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**TRANSGENDER MURDER MEMORIALS:
A CALL FOR INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANS LIVABILITY**

BY

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B.A., MUSIC, RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES, ST.OLAF COLLEGE, 2014

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

American Studies

The University of New Mexico

Albuquerque, New Mexico

May 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was written on unceded Pueblo Land.

Many thanks to the American Studies Department at the University of New Mexico for the wisdom, knowledge, and guidance these last three years. I would like to thank especially my advisor and committee chair Dr. Amy Brandzel.

Thank you to my queer and trans community here in Albuquerque, especially my QTPOCs. Y'all uplifted me from some dark depths, and helped me keep my eyes on the prize. Thank you for the laughter, the music, and the love. May we continue to build futures that center our livability, may we gather to celebrate not only mourn, may we not just survive but thrive.

I would like to thank my family. My father: for instilling a passion for our peoples' history in me, for his endless love, and his constant reminders to "keep the faith." My mother: whose hands extended seven generations of musical wisdom to me that kept me sane through this whole process, whose passion for reading kept my curiosity aflame, and whose ears were always there when I needed to be heard. My sister: my first friend and fiercest protector, your work ethic and passion have awed me my whole life, and I'm dazzled and amazed by your brilliance and caring everyday. I am blessed to share blood with y'all, and endlessly grateful for all of your support in all of my endeavors.

I would like to thank my ancestors and elders. Stolen from far away shores and taken to this stolen land. Thank you for the resiliency, strength, courage and wisdom. And to the next generations: may your burdens be lighter, your laughs louder, and may your identities be held wholly as holy. Axé.

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ABSTRACT

The number of transgender folks in the United States lost to murder increases every year. These murders have recently gained more recognition, with the memorials moving from trans-run organizations and communities to mainstream LGBTQ groups. Using visual culture and discourse analysis of four transgender murder memorials, I argue there are problematic trends of centering a white and cisgender audience, and lack of acknowledging trans livability. Memorials like Transgender Day of Remembrance take place every year, and though the oldest memorial for trans death in the country and most well known, the event creates a spectacle of violence for cisgender consumption and erases the race of the victims for white comfort. The Human Rights Campaign, the largest LGBTQ organization in the U.S., creates a yearly report on transgender violence. The report centers cisgender readers, a trend that the organization echoes in its history and practices. Online media conglomerate Mic.com launched an interactive database and report to highlight the trans murder epidemic, and unpack it with an intersectional lens. The visual aspects of the report highlight trans livability and self representation,

reminding the readers that trans folks are not just murder victims. Finally, Autostraddle's online reporting by trans woman of color Mey Rude always reminds readers of the disproportionate rate that Black trans femmes are murdered compared to their cisgender and white counterparts. Rude also includes actionable steps for readers to support trans women of color while they're still here, highlighting the promotion of trans livability alongside trans mourning.

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Introduction

Two figures sit on a bench, two figures stand. Both pairs appear to be friends or maybe lovers, with hands lovingly placed on shoulders and thighs connoting closeness beyond just the physical. They are gleaming, brilliant, clean, articulate, and white. This is the official monument for the Gay Liberation Movement, erected in 1992 across the street from the Stonewall Inn.¹ Four bronze statues as white washed as the remembering of the movement, made from plaster casts of people uninvolved in the movement by straight white cisgender artist George Segal.² Created decades after the most publicized LGBTQ uprising, the statue is one of many steps on the path of intentionally forgetting the role of trans women of color in LGBTQ liberation.



Figure 1: George Segal's statues in Christopher Park

In 2015 a film directed by Roland Emmerich simply titled *Stonewall* continued the legacy of removing trans and queer people of color from the Stonewall narrative and

20th century LGBTQ movement making. The film revolves around a white, cisgender, gay boy from Indiana. It has the audacity to suggest that this fictional white boy started the riots. Trans journalist and playwright Leela Ginelle laments, “In 2015, with so much political activity around anti-racism and trans rights, a film about Stonewall could have been the perfect opportunity to tell an intersectional story of this important event, putting queer and trans people of color front-and-center where they belong.”³ The film could have been a flashpoint in connecting the incredible activism happening in 2015 with the legacy of the radical intersectional trans and queer fights like Stonewall. It was a prime opportunity to demonstrate the role that trans women of color have always played, and how centering them and their voices positively impacts the entire LGBTQ community.

Black trans elder and activist Miss Major was on the frontlines those hot June nights in 1969, fighting with her sisters against the state—represented in full force by the police. Prior to the release of the film *Stonewall* she expressed her exasperation at the bleaching of the narrative and the (re)marginalization of trans women of color. When asked what folks could do instead of supporting the film and the whitewashing of Stonewall’s story she turned her attention towards the statues in Christopher Park saying, “Someone should smash those motherfuckers up and turn them into the white dust that they are and put a couple of statues of people of color and at least make one of them an overly obnoxious transgender woman 6’5”, three inch heels, blond/red hair, lashes, beads, feathers, and put one of those fine white boys next to her, now that I can handle!”⁴

Shortly after Miss Major was interviewed two local queer activists took her call to heart and corrected the disrespectful statues. Under the cover of darkness, they added some much needed color to the statues, redressing the two white men as trans women of

color. They painted the faces and exposed hands Black and Brown, leaving the bodies painted white. The statue painted Black, most likely an homage to Miss Major, Marsha P. Johnson, or one of the other Black trans women on the front lines those June nights outside Stonewall, has three brightly colored flowers in her Black Afro wig and a purple scarf around her neck. The Brown painted statue is presumably a tribute to trans woman and sex worker activist Sylvia Rivera. The newly renovated statue has a cascading brown wig affixed to her head. Both statues are rocking black halter tops.



Figure 2: Segal's statues after queer activists gave them a much needed makeover in 2015

The anonymous queer activists put some much needed color and truth back into the gay liberation narrative. Affixed to both statues was a sign, “Black + Latina Trans

Women Led the Riots, Stop the Whitewashing.” When asked by queer reporter Audrey White why they did it they responded, “Those sculptures are supposedly there to commemorate the Stonewall riots, but there isn’t a trace of the actual riots in them. They’re a slap across the face to the Black and Latina trans women who got whacked with batons and shoved into police vans, and still had the guts to continue to lead the fight for LGBTQ liberation.”⁵ This reclamation of public space transformed this monument into a commemoration of what trans women of color have done for the LGBTQ movement, creating a celebration of a singular moment of history while calling attention to an ongoing issue, whitewashing and cisgender centrism in LGBTQ organizing and communities.

The original statues created by George Segal and the film by Roland Emmerich are representative of the transformation of Stonewall as a radical, liberatory and intersectional uprising, to being seen as the birth of the Gay Rights Movement. The flashpoint of Stonewall was critiquing and combatting “policing, imperialism, social norms, and systemic patriarchy (including marriage)”⁶, and has since been morphed to be fodder for legislation that bolsters these very same systems. This move away from what I would argue is the history of Stonewall has reformed mainstream LGBTQ politics to narrowly focus on primarily white cisgender men, like the fictional protagonist of the film, and left the actual fighters and agitators, trans women of color, in the dust.

I define mainstream LGBTQ politics as those that receive the most funding and media attention, and typically center the interests of white, cisgender, men that make up a bulk of their executive directors and donors. Dean Spade argues that in order for true trans liberation to occur, “we must depart from well-funded lesbian and gay rights

nonprofits, and propose an approach aimed at producing resistance that will actually address the criminalization, poverty, and violence trans people face everyday.”⁷ There are organizations that center intersectionality and understand that queer and trans people of color are more susceptible to the violences of the imperialist police state. Organizations like the Trans Woman of Color Network, the Audre Lorde Project, and FIERCE keep the legacy of Stonewall alive by focusing on issues beyond marriage and anti-harassment legislation. These organizations focus more on making queer and trans of color lives livable: highlighting the arts, directing folks to health services, and providing housing resources.

