

OLOC End White Dominance March 22, 2024 Women's Herstory Month: Lesbians of Color

International Women's Day began in New York City on March 8, 1857, when female textile workers marched in protest because of unfair working conditions. It was one of the first organized strikes by working women, where they called for a shorter workday and decent wages. International Women's Day has been observed since the early 1900's which was a time of great expansion and turbulence in the industrialized world that saw booming population growth and the rise of radical ideologies. International Women's Day is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women.

National Women's History declaration in the United States began in February 1980 when President Carter issued the first Presidential Proclamation declaring the week of March 8, 1980, as National Women's History Week. In 1987, the entire month of March was declared National Women's History Month by the United States Congress, in perpetuity.

There is so much more history out there on the **MANY** women around the world that has been blatantly left out for years, and today, we are only touching on a very small sampling.

LOUISE FRIMMITTE GRIFFIN by Barbara Ester

I met Louise at a meeting of the Lesbian Task Force of NOW (National Organization for Women) the summer of 1976 when I arrived in Miami with my friend Joan. Louise passed away "peacefully" in the fall of 2011. She has been written about and honored in *Lesbian Connection*, *Maize*, *Sinister Wisdom* and her 'Dyknoses' from *Something Special!* She was 74 years old.

Louise was a land dyke with land in the city of Miami off 79th Street.

Her partner, Maryanne writes, "Think – Outside the Box" (*Sinister Wisdom* #109) and that's what they did together. She goes on, "a privileged white girl dared to meet and date Louise, a working class black girl during the segregated south of the mid-sixties." They were lovers for 48 years.

In that meeting of the Lesbian Task Force, I noted that Louise was a leader, a Leo, and expressed her views about 'men, meat, and money' easily; these three things she said divided wimmin! Her politics stood strong! I was impressed!

Louise and I began our relationship with seeds, the plants and music. I was new to these lands. I needed to know what grew here. She loved to share her knowledge of growing foods in the South. Her gardens were lush! She harvested much of her own seed.

Gatherings at Louise and Maryanne's house and later at 'Something Special' was where I learned how easily it was to sing, improvise, play percussion and make a lot of good sounding noise along with beautiful music. Joan wrote, "Louise would shine in these sessions, dancing, drumming, and clowning around. She was always the comic and laughing and laughing and laughing." All in wimmin only space! Louise thrived. She provided the wisdom, the need for self-loving and feeling proud of her Lesbian existence. She could reach me inside, plant a seed, a new thought, spark ideas that needed sparking, open areas of thought that were transforming her life as well as openly showing, and changing my own perceptions of our Lesbian culture.

After the Task Force was over, Louise and Maryanne noted that wimmin's groups were coming and going in those early 80s. They wanted something different, 'Something Special'! Wimmin and food, "sitting around a table of delicious and healthy dishes, good conversation, precious moments with wimmin only." Everything by donation.

In 1987 they opened their home as a 'sort of Lesbian drop-in center with an ambiance and focus on Lesbian Culture.' Learning about, talking about and sharing pride in being Lesbian! not gay, not feminism but Lesbian Culture!

Louise was the cook! The food is vegetarian! Eventually they hosted solstice and equinox gatherings with a huge buffet, fire circle in the backyard and music making, of course. They built a raised platform for Lesbian entertainers. For four years an annual 'Lesbian Bizarre,' brought a variety of crafts, yard sale items and talent show to their backyard. In the summer they closed and journeyed to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. 'Something Special' closed in 2011 with Louise's passing.

In Maize magazine, she said she loved the land and loved gardening. She was a professional. She rode her bicycle almost entirely for many years. We all learned about okra, collard greens, and Black-eyed Peas. I honor her in her wisdom and her love of sharing of the realization of how important Lesbian culture is.

A couple resources can be found at SLFAHERSTORYPROJECT.org.

Also search: Mary Sims and Mindy Dyke "Louise Griffin".

Barbara Jordan by Terry Baum

Barbara Jordan is most famous for doing the open opening speech in the impeachment hearings of President Richard Nixon in the House of Representatives. That is when she came to being nationally noticed.

