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Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation

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Marquis Bey

This conversation meditates on the ways in which Black Feminism and Trans Feminism relate to one another, how they speak to and supplement one another, and how they are in fact constitutive. Considering that Black feminism, historically, has attempted to interrogate the capaciousness of the very term “woman” and to gender, if you will, an androcentric “Blackness,” one might say, as Che Gossett has said, that Black feminism is “always already trans.” The present conversation, taking place via e-mail from October of 2015 to October of 2017, is a dialogue conducted by Black feminist scholars that deeply engages prevailing notions of Blackness and transness, and radicalizes how these are understood with respect to feminism. In short, it is a conversation in Black, in trans, in feminism, and offers different conceptions of how Black and trans and feminism work with and through one another.

Keywords: Black feminism, Black women, gender, trans* feminism

Marquis Bey (MB): To speak of Black feminism and trans feminism is to submerge oneself in a kind of study of life’s interstices. They both name, in different ways and by different inflections, the refusal of racialized sexism, transantagonism, anti-Blackness, the gender binary, and a range of other identificatory and sociohistorical vectors tied to hierarchical and fatal hegemonic regimes. I often think of these two modes of living and thinking—indeed, of disrupting and subverting—as terms for a volatile nexus. The volatile nexus that emerges when Black feminism and trans feminism converge (which is not to say they are wholly distinct from one another) becomes Saidiya Hartman’s “contested figure at the very center of social struggle,” or more broadly of sociality, and in this contestedness marks a troublesome relation

(to power) “rather than identity.”¹ Their imbrication demands that we enact them in service of a worldly and subjectively unbecoming and undoing. But there’s also the deeply historical circumstances in which they are embedded, I’d say? To cite bell hooks’s conversation with Janet Mock, Black and trans feminisms have always been historically imbricated. On this score, we must “historicize the reality that black women have always occupied the space that we can call queer. That the moment ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bear her breasts to prove that she was the woman, was already a queer, a trans moment.”² Black feminism and trans feminism have never been mutually exclusive enterprises because one could argue that they reference not separate phenomena linked to discreet demographics but liberatory penchants in service of marginalized people. But of course there’s more historical work we could discuss.

Kai M. Green (KMG): Right. To speak even more to the historical valences of Black feminism: Black feminism has attempted to do at least two major tasks: (1) It has challenged us to consider the limitations of the gender binary and made us think about how Black cisgender women in particular have always already functioned as excess of that category. Thus making it necessary to trouble the usefulness of the category “woman” in the first place. (2) It has worked to make visible the real material conditions and grievances that affect Black cisgender women. These two tasks happen simultaneously and in many ways, you can easily see the apparent contradiction of the two efforts. The first criticizes the category woman for its inability to hold the Black woman, and the pressure resulting makes us question the viability of the category itself. Should we (scholars, artists, people invested in liberation) be women? Should we *want* to be women? If the category “woman” becomes more inclusive so as to include Black and women of color, and queer and transgender women, then does the category still function in a way that is useful? Of course we have to say useful for what and when, which is why the second task is so important. To center Black and women of color as a group to organize around is necessary when the category of woman as a political category, perpetually and almost pathologically, centers white cisgender (heterosexual) women.

A lot of women of color and Black feminist theorizing gets dismissed as a kind of identity politics which at best manifest as neoliberal models of representational inclusion, but usually are deemed only useful for specific racial groups (i.e., Black feminism is only important for Black women). However, many have *mistook the map for the territory*, as Sylvia Wynter thoughtfully highlights.³ In their critiques, Black feminists illuminated a major problem with the category “woman,” they took up the work that wasn’t being done by the politics of women, but I don’t believe that was the end goal. I think this is a possible location where Transgender Studies and Black Feminist Studies might produce a generative meeting or coming together, if you will. It is the place of the demand. Is the demand for inclusion, for recentering, decentering, or is the demand for reconstitution of the terms and terrain? I think Black feminists were asking for a reconstitution of the terms and the terrain, not simply for an assigned roll or designated place on the already existing lands.

There is a common sense popular understanding of the term feminist, as in who is imagined when the term feminist is used. There is a kind of body that the word feminist hails into the imaginary, the body of a cisgender woman. It is less common that we discuss the other bodies or ways that feminist theorization and praxis is used by and useful for people who are not cisgender women. I think those conversations are necessary to hold on to. I write this as a Black man, a feminist, a Black Transgender man, a man who lived in the world as a woman for 27 years. I am compelled to announce these things.

