

Constructing Injustice Symbols in Contemporary Trans Rights Activisms

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the role that mourning and commemoration practices play in contemporary trans rights activism. Drawing from visual politics, digital activist culture, as well as media and communication, we analyse how trans rights movements construct injustice symbols that are used for sociopolitical mobilisation and expression. We contend that these symbols are constructed through shared communicative practices, which produce and circulate visuals that possess important memetic qualities (pictures, slogans, hashtags, graffiti, posters, etc.). To do so, we analyse three case studies where the unjust death of a trans person was collectively mobilised for political purposes: Jennifer Laude (Philippines, 1988-2014), Hande Kader (Turkey, 1993-2016), and Marsha P. Johnson (United States of America, 1945-1992). While each case study points to local or national specificities, our comparative analysis also underlines transnational trends in the production of posthumous visuals within contemporary trans rights activism. We conclude by addressing the contentions over the construction of trans symbols who inherently possess intersectional identities.

KEYWORDS

Activism, digital media technologies, icons, injustice symbols, memetic visuals, trans rights

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According to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project (2018), almost 3000 murders of trans and gender-diverse persons have been reported globally since 2008. In response to this ongoing violence, there has been a surge in initiatives among LGBTQ+ activist groups like street demonstrations, social media campaigns and monitoring projects to highlight the injustice of these deaths. While trans activism is not new, dating back at least to the early 1970s (Heany 2014), the development of digital media technologies has transformed how trans rights groups collectively mobilise, gain visibility, and demand justice on a global scale (O’Riordan 2005).

In the past decade, scholars have studied trans murder cases or trials to understand the representations of trans women in the media. Notably, the 2002 murder of Gwen Araujo, a young American transgender Latina, was analysed to deconstruct the transphobic, racist, and heteronormative discourses that circulated posthumously (Barker-Plummer 2013). More recently, Franklin and Lyons (2016, 440) investigated the mobilisation generated in response to the Araujo murder case by focusing on “the affective power of loss as a basis of political activism”. The authors’ findings reassert the centrality of mourning and commemoration practices in queer political mobilisation, which has been previously observed in the context of AIDS activism in the 1990s (Rand 2007).

In this paper, we investigate the role that mourning and commemoration practices and their digital mediation play in contemporary trans rights activism. To do so, we explore three case studies where the unjust death of a trans person was collectively mobilised for political purposes: Jennifer Laude, who was murdered by an American soldier in 2014 and whose death sparked protests for trans rights and against US

presence in the Philippines; Hande Kader, a Turkish activist who was raped and burnt in 2016 and whose death sparked the international #HandeKaderSesVer Twitter campaign; and Marsha P. Johnson, an American trans rights activist who died from uncertain circumstances in 1992 and who has been the source of increased LGBTQ+ mobilisation since the release of a biographical Netflix documentary in 2017.

Drawing from visual politics, digital activist culture, as well as media and communication, our comparative analysis shows that practices of mourning and commemoration play a key role in the grassroots construction of injustice symbols for trans rights activism, while also voicing struggles as to who is allowed to become the icon of a sociopolitical movement. We conclude by addressing the contentions over the construction of individuals who inherently possess intersectional identities (De Vries 2012) as injustice symbols in the context of trans rights activism.

INJUSTICE SYMBOLS AND THEIR DIGITAL MEDIATION

As argued by Butler (2009), grief is not solely about emotional containment or coping mechanisms; rather, it can sustain important acts of resistance that aim to make death politically productive. Here, we understand mourning and commemoration as practices which draw from and generate affective responses that not only galvanise sociopolitical mobilisation but also contribute in making the lives and deaths of queer subjects matter. By engaging in collective acts of mourning and commemoration, trans rights activists and their sympathisers directly appeal to moral emotions in ways that challenge dominant conceptions surrounding whose lives and whose losses are deemed ‘grievable’ (Butler 2009). These practices constitute acts of queer re-

sistance as they contest physical and systemic forms of violence, and redress relations of power by claiming the right of trans persons to be seen and to matter. Our objective is to show *how* these acts are performed through the development of shared communicative practices whose digitally mediated nature bridge and eventually collapse local and transnational contexts. These practices rely on the production and circulation of visual contents that possess important memetic qualities (pictures, slogans, hashtags, graffiti, posters, etc.) and that are deployed as modalities for political resistance in embodied and digitally mediated forms of activism. Our main argument is that trans rights movements – like several other social justice movements – increasingly construct ‘injustice symbols’ that are digitally mediated and used as strategic and affective mechanisms for sociopolitical expression.

