

General Editors' Introduction

SUSAN STRYKER and PAISLEY CURRAH

Grand theory travels. It circulates, colonizes, and globalizes. By contrast, minority discourses, subaltern voices, and historical formations outside the metropole are routinely “conscripted to the realm of the particular” because, Alexander Weheliye reminds us, “minority discourses seemingly cannot inhabit the space of proper theoretical reflection” (2014: 19, 6). Instead, these particularities are consumed and discharged in the production of “Theory” with a capital *T* that purports to abstract, despecify, and ultimately to deracinate. Of course, the universal forms such theoretical knowledges create turn out to be screens for a particular conception of the human—that is, (masculinist, Eurocentric, white, heteropatriarchal, able-ist, bourgeois) “Man”—which, as Sylvia Wynter writes, “over-represents itself as if it were the human itself” (2003: 260).

To what extent does transgender theorizing in the academy circulate as grand theory, subtended and overseen by the Man and all his baggage, and to what extent does it participate in critical minoritarian discourse and contribute to the livability of lives ranked less worthy of living according to Man’s mis-measures? This is the tension that frames this issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, “The Issue of Blackness,” guest edited by Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, C. Riley Snorton, and Matt Richardson.

These editors offer blunt provocations to the field of transgender studies and its practitioners: why, in its processes of institutionalization and canon formation, has transgender studies, another “theory in the flesh,” been so remiss in acknowledging women-of-color feminisms—black feminisms in particular—as a necessary foundation for the field’s own critical explorations of embodied difference? Why has it been so complicit in provincializing that body of work, replicating privileged notions of the human as Man, or celebrating in- or post-human figurations of embodied being that can prematurely foreclose humanness to the very beings routinely denied access to it? In what ways does transgender as a mode of analysis, point of theoretical departure, or object of study, in their words,

“always already depend on an abstraction of the racialization of space as foundational to the production of gender and sexuality?” And most pointedly, in a historical moment when images of black trans women saturate mass media as never before, yet the precarity of black transfeminine lives has rarely been greater, how might the field of transgender studies be building its relevance and accruing its cultural capital on such black women’s backs and using their lives “as a springboard to move toward other things, presumably white things,” while doing precious little to interrupt the power that renders black lives “killable and cageable”? As the editors note, they’ve “got issues” with “the issue of blackness” in trans* studies. Their voices, and the work of the scholars they have selected for inclusion in this issue of *TSQ*, do the vital work of centering all these issues for any further elaborations of the field.

Somewhat unexpectedly, this issue of *TSQ* also dramatizes the kinships and estrangements of trans* studies and queer studies through the lens of blackness. While it is certainly true that trans* studies has worked to hold queer studies accountable for its unstated cis-centrism and its privileging of sexuality over the forms of gendered embodiment that allow sexuality to “take shape and find its aim” (Stryker 2004: 212), it is nonetheless also true that a field of black queer studies has taken shape that provides an intellectual home for black scholars of trans* phenomena that such scholars have yet to fully seek or claim (or perhaps desire) within trans* studies. When queer theory was first becoming institutionalized in the academy a quarter century ago, it was widely perceived as a white affair, presided over by literary scholars of the Anglo-American canon working at elite private universities. And yet, within a few years, queer-of-color scholars were offering countergenealogies of the field that displayed its other roots, decentered its presumptive whiteness, and grounded its work in different problematics. Transgender studies is at just such a crossroads today. Work such as that collected in this issue can perhaps begin to demonstrate that blackness, rather than being a “new direction” of concern for the field, has in fact always already been a constitutive if rarely acknowledged element in the field’s formation and articulation.

As the activist Lourdes Ashley Hunter, the national director of the Trans Women of Color Collective, notes, “Every breath a black trans person takes is an act of revolution” (2015). Each such breath is a radical instance of the persistence of black being, of black mattering and continuing to matter as black, and of the need for and the possibility of deep structural changes that are conducive to black life. How can transgender studies as a field be more inspired by such sentiments so that it conspires with them: literally breathing in, in order to breathe with, a revolutionary black politics? Scholarly attention to the transversal relationality of

blackness to transness within the dominant system of social organization we all live within, which ranks us all according to cultural fantasies about the meaning of our flesh, must surely be part of any such transformative political project.

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We Got Issues

Toward a Black Trans/Studies*

TREVA ELLISON, KAI M. GREEN,
MATT RICHARDSON, and C. RILEY SNORTON

We are in a time labeled the “transgender tipping point,” a period characterized by the scaling up of legal protections, visibility, rights, and politics centered on transgender people. The contemporary visual landscape is populated with the bodies of Black women. How does the language and discourse of the tipping point elide the presence of a saturation of Black bodies? In academia this elision has taken the shape of the expansion and institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline. We are interested in what happens to the category of transgender as it becomes routed through the logics and power lines of institutionality and the metrics of administration. This special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* is the product and process of our attempt to think through how the institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline functions as a scene of subjection for blackness—for Black people and places.

We have engaged multiple fields in this issue, and these various intellectual quandaries all signal the simultaneous institutionalization of transgender studies alongside the heightened visibility of transgender people in our current popular and political landscapes. We are interested in the ways that these two simultaneous occurrences affect one another. Black transwomen and transwomen of color have sparked the interests of many because of popular figures like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock; at the same time, there has also been a lot more awareness around Black transwomen’s relationship to premature death. Though the popular representation of fabulousness and the crises of the trans subject are represented primarily by Black transwomen and transwomen of color, the field of transgender studies, like other fields, seems to use this Black subject as a springboard to move toward other things, presumably white things.

In 2000, the emergent field of Black queer studies brought together scholars from multiple fields asking questions about the relationship between blackness and queerness. The culmination of this meeting led to the groundbreaking *Black Queer Studies* anthology (Johnson and Henderson 2005). As we write this, the second volume of the Black queer studies anthology has just been published: *No Tea, No Shade* (Johnson 2016). How has the field of Black queer studies changed? What possibilities did the quasi-institutionalization of Black queer studies open up and/or foreclose? What are the blind spots that couldn't be named in 2000 that have become apparent in 2016?

If we ask what is new about Black queer studies, the answer is “trans.” There is an attempt not simply to grapple with the presence of noncis subjects but also, again, to return to this question: what will become the commonsense intellectual and political genealogies of transgender studies? If we also ask what is old and still relevant about Black queer studies, the answer is still “trans,” in that it attempts to organize itself around what we might call “a Trans* method [that] further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence” (Green 2016: 80). We might then pose the question: will the canonization of transgender studies proceed via the abstraction of race as a modern global signifier? Or, more accurately: in what ways does transgender studies always already depend on an abstraction of the racialization of space as foundational to the production of gender and sexuality?

The conceptualization of this special issue is tethered to the aforementioned provocations. This is also our attempt to bring and ring the alarm (as in, “We been through this too long”) to what we observe as a trend in scholarship to deconstruct the human and its attendant spatial narratives, like the Anthropocene, while neglecting to reckon with the contributions of Black feminism and Black queer studies to this line of thought. The frameworks of the posthuman, Afro-pessimism, and Afro-optimism/Black ops each attempt to think through the problematic of “the human” and humanism; each often makes its theoretical gambits by eliding and/or instrumentalizing those not-quite humans and sometimes humans whose violability forms the abstracted imaginative surface (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman [1997]) upon which the human and its metrics are conjured.

In “Black Feminism and the Future of Our Worlds,” Grace Hong (2008) expresses her skepticism about the institutionalization of Black feminist studies, arguing that it has proceeded as the vampiric theft of Black women’s labor, life force, and reproductive capacity: Black feminist studies without Black women. We hold the same skepticism about the institutionalization of transgender studies, having lived and felt the contradictions of expanding sites for intellectual inquiry that have done little to disrupt the violent machinations and accumulation

imperatives of racial capitalism that position those considered surplus as killable and cageable. Several authors in this special issue take up the question of the human directly: Calvin Warren writes from the position of blackness as nonbeing to articulate the potential of Black trans studies as a mode of thought that reveals the category of gender to be simply another humanist fantasy. Marquis Bey argues for the “trans*-ness of blackness” and the “blackness of trans*-ness” as a way of thinking through the meeting of Black and trans as an encounter that indexes those paraontological forces that make up the “demonic grounds” of subjectivity and ontology. Eva S. Hayward, following “[Frank] Wilderson’s critique of ‘the human’ as white beingness,” asks, “Is beingness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence?” And might “trans negativity help expose how the order of the subject, and the matter of ontology, are what make black trans women, in particular, vulnerable to violence?”

The principal logic of a special issue is to set forth a conversation that is ostensibly new in some way. The editors have thus staged an encounter between multiple voices and multiple fields that bear upon an emergent line of inquiry. This presumption of novelty that sensitizes the reception of a special issue is thrown into stark relief in “The Issue of Blackness.” Rather than presenting the works in this issue as “new,” we begin with a series of questions about repressed genealogies that might come into view through a more sustained engagement with blackness, as an “issue” that is both overseen and unknown. As noted in our call for papers, “Blackness is overseen in the sense that the literal and figurative capture of Blackness is a source of value for social and political subjectification and a mechanism of valorization for institutions and institutionalized knowledge.” The matter of blackness as overseen produces one way of viewing how transversality expresses the links between trans thought, trans life and death, Black thought, and Black life and death.

Édouard Glissant’s work on the interconnectedness of the Caribbean is instructive here, as he notes how transversality (rather than transcendence) explains the subterranean convergences, or what he calls the “submarine roots” that are “floating free, not fixed in one position . . . but extending in all directions . . . [in a] shared process of cultural mutation . . . that frees us from uniformity” (1989: 66–67). Glissant’s theorization points to the meaning of transversality as a collateral genealogy, or an encounter with the past that also contains an ethical confrontation with the collateral damages involved in blackness as overseen and unknown. Blackness as “unknown,” the consequence of hegemonic imaginaries that position Black people and Black life as “ungeographic” and untimely, promotes a way of viewing blackness as a belated arrival or addendum to trans studies. Thus, what we coeditors have sought to do is describe the

logics of the issuance of blackness as a problem, and to present an invitation to think about how the transversality of blackness and transness might come into view.

We have attended to a diverse array of entry points: through memory, social movements, visual and popular culture, and, perhaps most importantly, Black feminism. To draw on the language of Hortense Spillers (1987), Black/womanist/Africana feminist thought provides “grammars” for articulating gender that exceed the rubrics of biology/biocentrism or social artifice. Careful attention to the debates in the field opens up ways for reading transness as always and already theorized and theorizable from the literature on “racialized gender.” Contributor Elías Cosenza Krell uses Black feminist and Black queer studies theory to deconstruct constructions of transmisogyny coming from popular culture and queer studies. Krell questions to what extent transmisogyny instrumentalizes Black transwomen while universalizing whiteness, and sketches out trans-of-color feminisms from within and without the academy that complicate transmisogyny as a conceptual framework. Syrus Ware’s essay on queer and trans-of-color archives in Toronto insists on the transversality of Black queer and trans practices of remembrance, as they work through and exceed institutionalized archival spaces and structures. This transversality, Ware argues, reveals how LGBT archives and archival power more broadly configure the trans-of-color subject as the always belated arrival to the (white) archive. Jennifer DeClue pushes on the boundaries of popular understandings of Black feminism to place Black trans* and genderqueer embodiments in the ways that Black womanhood is epistemologically undertaken in cultural representation. Karen Jaime’s essay regarding popular representation takes us to the work of Ellison Renee Glenn, aka Black Cracker, to complicate our understanding of Black trans futurities. Glenn’s work as a hip-hop performer leaves more questions than it answers, as he contemplates what it means to “chase rainbows” of Black representation on a transnational scale.

In a piece about Black transwomen and transnational relationships, Erin Durban-Albrecht theorizes the “persistent self-fashioning and erotic transnational intimacies” that are crucial to the survival of Black transwomen in Haiti. Dora Silva Santana’s essay, which considers Black transwomen in Brazil, is an offering and instantiation of *escrevivência* as an Afro-diasporic practice of life writing that brings critical attention to the narrative convergences of gender and space that occur by way of the transatlantic. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley provides an introduction to a collection of letters written by activist CeCe McDonald during her imprisonment at the Minnesota Correctional Facility–St. Cloud. In “Go beyond Our Natural Selves,” McDonald theorizes violence, love, gender, and the politics necessary to undo a teleology that precipitates and predicts Black and trans death.

On Black Trans*/Studies

Black is a modifier that changes everything. The power of blackness to change all that comes after is part of its close relationship to death. To be preceded by death is to pull meaning into “dense and full space” (Hammonds 1994: 138). This issue is a meditation on the development of a distinct field of study that is in conversations with, but stands on its own in relation to, Black studies as broadly configured. The reader may find this issue particularly focused on ontology and nonbeing. It is our position that Black people have a significant stake in thinking about and theorizing the body in relation to self-definition, state regulation, and physical and social death among other phenomena. In this issue, we see Black feminist theory as essential to Black trans theory and to transgender studies. Black feminist thought, labor, and commitment have been essential to the de/construction of gender and sexuality. We acknowledge Black feminist theory’s contributions to thinking gender and the opportunity it provides for feminist dialogue across fields on gender’s fractious and fractured meanings.

We ruminate on the politics of citation that keeps scholars, including those in this issue, from recognizing the work of Black women by ignoring their contributions to the field. An appreciation for Black feminist theory is but one step. Another is integrating Black feminist analysis of the field, beginning with being attentive to the fact that all four of us are masculine identified, and while all four of us write about Black transwomen, it is past time for Black transwomen to occupy a similar position of power as we do in being able curate this conversation through an institutionalized medium, with living-wage employment. The persistent premature death of Black transwomen and all Black women and their exploitation in the political economy of academia and beyond means we did not receive many submissions from Black transwomen. In this issue there are two pieces by Black transwomen: CeCe McDonald’s prison writing and an essay by Dora Silva Santana. This is, of course, only a gesture toward a Black future wherein Black transwomen’s ideas and scholarship run at the front and center of Black academic thought.

There are, as always with any attempt at flight elsewhere, fugitive questions that do not get addressed in this issue. We return to genealogy and encounter to question how and why Black feminism continues to not be engaged as theory. And we caution the field to think about the Black feminists whom we evoke and deem worthy to take up as theorists. When we say “Black feminism,” what names do we call upon? Whom do we not turn to? How does transgender studies instrumentalize Black feminism and disavow it simultaneously? There are multiple and contradictory flows of Black feminist theory that do not agree with each other in relationship to gender and embodiment. These disjunctures in Black feminism reappear in this issue. Is Black feminism an interrogation of gender or

an attachment to the category of “Black woman”? We leave our readers with a nonexhaustive bibliography to move toward in partial answer to these questions, even if it does not land you safely in the status of arrival.

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All Power to All People?

Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto

SYRUS MARCUS WARE

Abstract In this article, the author considers the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. The author examines interventions by black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto. Lastly, the author considers how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. The classic archive structure — primarily white trans and queer archives — is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism, and the vilification of the less progressive other. The author suggests that we start with a black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change.

Keywords black, trans, archives, Toronto, time

In this article, I will consider the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. I will examine interventions by black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto.¹ Lastly, I will consider how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. This article was created through several collaborative feedback sessions with the Marvellous Grounds collective and draws on the emerging Marvellous Grounds archive project.² In particular, I draw on the writing of contributors Monica Forrester, a black trans activist from Toronto who has done sex worker outreach for the past two decades; Richard Fung, artist and activist and one of the founders of Gay Asians of Toronto; and Douglas Stewart, a black activist and organizer who started Blockorama and other key black queer and trans organizations in the city.

The classic archive structure—and I’m speaking here primarily about white trans and queer archives—is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008; Walcott 2015), and the vilification of the less progressive other (Taylor 2003; Stoler 2010; Said [1993] 1994; Dadui, forthcoming). As Haritaworn argues in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, the queer time line we are describing/critiquing suggests a seamless march toward rights, with hate crime activism as the apex of history into which the rest of the world must be forced (2015: 109–22). Instead, I am suggesting that we start with a black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change. As I will illustrate in this text, we need to consider what we want to remember and how we want to remember it, building an archive of our movements going forward to ensure that intergenerational memory can inform our activism, community building, and organizing. By tracing the histories of QTBIPOCs in Toronto,³ and the omissions of these narratives in mainstream archives, we can begin to do this work.

I would like to begin by calling names, following author Courtney McFarlane (2007) and his important commitment to remembering the great legacy of black queer and trans folks in Toronto over the past several decades. I want to call names to bring the spirit of these activisms into the room with us, to remember that it is ongoing and enlivened by a consideration of the past, present, and (Afro) future (Yaszek 2006; Butler 2012). I’d like to call into this space the important work of trans women of color and indigenous trans and two-spirited folks who are often omitted from the archives—from official records and collective memories of what has happened in this place. And so I call names:⁴ Mirha Soleil-Ross, Yasmeen Persad, Monica Forrester, and Nik Redman. The names of those with us, but also those who have already passed on, include Sumaya Dalmar, Duchess, and countless others. I call these names as an act of remembrance and reverence, but also as a suggestion for where to begin looking for our trans-of-color archive—in names called and stories shared.

Coming Out as Trans and Black

When I entered the largely white trans community in Toronto in the late 1990s, coming out as a black trans person felt incredibly isolating. The 519 Church Street Community Centre’s trans programs were in their infancy, and though they did a lot to promote early trans visibility, the ephemera they created tended to reproduce the idea that there were few (if any) black trans people. Online resources like FTMI (Female-To-Male International) and the Lou Sullivan Society didn’t do a

good job of connecting with and creating work by trans folks of color, something that would eventually change after years, if not decades, of trans folks of color mobilizing and organizing. And so I came out and felt quite isolated. But through organizing within black queer spaces, I met other people. I worked with Yasmeeen Persad through 519's Trans Shelter Access Project, and I connected with Monica Forrester through my work at Pasan. We shared information and resources. I found out through researching sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in North America that one of the first trans people to have SRS inside the United States was Delisa Newton, a black trans jazz singer. I learned about Storme DeLarverie, a black gender-variant performer and activist who set the stage for countless future trans artists of color. Where was I to go to find out about black trans history in Toronto? Historical and grassroots queer archives often don't do a good job at actively participating in the documentation and preservation of the artifacts, stories, and materials of black and African diasporic cultural production and activism (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009) despite a stated desire by community members to have their work be part of a visible archive.⁵ This erasure is part of a larger conceptualization of the black queer subject as a new entity, whose history is built upon an already existing white LGBTTI2QQ space and history.

A Marvelous Archive: Black and Trans Communities through Time and Space

Trans lives of color follow a different temporality: we fail the progress narrative espoused by the white trans movement, as advancement is typically reduced to acquiring "rights" that are inaccessible to most and in fact are wielded against so many on the margins of the margins through the prison industrial complex, the war on terror, and the aid development industry (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013). At the same time, trans lives of color open up different futures that are not just a reproduction of/diversification of/assimilation into the same. As Sylvia Rivera explains, trans folks of color were at the front lines in part because they experienced rampant marginalization and as a result they "had nothing to lose" (quoted in Gan 2007: 118). Our relationship to the law changes our relationships to space and organizing and creates a certain set of freedoms and also restrictions in our work (Rivera 2007; Ware, Ruzsa, and Dias 2014; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009; Palacios et al. 2013). Rivera and her communities put everything on the line to fight for systemic change and self-determination because of these relationships. Here, I am pointing to a different set of activist ancestors to create a tension with and challenge how we remember collective struggle.

By starting with QTBIPOC narratives, we gain a different entry point into trans and queer collective time lines of resistance and archives, and we interrupt the ways that these omissions produce a whitewashed canon. Starting with our stories and reading them alongside more mainstream narratives, we can inform

trans theory, guide future activism, and set the stage for new ways of working for change. Jacques Derrida (1996: 78), in his seminal work *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, argues that we produce something through these acts of remembering, or sharing stories: we create a sense of physical, liminal, and phenomenological space to consider our past presents and futures. In contrast, the prioritization of white queer and trans people's history by white historiographers suggests that all LGBTTI2QQ community organizing and development was created by and for white people (Ramirez 2015; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009). Instead, we offer a type of counter-archiving, as conceptualized by Jin Haritaworn et al. (forthcoming-a) in their introduction to the Marvellous Grounds book project *Queering Urban Justice* (Haritaworn et al., forthcoming-b). Counter-archiving highlights the problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand its own power in the present into the future, without letting go of the past or the future. It further questions what acts, subjects, and inscriptions legitimately constitute an archive. The question thus becomes not where is the archive but, rather, why are black subjects always already conceptualized as new additions? The stories of the resistance that black peoples have enacted since being on Turtle Island continually get forgotten and erased.

We've Been Here: Black Trans Organizing in Toronto and Beyond

Contrary to the claim of newness, countless artists, activists, poets, and community mobilizers within black queer and trans communities in Toronto have done the work of documenting our stories. This archive of black movements over time and space exists and is exemplified by, for example, Debbie Douglas, Courtney McFarlane, Makeda Silvera, and Douglas Stewart's (1997) anthology that brought together queer black authors in Canada entitled *Má-ka: Diasporic Juks: Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent*, the piles of historic video, the vivid textile banners and art by black queer and trans people created for Blockorama⁶ (currently housed in local activist Junior Harrison's basement, highlighting a large gap in the municipal archive), and the embodied interpersonal storytelling that happens when we get together in community—at Blockorama; outside a black queer dance party by local DJs Blackcat, Nik Red, and Cozmic Cat; and in the park outside the queer community center, the 519 Church Street Community Centre. There is, in fact, a big literature on the black queer and trans subject already, and here, I'm thinking of the important work of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008), Rinaldo Walcott (2009a, 2009b, 2012), Omisoore Dryden (2010), Cassandra Lord (2005, 2015), and so many others.

The "newness" of the discourse of the QTIBPOC subject is further belied by the long history of activism by QTBIPOCs across this northern part of Turtle

Island. Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s was brimming with activism by QTBI-POCs, who organized around homelessness, LGBTQ issues, HIV/AIDS, education, apartheid, and disability justice, as well as challenged racism and other forms of systemic marginalization and oppression, to name but a few examples. Folks were getting together to write letters in support of activists fighting apartheid on the continent, including to South African gay rights activist Simon Nkoli. Artists were coming together to form political arts initiatives like *Desh Pardesh*, a festival of queer and trans South Asian arts and culture in Toronto; *Mayworks Festival of the Arts*, a labor arts festival that makes intersectional links between class, race, and gender through an understanding of labor arts; and the *Counting Past Two* festival, one of the first trans film festivals in North America. Mainstream LGBTQ records and municipal archives have omitted these initiatives, yet they exist in our community and persist in an oral tradition of telling and retelling, embodied in our activism. These tellings and retellings are self-directed and draw on what Eve Tuck has conceptualized as a desire-based research: the need to root our considerations in a “framework . . . concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” in order to “document . . . not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression” (2009: 416). Indeed, these archives interrupt the neoliberal insistence on the forced telling and retelling of a one-dimensional narrative by those on the margins—a telling that is obligatory in what Tuck contrasts as damage-centered research. Instead, these shared memories tell of a deep, intersectional knowing that can inform our understandings of our own lives today, direct our future activism, and help us build stronger communities rooted in care and justice. These lived movements and collective memories are described by Monica Forrester, who talks about her entry into activism in the 1980s. She helps us understand the different relationship that young black trans women of that time had to archivable ephemera—keeping the kinds of objects that mainstream archives value as proof of value/worth was hard given what they were up against. She states:

The corner was the only community that existed. At that time, it was the only place where we could share information. And, that’s where I’ve learned a lot . . . the determination to make change. . . . And when I was thinking about history, and archiving, I thought, “Oh! I wish I took pictures.” . . . Because we were in such a different place back then. I think survival was key. No one really thought about

archiving, because we really didn't think we would live past 30. Our lives were so undetermined that no one really thought about, "Oh should we archive this for later use?" (Quoted in *Marvellous Grounds*, forthcoming)

Forrester's text references an urgent activism that aims to prolong life and chances of survival in a white supremacist and transphobic world, but it frequently eludes dominant queer narratives of space and time. Thus, QTBIPOC organizing happened not in the village but at the corner. Her story informs our understanding of subsequent activisms in the city, for example, shaping our understanding of how to organize to stop sex workers from being pushed out of the LGBTQ Village neighborhood in Toronto as part of ongoing gentrification processes and anti-sex worker stigma. By situating our understanding of the corner as being a community center, as a home, as a classroom, and the other ways described by Forrester, we can build a fight that ensures that the access points the corner represents are intact when we are done fighting.

Furthermore, in the face of ever-present systemic violence, "no one really thought about archiving, because we really didn't think we would live past 30." Just because we didn't keep ephemera doesn't mean we don't have an archive and things to remember. For obsessive collecting of memorabilia, think of the elaborate pin button project launched at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, a national archive of queer culture that was founded in 1973, and that now is the largest independent queer archive in the world.⁷ Despite claims that it represents and reflects queer culture across Canada, many have critiqued its lack of racialized historical content and visible trans archive, as well as its anachronistic name, "Lesbian and Gay Archives." Displays such as the thousands of pin buttons mean nothing without the embodied memories and stories that contextualize their creation. We might speculate how the archives of Monica Forrester would have differed from the elaborate pin button project. What would the archives of Monica Forrester have looked like had there been the capacity to create such documents at that time of great struggle? What would have been created or changed through the process of such recording? What would the community have had to look like, and who would have had to be in power to foster an interest in the creation of such an archive? What would power have had to look like in the village at that moment for the lives of black trans women to be considered worthy of archiving or remembering? We can reflect on Forrester's text to help us understand recent QTBIPOC interventions in the city, such as the Black Lives Matter-Toronto (BLM-TO) shutdown of the Toronto Pride Parade in June 2016 and the subsequent antiblack racist backlash and violence that followed within Toronto's queer and trans communities.⁸ Her articulation of who gets to hold power and have ownership over the directions and decisions of these communities, in

essence, who is remembered as being here and part of the fight, is brought to life in the BLM-TO moment. Their presence in the parade was seen by many to be unexpected, and their political analysis considered divergent and unwanted, with some white community members chanting, “Take this fight to Caribana,”⁹ suggesting that black queer and trans organizing was not “of the Village,” as this is an always already white space, but rather that our organizing belonged to an explicitly black space, Caribana. BLM-TO’s leadership, largely made up of queer and trans members, and their role as Pride Toronto’s honored group still did not afford their belonging to the (presumed to be all-white) queer and trans community.

Forrester’s text tells of the need for an intersectional understanding of what has happened within black queer and trans communities in Toronto in the past four decades. She urges us to consider sex workers, poor and working-class trans women, and others who are marginalized within larger black queer and trans organizing as historical subjects. At the same time, her historical narrative does not simply “bring black trans ephemera to the archives.” It raises larger questions about who can interpret our histories, and who can understand our embodied repertoires.

Conclusion

I began this article by calling names. I will end it by sharing an encounter that illustrates, or perhaps embodies, the problem with the archive. Memory is a fascinating process. The more we recall, or perhaps repeat, our memories of events, the more we begin to remember the memories more than the events. The memories of an elder I encountered, for a variety of reasons including antiblack racism, transphobia, and the active marginalization of trans indigenous and racialized people from these movements, do not recall our presence at these events and eventually become “the event.”

I recently met with a self-proclaimed elder, a white gay activist whose account of the Toronto bathhouse raids is widely cited. He asked me for an interview, and I was telling him about my own organizing, and my desire to build on the important work of trans women of color leading our movements. He leaned forward and said, matter-of-factly, “You know, it’s not true. People nowadays say that trans women of color were there, but they weren’t. I was there. I would have remembered.” He was so certain that he was a more accurate witness of what had happened in the Toronto and New York histories that he could discount the living stories of trans women. He felt such confidence in his own memory as being *the* memory, *the* archive, *the* impartial record of human history. We simply were not there in his mind, and thus we were ripped from the fabric of time and space.

But we *were* there, and we are, as Miss Major says,¹⁰ “*still fucking here*” (Ophelian 2016). And we already exist in the beautiful (Afro) future. By beginning here, by starting with these genealogies, we can re-remember that we are here, that we will continue to exist, continue to fight, to struggle for change, and to win, as Assata Shakur urges us (1987). Black trans archives live in the moments of shared story, of names called, of gatherings and celebrations in public space. Our archives live in our bodies and minds, and they span time and space.

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Notes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, two-spirited, queer, and questioning.
2. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and ERA, *Queering Urban Justice* is a forthcoming collection of art, activism, and academic writings by queers of color in Toronto from the Marvellous Grounds collective. It is a book- and web-based project and is coedited/curated by Jin Haritaworn, Alvis Choi, Ghaida Moussa, Rio Rodriguez, and Syrus Marcus Ware at York University in Toronto.
3. QTBIPOC stands for queer, trans, black, Indigenous, and people of color.
4. These trans activists contributed greatly to the development of trans community during the 1990s and early 2000s in Toronto. Mirha-Soleil Ross is a trans artist, sex worker, and activist who has led seminal research and organizing from the early 1990s to the present day in Montreal and Toronto. Yasmeen Persad is a black trans woman in Toronto who has worked over ten years to create access programs for trans women of color through the 519 Church Street Community Centre and the Sherbourne Health Centre. Monica Forrester is a black trans woman who has spent several decades doing street outreach and organizing among trans sex workers in Toronto. Nik Redman is a black trans man in Toronto who has worked for two decades to create trans-specific programming and resources for queer trans men, trans parents, and filmmakers of color. Sumaya Dalmar was a black trans woman who died in 2015 in Toronto. The handling of her case by the Toronto Police Service came under fire when her death was not initially reported. Duchess was a well-known black drag queen in Toronto who died suddenly of meningitis in the early 2000s in Toronto.
5. The lack of adequate archiving and a desire to create a black queer and trans archive have come up several times; for example, this was the theme and focus of the Toronto Queering Black History gathering at Ryerson University in 2010, featuring talks on the subject by Notisha Massaquoi, Rinaldo Walcott, Courtney McFarlane, and Syrus Marcus Ware. The gathering was organized by a student collective led by Lali Mohamed and has become an annual event.

6. Started in 1998 by Blackness Yes!, an independent committee of grassroots organizers, Blockorama is a day-long arts festival at the city's annual pride celebrations; it has engaged in over seventeen years of resistance to whitewashing within queer organizing. An explicitly political space, Blockorama consists of arts programming that spans twelve hours and centers the narratives of black and African diasporic trans, disabled and deaf, and queer people.
7. The Pin Button Project featured a campaign to solicit the donation of historic activist buttons from Toronto queer and trans people. The project had some content that reflected a racialized history, but it largely reflected a white queer history. For more information, see Pin Button Project 2016.
8. Black Lives Matter–Toronto (BLM-TO) was named Pride Toronto's honored group and as a result was asked to lead the Toronto Pride Parade. Along the parade route, BLM-TO held a twenty-five-minute sit-in, during which they presented demands to the Pride Toronto executive director, cowritten with two other black queer and trans groups: Black Queer Youth (BQY) and Blackness Yes!. The groups collectively demanded that Pride Toronto do better by black, indigenous, racialized, trans, and disabled people, and they refused to restart the parade until the Pride executive director agreed to address their concerns. There was tremendous backlash by white festival attendees, with many throwing water bottles at black activists, screaming racial slurs, and yelling that they were being "selfish." In the days that followed, many of the BLM-TO organizers received death threats and hate mail in response to this direct action.
9. The Toronto Caribbean Carnival, known by most as Caribana, is the largest annual festival in the city of Toronto. Held over several weeks and culminating in a day-long parade and carnival celebration, the festival is heavily policed, and the site of the festival has been moved from a prominent location down to the edge of the city's waterfront.
10. Miss Major is a lifelong activist and community organizer well known for her role in the Stonewall Riots and for helping to set up supportive programming for black trans women across the United States.

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Transitionings and Returnings

Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water

DORA SILVA SANTANA

Abstract The author takes her *escrevivência* as a Brazilian black trans woman and experiments with the poetics of Atlantic water to let the text itself be a transitioning space of poetics-autoethnography-cosmology-water-energy-memory tissue. Water is the riverine thread that runs through the sections of this text, be it as rain, as tears, as sea, as metaphor, as body, as energy. The author suggests that, for black trans people in the African diaspora, trans travel narratives evoke the metaphor of transitioning in the similar ways that M. Jacqui Alexander works with the metaphor of the crossing, which not only recalls the embodied memory of the disembodied in the “tidal current of the Middle Passage” but also “evokes/invokes crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility.”

Keywords Brazilian black trans women, black feminism, transfeminism, African diaspora, black queer studies

***Escrevivência* and the Right to Write**

As the sky drizzles thin tears over our shoulders, I climb those stairs with the usual habit of not making eye contact, but discreetly searching for familiar faces in the crowd. I am stopped by hand waves of dear colleagues who kindly tighten themselves to leave me space to sit on the dry part of the concrete stair. Being touched by cold rainy tears would add too much to the affect of that mourning night. By sitting on the top row of the stairs, I look down with the usual habit of searching for resemblance. I greet three black friends on the next row down who turn back to acknowledge my presence with warm smiles. Resemblance comes with the few black necks I see here and there. I am handed a booklet with a long list of names I assumed would be remembered that night. As I flip the pages, my vision is blurred by tears, as I notice that most of the names belong to Brazilian trans women. One page, two pages. Blurriness. My wet palm can't differentiate between tears from the sky and my own. Memories of fear. Sadness. Rage. I can't read anymore. My mourning is interrupted by the miked voice of a

white woman saying, “We will remember the names of people in the US.” It must be the time constraint. It must be the cold rain. Skipping two pages out of the almost five reminded me that I somehow don’t belong here. The two pages filled with the names of murdered Brazilian trans women remind me that that nation doesn’t want me there alive, either.¹ I can’t differentiate my sisters’ pain from my own sorrow. Suddenly I clench my teeth as I berate myself. Does your privilege allow you to merge your pain with theirs? What legitimacy would you have to speak on those present in the skipped pages? What a privilege it is to mourn over printed names when people struggle over the bodies of their loved ones! It’s mainly their pain! Why me, right? A black Brazilian able-bodied (mis)documented (passable?) trans woman who transitioned in her thirties at the beginning of a PhD program at a US institution! Would I have lived this long had I transitioned earlier living in the *invasões*² of a mostly black poor area in northern Brazil? Would I have benefited from affirmative action sponsorship had I not been perceived as just a black man? Why me?!

After that rainy night of the Transgender Day of Remembrance 2014, ritualized on the stairs of Austin City Hall Plaza, “Why me?” haunted me strongly, like sounds of tides resonating in a seashell, questioning *shhhorre . . . ? shhhurre . . . ? sssurre . . . ?* Sure? Are you sure? In those moments, I have to remind myself that patriarchy has engendered an imaginary that we are suspect, be it for being too close or being too distant to our communities to tell the stories we want. Powerful black women writers, both cis and trans, have reminded me that despite the haunting “Why me?” we have the right to write, the right to be “unsubordinated,” as the Brazilian black feminist writer Conceição Evaristo (2007) points out. I needed to acknowledge that right in order to write this text, to allow my vulnerabilities and privileges to give me a precarious sense of entitlement to make the choices of language, vehicle of circulation, and academic alignment for this text. I have the right to write. I have the right to live. I have the right to transition geographies. I have the right to learn. I have the right to hope. Here, I take my *escrevivência*³ as a Brazilian black trans woman and experiment with the poetics of Atlantic water to let the text itself be a transitioning space of poetics-autoethnography-cosmology-water-energy-memory tissue. *Escrevivência* is the woven tissue of unsubordinated writing of our living, writing as our living, writing-living. Water is the riverine thread that runs through the sections of this text, be it as rain, as tears, as sea, as metaphor, as body, or as energy.⁴

The Trans Orientation of Language

In their introductory texts, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008) and Stryker and Currah (2014) tell us that although the use of the term *transgender* may signal delimitation, phenomena/subjectivities, the readers should be

comfortable to pick up any kind of trans- that best suits us. In a previous work also expanding the concept of “trans,” these authors reference the work by Sara Ahmed (2006) on orientation to invite us to think in a different spatiality for trans-, that is, instead of a horizontal perception. In this sense, the trans- that best suits me is the one from transatlantic, a *travessia*, the crossing, in M. Jacqui Alexander’s terms (2005). For Alexander, “crossing” is a metaphor that rests in the Middle Passage but is not “chattel or moveable property to be selectively owned by Africa’s descendants alone” (2005: 18). She states that the crossing is derived from her multifaceted engagement “with(in)” different genealogies of women-of-color feminisms and her relation with the sacred, with ancestral energies, which give the crossing the meaning of “breaking through” “inherited divides” that permeate the “multiple operations of power, gendered and sexualized power that is simultaneously raced and classed” but not limited to the “borders of the nation-state” (4).

