

Rita Hester's Murder and the Language of Respect:

A Chronology of the Trans Community's Response to Boston Media Coverage

We can't bring Rita back. But maybe we can avert the next murder, or at least begin to lessen some of the ignorance and bigotry that contributed to the murder, by making an effort to respectfully represent transgender people.

By Nancy Nangeroni (former MTPC Steering Committee member)

On Sunday, November 29, 1998, I returned home in the late afternoon, weary from an emotionally trying confrontation with an aunt over gender issues. I found on my answering machine a message from Ann Donlan, a reporter for the Boston Herald. The Herald is known around Boston as a reactionary voice, generally unfriendly to progressive causes. This time the voice was friendly, but the news was anything but. Yet another transgender person had just been found stabbed to death. When I returned the call, Ann told me the victim's name was Rita Hester, she was black and had been found stabbed about 20 times in her apartment in Allston. She asked if I knew her or had any information to share, but I told her I didn't. After hanging up, I shivered at the brutality inflicted once again on a person who could easily have been me.

A little later I received a call from a friend of Rita named Norell, who was very angry that a Herald story about the murdered transperson had deadnamed Rita and referred to Rita as 'he'. Norell told me that Rita had lived as a woman for years, and was friendly and well-liked, a good kid who "worked off an ad in the Phoenix." She said it was probably a client who murdered Rita.

I called Ann Donlan again, and she told me that the article had been written by another reporter, and that she was planning to do better. It did not occur to me then to make sure that Donlan knew what she was talking about. She seemed very sympathetic, so I presumed (my mistake) that she knew something of transgender issues.

Sunday evening at least two channels of local TV network news carried stories about the murder. It appeared that the Herald had been the sole source for the stories, as each mirrored the Herald's perspective that a man who was also a transvestite had been stabbed to death. I later found out that police reports had been the primary source for early information about the case, which may explain the similarity of media reports.

On Monday the Boston Globe printed a story titled "Stabbing victim a mystery to many" by staff writer Daniel Vasquez. Vasquez described Hester as a "nightclub singer and a party-thrower, a man who sported long braids and preferred women's clothes." He also referred to "Hester's apparent double life," and used male references for Rita throughout the story. Vasquez' painting of Hester as socially duplicitous enraged her friends and trans-sympathetic observers.

"Friends of murdered transvestite recall pal, mourn loss," Ann Donlan's story in the Boston Herald, included quotes from a number of friends and acquaintances, and told of a popular person who was, at one hangout, "loved by the women and accepted by the men." The article also included a supportive reference to murdered transsexual Chanelle Pickett, "whose killer was acquitted of murder and convicted instead of assault and battery." The tone of the article was sympathetic to the victim. However, it still used male pronouns throughout, and the use of "transvestite" was offensive to some.

When a person is cross-living full time, transgender or transsexual is the more fitting term. 'Transgender' is a general term, meaning "transgressive of gender norms." It doesn't imply specific behavior, but does indicate some cross-gender practice from any part of the entire range of such. 'Transsexual' implies cross-

living full time, or intention to do so, and at least some degree of sex-role reversal (or intention). A transsexual generally identifies as the opposite gender to which they were assigned at birth, with or without medical assistance. A transvestite, on the other hand, is someone who cross-dresses sometimes, and retains their primary identity in the gender to which they were originally assigned. Many – perhaps most – of those who cross-dress part-time prefer the term ‘crossdresser.’ They consider ‘transvestite,’ a medical pathology term long used to ridicule and denigrate, to be offensive, just as many gay and lesbian people object to the word ‘homosexual.’

On Monday I received more phone calls from angry transpersons complaining about the media coverage. Local activist Jessica Rylan said that she knew Rita, and Daviko Marcel, Director of the Transgender Education Network, a local program of the Justice Resource Institute, said, “We have to do something.” I agreed, and Jessica, Daviko and I began working together, first arranging for a planning meeting the following evening.