Injustice symbols often relate to individuals in “events and situations that involve perceived moral and political transgressions (...) that are shaped by political dynamics beyond their local/national origin and [that contain] meanings for audiences outside of this context” (Olesen 2015, 1). In other words, they emerge in situations where unjust human suffering or precarity is representative of broader sociopolitical contentions. As detailed below, the deaths of Jennifer, Hande, and Marsha are all framed by activist groups as unjust events that illustrate transnational patterns in trans rights abuse (among other intersecting issues). By being mourned and commemorated collectively, these deaths become an integral part of an ‘injustice memory’ (Olesen 2015) that is revived through gatherings on anniversaries, in festivities, or in the advent of similar killings.

In turn, these practices not only contribute in humanising queer subjects by deeming them worthy of grief; they also make grief politically potent by transforming these subjects into icons of transnation-

al activism for trans rights. In contemporary activism, ‘icons’ are understood as “constructions in public discourses involving intense circulation across media platforms along repeated statements about their iconic status and ability to symbolise topical tensions or conflicts in society” (Mortensen 2017, 1144). Icons reshape conceptions and orient collective actions posthumously by appealing to notions of (in)justice and by invoking human rights and dignity (Hariman and Lucaites 2018). Indeed, they allow for the characterisation of the deceased as something larger than themselves (a hero, an innocent victim, a saint, etc.). In turn, this enables activists to make collective claims in their names and to act upon these claims. As we show, while the construction of icons has traditionally been a top-down process, much of the iconicity work in trans rights activism is the direct result of grassroots initiatives.

For this paper, we specifically examine the role of digitally mediated visuals and their memetic qualities – i.e. their propensity to being extensively or rapidly reproduced, modified and circulated online and in embodied protests – in constructing iconicity. Within contemporary activist cultures, the construction and remediation of memetic contents have become a reoccurring practice of visual politics that is increasingly employed as a mechanism to expose instances of injustice and lay claims of authenticity (Shifman 2018). Broadly speaking, memetic visuals that make political claims (and that are born through them) aim to bypass the control shared by the state or by mainstream media over the production and dissemination of authoritative and authentic content. As Mirzoeff (2017, 18) states, the visual production of memetic content is key in social justice activism, as “to appear” is to be grievable, and to be grievable is to be “a person that counts for something”. Thus, digitally mediated visuals that depict or symbolise the deceased become remediated as key re-

sources for expressing state distrust and for rearticulating resistance against censorship (Shifman 2018).

Memetic forms of political expression that enact the affordances of social media can become particularly potent as they privilege visibility as a means to provide activists with new ways for doing politics and for being political. Memetic visuals often involve expressive contents marked with hashtags, a classificatory feature of social media typically used to aggregate content around a topic or event, which play a significant role in constituting affective and, in this case, posthumous publics (Papacharissi 2015). As detailed below, each case study depicts the use of contextual hashtags that come to symbolise local grievances, while also underlining the use of prevalent hashtags (*#TransLivesMatter*, *#JusticeFor...*, etc.) that situate the production of posthumous visuals within a transnational movement for trans rights. Each of our cases highlight a key feeling of collective outrage that translates into contentious claims over what the deceased symbolise and over what they allow in terms of political potency. Building from our conceptual framework, the next three sections offer a comparative analysis on the protests sparked by the unjust deaths of Jennifer, Hande, and Marsha to highlight ongoing trends, as well as local or national contentions in contemporary trans rights activism.

JENNIFER LAUDE AND THE ROLE OF INJUSTICE INTERPRETERS

On October 11, 2014, Jennifer Laude, a 26-year-old transgender Filipina woman, was killed in a motel room in Olongapo, a city situated 80 kilometres northwest of Manila. Four days later, an official complaint was filed against US Marine Joseph Scott Pemberton, wanted for having beaten, strangled, and drowned Jennifer in the motel's bathroom (Gray 2014). Located in the Subic Bay, Olongapo City is the host of

a US Navy Base from where Pemberton was on shore leave. The Navy Base's presence in the region is part of a 2014 agreement that maintains the US government's right to conduct its operations on Filipino grounds, operations that have been ongoing since the early 20th century (Rauhala 2014). Following the murder complaint, it took over a month for Olongapo authorities to interview the American suspect who had fled to the Subic Bay Navy Base. This delay was due to the provision of a highly contested agreement, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which allows for the US government to retain jurisdiction over its military personnel accused of crimes in the Southeast Asian country (Santos 2014). Three days after an official arrest warrant was filed for murder with aggravating circumstances on December 16, Pemberton appeared at the Olongapo Trial Court while remaining in US custody (Ng and de Castro 2014).

