

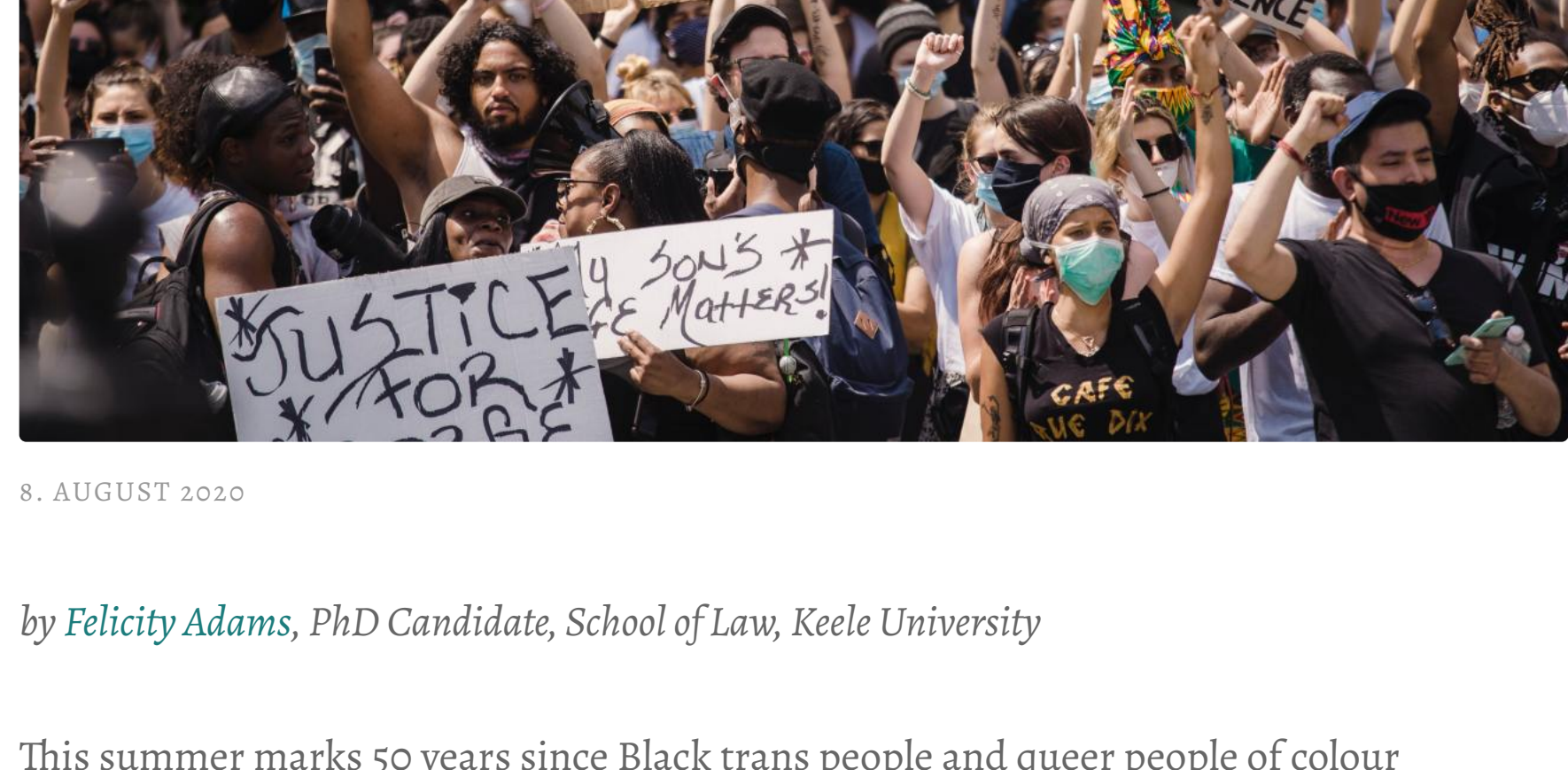


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# Black and Trans Lives Matter: the link between policing, anti-blackness and anti-transness



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This summer marks 50 years since Black trans people and queer people of colour including Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Stormé DeLarverie led the Stonewall Rebellion against systemic police violence. As Bassichis, Lee, and Spade highlight:

“These early freedom fighters knew all too well that the NYPD – “New York’s finest” – were the frontline threat to queer and trans survival... Stonewall was the culmination of years of domination, resentment, and upheaval in many marginalized communities coming to a new consciousness of the depth of violence committed by the government against poor people, people of color, women, and queer people”.

Their courageous and collective actions culminated in the birth of the gay and queer liberation movement and what we refer to as Pride – a month of community remembrance and celebration.

