

Surpassing Certainty with Janet Mock: A Dialogue

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Janet Mock—writer, activist, television host, director—has become a leading voice for transgender women of color in the twenty-first century. After beginning her career as a staff editor for *People* magazine, Mock launched into the public eye in 2011, when she shared her truths as a transgender woman of color with *Marie Claire* readers in a feature written by journalist Kierna Mayo. Although the article was shaped heavily by one-on-one interviews between her and Mayo, Mock quickly realized that the point of view of the story and its subsequent framing and marketing were not consistent with her personal voice. Inspired by a rich tradition of black women writers—the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and Terry McMillan—Mock understood that she must use the powers of her own voice, which motivated her to write the book she wished that she could have read in her girlhood years. Thus, in 2014, Mock published *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More*, which detailed her journey to womanhood as a young trans girl of color with few roadmaps to follow. Shortly thereafter, Mock became a *New York Times* best-selling writer and garnered the critical praise of bell hooks, Melissa Harris-Perry, Oprah Winfrey, and more. Hooks described Mock’s work as a guide to transformation, Harris-Perry situated her work in the deep tradition of life writing in African American arts and letters, and, on the book jacket of Mock’s *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me* (2017), Winfrey called her a “fearless new voice” who “changed my way of thinking.”

With the publication of *Redefining Realness*, Mock discovered a platform through which she could blend her writerly talents with her activism, advocacy, and kaleidoscopic array of popular culture knowledge. In so doing, she found her way into women’s, gender, and sexuality studies classrooms; into African American studies curricula; and even into English courses around the country. Furthermore, she flexed her public speaking skills by becoming a distinct voice on college campuses, delivering the commencement keynote at Pitzer College in 2015, among several other speaking engagements around the country. In her debut memoir, Mock expands storytelling by and about transgender folks

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by offering a text that is rigorously intersectional and, indeed, literary. While most narratives by and about trans folks satiate the cisgender gaze and tell particular “coming out” stories that usually center white trans experience and focus heavily on a particular age group and on the medicalized body, Mock adds more dimensions to this narrative by calling in her literary foremothers and by spotlighting her trans women-of-color political lineage. As a result, *Redefining Realness* tells the story of a young native Hawaiian and African American girl who comes into consciousness about her gender identity at a young age and builds community with like-minded folks around her to push against expectations and chart a life of thriving in a world not built for her and other trans women of color. Importantly, though, Mock couples her captivating storytelling abilities with her deft precision to speak truth to power in accessible language that can educate for generations to come.¹

Even before the publication and subsequent success of *Redefining Realness*, though, Mock had already become a beloved and vital presence in queer and trans communities on social media and in various nonprofit sectors. With her establishment of the social media campaign #GirlsLikeUs in 2012, Mock cultivated a digital space in which trans women of all backgrounds could build community and share narratives to inspire, guide, critique, love, and cackle with one another. Because access to physical space that fosters safe community building for trans folks is often scarce and because trans women traveling outside of their homes and living in their truth can often be a matter of life or death, Mock’s construction of a digital space helped many to find a refuge—one replete with resources, opportunities, and the joys of sisterhood. When prompted, Mock offers the following characterization of the digital space: “a space created by and for trans* women with the purpose of connecting, upLIFTing one another, and sharing resources and stories. It reaches across generations and color, location and socioeconomic standing, established by @janetmock in March 2012 to empower trans women to live visibly and connect in sisterhood and solidarity” (Mock, “My”). Eventually, as Mock details in her blogging about the initiative, the hashtag took on a life of its own; her Twitter handle eventually faded; and digital community often morphed into physical interaction, group mobilization, and even artistic collaboration. To be sure, her digital organization was an extension of the labor she already provides to organizations such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Anti-Violence Project, the Arcus Foundation, and the Center for American Progress.