Barbara Jordan was born in Houston, Texas in 1936 and she died in Austin, Texas. She was a professor after she was in Congress, she was a professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin until she died. She was almost 60 years old when she died, not quite old enough to join OLOC. When she died and she would not have any help because she was very much in the closet her whole life about being a lesbian, and she also had multiple sclerosis and was in the closet about that too; even though for a very long time she was in a wheelchair.

She was a first in many, many categories:

- The first African American woman from the South to be elected to Congress. Being the first woman in her own right which means she was not the widow of somebody who died in office, the kind of tradition all over the country is often the widow of a male congressperson runs to take his seat. So, Barbara was the first woman in her own right to represent Texas in Congress.
- In 1976 she was the first woman and the first African American to give a keynote speech at a Democratic Party convention.
- She became the first African American woman to serve as governor of a state on June 10, 1972 the governor of Texas was out of state so she was acting governor for that day.
- Even though she was totally closeted for her whole life, she is listed in the National Archives as the first lesbian elected to Congress.
- When she died, she was the first black person to be buried in the Texas State Cemetery. That was a particular attribute of Texas political life, that the great people were buried in the Texas Cemetery. She was buried next to Sam Austin, which certainly would be considered the grave of honor.
- She has had so many things named after her all over the world, but particularly in Texas.

Barbara Jordan had a quality when she spoke. She was not a charismatic visionary like Martin Luther King Jr. You felt a very solid trustworthy person there, you just trusted her. Barbara was all about using her reason and establishing things according to reason when she presented her position.

Barbara was born into poverty and her father was a Baptist minister and her mother was one of the teachers at the church. She was the great granddaughter of one of the last African American members of the Texas House of Representatives because after that all the black people were disenfranchised

under Jim Crow. You can certainly say that politics was literally integral to her life. She was inspired to become a lawyer in high school by a speech by Edith S. Sampson who was an American lawyer and judge, and the first Black United States delegate appointed to the United Nations. So, I would say the message of that particular fact is if you have a chance to speak with high school students take it because you have no idea who you are going to influence at a time in people's lives when they are just figuring out about what and who they want to be when they grow up. She was an outstanding student in high school, but she could not attend the University of Texas because it was segregated. So Barbara attended Texas Southern University, which is was a historically black college in Houston. Her proudest college accomplishment was that she was on the debate team that rose to the top in the national competition and tied with Harvard. That was considered a great honor for a team - one of the historically black colleges to tie with Harvard. Who knows if it was covered at all anywhere, but it is covered in her biography.

Barbara worked hard as a volunteer on John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960, which was her first involvement in politics. She was a lawyer in private practice at that time in Houston. And then, it does not say this anywhere, but she was probably noticed as somebody who should be encouraged to run for office. And she did run in 1962 and 1964 and lost for the Texas House of Representatives. In 1966 she did win a seat in the Texas Senate. She was the first African American state senator since 1883 which was the official end of reconstruction in Texas; and the first woman and of course the first black woman. Barbara became noticed when she was in the Texas Senate. President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson invited her to come to the White House to hear a preview of the address on civil rights that he was going to give. I don't know if he actually asked her but definitely saw her as having extraordinary potential. Again, this woman was an amazing orator and there was something so solid about her. She was not a rabble rouser; she was not a radical, she was a solid mainstream Democrat. Barbara had this tremendous personality that made you believe what she was saying. President Johnson got her on the judiciary committee when she got to Congress, which was a very important assignment to have that would be difficult for a freshman congressperson.

She came to national attention with her opening speech of the Nixon impeachment hearings. In her impeachment speech, she did not tell people that Nixon should be impeached, she set out the evidence about him and then she quoted from the constitutional ratification. The conventions of almost all the southern states talk about impeachment. She did not quote from one northern state. She made it all about what southern politicians said in the 1700s about impeaching the president and included a statement from Woodrow Wilson. The transcript is very clear that she was not speaking to the Democrats, but to the Republicans, particularly from the South, encouraging them to vote to impeach Nixon. Nixon decided to resign about five days after her speech because the Republicans turned against him.