The trans- as crossing becomes a space of simultaneities, whose orientation is other than just horizontal. The transatlantic is in that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy and body, and the energy is also body and water. Transing, in this sense, is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. Water is the embodiment of trans orientation. The illusion of horizontality contrasts with the shape-shifting, leaking, bleeding, in-corporating, *em corpo*; water is membrane, burial, means, memory, and a connection. Transitioning is our movement along that space of possibilities that produces embodied knowledge. It is moving across and along the waters, the imposed limits of gender, the secular and the sacred, the expectations of our death, the imaginary that we are not lovable. My orientation is also translinguistic, a confluence of Portuguese and English in which *trans-* happens to coincide as a cognate term, not interchangeable, in both languages and brings me the acoustic/embodied memory of crossing. I use *transitioning* instead of *transition* because I want to convey the continuum motion of resisting systematic oppression through embodied knowledge.

Transitioning along Black Diasporic Brazil

In the summer of 2014, a few months after I started publicly vocalizing “I’m transitioning,” I returned to Brazil after a year and a half in the United States. As I sat at a table outside a bar in the Rio neighborhood of Lapa with a group of trans-activist friends, most of whom are black, I was approached by what I read as a black cis male police officer asking for my purse. Because of the World Cup, Lapa was heavily crowded with people from outside the country, including a considerable number of harassing white males. Realizing that we were the only group targeted within the entire crowd, I was so paralyzed by the mixture of anger, fear, and the sadness of the predictability of the situation that I couldn’t react and just

stayed where I was, with frenetic smiles of amazement framing my “I can’t believe this, I can’t believe this!” as he grabbed my purse and shuffled the things inside it. Some of my friends stood up and started yelling at the police officer, “She’s just arrived, she’s not from here, that’s shameful what you’re doing!” As the officer didn’t care and skipped from my purse to the purse of the dark-skinned black trans woman at my side, people at the table started shouting, “Polícia racista! Polícia racista!” (Racist police! Racist police!). Not able to find or plant anything considered illegal in our purses, he and two other white police officers left. A few minutes later, they targeted a black man wearing a backpack who was selling shots, which is not illegal in Rio. A black woman who appeared to be his mother reached for her son while people in our group yelled at the black man to watch his bag closely while the officer screened it so that they were not able to plant anything in it. As we witnessed the profiling of this person, our group started shouting, “De noite, de dia, contra o racismo, o machismo e a transphobia!” (At day, at night, against racism, machismo, and transphobia!).

This scene is an example of my *escrevivência* as an archive of transitioning. It focuses on a context in which mega events mobilize high surveillance of black bodies through racial profiling and, in this case, intersect with transphobia, but it finds resistance by the voicing of black trans people naming those systems. I situate this experience as an instance of what Matt Richardson and Enoch Page call “sexually racist and gendered practices of oppression” shared by millions of blacks in the African diaspora, which defines “Black trans subjectivity as a racialized embodied experience of gender variance that ranges beyond the state’s preferred binary gender code” (2010: 57). I suggest that, for black trans people in the African diaspora, trans travel narratives evoke the metaphor of transitioning in the similar ways that Alexander (2005: 8) works with the metaphor of the crossing, which not only recalls the embodied memory of the disembodied in the “tidal current of the Middle Passage” but also “evokes/invokes crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility” (8). The idea of “return home” here, rather than what Aren Aizura (2012: 140) points out as an “import of Euro-American geographical narrative about the shaping of the (colonized) world into a center,” is closer to the discussions of home as a site of displacement but also connection, which is raised by authors such as Janet Mock in her memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014), Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (2007), Joseph Beam in his essay “Brother to Brother” (1986), and Sharon Holland in her foreword to *Black Queer Studies*, “‘Home’ Is a Four-Letter Word” (2005).

But when my friends say “she’s not from here,” although used as an attempt to restrain the officer’s screening by pointing out the state politics of having the police protect foreigners in mega events, it also marked my outsider status, the privilege of mobility, my passing (?) as a cis black woman, and the

possibility of performing foreignness by speaking English with a certain prestigious phonetics, indicative of an academic education; and all these factors' implications and the precarious legitimacy of my discourse of "us, black trans people." On the other hand, if I had passed as a black cis woman from the United States, would the implications be different? Other cis black women from the United States who are Brazilianist scholars, such as Erica Williams (2013), have talked about their experiences of racism and misogyny, for example, being mistaken for a sexually available Brazilian black woman. There's no privilege—or if there is one, it's very precarious—that confers safety in "passing" as a cis black woman across the diaspora, from the accounts I know so far.

As a black trans woman, when I say I'm transitioning or I've transitioned, I want to do something with it. When I'm exhausted and choose not to give further explanations to the daily question "What do you mean, trans?!" and I just answer back, "I've transitioned, I've transitioned," I imply the usual assumed meaning of "transition from male to female through bodily modification" despite the fact I think it is a continuous process of self-discovery. I realize this is the meaning assumed, when the addressee responds with a flinch, "Oh, okay." In this piece, I've chosen to unpack the meanings of this "I'm transitioning" as a Brazilian black trans woman, but such experience comes in a range of related and different forms to other trans people, as my trans men and gender-queer friends have shared with me. Although I've used "I've transitioned" instead of "I'm transitioning," these are not in opposition. "I've transitioned" may consist of a chosen point of departure within the continuum of "I'm transitioning." That refers, for instance (within the different examples of nonconforming experiences), to choose at a certain point to share in public an aesthetics of femininity, mutually constructed on our own terms and outside the perceptions of others, that does not match an old photo ID. That does not necessarily mark a point of start or end, or even an abrupt and sudden change, but it states a point of departure of a series of effects based on that decision; one of those effects is suffering transphobic violence.

As a black trans woman in Brazil, I transition along a discourse of racial democracy that multiply negates the experiences of black trans people, including the negation of the effects of race on a black trans body and the negation of one's gender due to racialized constructions of gender. Transitioning along the discourse of racial democracy refers to an embodied knowledge constructed by the visceral effect of moving within and reacting to those spaces in which we are negated. In my case, those instances are materialized by cordial racist transphobia: "Oh, but you are *morena* [brown], not black"⁵ and "You don't look like you're trans." It is materialized in the pathologizing scrutiny of my body and story through my forced confession in order to convince the state to change my

documents, in the visceral effect of anxiety around the possibility of being a victim of a random hate crime, and even in my hyperconsciousness in leaving and entering the United States and Brazil, given the technologies of surveillance that target black bodies and the shaming procedures of screening trans bodies.

My oral response, “I’ve transitioned,” or my body reaction (I raise my eyebrows) is a response to the inquiring gaze of the addressees who look at me with a multistable perception (the vase or the face?) and who assume their work is to construct my beforeness/nowness through the cues of my body features and color and my geographical (dis)placement. Such beforeness/nowness comes into discourse through the stuttering on pronouns and racial classifications. In my case, it comes after the stuttering “mmm . . . b . . . black/b . . . Brazilian, of color . . . Latina . . . h . . . she” I transition along those racializing formations as I interrogate racial classification in institutional surveys: “Excuse me, isn’t there an ‘other’ in this form?” I transition in languages in an accent and tone that elicit answers like “Oh, but you don’t sound like you’re Brazilian” or “Oh, but you don’t sound like you’re black.” For me, those identifications refer to transitioning along space but not citizenship, transitioning along racializing gaze but not a certain language socialization. Transitioning (*transicionando*, *transitando*) in the sense I have discussed refers to spatial mobility, crossing theories, embodied knowledge, and intersecting community engagement. Transitioning is a state of acknowledgment in which I am labeled as just “*morena*” (brown), “person of color,” “Latina,” or “just a woman”; this flattening of transitioning along the racializing gaze denies slavery, racism, transphobia, and my self-identification as a black trans woman. Sometimes those acknowledgments come embedded in sexualizing intonation, as in “Mmmm . . . Brazilian, huh?” That “mmm” and its prosodic variations encapsulate the sexualization of black trans women’s bodies and make it very difficult to experience/acknowledge desirability in a nonobjectifying manner. Acknowledgment may also come as the patronizing statement “Black trans people are humans too.” My frowning answer, yes, to both kinds of acknowledgment always reminds me of the quality of these transitionings. What heals me in the move is being in movement, crossing, transitioning along self-collective-familial-intimate-erotic love—love that make us stand together and shout and echo our voices.

Transatlantic Transitionings, Returnings, and the Work of Love

Jafari Allen states that black queer “work is both a labor of love and the evidence of it, perforce” (2012: 217). He also engages with the work of Chela Sandoval (2000: 146), for whom “love is a hermeneutics of social change” “in which love can access and guide our theoretical and political *movidas*—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being.” Like the work Allen (2012: 218) introduced in the

issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* entitled “Black/Queer/Diaspora,” my work is also “passion filled” (not easy, uncomplicated, or necessarily romantic), but also full of tensions and irresolution. I’m interested in what the work of love (hooks 2000) among black women, cis and trans, can do, that is, love embodied in flesh in ancestral energies with potential to heal, to fight death, and to organize, and as praxis of caring for each other against intersecting oppression. Love and passion here are not intended to have the effect of sentimentality, since, as Barbara Christian has stated, “sentimentality replaces the passion for living” (Christian 1986 quoted in Bobo 1988: 47). The black queer/trans work of love is instead the work that fills our passion for living and assures our survival but doesn’t forget the dead. It is in this spirit that I end this section with transitioning love, as it transforms itself into a new language to also transition with us.

***Minha Filha!* Memories of a Black Brazilian Trans Daughter**

My mother’s joy and loud laugh have warmed my memories. Our arguments have haunted me, too. It was June 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. A year and a half had passed since I left our island of São Luis in Brazil to pursue my graduate studies in Austin, Texas. This time, I had transitioned through the aerial waves over the Atlantic from Austin to Rio, where my auntie and I awaited my mother. I left in a body whose changes into my womanhood during a few preceding months my mother hadn’t seen. Will she see *me*? My gaze shifts from the bus window on the way to the airport and goes to the patterns on my yellow dress. It’s Senegalese, the street vendor said at the time. I follow the route of black lines crossing each other into lozenges filled with a bright orange over the gold yellow fabric. The wax cloth rubbing against the changing feeling of my skin under the effect of hormones during those few months made me think about my resilience along my transitioning. A legacy of resilience from my ancestors who transitioned through the water, into the water, from the water—a legacy rippled through generations and poured by this powerful black woman that my auntie and I were about to see again. I entertained the idea that this fabric had its own route crossing the Atlantic to get to Rio de Janeiro; it would cross over the ocean again with me upon my return to Austin. This fabric could have its birth with exploitation as well. Its crossing would intersect with mine, ours. This time, the dress would not dance with the breeze from the watery skirt surrounding São Luis Island. My hometown? It doesn’t feel like home yet. Nowhere feels like home now. The encounter of my auntie, my mom, and me was a celebration of our search for ourselves and for each other, in our love for each other. Black women daring to love each other. Mom, Mamãe, would see her baby sister after all these years; she would also see her daughter. At the airport, I spotted that short curvy black woman covering her smile. There she is, auntie! Auntie Matilde, Tia Matilde, ran and hugged my

mom tight and long as they exchanged words of love and longing. I was right behind my auntie, and I also let water flow from my eyes and wet my yellow dress. After a few moments, my aunt releases her sister and looks at me and back to mom and says, “Here is your daughter.” Mamãe looks at me in a way that I haven’t seen before. It takes only a few seconds before we hug, me leaning over my mom. My mom hugs *me*. The water feels right. I let myself into my mother’s arms, and I recall that feeling. I feel that she is not concerned about what a hug could do to me at this point. My mom hugged *me*. Dora, her daughter. I am not used to feeling such happiness. When we release each other, mom looks at me from head to toe, and the water in my body seems to want to escape through my palm when I see her motion to speak: “You are too skinny, you haven’t fed yourself properly as usual.” I smile as water cools my neck, saying, “Let me pull your suitcase for you, Mom.” My aunt grabs my mom’s hand, and they start talking. I go a little forward, pulling the small suitcase she brought, as I hear her saying how adventurous she felt flying on a plane for the first time, how well treated she was by the crew who helped her at every step, so that she didn’t need to say she forgot her glasses to avoid saying she couldn’t read. From time to time, my mom would pause while my aunt took over the conversation, and I could see from the corner of my eye that she was looking at me from head to toe again, with that expression I couldn’t read. I had become very knowledgeable in reading gazes at this point. Walking in the sidewalks of Copacabana during the World Cup forced me to react to multiple gazes, especially those by intoxicated white male foreigners. As I walk on the skirts of Yemaja-Rio-Waters, I say to her, We meet you under vigilant eyes, we are pushed away by the walls of buildings, but we fight to be close, Mother, *Axé, minha mãe!* Eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes. Frowning eyes, staring eyes, smiley eyes, angry eyes, hungry eyes, indifferent eyes, eyesss, eyes see, eyes-sea, see, sea, see-sea-eye, eye . . . water heating . . . I . . . water boil. I, I’m, am, am, mmm, me, me, *me!* What are you looking at?! I breathe deeply. Water cools my neck. As I let these memories flow and I mechanically walk as I pull my mom’s suitcase, I hear it. Dora! Dora! I turn back, making sure I was not still in my head. Mamãe asks me with uncertainty and the same gaze, “It’s Dora, isn’t it?” “Yes, Mom,” I answer, taming the tears. “Come back here, your aunt says we should go this way,” Mom says. I pull the suitcase in another direction. Water rises and layers and turns my sight into watercolor. She said it! She said it! After a week, that gaze was not there. I was not used to having my mom’s gaze of (un)familiarity, of an (un)familiar love. She was learning to love her daughter. I was learning to deal with her timing to love me. We are learning to give language to each other’s (un)familiarity. As I remember, water rises, folds, and shores up at the edges of my eyes. Water cools my neck. The water feels right. The water feels right. *Axé, minha mãe Yemaja!*

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Notes

1. The English version of *trans woman* I use here encompasses a range of self-identified terms in Brazil such as *travesti*, *mulher trans*, and *transexual*, which at times overlap, connect, or oppose one another, depending on the meanings and contexts one builds during our process of self-making.
2. I refer to the nonofficial occupation of state land in the capital of Maranhão, São Luís, mostly by poor black migrants from the countryside, who have resisted leaving despite the government's attempt to demolish our houses. A similar process characterized the formation of favelas in Rio de Janeiro.
3. Evaristo (2007) defines *escrevivência* as a process of writing lived experiences of and by black women who dare to tell stories with a pedagogy of graphic work. She uses the term *graphic work* to refer to different forms of writing, from drawn on the ground to words on paper. She argues that because black women's stories are erased, daring to tell our stories is a form of insubordination.
4. The perspective of Atlantic water as a powerful metaphor and framework for black queerness comes from my dialogue with Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" (2008).
5. In Brazil, the ideology of racial democracy consists of the belief that the "nation" is inherently mixed, that race (implied as blackness) is not part of the cultural imaginary. However, as the black movement in the country has argued and as scholars have pointed out, clinging to the discourse of mixture is a strategy of negating blackness and not being accountable for its structural oppressive effects in the country. A more detailed discussion on negation of blackness in Brazil can be found in Vargas 2004.

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Don't Exist

EVA S. HAYWARD

Abstract This note represents an effort to think together Afro-pessimism and trans studies.

Keywords transsexual, cut, Afropessimism, ontology, psychoanalysis

“Don't exist” is an imperative, a sanctioned foreclosure. “Don't exist” is not “nothingness”—the social death Eric Stanley so ardently articulates as queer (2011)—not exactly. Nothingness is no-thing (Martin Heidegger's [2013] “thingness”), an exclusion from mattering (see Fanon 2008), whereas “don't exist” indexes a plot, a social condition for making killable (see Haraway 2008), an insistence on not-existing such that killability is unnecessary to articulate or make conscious. “Don't exist” articulates an attack on ontology, on beingness, because beingness cannot be secured. Talking about trans nonexistence, Laverne Cox (2013) writes in the *New York Times*, “At the heart of the fight for trans justice is a level of stigma so intense and pervasive that trans folks are often told we don't exist—that we're really just the gender we were assigned at birth.” This “stigma,” Cox continues, is “a state of emergency” that results in “many gay, lesbian, and bisexual brothers and sisters” not wanting anything “to do with us.” And yet, Cox says, the paradoxical consequence of this nonexistence is violence, unemployment, and lack of housing and health care, especially for black trans women and trans women of color. You do not need to read the article's comment feed to recognize the conundrum: terrible violence directed at the nonexisting, the never having existed. Cox's critical call is uncannily echoed in the recent antitrans work of Elizabeth Grosz, who writes:

However queer, transgendered, and ethnically identified one might be, one comes from a man and a woman, and one remains a man and a woman, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical transformation of one sex into the appearance of another. . . . Sexual difference is still in play even to the

extent that one identifies with or actively seeks the sexual organs and apparatus of the “opposite” sex: at most one can change the appearance and social meaning of the body, but the sexually specific body that is altered remains a sexually specific, if altered, body. (109–10)

Specificity, sexed ontology, and materiality, for Grosz, resist transition, transfiguration, and ultimately trans. Not surprisingly—perhaps because her resistance aims to make trans nonlife, a void, cut life, an alteration without substance—I stumble at the threshold of her argument. While trans is not Grosz’s only target—so too are the “queer and ethnically identified”—she defines trans as little more than an iterative identificatory gesture with regard to the ontological order of male and female difference, which, she argues, is of an order unto itself. Working with Luce Irigaray and Gilles Deleuze, Grosz argues for a feminist renunciation of identity and its various politics, arguing for a reinvestment in the materiality of sexual difference—what she has called the return of the real Real.

Putting Jacques Lacan’s alienation and Frantz Fanon’s antiblack violence into conversation, Frank Wilderson argues that while Lacan attends to how alienation is essential to the formation of the subject in relation to the Imaginary and Symbolic, Fanon insists on how racial violence is at work at the level of the Real. He writes, “Whereas Lacan was aware of how language ‘precedes and exceeds us,’ he did not have Fanon’s awareness of how violence also precedes and exceeds Blacks” (2010: 96). Blackness, Wilderson argues, is structured through gratuitous violence—a matrix of suffering that is illegible to “Humanist discourse [that] can only think a subject’s relation to violence as a contingency” (68). Blackness exposes the white supremacy at work in the ontological, in the beingness of “the human,” revealing that the divide is not the human/the animal but, as Wilderson excellently diagnoses, “the Human/the Black” (73). What of the black trans woman, the position from which Cox speaks? As Cox writes, trans women are dying because they don’t exist—for black trans women, this equation reveals a matrix of “gratuitous violence” forged in relation to “don’t exist” (2013). The “don’t exist” of trans is not equivalent to the racist refusal of “the human” for blacks—if institutionalized trans only indexes desire for change as disfigurement of, or reification of, sex/gender, then trans is still human oriented. Following Wilderson’s critique of “the human” as white beingness, might we ask: is beingness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence?

Rather than refusing Grosz, what if we say that she is right, that trans ought to refuse “the human” (see Hayward 2008), and, in doing so, refuse Grosz’s racist and antitrans arguments, boycotting the humanist (antiblack) project of the ontological (sex centrism)? Might this trans negativity help expose how the order of the subject, and the matter of ontology, are what make black trans women, in

particular, vulnerable to violence? In this way, trans negativity turns against liberal (white) transgender projects about visibility, accessibility, and progressivism, to expose how these political logics are predicated on racialized humanism (Weil, in progress; Gossett 2016; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). We can say that trans cuts the technology of sex/gender; yet and still, the logic of sex and gender are given coherence and meaning through the Middle Passage, through slave making (see Spillers 2003). Rather than building a political and intellectual project on the bodies of dead black trans women—the ongoing project of slave making—trans negativity asks how trans identity, representation, and politics have needed the murdered bodies of black trans women and trans women of color to constitute “the transgender tipping point.” It is no surprise that *Time* magazine’s “tipping point” cover features Laverne Cox; conscripted labor of black trans women is the inevitable violence that institutional trans/sexual/gender projects (broadly imagined here) need in order to become, in order to potentialize the politics of identity. These projects, then, are an effect of progressive humanism, with white uplift as their aim.

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Postcolonial Disablement and/as Transition

Trans Haitian Narratives of Breaking Open
and Stitching Together*

ERIN DURBAN-ALBRECHT

Abstract This article brings together black transgender studies and postcolonial studies to consider the possibility for trans* narratives of Haiti, known as the “Black Republic.” Based on ethnographic research with *trani*, trans*, and transgender Haitians, this article focuses on how one woman—“Kelly”—has built a life between Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States. As the author argues, the 7.0 earthquake on January 12, 2010, is the most prominent transition in Haitian transgender lives because of the ways that it reorganized bodies and social relations. The author draws from black, queer, trans*, and crip theories to consider how Kelly’s life herstory creates possibilities for elaborating the effects of breaking open—the tectonic shifts in gender embodiment and social life that have taken place in Haiti alongside the earth’s movements. More specifically, the author illustrates that antiblack postcolonial disablement of the earthquake produced transing effects. Kelly’s remasculinization through sustaining injuries and receiving medical interventions resulted in the most profound dysphoria of Kelly’s life. The disaster also amplified the fractures in MSM organizations because of how they paid lip service to supporting transgender women. In exploring the question of what the forms of black trans* self-authorization look like in this context of antiblack postcolonial disablement, the author proposes stitching together as a strategy geared toward black trans* futures through (imperfect) reparation and survival.

Keywords black, Haiti, living archive, postcolonial disablement, trans* futures

In this piece, I draw from black transgender studies and postcolonial studies to consider the possibility for trans* narratives of Haiti, the Black Republic. Very little has been written about transgender embodiments and identities in Haiti, even in popular media. The only academic article to date is Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s “Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender” (2011), which centers on the category of *masisi*. In Tinsley’s close reading of the ethnographic film *Des hommes et dieux* (*Of Men and Gods*; Lescot and Magloire 2002), she

highlights that *masisi* is more than a referent to male same-sex sexuality; it also is a Haitian conceptualization of transgender embodiment connected to the Afro-syncretic religion of Vodou. Here, however, I am primarily concerned with those Haitians who understand and describe themselves in *Kreyòl* as “*trani*” or “*trans*,” or in English as “transgender.” These terms are often used interchangeably by *trani*, *trans**, and transgender Haitians, several of whom have asserted to me that they are “the same thing.”¹ These subjects sometimes have had a period of identifying with the term *masisi* or its female counterpart *madivin* (my divine), but even though *trani* Haitians might be practitioners of Vodou, the terms *masisi* and *madivin* no longer feel like the right fit to reference their sense of self.

This article is inspired by LaMonda H. Stallings’s discussion of black transgender narratives in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (2015). Stallings opens up a space to think about forms of transgender self-authorization and transition outside the privileged biomedical process of “medical transitions.” Here I expand on her insights to consider their implications for black *trans** life outside US contexts, specifically in postcolonial Haiti. Haitian artist and anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse (2015) has written about why Haiti needs new narratives, now more than ever. She urges people beyond the pathologizing and dehumanizing accounts of “the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere,” a stream of poverty porn (laced with white missionary do-goodism), histories of “political corruption,” and black chaos and incompetence that creates a requirement for external supervision from the United States and United Nations. The antiblack racism of these imperialist narratives are rooted in fear of the promise that Haiti represents: black freedom.²

In putting the work of these scholars together to consider the possibilities for black *trans** narratives of Haiti, I intentionally move alongside and beyond the necropolitical to highlight *trani* Haitian lives and life-building strategies of survival. This is a turn away from the antiblack obsession with black death, ranging from accounts of murdered black transgender women to the circulation of photos of corpses in the ruins of postearthquake Haiti. This move is one that has optimistic investments in what Stallings refers to as “black transfutures beyond necropolitics” (2015: 224). One of my strategies to unsettle the proximity of *black* and *death* is to collaborate with a living archive, “Kelly,” to theorize (always already black) Haitian transgender subjectivity.³ I focus on the ways that Kelly has navigated the necropolitical scene of postcolonial Haiti as a transgender woman and document the ways that she has worked against annihilation by stitching together black *trans** futures through transnational forms of intimacy and caring.⁴

As I will argue here, the 7.0 earthquake on January 12, 2010, is the most prominent transition in Haitian transgender lives because of the ways that it reorganized bodies and social relations. I draw from black, queer, *trans**, and crip

theories to consider how Kelly's life herstory creates possibilities for understanding the implications of this transition. I first elaborate the effects of *breaking open*—the tectonic shifts in gender embodiment and social life that have taken place in Haiti alongside the earth's movements. In exploring the question of what the forms of black trans* self-authorization look like in this context of post-colonial disablement, I then propose stitching together as a transgender Haitian mode of (imperfect) reparation and survival.

Living Archive of Disaster

Kelly was born into a Christian middle-class family in the Bois Verna region of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Her mother died when Kelly was five, and her father—a medical doctor who was previously enlisted in the army—remarried and had seven more kids. As she said, her father cared for Kelly financially, but she grew up primarily with her grandmother. In school, her best friends were girls, and they called themselves “the incredible trio,” while outsiders called them “girls of the trio.” When people would ask if she was a girl or a boy, Kelly would say “Both!” because despite her feminine comportment, she kept her hair close cropped and wore the mandated clothing for boys. She ended up living abroad in Santo Domingo after her teenage years, where she let her hair grow, started wearing feminine clothing in public, and got her nails done. During this time, Kelly helped her best friend—another transgender Haitian woman—and her husband conceive a child with a surrogate by being their sperm donor. She lived with them until their departure to the United States.

When Kelly returned to Haiti, the person who looked at her passport thought that her sex designation had been a mistake, and she was reissued documents. In the next ten years, Kelly had a series of jobs as a receptionist at the cell-phone company Digicel and in a hotel, as a fashion designer, and as a homemaker. She had flings (*ti mennaj*) and longer-term serious relationships with men across the full range of Haiti's economic spectrum, most of whom Kelly described as heterosexual and some of whom were masisi and/or bisexual. For a while, she was even engaged to a prominent public figure who is significantly older and had been a friend of the family.

I met Kelly shortly after moving from Tucson, Arizona, to the southern coastal city of Jacmel in summer 2009 to conduct multisited ethnographic research about queer issues in Haiti. She had traveled four hours from Pétionville with friends to attend a Vodou ceremony, visit a lover (one of my key informants), and go to the beach. When I told Kelly about my research project, she invited me to check out the HIV-outreach organization in the capital city of Port-au-Prince where she worked (unpaid) to help coordinate a program for “minorities,” understood on the organization's terms as men who have sex with men (MSM).

Through this research project, I conducted several formal interviews with Kelly between 2009 and 2014. However, most of the insights that I provide here come from the transnational friendship that Kelly and I have developed over the last seven years. It is a friendship forged through being with each other in many ways through those years, and most especially through mutual loss.

Unlike many “living archives” whose age permits a longer look at historical events, Kelly—like me—is in her early thirties. As is true for the majority of the population in Haiti (more than 50 percent under twenty-five years old), Kelly did not live through the terror of the US-backed Duvalier dictatorship. She was a kid during the *dechoukaj* (uprooting) of Jean-Claude Duvalier and his supporters in 1986 and most major political events, including coups, US Marine invasions, the US-enforced embargo, and the US abduction of the Haitian president during the bicentennial events in 2004. These are faint memories compared to personal ones of childhood best friends, losing her virginity, entanglements with lovers, and performing at parties.

The structuring historical event for this generation of Haitians is the 2010 earthquake—known within the country as *trembleman te a* (the trembling earth) and *goudougoudou* (a Kreyòl word that emulates the sound of the quake). It is what marks a before and after, pre and post. The trust that people in Haiti had that, if nothing else, the land beneath their feet would hold them up was shaken. The earth and buildings and bodies and everyday life broke open. It is this event that forms the locus of transition in Kelly’s life narrative.

Breaking Open

Less than a month before the disaster, I was working as a production assistant on a “transnational tranny porn film” remaking Kathy Acker’s *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978). All the Americans involved in the project were white and transgender and/or genderqueer, and, for several of them, it was their first time in Haiti. The director was an expat who lived in Jamel and was good friends with Kelly and other trans, transgender, and other trans* Haitians (such as masisi) who came to visit before or after the filming. These erotic encounters included smoking, drinking, and long conversations that included details about fucking, loving, parties, traveling, hormones, and the dangers of silicone implants. There was all-night dancing at the weekly RAM concert at the Hotel Oloffson, which is the last time I spent with Kelly (and her much older foreign boyfriend) before the earthquake.

Memories of that particular night of fun hung over me like a vibrant vivid cloud after I received a text about the *trembleman te a*. I struggled to find a way to understand what was happening from my home in Arizona, where Anderson Cooper mediated my information about what was happening on the ground. So I prayed. I thought about my friends. I constructed an altar on my mantel and then

one at the main entrance to my university campus, where the new semester was about to begin. Then I waited for news, any kind of reply to my phone calls and e-mails. First I heard that my friend—the director of the film project—had died. Then I learned that one of my research sites—the organization where Kelly worked—had collapsed during a support meeting. Everyone, including Kelly, was assumed to be dead.

So it came as quite a shock then when I received a call from Kelly a few days later responding to my messages. She sounded far away. It was not just because she was in a hospital in the Dominican Republic, it was something else. When I asked how she was doing, all she said was “I’m fine, *bébé*.” Kelly asked, “Where is Flo? I need him. Where is he?” Until that moment, I had not even really processed the death of our mutual friend. It felt unreal. But the gut-wrenching pain of loss choked my words when I told her, “I’m so sorry. Flo is dead. I’m so sorry.” She wailed, “No, not Flo. Not Flo, too. Everyone is dead. Everyone is dead.” We cried together without talking for a long time.

In a few weeks, I was finally able to get a flight to Santo Domingo, where I could catch a bus to Pétienville. On my first night in the Dominican Republic, I was walking with my lover, Gayle, to find something to eat when I heard my name called out in Kreyòl. Kelly was sitting in a wheelchair with an escort not too far away. My initial excitement at seeing her turned into concern. Her head was bandaged, and it quickly became apparent that even though Kelly had recognized me, she was disoriented—from the severe concussion, drugs, or both. I made a date to meet her for coffee in the morning, but (uncharacteristically) she did not show up. I received an e-mail not too long afterward with no explanation, and for a period of time I only received brief updates about her health.

It was only when we reunited for a couple of weeks in 2013 that Kelly told me her version of the events. Kelly had been working when the walls and the ground looked like they turned into liquid. She was the only one to survive the building collapse; fourteen of her friends and close acquaintances died in her immediate vicinity. Her own body had been broken open by chunks of concrete and debris, and she was in need of immediate medical assistance. Her boyfriend arranged to take her by car to a hospital in the Dominican Republic and took a big gamble—it was a long journey, but there was a better chance of receiving medical treatment, even potentially from a doctor who would not be concerned about a woman with a penis (or possibly a man with breasts). It paid off, and Kelly stayed through many surgeries to reset her bones. She was eventually able to walk again, but with a lot of effort and a residual limp. She noted, gesturing to the scar on her face and her transformed lower body, “It only took thirty-four seconds to completely change my life.” As Kelly’s story illustrates, the tectonic shift broke open more than the earth. Beyond the lives lost under decimated buildings, hundreds

of thousands of people lost limbs and/or incurred injuries that impacted their long-term health and mobility.

While many have considered the implications of this massive disablement for Haitians, here I focus on its gendered effects. Not only were Kelly's bones crushed, but the experience of undergoing medical treatment for these wounds had a masculinizing effect. Her hair was cropped short because of the head trauma, and she had to discontinue feminizing hormone therapy while on medication. Because of the ways doctors set her bones, Kelly also had a newly masculine gait rather than a swish of the hips. Her friends were surprised by the transformation of a once high femme into someone whose body was too in between. They wanted to know, "What are you?" Kelly did not know the answer, and she experienced the most profound dysphoria of her life.

In other words, breaking open was a way of "becoming disabled, becoming trans*." This is a departure from US scholarship on the interconnections between transgender and disability that focus on the ways in which "transgender" gets coded as "disability" and the various political responses to this framework.⁵ Instead of thinking of transgender as always already disabled, I am asking what happens when trans* bodies become disabled. What are the effects of disabilities for those who have labored so attentively, in loving and painful ways, to shape their sex and gender embodiments?

Incurring a disability from life-threatening bodily injuries—for instance, as a result of antiblack racism—can have a transing effect for everyone, not just transgender people. This effect is related to Robert McRuer's (2006) theorization of the ways that queerness and disability are coconstitutive through compulsory able-bodiedness, wherein the disabled body is already marked as queer and the queer body is already disabled because neither can achieve normative heterosexuality. While McRuer does not explicitly consider the gendered dimensions of normative heterosexual achievement, it is not a stretch to say that the queerness of the disabled body is related to the ways that compulsory able-bodiedness produces normative masculine and feminine embodiments.

"Becoming disabled, becoming trans*" therefore requires us to think about medicalized transition expansively. This is both to draw on and complicate Stallings's claims about transition. Her concern with multiple forms of transition in (black) trans* lives makes it possible to understand the earthquake as transition. But while Stallings moves helpfully away from "the clinic" as the sole or primary site of transition, this distance does not help us to begin to understand the imbrications of black bodies with the medical-industrial complex as a result of antiblack violence. So rather than referring only to those forms of self-selected and often difficult-to-access technologies that alter sex and gender embodiments, here medicalized transition also includes unexpected forms of life-saving medical

interventions and therapies as a result of violence. There is an endless variety of the transing effects of these interventions that temporarily or permanently remove the ability to achieve normative, or at least desired, masculine and feminine embodiments.⁶

But of course before “becoming disabled, becoming trans*,” not all bodies intentionally worked to defy the violent constraints of cissexism and transphobia. For people with transsexual and transgender embodiments then, these medicalized transitions pose additional challenges to claiming one’s life. Kelly, who was assigned the gender of *ti gason* (boy) based on her male embodiment, had overcome incredible barriers to claim feminine embodiments as a *ti fi* (girl) and then as a *fanm* (woman). Her unwelcome gender transition from a woman to a “what are you?” (or sometimes a man) was devastating.

While these connections between trans* and disability are worth exploring more on their own, here I want to posit antiblack postcolonial disablement as key to understanding “becoming disabled, becoming trans*” in the context of Haiti. Since Haitian independence in 1804, European and US imperialists have worked methodically to undermine the success of the Black Republic as a way to punish Haitians and their enslaved ancestors who fought for and claimed their freedom from white colonial domination. These various imperialist campaigns—including the refusal to recognize the existence of Haiti, the implementing of trade embargos, the withholding of aid, and neoliberal restructurings—have cumulatively contributed to what some call Haiti’s chronic “underdevelopment.” International media attributed the destruction of the earthquake to this so-called underdevelopment, evidenced in things like poor construction materials and methods. An antiracist historic frame helps us to understand that it was these Euro-American imperialist legacies rather than “poverty” or “lack of building codes” that determined the extent of bodily damage in the earthquake.

I have already documented evidence for the first part of my argument: that the earthquake is the most prominent transition in Haitian transgender lives because of the ways that the unnatural disaster reorganized bodies. The antiblack postcolonial disablement of Haiti combined with seismic waves resulted in tremendous life loss and massive bodily damage. This violence and the subsequent medical interventions had transing effects. For Kelly, this process of “becoming disabled, becoming trans*” manifested in the masculinization of her body. However, more than Kelly’s sense of embodiment was broken open; the disaster also reorganized her social life. This forms the basis for the second part of my argument about the earthquake as transition. Elsewhere (Durban-Albrecht 2015), I document that the US LGBTQI organizations who conducted disaster relief efforts catalyzed new identitarian regimes in Haiti: the formation of “LGBT community” (now LGBTI) and “trans*”/“transgender” as correctives for “masisi”

and “trani.” These biopolitical shifts were the backdrop for the social isolation that Kelly experienced after the earthquake.

During her recovery period in the Dominican Republic, Kelly waited for her friends in Haiti to come visit. The roads were traversable, and many people were traveling back and forth between the two sides of the island by bus and car. However, these visits never materialized. Her friends rarely even called to check in and see how she was doing. The hope of waiting for these gestures of care gradually calcified into resentment. These feelings were exacerbated when Kelly learned that her “friends”—many of whom worked for HIV-outreach organizations for men who have sex with men (MSM)—had used her story to obtain emergency grants and other funding from American agencies after the earthquake. In these stories, the organizations’ leaders portray Kelly as an intimate and integral part of the “community,” whose misery and misfortunes are deeply felt by all. These men may have even believed it because when Kelly eventually confronted them for commodifying her trauma, they were surprised by her anger. They conjectured that the reason for her “madness” (meant as both intense anger and insanity) was that she had not received a payout from them. However, Kelly was not interested in this base reconciliatory gesture. Rather, her feelings stemmed from the ways that these events threw into relief something that Kelly had long suspected: these organizations trafficked in transgender but did not really hold up their commitments to trani or trans* women. Thus the earthquake broke open social fault lines as well.