With her early influence in trans and queer spaces through social media and nonprofit contributions, and with the official launch of her first memoir by her side, Mock started to expand her circle of influence by sharing her work with broader audiences through major public appearances: Oprah’s *SuperSoul Sunday*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, *The Wendy Williams Show*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and even her early controversial appearance on *Piers Morgan Live*, to name a few. On these high-visibility

platforms, Mock welcomed new audiences to her person and her work as she continued to instill a firm sense of possibility in her own communities. Additionally, she graced the covers of *Candy*, *ELIXHER*, *Out*, and *Metro Weekly*, and she was profiled by *The New York Times*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, and more, using her words and image to display the intellect and beauty of trans women to the world. Indeed, her numerous interviews and cover stories certainly intervened in industries that often sideline or neglect the voices, creations, and even the glamor of trans women, especially those of color. In each of these moments of visibility, Mock nuanced the public discourse, shifting conversations about bodies, identity, politics, and narrative. Moving beyond the media, she occupied center stage during the electrifying Women's March on Washington in January 2017 to deliver her intersectional, inclusive feminist speech that should be mandatory reading or viewing for all: "I am My Sister's Keeper."

While Mock has often been the subject of interviews, photoshoots, and speeches, she has perhaps left an even greater mark on the cultural landscape through her own interviewing prowess. Equipped with a master's degree in journalism from New York University, Mock displayed her content-creation skills by conceptualizing and hosting the online show *So POPular!* on MSNBC from late 2014 to early 2016, a show that centered material often considered pleasurable rather than serious, and she reframed what can and should be taken seriously. After a successful online show with MSNBC, Mock produced and offered the introduction to HBO's documentary film *The Trans List* in 2016, which featured the unique stories of eleven transgender folks from all walks of life and diversified the visual representations and narratives widely accessible to the public. She also conducted the interviews with all eleven featured folks that provided the material for the film. In 2017, she continued her focus on expanding possibilities in and through narrative with her podcast *Never Before with Janet Mock*, in which she engaged in provocative, insightful, and sometimes hilarious conversations with Congresswoman Maxine Waters, Gabourey Sidibe, Tarell Alvin McCraney, and many other powerful cultural voices, regularly from the margins. Finally, her own writing as a contributor to *Allure*, *Marie Claire*, *People*, *Variety*, *The New York Times*, and *Time*, to name a few, solidifies further her meaningful and always dynamic impact on American arts and letters and on social and political discourse, particularly in a turbulent national climate in which trans rights are one of the most hotly debated political conversations of the twenty-first century.

In the midst of launching her podcast *Never Before* with Pineapple Street Media and Lenny Letter, Mock returned to her platform of creative nonfiction with the release of her sophomore memoir, *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me*, which was originally titled *Stealth*. In the follow-up to *Redefining Realness*, Mock again delivered on what she does best: storytelling that remains rigorously intersectional, boldly vulnerable, and deeply literary. *Surpassing Certainty* continues the narrative trajectory of *Redefining Realness* by picking up

the story of her life during the months leading to her twentieth birthday and by telling narratives about Mock's college years and early adulthood, when she moved from her native Hawai'i to New York City to navigate life, love, and career-making as a young trans woman of color who kept stories of her past close to her chest.

In this iteration of her life narrative, readers learn about Mock's undergraduate experience at the University of Hawai'i, her first marriage, her years as a graduate student at New York University, and even her early career years with *Playboy* and *People* magazines. Indeed, *Surpassing Certainty*, like many of the "twenties-tell-all memoirs" before it, chronicles the difficulties of moving into adulthood, building relationships, traveling away from home, and choosing career paths. However, unlike most of the "twenties memoirs" before hers, Mock's *Surpassing Certainty* spotlights the unique experiences she had as a transgender woman of color who had (or so she thought) made peace with her body after her medical transition and who was choosing how to share her body and her varied selves with the world. More often than not, she did so without sharing details about her past and her transness. As Mock consistently remarked during the marketing tour for the book, this second title explores her life during those years of becoming when she was learning to advocate for herself before becoming the advocate for others for which she is now so well known. In this second memoir, which is in-and-of-itself a rare distinction for a trans woman-of-color writer, Mock details her views and experiences with disclosure, dating, and desire in a trans woman-of-color's body; furthermore, she explores the complicated terrain of college and career-building as a trans person of color from a low-income background, well before the so-called "transgender tipping point."²