Barbara Jordan's speech at the Nixon impeachment hearings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrqVBclJVco>

Viqui McCaslin by Marie Moore

The person I would like to honor is a two spirit person, Viqui McCaslin. She lived in Southern California and was raised in the Los Angeles area. Viqui attended the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) in the 1980s. There is a lot of information online from her. I have not had any contact with her for many years, but I remembered that she had done a lot of work. She had a little blurb on the computer, it was called "About Me" and I want to read that to you.

"I am a Yaki Indian, a descendant of three generations of registered enrolled members of the San Gabriel Mission, California starting in the 1700s. I am also a descendant of the Chumash Indians living

in the Presidio of Santa Barbara, California and the Wayne Ventura Mission in Ventura, California. I am highly respected for my award-winning public art projects. My work encompasses historic and environmental themes and has been explored primarily through ceramic tile and sculpture. My installations are widely displayed in private estates, shopping malls and art galleries as well as in the Metro link in Caltrain train stations throughout California. Tribal ancestry and a philosophy of living in harmony with nature are paramount to my work. In addition to running a successful ceramic studio for several decades, where I employed many assistants to help execute my work, I built a reputation as a respected college and university instructor and mentored many. A great number of potters in my community credit their technical skills and passion for ceramics to their years of studying with me. At this time, I reside in Fillmore, California and I am working on developing historical, environmental and cultural themes on canvas using acrylics. Along with my art degrees at UCSB, I have a strong background in anthropology, having studied Native American Indians and archaeology. Together with my Indian heritage, I have an extensive body of cultural knowledge, data and stories that are expressed in my paintings. Being a teacher and a mentor through many mediums is a way of life for me".

The one picture is of Vicky at age 58 and then one of her today. Vicky is a two spirit. I met her when she was 32 in the first gay bar I ever went to. She pretty much abducted me when I was 21 just coming out. She came and got me, and it took me to where she lived. I stayed with her for a couple of years. She was at that time a bartender at the gay men's gay bar in Santa Barbara and she was just a wild girl studying her ceramics at the university and working at the gay bar. She told me stories about how it was in her time, ten years before me in the 1960s and how you were either a butch or a femme. When I came out it was just in between butch and femme and then maybe ten years later we started having the lipstick lesbians. She would tell me stories about how she used to put socks in her pants so that she would look like she had a penis when she went to the bar. I found the stories fascinating about that era about the butch and the femmes. The picture of her at age 58, she is into her career as a ceramic person and the one at the bottom is one of her many installations at a train station. This one of the horses is huge on a big wall. She did many works like that. She also helped do all the tile work for the Channel Islands Environmental area outside of Ventura. Viqui also did a 5,000 square foot flooring mosaic at the Santa Barbara Public Works Department. Then as she got older and ceramics became too difficult, she turned to the medium of painting and it is very interesting. In the picture she has a beard, and she has transitioned to a male when she was about 55 years old. I found her online at this website and I wrote a note to her. Yesterday her/his wife called me and told me she had become Victor McCaslin and had died the day before from complications at the age of 82 from having worked with ceramics, kilns, and glazes. For so many years, Victoria Caslin finally got to become Victor McCaslin. I think her work is also in the Heard Museum in Phoenix where the OLOC Gathering was held and I am just still blown away that I got contact with her wife the day after she died. So just a tribute to a two spirit Indian person who I met in the 1970s who brought me out. I knew that her mother was a Yaki Indian and her father was from the Peninsula. I never knew that she had local ancestry with the Indians of her region as well, but it makes a lot of sense because that is where her mother resided. I think we need to honor our two spirited people.

Beth Brant by Patty O'Donnell

Beth Brant was born in Detroit, Michigan on May 6, 1941 and was a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Deseronto, Ontario and the Tyen-di-naga, Mohawk Territory. She grew up off the reservation but maintained a deep link to her Mohawk heritage with her paternal grandparents where she learned the culture, language, and traditional stories. She began writing at the age of 40 following a deeply profound encounter with a bald eagle while on a motor trip through the Mohawk Valley in upstate New

York. "A bald eagle passed in front of our car and landed in the white pine in front of us. I got out of the car and looked at the eagle and he looked at me." For an unknown amount of time as she looked at the bird, Brant was transfixed and transported to another place. She said, "I thought about that a lot and kept wondering about that eagle because I had never seen a bald eagle before and especially that circumstance of being so close together. I felt the eagle brought me the gift of writing. When I got home, I just started writing and have kept writing."

