Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves: Ideological Regimes and Creative Praxis in Black Trans Life Writing

by

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Dedication

For my mother, LaQuitta René Jones, and in memory of my father, Sylvester “Sly” Jones, Sr. (1962-2022) and godfather Deacon Elgie L. Summers (1945-2020). May I always honor the hard work, love, and support with which you showered me.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines contemporary black transgender women's life writing in the U.S. and uses an interdisciplinary black feminist approach to transgender studies to argue that imagination is a key facet of political resistance and social transformation for these writers. By analyzing the autobiographical acts and embodied and narrative modes of self-fashioning employed by Toni Newman, Janet Mock, CeCe McDonald, and Venus Di'Khadijah Selenite, I explore their subjectivity and self-making through a matrix of narrative and embodied self-fashioning practices I call *critical trans* imagination.* Through understanding these writers as philosophers who construct radical black trans counternarratives and counterknowledges, this project challenges the hegemonic whiteness inherent to discussions of transgender subjectivity and the transgender memoir genre. In doing so, I illuminate the ideological narrative acts that black trans women writers rely on to sharpen their own sociopolitical consciousness and craft liberatory spaces for all black women. By examining a wide and necessary range of autobiographical acts and texts, such as traditional memoir, prison letters, and digital blogs, my dissertation generates a collage of black trans life in response to the ongoing erasure of trans women of color from dominant discourses.

This project interrogates the discursive history of black trans women through an expansive approach to life writing. This study draws connections between the lived experiences of black transgender women and their strategies for imaginatively narrating those experiences through autobiographical writing, providing the basis for a dialogue about the featured writers'

foundational contributions to black feminist and transgender studies. Thus, the second-person narrative voice throughout the dissertation emerges from the dialogic relationship between the black trans women engaged here—from scholars to authors to my own critical voice. I contend that embodied and narrative self-fashioning practices, combined with political consciousness-raising, is a critical form of radical creative praxis for audiences invested in black and trans liberation. Ultimately, this project advances blacktransfeminist thought in transgender studies and cultural studies through investigation of the black trans femme figure in the U.S.

Chapter 1: Introduction: The "Arrival" of Black Trans Mattering

I grew up as the only child of a working single mother who, like many other young black women in the 1990s, had few childcare resources. Therefore, I remained at home alone for large quantities of time, complete with strict rules of conduct and, as I grew older, the expectation of finishing chores. It was not all bad though. During the nights my mother and I did spend together, we would eat fast food and watch our holy trinity of programming on our favorite channel Lifetime: Television for Women. I loved hearing the reminder of who the intended audience of the channel my mother and I bonded over was, which left me feeling like a secret member allowed into a special club in plain sight: women who knew women were awesome, brave, resilient, and overall fabulous. However, these were not the only characteristics that painted the women we watched on the screen. In 2006, when I was a pubescent seventh grader, I watched the premiere of a new Lifetime Original movie *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story*. The film dramatizes the life and gender transition of Gwen Araujo, a transgender Latina who was murdered in Newark, California in 2002. I began crying within the first twenty minutes of the movie. The film opens during a traditional Latinx celebration, where a young boy in the Araujo family allows his cousins to put him in a pink dress. Though the young boy, the protagonist who would go on to name herself Gwen, wears the dress with pride before his family, the elders in his family--his mother, in particular--look on in shame and disappointment for this act of gender transgression. This mix of pride and shame felt all too familiar to me, a young brown gender non-conforming child myself. Even though I, too, felt desires to express a feminine part of myself, I always knew that this was not a safe practice in which to engage. Further viewing of *A*

Girl Like Me seemed to affirm these feelings as the film climaxed with four young men beating and murdering the seventeen-year-old trans girl right after looking down her pants to confirm their suspicion of her gender. The ensuing media attention to the murder trial—Araujo's mother's sympathetic pleas to audiences, in particular—was a moment in the early 2000s that demonstrated consideration of murder specifically based on an individual's sexual or gender identity as a hate crime as a critical aspect of gaining civil rights and liberties for LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. Despite its depiction of the brutality against gender non-conforming children of color, the film *A Girl Like Me* comforted me in my domestic solitude because it validated gendered feelings I have felt throughout life and permitted me to empathize with Gwen's journey. *A Girl Like Me* demonstrates how the life, the actual lived experience of trans people of color, matters, and how the forms in which they self-fashion are potential blueprints for comfort and self-realization for some viewers.

Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves is concerned with the imaginative ways in which black trans women, such as myself, creatively self-fashion through embodiment, performance, and narrative. This project is itself my own act of narrative self-fashioning, thinking critically and imaginatively about my life experiences through writing. Like the writers I think with in this project, I was able to cultivate vocal practices of self-fashioning that not only provided a felt sense of safety and comfort—something a child feeling alone and isolated would need from somewhere, anywhere—but also tapped into a critical imagination that continues to impact my abilities as a writer, teacher, and scholar.

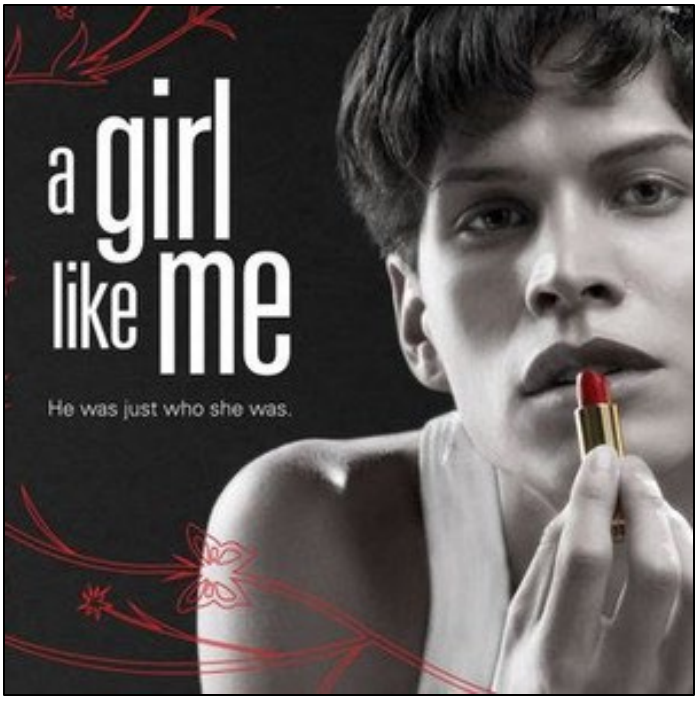

Figure 1: Promotional movie poster for A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story

Actress Laverne Cox cuts a striking figure in her dark blue dress and heels as she heralds the "transgender tipping point" on the June 2014 cover of *TIME* magazine. With her slender, elegant figure and gesturing fingers symbolically point the country in the direction of deeper inclusion of transgender people in the fabric of society. As interesting as it is that a black trans woman stands next to the headline labeling the "transgender tipping point" as the next frontier for civil rights in the U.S., there is a contradiction here. An often-cited example of social contradiction in trans studies is the discursive moment of the "transgender tipping point" which celebrates the elevated moment of trans visibility, especially of black trans women.[1] However,

[1] Since its declaration in 2014, the "transgender tipping point" has been a hot point of contention for trans and gender nonconforming scholars, writers, and activists. For scholarship that contends with the discursive, material, and artistic consequences of this "tipping point" moment, largely from interdisciplinary, humanistic inquiry, see Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017), Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* 2nd ed. (2017), Aren Z. Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (2018), Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures*

this rise in visibility and accomplishment for trans people coincides with a record number of instances of violence, abuse, and murder suffered by black trans women, a rate that only increases each year.[2] One might ask if positive representations of trans people are on the rise, why, then, are the number of murders rising, too? Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, the editors of the landmark anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* urge readers to resist the "trap of the visual"[3] and understand that "representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible."[4]

Despite the lack of work concerning the discursivity of the trans woman of color figure, this is not a new question. In 2009, scholar Salvador Vidal-Ortiz questions why academics and activists alike automatically relegate trans women of color to the most vulnerable and precarious position possible in social imaginaries. He speaks directly to the reader, asking what and how they imagine "the transwoman of color," and claiming, "The transwoman of color becomes a singular figure in those moments, a utensil to reference at will. This is an additive approach that fails to consider the structural arrangements and discursive practices that locate the transwoman of color in such a complicated site. I wonder if this is truly a concern about the invisibility of

and Technologies of Movement (2019), Amy Marvin, "Transsexuality, the Curio, and the Transgender Tipping Point" (2020), Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (2021), Cameron Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* (2022), and Niall Richardson and Frances Smith, eds., *Trans Representations in Contemporary, Popular Cinema: The Transgender Tipping Point* (2022).

[2] To be clear, the rising rates of violence against black trans women and trans women of color is only based on incidents that get reported. Transmisogyny in the forms of deadnaming, misgendering, and hiding a victim's trans identity further obscure the actual rate of violence trans women of color experience in the U.S. Even in death trans women of color are refused resolution, justice, and truth.

[3] Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017: xv

[4] Tourmaline, et. al., *Trap Door,* xviii.

transwomen of color, or the speaker's positioning as an ally."[5] Taking a historical approach to the question of the discursive figuration "transgender women" begins to take on in the twentieth century, Emily Skidmore questions the whiteness central to Christine Jorgensen's rise to celebrity status via her sex reassignment surgery in the 1950s. By contrasting Jorgensen's celebrity with the erasure of Delisa Newton, a black trans woman and contemporary of Jorgensen who did not receive nearly as much attention in mainstream media outlets, we see that erasure, specifically of black trans women, is a defining feature of black women's participation with not only the category "woman" or "cis woman," but even "transgender woman." Blackness, then, must be attended to in our studies of transgender phenomena.[6]

Curiosity animates my investigation into who the discursive trans woman of color figure could be, if one were to tune in and pay attention to her. I take up this query and examine a body of black trans life writing that I argue uses narrative strategies and self-fashioning practices that constitute what I call a *critical trans* imagination* to resist dominant narratives that consistently exclude, criminalize, and dehumanize the experiences and perspectives of girls like her[7] and make way toward other possibilities. The critical trans* imagination embedded within black trans women's life writing manifests through embodied and narrative practices of self-fashioning. Life writers discuss embodied self-fashioning practices in passages when the narrated autobiographical subject (ex. "the narrated Newman") engages in things pertaining to their body that relate to their gender-racial-sexual self-determination. Meanwhile, narrative self-fashioning

[5] Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, "The Figure of the Transwoman of Color Through the Lens of 'Doing Gender.'" *Gender and Society* 23.1 (February 2009), 101-2.
[6] Emily Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37.2 (Summer 2011): 270-300.
[7] I intentionally use the language of "girls like her" to allude to Janet Mock's Twitter hashtag campaign #GirlsLikeUs in order to raise awareness about the precarity black trans women and trans women of color often face.

occurs through the narrating author's connecting the imaginative language of embodied self-fashioning to the complex processes that lead to their own autobiographical catalysts. Narrative self-fashioning also occurs through intertextual relationships with black queer and feminist authors and texts. These intertextual relationships emerge through allusions and other kinds of engagement with life writing and their authors. Most notably, these intertextual relationships rely on the imaginative capacities of these life writers to extend the genre of autobiography.

This dissertation questions how black trans life writing engages issues of criminalization, incarceration, and dehumanization, and argues that a critical trans* imagination informs how writers resist systems of power, engage complex discourses on visibility, and create counternarratives through which they attempt to reclaim subjectivity and agency within the struggle for liberation. Here, trans* with the asterisk is intended to perform different work than when referring to people, practices, or studies as trans, transgender, or transsexual. *Trans** in critical trans* imagination signals the theoretical expansiveness of *trans* as articulated by Marshall Green and C. Riley Snorton, who urge us to consider trans as not just an operation of gender(ing), but as a technology of racialized and classed management.[8] Green follows up with consideration of a Trans* method as that which "requires that we be more attuned to difference rather than sameness, understanding and declaring that our sameness will not protect us. We most move to those uncomfortable places of contradiction and conflict, and in those moments, we will develop a more critical and nuanced analysis of the conditions under which we are

[8] C. Riley Snorton in his book *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* deploys trans as "more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival," and as that which "finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender" (2017: 2). I interpret Snorton as significantly expanding Avery Tompkins's definition of the asterisk (*) as "used primarily...to open up *transgender* or *trans* to a greater range of meanings" (2014: 26). Also instructive here is Christina Sharpe's "Trans* Atlantic," which constitutes "that s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents…[as something which gets] at something *about* or *toward* the range of trans*formations enacted on and by Black bodies" (2016: 30).

required to live, named and unnamed."[9] I must be clear here: I am not arguing that only black trans writers utilize critically trans* imaginative narrative strategies. Rather, I believe imagination, as I explain later, is a foundational affect and mode of thinking for trans studies, black studies, and self-life writing by both black and/or trans writers.

