



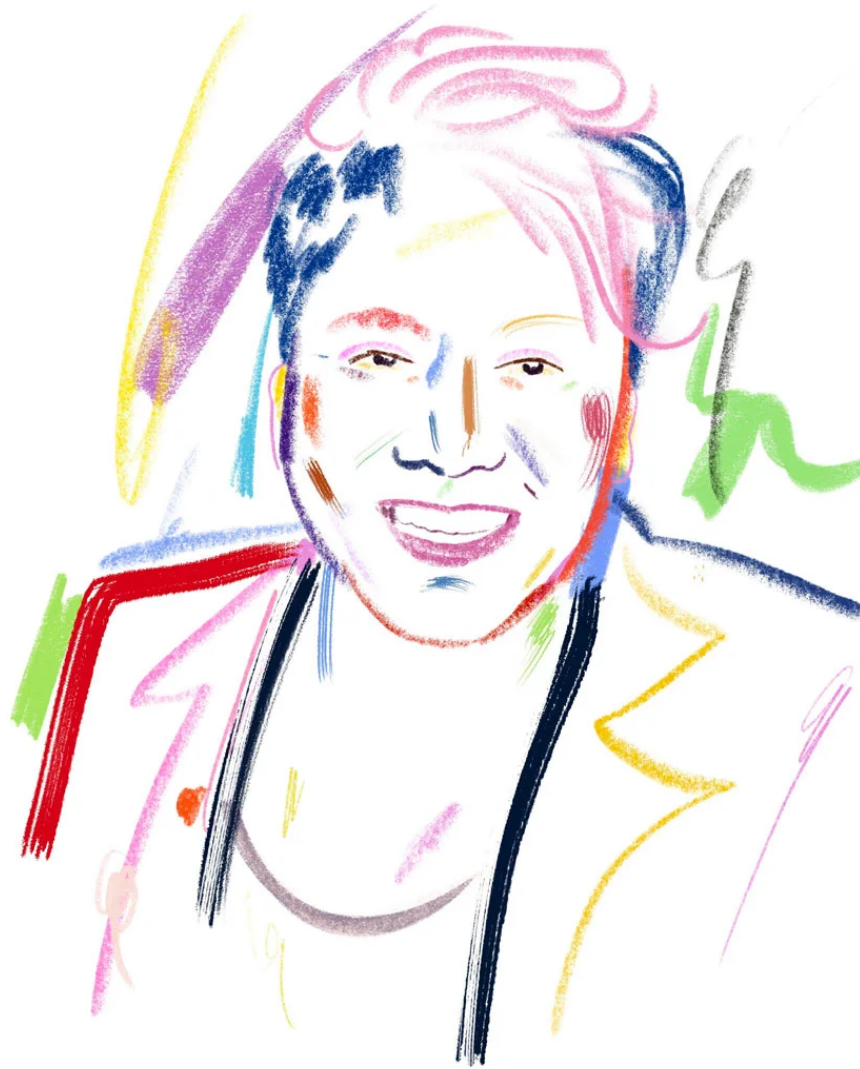
COMMUNITY

How Monica Roberts Became One of America's Most Respected Black Trans Journalists

On her blog, TransGriot, she's published pioneering reporting and opinion on the Black trans community for 14 years — with no signs of stopping.

BY ASHIA AJANI

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from generation to generation, and honor the histories that make up Black life.

In West Africa, the oral historians who curated these stories were called “griots.” Originating from the West African Mande Empire of Mali, the role was exceedingly important in communities, as griots were the main preservers of cultural history. They remembered special events, attended political meetings, put their stories to music, and were often called upon to resolve disputes. On New Year’s Day 2006, trans activist and blogger Monica Roberts created [TransGriot](#), a blog dedicated to chronicling the

stories of Black trans people. First introduced to the world in 2004 as a column in a Louisville, Kentucky LGBTQ+ newspaper called *The Letter*, *TransGriot* was born out of the lack of online resources focused on the issues that mattered to Black trans people and other trans people of color.

Growing up in segregated Houston, Texas during the '70s, Roberts was acutely aware of the lack of Black trans stories in the public eye from an early age. She transitioned in 1994 during her time as a gate agent at the Houston airport, and said that coming out was made easier by the sheer number of queer coworkers she had at her airline. As she began to transition physically, Roberts also attended local trans support groups — but was disappointed by the lack of people of color in attendance.

