

Visible Invisibility: The Lives and Deaths of Transgender Women of Color

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Social fears and anxieties about what we don't know or understand, coupled with very rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity, shape cultural, social, and thus human responses to people who live outside the normative sex/gender relations. This gender misrecognition, as a result of both our notions about gender and sex and our fears and anxieties is a key factor in documenting the violence and murder directed towards transgender people. As a result, crimes are under reported and miscategorized. Anti-transgender biased violence and murder is on the rise despite an overall decrease nationally in the number of reported anti-LGBTQQ incidents. Between November 2006 and November 2007, 17 transgender deaths and murders occurred. Of these deaths, transgender women of color were the primary victims. My investigation focuses on three transwomen, two of whom are sex workers, brutally murdered between January and March of 2007 in California, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania. It is my hope that this investigation will illuminate the social anxieties and fears which fuel anti-transgender violence and the vulnerability transgender sex workers face in their daily lives. Equally, this investigation examines these murder narratives to further understand how these acts of violence reveal attitudes towards gender, sexuality, race, class, and politics. Using health studies and anti-violence reports as my primary sources, this paper examines the intersection of the statistical data and death narratives as indications of the contemporary social and political climate surrounding transsexual sex workers.

Violence against queer people is an aggressive assault that operates to police gender, argues Vivian K. Namaste, in her inquiry into the erasure of transgender people from history.¹ Working from the stereotype of gendered public and private space illustrated in the different ways “lesbians” and “gays” experience violence, Namaste defines cultural and social perceptions as often intertwining and confusing gender and sex. These cultural stereotypes that mark public

space as male and private space as female are corroborated in violence reports, which according to Namaste, reveal gay men as more likely to be attacked in public space, usually around “gay” establishments, while lesbians are more likely to be attacked in and around their homes or work. Following this logic Namaste understands the use of words like “sissy,” “dyke,” and “faggot” to “suggest that an attack is justified not in reaction to one’s sexual identity, but to one’s gender presentation.”² The use of these words indicates that gender presentation figures prominently in these acts of violence.

What is perhaps most interesting in Namaste’s chapter “Genderbashing,” in terms of my work here, is a study conducted by Susanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, to which Namaste pays special attention. Kessler and McKenna presented 960 students with images of different bodies; this study found within these images of nude bodies that “[i]f a penis was present, a “male” gender attribution was made 96 percent of the time.”³ In contrast, “for a figure to be considered “female” more than 95 percent of the time, it needed to have a vagina and two other cues indicating femininity (e.g., long hair, breasts).”⁴ Following this Namaste summarizes, “If gender ambiguity is habitually resolved within a masculinist frame of reference, then genetic males who live as women will be among the most at risk for assault.”⁵

The gender policing that Namaste identifies appears quite strongly in these crimes: visible as women yet killed in an attempt to refuse their identity as women, a violent repossession of male space and reinforcement of the gender binary. 2006 reports published by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) and Communities United Against Violence (CUAV) indicate anti-transgender violence and murder is on the rise nationally. Locally, anti-transgender biased murders spiked in California doubling from 2005 to four. According to the NCAVP report, “Two of these victims identified as Latina while the third

identified as person of mixed heritage; Latina-African American.”⁶ These incidents follow a trend identified by NCAVP, which states that transgender women of color murder and death cases occurred at a higher rate from 2005 to 2006.⁷

Murder Narratives

Nakia Ladelle Baker

Two Nashville news reports, Out & About Newspaper, a queer newspaper, and the Nashville Police Department Crime Reports, a mainstream press, are my primary source for the following information regarding Baker’s murder. In the early morning hours of January 7, Nakia Ladelle Baker’s beaten body was discovered, next to her car, in the parking lot behind a nightclub in the Radnor neighborhood of Nashville, TN. Baker, a 31-year old transwoman of color from Murfreesboro, TN, died from “blunt force trauma to the head. Other reports indicate the autopsy found a bullet, which might indicate that Baker was shot after she had already died.

