

Not survival only - James Butler



Speech given at an event in South London to celebrate the role of marginalised LGBT people in the history of queer liberation movements as part of LGBT History Month.

Earlier this week I spoke at an event organised by [South London Anti-fascists for LGBT History Month](#), on a panel that included LGBT asylum seekers from Uganda and Nigeria, and people organising among sex workers. I returned home to find Stonewall celebrating the ‘final piece of the legislative jigsaw’ and thanking parliamentarians for deigning to give LGB people access to equal marriage. Below is what I said at the event, which offers a somewhat different perspective to the position of Stonewall and other rights organisations.

Good evening.

I want to start this evening by offering a message of solidarity to LGBTQ persons in Uganda. This morning, President Museveni signed into law the anti-homosexuality bill, which sentences those convicted of “aggravated homosexuality” to fourteen years in jail. There are complex reasons for this, not the least of which is as a statement against western impositions, or of colonialist tropes reheated by western gay rights organisations with little contact in the country itself. Verbal expressions of solidarity seem powerless in the face of this, like a futile gesture. Words are not enough, certainly; words alone do not break prison bars, or save lives. But our words can be a beginning. That is what I hope we do here tonight.

It's LGBT history month. Again. And I've been thinking about our history – histories, plural – what gets left out, and left in. Whose names get remembered, and whose don't. I've been thinking about official and unofficial histories. I've been thinking as well about where my political roots are, which come out of LGBT activism, and how those experiences shaped my perspective: the countless small acts of defiance, countless ingressions against a housing injustice, an injustice of asylum, finding somewhere for people who can no longer see their families to live -- these are small acts that do not make the history books, but nonetheless form the mainstay of that kind of activism. They will sometimes get looked down on by people who claim to be big-picture thinkers, who sneer and say, well, you can't change the world that way.

As far as it goes, that is true. Merely surviving is not enough to change the world, and we must change the world – change it so far that mere survival no longer has to be the sole criterion, the sole priority of our activism. And this brings me to our history again. It would, I'm sure, be an argument of many in this room that the formal recognition of a minority, the guarantees offered by the state for our protection, are not only insufficient but are unequally distributed: that is to say that laws against homophobic crime do not offer equal protection, but protection to only those kinds of queer people whom the law deems it worth protecting. Most often those people look like me. And because the law deems it worth protecting people who look like me, the history of the LGBT movement has been transformed – transformed in what I would call an act of historical violence – into a story about people who look like me, about the sloughing off of so-called “ridiculous” or “unrealistic” demands, the quietening of slogans that demanded not just

toleration but complete social overhaul, the silencing and disappearance of anyone too different or inconvenient. But the story of the LGBT movement, which is a story made up of those countless small acts as well as the birth of a collective struggle, is a story of people who do not look like me – and it is a story that is not yet over.

It is a story that is unfinished, that is a half-completed step, partly because of the way that history has been rewritten. The history of a movement that came from the margins has been made into a history of people who were, in the eyes of government, *people who were just like us all along*. We are told not to be ungrateful. We are told that, to enjoy an equal footing when it comes to property rights, to rights of visitation in hospital, to rights of protection against violence in public places or simply against murder in the streets that we must pack away our dreams of anything more than that, we must look away from the detention centres and violence at our borders, we must dissociate ourselves from sex workers, or our trans friends, we must be happily ornamental, provide sufficient human rights cover for politicians or large corporations. We have been taught, in other words, to modify our demands so they can be easily met and close our eyes to the violence that guarantees those rights.

I want to tell a brief story tonight. These are not special stories, and they are not unusual stories. They are, in fact, so typical that I'm sure many people in the room will have similar ones. They make up the background noise of homophobia to which we have become so acclimatised they do not, perhaps, seem even slightly out of the ordinary.

In 2007 I was leaving a club in a smallish city with a friend. It was a club that hosted the only gay night in town, and was across a car park on a back road, badly lit. When we were crossing the carpark – as we had done before – some young men jumped out of the bushes near the club and assaulted us. As is often the way with these things, I do not remember the exact sequence of the violence, whether the kick to my ribs came before my face hit the gravel of the car park. I lost it. I know I lost it. I know they ran off eventually. I remember being angry all night, after cleaning the blood off my face. I remember walking around my kitchen at 4am thinking whether it was my fault. I remember my friends – who are progressive, sweet and clueless – urging me to report it to the police. I made that decision when we were told the next morning that someone else had been jumped, and that they weren't able to go to the police because of the kind of work they were doing at that time. Now I don't trust the police. I didn't at the time. But they said, at least get it recorded as a homophobic crime.

I went to the police and they took photos of my injuries. They gave me a gay policeman. They offered me a cup of tea. Then they asked me if I'd shown off, or sworn at my attackers. If I had done anything to provoke them. They told me they couldn't use the CCTV, because at night the cameras zoomed in on the parking payment machines. Then they told me the crime wasn't homophobic because no homophobic words were used. That it was not homophobic – not sufficiently homophobic – to lay in wait outside an isolated gay club. I remember feeling like the room was spinning around me. I wanted to be sick. I only half remember what happened after that because of the rhythm of the blood pumping in my ears.