Desired Bodies, Imagined Selves brings these realms of writing and thinking together, which includes various forms of black trans life writing such as memoirs, prison letters, personal essays, and online blog entries. As a capacious literary genre and mode of representation, life writing allows me to center the self-proclaimed and self-represented lives of black trans people and identify the narrative strategies they employ to resist and defy dominant and violent institutional structures that rely on white supremacist and capitalist logics to function and proliferate, such as prisons, organized religion, and even mainstream publishing industries. Furthermore, the narrative strategies these texts employ, I contend, are engaging with and even at times extending existing tropes present in black women's literary traditions. Newman, Mock, and McDonald narratively self-fashion themselves as life writers by writing themselves into larger discussions of self-determination within black women's literature. By using their specific experiences to participate in those same traditions, I assert black trans women's life narratives can further collapse the distinction between "cisgender"[10] and "transgender" when encountered by black womanhood[11] and demonstrate a critical trans* imagination in which the differences

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[9] Marshall Green, "Troubling the Waters," 79.

[10] Derived from Latin, "cisgender," usually shortened to "cis," names individuals who always consistently identify with the sex and/or gender assigned to them at birth, meaning they do not identify as transgender. For critically trans political approaches that deconstruct the term and usage of cisgender, see Che Gossett's 2014 interview with Christina Ferraz at https://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/07/08/queerstions-cisgender-mean/, and Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

[11] For more on the distinction, or lack thereof, between cis and trans black women, see Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here* (2016), C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides* (2017), Marshall Green and Marquis Bey's "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation" (2017), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Ezili's Mirrors* (2018), and Treva Carrie Ellison's "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender" (2019).

engendered by those categories are less salient than the material connections shared by the gender-racial-sexually oppressed. Imagination, then, becomes a crucial vehicle for analyzing life writing beyond modes of memory and recollection, which, as award-winning Toni Morrison attests, "won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me."[12] I aim to demonstrate how the imaginative forms of resistance conjured up by black trans people in literary self-representation are critical forms of embodied knowledge[13] that seek to theorize, resist, and imagine beyond the myriad stigmatizing practices and dehumanizing structures they endure, including systems of criminalization, policing, surveillance, medicalization, and sexual terrorism.[14] In doing so, black trans life narratives exemplify urgently needed counternarratives for creative black and brown queer and trans expression, ones that speaks to the centering of life and livability within movements such as the #BlackTransLivesMatter movement.[15]

My theorization of black trans life writing utilizing a critically trans* imaginative narrative strategy borrows from Dean Spade and Eric A. Stanley's conception of gender self-determination. In his essay "Mutilating Gender," Spade blends Foucauldian analyses of power, governance, and discipline with his self-narrated journey for gendered body-alteration to

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[12] Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir.* 2nd ed. Ed. William Zinsser. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995: 92.

[13] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue this exact point, claiming, "But the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge (a textual surface on which a person's experiences is inscribed) because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects." See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010: 49.

[14] I borrow this specific list of state-sponsored dehumanizing maneuvers from Treva Carrie Ellison's essay "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender" (2019).

[15] Here, I'm drawing on the editors of *Trap Door* (2017) and C. Riley Snorton's (2017) deployment of the #BlackTransLivesMatters movement, namely as both a continuation of logics embedded, though often overlooked, within the annual observance of Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR) as well as a moment to reflect on the precarity for black trans lives, both when invisibilized or hypervisibilized. Further explanation is provided in the summary of the conclusion under the "Chapter Summaries" section.

demonstrate the ways in which discourses about access to trans health care can uphold normalizing regimes of social power. Spade clarifies how medical and legal institutions often depend on restrictive conceptions of gender norms and expectations that reify cisnormative and gender essentialist assumptions about transition and how trans people should live their lives prior to and even after "achieving" gender reassignment treatments. As a trans person who does not fit the normative conceptions of "transsexual" as prescribed by dominant medical establishments, Spade embraced an ethic of gender self-determination, a "respect for all expressions of gender"[16] that need not lead to normative forms of gendered body-alteration or reassignment.[17] While Spade deployed gender self-determination as simultaneously an embodied ethic and political consciousness, Stanley expands the definition significantly, defining the term as "a collective praxis against the brutal pragmatism of the present, the liquidation of the past, and the austerity of the future. That is to say, it indexes a horizon of possibility already here, which struggles to make freedom flourish through a radical trans politics."[18] A radical trans politics, for Stanley, is an explicit bridge between "queer liberation and prison abolition," as articulated by the CR10, Critical Resistance's tenth anniversary conference in 2008.[19] This bridge emphasizes the role of the prison industrial complex and penal enactments of state power as normalizing regimes of gender, sexuality, and race.[20]

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[16] Spade, Dean. "Mutilating Gender." In *The Transgender Studies Reader.* Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge, 2006: 325.

[17] For more reading on the medical model of transsexuality and trans people's engagement with trans healthcare and the juridico-medical industrial complex, see Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966), Spade's *Normal Life* (2011), Aren Z. Aizura's *Mobile Subjects* (2018), and Toby Beauchamp's *Going Stealth* (2019).

[18] Stanley, Eric A. "Gender Self-Determination." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014): 89.

[19] Ibid, 90.

[20] My understanding of "radical" here is also informed by Kara Keeling's description of Black radical imagination as that which "goes against the root, taking aim at the very foundation of a shared reality" (2019: 34).

Even further, Stanley emphasizes prison abolition's[21] importance to gender self-determination as it "helps us *imagine* an entirely different world--one that is not built upon the historical and contemporary legacies of the racial and gendered brutality that maintain the power of the [prison industrial complex]."[22] As black studies scholars such as Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Katherine McKittrick, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, and Matt Richardson help us see, there is a longstanding, historical relationship between the Atlantic slave trade, plantation logics, and the prison industrial complex.[23] Not only did all three serve to dehumanize and violate black bodies, but each is as much a gendering apparatus as it is a racializing one, or, as black literary scholar Hortense J. Spillers would clarify, an ungendering apparatus.[24] These are the legacies Stanley alludes to, historical processes that show how anti-black violence is coterminous with gender violence, upholding logics that animate the violence and normalizing regimes inherent to the prison industrial complex. Blackness, then, becomes a central facet of thinking through gender self-determination and its role in mobilizing against penal systems such as prisons and police. Theorized this way, gender self-determination is both a political commitment to bodily gender autonomy as well as a journey of gender self-discovery that always relates to an individual and community's totality, meaning it grasps relationships to race, class,

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[21] Generally speaking, prison abolition is a global radical movement to work toward the dismantling of the prison industrial complex. Prison abolition is distinct from prison reform, since the latter advocates for ways to improve the conditions of prisons and the experiences of incarcerated people as opposed to eradicating the institution and the logics that support its existence altogether. For more reading on prison abolition, see Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), The CR10 Publication Collective's *Abolition Now!* (2008), Dean Spade's *Normal Life* (2011), and Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith's *Captive Genders* (2015).

[22] Stanley, Eric A. "Introduction: Fugitive Flesh: Gender Self-Determination, Queer Abolition, and Trans Resistance." In *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex.* 2nd ed. Eds. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith. Oakland: AK Press, 2015: 14. (italics mine).

[23] See Angela Davis's essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *The Golden Gulag* (2008), Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* (2006), and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson's "From Black Transgender Studies to Colin Dayan: Notes on Methodology" (2014).

[24] See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

ability, and nationality as well as gender identity and the oppressive and violent legacies that produced those categories.

"Critical trans* imagination" puts these concepts of gender self-determination and prison abolition in conversation with what black feminist life writer and scholar bell hooks calls "critical imagination." In her 1990 book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* hooks outlines a liberatory praxis of learning, study, and creation by posing the following question, "How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualizations?"[25] It is this quest for deeper expansion and engagement with political consciousness, I believe, that motivates black trans women life writers to develop self-fashioning practices and diverse counternarratives to bring them closer to self-actualizations that run deeper than gender identity alone. Indeed, I argue that imagination is perhaps the most difficult and queerest aspect of prison abolition, the most elusive and full of the most potential. Or, as Che Gossett puts it, "abolition is already eroticopolitically queer. In the face of policing, closets, and cages—abolition is a queer desire."[26]

The texts conceptually depend on the imaginative and collective elements of gender self-determination to mobilize critically trans* imaginative narrative strategies. (Re)imagining and (re)defining terms of community, belonging, and racial-gender collectivity are the unique elements of black trans life writing. Critical trans* imagination positions black trans life writing as doing something different from life writing authored by white trans individuals or individuals who only focus or primarily focus on gender and gender transition in their narrative as the main

[25] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 15.

[26] Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture," in *Death and Other Penalties: Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 270.

way of claiming narrative and social agency.[27] As a capacious narrative strategy that depends on blackness as a vestibular epistemic operation, critical trans* imagination captures not only the desire for transition and acceptance, but the entire lives that black trans people find themselves enveloped in. It highlights the desire to mobilize faith, to find true love, to discover one's sexuality, and to politically advocate for the dismantling of violent institutions. This narrative conception participates in ongoing conversations in black queer and trans studies that seek alternative worlds, other possibilities, and ways of (re)imagining the livability of black and trans life.[28]

1.1 Theoretical Foundations

This project is shaped by the foundational epistemologies of transgender studies, specifically the forms of thought articulated by black trans studies. Trans historian Susan Stryker maintains that as a field, trans studies should be "predicated on an explicit recognition of transgendered people as active agents seeking to represent themselves through any number of strategies, rather than as passive objects of representation in a few dominant discourses."[29] In this essay, as in much of her body of work that defines the contours of trans studies, Stryker aims to elevate and center trans-generated knowledges about trans people, prioritizing the ways in which they navigate and make sense of the world. My approach to the objects of analysis under investigation here follows suit, but I situate blackness as an unavoidable, interlocking category of analysis and epistemological foundation for studies of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, this

[27] Here I understand trans* as operating similarly to quare for performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson, who's scholarly aim behind black queer studies is "to *quare* queer—to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of extending its service to 'blackness'" (2005: 7).
[28] Here, I am thinking alongside Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's conception of a black/queer poetics, which she describes as a form which "challenges us to think creatively about the overlapping meanings of form and difference in various discursive spaces" (2021: 19).
[29] Susan Stryker, "The Transgender Issue: An Introduction," *GLQ* 4.2 (1998): 148.

dissertation considers black trans women intellectual workers who use life writing as a vehicle for theorizing the complexity of the world, understanding them as "oral *and* literate, folk *and* intellectuals, theorists *and* practitioners."[30] Centering black trans women's production responds to gaps within the developing field of black trans studies. Groundbreaking critics Treva Ellison, Marshall Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton explain: "all four of us are masculine identified, and while all four of us write about Black transwomen, it is past time for Black transwomen to occupy a similar position of power as we do in being able [to] curate this conversation through an institutionalized medium, with living-wage employment."[31] As the special issue editors of *TSQ*'s issue on black trans studies, these scholars center the need for black trans women-generated knowledge alongside the rising concerns of the emerging field, a practice that falls in line with their position that "black feminist thought, labor, and commitment have been essential to the de/construction of gender and sexuality."[32] Henceforth, blackness, in its many interpretations and intellectual deployments, is understood here as a necessary category of analysis for understanding the epistemological and political aims of trans studies.

Considering black trans women as intellectual workers capable of producing legitimate knowledge requires resisting the move to position black trans people as simply observable objects without voice and agency. As articulated by Stryker, this is trans studies' main contention with queer theory; similarly, it is black trans studies' demand of black feminist/queer studies and queer of color critique. Though queer of color critique, along with black feminist studies, has spoken to the biopolitical and constructed nature of race, gender, and sexuality as ontological and

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[30] Fulton, DoVeanna S. *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery.* New York: SUNY Press, 2006: 16.
[31] Treva Ellison, Marshall Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, eds., "We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies," *TSQ* 4.2 (May 2017): 164.
[32] Ellison et. al., 166.

epistemological categories, some scholarship has offered the specter of the black trans figure but not allowed that figure's story to fully inform their theoretical interventions. Cultural theorist Roderick Ferguson, for example, writes in the preface to his seminal work *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique,* "I know as well that there are subjects missing who should be accounted for--the transgendered man who wore Levi's and a baseball cap,"[33] seemingly offering up this figure as one deserving priority in critical analysis of race, class and gender. However, this *specific* figure's account is never given, at least not within the pages of *Aberrations in Black.* We do not see or hear from the "transgendered man in Levi's and a baseball cap" until the final page of Ferguson's conclusion where he asks, figuratively, of course, where this man is in our intellectual discourses on race and queerness. Even though Ferguson expertly discusses the lives of queer men of color, this particular queer man is left out of the analytical frame and is rather used to bookend the analysis of men who represent a more stable gendered ontology, even inasmuch as they defy normative gendered expectations. Black trans studies and trans of color critique emerge, then, as fields capable of handling the transgendered man's story, of placing his story within the pages of the article, or the monograph, or the exhibit, rather than relegating him to the very beginning and end of discourse.

I do not seek to merely condemn queer of color critique (or Ferguson, individually) for not prioritizing or centering black trans figures. In fact, much recent scholarship in black studies, black feminist studies, and queer of color critique has done this exact kind of work.[34] Furthermore, even trans studies scholarship that uses critical ethnic studies can speak around black trans figures. Aren Z. Aizura's *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender*

[33] Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004: xiii.
[34] See Matt Richardson's *The Queer Limit of Black Memory* (2013) and L.H. Stallings's *Funk the Erotic* (2015) for great examples of black queer studies' engagement with black trans subjectivity and stories.

