

Why Do Men Kill Trans Women? - 'There were 23 known killings of transgender women in the United States in 2015'

Tuesday 23 August 2016, by [BUTLER Judith](#), [TOURJEE Diana](#) (Date first published: 16 November 2015).

In an exclusive interview with Broadly, the beloved philosopher and author of "Gender Trouble" discusses extreme violence against transgender women in 2015.

There were 23 known killings of transgender women in the United States in 2015. That number nearly doubled from the 12 reported in 2014. Broadly published an in-depth feature on these crimes in which we investigate their underlying cause. In addition to contacting police departments, victims' friends, and family, we interviewed the renowned queer theorist, Gender Trouble author Judith Butler.

Butler's insight into the lives and deaths of transgender women in 2015 penetrates beyond the surface details of their deaths. In conjunction with our analysis of the data, her perspective illustrates a startling reality about the real cause of violence against trans women, and the fatal importance of an intersectional approach to the liberation of transgender people.

One of the most disturbing, yet often easily overlooked, aspects of these crimes is the gender of the killers. Butler maps anti-trans violence back to the source, ultimately suggesting that trans deaths were caused by men because of men's need to meet culturally held standards of male power and masculinity.

She also insists that gender cannot be parsed from the other realities of the victims' lives. Ninety-one percent of the trans murders we investigated were people of color. They were primarily poor; many engaged in sex work. Law enforcement agencies have widely failed to classify these murders as hate crimes, maintaining a myopic perspective. By insisting that these facts be considered together, Butler does what the police have failed to do: recognize that the context in which these women lived and died is inseparable from their lives as transgender women of color.

Our full investigation into the killing of 23 transgender women in 2015 can be read here. What follows is Broadly's interview with Butler. It has been edited and condensed.

Diana Tourjee

BROADLY: 2015 was a year of contradiction for trans people. Visibility and representation were at an all-time high (because of Caitlyn Jenner, Transparent, etc.), and the triumphs of pop culture bled into politics (healthcare reform, Congress's Transgender Equality Task Force). But at the same time, violence reported against trans people basically doubled

since 2014. Can you speak to these dual truths and how they may be related to or play off each other?

Judith Butler: It is true that we have seen a clear increase in media attention to trans people and trans issues, but we have also seen a backlash. It may be that the proliferating signs of greater acceptance stoke those who are transphobic, so that there is now a kind of war between the move to acceptance and the move to consolidate violent exclusion or debasement of trans people. But I think we also have to take note of the limits of media attention. We have seen, for instance, how the election of the nation's first black president coincided with a worsening economic situation for black people, so media attention is hardly enough to secure concrete equality. The situation of trans people of color is more precarious as a result. It is always possible to be an object of public fascination or a visual icon of trans life that cisgendered people want to consume visually at the same time that the legal and economic situation for trans people remains bad, or worsens. There is a long history of cross-dressers, drag queens, and trans people as visual icons—sometimes the public wants them to stay precisely in that place, on the stage or on the film, “over there,” but not part of life. In *Transparent*, the visual imagery of trans draws on older conceits of trans people as both preposterous and entertaining. Laverne Cox is another story—there is nothing preposterous about the strength and the beauty.

All but two of 2015's 23 trans murder victims were transgender women of color. Many of them were poor, some sex workers. Why do we see this disparity in race and class, and how does gender come into play?

I cannot say how gender comes into play in each of these situations, but one thing we can know is that it is not exactly a “variable” that can be separated from the issues of class and race with which it is intertwined. My sense is that we cannot undertake the gender analysis separately. If we consider poor, trans sex workers, they are exposed not only to violence from clients and johns, but sometimes from police as well. In places like Brazil and Turkey, they have no recourse to the police or the law without exposing themselves to further injury. The violence against trans sex workers in Brazil and Argentina both is staggeringly high, which is one reason why the social movements in those countries—and the allied actions by feminists, queers, and gay and lesbian people—is so important.

“Trans women have relinquished masculinity, showing that it can be, and that is, very threatening to a man who wants to see his power as an intrinsic feature of who he is.”

