



Can I Get a Witness?

Black Feminism, Trans Embodiment, and Thriving Past the Fault Lines of Care

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How do we organize around our differences, neither denying them nor blowing them up out of proportion? The first step is an effort of will on your part. Try to remember, to keep certain facts in mind.

—Audre Lorde, “I Am Your Sister”

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A COMPOSITE REFLECTION OF ENCOUNTERS and experiences that I have had in the academy over the past decade—not to keep score of a generalized list of grievances, but to convey that these are the kinds of experiences that I routinely must prepare myself to negotiate. Regardless of whether they ultimately transpire, the fact of having to brace myself against the fault lines of care and the potential for antagonism or harm is a taxing labor that takes its toll. It is the sort of distraction that is a feature rather than a flaw (which is to say, a fault) of the academic industrial complex that must be altered. Thus, this reflection includes concrete strategies borne from those experiences that might be useful to figure out how to mitigate future and ongoing harm, so that we can all take up the work of meaningful solidarity in the academy, and of collective liberation despite and beyond it.

As a conversation intended for and between Black feminists, those of us who are trans, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary (perhaps as well as queer,

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1 asexual, or other marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities) have
2 needed to consider and develop strategies to communicate between cis or non-
3 trans and heterosexual Black feminists for our collective survival. To that end,
4 there are some things that those Black feminists in the academy might want
5 to *know* and *do*, on an embodied and material level when engaging with us in
6 intellectual, political, and social community. This kind of necessary self-care
7 work holds that making room for living into our principles rather than merely
8 stating them in the abstract requires introspection and a reckoning with the
9 oppressive tendencies that we all differentially share. This care-full work might
10 occasion cis or non-trans Black women feminist academics to sit with their own
11 trouble and assess the fault lines of care for themselves as it pertains to their
12 relationships to trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming (TNBGNC)
13 people in Black feminist academic spaces and in their communities writ large.
14 That way, it's not just TNBGNC people coercively serving as the proverbial
15 canary in the coal mine of Black feminist thought wherever contradictory
16 entrenchments into the gender binary are concerned.

17 When beginning to write this piece about the practice and politics of care,
18 critique, and clarity for Black feminists across the gender spectrum, I found
19 myself feeling insecure and deeply afraid. What if I am misread? What if
20 people perceive my thinking to be indicative of internalized oppression? What
21 if people who share similar embodiment or identities think that I am selling
22 them out? What if the people who I am addressing feel I am antagonizing
23 them? And so on, and so forth, until all I was confronted with was the blithe
24 indifference of the blinking cursor in an MS Word document for weeks on
25 end. The imaginary critics with their scathing and hyper-discerning assess-
26 ments of the person espousing them—casting doubt and calling into question
27 my very embodiment—led to a kind of inertia, through which nothing could
28 even be written at all. There is a deep and familiar irony in attempting to
29 write about the politics of care and caring so much about responses to the
30 as-yet-unwritten work that it manifested a blockage in my ability to complete
31 it. That excessive iteration of care—caring too much—led to self-protective
32 inaction, sidestepping the vulnerable process of sorting things out that can only
33 be achieved through active and messy communication, written or otherwise.
34 My imagination foreclosed any ability to hail a generative or compassionate
35 set of readers and thus a care-full environment of people who would see my
36 humanity first—which is to say, a generous audience of people who also don't
37 have the answers but are searching for strategies for our collective survival
38 and who recognize the effort in considering new ways to make care known,
39 knowable, and possible.

40 This writing is an invitation for “us” to figure out the kind of academy we
41 might want to move in relation to, in full acknowledgment that the present-
42 day academy is what is causing harm, and that risks are required to produce

an otherwise academy in which it is possible to breathe.¹ As members of the Combahee River Collective wrote, “The only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us.”² With my mobilization of “us,” I’m invoking a broad swath of accomplices—especially Black people—of all genders who believe that (other) Black people of all genders are worthy of care, in complete contradiction to the anti-Blackness that is the bedrock of this modern world. It’s as Audre Lorde said, that “we have all been programmed to respond to human difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.”³ This inability to consistently relate across difference leads to the maintenance of hegemonic supremacy of groups that situate themselves as dominant by subjugating others, and coercing the subjugated to choose a side, to see themselves as either in favor of the dominant class or forced remain subordinate to it. I’m invoking a fellowship outside of that which instead sees “us” as possible *in* and *because of* our differences. I’m invoking a fellowship that is always seeking new, future, and ancestral ways to constitute the kind of “us” that will be fundamentally well and free, with an understanding that the way there has been fraught, if not downright *faulty*.

READ CARE-FULL WITH ME: BLACK FEMINISM AND THE ACADEMIC INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

What I am calling for is a renewed insistence on generous, generative, and transgenerational reading practices when it comes to engaging in collaboration and in moving through conflict with each other. This type of reading is situated within the Black feminist and Black radical traditions that urgently seek a different and anti-oppressive world order. It necessitates reading—which is also to say sitting in epistemological relation—even a conflicted one—to learn and to understand what is possible or what might work, rather than to ready a new defense or to end the conversation at the point of stating negative preferences. Black feminist reading practices help us to grasp that the ills of the cisheteropatriarchal racial capitalist grounds on which we are divergently and presently bound are indefensible, and that an otherwise relation is fundamentally required. It acknowledges that many false starts will continue to happen along the way to that otherwise, which could be received generously even in all necessary attempts to minimize them for the sake of reducing their cost.

To recall a line from a key bell hooks essay: “Whether the threat of negative reprisal is real or not, Black critical thinking will never openly flourish if individuals are constantly self-censoring.”⁴ I find myself pushing past the misreadings that might have already taken place here to insist that the fact

1 of being a Black trans nonbinary scholar does not make my arguments on
 2 *anything* materially better or worse, but rather that through Black trans non-
 3 binary identification (and more besides), I claim certain political commitments
 4 to care for my communities and myself. Black women of all genders laid the
 5 groundwork for stewarding us toward and through the means for our survival,
 6 and indeed our thrival.⁵ Careful (“care-full”) self-critique and reflection are
 7 key components of Black feminism and are necessary lessons for the survival of
 8 our communities. The Combahee River Collective also wrote that “our politics
 9 evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which
 10 allows us to continue our struggle and work.”⁶ In order to realize the visions
 11 emanating from the polyphonic emancipatory calls of Black feminism, we as
 12 Black feminists must ask who “we” be, what is it that “we” owe to each other,
 13 and how we might navigate intracommunity harms as Black people who do
 14 feminism in order to forge the support systems that we deserve and that are
 15 necessary to surviving the generalized, foundational, and neoliberal violence
 16 of the university.