Beth was a pathbreaking lesbian author, poet, essayist, editor, lecturer, and literary activist. Her work included books, articles, edited anthologies, gathered oral histories, and mentored younger First Nation writers. Her recurring themes included recovering from racism, recovering from colonialism, recovering from addiction, and about sexism, classism, and homophobia. She wrote based on her deep connection to her Indigenous people. She brought her writing to life from her personal experiences of being a lesbian, having an abusive male spouse, and her mixed blood heritage from having a Mohawk father and a Scottish-Irish mother, and her early shame of being 'light skinned' in a family of dark hair and dark eyes. In addition to writing, Brant performed her poetry at the Detroit Women's Coffeehouse and traveled around the United States and Canada speaking and reading from her work and talking about lesbian, feminist and indigenous writing. She critiqued attempts of the women's movement to appropriate symbols and histories from other cultures, noting "one can only come from one's own culture and class." Some of her works included: Editor of *Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women*, author of *Mohawk Trail, Food and Spirits, I'll Sing 'till the Day I Die: Conversations with Tyen-di-naga Elders, Writing as Witness, and Testimony from the Faithful*.

In *Writing as Witness*, she speaks of homophobia as a sickness that was introduced by colonialism, just as smallpox and alcohol were introduced by Europeans to weaken and destroy the first peoples of the land. In Beth's writing she wrote 'back' to her family, as forgotten Mohawk works jumped into her computer - writing was Medicine against the lies and colonial untruths. She wrote of how white reviewers who do not know her references, dismissed her stories, or plucked out details that suited their needs - comments that come from ignorance - and how publishers will publish the fake shamans, the Tony Hillerman's and Lynn Andrews of the world; it is about how the world will try to classify, ghettoize her work into artificial arbitrary fragments – *categorize, compartmentalize, reduce, and dismiss*. In 1982, she and Denise Dorsz, her longtime partner founded Turtle Grandmother Books, a clearinghouse for manuscripts by Native American women and a source of information about Native women which lasted until 1987. She was also an AIDS activist, working with People with AIDS and giving AIDS education workshops throughout Native communities.

In 1990, I invited her to be the keynote speaker at the Michigan National Organization for Women state conference in Traverse City, Michigan and her keynote was about "Sky Woman".

Beth Brant passed away on August 6, 2015.

COMMENTS

- I will be talking about June Jordan. June was born in 1936 in Harlem. She died in 2002 just under 66 years and died of cancer. Her father Grandville Ivanhoe Jordan from Jamaica inspired her to read and memorize passages and to read widely. June went to a special school in Brooklyn and apparently must have done even for that school remarkably well. Then she went to a very prestigious prep school in Northville, Mount Herman in Massachusetts. After prep school, June went to Barnard. She met her husband there, Michael Meyer who was at Columbia. A couple of years later they got married and she followed him to where he was working/studying anthropology. She studied a lot of anthropology. June and her husband were both wonderful writers and they both believed in Black English. And I really would like to emphasize some of that about her. She

wrote many, many things. Early on she wrote, *Who Look at Me*. June explains how she feels black English is, that it is its own language, it has its own rules. For example, you do not inflect the verbs. You do not say, I will go is I went; you go into the store is you are going to the store. You leave out words. She felt it is a very vital language. They recorded people in their languages and in their dialogues, and in other parts of the Caribbean. She wrote a libretto at one point; she wrote her memoir; but mostly she wrote a lot of poems. This was the final book of hers that was published and it is "Directed by Desire." It is a compilation of ten other anthologies of hers. June wrote twenty-seven books, and she wrote about political love, homosexuality. She never would say that she was a lesbian, but she did say she was bisexual.