In the months following the release of *Surpassing Certainty* in summer 2017, Mock received a call from Ryan Murphy about a new television series in development that would focus on the New York City ball scene in the 1980s and that would center the lives of transgender women of color and queer communities of color more broadly. Within months, Mock was hired as one of the head writers for FX's new series *Pose*, marking an important shift in storytelling about trans and queer communities—especially for a major network. Understanding the politics of representation, Murphy welcomed Mock and Our Lady J (*Transparent*) into the writing room of *Pose* to join the show's creators, Steven Canals, Brad Falchuk, and himself.

Additionally, the show cast trans women of color as the show's leads, making it the largest transgender cast in television history (and employing more trans folks on set than any show ever before). Not only did Mock invest her artistic and embodied experiences in the shaping of *Pose*'s scripts but also she took to the director's chair for key episodes in the show's first two seasons, including season one's acclaimed episode "Love Is the Message" (2018) and the season two finale "In My Heels" (2019). With her directorial debut, Mock became the first openly trans woman of color to write and to direct a television show on a major network

show. Without doubt, in this latest writing foray, Mock stays true to form: she infuses the characters of *Pose* with the linguistic rhythms, political dimensions, and communal ethos that form the heartbeat of her growing literary corpus of *Redefining Realness* and *Surpassing Certainty*.

While her career is still, in many ways, in its infancy, Mock moved into the spotlight by slaying boundaries, by speaking truth to power, and by bringing herself and her community into spaces in which they have not historically been welcomed. Whether audiences are engaging her literary work in the realm of creative nonfiction, her public speaking engagements, journalism, podcasting, or work in television and film, they will undoubtedly find the indelible trace of a rich tradition of black, trans, and queer literary craft and a deep history of political resistance influencing her art and her consciousness-building. When Mock generally speaks about her work in press interviews, interviewers regularly remain locked into questions about her own embodied experiences or about the social and political dimensions to her work, which are vital, to be sure (“Activist”).³ However, this cultural tendency to ignore questions of her writerly craft in favor of questions that *only* detail the social and political dimensions of her work or details about her own embodiment robs Mock of her complexity—obscures the fullness of her literary and cultural productions—and neglects the multidimensionality of her many identities, for she regularly lists “writer” as one of her first markers of selfhood. In fact, one is reminded of Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s career-long argument about black literary writers in particular being reduced only to sociology, history, or politics while being barred from the literary or philosophical.⁴ In literary studies circles, Mock has spoken once in print, in 2015, about her debut memoir, *Redefining Realness*, when she and I sat down for an interview for *Callaloo*. That interview centered questions about audience, structure, and literary influences that she had hoped to discuss in other settings. Taking cues from this dialogue and how it was valued by her and by readers, I offer an interview about Mock’s second book, *Surpassing Certainty*, and this interview similarly concerns itself with her writerly craft and her writing goals.

During our conversation at Babbalucci, a favorite restaurant in her beloved Harlem neighborhood, Mock reflected on her first book in light of the writing of her sophomore release three years later. She also shared insight about writing love and dating storylines for transgender women of color, which was an amplified focus in *Surpassing Certainty*, and she discussed the dynamics of disclosure as she explores them in narrative and in life. Further in the discussion, she ruminated about what constitutes home for her and about what it means to her to write about space and place. Such remarks importantly center her native Hawaiian roots and components of her multi-ethnic identity that are so important to her understanding of self. Relatedly, she even discussed her experience on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s television show *Finding Your Roots* and how it connects to her understanding of self and her writing. Finally, and importantly, Mock offered

some of her most recent thoughts on being a trans woman of color in the public sphere in an increasingly turbulent national climate—particularly for folks on the margins of the already marginalized.

Timothy S. Lyle: Thanks so much for making time to chat with me tonight. I know that your schedule is intense with the release of the new book and recording and promoting your new podcast.

