 Schomburg Center, “Hamilton Lodge Ball.”

Further Reading


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NATIONAL HONOR SOCIETIES
Summer History Quiz—
All answers can be found in this edition of
Digging up the Past!

This A.M.E minister hosted the “First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California” in his church:

Quotable Past:

Who wrote “A misinformed people is a subjugated people”?

In what year did the Stonewall Riots take place?

In the 1860s, two Black newsmen, Phillip A. Bell and Peter Anderson, founded this newspaper (Bell was also a political activist):

This is the place in Harlem, New York, where (some historians believe) drag balls originated:

Bring your answers to the Department of History Wilson-Short 301 for your LOADED HISTORY MUG!