What Black feminists pointed to was that when the term feminist was used, it evoked white ciswomen, its imagined and idealized subject was white-ciswomen-centered. When we say “woman” today we usually mean cisgender; a whole host of other bodies, trans and gender non-conforming, are left out of our imaginary. It is important, too, to note how the visibility of transgender people, particularly the visibility of Black and transgender women of color has shifted the grammars of Black liberation this time. This time, Black liberation has laid itself out as the platform for those most marginalized under capitalism’s time. We name patriarchy, misogyny, and racial capitalism. Women, Black and Queer, become the faces and the voices this time: Patsisse, Opal, Alicia, Charlene, CeCe. Agendas launched in the name of Black women, Black femmes. Say her name. Black lives matter. Black Queer feminist lens. Our language has changed and we on the left (or left of left), have become hyper aware this time of the erasures that took place in earlier Black liberation movements. So when we say Black lives matter we mean ALL Black lives matter. Trans and cis. Gender Non-Conforming. Poor. Unemployed. No one is to be left behind this time. Consumed by naming, naming ourselves and those who we have lost, Sandra Bland, Chyna Gibson, Tamir Rice ... We long to account for all the ways we have been separated from one another because of generations of systematic oppression, violence, and the outright predatory assault on our institutions, neighborhoods, families, and bodies. Say her name. We know that our potential for liberation requires a critical collectivity, a collective consciousness, but in our desires to bring ourselves together some slippages occur, some miscommunications. Inclusion was/is necessary, but what did/does inclusion truly mean? Is the model being mirrored this time, still, a neoliberal mode of diversity and inclusion? Are the master’s tools still being harnessed to dismantle the master’s house? I point to the evocation of a term like All Black Lives Matter and ask what it says about how we, this time, long to account for difference within our Black liberation movement. Have our desires for inclusion, compelled us to believe we were accounting for difference within? Are we still uneasy and unsure of how to deal with difference so we mollify it with *ands*? Black women, trans, *and* cis.

In Cathy Cohen’s 2015 interview “Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism,” she states, “cis and trans women—have to be at the center of how we think about black liberation. The centering of cis and trans women and lesbians and gay men as members and leaders of our communities, that to me is significant and new.” She later continues, “I don’t think we have often seen movements say that the common thread

of blackness is not just the male body, or the presumed cis male body, but in fact that cis and trans black women can represent the intersectional positionality and oppression that black communities face.”⁴

In a similar fashion, my good friend and comrade, Charlene Carruthers, the national director of BYP100 (an organization that is a part of the broader movement for Black lives) writes in a 2016 Colorlines article, “The execution of Korryn Gaines at the hands of the Baltimore County Police Department (BCoPD) requires a national call-to-action to defend Black women. Gaines’s story shows us the inextricable links between the struggles to secure Black liberation and reproductive justice in America. In this moment, everyone who believes that Black lives do indeed matter is needed to build a defense of Gaines and all Black women (transgender and cisgender) who are victims of state-sanctioned violence.”⁵

How does the category of woman function here? Who is it able to hold and how is it able to hold difference? Those of us who are interested in Black liberation must be weary of the “and” in “trans and cis” as it purports to have reckoned with the real difference and fissures that rest between trans and cis. It is a question of relationality. How do we/they belong to one another? The “and” here is not natural as it seeks to bring transgender women into the fold of the category women (read cisgender), a category that has been critiqued by Black and Women of Color feminists as a category that continuously fails, fails to articulate clearly what it is that makes some women, who are not white, who are not middle class, illegible as the imagined universalized representative subject of the category. So we are left asking (1) Are Black women, women? (When? How?) (2) If not, why do we hold on to that category “woman” at all? (When? How?)

It seems to me that many scholars and organizers assume the answer to Sojourner Truth’s question, “ain’t I a woman?” is “Yes!” But what if we instead took the gift of Truth as a proposition to dwell in the question? Do models of inclusion prohibit us from thinking about or asking for something else? Even more challenging: what would something else look like without the organizing binary of male and female? And even more challenging than that: what about all the ways we love gender, being seen as either this or that? We work within these limited categorical identities even though we know their limitations, even when we see that they can’t account for the nuances of holistic being. I think we fear non-existence without them as a sign post to remind us that we are human. The fear of non-existence is a logical fear for Black people and queer people as our relationship to premature death is almost always already pre-determined under racial capitalism and patriarchy. But the non-existence that I want those of us who are working toward Black liberation and gender liberation or gender self-determination is the non-existence or erasure that we impose on one another consciously and unconsciously. As our grammars shift and change to be more inclusive, particularly when it comes to a Black queer feminist politic that consciously names “cis and trans” as a modifier of “woman,” we must be careful about what the *and* then dislodges. It is not productive to simply add transgender women to the category of woman without thinking through the ways that transgender women force us to consider again how “woman” as a category is a failure. If we simply add “woman

(cis and trans)” as the proper subjects of feminist politics, then what happens to men who have lived as women? Are they no longer a part of the narrative? Are we able to hold the stories of both CeCe McDonald, Marissa Alexander, and Kye Peterson⁶ under this inclusive Black Queer Feminist framing? I seek a Black feminist praxis that can hold all of these people, but in order for that to be the case we may have to disentangle ourselves from a reliance on “woman” and instead think through the ways in which femininity and masculinity are moving in and across all kinds of bodies. The category “woman” remains attached to notions of biological authenticity and realness that inevitably reaches its limits when trying to capture bodies that shift, trans bodies. Basically, what I am getting at is that we can and should shift our grammar and language to be more inclusive, but understand too that the way we think of women/men, this binary is undone (and sometimes redone) by transgender and gender-nonconforming people whose gender journeys aren’t always linear.

