

Mourning Our Dead, Demanding Our Lives

Thoughts on the Transgender Day of Remembrance

Michelle O'Brien, February 2004

This coming November will be the fifth year of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, an international event honoring and mourning the lives of trans people and others who have been killed in ways linked to anti-trans hatred. The Day of Remembrance began in 1998 following the murder of Rita Hester in San Francisco. Since then, organizing around the day has grown dramatically, with events in over 90 cities and eight countries.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance varies between cities. Often times involving a candlelight vigil, the readings of names of murdered trans people, and possibly short speeches, the events can be deeply significant for trans community campaigns against violence. A website supports and coordinates this work. This website offers a list of murdered trans people to be read during such events. This list includes names, death dates and the means by which almost 300 individuals were killed, all since 1970.

I first came into organizing against anti-trans violence following the murder of Nizah Morris. Nizah was an extraordinary woman, dearly loved by her family and communities, known and respected as a performer and a mentor for younger African-American trans women. She was killed just before Christmas of 2002 in Philadelphia. Though the circumstances of her death are far from clear, many suspect police culpability. The police and media response to her murder showed a cruelty, racism and transphobia that has enraged many throughout the city.

We organized a large memorial for Nizah, drawing together over 300 people in a powerful and transformative space to mourn her death. It was one of the first substantively cross-racial organizing ventures among trans communities in Philadelphia, and has had a major impact on community building and activism since.

I had the honor of being involved in the organizing for Nizah's memorial. I spent a lot of time, then and now, trying to think about what it meant to mourn, to remember, to organize. Organizing against violence has

become central in building trans communities and movements, in demanding legislative reform and in expanding popular awareness of transphobia and the social oppression of gender variant people.

What does it mean to mourn as a community? What does it mean to speak of Nizah, here at Syracuse at this time, to speak of her as if she was a marker of history and movement for trans people in Philadelphia? What does it mean to appropriate the bodies and names of the dead as symbols into our movements, my lectures, our discussions? How do we survive the ongoing vicious brutality, daily terror and consuming loss of systemic transphobia? What does it mean for me to speak of 'we', to an audience of university students, as a white middle class woman, amidst the vast differences of race and class privilege within trans communities, and in the experience of transphobic oppression?

This talk is about survival, about mourning, about envisioning ways of building communities, healing from our losses, and making a world free from the violence that wreaks such devastation on our lives.

To speak of mourning, to speak of the dead, is never simple, never straightforward, never easy. The dead are not symbols or themes for my lecture; they were each people; living, complex, real people. The Day of Remembrance mourns people whose very bodies and lives elude easy languages or categorization, people murdered for not fitting into rigid categories of gender and normalcy.

Writing this talk, trying to untangle the mess of my thoughts and emotions, has been extremely difficult. It is far too bound up with my own life, my own body, my own fear, to make easy sense of it. The first weekend I had set aside to draft this speech was marred with news of the suicide of one trans activist I've worked with. My thoughts of mourning, ghosts and trauma suddenly became far too real and immediate to pretend such a speech as this could even be conceivable.

I am here to try to speak of what it means to mourn the dead, but the dead can rarely speak back, can't stand up from the audience and insist that I have misspoken, they can't correct a false assumption or insist on another story. They can't, any longer, define their own identities and their paths. So to try to speak of the dead asks for trust, trust that I am capable of honoring their memories, respecting their lives. Trust that I will not compound and reproduce the anti-trans hatred and violence that fuels these murders. Trust too isn't always so easy. I don't know you all,

and of those I'm speaking I know very few. In some cases it might be fair to claim some kinship, some link, some place of myself in communities amongst these dead. But I cannot ask them, cannot beg permission, cannot confirm with them the appropriateness of my words.

I am here to speak of communities in mourning, of a rage that tears at our present, of trauma that haunts our lives. I don't know if I am able or ready. I don't know, really, if I have the legitimacy to stand right here and try to speak of remembering those past.

But I have to try. To speak of mourning and the dead, these dead, is dangerous, complex and ethically precarious. But to not do so-- to ignore the horror of anti-transgender violence, to find easier and less risky topics, to leave this room silent, in this moment, in this world, at this time -- would compound the erasure of these lives, of my life, of the lives of those I love.

