

Black Trans Women Seek More Space in the Movement They Helped Start

At no point have black trans people shared fully in the gains of the L.G.B.T.Q. or racial justice movements. This may be changing.



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Transgender women of color were leaders in L.G.B.T.Q. activism before, during and after the uprising at the Stonewall Inn 51 years ago on Sunday, but they were never put at the center of the movement they helped start: one whose very shorthand, “the gay rights movement,” erases them.

Though active in the Black Lives Matter movement from the beginning, they have not been prioritized there either. At no point have black trans people shared fully in the gains of racial justice or L.G.B.T.Q. activism, despite suffering disproportionately from the racism, homophobia and transphobia these movements exist to combat.

But now, as the two movements are pulled together by extraordinary circumstances — the protests sparked by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery; the killings of two black trans women, Dominique Fells and Riah Milton, shortly after a black trans man, Tony McDade, was killed by the police; a pandemic that has disproportionately affected people of color; an economic crisis that has disproportionately affected trans people; and a Supreme Court decision protecting gay and trans people from employment discrimination, all coming to a head during Pride month — black trans people are mobilizing more visibly than ever before.

This moment, advocates say, is long overdue, and they are determined not to let it slip away.



Protesters dancing and marching in support of black trans people in Brooklyn, N.Y., on June 14. Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

For decades, the idea that “we were all minorities was enough for people to just say, ‘OK, that’s what we have in common, so if I win, that means you automatically are winning, too,’” said Peppermint, a black trans activist who co-hosted the Black Queer Town Hall, a three-night series of virtual performances and discussions this month. “I think that the notion of intersectionality is becoming more readily available for people to understand that a win for one group or one identity doesn’t necessarily equal an automatic win for the other.”

While L.G.B.T.Q. people have secured many legal rights and protections, black transgender women are still killed so often that the American Medical Association has declared it an epidemic. Last year, 91 percent of the transgender or gender-nonconforming people who were fatally shot were black women, according to the Human Rights Campaign. This year, at least 16 trans people have been killed — almost certainly an underestimate, because many cases go unreported and many victims are misgendered.

“So much money and resources and energy has been put into legislative fights or judicial fights, which is important — those wins are important,” the activist Raquel Willis said. “But as a black trans woman, I often have to grapple with the question of, what do any of these protections mean if I am dead, if I am still at risk of literally being killed?”

Violence against transgender people increased after President Trump was inaugurated, advocacy groups found in 2017, and Mr. Trump has singled out trans people in his policies since the beginning of his presidency.

His administration reversed Obama-era protections for transgender students, reimposed a ban on trans people serving in the military and, just this month, erased rules protecting them from discrimination in health care. It also sought to define gender as an immutable trait assigned at birth — an effort that would, essentially, define trans people out of legal existence.

“The attacks on the trans community are at every level, and it’s coming from the highest office in this country, and it has from Day 1,” said Sarah Kate Ellis, president of the L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy group GLAAD. “I think that black trans people and trans people of color are mobilizing and using this platform and this moment because you can’t have black lives matter without having black trans lives matter.”

In recent weeks, donations to grass-roots organizations that help black trans people, bail funds and individual fund-raisers have surged.

And two weeks ago, 15,000 people showed up for the Brooklyn Liberation march after the killings of Mr. McDade, Ms. Fells and Ms. Milton.

Ms. Willis was one of the speakers at the protest, as was Melania Brown, the sister of Layleen Polanco, who was active in the ballroom scene in New York as a member of the House of Xtravaganza and who died last year after having a seizure in a cell in Rikers Island, where guards failed to check on her.



Ianne Fields Stewart founded The Okra Project, which serves black trans people and has seen a spike in donations. Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

"Fifteen thousand people should now be the number that always serves as the bare minimum when state-sanctioned violence happens against black trans people," said Ianne Fields Stewart, founder of The Okra Project, a collective that provides black trans people with home-cooked meals prepared by black trans chefs.

Nala Toussaint, the founder of Reuniting of African Descendants, a grass-roots healing initiative for L.G.B.T.Q. people of African descent, said the trans community had always taken care of its own by "making sure that we have food in our stomach, making sure that our folks have housing, making sure that there's lights and building utilities running."

What is new is the national visibility of black trans people as movement leaders, and the prominence of their structural demands.