18 NAVIGATING THE FAULT LINES: (SELF-)CARE AND THE NEOLIBERAL 19 UNIVERSITY

21 The academy is one of many institutions that is at its core sustained by
 22 cisheteropatriarchal white supremacist ideology, which is both anathema to
 23 and differentially extractive of Black life and thought. As such, it remains an
 24 abiding site of psychic and physical harm for us. Many scholars continue to
 25 work within, despite, and beyond the academic industrial complex to share
 26 and develop knowledge that seeks to dismantle the violent and oppressive
 27 ideologies that shape our lives, which are themselves acts that mitigate harm.
 28 These writers and artists produce scholarship that names systemic problems,
 29 provides a litany of examples of the violence endemic to these systems, and
 30 circulates critiques in the hopes that the power of these systems can be named
 31 and lessened in that naming. Black feminist scholarship offers one such power-
 32 ful means of naming these systems and categories so that we can challenge the
 33 violence of the modern world. Black feminism is a method of assessment and
 34 a mode of analysis that enables us to fully realize the fault lines of care that
 35 populate academic life precisely due to the friction that comes with how the
 36 incommensurability of thriving in academic sites has underscored the need
 37 for disrupting and dismantling the status quo. We need to attend to Black
 38 feminism and to always return to its lessons, lest we be seduced by these toxic
 39 and troubling grounds.

40 Writing this on Tongva land in the wake of the most intense earthquakes
 41 experienced in the state of California in the last couple of decades, I’ve been
 42 moved to think somewhat geologically here about the epistemological grounds

we must navigate.⁷ A fault line represents “a line on a rock surface or the ground that traces a geological fault,” and a fault is the actual break in that rock surface, to the either side of which reside rocks that have moved past each other in different ways and with different effects.⁸ There are several different kinds of faults, including divergent, convergent (colliding), and transform faults. Some are ones that we might readily see, even as we may require further technology or mechanical aids to begin to comprehend just how deep and how long those faults may extend. The lines themselves are a trace, a pointing to or outline through which we know effectively to pay attention “here,” for something may happen or have happened. Moreover, it tells us that something else is going on that we have yet to grasp or fully witness, something that indeed may take place elsewhere or that may have yet to erupt. It’s the ability to identify where “X marks the spot” that is one of Black feminism’s greater lessons. Terms like “gender,” “race,” “the body,” and “matter” comprise the grounds, the “rock surface” as it were, and Black feminism tenderly but relentlessly calls upon “us” (those to whom it gives life and for whom it helps makes sense of our livingness) to do the care-full work of examining and understanding those and many more interconnected categories by manifesting as disruption on the surface as a mark or a break on the grounds.⁹

Black womanist, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet Audre Lorde has been lionized and commodified in the mainstream when it comes to considerations of “self-care.” We have seen in recent years a proliferation of language about self-care that ironically precludes full attention to structural problems with the requisite care that would offer lasting solutions. The issue lies with the inability or refusal to combat the neoliberalization of self-care, fueling the commercialized development of a self-care and wellness industrial complex. Many feminists, including Barbara Ehrenreich, Angela Davis, Moya Bailey, Alison Kafer, and Toni Cade Bambara, have written on the individualization of wellness and the divestment or erosion of attending to the structural problems and (internalized) oppressive regimes that are anathema to what it might mean to be “well” in this era of late-stage capitalism.¹⁰

One of the prevailing violences upheld by the academy is the duality of the “life of the mind” versus the ability to be a wholistic person with a body and a range of needs and desires. If we insist on politicized readings of self-care in the genealogy of Audre Lorde, we must reject the grounds of that binary premise and deeply consider what tectonic shifts must occur to make self-care—which includes the capacity to ask for and reliably experience care—truly sustainable in the academy and certainly beyond for Black trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary people. In her poem, “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge,” Lorde writes, “I am writing these words as a route map / an artifact for survival / a chronicle of buried treasure / a mourning / for this place we are about to be leaving.”¹¹ Let this writing be a “route map,” of sorts.

1 Not an exhaustive one by any means, because we need not mistake “the map
 2 for the territory” as Sylvia Wynter decisively guards us against.¹² But certainly
 3 I intend it as an artifact that can be considered for my own survival in the
 4 academy and for Black people of all gender experiences, especially for Black
 5 trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary people—along with all others
 6 who share various communities and philosophies with them—to navigate the
 7 fault lines of care that course through the academy. We need to leave this
 8 place in the name of Black feminist epistemologies and reading practices. And
 9 we can and we should acknowledge that, for many of us, there continues to
 10 be a kind of mourning, an abiding sense of lost certainty when it comes to
 11 negotiating the shifting status quo that we all need to grapple with as we move
 12 toward realizing our freedom dreams and the creation of a more just world.¹³
 13 Mourning is a by-product of what some call recognizing “privilege”—what
 14 is perhaps more clearly the necessary relinquishing of the relative power that
 15 categories like class, ability, normative sexuality, and binary gender or the
 16 willful under-interrogation of the gender binary may hold. We may need to
 17 “pour one out” for privilege as part of the process of divesting from it and the
 18 racial capitalist regime that affords it additional value. We need to employ a
 19 nonbinary relationship to power via an awareness of when our positionality
 20 shifts. This includes shifting the grounds of self-perception such that it is no
 21 longer tenable to operate as persistently and singularly “oppressed” without any
 22 consciousness of the relational field of power undergirding all social relations.
 23 This—allowing yourself to mourn and acknowledging any feelings of anxiety
 24 or lament—is another iteration of self-care that would let us be better about
 25 living into our principles both in relation to ourselves and to one another.

27 **KNOWING-BEING-DOING: INTRACOMMUNITY HARM AND BLACK** 28 **FEMINIST SPACES**

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 30 The unyielding and tender energy of Black feminism allows us to question
 31 the material (racial, (un)gendered, fleshly) order of things and to interrogate
 32 the structural modes of relation such that we can truly negotiate relational
 33 iterations of harm and its constitutive categories. Thus, reading with multiple
 34 genealogies of Black feminism, we see considerations for what constitutes care
 35 and revelations about who has historically been forced to undertake care work,
 36 who or what “we” must care about (and to what end), and who is seen as worthy
 37 of care in the modern and contemporary antagonistic world order—both
 38 before and with a Black feminist lens. In addition to the carelessness and harm
 39 perceived to be systemic, “external,” calculating, and intentionally cruel, Black
 40 feminism offers insights for addressing conflict and the violence that occurs
 41 internal to communities that Black feminists perceive as our own. It can help to
 42 develop some recourse for trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary Black

