

# Trans Activists, Visibility & Violence

📅 April 25, 2023    👤 T.J. Jourian



“I would have rather been punished for asserting myself than become another victim of hatred” - CeCe McDonald

In June 2012, [CeCe McDonald](#), a Black trans woman, accepted a plea bargain for second-degree manslaughter for defending herself against a man who verbally and physically assaulted her and her friends outside a Minneapolis bar. [FREE CeCe](#), a documentary by Laverne Cox and Jac Gares, tells McDonald’s story as contextualized within the [epidemic](#) of violence experienced by Black and brown trans women.

McDonald was fully aware of the possibility of death had she chosen not to defend herself, as well as the possibility of 40 years of incarceration had she not taken a plea. Black and brown trans women are consistently the majority of trans people murdered each year in the US, a number that [doubled between 2017 and 2021](#), and is likely higher due to underreporting and misgendering of victims by police, media, and their families. Prison sentences come with elevated rates of physical and sexual assault, particularly when trans women are housed with cisgender men, as well as other forms of violence, such as refusal to provide healthcare and drug treatment. Additionally, most [incarcerated](#) trans people are people of color.

McDonald's story is not unique. In Chicago, [Eisha Love](#) was jailed for the attempted murder of her assailant and harasser. McDonald and Love survived both violence at the hands of individual transphobes and [administrative violence](#), a term Dean Spade coined to describe "what systems of law and administration do to trans people and our interventions" that endanger trans lives. [Mar'Quis Jackson](#) and [Melissa Núñez](#) were not as 'lucky,' if you can call what McDonald and Love endured "lucky." A fierce advocate for the trans community in Philadelphia and a Black trans man, Jackson was beaten and left to die outside in December 2022. Also an advocate herself, Núñez was gunned down in Honduras just a few months prior.

Increased visibility has often been heralded as both evidence that things have gotten better for trans people over the years and as a tool to further awareness and acceptance of the community at large. Yet, violence - both interpersonal and state-endorsed - against the most marginalized and often most visible in the community hasn't stopped peaking. Visibility as a tactic places the burden of social change on those under attack to assert their humanity to those who do not see them as human. By virtue of their work, trans activists are particularly hyper visible and vulnerable to violence.

"I myself am a survivor of multiple ways of violence both on the streets and in person. Violence specifically towards trans women has always been present," said [Bamby Salcedo](#), president and CEO of [TransLatin@ Coalition](#) and one of the most visible trans activists in the US today. Trans activists on [social media](#) bear the weight of endless death and rape threats, dehumanizing commentary, and harassment, particularly with the rise of the so-called "gender critical" movement - trans exclusionary radical "feminists" (TERFs) - and [irresponsible journalism](#).

Even when trans survivors of violence are not criminalized themselves, they often have to contend with a reluctant-at-best justice system and with further dehumanization. When Philadelphia-based activist and Black trans woman [Kendall Stephens](#) was attacked in her own home, police refused to arrest one of her attackers and mocked her injuries. In court, [she stated](#), "I could never truly claim a sense of survivorship because I could never exercise my right to be the victim of a hate crime."

Being an advocate for vulnerable, perpetually maligned, and unprotected communities means knowing that you might be elevating yourself as a target so you can contribute to dismantling that very same target. It means taking care of and mourning others just like you on a regular basis, extending emotional,

financial, and physical labor, and seeking support and care among others doing the very same.

What would it mean to share or unload this burden from the backs of Black and brown trans women? What would it look like for us to recognize how much we all have benefited from their leadership, resilience, fight, and love, while doing fairly little to fight alongside them and love them back?

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#### About the Author



T.J. Jourian, Ph.D., is an independent scholar, consultant, and trainer with Trans\*Formational Change. His professional experiences span LGBTQ+ life, residential life, women's center work, and multicultural affairs. He has also served as faculty at four institutions in their higher education and student affairs programs.

T.J. co-founded Trans\*Forming Higher Education Collaborative and the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs. His research and advocacy interests center on queer and trans people of color, with particular attention to masculinity, transness, and racialization; campus gender and sexuality centers and practitioners; and trans\*ing constructs and methodologies.