MB: I’m always at a bit of a loss with respect to the question of whether we should retain “woman” as a category on a few fronts: first, there is an ethical dimension to the extent to which I can even enter such a question by virtue of my identification, which is itself deeply troubled and unsettled.⁷ Second, marginalized folks do often find joy in claiming the category, so the extermination of it might in fact do a kind of harm (which is not to the exclusion of the very harm done by the category itself, known or not). This is all in part why I am interested more in politicized identities, following Cathy Cohen; why I am interested in the *work* that we do *as* the identities that come to subjectivate us, rather than presuming that identity is an immutable possession. The phrase you use, the “place of the demand,” is right where I want to dwell, and it is that demand that I’m interested in. It seems to me that to do or be a Black or trans feminist, or both, is to heed that demand. The “identity,” of sorts, of one who uptakes the demand Black feminism and trans feminism bear—and thus the eruptive volatility and multiplicity simmering beneath and alongside each of them—concerns less a delimited entity that is *a* Black and/or trans feminist and more in the vein of Nathaniel Mackey’s “enmity,” a non-substance that describes an “auto-constitutive stress.”⁸ The transness of Black feminism and the Blackness of trans feminism, as it were, marks a reverberatory tremor that pervades the rhythm of work done in service to Black and trans feminism. The vibratory waves of its stress is the fuzzy location in which “identity” resides, unable to be placed or limned and rather a haptic disturbance, a tenor, a worrying, a movement that is placed where it cannot be placed.

So yes, the centering of Black “women” (again, this is a troubled term, especially rubbing so close to the gender trouble that is Blackness) in conversations surrounding feminism and the operative gender category of “woman” was in many ways meant to critique that very term—to whom it actually refers in our imaginary, to what and whose ends is the term deployed, in what situations is the term deployed. “[T]he ‘Black woman,’” L.H. Stallings writes in *Mutha’ Is Half a Word*, a phenomenal examination of the “unnaming” processes of Black women, radical Black female sexuality, and Black queer desires, “represents an invented character by cultures not of her own making ... the term unsuccessfully attempts to join the narratives of woman (white) with that of Black (man).”⁹ In critiquing the notions of “Black”

and specifically, initially “woman,” Black women, in effect, put a pressure on it that questioned its very nominal and social status and sought to alter the very foundations and assumptions upon which the racially solipsistic category of “woman” rested.

You touch on something really important: the simultaneous urge to disrupt and change these limited and limiting categories we use to identify ourselves, and to hold them close to us because it is by virtue of these categories that we exist as subjects; we are subjectivated by these categories, so to do away with them entirely would be to feel as though we have lost ourselves. But I sometimes wonder if *this is* the aim, to lose ourselves, to cultivate liveable space in the losing of ourselves. Might the nexus of Black feminism and trans feminism be an enabling provocation for un/racial, un/gendered “thought and existence otherwise, an otherwise than being,” a shade-throwing deployable problem for thought that names a force rather than physical characteristic?¹⁰ Could that be a place to live? This is a genuine and open question that I really want to invite to be interrogated.

KMG: One of my favorite quotations is from D.L. Smith’s essay, “What is Black Culture?” where he writes, “Perhaps in losing ourselves, we will find ourselves.”¹¹ We are made into subjects through processes of imprint upon bodies, identity; race, gender, class, and/or sexual orientations. Without these identities, we fear that we will lose some sense of ourselves that is bound to history, so we carry it (history), sometimes by choice and other times, identities are placed upon us from the world around us and we have no real choice in how others choose to perceive us or our embodied histories. The fact of the matter is that we know that just because you are poor doesn’t mean that you will have radical anti-capitalist politics. Just because you are Black doesn’t mean that you will somehow have an affinity towards or with other Black people. These identities are scripts and the people who carry these scripts in their body, or rather those who embody evidence of particular identities, constantly prove how categorical labels are always already, they be, incapable of articulating the fullness of we (subjects) who endure, challenge, reinforce, despise, love, and sometimes encourage the naming. This limit does not exist simply because of a failure to acknowledge intersectional identities that many people carry, that is, a Black transgender working class woman—we could continue to add on here bisexual, college educated, Latinx, Republican—all of these identity claims start to help you understand the fullness of a subject, but none of these give you the full subject even if we keep listing out all of the identities we hold, we will only ever be approaching the fullness of a being or subject as said being changes in and over time. So I think the fear that we will lose ourselves without these categories is a trap that keeps us holding on to categories that we know fail us.

There is a bind though because these identity categories prove useful in garnering state recognition, and also in creating a sense of community or group affinity. Think of the notion of a “protected class” that describes persons who are supposedly protected by the law because of their identity, but these anti-discrimination laws don’t always work to protect the people they set out to protect. While most hate crimes are still committed on Black bodies, it is LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] (white) folk who are most evoked when thinking of hate crimes and we are usually thinking about white queer bodies.¹² For example, a recent episode

of *Law and Order SVU*, “Transgender Bridge,”¹³ centers on the story of a white transgender teenage girl who is taunted by high schoolers from another school, a Black school, and an altercation ensues on the bridge after school. The Black boy pushes the girl and she falls over the bridge. She survives the initial fall, but later dies because of complications from the fall. Over the course of the episode, the Black boy keeps being reminded that he didn’t just hurt anyone, but someone from a “protected class.” The viewer isn’t supposed to be able to see or hold that the Black boy is also a part of a class that needs protecting. This kind of nuance would disrupt and make unstable the position of the white transgender girl as the proper “protected class.” The Black boy is sentenced to 7 years, 3 years in a juvenile facility, and upon his 18th birthday he’ll be transferred to an adult prison to serve the remainder.