feminists who need it when they turn to Black feminism in their scholarship and praxis but come up against the limits of solidarity and community-building on a quotidian and nontheoretical level. Even within the framework of “we’re all Black feminists here,” there can be the subliminal reinforcement of binaries in terms of race, sexuality, and gender; a difficulty to name or effectively witness all sorts of harm stemming from pervasive norms of racialized gender; and embodied structures of exclusion. This experience is intensified when one is confronted with the potentially tokenizing occasions of being the sole representative of one’s gender identity. More than the fact of being “the only one” within the configuration “we are all [insert identity] here,” the problem is the attendant and incessant normativity that often seems to follow articulations of cis, or at least non-trans identification in the academy, a reality from which Black feminists are not exempt. I refer to “cis and non-trans” as a working term because of the obviously fraught relationship to cisgender identity that many who identify as Black women have, based on the very fact of their Blackness and how it can disrupt the possibility of a “secure” attachment or recognition within the category “woman.”¹⁴ It is also because not everyone in the spaces or encounters I go on to describe has overtly identified as “cis”—perhaps for the aforementioned reason—even though they may not attend to gender in a way that does anything but reinforce its power or take the gender binary for granted. It is precisely this unquestioned or uninterrogated status of gender that shows up in encounters with some non-trans/cis heterosexual Black feminists that feels disappointing given the presumed “common knowledge” status of that historical and epistemological context within Black feminist thought.

We’ve also learned from Black feminist thought and activism that *knowing*, *being*, and *doing* are processes that are overlapping but distinct.¹⁵ This particular trichotomy holds a crucial lesson for us to consider while entangled with academia. No matter how many degrees we have or in what disciplines we may critically engage, we need to remember that it is possible to *know* wrong and yet we may still *do* wrong. Put another way, we may hold a deep intellectual understanding of how intersectional identities are produced, and we may be able to proffer nuanced definitions of all kinds of oppression, and yet we may still fumble over the chasm between theory and the encounter. Further still is the binary conceit of *being* wrong, which is to say fundamentally immoral or otherwise “problematic” in one’s entirety.

SCENARIOS AND EXPERIENCES FROM THE FAULT LINES

Several times over the course of my early career I have been invited to participate in symposia, seminars, and workshops organized by and for Black feminists. The events tend to include a range of artists, activists, and academics at all stages. I’ve tended to be the most junior scholar in attendance, and

1 the only one to openly identify as trans or nonbinary. The event descriptions
 2 regularly mobilize the category “Black women” as the object qua object of
 3 study for Black feminism and even use “Black feminists” and “Black women”
 4 interchangeably. If I am specifically invited to one of these events and not, say,
 5 reviewing an “open” call that is circulating, I typically write to the conference
 6 organizer(s) to ask for clarification. At this point, it’s happened often enough
 7 that I’ve developed something of a scripted template: *Thank you so much for the*
 8 *consideration/invitation to [event]. Given the description, I’m writing to inquire*
 9 *whether the event is intended for participants who presently identify as Black women,*
 10 *for participants of all genders who have historical experience as (i.e., being hailed,*
 11 *living, or otherwise identifying as) Black women, for participants of all genders who*
 12 *write about Black women and Black womanhood, or some combination of the above?*
 13 I go on to explain that, again, while I appreciate the invitation and (if it’s an
 14 event local to me that I could attend at low financial cost) would be an eager
 15 and supportive audience member, if the event were explicitly for individuals in
 16 the first category, I would necessarily have to decline as I am mindful of the
 17 distinction. It’s my experience that the one(s) personally extending the invita-
 18 tion *know(s)* this, but perhaps not in a wholistic enough way as to fully grasp
 19 how the language for such an event might be incongruous with my material
 20 embodiment. I take it upon myself to opt for clarity as the most protective
 21 way forward. If they didn’t know, now they know. My preparation of a ready
 22 response stems from an awareness of the gap between thought and praxis, most
 23 generally, and specifically the embodied experience of confronting genuine
 24 ignorance (meaning the nonmalicious sort) when it comes to what nonbinary
 25 trans identification might materially *mean*. Without clear confirmation, the
 26 actual space or event might have a tokenizing effect and wind up reproducing
 27 unconsidered or unintended harm, especially once it becomes clear whether
 28 organizers were intent on producing a space that could be fundamentally trans-
 29 formed by the invocation of “Black feminist” as not singularly constitutive of
 30 “Black women.” It is wearisome and disappointing that intellectual “agreement”
 31 or awareness does not always align with consistent understanding or embodied
 32 awareness on a practical level. Indeed, like divergent slabs of a rock surface, the
 33 epistemological grounds holding that trans people deserve to exist free from
 34 oppression can move antithetically to the understanding that different trans,
 35 gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary bodies exist in materially different
 36 configurations.

37 Many TGNCNB people might offer to opt out of space with an intended
 38 audience that is ambiguously named rather than have either party (inviter or
 39 invitee) discover that there were boundaries around the category of people
 40 who were expected to attend and the kinds of embodiments or presentations
 41 they may have. On structural, systemic, and interpersonal levels, pervasive
 42 transphobia and cissexism tell us that the risk of overt harm can be sudden and

acute. Furthermore, navigating lives in antagonism to the gender binary can intensify the realization of the importance of exclusive spaces and the deeply relative safety that may provide. Thus, respect for those spaces may lead to deference and self-withdrawal, even as that specific trans and/or nonbinary person may have been individually welcome and even benefit from the experience of community. Despite the culturally inscribed U.S. Black orientation of asking the professionally “disciplined” and cordial version of *who all gon’ be there* with stated unequivocal support of the spaces carved out by these events, my initial requests for clarification are often perceived as either a calling out or the precursor to one. When I have decided to attend these events, it is because the organizers have indicated a cursory understanding of my gender identity and reiterated that I was specifically invited to attend. I would posit that those “clarifications” are different from being actively and intentionally considered in relation to the space. The presence of trans nonbinary people *necessarily transforms those spaces* because of the divergent articulations and experiences of racialized gender formations, not least in Black feminist spaces where gender is materially understood as a racialized category of analysis.

In a conversation with Marquis Bey, “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans Feminism Meet,” Marshall Green asks us to consider what our goals are in relation to liberation and living: “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.”¹⁶ We should remember and consider this aim deeply when organizing events or spaces and inviting anyone into them. What does it mean for a space to be open to trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary folks other than just the ones we think we like or know? The problem of hypervisibility/invisibility is one that is incredibly salient for all Black people and a key feature of antiblackness. Black people are routinely unseen as themselves because they are seen through the metrics of threat or excess. Tamir Rice could not be the twelve-year-old boy playing on the grass. Michael Brown was not a recent high school graduate and child but instead seen as a “demon” by killer police officer Darren Wilson, who gunned Brown down and left his body on the street for hours. Sandra Bland was not seen as a weary commuter trying to get to where she needed to go. Renisha McBride was not seen as a young woman calling for assistance after experiencing a car accident. CeCe McDonald was not seen as a woman in need of protection who engaged in self-defense from the bar patrons assaulting her and her friends. Aiyana Jones was not a little girl; even in her sleep she was identified as an active threat. The stories are endless and the metrics of threat and excess, ubiquitous. Inside the academy and out, the stakes of (mis)recognition and the paradox of hypervisibility/invisibility are far too deadly for performative overtures and invitations.