In 2020, Pride month and the Black Lives Matter movement converge. These movements are united by a shared and resurgent history: police violence. Many are challenging the legitimacy of the police in response to historic and the most recent iteration of racialized, police brutality against George Floyd. Meanwhile, some have used this moment to emulate policing logics by regulating the identities of transgender people – the vanguard of the gay and queer liberation movement. This is, as Andrea J. Ritchie describes “gender policing” – or actions that work to “produce, maintain, reify racially constructed gender norms”.

Once again, the issue of gender policing has risen to the top of public discourse, this time through recent commentaries by high-profile writers during the midst of a global pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Pride month. These recent commentaries work to monitor gender identity and govern transgender people’s lives. As such they reproduce the logics of colonialism and white supremacy because gender policing is “embedded in, operates in conjunction with, and furthers policing of race, class and nation”.

## Black Lives Matter and Policing

The police have an established history of racist violence against Black communities in the Euro-West. Their unrelenting brutality against Black people is accompanied by a culture of impunity. Although the police have issued apologies in the past for some instances of racism, they continue to disproportionately target Black communities. As such they render these reparative efforts as performative. The police can be said to use apologies opportunistically; ultimately using these methods to legitimise their violent and racist behaviour and to bolster their image as the beacons of safety and security.

The latest instances of racialised police violence against George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery evoked an outpouring of anger, grief, and solidarity across America. This chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement quickly crossed the American borders and transformed into a collective, global struggle against systemic racism, anti-blackness, and white supremacy. Across the world, swathes of people have attended marches and static protests to challenge the institutionalisation of anti-blackness and white supremacist agendas and to show that Black Lives Matter.

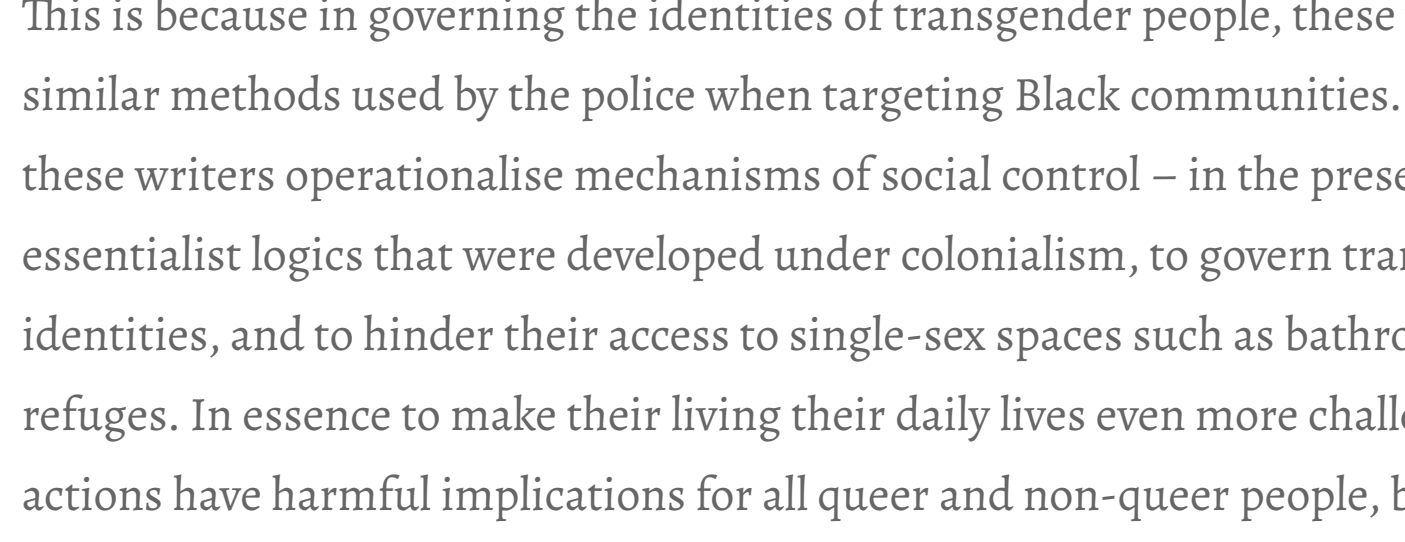
During this current moment of anger and collectivisation across the world, some white people have sought to meaningfully engage with their position in the history of anti-blackness and racism. Many have pledged to become better allies by actively using their white privilege to challenge systemic inequality experienced by Black communities.