Calls to redistribute police funding to education and public housing could benefit black transgender people, who because of widespread transphobia have some of the highest rates of homelessness and unemployment in the country. More than one in four transgender people have lost a job because of bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced workplace discrimination, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality.

The idea of defunding the police is also tied to efforts to change the criminal justice system more broadly: Peppermint noted, for instance, that decriminalizing sex work could reduce interactions between officers and trans people, especially black trans women, which can be traumatic or even deadly.

A report from the N.C.T.E. found that 22 percent of transgender people who interacted with the police reported harassment. For black trans people, and especially sex workers, the number was higher.

Black trans activists are also calling for the redistribution of resources within mainstream L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy organizations that have usually been led by white, cisgender people.

National nonprofits with strong funding "need to get serious about reallocating resources to black- and brown-led grass-roots initiatives," Ms. Willis said, "and they need to really reorient themselves around who they consider to be a leader."

Historically, mainstream L.G.B.T.Q. rights groups have focused more on white gay people and lesbians than on trans people or people of color. While that has begun to change, there remains a well of mistrust and a conviction that effective advocacy will need to be led by black trans people.

"They don't know the first thing about what it is to live a life like we have, and they have no comprehension as to what it is we suffer and go through," said Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, one of the last surviving leaders of the Stonewall uprising. "So I myself do not participate in groups that are led by white people, because they just don't understand."

That lack of understanding is part of what advocates are trying to address.

Daniella Carter, a black trans woman from Queens, said that in high school, her classmates seemed to be "just learning what L.G.B.T. meant, let alone what transgender meant."

Ms. Carter, now 26, was homeless and did sex work for much of her adolescence. But at times, "it wasn't navigating survival sex work that felt like it was the burden, it was having to go to school and watch an entire classroom move away from me," she said. "Because not only was I a burden to that space, there wasn't even enough language out there yet to talk about what acceptance looked like."

Her life changed, she said, after she saw Janet Mock on the cover of Marie Claire magazine.

It was the first time she had seen a trans woman "who reflected that woman I always dreamed of — the woman who is black, who's powerful, who can present herself chic," she said. "I said to myself, 'I don't know how, but I have to get in touch with this woman.' I'm like, 'That's me, and I need to learn how to be that.'"

Ms. Carter did get in touch with Ms. Mock and other black trans activists, and eventually went to film school. This weekend, she released a video that highlighted trans people and emphasized their resilience — part of an effort to increase the visibility of trans people's stories, and not just the ones in which they are victims.

A similar impulse was behind the Black Queer Town Hall, which Peppermint said stemmed from the many conversations she had with Bob the Drag Queen, her friend and co-organizer, about the killings of black trans people.

"We said to each other, 'We need to do something that is more celebratory,'" she said. "Because all of the conversation around this only focuses on the terrible parts of this, which need to be talked about, but we wanted a moment to celebrate queer black excellence."

The premiere of "Disclosure," a Netflix documentary executive produced by Laverne Cox, has drawn new attention to Hollywood's depictions of trans people. New York City Pride's annual rally on Friday — held virtually this year — was hosted by two black trans people, Brian Michael Smith and Ashlee Marie Preston.





Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in 1989 or 1990 in Manhattan. Rudy Grillo/The LGBT Community Center Archive

This sort of public visibility is very much new. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, trans women who were key figures in the Stonewall uprising, got a monument in New York last year, although neither lived to see it.

But Miss Major, one of their fellow leaders at Stonewall, is still alive, a fact she phrases in defiant terms: “I’m still here,” with an expletive. Miss Major, 79, was executive director of the Transgender Gender-Variant Intersex Justice Project and now runs a house for trans people in Arkansas.

She has been vocal about the erasure of black trans people in the broader L.G.B.T.Q. movement, and said in an interview this week that while she hoped this moment would be different, she did not expect it to be unless her community fought loudly for itself.

“What I tell the girls is that they’ve got to keep fighting,” she said. “They must keep fighting. Because if they don’t succeed and do the work, we’ll get left behind, and one thing we cannot accept is being left behind this time.”

Correction: June 29, 2020

An earlier version of this article referred imprecisely to the role of transgender women of color in the Stonewall Inn uprising, suggesting they were the sole leaders. Trans women of color were leaders in L.G.B.T.Q. activism before, during and after the uprising, but they were among many activists who led at Stonewall.

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