

Black trans women face a unique threat rooted in centuries of history

19th-century blackface minstrelsy helped stigmatize Black trans women as both threatening and inauthentic.



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Qween Jean, the founder and chief executive of Black Trans Liberation, participates in the March On For Voting Rights in Washington on Aug. 28, 2021 (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

May 1853 marked the final arrest of Mary Jones for grand larceny in New York City. Also known as Beefsteak Pete, Jones had gained notoriety for their publicized trial 10 years before for grand larceny related to prostitution. Jones was one of the earliest openly transgender people of color in U.S. history,

and their story helps explain why even as American culture has become more tolerant toward LGBTQ people, 2021 was one of the worst years of violence against trans people in U.S. history (particularly trans women of color).

Jones's story reminds us of how American culture stigmatizes trans people as counterfeit and therefore disposable. When compounded by American racism, trans women of color remain particularly vulnerable.

Jones was born in New York in 1803, at a time when the dominant American culture excluded openly gay and lesbian people. Until 1828, the legal penalty for "sodomy" in New York — understood then as sex between two men — was life imprisonment. Moreover, recognition of individuals as trans was largely unheard of. It would be over 100 years until the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld used the term "transvestite," and another 60 before terms such as "transsexual" and "transgender" existed. As a result, trans people were often mislabeled as "perverts" or lumped into the wider category of sodomy. Trans people existed — but they faced social isolation, violence and even death.

Jones's first run-in with authorities, in June 1836, illustrated the plight of trans Americans in this period. Police apprehended them for allegedly stealing the wallet of a White man who had solicited Jones for sex. Jones passed for a cisgender woman, and the police did not discover anything otherwise until the arresting officer searched Jones and noticed that they wore a prosthetic "woman's womb" held up by a girdle (a fact that would earn them the moniker "Beefsteak Pete").

The rarity of an openly trans woman drew major attention to Jones's initial trial. During the trial, Jones testified that, though "a man," they had "always attended parties among the people of [their] own Colour dressed [as a woman]." Adding to the rarity of the case was Jones's race. [In 1830](#), the free Black population of the entire state of New York was only around 2.3 percent. Although that population was concentrated mainly in New York City, Jones's presence in the metropolis as a Black person would not have gone entirely unnoticed — something magnified by their prostitution.

Elements of racial subversion made Jones's story that much more sensational. Reporting on another of Jones's arrests, in 1842, [the New York Herald](#) referred to them as a "deceiver" of those with a desire for

“amalgamation” — interracial sex. Neither prostitution nor interracial sex was illegal in New York. However, in areas like the Five Points and the Bowery, where Jones worked, social conventions ensured that even illicit activities kept races separate. What repulsed the media most and drew attention from authorities was that they viewed Jones as a Black man who violated gender, sexual and racial norms seemingly to defraud innocent White men.

The prevailing logic of race in the period stigmatized “amalgamation.” Slavery — even in New York, it had only been illegal for 10 years before Jones’s trial in 1836 — and the social system it generated required that Black bodies be treated as inferior, hypersexual and as tools of labor.

Ironically, the popular blackface minstrel shows of the era helped entrench this culture. By publicly depicting gender in flux, minstrel shows were notorious for their use of female impersonators and fascination with Black sexuality. These shows rose in popularity at the height of antebellum slavery, as a response to White male anxieties around race, class and labor. Most important, the hypersexual performances aimed to assert White masculinity and dominance.

In New York City, blackface performances flooded city theaters in many of the same areas Jones frequented. Songs like “Longtail Blue” sexualized Black bodies through heavily phallic references, the performers often contorting their bodies in hypersexual poses. Shows also featured cross-dressing White male actors playing female “wench” roles while performing songs like “Coal Black Rose” satirizing Black women as unattractive, physically masculine and laughable. The blackface cross-dressed “wench songs” and the genre’s wider treatment of Black sexuality reinforced a culture that treated race and gender/sexual amalgamation as equal parts bizarre spectacle and threat. With its blacked-up, cross-dressing casts, minstrelsy allowed White men to earn a profit by crossing lines of race and gender while shielding them from the social and legal persecution faced by someone like Jones.

More important, blackface prioritized cis gender White manhood as the standard. Indeed, it depicted the transgression of racial and gender lines as exclusively for White cis gender men. When combined with a dominant culture that rejected cis gender “sodomy,” blackface’s fictional gender transformations made recognition of trans bodies as authentic unthinkable.

This explains public reaction to Jones’s gender and sexuality. In a culture that reserved flagrant crossing of race and gender lines for fictional performances by cis gender White men, the public ridiculed Jones’s real racial and gender subversion.

Newspaper articles specifically gendered Jones as a man, and they also noted the “tremendous roar” and “greatest merriment” when a spectator “snatched the flowing wig” off Jones during their trial, unmasking the perceived falsehood of Jones’s identity. [An 1844 article](#) expressed a more immediate danger by citing Jones’s habit of “[enticing] men and boys into alleys” as “terrible, revolting and peculiar [in] character.” Jones was therefore cast as an oddity and a devious threat. After serving a five-year sentence for the alleged 1836 robbery, Jones would continue to be arrested for their “old game” for years to come, albeit with less media frenzy. They would nevertheless be immortalized in a now-famous lithograph as [“The Man-Monster.”](#)

The close to two centuries between Jones’s life and the present day have witnessed seismic transformations tied to gender, sexuality, race and their intersections. Our culture has become more accepting of trans people — although that is a very recent development. Individuals like Janet Mock and Laverne Cox stand at the forefront of current representations of trans women and embody a recognition of trans personhood unimaginable two centuries ago. Race relations in the United States have likewise undergone seismic transformations. Particularly, emancipation, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, and the Black Lives Matter movement have embedded recognition of Black humanity into American culture.

Yet, this progress has not erased the idea that bodies subverting sexual and gender norms are inauthentic and threatening. What is more, extant ideas about the gender binary remain tied up in assumptions about race, racial purity/hierarchy and, ultimately, White supremacy. In November, [a study by Human Rights Watch](#) concluded that more than three-quarters of the trans and nonbinary people killed in the United States in 2020 were people of color, with trans women of color at a particular risk.

The same study showed that from 2016 to 2021, between 88 percent and 91 percent of the transgender people killed in Florida, Ohio and Texas were people of color. These statistics are especially concerning, given the recent surge of White supremacy and far-right conservatism in the country.

More broadly, new efforts targeting transgender girls and women for harm are proliferating. In the past few months, South Dakota and Iowa each passed laws [banning](#) transgender girls and women from playing on female sports teams, and [Indiana lawmakers](#) advanced a similar bill. Other states are likely to follow. Further indicating continued treatment of trans bodies as inauthentic in U.S. culture, rapper Lil Boosie [recently tweeted](#) “Cheater!! ‘he needs to leaave lol’” about collegiate trans swimmer Lia Thomas.

These assaults on trans people are no laughing matter. As the story of Jones reminds us, these efforts are deeply historically rooted. This history explains why even as our culture has become far more forward-thinking on issues of race, gender and sexuality, trans women — especially trans women of color — continue to struggle for basic recognition of their humanity.