Reassignment (2018) explores how trans narratives of gender reassignment depend on the possibility of mobility, of achieving an "elsewhere," both geographically, economically, and in a gendered sense. Aizura draws heavily on trans life writing to analyze how these narratives evidence the apparent need for travel to secure gender transition, with Thailand being the focal location for the book. Instead of including Janet Mock's first memoir *Redefining Realness,* in which she discusses her experience as a mixed-race Hawai'ian trans woman seeking gender affirming surgery in Thailand, Aizura simply alludes to her status within popular trans culture and does not take the opportunity to offer up Mock's memoir as another example of trans life writing that speaks to the ways in which discourses of gender reassignment and transition involves a biopolitical mobility purposefully available to certain populations and not others. I speculate that including Mock's memoir would force Aizura to contend with the ways in which black transsexuality potentially interrupts stable discourses around transnationalism and varying forms of mobility open to U.S. citizens in search of gender reassignment care. Such an interruption could enhance or enrich Aizura's analysis.

I assert that we lose potential richness by not delving into the unique stories of these eclipsed figures. Interdisciplinary trans of color scholar micha cárdenas speaks specifically of queer theory when she writes that the field "has historically used trans women of color as the image of death and our desires for family as a symptom of heteronormative false consciousness,"[35] further illustrating the refusal that the trans woman of color—figuratively or literally—has and will continue to receive. These omissions represent opportunities to explore the contours of black trans and trans of color subjectivity, which would offer complex and nuanced moments of reflection and analysis for various fields that theorize race, gender, class,

[35] micha cardenas, "Pregnancy: Reproductive Futures in Trans of Color Feminism," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3.1-2 (May 2016), 55.

and nationality. My project hopes to not only fill in these critical gaps but demonstrate why we need these stories and what we lose when we do not center black trans lives and stories.

In their call for papers for the special issue, the editors noted, "Blackness is overseen in the sense that the literal and figurative capture of Blackness is a source of value for social and political subjectification and a mechanism of valorization for institutions and institutionalized knowledge." The oversight of blackness's value and relationship to trans studies reveals the transversal relationship between black and trans, meaning the unconscious-yet-effective shift among racialized gender and sexual assemblages.[36] It also clarifies the hesitation these scholars approach trans studies with, wary of the ways in which black trans subjectivities have been tokenized and co-opted by academic fields and mobilized for neoliberal political agendas. As a public figure who gives many speeches on issues impacting black trans women and trans women of color, Janet Mock notes, "When I walk into queer and gender studies spaces on campuses across the country, I've witnessed people theorize about these women's lives. But we often know nothing about their lived experiences, about how these women survived and loved and gave and fought this racist, classist, misogynistic, and femme-phobic world."[37]

Life narration has long been understood as the foundational force behind trans studies. Scholars such as Susan Stryker, Dean Spade, and Aren Z. Aizura, among others, couple their personal stories of gender transition with their theorization of gender non-normativity and demonstrate the frequency of the autobiographical impulse in trans studies.[38] In much of her

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[36] For further explanation of transversality and black trans studies, see Abraham Weil, "Trans*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans* Political Life" (2017) and Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017).

[37] Mock, Janet. "Not All Memoirs Are Created Equal: The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Color's Stories." *Janet Mock.* 5 June 2013. https://janetmock.com/2013/06/05/memoir-trans-women-of-color/.

[38] Citing Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Jocelyn K. Moody finds "the autobiographical impulse to tell both individual and collective stories providing 'a key to unlock the madness of American racism, and strategies for [one's] own

scholarship, Stryker positions the self-referential writing of Leslie Feinberg and Sandy Stone as the texts that significantly shape the early contours of trans studies. Stone's seminal essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back" especially demonstrates the centrality of trans life writing to the project of defining the category of "transgender" and arguing for a fully realized trans politic from which to advocate and agitate for trans inclusion, acceptance, and understanding.

This dissertation argues that conversations about trans subjectivity--and trans life writing, specifically--must maintain a vision that understands fully how racializing processes impact which stories get told, who has access to tell their stories, and which stories are historically erased, whitewashed, and silenced. Beyond recovering black trans narratives' place among trans life writing, I argue that blackness is a necessary category for understanding trans life writing's importance to both academic and political trans enterprises. As I discuss later, blackness also intervenes in approaches to life writing studies by interrupting stable notions around truth and subjectivity. Discourses of transmisogyny and antiblackness, according to Elias Cosenza Krell, are "sustained not only by critical vulnerabilities but also by unacknowledged white privilege and class oppression."[39]

With these declarations, however, I do not wish to simply label black trans studies a more diverse or inclusive version of trans studies. Black trans studies, though an emerging academic field of inquiry, has addressed hegemonic trans studies' inability to incorporate blackness into its intellectual purview.[40] Stryker and Currah admit as much in their introduction to the special issue

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survival of it." See Moody, "Crafting African American Life Writing," in *A History of African American Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

[39] Elias Cosenza Krell, "Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women of Color? Black Trans Feminisms and the Exigencies of White Femininity," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017): 227.

[40] My thinking on the trans* in critical trans* studies and black trans* studies is informed by Marshall Green's formulation of trans as a "method or optic, one that, similar to queer, refuses temporal or spatial fixity. Moreover, I use it to articulate a unique relation between two or more identity categories where one marks the limits and excess of the other, simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing or reimaging new possible ways of being and doing" (2017: 67).

on blackness, claiming, "Work such as that collected in this issue can perhaps begin to demonstrate that blackness, rather than being a 'new direction' of concern for the field, has in fact always already been a constitutive if rarely acknowledged element in the field's formation and articulation."[41] This admission helps illustrate the claims about trans/gender's relationship to blackness and race that Snorton and Sarah Haley make in their respective works[42], particularly in their engagement with black feminist scholar Hortense J. Spillers's 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In different, though of course, connected ways, Snorton and Haley draw on historical archives and visual and literary objects to demonstrate how categories and phenomena like transgender and gender non-conformity are constituted largely by the ways in which black bodies were systematically denied access to categories of "man," "woman," and "human." Additionally, literary scholars Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson use CeCe McDonald's experience of violence and incarceration as a case study to explore the historical connections between anti-black racism and transphobia, linking McDonald's experience of the prison to the capitalist, (un)gendering logics of the Atlantic slave trade and plantation. The narratives under review in this dissertation contend with legacies of chattel slavery, genocide, and colonialism, producing nuanced accounts of how these structures of power continue to weave the fabric of black trans people's lives. Karen Jaime puts it excellently by marking *trans* as that which "points us toward a black Atlantic transnationalism with an increased emphasis on the immediate past as a historical archive in order to imagine and create a queer, trans Afrofuture."[43]

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[41] Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," *TSQ* 4.2 (May 2017): 160.
[42] See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) and Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (2016)
[43] Karen Jaime, "'Chasing Rainbows': Black Cracker and Queer, Trans Afrofuturity." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017), 209.

Black studies has a history of intellectual and creative engagement with imagination and possibility as a generative methodology and framework. Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman offers perhaps one of the most salient, intellectual imaginative conceptions in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts." She defines her concept of "critical fabulation" as a writing practice that seeks "to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death--social and corporeal death--and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visibly only in the moment of their disappearance."[44] Working deeply in the archive of slavery, a location and technology Hartman describes as "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body,"[45] a place always "inseparable from the play of power"[46] that continually marks certain subjects as non-existent and others as innocent, this writing method justifies the necessity to move beyond the "romance of resistance"[47] and construct lives for those to whom the archive never freely gives us access. Critical fabulation is a tool for making life out of no life, for imagining what probably was despite verification. Picking up on Hartman and focusing on black queer visual cultures, performance scholar Tavia Nyong'o offers "Afro-fabulation" as a theory for understanding the "'changing same' of black aesthetics and expressivity [and how they] may have always already been queer,"[48] specifically the ways in which that which was not supposed to appear in the field of visuality or legibility in fact did. Afro-fabulation is a "theory and practice of black time and temporality,"[49] of the event and non-event. Nyong'o attempts to illustrate how fabulation becomes a way of making meaning within an anti-black and racially

[44] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *small axe* 12.2 (June 2008): 12.
[45] Ibid., 2.
[46] Ibid., 10-11.
[47] Ibid., 9.
[48] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.
[49] Ibid., 5.

hierarchized world. Fabulation, he defines, "exposes the *relation* between truth and lying in an other-than-moral sense, to paraphrase Nietzsche."[50]

Though fabulation informs my approach to imagination, these concepts are not exactly synonymous. Whereas fabulation draws our attention to the relationship of truth and what dominant social forces enforce as "truth," often at the cost of hiding away other knowledges that would otherwise emerge as truth, imagination attempts to think past (or perhaps around) this particular dialectic and, as Kara Keeling advocates, "participate in the construction of the present through a combination of past and present elements that are not necessarily attached to presently perceptible reality."[51] For Keeling, imagination and imaginative scholarship have historically allowed black communities and thinkers to "reach through and beyond what exists, including the distracting demands of daily life, and make perceptible another organization of things."[52] It is precisely this operation of imagination that I argue informs contemporary black trans life writing's utilization of critically trans* imaginative narrative strategies. These scholars, along with others and other black studies intellectual formations, chart imagination as a tool, method, and politic that moves beyond resistance as *the* response to anti-black racism, sexism, transphobia, and other valences of power. Imagination, then, works as a theoretical and political bridge between black studies and trans studies, offering ways of thinking beyond the "quotidian violence that secures the existing organization of things."[53]

Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves examines a body of work that, according to trans femme writer Kai Cheng Thom, is "hugely underdeveloped [and] undervalued genre in

[50] Ibid., 5.
[51] Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 33.
[52] Ibid., 34.
[53] Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures,* 16.

mainstream society."[54] Nonetheless, this dissertation is not invested in the traps of representation, visibility, or the like. An often-cited contradiction in trans studies is Laverne Cox's June 2014 feature on the cover of *TIME.* This feature, claiming to herald a "transgender tipping point," celebrates the elevated moment of trans visibility, especially of black trans women. However, this rise in visibility and accomplishment for trans people coincides with a record number of instances of violence, abuse, and murder suffered by black trans women, a rate that only increases each year.[55] One might ask if positive representations of trans people are on the rise, why, then, are the number of murders rising, too? Furthermore, the editors of the landmark anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017) urge readers to resist the "trap of the visual"[56] and understand that "representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible."[57] Unfortunately, a future that the "transgender tipping point" has manifested is that of frequent black transfeminine death. This contradiction between black trans achievement and black trans death illuminates Che Gossett's assertion that "blackness...troubles the politics of trans visibility."[58] For Gossett, visibility functions as a tokenizing mode of surveillance, a biopolitical apparatus that permits some to succeed inasmuch as others become further invisibilized and subject to state injury. Black queer scholar Julian Kevon Glover argues that in normative

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[54] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Creating a Lush World of Trans Woman Literature: An Interview with Writer and Fierce Trans Femme, Kai Cheng Thom." *Bitch Media.* 23 March 2017. https://bitchmedia.org/article/creating-lush-world-trans-woman-literature/interview-writer-and-fierce-trans-femme-kai-cheng#.WNg1MnkrFvs.twitter.

[55] To be clear, the rising rates of violence against black trans women and trans women of color is only based on incidents that get reported. Transmisogyny in the forms of deadnaming, misgendering, and hiding a victim's trans identity further obscure the actual rate of violence trans women of color experience in the U.S. Even in death trans women of color are refused resolution, justice, and truth.

[56] Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017: xv

[57] Tourmaline, et. al., xviii

[58] Gossett, Che. "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility." In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility.* Eds. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017: 183.

mediascapes, black trans women such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox are only permitted certain levels of access as long as they adhere to cisheteronormative expectations around fashion, dating and romance, and comportment.[59] Respectability politics, then, becomes the way by which black trans women gain access to some modicum of neoliberal success. Normative regimes of media representation and respectability, I contend, are always skeptical of blackness and employ measures to corral it and keep it manageable. Gossett's articulation of blackness as trouble for trans visibility echoes Ellison et. al's positioning of blackness as an "issue" for trans studies. Thinking of blackness as an interrupting facet reveals contradictions embedded in neoliberal, capitalist knowledge claims around progress for marginalized communities. This helps us understand the contradiction of the "transgender tipping point:" Cox, a black trans woman, serves to herald its arrival when it is women like her who are most jeopardized within this society that clings to a progress narrative for minorities, or, as Cameron Awkward-Rich claims of Miss Major and CeCe McDonald, she serves as an "embodiment of the general paradox."[60] Given trans studies' structuring around this contradiction, I contend Black trans life writing grapples not with resolving the contradiction, but rather "marking [it as] an unresolved problem for thought."[61] Through the imaginative acts which constitute critical trans* imagination, black trans life writers are able to craft insurgent counternarratives and create alternative spaces of knowledge- and freedom-making. *Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves* thus contributes to what

[59] See Julian Kevon Glover, "Redefining Realness?: On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the Representation of Transgender Women of Color in Media." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18.2-4 (2016): 338-357.
[60] Awkward-Rich, Cameron. "Thinking Black [Trans] Gender." *American Quarterly* 71.3 (September 2019): 905.
[61] Ibid., 905.

Marquis Bey calls *blacktransfeminsit thought*, or a "mode of thinking that marks an ideological and political site of simultaneous becoming and *un*becoming."[62]

1.2 Imagination and Imagining the Self

If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.

- Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"

Along with black trans studies, life writing studies provides a language and analytic for arguing for black trans life narrative's centrality in discussion of trans subjectivity. As I've emphasized above, trans studies already has an extensive relationship with acts of self-narration and self-referentiality; therefore, this project aims to both demonstrate black trans narrative's position and engagement with that project and illustrate how self-narrating strategies, such as critical trans* imagination, facilitate that engagement. Literary critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson assert: "The complexity of autobiographical texts requires practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text."[63] As texts perform a number of discursive moves at once--signaling the presence of black voices in trans life writing, engaging with multiple structures of power and violence, and laying out various ways to resist those structures, to name a few--critical imagination functions as a narrative strategy that encapsulates the simultaneity of these moves. Smith and Watson further claim that self-referential narrators "place themselves at

[62] Marquis Bey, "The Shape of Angels' Teeth: Toward a Blacktransfeminist Thought through the Mattering of Black(Trans) Lives," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5.3 (2016): 41-42.
[63] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography,* 13.

the center of the stories they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, or conditions, or events for their *own* stories." This clarification not only signals the importance of centering trans self-generated knowledges, particularly by black trans women themselves, but also shows how gender self-determination's emphasis on collective praxis and community building informs how black trans life writing discusses larger forces within black trans communities and in the general world on their own terms. Within specific chapters, I also draw on theories of life writing to illustrate how they mobilize critical trans* imagination as narrative strategy within black trans life writing.

Interestingly, African American literature and trans studies are two fields of thought that originate with the politics of life writing. Fugitive slave narratives are the oft-cited beginning of what would become an African American literary-cultural tradition.[64] Similarly (though of course radically different) the often-claimed foundational text of trans studies, Sandy Stone's "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," begins with a reflection on trans life writing. Stone argues against the medically sanctioned narratives of transsexuality espoused by early trans autobiographies such as Lili Elbe's *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Sex Change* (1933) and Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974). Rather, Stone advocates for the development of a "posttranssexual" positionality, one which "constitut[es] transsexuals not as a class or problematic 'third gender,' but rather as a *genre*--a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored." If an essay that proclaims to be a "*post*transsexual manifesto" (emphasis added) is the founding document of trans studies, then the temporal and imagined contours of the field are completely

[64] See Joanne M. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989), Yvonne Johnson's *The Voices of African American Women* (1998), Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember* (2002), and Tomeiko Ashford Carter's *Powers Divine* (2009).

unstable and unfixed, lacking any linear disciplinarity, or disciplined linearity.[65] This reveals how central discourses of temporality are to theorizing about the linearity of trans narrative, how transness is thought of in temporal-spatial terms, and how discourses around trans self-narration moved from a focus on materiality to focus on temporality. Even C. Riley Snorton, drawing on Frantz Fanon, asserts: "the problem under review here is time."[66] Therefore, it is no wonder that as for Stone and Snorton, black studies scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Tavia Nyong'o, and Kara Keeling demonstrate how a discourse of temporality and black time structures the fields' relationship to imagination, fabulation, and locating livability and survivability for black subjects. Imagination and temporality both index the transversal relationship between black studies and trans studies, providing another avenue for their convergence in addition to their challenging of normative gender categories and how marginalized communities fit (or do not fit) within those configurations because of anti-blackness, cisnormative heteropatriarchy, or both. Since almost all the text under examination in this project were written and circulated during the twenty-first century, the need to rely on various kinds of autobiographical writing, across genre and aim, makes sense here. For, as Jocelyn K. Moody notes, "Twenty-first century African American life writing resists strict genre conventions; expansion and experimentation supersede conventional limits and genre parameters."[67] Of the keywords she lists in her collection on the field, of note here are *counternarrative, counter-storytelling, consciousness,* and *interiority.*[68]

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[65] This unfixed temporality around the origin and continuity of trans studies also reveals the non-academic origins and foundations of the field and how essential they, are to the field's present and future. If we assume that the field "arrived" in 1992 with Stone's essay, and the field became more concretized in 2006 with the first edition of the *Transgender Studies Reader* and in 2014 with the launching of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* with Duke University Press, then we can assume that trans cultural production, storytelling, and activism, along with theory and academic discourse, helped shape the arrival of the field and urge Stone to advocate for something that comes after an already established intracommunal attitude towards passing, narrative, and the possibility of trans embodiment and agency.

[66] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* xiv.

[67] Moody, *A History of African American Autobiography,* 5.

[68] Ibid*,* 13.

Recent scholarship on trans life writing, while focusing largely on writing produced by white trans individuals, emphasizes how trans life writing harbors the possibility of reimagining the terms on which we understand gender transition, as well as how narratives of transition respond to Stone's call for posttranssexual identity formation. Scholars and writers such as Sarah Ray Rondot, Juliet Jacques, Chiara Pellegrini, and Evan Vipond establish the myriad ways in which "canonical" trans life writing engages with sensationalist media technologies in the twentieth century, revises narrative tropes around gender intelligibility and passing, and opens up other ways of understanding the fluidity and queerness of gender and gender identity.[69] Interestingly, Rondot uses black feminist scholar Margo V. Perkins's scholarship on black women's writing during the Black Power era to emphasize how central facets of "bearing witness" and "building legacies" are to trans life writing as well.[70] Despite not drawing on any other black creative writing or scholarship, or using race or blackness as analytics for the assumed, unchallenged universality of whiteness in trans life writing, Rondot's essay helps illustrate the potential (and already existing) affinities between black and trans approaches to literary self-narration. These essays, along with Rondot's, suggest the unfixity and instability of trans life writing as both a literary genre and cultural product, making space not only for other interpretations of the possible generativity of the genre, but also for the myriad cultural prioritizations that might come to bear on it. For this project, those cultural prioritizations include blackness and class. Rondot's assertion that white trans writers Jennifer Finney Boylan and Alex

[69] See Sarah Ray Rondot's "'Bear Witness' and 'Build Legacies': Twentieth-and-Twenty-First-Century Trans* Autobiography" (2016), Juliet Jacques's "Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing" (2017), Chiara Pellegrini's "Posttranssexual Temporalities: Negotiating Canonical Memoir Narratives in Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* and Juliet Jacques's *Trans*" (2019), and Evan Vipond's "Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writing" (2019).

[70] See Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

Drummond use imagination as a way to "widen [the] narrative possibilities" of trans identity allows me to articulate the specificity of critical trans* imagination as a narrative framework. Again, I do not contend that only black trans life writers use imagination as a tool for thinking through and beyond oppressive systems of power. My understanding of life writing posits that writers from numerous intersecting marginalized backgrounds use imagination and reimagination to establish an authentic, narrative self, one capable of claiming personhood, cultural legibility, and access to necessary facets of humanity. The necessary distinction here, that the dissertation will stress, is that imagination is working on more grounds than just gender.[71] By relying on Snorton's understanding of transness as inseparable from blackness, and by making that designation clear nominally by my use of the asterisk (*), I show how my deployment of imagination as a critical narrative strategy depends on an understanding of blackness as always tied to the ways in which gender informs trans life writing.

This dissertation is interested in the discursive history of black trans femme figure, specifically as the life writing of black trans women themselves. As Calvin Warren writes, "Black trans, as a discursive formation, is charged with an exceptionally difficult task: creating the intellectual occasion for recognizing, interpreting, and introducing black trans experience into a larger field of inquiry."[72] Despite the dearth of scholarship addressing the discursive figure of trans women of color, this question, particularly around imagination and trans women of color, is not necessarily new. Again, Vidal-Ortiz queried in 2009 how scholars and activists take up the discursive figure of the "transwoman of color," and how she is imagined through existing

[71] This is true even for life writing by white trans people. As scholars such as Aren Z. Aizura, Susan Stryker, and C. Riley Snorton posit, whiteness is always functioning as a racializing technology, and despite its explicit absence, it is always present in how it shapes narrative conventions, styles, and aims in life writing.
[72] Calvin Warren, "Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017), 267.

discursive frameworks that prioritize her relationship to survival sex work and street life. Ultimately, the discursive shift for trans women of color comes through the counternarratives they are able to craft and circulate. And imagination, as a key component of gender self-determination and other critical projects involving trans*ness, animates the practices that get us there.

Life writing constitutes an act of creative self-narration, taking both individual and communal forms. I draw on theories of life writing and autobiography studies that suggest the instability and unfixity of autobiographical acts, pacts, shifts, and aims.[73] As a black feminist project, *Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves* engages the relationship black feminist/black women writers have with notions of truth and authenticity, and how those notions often trouble stable understandings of genre as a way of categorizing writing and, by extension, black life itself. For example, in her first memoir *Redefining Realness,* Janet Mock continuously illustrates how central reading was to her development as a young, gender non-conforming child of color. While the text wholly inserts itself into the black feminist literary tradition, young narrated Janet relies on the storytelling of Maya Angelou and Alice Walker to articulate her own sense of self and imagine future possibilities as a black woman able to take up space in the world, like Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* She writes:

> It was in English class, through *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Color Purple*, where I met a young Maya Angelou and her brother Bailey, and Celie and Nettie. I had never read stories about people who looked like me, about girls who had been touched and told to be quiet about it. I was deeply struck by Maya Angelou's self-inflicted muteness brought on by guilt and abuse. And though I am unable to carry a child like

[73] See Carolyn R. Miller's "Genre as Social Action" (1984), Susanna Egan's *Mirror Talk* (1999), Julie Rak's *Negotiated Memory* (2004), and G. Thomas Couser's "Genre Matters: Form, Force, and Filiation" (2005).

> Celie, I, too, was pregnant with trauma and fear. Celie's audacity to write to God to give her life meaning continues to influence me.[74]

Mock's description of her encounter with black literature for the first time sets up her capability to imagine both herself and her narrative as a part of its legacy. By ruminating on her experience of sexual abuse, Mock allies herself with canonical black female literary figures. She also highlights the paradox of pregnancy: she is pregnant not with child but with "trauma and fear," and to that list I would add possibilities and audacities. By thinking herself also capable of a pregnancy, though of a different sort, Mock psychologically and narratively works herself into Walker's text. Furthermore, I contend that Mock performs her own audacity by daring to write herself into the black women's literary tradition of Hurston, Angelou, and Walker, just as Celie dared to write to God. These moments of similarity and affinity illustrate how Mock uses imagination to intervene in transphobic, anti-black, and sexist discourses that informed her own racial-gendered subjectivity while growing up, illuminating how black women's writing provide the platform for such a politic of imagination and possibility. Imagination helps aid the development of the self in which self-determination takes root. As Gayle Salamon notes, "What appears is always conditioned and made possible by that which does not. The real is always circumscribed and realized through the imagined" (2018: 22).

This dissertation contributes to scholarship in black literary and cultural studies that thinks with imagination critically. As the work of Sami Schalk and Kara Keeling suggests, speculative fiction is a genre built on the premise of imagining and fantasizing about alternative relationships among bodies, technologies, and society. Despite being an obviously fitting literary genre for thinking through the politics of imagination, I argue that speculative fiction is not the

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[74] Mock, Janet. *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More.* New York: Atria, 2014: 129-130.

only genre fit to do this work. By demonstrating how a critically trans* imagination informs how black trans life writing responds to dehumanizing and stigmatizing practices of state and social power, I show how imagination is a fitting framework for analyzing life writing as well as speculative fiction, thus challenging, in a black, queer, trans, feminist way the stability and discreteness of fiction and life writing as literary genres.

1.3 Objects and Methodology

Desired Bodies, Imagining Selves employs an interdisciplinary reading approach rooted in humanistic black feminist inquiry. As such, it is a cultural analysis of autobiographical accounts written by black trans women and femmes aimed at demonstrating their sociopolitical utility as texts. This project demonstrates the ability to use black feminist thinking outside of strict genre conditions. As Figure 2 shows, the primary authors under review in this project overlap in significant ways in terms of autobiographical genre, mode, and aim. For example, the life narratives of Toni Newman and CeCe McDonald both harbor journalistic qualities. Both writers, however, are self-fashioning their autobiographical selves under different spatial dynamics: in between clients in New York and Las Vegas for Newman, and in a men's prison facility in Minneapolis for McDonald. As Leigh Gilmore reminds us in *Autobiographics,* autobiographical writing is often situated "within discourses that construct truth, identity, and power, and these discourses produce a gendered subject."[75] My primary objects of analysis are the published self-referential life writing of Newman, Mock, McDonald, and Selenite. I support my analyses of these texts with context and analysis from secondary textual sources, such as

[75] Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), xiv.

digital blogs, social media posts, readers' comments, and scholarly perspectives on blackness, transness, and life narrative.

For this project, texts are considered "published" as long as they are compiled and circulated writing that clearly articulates a life writer's autobiographical project. This definition permits analyses of various kinds of autobiographical writing in diverse spheres of life, enriching the everydayness of black trans women's life narratives and the tools they harbor for radical transformative justice.