I called Ann to ask why she had referred to Rita as “he” and as a transvestite. It was then that she told me that she didn’t know the difference between transsexual and transvestite, nor the meaning of the word transgender. She said that her use of pronouns had been dictated by her editors, but that she had tried to paint a sympathetic picture, and I acknowledged that she had indeed done as much.

Late Monday night Gordene MacKenzie, a trans activist visiting from Albuquerque, reached the night editor at the Globe. She told him about the problems with their story. He said that there had been a meeting of editors, and that they had agreed to a policy of using male pronouns and names in reporting on Rita’s death. He said that he would pass our concerns on to the others.

Tuesday afternoon Jessica and I taped a segment for WGBH’s “Greater Boston” with Emily Rooney. Emily introduced the topic at the top of the program by referring to our “strange transgender lifestyle.” After discussing some of the problems with the media coverage, I pointed to the tone with which she had felt compelled to introduce our segment as yet another example of media bias. I asked how she would feel if she were a guest on my radio program and I introduced her as strange.

To her credit, in a “Meet The Press” segment on Friday Emily advocated on behalf of the transgender community with local news editors. She asked if transgender sensibilities could not be shown the same respect shown for blacks, women, gays and lesbians. A Herald media critic suggested that some accommodation ought to be made, but the prevailing sentiment seemed to be that this was just another group whose concerns were too highly specialized to be worthy of the effort it would take to satisfy them.

On Tuesday Ann Donlan’s second piece in the Herald was headlined “Transgender slay victim apparently knew killer.” This time she correctly described Rita as transgender, but continued – presumably at the insistence of editors – to refer to Rita as ‘he’. She quoted Norell describing Rita as a “call girl,” backed up by Rebecca Durkee affirming that Rita ran an “escort ad.” She also mentioned two arrests in 1993 on prostitution charges. Interspersed were positive references to Rita as an “honest and a good person.” But the repeated mentions of her sex work incensed some of Rita’s friends, who thought that such mention should be minimal at best.

On Tuesday evening over 60 people attended the community response organizing meeting. The highly diverse group included Rita’s brother Darryl and sister Diana, friends from the local rocker music scene, various transgender folk, GLBT and other social activists, representatives of MOCAA and other organizations, a camera crew from channel 56 and reporters from (at least) the Herald and Bay Windows. There was considerable venting of anger over Rita’s death, and at the media for their misrepresentations of her identity and life. With no suspect, and an assurance that police were taking the crime seriously and pursuing the case with due diligence, an obvious target for anger was the media. However, the focus that emerged from the meeting was directed otherwise, except for one person who volunteered to create a

“RitaHester” web site with copies of articles and form letters for response to the Globe and Herald pieces. Following an impassioned plea from Jessica Rylan for an immediate demonstration of support and grief, Friday evening was set for a vigil. Any further organized response to the media was left for later.

On Wednesday, December 2, Bay Windows (“New England’s Largest Gay & Lesbian Newspaper”) published their first story on the case, deadnaming Rita, referring to Rita throughout as ‘he’ and placing her feminine name in quotes each time it was used. Again, I received a number of unsolicited calls expressing anger over the paper’s refusal to honor her chosen and fully lived gender.

Wednesday evening, I interviewed Rita’s mother Kathleen, sister Diana and brother Darryl on GenderTalk radio. All three spoke of their caring for their lost loved one. All three referred to Rita as “he”, but also accepted references to her as ‘she.’ Kathleen in particular bore eloquent witness to the fact the victim had been part of a

loving family, their obvious reticence or difficulty or resistance or avoidance of using feminine pronouns notwithstanding. As a transperson living as a woman myself, I know that to me and to many, and perhaps most, others like myself, to be called ‘he’ causes a feeling not unlike the stab of a knife, if somewhat less intense. I have yet to meet or hear from a transgender woman who does not prefer to be referred to with feminine pronouns. Clearly Rita was sincerely loved by her family, but their inner acceptance of her as a woman may have been somewhat limited.