Janet Mock: Of course, I am glad that we could find time. I always love talking books with you.

TSL: Well, let’s get right to it. The last time we talked about *Redefining Realness* in print, I asked you about your ideal reader (Mock, “Interview” 502). You shared that it was a young trans girl of color looking for a reflection of herself—writing the book that you wished you had had as a young person. Who did you have in mind for the second book, *Surpassing Certainty*?

JM: This time, it wasn’t as clear because, even though I had an ideal audience for the first book, it went further than that particular person. This book largely came out of the questions that I heard from young people. I wrote it for someone who is likely ending high school, in college, ending college, heading into graduate school, moving into their first place, or getting their first job—people seeking guidance. I yearned to be a *slightly older* friend to that younger reader; I am not quite comfortable with Auntie yet. A lot of people who read my first book were like, “you have such a great success story: you went from all of these tragic experiences and came out on the other side to find love, a great job, *and* people listen to you,” but I felt there was an important part missing from that narrative. That gap was my starting point for my second book. *Surpassing Certainty* addresses the years when I was not advocating and not speaking out.

Ultimately, I aimed to give readers license by saying that sometimes you just have to do you, and that’s maybe how you practice self-care for a period of time. Once you figure out what you really want and who you really are, then you go out in the world to act and maybe share yourself with those around you. I find that there is this intense pressure to “come out, come out wherever you are” and “tell your story.” Yes, our truths and storytelling are vital, but that can put a lot of pressure on people who may not be quite ready.

I needed to show who I was when I was not necessarily contributing to anyone but myself. I was taking care of myself. And I was figuring things out. I also wanted to show who I was when I was trying to find connections with people but also hiding parts of myself.

TSL: Do you want *Surpassing Certainty* to be read as a continuation of *Redefining Realness*? Has your imagined reader read *Redefining Realness* already, or do you want the two titles to exist on their own?

JM: My ideal reader would have read *Redefining Realness*, but I think I will be seen and heard on levels that I was not seen and heard on when I was promoting my first book because I was largely unknown then. A lot of people will come to *Surpassing Certainty* first, whether through their bookstore or reading an article about me or hearing my podcast, and they will be curious. This book deliberately did not give people answers about certain stories in my becoming. I alluded to a lot of things: I wrote briefly about when I went to Thailand or when I hustled the streets, but they are only nods to my past because there is a complete text that centers all of those plot points of my personal narrative. You have to read both texts if you want to see the larger portrait. As a reader, I believe that I would have a much fuller experience if I had read *Redefining Realness* first and then went to *Surpassing Certainty*.

TSL: I agree. People often talk about the “sophomore struggle” or the pressure they feel when producing again after they’ve had a lot of success with their debut. Do you think your experience with *Redefining Realness* shaped your writing of *Surpassing Certainty* at all?

JM: Not so much success because I didn’t feel like I really received literary success with *Redefining Realness*. I wasn’t really embraced by those kinds of reviews. It was well edited, and it was good for what it was at that time. I’d love to revisit it to work on it, but it served its purpose at that moment, which was largely to tell a different kind of trans woman’s story and to offer some readers accessible language to understand how transness can be affected by race, class, and generation.

With *Surpassing Certainty*, I felt a lot freer as a writer. I was free in the sense that—and this is one of my greatest struggles, which will probably always follow me—I did not feel the burden of having to bring everyone else’s story in with me as I was trying to tell my story. Because the texts that had predated *Redefining Realness* did not regularly offer people accessible language, did not have an intersectional feminist lens, and the writers often times weren’t really great readers (in the sense of calling forth forbearers, whether in literature or activism), I felt deeply obligated to do all of that work with my first book. I am really glad that I did, but that work did pull me out of my own voice at times.

Also, when I was writing *Surpassing Certainty*, I did not have the same pressure to explain my experiences because I had already done that. And that’s just not work I am willing to repeat or do again. In that way, *Surpassing Certainty* is truer to my voice, my experiences, and my perspective and not so much [. . .] seeking to educate people in the world. I also just had a lot more fun writing *Surpassing Certainty*.