In order to be able to view the nuance of the above situation it requires what I call a trans* positionality or lens. For me, there is a difference between trans and transgender. Transgender people are all very different so there isn’t one thing that I can say about Black transgender people. Being Black and transgender doesn’t give a person the ability to redeploy strategies of feminism. There are Black transgender people who do that work, but there are others who do not. I think what is more useful is to think about the ways in which trans*, like blackness, can be embodied, but it actually marks a certain kind of orientation in the world, it is not fixed though always precarious. It is important to make this distinction between transgender and trans because many transgender people do not identify as transgender, but rather identify as man or woman, not asking to remake or add a new gender category, but rather fit into one that already exists. In this case, I would not say that transgender people are actually undoing the categories that produce the boundaries of a gender binary, though changing one’s location on the binary does challenge the notion that gender is fixed, because some people are able to change genders. I think what might be more useful in this conversation is to think about gender non-conforming bodies, bodies that do not fit and actively refute a binary legibility. Not because these people are necessarily more radical, but their existence often poses a critique to the gender-binaried-order of the land. I believe it is necessary to cultivate a politic that is able to view the ways in which certain bodies are made more vulnerable to certain kinds of violence, but to also note that vulnerability changes depending on time, place, and condition. In the latest essay I published I propose trans*:

We must listen for the fullness embedded in the silences and gaps, the moments of existence before the name or the category came to do its work upon the body. We must be more attuned to the present absences which calls for a Trans* method. One of the ways in which Black Queer Studies scholars have challenged us to engage black sexuality and gender is through simultaneous black and queer acts of (re)membering. Black Queer Studies staged this work in the gap and in the silence of Queer Studies and Black Studies who articulated themselves as mutually exclusive. Black Queer Studies helped us to call out the missing, the ones who are with us, but neglected. A Trans* method further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence. A Trans* method is a tool that helps us to embark upon the work of listening, understanding, and reading as both intellectual and political practices. It

allows us to see certain things that might not normally be seen. It also helps us to understand how that seeing is being shaped.

As the T in LGBTQI becomes more apparent in popular culture, it is important that we still hold fast to a Trans* analytic, knowing that representation is not enough. We know that it is not enough, for just as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock have become the popular beautiful women of color representing the transgender movement, there have been countless other unnamed (and named, but names we are not familiar with) transgender women and men who have been harassed, violated, and murdered in the streets. At the heart of black feminist praxis is a push to make the lives of disappeared black women matter.¹⁴ In order to make that argument, black feminists showed us how the category of woman failed to account for the unique experience of black women. This critique both challenged and clung to the category itself. I consider the identities that have yet come to cohere as nameable, yet are ever present with us. How do we carry those not as simple additions to an ever growing acronym, LGBTQI, but instead hold them up as future Trans* operations that will come to do work and further open us up to new possibilities. This is the charge of a Black Queer Studies *for now*; and by now I mean in this current historical moment, but I also use *for now* to imply the temporariness of this method as one that is unfixated so that we might always be open and ready for a name changing considering what is necessary *for now* is not necessary for always.¹⁵

MB: I like the distinction you're making between transgender people and gender nonconforming bodies. One can identify and be identified as transgender and yet do little to subvert and disrupt the gender binary. I imagine, maybe, you'd say something similar about those who are epidermally read as Black? That is, one can identify and be identified as Black and do little to undermine white supremacy. We can name a whole host of racially and gender marginalized folks who do not do Black feminist or trans feminist work, as it were: suffragists who said that they'd "cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman"; Hotep dudes pontificating about their "African Queens" and demanding babies, babies, babies because birth control is "genocide"; Southern African American men with swastika tattoos and confederate flags on their pick-ups; far-Right transgender women who buttress the gender binary; African American women who chastised "their" men for not being "manly" enough to defend "the race." Surely subjectivity is complex and perhaps we all harbor instances of hegemonic practices. I think I want to maintain, though, that the Black/trans/feminist work to be done rests not in what we purportedly are but in how we mobilize ourselves and our politics in subversion of power.

The terms at hand, then, come to be tied, for us, to relations to power and a willingness to enact the political forces behind these terms. In other words, we must *choose* Black and trans and feminism; we must make these things mean and matter in politically liberatory ways. I think I yearn for the thing that flows from the meeting of Black feminism and trans feminism as *gendered fugitivity*. The Blackness and transness of feminisms are not distinct phenomena to be hierarchized, nor mutually exclusive modes of subjectivity; Blackness and transness both engender animacy, act as analytical sites of disruption, and imbricate one another to the end of excavating the interstices of categorization.