## Doubling down on gender policing

Meanwhile, amid the collective struggle against institutional anti-blackness and Pride month, some high-profile white commentators, including J.K. Rowling have relinquished the opportunity to actively confront the British role in colonialism and white supremacy. Although at points, these writers have used their large media platforms to amplify some Black voices, they have not seized this moment to educate their following on the history of systemic racism and the harms generated under whiteness. Similarly, they have not grasped this moment to affect long-lasting change. For example, by using their platforms to challenge institutions such as the criminal legal system for its role in furthering “racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia”.

Instead, these commentators have seemingly supported the Black Lives Matter movement, while simultaneously doubling down on methods of policing to problematise the identities of transgender people. They claim to regulate the identities of transgender people, namely trans women under the guise of “protecting” all women. In reality, they have appointed themselves as the Gender Cops to fiercely govern the parameters of a certain, white notion of womanhood and upholding gender essentialism, which excludes people on the basis of race, class, ability, and sexuality as well as gender identity. Postcolonial feminists such as Ratna Kapur caution against replicating Western feminist tactics that “serve only to erase or marginalise the heterogeneity of the Others”. However, by enforcing gender conformity and excluding the “Other” based on the desire to preserve uniformity, exclusionary or “gender critical” feminists play directly into these harmful “us and them” narratives. As Lola Olufemi reminds us: “As feminists, we have a duty to dismantle that circus and redirect public imagination. Trans life is fundamental to our collective liberation”. This means proactively using our privilege and politics to dismantle harmful systems of Othering, rather than remodelling existing methods of exclusion and state violence.

As the Marsha P. Johnson Institute clarifies:



This is because in governing the identities of transgender people, these writers employ similar methods used by the police when targeting Black communities. Like the police, these writers operationalise mechanisms of social control – in the present case, essentialist logics that were developed under colonialism, to govern trans people’s identities, and to hinder their access to single-sex spaces such as bathrooms, prisons, and refuges. In essence to make their living their daily lives even more challenging. These actions have harmful implications for all queer and non-queer people, but particularly for Black transgender women and transfeminine people.

## The link between policing, anti-blackness and anti-transness

Many Black feminists have highlighted the intersection between “the imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” as central to our everyday experiences and social positioning. Similarly, what fundamentally binds policing, anti-blackness and anti-transness are violent colonial logics, white supremacy, and capitalism. These are the interlocking systems that enforce sameness, punish difference, and predominantly revere white, cis, heterosexual, upper-class men – all in the pursuit of maintaining conformity, a false sense of unity, and profit. As Queer (In)Justice demonstrate “gender and sex policing are not only important weapons of policing race and class, but also critical independent functions of law enforcement.”

The gender binary is a method of social categorisation that was originally imposed on indigenous communities by the Euro-West to regulate bodies, identities, and ways of being. Authors such as Simpson illustrate the normalcy of indigenous people’s fluid gender identities throughout their lifetimes before the institutionalisation of the gender binary by colonisers. The process of enforcing the gender binary was undeniably violent. As Ritchie highlights, Gary Bowmen, a transgender man describes Native people historically to “have been murdered, burned, beaten, hanged, imprisoned, flogged, stripped, humiliated, and otherwise forced into compliance with dominant standards of gender and sexuality or exterminated when they resisted”.

Although rooted in a history of violence, subscription to the gender binary has since been normalised as a precondition to humanness across the Euro-West. However, it remains a product of the colonial project that works to “erase” variance and limit the possibilities of identity. We must remember that like all gender identities, transgender people’s identities also exist along a continuum. Many trans people identify within the gender binary to varying degrees, but some people also express their identities outside of this binary. Despite the diversity of trans people’s identities, contemporary commentators mainly direct their anti-trans rhetoric towards transgender women and transfeminine people. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Black feminists have highlighted that the gender binary is underpinned by white and colonial conceptions of gender; meaning that the very foundation of the gender binary is implicitly exclusionary – especially for Black trans women and Black transfeminine people. Thereby shrinking the potential for gender identity and expression.

The contemporary focus on transgender women also reflects what Julia Serano terms “transmisogyny”. In essence, the distinct and intersecting gendered and sexist oppressions experienced by trans women and transfeminine people. This is despite the reality that like non-trans women, transgender women are subject to the patriarchy in similar and different ways. Recent estimates highlight that their life expectancy in the Americas is between 30 and 35 years; suggesting that trans women as a collective experience heightened forms of disadvantage throughout their lifetimes. It is also important to engage with the racial dimensions of this issue. Black transgender people’s experiences are distinct within this prism, as they are shown to experience high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and discrimination by law enforcement agents. Meanwhile, Black transgender women are disproportionately subject to transphobic fatal violence.