Unlike the radical organizations above that took direct action to bring attention to queer and trans disparities, modern mainstream gay and lesbian organizing has sought what Dean Spade calls, “the institutionalization of the lesbian and gay rights agenda into a law reform-centered strategy.”⁸ Large nonprofit LGBTQ organizations, especially the juggernaut The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), have historically taken a “wait your turn” approach to trans folks seeking justice, putting a bulk of their resources behind reclaiming the privileges lost by white cisgender gays and lesbians. The emphasis on marriage equality for the last decade as well as the ineffective and dangerous anti-harassment legislation left little room for these organizations to take real actionable steps to help deter and eliminate the daily “administrative violences” trans folks face and the pandemic of trans women of color getting murdered. Administrative violence is a framework created by trans legal scholar Dean Spade to articulate the way the state’s reliance on sex and gender categorization negatively impacts trans folks’ lives daily. He breaks down the three categories as: the rules that govern gender classification on ID,

rules that govern sex-segregation in institutions like jails and hospitals, and rules that govern access to gender-confirming healthcare.⁹

I argue that what a majority of mainstream LGBTQ movements do for trans folks in this country is commemorate our deaths and that even the way they do this is ineffective and in some instances harmful. It is easier to be an ally to a dead body than fight for the living, especially when the living lay at intersections that illuminate the shortcomings of yourself and your organization. Instead of addressing the day to day violences that trans people, especially trans women of color, lesbian and gay organizing come in to “save the day” once we are gone. And even then, they don’t quite hit the mark with their memorials. I argue that these memorials of murdered trans folks, mostly trans women of color and especially Black women, are representative of the inaction or ineffective action of LGBTQ organizing and the state to support trans livability.

In this thesis I explore the intentions, effectiveness, and outcomes of different memorializations of trans life and death. Marita Sturken contends that “a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values.”¹⁰ The values that trans murder victims upheld, and what trans memorials should center, is the right to authentic gender expression and the right to live authentically. I argue that the key to a memorialization is honoring the dead and the values they represent in a way that: educates those not affected without (re)traumatizing those who are, highlights the locality and universality of the terror connecting it to state violence, and centers the livability of those left behind. By those not affected I mean cisgender individuals, inside and outside the transgender umbrella, who live without fear of being slain for their racialized gender identity and

expression. I argue that memorialization should move viewers, mobilize them into action, and offer space for mourning.

Methods and Methodologies

My methods for this project are primarily visual culture analysis and discourse analysis. I draw mostly from Elspeth Brown's guide to reading images, following her analysis triptych of: description, deduction, and speculation.¹¹ I'll be engaging with visuals from commemorations of murdered trans folks, primarily online memorials and analyses. As a trans person of color viewing this images I find the the second step of Brown's deduction process most useful, engaging with the image empathetically. Brown argues, "You need to be sensitive to how the image is asking you to interact with its pictorial space."¹² I'll analyze these memorials, keeping in mind image creators, curators, and intended audiences. In addition I'll perform a discourse analysis of a variety of sources: statements made by organizers and activists, online memorials' text, and works from my fields of study.

I approach my objects of analysis with my methodological approaches of critical trans politics, Black transgender studies, and Black Lives Matter. Critical trans politics as defined by Dean Spade differs from mainstream gay and lesbian organizing's agenda as a politic that "demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society, security, and social equality."¹³ I build off of Spade's critique of anti-harassment and anti-discrimination legislation in aiding trans lives, by looking at mainstream LGBTQ approaches to memorializing trans death in a way that ignores and eschews our livability.

I use Black transgender studies to push back against the belief behind many of these memorials—that violence inflicted on transgender bodies is solely rooted in transphobia. My methodology is informed by non-binaristic understandings of race and gender that destabilize and refuse to reproduce white supremacist categories. Rooted in and related to Black queer studies, Black transgender studies seeks to expand the field and center trans livability by “tranifesting” defined by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison as the creation of “forms of collective life that enliven and sustain us in a future worth living.”¹⁴

Black Lives Matter is a hashtag, a movement, and a methodology. The official movement was started by three Black queer women—Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—who intended it to be a break from the typical Black liberation format of loud, cisgender, Black men taking center stage while pushing folks that don’t fit in that box to the margins. They argue for Black liberation beyond Black nationalism saying in the “About the Black Lives Matter Network” section of their website, “It goes beyond narrow nationalism...which merely calls on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cisgender Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folks take up roles in the background or not at all...It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.”¹⁵ Black liberation goes hand in hand with trans liberation and the movements need to realign like they did at Stonewall.

Black, queer scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor notes the discrepancy in which Black lives get mourned in the aftermath of state sanctioned police violence, noting especially the absence of mourning and marching for all women, “It is hardly

newsworthy when Black women, including Black transwomen, are killed or violated by law enforcement-because they are generally seen as less feminine or vulnerable.”¹⁶ Black Lives Matter as a tool of analysis is indebted to the field of Queer Indigenous studies for its understanding of gender and sexuality, and the role of white supremacy and settler colonialism in the creation and violent maintenance of binaries.¹⁷ Black Lives Matter as a methodology is a culmination and rumination on the fields and legacies of Black feminisms/womanism, queer of color critique, and Black liberation movement studies. It demands the livability for all Black bodies, especially those eschewed by past movements, and is the intersectional lens needed to unpack trans memorials of mostly Black femmes.

I start by analyzing Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), arguably the most visible trans memorialization in the world. This event, held simultaneously around the globe, is the result of one woman’s attempt to draw attention to the murders of trans folk, and not much else. I build off of Sarah Lamble’s critique that Transgender Day of Remembrance is more about white spectatorship and culpability than helping trans communities and highlights the lack of intersectionality in the celebrations. I draw from Black feminist critiques to form an argument using my own lived experiences as a trans person of color at these events and from the official Transgender Day of Remembrance resources. Next, I critique the efforts of the Human Rights Campaign and how they have responded to criticism that their organization is by and for cisgender, white, gay men. Using stories from trans folks and employees of color at the organization, performing a discourse analysis of their online commemoration of trans lives lost in addition to their

public (in)action around trans issues, I explore how and why lesbian and gay organizations fail to help the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ acronym.

Continuing an analysis of grassroots online commemoration of trans murders, I analyze two sources that I argue memorialize trans lives more effectively. Media conglomerate Mic.com launched a project titled “The Unerased” to fill the void in reporting trans murders. The site has created a database stretching back to 2010, and provides an interactive guide to understanding the intersectionality of trans murders. I analyze visual elements of the homepage of the project, examining how photos combined with infographic layered data and written analysis creates a compelling portrait of trans life and death. Drawing from Dean Spade’s critical trans politics I explore the project’s limitations of leaning on the law for trans justice, defining it more as the incarceration of culprits than the transforming of systems that assist trans livability.

I wrap up my analysis of online trans commemorations by looking at the coverage done by Autostraddle, a queer online staple since the early 2000s. Autostraddle’s Mey Rude, a trans woman of color, has reported every known trans murder since 2015. Her write-ups include more details about the lives of the victims than the details of their death and include actionable steps people can take including links to funeral funds and information about trans women of color organizations to donate to. Each write up includes photos of those lost, making the anti-Blackness of this violence unignorable.

Transgender Day of Remembrance:

White Cisgender Comfort and Deracialized Trans Identity

A whistle blows and bodies hit the floor. The maneuver is a lot less elegant than the death drops of Black and Brown ballroom culture, but the gesture in a way immortalizes the very people who invented them. It was November 20th, and I was at another “die-in” to memorialize trans lives lost to violence. Every year in communities and on campuses around the world, trans folks and our allies gather to collectively grieve the siblings we have lost to the violent policing of the heteropatriarchal, settler colonial gender binary.

I didn’t join in. I was at St. Olaf College, a school ranked in the top five of the Ku Klux Klan’s college guide “Best Universities for Whites.” The student group in charge of organizing the event was called GLOW, standing for “Gays, Lesbians, or Whatever.” The extreme whiteness of the organization and their inability to think beyond cisgender gays and lesbians (or whatever) always made me wary. I didn’t have the language to explain why at the time, but now looking at the endless Black faces that grace the memorial and vigil altars we build, I know why. Anti-transgender violence cannot be memorialized or studied on this stolen land in a vacuum devoid of discussions and analyses of race, class, and settler colonialism.