Stitching Together

“Of all the people who survived, I was the one who was most broken.” Kelly has repeated this line to me on several different occasions. This is her story, in brief, of the transformative power of the earthquake. The disaster broke open her body and the social life that she had relied on to make a place in the world. But just as Dominican doctors had sewn together, reopened, and resewn her flesh to transform and heal Kelly’s broken body, she stitched together a new life—as a trans-migrant living between the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

In the remainder of this article, I propose that we might read these moments as a “stitching together,” and, further, that this stitching together is a strategy crucial to trans* Haitian reparation and survival. This strategy is related to Micha Cárdenas’s (2014) concept of “the stitch,” a trans* feminist operation rooted in antiviolence work that describes many different creative practices geared toward the survival of trans* women of color. Cárdenas’s conceptualization of the stitch draws on histories of women’s (re)productive labor in the form of sewing, women-of-color feminisms’ political work across lines of racial difference, and transsexual body modification through surgery. As I noted

previously, Stallings (2015) is particularly focused on forms of black trans* self-authorization beyond transsexual body modification through surgery and, more generally, the privileged sites of biomedical contexts. Here I want to draw on these theorists' concern with black trans* and trans*-of-color survival and self-authorization, but specifically in relationship to the (broadly conceptualized) medicalized transitions resulting from antiblack violence and healing interventions. I offer the alteration of "stitching together" as different forms of constituting trans* selves in these contexts of antiblack (postcolonial) disablement.

Kelly performed the operation of stitching together by fashioning a self in several ways in the wake of a disaster that broke open her body. Even from the time she was in the hospital after the earthquake, Kelly had worked to counter the effects of masculinization. She adorned herself with makeup and beautiful head scarves as she lingered in hospital beds. But as she struggled with dysphoria, these practices became less consistent, and she would sometimes present with her given name. Eventually, Kelly decided that to get her life again she needed to be immersed in cultures of self-fashioning, and she enrolled in a beauty school in the Dominican Republic. The experiences of working as a black woman alongside other black women and engaging the pleasurable and painful tools to style feminine embodiments were ways of stitching together a self and healing after incredible trauma. Kelly even selected a new name that sounded like the one of the daughter she had helped create, and in this way, she was symbolically rebirthed.

Gradually, Kelly moved away from trying to counter her masculine embodiment with hyperfeminine stylings. She embraced aspects of her masculinity, switching out glamorous dresses and shoes for tank tops, jeans, hoodies, and pink Converse All Stars. Because these stylings and Kelly's swagger are unexpected among middle-class Haitian women, people on the street started calling her "madivin" (lesbian, or something more akin to dyke).⁷ She said, "I am not a lesbian, but people don't know. They are just ignorant. I used to care when they called me [madivin], but I don't care anymore. I just take care of my own business."

Stitching together is also about transnational sociality as a mode of Haitian transgender survival. Here stitching together works alongside and between "the stitch" and Jafari S. Allen's (2015) elaboration of "Stitching, Darling!" as the performance of a necessarily transgenerational black queer diaspora. The quote is from the notorious New York City queen Kevin Aviance at the closing of the Palladium nightclub. Allen notes that the phrase highlights Aviance's articulation of black queer sociality through generations (as a "queen who came from a queen who came from a queen . . .") and the embodiment of it in the gay scene of the long 1980s. "Stitching, Darling!" inspires Allen's mobile methods of black queer

diaspora: suturing (with a flourish) the past, present, and future as well as scenes “here and there” in disparate geographic locations.

For Kelly, this meant cultivating relationships with people “here and there” who wanted to imagine black trans* futures. She stitched together transnational friendships and romances that were enabled in large part by social media. Kelly is part of a generation of Haitians that can remember only ever being connected to the rest of the world through radio, television, computers, cell phones, tablets, and the systems that link these devices. She is usually hooked into at least two of them at any given time, which she uses to access accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Skype, and other social media platforms. Because Kelly speaks French and Spanish fluently and has an ever-expanding proficiency in English, she can communicate with people in many parts of the world.

After the painful dissolution of her longtime social networks in Haiti, Kelly made different friends that affirmed her (now masculine and less entertaining) femininity. This included those she interacted with on a day-to-day basis, such as nontransgender Dominican cosmetologists, as well as gay Haitians who were newly involved in what had become LGBT organizations in Haiti. But she also reached out of these circles to connect with trans* women and men around the world, and she would message people she found interesting to initiate a relationship.

Kelly was primarily, although not exclusively, interested in the lives of black transgender people. She watched the news on her feed for stories about black trans* activists in the Caribbean and in different parts of Africa. Kelly reveled in the popularity of Laverne Cox and Janet Mock in the United States, and she requested that I bring *Redefining Realness* (Mock 2014) to Haiti for her. Since I lived in Arizona, she also pressed me for details about Monica Jones’s case, one that encouraged her to rethink her negative perceptions of sex work, or what Stallings helpfully reframes as “antiwork sexual activity” (2015). Through the intimacies she cultivated on social media as well as her actions to claim an education about global issues, Kelly started to consider herself less of a health advocate and more of an activist. From this position, she dreams big dreams for her future: obtaining a degree in public health and beginning a transgender organization in Haiti.

With the daily material realities of trauma, chronic pain, and now working as a home health aide in the Southeast of the United States, Kelly struggles with caring for herself and others. The earthquake fundamentally transformed her life and relationship to the flesh. Here I have sketched out those creative practices of stitching together—through persistent self-fashioning and erotic transnational intimacies—for Kelly to survive as a black transgender woman in a world bent on her destruction. Who knows if she will go to college or initiate

new social movements within Haiti? But dreaming functions as yet another important form of antiviolen work, of reaching toward the queer horizons of black trans* futures.

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Notes

1. However, after the influx of US-based LGBTQI organizations in the wake of the 2010 earthquake, more Haitians use *trans* rather than *trani*. For more about these shifts, read Durban-Albrecht 2015.
2. As a brief history, the organized uprising against white settler colonialism in San Domingue (the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804) resulted in the creation of the first modern republic in the world where all people were free. Haiti is known as the "black republic" where constitutionally everyone—regardless of phenotype—is black (*noir*). Colloquially, Haitians are "*neg*" and foreigners are "white" (*blan*). In addition to serving as an inspiration for abolition elsewhere in the Americas, the newly created Haitian state supported Simón Bolívar to throw off the chains of Spanish colonialism. Two hundred years later, the decolonial project of the Haitian Revolution is ongoing. Haitian activists work tirelessly to challenge the remaining legacies of French colonialism.

Since its inception, the postcolonial Caribbean nation has been punished for Haitians' ability to imagine and create the world otherwise. Overwhelming foreign debt as "reparations" to France for its colonial property, refusal to acknowledge Haiti's independence, boycotts on Haitian trade, and the recolonization of Haiti during the American occupation (1915–34) are just the beginning. Stories about Haiti's perversions, delusions, criminality, and inability to self-govern have emanated from Western Europe and the United States, creating a white imaginary of Haiti full of unbridled sexuality, demonic possession, greed, and malfeasance. There is a corresponding enforced amnesia about how the history of European colonialism and over a century of US imperialism have shaped contemporary conditions in the black republic.

3. This concept of a living archive comes from Stuart Hall (2001), who considers the constituting of an archive away from the "dead works" of museums. My use comes from Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's (2005) oral history work with QTPOC subjects in the United States as "living archives of desire."

4. “Kelly” selected this pseudonym in 2009 and decided to keep it for this piece.
5. See, for instance, Clare 2013, Puar 2014, and Puar 2015. This is distinct from those who draw lines of commonality between disability and trans* studies, such as Ashley Mog and Amanda Lock Swarr (2008) and Alison Kafer (2003).
6. According to Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, transing is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being and that allows for their reassembly. Transing can function as a disciplinary tool when the stigma associated with the lack or loss of gender status threatens social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination. It can also function as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway toward liberation (2008: 4).
7. These shifting modes of embodiment are connected to the Vodou family of spirits, Erzulie or Ezili, with whom Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley has an intimate intellectual connection that she explores in scholarship. Here Kelly is moving from the feminine Ezili Freda to the more masculine Ezili Dantó, dark mother of Haiti. Thank you to Dasha Chapman and Mario LaMothe (my colleagues and copanelists at Trans*Studies: An International Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment, and Sexuality, University of Arizona, 2016) for helping me see these in relationship to their work on transnationality, transcorporeality, and transgender in Haitian contexts.

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“Chasing Rainbows”

Black Cracker and Queer, Trans Afrofuturity

KAREN JAIME

Abstract In this essay, the author argues that Ellison Renee Glenn as Black Cracker performs what LaMonda H. Stallings, drawing on the work of C. Riley Snorton, defines as a “transworld identity,” or as an “identity across possible worlds.” Specifically, the author focuses on how the move between the politics of the United States and abroad, evidenced in Glenn’s cultural productions, also temporally shifts his work toward the creation of a queer, trans Afrofuture. An Afrofuturity sonically, visually, and textually reflected in his video for “Chasing Rainbows,” a track on his recently released *PosTer Boy* album that complicates our understanding of race, gender, and sexuality.

Keywords black, queer, trans, Afrofuturism, hip-hop

Art is not about nor will ever be about popularity. It is a quiet meditation on time and scale and skin that at times roars and erupts but mostly steeps until it evaporates. I just try my best to stay true to the voices in my head.

—Black Cracker, “Interview: Black Cracker (and Free Download of the New Acid Washed Remix)”

When I first met Ellison Renee Glenn, the artist who performs as Black Cracker, he was an art school dropout working at a paint store for less than minimum wage and living with a roommate. Aside from the paint store, his income sources included spoken word prize monies and musical performances. In order to contact him, I usually left a message with his roommate or on his answering machine and stopped by one of his usual haunts in the hopes of running into him. This was before Facebook and smartphones and then, as well as now, Glenn was always on the move. In fact, other than his gig serving as the host of the Wednesday Night Open Mic Slam at the Nuyorican Poets Café, Glenn did not really follow a set schedule.¹

Glenn's constant physical motion, similar to water steeping and evaporating, both reflects and shapes his art-making practice, alongside his engagement with cities and communities, cultures and continents. Steeping, or the soaking of a solid in hot liquid so as to extract flavors from it, is how tea is made, and sipping tea is an important component of black/queer trans vernacular. Evaporation, or the dispersal of water into the air, signals a change in form, not content, a natural and secular transubstantiation. Whether it is a hot liquid or vapor, water remains water, despite its change in physical state. Glenn's ethics and aesthetics index his critical artistic consistency rooted in a transitory queer black Atlantic, with the constant geographic and temporal motion evidenced in both his life and his work.²

In this essay, I argue that Glenn as Black Cracker performs what LaMonda H. Stallings, drawing on the work of C. Riley Snorton, defines as a "transworld identity," or as an "identity across possible worlds" (2015: 207). *Trans*, in this essay, operates on three levels. Initially, *trans* serves as an identitarian marker, signifying Glenn's position as a "man of transgender experience" (Black Cracker 2015). Second, *trans* signals the transit of black people and politics worldwide, as theorized in, among other texts, both Lindon Barrett et al.'s reading of mercantilism in *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (2014) and Brent Hayes Edwards's understanding of diaspora and the interwar period in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003). Finally, *trans* points us toward a black Atlantic transnationalism with an increased emphasis on the immediate past as a historical archive in order to imagine and create a queer, trans Afrofuture.

While maintaining "Black Cracker" as moniker and shifting persona, Glenn has moved from spoken word to a punk aesthetic with his former group, the Victory Riot, to his present work as an indie beatboxer/rapper/electro-pop music producer. His embodied artistic practice and articulated political stances form a dialogic aesthetic across genres/audiences and communities. As with his chosen performance persona, Black Cracker, Glenn deliberately (and brilliantly) combines seemingly disparate and intentionally troubling elements to examine their utility for opening up new ways of being for racialized subjects.³

Posing the Dilemma: Can One Be Both Black and (a) Cracker?

Cracker as an epithet for whiteness, white people, and working-class whites operates as synonymous with what gets termed "redneck" and/or "white trash." A post on UrbanDictionary.com defines it as "Noun. Slang word used to refer to those of European ancestry. The word is thought to have either derived from the sound of a whip being cracked by slave owners, or because crackers are generally white in color" (FigurinOutLife 2004). And, as performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz articulates, whiteness, in dialectical tensions with brownness,

functions as bland and flavorless: lacking taste even as it sets the standards for taste and exoticizes all other flavors.⁴ In turn, Glenn recombines charged language and combative discursive territory alongside racialized history as critique and taunt. The appellation “Black Cracker” brings together two antagonistic concepts in the United States, and in particular the southern US imaginary. In devising a staged identity that operates as both “constructed and contradictory,” that places in one black trans body histories polarized by US racial binaries and histories, Glenn’s practice keenly relates to Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, which he defined as “a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance” (1999: 25). While disidentification defines the way in which minoritarian subjects refuse to turn toward or away from majoritarian or mainstream society and culture, as a performance methodology it enables Glenn to navigate a “phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Thus, via Black Cracker, Glenn inhabits polarized racializations, while disidentifying with the South’s toxic, racist binaries and imagery. In choosing to perform, write, and make music as Black Cracker, Glenn lampoons essentialized whiteness and blackness, simultaneously forcing audiences to examine their own racialization and the anxieties of racial placement summoned in the name “Black Cracker.” In Glenn’s earlier performances, Black Cracker served as a satirical portrait of hip-hop’s cis masculinity and its boastful masculinist stage and street personas. Through overgesticulation and heightened mugging, Glenn’s Black Cracker critically evoked the minstrel figure and minstrelsy, often chilling his young US multiracial audiences. Trained via videos and marketing to see hip-hop artists and emcees generally as “authentic” performers of urban black strife and success, both mainstream and “conscious” urban multiracial audiences figure the black male hip-hop artist as oppositional to, and critical of, minstrelsy and the racist past.

In his chapter “‘The White to Be Angry’ Vaginal Crème Davis’ Terrorist Drag,” Muñoz writes on Los Angeles black artist Vaginal Davis, terming her queer and trans work “terrorist drag” and reading her multiple- and multiply-raced musical group personas thusly: “Performance is used by these musical groups to, borrowing a phrase from George Lipsitz, ‘rehearse identities’ that have been rendered toxic within the dominant public sphere but are, through Davis’ fantastic and farcical performance, restructured (yet not cleansed) so they present newly imagined notions of the self and the social” (1999: 97). A similar mix of violence and comedy, as well as an imaginative restructuring of the historically toxic, define Glenn’s early work as Black Cracker. Such defiant invoking of minstrelsy is also at work in Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* (2000), and MacArthur Fellow Branden Jacob-Jenkins’s play *Neighbors* (2013). In each of these black cultural

products and projects—all initially developed, staged, and/or filmed/performed/realized in New York City in the late 1990s and early 2000s—minstrelsy is invoked not as the ignominious past but rather as the insidious pleasure and crass profitability of contemporary masked black pain and gendered complicity.

Thus, Glenn's earliest pose as Black Cracker was as a hip-hop emcee as minstrel, a buffoon whose overwrought masculine racialization underlined long-held racist stereotypes and sexist posturings in commercial hip-hop that have made many a black male millionaire.⁵ For example, earlier in his career, Black Cracker performed alongside the artist known as Bunny Rabbit. Onstage, Bunny Rabbit would rap while Black Cracker provided the beats. Throughout their songs, Black Cracker adopted the stance and movement aesthetic of contemporary rappers—kicking one leg in the air before drawing one arm forward and then back to grab his crotch, the movement accompanied by a staccato bouncing up and down of his body. I read this performance of Glenn as Black Cracker as a form of queer hip-hop minstrelsy. That is, Glenn critiques the masculinist, corporatist agenda by presenting its centralized figure, the boastful black, masculine ideal, as racial buffoon and clown. While Glenn does not perform in blackface, he takes on the trope of the hip-hop hype man as minstrel, to subvert audience expectations and heteronormative gender stylings regularly articulated in commercial hip-hop. He employs the exaggerated gestures, the wide grin, the pandering to the audience while walking around hunched over and extolling them to “come on, come on,” which signals a return to minstrelsy, but he does so with a wink to the audience. He intentionally takes on the minstrel personage and recodifies it through his own queer version of hip-hop. Glenn as Black Cracker has since moved this performative persona away from underlining masculinist racial clowning of the hip-hop present and the minstrel past, toward inaugurating a trans Afrofuturism that is queer and diasporic.

Black Cracker now creates artistic productions that function as part of the larger tradition of Afrofuturism and electronica, producing beats for himself as well as other artists, including Slick Rick, Grimes, and Trust (Ozuna 2012). The cultural and literary aesthetic of *Afrofuturism*—a term first coined by Mark Dery in “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose” (1994)—was later more fully explored by Alondra Nelson in “Future Texts,” the introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* (2002). Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, scientific inquiry, and magical realism with non-Western cosmologies and not only enables a critique of contemporary issues faced by people of color but also functions as an avenue to revise, interrogate, and reexamine the historical events of the past (Nelson 2002: 6). Nelson highlights an inclusive Afrofuturism that contends that there are “other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come” (9).

Through his videos, Glenn presents sonic counternarratives to the configuration of blackness as both “the anti-avatar of digital life” and as oppositional to “technology driven chronicles of progress” (1).

Glenn’s music video for “Chasing Rainbows,” from his recently released *PosTer Boy* album, functions as a future text, presenting the past and future, combining memory and utopia. What does it mean to “chase rainbows”? Similar to the classic ballad “Over the Rainbow,” “Chasing Rainbows” expresses a (queer) quest for a better tomorrow. Yet, while “Over the Rainbow” articulates an eventual destination, “Chasing Rainbows” references a never-ending journey. After all, rainbows as phenomena caused by the reflection, refraction, and dispersion of light in water droplets have no visual or tactile beginning or end (*Wikipedia* 2016). Rather, they seem to stand in for futures just over there, wherever there is. So, what *does* the future sound like? Feel like? How does hip-hop and Afrofuturism enable Black Cracker’s move between alternate lifeworlds, and can electronica and the black Atlantic be sites for utopic black trans visions and worlds?

In “Chasing Rainbows,” Glenn utilizes a green screen in order to digitally move between geographic spaces and times, from a dark-gray dystopia to a more colorful world, perhaps even hopeful space, which seems to signal alternate “realities” and possible futures that emerge from chasing rainbows. The title of the album that includes the track “Chasing Rainbows,” *PosTer Boy* with the *T* capitalized, serves as the follow-up album to *PreTty Boy*, with the initial *T* also capitalized. The terms *pretty* and *poster* before the word *boy* invites a reading of how Glenn as Black Cracker marks his gender transition in relation to *T*, or testosterone. While the play with capitalization has roots in the work of Prince, Ntozake Shange, and the Nuyorican Poets Café’s poetic aesthetics, Glenn’s titles and emphatic yet wry use of the capital *T* position his albums in an emerging trans and queer Afrofuturity. Here Stallings’s work on trans-world identities proves particularly useful in situating trans subjectivity away from the medicalized body by instead focusing on the relationship between transness and movement.

In the image that introduces the video for “Chasing Rainbows,” there sits a white woman—missing both her eyes and mouth, which appear to have been scratched out—in a bedroom, while on the wall behind her bed hangs a poster of a shirtless black male sitting in a chair, arms raised behind his head, framed from the neck down with his face not visible (Black Cracker 2014). The visible pectoral scars, alongside his attire, especially when positioned next to a picture featured on the German website *Südblock* in which you can see his face, identify the person as Black Cracker. While the woman has no eyes or mouth, and therefore cannot see or speak, neither can a headless Black Cracker. I read this image through the work of Miles White in *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (2011), wherein he argues that in hardcore styles of hip-hop, facial

expressions alongside the shirtless male torso telegraph hypermasculinity and the idea of psychic hardness, while simultaneously privileging the objectified and spectacularized body. Yet Glenn as Black Cracker complicates this reading by including his shirtless torso with no complementary facial expression.

What, then, is at stake in including a spectator who cannot see or speak in front of an object—the poster bearing the image of Black Cracker—who also cannot see or speak? Glenn’s response to this question and to the classification of artists as LGBT or as part of the queer hip-hop scene represents the ways in which his work critically engages with the politics of identity. He states, “I believe it’s discriminatory and will believe so until we define other things as heterosexual or white or male or skinny or all the numerous ways in which many are determined and dead set on making humans ‘other’” (Romana 2014). This posthumanist comment shows Glenn refusing the structural and categorical imperatives of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy that position him as other without agency, history, or futurity. Yet, while in the interview Glenn presents himself as forthright and declarative, as *PosTer Boy* icon Black Cracker in “Chasing Rainbows,” his approach and aesthetic are far more enigmatic. The headless black transman and the disfigured/defaced white (cis) woman are emblematic, then, of a move away from Muñozian disidentification toward an expansive trans Afrofuturism.

The second image on the visual time line presents an ominous blue-gray sky and dark mountains in the distance, while a small green patch of grass frames the dead-end roads at the bottom of the screen that seem to be going somewhere/nowhere at the same time. The third image of a fiery cloud of smoke denotes an explosion, while a set of lipsticks serve as the end of this sequence. The lipstick—a tool used in generating a facial mask—stands in for the construction of feminized/sexualized female beauty. These pictures function as the backdrop for an emerging Black Cracker in the lower right-hand corner. He begins rapping while wearing rolled-up gray shorts, a white and black plaid wool shirt, and a baseball cap, with black combat boots covering his feet. These images contradict one another, the ominous explosion followed by the arguably banal red lipstick, the horizon of the mountains seeming to represent a potential future over “there” contrasted by the apocalyptic end brought on by catastrophe.

In the following scene, we encounter the first of many scantily clad women throughout the video. The woman, with her white/light skin, is ethnically ambiguous, and she wears a white lace bustier with matching underwear and garter belt. The woman sports long, straight, black hair and initially sits in a chair, leaning back while opening and closing her legs. She then moves and begins to crawl seductively on a window ledge, while he stands to the side of her and continues to rap. The focus of the camera moves to her, while relegating Black Cracker to the periphery. In the following scene, the same woman, now wearing very short, high-cut denim shorts and a white tank top with a red heart covering

the front, gyrates in the same white heels as in the previous sequence. At this point in the video, the woman has been duplicated, and there are two versions of her dancing side by side behind Black Cracker. In both scenes, we see the woman positioned at such a distance that her face and expression appear out of focus. This woman, surrounded by signs of decay—the peeling floor, the missing wall, the branches on what appears to be an old basketball court (evidenced by the fading lines for what seems to be the three-point shot)—operates as both out of place and in place within the temporal realities that Black Cracker puts forth.

The contrast between what the white/light-skinned woman is doing, how she is dressed, and what is occurring in the video at that moment continues as a black woman wearing a lavender dress appears in the corner of the screen. Shortly thereafter, we see her in a magenta Lycra sleeveless dress, arching her back while resting on her forearms, before she sits up and begins opening and closing her legs while rubbing them seductively. Her face and expressions are visible, and she looks directly at the camera and meets the viewer's gaze. Similar to the other woman dancing in the video, there are multiple dancing versions of her onscreen. Throughout, she alternates between being in front of and then behind Black Cracker while the screen flashes and changes colors. I find the representation and inclusion of women useful, as well as the dichotomies with respect to color that Black Cracker presents lyrically. While the appearance of these women in the video can arguably be read as Black Cracker's continuing to participate in the objectification and mistreatment of women owing to a fear of female sexuality, as argued by Tricia Rose in her essay "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile" (2004), I argue for a more complicated reading of this video.⁶

The video visually, lyrically, and sonically presents a constructed world of different possibilities. While the dancing women, arguably white and black, are in constant motion, owning their sexuality—Black Cracker never makes them the object of his gaze nor denigrates them lyrically—the woman in the initial sequence of the video is rendered static. The white (cis) woman with her eyes scratched out remains fixed in one position, in a photograph, and she becomes an object within an object with no agency, and no possibility to visually interact with the viewer. Yet her position in some ways mirrors ours as listeners and viewers of the video. Recall that she appears in a room in which Black Cracker appears as a mere poster boy—a two-dimensional and eroticized headless torso. Whereas in his earlier work he operated within modes of recoding and subverting binaries of black/white and man/woman, in "Chasing Rainbows" he makes enigmatic the relations between women and men, cis and trans people, black and white, and femininity and masculinity precisely by flattening them out. This is done, I believe, so that Black Cracker's later dancing and multiple selves in a stark landscape can figuratively bust out of the received narratives of race, embodiment, and subjectivity.

We see this engagement between the seemingly absurd and the carnival-esque continue in the subsequent two scenes. In one scene, Black Cracker is standing in front of overgrown foliage covering the former tracks of a nonexistent roller coaster, while an oversized colorful butterfly in midflight hovers between a series of flashing lights. The bright hope and transformational processes signified by the butterfly and the lights are contrasted in the following scene by the unkempt greenery covering another amusement park signifier—the bumper car ring. Only in this instance, the rusty metal frames where the rooftop would be, the brown leaves, and nonfunctional bumper cars seem to highlight a ghostly lack of use and life. Unlike the earlier scene in which there stood a singular Black Cracker, here we see three versions of Black Cracker, as if to articulate his refusal to be relegated to invisibility or a monological identity. In emerging from below and head first, Black Cracker resists his erasure while forcefully embodying and presenting multiple versions of himself. These iterations of self continue in the next sequence, wherein three more versions of Black Cracker dance and rap in what seems to be a collapsing shed. Written on the wall is “The old fortune teller lies dead on the floor, nobody needs fortunes told anymore” (Black Cracker 2014). Alongside the spray-painted clown, this legend functions as a signifier for the collapse of memory and history, the past as well as the present. The amusement park in disrepair, its promise and futurity decayed by economic recession and urban postindustrialization, signals Glenn’s understanding of racial materiality as the matrix for the future’s emerging, dancing and rapping, trans and queer selves.

In the final scene of “Chasing Rainbows,” we see Black Cracker walking on an endless road. This visual endnote relates to José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of utopia as an “anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (2009: 49). Additionally, Glenn as Black Cracker’s queer Afrofuture indexes Judith Butler’s articulation of the potentiality of the term *queer* as a “site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (1993: 228). These reflections and imaginings function, for Butler, as something “never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (228).

Both Muñoz and Butler prove useful for framing my textual analysis of “Chasing Rainbows.” Specifically, I call attention to the lyrics:

In the midnight
Ebony/ivory
I believe
You and me

Live in prisms
 Reflecting an infinity
 We coloring outside the lines
 White light
 Clouds/cumulus on the undefined.

This is followed by the chorus:

The night is black
 Your skin is white
 My skin is brown
 The seas is gray
 Your heart is blue
 Your eyes are red
 The smoke is green
 We chasing rainbows.
 (Black Cracker 2014)

While layering colors lyrically in the way that rainbows do optically, Glenn, a dark-skinned black man, once again puts Western polarities (ebony/ivory, brown/white, me/you, heart/eyes) through a prismatic process of recombination that serves as his trans Afrofuturist optic and sonic. Both the song and the video move toward a future collectivity by the time they end. Black Cracker extends the potential of “Chasing Rainbows” to everyone when he raps, “We chasing Rainbows,” not “I am chasing rainbows.” Through his cultural productions, and this video specifically, Black Cracker offers this future as a possibility for everyone, if we collectively move beyond fixed identitarian markers regardless of space, place, or time.

Glenn’s musical productions as Black Cracker articulate a sonics of ceaseless motion and travel through repetition. The musical repetition creates a circularity, or a temporal loop, that signals a lack of arrival. Ultimately, Glenn as Black Cracker presents transness as unsettling to configurations of Afrofuturism as a politics of arrival: the future is not about the arrival. The future operates as an outside, an elsewhere, a dynamic function of geopolitics as theorized by Snorton and Stallings.

This movement away from and toward identitarian markers informs all of Black Cracker’s cultural productions. Beginning with his early days as a poet at the Nuyorican Poets Café, to his later work, Black Cracker as a performance identity enables Ellison Renee Glenn to appropriate racist iconography and reconfigure it as an oppositional and joyful political gesture. The significance of his work extends beyond the communities of spoken word, queer hip-hop videos, and

multimedia productions. Glenn forces us to reexamine the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality as identity markers are produced and subsequently performed not just in the United States but everywhere that the music, lyrics, and images travel.

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Notes

1. The Wednesday Night Slam Open at the Nuyorican Poets Café serves as the qualifying event (of a three-round poetry competition that is judged by randomly selected audience members) for the Friday Night Slam of the café. The winner of the Wednesday event is guaranteed a slot as one of the five competing poets in the Friday night event. I served as the host of the Friday Night Slam from 2002 to 2005 and filled in as the host of the Wednesday evening event for a month the previous summer.
2. Here I am referencing the work of Paul Gilroy on the black Atlantic in *The Black Atlantic* (1993).
3. In speaking with Glenn, he tells me that he took on the moniker "Black Cracker" around 2007, after seeing an Atlanta Black Cracker's baseball hat in a department store. He knew that it was the appropriate name for him "because of the sound and the political irony" (pers. comm., June 1, 2016).
4. In his essay "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*," Muñoz defines whiteness and white affective performance as "minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment," essentially arguing for the positioning of "whiteness as lack" (2000: 70).
5. Here I am drawing on Nicole Fleetwood's work on black visibility, specifically the fourth chapter of her text *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, entitled "'I Am King': Hip-Hop Culture, Fashion Advertising, and the Black Male Body" (2001).
6. For critical writing on the role generally assigned to women in hip-hop videos, please refer to Rose 2004.

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To Visualize the Queen Diva!

Toward Black Feminist Trans Inclusivity in Beyoncé's "Formation"

JENNIFER DECLUE

Abstract This article discusses the sonic presence and visual absence of legendary gender-nonconforming New Orleans-based bounce music artist Big Freedia in Beyoncé's music video "Formation." "Formation" was released in February 2016 as the first piece of Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. In this analysis the author considers the implications of Big Freedia's visual absence in the video as well as the black feminist potential of Big Freedia's vocal presence in "Formation."

Keywords blackness, gender, representation, black cultural studies, black feminism

In the early winter of 2016, Beyoncé released a music video that triggered reactions ranging from black feminist jubilation to propolice outrage.¹ Beyoncé's "Formation" captured the collective imaginary that profusely expressed itself through a proliferation of online think pieces and debates for nearly a week after its release, which is an eternity in digital time and space (Ifeany 2016; Drayton 2016; Blay 2016). What remained in the recesses of the conversations that raged about "Formation" and Beyoncé's representation of New Orleans after Katrina, the Black Power movement, #Black Lives Matter, police violence, and the colorism that still impacts African American standards of beauty was the vocal presence and visual absence of New Orleans bounce music artist Big Freedia, the Queen Diva!² While Big Freedia's sonic contribution arrives midway through the track, Messy Mya, another New Orleans-based musical artist who pushes the boundaries of gender, opens Beyoncé's "Formation" with this inciting query, "What happened at the New Wildins?"³ The haunted quality of "Formation" produces a seductive sound that captures the spectral resonances alive in New Orleans, resonances cultivated in large part through the absent presences of queer voices.

Big Freedia, the already legendary bounce music artist whose reality TV show *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce* (Big Freedia 2013–) is entering its fifth season, is featured prominently on Beyoncé’s “Formation.” Big Freedia’s wide and booming voice is heard over the plucking of a singular electrified sitar.⁴ With this vocal inclusion, Beyoncé shares the sonic space with Big Freedia but not the visual theater of the “Formation” video.

On *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, Big Freedia’s six-foot-three-inch frame is documented wearing a range of styles, from around-the-way-girl chic to classic femme-dapper looks, and the hair is consistently laid—as it were. Big Freedia as a reality star personality and as the quintessential bounce music artist of our present moment is captivating in terms of both the perpetually bedecked appearance and the rousing tonal quality that makes Big Freedia so magnetic. Stark images of modest New Orleans homes and sparsely populated sidewalks appear in “Formation” accompanied by Big Freedia’s voice-over: “I did not come to play wit you ho’s.” Big Freedia’s illustrious declaration introduces a plantation-style porch scene in which Beyoncé, flanked by a multigenerational group of handsome black men who don tuxedos as they stare into the space just beyond the camera, is dressed in a black satin off-the-shoulder top; long, full black satin skirt; and a wide-brimmed hat with two long blond braids that extend well past her waist. Beyoncé bobs her head incisively to the tickling pluck of the sitar.⁵

Big Freedia’s voice rings out, “HaHa! I came to slay, bitch.” The lush pastoral setting, with its stoic funereal quality, is quickly juxtaposed with a scene that takes place inside a wig shop where three young black women stand shoulder to shoulder staring blankly into the camera. The woman in the middle has ocher-colored hair, wears a caramel brown jumpsuit, and strokes a wig that sits atop a mannequin bust in her hands. She stands to the right of a woman with vibrant sky-blue hair in stiletto boots that match, which both contrast her all-white romper. On her right, a woman is positioned with fashionably ripped jeans and a denim and white midy top as we hear Big Freedia pronounce, “I like corn breads and collard greens, bitch. Oh yaas you best’a believe it!” Those who are familiar with bounce music and Big Freedia’s oeuvre will immediately recognize this distinct and soul-stirring voice.

Given Big Freedia’s sonic vivification on “Formation,” a visual text that is a part of Beyoncé’s celebration of the majesty, strength, and beauty of black women that enlivens the visual album *Lemonade*, it is curious that Beyoncé chose not to feature Big Freedia’s body in the video along with the renowned voice.⁶ The history of transwomen in feminist circles or within gay and lesbian communities has been fraught with exclusion and contested admission, but rather than speculate about why Beyoncé chose not to include a visual representation of Big

Freedia in "Formation," I will focus my analysis on the meaning that circulates through this cultural text as a result of her choice.⁷

Though Big Freedia does not identify as a trans person and does accept the use of the pronouns *she* or *he*, Big Freedia's gender expression can be understood as queer, in that it exceeds and pushes the boundaries of imposed gender norms. When visiting a queer youth group in New York, during season 4 of *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, Big Freedia was asked by a young LGBT activist if Big Freedia had a preferred gender pronoun. Big Freedia responded by saying, "To me, it's whatever you choose, 'he' or 'she.' I'm confident to know who I am. My fans of course prefer 'she.' I usually go with 'she' most of the time. But if somebody go with 'he,' I'm like, what's up, bra. [Big Freedia motions as if giving someone a pound.] Ya know. So, it's either or. I know who I am."⁸ Big Freedia's choice not to choose a gender pronoun lays bare the failure of gender pronouns to adequately capture the spirit, the depth, the complexity of one's gender. One mode of addressing this impossibility is the use of plural pronouns, but Big Freedia's response to the pointed question about Big Freedia's own gender pronoun usage places that rhetorical decision upon the one who beholds.

Big Freedia's gender queerness, with all the resistance to fixity and perpetual liminality that it produces, confounds mainstream representation such that a mega star like Beyoncé, who has the creative license to produce anything that she so desires, would choose to foreclose the visual representation of Big Freedia in this video. Big Freedia's vocal inclusion on the track is an expansive choice, yet an absent presence is produced when the sonic incorporation of Big Freedia's voice is met by the visual occlusion of Big Freedia's body. Big Freedia's sustained absent presence elicits the spectral quality that Beyoncé's "Formation" ushers into the cultural field.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon (2008: xvi) describes haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely." The haunting that is produced through Big Freedia's absent presence in "Formation" calls up the unresolved social violence, the murders of transwomen, transmen, and trans people of color in epidemic proportions, as well as the threat of violence and the nonlethal assaults that trans people have to contend with in their daily lives.⁹ The violence of erasure, the refusal of visibility, the pain of a contingent inclusion in black feminist world making is actively being produced with this cultural text. The haunted feeling of "Formation" becomes amplified through the voices of the musical artists whose gender expressions destabilize entrenched and repressive gender binaries. The visual representation of Big Freedia's gender-nonconforming corporeality and

sartorial expression in “Formation” would force a recalibration or require an opening up of black womanhood to include black trans and gender-queer embodiments in the mainstream. Black feminist thought and politics that account for black lesbian sexuality have already forged a modality for inclusivity that recognizes the stakes of robust and nonhierarchical inclusion.