The majority of these murdered trans women were under 25 years old. Do you think that youth experiences more violence because they are expressing this forbidden part of their gender for the first time, and an inhospitable society essentially snuffed it out?

These are terrible statistics, to be sure. I wonder whether the younger trans women are being mentored and protected, or whether they are operating outside of networks. I would need to know more to speculate on the grounds. But yes, youth can be attractive precisely because of their vulnerability, and they can also be exploited and murdered because of that vulnerability. It would be interesting to know whether their murderers kill because they are repelled by their own attraction, or whether they fear an identification with those they extinguish, and so extinguish a part of themselves.

Their killers were almost all men—only one identified murderer was a woman. Why would most of these killers be men? What's so threatening to some men about trans women?

It depends a great deal if we are talking about gay or straight men, and what kind of destructive

rage they undergo in relation to someone who has stepped out as a trans woman. Killing is an act of power, a way of re-asserting domination, even a way of saying, "I am the one who decides who lives and dies." So killing establishes the killer as sovereign in the moment that he kills, and that is the most toxic form that masculinity can take. Trans women have relinquished masculinity, showing that it can be, and that is, very threatening to a man who wants to see his power as an intrinsic feature of who he is.

"I presume that the straight man who shoots the trans woman, he feels like he has been" attacked" by the flirtation."

Zella Ziona, who was 21, was shot in the head shortly after she embarrassed a young male acquaintance by flirting with him in front of his friends. Mercedes Williamson was 17 when she was brutally murdered by a young man she knew and buried in the yard behind his father's home.

Yes, and we can add Larry King to that list—said to have flirted with his murderer, though we do not really know. I think perhaps that if a trans woman flirts with a man who is straight, and that man feels humiliated or embarrassed (is that last word strong enough? maybe mortified), it is probably because he is identified by the trans man as someone with whom flirtation is possible, who could himself be involved with a trans woman or might himself be one. For some straight men, it may be possible to flirt back or to say, "thanks but no thanks," and for others, they reach for a gun. What accounts for those differences? I presume that the straight man who shoots the trans woman, he feels like he has been "attacked" by the flirtation. That is very crazy reasoning, but there is lots of craziness out there when it comes to gender identity and sexuality.

The violence these women endured was extreme. They were stabbed, shot. Tamara Dominguez was killed by a man after he left her out of his car. He ran her over, and then ran over her body again and again. What does this extreme violence indicate?

It indicates that we are all living in a society in which such hideous and horrible things happen, and that there is nowhere near enough media attention paid to such matters. In fact, the popular media deflects from this aspect of trans existence when it should be raising our awareness and helping us to organize a systematic resistance to such violence. Perhaps the man who drives over the trans woman time and again cannot quite make her dead enough. At a certain point, she is already dead, but he is not finished killing her. Why? It is because he wants to obliterate any trace of his own relation to that living person, obliterating a part of himself and living person at the same time. But also establishing his absolute power, and his own masculinity as the site of that power. Perhaps he is rebuilding his gender as he continues to try to take apart and efface that trans woman who never deserved to die. He is seeking as well to establish a world in which no one like her exists.

"When the crime is not named as a hate crime, the police are sending the same message as the murderer."

In many cases, police have been quick to announce that these murders are specifically not being investigated as hate crimes. I went to Philadelphia this fall to investigate the murder of Keisha Jenkins; Keisha was 22 and killed in a well-known trans sex work area by a group of men. Police immediately announced that this was a robbery and not a hate crime, but during my week-long investigation I heard testimony from other poor, black trans sex workers in the area that indicated otherwise. One woman told me that Pedro Redding, the man being charged with Keisha's murder, was also a client. Is it possible to separate these murders from the context of the victims' lives as transgender women of color?

It is not possible to separate such murders from those contexts. The police are in this sense part of the very problem, refusing to name the crime, and so refusing to prosecute. This was also the case with Larry King in southern California. In trials such as those—as demonstrated by [psychoanalyst focusing on masculinity] Ken Corbett and [queer and trans theorist] Gayle Salamon—the murderer can be construed as a victim, “assaulted” by a joke or a flirtation. In the case of the murderous client, we have to wonder whether desire and hatred mix there in some truly toxic ways. The lives of transgender women of color are not accorded the same value as white women who are cisgendered, that is true. But what is really needed is an anti-racist, anti-transphobic movement that draws from the feminism of women of color and its trenchant critique of racism and police power.

