
The Shape of Angels' Teeth

Toward a Blacktransfeminist Thought through the Mattering of Black(Trans)Lives

ABSTRACT This essay argues for a productive alliance between trans feminism, trans studies, and black feminist thought (BFT) to articulate a black feminist mode of activism that takes seriously the epistemologies of black trans women. Ultimately this essay critiques BFT's cisgender normativity and offers a more inclusive imagining of BFT, referred to as blacktransfeminist thought (BTFT). To illustrate the scholarly significance of BTFT, I draw upon the ontological invalidation of black trans lives in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. #BlackLivesMatter is situated as (1) an exemplar of how black transgender women are commonly excluded from activist discourses, and (2) an opportunity to theorize the utility of BTFT as it relates to racialized gender variant lives and deaths. **KEYWORDS** Black feminist thought; Trans feminism; Blacktransfeminist thought; Cisgender privilege; Black Lives Matter

What does the perfect elevator look like, the one that will deliver us from the cities we suffer now, these stunted shacks? We don't know because we can't see inside it, it's something we cannot imagine, like the shape of angels' teeth.

COLSON WHITEHEAD, *THE INTUITIONIST*¹

IMAGINING ANGELS' TEETH

All my life I have been edified by black women: my mother, a blood-red-haired woman with a bite just as sharp as her bark; my maternal grandmother, whose life is governed by her rules and her rules only; and my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Stokes, her voice a harp's melody coupled with an aura that shrouded her presence in unceasing respect. There was also a bevy of aunts and older female cousins who spoke to anyone and everyone in tones calcified by recalcitrant backbones. Given my roots, it makes sense that I gravitated toward studying and imperfectly embodying black feminist thought (BFT), a theoretical mode of inhabiting the world that spoke directly to the women of my life—even if they did not formally know its academic name. In many ways, scholars like bell

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hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Michele Wallace, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Hortense Spillers felt like academic incarnations of the black women in my life. In the academy, they have been vital for my wellbeing. Like oxygen, I breathe the words of Toni Cade Bambara's assertion that "The job of the writer is to make revolution irresistible."² Like water, I drink Audre Lorde's dictum that "Your silence will not protect you."³ Yet my relationship to and use of black women's feminist works is political as a black cisgender male who benefits from sexism, patriarchy, and cisgenderism. As a black cisgender male, naming cis male supremacy and unmasking its terrorism is imperative; however, doing so with all black women in mind—cisgender, transgender, and gender-queer—is equally as important to challenge the normative silences surrounding the violence imposed on trans lives. My aim as a scholar of feminist theory and queer theory and transgender studies is to undo myself. Though I fail daily in my endeavor to actualize feminism, I aim to embody a black feminist posture and use it as my primary interpretive gaze. Moving through the world as a black feminist cisgender black man matters insofar as my corporeality is the vessel through which I understand the world, and is the medium through which others understand me.

Reflexively, there was a time when I was only attuned to my own and then black cisgender women's interests; I maintained the gender binary and elided the existence of gender variant bodies from my interpretive gaze. Ironically enough, a hip-hop song sparked my "aha" moment. Though hip-hop is and fittingly remains known for its prevalent misogyny,⁴ as I listened to "Onslaught" by Slaughterhouse—probably in the gym surrounded by rusted steel—hip-hop artist Joe Budden rhymed, "Cause if you ain't all about ya pace / then, nigga, you a transgender—all outta place."⁵ The rhyme was fleeting, but also made me think about how I overlooked gendered bodies that are excluded from the cisgender binary. This gendered "outta place-ness" was subtly racialized by its close lyrical propinquity to "nigga," a distinctly raced and gendered term. Amid its transphobic lyrics, "Onslaught" planted the inchoate seeds for what I envision as the foundational contribution of this essay: to suture a constitutive relationship between black feminism and trans subjectivity.