In the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement,” the scholars recognize black women’s “continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” (Hull et al. 1982: 14). The belief that black women are inherently valuable along with the absolute dismissal of biological determinism undergirds the Combahee River Collective’s black feminist imperative around sexual politics. The “Black Feminist Statement” offers an approach to thinking about the complexities of black women’s oppression in an intersectional way before that term was coined.¹⁰ The Combahee River Collective insists, “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (16). In this statement, the Combahee River Collective makes clear its commitment to developing the necessary framework to sustain a movement that will fight for the liberation of all oppressed people. The mode of analysis that the Combahee River Collective develops to address the multiplicity of black women’s experiences of race, class, and sexuality can be expanded to include our contemporary understanding of gender as multiple, nonbinary, flexible, and transformative.¹¹

As the quintessential black feminist text of 2016, the visual album *Lemonade* and the music video “Formation” must be asked to recognize the importance of visually representing black trans and gender-queer embodiments. If, as black feminists like the pathbreaking scholars who formed the Combahee River Collective have declared, the liberation of all oppressed people is a black feminist imperative, then certainly we must recognize the continuous life-and-death struggle of black trans and gender-queer people. If Big Freedia’s presence in “Formation” could have been brought out of the domain of specters and into the multivalent visual landscape that Beyoncé produced with *Lemonade*, a landscape in which an array of black womanhood is carefully arranged and portrayed, this cultural text would demonstrate that black trans and gender-queer people also have a place in this celebration of black womanhood. A black feminist imperative that recognizes the inherent value of black trans and gender-queer people demands that Big Freedia be brought into the ontology and epistemology of black womanhood in such a way that Beyoncé would not hesitate to include Big Freedia’s body in the visual landscape of the black feminist worlds that she creates. The practice of recognizing the inherent value of black trans and gender-queer lives by not only showcasing black trans and gender-queer voices but also

visualizing black trans and gender-queer embodiment takes black feminist inclusion and value recognition out of the realm of possibility and brings them into the world of actuality.¹² The act of visualizing trans and gender-queer inclusion in black feminist cultural production is radical value-building and potentially life-saving work. Being moved by Big Freedia's voice while seeing her join a black feminist chorus of power, which some call magic, is a black feminist possibility within reach.

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Notes

1. To view Beyoncé's "Formation" video, see Beyoncé 2016. The "Formation" video was the first installment of Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade*. Incidentally, "Formation" is sonically alluded to at the end of the visual album *Lemonade* but is not included in the body of it.
2. Bounce music is New Orleans party music that has the Triggerman beat. This is body-positive, sex-positive dance music in which all who enjoy the sound are encouraged to appreciate their bodies, especially their booties, and bounce to the beat. The social dance that Big Freedia, Big Freedia's dancers, and many of those who enjoy bounce music perform, invent, re-create, and perfect is twerking. For more on twerking, see Gaunt 2015.
3. Messy Mya was a comedian and bounce artist from New Orleans who was shot and killed in the Seventh Ward in 2010 (McCarthy 2010). The audio recording of Messy Mya's voice that opens Beyoncé's "Formation" is drawn from one of Messy Mya's videos, "Booking the Hoes from New Wildins" (Messy Mya 2010). In this video, Messy Mya asks the question, "What happened at the New Wildins?"
4. In 2015 Big Freedia published a memoir, *Big Freedia: God Save the Queen Diva!* (2015a), that chronicles Big Freedia's life growing up in New Orleans and the path that led Big Freedia to become a legendary bounce music artist.
5. For more discussion of Beyoncé's music videos and black femininity, see Durham 2012.
6. Big Freedia was included in the live performance of "Formation" at the concert held in New Orleans for Beyoncé's Formation World Tour in September 2016. In a BET story about Laverne Cox meeting Beyoncé for the first time at the 2017 Grammy Awards, Cox disclosed that she was invited to be featured in the "Sorry" segment of *Lemonade* but could not accept the invitation because she had already committed to starring as Dr. Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Orcutt 2017).
7. Sandy Stone's "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (2006) is a response to the feminist exclusion of transwomen. Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) espouse transphobic arguments about the need to exclude transwomen from feminist groups. In "Good and Messy: Lesbian and Transgender Identities" Matt Richardson (2013) recounts incidents that occurred in the 1990s in a gay and lesbian youth group and

- a black lesbian organization in which black transwomen were either excluded or had contested admission.
8. This interview took place at Speak Out Loud, an LGBT youth support group in New York, and is featured in "Freedia Takes Manhattan" (Big Freedia 2015b).
 9. The number of trans people who are killed each year is devastating. *The Advocate* produced a slide show of the trans people who were killed in 2016 (*Advocate* 2016).
 10. The term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."
 11. The Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" is a foundational black feminist text. Other central black feminist texts that offer important critiques of race, gender, sexuality, and class are Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1982); Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984); Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984); Joy James's *Shadow Boxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (1999); and bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982).
 12. Though I am arguing here for the inclusion of trans visibility in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, specifically in the "Formation" video, I recognize that trans visibility is not simple and is not the solution to violence against trans people. Talia Mae Bettcher's "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion" (2007) discusses the complexities, precarity, and life-threatening danger of being seen as trans.

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Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women of Color?

Black Trans Feminisms and the Exigencies of White Femininity

ELÍAS COSENZA KRELL

Abstract This article takes as its starting point a recent appearance by musician, actress, and TransTech Social Enterprises CEO Angelica Ross on Caitlyn Jenner’s reality television show, *I Am Cait*. The first section places Ross’s exegesis in conversation with C. Riley Snorton on the representation of Black sexual duplicity in popular culture and Audre Lorde’s critique of white saviorism. Part 2 turns to contemporary discourses of transmisogyny and demonstrates that the term is ill equipped to address the structures of power that manifested in *I Am Cait*. The discussion suggests that race and class surreptitiously impact the emergence and circulation of transmisogyny as an analytic. Julia Serano’s scholarship is read alongside Marlon B. Ross on the universalization of whiteness in theories of gender and sexuality. A final, briefer section posits alternative genealogies of trans feminism that focalize the writing, activism, and performance work of trans women of color.

Keywords transmisogyny, transmisogynoir, Black feminism, women-of-color feminism, intersectionality

We are living in a moment in which it is common practice among trans activists and sympathetic media to outline trans vulnerability in the following way: “We need to care about trans lives, especially trans women’s lives, especially trans women of color’s lives.” This essay questions the straightforwardness of a trajectory of vulnerability from the categories “trans people” to “trans women” to “trans women of color,” suggesting that key aspects of race and class supremacy are elided within it. A recent article entitled “Is Transmisogyny Killing Transgender Women?” does not pose its titular question, seeming to suggest it needs no answer (Compton 2015).¹ Behind that which is deemed unquestionable, even or especially by trans activists themselves, often lie important questions of power. I suggest that contemporary discourses of transmisogyny are

sustained not only by critical vulnerabilities but also by unacknowledged white privilege and class oppression in ways that impact even conversations aiming to be intersectional. The discussion unfolds in three sections: part 1 centers the narrative of musician, actress, and chief executive officer of TransTech Social Enterprises Angelica Ross's experience on Caitlyn Jenner's television show, *I Am Cait*, in fall 2015. I place Ross's exegesis in the "Black Voices" segment of the *Huffington Post* (Ross 2015b) in conversation with interviews I conducted with her, with C. Riley Snorton and other Black feminist scholarship on the representation of Black women in popular culture, and with Audre Lorde's critique of white women's saviorism.² The second section turns to contemporary discourses in transmisogyny, a term coined by Julia Serano. I read Serano alongside Marlon B. Ross's critique of the universalization of whiteness in gender and sexual theories. The final section moves away from academic genealogies of trans feminism to highlight trans feminist-of-color theories emerging from activism and performance.

Part 1

The first step to dismantling a system of oppression is recognizing your role in its perpetuation.

—Angelica Ross

After weeks of deliberation, Angelica Ross agrees to fly to San Francisco to tape two episodes of Caitlyn Jenner's show, *I Am Cait*. She is motivated largely by the opportunity to promote her new start-up, TransTech Social Enterprises. After becoming disenchanted with the top-down economics and power structures in the nonprofit world, Ross founded TransTech so as to empower Chicago's community of low-income trans people by training them in information technology and software engineering, with the idea that they could then work anywhere in the world with access only to a computer (Ross 2014).

At the show's taping, Ross is joined by six other trans women, most of whom she knew personally and four of whom were women of color. Ross writes:

As we sat down for our conversation at the HRC [Human Rights Campaign] store in San Francisco, there was a palpable sense of sisterhood in the air, Cait included. We began sharing our stories and together shed light on the systems of oppression that impact trans people, but more acutely affect trans women of color. I felt seduced into a false sense of safety in opening up for the cameras and sharing our stories. After all, I knew most of the people there way before the show. After months of being silenced by a non-disclosure agreement, my excitement and anticipation to finally see the conversation on television turned into me feeling

hurt and further silenced by the end of the episode. My story—and the story of TransTech—had been truncated down to the fact that I had once been involved with sex work. (Ross 2015b)

The reduction of Ross to her brief past as a sex worker in the show follows the salaciousness in which Black sexualities have been depicted, as C. Riley Snorton (2014) observes, from the days of the overseer on slavery plantations to modern-day popular culture. Snorton demonstrates how duplicity is constitutive of representations of Black sexuality, wherein blackness is wrought through a kind of vestibularity through what Snorton terms, drawing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “the glass closet.” Whereas she had and has careers in retail, photography, software development, performance, nonprofits, and entrepreneurship, Ross is reduced to her past as a sex worker by Jenner (who is an executive producer) and her production team. Thus, Jenner’s show becomes the prurient proscenium upon which Black trans feminine duplicity is both displayed and confined, as per Snorton’s glass closet. We can hear the producer’s imagined audience responding both, “I would never have known you were trans!” and “I would never have known you did sex work!” almost in the same breath. Thus, duplicity and/as blackness become a hinge that cleaves Black trans femininity to salaciousness, all while highlighting Jenner’s show as the stage upon which the reveal(s) takes place. It is notable that Ross herself did not see her past as shameful or salacious, and she went to pains on social media after the fact to explain that her critique should not be understood as a critique of sex work.³

Hortense Spillers (1987) evidences that the logics of slavery reduced Black femininity to/as a commodity at the site of the body’s flesh, a flesh capable of birthing other commodities: “The captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange” (65). The ways in which Ross is reduced to her past as a sex worker should be thought through the economic structures and representational paradigms of slavery. If antiblackness is experienced in particular ways by gender and sexually dissident subjects, as Snorton (2014) suggests, then Ross’s transgenderism makes her potentially particularly vulnerable to the intersections of antiblackness and antisex work. To the extent that transphobic discourses construct her as an inauthentic woman, she is not even ascribed the (albeit abjecting) productive quality of fertility extended to her cisgender counterparts.

Following the first episode’s airing, media outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* promoted the anti-Black rhetoric of the show: “[Caitlyn] hears from one woman [Ross] who’s been transitioning since age 19 and wound up as a sex worker after being trans got her fired from four jobs. And then it’s time to hear from Blossom Brown, who’s not about to hold back” (as quoted by Ross [2015b]).

This framing of two Black guests traffics in the racist history of representation in which blackness is rendered “uninhibited, aggressive, excessive,” as Ralina Joseph has observed (2013: 106). Furthermore, having been framed as the duplicitous, promiscuous Jezebel, Ross was constructed in the second episode as “the angry Black woman”:

I was the first . . . to speak, saying, “A lot of people who want to be seen as heroes and want to save our community . . .” The camera then cuts to Caitlyn looking a little overwhelmed, as I continue, “They want these kind of direct, wrap a bow around it, now this person is all better and they have a job,” followed by the rest of the girls chiming into what is starting to sound like an argument. . . . [This] sound bite was cut out from another part of the conversation where I was explaining what TransTech does and how it’s different from what other organizations are claiming to be doing for the trans community. The editors . . . make it seem like Chandi is coming to Caitlyn’s defense when she says, “We made it clear to Caitlyn that a lot of girls are going to be jaded . . . because the things that Caitlyn has been able to achieve in a few months, some of them will never achieve those things their whole entire life.” During this part of the show, the camera cut to me a total of eight times not saying a word. [At first], I thought, “Alright girl, you look sickening!” But, after the eighth close-up, I felt silenced. . . . The show’s editing pits trans women of color against each other. As trans women of color, our intersectional identities as black women face us with the challenge of being portrayed as angry black women. At no time during the filming of those episodes was I angry, not at any of the other trans women, and certainly not at Caitlyn. Actually, I laughed, teared up, and snapped my fingers encouraging my sisters to speak the truth. What you were really seeing was a group of women passionate about the change they want to see in our world and speaking about a system and not about individuals. (Ross 2015b)

Shifting the focus from systemic change to individual characters, the repeated close-ups of Ross’s unsmiling face (in a context in which she was listening to another guest) represent Ross as the ‘Sapphire’ or ‘angry Black woman.’ This caricature naturalizes and invisibilizes the cause of women of color’s anger, and, along with the Jezebel and Mammy, is one of several stereotypes or angles in the “crooked room” that Black femininity occupies in the popular imagination (Harris-Perry 2011: 33, 42, 105).

Jenner’s emergence as the innocent and beneficent host, passionate about helping women of color, is inseparable and produced via the same mechanisms as Ross’s apparent dissidence, demonstrating the ways in which Black feminine abjection and white feminine innocence are imbricated (Carby 1987: 23–32). Ross’s manufactured anger is projected visually, along with images of her host as slightly overwhelmed. The white feminine brand of saviorism, as Abu Lughod (2013),

Mimi Nguyen (2011), and others have theorized, recenters white women's stories and renders further invisible women of color's agency and activism. In this case, *I Am Cait* literally silences Ross by foregrounding the reaction of Jen Richards, a white trans woman and close friend of Ross's, to Ross's voice, while overdubbing Ross's story with that of Chandi, another guest who is both lighter skinned and younger than she is:

[The] editors . . . go the extra step to make it seem like Jen Richards is wiping tears. . . . Jen and I now laugh about it, but you can tell that Jen is actually getting emotional about something I am speaking about. The editors forget to cut my moving hands out of the frame. People who have seen me speak know that I talk with my hands, but I'm not usually moving them when others are speaking. (Ross 2015b)

As I indicated earlier, the literal muting of Ross's voice amplifies the imbrication of white privilege with anti-Black racism. As the only dark-skinned Black woman on the show for those two episodes, Ross cannot be seen as the source of Jen Richard's tears. If she were, it would undermine both the value of white feminine tears and the unsympathetic portrayal of the constructed "angry Black woman." I argue that this elision should not be read as simply editorial convenience (whatever that might mean) but as integral to the structure of the transmisogyny Ross faces as a dark-skinned Black woman. In other words, the editing out of her voice demonstrates how the privileging of white feminine feelings works in tandem with the production of a dark-skinned Black woman as angry and undeserving of sympathy. Ross cannot be seen or heard to be evoking white feminine tears; conversely, Ross's silencing allows those tears to be attributed to another source, and white feminine feelings can retain their value and validity. Interestingly, Ross's hands remain a visual trace of the affective structures that produce white women as sympathetic, caring, and feelingfully human to dark-skinned Black female voices as flat, angry, or simply nonexistent.

The fact that Jenner's production team found a way to center Jenner in the face of an actual (in the sphere of the show) critique of white saviorism speaks to the capacity of whiteness to adapt and change in the face of resistance (Hiram Pérez, pers. comm., December 20, 2015). Ross's candid and courageous (given the context and the possibility that it would be misinterpreted) explanation of white saviorism is converted into an entirely different conversation, one that revolves around Jenner, rather than Ross or the community TransTech serves.

Tania Modleski observes that Black female characters on-screen "serve either as an embodiment of female sexuality (Black female body as sexualized body) or of the maternal (Black female body as procreative body)" (2009: 290). *I Am Cait* traffics in both, casting Ross as the Jezebel/Sapphire and a lighter-

skinned Black woman named Chandi as the “mammy” who mediates between Ross and Jenner. Colorism is at work here, where Chandi performs the emotional labor of mediating between blackness and whiteness for a conversation that, to be clear, never happened. This labor should be read in the context of a long history of representation of racialized domestic work in and outside the United States as “natural,” representing Black women as committed to serving white families rather than as working for a wage (Johnson 2003). In more recent popular culture manifestations, as Harris-Perry (2011) observes, the mammy figure is represented as the “sidekick” to the white female protagonist. The Black feminine figure’s sole purpose is to assist in the white protagonist’s self-actualization, and she undergoes little to no character development. Via a rhetoric of Black duplicity and material history of racialized labor, Ross becomes the foil to Jenner’s innocence.

Audre Lorde observes that white savior narratives silence Black women’s voices, critiquing Mary Daly’s reference to Afro-diasporic traditions as always sexist. She writes, “I felt that you had misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of color . . . this feels like another instance of the knowledge . . . and word of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman” (2015: 91–92). I find Lorde’s direct address useful for understanding Ross’s response to Jenner as part of a genealogy of Black women’s resistance to white women’s racism.⁴

I want to take this opportunity to hold Caitlyn Jenner responsible as an Executive Producer for the editing and misuse of her new found power. The first step to dismantling a system of oppression is recognizing your role in its perpetuation. This is a step we all have to take regardless of race or ethnicity. If Caitlyn wishes to be a part of the solution, then she must be willing to examine the ways she has contributed to the problem. The way “The Road Trip” episodes parts 1 and 2 were edited, were just some of the ways she is contributing to the problem. I urge Caitlyn to retreat from the “White Savior” narrative. As trans women of color we are capable of saving ourselves if given the tools. (2015b)

Ross’s experience troubles the idea that feminine persons might find more freedom in community with one another rather than, as they are so often represented, playing the counterpart to butch or masculine persons. Kara Keeling writes that “television relies for its legibility on its tenuous ability to put into circulation images of official common sense” (2007: 96). Keeling asserts, via Gilles Deleuze, that visual media are crucial sites for the study of racism, sexism, and homophobia because they not only represent cultural norms but also work to construct them (3–5). Extending Keeling’s analysis, I am interested in how the episodes of *I Am Cait* in which Ross appeared offer an opportunity to study the logics that sustain the intersecting vectors of power Black trans women face. In many of the

films Keeling investigates, the femme performs (though is never reduced to) such a function. A trans analytic supplements Keeling's "Black," "femme," and "lesbian," a useful frame which nevertheless largely takes cisgenderism for granted. "The Black femme function," as Keeling names it, is an analytic for the representational work of the Black femmes (I use the plural intentionally here to signal the capaciousness of what Black femme is or does) in cinema and television. Ross's written exegesis in the *Huffington Post* represents the breakout that Keeling insists is necessary for politics of visibility. Keeling observes that it is not enough simply to be represented in cinema, but one must break out of cinematic representation itself for a politics of visibility to have a chance of success (2007: 10). Ross's narrative aptly makes it clear that, even in a community that lulled her into a sense of safety, the forms of sexual and gendered oppression of Black and white trans women are not coterminous.

Part 2: Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women?

Julia Serano coined the term *transmisogyny* in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) and expands upon her thinking in *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (2013). Serano argues that the abjection of femininity in conjunction with transgenderism constitutes a particular form of oppression that trans women face. She calls this oppression "transmisogyny." Serano's scholarship has contributed greatly to the conversation on cis/sexism and the devaluation of femininity both in and outside feminist communities. However, her scholarship elides race and class and allows white middle-classness to stand in as a universal, greatly diminishing the capacity of transmisogyny to describe the oppression(s) that trans women of color, and Black women in particular, face.

An illustrative anecdote in *Excluded* demonstrates not only how transmisogyny operates but how race and class operate surreptitiously in Serano's thinking. She narrates her experience at a feminist psychology conference, in which a cisgender psychologist presents on two of her transgender clients:

First the therapist discussed the trans masculine spectrum person, whose presentation she described simply as being "very butch." She discussed this individual's transgender expressions and issues in a respectful and serious manner, and the audience listened attentively. However, when she turned her attention to the trans feminine client, she went into a very graphic and animated description of the trans person's appearance, detailing how the trans woman's hair was styled, the way her makeup was done, and so on, [which] elicited a significant amount of giggling from the audience. (2013: 51)

In this scene, as in her scholarship generally, the genders of the participants are given in detail, while their race and class identities go unnamed. I argue that this

silence is both undergirded by and productive of the invisibility of women-of-color feminisms generally and trans women of color in trans feminisms specifically.

In his essay “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” Marlon B. Ross explores the epistemological effects of and ontological roots by which whiteness stands in as a universal in canonical theorizing on gender and sexuality. He begins with Michel Foucault’s seminal formulation of the emergence of the homosexual in *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Ross argues that the precondition for the homosexual’s becoming is in fact an elision of race, by both Foucault and the psychoanalysts:

Foucault . . . needed to erase the question of racialized bodies in order to theorize the invention of the body homosexual as a *unified*—that is, unmarked and implicitly *ubiquitous*—Anglo Saxon subject. Foucault’s scientists can script their human subjects as *total* homosexual compositions only because those bodies are not already marked as Negroid or Oriental; that is, in other words, because they are silently, invisibly already marked as unspecified Anglo-Saxons. . . . Assumed racial sameness between the Anglo-Saxon sexologist and his Anglo-Saxon sexual subject not only makes their racial identity invisible but also makes possible the sexual difference between them. (2005: 167; emphasis added)

The added emphasis is meant to underscore how the very coherency—the double meaning is crucial here—of the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* are consolidated through already drawn racial, national, and, I would add, classed and abled borders. Ross offers some examples:

Foucault can script the formation of homosexuality as a totalized identity only by leaving unremarked the racial ideology undergirding these emerging sciences. . . . An African man is sexually deviant because of his racial difference, whether owing to a larger cock or a diminished brain size that prevents sexual self-discipline or a primitive jungle environment that fosters exaggerated sexual passions. Even if the African male’s sexual difference is not physically marked, his racial deviance is, such that racial difference necessarily overdetermines the capacity for sexual deviance as a bodily affair. (167–68)

Thus, the distinction between queerness and heterosexuality the psychoanalysts document is made manifest through a mutual middle-class whiteness, without which said difference would not hold. Siobhan Somerville (2000) has determined that ideologies of gender/sexuality and race mutually inform one another and have done so since their inception.

Building from Somerville and Ross, I argue that the categories upon which Serano’s theory of transmisogyny depends not only erase race, class, and nation

but are made possible through that erasure. Her work and the contemporary discourse of transmisogyny broadly, as others have noted (Enke 2012), depend upon hard-line distinctions in the categories “cisgender” and “transgender,” as well as “trans femininity” and “trans masculinity,” distinctions between the categories that both depend upon and reproduce normative whiteness. I argue that the literal and figural absence of trans people of color, as well as cis people of color, in her examples consolidates the borders of the categories on which her definition of transmisogyny depends.

Any consideration, for example, of the ways in which bodies of color, particularly Black and native bodies, have been subject to and subjects of the medical industry (e.g., Washington 2006) would necessarily complicate Serano’s analysis of the ways in which power was operating in that conference presentation. In what ways might Serano obscure the ways in which the ridiculed white woman, abjected as she is, cannot be thought apart from the trans woman of color who may not be deemed valuable enough to receive therapeutic care to begin with? Angelica Ross’s life story being reduced to sex work evidences the ways in which a Black trans feminine body may have elicited reactions more pernicious than laughter.

Serano gives us the trans masculine patient first in the therapist’s terms, and I read her as subtly criticizing the therapist’s terminology of “very butch.” This person becomes “trans masculine” later in Serano’s description. This slippage and Serano’s critique are both indicative of her theoretical imperative to sediment the borders around the categories “cisgender” and “transgender,” and “trans feminine” and “trans masculine.” The affective and material histories that produced white, middle-class men as deserving of thoughtful care is erased in the service of this binary trans/gender construction. This binary not only obscures the fact that people can be viewed as trans feminine regardless of their identifications; it also renders abjection of trans masculine people as impossible. A Black trans-of-color critique shows that we need theories not only for thinking about how trans women of color navigate but also for racialized transmisandry, to explain the ways in which Black trans masculine persons live in a sphere of literal and discursive policing around Black masculinity.

Put another way, how could the fact that Serano never engages race or class *not* impact transmisogyny as an analytic? Reading Ross in tandem with Serano reveals how whiteness is constitutive of binary gender as a construct, even when that binary includes transgender identifications. Her theory’s implicit normative whiteness proffers rigid boundaries around trans femininity and trans masculinity, imparting upon these categories a distinctiveness that traffics in white middle-class normativity. These hard-line distinctions have gone underinterrogated, even by those explicitly doing intersectional trans feminist work. One influential trans femme of color stated that trans men experience no oppression at all, that there is only transmisogyny. That this assertion emerges over two years into the

worldwide mobilization led by Black Lives Matter against the murder of Black men and women, and in the context of a book on “decolonizing transgender” (binaohan 2014), signals the effectiveness of trans/gender binaries, even in work that aims to be intersectional.

Serano’s elision of race and class is hardly limited to this example. Her opening chapter describes a woman who challenges Serano about a race/gender analogy in a pamphlet distributed by and at Camp Trans. The pamphlet analogizes trans people at the Michigan Women’s Festival to people wearing turbans on airplanes. In Serano’s (2013: 27) response to this justified and important critique, she writes, “The fact that a woman of color wrote the pamphlet seemed to have little effect on her.” No further text is spent analyzing this exchange. This vignette is paradigmatic of the ways in which not only Serano but many white (trans) feminists act as if intersectionality is the purview of people of color, rather than engaging it herself. Serano levies the racial identity of the author as a bulwark against having to do intersectional theorizing herself (as if people of color never say things that are not intersectional).

Broadly, as the title of Serano’s book suggests, her project mutes the ways in which rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion are colonial. A discourse of “inclusion,” as many critics of multiculturalism have espoused, is both anti-Black and anti-indigenous in that it posits inclusion as an antidote rather than questioning the structures that produce an inside and outside. If we take as our starting point the fact that the United States is a settler colony; foreground the ways in which national projects continue to subjugate native people and other people of color via political, economic, and environmental sanctions; or argue that antiblackness is foundational to what it means to be “American,” as do Morgan Bassichis and Dean Spade (2014), calls of inclusion seem to potentially contribute to the problem.⁵ There has been an “inside” only as long as imperial logics have determined an outside, and capitulating to those logics while obviating race and class obscures how, as the late Leslie Feinberg (1996: 28) wrote, “patriarchy is a tool of colonization.”

The point is not merely that Serano’s universalization of whiteness has a negative effect (that it fails to do something, for example, failing to include people of color) but that it also does something. Namely, it forges a theory of transmisogyny through whiteness and middle-classness while purporting to speak to all. The mechanism by which this elision occurs is the hard-line distinction of categories that themselves only hold in a nonintersectional optic. The issue of blackness for transness, then, seems to be that it uncovers the implicitly racist and classist underpinnings of hard-line categories of sex and gender.

I began this essay with Angelica Ross and Caitlyn Jenner because, despite Serano’s careful work around femininity and transmisogyny, I do not think her ideas help us to understand much of anything about what the women of color

experienced on Jenner's show.⁶ In another context, Roderick Ferguson writes, "Blackness is always and already understood as a candidate for social and actual death, a history in which whiteness is socialized to maintain its independence at whatever cost" (2015: 145). I have attempted to show that transmisogyny has, from its very inception, maintained an almost perfect independence from race, an independence that may contribute to the potential for terms like *transgender* and *transmisogyny*, as they gain increasing cultural currency, to facilitate antiblackness: the social justice capital that *trans* presumes to carry is Jenner's show's *raison d'être* and it grants an air of radicality to Serano's work, despite that work having almost nothing to say about race, class, nation, or ability.

Part 3: Alternative Genealogies of Trans Feminism

Serano's lack of attention to race, class, and ability signals a larger myopia in trans feminism of the ways in which gender and sexuality operate as regulatory mechanisms for all people of color (Smith 2015; Snorton 2014; Johnson 2003; Vaid-Menon 2014; Koyama 2004).⁷ While I do not have the space to fully argue it here, I suggest that this elision is buttressed by the marginalization of women-of-color feminism vis-à-vis (white) women's studies.⁸ While academic trans feminisms are starting to try and account for race and class, the decades-long gap between women-of-color theorizing and these rejoinders is startling. Bringing these discourses into dialogue would potentially offer much toward understanding how white trans women benefit, however complexly, from discursive and material regimes of antiblackness.⁹ How, for example, would the seminal Black feminist theorizing of Dorothy Roberts (1998), who showed how state control of Black women's reproductive lives troubles white women's demand for freedom of choice, intersect with trans feminist interventions in the medicalization of trans feminine bodies?

The dearth of transgender people of color, especially women, in the academy, as well as white trans feminists' privileging of the academy as the genesis of trans theory, also play a role in the lack of engagement with the terms *misogynoir* and *transmisogynoir* in the academy—terms that have been in circulation for years in the blogosphere.¹⁰ *Misogynoir* is largely credited to activist and digital humanities scholar Moya Bailey: "Known for creating the term Misogynoir, Bailey defines it as the intersection of racism, antiblackness, and misogyny that Black women experience. The term is specific to Black womanhood, as Misogynoir cannot be experienced by women of any other race, but can be perpetuated by people of any gender or race" (Bristol 2014). The term *transmisogynoir* draws from Bailey, and a survey of the term reveals some variety in who is encompassed in that term. Some websites such as *Social Justice Wiki*, a blog that describes itself as "community centered around intersectional social justice," defines the term as follows: "Transmisogynoir (or trans-misogynoir) is the oppression of trans

women of color, and trans feminine people of color, more generally. It exists at the intersection between transphobia, misogyny, and antiblackness” (“Transmisogynoir” 2014). Interestingly, while *misogynoir* is specifically defined as violence that Black women experience, the primary sentence in *Social Justice Wiki*’s definition of *transmisogynoir* links the concept to all trans women of color rather than specifically to Black women. Is this coincidental? Merely an effect of the timing of these writings? I suggest that it is possible that the whitening of the term is an effect of the ways in which transgenderism and trans feminism have been coded as white and the ways in which antiblackness has been sidelined in trans feminist discourse.

We may need a term like *racialized transmisogyny*, echoing Patricia Hill Collins (2004), to describe the oppression of non-Black women of color, leaving *transmisogynoir* to those who experience antiblackness. Alok Vaid-Menon (2014), a trans femme of color activist, has articulated the racialization of transmisogyny as an ontological phenomenon. They define transmisogyny as the “policing of femininity on bodies it is understood to not belong to” and insist that all people of color experience transmisogyny. In so doing, Vaid-Menon offers us a definition of transmisogyny that melds trans feminism to antiracism.

I may seem to be contradicting myself by saying both that transmisogyny cannot account for the oppression transgender people of color face, and that it applies to all people of color, but this is largely an issue of semantics: I am critiquing the dominant (if it can be called such) understanding of *transmisogyny* and suggesting that it needs to be rethought from the ground up. The fact that cisgender Black women can enact transmisogyny is not an argument against the idea that all Black women and men face transmisogyny because trans people can enact transphobia and transmisogyny on themselves.

The standard framing of the genealogy of trans feminism has prioritized the academy as the site of trans feminism, which has tended to construct activism a priori of theory rather than in conjunction with it, as theory in action, as always ongoing.¹¹ We might begin a genealogy of trans feminism with Sylvia Rivera’s Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), as Reina Gossett did in a recent lecture: “Rivera sitting around with her collaborators and strategizing how to run STAR and what organizing tactics they were going to do, and also just about how to survive, is theorizing” (2015). Angelica Ross’s strategic and thoughtful planning with her staff is theory that generates the work of those who study at TransTech; Ignacio Rivera’s groundbreaking Heal Project works to end childhood sexual abuse from a queer trans of color intersectional approach; Suzy Shock’s performances of poetry and song have mobilized an entire generation of young people in Buenos Aires around transgender justice, succeeding in passing what has been called the most progressive transgender rights law in the world (Salum 2012); Indianara Siqueira, recently elected to the legislature in Rio de Janeiro, is

currently reenergizing the Left in a conservative neoliberal regime; and CeCe McDonald's organizing around prison abolition is all critical trans feminist work.

Conclusion: Speaking Is to Singing as Listening Is to Silence

Angelica Ross's music sings of love, heartbreak, and friendship, but never of being trans. This silence is one Fred Moten might describe as occurring "in the break" between signification and sound. Per Moten, blackness is both discursively generated by and resistant to racialized capitalism that constructs it as the purview of objects (literally, in enslaved bodies) who nevertheless speak (2003: 10–12). Angelica Ross sings back to transmisogynoir by modeling strategic musical silence. Silence is, after all, the precondition for listening. But it also allows her to avoid being reduced to the matter of sound.¹² She shouldn't have to say anything in a world which "know[s] everything you need to know about me" to allow her to live and thrive (2012). Ross's musical silences are pivot points in which speech and song mechanize Black trans femininities in an anti-Black milieu.

It is foundational to women-of-color feminisms to note how feminist terms are productive of their own violence when applied universally (e.g., Alice Walker on "womanism" [2011: xi]). Lorde (2015) famously wrote, "To imply . . . that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other" (91). If we take race and class seriously as inseparable from transmisogyny, then should we even assume there exists something called "transmisogyny" that affects all trans women? An understanding of transmisogyny that claims to apply to all trans women obviates the ways in which white trans women profit from the elision of those differences. It is time for a definition of transmisogyny that focalizes the lives of trans women of color, especially Black trans women; that moves us toward a field of trans feminist studies that resists the academy's fetishization of Black feminism, as Barbara Christian presciently warned; and that works to ensure that Black feminists remain major contributors to the field (Christian 1994; see also Hong 2015: 125–46).

Although there are undoubtedly stigmas associated with even privileged trans femininity, to mute the difference in the effects of that violence is to appropriate the violence that trans women of color face potentially toward sustaining a rhetoric of white middle-class vulnerability. The slippage from "trans women" to "trans women of color" that I narrated in my opening paragraph potentially minimizes their distinction, coding the former as white and appending the vulnerability of the latter to the former, at the cost not only of trans women of color but also of trans masculine people of color, especially those without economic and able-bodied privilege. Toward the end of her essay, Ross writes, "Being trans comes at a high cost, but being Black and trans can cost you your life" (2015b). It is precisely the difference between life and everything else that marks a

need for a new language of transmisogyny. Ross broke one kind of silence in the *Huffington Post*, but we should not assume there are not also strategic silences within that piece. It remains to be seen how and by whom they will be heard.

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Notes

1. The fact that I have had to remind the white gender-nonconforming students in recent years that race and class do not go away just because you are trans is reflective of the continued preference and prevalence of gender (coded as white and middle/upper class) over race and class as topics in my (predominantly white) gender studies classrooms.
2. These interviews and more informal conversations were conducted and transcribed by the author in Chicago and Poughkeepsie, New York, in 2015.
3. It also makes impossible a celebration of sex work as a form of labor and also of self-care, as a method of providing for herself financially. Ross went to lengths on Facebook to clarify that her frustration with the characterization of herself as a sex worker was not to be confused with a disdain for sex workers or sex work.
4. I do not uncritically parallelize Ross/Jenner and Lorde/Daly. Jenner is particularly privileged and, in Ross's terms, "wet behind the ears" vis-à-vis trans politics, while Daly was a multiply-published author on feminism. I am suggesting that these conversations resonate with one another within a genealogy of Black women calling out white women's racism.
5. In a panel presentation at the 2014 American Studies Association in Toronto, Andrea Smith (2014) theorized the imbrication of antiblackness and anti-indigeneity, arguing that the enslavement of Africans constituted a colonization of those indigenous to Africa, and that both were constitutive of the colonial project in the Americas.
6. Nor am I confident that a viewer radicalized around white trans feminism would have the tools to understand what is going on in racialized and classed terms.
7. This lack in white trans feminist scholarship has been critiqued (see Koyama 2004), but these critiques are far less common than those of white trans masculinity, in part because of the high stakes of such a critique. White women do of course experience violence, as in the recent attack on a white trans woman in Brooklyn on May 13, 2016, narrated on NBC

news (Villeda 2016). However, the notable absence of media coverage and the earnest reportage of the cases of Monica Loera, Courtney Yochum, Maya Young, or Keyonna Blakeney, each of whom not only experienced violence in 2016 but also lost their lives to it, seems to confirm Sarah Lamb's (2008) trenchant point that whiteness is the precondition for the value of transgender life.

8. See, for example, Finn Enke's (2012) assertion that transgender studies "has a highly ambivalent relationship to women studies," a statement that covers over the ways in which all women and queer-of-color theorizing has an ambivalent relationship to women's studies.
9. Placing trans and other women-of-color theorizing in conversation (for example, Sylvia Rivera's "Queens in Exile" [2002] and the essays in *This Bridge Called My Back* [Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015]) has elicited stimulating conversations on transmisogyny among my students.
10. With the notable exception of Kelly Macías's (2015) dissertation.
11. For example, Finn Enke (2012), cites Sandy Stone in the acknowledgments to *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, who, "in so many ways, really started it all" (ix). This framing of trans feminism privileges those with access to (the most elite institutions in) the academy.
12. I am riffing here on Moten, who writes that sound was traditionally understood as a material that language merely used (2003: 13–14).

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“Go beyond Our Natural Selves”

The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald

CECE MCDONALD

Edited by OMISE'EKE NATASHA TINSLEY

Abstract This is a collection of the prison letters of CeCe McDonald, edited and with an introduction by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley.