There have been no arrests made in connection to her death, and the investigation seems to have stalled despite a sensitive and pleading letter from her cousin, Robert Shaun White, to both Mayors of Murfreesboro and Nashville. He writes, “I have noticed in the past that the police in the city really takes a blind eye to violent crimes among the gay community you have there. I also am aware that the citizens in the city are tied deeply to [their] faith, but you have to admit that a crime that could have been committed in the name of hate and fear is despicable.”⁸

White’s plea to both mayors is particularly significant, since the three major news sources all identify Baker as a man found “dressed as a woman” who was socializing at a bar “frequented by men who dress like women.”⁹ White situates Baker’s death within the homosexual narrative rather than advocating for recognition of Baker’s transgender identity and her death as the result of anti-transgender violence.

While the advocacy by White is admirable and I believe comes from a place of genuine familial concern it buttresses the already existing biases, which dismiss or fail to recognize Baker's femaleness. While it's difficult to presume White's tactical misrecognition I would like to propose that this logic steams from a determination that the Nashville and Murfreesboro Communities must first acknowledge and protect their "gay" citizens before "we" can expect equal rights and treatment for trans people. In the mainstream news reports, statements issued by the Metro Nashville Police Department, and the obituary for Baker's funeral, male pronouns are used to exclusively identify Baker. This happens in spite of her gender presentation and despite her legal name change from her birth name Ladelle to her chosen name Nakia. Equally, the description of Baker as a "man dressed as a woman" withholds this as an act of identity and pronounces it as a fetish.

Ruby Rodriguez aka Ruby Ordeñana

"A young Latina transgender woman's body was found naked on Friday, March 16," reads the Bay Area Reporter (B.A.R) article by Heather Cassell, "at about 5:40 a.m. on the sidewalk in the 1600 block of Indiana Street between Cesar Chavez and Marin Streets."¹⁰ Later reports identify her as Ruby Rodriguez, a 30-year old immigrant from Nicaragua and an HIV positive sex worker. Although, legally Ruby Ordeñana she took her boyfriend's last name Rodriguez, which I will also use.

Rodriguez was strangled to death and her body discarded body near Interstate 280 in the Potrero Hill neighborhood of San Francisco.¹¹ Despite having lived in the United States for the past 10 years, Rodriguez was not a legal citizen. Luke Woodward identified as a friend of Rodriguez's told the B.A.R. "she was working on obtaining asylum in the U.S" but that "he [Luke] wasn't sure if her application had been accepted."¹²

The police reports identify Rodriguez as a “male to female transsexual” and that she “had some operations performed to become female.” Rodriguez’s identity is respected to the extent that female pronouns are used consistently in police reports and the press and that is not further dehumanized through the press and death narrative. However, at her funeral Rodriguez was re-dressed “as a boy” at the request of her father despite the fact that the funeral director had already dressed Rodriguez in a dress suit provided by her friends. Despite the more positive and life affirming treatment in the press, Rodriguez’s identity is still stripped away from her in this one last gesture. Although no arrests have been made, CUAV and The Transgender Law Center continue to advocate on her behalf and on behalf of her family.

Erica Keel

What we know of Erica Keel’s death is a complicated mix of eyewitness testimony and conflicting police reports and statements that don’t mesh up with the cause of death listed with the Medical Examiners Office. Keel, a 20-year old African American transgender woman, was struck by a moving vehicle, about 2 a.m. on March 21 and died two days later from multiple injuries.¹³ According to eyewitnesses and Savannah Hornbeck, who is identified as a close friend of Keel’s and a “peer educator for Youth Health Services,” Keel, who was engaging in sex work at the time, entered a car, only to be ejected from the car one block further.¹⁴ Keel hit her head on the pavement and as she lay in the street the driver of the vehicle proceeded to run over her by backing up and pulling forward over the Keel’s body four times. The driver then fled the scene.¹⁵

This narrative, which seems consistent with the medical examiner’s report, classified Keel’s death as a ‘hit and run’ is corroborated by a “handwritten AID (Accident Investigation Division) log also listing Keel’s death as a “hit and run.”¹⁶ The AID’s Lt. John Hearn, disputes

this evidence and restates it as accidental; “she [Keel] flies up in the air and strikes a parked, unattended auto, then a fire hydrant.”¹⁷ This is meant to account for her multiple injuries and disregards the possibility that she was struck multiple times by the driver.”¹⁸ Thus, the driver, identified as Roland Bottom, remains uncharged, as the police have “ruled Erica’s death an accident and have refused to conduct an investigation.”¹⁹