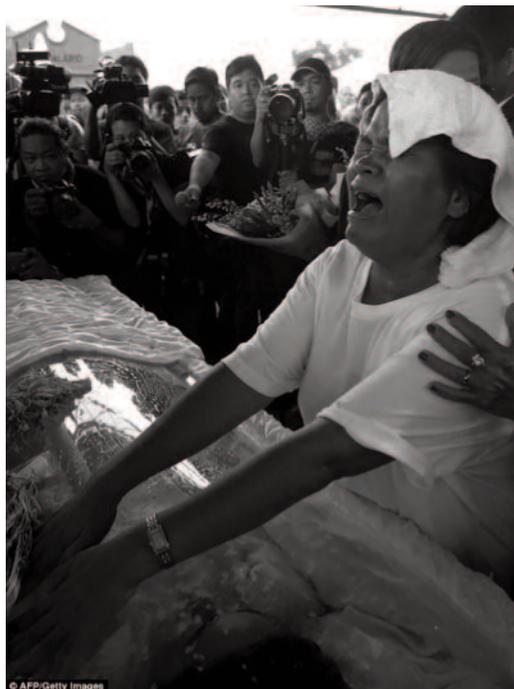


Figure 1

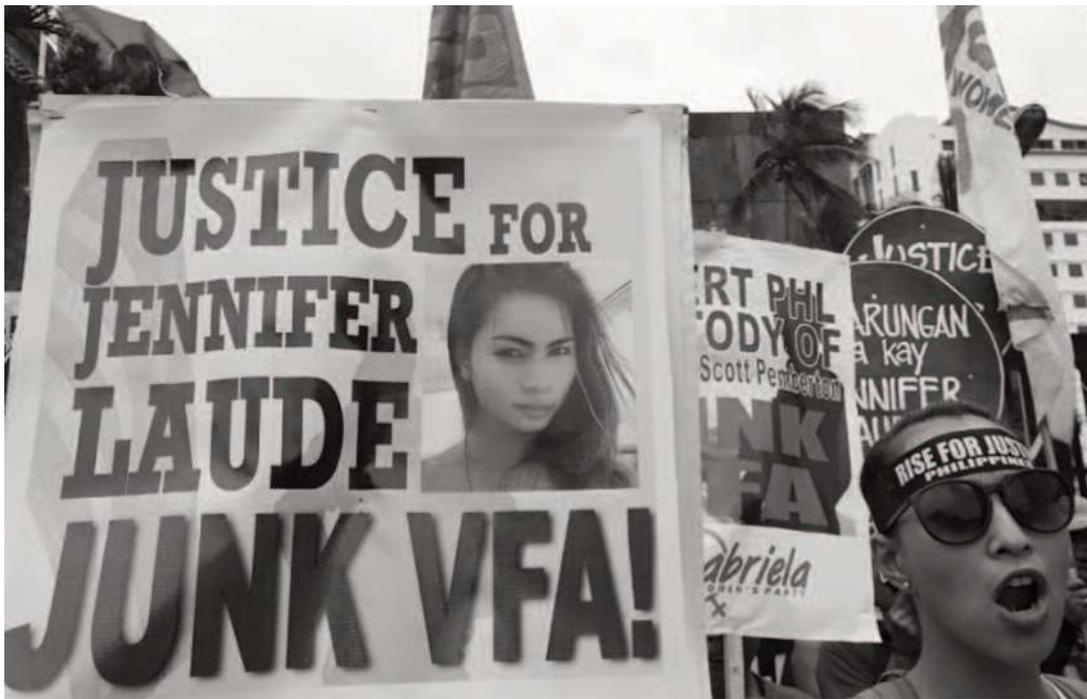


Figure 2

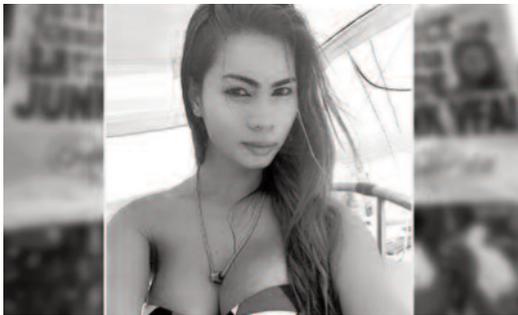


Figure 3

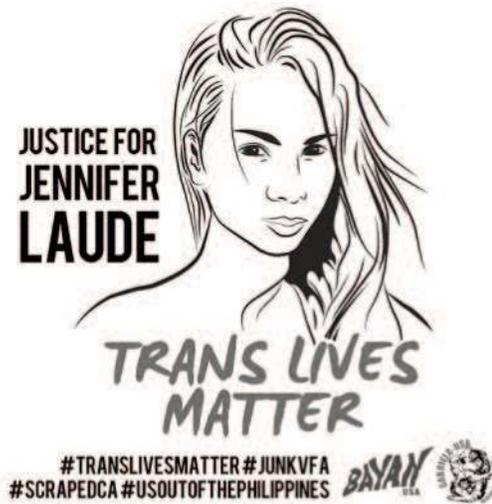


Figure 4

During this month of jurisdictional conflict, the Filipino media maintained an extensive coverage of the ‘Laude murder case’ that focused on Jennifer’s mother, Julita Cabillan, and fiancé, German national Marc Sueselbeck, who alternately ex-

