Interview with Mirha-Soleil Ross

Mirha-Soleil Ross, we have known each other for a long time—I remember I first saw you in the halls of the Université du Québec à Montréal, in the early 1990s, back when you were studying theatre and I was studying semiotics. Since that time, we have seen and known each other in spaces very different from the university. And you have become a prominent figure in Canadian, Québécois, and international milieux. You are an accomplished video artist; you founded and were the first coordinator of MeaTrans, a program for low-income transsexuals and transgendered people in Toronto; you initiated Counting Past a (CP2), a transsexual/transgender arts festival; you were the Grand Marshall of Toronto’s Pride Parade in 2002; and you have been involved in a number of different activist arenas, including transsexual politics, animal rights, and the decriminalization of prostitution. All of this by way of presenting your rather impressive credentials. Today, I would like to focus on matters explicitly related to transsexual and transgender politics.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Viviane Namaste: You have been involved in transsexual communities for more than a decade—as a prostitute (bar, street, and escort), as a service provider, as a community organizer, and as an activist. As such, I would like to ask you to reflect on what you see as the successes and the failures of transsexual and transgender politics in Canada and Québec throughout the past decade. What kinds of transformations, if any, have you seen
"femmes" but who are now taking "transgender" or "trans-sensual" in front of that label. And finally, to top it all off, there is an increasing number of self-identified lesbians who are attracted to butches, trans men, and transsexual men, and who also now claim their right to be part of the "trans" community as "soffas." So it is no wonder that in Anglophone contexts, "transgender" has become synonymous with "lesbian" and "queer." And of course, all these people have vested interests in maintaining their lesbian/queer identities. Queers and lesbians have access to enormous resources, culturally and politically, privileges to which transsexuals who don't identify as queers haven't had access. Those include counselling services, bookstores, film and art festivals, community centres, sports clubs, boutiques and cafes, bars, not to mention the myriad support groups catering to just about every cultural and religious group of queers including First Nations, Italian, Portuguese, French, South Asian, Black, Jewish, Muslim, Christian. All of which, of course, trans people have not had any real access to.

THE PROSTITUTION CONNECTION

VN: You have been active and vocal in speaking out against the criminalization of prostitution. And the "Statement to Agencies" that you co-wrote with Monica Forrester, Jamie-Lee Hamilton, and me [see Chapter 6 of this volume], makes the explicit argument that there is an important historical connection between prostitution and transsexuals in Canada and Québec. In this statement, and in other public interventions you have made, you deplore the fact that many contemporary transsexual and transgendered activists do not integrate prostitution into their political agenda. Why do you think this is the case? What can be done about it?

MSR: I think these people don't understand the gravity and breadth of the situation. They don't see the day-to-day violations of prostitutes' most basic human rights. They don't see our vulnerability and can't grasp how much the criminalization of prostitution affects our work and our lives; how much it impacts us emotionally, socially; how much it costs in human lives.

But my main request is for transgender activists to step their sinister appropriation of the abuse and violence that transsexual and transvestite

prostitutes endure on every continent. When you look at the majority of transsexual, transvestite, and transgendered people who are attacked, raped or murdered, being a prostitute and being part of that specific social and cultural context seems to be a common denominator. So realizing that almost all trans victims of violence are prostitutes, you have to start asking serious questions about societal attitudes towards prostitution. You have to investigate how much such attitudes might contribute to—or perhaps even constitute the main determinant in—making trans prostitutes targets for hatred and attacks. And you also have to consider, in addition to transphobia, other factors such as racism and misogyny.

So when you ask why transgender activists do not take prostitution into consideration, I am forced to say that if they were to do so, they would have to give up the majority of their martyrs. By that I mean the dozens of "transgendered" people who every year are murdered throughout the world. Trans activists use their deaths as fuel in their crusade for "transgender rights." Their campaigns have everything to do with supporting their own political agendas, agendas that are all about securing and maintaining their middle- and upper-class privileges through and after transition, but absolutely nothing to do with improving the working conditions or lives of transsexual and transvestite prostitutes.