From 1973 to 2003, according to the website of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, 294 people were murdered by anti-trans violence. Perhaps some of them were friends of people in this room. We might have seen the news stories of a few of their deaths. Some of them, these people, these dead, are marked with names many of us might recognize: Gwen Araujo, Nizah Morris, Brandon Teena.

But already I have misspoken. Respecting names, respecting people's own self-determination of their names, is fundamental and absolutely necessary in showing dignity to people, especially trans people for whom names can be so important. The individual whom some call Brandon Teena used many different names including Brandon, Charles Brandon, Brandon Brinson, Tenor Ray Brandon, Charles Brayman and others. But never, it appears from what little evidence we have, did this person choose "Brandon Teena" as a name. Speaking of the dead, especially trans people, is always so very risky.

Violence is an ongoing reality for many trans people. One report from the NGLTF estimates that 60% of all transgender people have been victimized by hate crimes. Hate crimes against trans people, particularly trans women, is disproportionately brutal and violent, with a statistical overrepresentation of murders. Many trans folk live with the constant threat of street harassment, abuse from spouses or lovers and police brutality. Anti-trans violence, on the streets and in one's home, are often difficult to track or document, but what little evidence there is suggests

staggering, epidemic proportions. A study entitled Gender, Violence and Resource Access Survey, completed in 1999 on trans and intersex individuals, found that 50% of respondents have been raped or sexually assaulted by a partner. Often cited is the chilling statistic that one trans person is murdered every month, confirmed by the periodic flood of emails that arrive in my inbox. This physical domination are intimately tied up with other, more subtle forms of violence: poverty, social marginalization, severe discrimination in accessing basic healthcare or services, and having our bodies and identities mislabeled and misidentified.

These statistics, we must always remember, are representing real people. The long list of names read at the Day of Remembrance isn't just a symbol, a movement building tool or an emotional experience designed to overwhelm or make a point: it is a catalog of once living people, with lovers, with family, with friends, people with desires and fears and boredom and rage, people with complexities and faults and beauty. Each was a real, specific individual whose life path was cut brutally short.

These murders and other forms of violence have a massive impact on the lives and communities of many trans people. They collectively create an environment of terror and loss. Fueling the widespread personal struggles with depression, self-hatred and suicide among some gender variant people, the cost of these murders is massive. This fear damages our organizing, making it difficult to build movements without taking out our pain in vicious, petty disputes waged against each other.

It would be a mistake to understand these murders as isolated instances. They reflect and reproduce a common social system that treats the bodies and lives of trans people as worthless objects of hatred. Many trans people are left trying to survive amongst a constant, ongoing backdrop of terror and suffering.

In the midst of this trauma, mourning couldn't be more important. We must find ways of remembering and honoring those we have lost, of gathering with each other in love and support, in coming to terms with our pain in ways that are self-loving and self-affirming. In this way, the Transgender Day of Remembrance and other trans community organizing against violence play crucial roles.

There are many ways, however, this organizing can go very wrong.

Anti-trans violence isn't experienced equally by all gender variant people.

Instead, hate crimes and police brutality have largely targeted poor trans women of color. Transphobia rarely acts alone; in most anti-trans murders it is intimately bound up with white supremacy and racism, the oppression of poverty, brutal misogyny and social stigmas against sex workers.

While clear from any sampling of photos or news stories, the overrepresentation of women of color is often overlooked, and rarely is race or class ever seriously addressed in studies of violence against trans communities. Rather than foreground the leadership and representation by women of color, sex workers and poor women, many trans civil rights movements and community organizations are dominated by white, middle class people like myself. Trans people and allies with race and class privilege often seize and hold key resources, leadership positions and control over the course of public trans rights movements.

Something is profoundly wrong here. The bodies, identities and names of murdered poor women of color get appropriated and used by white middle class activists to advance a movement that does little to promote the substantive self-determination of the communities most affected by anti-trans violence. Trans anti-violence movements are not the only ones to make such an egregious ethical mistake; far too many movements on the left are dominated by white middle class people, but claim to be fighting systems of oppression that most systematically target poor people of color.

