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STAYIN' ALIVE: TRANS SURVIVAL AND STRUGGLE ON THE STREETS OF PHILADELPHIA

MICHELLE O'BRIEN

(penury = extreme poverty)

Trans people in Philadelphia have fought for decades for our survival and liberation. Many trans people in Philadelphia face penury, racism, street violence, and harassment. Completely excluded from the wage economy through job discrimination and poverty, many of the city's poor trans people and trans people of color are left with few options but sex work to make ends meet. Until recently, trans people have had no access to affordable and respectful health care. Trans women find hormones on the street when doctors' offices are too hateful or too expensive. Excluded from homeless shelters, brutalized by police, unjustly held in prison, and faced with high rates of HIV and Hep C, trans people have had to rely on each other for our survival.

Gender variant communities across the city have spent years developing networks of mutual aid and support. These networks have taken many forms. Some trans people, particularly black trans women, have found support and care in the infrastructure of House families within the Ball Scene, an underground dance subculture. House families provide literal surrogate families and regional systems of support. House families assist each other in housing and medical and emotional care. This network is invaluable for many trans women with nowhere else to turn. Trans

people in Philadelphia have also developed an interconnected collection of support groups, where we provide each other with advice and dignity through difficult times.

Informal systems of mutual support for trans people have begun to provide the beginnings of political movements for justice. Trans community and health activists recently organized a successful trans health conference, bringing together diverse communities to fight for affordable, accessible, and respectful health care. We are beginning to plan a trans-run emergency housing facility for gender minorities. Marginalized trans people are defining and leading these innovative social service and health projects. We are redefining the world of social service agencies, both gay and straight, that have long excluded trans people.

Philadelphia trans politics have long been hampered by extreme racial and class division—deep, insurmountable splits between suburban white heterosexual cross-dressers and center city African-American trans sex workers, between young white punk transmen and femme queen vogue dancers, between successful professionals and trans people in prisons, in inpatient facilities or on the streets. Much of the successes of recent organizing comes from beginning to build respectful connections across these many divides of race and class.

As a trans woman with white and middle-class privilege, I've been working with a few other white or middle-class trans people to establish relationships of accountability and respect with other trans communities. Working out these relationships is complex and requires understanding, patience, and dedication. By recognizing the differences of privilege, access, and experience within our communities, we are laying the groundwork for standing with each other as allies in ways that are lasting and real. As white or economically privileged trans people, challenging our own racism and classism is crucial in order to be effective and sincere participants in a movement that addresses the needs of all trans people.

These new cross-racial connections among trans people are powerful and exciting. They are possible because of relationships we formed in organizing a memorial for Nizah Morris in February of 2003. Just before Christmas 2002, in center city Philadelphia, Nizah Morris was mysteriously murdered. Nizah was well known as a performer, a loved member of her family, and as a mentor for other African-American trans women. While the circumstances are far from clear, the police stories from that night are extremely dubious. Suspicions of police culpability are but-

tressed by less deniable truths: the media and police response to Nizah's death reflected extreme racism, transphobia, negligence, and hatred.

For weeks, the police refused to investigate Nizah's death or to classify it as a murder. Media coverage horribly misidentified Nizah as a male prostitute and made repeated unsubstantiated accusations of illegal drug use. Nizah's family, and many throughout trans and gay black communities in Philadelphia, were offended and outraged by the media and police. Many mainstream gay organizations failed to respond to her murder. The *Philadelphia Gay News* ran a horrible and offensive article on her death that parroted police lies, clearly indicating the reporter's failure to actually talk to Nizah's friends or family.

We put together a coalition of individuals and groups to organize a large memorial for Nizah. The organizing was extraordinary. Trans people managed to maintain consistent leadership, and a working-class black trans woman from Nizah's community took the main leadership role. It was the first time anyone remembers black and white trans people working effectively together in Philadelphia. With the participation of Nizah's family, we drew from the support of many communities and organizations around Philadelphia and put together a widely publicized and powerful memorial, drawing over three hundred people. We managed to define and solicit the support of gay- and lesbian-run organizations, like the community center or legal activist center, without letting them take charge. Instead, the needs of Philadelphia's marginalized trans people defined the agenda.

The event had a major impact on the police and media response to her death. Police finally began an investigation of sorts, and classified the death (six weeks later) as a homicide. The district attorney conducted an investigation. News coverage improved dramatically. The *Philadelphia Gay News*, in particular, did a dramatic turnaround. In subsequent months, they ran a penetrating series of articles on the issue, exposing police misconduct and institutional negligence, and spotlighting Nizah's extraordinary life.