pressed sorrow at their own loss and anger at procedural delays. This media coverage was heightened by the demonstrations sparked by Jennifer’s death in the Philippines and in the US. During the week of her wake, dozens of journalists gathered in

a small Catholic memorial room (see Figure 1) to witness former Vice President Jejomar Binay offer Mrs. Cabillan his condolences (Reyes 2014), as well as the ‘emotional’ entrance of Jennifer’s fiancé (Macatuno 2014). Here, Jennifer’s family members can be understood as ‘injustice interpreters’ (Olesen 2018) who humanised her suffering for both local and global audiences, and amplified Jennifer’s killing through persistent media appearances.

On October 24, as Jennifer’s funeral procession was under way, protesters took to the streets (see Figure 2) during an event entitled *#JusticeForJennifer: National Day of Outrage* (Cristobal 2014). On Facebook, pages like *Justice for Jennifer Laude and the Filipino People* were created to witness the injustice of her death and mobilise protests. On social media, hashtag-related content was circulated. Selfies of Jennifer (see Figure 3) and images taken during protests were shared alongside slogans like *#JusticeForJenniferLaude* or *#ConvictPemberton*. While some supporters identified Jennifer’s death as a trans or LGBTQ+ issue by using hashtags like *#TransLivesMatter* and *#LGBTOutragePH*, others framed her death as a geopolitical issue through the hashtags *#JunkVFA*, *#USOut-OfthePhilippines*, and *#NoToUSImperialism* (see Figure 4). Jennifer’s family members also participated in this geopolitical framing of her death. On October 28, they released crime scene photos showing her brutally beaten body alongside a banner that read “the VFA did this” (Carleon 2014). As injustice interpreters, they shaped discourses over Jennifer’s killing within a broader oppressive regime by speaking to an embodied and personified grief, while also suggesting the existence of wider injustices (Olesen 2018).

Overall, these mourning and commemoration practices contributed in developing two ongoing narratives that set to establish the authentic meaning of Jennifer’s homicide. One, a transnational narrative on

LGBTQ+ rights, mostly developed by human rights groups, identified her killing as a hate crime and called for greater protections of trans persons (Teodoro 2014). Two, an anti-imperialist and pro-nationalist narrative claimed that, by preventing the Philippines to enforce its own criminal laws, the VFA directly increased the vulnerability of Filipino citizens in a way that justified for the country to regain its sovereignty. For some, these two narratives were apprehended in an intersectional way. As argued by Naomi Fontanos, Executive Director of the trans rights organisation Ganda Filipinas, “remembering the death of Jennifer Laude is part of our resistance against gender-based violence and our call to dismantle social forces and structures that promote it: sexism, patriarchy, and militarism” (Tan 2015).

For others, the same narratives appeared to be competing, having to recognise that American imperialism played a part in Jennifer’s unjust killing, while refuting or omitting to address the issue of trans rights. This is best illustrated by General Gregorio Catapang, former chief of the Philippine armed forces, who stated that, while Jennifer Laude’s killing would “not affect our relationship with the United States”, the victim “is *still* a Filipino, and we have to fight for his [sic] rights and for justice” (Whitlock 2014, emphasis added). Thus, this underlines the existence of discursive struggles over the authentic characterisation of Jennifer, alternately accepted (or denied) as a woman, as a trans person, or as a citizen of the Philippines.

While Jennifer’s gender identity was obscured in some pro-nationalist discourses, it was clearly articulated during the Pemberton trial that began on March 23, 2015. During the trial, Pemberton pled a trans panic defence that failed to convince the Filipino jury (Stern 2015). On December 1, 2015, he was sentenced to 12 years for the homicide – but not the murder – of Jennifer. However, his sentence was later



Figure 5

reduced to 10 years because of so-called mitigating circumstances, the judge having qualified Pemberton's act as a passionate crime partly caused by the victim's obfuscation and intoxication (Torres-Tupas 2015). Further demonstrations were held to demand that Pemberton, who should be serving his sentence in the US guarded section of Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City until 2025, be moved to a civilian Filipino prison (Love de Jesus 2015). While some years have passed since Jennifer's killing, the release of an American documentary entitled *Call Her Ganda* (Raval 2018), which premiered at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival, brought the Laude case to the forefront of transnational campaigns for trans rights by offering an analysis at the intersection of cissexism, classism, racism, and colonialism.