Often, however, the initial impetus and continued drive for anti-violence and anti-oppression movements comes from these very marginalized communities. Black and Latina trans women and femme queens fought in the streets at Stonewall, spoke out after Nizah's death, and have played a key role in helping to build liberation movements that too often do not respect their leadership. In some cities, the Transgender Day of Remembrance reflects the leadership of the women most affected by anti-trans violence; in others, it does not.

This is not the only problem I've had at times with the Days of Remembrance. Far from healing and inspiring, my personal experiences of these events have often been that they added to and fueled my fear, self-hatred and hopelessness. Listening to hundreds of names and graphic forms of murder leaves me feeling even more traumatized. Many trans people do not share my experience. But these events have not been positive for me, they have instead been scary times when I feel

most overwhelmed and incapable of confronting the violence against trans communities. I have heard similar critiques concerning many community memorial events of all sorts.

I don't mean to disparage the worth and value of these events. My critiques are not distant or uninterested. Anti-trans violence has marred my life like countless others, leaving me, as the living, to struggle to survive, cope, mourn, heal. It is precisely the urgency of mourning that makes it so difficult to hear this list of names and little else. I am glad activists come together to make the Transgender Day of Remembrance happen; I honor their labor and the necessity of this work.

The systemic violence against trans people is linked to a broader intensification of brutality against poor people and people of color across the globe. In the last few decades, we've witnessed the dramatic restructuring of global capital, as multinational corporations are draining resources and reorganizing societies to meet the interests of profit. In many countries, new social policies defined by the interests of the wealthy have led to a massive escalation of prisons, police systems, crime, poverty and violence against highly marginalized people within poor communities of color: especially sex workers, drug users, and sexual and gender minorities. Poor people of color across the world are waging a war for survival against destructive economic and political systems. Trans people have been particularly targeted in these new systems of violence, poverty and power.

Several of the names on the list of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, for example, are trans women and drag queens in Guatemala City. Guatemala is coming out of a several-decades-long brutal war of US-supported and state-sponsored terrorism, torture and mass murder against social justice movements and marginalized communities. Now new peace treaties and economic policies are laying the groundwork for US-based clothing manufacturers to build ultra-exploitative sweatshop factories. Through the 1970s and 80s death squads in Guatemala City worked in disappearing, torturing and killing tens of thousands of students, labor leaders, indigenous people and community activists. In recent years, the remaining death squads have begun to target trans sex workers, leading to a string of murders and disappearances.

Guatemala was not the only country where brutal, US-backed military governments used disappearance to try to terrify a population into submission. Disappearance was a tactic used to crush social justice

movements and political resistance. It refers to the secretive kidnapping of individuals by the military or police. The disappeared suddenly vanish from their daily lives without warning or explanation, "without leaving a trace." Those left might try to investigate their whereabouts and well-being, but face only denial and deception from government officials. People often know vaguely of the ongoing reality of disappearance, enough to generate and maintain fear and submission, but clearly documenting or explaining exactly what was happening usually only became possible following military rule. The disappeared were often, but not always, tortured and interrogated in military facilities before being killed. Military officials would often then secretly dispose of the bodies.

Although no longer as central to state power or counterinsurgency, disappearance continues today throughout the world. Here in the United States, the secret arrests and detentions of Islamic, Arabic and South Asian men has frightening parallels to some elements of disappearance. The mysterious murders of nearly 450 young women in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico over the last decade evokes a similar environment of unaccountable terror and anxiety.

Disappearance works as a strategy of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. As Avery Gordon explains in *Ghostly Matters*, disappearance is not as simple as murder, for the uncertainty of the fate of the disappeared leaves those remaining in a state of constant apprehension and fear, robbed of safety, certainty or clarity.

In Argentina, 30,000 people were disappeared in the seven years following a 1976 military coup, a period known as the "Dirty War." Military forces waged a brutal, massive campaign of terror against the Argentine people. They used secret arrests and executions to wipe out labor unions, student groups, journalists and many others who were perceived as subversive. In the years since military rule, human rights organizations have gathered tens of thousands of pages of documentation, carefully tracing the vast and horrifying reality of disappearance.

