

United States: LGBTQ People and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Tuesday 23 August 2016, by [MILAN Kim Katrin](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2016).

The visibility and presence of Black LGBTQ people is fraught with racialized homophobia and transphobia that co-opts their efforts.

For over two years Black Lives Matter as a movement and a hashtag has been furthering both local and international discourses on police brutality and anti-Black racism. With a distinct approach to leadership and engagement, this civil rights movement has women, queer and trans people in visible and central roles, something we haven't seen in the past.

They are self-described [\[1\]](#) as a “leaderfull movement ... composed of many local leaders and organizations.” One consequence of this diversity are the increasingly complex conversations about whose Black lives really matter. For Black LGBTQ people who affirm kinship through activism inclusive of all Black folks, they are asked to contend with misogyny, homophobia and transphobia that permeate organizing spaces both on and offline. The visibility and presence of Black LGBTQ people is fraught with racialized homophobia and transphobia that co-opts their efforts while maintaining much of the same systemic and community based violence. An intersectional approach to education and movement building is necessary to combat these attitudes and address the legislation of bias.

Black LGBTQ people have been integral in civil rights movements, most notably Bayard Rustin, advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. and the organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. He set the stage for one of the largest nonviolent protests ever held in the United States. Despite his work, “Rustin was silenced, threatened, arrested, beaten, imprisoned and fired from important leadership positions.” He was told often that his sexuality was a distraction to the movement.

In “Brother Outsider,” [\[2\]](#) the award-winning documentary on his life and accomplishments, we learn that he was meant to address the crowd in Washington, but a recent arrest where he was targeted as a gay man led to him being barred from doing so. Instead of a recognition that the police brutality gay Black men were facing in America was part of a larger conversation, it was excluded from the dialogue all together. BLM acknowledges that “those old models attempted to silence gay and lesbian leadership.” [\[3\]](#) And this legacy is part of what organizers continue to endure.

Today we see how this kind of homophobia and transphobia happens in ways that are both familiar and unique. The disproportionate way that trans women of color fall victim to homicide [\[4\]](#), yet remain largely unacknowledged when their lives are taken. Black Lives Matter reported on “the loud silence when trans women of color are killed,” [\[5\]](#) despite the fact that “among LGBTQ communities, trans people are most susceptible to police violence; trans women in particular are most likely to be killed by hate violence homicides.”

Lesbian Black Lives Matter Pasadena leader Jasmine Richards’ was convicted June 1 of “felony lynching” after attempting to “intervene in what she and other activists believed was the unjust

arrest of a Black woman last year.” It was the support she received from Angela Davis as a fellow, Black, queer, political prisoner that was part of what got her through her time in prison.

After Ferguson activist and Baltimore mayoral candidate Deray McKesson was arrested in Baton Rouge, there were multiple tweets that suggest that the reason why Black men don’t follow and support him is because he is a gay Black man. Everyone has the choice to feel aligned with a leader or not, but that alignment should be based on something more meaningful than stereotypes or assumptions about their sexual orientation.

This hasn’t deterred activists from their work or from finding love grounded in political resistance.

Down in Ferguson back in 2014, two of the founders of Millennial Activists Brittany Ferrell and Alexis Templeton wed at St. Louis City Hall only a month after a state judge overturned Missouri’s constitutional ban on gay marriage. As written in the *St. Louis American* [6],

“After they received the license in the small office, the crowd chanted, “Black love matters.”

Throughout the event, police were speckled throughout the halls and entrances. They even asked activist DeRay McKesson when he arrived if they were trying to shut down City Hall. He told them, “No.” It was just two people celebrating their love and trying to get married.

Patrisse Cullors is the cofounder of Black Lives Matter. She is also a performance artist [7] who has performed on multiple stages including in Toronto in 2015 as part of Cabaret featuring queer and trans political artists. She is a Fulbright scholar, an NAACP History Maker [8] as well as new mother. She speaks on her marriage to Toronto-based activist Janaya Khan, a part of Black Lives Matter Toronto. In *Esquire*, Cullors reflects on the fraught and complicated history Black people have with marriage and the state,

“I knew marriage—in all its messy complexity—was right. Janaya and I dreamed together. We dreamed about what our union meant to both of our countries that raised us while ostracizing us. We dreamed about how powerful it was for two queer Black people to tie the knot. We reflected on the time when marriage was illegal for Black people and remembered when it was illegal, just months earlier, for LGBTQ people. We understood our love as an act of political resistance.”

This love is at the foundation of greater work being done for the community, BLM in Toronto is largely organized with queer and trans folks both at the front lines and the works of multiple queer and trans activists and scholars highlighted in their syllabus and as educators for their Freedom School.

The false rumors that plague our community suggest that we can’t wait to push our “agenda,” but the plain facts show our community specific issues are not centralized, despite the fact that LGBTQ folks of color are more likely to face violence than heterosexual counterparts. Activists and advocates don’t allow the homophobia of others detract them from fighting for the freedom of all Black People.

The push for intersectionality in our movements that comes from Britney Coopers significant work with #SayHerName, and her presentation “Towards a Gender Inclusive Movement for Black Lives” [9] requires that we consider the multiplicity of those intersections and centering all vulnerable and marginalized groups We know that disabled people are far too likely to be shot by the police with half of the people killed by the police having a disability [10]. We know that Black women trans and cis ages 18-35 are most likely to die as a result of domestic violence [11]. We know that queer and trans women are experiencing street harassment and gender-based violence both inside and out of movement spaces.

There is more than enough space for these issues to all be interconnected and important.

Kim Katrin Milan

P.S.

* Published 1 August 2016:

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/11-major-misconceptions-about-the-black-lives-matter-movement>

* Kim Katrin Milan is a writer, multidisciplinary artist, activist, consultant, and educator. Milan is the co-founder and current executive director of The People Project, a movement of queer and trans folks of color and allies, committed to individual and community empowerment through alternative education, art activism and collaboration.

Footnotes

[1] <http://blacklivesmatter.com/11-major-misconceptions-about-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

[2] http://rustin.org/?page_id=2

[3] Idem.

[4] ESSF (article 38791), [Why Do Men Kill Trans Women? - 'There were 23 known killings of transgender women in the United States in 2015'](#).

[5] <http://blacklivesmatter.com/the-loud-silence-when-trans-women-of-color-are-killed/>

[6] http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/revolutionary-love-ferguson-protest-leaders-get-engaged-at-city-hall/article_bcd08906-8590-11e4-9673-239990c2313c.html

[7] <http://patrissecullors.com/art/>

[8] <http://www.naacp.org/blog/entry/naacp-history-makers>

[9] <https://vimeo.com/152294421>

[10] <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/half-people-killed-police-suffer-mental-disability-report-n538371>

[11] <http://time.com/3313343/ray-rice-black-women-domestic-violence/>