TSL: Do you think that writing a second memoir (especially with so few of those by trans folks of color) freed you up to tell a different kind of story? Because you

are no longer doing the foundational work of a transition memoir, does it offer more possibilities as a storyteller?

JM: Definitely. I felt obligated to write *Redefining Realness*. Because my transness was such a deep focus publicly, other facets of my identity tended to fade into the background. Because my transness was what people were interested in, I wanted to get my transition narrative out of the way so that I never had to talk about it again. *Redefining Realness* centered my transition narrative, but it also did so much more by contextualizing, including sociopolitical analysis, and broadening the scope to show that other people might have had it different than I did. I wanted to show my access and my simultaneous experiences of privilege and oppression—to complicate a lot of what was already out there in that memoir genre.

TSL: After the initial transition journey in *Redefining Realness*, what narrative thread was a priority for you in *Surpassing Certainty*?

JM: Before I started writing this book, I was clear that I wanted to talk about what it means to exist in this body and to share my body with those around me. Often, what happens for trans and queer folks as we become more mainstream and more accepted is that we are often stripped of our sexualities and separated from our spaces of desire because we are turned into symbols. I resisted that by centering spaces of desire and pleasure in my life, but at the same time, I needed to show that just because I was sharing my body with others that didn't mean I was necessarily sharing myself completely. Actually, that choreography of sharing and revealing myself and then also hiding and concealing myself was, for me as a writer, an ultimate tension in the work.

TSL: I am so glad you mentioned that tension. In *Surpassing Certainty*, you use the term *selective openness* a few times. Do you think the selective openness that you write about in living also applies to you as a writer, particularly as one who writes the self for the public?

JM: So much of my writing has been shaped not just by what I've read but also by the training I got as a journalist. "All the news that's fit to print" is there for a reason because not everything can fit [in] print. For me, the deciding factor is this question: does the story fit the overall narrative that I am trying to tell right now? Not every single sexual or romantic partner, roommate, argument I had, or time that I cried and felt alone is necessary, but I do ask if those feelings that I need to center are communicated through the stories and the slices I choose to share.

My reading of fiction writers also influences my work. For example, there are composite characters in both of my books. In *Redefining Realness*, I write about the girls on Merchant Street, but some are actually composites of like three different women, and I am never open about who those three women are. Girls in

Hawai'i send me messages or emails all the time and ask if something I've written is about them, and I tell them "not really, but the character was inspired by the experiences we had together and by my watching you when I was young."

I think that's what great memoir writers tend to do: they communicate some kind of thorough and concrete desire line for the reader.

TSL: Part of why I ask is because one impactful characteristic of *Surpassing Certainty* is that you both engage in memoir writing and then you also theorize about memoir writing with readers. For instance, you detail decisions that you have made as a writer, like choosing to leave certain narratives out of *Redefining Realness*, and then you powerfully explain why.

JM: When I write about an experience, I ask myself a few questions: do I have enough space from it, have I learned from that experience, and can I write about it in a way that puts me in the narrative as the protagonist to communicate the feelings I experienced at the time?

When readers learn about my relationship with Troy in *Surpassing Certainty*, this becomes important. In *Redefining Realness*, Aaron is framed as the first man I told my story to and was accepted and embraced [by] in a larger and longer and more fulfilling way, and he is this. Even though I actually disclosed to Troy before I met Aaron, I did it in a way that was kind of sloppy and messy, not very clear and exacting. He also replied in a way that was very fulfilling for that younger version of myself who was hoping that someone would accept her without any questions.

As I got older, though, I wanted someone to ask me questions, and that's what Aaron provided. In the opening of my first book, my sharing with Aaron is a stand-in for my sharing with the reader. I did feel some guilt about not including my relationship with Troy in the first book, but not really. Regardless, I wanted to be transparent about my writing decisions in *Surpassing Certainty* and share with my reader that I deliberately made the choice not to include Troy in *Redefining Realness*. I deliberately cut off the first book when I was eighteen years old because it was the right point to end. Otherwise, I would be going into an entirely different direction to talk about a whole bunch of other stuff that I wasn't yet ready to put on the page. I didn't have enough distance yet. That next period is what *Surpassing Certainty* covers in detail.