During the Dirty War, challenging the military within Argentina was nearly impossible. Public protests, political dissent, critical journalism or any other form of identifiable resistance was met with immediate and massive violence. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are one of the only organizations to emerge in this period that identified and challenged disappearance. They were an extraordinary group, a remarkable and

deeply inspiring movement that has much to offer in envisioning the possibilities of mourning and resistance for trans activists in North America today.

As Avery Gordon writes, "The Mothers were middle-aged women, mostly housewives with no political experience, who met while searching for their children in the various waiting rooms of the Interior ministry. They made their public appearance, the first and for a long time the only (illegal) public protest against the regime, in the shadow of the security police in April 1977 when fourteen women walked quietly in a circle around the Plaza de Mayo [in front of the Presidential Palace]." (108). The Mothers pinned photos of their children to their chests, children who had been disappeared. The Mothers eventually evolved in a sophisticated, radical political organization demanding massive economic and social reforms, an end to military rule and, above all, justice for the disappeared. *Aparición con vida* became their slogan. "Bring them back alive."

This was an odd slogan. Everyone knew their children were most likely dead, secretly tortured and murdered by the state. Following the 1984 return to civilian government, laws declared the disappeared legally dead. The military began returning the years-old remains of some of the disappeared to the Mothers, including curt notes stating their children's culpability in treason and sentence of execution. Another law provided for reparations for surviving families of the disappeared. But the Mothers challenged such attempts by the civilian government to put to rest the memory and trauma of the Dirty War. "Bring them back alive." Their slogan demanded justice, an accounting far beyond the presumption of death.

"The truth is," Gordon quotes an activist from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, "we know they've killed them. *Aparición con vida* means that although the majority of them are dead, no one had taken responsibility for their deaths," or "They have to explain what they don't want to explain. This is the meaning of *aparición con vida*" (115).

Gordon writes "*Aparición con vida* meant ending the conditions that produced disappearance, the only way to provide a hospitable memory for the *desaparecidos*. *Aparición con vida* meant that these conditions had not ended. *Aparición con vida* meant that the haunting ground remained and the reckoning with the ghosts had yet to take place" (115).

This slogan of the Mothers -- Bring them back alive -- understands something crucial that the massive annals of human rights documentation does not. The Mothers refused to simply focus on the death, the remains, the passing of the dead. The Mothers demanded a reckoning among the living, with the living, by the living, a demand made alongside the dead and missing.

This reckoning calls on and recognizes the ongoing presence of the disappeared in our lives. The photos of the disappeared pinned to the Mothers' chests create this presence, a haunting that demands justice, a haunting that sides with life. These photos were not of tortured or mutilated bodies designed to shock or numb, as torture is often characterized in contemporary media. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were not primarily interested in the remains of their children, or an account of how and where their children were tortured and killed. They were interested in true justice.

Their photos were of their children as living, they evoked and demanded life. Their slogan "Bring them back alive" asserted that so long as justice had not been won, so long as violence and domination structure our political, economic and social systems, so long as the conditions that created disappearance remain, their children will not have passed. *Aparición con vida* refuses a dwelling on death when the haunting horror of disappearance and oppression remains.

Attending the Transgender Day of Remembrance is hard for me. More than anything, I think, the endless catalog of descriptions of forms of torture, mutilation and murder numb me and leave me frightened.

Like disappearance, we don't experience anti-trans violence simply in terms of singular losses, of bodies that must be buried. For anti-trans violence is embedded in a larger regime of oppression, hatred, poverty and terror, one intimately linked to misogyny, homophobia, white supremacy and capitalism. The reality of anti-trans violence is systemic, and its effects on our lives and psyches runs deep. Accounting for the dead honored in the Day of Remembrance demands more than simply putting the dead to rest, then discussing what happened, or acknowledging that something went wrong. This is precisely why the Day of Remembrance is so important, and why so many put energy and time into organizing these events.