Keywords prison, journal writing, transfeminism, transmisogynoir, black feminism

Editor's Introduction

Curating this collection of CeCe McDonald's prison letters has been the greatest honor of my writing career. In June 2012, Ms. McDonald was sentenced to forty-one months in prison for stabbing an assailant during a racist, transphobic attack against her in Minneapolis (detailed in letters that follow). Her arrest for an act of self-defense and subsequent placement in men's correctional facilities galvanized local, national, and transnational communities of support who protested that McDonald “was the victim of a hate crime, a broken justice system, and a transphobic, violent prison complex,” in the words of the National LGBTQ Task Force (2016). During the twenty-eight months she served in Hennepin County Jail Stillwater and St. Cloud facilities—enduring significant time in “administrative isolation” or solitary confinement, allegedly to protect her from violence in the general population—she penned letters that her support committee published as a blog (McDonald 2016). The following is excerpted from those letters.

McDonald's prison writings join an established black intellectual tradition of works produced in what she calls the “concrete chaos,” including letters and essays by Martin Luther King Jr. (1994), George Jackson (1994), and Angela Davis (2016) that galvanized black radical analysis and activism in the 1960s and 1970s. They also fill a significant gap in the emerging intellectual terrain of black transgender studies. While figures like McDonald and Laverne Cox are well known as activists, black transwomen authors are almost entirely absent from academic

publication. Black gender-nonconforming and nonbinary authors are similarly underrepresented. In the last decade, black transmen have published important scholarly monographs and articles, but the same has not been true for black transwomen. This absence results from institutional transmisogynoir, which, according to Demoya Gordon of Lambda Legal, limits black transwomen's access to formal education and "robs transgender women of color of educational, employment, housing and other opportunities and makes this community particularly susceptible to violence both within and outside of the criminal justice system" (2015).

McDonald is well known for her analysis of racism and (trans)misogyny in the criminal injustice system and her critique of the prison industrial complex—themes that emerge prominently in what follows.¹ In this introduction, however, I want to highlight two more rarely remarked hallmarks of McDonald's thought that stand to contribute significantly to black gender and sexuality studies.

"I Use the Term Woman Broadly":

Black Transfemininity as a Practice of Relationship

Declaring herself a "(trans)woman of the 21st century," McDonald proclaims her desire "to be unmarginalized and recognized for who I am, and who we are: strong, wonderful, loving women." The construction of this phrase exemplifies an important tenet of her thinking: McDonald's "who I am" is always connected to "who we are." Inviting readers to witness her experience of black transfemininity, she holds a mirror where we can see our gender expressions beautifully connected to her own. The "mirroring effect" she describes in "Go beyond Our Natural Selves" resembles the work of Oshun, Yoruba deity of femininity, love, and art, who (in Joan Morgan's words) carries a "mirror as the tool Oshun holds up to our faces when she requires us to do the difficult work of really seeing ourselves" (2016).

McDonald seamlessly theorizes black transfemininity in relation to black cisfemininity. She embeds her account of the Minneapolis attack in a letter entitled "Violence against (Trans)Women Today," which tells her story in the context of what Beth Richie calls the "violence matrix": "the tangled web of structural disadvantages, institutionalized racism, gender domination, class exploitation, heteropatriarchy and other forms of oppression that locks the systematic abuse of Black women in place" (2012: 128). The letter begins by noting the ubiquitous "violence against all women, which also includes transwomen," and it ends by linking her case to those of black ciswomen incarcerated for self-defense: "Patreese Johnson, Charmaine Pfender, Marissa Alexander, and Tanika Dickson. I LOVE YOU ALL! We are all victims of violence and the injustices and oppression

of a faulty legal system.” At the same time, McDonald’s black (trans)feminism insists on recognizing the differences between women as lovingly as our similarities. The same letter reminds us, “I, and most transwomen, have to deal with violence more often and at a higher rate than any cissexual person, so every day is a harder struggle, and the everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk.” Through these differences, relationships with black women remain the cornerstones of McDonald’s understanding of the power of black fem(me)ininity. In her Mother’s Day shout-out to “moms around the globe,” she acknowledges, “I love you so much mommy, and I love both my grannies and all my beautiful aunts. These women are great examples of strong, fierce females and I’m so appreciative of them for being understanding and caring.”

McDonald also theorizes transfemininity in relationship to masculinity. On the one hand, the frailties of unexamined cismasculinity become apparent in her interactions with “masculine men.” Writing of partners who have been less than “secure . . . with their identities as masculine men” because they were dating a transwoman, McDonald remarks, “I would figure that a (masculine) man’s dominance and assertiveness would put him in a position to hold his ground, that as the ‘man,’ he should (or would) use his masculine authority to show his right to be involved with whoever he pleases. . . . For me, it comes off as if femininity, homosexism, or transgenderism is contagious and that the man’s masculinity is jeopardized with the association of the fem-man and/or (trans)woman.” On the other hand, she celebrates the love, desire, and pleasure that become possible when masculinity is untangled from normative gender expectations. These possibilities blossom in an erotic scene between McDonald and a female stud. She narrates, “Me, the girl who was penis obsessed, is kissing a stud in the middle of the walkway while the gaybies around us cheer and whistle. So there I had to admit that it wasn’t the fact that I was kissing a girl, because that didn’t matter anymore. Her masculinity was what turned me on. After I realized that I understood myself more than ever.” Just as masculine men stand to learn about their identities from being in relationship with a transfemme, McDonald learns about her gender and sexuality from being in relationship with the trans- and queer masculinity indexed by her stud’s masculine-of-center desirability.

“Love Is a Bustling Highway”: Love and/as Social Justice Movements

“I love all of you, no matter what, and I believe in my heart that you love me too,” McDonald writes supporters. “We are all different with different beliefs and a different story to us all, but we are connected through that and our love for each other draws us closer.” From the isolation of solitary confinement, McDonald insistently theorizes love as a political force that can counteract multiple oppressions. In 1989, black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term

intersectionality to describe how multiple power structures interact in the complex discrimination that black women face. Crenshaw chose the intersection as an “everyday metaphor that people could use to say: ‘it’s well and good for me to understand the kind of discriminations that occur along this avenue, along this axis—but what happens when it flows into another axis, another avenue?’” (quoted in Adewunmi 2014). In her letters, McDonald employs another everyday roadway metaphor to a related end. Her response to intersectional oppression is a highway of love: “Society says that love is one way and very black and white, but *we* all know that love is a bustling highway and bursting with all vivid colors.” McDonald challenges us to imagine what happens when we take our deepest, most intentional commitments not just onto another avenue but onto a highway—one that can take us miles, states, and countries away from where we began.

Turning off the one-way street of intolerance onto the bustling, bursting highway of love helps to develop the emotional and intellectual motility needed to resist systems of oppression, McDonald believes. “Those who oppose us couldn’t stop the love which has, and was defined, to bring us all together. To give us the strength and the mental durability to go the distance and fight this evil who tells us we are wrong,” she writes. McDonald translates her theorizing into concrete terms in discussing plans for a leadership role in Minneapolis-based Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN). In a statement characteristic of her writing style—one that lovingly marries phrase after phrase into expansive sentences—she declares, “At TYSN we believe that we can bring the (trans) community together, that we can foster the creation of POWERFUL art, that we can change the world, that we can create empowerment, that we can work with existing systems and outside systems to create resources for self and community and importantly, that we can overcome adversity and build a whole, balanced, and successful life.” She punctuates this vision: “Get ready for a revolution, and it will not be televised!”

The midline of McDonald’s bustling highway—the element that shapes it and keeps it safe—is self-love. For (trans)women, people of color, and queers living in (trans)misogynist, racist, and homophobic societies hostile to our existence, self-love is an act of resistance necessary for survival. “I’m pretty sure most people heard the saying ‘you can’t love anyone, if you don’t love yourself,’ and that is true,” McDonald reminds us. “But it goes beyond that. You can’t LIVE if you don’t love yourself. The fears and hate of a patriarchal society have told us that we don’t fit the mold. . . . And in most cases these psychological manipulations work, and those who ‘don’t fit the mold’ try to fit it, or break themselves trying to.” The self-love McDonald describes is neither sentimental nor solipsistic. Rather, loving one’s black, queer, fem(me)inine self into existence is an art form that requires perseverance, discipline, and expansive vision. Instructing readers in the art of creating “love, joy, individuality, growth” for ourselves, McDonald

metaphorizes, “With every stroke of the brush, we decide how our art of life will be. Pictures full of life’s achievements and the possibilities. Creators of our own masterpieces, how will you depict your picture? Will you leave your canvas blank and unfulfilled, or will your tableaux show all that life has to offer?”

As her prison communications make clear, McDonald is an artist in this metaphoric sense as well as a traditional one. In addition to her letters, a series of photographs of McDonald were published online during her incarceration. These photos—taken through a window during visitation—show McDonald posing with hair, nails, and brows flawlessly done, her lips in artistic smiles or pouts. The most striking of these, perhaps, is a picture in which a radiantly smiling McDonald holds one hand to her heart and the other to meet the visitor’s on the glass.² As you read the following, I invite you to imagine yourself as the viewer on the other side of the glass and to meet McDonald’s mirroring image and outstretched reach with your own.

Letters from Minnesota Correctional Facility—St. Cloud

By CeCe McDonald

November 5, 2011

Pursuit of Happiness

When I was a child, I knew where I wanted my life to head. And, of course, there are hurdles put to distract, detour, and mislead one from their pursuits of happiness. Now 23, I’ve never imagined my life to take the turns that it has. My life has been a constant roller-coaster ride, with all its loops and deep dives. But I refuse to let these rides make me feel that I have to back away from my own pursuit of happiness.

As another day passes by, I thank God every day I get to see another one. When I was younger, and even now, I always tried to understand all things, it didn’t matter what. I always like to dissect a situation, and piece it back together with full understanding. I never liked just knowing enough about anything, or what was only given, which caused me to do my own research or my own further investigations. I’ve always had a curious mind, and am always willing to learn something new. Because I realize that these people who live on the very same planet we do, have totally fucked the world, brainwashed humanity into their fake image of how society is (or should be in their eyes), and everybody wants to blame each other for the way we live, as if it was an actual decision to make for ourselves, for the economy crashing, for so many killings in the world, and in the U.S. right in our own communities, and all the hidden evil that lurks around us, and not

many pay attention to because of their own ignorance or not caring enough to know what type of people could even be living next door to them. . . .

I was told that I should never worry about how a person feels, or thinks about me, because I would never be able to progress within my own life because of my fixation on what or how someone feels about me. And that was true, because I found myself stressing over the fact that people actually hated me for their own reasons. And I would feel some form of wanting others to understand me, as a living breathing human being, just like everyone and everything else on God's green earth. . . . And fortunately, I had people in my life that were honest and told the truth. And not those candy-coated, bullshit stories people get throughout their life growing up. I was taught that we as people should embrace each other, and love each other as we love ourselves. And, of course, I know it's a challenge to love someone who is taught or manipulated into hating a certain person, race, or sexual preference and identity, but I heeded to what I was taught. And despite the challenge with all its complexities, I will never turn my back on anyone. Throughout my life there were people there who took me in, even when I gave up on myself, and I vowed to myself and God that I would help any and everybody in any way that I can. But I will no longer go the unnecessary lengths to make, or even try, to convince a person to like me. If someone, anyone, is going to be associated with me, then I want it to be from their own personal perspective of me, and not from their idea or assumption of me, but by getting to know me. . . .

I can recall so many times dealing with being scrutinized for me wanting to be myself, most of these incidents happened within my own household with members of my family. I can recall an incident that happened when I was living with my grandma, during a family gathering. I had a letter in my backpack for this boy who I was talking to at my school. After writing the letter I put it in my bag in anticipation of giving it to my friend, and then I went to the bathroom. After leaving the bathroom I went downstairs where the rest of my family was together. But I noticed this look on one of my uncle's face, and before I could figure out why he was looking at me the way he was, he asks if he could speak with me. So we walk into the kitchen, and he tells me to have a seat. Next thing I know he's holding up the letter that I wrote to my friend. But as he's asking me what's with the letter I'm thinking in my head how rude are you, or whoever went through my bag to get my letter without my permission, and not only that I'm in no mood for any lectures. And as I got fed up with the argument we were having, I got up to walk away from the situation. But in my attempt, my very own uncle wrapped his hands around my neck, and threw me to the floor with force, and continued choking me. I was so shocked, I didn't even know how to process what actually was going on, because I expected behavior like this from strangers, but to have it happening in front of my family by my family was a totally different experience

which I didn't know how to handle. I never felt so betrayed in my whole life. Later that very evening, after all was done and said, he tried apologizing and goes on to say that he did it out of anger and he was looking out for me because he didn't want me to die from AIDS, because gay people get AIDS. And of course everything he said went through one ear and out the other. Once again listening to the ignorant statements of a person, who in fact was in the medical field and still gave biased topics that many have just associated with being gay, as if straight people can't get AIDS, and for all the other reasons his statements were brushed off as ignorant and unworthy of being listened to. I wasn't sexually active, and if I was there were way better approaches to the subject, instead of putting a confused teenager in a hostile environment, where most should feel comfortable, which was with my own family. From that point in my life I knew my family would not be supportive of me in my life decisions, especially dealing with my sexuality.

And not just dealing with the judgments of my own family, I dealt with it outside of the home. I remember being harassed everywhere from school to even the people in my own neighborhood. One incident where I came from a local store and being harassed there, but I spoke up for myself and I guess the men didn't like that. When I walked out the store I was followed and then jumped by 5 guys, who were in high school while I was only in the 7th grade. And it seemed that when I tried defending myself, they retaliated more. I can remember hearing them yell, "kill that faggot" as they stomped and punched me. I begged them to stop, but they continued. After they took my money, they ran off leaving me there. No one was there to help me, and I was scared to even move, even though I was only a couple feet from my house. When I walked in the house, my mom asked why it took so long, and then she turned around and noticed that I was bloody and distraught. It hurt me for my mom to have to see me like that. Her reaction was grabbing her shoes and the closest thing she could use for a weapon, and asked who they were and where they lived. I told her to forget about it, and she was furious that I could just let that happen to me and not retaliate. My biggest fear was my mom or siblings getting hurt in the process of defending me, or even being associated with me. I went to the bathroom and cleaned myself up. And as I washed my face blood continued to run, which is when I noticed that during the jumping my lip went through my tooth which caused me to have a scar over my top lip, and it's still there. That was one of the many bashings I endured during my years growing up. And dealing with the bashings, being disowned by some in my family, my own confusion throughout the years caused me to grow angry, hateful, depressed, suicidal, hopeless, scarred and scared. I lost hope in others and myself. The best advice I got was pray that the lord makes you straight. And the younger naïve me did thinking that my life would be easier if I was straight. I was forced, literally, to go to church. I even remember being in the bathroom on my knees

bawling, asking “God why am I like this? Please, please change me. Please make me straight.” And after all the praying I would still wake up attracted to men, even if I tried not to be. But later in my life and learned lessons he changed me in a way I never would have imagined. He changed me to accept me and love me for who I am, and not how others wanted me to be.

And now, with the recent incidents that involved me, involuntarily, I feel that once again a single situation has blocked me from further reaching my pursuit of happiness. This time not only dealing with transphobia, but also racism which has never been an issue that I’ve had to deal with. Me being of different ethnicities, I never found room to discriminate or judge someone racially, even though I know that I have been indirectly judged by many of different races, along with being discriminated for my sexual preference. But to deal with racism and transphobia directly and upfront is very hard. Even hearing the words being said left me in total confusion and shock. And to have to be attacked in my own community by individuals who felt it was their duty to yell hate speech at not only me, but my family who was with me, and attack me for their own satisfaction of making someone else’s life miserable. I felt that I’ve worked very hard from where I started, to where I’m at now in my life, just to have it all taken away from me. . . . And now I have to deal with the repercussions of other people’s hateful actions. To deal with the nightmares, the stress, and the PTSD. To feeling paranoid that someone might try to kill me, or my family. To be unsure of where my future lies. I feel like the person I used to be, who didn’t know what life was about, or how to handle it. But I know with the support of my family, which is everyone who has been with me through this tedious journey, I will be better in time. I won’t let the actions of hateful people detour or distract me. I will continue on my path to loving myself, and others. But most importantly, continue in my pursuit of happiness.

Love,
Honee Bea³

February 14, 2012

Sometimes I feel blank, like a canvas. Waiting for its oils and pastels and water-colors to help bring out its true colors. To become the Monet or Mona Lisa of this reality. I dream for the paints of life to create my beautiful existence. Where vibrant colors aren’t just seen, misunderstood. But taken for all their glories. Bright and Beautiful like you and I . . . we are the colors. And without the colors our lives will be blank. Like the untouched canvas, mundane and lacking.

Our canvases are created to be filled, which is condign. And the colors of our lives are to consume the canvas to express love, joy, individuality, growth and all the pictures that express our lives. And as we are the canvas, we are also the

illustrator. And with every stroke of the brush, we decide how our art of life will be. Pictures full of life's achievements and the possibilities. Creators of our own masterpieces, how will you depict your picture? Will you leave your canvas blank and unfulfilled, or will your tableaux show all that life has to offer?

And so, I ask that you all will not leave your canvases undone. Use every color imaginable to show who you are inside and out, for every tint and every hue counts. And as you create your picture remember you are the illustrator, so no one can create your picture but you. So make it the most precious and most beautiful picture that you can, with love, truth, and joy in every color.

Love,
Honee Bea

April 12, 2012

A couple of days ago I woke up and felt drained so I found some inspiration in the Bible. I usually don't read the Bible, but that day it called for me. And as usual I don't go looking, yet I let it lead me, and it took me to 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1 through 13, which gave me strength & peace. It talks about love, which is the best way of all. It says, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I had the understanding of a child. When I became a [wo]man I put childish ways behind me. Now we see only a dim likeness of things. It is as if we were seeing them in a mirror. But someday we will see clearly. We will see face to face. What I know now is not complete. But someday I will know completely, just as God knows me completely. The three most important things to have are faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them is love."

This passage was almost poetry to me, but most importantly I acknowledged and understood what the scripture was telling me. For a long time in my own life I struggled to know the identity of love. I searched high and low, and the wanting of love resulted in me conceiving a false love for others and myself. And like the scripture said, I saw things more clearly and I've seen those things face to face in reality. When I have given up on love, whether it be with me, my family and friends, or even my partners, I realized that love is unending and cannot be avoided. And it started with myself. And all the while I searched and longed for love, and didn't even love myself. So that's where I started, and now I have enough love within me to love myself and all of you.

I love you all because you all invested in me what I could have not done on my own. Your own time, dedication, and emotions. And wherever it may have come from, it has given me the motivation and inspiration to fight for all of us. Society says that love is one way and very black and white, but *we* all know that love is a bustling highway and bursting with all vivid colors. They tell us who we can and can't love, how we should love them, and why. And well, that's not love at

all because love is natural, organic, how it was intended to be before it was used for greed and manipulation. Love can never be manufactured!

Those who oppose us couldn't stop the love which has, and was defined, to bring us all together. To give us the strength and the mental durability to go the distance and fight this evil who tells us we are wrong. We all were made in the image of God, and he makes no mistakes.

I love all of you, no matter what, and I believe in my heart that you love me too. We are all different with different beliefs and a different story to us all, but we are connected through that and our love for each other draws us closer. What's most important is to love those who hate you and have wronged you, for they are wrong and they only see love on a one-way street. But they are still lost and do not know love at all. This situation I'm in would have made one second guess their own faith, trust, and love but I know where my heart and mind is. Plus, the support of all those I love lets me know there is no situation or hardship that I or any of us can't overcome. . . .

I love you all, and I give much thanks and appreciation.

—CeCe

May 11, 2012

"Go beyond Our Natural Selves"

Hi everyone! Before I start, I just want to thank all of you and everyone who has invested their time, dedication, perseverance, and most importantly, the love and willingness to be open and allow the most personal parts of your inner-beings to be involved with this case and the metamorphosis of myself into a more spiritual, grounded, loving woman. . . . I love you all and I thank you from the bottom of my bottomless heart with truth and sincerity. One thing I've learned, which was brought to my attention from a close friend, was that throughout this case, from the beginning to end, all of us have played a part in this "mirroring effect," where we see each other as we saw ourselves, giving to each as we would, or have wanted to, for ourselves. And in each of us was that struggle, and that was also seen, so like we would have tried for ourselves we uplifted and encouraged each other to go beyond our natural selves and to have the faith to move mountains. And know that every day I look in the mirror, not only do I see myself, but I see all of our beautiful spirits together with one voice in a continuing struggle against hate and oppression, where we speak of love and TRUE FREEDOM. I want everyone to know they had a part in my evolution, whether it was a visit or a letter in the mail. Just know it made a difference in my life. And just as you did for me, I hope that I did the same for you.

Now, I know circumstances have taken a turn, and it probably wasn't expected, or probably was.⁴ None of that actually matters. But what does was to

know that even though there were those who thought they defeated us, we never threw in the towel. And to know I still had the support of all of you made my decision worthwhile. There were many reasons for my decision, but the most important things that mattered were being able to continue my works and the battle against hate in my freedom rather than in oppression, and also, just being able to be with all of you again. When I thought about all things, considering the situation, I realized that my true nature is to take responsibility for my part in the incident. That was the hardest part for me because I didn't want to have that association of those ideas or even the feeling of knowing what I knew because I knew it wasn't of my nature. But I realized trying to deny or escape it wouldn't make it go away, as I have done with most things in my life. Once I was able to understand, acknowledge, and accept things as they were, I was able to grow from it and even attain the compassion and empathy for those who have wronged me in this situation, as well as those that have troubled me all my life. I know that this incident will always be a part of my life, but I made the decision to not let it continue to be a burden in my life, and no matter what path I may take after this I will not go into whatever may come with extra baggage or any regrets. And hopefully you all can also evolve and progress in life without holding on to the things that keep you from achieving self-enlightenment.

I'm pretty sure most people heard the saying "you can't love anyone, if you don't love yourself," and that is true. But it goes beyond that. You can't LIVE if you don't love yourself. The fears and hate of a patriarchal society have told us that we don't fit the mold. But no two people are alike, so what mold do they speak of? They implant in the mind and heart that if we aren't them, then we're wrong. And in most cases these psychological manipulations work, and those who "don't fit the mold" try to fit it, or break themselves trying to. I was one of those people. On the verge of suicide trying to figure out why I wasn't normal. Unfortunately, unlike myself, many young teens and even adults destroy themselves, whether it be mentally, spiritually, or even physically, trying to live up to something or someone they are not. But being true and loving yourself is true living and loving. Then in that a person can go beyond their natural selves and do things that were unimaginable to their own mind. Never doubt or underestimate your own abilities. We are all stronger, smarter, talented, more beautiful and resilient than we were told.

Now I know this for myself, as I want all people to know for themselves. The best things in life are truth, love, and knowledge. Even in the Bible it says, "There is gold. There are plenty of rubies. But lips that speak knowledge are a priceless jewel" (Proverbs 20:15). What I try to give back is the knowledge I have attained throughout my lessons in life, and even though I'm only 23 years young, I've been told I've been around for hundreds of thousands of years (LOL). And I

just want to share what I know with all of you, and also to leave for future generations who will need these words to be people of love and understanding. My love now is unconditional and everlasting. My pride is still intact, but my humbleness is overflowing. I know things about myself that I never imagined. I hate that it took an incident of this magnitude to show me, and all of us, who we really are and what we are capable of. My message to everyone is to go beyond your natural self, live and love freely, be true to your heart and never hide who you are! Love is eternal and will always prevail. I love you all soooooo much, and whatever awaits my future I know the love and support will keep me pushing for inner strength and knowledge. I want to thank everyone again for EVERYTHING! Now, go live and love freely!

Love,
Truth Power Princess A.K.A.
CeCe

November 16, 2012

On Trans Day of Remembrance

In light of Trans Day of Remembrance, this letter is more of a proposal to the LGBTQI community, specifically to my wonderful sisters of the “transnation.” My objective is to share ideas and ignite a spark in the women (and I use the term woman broadly to express all women and not having to put “trans” in front of the term. We are all WOMEN, be it that that’s what you identify as, and I don’t speak for all women but those who identify as such) to change our perspective of our communities (be it our neighborhoods, abroad, and the LGBTQI communities) and ourselves. . . .

Now, prior to this I’ve had many conversations with my lovely friend and colleague Katie Burgess (Executive Director of TYSN) about my future beyond the “concrete chaos,” which includes my position at TYSN and how my position of leadership can bring a change to TYSN and how the “world” views (trans) women, for the better. And after [Trans Day of Remembrance events], it felt that I wanted to take on this challenge of being a leader now more than ever. It was fate that at the moment of having these feelings, I received a review packet of TYSN’s Leadership Program with all these wonderful ideas and solid policies. And of course, me being the optimistic and sometime overly-anxious person that I am, I was so charged to get to business.

And like any person with optimism, sometimes it can be scary and overwhelming, especially when it’s a job or craft that one enjoy and cherish, like this is for me. And I don’t know how to handle it, all these ideas and feelings and wanting to go all in. So I felt a little lost and had all these questions that felt unanswered. For me, I go to my faith which is anything spiritual. From prayer to

yoga, I do it all. For this, I was drawn to my Tarot cards (thanks Kat!) and it seemed like they read into my soul and hit dead on. I asked the deck: “How does leadership and my future come together and how do I handle it, and is this where I should be (referring to being a leader)?” After I asked, I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths. I pulled four cards and laid them out. I opened my eyes and there was the Two of Bones, the Instructor (aka the Hierophant), Mentor of Bottles, and The Code.⁵

After giving myself such a relevant and accurate reading, I know that this is where I belong (referring to being a leader). That most times in our lives we question our greatness, and sometimes feel that we won’t or can’t deal with the pressures of being leaders, to own the power to have authority and make changes, even if it’s what we want the baddest in life. And from the Leadership Development Program review, I know that our beliefs can be passed on and taught to our future leaders of the LGBTQI community. To have rights and a voice. To be able to walk in this world, not afraid and actually feel like a human being and not a shadow in a corner. At TYSN, we believe that our trans youth know themselves, believe in each other, can create the basis of respect by understanding our fears, are all teachers and learners all the time, that we are all mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, daughters and sons, but most importantly we are all worth it, worthy, beautiful, strong, more than a binary, are able to become self-actualized, can and have already succeeded as a person, and of course, leaders. We need to understand this now more than ever. We need to not only celebrate for Trans Day of Remembrance, but also become self-aware and ready to put an end to our community being the focus of violence. Of course it is more than important to recognize and pay homage to our fallen, but we also need to put our feet down and start being real leaders and making this stand. And personally speaking, if it’s true that this is my personal journey as a leader, I want to lead my troops to victory. I can’t continue to say “how bad” that another brother, sister, mother, father, partner, friend is gone from blind-hatred. From ignorance and discrimination.

I would have rather been punished for asserting myself than become another victim of hatred. No, I’m not saying violence is key or all people should react the way I did, but our communities, whether here or abroad, have become the victim of malicious and hateful crimes. We need to start now. Make your voices heard. Reach out to the lawmakers, hell get it to the president if we have to. But we need to stop and work from inside out. We need to find strong leaders who can handle the pressures of being just that. Also we need to stop “throwing so much shade” to each other. All that anger that we direct towards each other should be directed at its true source, the people who treat us badly. The politicians who act like we don’t exist and don’t focus on the rights and safety of the LGBTQI

people, especially (trans)women. I would be lying if I said that I once wasn't a shady girl, but now I am a woman who wants to be a role model and a leader for the (trans)woman of the 21st century. To be unmarginalized and recognized for who I am, and who we are: strong, wonderful, loving women, and that we are people. That femininity can be as, if not more, strong and resilient than masculinity. That we deserve the same rights as any heterosexual, cissexual, or any person who objects against our being. It kills me to know that a man, or any person with a penis, can get a "genital pump," with medical insurance, but we as (trans)women have to struggle with costs for GRS⁶ and other trans related medical issues, some of which are not even considerable for insurance coverage. Crazy, right?

So my proposal is for all the organizations who are for growth of the (trans) youth, for the growth of OUR communities and such, to now take a collaborative into effect. To connect and extend to other organizations. To start building leaders and making changes for the better. At TYSN we believe that we can bring the (trans)community together, that we can foster the creation of POWERFUL art, that we can change the world, that we can create empowerment, that we can work with existing systems and outside systems to create resources for self and community and importantly, that we can overcome adversity and build a whole, balanced, and successful life. And I know we want that for all our (trans)women around the world. We need for our mission to promote racial, social, and economic justice for trans youth, with freedom to self-define gender identity and expression. I love my people and I want us all to succeed. It won't be long before I'm out and I want to be involved with all those who are willing to step up and get ready for a revolution, and it will not be televised!

January 15, 2013

Embracing Pansexuality?

Being a (trans)woman, I constantly have to deal with men, now more than ever since being in here. And with that I'm always faced with having to explain the "laws of attraction," and why they have these feelings. As of recently I've become very close with this guy and we've become the best of friends. We discuss our dreams, goals, relationships or anything that we might want to share with the other. Then one day he says to me, "I don't like men—" I butt in "I don't identify as male." "But . . . I want you to know that if I love you, it's for you . . ." At that moment I really didn't know how to feel because for the first time, in a long time, a man can admit to falling in love with me or anyone for who they are. As he identifies as "straight," and so do most of the men I date . . . or, "other." I know that they are attracted to my femininity, and I know I'm as femme as they come. But, as a bonus, if the person is willing to really get to know me, then they are

intrigued and attracted to my intelligence, my independence, and even my meek submissiveness. It's even funny sometimes to see men become hypermasculine creatures to assure themselves of their own "straightness" by proclaiming their love for vagina or by challenging another man to push-up competitions. I just think it's about time for masculine men to embrace who and what they are attracted to, and learn to stop going for physical and focus on mental, emotional, and spiritual connections. This is also true for women, so don't think you all got out of this easily.

Even for myself, I found myself saying I can't like girls, that that ship has sailed and the attraction wasn't there. That was until I became more experienced in the world, and learning about femininity and masculinity. The more I understood about myself the more I realized what it was I was actually attracted to. And this all became very clear to me when I kept encountering actions and reactions between me and a close friend who was a very masculine stud. She would always compliment me on my prettiness, or my body, or my fashionable style. The flirting became something of the norm, and it really made me contemplate my feelings for her, and how different it felt that it was a her. Then one night, after me and some friends left the gay club downtown, there she was. Was it even more a "coincidence" that we were both at the same club that night? We shared a couple of dances, but mostly were with those we came with. As I stood there, being P.G.T. (Pretty Girl Topsy), she came over to tell me my dress was fitting right and how good of a dancer I was. All I could do was smile and blush. As the club poured out from closing, and people mingled, there we were making jokes about her fucking me and it didn't seem weird at all. That led to her kissing me and to me it felt good. Me, the girl who was penis obsessed, is kissing a stud in the middle of the walkway while the gaybies around us cheer and whistle. So there I had to admit that it wasn't the fact that I was kissing a girl, because that didn't matter anymore. Her masculinity was what turned me on. After I realized that I understood myself more than ever. I was starting to see people as individuals, and being attracted to both men and women was all in the case of femininity and masculinity.

So there is the possibility that pansexualism can be the evolution of the world, but that can only proceed through acceptance of others and ourselves, and I know that that is something that I try to reiterate as much as often in these posts. With acceptance comes love, and with love comes happiness. And who doesn't want to be happy? Just something to think about.

CeCe

May 12, 2013

Violence against (Trans)Women Today

I wrote a short essay on street violence against women and (trans)women that I initially did for a panel for the U of M but because of the DOC drama, I never got a chance to finish it . . . until now. I hope you all enjoy it. I love you all! TTYL!⁷

A major problem in the entire world is violence against all women, which also includes transwomen. Throughout time, women have been subjected to the cruel “iron fist” of the male species’ ever-inflicting egos. The violence that has been upheld for centuries has affected us all, whether it be a tyrannical leader’s harsh rule over a nation or domestic rule inside the household. Women have a higher rate of experiencing violence in all its forms—physical, verbal, and/or sexual. In most cases we are the victims of murder, and in the act of defending ourselves we are subjected to time, even life in prison. How can society say that it detests and challenges violence against women, when there is very little, if any, real help for us, and the help we give ourselves results in punishment?

Street violence and transwomen go hand in hand, and I’m sure that if asked any transwoman can agree that most of her conflicts occurred outside of her dwelling. For me, all of the incidents that I’ve experienced were outside of the home. I, and most transwomen, have to deal with violence more often and at a higher rate than any cissexual person, so every day is a harder struggle, and the everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk, even something as simple as taking public transportation. Street violence has affected me drastically, and I think—no, I know—that if I never learned to assert myself that I would’ve never gained the courage to defend myself against those who have no respect or gratitude towards others in the world, I would have met my demise years ago.

Currently, I am in a men’s state prison for the death of someone I accidentally stabbed in the act of defending myself. It all started around 12 a.m. on June 4th, 2011, when a group of racist drunks began to verbally bash my friends and I on our way to a local 24-hour grocery store. After being called everything from faggots to niggers, tempers escalated and I was caught in between the madness. A woman from the other group decided to throw her alcoholic cocktail in my face, and to add insult to injury, she smashed her glass cup in my face which lacerated my cheek deep enough to cut a saliva gland which caused painful complications later on after getting 12 stitches. When the police arrived it wasn’t hard for them to assume who the aggressors were—surely, for them, it had to have been the group of black kids who started all this drama. At least that was the feeling I was receiving by the way they were treating me and my friends. And instead of taking me directly to the ambulance, they made me sit in the back of a squad car in handcuffs while bleeding badly and in very bad pain.

When I was finally transported to the ambulance, I was immediately bombarded with questions, even before I could get the medical attention I needed. And when I got to the hospital it didn't go any better. I was told to take off all my clothes, after that I was shackled to a hospital bed, and poorly examined hence the large deformity that was on my left cheek from a saliva gland being cut. From there I stayed in an interrogation room for over 5 hours. And it all went downhill from there. I can say that I'm so blessed to have such wonderful, caring, loving friends, family, and supporters that helped me through this injustice.

But it does go to show that there is nothing really in place for women to protect themselves—ourselves. We need to unite to make a voice for all those who have become a victim of violence. I want to shout-out all the organizations and programs that are doing just that. To all those who showed up to the 1 Billion Rising event in Pittsburgh on Valentines Day I LOVE YOU ALL! I also want to shout out all the victims of violence that were honored at the event: Patreese Johnson, Charmaine Pfender, Marissa Alexander, and Tanika Dickson. I LOVE YOU ALL! We are all victims of violence and the injustices and oppression of a faulty legal system and the PIC. And in memoriam of all our fallen sisters, this is for you! Our flames of resilience and tenacity burn bright in the efforts of a revolution for women. We will not give up until there are the necessary changes in this world for better protection and equality. And it is up to us to show that we are concerned and that none of our struggles will go in vain. . . .

xoxo

CeCe

May 17, 2013

A Major Milestone: My 25th Birthday!

Greetings my loves!

Well, despite the shitty circumstances I'm in, I'm excited to say that I'll be turning 25 this month . . . YAY! . . . For me being in prison for saving my own life is worth celebrating another year, even if it's in a fucked up environment. I feel blessed—no I am blessed to say that I've lived for a quarter of a century. That through my trials and tribulations, through my life's quarrels, that when I never thought I'd make it past the age of sixteen, I triumphed over all obstacles and that in itself is a victory. So for me, this is a major milestone, especially considering the violence against transwomen and the injustices of a faulty "judicial system" and a society that's been hijacked and distorted by radical-religious ideas. I can say that through all the adversity I faced over the course of time I lived so far, I've evolved and accomplished more than I would have ever imagined. And I can only go up from here! And it's also a blessing to have such wonderful, loving, caring people in my life. I want to take this time to thank those people who have grown to know me

and love me as I do for them. I love you all so much, there aren't even words to express my love and gratitude for you all. Also to all the supporters around the world I LOVE YOU ALL!

I also want to give a major shout-out to my mom, and all moms around the globe in honor of Mother's Day. I love you so much mommy, and I love both my grannies and all my beautiful aunts. These women are great examples of strong, fierce females and I'm so appreciative of them for being understanding and caring. And for my mom who is supportive and helping me through this tough time, you've been a great mom and I love you. Thank you for being a top notch mom.

June 29, 2013

Masculine Men and "Outside Speculators"

After having a conversation with a close friend of mine about masculine men and their identities as individuals and their involvement with feminine gay men and/or (trans)women, I figured I'd use this for a topic for this post.

It all started when the subject of my male friends came up, which included someone I've been involved with for three years. I was explaining each of my involvements with each guy and how they all differed. But the common factor with them was how secure each of them were with me with their identities as masculine men being questioned by "outside speculators," and how that affects the relationships I have with them. For all of them it varied with different results, and I can say that men's masculinity is very important to them and that their relationships with others do indeed affect their masculine identities apart from their individuality.

So the underlying question here is, why do masculine men get so caught up in the opinions and ideas of others? And not saying that all (masculine) men are like that, but the majority are. I can say that there has only been one (very) masculine man that has not let others' ideas affect our friendship, and that has actually made us grow closer and now I can say he is one of my closest friends. Anyways . . . I would figure that a (masculine) man's dominance and assertiveness would put him in a position to hold his ground, that as the "man," he should (or would) use his masculine authority to show his right to be involved with whoever he pleases. Right? . . .