HANDE KADER AND THE COUNTERVISUALITY OF TRANS RESISTANCE

On August 8, 2016, Hande Kader, a 23-year-old Turkish transgender woman, sex worker, and LGBTQ+ rights activist was found brutally murdered in her hometown of Istanbul. Hande was last seen entering a car with a client in the district of Harbiye in late July 2016 (Daily Sabah 2016). After she did not return home, a missing person report was filed by her friends. Police initiated a search and rescue and, 10 days later, Hande's body was discovered heavily mutilated, raped, and burnt in the upscale neighbourhood of Zekeriyaköy (BBC News 2016). To date, no suspects have been identified for her murder (Ertan 2017).

Hande became an important figurehead of the LGBTQ+ movement following a violent police crackdown on participants dur-

ing the Istanbul Pride March and Trans Pride March on June 28, 2015. While these marches were banned by the Istanbul Governor's Office (Al Jazeera 2016a), participants defiantly gathered in Taksim Square where police dispersed crowds with water cannons, rubber bullets, and pepper spray. It was at that time that Hande's rebellious stand against the anti-riot police was captured by photojournalists (see Figure 5). Her face in tears, she reproached the photojournalists saying: "You take pictures but you do not publish them. No one is hearing our voices" (Ertan 2017). Images and videos of Hande's protest were extensively circulated across mainstream and social media (Kedistan 2016), turning her into a face of resistance within the Turkish LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Hande's murder occurred in the aftermath of a failed *coup d'état* against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 15, 2016, and the subsequent imposing of a two-year-long State of Emergency Law that saw a tightening of press freedoms and increased hostility within Turkey's pro-government news organisations toward the LGBTQ+ community (Fox and Yalcin

2017). Consequently, while both Hande's activism and murder received significant international media coverage, Turkish rights groups criticised national mainstream media for their deliberate silence on her murder (Triani 2016). Citing the case of Özgecan Aslan, a Turkish cisgender woman whose attempted rape and brutal murder in 2015 mobilised tens of thousands of protesters, the LGBTQ+ community expressed frustrations toward the lack of attention on Hande's murder and stated that the "life of a trans woman should be as valuable as the life of a cisgender woman" (Al Jazeera 2016b). By juxtaposing the names and images of Hande and Özgecan (see Figure 6), activists employed tactics of countervisuality (Mirzoeff 2011). Specifically, they set to visually establish that trans lives should be recognised as lives worth living (and as deaths worth being mourned) in ways that challenged dominant cisheteronormative discourses. These mourning and commemoration practices can be understood as political acts of queer resistance that aim to publicly and collectively resist trans segregation and erasure from civil society.

Figure 6



After a week of media silence, the campaign *#HandeKaderSesVer* (*give voice to or speak out for Hande Kader*, Ertan 2016) was launched on August 17. Local activists created an online petition called *Transgender murders are political and need to be stopped* (change.org, 2016) that urged the police and the Justice Ministry to punish Hande's killer(s), an initiative that received 15,000 signatures by August 19 (and 61,726 in total). On Facebook, the Istanbul LGBTI Solidarity Association established the *Jus-*

tice for Hande Kader protest and invited people to march from Tünel to Galatasaray Square on August 21. On that day, hundreds of people defied the state of emergency and mobilised in solidarity to protest in the streets of Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities across Turkey (Middle East Eye 2016). Demonstrators carried photos of Hande, rainbow flags, as well as placards and banners stating "trans lives matter", "justice for Hande Kader", and "let's fight for our survival" (Al Jazeera 2016b). As

Figure 8



shown in Figure 7, the slogan “trans cinayetleri politiktir” (or *transgender murders are political*) was used in political memes and was chanted by demonstrators (SBS 2016). Other activists (see Figure 8) painted tears made of artificial blood (Middle East Eye 2016) and wrote “I want to live” on their bodies (Warren 2016). These practices symbolise and act upon a collective outrage in the face of trans lives’ oppression or erasure. To borrow from Butler (2009), they speak to the identification of a



Figure 7

“shared precarity” that calls for universal rights.