This essay finds its scholarly call to action in Rachel Alicia Griffin's poignant statement: "we certainly fall short in research that includes trans and gender-queer women as a means to confront the harsh reality of who gets lost in normative assertions of 'woman' and 'women.'"⁶ Because "Women matter. Gender matters. [And] Feminism matters,"⁷ providing a platform for the marginalized voices, knowledges, and experiences of black trans women in particular is an ethical imperative for feminist work. A black feminism that takes seriously and is

imbricated with trans feminism is fueled by the reality that, as of 2014, the average life span of a trans woman of color is only thirty-five years.⁸ It is fueled by the dismal reality that black trans women and other trans women of color suffer incredibly high rates of HIV seropositivity, mental health issues, and body-modification-related health problems.⁹ It is fueled by the reality that black trans women are highly likely to be forced to conceal their trans identities, and when they do express and live boldly in their trans-ness, they are commonly killed by others who are often exculpated for their murders due to “gay panic” and “trans panic” defenses (which, to date, is legal in every state except California).¹⁰ Nevertheless, a black feminism imbricated with trans feminism—blacktransfeminist thought—maintains, in the words of the executive director of the Trans Women of Color Collective, Lourdes Ashley Hunter, that “Every breath a [black trans woman] takes is an act of revolution.”¹¹

Methodologically, I deploy performative writing not only to expand “the possibilities of writing,” but also to expand the possibilities for life.¹² At the intersections of multiple, multiplicative marginalized identities, we could, in effect, say “Give us language to give us life.” As Della Pollock defines it, performative writing “answers discourses of textuality not by recovering reference to a given or ‘old’ world but by writing into a new one.”¹³ She adds, “performative writing is not a genre or fixed form. . . . Performativity describes a fundamentally material practice. Like performance, however, it is also an analytic, a way of framing and underscoring aspects of writing/life.”¹⁴ This alludes to a writerly way of discerning which, or maybe even how, lives matter. The performativity of this essay marks a discursive site of subversion that Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Moore might call a writerly “transing,” as a discursive “practice that takes place within, as well as across or between” the boundaries of writing about gender.¹⁵ As a performative text authored by a black cisgender man, this essay aims to be accountable to my male and cisgender privilege by witnessing the narratives trans people have told and centering upon their contributions to feminist theorizing.¹⁶ Furthermore, because performative writing “attempts to keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in scholars’ abstractions,”¹⁷ it places primacy on the lived, embodied, and visceral knowledges that are integral to black and transgender scholarship.¹⁸

The opening epigraph of this essay, from Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, is appropriate because it serves imagining what is thought to be unimaginable or, imagining what is the “undercommons” haunting the stability of the epistemic center.¹⁹ To me, the shape of the angels’ teeth reflect the perennial becoming of BFT. I ask: What might it mean for trans subjectivities to be not only included

in black feminist theorization, but also constitutive of it? In other words, while there are benefits to infusing trans feminism²⁰ into BFT as it relates to bringing visibility and historical subjectivity to marginalized bodies, how might the introduction of trans subjectivity affect both the utilization of BFT and its relevance in the everyday lives of *all* black women? Throughout this essay, I pursue Whitehead's "perfect elevator" as a metaphor for the inclusive epistemological ideal that I believe black feminism is capable of via the infusion of trans feminism.

In this essay I critique BFT's cisgender normativity; offer blacktransfeminist thought as a more inclusive articulation of BFT; and use Black Lives Matter as a movement that often excludes black trans women, yet is fertile ground to theorize the utility of blacktransfeminist thought (BTFT). This is not to say that Black Lives Matter is inherently transphobic—to the contrary. The founders of Black Lives Matter are committed to trans inclusivity. Co-founder Alicia Garza writes in her herstory of the movement, "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum."²¹ Garza's remarks go beyond mere inclusion; she implies the integrality of these trans and gender non-conforming groups.²²

In suturing trans feminism to and within BFT, my goal is not merely to include trans feminism. Simple inclusion would connote what Sandra Harding refers to as an "add and stir" approach, meaning to simply "provide spaces for 'other' forms or modes of knowledge-production in a mechanical way, without attempting to show how these either effectively query or even displace the epistemic premises upon which questions of knowledge-production occur."²³ Rather, trans feminism needs to be more than just included in BFT; trans feminism must become *constitutive* of it to theorize fully the lives and deaths of black transgender women.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Rooted in the 1830s with free black "feminist-abolitionists" like Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frances E. W. Harper, the overarching commitments of BFT are unquestioningly admirable. Historically, BFT has been situated in the experiential knowledge of black women who, because of their "standpoint epistemology," possess unique angles of vision for assessing social conditions.²⁴ The miners' canaries of the social milieu, black women's practice of BFT finds its first scholarly articulation in 1990 via Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*, wherein BFT is defined as a "collective wisdom on how to survive as US Black women [which] constituted a distinctive Black women's