1 **EXCLUSIVE SPACES MASKING AS INCLUSIVE SPACES**
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3 The way that liberal or “progressive” social politics are currently organized in
 4 the United States, there is a reticence about intentionally producing or naming
 5 certain kinds of spaces as exclusive, even though that’s ultimately what they
 6 turn out to be, in spite of, or because of, the invited other who gets rendered an
 7 interloper. This is due in part to a general (mis)understanding of exclusiveness
 8 as de facto oppressive that has been allowed to take shape because of the deeply
 9 neoliberal reality of contemporary institutional rhetoric that centers on diversity
 10 and inclusion, especially in the academy. Under the university’s neoliberal and
 11 anti-protectionist policies, adding Black, brown, indigenous, or other racialized
 12 subjectivities to the professoriate is well and good (if they are deemed worthy in
 13 the “free market” of candidates by the majority white, [upper-]middle class, cis-
 14 heterosexual male arbiters of that worth or others who determine and uphold
 15 those values). In this model, no efforts need to be taken to shift the material
 16 conditions of what is a fundamentally white and settler colonial space that takes
 17 great pains not to name itself as such. To say point blank that “Black people are
 18 not welcome in the academy” is socially unacceptable in the public sphere, yet
 19 it remains acceptable to maintain material conditions that are extractive and
 20 antagonistic to Black life and thought. This, coupled with the racist neoliberal
 21 belief that the Black folks who are present in the academy are conditionally
 22 “worthy” and therefore those who are not present are not excluded because of
 23 their race but rather cannot be included based solely on “objective merit,” make
 24 that statement plain. Pointing to the handful of Black academics who have
 25 risen through the ranks is a common defense tactic to conceal and reinforce
 26 that material truth. This mode of organizing and institutionalizing has perme-
 27 ated interpersonal and collective interactions, along with the continuation of a
 28 strategic set of trends from the mainstream contingent of the U.S. civil rights
 29 movement. This strategy mobilized the threat of Black folks entering “whites
 30 only” spaces if the legal mandate of “separate but equal” was not upheld. It
 31 routinely led to the forced integration of “whites only” spaces (e.g., via sit-ins
 32 or other acts of civil disobedience) while striving to maintain and protect any
 33 “colored” or “Blacks only” spaces that were developed in relation to the legal
 34 and immoral modes of identitarian exclusion that intensified the accumulation
 35 of white economic power in the United States.¹⁷

36 In this context, a cognitive dissonance persists in our contemporary moment
 37 in relation to the need for exclusive spaces. On the one hand, a space solely
 38 for Black folks, queer people of color, indigenous people, or other intracom-
 39 munity—only space may be seen as crucial and can be truly life-affirming—but
 40 when it comes to certain gendered spaces, there is a hesitation to name or
 41 clarify restrictive or protected spaces as such because of a fear of being read in
 42 concert with the existence of trans-exclusive radical feminists (TERFs) or other

trans antagonists. I say “certain gendered spaces” because it may be acceptable to conceive of the need and importance of certain iterations of “Black (cis) men only” spaces (e.g., spaces for survivors healing from trauma, gay men’s HIV+ support groups, support groups around fatherhood, spaces to consider the category of nontrans Black manhood and what it means or needs in relation to, but as independent from the needs of “Black women”), but “Black women only” is received as somehow more fraught or suspect because it’s expected to do to the more care-full work of carrying women and all other genders deemed “not men,” despite the unsustainable (and ultimately antifeminist) asymmetry and undue burden of that fact. As Green asked, “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.”¹⁸ We see this syntactical charge in phrases like “women and femmes” or “women and nonbinary people.” The latter is a particularly fraught category when we come up against temporality and how to effectively designate a place on already existing lands rather than reconstituting the terrain such that maybe at one time a nonbinary person was presumed to be a cis woman or experience womanhood.¹⁹ If we take stock of who is generally included in “women and nonbinary” spaces, we might see a pattern of overrepresentation of nonbinary people who are almost exclusively AFAB. This heightens the risk of harm or misunderstanding in the social attempts at community building underpinned by the thought that “we’re all women (or have experiences as women) here.” Trans men, who are decidedly men, have also been invited to these spaces and obviously reject invitations for the reasons I described above, and given the grounds of resisting biological determinism. “Black women, trans *and* cis” neither includes trans men nor nonbinary people, and that is necessary to understand without compunction so we can move toward meaningful solidarity.

POSSIBILITY MODELS AND THE DIVESTMENT FROM CANCEL CULTURE

Collectively, we need to mobilize the more generous sort of reading practice that allows us to discern whether requests for clarity are just that, or whether they are passive-aggressive attempts to trap one another into the recesses of the carceral destruction of social capital, economic opportunity, and other supportive community resources, otherwise known as “cancelling.” If we cannot mobilize these tools quickly enough, we need to build up concurrent structures of trust and mutual support wherein it’s safe to simply *ask* or state a position: What is underlying in this request for clarity? Here is where I am coming from and how I am trying to move. We might consider implementing Laverne Cox’s “possibility model” to ask how cis-heterosexual Black women can model the kind of care or attention they’d like to receive or be met with in their

1 conversations/community building with trans, gender-nonconforming, and
2 nonbinary folks.²⁰ Laverne Cox uses the term “possibility model” instead of
3 “role model” to clarify that her career path as an actor and activist has been lit
4 by Black trans women who came before her. The fact of their existence modeled
5 for her ways to achieve the same goals. In this vein, we might consider ourselves
6 as possibility models for ways of communication that we most value when
7 we seek to make ourselves felt and heard, to model that in relation to others
8 who are trying to do the same. In so doing, we could make room for requests
9 for clarity as well as make room for a response that confirms the underlying
10 suspicions that make such requests necessary. That is, it should be possible to
11 say that, on second thought, more time might be needed to prepare the grounds
12 for substantive engagement. Thus, it would not be about the invited individual
13 no longer being welcome but rather an acknowledgment that the space wasn’t
14 ready for that person to participate in a way that would not require undue labor
15 to singularly reconstitute the terrain.