My idea is that when a man's ego and reputation are at stake, they fold into the pressures of society's idea of what masculin/ity is. For me, it comes off as if femininity, homosexism, or transgenderism is contagious and that the man's masculinity is jeopardized with the association of the fem-man and/or (trans)woman. But that's not at all the case. A masculine man should never get hung up on whether his identity as an individual is questioned by others, because

no one's individuality could never be taken away by another person. You are who you are, regardless of who you associate with. I figured that was the contributing factor that causes my relationships to fail. And I'm sure I'm not the only one who can attest to that.

Also, I can say that the stereotypes and stigmas attached to fem-men and (trans)women are also a factor in the relationships between us and the (masculine) men. I would always think that the men I dated were ashamed of being with me when in reality they're ashamed of themselves. Their own insecurities, unassurances, and peer pressures cause them to fall into society's conformative gender identities and roles, but in reality who ANYONE associates with does NOT add or take away from who we are as individuals. It's all what we make it and how we view ourselves.

I love you ALL! Thanks for checking in and the support! TTYL!

xox<3,

CeCe

August 4, 2013

Injury and Insult: Trayvon Martin, Racism in the System, and a Revolution amongst Us

As I sit and watch Michelle Alexander and Chris Hayes have a conversation about race, as well as all of the nation in light of the George Zimmerman acquittal, it can't be any clearer that the injustice system has failed us once again. So with that it's obvious to know how I feel at this time. Not just for myself but for all the "minorities" who have been affected by this faulty judicial system that treats us as second class citizens, even less than that. To be looked down upon and to add injury to insult, laugh in our faces, throw salt on our wounds, and even piss on our graves. Rapper Lil' Wayne said it best, and I quote, "God bless Amerika, this ol' godless Amerika . . . sweet land of kill 'em all and let 'em die." . . .

After the Zimmerman trial, many activists and organizations rallied and demonstrated for Florida's Governor Rick Scott to call for a special session to reform or reject the "Stand Your Ground" law. As of late Phillip Agnew and the Dream Defenders have been occupying the capitol building there in Florida until FL Gov. Rick Scott calls that special session. He stands with the SYG law, and feels that it needs no reform. Now . . . this law that has let a man get away with murder, has caused a Florida woman to spend 20 years in prison! Marissa Alexander, a 30-year-old African American mother, was sentenced to 20 years behind bars after she was charged for firing a gun as a warning shot at her then-abusive husband who admitted to the allegations. She never shot anyone, in fact no one was even injured—well, except her at the hands of her husband, and a man who shot a teenage boy in claims of self-defense. In the case of Marissa, she was denied the right to use SYG—not killing anyone—and sentenced to two decades in prison.

Can someone please explain to me how an injustice such as this does not make one question the biased laws and the discrimination that still exist in the “justice system?” And people wonder why the prison percentages between whites and non-whites are so disproportionate. More importantly when are people going to ACT on these injustices and fight for the equality of each person in this country, both free and in the “system?”

It’s hard for me having to watch the trial and seeing everything unfold. Where all of us speculating knowing that this whole situation, from the incident itself to the trial, is all based on race—racial profiling and racism spewing from it all, regardless of what anyone says or thinks. I know that people have been comparing my case to Zimmerman’s, and yes it’s obvious that laws are biased. But even I can say I came out blessed knowing that (a) the system was against me to begin with, and that (b) looking at other cases similar to mine, I didn’t have to spent extensive time—even decades—in prison. People don’t understand that I actually feel a guilt for that. I know that nothing beyond the incident and getting arrested was in my control, as it is for anyone who is a victim of the system. But for me it hurts—a lot. My heart aches for the Patreese Johnsons, the Marissa Alexanders, and the Chrishaun McDonalds. But no pain can bring back the Trayvon Martins, the Oscar Grants, the Matthew Shepards, the James Byrds, the Gwen Araujos, and all of our brothers and sisters who were victims of hate in this world. I can say that survivor’s guilt is real. That I’m still, to this day, dealing with the fear and sadness of my experience with hate and discrimination. How blessed am I to have so much love and support from my family, and I say family which extends to all my friends and supporters around the world.

My love and support is with Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin as they go through this journey of leaving a positive legacy for Trayvon. I couldn’t help but to cry after hearing Sybrina tell an audience at the National Urban League to “wrap their minds around that there is no prom for Trayvon. There is no high school graduation for Trayvon. There is no college for Trayvon. There aren’t any grandchildren from Trayvon” all because of George Zimmerman. When I went through my own incident, that was something that harbored on my mind constantly—how would my death have affected my family and friends, and how different would things have been if it were the other way around? That question was rhetorical. We know what the outcome would have been, just like we know what the outcome would’ve been if Zimmerman was black and Trayvon Martin was white. Or even if Zimmerman was black and it was just a black-on-black crime. Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin are catalysts for not just their own son’s death, but for all those who have been victims of hate and violence. They are heroes in my eyes. Strong and brave, creating a voice that has been long overdue to be heard, and they deserve the acknowledgment and respect that some, not all,

have given them. I love them as if they were my own mom and dad, and we should understand that their struggle is our struggle.

Aside from the attention surrounding the Zimmerman trial, issues of racism and discrimination extend beyond that. The debates about immigration reform and the Voting Rights Act have pulled back the veil of intolerance of equality and acceptance in this country. The insults aimed at the African-American and Latino communities are disrespectful, dehumanizing, ignorant, unintelligent, and very hurtful nonetheless. Indeed it's a blessing that the SCOTUS recognizes the rights for gays and lesbians to get married legally and have the same federal rights as hetero-marriages, but I don't want people to lose sight of the other issues that will affect us all in the long run. Their deliberate efforts to minimize the minority by restricting voters rights is a slap in the face of the civil rights movements of the past and present that fought so hard for the rights of minorities to vote. And the idea that sending all the immigrants back and building large fences will solve all of America's issues. But it seems that this policy only applies to black and brown people, and knowing all of this is the attempt of Republicans and right-wing conservatives to win elections that they're obviously losing. So I'm guessing that insulting and stereotyping us will bring them those votes they need? These people need to get a serious grasp of reality, like really soon. . . . Not that I care for them to ever take office. Actually, I just don't care for them at all, but I do believe we all deserve respect as humans, regardless of our race, gender, or social status.

I really want people to start thinking on how we can help minorities and the poor to help us all grow as a community and united front. Can we challenge ourselves to unite all races of this nation by taking an initiative to end our own preconceptions of each other? I know that I was extremely upset after having a visit from a close friend, and he told me that people have been criticizing him and my other non-Black friends for being in pictures that they post online. That divisive attitude is why I ask for a mend in race relations. Have these people ever thought how it feels for them, and myself, to have to deal with me being in prison? It's always easy for someone to conjure up negative thoughts and reactions to my "white" friends who've gained popularity from their "black" friend in prison. First of all let me say that there is nothing glamorous or "popular" about being in prison. And why can't there be support for those who have went through this struggle with me instead of backlash. I love these people. They have been here for me since day one, and regardless of what others say, they will be my support and my family and at this point you're either with us or against us and none of us have time for hate or divisive attitudes or ideas, especially at critical times like now. And that's not just directed at those who are commenting about me, my case, and my fam—but for all people across the nation and around the world.

I feel a revolution is amongst us, and I know that there is no better time than now. I wish that I could march with the many of people who will be marching across Washington this August in honor of the 50th year anniversary for the Civil Rights March on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement of that era. I encourage everyone to join the march and the experience of unity amongst all people—races, genders, sexualities, social statuses, and cultural backgrounds. Even if you can't make it to the march still get active and get involved however that may be.

Before I go, I just want to say that I love you all more than ever now. I couldn't be more conscious of the love and support you all give me—my family, and that's kin and chosen, and of course I have chosen all of you. You're all my family and I will love and cherish and appreciate you all until there's no more of me. We are the future, we are the revolution!

Until next time my loves keep fighting, stay strong, and live out loud. Do you, cause no one can do it better!

xo

CeCe

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley is an associate professor of black studies at the University of Texas, Austin, where she specializes in black feminism and black queer studies. She teaches the nation's first "Beyoncé Feminism, Rihanna Womanism" class, which BuzzFeed rated number one in its 2014 list of Celebrity College Classes You'll Want to Enroll In. She researches and publishes on queer and feminist Caribbean performance and literature. Her articles have appeared in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Small Axe*. She is currently at work on a book project entitled "Ezili's Mirrors: Black Feminism, Afro Atlantic Genders, and the Work of the Imagination," which explores spirituality and sexuality in twenty-first-century queer Caribbean literature, dance, music, and film. Her artistic work includes performance and collaboration with the Ananya Dance Theatre as well as a novel in progress entitled "Water, Shoulders, into the Black Pacific," which explores relationships between black female ship-builders during World War II.

Editor's Notes

1. See McDonald's introduction to Eric A. Stanley's *Captive Genders* (McDonald 2015).
2. Some of these photos can be viewed on BuzzFeed (Karlán 2014).
3. CeCe's nickname.
4. According to the CeCe Support Committee (2016), "this post was originally written to a gathering of CeCe McDonald's family, friends, and supporters, which she organized from within the Hennepin County jail. She asked that the letter not be read until everyone was

- gathered to hear her words together. She wrote this letter the week after she accepted a plea agreement to a reduced charge of second degree manslaughter.”
5. The Two of Bones indicates personal and societal change coming. The Instructor indicates spiritual leadership and expansive learning. The Mentor of Bottles represents calm leadership in the midst of change. The Code represents social codes to be embraced or changed.
 6. GRS is an acronym for gender reassignment surgery.
 7. U of M is short for University of Minnesota. DOC is an acronym for Department of Corrections. TTYL stands for “talk to you later.”

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Calling into Being

Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology

CALVIN WARREN

Abstract This essay argues that “tranifestation” is an onto-phonological procedure, which provides insight into being-in-the-world for the human and, implicitly, explains the exclusion of blackness from ontology because of its muteness. Furthermore, the concept of black trans serves a speculative function in foregrounding the problem of black ontology.

Keywords Afro-pessimism, gender, ontology

We can theorize, we can meditate on black suffering, we can experience the violence, we’re marked. But we cannot *be* . . . since the idea of being is foreclosed to us: we’re non-being.

—Christina Sharpe, “What Exceeds the Hold? An Interview with Christina Sharpe” (emphasis added)

Tranifesting, or transformative manifestation, describes the theories, methods, and modes of self-representation that attempt to *call into being* flexible collectivities or groupings whose articulation transforms normative understandings of race, gender, sex, and sexuality.

—Kai M. Green, “What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s *Say Jesus and Come to Me*” (emphasis added)

I. Calling into Being

Can we represent the black self through a call into being? What manifestation is possible, ontologically, within the context of an antiblack world (and an antiblack field of being)? What might such a transformative call entail? I present these questions to build a way, or a putative path, toward understanding the necessity of black trans, as a philosophical practice/procedure. For, indeed,

undergirding these inquiries is a desire, or desperation, to provide intellectual space for black trans. It is undeniable that black trans “beings” have experienced tremendous violence, routinized humiliation, and systemic terror. Black trans, as a discursive formation, is charged with an exceptionally difficult task: creating the intellectual occasion for recognizing, interpreting, and introducing black trans experience into a larger field of inquiry. But how exactly is this done? One strategy is to appropriate the ontological presumptions and foundations of humanism to gain recognition and intellectual space—ground upon which much trans/gender/sexuality/black studies is predicated. In this meditation, I suggest that appropriating humanism is an unreliable strategy for black trans, since ontology and humanism do not “explain the existence of the black” (Fanon 1967a: 110). Tranifestation is such a strategy, and I suggest it is applicable to humans but not blacks. Furthermore, I argue that we can reconceptualize black trans not as an ontological formation (i.e., nonnormative human subjects) but as a speculative or philosophical enterprise—one designed to devastate ontological humanism.

Tranifestation provides a philosophical space of investigation, in which the question of black existence infuses itself into the discourses of gender and experience. There is no escaping this question, since the ontological ground within which gender and experience are located raises particular concerns for blackness. If gender and experience are features of a self capable of representation and transformation—as the theory of tranifestation seems to suggest—then it is the ontology of this self that provides the necessary ground (or condition of possibility) for any procedure of manifestation. Furthermore, this self possesses the capacity to call into being, to inquire, demand, and extract from being’s mysterious resources, something transformative, something that challenges normativity, a being. Manifestation, then, evidences a successful call, in which the transformed being serves as being’s answer to this very call. The self is represented through the call, and representation is the creative appeal to being—creative since it is transformative. In short, tranifestation is ontological creation, and the call is the mysterious vehicle for the self to manifest anew.

The question of black existence, however, inquires about this call and the possibility of being—transformed or otherwise. For if manifestation is the evidence of a successful call into being, then the black never manifests in an antiblack world, since the black lacks being. In other words, the lack of being is the evidence of an unsuccessful call—an appeal to being that is ultimately rejected. Christina Sharpe suggests that the “idea of being is foreclosed to us: we’re non-being” (Terrefe 2016).¹ The experience of suffering and violence, although quite real and devastating, fails to provide being for blackness. Blacks can experience trans violence, but this experience does not translate into being trans.² It is this devastating split between existence (the province of experience) and being (the field

of ontology) that constitutes the core of black suffering in an antiblack world and renders the black catachrestic—unrepresentable as a self. Fanon reminds us of this devastation when he avers, “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man . . . the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (1967a: 110). We might understand tranifestation, then, as a mode of “ontological resistance,” in which the self manifests despite the violence of gendered normativity. Selves capable of resisting, ontologically, have the capacity to synthesize experience and ontology into a call for being anew. But the black existence lacks ontological resistance—the capacity not only to call but also to have that call answered and acknowledged—because of the split between existence and ontology, a treacherous gulf that is unbridgeable. Thus, trans experience does not equate to trans being for blacks—for, ultimately, only those who can resist ontology can be. (It is impossible for blacks to tranifest in an antiblack world.) Existence is experienced but unrepresentable with the transformative instruments of ontology. But what *is* this “experiencing black” if this black lacks being? This is the fundamental question of black existence, and it is a question that, perhaps, lacks any sufficient answer, given our philosophical paucity. Black thought must continually broach this fundamental question with the resources at our disposal—however inadequate or insufficient these resources are for our task.

Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that “ontology is a phonology” to the extent that the law of being calls, or summons, the place of *Dasein* (1993: 45).³ Tranifestation’s calling into being, its onto-phonological procedure, requires certain metaphysical coordinates of latitudinal and longitudinal richness. The preposition *into*, from which being is called, suggests a certain space of creativity and transformation that manifests in a “thereness.” The place of manifestation is this very thereness for the self. We might think of gender, then, as a particular metaphysical coordinate along an onto-metaphysical plane, which provides an intelligible place for the self. But to have a place, a thereness along the onto-metaphysical plane, being is necessary. Black trans-*gender* thus stages and raises the question of place: can blacks inhabit a place in the world along the coordinates of gender (or any other coordinates for that matter)? For if, as Hortense Spillers (2003: 206) argues, blacks are “reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor,” and not being for itself, then the black does not inhabit the world as a self but as a thing (or no-thing that we can understand with the instruments of ontology). The thing can experience the world, but the thing lacks a place within the world, the requisite coordinates of thereness for a self. Or as Frank Wilderson would suggest, “No slave [black existence] is in the world” (2010: 11). When Spillers limns the philosophical problematic of gender and ontology, she seems to suggest this very lack of place of an ontological coordinate for this experiencing thing: “This problematization of gender places her [black

ungendered female], in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it our task to make a place for this different social subject” (2003: 238). But this (non)place that we make for this ungendered thing is not a recognizable place within ontology—if we can even call this conceptual space a “place.” Placing blackness within gender, or finding the place of blackness along gender, is an impossible project. And for this reason, Spillers suggests that “we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject” (239). The (non)place of black gender is the foreclosure of a call to being—since no “into” exists for blackness from which being can be called.

In a conversation revisiting “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers et al. present the term *symbiotic blend* to describe a melding between gender categories (2007: 304). Given that antiblackness disqualifies blackness from the privilege of traditional gendered categories, black existence becomes something other, a blend of sorts of categories that is unrecognizable as gender. We might call this symbiotic blend a form of transness, in which the blending troubles not just gender categories but also the categories of the human itself. Black trans presents the problem of ontology through gender, and this problematic is the philosophical melding of black feminism and black trans studies. In other words, black feminism (in particular the groundbreaking work of Spillers) provides a path, or a philosophical opening, for the deconstructive work of black trans studies. As Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison state, both black feminism studies and black trans studies “challenge the categories of man and woman as ontological givens” (2014: 223). But what I want to reiterate is that this path, or opening, does not stop with gender, although it catalyzes it. The problematic that black trans studies raises is that ontology itself is the fundamental issue—gender serves as the covering for a deeper onto-metaphysical challenge, the lack of the onto-phonological procedure.

But we have focused on an aspect of the philosophical phrase opening our meditation; it is time to return to the fullness of the phrase, for it illumines the (non)relation between blackness and ontology. Green modifies the phrase “calling into being” with the word *attempts*. Tranifesting attempts to call into being. What would such an attempt entail? What is the significance and aim of the attempt? I have argued that calling into being is an impossible enterprise for blackness because such an onto-phonological procedure is absent. There is only muteness, an interdiction on phonology and placing. When blackness is concerned, such a call encounters a censure on the ontological activity of calling itself—meaning that such an attempt is not a call at all, but something other. The attempt, then, undermines itself at its very deployment, from its announcement into being. Put differently, the attempt marks a certain fraudulence, and thus the

word *attempt* is absolutely essential to any call of blackness. Blackness, then, can only attempt the impossible; the attempt never manifests into a call but a rebounded muteness within the terrifying chamber of being. The word *attempts* announces its own failure (i.e., the call as muteness), or the fractured aim of the enterprise (i.e., it is not a call, but something which we lack a grammar to describe within the precincts of onto-metaphysics). The aim of such an attempt is “maso-critical,” as Paul Mann (1999) would call it, given that it sets out to undermine itself in relation to being (and finds pleasure in such an enterprise). What anti-blackness does is that it mutes blackness (this is black suffering), and this muteness signals the lack of phonology. The attempt masks failure as possibility, muteness as transformative. Such an attempt only reproduces the structure of misery and disappointment. Why do we attempt the impossible? Is this not a similar structure to the psychoanalytic notion of “drive”—the unrelenting attempt to possess an impossible (nonexistent) object, even to the death? Tranifestation docket a certain drive (perhaps a death drive) within black critical discourses. We attempt, relentlessly, to achieve an impossible objective—to call into being, despite muteness and lack of space.

We might also suggest that tranifestation is seductive, or it *attempts*, with the possibility that the impossible can be overcome or that we might be heard in our silence, and this muted hearing might create space in being. Such ontological fantasizing is tempting when the aim is ontological creation. But such a procedure reaches an impasse: How would we create such space in being? How does muteness create? What is a muted call? Does the muteness of the call undermine the call itself? Many would probably argue that muteness is powerful—there is power in silence. This is an interesting avenue for thought, but tranifestation leaves such a possibility unattended, perhaps because it does not intend that a call would be mute in the first place—it advances an argument that blackness is capable of calling just like everyone else. This is the fatal attempt of humanist philosophy, and it is one that we continue to pursue despite the impossibility of the aim. In short, blackness must overcome or traverse such an attempt—although it is tempting. Matt Richardson (2013) might call the knotting of seduction, desire, and impossibility the nexus between the “irresolvable” (structural position of otherness) and “irresolution” (unfixed). The juxtaposing of blackness and tranifestation is precisely this nexus of the structural position of the other of ontology and the unfixed movement into being. The call is designed to suture the gap between irresolution and irresolvability. But black existence is this very gap, and it is this gap that black trans orbits and must approach.

Tranifestation, encountering the muteness of blackness, can lead the way into a field of critical inquiry concerning muteness and ontology. We can use

tranifestation as a signpost to refuse the seductions of onto-phonology and the violence such a procedure inflicts on black bodies.

II. Black Trans as Instructive

For black things inhabiting the world in a (non)place, the call to being is always already foreclosed. Blackness remains mute before being. This equates to an existence without being, an inhabitation without a manifestation. The experiencing thing does not transform into any being—nonnormative or otherwise. This is the crux of black suffering and the violence that is ontological. I would argue, however, that the concept of tranifestation provides a beautiful structure to understand both being and nonbeing, or blackness. Tranifestation presents the ontological procedures necessary to establish being-in-the-world, and, implicitly, it explains why the black transgender will never constitute a being or subject within the world: because antiblackness precludes the onto-phonological procedure. In other words, tranifestation is the inverse of Fanon's description of black existence, as that lacking ontological resistance. The tranifested subject uses the call as resistance in the face of gendered normativity and hostility. This is an exceptional tool for humans to refashion themselves, but such refashioning is not possible for blacks within ontology—despite the seductions of invention.⁴

The black transgender lacks any being-in-the-world, and the lure of gendered embodiment functions as a foil to black muteness. In other words, the body is called upon to speak being where there is none. Black bodily experience is charged with the impossible—to transform black into ontological subject. Indeed, a body is not an ontology. Embodiment might provide the ground for phenomenological experience, but once “ontology leaves existence by the wayside,” as Fanon (1967a: 110) suggests, black embodied experience is unexplainable and inassimilable ontologically.

Within this context, “black trans” serves a speculative function, in that it foregrounds the gap between black existence and being through the coordinates of gender. Instead of thinking of black transgender as a nonnormative (gendered) subject in the world, we can think of it as instructive, philosophically. The black is trans to gender, not transgender. The black is trans to queerness, not black queer. The black is trans to the world itself and all its coordinates of being. What black transgender is teaching us is the impossibility of finding symbolic coherency in the world. Gender is a cloak, an ontic garment. We've clothed ourselves in these garments, although they do not fit and were not intended for us. It is time for us to disrobe and face the naked of blackness, its nothingness. Black trans is precisely the process of denuding the garments of being, and the black transgender provides an opportunity to work through this process through the experience of out-of-placeness.

We can understand black trans as undoing and denuding ontological procedures and practices—exposing “nothing” at the core of black existence. A philosophical practice of black trans would undress critical discourses of the onto-phonological procedures, which set them into motion and sustain their ethical ground. Its aim would be to point us to the irresolvable tension between ontology and existence through the breakdown, or undoing, of human gender (i.e., gender becomes but one philosophical pathway or allegory to understanding the conundrum of blackness).

Black studies (and queer studies/trans studies), I would argue, is in desperate need of a black trans procedure. There is a disturbing resurgence of humanism and its universal ontology in the fields of black, gender, and sexuality studies. The ontological ground of such discourses is rarely interrogated, resulting in fantastical ideas of universal humanism, postrace thematics, coalition politics, and race blindness. All these critical idioms neglect the ontological dimension of antiblackness, in order to provide resolution and resolvability of the tension between blackness and being. Black trans, as I imagine it here, would unravel ontological humanism, which sustains a death drive, one instantiating tremendous misery, disappointment, and agony. Thus, black trans is not invested in the ontology of trans studies, queer theory, and black romantic humanism. Its aim is to impose seismiclike devastation on these fields to expose the antiblack violence that sustains them (even aspects of black studies relying on antiblack instruments of ontology, humanism, metaphysics, biopolitics, and futurity). Black trans studies must overcome tranifestation and its seductions—even as the philosophical structure of tranifestation beautifully explains the mechanism by which the human creates ontologically.

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Notes

1. I have omitted the word *Afro-pessimists* in the epigraph (“But we cannot *be* Afro-pessimists”) because the foreclosure is not intended to apply only to Afro-pessimists but to black entities in general. All blacks, regardless of philosophical orientation or mode of existence, are refused being. It is not that being abandons blacks (in the same way that being abandons *Dasein*), as if blacks can restore or remember being through non-metaphysical thinking (or destructive procedures), but that blackness is without being—and we lack a proper grammar to describe black existence outside the precincts of onto-metaphysics.

2. Frantz Fanon (1967b) conceptualizes the work of violence through and upon the oppressed as a form of wretchedness. According to David Marriot, “The wretched is not an identitarian category, nor is it a disidentitarian category (in the sense of the promise of community). It signifies that which is radically heterogeneous and yet necessary and constitutive; the wretched are a ‘gangrene’ at the heart of the colony that cannot be absorbed or eradicated: the inassimilable” (2014: 520). If we think of trans not as an identity formation, or a set of traits, but as a working through and with violence to disrupt and fracture, then we get at the productive function of transness. The tendency to organize transness around identity limits the work that violence does to throw any such identity formation into crisis.
3. I also think of *trans* in a similar way that Nancy thinks of *eccesity*, as “a being that is stripped of everything that is not its being-here—or its being-there” (46). I must depart from Nancy, however, since when the black strips its ontic garments, being-there is not revealed, instead it is a “no-thing,” which ontology is unable to explain. This “stripping” is what *trans* instructs blackness to do, I argue—expose the no-thing at the core of black existence.
4. There are certainly similarities between the concept of tranifestation and Fanon’s (1967a: 229) insistence that we “introduce invention into existence.” Sylvia Wynter builds on Fanon’s notion of invention, in particular his concept of “sociogeny,” which is presented to correct the erroneous separation of the social and the biological (currently dominating the human sciences). But we must read Fanon’s insistence on invention alongside his admonition that ontology and existence are not reducible to each other; in fact, black existence is not ontological. This is to suggest that if we are to invent, we must do so outside ontology because to invent within it would still reproduce the forms of violence (what he calls the “metaphysical holocaust” [110]) ontology instantiates. Wynter’s magisterial presentation is still operating within traditional ontology through its reliance on consciousness—which is an antiblack instrument of interior domination, as Denise Ferreira da Silva has reminded us. Furthermore, consciousness is still wedded to being; it does not challenge being as such, only the mechanism for understanding being(s). I believe Fanon intended for invention to trouble the very ground of being and not just the organization of metaphysical reality. Wynter, Green, and Ellison invent within the precincts of ontology, which rebounds upon the very problematic Fanon presented. How do you invent into existence, when such existence remains a philosophical mystery? How do you avoid invention becoming metaphysical repetition? Invention, then, is something indeterminate and thus fractures the teleology of onto-metaphysics. Invention must also contend with the ontological puzzle of blackness to have any effect. Please see Wynter’s “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be Black” (2001). Also see da Silva’s critique of interiority and consciousness in her *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007).

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The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness

MARQUIS BEY

Abstract The essay thinks radically differently about the concepts of black and trans*. *Trans** and *black* thus denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black or transgender. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an original lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology. Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black or trans*, precede and provide the foundational condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations. The author seeks to demonstrate the ways in which trans* is black and black is trans*. In what ways, and to what extent, is there a “blackness” present within “trans*-ness,” and vice versa? What is the effect of these analytics? This essay hopes to address these questions but also leave them suspended in black/trans* liminality.

Keywords blackness, trans*-ness, para-ontological, fugitive

By black here, I don’t mean a particular skin color or identity, a certain vocal affectation, musical aesthetic, or capacity for rhythm (though I *do* mean all those things, too). Instead, I mean blackness as a radical refusal of the movement of reconciliation, and thus, of whiteness. To be black and to be made black is to take seriously the work of refusal, which is an antagonism, a thorn in the side of the sovereignty of whiteness. . . . To become black is to remain in instability, is to remain in solidarity together in instability. To become black is to be against the movement beyond sociality for the sake of becoming logical and reasonable. To become black is to refuse being made a something—to be and become nothing. Not because nothing is an absence or a lack of life, but precisely because nothing is the abundance and multiplicity out of which life is formed.

—Amaryah Shaye, “Refusing to Reconcile, Part 2”

I want to argue that “in the beginning is ‘trans’”: that what is original or primary is a not-yet-differentiated singularity from which distinct genders, race, species,

sexes, and sexualities are generated in a form of relative stability. . . . Fixed kinds such as the trans-gendered, trans-sexual, or trans-animal body are expressions of a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as the human.

—Claire Colebrook, “What Is It Like to Be a Human?”

As I read the 341-page *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Weed and Schor 1997), swooning over the invigorating erudition of top-notch queer theorists, I began to wonder, quite seriously, whether this formulation of “theoretical concept 1 meets seemingly disparate, but actually not really, theoretical concept 2” would work for blackness and trans*-ness. Could a similar volume, perhaps also comprising collated essays from a special issue, be fashioned under the appellation “Blackness Meets Trans*-ness”? After fantasizing about being the one to edit this volume, perhaps alongside other, more dexterous scholars than I, I conceded that such a volume, quite simply, could not exist. Blackness cannot meet trans*-ness; trans*-ness cannot meet blackness. But why not? Black transgender people exist, a friend of mine said, as I thought out loud with her in a local café. My answer then was not as articulate as I would have liked, so I will respeak now, at this much more thoughtful and thought-fed moment: because blackness and trans*-ness, different yet intimate primordial kin, arise from the underbelly, the “undercommons” that absently saturates the conditions upon which subjectivity rests. Blackness and trans*-ness mark, as J. Kameron Carter says of blackness, “a movement of the between . . . an interstitial drama on the outskirts of the order of purity. [They mark] an improvisatory movement of doubleness, a fugitive announcement in and against the grain of the modern world’s . . . investment in pure being.” In short, borrowing again from Carter, I designate black and trans* as, “to invoke [Nahum] Chandler once again, ‘paraontological’” (2013: 590).

I am embarking on a cogitative journey through the para-ontological annals of the stuff of life and nonlife. Like W. E. B. Du Bois and his intellectual comrades William Shakespeare, Honoré de Balzac, and Alexandre Dumas, here in the forthcoming essay I sit with Fred Moten and Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, and Eva Hayward; I move arm and arm with Amaryah Shaye and Claire Colebrook—among many others, some of whom are the editors of this special issue. With these thinkers, I come to blackness and trans*-ness by way of refusal, fugitivity, anoriginality, para-ontology, and eruption. *Trans** and *black* thus denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black or transgender. They move in and through the abyss underlying ontology, rubbing up alongside it and causing it to fissure. *Trans** and *black*, however, as fundamentally para-ontological do not

discredit the materiality of ontic subjects who are characterized by and through these identificatory markers. The relationship between my usage of these poetic forces and subjects identified with/as black or trans* must be handled with care. But indeed, as Kai M. Green (2013: 289) writes about those who identify and are identified as black, epidermal hue and racial (and sexual and gender and class) situatedness in history “cannot predict the politics of black people. So while race, class, gender, and sexuality will no doubt inform the way a person walks through the world, it will not provide a predetermined outcome as much as we might like it to. This is especially true when our politics or the leadership we endorse is limited by scenario.” In short, racial identification will not determine one’s relationship to power, thus making epidermal blackness in this case not an a priori determinant of politicality. This is what Hortense Spillers, quoting George Lamming, says “we definitively know now”: “the nature of power [is] unrelated to pigmentation, that bad faith [is] a phenomenon which [is] independent of race” (quoted in Spillers 2012: 936).

Such is the case, too, with people who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. Cathy Cohen writes, “People may not like this, but without an intentional politics, I don’t see trans as inherently radical. I think there are many instances where marginal individuals are inserted into traditional institutions or movements and they do something to change the dynamics but they don’t necessarily change these spaces and entities in a radical way that is open and more equitable.” Cohen goes on to say, “I’m interested in trans feminist politics in the same way that I’m committed to a black feminist politics that is tied to a transformative liberatory agenda” (Cohen and Jackson 2015). To an extent, this is true, though I would nuance Cohen’s assertion with gender-nonconforming bodies’ situatedness in a gender-normative space, a hegemonic grammar that utterly disallows the very possibility of transgender; thus their very existence in a space that is constituted through the assertion of the impossibility of trans* and nonnormative bodies is, by virtue of their inhabitation of public space, radical. This could also be said to be the case with black bodies occupying space implicitly coded in and through whiteness. No doubt, in some cases, black people or transgender folks sedulously work toward assimilation through buying into a proper black or transgender citizenship. And this entails “fading into the population . . . but also the imperative to be ‘proper’ in the eyes of the state: to reproduce, to find proper employment; to reorient one’s ‘different’ body into the flow of the nationalized aspiration for possessions, property[, and] wealth” (Aizura 2006: 295). Surely, then, the two can appear at times in opposition to one another, as in those who identify as transgender and are conservative, antiblack (people), neoliberal, and so forth; and those who identify as black may be deeply transphobic. While these combinations arise, I maintain that even amid disruption one can harbor

comforting compartments of hegemonic stability. Black and trans* are both disruptive orientations indexed imperfectly by bodies said to be black or trans* and thus can succumb to logics of white supremacy and cis sexism. The anoriginal blackness and trans*-ness that bodies cite exceed bodyness and thus can never be “captured” in perfect entirety, leaving room, as has been historically evident, for moments of clash between black people and transgender people, and their imbrications.

What I wish to delineate regarding the relationship between blackness and trans*-ness (as analytics) and black and trans* bodies is the tangential and ultimately arbitrary connection between them, yet the metonymic nature of what can be said to be black and trans* bodies’ positionalities. That is to say, as Spillers says of black culture (though, I would assert, the logic can apply to trans* folks as well), black and trans* bodies speak to and as metonymic flashes of the poetic forces of blackness and trans*-ness insofar as they are imagined as “an *alternative* statement, as a *counterstatement* to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identif[ying] the cultural vocation as the space of ‘contradiction, indictment, and the refusal’” (2006: 25). They are instances, not archetypes, of this fugitive, lawless force we might call “black and trans*.”

As well, this is not to collapse blackness and trans*-ness, diluting their uniqueness and utility as analytics for different, though related, disciplinary fields. They are, rather, nodes of one another, inflections that, though originary and names for the nothingness upon which distinction rests, flash in different hues because of subjects’ interpretive historical entrenchment. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology. Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black and/or trans*, precede and provide the foundational condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations. In short, what I seek to do is, as my title suggests, demonstrate the ways in which trans* is black and black is trans*. Though I cannot cause the fictive “Blackness Meets Trans*-ness” volume to materialize as an academic tome, I can come close by showing how they perennially speak with, through, alongside, and back to (or, alternatively, black to) one another over there on the “outskirts of the order of purity.”

I. The Trans*-ness of Blackness: A Burning Paris

To address the first clause of my title, “the Trans*-ness of Blackness,” my aim is to articulate the anoriginality of that poetic, creative, fugitive force known as blackness. It bears a slight textured kinship with Michel Foucault’s understanding of literature, that “third point” that is external to language and literary works and

that describes an “essential blankness” (notably, I kept misreading this as “essential blackness”) in which the question of “What is . . . ?” is “originally dismembered and fractured” (Foucault et al. 2015: 47). Blackness here, in another sense, riffing on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concept, is an undercommons, a subtending and subverting sub- where fugitives dwell, reveling in chaos. It is “not a coalition” but rather “an absolutely open secret with no professional ambition” (Moten and Harney 2014: 188)—a burning Paris, perhaps.¹ As an undercommons, blackness is a no/place that simmers alongside, or on the underside of, discernible ontology. It is a no/place, a spaceless space that renders governability ungovernable; blackness “means to render unanswerable the question of how to govern the thing that loses and finds itself to be what it is not”; blackness is the modality of constant escape, of flight, of a “held and errant pattern” that eludes (Harney and Moten 2013: 51, 49).

Additionally, blackness marks a “*break* in the passage of syntagmatic movement from one more or less stable property to another, as in the radical disjuncture between ‘African’ and ‘American,’” says Spillers (2003: 262). As disjuncture, it rests on a modality of not only being in the interstices but also of breaking and uprooting by virtue of its escape. Or, blackness “lays in the cut,” as the vernacular saying goes, and stalls the very logic of social syntax as, for example, Black Lives Matter activists—bold irruptions of corporeal, unapologetic blackness—congealed across highways to forestall traffic. Sociality as manifested in the zip and zoom of automobiles oblivious to, and thus constitutive of, the plight of blackness was socially lacerated. Blackness is “a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a *wounding*” (Spillers 2003: 262), and in this constant wounding, this constant cutting, it is the “abeyance of closure” (Carter 2013: 595). Blackness rests in the in-between, and this “between” is also a movement of flight, of escape, of fugitivity from the confines of ontological pinning down. The pinning down requires fixation and definable locations, but as in-between, blackness is that elusive interstitiality; it is that “posture of critical insurgency” about which Spillers speaks, but unlike Spillers’s conceptualization, blackness cannot be achieved or arrived at (2003: 262).² Excessive of the logic of sovereignty—governability, logic qua logic—is blackness, and it is always smoldering, fissuring, crackling.

But why? Will blackness ever rest? No, because via its interstitial position, its undercommonality, it is perennially refusing impositions. Amaryah Shaye, whose epigraph graces the beginning of this essay, thinks of blackness, relatedly, as a “besideness,” and through that *besideness* blackness operates “as a refusal of the unitive logic of reconciliation” (2014b). Blackness says no, then sidesteps the conversation, the imposition, and keeps it movin’.