“...while national and regional trans conferences have been around for decades, like Fantasia Fair, The Texas T Party, California Dreaming, [the International Foundation for Gender Education, or IFGE] conference and Southern Comfort,” Roberts said in an interview with *Bitch Media*. “they weren't diverse because of several factors, like cost and the need to travel to get to them.”

Roberts nevertheless continued to be involved with organizations like IFGE and Southern Comfort, noting that in these spaces helped her in establishing lifelong friends. In 1999, Roberts helped found the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition and served as the political director on its inaugural board from through 2002.

While living in Louisville, Roberts served on the board of the city's Fairness Campaign and its political action committee, and later went on to organize a conference called Transsistahs-Transbrothas in 2005 and 2006. When *TransGriot* was founded in 2006, Roberts had already begun writing about Black trans issues, and critiquing the ways in which white queer people consciously marginalized Black trans people and other trans people of color.

Roberts recognized that racism and sexism were serious issues within queer spaces, especially among cisgender gay and lesbian communities. “Trans folk are the canary in the civil rights coal mine,” Roberts said at the National LGBTQ Task Force Creating Change Conference this January, where she received the Susan J Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement. In her acceptance speech, Roberts reflected on how

when she got her start as an activist in 1998, there was an overwhelming attitude within the queer community that adding trans issues to LGBTQ+ legislation would worsen its chances for implementation. Roberts herself has dealt with harassment from trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS), and even believes that they are to blame for *TransGriot* being temporarily taken down in February 2019.

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Trans people are still waiting for equal rights at the state and federal level, and equal representation within the queer community. But Roberts remains vigilant, particularly as it pertains to civil rights gains within the South. The Creating Change Conference took place in Dallas, Texas, and Roberts notes the exceptional trans activism that is taking place in Texas. In 2017, trans youth activists led the charge to kill the SB 6 “Bathroom Bill,” and Roberts is hopeful that in 2020, voters will flip the state blue.

“We know for a fact that the first 48 hours are critical in any murder investigation in whether the person gets justice,” Roberts said in an interview with The Daily Beast last year. “So when you deliberately misgender a victim, then you’re delaying justice for that trans person who has been murdered.”

Views of the American South as a deeply ignorant geographic region have resurfaced in light of the upcoming 2020 presidential election. To deny the South power and agency is to deny the entrenched Blackness of the region, specifically the Black queerness of those Southern States. As of 2017, approximately 58 percent of people who identify as Black live in the American South. In Texas alone, approximately 11 percent of Black people identify as LGBTQ+. These are some of the most disenfranchised groups in America, and media focus on the homophobic engagements of the Black Christian church ignore the legacies of Black queer relationship building within these communities.

“...the front line of the trans rights struggle has shifted to Texas and South; it’s past time for funders to fund the organizations in the South so that we can do our work.” Roberts said in a November interview with Queerty. “Especially organizations that focus mainly on Black trans folks and trans folks of color. We are the front line at this point. The history of this movement has also got a Texas Twang to it.”

In recent years, Roberts has started researching and ID-ing trans people who have been murdered. Upon hearing about a death in the trans community, Roberts combs through local police reports, matches that person’s chosen name to the report that often uses their legal name to identify them. This means in many reports, trans people are posthumously misgendered, and Roberts seeks to right that wrong. The act of misgendering leads to confusion within the investigation, and may delay justice for the victim.

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On January 1st, 2020, Dustin Parker, a transgender man, was fatally shot in Oklahoma. His death is believed to be the first murder of a trans person in 2020. A few days later, Roberts spoke to Kendis Gibson at MSNBC about the danger of anti-trans rhetoric, and how this rhetoric gives way to violence against trans people. Roberts also spoke about how the trans panic defense, the legal strategy that a person’s gender

identity/sexuality can be used to justify their own murder, desperately needs to be repealed.

“There are eight states now in which there is a ban on the trans panic defense,” Roberts said. “Unfortunately, my home state of Texas is not one of them.”

Advocacy organizations and media outlets often rely on Roberts during the early stages of reporting, given the success she’s had. Considering the longevity of *TransGriot*, the breadth of research and reporting she’s done, and the sheer level of heart Roberts brings to the table, it’s no wonder that *TransGriot* is celebrating its 14th anniversary and fifth GLAAD Media Award nomination this year. Honoring the memory, legacy and accomplishments of Black trans people is crucial to ensuring that these histories do not fall by the wayside.

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