Hate crime law identifies otherwise isolated criminal acts as part of a broader trend of prejudice-driven violence against groups of people with (perceived) shared characteristics. If one person is the victim of a hate crime, the rest of that group is at risk, too. Do you agree with that definition? Do you feel hate crime law is important?

I think that hate crime law is important. For it to work, we have to be able to establish evidence that it works in courts of law, and we know that some judges and some juries do not acknowledge the evidence that is right in front of their faces. Even as one has to have the best possible legal argument backed up by evidence, one also has to change the way that people hear and see. Both the visual and audible field are structured such that some crimes are never acknowledged as crimes—much less as hate crimes against minorities. What you point out is very important about the group character of a hate crime. If a trans woman is killed, it is a sign to other trans women that they can be killed as well. Same with the harassment, rape, or murder of butches and trans men—a problem that many groups are addressing in South Africa. Every time one trans person is killed, the message goes out to every trans person: You are not safe; this dead body could be yours. So the murder operates as a violent crime and as a threat that more violent crimes will happen. So when the crime is not named as a hate crime, or when the crime is dismissed because the murderer was somehow “prompted,” the police are sending the same message as the murderer.

The civil rights movements of the 20th century seem to be coming to a head again in the 21st. We’re fighting for women’s bodily autonomy, the Black Lives Matter movement is strong, and trans rights have come to the forefront after decades of a relative lack of visibility. Why do you think these movements are rising again?

Because people are angry and they see how class differences are intensifying, how their future horizons are shutting down, how there is no protection from police (they are neither protected by the police nor protected from police violence). They also see that major powers are thwarting the realization of equality and dignity, whether it is the right-wing assault on Planned Parenthood, the killing of unarmed black men and women in the streets by police who are then exonerated, or the radical lack of publicity given to the killing of transgendered people; their deaths are not noticed, their lives are considered ungrievable. All of these are lives that matter, who deserve to flourish, to exercise their freedom and to be entitled to equality before the law, who deserve a legal system in which equality and freedom are actually realizable. I do think that we are also seeing the emergence of people who understand their lives as precarious under contemporary work conditions, and who understand that basic rights are radically undermined by the strengthening of a militarized police force and a neoliberal state that safeguards its markets over its people.

What is really needed is an anti-racist, anti-transphobic movement that draws from the feminism of women of color and its trenchant critique of racism and police power. I believe that the trans movement encompasses issues beyond changing one’s sex; it challenges the fundamental building blocks of social identity and the power structures of our world. To you, is being transgender ultimately about accepting natural human

difference at large?

I think that trans people have to answer that question. Sometimes I think that I am probably trans, but that does not really suffice. Those who identify with the category and claim it in public are the ones who can say best how it relates to social identity. I do think that gender is very complex, involving for some a quite abiding sense of identity, but also a sense of freedom, desire, and a relation to both the public and private realm. It seems to me to be an integral aspect to who we are as social beings, and that we cannot think of our social existence without recourse to gender conventions and norms in some way.

How can we as a society work to protect transgender people who are at risk, to prevent this extreme violence?

Perhaps the question is, how can we work together for a society that overcomes its transphobia? My sense is that a movement that seeks to realize a better world for trans people should be joined by all of us, regardless of how we identify. Protection against violence is important, but relying on the police is not wise. So perhaps another kind of power, the power of self-determination, is what we need to strengthen so that a movement against transphobia is linked with the struggle against racism and poverty, against homophobia and misogyny, and against radical economic inequalities. Countering transphobia is, and should be, central to all those struggles.

P.S.

* "Why Do Men Kill Trans Women? Gender Theorist Judith Butler Explains". Broadly . DEC 16 2015 4:10 PM:

https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/why-do-men-kill-trans-women-gender-theorist-judith-butler-explains