And I want to be clear that the political valences of the language I choose to deploy with respect to the Blackness and transness of feminisms must be handled with care. This conversation is testament to the fact that we care a great deal. And it is because we care a great deal that we are asserting these positions. We care about—nay, we *love*—the deviant, the marginalized, the fugitive, the renegades, the rebels, the gender-benders, the queer. These are the ones with whom I want to be. I want to be in sociality with them because they are, to me, seeking to actualize radical politics, mastering the refusal of mastery.

Perhaps a question I have is this: if the fear of losing categories that are ultimately inadequate is a trap, yet in many ways useful, as you say, in garnering state recognition and creating a sense of community or group affinity, how would you suggest we remedy this? Would you agree that we only *are* on the basis of being recognizable through identities attached to us, and if so, then is the solution to divest hierarchical power embedded in these identities? Or something else?

I love your phrasing “those who embody evidence of particular identities” because it speaks to the ways we are “hailed” into these identities and how they mobilize scripts that are discursively imposed rather than being self-evident and rising from within. In this vein, I wonder what happens when some subjects embody evidence of identities that are new and perhaps have no or very few identificatory precedents? For sure, there are transgender folks who do not do the work of feminism and who seek only to “arrive” at a normative gendered end. If I understand you correctly—and do correct me, please, if I am misinterpreting you—this quest for gendered normativity that is in many ways unconcerned with feminism, social justice, etc. more accurately denotes transgender, while trans*, for you, is a disruptive orientation. If this is accurate, then Nael Bhanji, who in his essay “Trans/scriptions: Homing Desires, (Trans)sexual Citizenship and Racialized Bodies” uses a diasporic framework to problematize the “homing desires” of transsexuals, says, “As a spatial marker of possibility, the prefix, *trans-* does not just signify movement across or beyond a schism. Instead, it is also evocative of the *transgressions*, *transmogrifications*, and *transmutations* of established norms. Indeed, one of the functions of *trans-* ... is to destabilize the notion of space as a controlled location.”¹⁶ Is it then that trans (or trans*) denotes those bodies that are gender nonconforming or nonnormative, and thus does disruptive work?

The liminality, or embodied gender nonconformity, is the “silences and gaps” in which fullness is embedded, as you write. So what is important, if I can try to bring the conversation to a more explicitly feminist position, is the openness of Blackness, transness, and feminism. That they always cultivate room for the not-yet-imagined or the overlooked marginal voice to come is what the work of feminism ultimately seeks to do. Is this somewhat what you’re thinking?

KMG: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do such deep thinking in community. Gratitude. I am glad this is a long dialogue because I imagine we are going to do a lot more opening up before we feel some kind of suture, if that is what we are even grasping for. So to this first notion that there are Black folk who, say, may condemn efforts like The Movement for Black Lives or harbor deep-seated racist

sentiments toward “those” Black people—these might be the Uncle Ruckuses or hotepts, but they might not be recognizable as that stereotypical extreme. So in the same way we know the idea of “those” Black people (in referring to The Movement for Black Lives) is shortsighted as it assumes “those” Black people are all the same when The Movement for Black Lives is composed of many different kinds of people and organizations who have varied ideas when it comes to political and social visions for new possibilities.¹⁷ So I believe that even the notion that Uncle Ruckus is the Black anti-Movement for Black Lives figure that we might fixate on, it prevents us from sometimes seeing how those figures are also nuanced. That figure might, that sentiment might, be alive in and at work in someone who also holds the capacity to be, do, and think other possibilities at the same time.

The fear of losing categories isn't the trap. The trap is believing that these categories have the capacity to deliver us to ourselves fully and wholly. Again, perhaps setting our eyes on a remedy is the trap. Identities like language to help to bring us closer to a thing or a being, but we never fully arrive at the materiality, the flesh of the matter, and I don't know if we should try to remedy that. Perhaps it might be more useful to set ourselves down in the present and take note of how we are being created constantly as the past hails us and holds us (or attempts to) while the future is a product of what is remembered and what must be (or inevitably is) forgotten. Change is constant over and in time. Stopping time (is that even possible?) will not prevent the inevitability of change, but that is where change becomes a challenge to history as marked by distinct time with a beginning and an end, because history is never just what happened, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, but *what we say happened*.¹⁸ History, the way we narrativize the past, can be changed, even if the past itself cannot be changed as it has already happened. The narratives that we tell about ourselves have an affect on time past, future, and present. I think what we can do is try to mobilize a trans* analytic, an approach to change overtime that understands the relationship between temporal axes and the shaky ground upon which we are always standing.