16 The threat of cancel culture, of rendering all people (especially Black people)
17 as “trash” and otherwise utterly disposable in terms of their social capital and
18 social capacities, leads to fear-based responses like inaction or the kind of
19 inertia that has as its temporary “way out” the misstatement of intent that is
20 perceived to align with acceptable political values rather than the potentially
21 life-saving revelation of the exclusivity of certain spaces. The specter of the
22 cancel leads to a defensive doubling down in some instances, where stating
23 harm can get misconstrued as the harm itself. We see this when, for example, a
24 nonbinary person corrects someone on their pronouns and that person responds
25 as wounded or anxiously denies or ignores the reminder instead of internalizing
26 the information and moving forward. Again, that person may have perceived
27 an impending call-out or character assessment and responded with a desire to
28 show that accusation to be pre-emptively false—that they *know* misgendering
29 is “wrong” and so it is of course something they’d never *do*. I’ve corrected
30 people on my pronouns and have had the misfire response of “Girl, I got
31 you” or had the speaker not so subtly find a way to tell me that they are gay
32 or queer, or their good friend is. This is a troublesome recapitulation of the
33 shame response that white people face when doing or saying something racist
34 and performing the affective self-flagellation that may ultimately absolve them
35 from taking accountability or having to remedy the harm. These tactics are
36 readily recognizable by Black feminists when it comes to the matter of race
37 and racialization. And yet, it becomes more difficult to recognize that, even
38 intracommunally, we inhabit different modes of relational power.

39 There are many parallels between cancellation and incarceration, not least
40 an etymological one.²¹ The fear of punitive cancellation (as punishment or pub-
41 lic maligning) is a misplacement of relative power “from below.” This is because
42 of the fundamental untenability of cancellation of everyone or everything that

is seen as causing harm. If I canceled everyone who misgendered me, mostly inanimate objects and nonhuman animals would be left. A shift away from (the whitened, virulently liberal strain of) this contemporary tendency is required, one that doesn't facilitate the alienation of those of us who need community to survive, that allows for self-protection from harm for the vulnerable, and that enables the genuinely ignorant to grow in their understanding not at the expense of the vulnerable. This reading practice acknowledges that neoliberal demands for forgiveness are especially placed on Black people by mainstreamed and corporatized religious leaders and other people in service of respectability politics, violent status quo, and agents of the state. Rather than the suggestion to forgive everyone, I'm moving toward the idea that a retrenched stance of unforgiveness has been simply untenable.²²

NO LANGUAGE IS (GENDER) NEUTRAL:

GENDER NORMATIVITY AND THE INTERSTITIAL NONBINARY

The nuance between gender inclusive, gender expansive, or gender exclusive but non-antagonistic can be difficult to communicate, to request, or to acknowledge on multiple levels. Unless I know them well (and even then), organizers of the spaces I am describing cannot necessarily intuit my request for clarity as genuine and self-protective. Moreover, in the beginning of these experiences it was difficult for me to anticipate an anxious or paranoid interpretation that would routinely lead to a less than substantive response. In either case, it's useful to think through how to communicate the importance of clarity and stating mutually beneficial, community-oriented intent.

Normative tendencies and capacities get foregrounded when Black feminist spaces are made to equate with Black women's spaces, and it's usually a certain kind of figure (i.e., a middle-class, able-bodied, non-trans, heterosexual Black woman) who gets centered as a result. In these ambiguously named or interchangeably described spaces, when there is the request to state pronouns in an introductory setting (such as the beginning of a meeting), the majority of people may skip or shift uncomfortably at the request, state they "hadn't really thought of it before," or assert that "all pronouns are fine" in a way that we should all learn to discern as not materially true. If one were to conduct an experiment wherein they consistently addressed the kind of person who makes this ill-considered claim as *he* or *it*, that person would, without a doubt, feel some type of way. Then we would see that binary gender is often taken for granted in spaces such as this, and the cisheteropatriarchal norms that constitute it are allowed to prevail unchecked. In the stolen moments between these events that can often be the most generative because we are finally structurally permitted to pause from "the life of the mind" and attend to our bodies—that

1 is, cigarette, coffee, or bathroom breaks and meals—the topics of discussion
2 invariably underscore this truth. Discussions that aren't about our research
3 have ranged from how difficult it is for educated cis-heterosexual Black women
4 professors to find a partner who wasn't insecure about her being more educated
5 than him, the difficulties in managing work-family life/childcare balance and
6 how Black women (who are heterosexual) need “wives” to get work done, to the
7 confusing occupation of the (explicitly queer) identity of “femme” to indicate
8 resentment at having to care for students and other service and care work
9 outside of the job description that their (presumably cis-heterosexual male)
10 masculine-presenting counterparts would “never” be called upon to do while
11 also maintaining grueling teaching and research schedules, and so on. I fully
12 recognize that these topics of discussion are deeply energizing and important
13 for my colleagues and other participants, but that realization makes the space
14 no less alienating. Instead, it has led me to self-withdrawal and isolation for
15 aforementioned reasons, so that I do not center myself in what has clearly
16 developed into a normative Black women's space in a way that might interfere
17 with or disrupt the right of Black sisterhood to exist, since I firmly believe it
18 deserves to thrive in all insurgent spaces carved out in the academy.