TSL: Absolutely. In documenting your twenties, disclosing or not disclosing is a central idea. As our cultural conversation expands, I see two major camps: one side claims, "oh, trans folks should disclose immediately" because it is just deception otherwise. The other side foregrounds the dangers of disclosure and how we should create safer spaces for trans folks to share their truths. What would you like readers to recognize about disclosure after they've read your work?

JM: When I was writing, I was in conversation with those sound bites: the number one that was in my head was "the reason why she got killed was because she

didn't tell him." The fact that people can think that not disclosing is a reason for someone to be killed shows how high the stakes are. Ever since I was young, one of the first things I was frightened of was guys who would cat-call me. I was afraid that I would get killed if they found out that I was trans because of the prevalent narrative. In *Surpassing Certainty*, I am speaking to that idea that our stories are ours—to reclaim again. Not everyone is deserving of me and my story and my body. I think I also said that in *Redefining Realness*. It is a tenet that I hold. And I will never buckle to societal pressure that accuses me and my sisters of tricking men. I am always pushing back against that.

Because I was writing about sex, dating, and relationships, I needed to point out that this remains dangerous territory for trans women. At the end of the day, I want to be clear that we should be able to choose: when and where and *if* we feel safe enough to share ourselves with people. Sometimes, people are not deserving of all of us. I know that some people's philosophy is to disclose right away—tell their "T" immediately. I get that. That's what their comfort level is.

In *Surpassing Certainty*, though, I was really trying to speak back to that "if you're not telling, then you're deceiving" and to that pattern of framing trans women as objects of deception. This kind of thinking is what leads to trans folks being seen as objects that can be easily disposed of. When our culture talks about the violence against trans women (if at all), that dangerous link of ideas is still not an important part of the conversation, and it should be. Often times, trans women experience violence at the hands of straight cis men who feel like they have to protect their masculinity by eliminating something that they see as just an "object."

TSL: Absolutely. Considering another component of disclosure, I've been thinking a lot about a lack of intergenerational dialogue and about some of the loneliness that often can come with folks living stealth. Maybe *Surpassing Certainty* can provide readers with some community even if they decide to change nothing about how they identify or live their lives.

JM: I know that I have been in conversations with young trans women since I came out in 2011 publicly, and I've seen some of these women go into stealth mode. I've seen them take that time to themselves and delete all of their social media. Able to blend in more easily, they often just delete everything. They break their connections. I've seen this happen over and over again.

I hope that this book can be something that calls to them to say a few things: first, I am never going to judge you for doing what you need to do to survive because I know that you are judging yourself enough. Second, I want to say that "I did the same thing, and there shouldn't be any shame in that." See, there is this conversation within our own community that tells trans people if you're stealth that you're not helping the movement. But for many of us, especially who blend in as cis, it creates this idea that "my story is not my own. I have to be out for the movement."

Also, in a culture that is intent on pushing out, exiling, harassing, threatening, and killing trans women—especially those of color—I don't think any of us should add any kind of pressure, judgements, rules, or binaries to these disclosure decisions. We have to dismantle the binary of either you're out in every single space or you're not helping the movement. You can be out to the intimate people in your life that you love. If they know, I think that can be enough. But people need the time and space to be able to do that. They also need a nonjudgmental voice—I believe a *text*, maybe—to say, “you do you. It's fine for you to do you for now.” *Surpassing Certainty* is my attempt at that.

TSL: You almost give trans women space with your second memoir and its stories. You tell them that this self-work is important. While they are engaged in that self-work, I hope that *Surpassing Certainty* can be there to assuage some of the loneliness that can come from living stealth—something you describe so poignantly.