It has also been shown, perhaps most recently, provocatively, and cogently by Michelle Wright, that thinking of blackness as “a determinable ‘thing,’ as a ‘what’ or ‘who’” proves problematic (2015: 2). Blackness must move and be thought in motion. Though Wright conceives of her blackness in *Physics of Blackness* through space and time (spacetime) and through her notion of “epiphenomenal time,” I am concerned more with thinking of blackness as fugitive, as volatile, as, to use her language for James Baldwin, “quantum.” But although Wright is thinking differently than I am, she is, to be sure, not thinking deficiently or contrastingly. A black interlocutor she is. Her blackness, too, is a node of fugitivity. Thus, in this sense I do not part with her—her expansion of blackness as not solely affixed to the Middle Passage slave ship or linear causality indexes a kind of capacious fugitivity, as she says of Olaudah Equiano’s black when-and-where-ness, “creat[ing] the greatest number of Blacknesses that are possible and viable” (Wright 2015: 25). Where I do wish to supplement and critique Wright is her particular handling of Spillers’s work, namely, Spillers’s landmark article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Within *Physics of Blackness*, Wright argues that Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby,” in part, expresses that in order to resist the white supremacist “controlling images” imposed upon black women, black folks must return “to the heteronormative gender and sexuality roles that preceded enslavement” (80). This, however, is misguided on two fronts: first, black sexuality cannot be heteronormative, at least in the context of US white supremacy, because, as we learn from Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black* (2004), black people might be “heterosexual [or homosexual] but never *heteronormative* [or *homonormative*]” (87). Second, Spillers does not seem to be proffering a (impossible) “return” to heteronormativity; indeed, Spillers asserts something far more queer, far more, one might tentatively argue, trans*. At the end of “Mama’s Baby,” the penultimate paragraph reads:

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of “yes” to the “female” within. (Spillers 1987: 80)

There is a marked fugitivity in Spillers’s black female as she “breaks in upon the imagination” with a force that is “both a denial and an ‘illegitimacy.’” The illegitimacy that is blackness, that is lawlessness, is in full effect, historically, with

black women. But if we home in on the last sentence of the above quote, we can better understand Wright's interpretive misstep. Spillers does not wish to return to heteronormative gender; on the contrary, there is something decidedly non-normative, something even transgender, about Spillers's black heritage advancing "the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within." Heteronormative gender maintains a strict, exclusionary gender binary that Spillers, here, is undoing—transing, even. Spillers's conception of African American culture, since the mid-seventeenth century, is a tale "between the lines," which is to say, a tale that is black, that is even trans*; it is a tale in which "gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female" (1987: 79). Quite far from advancing a return to heteronormativity, Spillers describes a black trans* lineage within African American culture. Indeed, Spillers's claims "transly" resound in black, queer, gender-nonconforming Afrofuturist janaya (j) khan's (2015) writing when they³ say that black trans women are integral to black liberation, the "fulcrum" of it, its "nucleus." And those who have ever taken high school biology know how consequential the nucleus is for the functioning of the entirety of the cell. Blackness, and the liberation of its corporeal bearers, is fueled by its trans* nucleus.

It may seem, though, like blackness is always and already tied to black/African American bodies, since I have been relying heavily on Spillers's and others' theorizations of African American culture. But blackness here, I want to reiterate, bears a vexed and tense relationship with black people/bodies, which is to say that there must be a highly textured conveyance of the "'para ontological distinction' between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black" (Moten 2008: 1744). Alexander Weheliye's work is helpful here: in a footnote in his 2008 article "After Man," Weheliye writes, "It is crucial to disarticulate blackness from black people, since not doing so accepts too easily race as a given natural and/or cultural phenomenon rather than an assemblage of forces that must continuously re/produce black subjects as nonhuman" (333). In other words, "blackness" is not natural—or inherent or commonsensical—to "black people." Weheliye goes on to say in "Engendering Phonographies: Sonic Technologies of Blackness" that despite the necessity of disarticulating blackness from those who are said to be black, it remains that "Blackness as a category of analysis does not disappear black bodies" (2014: 182). So blackness as a poetic force is both linked to and disarticulated from black bodies. Weheliye, though, remains in the intellectual camp of thinking "Blackness [a]s an effect of Western modernity," which does not acknowledge, too, the anoriginality of blackness (181). But I maintain that blackness is not reducible to a colonial imposition or modern racial categorization. Certainly, it is metonymic and manifests in the world, but, too, it is anoriginal, nothingness.

For the remainder of this discussion of blackness, of the first clause of my title, I want to home in on Fred Moten's work, as his is the most generative and direct articulation of blackness, fugitivity, and nothingness. Fred Moten: that "black motherfucker" who, like Curtis Mayfield, will continue to remain a believer—in blackness. Moten crystallizes blackness in the most beautifully tortuous way. For him, as it is for me, when we speak of blackness we are speaking of those "irruptions of that 'thematics of flight'" (toward which Spillers moves as well) and that Kantian "nonsense" that constitutes the lawless freedom of imagination's lawlessness (see Moten 2007: 218, 220). Varying Nahum Chandler's thoughts a bit, Moten has said that "blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, . . . it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space"—or, if I may vary Tina Campt's thinking (Campt 2014), blackness is the quotidian practice of refusal to "be"; that is, affirmation of its nothingness.

Blackness is already here, and it is the disagreeable, the subversions of the stasis giving intelligibility to one's validity as "human" or Sylvia Wynter's over-represented "Man" (which she calls an "ethnaclass" but is also, a bit more accurately, an "ethnogenderclass"). Blackness cannot, and refuses to, attain the agreeable because such a category is predicated on an exclusionary "human" and defers to a fixed rigidity that aligns with propriety, decorum, and the like. "We are disruption," blackness says—disruption of syntax via black vernacular, disruption of racializing ocular logics via the "fantastic" blackness of someone like Rachel Dolezal,⁴ disruption of the commonsense violence constituting hegemony via, say, slave insurrections—"and [we] consent to disruption" (Moten and Harney 2011: 987–88).

Always moving, always the elusive thing escaping, blackness manifests as "that desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its telos, [and] is indexed to anoriginal lawlessness" (Moten 2007: 223). Itself a proxy for "the inadequacy of mechanistic explanation" (223), blackness stands in as a perennial refusal of lawfulness—indeed, of law—and is unable to acknowledge the law. The law can never grab blackness; blackness, in nursery rhyme fashion, is the Gingerbread Man, so run, run, run as fast as you can, but you will still not catch blackness. It is always escaping.

But this constant refusive escape, as Moten says, "is uneasy." But "perhaps constant escape is what we mean when we say freedom," Moten muses; "perhaps constant escape is that which is mistreated in the dissembling invocation of freedom and the disappointing underachievement/s of emancipation" (2007: 242). And perhaps he is right. If one were to look at the nexus of when blackness meets a bastion of institutional, one might say academically hegemonic, power,

the workings of blackness become a bit clearer. And of course, that nexus is black studies, and Moten avers that “Black studies is a dehiscence at the heart of the institution and on its edge, . . . graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this *situated volatility*, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret” (2008: 1743; emphasis added). Black studies—the study, that is, of blackness—is volatile, characterized by volatility and dehiscence, a cut, a Spillers-like wounding. It is the instantiation of a critique of the West, of imperialism, of hegemony. It remains, because of its blackness, “unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses” (1745). As shown by the 1969 Cornell “crisis of the American university,” black studies is fugitive. At Cornell University in 1969, after experiencing white supremacist vitriol in the form of cross burning, epithets, and curricular erasure on the annual parents’ weekend, over eighty members of the university’s Afro-American Society (AAS) occupied Willard Straight Hall—then an administrative building—and ultimately demanded an end to campus racism and the creation of an Afro-American Studies Center. The takeover lasted thirty-six hours in total. In an attempt to take the building back, white Delta Upsilon frat brothers entered Willard Straight and brawled with AAS students in the Ivy Room before being subsequently ejected. Fearing for their safety, or keenly acknowledging the insurgent social life that is blackness, AAS members brought rifles to defend (or enact) their blackness. In the end, as a *Newsweek* magazine article titled “Universities under the Gun” (Elliott 1969) indicated, the making of the Afro-American Studies Center was expedited because “students wanted an autonomous program” (Lowery 2009; see also Downs 1999).

This historical anecdote is meant to show how volatile and disruptive, irruptive, eruptive blackness is, especially when met with hegemonic institutions, viz whiteness. To think about blackness, or to engage in thinking black, in black thought, is to bring to the fore that interstitial space of volatility and to utterly threaten to disintegrate the hegemonic polarity between—well, you name it: humanness and thingness, humanness and machine, law and unlaw, and so forth. The AAS’s demand for, essentially, a black studies program brought insurgency in the flesh to the whiteness of the academic institution, which portended and metonymically cited the lawlessness of para-ontological blackness. Study of blackness is “the anoriginary drive . . . the runaway anarchic ground of unpayable debt and untold wealth, the fugal, internal world theater that shows up for a minute serially,” and this is a (para-) ontological issue that destabilizes everyone’s purportedly stable claim to ontology (Harney and Moten 2013: 47). The gun-wielding black bodies in Ithaca, New York, in 1969 were themselves demonstrating the subversivity, the fugitivity, of the anoriginal lawlessness driving para-ontological subjects.

II. The Blackness of Trans*-ness: Roots Need Not Apply

If the previous section characterized blackness's undoing of the human, and its disruption of systematicity, this section delineates similar effects of trans*-ness. So if trans*, too, is not simply a descriptor of a body, then tell me, what is it? Because we know that corporeal representation and identificatory proclamation is not enough, trans* denotes a disruptive, eruptive orientation; it denotes "unpredetermined movement," Kai M. Green writes, and is "a tool that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation" (2015b: 191, 196). It is a mode of worldly inhabitation that fugitively engages history and space by reveling in excess, constantly refusing to limn ontological overflows—akin, perhaps, to what Matt Richardson would call the "good and messy." It is for this reason that I use *trans** instead of simply *trans* or *trans-*. Though Mel Y. Chen (2012: 137) uses the "prefixal trans-" to show that it is "not preliminarily limited to gender," and Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore note that the hyphen "marks the difference between the implied nominalism of 'trans' and the explicit relationality of 'trans-,' which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix" (2008: 11), *trans** is intended to be even more disruptive and to highlight its own dehiscence. And the asterisk is "starfishy," a regenerative cut that pulls the body back through itself, moving closer to oneself through the wound that is (on) the self—a cut that itself is that Butlerian crucial bread of possibility⁵ (Hayward 2013; Hayward 2008: 72); too, it is "fingery," a "multipointed asterisk" that "both points and touches" so that it "repurposes, displaces, renames, replicates, and intensifies terms, adding yet more texture, increased vitalization" (Hayward and Weinstein 2015: 198). Additionally, however, it is celestial. Beyond our discernible stratosphere is the galactic backdrop of all that we know to be possible. Colloquially, and tellingly, known simply as "space," it is empty yet full, and it is the very condition of possibility for, essentially, that which is possible. More tellingly, it is full of stars, for which the asterisk in *trans** is a metonym. If stars stipple the pregnant celestial void, and if "almost every element on Earth was formed at the heart of a star" ("Are We Really All Made of Stardust?," 2016), then *trans** denotes the ubiquity, the transitivity, the fundamentality of the primordial force of unfixing openness. In the beginning was, in fact, *trans**—because in the beginning stars floating without laws set in motion that originary trans*-ness, the fundamental openness of our world.

So while I am certainly speaking about those "refugee[s] without citizenship" known as transgender and gender-nonconforming people (Bird 2002: 366)—and as we learn from Bertolt Brecht, "refugees are the keenest dialecticians. They are refugees as a result of changes and their sole object of study is change" (translation quoted in Jay 1986: 28; and we learn from Jared Sexton that refugees bring about the "urgent renewal of categories"⁶)—I am more so speaking about

what Claire Colebrook calls “transitivity.” Transitivity is the beginningness that underlies the (gendered) conditions of possibility that allow for distinction. If we permit the loose and tangential link of transgender and gender-nonconforming bodies to stand in here as illustrative examples of trans*, transitivity can be said to highlight how, rather than being a “special test case that might provide the normal and normative with a basis for a renewed sense of its own difference,” metonymic trans* subjects, and any dialogue about distinctive corporeal categories, are “preceded, conditioned, and haunted by a condition of transitivity” (Colebrook 2015: 228). Transitivity is the prepersonal singularity preceding normative predicates like race and gender. In this singularity’s potentiality, it is characterized by instability, stabilizing only in talk of regulated legible corporeal identities. Therefore, Colebrook argues, transgender, transsexual, transanimal, and so on, bodies are not supplements to the discourse of the human but, when starting from the human, the displacement of it. “In the beginning is transitivity,” says Colebrook, “and it is the subsequent metalepsis and fetishization of identity that displaces this force” (229). And this is akin to Eva Hayward’s *trans-*: it is a disruptive perturbation of the process of purification, much like Carter’s description of blackness as the interstitial drama performed on the outskirts of the order of purity. The affixation of the asterisk onto *trans**, in a sense, opens up openness. Relating this to Internet searches, as blogger and trans* activist Sevan Bussell (2012) notes, the asterisk tells “your computer to search for whatever you typed, plus any characters after”; it tells the *cyberspace* to further open the already “open, and always, opening” prefixal *trans** (Tolbert 2013: 7).⁷

*Trans** is also weighted with its etymology as all words are, and *trans** (or, *trans-*) is prefixial—across, to the side of (para-), beyond. *Trans** is elsewhere, not here, because here is known, ontologically discernible and circumscribable. By now we know that *trans** suggests, and has suggested, the unclassifiable and illegible, but I would assert that it also suggests the pervasive moving non-movement that precedes that which is human, that which is animal, that which legibly is. Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein (2015: 196) note the asterisk’s designation of the primacy of, not the human, but the “eventualization of life.” That is to say, *trans** denotes its own antefoundational status, its own fugitivity insofar as it—by being prefixally *trans** and suffixally an asterisk and thus incompletely completing itself, disallowing the stabilizing force of an ontologizing root word—refuses rootedness. Syntactically and linguistically, *trans** is its own nonroot, its own para. Roots need not, indeed cannot, apply. Hence, its own nominative paradoxically marks its perpetually moving unnamability:

If *trans** is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness. In other words, *trans** is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes

through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans* is prepositionally oriented—marking the *with*, *through*, *of*, *in*, and *across* that make life possible. Trans*life works purposefully crabwise to ontological claims; trans* can be ontological to the extent that it is the movement across precisely *vitality* itself. (Hayward and Weinstein 2015: 196–97)

“Trans* is both movement and the force of materialization that may become matter, but only prepositionally so,” Hayward and Weinstein go on to write (197). Trans* is an operation, though not a mechanistic one, of locomotion and agitation, troubling and troubling ontologized states. This point, then, is an important one to make explicit: the starfishy, fingery, celestial asterisk “is the agglutinating asterisk and prefixial nature of trans that always materializes prepositional movements . . . is *moving mattering*. As such, trans* is not *not* ontological but is rather the expressive force *between*, *with*, and *of* that enables the asterisk to stick to particular materializations” (197). Force, a metonymic one, is what trans* is, like blackness, expressly provoking ontologization by moving beneath it and to the side of it and through it. Trans* breaks open—ever the fugitive who despises hir confinement, who, indeed, can’t be confined—even the categories of transgender via engaging in a kind of “guerrilla” (em)bodying through “burrowing in and virally *disrupting* the smoothness and closure on which power depends” (Stone 2014: 92; emphasis added). Trans* is that refusal to be itself, to be sure of itself, to be sure that it is where it’s at.

Trans* as transitivity, as a prefixally trans- fugitivity, enacts what C. Riley Snorton calls “transfiguration” (Snorton 2011). As an analytic of radical destabilization that “gesture[s] toward a space of transition as a site that allows us to understand the queer relationship between” feminist universality and particularities, trans*/transitivity as transfiguration operates in the space of liminality, of *transition*, which is the very site of the most radical destabilization. And this transitive/transitional space, Snorton writes, “serves as a place where particular assumptions about gender and its mapping on the body come under such scrutiny as to implode.” This implosion, like blackness’s volatility, is a disruptive and irruptive undercommon subversion. And this transitive, undercommon subversivity, as LaMonda H. Stallings says of hip-hop (Stallings 2013: 135), trafficks in a queer above- and below-ground fluidity wherein examining the “nook and cranny spaces of transitional bodies” and subjectivities disintegrates the ontological demarcations of ontic ontology. A transfigurative transitivity unmakes ontology via its para-ontology. What Snorton is responding to in his essay “Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women’s Studies,” from which the analytic concept of transfiguration is taken, is the proclivity for black male feminists to buttress a gender binary and conflate “male” with being in possession of a penis,

compounding an uncritical self-reflexivity. What Snorton wishes to undo is that very assumption of penis equals male, in pursuit of a more expansive deployment of black feminism.

So if Snorton critiques the genitally normative categories of gender that black (male) feminists often unwittingly uphold, in an effort to “trans*blasphemously” concretize my theorizations, if you will, I wish here to also obviate the conflation of trans*(gender) with racial whiteness. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar explains, value is extracted from (trans*) bodies of color in order to produce transgender whiteness. Drawing on the work of Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, Puar’s project in “Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled” (2015) is to always imagine an affiliation between disabilities, trans*, racial, and interspecies discourses through her concept of “becoming trans,” which is to say, quite controversially, that boundaries are porous insofar as they engage the force of ontological multiplicity and, ultimately, make an end goal an always shifting impossibility: “There is no trans” (46–47, 62). Puar writes, “Trans becoming masquerades as a teleological movement, as if one could actually become trans. Trans is often mistaken as the horizon of trans and, as such, is mistaken for becoming trans as linear telos, as a prognosis that becomes the body’s contemporary diagnosis and domesticates the trans body into the regulatory norms of permanence.

“*Becoming trans*, then, as opposed to trans becoming, must highlight this impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points” (62–63). One might initially castigate Puar for erasing transgender subjects. After all, to say “there is no trans” is a rather provocative and contentious claim for a queer theorist to make. But Puar is in fact suggesting something rather profound. One cannot arrive at trans* precisely because it is movement, excitation, and agitation. To “be” trans* is an impossibility since trans* is a radically unstable non/site laying the ante-foundation for the possibility of Heideggerian *Dasein*. Trans* is “force” and “intensity” rather than identity, fixed or otherwise (Puar 2014: 80). Trans* is not linear, permanent, or an end—it is in fact the impossibility of these things. “Sometimes the shit stays messy,” Maggie Nelson writes of her partner Harry Dodge, who insists of their gendered subjectivity, “*I’m not on my way anywhere*” (Nelson 2015: 52–53). Nelson and Dodge vocalize the impossibility, the nonlinearity of (gendered) identities. Thus “becoming trans” references this perpetual disruptive movement, this messy shit. Linked historically to the Greek philosophies of Heraclitus and Aristotle, becoming denotes the undoing of stasis, of being-as-such, tied to a known and knowable fixed identity, thus marking a transitive perpetual motion. It is in no way teleological, linear, regulated, or logical. There is no “trans*,” which is to say, seemingly oxymoronically, there is no

legible or identifiable manifestation of trans*-ness. Trans* is that lawless anoriginality that refuses to be captured or ontologically limned.

Metonymic trans* bodies, metonymic black bodies,⁸ are the maroons who “know something about possibility.” As Moten and Harney assert, speaking to and with a kind of trans*-ness/transitivity and blackness, “They are the condition of possibility of production of knowledge” (2004: 105). Trans*-ness, and trans*-ness’s blackness, is the beyond of politics and distinctions and legibilities already in motion—perpetual motion—and, from the “way, way below,” from the non/text of that “hidden transcript,” exacts a kind of infrapolitics that is before and beyond (see Kelley 1994).⁹

III: That Alternative Groove We In

Amiri Baraka’s work is in the break, in the scene, in the music. This location, at once internal and interstitial, determines the character of Baraka’s political and aesthetic intervention. Syncopation, performance, and the anarchic organization of phonic substance delineate an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work. . . . The black radical tradition . . . constitutes its radicalism as a cutting and abundant refusal of closure. This refusal of closure is not a rejection but an ongoing and reconstructive improvisation of ensemble; this reconstruction’s motive is the sexual differentiation of sexual difference.

—Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

Both the blackness of trans*-ness and the trans*-ness of blackness un/mark, in a slight recapitulation of Katherine McKittrick’s phrase, “demonic non-ground.” McKittrick’s “demonic ground” describes “perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life” (Weheliye 2008: 323). A demonic ground is ground that is fugitive and unstable, “a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable outcome,” “a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity” (McKittrick 2006: xxiv). For blackness and trans*-ness to un/mark a demonic nonground is a creative use of language to describe the thereness and not-thereness of the ground that is not a ground—a ground that, in not being a ground, is the condition for groundedness—which, in other words, is black and trans*. The demonic nonground resonates with Evelyn Hammonds’s “black (w)hole,”¹⁰ situating it in a black feminist genealogy, and also highlighting the accusatory, light-bearing, critical (etymologically, “demonic” or “satanic”) abyss underlying the order of purity. It, too, is a space of liminality, of volatility, and in that liminality/volatility it is productive, forceful, and destructive of the human-as-man. I might alternatively call this demonic space “virtual,” as virtuality is of a voidal non/space in which there is a “lively tension, a desiring

orientation toward being/becoming” that is aptly described as an imaginative “scene of wild activities” (Barad 2015: 396).¹¹ But though demonic and virtual, there is also something sonic here in the liminality, something echoing Moten’s “Black Mo’nin” or “break,” or Claudia Rankine’s (2015) mournful condition of black life.¹² Or maybe this is simply to say, there is something rhythmically and interstitially poetic here.

I have been calling blackness and trans*-ness poetic forces throughout this essay, echoing Fred Moten. In this sense, they share a disciplinary affiliation with Amiri Baraka. Though one imagines Baraka would have never given much thought to his relationship to trans*-ness, Moten sees in Baraka’s work the epitomization of musical interstitiality. As an archetypal black radical, Baraka dwells in the break, the undercommons, and refuses the foreclosure of his unfixing poetics. And in this refusive posture, the fugitive posture is syncopated, uneven, differing and differential. And syncopation, like the break writ large, is a gapped chasm, which itself is, as Moten writes of black mo’nin’, “the difference within invagination between what cuts and what surrounds, invagination being that principle of impurity that . . . is constantly improvised by the rupturing and augmentative power of an always already multiply and disruptively present singularity” (2003: 202). That rupturing, disruptively present singularity is what I have called “blackness,” what I have called “trans*-ness.”

It stands, though, that in their poetics, in Baraka’s, blackness’s, and trans*-ness’s musicality, there exists, too, a rhythmic force. We are surrounded by rhythms reverberating throughout the vibrations of worldly inhabitation, but the prevailing rhythm, the one that seeks to circumscribe our para-ontological cacophony, is what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call a “killing rhythm.” But, as they assert, “at the heart of its [the killing rhythm’s] production is a certain indiscretion . . . a haptic resonance that makes possible and impossible this killing rhythm, the undercommon track that remains fugitive from the emerging logistics of this deadly rhythm and will exhaust it” (2014: 185–86). Simmering beneath the killing rhythm of hegemony is that indiscretion and fugitivity that I am calling “black” and “trans*.” They reside in the undercommons, refusing the logic of logic, which is another name for the killing rhythm. “If logisticality is the resident capacity to live on the earth,” Moten and Harney write, “logistics is the regulation of that capacity in the service of making the world, the zero-one, zero-one world that pursues the general antagonism of life on earth.” Logic, hegemony—or as hegemonic racial and gender analogues to black and trans*, white and cisgender—attempts to create logical individuals, and this is to be firmly immersed within the symphonic trap of the killing rhythm. The killing rhythm seeks structure, fixity; it seeks “to beat out that rhythm over the under-common track that keeps its own measure” (Moten and Harney 2014: 187–88).

And the alternative rhythm facing fatal melodic extermination is, in other words, black and trans*.

The end, the demise of this logical individual who sings to the tune of the killing rhythm is, Moten and Harney assert, “flesh/blackness” (189). It is also a kind of trans*-ness, I’d add, a fatal cut, a dehiscence, a rupture to the stitches of circumscription. Characterized as a “spooky action,” Moten and Harney enunciate the para-ontological sociality of blackness, and by my own extension, trans*-ness. They write:

What one might call the social life of things is important only insofar as it allows us to imagine that social life is not a relation between things but is, rather, that field of rub and rupture that works, that is the work of, no one, nothing, in its empathic richness. The social work of social life is no work at all, but the madness remains; rub and rupture all but emerge, but in nothing like an emergence, as something imprecision requires us to talk about as if it were some thing, not just discrete but pure. . . . This “thing,” our ~~thing~~, the alternate groove we in, the devalued and invaluable local insurgency, disobeys our most loving invocation. This gift of spirit gives itself away and zero-one is left embittered. (188)

Blackness and trans*-ness: that “alternative groove we in,” a groove that underlies grooviness and undoes it, opening it up again and again. What I have attempted here is a “grave-robbing” stratagem, as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson (2014: 161) might say, a stratagem that insists on the necessity to “exhume tools that might help us explain what has been going on in our own backyard.” I insist on this work, and my scholarly corpus in general, as a black trans* studies methodological approach to “uncovering the skeletons of racism, misogyny, and other systemic violence and piecing them together” as a way to think through the very world in which we live (161). It is an alternative song, one that moves to an alternative groove, or perhaps a groove that does not even adhere to the sonic tenets of grooviness. But that is good, because what has passed for rhythm has been structured on a necessary, constitutive “killing.” In this alternatively groovy vein, blackness and trans*-ness are things, discursively marking their thereness and not-thereness, their very linguistic volatility, their elusion of syntactical nominatives, which themselves, ultimately, are a form of fixing. Ever the artfully escaping air from the enframing of life, blackness and trans*-ness embitter the binaristic zero-one formulation that is ontology. “Catch me if you can—but you can’t and you never will,” say blackness and trans*-ness as they skip away, holding hands, perhaps, laughing all the way (ha ha ha).

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Notes

1. See the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston. The film is a documentary about New York's underground drag scene in which genderqueer folks of color vogue, mop, perform "realness," and destabilize all that one thinks they know about gender performativity.
2. Spillers writes that "a posture of critical insurgency must be achieved. It cannot be assumed." But I might also submit that since blackness underlies possibility, it *can* be assumed, as it is the foundation of everything's foundation. In Amaryah Shaye's words, "Blackness is a thing, is a space, *that already is*" (2014a). As an original, it can be assumed on the grounds that it is always, and has always been, before.
3. Khan uses the singular *they* gender pronoun, so I am honoring that preference here.
4. See, for example, Kai M. Green's (2015b) piece, "'Race and Gender Are Not the Same!' Is Not a Good Response to the 'Transracial'/Transgender Question or We Can and Must Do Better"; Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides's (2016) article, "When We Enter: The Blackness of Rachel Dolezal"; and Rogers Brubaker's (2016) book, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*.
5. A reference to Judith Butler's quote that "possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (2004: 29).
6. In "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," Sexton writes, quoting Giorgio Agamben, that

the refugee [i]s a limit-concept, a figure that "at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed." This urgent renewal of categories is made possible by the conceptual crisis of the nation-state represented by the refugee insofar as she disarticulates "the trinity of state-nation-territory" and "the very principle of the inscription of nativity" upon which it is based. The refugee is the contemporary political subject par excellence because she exposes to view "the originary fiction of sovereignty" and thereby renders it available to thought. (2010: 31)

This provides insight into my purposes of thinking about anoriginality and the (lawless) conditions for distinction and the destabilization of normative categories.
7. As well, Avery Tompkins notes that, pertaining explicitly to transgender discourses, "proponents of adding the asterisk to trans* argue that it signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals. Trans* is thus meant to include not only identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans* man, and trans* woman that are prefixed by trans- but also identities such as genderqueer, neutriots, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid" (2014: 27).

8. On the subject of bodies that are deemed trans* and their always already indexation of blackness, we can turn even to the “bathroom debate” and its antitrans* discourse as it indexes the legacy of racial slavery and is mired in the afterlife of slavery, bathroom signs, and their (violent) gender-normative regimes mimicking the “Jim Crow era[’s] refer[ences] to ‘men,’ ‘women,’ and ‘colored’—dramatizing how the Lacanian ‘sexed body’ is always already a racialized body and a colonized body, and how Black and/or indigenous peoples have always figured as sexual and gender outlaws to be disciplined and punished” (Gossett 2016). In short, “we can’t think the gender binary outside of the context of racial slavery,” which is to say, quintessentially, in the US context, the context of blackness’s many enslaved afterlives (Gossett 2016). Transgressions of gender—really, of the fundamentality of “the human” and its racial and gender normative predicates—index both, by necessity, blackness and trans*-ness. Blackness is inextricable from trans*-ness.
9. “Way, way below” references Robin D. G. Kelley’s introduction title: “Writing Black Working-Class History from Way, Way Below.” Additionally, Kelley borrows *infrapolitics* from James C. Scott, a political anthropologist who conducted extensive research on peasants in Malaysia from 1978 to 1980. As well, *hidden transcript* is also taken from Scott and is defined by Kelley as “a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. . . . The veiled social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance—thrift, footdragging, the destruction of property or more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination” (1994: 8).
10. In reference to Evelynn Hammonds’s 1994 article “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” in which she seeks to unearth the reasons for the silence around black women’s sexuality.
11. In full, Karen Barad writes:

Virtual particles are not in the void but *of* the void. They are on the razor’s edge of non/being. The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The void is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what might yet (have) be(en). Vacuum fluctuations are virtual deviations/variations from the classical zero-energy state of the void. That is, *virtuality is the material wanderings/wonderings of nothingness; virtuality is the ongoing thought experiment the world performs with itself*. Indeed, quantum physics tells us that *the void is an endless exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles, a “scene of wild activities.”* (2015: 396)
12. These are in reference to Moten’s chapter “Black Mo’nin” and his notion of “the break” in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, and Claudia Rankine’s *New York Times* article “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning” (2015). Black Mo’nin’ for Moten is the sonic resonances of images, the blackness, if you will, of racialized trauma. The break is that generative, black liminal space in between. As Valorie Thomas (2012: 50) writes in her chapter in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, the break “is a transformative technology that mirrors the vitality, dissonances, and underlying coherence of diasporic cultural processes.” Lastly, Rankine argues that, simply, the very condition on which black life is grounded is mourning—mourning the death, essentially, of the appearance of blackness in public spaces coded as white. All these are interstitial spaces that musically and tonally resonate.

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The Crowns of Stuzo Clothing

Design, Representation, and Self-Craft

FRANCISCO J. GALARTE

The fashion section of this issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* features an interview with the owners of Los Angeles-based Stuzo Clothing and images of their clothing. Stuzo Clothing is owned and operated by Stoney Michelli and Uzo Ejikeme. The designs and ethos of this fashion company complement the concerns of this issue of *TSQ*, as the vibrant prints and “genderless” style of clothing highlight the “Issue of Blackness” as it is addressed and questioned by the contributing authors in this volume. Stuzo Clothing designs highlight processes of representation and self-craft. For the first time, this section features photographs that will allow readers to see for themselves the formative power of fabric and silhouettes in “racial mattering” and the “sovereignty of bodies in world-shaping ways” (Nguyen 2015: 792). Stoney and Uzo describe their clothing as “genderless” as opposed to “unisex,” which signals a project that is about more than generating headlines, like the “temporary pop shopping experience” that appeared at Selfridges in London in the spring of 2015 (Chrisman-Campbell 2015). The transformation of the three floors of Selfridges’ Oxford Street store into gender-neutral shopping areas with androgynous mannequins clothed in unisex garments referenced a history of unisex clothing as a trend that began on Paris runways and featured sleek, simple silhouettes and graphic patterns with no historical gender associations (Chrisman-Campbell 2015). Stuzo Clothing’s “genderless” clothing lines feature textured “crowns” (snapback hats), beanies, graphic-printed hoodies, tanks, joggers, and tunic-length tops; only a few pieces of each design are produced, signaling a limited-edition product model and a carefully curated arrangement of prints, fabrics, and silhouettes (Dolce Vita 2015). The experience of encountering Stuzo Clothing is one that is anything but ahistorical, let alone apolitical.

The photos accompanying the interview below highlight how Stuzo Clothing’s “genderless” designs offer subtle gestures to the Panamanian and Nigerian backgrounds. The pairing of the nonnormatively gendered, androgynous

models in the photos dressed in garments with prints that cite “supposedly African fabric,” which according to Monica L. Miller (2009: 272) “enjoyed a vogue in post-civil rights America in the 1970s as a result of the growing popularity of black nationalism,” disrupts any trace of heteropatriarchy commonly associated with cultural nationalism. For example, one of the models in the photos is dressed in a white bomber jacket featuring contrasting sleeves constructed from a stunning turquoise, lime, blue, and black patterned fabric, and underneath the jacket is a tee that bears the words *Panama Canal* screen printed in repetition. It is here that Stuzo Clothing’s genderless designs enact subtle political critique, referencing the slave labor and coolie labor that built the Panama Canal and the canal’s imperialist legacy in the Americas. Stuzo Clothing designs are then “trans” insofar as at the core of the garments is “transformation—change, the power or ability to mold, reorganize, reconstruct, construct” and also “of longitude: the transcontinental, transatlantic” (La Fountain-Stokes 2008: 195). It is my hope as the editor of the fashion section of *TSQ* that the photos of Stuzo Clothing included alongside the interview allow viewers and readers to “look both [or all] ways at gender, sexuality, race and power” (Miller 2009: 273).



Figure 1. Stuzo clothing. Image courtesy of Molly Adams

Francisco Galarte: Where are you two from, and how did you become collaborators?

Stoney Michelli: I am Panamanian but grew up in the Bronx, New York. Uzo is Nigerian but spent most of her time in Harlem, New York. We met in New York in 2009 and became a couple shortly after. Since then, we've been creating ever since.

FG: How did Stuzo Clothing come about, and what is your vision for your company?

SM: When we met, I was in school pursuing a graphic design degree while sketching up logos for what was to be a T-shirt company. I shared my designs with Uzo and she fell in love. She told me how much she loved them and believed that we could succeed if we started a company. Coincidentally, we both shared the same dream of moving to California, so we made the move instantly. Once we got to Los Angeles, we officially launched our company as "G.Q.A." (Graphic Queen

Apparel). We operated as a T-shirt company under that name for a couple of years but felt the direction of the company wasn't quite there. After taking a look at who we really are, we decided to rebrand ourselves and change the company name to "Stuzo" (Stoney and Uzo). We wanted it to reflect who we were, two women who embrace both genders without apology, women that represent all walks of life in fashion, not just the feminine ones. The birth of Stuzo solidified the vision of a company much larger than T-shirts [and] a brand was born.



Figure 2. Stuzo clothing. Image courtesy of Molly Adams

FG: You refer to your clothing as "genderless" as opposed to unisex; can you say a little bit more about that?

Uzo Ejikeme: Unisex clothing implies that it is for women and men only. Genderless implies it's for all! The world is made up of different people who do not simply classify themselves as men and women. As the time goes on, the pronouns have grown and so have we. We represent she, he, them, they, and all.

FG: What is your current collection, and what is the inspiration behind it?

UE and SM: Our September 2016 collection is inspired by our everyday experiences, the ones [experiences] of the victims we see in current times, and those that are in pain because of it. It's also inspired by our unwillingness to conform to what society has taught us to believe in. From childhood, society tells you how to think, act, dress, and feel about yourself. We want to free the minds of those [who] have been taught how to be. The collection has a great balance of strength and lightheartedness, so of course there will be patterns and color!



Figure 3. Stuzo clothing. Image courtesy of Molly Adams

FG: Activists and academics have described clothing as political, especially when you think of the Trayvon Martin and the profiling and violence he endured in part because being black and wearing a hoodie marked him as dangerous and threatening. Do you think there is room in what you are doing in the fashion world to make important political statements? If so, do you feel Stuzo Clothing does this?

UE and SM: We believe in creating pieces that invoke thought and emotion. Anytime we create a piece, it's meant to open your mind to something different. No one outfit should mark you for death or label you as a gangster or criminal. We like using messages, like our past "Human" tee and some of the pieces in our new collection, to send political and human rights messages. Lastly, Stuzo makes clothing that spreads peace and love, and there's always room for that.

FG: Critics have described your clothing as falling into the category of streetwear that continues to trend in menswear magazines. How is Stuzo Clothing reconfiguring/reshaping what streetwear is?

UE and SM: We don't solely consider our brand as "streetwear"; we make clothes for all to wear. When we create, there is no gender or genre in mind. We make gear beyond the streets of where we grew up but of the ones we've seen, walked, and will reach. This is [the] reason we have been fortunate to have people all over the world rock our gear with pride.

FG: The photographs featured alongside this interview contain ensembles with vibrant and powerful prints; can you elaborate a bit more on Stuzo Clothing's use of prints?