19 What's also disappointing about these kinds of encounters is how Blackness,
20 under the auspices of class-coded vernacular, can be mobilized as a shield from
21 accusations of harm. Specific examples included terms like “sis,” “bitch,” “girl,”
22 and phrases like “whose mans is this?” (to indicate that the person speaking
23 has said something out of pocket—that is, inappropriate or uncalled for and
24 that people who claim them in community need to round them up) routinely
25 circulate in certain Western Anglophone Black spaces. I've been surrounded
26 by many types of conversations around these terms—I've even had to add
27 the latter phrase because, literally at the time of writing the previous sen-
28 tence, the question of whether or not it is transphobic to refer to a cis woman
29 as the aforementioned “mans” that needed to be collected was vociferously
30 up for debate in an internet forum of Black women and nonbinary people
31 (not all explicitly feminists). This is not at all to undermine or dismiss queer
32 vernacular, and how cis gay or bi men may refer to one another as “girl” or
33 other feminized terms. But it's as Audre Lorde said, “Well, I do not want
34 to be tolerated, nor misnamed. I want to be recognized.”²³ Which is to say
35 that, when nonconsensually applied, these frequent encounters also point to a
36 fundamental misunderstanding or generalization of nonbinary experiences as
37 not man, not woman, but something in between. Acceptance of trans, gender-
38 nonconforming, and nonbinary people must happen on our own terms and with
39 consideration for the fact that the status quo must necessarily shift. When not
40 mobilized consensually, the positionality invoked by seemingly casual phrases
41 that coerce a subject into relation with an undesired gender category like “if
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you were a man . . .” or “you’re just one of the girls” is a continuation of the violence of binary gender when not engaged consensually. 1
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My intervention, there and now, is to point out that no language is gender neutral, no matter how much we will it to be. Black lesbian and literary icon Dionne Brand wrote the book *No Language Is Neutral* in 1990 to trace her Black lesbian diasporic identity across Canada and the Caribbean (Toronto and Trinidad). In the final poem in the eponymous section “No Language Is Neutral,” she writes: “I have tried to write this thing calmly / even as its lines burn to a close. I have come to know / something simple. Each sentence realised or / dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a / side.”²⁴ What becomes clear throughout this poem, which begins, “In another place, not here, a woman might touch / something between beauty and nowhere” (34) is that there is an otherwise possibility of experiencing “beauty and nowhere,” but for now, every flesh-laden one of us—which is to say, every Black person—is simultaneously produced and destroyed, named and unnamed through the bind of language.²⁵ Put another way, it’s as L.H. Stallings said, that “the ordering of black female bodies and the attempt to silence their voices and make absent their desires happens through one specific means: language.”²⁶ Given this, any iterative aspect of Blackness is told on the body and in the flesh in Brand’s “faultless / knowledge of skin.” For trans nonbinary people, the fact of language is subservient to the body but gives way to the flesh (or is something that is experienced viscerally). Black feminist literary theorist Hortense Spillers infamously said that “Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb.”²⁷ She was writing about the aporia of self-authored texts on Black women’s sex and sexuality, a field that has certainly proliferated since the time of her writing. 3
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The visual of an animal as large as a whale being sidelined (beached) feels appropriate when recalling the hypervisible/invisible experience that I described earlier. Nonbinary people have been cast into the fault lines of gender and have yet to hit the bottom. We are routinely *interstitialized*, sometimes coercively, sometimes even voluntarily. For an example of the latter, note that the recently established International Nonbinary People’s Day was deemed July 14, the day chosen by bloggers and activists who organized campaigns for the day to exist because it is equidistant from International Women’s Day (March 8) and International Men’s Day (November 19). The perceptions of in-betweenness and neither here-nor-thereness of trans nonbinary experience is a part of what makes antagonism against us possible and palatable, and its dismissal as minor routinely accepted, even in Black feminist spaces. This is especially true with the rapid mainstreaming of pronouns like they/them. Often referred to as a “gender neutral pronoun,” it also has been explicitly adapted by people with trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming gender identities. Therefore, it’s not neutral in value, in substance, or intent, and it’s 27
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1 indeed possible to misgender someone by referring to them as *they* if that the
 2 person uses *he* pronouns, for example, and can lead to exacerbating dysphoria
 3 in a person who is trans (FTM or AFAB) because it may indicate his failure to
 4 effectively be seen (that is, “pass”) as his gender identity.²⁸ It’s a nuanced line
 5 to straddle, especially as *they* and its declensions has been used in English for
 6 centuries to denote that the speaker/writer does not necessarily know or wish
 7 to reveal the gender of the person being discussed.

8 We must learn to cure ourselves of the principled amnesia that disrupts our
 9 relationship to thought, encounter, and praxis as we move forward in rela-
 10 tion to one another. Rather than a call to empathy, we truly need to move
 11 as possibility models for how we wish to be treated, touched, or otherwise
 12 received *everywhere*. I focus on the academy here as it’s what I’m presently
 13 trying to navigate and because it’s a place where the many configurations of
 14 “we” who are structurally oppressed come into iterations of relative power and
 15 are simultaneously starved for appropriate care and consideration in a way
 16 that suppresses the acknowledgment of physical embodiment. Thus, when
 17 encountering a “like-minded”-seeming body, the desire for physical proximity
 18 may overwhelm and undermine otherwise sound and basic Black feminist
 19 principles that can also be extended, like the right to physical boundaries, the
 20 importance of consent, and the right to self-determination.

21 In the wake of these encounters, I wish for cishet Black feminists to know
 22 that Black trans and nonbinary people are not what I’ve called the platonic
 23 mammy boyfriend. This term captures the carelessness of using the figure of
 24 the queer trans nonbinary person to process needs that are not being met by
 25 cis-heterosexual men, while simultaneously rendering the material and gen-
 26 dered labor of intimacy invisible. That invisibility is performed by dismissing
 27 the actual nonbinary person as a nonthreatening sexual nonentity because
 28 of a retrenched understanding of sex/gender and what acknowledging (not
 29 to mention acting on) possible sexual attraction would mean for one’s cis-
 30 heterosexual identification. Rather than utilizing the queer trans nonbinary
 31 person as a proxy to process unmet needs, I would ask those Black feminists
 32 to be poised to consider to what extent such behavior signals an indictment of
 33 cis-heterosexual relationships as well as the degree to which Black trans care is
 34 being compelled to negotiate catharsis in order to remain in those unfulfilling
 35 arrangements. As L.H. Stallings observes, “once the categories of gender are
 36 dismissed, sexual desire no longer has to properly align with any particular
 37 sex. By being unnamable, we can sustain control over the deferment of gender,
 38 explore individual sexual desires, and become equipped with a mother tongue
 39 to discuss our subjectivity.”²⁹ We must understand that it is hurtful to demand
 40 intimacy work without reciprocity, and that the direction of care underscores
 41 another instance of binary gender reinforcing asymmetrical power relations.

NAVIGATING MISGENDERING

In spaces that involve Black feminists in positions of more direct power over my career or finances, such as my advisors, department managers, chairs, deans, and so on at different levels in the academy (undergraduate, graduate, visiting fellow, postdoc, and now assistant professor), I also toil along the fault lines of care to prepare and protect myself. Despite wanting to simply show up and do my work, I am confronted with the need to constantly articulate myself as a trans nonbinary person, and to sit with the uneven integration of that knowledge. The less satisfactory responses have ranged from genuine confusion, the will to misunderstand, discomfort, and blatant disrespect. All of these I have had to carry on my own because of my acute awareness of being “the first” or “the only” nonbinary individual that the person in question has encountered or needs to encounter on a regular basis, and that, further, they need to be protected from feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable so that in the long run I might be protected from the outright violences that comes from people being surprised, corrected, or otherwise called to reflect on their actions. This is a range of responses I’ve received from all walks of life, but it stings all the more when coming from people who are supposed to “know better.” Though it’s precisely because they do “know better” that they lash out in the ways that they do, rather than let themselves be called upon to live into the principles they claim to hold dear.

The experience of disappointment and anxiety comes up for me around the notion of misgendering, which happens often. The concept of misgendering has been taken up in mainstream discourse by and about trans people as a primary vector of harm that has deleterious effects for trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people ranging from shame, anxiety, exposure to physical and other kinds of harm, and death via homicide or suicide (both of which are tacitly state-sanctioned epidemics in the United States and for trans people globally). Misgendering is a serious problem that deserves attention and resolution. However, its *mainstreamification* has also occluded other timely and urgent issues plaguing trans communities, such as the increased risks of sexual violence or sexual assault, homelessness, and premature death. In terms of “care,” dealing with misgendering is at the very least a necessary palliative. It’s true on one level that the person who causes harm needs to do the work of remedying it. But in my most generous reading, some people, including ones we seek to be in the struggle with, simply may not know how. That, in conjunction with the feeling that they *ought to know* can manifest in a hostile or shame response that exacerbates carelessness or extends further demands of labor from the person misgendered.