JM: I hope so, too. I have always wanted to have conversations with those women who went away, and I knew that there were (and I mention this in the introduction of the book) wells of lived experience—of knowledge—of narratives that were not told because these women broke away to do what they needed to do. Because of that, many of us don't have a roadmap to follow. When we don't have a way to share our narratives with one another, something will always be missing. I do think books can be a safe space to do that sharing because people can read them on their own terms. Whether it is an ebook, an audio book, or a physical copy, you can keep it to yourself. Or you can go to a library and read it a couple of hours a day, put it back on the shelf, and then come back when you're ready. It can be a private thing until people are ready for something more public.

TSL: Now I am thinking about your relationship with space and place. *Surpassing Certainty* is a book that is saturated with movement—geographically as well as emotionally. The narrative also reads like a homecoming of sorts, or at least a deep meditation about what it means to build a home-space. What might readers learn about what home means to you?

JM: That question is so interesting to me. Home and place, I think, are two pillars of this book, or at least themes. In *Redefining Realness*, I explained how I moved around a lot as a young person. You know, my dad and my mom were together at first, and they had their little home together for three to five years. After they broke up, I went to live with my mom for a bit. Then I went to live with my dad and brother in Oakland. Of course, then my dad hopped around from girlfriend to girlfriend and then to another state—Texas. When I went back to Hawai'i and got to stay in Hawai'i, I felt like that was the first time I was home. I stayed in Hawai'i from the time I was twelve until almost twenty-one,

basically. None of the places I had lived before (even ones I had called home at the time) were of my choosing.

During the *Surpassing Certainty* years, a part of me was searching for what that home-place is or was going to be. I knew it wasn't Hawai'i anymore. Hawai'i had grown too small for me. Too small in the sense of my being too closely linked to so many people and also in the sense of "there is nothing that I can really do here." I wanted to do grander things, and so I thought, "this small island cannot contain me anymore." I needed to break away to figure it out. New York City clearly became that place for me, mostly through the imagery that I had been inundated with while growing up. I also felt like New York City would challenge me. Coming here would make me face myself, and New York City was the first place that I chose completely on my own.

But because of the relationship that I was in at the time—one that was kind of all-consuming, in a sense—I left New York. Since he had accepted me and had been the only person in my life at that point who had accepted me as I knew myself to be, the relationship was an obligation. So, I left New York. I don't even know if I wrote that moment as heartbreaking as it was for me. It was also deeply demoralizing—and deeply basic—to be on the New Jersey Transit with people who had children my age for that everyday commute. I could not find anyone my age in that experience and was aged because of it. That experience, I knew, certainly did not feel like home. In that relationship, he didn't feel like home.

When I got back to New York and concentrated on myself, I built that home-space back up for myself. I was choosing to be here, which was important for me. I remember writing about driving back into the city—seeing the city again. It was like I had never seen it in that way before. And that was true: I hadn't. But I had never been in that mental and emotional space of freedom. During my whole adult life, I was with this man—overwhelmingly. Not physically with him always, but still tethered to him. To break free from that relationship and the obligations there were vital to building that feeling of home. Ultimately, finding a sense of belonging is what I tried to capture in the afterword of *Surpassing Certainty*. I wanted to describe what it was like to be in this space where I was turning thirty years old, and I had these people who wanted to celebrate me, and they were my people. I was home. These are the same people that are still in my life right now.

TSL: Chosen people.

JM: Completely. What's interesting is that New York is where I was able to do the work that I really needed to do to prepare myself to write open and honestly, to live open and honestly. Also, NYC was where I did the work to love boldly—allowing myself to be vulnerable and to be seen in a way that would enable me to have the kind of relationship that I've always wanted with another person. And it was where I did the work to have that kind of relationship with myself—knowing that I can face myself and that I can write that first book and

tell my story, without being fearful of losing everything. Without that home-space, I am not sure if all of this would have been possible. All of that is about safety for me, and that's closely linked to home and refuge and belonging and recharging. All that vital work . . . I did in New York City.

TSL: I was so struck by your profound depictions of place—New York City, Hawai'i, Rhode Island. In the text, you even mentioned taking a course called “Writing about Place.” You wrote that no one knew you better than those East Village streets during your twenties—and perhaps no one ever will. Would you say that New York is a character of sorts in *Surpassing Certainty*?