According to a study published in the recently re-released “The Uninvited Dilemma,” roughly 50% of transgender people are rejected by their families following disclosure. It is neither unreasonable nor unsympathetic to think that Rita’s family might have felt some discomfort at her gender. Her family, though, does not define her gender. She did, with her life and death. It is Rita’s choices that define how we should refer to her, not those of her birth doctor, society or her family.

On Friday evening the Model Café in Allston was packed for the speak-out, which was held in the larger of the café’s two rooms. Waiting respectfully outside with the motorcycle police who would conduct traffic during the procession was Boston Police detective Mullen, who was seeking any information about the murder that attendees might be willing to offer.

I started the speak-out by announcing that the purpose of the event was to honor and remember Rita, and that those who wished to express their feelings about the press coverage would have opportunity another evening. During the speakout, most comments were focused on grief at losing Rita. George Anthony, bar owner, spoke of the many friends Rita made with her warm and welcome presence, thoughts that were echoed time and again by those who knew her. Particularly dramatic was the testimony of Rita’s mom Kathleen, whose tremendous passion hushed everyone in both rooms. After testifying to the strength of her love for her child and bemoaning her loss, she collapsed in a grief-induced faint which had everybody present holding their breath. She revived readily, though, and was gently helped to her seat.

When there were none left who wanted to speak, the crowd moved outside, lit candles, and formed up behind Rita’s family. The procession followed Ms. Hester, who carried on in her grief the whole way, along busy Brighton Avenue for the several blocks to Park Vale Avenue, where Rita lived and died. Turning up Park Vale, the noise of traffic was replaced by an eerie silence, against which Ms. Hester’s moans and cries stood out in stark relief, echoing off the apartment buildings which stood like canyon walls on either side of us. The large procession stopped in front of Rita’s residence, filling the street. Rita’s family members were struck with grief at our proximity to where she lived. Mourners laid flowers and candles at the door stoop, and placed a memorial sign facing the street. Finally, we all joined Kathleen in a prayer at the doorstep, and the procession moved on, making a circle around the block to travel back to the Model Café by the most visible route.

Back at the Café, as marchers milled about seeking closure, I announced the “Truth Rally” the following Friday while organizers distributed flyers. Privately, I expressed to organizers my reservations about the tone of the rally publicity, which struck me as overly demonizing and confrontational.

On Wednesday the 9th Bay Windows published a column in which editor Jeff Epperly snickered at the web activist form letters he had been receiving, and accused the transgender community of unreasonable hysteria. To his credit, he published two excellent letters criticizing his editorial policy on the reporting of the story. In response to a letter criticizing the use of quotations around Rita’s name, he accused critics of “paranoia,” and admitted flatly that “the quotation marks were a simple mistake.” He made no apology for any hurt done or mis- impressions made by that mistake. Instead, he wrote: “There was no disrespect intended. There was no disrespect in our coverage.” What Epperly fails to understand is that disrespect comes as readily from bigotry or ignorance as from intent.

On the same day, In Newsweekly, Boston’s alternative GLBT weekly, published an editorial by Fred Kuhr critical of the media for their insensitivity to transgender concerns. Using words like “sickening” and “insulting,” Kuhr lashed out at the Globe, the Herald, and Bay Windows. His criticism of the latter was especially harsh, accusing them of playing “petty word games.”

On Thursday, many trans people were stunned when the Boston Phoenix published an article by Sarah McNaught titled “Displaced anger: Is Rita Hester’s murder being eclipsed by the transgender community’s grammatical agenda?” The article’s fallacy is evident from the headline, which focuses on the language issue rather than the murder, precisely what it accuses trans activists of doing. Many of those quoted in the article – friends of Rita and activists alike – were furious at its misrepresentation in painting a community divided over priorities. Such division was and is pure fabrication. All of the leading organizers, and everyone else I’ve spoken with, feel that the murder is the important issue. It is the murder which creates such a fervor over the prejudicial media coverage. We can’t bring back Rita, but maybe we can avert the next murder, or at least begin to lessen some of the factors which contributed to the murder, by making some effort to represent our view of transgender people as respectful.