standpoint on gender-specific patterns of racial segregation and its accompanying economic penalties.”²⁵ Though an interdisciplinary mode of thought, BFT is premised on the following key tenets: black women experience a qualitatively different oppression because of their race, gender, and class; black women cannot extricate their fight for racial and gender justice from one another; the struggles to end racism *and* sexism (and classism and heterosexism) are in no way contradictory; and the framework structuring BFT is profoundly rooted in black women’s lived experiences.²⁶ This brief overview situates BFT as an indispensable means to liberate black women. Yet, the framework and field have yet to fully embrace black trans and gender-queer women, which reflects a serious infraction of its commitment to liberation. From this resistant foundation, I argue that BFT should also be concerned with critiquing and expanding the category of woman—whom the term signals and what it means. Guita Baines from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* asks, “Can’t I love what I criticize?”²⁷ My answer is, “Yes.” I love—deeply, abidingly, wholeheartedly—what I criticize.

Despite the laudable black feminist tradition, BFT and black communities at large have generally been transphobic toward black trans people, particularly black trans women. While violence is a quotidian phenomenon for black folks, ranging from explicit white supremacy to environmental racism to extra-legal extermination,²⁸ the violence visited upon black trans women largely comes at the hands of other black people. “These acquaintances and partners [who demean, invalidate, and exterminate black trans women],” writes Ashleigh Shackelford, “are primarily Black cisgender men. But it’s not just Black men who are at fault. The family rejection, interpersonal violence, and transphobic norms are highly perpetuated by people like me—Black cisgender women.”²⁹ To assert that black cis men and black cis women have done violence to black trans women and other gender nonconforming people is a trenchant critique indeed.

As Judith Butler observes in “Against Proper Objects,” the pressure of critique is in many ways a gift to ideologies and political movements seeking to advance social justice:

[W]hat is incisive and valuable in feminist work is precisely the kind of thinking that calls into question the settled grounds of analysis. And even the recourse to sexual difference within feminist theory is at its most productive when it is taken not as a ground, foundation, or methodology, but as a *question* posed but not resolved.³⁰

Thus, if BFT is to be truly “the most self-critical” among all movements of social justice, and if it is to continue to question its grounds of inclusion and

transformation, it must undergo critique leveled by trans feminism.³¹ Amid such critique, I maintain that BFT can still offer a hospitable mode of thinking and being for black trans people. BFT is neither intrinsically transphobic, nor fundamentally unable to advance a trans inclusive—indeed, trans *constitutive*—activism. On the contrary, “my critiques on the marginalization of black trans women from the larger movement rests on my belief that the movement is the most fitting to support their narratives.”³² BFT is rooted in the liberation of *all* black women, and as such “the liberation of black cis women is contingent upon the liberation of black trans women”; BFT is ever-shifting, as it must be, and therein lies “my hope. . . that this movement will become more inclusive of black trans women.”³³

BLACKTRANSFEMINIST THOUGHT

To clarify the contours of BTFT, it is useful first to define trans and trans feminism. Though the terms “transvestite” and “transsexual”³⁴ predate “trans” and “transgender,” the first use of “transgender” occurred in 1974 at the First National TV TS Conference. At the conference, “there was talk that [it] would take some 20 years to become widespread: of transsexuals seeking ‘gender alignment’; of ‘trans-gender’ and ‘trans.people’ used as umbrella terms to include both TVs and TSs.”³⁵ Guided by contemporary discourses, I employ “trans” and “transgender” to denote a practiced gender identity that challenges gender normativity and disrupts gender concreteness. It is also crucial to note that some people whom others may identify as trans emphatically rebuke the term and aver that they are simply men or women who are correcting a biological mistake. Trans here is a subjectivity and presentation that, as the etymological roots of “trans” delineate, falls beyond, between, and across stable categories of “man” and “woman,” while also always being part of “contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being,” constantly interplaying with other identity vectors.³⁶

Rooted in trans realities and the search for gender justice is trans feminism. The most explicit and lucid definition of trans feminism comes from Emi Koyama’s “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in which she defines trans feminism as

primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans women, non-trans men and others who are sympathetic toward needs of trans women and

consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation.³⁷

Koyama maintains trans feminists believe

that each individual has the right to define her or his own identities and to expect society to respect them. . . . [And] we hold that we have the sole right to make decisions regarding our own bodies, and that no political, medical or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them.³⁸