In addition, I have to question the idea of “new” here partially because if we go back to what I was talking about earlier with history, the present always contains the “old” and I wonder if we tend to obsess or valorize the “new” in ways that are actually detrimental to our full capacity for being. I think of the notion of *fill in the blank* is the “new Black.” When folks evoke this what they are attempting to do is to say that *fill in the blank* is an (or the ultimate) oppressed category. This also does a certain kind of epistemological violence because for anything to become the new, it presupposes a displacement of the old. But if Black remains the constant marker of a certain kind of abjectness then it is not replaceable or at least it hasn't yet been replaced. We can talk about the ways in which Blackness functions to hold an ontological site of abjection, but also fugitivity as Fred Moten contends. Can *fill in the blank* become the new Black? Well, I think that would require a paradigm shift, but until then we can discuss the ways in which *fill in the blank* is related to or bonded to Blackness and I think that is a useful approach. It would allow us to discuss things like the incident of Ahmed and his clock as not only Islamophobia, but also how it was a case of anti-Blackness if we are thinking epidermally.¹⁹

There are a few slippages here that I want to be clear up. A transgender person who moves from one gender to another and socially passes in society as that gender, does not mean that that person is “unconcerned with feminism, social justice etc.” Trans* is a disruptive orientation but it is not for me specific to transgender bodies, it is rather a method or mode of engaging time, history, people, things, places with an openness and an acceptance of the excesses that are constantly being created and unaccounted for. So Trans* does not denote bodies and the work that bodies do, it is rather an acknowledgement that bodies do, be doing and they might be transgender, gender-non-conforming bodies that do the work of disrupting heteropatriarchy, but it is not a guarantee that certain bodies always do a particular work.

MB: Thanks so much for the response. I’m really, *really* digging the dialogue, and I’ve been trying to tailor my responses, in part, to allow this conversation to be as generative as possible. The question I’m wondering about, then, is how do transgender folks relate to trans*? That is, if trans* is, for you, “a disruptive orientation ... [that is not] specific to transgender bodies, it is rather a method or mode of engaging time, history, people, things, places with an openness and an acceptance of the excesses that are constantly being created and unaccounted for”—and I indeed *love* your phrasing “disruptive orientation”—is there some kind of link between trans* and people who identify as transgender, or perhaps more contentiously, do all bodies have a kind of access to the trans*? Do some have more access to the disruptive orientation that is trans*, and if so, which people, which bodies?

These are questions I, too, have long been thinking about but have no definitive answers for. I often want to enact my Black and trans feminism in racialized and gendered ways that escape what Jasbir Puar, following Joseph Massad, calls “an epistemological capture of an ontologically irreducible becoming.”²⁰ Black and trans feminisms cannot be captured in their entirety by the terms themselves; they are always becoming in excess of themselves. No doubt Black people and transgender people, and their intersections, are positioned historically and contemporarily in ways that make them more vulnerable to violence, and no doubt this is important to address irrespective of how they may or may not hold oppressive views. But as excessive of not only themselves as categories but also *categorization itself*, Black feminism and trans feminism can be taken up by anyone willing to commit to the necessary work they demand. To *do* Black feminism and to *do* trans feminism is to maintain that disruptive orientation, to engage disorientation without being disoriented perhaps. Too, it is a secretive and shadowy force that presents the conditions of possibility for possibility. There is a constant, and difficult, openness to this that urges for acceptance rather than exclusion. A radical openness might be one of the only ways the abolitionist goal of the “end of the world” can transpire, as Black and trans feminisms do the really hard stuff of imagining what we must become, and what we must give up, in order for the beings who have not yet been allowed to emerge to do so.

KMG: Thank you for these questions, Marquis. I hope it doesn’t feel like we are going in circles, but these are the questions that I have been grappling with in my larger forthcoming multimedia project, *Into the Darkness: A Quare (Re)Membering*

of *Los Angeles in a Time of Crises*. It's helpful for me if I first talk about the function of darkness as I see it as a product of hailing a thing, being, history into the realm of representation. To put it in very simple terms, every time we call a being into the representable, we also cast out all of those things, beings, that inevitably are the excesses of said being (what it is not, but still holds traces of). Without that which is cast aside in order to call forth or hail what is, the represented becomes unrepresentable as a unique entity. This does not mean that it does not exist. There is great rich, infinite life in the realm of darkness. So I say this to say that my use of trans* is primarily about a mode, method, or analytic that is interested in not simply knowing or making known the inevitable darknesses that we produce upon every utterance or categorical hailing, it is a mode that is infinitely generative because it is constantly opening up to the possibility of the simultaneous alternatives. In LaMonda Horton Stallings incredible book she has a chapter entitled "Black Trans Narratives, Sex Work, and the Illusive Flesh" where she describes a Transworld identity, an "identity across possible worlds" which "assumes identity as more metaphysical than social. Hence it displaces the unified social body or transgender identity that the state produces."²¹ So I am interested in decoupling the possible link that you are inferring between trans* and transgender as necessary or inevitable—this is not to say that it isn't possible though. I think our political movements have been stifled at times and relied too much on identity categories' ability to provide a basis for organizing. One of the reasons for this is that we tend to become as wedded to our identity categories as we are to our desires for liberation, not always able to decouple the ways that certain kinds of categories keep us bound to the state. The state needs these categories in order to surveil and keep us captive, but they also use these categories to promote models of inclusion that instead of dismantling structures that reproduce uneven distributions of power, they resituate new bodies so that they might start to feel a part of a broken system. The fact of alienation that non-normative bodies feel might be temporarily ameliorated by a gesture of inclusion, that is, gay marriage, but as you know, gay marriage is a demand for equality that doesn't change the fact that the equality that we seek upholds heteronormative marriage as the ideal and superior relationship model. How does this connect to Black feminism? Well, the way I read certain models of Black feminism is that they are politics built from personal experiences of Black women who were basically left for dead by the state and people in Black communities, who refused to prioritize their burdens as Black women. Now this is a very simple statement for something that is so vast and nuanced, but for the sake of what I want to argue I will leave it at that. I am aware of the darkness that statement creates in its simplicity. I say that though to speak to the other important tenet that Black feminism gifted us with or at least I believe tried to impart on the future, that is something.