What McNaught, Epperly, and editors at the Globe and Herald need to understand is that language influences thought, and the stigma towards transgender people is maintained by media denigration and disrespect. Transgender people have long been the butt of jokes, regularly depicted as something other than “normal,” not worthy of respect or even protection under the law. All of this contributes to the devaluing of transgender lives. Calling Rita ‘she’ wouldn’t have saved her, but it is a show of respect for transgender lives that will move things in the right direction, towards an open acceptance of gender diversity within our culture. While there is room for debate about the exact relationship between gender and homosexuality, it seems clear enough that rigid gender roles and homophobia constitute a mutually supportive system of repression.

Too many times I’ve heard that media representation of transgender people has nothing to do with the absurdly high rate of violent crime against us. Was it not a public tone of racism that made slavery and racist violence possible? Was it not a public tone of sexism that made sex discrimination possible? Is it not public homophobia that fuels the engines of hate which produce crimes such as the murder of Matthew Shepard? The media editor or producer who claims that disrespectful representations of stigmatized minorities do not fuel hatred is practicing willful ignorance. Next we’ll be told that racism does not still flourish, that there is no homophobia, or that transgender people are not among the most popular targets for violence.

The pronoun issue is one on which there is no disagreement in the trans community. Editors, though, continue to use community disagreement over the exact use of the emerging term “transgender” as proof that the concerns of the trans community are unreasonable and cannot be satisfied. This seizing of one

disputed element as proof that the entire issue is moot is the same tactic that was employed against civil rights, feminist, and gay & lesbian rights advocates.

One useful point made by editors in the interview with Emily Rooney is that when reporters get a police report in which the term “male” is the only gender or sex defining term, they are obliged to use that in their reporting. Clearly, some education needs to be done with law enforcement officials. When a person is found dead in women’s clothes, when that person has breasts and a penis, and their closet contains women’s clothes, is it not reasonable to be conservative in stating what the sex or gender of the victim was? Why can’t the police report indicate that the person was transgender – a fact in obvious evidence? When neighbors report seeing the person exclusively as a woman, is it not reasonable to use female pronouns? To do so would not, as has been asserted repeatedly by editors, create “confusion.” Rather, it would properly identify this person to others by the way they represented themselves, which is all most of us see. To hold genitals as the ultimate marker of identity is absurd, not to mention homophobic. Should we all be expected to ‘drop trou’ in order to identify ourselves to each other? Only in a homophobic or sexist mind is genital shape of such vital importance.

On Friday December 11, the Truth Rally, sponsored by a broad coalition of activist groups, took place as planned, led by local activists Justice Williams and Chris Sterling. It started at the Boston Herald as part of a demonstration by Puerto Rican sympathizers against a virulently racist anti-Puerto Rican statehood column. From that demo, about 60 trans activists and sympathizers marched to the offices of Bay Windows, where speeches were made on the sidewalk in full view of Bay Windows staffers. Speakers included Leah Eckelberger from A Slice of Rice (an Asian queer group), Chris Sterling of Queer Revolt, Lorenzo Rossello of the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political Prisoners and POW's, and Kazi Toure of the Concerned Friends and Family of Mumia Abu-Jamal. It was here that I delivered a somewhat emotional response to the media and Jeff Epperly, which was subsequently printed in In Newsweekly, along with a sympathetic editorial.

On Sunday evening, December 13, a benefit for Rita was staged at Jacque’s, Boston’s leading tranny hangout and popular new music venue. The program included over a dozen acts, including rock ‘n roll bands not otherwise affiliated with the trans community as well as tranny performers. The well-attended event raised money badly needed to help pay for Rita’s funeral expenses.