While this definition of trans feminism is clear, I echo Nicholas Birns and find Koyama's articulation uncertain about what trans feminism is because it does not address whether it stems specifically from the standpoint epistemology of trans women or if it is an expansion of feminism in general.³⁹ Additionally, it is uncertain if trans feminism is

a feminism that defines the "trans-" prefix in a maximally heterogeneous way, focusing on transnationalism and transgendered articulations of identity in understanding the cultural formations at play in the identity of women in the twenty-first century as well as their diasporic manifestations.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Koyama lacks an accounting of the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.; bolsters the gender binary ("*his or her own sex*"); and positions gender identity as ahistorical and one of pure individual choice. While Koyama may be speaking idealistically to depict trans feminism as "a social arrangement where one is free to assign her or his own sex (or non-sex, for that matter),"⁴¹ it remains that the plurality of gender demands, as Stuart Hall says regarding race, "a recognition that the central issues of [gender] always appear historically in articulation."⁴² That is to say, to think of gender as completely individualistic "threatens to become a dangerous abdication of history."⁴³

janaya (j) khan, a black, queer, gender non-conforming Black Lives Matter activist and Afrofuturist, serves as a kind of supplement to Koyama's work by imparting forceful black trans knowledge. They⁴⁴ argue that "queer and trans Black people are leaders" of Black Lives Matter, and all national and global anti-racist and feminist social movements. "On the front lines and online, queer and trans Black folks are fighting for the liberation of all Black peoples," khan writes. "And you need us."⁴⁵ For khan, black trans women are constitutive of feminist thought and anti-racist social justice. khan's writing and grassroots activism demonstrates the BTFT that I theorize throughout this essay, plainly proclaiming, "Queer and trans Black people have the skills and tools necessary

for the liberation for all Black peoples. None more so than Black trans women.”⁴⁶ Khan highlights the similarities to traditional BFT as well as the specific plight and experiential resources of black trans women. They note, like black cis men and women, “Black trans women are killed for simply existing.” Additionally, however, “The harshest manifestations of anti-Black racist, cissexist, white supremacist, capitalist hetero-patriarchal oppression exists on the bodies and in the experiences of Black trans women,” which provides black trans women with epistemological rarity and value. It is precisely because of Khan’s belief that “Black trans women are the fulcrum of Black liberation” that they not only center black trans women, but also constitute their activism through the experiences of black trans women.⁴⁷ If feminist politics use trans-exclusion as the basis for its “woman” solidarity, trans bodies expose “not only the unreliability of the body as a source of their identities and politics, but also the fallacy of women’s universal experiences and oppressions.”⁴⁸ BTFT, like what Ronald J. Pelias says of performative writing, validates the trans-ness of trans bodies, which are “real lives that shake the imagination / connecting us to subjects that truly matter, / connecting us to each other.”⁴⁹

As such, BTFT can be understood as an embodied and enacted social and ideological posture that necessarily disrupts cis normativity because, indeed, “The normative is violent.”⁵⁰ BTFT is woven throughout the professed realities and experiences of Black trans women’s lives and thus inherently and perennially challenges binaristic models of gender. It is what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call “fugitive,” a deviant insider and thus incisively subversive.⁵¹ As a citation of fugitivity, trans-ness is a corporeal illegality; as Princess Harmony Rodriguez says, citing her own embodiment, “being transgender (resisting patriarchy’s desire for our lives) is—essentially—illegal.”⁵² Trans experiences and feminist inquiry are tightly woven into larger frameworks of gendered epistemologies because hegemonic forms of knowledge and the nature of sociality that these knowledges uphold “define who gets to be a ‘subject’ and a ‘knower’” as well as “which knowledges and phenomena are deemed valid ‘objects’ of study and consequently worthy of recognition, authority and legitimacy.”⁵³ Thus I use BTFT as a processual space of what C. Riley Snorton calls “transfiguration,” a transitional, slippery site that cultivates room for a productive relationship between BFT and burgeoning trans disruptions of BFT’s cisgender normativity.⁵⁴ BTFT as a site of transfiguration “serves as a place where particular assumptions about gender and its mapping on the body come under such scrutiny as to implode.”⁵⁵