The most shameful example of this type of political appropriation is the "Transgender Day of Remembrance" organization, whose goal, according to their Web site, is to "memorialize those who were killed due to anti-transgender hatred or prejudice." Their introduction goes on to say that "Although not every person represented during the Day of Remembrance self-identified as transgendered—that is, as a transsexual, cross-dresser, or otherwise gender-variant—each was a victim of violence based on bias against transgendered people." But if you take a moment to look at the long list of victims, you will clearly see that most of them were prostitutes. Now it might or might not have had something to do with their deaths, but that is certainly something that most of them had in common. My point is that we do not necessarily know why these individuals were murdered. It could have been because of hatred and prejudice against sex workers, because of racist or misogynist attitudes, because of a drug deal gone bad, or simply because that particular trans person was a fucking asshole who stepped on too many toes. Or most likely, it was a combination of the above factors. But it was definitely not, in most cases, simply due to "transphobia." It is very sad that after decades of feminists
and social justice activists pointing to the need to make “link(s)” between issues, that an entire political movement—the transgender movement—would be so naive when dealing with an issue as complex and multi-faceted as violence. The only thing I can say is that there must be some really high political interests at stake. I invite people to take a minute to look at the Web site for the Transgender Day of Remembrance. You’ll find four people from Toronto: Grayce Baxter, Shawn Keagan, Deanna Wilkinson, and Cassandra Do. They were all trans prostitutes who were murdered while working. According to the Web site, they were killed because of “anti-transgender hatred and prejudice.” But Grayce Baxter—who was a completely passive, post-operative transsexual woman—was working as a genetic woman and was killed by a client who didn’t even know she was a transsexual. He learnt it from the newspapers’ headlines—“Transsexual Hooker Disappears”—before his surrender. Marcello de Palma, the man who shot Shawn Keagan and Deanna Wilkinson, also shot a non-transsexual prostitute, Brenda Ludgair, the same night. He was out on a killing spree and was targeting prostitutes. He didn’t say anything, during his trial, that showed evidence of “anti-transgender hatred.” He said, however, that he “considered street people and prostitutes to be scum of the earth.” For Cassandra Do, we still don’t know why she was murdered and in exactly what circumstances. All we know is that she was strangled and that some DNA found on her body was linked to the sexual assault and attempted murder of another sex worker, a non-transsexual woman, in 1997. So linking, at this point, Cassandra’s murder to “transphobia” is ridiculous. But that didn’t prevent the organizers of the Transgender Day of Remembrance to use her picture on their 2003 poster, turning her into a martyr for their cause. The Transgender Day of Remembrance, with its sister project, the Remembering Our Dead Web site, is a big, bold, and sickening political fraud. It sure makes for a powerful street performance: candles, tears, hugs, and smoozes over cardboard pictures of butchered members of a marginalized minority produces emotionally charged images. But it functions, both theatrically and politically, to benefit a privileged subsection of the trans community.

One last thing. Not only are most of the trans people murdered sex workers but they are nearly 100 percent male-to-females. Violence against these people, while not solely due, in my opinion, to transphobia, is surely a “gendered” form of violence. And that very crucial aspect is completely erased when people frame the issue as one of “violence against transgender people.” This is not an issue of “violence against transgender people” but an issue of violence against transsexual women and against male-to-female transvestites who are mostly prostitutes. And if we were to be a real pain in the ass, I would further insist that we start identifying such things as class and cultural backgrounds, race, ethnicity, age at time of transition, age at time of murder, and sexual orientation of the slain TS women and MTFs, because that would reveal exactly who is and who isn’t targeted in those crimes. So the fact that MTFs are the ones who are almost exclusively attacked and killed is something that needs to be pointed out. For every Brandon Teena, there are a thousand TS/TV prostitutes who were raped, stabbed, shot, strangled, beaten to death, burned alive, without every having had a single book, documentary, or fiction film produced about them.