The following evening, WFNX’s “One in Ten” radio program, a GLBT issues talk show, hosted a discussion of the media issues raised by the coverage of Rita’s murder, with Epperly, McNaught, and myself. McNaught and Epperly used the first 20 minutes of the program – supported by co-host and Bay Windows employee Sue O’Connell – to repeatedly slam transgender activism and this author in particular, with a strong undercurrent of self-justification. Fortunately, I was able to resist being drawn into the emotional fight for self-interest, and instead articulated some of the reasoning behind trans activist concerns.

Unfortunately, it appears that communications with Epperly and his supporters are serving only to harden his unsympathetic position. I have to wonder if I’ve lapsed too deeply into criticism of those who are not sympathetic to transgender concerns, rather than simply doing educational work around trans issues. The transgender movement has made a lot of progress in the last several years, much of it, I believe, due to an approach of loving education rather than angry activism. In the wash of strong feelings following Rita’s murder, I fear that I may have been too much of an instrument for emotional reaction, and not enough of a voice for tolerance, even of those who don’t care or who actively oppose us. If we can’t tolerate them, we can’t very well expect them to tolerate us.

Word on the street is that Rita was involved in the marijuana trade, and that her killing stemmed from bad business dealings. Why, then, the 20 stab wounds? Was Rita viciously brutalized, when another might have been simply intimidated, or shot quickly to death? We may never know the answer, but we do know that most businesses won’t knowingly hire transgenders into decent jobs, and that many of us are all but

forced into outlaw lives, when there is so little acceptance within “law abiding” society. Trying to establish a life of self-respect is even further out of reach for too many transgenders. We struggle at great length to win the merest tokens of public respect, and most people still wouldn’t dare to publicly admit to finding one of us attractive. Rejected, ridiculed, refused work, threatened with physical violence and intimidation – is it any wonder that some of us fall through the cracks? Is it so hard to understand that the isolation we are pushed into by ridicule and stigma sometimes retards social skill development? How dare those with a responsibility to all, and especially those that ought to know better, add further insult to such systematically injurious treatment.

On Saturday night I was rollerblading around Cambridgeport when I decided to skate over to the area of Brighton where we had marched in solemn candlelight procession the previous evening. It seemed important to take to the streets Rita had once called home. I wanted the killer, if he was there, to see me in my *Transsexual Menace* sweatshirt, and to know that the streets belong to us, too. I passed the Model Cafe, where I imagined the Anthony family setting a friendly tone for the folks enjoying themselves inside. Then I skated the course walked by the vigil. I stopped at the Silhouette Lounge, where Rita was last seen, and peered at length through the glass into the faces of the people inside. Can a killer be recognized by his eyes? I searched theirs for signs of guilt, but found only people relaxing on Saturday evening. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I sensed a faint remembrance of the evening before, and the friendly girl whose laughter had been cruelly silenced. After awhile I turned away, heading down busy Brighton Ave. A few blocks later, I turned up Park Vale Ave., a small side street whose silence stood in stark contrast to the noisy traffic on the main drag. I heard once again the tortured cries of Rita’s mother echoing against the silence of the night. At the stoop in front of Rita’s building, I found flowers, and two candles burning. There were some candles unlit, so I lit one more, to let all know that another person who cared had passed by.

Following the trial of William Palmer for the strangling death of transsexual Channele Pickett several years ago, In Newsweekly quoted Rita Hester in what now rings as a chillingly ironic response to the verdict. Rita’s words: “I’m afraid of what will happen if he gets off lightly. It’ll just give people a message that it’s OK to do this.

This is a message we cannot afford to send.”

The message is still being sent too often, by too many. Language counts. There’s good reason why we do not refer to blacks as negros, to women as girls, to gays and lesbians as homos, or to transgender women as men.

There’s nothing complicated about this, except the convoluted justifications offered by those who refuse to honor such a simple, humane, and consistent request.