The gender policing that Namaste identifies appears quite strongly in these crimes: visible as women yet killed in an attempt to refuse their identity as women, a violent repossession of male space and reinforcement of the gender binary. The level of violence often beyond what is required to terminate life seems enough to classify these murders as hate-crimes, and yet this are often miscategorized because the police force or federal reports do not recognize transgender status.²⁰ Because of transphobia, transgender women are often described as “men dressed as women” and grouped into homosexual crime or “men who date men” crimes statistical categories.²¹

Considering the narratives of Nakia Ladell Baker, Ruby Rodriguez, and Erica Keel this analysis by Namaste becomes particularly illuminating. Baker, Keel, and Rodriguez each lived as women. Baker was killed just outside of a transgender/transsexual bar, “a place frequented by men who dress as women,” while both Keel and Rodriguez appear to have been engaged in sex work at the time of their deaths. Baker’s death, situated within the rubric of anti-gay violence, further marginalizes both her life and her death. Rodriguez’s identity lingers between visibility and invisibility – a border existence – Rodriguez/Ordeñana, Latina/Nicaraguan/Californian, and male/female. Equally, the intersection of multiple identities –illegal immigrant, HIV positive, post-operative, Latina, male to female transsexual, Californian resident—conflate in unique ways

only partially revealed in these narratives. Classifying Keel's death as accidental and refusing to investigate her death emerge as gestures of dismissal and attempted erasure of her life.

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“In recognition of Transgender Day of Remembrance,” reads the email I’ve just opened, “the FORGE website goes "black" on November 20, 2007.” It is November 20, I click on the link and am taken to a black page with white text that reads “We Remember.”

I remember.

Notes

¹ Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 145-156.

² Ibid., 140.

³ Ibid., 144.

⁴ Ibid., 144-145.

⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁶ Clarence Patton, *Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Violence in 2006: A Report of the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs*, (New York: NY, 2007), http://www.ncavp.org/common/document_files/Reports/2006NtnlHVRReportReleaseEdition.pdf.

⁷ Ibid., n.p.

⁸ Robert Shawn White, "Cousin of Nakia Ladell Baker sends letter to Nashville and Murfreesboro mayors", *Out and About Newspaper*, January 11, 2007, <http://outandaboutnewspaper.com/article.php?id=1255>.

⁹ Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, "Murder of Nakia Baker on Nolensville Road in South Nashville," *Crime of the Week 2007 Archives*. Nashville Crime Stoppers, February 6, 2007, http://www.police.nashville.org/get_involved/crime_stoppers/2007/0206.htm.

¹⁰ Heather Cassell, "Trans woman found dead," *Bay Area Reporter*, March 22, 2007, <http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=1656>.

¹¹ Heather Cassell, "Friends mourn Ruby Ordeñana", *Bay Area Reporter*, March 29, 2007, <http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=1676>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Timothy Cwiek, “‘Accidental’ death disputed”, Archives, *Philadelphia Gay News*, 2007, <http://www.epgn.com/041307/1accidental041307.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Timothy Cwiek, “ME: Trans death a ‘hit and run’”, Archives, *Philadelphia Gay News*, www.epgn.com/050407/1transdeath050407.htm.

¹⁷ Timothy Cwiek, “‘Accidental’ death disputed”, Archives, *Philadelphia Gay News*, 2007, <http://www.epgn.com/041307/1accidental041307.htm>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jennifer’s Blog. “Philadelphia Police Fail To Investigate Suspicious Death of a Transgender Woman.” *Young Philly Politics*, May 10, 2007. http://youngphillypolitics.com/philadelphia_police_fail_investigate_suspicious_death_transgender_woman_meeting_friday_plan_protest

²⁰ Megan Tady, “Transgender People Face Violence, Obstacles,” *New Standard News*, January 18, 2007, <http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/4103/printmode/true>.

²¹ Ibid.

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