Transgender Day of Remembrance started in 1998 with the murder of Black trans woman Rita Hester and has been held every November 20th since. While Transgender Day of Remembrance was created and is currently “owned” (but not copyrighted) by only one person, Gwendolyn Ann Smith, the events are usually held by local LGBTQ community centers or university groups across the globe.¹⁸ Most vigils for those lost to

violence—police brutality, school shootings, individual hate crimes—happen after singular events, events out of the ordinary that horrify those outside the community affected and terrify those within. In the transgender community we know without fail that every November 20th we'll have names to read and lives to mourn, a standing date to grieve.

A typical event is public and open to folks inside and outside the transgender and gender non-conforming community. The format suggested by Smith centralizes the naming of the dead. This can be a powerful practice when done well. As C. Riley Norton argues in favor of the #SayHerName/#SayTheirNames movement, “The practice of remembering and saying their names is also a demand for new structures for naming that evince and eviscerate the conditions that continually produce black and trans death.”¹⁹ I contend that naming the dead can be a powerful practice, connecting the living to the dead, and for trans folks speaking their chosen name when many have been deadnamed following their death, is a radical act. However, with the format suggested and the only one I have personally seen used at these events, the names are followed by the date of their death and the details of their murder. Witnessing and listening to this as a trans person can be traumatic, it seems much more a practice to untap cisgender pity and guilt than memorializing or mourning.

Founder of the New Orleans chapter of the Trans Woman of Color Collective L'terrét Jazelle Ailith says, “It's not enough to read the names of my sisters killed off by the normative nature of this capitalistic system. Moments of silence are not enough. Calling us courageous is not enough. Having one or two trans friends is not enough. WE need to begin to develop more complex analysis of the world in which we live.”²⁰ Simply

naming the names without pushing to question, “why her, why them?”, flattens out the intersections of the violence to make it more digestible by white folks, cisgender folks, and heteronormative individuals untouched by the fear of this violence. Similar roll calls for the dead were performed at displays of the NAMES AIDS Quilt, but what differs most is that the naming was to emphasize the lives of the individual not the death. As NAMES organizer Scott Lago said “It is a celebration of a person’s life. Not a comment on death. Hell we know he’s dead. But she was a scream when she was alive.”²¹ Where Snorton sees an opportunity to name the dead and give voice to futures void of this violence, and Lago sees an emphasis on lives lived rather than lost, I argue Smith’s format and reasoning for naming is jarring and scarring for those of us occupying similar identities to the dead.

Other rituals tend to round out Transgender Day of Remembrance. Faith leaders are often asked to lead the group in prayer, typically with no consideration for the role of religion in the sometimes deadly demonization of transgender and gender non-forming folks and communities. Speakers from the LGBTQ community may share some words, and offer some hope for those gathered. Politicians occasionally make remarks, especially during election years, displaying their LGBTQ positive track record. Tears abound for the trans community lost and then we go home.

The online counterpart to Transgender Day of Remembrance continues the practice set out by the physical memorials. While there are numerous online lists and Youtube videos of names, the “Remembering Our Dead” project is by far the oldest and with its official association with TDOR the most used.²² The web project was launched in

1998, the same year as TDOR, to fill the void in media reporting of transgender murder victims.²³

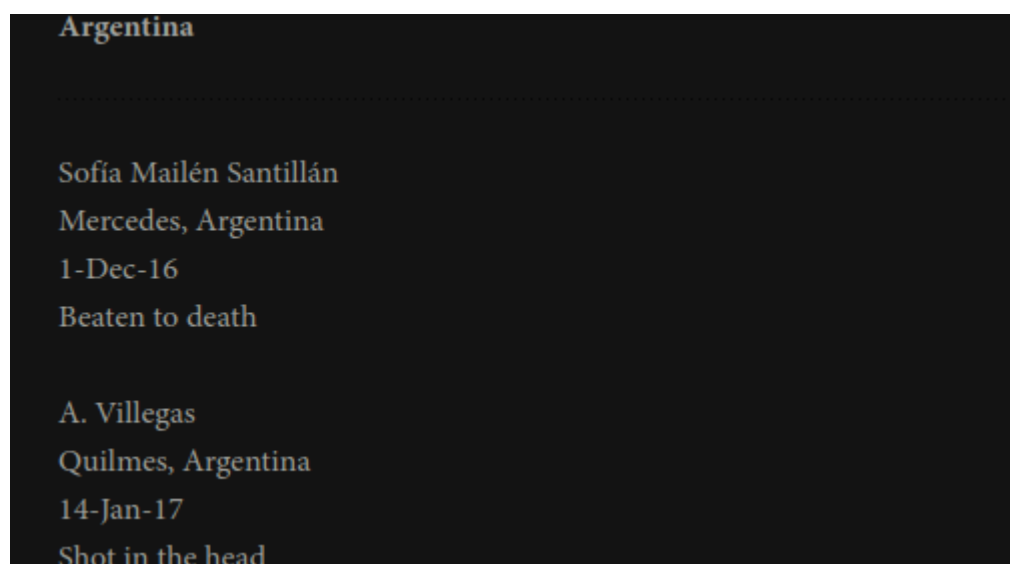


Figure 3. A screenshot of the top of the “Remembering Our Dead” online memorial

A quick visual culture analysis brings little to light. The website is a simple directory of names and numbers. White text appears on a black background with no images. The format of the site is the same as the one used for the ritualistic roll call at the physical memorials. It simply lists: country, name, date of death, means of death. Scrolling through the list as a trans person of color is a disconcerting experience. With no facts beyond names and places, and more details about the death than the lives of these individuals, it seems hard to see what else these humans were besides victims and transgender or gender nonconforming. Given the locations of the deaths and the names of the victims I can surmise that most of them were women of color. Who were these people besides the violence brought down on their bodies?

This list of names on a black backdrop is evocative of the Vietnam War Memorial. The memorial, designed by then Yale undergraduate Maya Lin, “consists of a V shape of two walls of black granite set into the earth at an angle of 125 degrees.”²⁴

Nestled in the heart of the nation's capital, the controversial memorial lists only the names of the victims of the Vietnam War. The names are listed chronologically and then alphabetically, just like the TDOR website, but with fewer details. Having the names stripped of rank and place conveys a universality of the violence devoid of race and class. The black backdrop of both can act as a reflective surface, making the viewer see themselves in the memorial, no matter their physical or emotional distance from the violence. As Sturken notes of this roll call of the dead, "The name evokes both everything and nothing as a marker of the absent one."²⁵ The names of the dead coupled with the cause of death on the TDOR online memorial marks not just an absence, but a violent removal.

The in-person and online memorials are supposed to be a public renunciation of anti-transgender violence and an opportunity for those affected by the violence to find community and grieve, but I agree with Sarah Lamble's argument that these events function as spectacles meant to appease cis, white guilt. The focus is on the victims of anti-transgender violence, with often little to no critique of the roots of this violence, the role of the state, or any intersectional analysis. Lamble argues that these deracialized memorials allow white people, and I would contend cisgender individuals as well, to act as witnesses to a spectacle of white supremacist violence, and not question their position as beneficiaries of the systems of violence that create trans vulnerabilities.²⁶

Lamble examines the racial erasure of trans victims by looking at the legacy and format of Transgender Day of Remembrance, its online counterpart "The Remembering Our Dead Project Project, and the narrative history of gender non-conforming Native youth and murder victim Fred F.C. Martinez. Through this she argues that the emission

of the victim's race is dangerous because it confuses the root cause of violence, suggesting that transphobic violence is the act of one perpetrator on one victim. When we do not address the roots and intersections of the issues we cannot successfully combat it, she writes that "if we are to engage in effective struggle against violence, we must resist remembrance practices that rely on reductionist identity politics; we must pay attention to the specific relations of power that give rise to acts of violence; and we must confront violence in its structural, systemic, and everyday forms."²⁷

Lamble does not deny the role of public grieving and mourning as an important act for communities, but notes that when we remember the dead we cannot strip them of identities that do not serve our projects. As Lamble states about the online "Remembering Our Dead" project:

Deliberately unmarked by race, class, age, ability, sexuality, and history, these individuals - otherwise unknown - are rendered visible solely through the violence that is enacted upon them. The very existence of transgender people is verified by their death. Violence thus marks the body as belonging to the trans community. In this way, violence simultaneously obliterates and produces a particular trans subject - both materially (in the act of killing) and symbolically (in the subsequent narration)²⁸

I agree with Lamble's reading of the website in this way. While I believe there can be power in gathering as a group and collectively mourning those we've lost, and naming the dead, but neither the Transgender Day of Remembrance nor its online memorial go far enough. I argue that trans lives deserve to be celebrated and mourned, with all their intersections intact, so that we may better fight for the livability of those of us left.