This leads me to parse out some descriptions of what I would want to hear as a response to being misgendered in order to feel that the harm from it was

1 sufficiently addressed without producing alienating effects. I also include some
2 of the principles I am constantly trying to practice (above all, discernment)
3 as I care for myself and try not to invest in the tendency to withdraw from
4 community by way of distancing from the person who caused that specific
5 harm. I reiterate that these are things I consider necessary for myself to practice
6 when I have the capacity to do so, and not that every person need to have this
7 relationship to language and self-determination. I am predisposed to making
8 this sort of room because I speak several (primarily Romance and Slavic)
9 languages in which consistently and coherently communicating someone's
10 nonbinary gender identity is difficult and grammatically cumbersome, even
11 self-referentially. What's primarily important for me to acknowledge is the
12 difference between willful misgendering and genuine ignorance, although
13 of course what should ultimately be of concern is the impact. This does not
14 entertain the rampant phenomenon of willful misgendering or the dehuman-
15 izing and invasive treatment that trans people routinely face. I've personally
16 experienced shifting relationships to being misgendered that correlate to my
17 own relationship to my gender identity, to my interlocutor, and to my mental
18 capacity in the moment of the experience. As much as I have wished for clarity
19 in relation to others, I also have needed to be clear for and with myself about
20 what remedying this level of harm looks like. This is especially true of the
21 times I've been misgendered, received an apology, and still held on to distrust
22 or anger. Those feelings are certainly valid, but I've come to realize that, for
23 the way I would like to move in the world, holding on to those feelings is not
24 ultimately useful to me and that receiving an apology without the intent to
25 forgive or to at least state clearly what else I require to feel that harm was suf-
26 ficiently addressed has not actually done anything to make my life better or to
27 make me feel materially well. I'm trying to discern for myself whether and what
28 I'm not going to forgive, and to name it as a boundary so that the dynamics of
29 social relations I maintain are reasonably clear. If I sense that someone meant
30 intentional harm, my responses are different from with someone who makes
31 mistakes or did not know. The latter two categories are what I'm addressing
32 here, since it should not be a requirement to entertain those who intentionally
33 mean us harm. For the latter categories, it is up to me to choose how or whether
34 to continue to move in community, though the burden of labor or carrying their
35 mistakes is not mine to hold.

36 If misgendered by someone that I know in a professional setting with wit-
37 nesses, the first thing I would want is for the person who did it to acknowledge
38 that it happened without anxiously belaboring the point or performing self-
39 flagellatory shame. Acknowledgment might look like the classic "I'm sorry,"
40 or "my bad," or "I know it's [your actual pronouns] and I'm working on it,"
41 without the additional commentary about their age or unfamiliarity with
42 "novel" terms or other attributes preventing them from remembering a key

means of my self-determination. Those factors may well be true, but they also read as seeking absolution and are a distraction from taking full accountability. This instigates a demand of more of my labor and hinders me from processing my own feelings. If the person does not acknowledge the misgendering, the power and possibility of witnessing becomes paramount. The witness might speak to that person separately so that I don't always have to participate in any performative absolution. Then, the witness could briefly report back with something like "I let [person] know that your pronouns are [pronouns] and that they can do better next time," so that it's clear that the situation has been handled and that the person being misgendered is not the only one carrying negative affect, not just about being misgendered, but about how everyone else stood uncomfortably by as it happened. What's clear in either instance is the need for some people not to be an audience, but to witness effectively. Academia's grounds are unprepared for this work. Thus, we must restructure academic community in a way that is antithetical to academia. I know that I need people to consent to showing up in this way, to doing this type of care work, so that I am not left alienated or fending for myself. It behooves me, then, to try to continue to build up trust and community to be able to have avenues to solicit or accept that kind of support from ready accomplices, who I commit to supporting reciprocally.

BLACK FEMINIST EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS / WARNINGS FROM THE FAULT

The practice of reading and epistemological relation I'm trying to mobilize also entails Black feminist citational praxis that is about centering what's useful, not what is sanctifiable or what signals certain political virtues. Like the fault lines etched in the uneven earthly grounds, the way through continues to be messy and fraught. If we take seriously the fact that we need to learn in the encounter to bridge thought, encounter, and praxis, then the singular act of citational inclusion cannot be one that absolves us, as it is not without its own attendant potential for contradiction, if not harm. We might instead think about them as important landmarks that we can mobilize in our quest for justice undergirding our Black feminist communication, solidarity, and kinship. I'm constantly returning to a demand and a question that Afro-Latina rapper and artist Belcalis Almánzar (Cardi B) confidently put forth: "Be careful with me. Do you know what you're doing?" Cardi B is perhaps a polemical figure to cite here. We must acknowledge her history of anti-Blackness in relation to dark-skinned Black women at the start of her career, that her fame has as much to do with her presentation as light-skinned, and her complex ethnoracial signification across different sociocultural geographies. The lyric is nevertheless one I'm often moved to revisit. In fact, it may well underscore one of the

1 points I'm trying to make, which is that all Black people must reckon with our
 2 anti-Blackness and that all Black feminists must reckon with our anti-feminist
 3 tendencies. She's not suddenly less Black in the face of her anti-Blackness,
 4 though, again, "no language is neutral." It's a further reminder that carelessness
 5 around gender is also anti-Black.

6 When navigating the fault lines of care between Black feminists in the
 7 academy, it's important to acknowledge what is at stake. Black feminists who
 8 do not interrogate the ills of gender normativity and binary gender in their
 9 interpersonal encounters with trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary
 10 people may uphold the status quo in a way that may gain them highly con-
 11 ditional security and power in this cisheteropatriarchal world at the expense
 12 of real people, even if they desire to hold them (and especially to be held) in
 13 community or otherwise proximity.

14 The demand to be regarded must not be received as a threat, but rather a
 15 warning, as Cardi B reminds us in the chorus of "Be Careful." The warning
 16 that I'm issuing is sort of the seismometric alert (the siren sounds that announce
 17 an advancing earthquake) along the fault lines of Black feminist care that
 18 signals the need for a radical reorientation in our processes and processing with
 19 one another and ourselves. We need to be care-full with each other. It's not
 20 better to be right than to be sorry and commit to doing better. This impedes
 21 progress (beyond a liberal sense) and transformation (in a radical sense) if that
 22 defensive doubling down is akin to securing your place in a colonial gender
 23 binary and toxic world order, which should not be worth it by any measure of
 24 the worlds Black feminisms urge us to keep building.