This outrage was not confined to Turkey. On Twitter, some called on international leaders including Barack Obama, Justin Trudeau, and Angela Merkel to take a political stand against Hande’s murder and stop the injustice being committed against trans people in Turkey. Events also took place in Berlin, Bern, and Amsterdam (Atria 2016). In Hong Kong, various rights groups protested at the Turkish Consulate General in solidarity with the Turkish LGBTQ+ community (WKNews 2016). International rights groups, including the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (2016), issued public statements calling for Erdogan to publicly denounce Hande’s brutal murder, to ensure that prosecution be brought against the perpetrator(s), and to take all legal measures to protect the Turkish LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, in the years following her death, activists and artists have

worked to keep the spotlight on her murder by creating several works of film, art, and literature.

In a rare public display of solidarity with the Turkish LGBTQ+ community, some opposition parliament members joined activists in a press conference to speak out against Hande's murder, labelling it a hate crime, and asserted that "most aggressors charged with violence against transgender sex workers have been able to get off scot free" (Ertan 2017). During the event, Deputy enal Sarihan of the Republican People's Party publicly stated that "peace and unity in a community can only be achieved through a joint fight against violence and hate, whether it is manifested in terrorist attacks, murder by the bullet of a spouse, or the killing of someone perceived as the other" (ibid.). However, she refrained from referring explicitly to the violence perpetrated against Turkish trans citizens, which highlights discursive struggles over the social recognition of trans murders as specific acts of political injustice. In her death, Hande came to symbolise governmental failures in protecting the Turkish LGBTQ+ community and the curtailment of their civil liberties. Her murder has also been used to draw broader attention to Turkey's increasing anti-secular stance and its consequences for human rights and freedom of expression (Shafak 2016).

MARSHA P. JOHNSON AND THE REMEDIATION OF AN LGBTQ+ ICON

On July 6, 1992, the body of Marsha P. Johnson washed up on the Hudson River's Christopher Street Piers. Born on August 24, 1945, Marsha moved to New York City in the mid-sixties and became known in the Greenwich Village as a human rights activist, drag performer, sex worker, and Warhol muse. Marsha's fame is intimately linked with her participation in the 1969 Stonewall riots. During a police crackdown,

the Inn's patrons carried out violent acts of resistance that lasted for several days and largely contributed to establishing the US Gay Liberation Movement (Kissack 1995). While the nature of Marsha's involvement in instigating the Stonewall riots is subject to ongoing debates,¹ her early activism for the protection of trans rights is well established (Ferguson 2019). Alongside activist Sylvia Rivera, Marsha cofounded the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970, an outreach initiative that coordinated unprecedented effort in caring for trans, homeless, and sex working persons (Bishop 2018). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Marsha remained a devoted HIV activist and a popular drag performer.

A few days after her body's discovery, Marsha's friends and admirers walked down 7th Avenue toward Christopher Street Piers where they scattered her ashes. Marsha's death, which generated little media attention in 1992,² occurred in unclear circumstances. While members of the community insisted on the possibility of foul play, the police rapidly classified it as a suicide. The community was outraged and organised demonstrations where protesters carried "justice for Marsha" signs and chanted slogans for the police to "do their jobs!" (see Figure 9). In the early 1990s, members of the LGBTQ+ community and, notably, trans women of colour were already the incessant victims of violent crimes that often failed to be thoroughly investigated (ibid.). Police officers were not only distrusted for their inaction but also for their own role in brutalising trans women, adding to the generalised outrage. Unsurprisingly, Marsha's drowning was never officially resolved.

Thanks to trans rights activist Mariah Lopez, the Manhattan District Attorney's office reopened Marsha's file in 2012 (Jacobs 2012), which preceded several projects to bring her life and death back into the public eye. In 2012, a first documentary featuring Marsha's friends was released



Figure 9

under the title *Pay It No Mind: Marsha P. Johnson* (Kasino 2012). In 2015, Marsha was portrayed in the drama *Stonewall* (Emmerich 2015), a movie that received extensive backlash for making a white and straight-acting fictional character the instigator of the 1969 riots (Barnes 2015). A fictional short film called *Happy Birthday Marsha!* (Gossett and Wortzel 2018), depicting the hours leading to the Stonewall riots through the Johnson/Rivera relationship, started production in 2015. Importantly, Netflix's feature documentary *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (France 2017) gained international recognition in 2017 and (re)introduced Marsha to LGBTQ+ and mainstream audiences.