“White Men’s Club”: The Human Rights Campaign

Since its small, local inception, Transgender Day of Remembrance has spread to be a global event. While most vigils are created for and by local LGBTQ communities, larger and more visible organizations like the Human Rights Campaign have begun to organize around it as well. The HRC has also taken on creating a report each year, released in time for TDOR, to highlight the deaths of the known trans victims and some added analysis for why this epidemic seems to be worsening.

This foray into transgender lives, issues, and mostly deaths is relatively new for this organization. I contend that their efforts in memorializing trans death is representative of their larger failures as an organization to assist the trans community. Through a discourse culture analysis of their report, trans elder insights on the history of the organization, and recent grievances from trans employees working within the organization, I demonstrate how the HRC has failed trans lives by focusing too much on our deaths and too little on the day to day violences we face, even within their organization.

In 2016 the Human Rights Campaign created its first yearly report on transgender violence. The Human Rights Committee partnered with the Trans People of Color Coalition (TPCC) to release the report “A Matter of Life and Death: Fatal Violence Against Transgender People in America 2016” and “A Time to Act: Fatal Violence Against Transgender People in America in 2017.” I argue that while the report features the names and stories of the trans folks we lost in 2017, it fails to memorialize them in a way that promotes trans livability with its unsatisfactory intersectional analysis and obvious intent for a cisgender audience.

The report opens with a letter from and photos of the executive directors of the respective organizations that created this report, Chad Griffin of the HRC and TPCC founder Kylar Broadus. In the co-written, one page letter two paragraphs appear in bold. The two men state the onus for the project and for all HRC's efforts in tracking trans death, "Today, HRC and the Trans People of Color Coalition stand among a network of activists and reporters who share information and elevate the tragic stories of those taken by anti-transgender violence, in hopes of bringing attention to a heartbreaking but preventable crisis."²⁹

I argue that this wording, "anti-transgender violence," problematically promotes the need to focus on trans death as a singular violence against gender identity and expression alone without critiquing and challenging the role of race, class, and colonialism. We cannot eradicate "anti-transgender violence" without pushing to study its root causes. In addition, this sentence sets the stage to center cisgender readers, those living personally unaffected and thus unaware of this "preventable crisis." The rest of this published report is written by Mark Lee. His title for his position at the HRC is "Senior Writer, Public Education & Research."³⁰

The next page features statistics in large font, including the fact that 84% of known trans victims in 2017 were people of color. They go on to note the difficulty in accurate data collection for trans violence, and the need to acknowledge the individual stories of the victims. They write, "Those killed came from and lived in rural, suburban and metropolitan communities; they were siblings, parents, advocates, people of faith, students and friends, who had bright future and dreams."³¹ Here we see an attempt to ascribe social value to those taken by making them relatable and also elevate the tragedy

of the loss. There is no inherent value in a singular trans life lived without some connection to a cisgender anchor to conjure some emotion in the cis reader.

The following page is titled “Who is Transgender?” They start with what I would argue is the standard definition—someone who identifies differently than the sex they were assigned at birth. The short page ends with, “Many transgender people are women or men, while many others have a different gender identity, such as non-binary, genderfluid, gender diverse or gender expansive.”³² Of the memorials analyzed, this is one of the more expansive and up to date definitions. In comparison, the founder of the “Remembering our Dead” online memorial writes the following, “Although not every person represented during the Day of Remembrance self-identified as transgender—that is, as a transexual, crossdresser, or otherwise gender-variant—each was the victim of violence based on bias against transgender people.”³³ I find this problematic on a few fronts: “transexual” has fallen out of favor in the trans community due to its roots in medical institutions, the conflation of crossdresser with trans individuals flattens out the difference between gender identity and expression, and the fact that those included might not self identify as transgender.³⁴ The HRC report centers how the individual identified and self expressed, while the TDOR report makes assumptions based on solely expression. The question, “who is transgender?” can be answered by individuals alone, by and for themselves.

The individual twenty-five memorials follow a similar format as the official TDOR “Remembering Our Dead Project.” Each opening sentence contains the cause of death and how the lifeless body was found, “found shot to death,” “found stabbed to death,” “found shot to death with a single gunshot wound.”³⁵ While these

memorializations take an important step that the TDOR project does not, by identifying the intersecting identities of victims like race, I still find the format of opening with gruesome details troubling. I argue this is for shock value and to create a spectacle of violence, not to convey necessary information to mourn or remember the victims. The report's emphasis on the violent departure from life instead of the life lived centers cisgender lives as both perpetrator and reader. As Lamble argues, "A spectacle of violence undermines the antiviolence cause by sensationalizing brutality, objectifying the dead, and exploiting raw emotion...the closeness of pain that arises from personal grief cannot be confused with the distanced emotions that are generated through the consumption of spectacles of violence."³⁶ With this affect, it seems that the memorials are more to shock cisgender readers than offer a place of mourning for transgender readers or family and friends of the victims.

The penultimate section of the report that follows the memorials is titled "The Statistics Behind the Faces." A mix of text and infographics, the section highlights the disproportionate rate that trans women face to cisgender women, the overwhelming violence that trans women of color face, and the involvement of gun violence in the deaths of trans folks.³⁷ The report continues with a section about the lack of legislative protections for trans folks titled, "Addressing Anti-Transgender Violence: Dismantling a History of Discrimination and Systemic Barriers." This section roots transgender violence in lack of protections, not white supremacy or settler colonialism. Queer activists of color, especially Indigenous queer, trans and two-spirit activists and academics are quick to connect these links, and push us to "constantly decolonizing our paradigms."³⁸ It highlights individual issues that trans folks face like poverty (though I would argue this is

systemic problem and not individual), difficulty in changing identifying documents, and intimate partner violence.³⁹ It goes on to lay out specific instances in 2017 when state and national government intentionally infringed trans upon rights like the military ban and the rescinding of federal trans student protections.⁴⁰

The final section has actionable steps for readers titled, “Take Action!: What Can You Do?” Working through this mix of memorial and analysis for transgender victims, I wondered if it was for the trans community, family and friends of victims, or curious cisgender folks. The final section pushed these doubts aside and confirmed that this report is not for the transgender community, but for cisgender folks. This is evidenced by the fact that one of their suggestions to ending trans violence is “Get to know transgender people, if you don’t already. When appropriate and safe, share their brave stories with others around you...By being a visible friend and ally of transgender people, you also show others around you that you stand with transgender people and their right to live openly and safely.”⁴¹ By not including actionable steps for trans people, like a section to inform us of our rights and protections, the report strips trans folks of agency and assumes that we cannot help ourselves or our communities. This report sees us not as survivors but as victims.