25 In addition to the metaphorical manifestations of geological fault lines, the
 26 idea of the fault lines in terms of care and caring in academic spaces and beyond
 27 also begs a question about the originator(s) of harm: "Who's at fault?" This
 28 question riddles our interpersonal interactions and often settle and even take
 29 root along identitarian categories, rendering them discrete. I'm trying to move
 30 beyond the individualization of this question in order to be about the work of
 31 our collective liberation and hope those intentions are clear. I'm aware that the
 32 very personal nature of this essay will cause some people to feel interpellated,
 33 whether I intend it or not. To those readers, I would say, "welcome to the
 34 fault lines," and encourage them to continue living into their principles by
 35 sitting with the discomfort and then operationalizing that feeling to struggle
 36 and shift from oppressive tendencies and structures. What I'm speaking in/
 37 to are systemic issues for which trans, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary
 38 people should not effectively become the latest casualties. We should not have
 39 to suppress our need for care and endure harm from all sides of the fault such
 40 that other subjectivities may take shape, flourish, or sediment as entrenched
 41 monuments to systems of oppression. Since what I'm calling for is a reading
 42 practice, the distinction here is one between the ability to read and the struggle

to comprehend. In the race to seem like we *know* what is “right,” we forget the importance of trial and error and that not everything is intuitively right or wrong.

While on the presumed solid ground of the “we” (e.g., “we’re all Black feminists here,” “we’re all queers here,” “we’re all Black people here,” etc.) the fault lines let us know that the grounds may tremble and give way beneath us at any given moment. They are doing so at this very moment, hitting the lower end of the Richter scale of our perception such that some of us may not even feel it. As I continue this intracommunity conversation with and between Black feminists of all genders, sexualities, and relationships to and beyond the academy, I will continue to urge us to think about emergency preparedness. If we don’t have effective and protective strategies in place, we won’t be ready for the untold damage that may arise when the epistemological faults collide and reconfigure the “us” away from liberation and otherwise possibilities. That’s where the real capacity for destruction lies, and something that we can do the work to minimize or prevent. Audre Lorde closes “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” this way: “And I dream of our coming together / encircled driven / not only by love / but by lust for a working tomorrow / the flights of this journey / maples uncertain / and necessary as water” (449). She makes an invocation that we must return to and keep returning. Coming together in true solidarity is not easy. It’s not always pleasant. But it is a necessary practice for those of us who not only dream of a working tomorrow but lust for it. The earnest desire for a tomorrow that sees all of us free is necessarily undetermined, but Black feminist ancestors, living and dead, continue to trouble the grounds in order to dissolve our chains. In readying ourselves and making of ourselves vessels for “a working tomorrow,” we need to experiment with the divergent possibility models that might guide us to it. That we do not have a precise map of engagement should be considered a saving grace in the arsenal, a key emancipatory component among our strategies for improvising our navigation of the mess and the trouble. *i. author’s note.* I extend my gratitude to the editors. Thank you to Aisha Finch for foregrounding friendship and a commitment to learning together when we discussed the article’s themes. The deep time, labor, and attention of my interlocutors have not only made this work possible but have helped me clarify the kind of person and thinker I want to be, and the kind of community I want to continue to build with others. I would like to acknowledge Xhercis Méndez, Moya Bailey, and C. Riley Snorton for reading multiple drafts and helping me to expand my thinking with their insightful and generative comments and edits. Thank you to Ianna Hawkins Owen for being such a generous listener, close reader, and friend and to Chanda Prescod-Weinstein for offering to read the complete draft. Thanks, too, to Nick Mitchell for reminding me that if the work is going to be got, it’s first got to get done.

NOTES

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- 3 1. Thanks to dear friend and Black feminist Moya Bailey for talking me through this
- 4 point over many conversations about this piece, and to Ashon Crawley, whose
- 5 *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Durham, NC: Duke 2016) I'm
- 6 tangentially invoking here.
- 7 2. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *Words of Fire: An*
- 8 *Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (The
- 9 New Press, 1995): 210–218.
- 10 3. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister*
- 11 *Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984).
- 12 4. bell hooks, "Censorship from Left to Right," *Outlaw Culture: Resisting*
- 13 *Representations* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994).
- 14 5. A quote attributed to Maya Angelou goes, "My mission in life is not merely to
- 15 survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some
- 16 humour, and some style." I've written a poem called "A History of Black Trans
- 17 Thrival" that takes up this mission and recognizes it as a guideline for Black trans
- 18 feminist living, thinking, and doing as a means to more than mere survival.
- 19 6. Combahee River Collective, 212.
- 20 7. Two July 2019 earthquakes in Southern California respectively registered at M6.5
- 21 and M7.1 on the Richter scale.
- 22 8. "What Is a Fault Line?" WorldAtlas.com. www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-a-fault-line-and-where-are-they-found.html
- 23
- 24 9. Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2
- 25 (Summer 2014): 16–28.
- 26 10. See, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the*
- 27 *Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*; Angela Davis, *Women,*
- 28 *Race, and Class*; Moya Bailey and Whitney Peoples, "Articulating Black Feminist
- 29 Health Science Studies"; Alison Kafer, "Time for Disability Studies and a Future
- 30 for Crips"; and Toni Cade Bambara, *Salt Eaters*.
- 31 11. Audre Lorde, "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazzano Bridge,"
- 32 *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 448.
- 33 12. Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned
- 34 Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies
- 35 Toward the Human Project," *A Companion to African-American Studies*, eds. Lewis
- 36 R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 107–118.
- 37 13. See Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*.
- 38 14. See, for example, C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Sarah Haley, *No Mercy*
- 39 *Here*; and Ashley Shackelford, "Why I'm Nonbinary but Don't Use They/Them."
- 40 15. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the 70*
- 41 *Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
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16. K. Marshall Green and Marquis Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation," 439. 1
 17. Thanks again to Moya Bailey for helping me clarify this distinction. 2
 18. Green and Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought," 440. 3
 19. We see this fault line clearly in the debate over the inclusion of trans women more readily than trans men into women's colleges across the United States, a breakdown that comes up against the reality that many people who attended women's colleges and go on to identify as trans men come into this understanding in those very spaces that are debating their inclusion/moving for their categorical exclusion. 4
 20. *Katie*, "Laverne Cox," Katie Couric, ABC, January 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mgBwCxTRDY 5
 21. Both "cancel" and "incarcerate" stem from the Latin word variant *carcer*, meaning prison. 6
 22. I've come to this point after many long and difficult conversations with dear friend and Black and trans studies scholar Riley Snorton among others. 7
 23. Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1985), 8. 8
 24. Dionne Brand, *No Language Is Neutral*, 34 9
 25. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206. 10
 26. L.H. Stallings, "The Black Woman and the Trickster Trope of Unnaming," 33. 11
 27. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," 153; emphasis in original. 12
 28. FTM refers to "female to male" transsexual or transgender and AFAB indicates the designation of "assigned female at birth." 13
 29. Stallings, "The Black Woman and the Trickster Trope of Unnaming," 79. 14
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