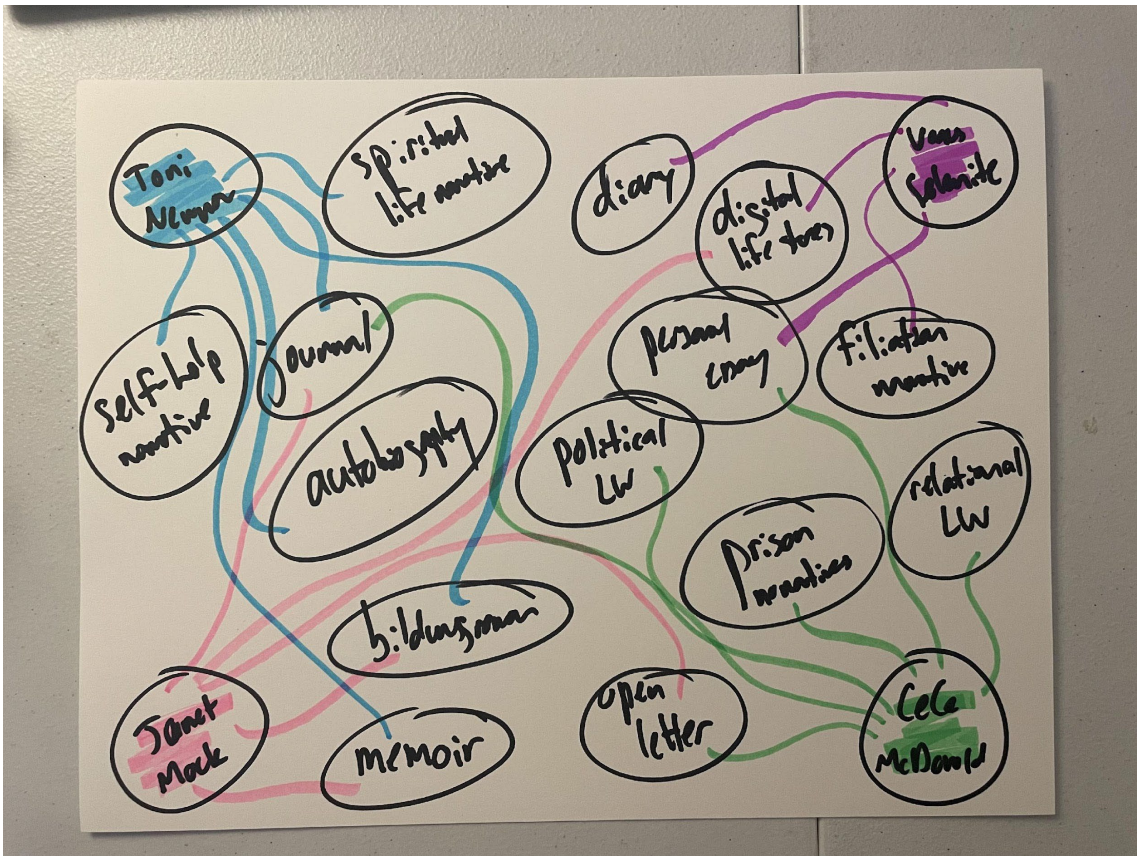

Figure 2: Hand drawn diagram by author showing how each primary text relates to each other and other autobiographical genres and categories.

My primary reading approach for authors' expression of critical trans* imagination is through self-fashioning practices. Through their narrated autobiographical subjects, these life writers engage in practices of self-fashioning—whether embodied, vocal, digital, or spiritual—in moments where their discussion or display of their embodiment and creation of meaning through narrative aligns with their professed gender-racial-sexual self-determination. These moments of self-fashioning reside in the thick of these writers' narrative, so illuminating their presence in the text, along with my analysis, shows readers that discussion of transgender subjectivity often does exceed the parameters of how medical gender transition is often understood and depicted in society. As Chandan Reddy argues in *Freedom with Violence,* social enactments of violence and "practices of hate, then, are the kinds of violence that the state has an obligation to eradicate, so that political society can remain free—in this way, the state delivers not a political violence against a political enemy, but a nonpolitical violence against the enemies of modern political society."[76] This quote suggests that marginalized folks receive forms of violence that become so naturalized within the operations of society that it takes close analyses of legacies of power and knowledge to see connections between state-sponsored harm and social abandonment. Similarly, Grace Hong, in thinking about Lorde's erotic and the neoliberal power structures that encase vulnerable populations, asks, "How are some populations rendered unworthy of protection? According to Lorde, this crucial operation of neoliberal power occurs through the mobilization of terror and loathing as affective technologies of abandonment."[77] In other words, the fear and

[76] Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 12. I also consider Reddy's understanding of the state as that which I deploy in this project: "as an ideal form that authorizes regulatory and coercive powers within and through variously designated institutions for the protection—in our time—of society, economy, and markets" (2011: 183).
[77] Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal,* 77.

suspicion that often attends trans antagonism stems, and are maintained by, economies of feeling that keep certain subjects in line.

Subjects and subjectivities are shaped by their surrounding discourses, and therefore attending to the ways trans women of color life writers challenge their discursive representation under regimes that do not protect them. For example, in the 2015 documentary *Free CeCe!,* abolitionists Angela Y. Davis and CeCe McDonald discuss their feelings about how the violence of the state works within the home, family, and communal life of marginalized folks. They argue:

> We often replicate the structures of oppression and violence in our own emotions. The gender policing that often takes place through the work of the authorities: there are "men's" prisons and "women's" prisons. Therefore, trans people, they are caught in the middle of this violent binary that is supposedly based on biology. But policing often happens in our communities as well. It happens through our friends, our families, because we often do the work of the state through our own emotions without even realizing it.[78]

Sitting together, thinking about the specificity of McDonald's incarceration and larger-scale modes of violence suffered by marginalized people under transphobic racial capitalism, Davis produces a social theory about how, in late-stage capitalism, the state perpetuates its harms and violences against its intended recipients with an ease and transfer of power crucial to recognize in our fields in which we want to end the oppression of trans people. For example, Davis offers the spatial logic of "men's" and "women's" prisons, noting that by its very design, the prison industrial complex is inhospitable to trans identity—or trans self-determination, more specifically—while allowing white supremacy and black subjugation to remain the status quo.

[78] Jac Gares, dir., *Free CeCe!,* 2015.

As asserted throughout this dissertation, it is paramount that we wrestle with the affective economies diffused through our myriad communities and face, with clarity and purpose, the ways in which we perpetuate harm in our communities through our attitudes, practices, behaviors, and preconceptions that solidify the status quo and refuse imagination and the ability to transgress. By clarifying these affective regimes as well as who is not present at the table, we see how multiple kinds of harms—lack of archive, erasure, empty accolades, harmful preconceptions—can be instilled and maintained through our own actions. We can, then, more clearly align interior and anterior selves and subjectivities, and move past harmful ways of being to more wholesome, integrative ones. Ah, the importance of self-determination.

As I show in chapter 4, CeCe McDonald mobilizes blacktransfeminist analysis to shed light on a cultural phenomenon I call *regimes of unprotection.* I formulate this term alongside Sarah Haley's contention that in the Jim Crow South, "gender ideology was constructed and reiterated through discourses of protection,"[79] meaning that the category of gender is maintained by understanding white women as the protected class of subjects and thus the proper inhabitants of "female gender." If the proper inhabitants of gender are considered a protected class, then those who continue to experience a lack of protection or defense in this social schema because of their difference must therefore be considered unprotected. Given this sociopolitical reality, regimes of unprotection is a biopolitical naming of how dominant structures of power purposefully construct certain populations of subjects as legally inviolable yet vulnerable to persistent violation.[80] In other words, groups negatively impacted by dominant gendered-racial-sexual ideologies, such as trans women of color, are contradictorily unprotected by the law and

[79] Haley, *No Mercy Here,* 8.

[80] I am grateful to Ruby C. Tapia for offering this language which helps shape my concept of *regimes of unprotection.* Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death* (2012) also informed the term's intention.

social status quo. I do not mean simply that trans women of color and other oppressed groups are left out of legal protections;[81] rather, I intend to draw attention to the specific ways in which trans women of color—or even those who are perceived approximate to that figure—are purposefully left unprotected by the law when they exert some form of self-determination. Regimes of unprotection, then, rely on the vulnerability and indefensibility of marginalized subjects and communities to construct an arena of precarity for those populations. I intend to stage conversations among these writers, myself, and the (counter)publics that surround us and our thriving. "A conversation has the potential to cement connections more than a monologue," Miss Major reminds us.[82]

As defined by Geneieve Alva Clutario, regimes are constituted by the interrelated networks of power and sociality that surround substantial communities of people. Informed by the work of Inderpal Grewal and Emily Raymundo, I use the word regime in "regimes of unprotection" to illuminate "subjects, technologies, and ethical practices"[83] that inform the sociopolitical realities of trans women of color. By describing the affective atmosphere which

[81] Even when laws and policies are created with the intention of protecting individuals based on the myriad categories created for social management (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, etc.) the end result is rarely a significant decrease in violence experienced by such individuals, but rather an increase in such violence as well as incarceration rates. With the advent of the "transgender tipping point" around 2014, hate crimes legislation, specifically, has been a major discursive topic within trans studies. For more perspectives on hate crime legislation within the humanities, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of the Law* (2011), Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (2011), Eric A. Stanley, Dean Spade, and Queer (In)Justice, "Queering Prison Abolition, Now?" (2012), Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture" (2015), and Gayle Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* (2018).

[82] Meronek, *Miss Major Speaks,* 27.

[83] Genevieve Alva Clutario, *Beauty Regimes: A History of Power and Modern Empire in the Philippines, 1898-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 5.

surrounds gender-racial-sexually oppressed subjects as regimes of unprotection, I emphasize the operations of power that govern these subjects.[84]

1.4 Interventions

This dissertation signals new directions in the fields of black trans studies and black feminist thought. By analyzing a grouping of texts that have received little scholarly attention, especially together, I clarify the value of black trans writing in critical contexts. In particular, I explore how such narratives give us new lenses for thinking through issues of representation, resistance, and practices of self- and communal-narration, and what we miss in dominant discourses on life writing, (trans)gender studies, and black feminist studies when such prioritizations are not made clear and put forward centrally. Though admittedly not a new direction for trans studies broadly, as Stryker and Currah clarify, blackness does beg us to reconsider how black trans narratives have been positioned as "blind spots"[85] in the field and how they shift what we think about discourses of trans life writing and the possibilities behind narratives of transition. These narratives perform the cultural work of what visual artist Syrus Marcus Ware calls "building an archive of our movements going forward to ensure that intergenerational memory can inform our activism, community building, and organization."[86] Additionally, positioning black trans women as theorizers of their own life experiences, although they are not traditional academics and may lack formal education, highlights how black trans life

[84] Sarah Pemberton's essay examining Foucauldian analyses of power and the prison industrial complex is also useful in thinking through the usefulness of the word "regime." For more, see Sarah Pemberton, "Enforcing Gender: The Constitution of Sex and Gender in Prison Regimes" (2013).
[85] Ellison et. al., 163.
[86] Ware, Syrus Marcus. "All Power to All People?: Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017): 171.

writing shifts how we understand and legitimate trans embodied knowledge. Even further, centering black trans women's theorization of community and resistance through self-representative narrative strategies pushes on black feminist understandings of criminalization and racialized gender violence. To this end, this project addresses Angela Y. Davis's query at the 2013 lecture "Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the 21st century:" "What would it be like to have, say, a black trans woman who has been involved in struggles against violence, struggles against the prison industrial complex? What would it be like for that woman to stand in as the sign of the category of woman?"[87] By bringing critical attention to black trans life writing, I hope to demonstrate how other forms of black trans cultural production, such as fiction, poetry, visual art, and film, take these critical fields in new and necessary directions. In doing so, I join Mecca Jamilah Sullivan in examining an aspect of the "black feminist literary tradition in which the expression of psychic and bodily experiences of difference interrogate power and wage anti-oppressive critique."[88]

This project also aims to deploy imagination as a critical strategy to evaluate and challenge how we, as academics, measure and value rigor. Imagination clarifies different spaces and modes of knowledge production and legitimation, inasmuch as those spaces are fugitive and counternormative to the norms established by the search for scholarship that is "rigorous." I join Kara Keeling in "challenging the interests served by existing measures of academic rigor," and seek, rather, to prioritize "'the imaginaries of the people, their varied poetics,'" to borrow from Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation.*[89]

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[87] Davis, Angela Y. "Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the 21st Century." CSRPC Annual Public Lecture and CSGS Classics in Feminist Theory Series. YouTube, 10 May 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKb99K3AEaA.

[88] Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 3.

[89] Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 15-16.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which examines the autobiographical writing of a different black transfeminine writer. Each chapter looks across the writers' body of self-referential writing and analyzes how they imaginatively engage with various autobiographical narrative acts which deconstruct the discursive trans woman of color figure. These narrative acts manifest as practices of self-fashioning: embodied, narrative, or digital. I tie this discursive movement to the relationship these primary texts share with black feminist, queer, and anti-racist writing and thought, itself another form of narrative self-fashioning. I then demonstrate how their writing reveals or critiques what I call regimes of unprotection, and I ultimately contend with the specific ways in which these texts offer strategies and possibilities for more liberatory social transformation through insurgent counternarratives and counterknowledges.

Chapter 2 begins with a description of the first published black trans memoir—Sharon Davis's *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood* (1985))—to illustrate the conversation surrounding the 2011 publication of Toni Newman's memoir *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman* and the erasure endemic to the preservation of black trans life narratives. From there, the chapter focuses on the memoir's critical trans* imagination demonstrated through the relationship between Newman's embodied and narrated practices of self-fashioning. These practices clarify the spatial dichotomy of internal and external belonging, self-definition, and movement toward integration, offering a more nuanced take on the "wrong body" trope in transsexual life writing. Newman's practices of self-fashioning ultimately led to a blacktransfeminist political analysis that identifies regimes of unprotection for trans sex workers and demonstrates how life writing

practices mingle with organizing and movement work toward collective trans liberation. As one of the earliest published memoirs by a black trans woman in the U.S., Newman's *I Rise* inaugurates significant motifs of familial violence and an affinity for literariness that subsequently reverberate in the life writing of other black and brown trans women, such as Janet Mock and CeCe McDonald.