Further, I argue that it’s not a solution to be able to say, “but some of my friends are trans!” or to out trans folks and share their stories. The HRC document is not for mourning, but spectacularizing trans death in a hope to mobilize cisgender readers. While some of the suggestions of actionable steps to mobilize cisgender readers may be useful, I suspect the overall intent of the HRC is to illicit donations from readers horrified by what they read about trans realities. When you land on any new page of the HRC

website that is trans related a banner populates on the bottom of the screen prodding you to donate to the HRC in its efforts to assist the trans community. While the report outlines some actionable steps for you to take, all of the organization's trans content is aimed at receiving funds for the organization itself, not trans individuals or communities. I contend that memorials are ineffective if they're triggering or upsetting to the very population they're claiming to mourn. What actionable steps are there for the trans reader in the report? How are we to navigate the various systems and setbacks they detail through these pages? There is no space for trans livability with the HRC as seen in this report. This trend continues with their open disdain for the trans community in the past and their inability to support trans employees in the present, both of which I will demonstrate later in this section.

I was happily surprised to see the HRC collaborate with an organization centering trans people of color, given the valid critique by trans folks and people of color in the three decades of HRC's work. I was also surprised to see the name of the organization, an organization dedicated to trans people of color, that I had somehow never heard of. The Trans People of Color Coalition was created in 2010 by Black and trans attorney, activist, and educator Kylar Broadus. Broadus rose to national attention in 2012 for being the first trans person to testify before the US Senate.⁴² Broadus created the group to act as a liaison between LGBTQI and people of color (a phrase which he uses interchangeably with Black) organizations. He says, "Our approach is intersectional and based on the simple premise that there is strength in numbers and that our struggle, as well as our liberation, is interconnected."⁴³ Broadus notes the transphobia in both LGBTQI and

Black organizing and the racism in LGBTQI organizing that led him to creating the organization.

The partnership with HRC to create this report can be seen as a direct attempt to infuse some much needed intersectionality into the organization's approach to trans lives and issues. It can also be seen as an attempt by the HRC to create an image of solidarity and comradery with the trans folks of color without actively engaging with us at large. I am leaning towards the latter, because I struggle to find evidence of TPCC's actions and advocacy from 2015 to 2018. Their website is no longer live and attempts to find news stories about them beyond their involvement in the HRC's report were null. On his website Broadus lists his affiliations first and foremost as the senior public policy counsel at the National LGBTQ Task Force and the director of that group's subsidiary the Transgender Civil Rights Project.⁴⁴ I surmise from these bits of evidence that this organization is no longer active, and that Broadus's inclusion in the letter and the lending the name of the group he founded was more to create the guise of centering trans folks of color and responding to critics about racism and transphobia inside the HRC and in their actions, a hypothesis supported by their trans track record.

The Human Rights Campaign Fund was founded in 1980 by white cisgender gay activist Steve Endean, and was originally just a political action committee for the first twelve years of its life.⁴⁵ Endean and the parade of exclusively white executive directors following him continued the legacy of gays and lesbians distancing themselves from trans folks post-Stonewall and personally fuelled the erasure of trans lives and contribution. In 1975 Endean and his team stalled the passing of Minnesota's LGBT protection legislation

demanding that trans protections be removed before the bill hit the floor, a tactic continued by his organization under later leaders.⁴⁶

Black trans elder and activist Monica Roberts lays out in her popular blog TransGriot the genealogy of Human Rights Campaign's trans exclusion through the 80s to the present. She notes that in 1995 Elizabeth Birch took over as executive director of the HRC and said that trans inclusion in the Employment and Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) would happen only "over her dead body."⁴⁷ In the years that follow the Human Rights Campaign insisted that trans folks wait for our rights while they fought for the heteropatriarchal property driven dream of marriage and legal protections based on sexual orientation but not gender. These beliefs are made clear by their actions, in 2007 pushing for an ENDA reform that excluded trans protections, the themes of their annual fundraising galas leading up to legalization of same-sex marriage, and the \$20 million they raised to back Barack Obama and the promise of rolling back the Defense of Marriage Act.

In response to HRC's inaction around trans lives and issues, trans folks of color, including Roberts, formed their own coalition to draw attention to the hypocrisy of gay and lesbian organizing. They created the organization National Transgender Advocacy Coalition, and starting a campaign aptly titled "Embarrass HRC." The plan worked to a point by raising awareness around HRC's negative comments about trans folks and inaction on trans issues, and the HRC actually noticed a decrease in funding as a result. As a response, the HRC created the National Center for Transgender Equality in 2003 to give the guise of trans activism and solidarity. HRC appointed newly out trans woman and long time politician Mara Keisling to head up the organization. New to the game of

LGBT organizing, with what seemed to be a spotty understanding of current issues made the trans community wary, Roberts quotes trans legal historian Kat Rose as saying about the new organization and leader “I simply do not trust NCTE or Mara Keisling.”⁴⁸

Under Keisling, the newly formed trans branch of the HRC has emphasized the need for anti-discrimination and anti-harassment legislation. This shift in LGBTQ organizing from its roots in securing radical queer spaces to being folded into the national body relies on these inclusionary laws. Dean Spade points out the problem with LGBTQ organizing taking this less radical path, “The thrust of the work of these organizations became a quest for inclusion in and recognition by dominant US institutions rather than questioning and challenging the fundamental inequalities promoted by these institutions.”⁴⁹ He’s also quick to point out the disparity between folks who found and run organizations like the HRC and those they allegedly serve. Every executive director of the HRC has been white, all of them cisgender, most of them have been men, and all of them have post graduate education. How effective can these folks be in the fight for trans livability when their identities have them so far removed from our existence? The solution is not more trans visibility in HRC leadership, but more funding for grassroots organizations by and for trans folks of color.

HRC holds annual fundraising dinners where they award LGBTQ activists and allies with awards and charge \$400 a plate to get a piece of the action. Black trans and queer protesters blocked the entrance the 2017 gala in protest of the HRC’s partnership with Wells Fargo. An anonymous Black trans woman on the frontlines explained their action by saying, “Our journey towards collective liberation is inextricably linked to dismantling systems that reinforce white supremacy and capitalism such as the prison

industrial complex, immigrant detention, housing discrimination and Native genocide-battles in which Wells Fargo and HRC sit confidently on the wrong side of.”⁵⁰ HRC’s actions show that they care more about their own money than actually addressing the root of inequalities in the LGBTQ community, especially for trans folks of color, even those that work for them.

More recently an internal report conducted by an outside agency of the HRC was leaked to BuzzFeed News. The report confirmed that while the HRC may have a trans organization under its wings and is no longer overtly transphobic, the organization still misses the bar in helping the lives of trans employees.⁵¹ Of the twelve trans and gender nonconforming employees at HRC, only one felt that the organization adequately handled trans employees needs and rights. Chris Reidner of BuzzFeed highlights trans employees complaints: misgendering after frequent corrections, unnecessary use of gendered language in HRC employee materials, an unformed and unhelpful Human Resources department, as well as difficulty transitioning on the job. HRC can’t even show up for its trans employees and in their attempts to memorialize our deaths they fall short too. The organization has promised to take the findings of the internal report to heart, and claim to be working on making trans employees feel more comfortable, but for the largest LGBT organization you would think that this change wouldn’t be coming 30 years after their founding.

In conclusion I believe this memorial is in line with the HRC’s trans track record. It fights for visibility and inclusivity, but fails at even that. It only centers trans folks of color on the surface, literally the cover of the report and with the endorsement of an organization with a great name and no action. The report and memorial are for a

cisgender audience, using tactics to shock them into action, most likely contributing monetarily to the HRC. Not providing resources or actionable steps for the trans community directly affected by this violence posits the cisgender reader as the potential saviors of the trans community, and strips trans individuals of agency or the possibility of fighting for our own liberation. Memorials should educate, but also provide space for those affected by the violence to reflect and mourn. In this report and the Human Rights Campaign there is no place for trans livability.

