

Why Are All the Statues of Heroic and Accomplished American Women Missing in Action?

by Phyllis Chesler



Eleanor Roosevelt monument, Riverside Park, New York City.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the unpaid obituaries in all the major newspapers were solely of men—and the occasional mother of a Great White Man. I often wondered: Had women never lived, or had we never died—were we actually immortal?

The obituary situation has gradually begun to change—so much so that the *New York Times* has been publishing Obituaries from the distant past of women and people of color who should have been memorialized long ago but were not.

However, women of great accomplishment have been disappeared, not only in obituaries but also in terms of monuments. Our land is dotted with statues mainly of men on horseback, soldiers, generals, presidents, male civil rights leaders. Of an estimated 5,193 public statues, [only 394 are of women](#). With some exceptions (Eleanor Roosevelt comes to mind), these statues are mainly of anonymous, generic women. And, of the 44 monuments maintained by the National Parks Service, like the Lincoln Memorial, none are of women.

The female form exemplifies Virtue. Thus, we have half naked statues of women as “Liberty” or “Justice.” Fully clothed statues of real women are rare.

Nineteenth century suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are still waiting for statues to commemorate their extraordinary accomplishments both as abolitionists and women’s rights activists. Harriet Tubman, former slave, abolitionist, and woman’s rights activist, still has no monument anywhere on earth. These three women have waited for far more than a century to be remembered. Recently, [President Trump delayed Tubman’s appearance](#) on the twenty dollar bill until 2026.

And there are many, many more women of color and white women whose accomplishments should become visible and normalized for the generations to come.

At this moment in history, who is being fast tracked? We are told that New York City plans to “[immortalize in a monument](#)” two transgender men, drag performers who, only fifty years ago, were also involved in the Stonewall Inn riots. Sylvia Rivera is Hispanic and Marsha Johnson is African-American. I

have been told that their original male names are considered “dead” names and are not be used. Well, that’s rather dramatically anti-historical as well as anti-biology. However, I have been assured that both Rivera and Johnson did great good deeds on earth and are very beloved.

I welcome honoring the accomplishments of people of color and of those who belong to gender identity minorities. But what’s wrong with also honoring accomplished lesbians, both white women and women of color? How about women of color who are not members of the LGBTQIA communities?

There are lesbians who participated both in the Stonewall uprising and most vitally in the creation of the American Gay Liberation movement. Where are the statues of Sydney Abbott? Rita Mae Brown? Lin Farley? Judy Grahn? Michela Griffio? Lois Hart? Karla Jay? Jill Johnson? Barbara Love? Audre Lorde? Phyllis Martin and Del Lyons? Joan Nestle? Martha Shelley? Robin Tyler? Edie Windsor?

What about a statue for Craig Rodwell who, according to Lin Farley, arranged for lesbians to lead the first-ever gay march in New York City? Are gay men today, or for that matter, are gay women pushing for lesbians to have named statues? Is anyone?

If not, let’s ask ourselves why not.

And, by the way: Where are the statues for Jane Adams? Mother Cabrini? Claudette Colvin, who refused to move to the back of the bus in Birmingham? Dorothy Day? Emily Dickinson? Mary Baker Eddy? Ellen Frankfurt? Matilda Joslyn Gage? Charlotte Perkins Gilman? Emma Goldman? Anne Hutchinson? Barbara Jordan? Emma Lazarus? Elizabeth Packard? Rosa Parks, whose subsequent refusal to do so was handled by the NAACP in a victorious lawsuit? Alice Paul? Jeannette Rankin? Barbara Seaman? Elizabeth Seton? Agnes Smedley? Gertrude Stein? Sojourner Truth? Ida B. Wells? Frances Willard?

The list of accomplished women whose deeds easily merit statues is a very long one. How long must they wait to be remembered?