June Jordan stated:

If I am a Black feminist serious in the undertaking of self-love, then it seems to me that the legitimate, the morally defensible character of that self-love should be that I gain and gain and gain in the socio-psychic strength needed so that I may, without fear, be able and willing to love and respect women, for example, who

are not like me: women who are not feminists, women who are not professionals, women who are not as old or as young as I am, women who have neither job nor income, women who are not Black.²²

Often I think we use Black feminism to create a politic around sameness when what was being asked for was the ability to work with and mobilize around differences. Of course, the challenge being the need to always defend oneself or group from some other force or category that holds the power to deny the needs of the different to secure the demands of itself. Black feminism has provided me with the tools to understand that the master's house is one that must be dismantled, but we must learn how to use tools differently while also creating new tools, a dynamic maneuvering is required in order to produce a paradigm shift that liberates us from both the freedoms and slaveries of our current representational binds. A rupture that will call forth new worlds and new peoples that we do not have names for, and that we may never have language for, perhaps they may never be able to be hailed into this world.

When *you* say Black Feminism what do you mean? What do you think the relationship between transgender studies and Black feminism as a field of study is? Is there a relationship between Black cisgender women and transgender people that you are interested in teasing out?

MB: I am deeply fascinated by your use of darkness here. Something to look forward to in your forthcoming project, I suppose. And, to echo (with a difference) your initial sentiment about the seeming circularity of this conversation, I don't think it's circular but rather productively and generatively becoming, perhaps un- and rebecoming. And *this*, I think, is very much how you (and I) may think of transness: continually reworked and reworking, open, an analytic that generates not totalizing knowledge but more proliferation. This conversation, this dialogue, this discursive expression of love is enacting syntactically and interpersonally what we're also trying to plumb through in its content. And it's dope.

But you ask what I mean by Black feminism. From my perspective, it is a modality of thinking-doing-living that escapes fixity, subverts hegemony, and is always open. It is an excessive force that always overflows attempts to circumscribe it, that always is more than the containable. Black feminism strikes me as, to cite, as you do, L.H. Stallings, a practice of "unnaming": "a process of unranking and challenging gender through a manipulation of language to elide the troubles and violations of language in the West"; that which "interrupt[s] the intelligible logic of gender, and ... continue [s] to defer." Black feminism, like unranking, "hinges on a subject's willful, infinite, multiple, and continuous process of defying classification/naming."²³ It does not designate movement *to* somewhere; it is itself movement that perennially uncovers and unmoors, a "loose [and loosening] seam." It does not designate an ontological beingness; it is para-ontological, an agnostic ontological imagination. It does not designate anarchy in search for something better; it is "wild" and "*over and between* sounds, words, sentences, and narratives."

Black feminism, which for me *always* indexes (fugitive) Blackness and transness, as Saidiya Hartman says of Blackness, "marks a social relationship of dominance and

abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a *contested* figure at the very center of social struggle.”²⁴ But it is not only *contested*; it is *contesting*, as it bristles, perennially, at all attempts to limn its contours. Black feminism is a *contesting* and “contested idea, whose ultimate destination remains unsettled,” and this unsettled destination is by necessity unknowable, unseen, and other than what is and has been.²⁵ “What is inadequate to” Black feminism “is already given ontologies,” Fred Moten writes. “The lived experienced of blackness [and of those who engage Black feminism] is ... a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events.”²⁶

I also look to Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s conceptual frameworks such as revolutionary mothering, Black feminist fugitivity, and “doing cartwheels on the blacktop” as ways of understanding Black feminism. And Gumbs, in fleshing out her own understanding of it, inherits conceptual frameworks integral to Black queer livability and flourishing, such as “combat breathing” from Frantz Fanon and Ntozake Shange; or that Black women are inherently valuable from the Combahee River Collective’s Black feminist statement; or queerness as unlikely, magical, and against the current of the reproduction of oppression, a definition gleaned from the interstices of Audre Lorde’s intellectual corpus. Black feminism, Black feminist theorizing—theorizing, of course, not in the sense of stodgy elitism but, as Barbara Christian has said, “more in the form of the hieroglyph”—seems to be that force, that analytic, that mode of inhabiting the world that refuses to succumb to hegemony. It is to take seriously those conversations in the kitchen, those side-eyes saturated with subversive meaning, those moments of, as Gumbs might say, *spillage*. And this is what Black feminism is and has done: it is a kind of *living* that is so immersed in refusal and subversive song—different names for love, perhaps—that it acts as a potent site for change. Perhaps Black feminism is the texture of the excess, the quality of the critical overflow that escapes capture, one that must continually be remapped, undone, redeployed, and worked, worked, worked.