The Unerased

Every year has proven to be deadlier than the last for trans folks in the U.S. It's all but guaranteed that these numbers are low for many reasons. Some of the causes for inaccurate data on trans murders includes: the difficulty trans folks have in changing documents to reflect our names and genders, ignorant professionals at every step of murder investigation from the first police report to the coroners, and transphobic family members who may erase their slain loved one's identity with burial.⁵²

While liberal thinking would have us believe that trans murders are rare instances of one individual acting out of hatred for another, the truth is that these murders are the results of systems of inequality and are extensions of state sanctioned violence. The data we have on trans folks is collected by nonprofits and some state governments is not broad or deep enough to expunge the daily violences trans Americans face. Creating programs and systems to assist us is difficult when we don't have accurate data about the challenges to trans livability. As Spade outlines, "Standardized, categorized data collection is essential to the creation of these programs because it allows government,

institutions, and agencies...to have a general picture of the population: its health, vulnerabilities, needs and risks.”⁵³ There is no way of knowing how many trans folks exist or are extinguished, or how our intersecting identities impact our lives and deaths.

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the role of data collection and the scientification and or surveillance of subjugated populations. In addition to the hesitation trans folks may have in submitting information about themselves to individuals and agencies collecting data, there are also often limitations and restrictions in the means of data collecting. For those of us existing outside of the gender binary very few government forms allow us to correctly self identify. The “sex” box appears as a requirement on documents across agencies and institutions, an unnecessary and pervasive nuisance that Spade defines as “administrative violence.”⁵⁴ With a potentially and rightly wary populace, ineffective measuring practices, and untrained and uneducated data collectors I argue that the data we have on trans lives and death is far from adequate. However, I contend the numbers we do have are still important in identifying trends, namely the glaring racial and gender gap seen in the overrepresentation of Black trans women as victims. Our work to undo these violences and create livable presents and futures needs to center the most vulnerable population: Black trans women.

One project that centers the intersectionality of trans murders and promotes trans livability is Mic.com’s “Unersed: Counting Transgender Lives.” The project is a combination of analysis, database, and photo gallery. I argue that this synthesis of the numbers, the stories, and the faces of the deceased creates a memorial that has space for trans folks to mourn and remember while also educating folks on the issues and violences trans folks face before they sometimes culminate in our murders. I’ll give a brief

description of the database before diving into a more in-depth visual and discourse analysis of the project's home page.

The Mic.com database is the only one of its kind and it strikes a balance between memorial and call to action. Stretching back to 2010, the collection covers the 133 known victims. You can filter them by year, race, age range, gender, circumstances of death, and case outcome. Almost all of them have photos attached to them and there is as much, if not more, information about their lives than their deaths, a rarity in the litany of lists of trans lives lost like the materials produced by the HRC or TDOR. You can see the trends in these murders and the everyday bureaucratic state violences that culminate in their deaths. While the project is better than what any government organization has even attempted or what other community based organizations have done, there are still issues.

One issue and important intersection left out of this analysis is the role of sex work. Causes of death are occasionally listed as "sex work," a blatant instance of victim blaming if I have ever seen one, and an incomplete analysis. The label of sex worker is not what is problematic, but that the profession someone partakes in, no matter the reason, is seen as grounds for violence. Other collections of trans murder victims, like those included in this thesis, list the means of death as the action inflicted by others onto the body, not the potential vulnerabilities that led to the violence.

When you arrive to the homepage you are greeted with text and peoples faces. The moving faces take up the entire screen with the text "Unerased: Counting Transgender Lives. A comprehensive look at transgender murders since 2010. The number is rising-and likely far higher than we know." The text does not state outright that these faces and folks are no longer with us, but the suggestion, coupled with their

presence, is hauntingly effective. While the database contains images for all of the victims that had available photos, what is most striking about the images on the homepage is that they are all selfies.

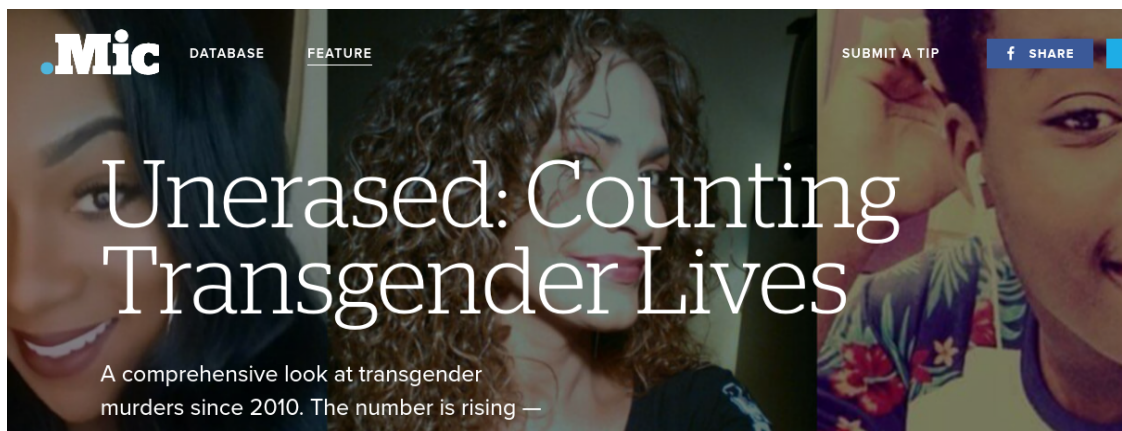


Figure 4: Still from the slideshow of the “Unerased” showing the faces of three victims

On the homepage of the “Unerased” there are nine individuals represented in a slideshow. Eight of them are trans feminine, one of them is genderfluid—all of them are Black save for one, and these identities are confirmed in the accompanying database. The images vary in backdrop and lighting. Some are photos snapped outside with the sun illuminating their faces, one is shot inside a car with a popular filter layered over it, and a few classic bathroom selfies. While they vary in composition and subject, these images all serve the same purpose, to present oneself as they wish to be seen. Typical visual culture analysis as laid out by Elspeth Brown leads us to challenge the intention of photographers and art directors in how they present the subject. Brown pushes us to interrogate the details that create and overall meaning, and what connotations and denotations emerge from the intentions of the person behind the camera. As photography has evolved, the gap between subject and image creator has in many cases collapsed into a single subject. For instance, in a selfie all of these roles are wrapped up into one. The

outfits, makeup, setting, lighting, angles, backdrop and location are all determined by the subject themselves creating self representation and meaning.

Given the long intertwined relationship between conceptions of race and gender and the development of photography, these self composed, curated, and publicly disseminated images of the most marginalized segment of Black culture is a radical reclamation of the technology. Photography has played an unfortunate role in the subjugation of Black bodies, especially women. Nicole R. Fleetwood highlights the history of Black women used as “subject/object” not just in art but “the routine practices of visually documenting the black female body in medical, scientific, and sociological areas of embodiment of abnormality and femininity’s opposite.”⁵⁵ In the case of Black trans women and femmes there is a double layer of fighting for the view to be seen as feminine, with many making the argument that they are not “real women.” Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, or TERFS, reinforce this fallacy even in supposedly liberal and radical spaces, leaning on biological arguments in a way that is not too far removed from the scientific attempts to distinctively categorize races.⁵⁶

The famous cry of “ain’t I a woman” by Sojourner Truth is answered when Black women control and create their own image. Fleetwood examines the self-portraiture of Renee Cox, arguing that her focus on her own naked body in remixes of classic paintings is a radical reclamation of the historical and cultural role of Black women’s in photography as either pathological subject or sexual object. Fleetwood quotes Hershini Young’s arguments about Cox’s photography, “Her gaze does not allow for modesty or shame at her nakedness but instead directly challenges the viewer-look at me, look at my body, and look at the imperial specters that have dictated how I traditionally have been

viewed.”⁵⁷ When it the image creator and subject are rolled into one, and that individual is from a frequently eschewed and fetishized group, these outcomes can be circumvented with a message of self representation and I argue empowerment..

In the queer and trans community selfies have been used as a form of storytelling to connect and share our lives. Son Vivienne argues in their piece on “gender-diverse selfies” that for many trans and gender non-conforming individuals taking selfies and uploading them onto social media platforms with a chosen audience is the only safe avenue for some to share and express their gender identity.⁵⁸ Selfies function as a form of communication in a way that self portraits of the past did not.⁵⁹ In the trans community selfies can serve the purpose of embracing identity out of self love or to prove to others, “I’m myself and you can be too.”