The third chapter examines the various autobiographical writings of Janet Mock—largely pulling from her first memoir *Redefining Realness*—and argues that Mock's critically trans* imaginative writing registers her rhetorical aim of shifting the cultural register associated with the contemporary media representation of the "trans woman of color," often a stand-in for the dead and dying sex worker, limited to few archetypes in mainstream visibility. By contrast, Mock has embodied the audacity to be as capacious a symbol as possible through her own self-representation. Thus, memoir and other forms of self-referential cultural production become fertile ground for trans women of color to create epistemological and discursive shifts that lead to transformative sociopolitical outcomes. Mock's willingness to "surpass certainty," to "shapeshift," to have faith despite conviction, radically disrupts the fixed transgender figuration presented by the "trans tipping point." Additionally, Mock narratively self-fashions herself as a writer by frequently alluding to black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, evidencing Mock's desire to place herself within an established lineage of black women writers.[90] By emphasizing sisterhood when it comes to fellow trans sex workers permit Mock's imagining of a fully realized trans future, one that includes gender reassignment surgery

[90] Even further, it is no coincidence that these black women writers Mock draws heavily from are also life writers. See Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks On a Road* (1942), Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and bell hooks's *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996). In the dissertation I plan to think deeper about this relationship and articulate the specific ways in which Mock's life narrative participates in and, in unique ways, extends a black feminist autobiographical tradition.

and true love, thus enacting the collectivity inherent in gender self-determinative practices.[91] I argue that Mock's desire to imagine herself within a canon of black women's literature signals the potential of black trans life writing to radically shift the terrain of black and trans literature through this act of narrative self-fashioning.

Chapter 4 examines CeCe McDonald's prison letters featured on her online blog and excerpted in the 2017 special issue of *TSQ* on black trans studies, with an introduction by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. McDonald's prison letters evidence the ways in which anti-black racism, transphobia, and incarceration shift her perspective on sexuality, desire, love, community, and the role of the prison industrial complex. Drawing on her theorization of "imaginative abolition" in her foreword to the anthology *Captive Genders,* I argue that McDonald's narrative exemplifies how her experiences as an incarcerated black trans woman led to her developing a political consciousness toward prison abolition and how, through consciousness-raising tactics, she makes prison abolition an inviting mindset to her communities both within and outside of the prison. I also discuss how McDonald's discussion of a "mirroring effect," which, I argue, is an example of Susanna Egan's theory of mirror talk, illustrates an imaginative mode of community building through a self-reflective analysis on "I" and "we."

The fifth chapter traces the critical trans* imaginative narrative strategies throughout the personal essays and digital life writing of Venus Di'Khadijah Selenite. I draw connections between the development of xyr writerly practices, and beliefs around self- and freedom-making, and I explain how they maintain imagination as essential to creative and political praxis. This chapter explores Selenite's self-fashioning practices through writing and self-curation in digital

[91] Here, I will specifically draw on Nat Raha's definition of "radical transfeminism" and Marshall Green and Treva Ellison's deployment of "tranifesting" to articulate the reimagined community building practices happening in all of the texts examined here as specifically black trans political and social operations.

publics and argues that xyr enacts critical trans* imagination through what they call *literary technology.* Further, I focus on self-publishing as a freedom-making strategy for Selenite as a literary technologist and explore the tensions between traditional publishing conventions and what self-publishing offers for marginalized creatives. Through close reading of personal letters, email updates, and digital life writing, I show how Selenite's writing reveals the regimes of unprotection inherent in publishing and how an abolitionist approach to conceiving of and producing literature by trans women of color seeks to evade the unprotection therein and offer other possibilities. By theorizing xyrself as a "literary technologist,"[92] engaging with readers digitally, and choosing to self-publish, Selenite enacts a gender self-determination both in xyr writing and throughout the production of the writing itself, critically imagining different possibilities in self-narration and self-curation.

The dissertation's conclusion returns to personal anecdote with my recollection of the 2018 Trotter Multicultural Lecture Series at the University of Michigan, "My Life, My Story! Centering the Lives of Trans Voices," which featured black trans public figures Janet Mock, Amiyah Scott, and Brian Michael Smith, further demonstrating the importance of critical trans* imagination in my own life, as a black trans woman and scholar. I ponder why the black trans femme figure gains sympathy more in death than in life, and discuss how black trans stories and lives, and their autobiographical narration, work alongside this project to elevate black trans women's stories of survival and thriving.

I contend that black trans life writing radically shifts the foundations of trans studies as well as black feminist and autobiographical studies by explicitly attending to the self-determined *and* self-narrated lives of black trans women. By articulating how critical trans* imagination

[92] Selenite, Venus Di'Khadijah. "Using Technology to Elevate Trans Women of Color Authors." Speech delivered at the Trans*H4CK iBuild4 Virtual Conference, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsiKp_hVTAM&t=3s.

advances blacktransfeminist thought within transgender studies, I respond to Snorton's call for "theoretical and historical trajectories that further imaginative capacities to construct more livable black and trans worlds."[93]

[93] Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017: 14.

Chapter 2: Redefining Firsts: Toni Newman and the Issue of Erasure in (Black) Trans Literature

Though there is abundant scholarship on the trans memoir genre, substantive engagement with blackness and how it shapes our understanding of gender therein is lacking. There is not a central history for black transgender women who have published their self-written autobiographical accounts with traditional publishers through which we can trace its history. Arguably, the first black trans woman to compile her life experiences and publish them as a memoir in the U.S. is Sharon Davis, who was born in Delaware in 1956. *JET* magazine profiled Davis for their issue published on October 10, 1983. The profile focuses on the idea of "sex" as in biological sex and covers Davis's journey with transitioning to female, getting bottom surgery, working on her memoir, and living a happy, authentic life with her partner, Arnold Gordy. In this profile, as in her memoir, Davis describes her experience as "a woman trapped inside a man's body," and her striving to bring her mind and body into "harmony."[94] Davis describes her feelings about transitioning as "inner turmoil," recalling 8the interior versus exterior perspective abundant throughout discourse about gender transition. In 1985, she published her memoir *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood: A Transsexual Speaks Out* with Vantage Press in New York City, one of the largest vanity self-publishing presses in the U.S. at the time. Though founded in 1949 and at the height of its circulation of texts in 1956, Vantage Press encountered financial issues stemming from their exploitation of their authors and closed in 2012. Though Davis

[94] Trudy S. Moore and James Mitchell, "Sex Change Brings Man Love, Happiness," *JET* (October 10, 1983), 28.

encountered hardship in financing and circulating her memoir[95], the narrative self-fashioning allowed her by her profile in *Jet* aids her autobiographical goal of "provid[ing] courage and offer[ing] hope to those human beings caught in bodies their souls cannot accommodate."[96] Through this definition of transgender and desire to offer support to the community through life writing, Davis, the first recognized black trans woman life writer, has a strong connection to Toni Newman, a black trans woman who believed herself to be the first black trans woman to publish a memoir. Paying attention to the tension between these texts and their place in trans cultural history illuminates the necessity for records and archives that sustain the life-affirming work of these marginalized creators.

The decade of the 2010s was a rich moment for transgender communities and politics in the U.S. The arrest of military whistleblower Chelsea Manning in 2010, the skyrocketed popularity of Laverne Cox's character Sophia Burset on *Orange is the New Black,* and the overall rise in trans celebrity culture are excellent examples of how the category "transgender" became more visibly incorporated into mainstream society. However, this incorporation did not always merit the full exposure, comprehension, or human complexity for trans women of color, especially black trans women. In 2011, after years of various forms of hustling and entrepreneurship, activist and working girl Toni Newman self-published her memoir *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman.* In her memoir, she discusses her many transformations through all the stages of her life, from adolescence to college years to life as a pre-operative transsexual businesswoman. Her jobs included bodybuilder, physical trainer, street survival sex

[95] Jim Miliot, "Vantage Press Closes," *Publishers Weekly,* 9 December 2012, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/financial-reporting/article/55199-vantage-press-closes.html.
[96] Sharon Davis, *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood: A Transsexual Speaks Out* (Vantage Press: New York City, 1985), vii.

worker, dominatrix, and trans legal justice advocate. In each role, her racialized-gendered embodiment is central to how the reader interprets her story and its value for racial and gender justice. Through hard work and self-determination, Newman charts a path for herself through which those seeking to understand transsexuals and aid them in society can do so, bringing the "hidden society" to light.[97]

I Rise is a significant cultural text for black and trans communities because of its accessibility and scope. The book begins by defining two terms that are central to understanding Newman's experiences, "transsexualism" and "mistress." These definitions also urge the reader to (re)consider any assumptions about trans people and people who engage in sex work/BDSM they hold, emphasizing the humanity of the author and the black trans women she represents through her writing. The typewriter font, simple and repetitive diction, and glossy captioned photographs of the memoir invite the reader into her story. This directness helps Newman narratively self-fashion herself as an authentic source of experience for readers. Upon publication, I *Rise* garnered much attention from LGBTQ readers, particularly black LGBTQ readers. However, this attention was not rooted in praise. Black trans blogger and historian Monica Roberts[98] details her cyber exchanges with community members who disagreed with her claim that the book is not a "first" in the black trans community in the U.S. Roberts documents the history of this erroneous comment in a December 15, 2011 blog post. She recounts:

> I posted a comment over at The Luckey Star blog which points out an incorrect assertion in a post on that blog about African American trans firsts. The author of it claims that

[97] Toni Newman, *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman* (Self-published, 2011), ix.

[98] Active from 1999 until her death in 2020, Roberts, a Houston-native, was a widely recognized and celebrated documenter of black trans history, culture, and politics in the U.S. Her award-winning blog *TransGriot* represented her well as "A proud unapologetic Black trans woman speaking truth to power and discussing the world around her since 2006." Her blog is still active and available at https://www.transgriot.blogspot.com.

> Toni Newman's *I Rise* book is the first one written by an African American transperson about their transition. Umm no, it isn't. Sharon Davis beat her to that historic distinction by over a decade. Davis's book *A Finer Specimen Of Womanhood: A Transsexual Speaks Out* was published in 1986.[99]

A cursory read of Robert's response could infuse Newman's publishing accomplishment with the merit of being the first black trans woman to publish her memoir. This infusion further complicates the story "the first black trans memoir." Though Newman accomplished gaining a wide audience with a self-published book, she was not the first black trans woman to do so. Roberts cites ISBN numbers, Amazon reviews from 1999, and a link to the *Jet* magazine profile of Davis and her book from 1983. Though *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood* went out of print before Newman began working on her own autobiography[100], Roberts clarifies that celebrating *I Rise* as the first black trans memoir is not only factually wrong, but also directs our attention to deeper systemic issues around the erasure of black trans women's lives, stories, and experiences. Being the first could be an essential form of self-fashioning for Newman, and thus would not diminish the accomplishment of publishing *I Rise.* Beyond being the first, I contend, Newman's narrative self-fashioning around her professed autobiographical impulse—to use her story to earn "respect [for] transgenders as people and to [help readers] understand why they transform their bodies"[101]—is more significant than any acclaim that comes apart from being the "first."

Roberts's intention to respect the facts of the history of black trans women's publication history while recognizing Newman's accomplishment in publishing *I Rise* is clear. As an "IFGE

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[99] Monica Roberts, "Sorry Toni, Sharon Davis' Book Was The First Written And Published About A Black Transperson's Transition." *TransGriot.* 16 December 2011. Web. Accessed 18. February 2023.
[100] Davis's memoir was available for years courtesy of the International Foundation for Gender Education's Synchronicity's bookstore during the 1990s.
[101] Newman, *I Rise,* ix.

Trinity Award winning trailblazing activist who happens to be the child and godchild of historians,"[102] Roberts felt compelled (and qualified) to set the record straight and acted accordingly. Many scholars and activists have critiqued the neoliberal "firsts" model as not actually a sign of progress, but rather a function of stagnation for marginalized communities. The brash language at the beginning of Roberts's post excites the reader, making it seem that she is *reading* the haters, so to speak. Roberts's longstanding persona in the online black transgender community supports this claim. As a blunt communicator and unwavering advocate for the dignity and respect of all black trans people, Roberts's entrance into this conversation surrounding Newman's memoir at first seems defensive. As a writer and theorist, Roberts's tone reveals frustration over the boldly proclaimed inaccuracy and impresses upon the black LGBTQ audience of readers that the personal desire and political necessity of accurate records for black trans folks to have access to and reflect on to further define themselves, find resources, offer community solidarity. Based on the usual vernacular language Roberts employs in digital blog writing, her post is meant to be more of a reflection of how the Houston native speaks and linguistically connects with subscribers. Roberts is not intending to hurt or discredit Newman, but by setting the record straight, she accomplishes a historic goal. Black trans literary production is worthy of accurate documentation and archiving, and Robert's correction reminds us of the importance of personal research. Newman might not have heard of Sharon Davis—or possibly even The Lady Chablis, though her memoir was published in 1996, as Roberts notes[103]—nor the followers of the original blog post. That is not their fault. At fault here is the

[102] Roberts, "Sorry Toni," n.p.