BTFT, in addition to speaking from trans subject positions, also stems from a desire to maintain a transgressive, transmutating, and transmutating

positionality. That is, BTFT seeks to disrupt normative gender and racial categories, destabilizing the foundation on which bodies stand. Space, or the grounds on which one might stand for a stable identity, is destabilized in BTFT. For example, at a recent queer studies conference, I witnessed a trans woman walk by two seemingly cis black men, who appeared viscerally disturbed by her inhabitation of public space. Loud enough for me to hear from a distance, one said to the other, “Was that a dude, yo?” Though brief, the encounter demonstrates how trans women—and queerness in general—disrupt gendered assumptions, and even incite presumably unwanted gendered commentary. Ultimately, BTFT can foment questions not only like, “Was that a dude, yo?” but also, hopefully, “What *is* a dude, yo?” In short, BTFT avers that these categories, not entirely unlike BFT’s assertions, must be undone and redone continuously by breaching the dominant confines of raced and gendered scripting. BTFT, when faced with logics of classification and fixity, explodes the logic through its confrontation of hegemonic logic itself. Briefly returning to my overhearing “Was that a dude, yo?” my inclination is to hope that this trans woman’s presence forced the two seemingly cis black men to question their positionality within the gender binary and the binary itself. However, considering their willingness to publicly question her gender identity, and the gender binaristic precedence that buttresses their invalidation of her, it is unlikely they did. Nor did I do as much as I should have to interrupt their thinking, having only said in passing, “No, a trans woman,” in my usual soft-spoken voice. No reaction from them, perhaps because they could not hear me—whether due to my low volume or due to the bastion of the discursive gender binary backing them up.

THE MATTER OF BLACK TRANS LIVES

It has become almost passé to point out the shortcomings of protests and movements for racial and gender equality. Mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement leaders challenged the pervasive de jure and de facto racism of the society in which they found themselves⁵⁶; black women challenged the sexism of the black men of the Civil Rights Movement while also critiquing the racism of those engaged in Women’s Liberation and feminist activism⁵⁷; and lesbian women challenged the heteronormativity of black feminists.⁵⁸ What these challenges reveal is not only a sense of “you forgot us; we want to be included too,” but also that these progressive movements always coming under fire by the “minorities within the minority” indicates a need for a mode of thought that does not simply *include* (which almost inevitably leaves someone out) but is *constituted* by instability. What is necessary is a mode of thinking that marks

an ideological and political site of simultaneous becoming and *un*becoming—a constitutive and deconstructive venue for bodies, positionalities, and intellects. I argue that BTFT is exemplary of this mode of thought.

BTFT is to know that BFT does not know, and that neither framework can definitively know itself. Like the biblical imperative, BTFT feeds, quenches, and welcomes the stranger (Matt. 25:35) because that stranger, that reflection of B(T)FT, can be the “holiness” that epitomizes BTFT. Trans bodies and ideologies that are characterized by, and rooted in, inherent destabilization are ideal sites from which to think about how hegemonic structures operate and thus can be dismantled. Trans bodies of color, particularly black trans women, unsuture the stitches of what bell hooks terms “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy”⁵⁹ that have long violated the vitality, the livability, the validity of trans lives and deaths.

Founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Temeti, and Patrisse Cullors, two of whom identify as queer women of color, #BlackLivesMatter discourse is useful as a vehicle through which to articulate the utility of BTFT and the particular disruption trans embodiment causes. As Butler reminds us,

the public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths.⁶⁰

With the movement’s public image and its de facto codification of “Black Lives” as black, *cisgender*, *male* lives, it both reveals and perpetuates what qualifies as a “life” insofar as its implicit codification of black cisgender male lives being those which matter shows how cisgender male supremacy dictates the movement’s activist reach, causing it to reify discourses of domination. The implicit and explicit male publicity of Black Lives Matter, including victims of violence such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Walter Scott, discursively indicates that it is black, cisgender, male that count as lives worthy of protest, mourning, and remembrance.

This departs radically from the co-founders’ vision of Black Lives Matter. Garza notes that

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond. . . keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all.

Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.⁶¹

Black Lives Matter has become a discursive terrain for black cisgender men at the expense of all black women. Male lives are often the only ones deemed valuable enough to mourn, which values male lives as more human and subsequently more worthy of mourning. By no means do I wish to imply that it is unjust or inappropriate to mourn the loss of black men. Rather, I wish to show, as many black women have sought to do in this contemporary context, that black women are also being murdered. Yet there is far less outcry for them, indicating the devaluation of black female bodies and thus inferiority to black men. Furthermore, there is even less—almost nonexistent outside queer and trans circles—outcry for black trans lives that are taken. Because they fall outside the gendered binary (that which qualifies one for life), black trans lives are rendered nonlives—nonbeings whose deaths are not and cannot be mournable since their claims to humanity have been revoked. Mourning the loss of black cisgender males, while incredibly necessary, inflects a mode of spectatorship that emotionally animates viewers to see only (or primarily) male bodies as citizens worthy of mourning.⁶² This is not to say that we should mourn black cisgender males less; rather, activists should labor to render the public sphere (e.g., vigils, protests, marches, etc.) more inclusive. If Black Lives Matter, ALL black lives should matter.