UE and SM: Our use of prints comes from personal preference and culture. With Stoney being from Panama and Uzo from Nigeria, we like to feature colorful prints that come from each of our countries. We feel it is important to bring that part of us in our line. Our backgrounds celebrate bright colors and patterns that have traditional value that still hold up in this modern world.

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Translation Section

The Issue of Blackness

Edited by DAVID GRAMLING,
PATRICK PLOSCHNITZKI, and TARA TAYLOR

The following three short pieces, translated from the German, emerged from the efforts of activists in the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (Initiative of Black People in Germany). Each of these short essays was published in *Spiegelblicke: Perspektiven Schwarzer Bewegung in Deutschland* (*Looks in the Mirror: Perspectives of the Black Movement in Germany*; Ridha et al. 2016).

Spiegelblicke, as described in the words of its editors,

is a book of essays, portraits, analytical texts, storytelling, and photo reports. The collection opens access to the history of Black people and their movement in Germany. In this volume, fifty Black authors, historical witnesses, and portrait-subjects describe and analyze racist structures in private and public spaces. They document stages in their search for identity and so-called empowerment. The volume is about their experiences during the Nazi era; the history of colonialism and its reach into the present (for example, in the education and legal systems); about empowering interventions by parents, teachers, artists, or people in the media; and about the everyday life stories of Black people in Germany. It deals with topics such as racial profiling, the role of human rights, and refugee activism. Also, dimensions of discrimination such as audism (discrimination against deaf people) that have rarely been discussed so far are rendered visible in the book. Along with the question of what it means to be Black and queer, feminist and lesbian, it introduces intersectional perspectives onto Black life. The views of various generations and voices are mirrored and reflected. They emphasize how even those spaces in which people seek refuge from daily discrimination can be dangerous spaces—that there too, it's about questions of openness. Thirty years after the release of the still path-breaking book *Farbe bekennen. Afrodeutsche*

Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte edited by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz (*Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, translated into English by Anne V. Adams with a foreword by Audre Lorde), the editors of *Spiegelblicke* present a volume that illustrates the processes of development, debate, and definition of the Black movement in Germany until today. Their goal: creating a lasting artifact that is easily accessible and addresses a wide audience, a book that is meant to encourage, inspire, and intrigue. (Orlanda Verlag 2016)

In the English translations below, words are italicized under two circumstances: (1) if the word in the original text was already an English loan word, such as *community*, *safe space*, *othering*, or *awareness*; or (2) if the German word is retained in the translation so as to specify a concept that would otherwise be obscured in translation. (Note that *queer* is not generally italicized here, as it has long since become a standard, mainstream German adjective. In contrast, the use of the English loan word *community* in the original texts signals an intentional elision of, and an alternative vision to, the German counterpart concept *Gemeinschaft*, which still today carries Nazi overtones.)

Coming Out and Coming Home

by Tsepo Bollwinkel

Translated by Trez Norwood

First published in German as "Coming-Out und Coming home"

I am a trans* man. I kept my distance from Black *communities* until after my transition. There were two reasons for this. One reason was that I felt uncomfortable as a person, in that I was experiencing an existential conflict between bodily disposition and gender identity, which led me to live in isolation. The second reason was that I was afraid to be confronted with hostility in the Black community. I'd already had my fill from white, heteronormative dominant society. I did not want to suffer that yet again among my Black sisters and brothers.

Back then, in the company of my fellow African compatriots, an outspoken animosity prevailed toward those who identified as queer or LGBT in the Western world. That came to be the case primarily thanks to colonial history, and through white and Christian influences (see below). To be labeled a trans* person was indeed dangerous. At the very least it carried a sense of ostracism. Today, however, the situation has relaxed. It is still wearisome that most of the African LGBTIQ* people I know either keep a distance from their countrymen or lead a stressful double life. So I have oriented myself quite carefully in my search for a black community.

Once I had survived my transition, I drove to the *Bundestreffen*, or “federal meeting,” and I was very happy to arrive into a Black *community*, but I kept my trans* identity a secret. At the *Bundestreffen* this was all too appropriate because I was able to observe homophobic discrimination and even attacks occurring. How hostile would the reactions have been toward a trans* man? The sacrifice of not unveiling myself in the community was painful, tied as it was to the fear of being accidentally outed against one’s will, losing my Black community as a result.

A few years ago, I finally felt secure enough to show myself as a trans* man at the *Bundestreffen*, and it was not a problem because in the last ten years a profound transformation has taken hold within the ISD [Initiative of Black People in Germany]. At least among the active members of ISD, the task was establishing an awareness that our community is made up of people with different experiences and living environments, people who are rich or poor, people who never graduated from school or those with a higher education, those that identify as German or do not, those who are physically and mentally in line with the social norm, those who love the opposite sex or same sex or those who are asexual, those who identify within binary gender roles or do not. A commonality we share is living the life of a Black person. And one of our duties is to create space for ourselves in which we can, as complete persons, contribute to the Black *community* in Germany.

The establishment of the LGBTIQ* Working Group (of nonheterosexual-loving and/or non-gender-binary-compliant-living people) in the ISD in 2014 was an important step for me. Within the working group I have a safe space to discuss my needs and to develop and manifest the networking and protection of queer Black people. I hope that we create a place for Black LGBTIQ*s who often live in isolation outside ISD, a place where they are a respected part of a lively Black *community*.

What can queer people, with their diverse life experiences and discourses, contribute to issues of concern to Black people in Germany? First and foremost, there needs to be an understanding that very different people and living environments come together in communities that actually only converge along one singular experience or common interest—in our case, being Black in a white-dominated society. As well as the knowledge of the urgent need to address all the difference and diversities within a community, openly and respectfully. Ultimately, queer Black *communities* will be able to break up the violent domination of white discourse around queerness, feminism, racism, and decolonization in this society; take these topics on as our own; and in doing so expedite changes to our society and work toward a possible nondiscriminatory way of living together from a Black perspective.

Black and Queer

by Ginnie Bekoe

Translated by Lydia Heiss and Judith Menzl

First published in German as "Schwarz und Queer"

When I first imagined the substance of this piece, I envisioned a huge table of queer people, exchanging perceptions, identities, experiences, orientations, lifestyles, and perspectives. For me, the only task left would be merely to put on paper what had been discussed and—voilà!—a survey of thirty years of queer Black history would be recorded.

This image is just as lovely as it is unrealistic. People are not, nor have they been, in quite this sort a position to share their experiences. I cannot reach everyone, and not everyone wants to participate. And I alone can't—and don't wish to—represent all queer people in the new Black movement. My perspective is vague and above all: *mine*. So I created a questionnaire concerning the topic "Black and queer." Sixteen people have responded, and most of the quotations here are taken from it. Most participants asked to remain anonymous. Instead of their name, only their sexual orientation and gender identification will be mentioned. What follows is a fragmented view on perspectives of the past, present, and future.

For many people of color, to be in the presence of other nonwhite individuals signifies a sense of relaxation, arrival, or homecoming. The knowledge of shared experiences and topics, of not having to step out from behind the veil of "otherness." The shared point of reference and the identity fulcrum of Blackness allow people to feel free to be individuals. To be themselves and not a delegate or class representative.

But what is it like when another fulcrum of identification or identity is added within the Black *community*, namely: queerness in its broadest sense?

"Lonely," writes a queer cis-gendered woman. Another says, "Black *communities* are not *safe spaces* for the LGBTQ person. Hetero- and cis-sexism are just as likely to occur there as in mainstream society. Thus I am just as on guard there with my sexual identity."

Here Yet Still Unseen

Tsepo Bollwinkel, a queer transgender man, adds, "At the very least a queer person is able to be an equally valued member of the *ISD community*. Still, the particular concerns of queer individuals are of no notable significance."

So we are here, but still invisible? A gay cis-gendered man wrote the following beautiful sentence: "Both in the queer *community* and in the Black *community*, only one part of my soul is caressed. Only rarely am I perceived in full."

ADEFRA [Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland, or Black Women in Germany], a sociopolitical collective of Black women founded thirty years ago, is considered an enclave among women of color, where nonheterosexually positioned women have been and are perceived in the wholeness of their identity. Stated rather crudely by a queer cis-gendered woman, “ADEFRA? A lesbian wonderland!”

ADEFRA and the women organized through ADEFRA, including lesbians, are considered by many as catalysts for the founding of the younger Black movement. Without the ADEFRA women, we would definitely not be as far along as we are today.

Thanks to Audre Lorde—a lesbian cis-gendered woman herself—the first Black communities were founded, and the first research was conducted on Black history in Germany. The first books were published, and the first networks were formed. From the beginning, then, these discourses and developments were coconstructed by queer women. But is this fact well known? Most responses to the questionnaire say it is indeed known, but that “more queer perspectives are lacking. There should be a heterogeneous pool of perspectives, meaning: voices from different generations, lifestyles, and political perspectives.”

We Need More Role Models

On this point, a queer, cis-gendered woman comments, “No, the fact that these people are queer does not mean the same as representation. It brings *awareness* to the *community*, but there is so much more to us.”

For male-identified individuals, there has been no enclave [such as the ADEFRA] thus far.

For one gay, cis-gendered man, the many queer members of the founding generation are inspiring, but he wishes for more gay role models.

At various points in time within the gay *community*, groups of men of color have attempted to establish a small enclave. Although in the Black *community* in the 1980s and 1990s, they held back in organizing such groups in the wake of verbal and physical aggressions. Queer-phobic currents further produced exclusions that especially affect genderqueer and trans* men and women to this day.

Noah Hofmann, a heteroflexible-to-pansexual cis-gendered man, adds, “I think it definitely helped that the young Black movement has been shaped by many queer individuals, even though it has not raised *awareness/sensitivity* to the level it actually should have. For example, instead of ‘only’ being perceived as Black activists, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Fatima El-Tayeb should also more consistently be named Black *queer* activists and be recognized for their queer impact and influences.”

Not Just Forging Space, but Giving It Too

The Black *community* in Germany is very heterogeneous. Perhaps this is due to the short length of the Black movement's existence in Germany, or thanks to those who, in the past, continuously made an effort to emphasize equality, or at least likeness. So as, on the one hand, to counter "othering" by *mainstream* society—the isolating categorization of something or someone as "other" and/or "foreign"—and, on the other hand, due to a general wish—in at least one context—to not have to argue and fight.

But the most various of individuals with the most various of backgrounds and perspectives do not feel they are being recognized within this context. A queer cis-gendered woman explains, "I think our *community* is largely influenced by the middle class, the privileged Afro-German perspective. As an African woman of color, I often feel marginalized. Sometimes I experience rejection within the *community*. There is a surprising amount of cultural prejudice against my perspective."

She writes further, "As a cis-gendered woman I have to be very, very careful to recognize and respect the experience of everybody else. Sometimes I feel as though my position, especially as a mother, is not seen as part of queerness." Also, those who do not clearly identify along the gender binary, who don't perform their social gender traditionally (that is to say, they don't appear as typically "male" or "female")—for example, polyamorous-living/loving individuals, people who do not identify according to Western categories, people with disabilities, asexuals, femmes, butches, bears, and others—are part of the Black *communities* and the Black queer *communities*, overlapping in their identities and concepts of life.

Meanwhile, there have been new, and sometimes revived, subgroupings within the Black movement that are working to make their own realities, wishes, and needs visible. But such a trend needs to be desired and made possible by all parties involved. It is not just about forging space. Space must also be given.

This is why queer collectives, study groups for people of color, and parent and child groups have emerged, especially over the last five to ten years. Through the connectivity and access of the Internet, celebrities such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox are now well-known trans*-idols in Germany as well. On the Internet, the Swiss musician* Msoke is just as visible to trans*-people living in Germany as Diana Hartman is as a lesbian intersex*-woman.

Similarly, it is now possible to follow Fatima El-Tayeb's research, to dance to Titica's and Leif's music, to be delighted by Mykki Blanco's *genderplay*, or to order for the *Black Queer Anthology* from the United States and *Queer Africa* through online bookstores.

A queer person in the Black *community*, a queer cis-gendered woman, describes her perceptions as follows: "In Berlin it's all right, but at the *Bundestreffen*,

or federal meeting, it can be difficult. . . . In the *community* worldwide—especially in the United States, it’s frightening . . . Gazi Kondo, for example, a gay, Black YouTuber fraternizes_sororizes with people who, on the one hand, think he’s great because he is radical, yet actually would like to slit his throat because he is gay. It’s crazy.”

Queer Topics in the Black Community

“It’s slowly getting better, but largely thanks to individual battles, self-segregating groups, and Web 2.0. . . . Trans*-people, in particular, mostly live rather hidden in the community, which is just such a shame.” On this point, it is also easy to recognize how intercontinental connections are important and available to be experienced. Indeed, they seem to be formative experiences for queers in today’s world.

Even with the permeability of information currents through the Internet, it is still important to experience these visible differences locally, in our own groups. When an unspoken norm is not questioned, the images of cis-gendered, heterosexual people are not challenged and remain the only visible lifestyle. As a result, people’s fears and anxieties about fully revealing their identity, along with the sense that they and their realities and concerns are not represented—indeed, nonexistent—these will also persist.

In that regard, it is worth noting that a gay cis-gendered man has, in the last few years, endeavored to establish a gay network, based in the wish to connect, exchange views, and meet up with more African men who have sex with men. He reports a sense of acceptance and joy, as they all stepped out of their perceived isolation and were able to enjoy pleasant times with one another.

ADEFRA is still active and continues to be an important place for women in Berlin. Similarly, the Les Migras organization works tirelessly to not only provide education on queer topics but also to provide support, consults, and group meetings.

There is a trend within Black *communities* in Germany to create awareness of intersectionality, of the existence of various domains in life where Black people are marginalized, suppressed, and experience difficulty above and beyond their Blackness, such that these experiences often remain unnamed.

What does that mean for the Black *community*? We probably don’t even need to think through all these realities of life right from the outset. It is probably impossible to think through them all. Still, I wish spaces would be created such that there might be room for everyone and everything, so that battles for visibility, recognition, and representation might not be necessary, and that spaces rather be simply palpable/digestible in the moment when it counts; that there be more consciousness and awareness that there are people present who experience discrimination through the same structures (power and suppression); that there are

people who have experiences other than mine; and, lastly, that the ostensible norm that “the World”™ presupposes does not seamlessly correspond with the realities and life truths of us all.

I wish for more listening, coexistence, and openness to arguing and accompanying one another.

Queerness—A Western Identity Construction

by Tsepo Bollwinkel

Translated by Kyung Lee Gagum

First published as “Queerness—Eine westliche Identitätskonstruktion”

Words such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual don’t just describe object orientation through the choice of sexual and/or romantic partners (male and female alike); a word such as trans* doesn’t just describe not only a specific form of physical/spiritual gender identity. Summarized in the term queerness is an understanding of identity that goes above and beyond today’s norm of binary sexuality and heterosexuality.

Queer, just like lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans*, is a self-designation of recent times, established at the end of the 1960s as a result of the Stonewall riots around the Stonewall Inn in New York, during which Black trans* women and queer *people of color* played a significant role. At that same time, queerness has manifested itself as an identity construct, which encompasses more than a preferred sexual partner (male and female) or gender identity.

Queerness understands the dominant social norms of two genders, heterosexuality, and monogamy as compulsory constructs. It challenges and contrasts this with a vision of a world in which people may live peacefully, equally, and fairly with their various different types of gender identity, sexual identity, and relationship forms. (To compare: my Black activism understands the dominant social norms of being white, of racialization and capitalism/colonialism as compulsory constructs, questions them, and contrasts it with a vision of a world in which all humans could live various models of societal and economic life peacefully, equally, and justly.)

The thought that gay and lesbian people are not people who need to be treated as mentally ill perverts who must either be punished or “be healed” is relatively new in the Western world—even in the so-called advanced circles, which are not yet fifty years old. Trans* and intersex* people continue to fight for recognition as equal and nonpathologized humans. The end of the legal persecution of homosexual men, the statutory establishment of legal options for voluntary sex change (as opposed to the forced castration of trans* people in the past), the expansion of antidiscrimination laws, the registration of same-sex life

partnerships—all these things are developments that have occurred in the last century against the fierce resistance of conservatives, churches, and their constituents. Antiqueer movements are however currently on the rise: the Tea Party in the United States, the antihomosexual politics of the [Vladimir] Putin dictatorship, and “concerned citizens” in Germany.

On the other hand, these standards, which have only recently been achieved (and are already yet again under threat), standards of a Western approach to the equality of gays and lesbians (where trans* and intersex* people are treated as step children) and the right of bodily integrity as an inalienable mandate, are being exported into the whole of the non-Western parts of the world, the so-called global South, the (former) colonies. For example, the basic prerequisites for the distribution of “foreign development aid” is to be in compliance with the current Western norms regarding the treatment of and dealings with LGBTIQ* people.

What is often neglected in this context is that non-Western colonized societies and cultures were acquainted with the most diverse ways of including same-gender-loving people as well as countergendered or other-gendered-living people, before colonialism knew about these things—and sometimes they still know them. Just as their quite culturally diverse definitions of sexuality are being ignored. This Western/white ignorance is a factor that is to a large extent concealed, but it is nevertheless an important factor when the attainment of human rights for people with nonstandard gender identity and/or sexualities is at stake.

And this is where Black activists* and especially queer Black activists* from Germany, Europe, and the West are called upon to scrutinize queerness as a Western concept based on their own experiences and struggles and to build a bridge of solidarity to Black people worldwide—and right in the middle of Germany, as well, to people whose life realities are shaped by other concepts of same-gender love and/or countergender life.

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Reclaiming Male Femininities

A Transfeminist Approach to Early Modern Literature

KADIN HENNINGSEN

Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature:

Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations

Simone Chess

New York: Routledge, 2016. 196 pp.

Much scholarship in early modern studies has addressed the female-to-male (FTM) crossdresser and the boy actor who would perform feminine roles on the early modern stage (and often these were one and the same—the boy actor played the part of a woman who crossdressed as a man). Until recently there has been a dearth of historical and theoretical scholarship on “the question of men dressed as and passing for women in literary representations” (2). In *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations*, Simone Chess investigates the role of male-to-female (MTF) crossdressers in early modern literature, asking, “How might thinking about MTF crossdressing, in particular, contribute to our understanding of early modern sex, gender, and sexuality?” (2).

In asking this question, Chess makes an important intervention in early modern scholarship in three ways. First, Chess invites “MTF crossdressing episodes to take a fuller place alongside FTM crossdressing episodes and discussions of boy actors’ crossdressing . . . demonstrating the particular contributions of MTF crossdressing episodes to conversations about gender and sexuality in the period” (2). Second, in prioritizing MTF crossdressing representations, Chess shows how these episodes are “rich sources for relationally and socially oriented readings of gender, and that MTF crossdressing episodes might therefore suggest that relational queer gender could have a positive or beneficial association” (3).

And last, by using queer and trans studies, Chess makes “a larger space for queer, genderqueer, male-bodied, and queer-feminine representations in conversations about early modern gender and sexuality, which have often skewed toward homo/hetero, masculine/feminine, female-bodied, and queer-masculine foci” (3).

In addition to expanding early modern scholarship, Chess makes an important contribution to transgender studies by demonstrating the many ways early modern MTF crossdressers do “trans” work by crossing socially imposed sartorial boundaries of sex/gender to elucidate the ways in which gender, especially queer gender, is relational and beneficial.¹ In fact, “relational gender” is the primary theme that runs throughout Chess’s book. For Chess, representations of early modern MTF crossdressers “focus less on the individuals and the ‘gender trouble’ they personally experience or provoke” and more on “the social impact that queer gender presentation can have on dyads, communities, and broader social structures, like marriage, economy, and sexuality,” and that most MTF crossdressed characters “are constituted *with* and *through* their relationships with other characters more than through identity or outfit in isolation” (2). Chess further argues throughout that “when an MTF crossdresser’s gender is embedded in and mutually constitutive with these larger systems, the crossdresser and his/her/their allies often benefit financially, socially, and erotically from that queer exchange” (2).

From the outset, Chess lays important groundwork in her introduction, “Passing Relations,” situating the project in both fields of early modern studies and trans studies. In addition (and because I love a good footnote), Chess carefully parses terminology (*genderqueer*, *trans**, *cisgender*, etc.) often used in trans studies through the use of extensive footnotes to provide an invaluable resource for scholars of early modern studies without bogging down her arguments with definitions already familiar to scholars in trans studies. For instance, her footnote (24n6) on the use of *crossdressing* as opposed to *transvestite* not only explains the history of these terms and how they circulate in the trans community and trans studies but also addresses “the tension between presentism and historicism” in early modern studies. In addition, because language around queer identities is always evolving, Chess is careful to be as exact as possible with her language, narrowing down her footnote on crossdressing even further by moving from an exploration of the nuances between the hyphenated *cross-dresser* and *crossdresser* to the specificities of MTF and FTM crossdressing and why MTF crossdressing specifically is important to her project.²

The book is organized to allow each chapter to build on the work of previous chapters while focusing on a specific potential benefit of relational gender in each: empathy, power, desire, and collaboration. Chess further anchors each chapter around three to four primary texts such as plays, poems, broadside

ballads, and paintings, to help elucidate the benefits of MTF crossdressing. For me, the most rewarding interventions by Chess came in chapters 3 and 4.

In chapter 3, “Crossdressing and Queer Heterosexuality,” Chess argues that “crossdressing has an erotics of its own”; what she calls “queer heterosexuality” is not same-sex or opposite-sex desire but the “encompassing *and* excluding of both” (104). Without being fetishistic of transness, Chess demonstrates through close readings of several primary texts how the erotic charge between MTF crossdressed characters and their cisgender female lovers is “not simply [attraction] to the man beneath the dress or to the woman presented by the dress” but is, instead, an attraction “to the very queerness of the entire gender presented to them— attracted to the idea and the appeal of a genderqueer individual” (104). As such, the erotic exchange between MTF crossdressers and their cisgender female lovers is “neither gay nor straight but distinctly queer and plural” (105).

By queering heterosexuality, Chess pushed me to reconsider my initial reading of chapter 1, “Doublecrossdressing Encounters.” For Chess, double crossdressing plots in the early modern period provide a “perspectival shift” that “promotes empathy, cross-gender identification, and reflection which last even after plots are resolved and clothing is switched back between the sexes” (40). So although Chess exhibits concern with the ways that double crossdressing plots are “inherently conservative” because “they reinforce the idea that there are only two sexes and only two genders” (43), she ultimately argues that double crossdressing narratives are beneficial because they ultimately “provoke cross-gender empathy and identification,” as well as provide a means for “showcasing these experiences for audiences concerned with the mechanics and rules of gendered social rules” (41). My initial concern with gender swapping was (and somewhat still is) specifically with whether empathy is useful because it “sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome” (Ahmed 2004: 30). Put another way, it isn’t necessarily the swapping of genders that runs the risk of reinscribing a gender binary as Chess claims, but is instead the supposed empathy that results from such gender swapping that reinscribes the other, and thus oppositional gender.

The framework of queer heterosexuality in chapter 3, however, troubled my own assumptions that underlie my initial reading of empathy as sustaining difference. For empathy to reinscribe oppositional gender in the double crossdressing plot, I would have to assume that the cisgender identity beneath the crossdressed clothes is indeed stable, meaning that, for instance, an MTF crossdresser reinscribes the feminine/female other by “imagining they could feel what another feels” (Ahmed 2004: 30) while also recognizing that her feelings are in fact not his own. If crossdressing is about “neither the body nor the dress, but rather their disruptive genderqueer combination” (104), then what the crossdressed MTF character feels is something else entirely. As such, he/she/they do not feel her

feelings but an amalgamation of feelings, and thus queer feelings. Furthermore, if empathy and crossgender identification remain even after the plot is resolved, as Chess contends, cisgender stability is thus called into question as a result of this remaining queer feeling that is neither his nor hers but a genderqueer combination of lingering feelings. So while empathy can sustain the difference that it seeks to overcome, Chess's reading of double crossdressing plots in conversation with queer heterosexuality helps us to see how empathy also engenders queer feelings of empathy that extend difference in new directions.

Relational gender is at play throughout *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature*. In chapter 4, "Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender Labor," Chess provides a concrete method for looking at how gender is not only relational but also collaborative. Pulling from the social sciences, Chess demonstrates how the concept of "gender labor"—the labor that intimate cisgender partners perform in order to cocreate their partner's queer gender subjectivity (138)—can be generatively applied to literary studies to see how gender is collaborative. Chess applies the three forms of gender labor identified by sociologist Jane Ward to early modern literary texts: the "labor of being 'the girl,' the labor of forgetting, and the labor of alliance" (Ward 2010: 242).³

Chess provides a thorough explanation of these three forms of gender labor before reading them against several primary texts. According to Chess, cisgender femme women perform the labor of "being the girl" by developing or exaggerating their own gender performance to supplement and enhance their partner's masculine gender (140). The labor of forgetting is an "epistemological stance of knowing-unknowing or refusing-to-remember" (141), which requires "choosing not to know or linger on the trans* person's full gender history" (140). Chess elaborates further that "the gender labor of forgetting is not about denial or misinformation, but rather about manipulating memory to make space for queer and inclusive narratives" (140). Last, the labor of alliance is "one in which both partners co-create the genders and gendered dynamics that work for them in public and in private" (140). Through close reading of three early modern texts, Chess skillfully demonstrates how locating acts of gender labor in texts (whether literary or historical) is an invaluable framework for excavating potentially trans figures from the past. While we can't know for sure if any one person identified as trans (partly because such a concept/identity wasn't yet available until the twentieth century), the rubric of gender labor allows us to locate where and how people collaborated with each other to "trans" socially imposed boundaries of sex and gender and that such labor has social, economic, and erotic benefits for those involved.

At its core, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* is a transfeminist project. Chess takes seriously that "our collective neglect of

MTF crossdressers, both in early modern studies and in contemporary queer studies, is a reflection of a broader neglect of feminine-of-center queer and trans* genders” (167). Indeed, “the absence of discourse around MTF crossdressing and other queer femininity [is] a reflection of the strong influences of transmisogyny, in both early modern culture and our own” (167). In “recognizing and validating historical male femininities and an insistence upon queer femme visibility,” Chess makes clear her investments in a transfeminist politic and methodology (167). Throughout the book, she refuses to perpetuate the dominant discourse attached to feminine-of-center queer and trans* genders—discourse that often focuses on “shame, violence, and punishment” (12). Instead, Chess opts to heed Julia Serrano’s call to “reclaim femininity.” More specifically, in her essay “Reclaiming Femininity,” Serrano (2012, 171) argues “those of us on the trans-female/feminine spectrum are culturally marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms, per se, but because of the specific direction of our gender transgression—that is, because of our feminine gender expression and/or our female gender identities.” By reclaiming femininity, Serrano asserts, “those of us who are femme are engaged in a constant process of challenging these negative assumptions that are routinely projected onto feminine gender expression” (170). Throughout *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature*, Chess not only argues for “the recovery of queer feminine presentations,” but also “advocates for readings of MTF crossdressers that show their female presentations to be authentic, relationally impactful, and beneficial” (167). Chess’s reclamation of male femininities through a deftly argued exploration of the social, economic, and erotic benefits of MTF crossdressing makes *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* not just an important contribution to early modern and trans studies but also an essential work of transfeminist scholarship.

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Notes

1. In *Transgender History* (2008), Susan Stryker writes, “It is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition—that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender’” (1). This articulation of transgender helps us to see how crossdressing can be included under the trans umbrella, and thus trans studies, even though many crossdressers do not identify as/with trans.

2. Throughout this review I follow Chess's use of the compound *crossdress* as opposed to the hyphenated *cross-dress*. Because *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* is a project that is as much about queer identity as it is about actions, I find Chess's reasoning to be both compelling and convincing. She writes, "I prefer the compound word *crossdress* over the more-grammatical *cross-dress* for several reasons: while both *crossdress* and *cross-dress* are common uses, and *cross-dress* is more common in academic publications, *crossdress* seems to be the more common use within online and in-person crossdressing communities. The compound term mirrors other compounds in gender and sexuality discourses, including *cisgender* and *transgender*; like those terms, *crossdresser* indicates a category of queer identity, more than simply modifying '-dressing' with the idea of crossing binary gender" (24n6).
3. In "Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression" (2010), Jane Ward defines *gender labor* as "the affective and bodily efforts invested in *giving gender* to others, or actively suspending self-focus in the service of helping others achieve the varied forms of self recognition they long for. Gender labor is the work of bolstering someone's gender authenticity, but it is also the work of co-producing someone's gender irony, transgression, or exceptionality" (237). Ward's study examines specifically the relationships between cisgender femme women and their FTM partners. As such, she's particularly interested in thinking through how gender labor is feminized to "nurture new genders (or new gender formations) into public and private being" (237), especially for trans men.

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Trans* Archives and the Making of Meaning

KC COUNCILOR

Ken. To Be Destroyed

Sara Davidmann, edited by Val Williams

Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2016. 128 pp.

Artist and photographer Sara Davidmann's book *Ken. To Be Destroyed* is a visually stunning and provocative project. The book is a processed and curated archive, one that has been augmented with artworks and essays, itself now an artifact for analysis. Like all good art, it offers more questions than answers and makes demands of the viewer. The project brings up issues important to archival work generally—about ethics, ownership and rights, private lives in public light, truth and interpretation. Perhaps one of its most powerful appeals is that it opens rather than forecloses meaning and interpretation.

Davidmann had been photographing and recording oral histories within transgender and queer communities in the United Kingdom for years before her mother, Audrey, revealed that Ken, the person she had known as her uncle, was transgender. It was only later, cleaning out her mother's house after she had moved into a nursing home, that Davidmann found the letters, envelopes, and album that compose this archive. Most of the letters were between Audrey and her sister Hazel, Ken's wife, but she had also kept early correspondence between Ken and Hazel, as well as Ken's papers, his research on transgender identity and notes on the effects of his estrogen therapy. The book comprises photographs and reproductions of the archive in various forms—stacks of letters tied with string, reproductions of photos and forms, handwritten notes. Davidmann has also created a large new set of photographs from the originals, images she produced

using photo chemicals, chalk, paint, ink, and markers, producing what she has termed more paintings than photographs.

This is a complex story, and like the stories that emerge from most archives, necessarily incomplete. Because of the nature of the archive—letters mostly between Ken’s wife Hazel and her sister Audrey, and letters between Ken and Hazel mostly from the courtship stage of their relationship in the early 1950s—the central figure, Ken, is largely absent. What becomes clear is that Ken’s gender is not his alone. It is variously a marital issue, a secret, a problem, a tragedy, a burden. It is a medical question, a legal one, a social one. As cartoonist and writer Lynda Barry has said, “We are gender mutual”—our genders are wrapped up in one another, relative and contingent (pers. comm., February 11, 2014). We are gendered by other people, and it is a façade that we are the sole authors of our own gender (or that our gender is natural and therefore authorless). This is often quite clear for those of us who are transgender or gender nonconforming. It is painfully true here, as the most vivid part of the archive is Hazel’s letters to Audrey depicting her intense struggles with Ken’s transgender identity. Present are so many secrets—a secret stash of money so Hazel could leave on a dime if her sanity depended on it, false-bottom drawers of women’s clothing, research on annulment, a spylike collection of evidence about Ken’s gender, and the insistence on keeping this a secret. Yet always present too is love and respect between Ken and Hazel.

The compromise Ken and Hazel came to was that Ken would be a woman in the house and present as a man outside it. There are few glimpses of Ken’s female self, and they are fleeting and indirect. In one letter, Hazel mentions feeling jealous of this other woman in her house, and that as a woman, Ken loved doing housework. There are Ken’s own handwritten charts about the physical effects of estrogen therapy. Yet while most of the archive orbits around Ken, Ken is most often an object of conversation and analysis—even his own. In a section titled “Correspondence,” Davidmann produces a beautiful two-page spread of envelopes laid out in a grid, different shades of neutral, some with one stamp, others six, some torn, some from the front and others the back. The images ask us to consider the idea of containers, how our most private messages and selves move through public spaces.

Davidmann plays with the archive’s absences. There are few photos of Ken in her archive or family albums. She takes the photos she does have and makes them into art materials, canvases. She manipulates images to see them differently, creating one series of prints that are so zoomed in that we see the photos on a cellular level: their original subjects unrecognizable. She focuses on the mold and the tears in the photos, uses bleach and photo chemicals as a way to ask questions

of the images. Davidmann's manipulation of images echoes Ken's handwritten transcription of a letter he received from a professor at a psychiatric clinic about his "condition," with his own annotations written in red ink, commentary like a dialogue with the professor. Both practices are ways of owning or understanding something better by putting it in your own hand.

Davidmann uses *K* as a name for Ken's female self in the absence of a name she actually used. In a section titled "Looking for K/Finding K," she writes, "I wanted to visualize how Ken might have looked as a woman. . . . The hand-coloured images gave a fictional vision of Ken's or K's life. He was not able to dress as a woman outside the home, and I wanted to give him the freedom that he was never able to have in his lifetime" (98). Few of the photos are manipulated seamlessly—most of the images draw attention to the process, to their constructed nature. They are poetic repetitions on a theme with different tones. Davidmann makes a reasonable argument based on the evidence of the archive that Ken would have related to the photos he took of Hazel. In some images, Davidmann superimposes Ken's face onto pictures of Hazel's body. This artistic choice is a provocative one. In a series titled "For Ken," Ken's face is placed on a photo of Hazel in her wedding dress, each print differently marred with photo chemicals. Davidmann's creative and intimate artistic work leads one to question, Who is the author of this story? Is it true? Fiction? Neither? The book also centrally raises questions about how to write about trans* subjects in the past. Davidmann calls Ken's female self "K" and creates images that place K in female form, yet she maintains "he" pronouns.¹

The book raises other troubling ethical questions, and to her credit, Davidmann doesn't obscure them but foregrounds them. From the very title of the book, readers are told they are being invited to read something that was intended to be destroyed; the page that precedes the title page is an image of a manila envelope with Audrey's writing on it: "Ken. To be destroyed." Here we are, invited to look into the envelope that wasn't meant for outside eyes. The last page in the book is the envelope from the other side—the book's pages are bookended by the envelope that held its contents. Even the beautiful, textured blue endpapers are prints of the bag that held some of these materials. The reader, too, then, is implicated through the act of opening the book and turning the pages.

The desire for secrecy is hypervisible even as the book itself exposes the secrets. Throughout *Ken. To Be Destroyed*, we see three blown-up images of typed words from letters that read "secret," "secretly this plight," and "Once again for pity's sake don't tell anybody." Davidmann writes that her mother likely kept the letters for a reason, knowing their significance, even as she insisted they remain secret. Whose desire for secrecy was it, and how does this matter? Davidmann has

written of the project, “My mother said that I was to keep this a secret and not even to tell my siblings—both of these I refused to do. I was upset by the fact that there was such shame in my own family attached to someone being trans*” (Brown and Davidmann 2015: 191). Davidmann inherited the archive, so there’s no question that it’s hers to make public, but does the public value of the archive outweigh the desires of those at its center that it remains private, even if they have passed away? Does today’s social and political context render their mid-twentieth-century desires for privacy irrelevant? If the desire for secrecy is rooted in shame, is revealing it then a form of liberation? How do concerns around privacy and confidentiality shift when the person calling for it is not the trans* person themselves?

Ken. To Be Destroyed is a rich artifact that trans studies scholars will find useful in thinking through the complexities of trans* archival work. As a creative project, it will likely inspire new methods and modes of engagement with trans subjects and communities. Davidmann’s book highlights the central role of art and the artist in trans studies and queer communities more broadly. It is an example of everyday documenting, both ordinary and extraordinary; it has historical value as a record of “ordinary” people navigating transgender identity in the 1950s and 1960s. The collection brings up perennial questions of value and currency in whose materials are considered worth archiving. Davidmann’s book makes this archive meaningful and shows us the fragility of collections like these, as there are untold numbers of similar archives that have been lost or destroyed.

Ultimately, one of the project’s gifts is its complexity, its rejection of simple answers and tidy narratives. One poignant example of this comes in a letter Ken wrote to Hazel four years before he died. He wrote, “Thank you, Hazel, most sincerely, and humbly, for sharing your life with me, and giving me so many of your years. . . . I am truly sorry that I have not been able to give you a better life in every way. It was not for want of trying to do so. I guess the dice were just too heavily loaded against us” (24). As cultural historian Anjali Arondekar has proposed, the draw of this archive is beyond the retrieval of an identifiable truth. “There is always a *politics* of the archive,” she writes, “because it is rarely a simple matter of revealing secrets waiting to be found” (2009: 20). *Ken. To Be Destroyed* shows how much is not revealed even in the revealing of secrets.

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Note

1. In her 2015 *Radical History Review* article on the project, coauthored with Elspeth Brown, she uses both *he* and *she* to describe Ken/K.

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