[103] Roberts adds the 1996 autobiography of black trans woman and entertainer The Lady Chablis's *Hiding My Candy.* Though Roberts does not give as much consideration to *Hiding My Candy* as she does to Davis's *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood,* I contend that given The Lady Chablis' notoriety as an entertainer in spaces dominated by crossdressers and drag performers—and the common conflation of "trans" with "drag," with their complicated

systemic erasure of the accomplishments of black trans women writers. Roberts's own accomplishment as an archivist aids the flourishing of black trans history and culture, offering a hopeful antidote to these structural flaws.

This anecdote captures a fraction of the systemic erasure of trans women of color's accomplishments and transformative cultural work. Roberts clearly states that her problem is with "the erasure of our history." Writer and cultural workers Tourmaline and Moya Bailey share this perspective on the problem of erasure in black queer and trans communities. Tourmaline asserts, "Because of historical erasure and a host of other violences, many of the lives of trans people of color—specifically trans women of color, drag queens of color, and people who identified as transvestites or transsexuals—were only accidentally archived."[104] Women, femmes, queer and gender non-conforming people of color consistently are left out of the record, as scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Matt Richardson, C. Riley Snorton, Sarah Haley, and Eric Darnell Pritchard illuminate in their scholarship.[105] However, even in official records, writers from these backgrounds are still left out. For example, in 2005, writer Jonathan Ames edited the anthology *Sexual Metamorphosis,* which focused on prominent transsexual memoirs that focused on the physical transformation of self-identified transsexual writers. None of these writers is black-identified, though at least two autobiographies authored by black trans women in the U.S.-

intersections—her narrative might not be considered in conversations of transsexual memoir, a genre in which Davis and Newman are clearly writing. For more, see The Lady Chablis, *Hiding My Candy: The Autobiography of The Grand Empress of Savannah* (New York: Vantage Press, 1996).

[104] Moya Bailey and Tourmaline, "Analog Girls in Digital Worlds," from *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities,* ed. Jentery Sayers (London: Routledge, 2018): 34.

[105] See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008) and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2019); Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

-Sharon Davis and The Lady Chablis–were circulating through traditional publishing houses.[106] The lack of anthologizing stories by black individuals here suggests the lack of such stories in the wider world, which is not true.

Coinciding with the publication of *I Rise* in 2011 was a special report on black and multiracial transgender individuals was published as part of the larger National Transgender Discrimination Survey launched in 2008. Titled *Injustice at Every Turn,* the key finding of the study was "that the combination of anti-transgender bias with structural and interpersonal racism meant that transgender and gender non-conforming people of color, including those who are Black, experience particularly devastating levels of discrimination."[107] These statements echo—and, in some ways, translate—Newman's observations and hypotheses about trans women in clinical spaces, media spaces, nightlife, and sex work in *I Rise.* These similarities suggest that just as quantitative surveys collect vital data for the improvement of marginalized communities, so, too, does life writing by those who come from these very communities. Such texts provide an example, an illustration of what these statistics attempt to capture and clarify.

The issue of erasure in the transgender literary canon is not limited to this instance. Contemporary trans life writers Kai Cheng Thom and Janet Mock clearly lay out the stakes in this conversation regarding trans women's ability to tell their stories through memoir and other autobiographical genres. In a June 5, 2013 blog post[108] Mock names the presumption that trans

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[106] Memoirist Janet Mock recuperates this history in her June 2013 blog post "Not All Memoirs Are Created Equal: The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Color's Stories," in which she lists an accurate list of existing and circulating texts written by trans women of color under the umbrella of memoir. Also included are sex work activist Ceyenne Doroshow and writer Ryka Aoki. For more, see Ceyenne Doroshow, *Cooking in Heels* (New York: Red Umbrella Project, 2012) and Ryka Aoki, *Seasonal Velocities* (Chapel Hill, NC: Trans-Genre Press, 2013).

[107] Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, and Justin Tanis, with Jack Harrison, Jodi L. Herman, and Mara Keisling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011), 166.

[108] Mock's blog post also succeeds in accomplishing the rhetorical aim of providing a reading list of life writing by trans women of color. In Chapter 5, I explain how Venus Di'Khadijah Selenite accomplishes similar rhetorical goals

women of color only carry value or meaning for the larger LGBTQ+ community after they have died or experienced intense violence because of their racialized transness. She names trans women the "martyrs [and] symbols" that generate mainstream attention and funding for organizations that do not support the most marginalized on the levels they could or should. Even deeper, Mock calls out the theorizing of trans women of color's lives by authors who know nothing of their lived experiences or care little about them. Understanding that the trans memoir genre has been dominated by the hegemony of older white trans people, Mock clarifies that the "unequal access to publishing has left a gaping hole in this genre and the imaginings of what we say is possible for trans people on the margins…And because I didn't have examples of women like me who made it through it was difficult to imagine a future beyond what I was living." We see, then, how a text, a record of life such as Newman's *I Rise* transforms from a journalistic record of Newman's particular lived experiences to a testament of the kind of subjectivities that can exist in the world, possibly opening the door to many other possibilities for readers and audiences alike.

Creating these opportunities is not just about giving equal access to publishing and imagination on the part of the trans women of color writer. In fact, that is just the beginning of a new era of trans women's literature, according to Kai Cheng Thom. Across engaging interviews with curious readers in online feminist outlets such as *Teen Vogue*[109] and *Bitch Media*[110], Thom

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in xyr digital life writing. For more, see Lovemme Corazòn, *Trauma Queen* (biyuti publishing, 2013), Ceyenne Doroshow, *Cooking in Heels* (The Red Umbrella Project, 2012), Ryka Aoki, *Seasonal Velocities* (Trans-Genre Press, 2012), and The Lady Chablis, *Hiding My Candy: The Grand Empress of Savannah* (Pocket Books: 1997).

[109] Britni de la Cretaz, "Author Kai Cheng Thom on Writing a New Kind of Transgender Memoir." *Teen Vogue.* 5 April 2017. Web. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/author-kai-cheng-thom-on-writing-a-new-kind-of-transgender-memoir/.

[110] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Creating a Lush World of Trans Woman Literature: An Interview with Writer and Fierce Trans Femme, Kai Cheng Thom." *Bitch Media.* 23 March 2017. Web. https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/creating-lush-world-trans-woman-literature/interview-writer-and-fierce-trans-femme-kai-cheng#.WNg1MnkrFvs.twitter.

discusses themes of danger, violence, and integrity in her 2018 novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir.* While depicting trans women of color as resilient fighters capable of nurturing strong sisterhoods while experiencing street violence. Thom seeks to shatter what she sees as the traditional trans memoir genre with her novel, further developing the genre of trans women's literature and exposing what she calls the "false truths" about trans women of color that pervade society, offering possible paths for trans women of color writers and stories. The erasure of trans women of color's stories contributes to the regimes of unprotection that discursively encircle black trans women and trans women of color. The efforts of the New York Trans Oral History Project, the work at the University of Minnesota Tretter Collection, and the University of Michigan LGBT Library holdings do great cultural work in archiving these histories and indexing their relationship to political struggle. As L.H. Stallings claims in her book *Funk the Erotic:* "nonfiction, fiction, and other creative forms such as pornography are essential to growing black transactivist movements and studies."[111] In order to bridge the personal, literary, and political, I examine the narrative self-fashioning practices of Newman's *I Rise* to connect black trans women's imaginative experiences with the autobiographical genre, lived experiences of black trans subjects, and political consciousness-raising and movement-building. Clarifying that these forces are connected helps to demonstrate the unique contribution Newman and other black trans women and trans women of color life writers make to the larger body of transgender life writing.

Interrogating the critical trans* imagination espoused in black trans women's life writing indexes a blacktransfeminist chronicling of how to navigate life despite overwhelming struggle. As I describe in more detail later, this erasure relates to the regimes of unprotection identifiable

[111] L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 208.

in Newman's narrative. This chapter focuses on the critical trans* imagination of Newman's *I Rise,* demonstrated through the intertextual relationship between Newman's embodied and narrative practices of self-fashioning. These practices clarify the spatial dichotomy of internal and external belonging and self-definition, offering a more nuanced take on the "wrong body" trope in transsexual life writing. These practices of self-fashioning also lead to a blacktransfeminist political analysis that identifies regimes of unprotection for trans sex workers and demonstrates how life writing practices mingle with organizing and movement work toward collective trans liberation.

Though not the first memoir published by a black trans woman in the U.S., Newman's *I Rise* touches on complex issues around family tolerance and literature as life-affirming that echo in autobiographical accounts by other black trans women and trans women of color, such as Janet Mock, CeCe McDonald, Precious Brady-Davis, and Cecilia Gentili.[112] These themes manifest specifically through descriptions of cisgender male family members using violence to maintain gender norms, early sexual experiences, the comfort of effeminacy, and making sense out of how these overlapping discourses lead to the desire for transition, or, for Newman, "transformation."

The conundrum of Newman's "false first" and the discourse it prompts is emblematic of the experience that most black trans women and trans women of color have in publishing their stories and speaking openly about their experiences with transition. Even more insidiously, this

[112] I'm thinking specifically here about similar motifs of familial (un)belonging, early sexual exposure/development/experiences of violence, and love of reading and identifying similar themes in classic and popular literature. For more, see Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (New York: Atria, 2014), CeCe McDonald, "Beyond Our Natural Selves': The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald." Ed. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017): 243-265, Precious Brady-Davis, *I Have Always Been Me: A Memoir* (New York: Topple Books & Little A, 2021), and Cecilia Gentili, *Faltas: Letters to Everyone in My Hometown Who Isn't My Rapist* (New York: LittlePuss Press, 2022).

story of false firsts shows that black trans women remain what Elizabeth Joan Jude calls "a footnote in their own story."[113] Taking a cue from Roberts, it seems appropriate to think alongside the other black trans women's memoirs and autobiographies that came before Newman, to comparatively illustrate the landscape in which these women are writing and to solidify the foundation upon which Newman and other writers examined in this project are contributing culturally and politically. As L.H. Stallings advises: "We should remember that literary genres have different histories, and these histories inform why and how autobiographical tropes of racialized subjects of an economically disenfranchised class might differ from white middle-class autobiographies."[114] In other words, Newman and other trans of color life writers are arriving at the autobiographical genre with heavy histories of erasure, censorship, and lack of access. How different, then, might Newman's memoir (and life experiences overall) have been if Davis's memoir were more commonly circulated among black trans readers?

2.1 Crossdressing and Bodybuilding: Embodied Practices of Self-Fashioning in *I Rise*

The critical trans* imagination embedded within black trans women's life writing manifests through embodied and narrative practices of self-fashioning. Life writers discuss embodied self-fashioning practices in passages when the narrated autobiographical subject (in this chapter hereafter "the narrat*ed* Newman") engages in embodied performances pertaining to their gender-racial-sexual self-determination. Meanwhile, narrative self-fashioning occurs through the narrating author (e.g. Newman) connecting the imaginative language of embodied

[113] Elizabeth Joan Jude (f.k.a. Takoda Patterson), "Religion and Transgender Identity," *An Injustice,* 1 July 2021. Web. https://aninjusticemag.com/religion-and-transgender-identity-cf691e953401
[114] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* p. 215

self-fashioning to the complex processes and experiences that lead to their own autobiographical catalysts. For Newman, these practices emerge through the theme of transformation and how aligning one's inside with the outside can be the result of sincere struggle and integration. Transformation is more than hormone replacement therapy and surgery here. For Newman, self-fashioning practices, embodied and narrative, point to the tension between internal desires and external pressures and expectations, helping to cultivate a sense of belonging in familial, educational, professional, and social spheres. These practices allow Newman to weave herself into a larger narrative tapestry of black women's self-making through writing and belonging (as I discuss in the next section on Angelou and narrative self-fashioning), as well as create knowledge about how blackness affects gender through embodied experiences. How might Newman's narrative and embodied self-fashioning practices urge us to reconsider how we think about the internal struggle of transition for gender non-conforming people, especially racialized subjects? Stallings writes, "Memoirs and fiction are a continuation of the [blues/jazz culture] tradition, but memoirs reflecting on what has been labeled as sex work can be as important an element of self-definition to various transgender folk as surgery has been in certain narratives."[115] What Stallings is saying here is that just as physical, surgical transformation has been a central theme in transsexual memoir as well as transsexual lives overall, so, too, have the embodied experience of sex work and the process of narrating it autobiographically, been a key element in establishing the value and self-definition of a transsexual author.