France's documentary relies on two interweaving narratives. One, it uses archive footage of LGBTQ+ protests from the late 1960s to the early 1990s and interviews Marsha's friends and siblings to underline her (and Sylvia Rivera's) crucial role in the Liberation Movement. Two, it follows trans rights activist and counsellor Victoria

Cruz as she investigates Marsha's cold case, thus seemingly borrowing from the true-crime genre to make the story more palatable for Netflix audiences (Lee 2017). Overall, France's documentary somewhat succeeds in addressing the discrimination faced by trans women both in- and outside the LGBTQ+ community. It also draws clear parallels between Marsha's unjust death and patterns of trans murders that have persisted into the 21st century. However, the movie was criticised for failing to reflect on gender identity at the intersection of social class and race (Iovannone 2017). Furthermore, *Happy Birthday Marsha!* directors Sasha Wortzel and Reina Gossett (a black trans woman) accused France (a cisgender, white gay man) of using their research without attribution (Armus 2017), spawning debates as to "who owns Marsha P. Johnson's story" (Juzwiak 2017). Controversies aside, the *Death and Life* documentary played a key role in remediating Marsha's iconicity by labelling her as the 'Queen of the Village', a 'hero',



Figure 10

a ‘veteran’, as well as the ‘icon’, ‘mother’, or ‘Rosa Parks’ of the LGBTQ+ movement.

Since her recent reappropriation by the *#TransLivesMatter* and LGBTQ+ movements, Marsha has been the subject of an increasing number of images, GIFs, and artistic renditions (see Figures 10 and 11). During the US Pride of 2017 and 2018 in particular, memes circulated on social media to showcase Marsha’s activism, commemorate her death, and demand protection for trans women of colour and for the LGBTQ+ community more broadly, thus attesting to her revitalised status as both a symbol of injustice and icon for Western LGBTQ+ communities. As argued by Olsen (2015), symbols and icons are socially created artefacts that eventually acquire independent existence in social reality. Once visually resurrected, these artefacts can be invoked discursively in (re)contextualised

ways, and within new temporal, geographical and cultural contexts. France’s (2017) documentary demonstrates this process effectively.

While increasing media attention enabled the remediation of Marsha’s iconicity, it also introduced counter-discourses that contested her legitimacy or authenticity as the face of the trans rights movement and, more broadly, of the LGBTQ+ movement. On Facebook, some users repeatedly insisted that Marsha should not be appropriated by trans rights activists, claiming that she identified as a gay drag performer. Other individuals aimed to discredit Marsha’s legacy by invoking often racist, transphobic, or whorephobic arguments that questioned her iconicity altogether (i.e. a trans person, a person of colour or a sex worker should not be selected as a spokesperson for the entire LGBTQ+ community). This social media commentary reminds that the

construction of icons is never static and that authenticity claims are always contested. Instead, they are collectively remediated by a variety of actors, which is precisely what enables them to acquire new (and sometimes competing) meanings and accomplish different effects over time and cross-culturally. For if icons are never fixed, it is precisely because they come into being and are sustained through discursive struggles, a quality that makes them inherently political.

POSTHUMOUS SYMBOLS AND THEIR CONTENTIONS WITHIN TRANS ACTIVISM

As shown above, each of our case studies highlights how trans rights activists make grief politically productive through the development of communicative practices that contest the *status quo* as to whose deaths and losses deserve to be mourned. While these cases bring up and are shaped by important local issues (like pro-nationalist Filipino sentiment, Turkish anti-secularism, or

Figure 11



anti-black and queer police brutality in the US), the construction of these killings as injustice symbols also enact global trends in trans rights activism. In each case, ritualised forms of practices emerged posthumously as a motif of resistance and commemoration through the use of digitally mediated visuals depicting the deceased alongside hashtags like *#JusticeForJennifer*, *#JusticeForHande*, and *#JusticeForMarsha* as an indication of solidarity, whether that injustice relates to the nature of the committed crimes (the particularly brutal killings of Jennifer and Hande for example) or to the inability of the legal system to treat these deaths fairly or effectively. Here, the injustice – and, eventually, the increasing contention – lies in the consideration that transphobia and/or ‘whorephobia’ played a central role in these deaths (on whorephobia, see Bruckert and Chabot 2014).

To contest, join, and bring visibility to these injustices, activists developed shared communicative practices that gradually and visually (re)constructed Jennifer, Hande, and Marsha as icons who symbolise the grievances of an emerging transnational movement for trans rights. Our comparative analysis points to broader patterns in the increasing importance of mediated forms of death and mourning in digital activist cultures. Indeed, these practices relate to several grassroots initiatives, like the Black Lives Matter movement among others, where popular representations of martyrs (Buckner and Khatib 2014) or icons (Mortensen 2017) are resurrected and mobilised in the face of oppressive policies or regimes. The similarities within these ongoing trends and their reliance on digital media technologies highlight the emergence of global templates that formalise the ways in which visual acts of resistance operate across contemporary activist cultures.