In short, Black feminism, rather than “is ...,” *does*, or more specifically, *undoes*. I see us dovetailing here: you seek to decouple politics—a veritable *doing*—and stable, fixed identities; I seek, too, to promote a *doing*, a politics that rests not on an identity but on a quotidian practice of refusal of fixity, and on not (simply) who one is *per se* but, following Cohen again, one’s relationship to power. I see it as a mode of thinking and doing that troublesomely rests at the nexus of Blackness and transness (because for me, as well as, I think, for you, Black feminism is always already trans, as Che Gossett says) and mobilizes the sites and moments of rupture. That is, those racial and gendered breakdowns, which are breakdowns of the category of the human, or Sylvia Wynter’s “Man,” are generative sites in Black feminism, and it is those unknowable, disruptive sites that are the key to unlocking a capacity for justice.

As this dovetails with trans feminism, there is a necessary self-determination I want to maintain as well. The Blackness and transness of feminisms must be a radical, self-determinative (which is unable to be thought apart from trans epistemologies of [un]gendered self-determination) subjective utterance signaling

an excess of categorization. What if we understand these two modes of living as gestures productive of a profound overturning of the identity category *period*, excessive of identificatory categorization, precipitated by Blackness's "excess, the power of the *unthought*"?²⁷ The zone of the unthought, a Black queer feminist unrepresentability, marks the limits of representation.

To put as fine a point on this as I can, the relationship between Black feminism and trans feminism, and those who do their bidding, is one that seeks to live in what C. Riley Snorton aptly and lusciously calls "appositional flesh."²⁸ Black feminism and trans feminism overlap referentially; they index a disruptive force that manifests and inflects in various ways across subjectivities. To aim for life in appositional flesh might be to "subjectivate" oneself *outside of* power's grasp, despite power being constitutive of subjectivity. It might be to render oneself illegible as a kind of life, or to mobilize the "impossibility" of oneself to the end of the world (as we know it). Maybe, just maybe, to be and become or to do and undo the irruptive nexus of Black feminism and trans feminism is to live life unbounded by hegemonic regimes, living the radical liberation we strive for *now*.

Notes

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56–57.
2. See "bell hooks—Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body | Eugene Lang College." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs> (accessed October 19, 2015).
3. Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 107–18.
4. Cathy J. Cohen and Sarah J. Jackson, "Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2015, <http://signsjournal.org/ask-a-feminist-cohen-jackson/>.
5. Charlene Carruthers, "In Defense of Korryn Gaines, Black Women and Children," *Colorlines*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/defense-korryn-gaines-black-women-and-children-opinion>.
6. Sunnive Brydum and Mitch Kellaway, "This Black Trans Man Is in Prison for Killing His Rapist," *Advocate*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2015/04/08/black-trans-man-prison-killing-his-rapist> (accessed September 12, 2015).
7. I have usually identified as a straight, cis, Black man, but have recently found a more apt descriptor in queerness insofar as it does the work of refusing the gender binary on which "straight" relies. As well, to understand myself as a Black queer man takes seriously the claim that Blackness *disallows* a seamless *cisgender* and troubles gender, which is to say that epidermal and para-ontological Blackness, to the extent that these describe my own Blackness, interrogate my perceived "cis" gender.
8. Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 2000), 72.
9. LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, Black Performance and Cultural Criticism (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 37.

10. J. Kameron Carter, "Paratheological Blackness," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 591, doi:10.1215/00382876-2345189.
11. David Lionel Smith, "What Is Black Culture?," in *The House That Race Built*, edited by Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998), 178–94.
12. U.S. Department of Justice, "Hate Crime Statistics, 2013," Federal Bureau of Investigation, Fall (2014), https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2013/topic-pages/incidents-and-offenses/incidentsandoffenses_final.pdf (accessed October 22, 2015).
13. "Transgender Bride," by Arthur Forney, in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (September 30, 2015, Season 17, Episode 2; NBC).
14. Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
15. E. Patrick Johnson, *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 63.
16. Nael Bhanji, "Trans/scriptions: Homing Desires, (Trans)sexual Citizenship and Racialized Bodies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 517–18.
17. Cooper, Brittney. "11 Major Misconceptions About the Black Lives Matter Movement." *Cosmopolitan*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a45930/misconceptions-black-lives-matter-movement/> (accessed October 22, 2015).
18. Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.
19. Jessica Contrera, "A Year Ago, Mohamed Became 'Clock Boy.' Now, He Can't Escape That Moment," *Washington Post*, August 2, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-year-ago-ahmed-mohamed-became-clock-boy-now-he-cant-escape-that-moment/2016/08/02/2b8650be-484b-11e6-bdb9-701687974517_story.html?utm_term=.562bd885ae16 (accessed August 3, 2016).
20. Jasbir K. Puar, "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *PhiloSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (October 2, 2012): 54.
21. LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 207.
22. June Jordan, *Civil Wars* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 143.
23. Horton-Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word*, 34, 36, 38.
24. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57; emphasis added.
25. Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: A Historical Context* (London: Phaidon, 2001).
26. Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 187.
27. Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 3; emphasis in original.
28. See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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