We must appreciate that this most recent instalment in anti-trans discourse is not coincidental. During Pride month and the Black Lives Matter movement, it serves as an intentional reminder to all transgender people, particularly to Black transgender women that they threaten colonial systems of social categorisation. This is what Trudy refers to as “transmisogynoir” in action – a term to name and describe the distinct experiences of misogyny, transphobia, and racism by Black transgender women. Heng-Lehtinen, Deputy Executive Director for the National Center for Transgender Equality reinforces that “Black transgender women live at the deadly intersection of transphobia, sexism and racism”. And while this is by no means a new phenomenon, its dimensions, especially in the present socio-political context are undeniably necropolitical. In other words, the current anti-trans discourse is underpinned by hegemonic understandings of who is, “who may live and who must die”. Historically, Black trans people have been confined to the bottom of this hierarchy through the actions of white people who consciously deploy the mechanics of colonialism to preserve an artificial binary and a false sense of unity.

## Creating more liveable societies for all people

As a society, we must recognise gender policing for what it is: a further entrenchment of anti-blackness and anti-transness via renewed logics of colonialism. We must follow the messages by many Black feminists such as bell hooks, the Combahee River Collective, and Kimberlé Crenshaw and understand that the struggles against race and gender policing are inextricably linked. We must accept that anti-blackness and anti-transness are driven by the same colonial legacies and white supremacist agendas that empower the privileged and subjugate the marginalised. Fundamentally then, we must all understand that anti-transness and policing in all forms are fundamentally incompatible with anti-racist praxis.

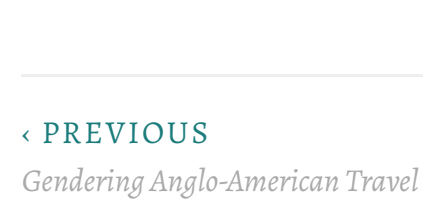
Now more than ever before, it is vital that we, as white and queer people in the present meaningfully engage with the legacies of colonialism and white supremacist ideologies in all of their forms, to cultivate more liveable societies for all people. We cannot claim to be actively anti-racist or feminist if our politics flourish by making our trans siblings and others’ lives unliveable. As bell hooks suggests “women’s liberationists will always be at odds with one another as long as our idea of liberation is based on the power that white men have”. Instead, we must break down these structures that inflict multi-layered harm on already marginalised communities.

Above all else, we must overcome exclusionary feminisms that merely seek a share in existing power structures that embody the dialectics of colonialism and reproduce the status quo. As Audre Lorde says “the failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower”. This means that rather than assimilating with regulatory systems and institutions, such as the police that aim to divide us, we must unite and join the real struggle against these regulatory, imperial-capitalist forces that harm us all. It requires that we also look reflexively at the “history of the gender binary and understand this system as what Che Guevara describes as: “part of the carceral continuum”. Fundamentally, it means that we must embrace the complex and intersectional nature of these struggles to change the systemic inequalities at the heart of capitalism. That is of course if we are truly committed to achieving the liberation of all people.

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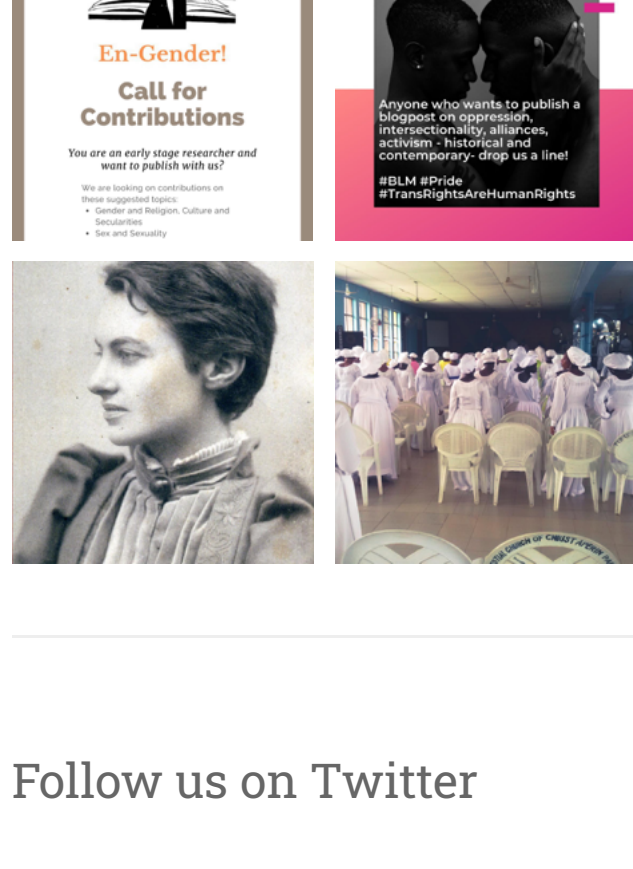
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