However, these communicative practices, while analogous, must simultaneously be examined in context. Indeed, if injustice symbols are part of several sociopolitical

movements, our analysis suggests that their construction have specific implications for trans rights activism, namely, because of the inherent intersectional identities of the trans individuals being commemorated (De Vries 2012). While the marginality of racialised trans women – the fact that they exist at the margins of intersecting social spheres – makes them strategic figures for activists to address an array of sociopolitical causes (misogyny, transphobia, whorephobia, racism, colonialism, anti-secularism, sexual oppression, freedom of expression, etc.), it simultaneously makes these symbolic processes increasingly contentious. Contentions not only appear in broader debates among sympathisers and detractors as to whether these women should be attributed visibility and sociopolitical importance to begin with, but also among sympathisers who fight on their own end over what type of visibility and meaning should be attributed to them.

In our case studies, the commemoration and political appropriation of racialised trans women reflect important custody battles over what their deaths should symbolise and how they should be made politically productive. Conflicting strategies arise among sympathisers, who either strategically reduce the deceased as ‘single-issue’ politics to fit their own agenda or celebrate them as intersectional symbols. Thus, while increased visibility can participate in making trans lives appear and therefore matter, visibility should not be understood as an inherently positive or conclusive feature, as single-issue visibility can contribute to historical forms of racial and/or trans erasure in (queer) politics (Lamble 2008; Ferguson 2019). As shown in our case studies, scholars not only need to address how racialised trans women are being made (in)visible; they also need to investigate how they are made to matter, by whom, and with what objectives.

There is little doubt that Marsha’s recent (re)mediation as an LGBTQ+ icon increased her profile posthumously. However, this has

sometimes been performed at the expense of the racial and gender components of her intersectional identities. Indeed, there are struggles over the visual construction of an ‘authentic’ Marsha, who is alternately depicted as marching in the streets with a poster in hand (Marsha, the outraged black trans activist) or as flashing a benevolent smile while wearing a floral headdress (Marsha, the saint of the LGBTQ+ movement). While both visual narratives do indeed contribute in making Marsha more visible and iconic, the former depicts her with a high level of political proficiency, while the latter constitutes an aestheticised and somewhat apolitical depiction that is more palatable (and less menacing) for mainstream and homonormative publics.

In opposition, most visuals of Hande that circulate online and in embodied protests clearly depict her as an activist icon, while candid shots of her have been used more scarcely. This is not surprising, since the visual construction of Hande as an engaged citizen fits and bridges the political agendas of LGBTQ+ and mainstream political organisations that all seek to overthrow – or at least heavily criticise – Turkey’s oppressive regime. While this strategic synergy did allow for Hande’s death to gain visibility, the act of characterising Hande as a symbol who represents ‘all’ Turkish citizens fighting against state repression can also potentially conceal the gender specific and whorephobic conditions that amounted to her death.

Similar struggles were observed during Jennifer’s case whose death was used to symbolise Filipino grievances against US occupation. In the mainstream media, Jennifer was often depicted as a pretty and passable woman, humanising strategies that relied on the use of candid selfies or pictures showing familial grief. Inversely, the pictures of Jennifer’s brutally beaten body were scarcely used by the press, even after having been released by her family members. The post-mortem pictures clearly

staged Jennifer’s dead body in her workplace (the motel’s bathroom, where she met with her customers), thus overtly revealing the horrific violence and conditions with which sex workers – and trans sex workers in particular – deal on a regular basis. While the omission of these post-mortem pictures could be partly explained by religious and cultural norms, it also points to the erasure of the whorephobic and trans-specific conditions that participated in Jennifer’s death in favour of a single (and seemingly more consensual) narrative surrounding Filipino citizenship and anti-US imperialism.

Thus, even among those who grant trans persons visibility, contentions emerge over the most strategic or authentic ways of making them politically productive in death. To that effect, the construction of injustice symbols within transnational movements for trans rights is not simply about seeing or being seen. It also refers to the visual and discursive processes that reflect and are constitutive of the inherent intersectional identities of trans persons (and of racialised trans women in particular). In this context, scholars and activists not only need to consider that trans lives matter; they need to address how they are made to matter, by enabling (or concealing) which components of their intersectional identities, while also investigating how trans actors can remain the producers and beneficiaries of these increasingly visual, digitally mediated, and intersectional narratives.

NOTES

1. Some believe that Marsha was the first to throw a shot glass against the wall, often referred to as “the shot glass that was heard around the world”, a claim that was refuted by Marsha herself (France 2017).
2. To rectify this, the New York Times wrote a retroactive obituary on Marsha’s death in its 2018 commemorative series *Overlooked* (Chan 2018).

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