Nizah's death was far from an isolated instance. In beginning to build mass movements that link justice for trans people to other movements for social justice and survival, we must locate our work and oppression within a broader context. The organizing in honor of Nizah was powerful not only because of the relationships built between diverse trans communities but also because of the ways her death linked to larger issues of racism, capitalism, and state violence. Looking at this

history can contribute to building the effective, strategic, and powerful movements we need in order to defend the survival and freedom of trans people. Philadelphia has a long history of extreme police brutality focused against the city's poor people of color. The more publicized police terror against black liberationists Mumia Abu-Jamal and the MOVE family are just a part of the larger violent war that has been waged over decades against poor black Philadelphians by the police department.

This war is particularly vicious for poor trans and gay people of color in Philadelphia. Nizah Morris is one in a long, long list of trans and gay black people who have died either at the hands of police or under circumstances that the police have been unable or unwilling to effectively respond to. In a well-known gay neighborhood, police harassment of poor black gay and trans people—especially sex workers—is constant. As a social service worker and support group facilitator, I've heard more than my fair share of stories of trans people raped repeatedly and otherwise brutalized by police.

Two Philadelphia organizations have consistently linked the racist wars within our city to a broader regional and global context: the International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia and ACT UP Philadelphia. While neither has placed trans issues centrally, both provide the breadth of analysis and work that is invaluable in understanding the relevance of trans organizing for health care and against violence.

International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia has spearheaded a global movement to free death row political prisoner and activist Mumia Abu-Jamal. They've been successful at linking Mumia's struggle for freedom and survival to a broader context of white supremacist violence and to a wide range of other social justice struggles and oppressed communities. They've drawn together an extraordinary, diverse, and global movement to stand against Mumia's execution. From French government officials to Los Angeles neighborhood groups, Italian Communists to Mexico City prison abolitionists, Mumia's case and Philadelphia based organizing have networked a remarkable coalition against white supremacy, state violence, and capitalism.

The organizing around Mumia's case can be an inspiration for trans activists in Philadelphia. Despite the homophobia and transphobia of key leadership in International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia, queer and trans people have been central to Mumia solidarity groups across the country. Trans people, particularly trans people of color, have been on the forefront of challenging

In Guatemala in the mid-1990s, for instance, the U.S. began to de-escalate the war it had been waging with the help of a military dictatorship against the country's social justice movements and indigenous peasant populations. After decades of scorched earth, death squads, and mass concentration camps, it became politically expedient to make Guatemala into a more stable society that could support the construction of *maquiladoras*—ultraexploitative industrial manufacturing centers for clothing—in a predominantly agrarian economy. So the government signed a few peace treaties, disarmed the guerrilla groups, and hired most of its army as security guards. Meanwhile, the only death squads that continue to operate in Guatemala City are not targeting social justice activists or ex-guerrilla *politicos* (although both could face such violence if there were again political movements threatening capital in the country); instead, these death squads are primarily targeting trans sex workers. Like several other Central American cities—San Cristobal de Las Casas, San Salvador, Panama City—the last few years have been marked by a dramatic escalation of paramilitary violence against the city's poor trans people.

Here in the United States such links are obvious to anyone looking. In the agendas of the New Right, whether we are talking about Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, transphobia, homophobia, and racism are intimately linked. Extreme sexual and gender normativity, enforced throughout the state's policies, are deeply interwoven with the intensification of white supremacy through the prison system, in exclusions from higher education, or in the gutting of social services. Immigration policy offers one example of the institutional interconnection of racism and transphobia. Trans immigrants face serious discrimination: bans against immigrants living with HIV, wide personal discretion given to transphobic immigration officials, inadequate asylum rights for trans people, and systematic violence against trans people in INS detention facilities. These forms of violence are embedded in a profoundly racist structure designed to terrorize immigrants of color. Here in Pennsylvania, one Guatemalan trans woman is fighting deportation while being held by the INS. The racism and transphobia of the INS here is intimately linked to the violence on the streets of Guatemala City.

Our organizing for the survival and health of our trans communities is deeply wrapped up in this ongoing reality of racist and transphobic violence institutionalized on all levels of state and corporate policy. State violence doesn't just take the form of death squads and police helicopters dropping C4 bombs, but it also manifests as institutional neglect, poverty, and poor health care.

While many trans women have died at the hands of Philadelphia police, more have died of AIDS in a city with grossly inadequate resources to address the health crises in poor trans communities. Our work for health care, housing, and against violence sets us against racist capitalism.

By linking these issues in our analyses and work, we can all begin to do what mainstream gay movements won't: build movements committed to justice for all people, movements committed to challenging capitalism and white supremacy alongside fighting homophobia. The survival of trans people, poor queers, and many others across the globe urgently depends on these movements.

Michelle O'Brien is a queer, genderqueer, and transsexual woman living in Philadelphia. As a writer, activist, and artist, she fights for social justice and health care with trans and genderqueer people. Coming out of anarchist political movCllents against imperialist war, capitalism, environmental decimation, and white supremacy, she Iries to connect diverse issues and communities. She works as a social worker for trans people living with HIV. She welcomes contacts and can be reached by email at michelle@deadletter.org.uk.

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