While these images were shot, produced, and disseminated by the individuals who took them, these folks had no input in this particular curation of “The Unerased.” They chose how they wanted to be seen, and with privacy settings and platform decisions their audience could be decided as well. While I think the inclusion of images of victims is important to humanizing the dead in a way that just listing stats of spatiotemporality and means of death is essential to generative memorializing, I’m curious about the curation. How does the meaning of these images change when taken from social media, and placed next to strangers’ faces? Goldberg argues that “the selfie constructs a momentary self through constructing the perspective from which that self becomes legible, a perspective that viewers are invited to occupy.”⁶⁰ Taken out of context and placed side by side, these self produced images invite the viewer to bear witness. The viewer occupies a different space when viewing these images in conjunction with each other. You’re not transported

to a bedroom or a car or a field, you are transported a space of the dead. No longer a tool of communicating glamour or confidence or pride in hard won gender euphoria, these moving images demand you see the connection—Black and Brown trans death.

The project’s interactive layout walks the user through some of the basic data about trans inequalities in the United States, highlighting the violence the community faces before the culmination of murder. Almost immediately the site brings attention to the fact that anti-trans violence disproportionately affects Black trans women, displaying the statistic in a red and blue infographic, “From 2010 to 2016 at least 111 transgender and gender-nonconforming Americans were murdered because of their gender identity, 72% of them were black trans women and gender-nonconforming femmes, who identify as neither male nor female but present as feminine.”⁶¹ The site continues by highlighting the difficulty in tracking trends in this violence due to the lack of data collecting around trans lives and deaths until recently. There’s no way of telling if as a community we are faring better or worse, but all that matters is we’re still getting killed.

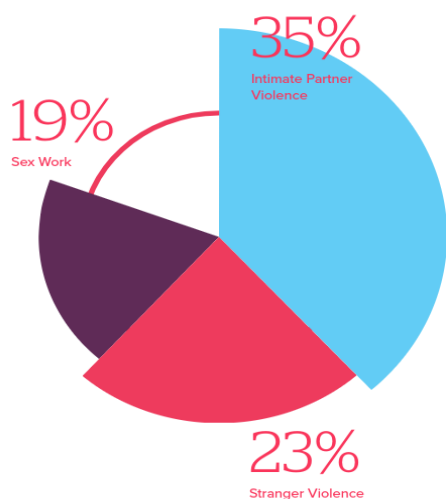


Figure 5: Infographic from “The Unerased” showing “causes of death”

A majority of the data is presented in infographics that is then broken down further in text. As you scroll down from the looping selfies infographics about U.S. murder rates populate the screen, and are an overlay on an outline of the continental U.S. Scrolling further down the homepage is an article titled “Documenting trans homicides” by gender nonbinary journalist and activist of color Meredith Talusan. As you move through the article graphs spring to life when they enter the frame, the data presented in pie charts and bar graphs all in red, white, purple, and blue. Infographics can convey more information with less space, and their visual appeal engages folks more than bare data and words, allowing folks to “learn and remember more efficiently and effectively.”⁶² These infographics, like the sliding selfies that first greet you on the homepage, make the reality unavoidable. The reader has no control over the moving pieces of the website, the faces and the numbers working together to powerfully convey the realities of the dangerous difficulties of trans livability. The reader is unable to avoid the realities of the violence, like those of us that live with it.

The article is broken into sections; “Transgender lives erased,” “A multifaceted problem,” “Above the law,” and “Beyond tracking.” Each section is headed by a large banner photo. Of the five photos included in the body of the article, four of them feature Black folks in action: hoisting protest signs with dead trans sisters into the air, speaking into mics, raising protest fists into the air, and finishing a performance. In three of the five photos there is another photo embedded of a murdered Black trans femme. The action photos take up the whole width of the screen, and the portraits of the victims occupy an inch by inch square floating along the bottom right of the banner images, their

faces framed by a pink rectangle.

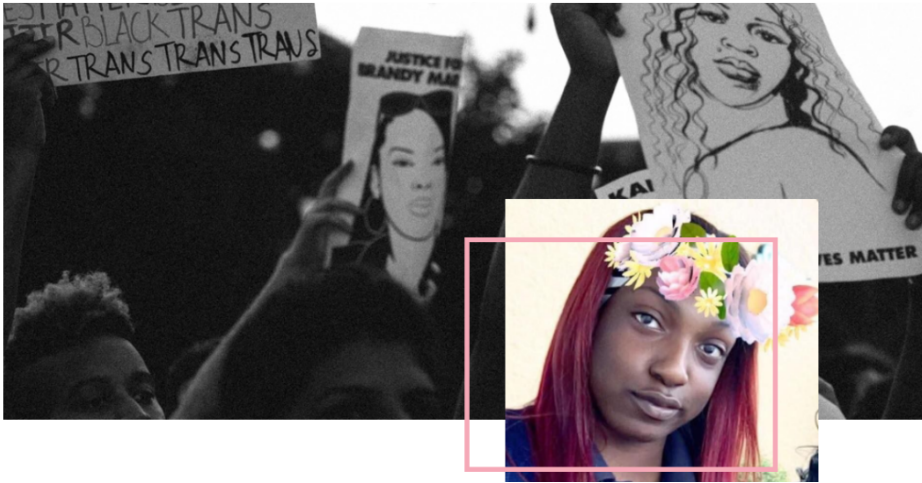


Figure 6: Section header displaying a protest for Black trans lives and victim Goddess Diamond

I argue that this coupling of photos of Black and trans bodies in action and fighting with the faces of the victims is striving more for highlighting trans livabilities than other visuals typically included in memorials (if they include any). It shows that trans women of color are not just victims, but leaders and fighters. It harkens back to the days of Stonewall when Black and Brown trans women threw down for all LGBTQ folks. These images prove to us that trans identity isn't created just out of violence or death, that trans women of color have been fighting for our liberation forever, and that our present and future livability is not entirely reliant on cisgender saviors.

Another limitation of the “Uneraser” is the emphasis on sentencing of perpetrators without acknowledging the violence of the prison industrial complex has on trans folks especially trans people of color. The “Above the Law” section of the page starts by emphasizing the sentencing disparities in the murder cases, noting that “People who kill black trans women and femmes are usually convicted of lesser charges than those who kill people of other trans identities.”⁶³ This section mostly quotes a trans police officer, Sgt. Jessica Hawkins of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington D.C. While

discussing “lighter” sentences for the murderers of trans folks she says, “It’s a big blow to the [transgender] community because you’re telling the community ‘Your life is not worth it.’”⁶⁴ There are other ways to combat transphobia and to make trans individuals valuable besides feeding the prison industrial complex. As Dean Spade says, “Criminal punishment cannot be the method we use to stop transphobia when the criminal punishment system is the most significant perpetrator of violence against trans people.”⁶⁵

I contend that the “Unersed Project” is effective in memorializing trans lives in a way that honors the dead by not creating a spectacle of violence while also contextualizing the murders in an intersectional manner not seen in Transgender Day of Remembrance memorial. The use of photos of Black trans women, living and dead, is unique to this project, reminding us that trans existence is not created through our death alone. While the project has its limits in demonizing sex work and leaning too heavily on the prison industrial complex as trans salvation, it’s a major step in the right direction.

Autostraddle: Femme Fueled Memorials

Autostraddle is the internet’s largest lesbian website.⁶⁶ Founded in 2009 to mostly share *The L Word* recaps, the site has expanded to be a hub of women centric queer and trans culture. Starting in 2014 Autostraddle began sporadically reporting the murders of trans women of color, and in 2016 and 2017 began giving each victim a full article. This is a unique departure from the Mic database, the HRC report, and TDOR’s in person and online efforts. Granting each victim a stand alone memorial highlights the fact that these folks were each individual humans. It grants more space to discuss the details of these people’s lives, not just the facts of their death. I argue that these memorials center trans

livability, are written for trans folks mourning, and provide cis readers with actions to eradicate this violence and help trans folks while we're still here.