JM: Oh yeah!

TSL: Arguably, a character that is one of the most important in the book.

JM: I started writing *Surpassing Certainty* when Aaron and I were preparing to leave the East Village. The neighborhood had encapsulated my youth, and I started writing about New York City as a place when I was leaving the familiar space of the village. In leaving, I realized who I was in these tiny apartments that I lived in in the East Village. These little spaces were more than enough for me: I think about heat on the streets in August and being welcomed into the city with that. I remember the Puerto Rican and Dominican guys on the block who had been in the neighborhood forever. I loved hearing about people who remembered Madonna when she was trying to make her name for herself around the scene. New York City, for me, is a big character.

When I was in graduate school at NYU, we took classes about place that pushed us to use the city as a laboratory. At NYU, the place feels like a public university in that it spans almost all of downtown. It just takes over. Because of that, I kind of came to the city with the sense of “this is all mine—this is all mine to report about and to write on—also to dance, to flirt, and to do all this stuff in.” It was the first time in my life where I felt free in a space. I didn't feel constrained by my body because I was content with it.

TSL: You said before that without Hawai'i, there would be no you—no Janet Mock, at least as we now know of you. Would you say the same thing about New York City?

JM: Oh, completely. They are sister spaces in my brain. Thinking about it now, I am realizing that all of the places that I've traveled to live are near water or islands. Coming from Hawai'i and then going to Manhattan. Of course, I would have to go to two different parts of this country to find myself (laughs). But I did: from the farthest little island space in the South Pacific to a huge northeastern, coastal city.

Recently, I did Henry Louis Gates's show *Finding Your Roots*, and I learned that all of my people come from island spaces—on all sides. My paternal grandmother—way back—was one of a few thousand that made it from Madagascar to

America during the slave trade. Also, my great grandfather—the Portuguese side from my mom—came from the Azores, which are islands off the coast of Portugal. Then, of course, my native Hawaiian side, too. My black side and my Hawaiian side have a connection to islands.

These are the spaces that built me, and I feel so balanced because of them. I come from people who live a slower island lifestyle, who are not rushed in their daily lives. Then when I was ready and wanted to chase big things, I moved where everyone is chasing something . . . and fast. And now I feel kind of settled; both are important parts of me.

Notes

1. Most narratives written by trans folks before Mock—especially ones met with mainstream approbation—center the “transition narrative” of a white trans person who transitions later in life, often in the later years of adulthood. The narrative is often quite personal and does not regularly pay homage to a literary or cultural lineage beyond the immediate context of the subject’s life. Mock, on the other hand, tells a different story: she focuses on the narrative of a young (girlhood) transgender woman of color. Additionally, she threads in the literary contributions of folks from Toni Morrison to Alice Walker and from James Baldwin to Terry McMillan. Furthermore, she centers the trans folks of color who form crucial components of her sense of rootedness—including, but not limited to, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. Finally, as Mock details moments from her life, she offers a primer for those interested in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, and she foregrounds questions of power to further her quest for social justice. In this way, what she produces is rigorously intersectional, deeply political, and profoundly literary.
2. See *Time* magazine’s 9 June 2014 cover story, featuring Laverne Cox, in which they announce a so-called trans tipping point in American culture.
3. Although a quick survey of interviews done with Mock will showcase this tendency clearly, Mock was so troubled by this trend that, in May 2014, she partnered with journalist Alicia Menendez of *Fusion* to stage an invasive interview in which she “flips the script” and asks the kinds of questions that are so often asked of her. With this exchange, Mock spotlighted important dimensions of power and privilege within media exchanges. Furthermore, she centered the problems with interviews shaped entirely by the cisnormative gaze on trans bodies. As a result, questions about her writerly craft are often sidelined.
4. See Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), and *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (1980) for book-length discussions on the unique characteristics of African American literature

and for the distinct need for an interdisciplinary reading strategy that combines explorations of aesthetics and surrounding contexts.

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