Just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo understood the circumstances

of disappearance remain, the reality of anti-trans violence is still with us. The Mothers' insistence that the disappeared are still with us, demanding justice, has much to offer in envisioning the possibilities of mourning trans people. *Aparición con vida* refused to simply let these deaths pass or to only focus on the moment of torture or murder. Instead, their slogan asserted the centrality of life, asserted a commitment to the living and to the ongoing presence of our lost loved ones in our lives and the world. The Day of Remembrance is frustrating to me not only because of the ways it reminds me of the brutal realities of anti-trans violence, but because the central focus of this list is on the moment of death -- the dates of death, the means by which people were killed -- and it gives me few means to experience hope for a new world. The list of means of murder and mutilation reflects and reproduces precisely my day to day experience of transphobia -- one of anxious fear, deep sadness and hopeless melancholy.

What would it mean to learn from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, to grasp and assert the logic of *Aparición con vida*, to demand our murdered kin be brought back alive? Though the situations are clearly different, there are many ways the insight and strategies of the Mothers could change the ways we organize the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and by extension many other forms of political mourning on the left. We could find ways of asserting life, of asserting the value of trans people's lives, of refusing to dwell only on the moment of torture and death, of recognizing the dead are still with us so long as justice has not been won, of laying our commitments firmly on the side of the living.

There are small ways to make this shift. We could read birth dates as well as death dates -- recognizing the span of each person's life. We could not read means of murder, but instead find stories of the remarkable and beautiful lives that each of these trans people lived. We could tell stories about the lives of trans people we have known and loved that have been lost to murder, suicide, inadequate healthcare or poverty. We could tell stories of our own survival, our own successes in fighting against hatred and violence. We could share resources for supporting each other in our own challenges and crises.

We could spend more time recognizing and honoring concrete projects that challenge the underlying forms of systemic violence and oppression that contribute to anti-trans murders: like trans support groups, sex worker drop-in centers and mutual aid networks, needle exchanges, harm reduction education, trans-aware HIV education, free and low-income

healthcare centers, police accountability and anti-police brutality movements, prison abolition and prisoner advocacy organizing, self-defense training programs, Take Back the Night Marches, trans-inclusive feminist consciousness raising, domestic violence and sexual assault support services that work with trans communities and hundreds of other projects committed to fighting transphobia, poverty, misogyny, racism and the social marginalization of drug users and sex workers.

All of these ideas shift away from just repeating the overwhelming catalog of horror, suffering and tragedy. Shifting our focus to people's lives -- honoring the worth and value of the lives of those who have passed, treasuring and honoring our own lives, building projects that provide accessible and effective means of addressing people's psychic, social and economic needs -- these can all begin to evoke the transformative and revolutionary power of the Mother's slogan: Bring them back alive.

Our lives matter. Against the traumatic brutality of contemporary capitalism, social hatred and political and economic marginalization, against the devaluation of the bodies and lives of trans people and others, we have to begin to believe that our lives truly matter. The deaths of trans people are among the most brutal and total expressions of a culture built on robbing people of our basic self-determination and self-love. In the midst of this horror, finding ways of coming to terms with our loss, healing from our pain and treasuring our lives and the lives of others couldn't be more urgent or necessary. At the heart of revolutionary struggle and liberation is the understanding that each person is precious and valuable, that oppression must end precisely because it denies people the means of fully expressing and fulfilling our rich possibilities of beauty, love and compassion.

The ongoing reality of anti-trans violence ultimately robs everyone of this chance, denies to us all the freedom to express and inhabit our genders in the most true and authentic way we can. Ending the murders, abuse and violence against gender variant people is key to beginning to build a world where we can be ourselves fully, love ourselves fully. The murders of trans people, each and every person murdered for their gender expression, leaves a traumatic scar on the world that goes far deeper than a circle of friends and families. We all suffer, ultimately, in the midst of a society that sees the bodies of trans people as worthless.

Mourning this loss is the first step to challenging and ending this violence.

We must recognizing the tremendous cost that anti-trans violence takes us on each of us -- in different forms, depending on our genders and gender histories, our bodies, our race and class privilege, our relationships and our communities -- but it takes its toll on each one of us nonetheless. Mourning these deaths, coming to terms with our suffering, is crucial to begining to heal and struggle.

And this mourning, as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo understood with extraordinary courage, creativity and hope, this mourning must be a siding with life. A commitment to the living, to the lives of those past, to our lives in the present, to the incredible possibilities of our world to come, to the beauty of each and every one of our lives.

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