The reports are handled by trans Editor Mey Rude, a trans woman of color. The articles are typically released less than 24 hours after news breaks on social media about another sister gone too soon. Autostraddle reports trans and gender non-conforming murders for not just femme of center folks, but all trans folks murdered. Rude always includes the role of race in her reporting, and includes photos from social media, making the overrepresentation of victims of color impossible to ignore. Quotes from family and friends are included and outweigh the grisly details of death that cisgender authors favor. A balance is struck between making folks aware of the violence, and mourning in a way that only someone who fears for their lives in a similar fashion can convey. Of all the reporting on trans murder victims, Rude is the most humanizing, focusing extensively on the lives of the victims while also not shying away from how terrifying it is to occupy the same identities that are met with so much violence.

One example of how reporting trans murders differs when the writer is a trans woman of color is from Rude's report on the murder of Black trans woman Rae'Lynn Thomas. She writes:

Rae'Lynn Thomas is yet another Black trans woman who joins our ever expanding list of trans people murdered this year. This isn't slowing down. This isn't getting better. This is just getting worse and more terrifying and more depressing. I am so afraid for my sisters, my friends, my elders, my family. It's a constant fear, one that never goes away. It just gets worse on the days I have to write articles like this and gets a little bit quieter on days that I don't.⁶⁷

As a trans person of color this is the most relatable content I've seen in a memorial. The details of how bodies are found, how many stab wounds, and the sentencing of perpetrators terrorize me more than they move me. Rude writes for the trans reader—because she knows as a trans woman of color that we're still out here living, fighting, and grieving.

Rude also includes actionable steps for readers to take. While the HRC report did something similar, Rude goes beyond suggesting simply befriending trans people and includes broad actions or specific ones pertaining to individual victims and their cases for cis and trans readers.. Instead of just allowing cisgender and white folks a voyeuristic window into the violent reality of being Black and trans, Rude pushes for action. Alongside every article she shares an Autostraddle compiled list titled “24 Actions You NEED to Take to Help Trans Women of Color Survive.”⁶⁸ Links to fundraising sites are also shared to help family and friends lay victims to rest, the median age of the victims is 35 and few prepare for a funeral so young.

The project is updated by community support, often beating the press to identify trans victims when they're misgendered in police reports, coroner notes, and local media. Social media has played a huge role in collecting and sharing stories about murdered trans folks. One person instrumental to disseminating the news of trans murders quickly that is frequently cited by Rude in her reporting is Black trans woman Monica Roberts, or TransGriot. TransGriot spreads the news quickly through her modest Twitter following, and eventually the news gets picked up by queer media spaces like Mic and Autostraddle. We roll out the hashtags, we prepare our vigils, and we mourn again.

This initial reporting of trans murders, by and for the trans community, is what Lena Carla Palacios calls media justice activism. In interrupting the typical narrative of trans murders, namely by acknowledging that we have lives before they're taken away, these trans reporters create a space for change beyond the mere awareness gay and lesbian organizations strive for. Palacios argues, "media-justice activism is premised on building the communicative capacity of movement organizations led by those most directly impacted by carceral state violence in order to create dense activist networks and mobilize mass movements capable of both transgressing the territorial-political boundaries of the nation-state and defending themselves against the promise of state violence."⁶⁹

Rude's reporting on one of the largest queer sites on the internet is a major piece of the network of disseminating news on trans murders, mourning the dead, and promoting action for trans livability not leaning on legislation or a the state to save us. I argue that the web of trans women of color that come together on social media that goes towards these reports has closer ties to the violence and thus a stronger analysis and solutions than what well funded and white mainstream LGBT organizations and activists could ever produce.

Conclusion: Give Us Our Roses While We're Still Here

In this thesis I have covered only four venues of memorializing trans murders, and sadly there are not many more. Some of the reasons there are so few are: the lack of public awareness, underfunded trans organizations, and ultimately and unfortunately the lack of empathy or assumption of social value of trans women of color. Part of the difficulty in commemorating Black trans women's murders is the assumed lack of moral

valence of the victims. Raj Andrew Ghoshal argues that three factors need to be present for the successful memorialization of victims, or what he calls mnemonic opportunity structures. The factors are, “(1) an environments present-day *commemorative capacity*, a past incident’s (2) *ascribed significance*, and the *moral valence* of key characters *at the time the incident occurred*.”⁷⁰ When memorials like Mic.com cite “sex work” as a cause of death, they are reinforcing this, noting that the decisions some of these folks made, in some cases to survive, is grounds for violence.

Trans women of color are seen as deserving of death, and memorials that reinforce this do little to help us mourn the dead or challenge the systems that produce it. Over the course of writing this thesis we’ve lost nearly fifty members of our community, most of them trans women of color, and I see the updated memorials continue these unhelpful trends. In academia we rarely talk about the mental and spiritual toll it takes being a member of a minority group and writing about the violence our communities face. I have stopped and started this thesis many times, often after reading that once again a trans sibling was violently taken from us.

The task of covering trans violence as a trans person of color seems sisyphian at times, and often feels like a sadomasochist act. As I submitted the first draft of this paper to my committee I got a news alert that the bodies of two local trans women, Zakaria Fry and Carrol Ray, were found in a trashcan forty miles outside of Albuquerque.⁷¹ In the weeks that followed I noted how local media outlets handled the double homicide, often only noting one of the victims as trans, a common trend of a family covering up the deceased’s identity once they can no longer speak for themselves. I participated with my

trans family in mourning both of their lives, fighting for our continued right to live as we are.

Sitting in the back of a crowded gathering hall at the Albuquerque Center for Spiritual Living a week after the bodies were found, I joined my community in memory and mourning. The local LGBTQ marching band struggled through an arrangement of the number “Seasons of Love,” from the queer classic RENT, while mourners began dabbing their eyes. Speakers from the local transgender resource center addressed the fear and anger we felt as a community, and read memories folks had shared about Zakaria. We honored both fallen sisters, but only one’s family came to claim her. Zakaria’s sister spoke about her life, her dreams, and all the things she was ready to accomplish before being murdered. She closed her speech with righteous rage, promising to attend every trial for the murderer who’s already been apprehended, saying she was hoping he received life in prison. I sat there, with my months of research churning in my mind, my radical queer politics bubbling in my belly, willing myself to quiet self righteous critiques and be present. There was no mention of race, even in the carefully crafted statistic laden homilies delivered by community leaders. There was no mention of the mutability of Carrol’s gender as her family and the mainstream media buried her under a deadname while we counted her as one of our own. There was no call for justice beyond relying on the criminal justice system that demonizes so many of us. Who was I to critique the way a family mourns their child? Who was I to be so salty while as a transmasculine person my chances of facing similar violence was much lower? Who owns the memory and fight for justice for these two murdered trans women?

Sitting a few rows ahead of me, directly behind the family of Zakaria, was a young Black trans femme. As the memorial continued I watched them shake more and more, their heels bouncing up and down faster and faster, friends on either side of them propping them upright. Looking around the room I was struck by how many trans people were there that I'd never met, forgetting that even in the trans community you can live in a bubble with those most like yourself. Folks of all ages, mostly people of color, leaning on each other physically and emotionally. It was the most trans people I have shared a space with. I don't want the only reason for the trans community to come together to be when one of us is murdered. I demand a present where we can gather and celebrate our lives before they are violently taken. I echo the call of Black trans artist B. Parker to "give us our roses while we're still here." To celebrate trans lives and successes, to elevate our stories and goals, to support one another in securing livable presents and futures.

Memorials of trans victims need to always center trans livability, push cisgender folks to action without creating a spectacle of violence out born out of pity, and highlight and challenge the intersectional nature of this violence. We have to mourn the dead, but we still have to fight like hell for the living.



Figure 7: Print by B.Parker for Trans Day of Resiliency

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