

# Vox

MAR 5TH 2025

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# There is No History Without Trans History

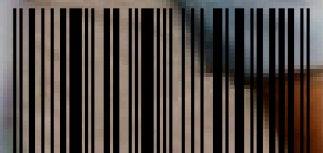
BY COURTNEY BAUGHMAN

# IDENTITY GENDER HISTORY

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PHOTO OF MARSHA P. JOHNSON CREDIT PINTEREST



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The Roses of Heliogabalus by Alma-Tadema (1888) depicts a feast thrown by Elagabalus. [Musée Jacquemart-André](#)

## Transgender identities are being threatened

Everyday more and more actions are being taken to strip and marginalize trans voices. With changes in the administration of our government, more policies are being enacted that continue to threaten transgender citizens of the United States.

One such policy is the Trump's administration's signing of the executive order that states the recognition of "two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable." (Whitehouse.gov 2025) Over the years anti-trans campaigns have worked to erase trans voices, making them out to be the result of a "new phenomenon" within the rise of social media. This is not true.

Trans people have been around for thousands of years. With hundreds of cultures over the entire world that celebrate and acknowledge multiple gender identities

and expressions. Trans history can not be erased or denied.

*"Trans people have been around for thousands of years."*

## Earliest instances of transgender history

While the term "transgender" wasn't created until the mid 1960's, trans identities date back thousands of years. With one of the first recognitions of trans identities being found in Ancient Rome and Mesopotamian societies.

Inanna, one of the most important figures in Mesopotamian religion was said to have the ability to change the gender of her followers at will. The accounts of her changing the genders of her followers are mentioned numerous times

in poetry and fables of this time, evidence of the existence of those outside the gender binary. In fact priestess of Inanna, known as Gala, were highly respected members of Mesopotamian society. They were male at birth priestesses who would often take on female names, and sang in the dialect reserved for feminine speakers to the gods.

Similar to the Gala, were the Galli of Rome. Gender ambiguous and transgender priestesses, followers of the goddess Cybele, who castrated themselves after their initiation into the priesthood. They were described as wearing women's clothes and heavy makeup upon initiation. They held ambiguous and almost defiant gender roles in ancient Roman time periods.

## Specific figures in trans history

Latter in ancient trans history was Emperor Elagabalus of Rome. Elagabalus was only emperor for four years before being assassinated in 222 CE, and is often known as the transgender emperor of Rome.

Elagabalus wore feminine clothing, grew long hair, (uncommon for men of this time period) and was alleged to have stated in one classical text "call me not Lord, for I am a Lady." Elagabalus, on many occasions stated their wish to have female genitals as well. Though many scholars debate the gender identity of Elagabalus, they can be seen as a great representation of gender nonconformity in the ancient world, if not transgenderism itself.



Painting of Chevalier d'Éon. Credit to ArtUK

In the 18th century of France lived Chevalier d'Éon, a spy for Louis XV, who quickly became a very influential aristocrat of this time. She fought in the Seven Year War, and was even knighted afterwards for her efforts. After being employed by Louis XV she was sent as a diplomat to England, but was secretly a spy to find a way to invade Britain in an act of revenge.

Though being born and raised male for the first half of her life, Chevalier d'Éon spent the later half of her life identifying as a woman after moving back to France, and through negotiations with Louis the XVI she was also officially recognized as a woman.

## Transgender identities in different cultures

Existence of gender non-conforming and multi gender expression has been present and celebrated in cultures around the world for thousands of years. Many of these cultures recognize the existence of third, or more, genders. One such example is the recognition of a third gender by the Hijra of Indian Hindu culture. There are many groups of third gender individuals in India, but Hijra are the most popular. The Hijra are a diverse group, with many intersex, non-binary, and transgender people

Their history dates back over 4,000 years, and today they account for nearly 4 million people in India (Harvard Divinity school). Evidence of the existence of Hijra in ancient India is seen in the accounts of third gender stories mentioned in core texts to Hindu faith, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Hijra held significant roles in Hinduism and were said to have been blessed with immense religious power. They often performed rituals and songs, and were invited to perform blessings for births and marriages. They held good status during past times in India until they were colonized by Britain in the early 19th century. Britain's strict gender binary caused all Hijras to be labeled criminals, and they still receive backlash even today.

## “Trans history predates America itself.”

Another culture who recognizes the existence of more than the gender binary are Native American societies. Over 100 different Native tribes have been recorded to recognize what they call Two-Spirit. Native cultures were not limited in their self identities. They believed that the spirit on the inside was not restricted by the physical form of the outside. As many as five different gender expressions were identified (UNM 2021).



Osh-Tisch, John H. Fouch Image, ca. 1877.

Two Spirit is the term coined for the general meaning of gender nonconforming expression. Native societies revered Two Spirit individuals. They were seen as doubly gifted and were given major roles in Native societies. The existence of Two Spirit people proves that transgender people have always existed. Trans history predates America itself.



Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, ca. 1989–1990. The Rudy Grillo Collection, Rudy Grillo / LGBT Community Center Archive.

## Modern representations of trans history

Trans history is long and inspirational, and some of the most important moments for transgender history is from a time not too long from today. In the early 1960's hate and brutality against LGBTQ+ groups, from police, was growing rampant. Trans and queer individuals suffered under the hands of police members, and even in what should have been safe spaces for them, they were not safe.

Many gay bars during this time suffered frequent raids from police and growing tensions between police and queer and trans people led to what is now known as the Stonewall Inn riots. After the raid of Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York was raided by police on June 28th, 1969, a riot lasting 6 days broke out between patrons.



Marsha P. Johnson, Womens History Museum

Marsha P Johnson, a transwoman and activist was one of the most well known participants of the uprising. While there are many accounts of what she did during this uprising, it is well known she was one of the women on the front lines, and is said to be the first to throw a brick at police officers. She is one of the front runners for the Stonewall riots, and continued to be an important voice for trans and queer voices afterwards. Unfortunately, she passed at 42 under suspicious circumstances. But her work will not be forgotten. She was a light for many queer individuals.

## Trans history can not be erased

Transgender people have existed since antiquity. Anti-trans groups can try, but they will never be able to erase what transgender groups have accomplished. There is no history without trans history. Even as every day new policies are being enacted by political groups that seek to erase trans and queer voices, and growth in gender and sexual related hate crimes rise, queer individuals are fighting back.

If the government won't fight for trans rights, then we must. We must not forget what Marsha P. Johnson and so many others put their lives on the line fighting for. How many cultures' identities were wiped from them from western imperialism. Stand up for the rights of others. Trans rights are human rights.

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