Patrisse Cullors notes the cis normativity of the movement as well: “I think a better job that the Black Lives Matter movement could do is actually uplifting the narratives of black trans women.”⁶³ Hunter observes the chasm between cisgender and transgender black people. Echoing Cullors, Hunter says

Just last year [2014], 12 trans women of color were murdered with no response from the black community. When folks scream, “Black Lives Matter,” they’re not talking about black trans women. Most of the time, they’re not even talking about [cis] black women.⁶⁴

In 2015, the death toll for trans women and gender nonconforming people was over twenty-one, almost all of whom were of color. 2015 hosted the most reported killings of trans women of color in US history.⁶⁵ As the movement currently stands, despite the founders’ intentions, it has been and remains normatively gendered in its implicit validation of black life. Albeit minimal, the inclusion of cis black women has begun to manifest via efforts such as

#SayHerName.⁶⁶ If the movement were supplemented with the narratives of black trans folks, then Black Lives Matter would be more honest to its appellation and become not only more radically inclusive, but also radically deconstructive and self-reflexive. It may look like black trans women stealing the mic from someone talking only about Trayvon, Michael, and Eric and saying, “I’m *not* gonna let you finish, ‘cause Zella Ziona is gon’ be talked about right now.” In reality, Black Lives Matter would be actualizing its radical call for justice more fully. Assuming that BTFT can assist in transgressing the limits of both Black Lives Matter and the hegemonic systems to which the movement is a response, Say his, her, *bir* name.⁶⁷

This is BTFT

What is necessary is what Moten says in an interview on the movement:

So when we say that Black lives matter, I think that what we do sometimes is obscure the fact that it’s in fact Black *life* that matters. That insurgent Black social life still constitutes a profound threat to the already existing order of things. And part of the reason it constitutes such a profound threat is its openness, its unfixing.⁶⁸

This is what makes blackness—and, I would argue, trans identity—fugitive: black and/or trans bodies disrupt normativity and disallow complacency. CeCe McDonald’s occupation of public space coded as cisgender unsettles the ability for that space to remain implicitly marked by proverbial “No Trans Allowed” signs. Kai M. Green’s occupation of *transnational* space via the airport, and his perturbation of normative Transportation Security Administration security, disrupts which bodies are deemed “threatening” or non-threatening (note his subsequent Facebook status: “#yourbinaryisbroken”).⁶⁹ As subjects who produce a cultural effect of gendered “ontological insurgency,”⁷⁰ black trans ontic-epistemological productions open up presumed axiomatic gender binaries and the normative whiteness of public space; they are, like gender-queer Morehouse College student Jamal Lewis, nominatively unfixing via their “he/she” identifications.⁷¹ They, as black and AfroIndigenous trans writer Shaadi Devereaux says, “mark the onset of revolution.”⁷² This is a call not only for the *mattering* of black trans lives and deaths, but also for the *mattering* of insurgent bodies, the bodies that unfix the normative order. Black and trans lives—archetypal fugitive embodiments—are rightly concerned with the phrase drawn from Eric Garner’s last words: “I can’t breathe.”⁷³ Whereas black lives struggle for air to fill their lungs, black trans lives are perhaps not even given the perceptual capacity

to draw breath. The transphobic message is, how dare you even have the audacity to breathe.⁷⁴

The disruption of normative space is the gift black trans bodies give to Black Lives Matter, alongside the expansion of BFT to BTFT. To shout, “Say her name!”⁷⁵ and hold a sign displaying this command in reference to black trans women functions to dislodge female pronouns from narrowly, “biologically” defined bodies. Doing so unapologetically challenges the gender binary and normative meaning of “woman” while demanding respect for self-definition, which mirrors the progenitors of BFT.⁷⁶ After doing this at a Hillary Clinton campaign stop in Cleveland, OH—a venue codified in the whiteness of governmental politics—Angela Peoples, leader of the grassroots lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer network at the civil rights group GetEQUAL, urged Hillary⁷⁷ to “divest from private prisons [and] invest in black trans women.”⁷⁸ In a follow-up piece explaining her rationale, Peoples writes:

Since Hillary Clinton makes equality for women a critical tenet of her campaign platform, we demand that Clinton—and our own movement for black lives—center the black transgender women so often left out of conversations about gender and racial equity.⁷⁹

These “transstahs,” as self-proclaimed TransGriot calls black trans women,⁸⁰ exist as subjectivities that stand in opposition to, and subversion of, prisons—literal and socio-ideological—from which power must divest. Black trans women must be validly subjectivated in their nonnormativity, the result of which will yield the disruption of the gender binary structuring the terms and conditions of “life,” and the radical reconstitution and deconstruction of hegemonic logics. Indeed, black women’s trans bodies, like the sex workers on Merchant Street Janet Mock describes in *Redefining Realness*, are “bodies that [a]re radical in their mere existence in this misogynistic, transphobic, elitist world.”⁸¹ These bodies steal themselves for themselves to *live*, pilfer their subjectivities, fugitively refuse the law precisely because the law says that they cannot—and should not—exist, especially not boldly. In this context, BTFT allows scholars to theorize how bodies can “matter” differently and more expansively, broadening who and what counts as “life” at all.

Black trans women’s bodies epitomize insurgency and disruption through their raced and gendered selves. This utter corporeal fugitivity, confounding hegemonic attempts to interpellate them into fixity, threatens the “order of things.” Black trans women’s bodies corporeally signify abject *disorder* juxtaposed against

the normative gender binary. However, in this disordering that becomes theoretically ordered through the inclusivity of BTFT, trans bodies in fact highlight the nuances of gender, and open up the binary to be dissected, examined, and ultimately reworked. Indeed, Devereaux says:

In answering why TWoC [trans women of color] seize the imagination of the mind so vividly, either as haunting ghosts or sensational fetish, we begin to unravel a larger narrative of just what it means to be a man, a woman, both, neither and, ultimately, human. People constantly ask if we are now ready to deal with transgender people. I think the question is really: “Are we ready to deal with ourselves?” Are we ready to live in a world without a script and strict casting call for humanity?⁸²

I recall a moment from Astra Taylor’s documentary *Examined Life*, in which Cornel West paraphrases William Butler Yeats: “it takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your own soul than it does for a soldier to fight in the battlefield.”⁸³ An apt assessment. Only when insurgent black life matters will black activists be acting courageously, putting ourselves on trial, and doing more than declaring war on those we deem enemies.

CeCe McDonald, a black trans woman who lethally defended herself after being dangerously accosted by a group of white people, was convicted of second-degree manslaughter and forced to serve 41 months in prison after enduring racialized, sexualized, and gendered epithets in 2011. The conviction effectively disallowed her human right to defend herself. On the grounds of her black trans womanness, McDonald was subjected to *de jure* dehumanization. Notable, too, are the murders of trans women in 2015, among whom are Lamia Beard, 30, Norfolk, VA; Taja DeJesus, 36, San Francisco, CA; Penny Proud, 21, New Orleans, LA; Ty Underwood, 24, North Tyler, TX; Yazmin Vash Payne, 33, Los Angeles, CA; and Zella Ziona, 21, Gaithersburg, MD. All received little to no media coverage or public outcry, sending a resounding message that these black lives do not fall under the ambit of the black lives—indeed, the black *life*—that is proclaimed to matter. Just as Malcolm X says about himself, black trans lives are quite literally, tragically, and fatally, “born in trouble.”⁸⁴ Not because of who they are, but because of the offensively oppressive world into which they are born. Black trans bodies are archetypally “trouble” as they embody the nonembodiable. One must note the similarity between “trouble”—that which defies decorum, propriety, and correctness—and “fugitivity”—to be a rebel and elude correction, to defy attempts to corral one into an ascribed code of conduct.

Black and trans people inhabiting social space that is codified as white and cis-gender traverse social space perceived as invalid life. McDonald's actions "did not seem to be legible, classifiable, or admissible as a form of self-defense."⁸⁵ Murdered black trans bodies, subject to a lack of recognition (and oftentimes *mis*recognition via incorrect pronoun usages), are "constituted. . . prior to [their] death[s] as. . . nonbeing[s]," and mobile black trans sociality recalls the opening scene of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which the unnamed protagonist is unseen by the white man who bumps into him.⁸⁶ Thus "'Nothingness' seems to be the ascribed lot of the black [trans] within th[e] case[s]' formulation."⁸⁷