- I am not naming one person; I just want to say that the existence in my life of black lesbians and Lesbians of color and women of color has been so profound and hugely impactful on my life. When I was thinking about what we were doing today, I just let some of the names run through my mind and some of the ones that you have talked about would be on my list, but it was more my friends. The people I knew from the time I was born, the women and the lesbians, the girls, the classmates, and women I have worked with in various settings and particularly at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and in Aradia, which was an organization in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that I was very engaged with, and here in the Ozarks. I just felt so happy to be spending all that time thinking about all those beloved women and lesbians in my life and I just want to acknowledge that. The huge impactful presence and how wonderful it has been for me and how sad it makes me feel sometimes when I hear other white women say I did not know any person of color until I was in my 60s or 40s. So much older than me and how lucky I was that that did not happen to me. I lived in a small 80,000 population town in Michigan that was between Chicago and Detroit. People from both of those cities immigrated to it because it was a smaller town. Where I live now is much smaller and I can go to my small town and see black women and other women of color, and some of them that I know are lesbian.

If I had to name one who had the most influence on me, I think it would be Mary Lu Lewis who has been a member of OLOC. Terry, you and I remember we were standing around outside the door of the auditorium on the first lesbian of color day event happened at the OLOC Gathering in 2017 in Tampa, Florida. We were talking about something there and she arrived from where she lives in Florida to go to that event. To have her there and have her be part of it. She was also very engaged with the black lesbian conference in Atlanta, Georgia as one of the planners of that event. She was really good friends with Byllye Avery of the National Black Women's Health Project.

Betty is a wonderful, fabulous old lesbian who helped me come out and I do not mean that we became lovers, she was a model for me, that you could be lesbian in the world and how you could be out, this was in the early 1970s. How you could be an out as a black lesbian in a city like Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was just astounding what she did and how influential it was not just on me but on lots and lots of other women. As a result, the community there was very mixed and it was not because of Mary Lu, but because of the atmosphere we had there. We were fortunate and we were reaping the rewards of the work we were putting into making sure that there would be something that a lesbian, could be involved with. I have just learned so many lessons from black women in my life, including June Jordan, including Barbara Jordan. I am thrilled that we are doing this today, and including Beth Brant who I lived fairly close to, she grew up in the same area where I did. Woohoo, what a day this is today. I thank all who participated in getting things ready and sharing. My life would be less valuable for me without the lesbians of color that I know.

- I just want to echo what was said in that same spirit. I have lived in the Cleveland area for say, 35 years and one of my daughters was in recovery and in AA. She brought me to a multi 12 step

program retreat, which by having AA and NA various 12 step programs it inherently made it multiracial. We got to know these black lesbians or a combination of black women, some were lesbian, and some were straight or maybe bisexual, but I just am remembering a birthday party for one of those women. My daughter and I were there and there was chatting and all that and there was a moment where she said, "This is another culture." I am speaking from the point of view that it is a precious gift to be a minority, to be one of one or two people of european descent and to be in an immersion of the richness that generosity. I feel that fortunately for me, my friendships have continued – it is a gift. Very much a precious gift.

- I just want to add to what the two previous participants just said because without my community of different cultures, not just African American backgrounds, we are in the South and some people do not think of Miami as the South but there was segregation, and to be embraced as a european, white person. I was so honored to be invited into their wisdom and knowledge, which is quite different than mine. To be accepted in the way that we found the common threads of seeds and plants and music, in drawing and art of all kinds. I just want to reiterate that I would not be the person I am today without those lesbians that I knew who presented a culture that is their own.
- I have many dear friends that do not look like me. And I'm so grateful. My life is so much richer at one time by taking that step to be the only white woman in the room.
- June Jordan: nothing at Barnard and no one at Barnard ever once formulated and expressed the necessity, the political necessity, if you will, for the knowledge they required you to absorb precedent tradition after all are not of themselves sufficient just for anything whatever. And nobody and not a single course of study at Barnard ever spoke to issues judged critical or to possible commitments evaluated as urgent. More specifically, no one ever presented me with a single black author, poet, historian, personage, or idea for that matter. Nor was I ever assigned a single woman to study as a thinker or writer or poet or life force. Nothing though I learned here lessened my feeling of pain and confusion and bitterness. As related to my origins. My street. My family, my friends, nothing showed me how I might try to alter. The political and economic realities underlying our black condition in white America.
- Two black lesbian writers who write mysteries: Cheryl A. Head and Penny Micklebury.