The next time I was assaulted I didn't call the police.

What I am saying here is not a plea for police reform. It isn't a sad story of good cops wanting to meet targets, resulting in bad policing. It isn't about lack of communication. It is about the fact that the protections that are given to us are given grudgingly. They are contingent. They are never complete. Where they act, they act only partially. What I'm saying is this: that with all the privileges I have – I am white, I am well educated – I was treated under the logic of suspicion that somehow I must have deserved it. This kind of treatment will not be a surprise for many in this room: it is how the police operate in the vast majority of their operations. All I want to say is we cannot and should not displace our responsibility

for our community on to the organs of the state, especially when they protect so very few of us and regularly harass, beat, arrest and deport others.

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Why choose that story? I have others: I could tell you about organising in a gay-run business in which sexual harassment was rife, and the defeat of the bosses by people who worked there. I could tell you about asylum cases we have won or lost. I could tell you about the drag artists who saved my life. I could tell you about the horror and disconsolation of trying to do HIV awareness work with gay youth. I think we should share these stories more, not least because our history is not written down. But I chose a story of violence – and the sad truth here is it is one of several I could have chosen – because our history is a history of violence, as well as pride found despite that violence, and resistance to it – and because that history is one that continues. It is a violence that is unequally distributed, as homophobic, transphobic, queerphobic, that exists at the hands of border guards and police, and that exists in subtle forms in the medical establishment and among our employers.

I want to say: look at how far we've come, and how much further we have to go. I want to argue against a conception of politics that sees its mainstay as gladhanding MPs who are happy to vote for gay marriage but fall silent when it comes to asylum claims by LGBT persons; that says politics is a narrow matter of formal recognition in law. That is not the end, but the first step of our politics. Hunger is political. The defunding of HIV research and the gutting of safe sex initiatives is political. The distribution of funds to campaigns for gay-friendly boardrooms and not to organisations dealing in queer homelessness is political. Adverts for pride parades with a smiling cop and a narrow range of professional equalitarians are political. The internal policing that brokers hesitation when I reach my hand out to my partner's hand in public is political. A press that will cover homophobia abroad but cannot recognise it on its own doorstep is political. Sex which comes hand in hand with violence and fear is political. A culture which deems gay rights a western innovation and deplores all other countries as barbaric, which avoids its own involvement and complicity in the establishment of regimes of torture and murder in the first place is deeply political. Our demands were never historically for toleration, for merely a formal recognition of homophobia, but the very abolition of the conditions that made homophobia thinkable in the first place.

That SLAF is doing this tonight is a good first step – because it is important to recognise that fascist movements in the UK and Europe are often openly homophobic, eliminationist, but that in the UK they often deploy this notion that one must be racist, one must join their culture of fear, to protect the western “innovation” of gay rights. I think we must refuse this. We must refuse this partly because it is a lie, but also partly because, under the veneer of toleration, these are the same homophobes who vary from the genteel supporters of section 28 to the violent eliminationists who want us dead. That refusal must be the first step. But we must also reconstitute a history that looks not just at Stonewall Lobbying but at STAR, not at only Harvey Milk but at Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera as part of our history that has been silenced, and help to rebuild that political project of which we have only taken the first half-step.

I want to end with a thought that has been playing round my head for days now. It is a thought that comes and goes over the years, but which has been in my head because I have been thinking about the huge rent in LGBT culture that was left by the AIDS epidemic, which we still hesitate to name as a political crisis exacerbated by homophobia, refuse to name as a crisis that should always have been laid at the door of the government. It is this: which lives are grievable, and how? Which lives get to count, and which don't. What I mean by this is we should start to realise that the way in which some segments of society get their oppression, their deprivation, their harassment and even their deaths treated as merely unfortunate but natural phenomena (which cannot be avoided) is politically charged, and can be changed. I mean by this – if the point is not clear by now – that after the nominal end of the AIDS crisis (which didn't, in fact, end) we have been subject to an overwhelming and coordinated political and cultural assault that tells us that

the lives of people with AIDS, as the lives of other segments of queer populations whose existence repels the people who run our society – who are black, who are migrants, who are sex workers, who are non-normative in other ways – are not grievable in the same way as other lives. They do not get monuments; their deaths do not get entered in the annals of our history as political obscenities. This logic, which attempts to privatise and naturalise what is a political and collectively-lived experience, is everywhere. It is the same logic that says of every gay man who is murdered by homophobes – well, did he try to cruise them? It is the same logic that teaches suspicion and difference, and which threatens potential relegation to excluded status should you speak out against it. Which says that you are here under sufferance. Against this, I want to say the hands that do violence against any LGBT person, which imprison them, which turn them away at borders, which harass them or beat them, which break windows or bones – they are not meant for them alone, but every LGBT person in this room and beyond. When we accept that, when that truth becomes clear, then the need to build that power which is not simply a politics of survival alone, but a politics of survival which does away with the very conditions that made our injured survival necessary in the first place. I hope we are taking a step in that direction today.

Originally posted on [tumblr](#).