Mirroring the impulse of black feminist thought, BTFT and the black trans women this framework intentionally humanizes always trouble social order, undo the strictures that demand normativity, and epitomize fugitivity. They send the public into a frenzy when they wish to use bathrooms befitting their gender identification, and bathrooms are explicitly gendered markers of sanitized social order. They call into question the cogency and justness of laws; and they, because of their gendered unruliness, are jailed—literally deemed illegal fugitives for existing when they are supposed to be "impossible people."⁸⁸ In doing this, (black) trans bodies return those of us who are not trans to ourselves, forcing us to assess critically where we stand, what damage we have caused, and what we must do about it. Arguing for the constitutivity of trans narratives and knowledges in BFT marks, as Devereaux writes, "the descent of a culture in which oppressive and nonconsensual assignments of gender mark non-male bodies as inferior and worthy of subjugation. Our bodies mark the onset of revolution." Aligning with Devereaux, I assert that BTFT compels us to "give up our violent comfort zones and step fearlessly into the Trans Femme Revolution."⁸⁹

Though I cannot provide an autoethnographic conveyance of (black) trans/women troubling, I disrupt gender normativity via trans/women names I say on social media, in my writing, and in the trans/women knowledge I choose to proliferate—both in this essay (and throughout my writerly corpus) and when enacting my black feminism. Proliferating an axiom of black trans, gender-queer, and cis women subject positions as productive of valid knowledge is imperative. As Sharon Holland makes clear, there is an ethics to "changing the arc of [the] citational terrain."⁹⁰ Reproducing and disseminating the experiential knowledge of trans people in general, and black trans women in particular, effectively citing them as much as I can, imbues a fundamentality of black/trans/female worldly frameworks into the way we structure the world, who exists in it, and who contributes to it.⁹¹ To this end, BTFT takes as its embodied models black trans and gender-queer women; inflects the radical inclusivity of black feminist

legacies with the ideological and syntactic enmeshment of trans subjectivity; and is a site of possibility that encapsulates, honors, and presents the possibility of refashioning histories that supervene on identities.

THIS IS BLACKTRANSFEMINIST THOUGHT

Returning numerous times to this article—adding, cutting, changing, rewriting—I experienced the commitment necessary for doing this work as one who is not female or trans, and therefore benefits from male and cisgender privilege. Having to: rewrite sentences so as not to imply discursive or epistemological violence, cite more black trans women, and question my fundamental assumptions about whose knowledges were indeed “knowledge” undid me. That is to say, writing this article and being edified by the black trans voices included here (and those who have informed my consciousness but did not make it explicitly into this essay), unhinged my privileged assumptions and modes of thinking. Assumptions and modes of thinking that failed to take seriously the insight of black trans women. I am owed nothing for identifying as a black cis male scholar of black feminism, queer theory, and transgender studies. I was made to do the work not on behalf of Others, but for the sake of my own humanity, for which I am thankful. And it is from here, perhaps, at least in part, that BTFT begins to take hold of one’s existential and epistemological being-in-the-world.

So let me/us pay homage—verbal, discursive, social, communal—to black trans women: Marsha P. Johnson, Mary Jones, Frances Thompson, Lucy Hicks Anderson, Carlett Brown, Crystal LaBeija, Dorian Corey. They too are black, validly gendered, and in possession of lives—of *life*—that matters. And should matter, to all of us.

This is BTFT

Let us, as we “say her name,”⁹² continually, relentlessly, painstakingly question who is/is not meant by “her” and seek to find those narratives. Let us find, disseminate, and immerse ourselves in the stories, the communal lives that speak to and back and with our own, and structure our understanding of the world in which we all find ourselves.

This is BTFT

Let us cite, chill with, love, admire, converse with, hug, head nod, dap up, and cherish black trans women—and those others who, too, are “black like us” and who may be generous enough to critique our solipsism—when we acknowledge BTFT, articulate BTFT, lay in the cut with BTFT.

This is BTFT

Among many, many things, BTFT tries to: seek the voices of black trans women as kinfolk and utilize their lived experiences to theorize; ensure that black trans bodies are present and contributory to conceptions of justice; validate the whole, incomplete, flawed, troublesome, perfectly imperfect lives, thoughts, bodies, and minds of trans subjectivity. Go ahead and like the Facebook status—hell, add a string of emojis, even—of trans folk who post pictures of their mastectomy scars, post about transphobic encounters at the airport, highlight the work of other trans folk, and unapologetically love their trans-ness.

This is BTFT ■

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