How this relationship plays out on the page tells us a lot about Newman's self-fashioning practices. Newman describes that her transness and effeminacy were no secret in her family. Though her mother "Esther, was a good Christian woman who…had strict spiritual beliefs and

[115] Ibid, 209.

was the disciplinarian of the family,"[116] other family members did not seem as good. They were, however, very disciplined, but in a different sense–not a religious sense, but in terms of reinforcing traditional gender norms and expectations. In the first chapter "The Beginning," Newman describes a tense confrontation with her Uncle Mac, whom she mentions "had been to jail a couple of times for minor offenses"[117] in order to establish the sense of trepidation she had in interacting with him. As they are gathered around the kitchen table in her family home, Uncle Mac confronts young Newman and, by extension, her parents, calling out her femininity in an attempt to "toughen [her] up." She recalls:

> At one reunion, Uncle Mac was particularly brutal in his comments to my parents and me over dinner. He made it clear that I was lacking in the man department. 'Hey Bubba, if you're not gonna do anything about that sissy boy of yours, why don't I take him out back and toughen him up myself?' My father just shook his head and smiled. Nobody at the table said a thing. I felt like an outcast within my own family. Where was the love for me at this big love fest?[118]

This call out reveals Uncle Mac's anxieties around gender non-conformity and how it is perceived as a threat to dominant social orders, like the forceful patriarchy of many young black Americans. The phrase "take him out back" is reminiscent of punitive language of the eras of enslavement and Jim Crow. Newman's feelings of being an outcast in her family relate to the struggle between the internal and external which Newman consistently returns to throughout the narrative.[119] The external unbelonging of her family exacerbates the internal desire to be gender

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[116] Newman, *I Rise,* 2.
[117] Ibid, 1.
[118] Ibid, 4.
[119] Newman's feeling of outsider status in her family gestures toward what black trans studies scholar Nathan Alexander Moore calls "transliminality," detailing how the Black trans femme is always visible but on the brink of

non-conforming. Though young Newman's parents pay him little mind in this outburst, Uncle Mac's accusatory tone condemns them for failing to properly raise and discipline their male child into respectable and normative gender performance. This outburst, this public shaming causes young Newman to feel like "an outcast within my own family," a clear indication of a lack of feeling of belonging. The narrated Newman draws the reader's attention to these dynamics around feelings of belonging to contextualize the desires and practices in which she would later engage.

At the age of eleven, the narrated Newman specifies that her growing physical attraction to men is not the result of self-identifying as a gay man, but rather of "the fantasy of being with a male...with me dressing up as a female."[120] Though this fantasy clearly describes cross-dressing--wearing the clothes of the "opposite" sex for performance or personal pleasure--critical trans* imagination further expands the effects of this fantasy and the ensuing intimate acts. An unnamed fifteen-year-old boy in the neighborhood caught eleven-year-old Newman staring at him while he exercised in his yard. Taking advantage of Newman's attraction, the neighborhood boy invites Newman into his home and proposes they have sex. The narrated Newman confesses that she "wanted to touch him and be one of his girls,"[121] not specifying the acts she wanted to perform but the role she wanted to occupy. Sensing her seriousness, the neighborhood boy provides Newman with his mother's wig, lipstick, and perfume, ensuring his sexual needs get met. The two have sex, which Newman describes as "ecstasy,"[122] and while both the boy and Newman are sexually fulfilled, Newman also undergoes a transformative experience.

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vanishing, observable but never fully recognized as requiring substantive care. See Nathan Alexander Moore, "Transliminality: Black Transfemmes and the Limit of Visibility Politics." In *TransNarratives: Scholarly and Creative Works on Transgender Experience,* eds. Kristi Carter and James Brunton (Toronto: Women's Press, 2021): 54.

[120] Newman, *I Rise,* 9.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid, 10.

According to the narrated Newman, cross-dressing within the secretive, liminal space of teenage sexual encounters provided her with one of the first clear moments of gender euphoria in her life and narrative. The narrated Newman recounts, "After that encounter, dressing in women's clothing always made me feel happy and free. No matter how low I got, when I dressed up, I felt great".[123] This feeling great signals the usefulness of dressing in women's clothes as a form of self-fashioning practices for Newman. The distinction between feeling low and high, and how the act of embodied self-determination in the form of cross-dressing during sex reveals the importance of embodied self-fashioning practices. Stallings clarifies this connection between embodied and narrative self-fashioning. She writes, "For Newman, narrative has to be more than a second skin; it has to form and represent mythic being. Mythic being invests in artistic, creative energies and expressions, and they do not require proper bodies."[124] The difference between the narrated Newman's feeling of euphoria and Newman's autobiographical recollection of the feeling demonstrates the erotic nature of transformation. In other words, by narrativizing the tension between familial (un)belonging and her desire to transgress gender expectations through clothing (and therefore also sex), Newman illustrates how embodied self-fashioning practices can lead black trans women to reimagine their relationship to their own bodies and other people, cultivating self-knowledge that enriches their self-determination. Newman's embodiment and narrative here serve as models of critically trans* imaginative possibilities.

Another site of Newman's embodied self-fashioning is when she spent years during and after college as a fitness trainer and bodybuilder. In order to grapple with her desires to be a woman, Newman engaged in consistent fitness routines throughout college and in her early

[123] Newman, *I Rise,* 10.
[124] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* 218.

professional years. Regarding her physique, the narrated Newman boasts, "I had been working out and going to the gym for a while. My body was in top shape."[125] For Newman, being in "top shape" means having a "very defined and sculpted"[126] body. In other words, proof of her ability to meet the expectations of masculinity placed upon her by society. Newman's focus on embodiment here seems surface level: growing muscles, building endurance, and presenting an imposing masculine figure to onlookers. Though building up her male physique seems to run contrary to Newman's desire for open expression of her feminine identity, this activity still evidences her self-determination in harnessing imagination as a critical tool for navigating life. She confesses, "I excelled at fitness to mask my inner feelings of femininity and my desire to be a woman. I thought bodybuilding could help me hide, maybe even forget, my female tendencies. I wanted to excel physically to forget my feminine thoughts."[127] The narrated Newman is engaging in another form of self-fashioning by attempting to use her muscled physique as a mask. However, this preoccupation with fitness and bodybuilding is not firmly grounded in a desire to advance the perception her male physique imposes. Rather, she self-fashions herself through her fit physique to evade dealing with internal feelings of gendered desire for transformation. The tension between desire and the self-fashioning practices that lead to (or away from) those desires fuel the narrative self-fashioning Newman engages in, both internally and with others externally. After a few years working as a male model and trainer at Adolphus Fitness in New York City, Newman gives up the denial of desire that fuels her bodybuilding, ending one form of embodied self-fashioning and begin another, with narrative self-fashioning providing the textual bridge for the reader.

[125] Newman, *I Rise,* 63.
[126] Ibid, 64.
[127] Ibid.

The narrated Newman removes her mask when she comes out to her fitness associates as beginning her gender transition. At a work-related party, Newman anxiously announces her decision to quit her job as a fitness trainer and transform into a female. Their initial reaction was disbelief, unable to understand why a black man with an impeccable male physique would give it up to become female. The loss of employment, income, and identity is unimaginable to them. Despite their confusion about her decision, Newman is certain, and content. Upon leaving the party, Newman recounts:

> That night brought my life to a full circle. I realized there would be no more masking and no more hiding and no more lying. There would be just me. I was willing to do what needed to be done. That was the key. I was ready, and that made it a lot easier to take the first step to transformation. The climax of my two projects had brought me to the point where I could finally say yes to me. I would say yes to the inner child and let her be born. I would say yes to wherever she took me.[128]

Newman engages in critical trans* imagination by narratively self-fashioning her internal desires for gender transformation as an inner child yearning to emerge. Allowing herself to release the embodiment of the "mask" (i.e. male bodybuilding) makes space for the self-fashioning practices that will advance Newman's desired self-determination. Newman thus concludes this "chapter" of her life with this confessed narrative self-fashioning and segues into her "Transition Years." Newman's experiences with familial unbelonging validates her anxiety around transforming her body and gender. Given that recurring themes of familial tension around the racialized-gendered embodiment and comportment of nonconforming youth of color often accompany an early love for literature and academic achievement in black women's life writing,

[128] Ibid, 97.

I will turn now to explore Maya Angelou's autobiographical influence on Newman's narrative self-fashioning as a black woman life writer.

2.2 Narrative Self-Fashioning with Maya Angelou in *I Rise*

In an interview with writer Claudia Tate, acclaimed poet and life writer Maya Angelou said she believes her work is about learning to endure—and this relates to Newman's belief that even though she was at her lowest, she was happy because she's herself. As the Norton volume says, Angelou's most famous quality was the "power to endure."[129] Through an exploration of themes of interiority, integrity, and the role transformation plays in all the above, we can understand how Angelou becomes a pivotal figure, particularly as a life writer, for Newman, aiding her black trans self-fashioning. Similar to Janet Mock's relationship with poet Audre Lorde in her memoir *Redefining Realness* (see Chapter 3), Newman narratively self-fashions herself as an inheritor of a rich autobiographical literary tradition, as a daughter of Angelou. Both geographic and creative proximity to Angelou emboldens Newman in the cultivation of her self-determinative practices around gender, blackness, and embodiment.

In 1982, during Newman's senior year at Wake Forest University, Angelou was named a Reynolds Professor of American Studies at the university. With excitement, Newman recalls:

> She was a buzz on campus, especially in the black community. Her arrival encouraged me to read her works and learn all about her life. I liked that she had come from such a humble background. I identified with her journey. Her writing was powerful and enlightening. Much later, when I was down and out and at the bottom of my

[129] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie Smith, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 2003), 2155.

> transformation, her poetry moved me and profoundly touched me while I changed to become me.[130]

The public honoring of Angelou, a prolific and visible black cultural figure would, of course, inspire pride in black students on and near campus. While Newman, like her black peers on campus, could identify with the central themes of blackness, family, and belonging in Angelou's writing, the narrated Newman specifically highlights her 1981 book *The Heart Of A Woman.* She explains, "The book spoke about Dr. Angelou's journey, but to me it spoke of the battle between the outer and the inner self."[131] Newman's interpretation of Angelou's work reveal why her embodied and narrative self-fashioning practices in *I Rise* return to the connection between her desire to integrate internal desires and external drives. This interpretation is capacious enough to hold Newman in all her narrative (and embodied) complexity. Angelou's poetry was a site of strength and transformation for Newman, especially during her low moments in life. Since Angelou's autobiographical writing focuses on the personal and political transformation of feelings of inferiority to dignified self-possession Newman, already feeling like an outcast in her family and community because of her gender and sexuality, eagerly resonated. As Angelou writes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."[132] Not only does Newman bear these untold stories within herself, but she actively self-fashions her embodiment in ways that run contrary to her truest desires. This shows us the connection between love of literature, a deep desire to know oneself inside, and bring into integration outer embodied self-fashioning behaviors. Sometimes trans memoirs and autobiographies written by white authors tend to offer a romanticization of the transition journey,

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[130] Newman, *I Rise,* 40.
[131] Ibid, 41.
[132] Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*

even when describing the often-arduous journey for most. This convention is not the case when it comes to writers impacted by anti-black racism and misogynoir. For, as Erica R. Edwards claims, "Black women's literature gives us an unromantic picture of endurance amid the continuing onslaught.[133]

Yolanda M. Manora notes that Angelou says: "I didn't come to stay" in *Caged Bird* to write a subjectivity in transition. If autobiography is also discursive and psychological, as Manora suggests, the autobiography, then, is an exploration of the transformation of self.[134] This connection reminds us that the exploration of self, creation of self, and investigation therein are all non-linear but do the work of integration for both writer and audience. Writing and literature, in this way, are nodes of self-knowing and self-discovery that inform Newman's transformations over the course of her life. Angelou's commitment to challenging the traditional autobiographical structure further reveals the connection between narrative practices of self-fashioning and gender-racial-sexual self-determination.

This connection illustrates the movement between interior and exterior self-fashioning for Newman as an agential, autobiographical subject. Newman's admiration for Angelou's writerly self leads her to invest in her own autobiographical subjectivity. When recounting her final meal with her friend, Dr. Joanne—a transsexual woman who was also a clinical doctor—Newman recalls: "She told me to always, always be myself. She said there was a battle brewing in me between my inner self and outer self, and I must find the balance that was right for me, even if that meant becoming a pre-op or post-op transsexual. She had no idea how prophetic and true her

[133] Ërica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror,* 28.

[134] Yolanda M. Manora, "What You Looking At Me For? I Didn't Come to Stay': Displacement, Disruption and Black Female Subjectivity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Women's Studies* 34 (2005): 362.

words would be to me."[135] Finding a balance between the inner and outer selves is a broad characterization of (most) trans autobiography, and *I Rise* is no exception. Newman describes how writing became an integrated and prioritized aspect of her living and working life. "I kept writing in my spare time between clients, and so I began this book," she recalls.[136] Newman's acquisition of new tech is meshed with her desire to begin recording her story for future purposes. She writes, "I often spent money on classes in computer technology and web design, and I started writing a journal about everything that happened in my life. I wanted to be able to do something else in the future, though I no longer wanted an MBA degree or a job in the business arena. Graduate school crossed my mind, and I started to consider studying law."[137]

I contend that seeing beyond Newman's superficial interest in Angelou reveals deeper levels of meaning regarding how Newman's autobiographical self-fashioning leads to transformative integration in her subjectivity. An anonymous reader of Newman's memoir wrote in an Amazon review: "What immediately strikes you when reading her story is that it is neither the story of a victim, nor that of a life fashioned out of the need to escape something or someone in her past. Instead, it's a story of simply becoming herself, of realizing who she always was inside."[138] Though Newman does not maintain the self she transformed into was an already existing aspect of her identity, this reader's comments reveal a line between the "wrong body" discourse of trans experience and an understanding of how narrative practices of self-fashioning constitute something beyond the wrong body trope. Through complex navigations of unbelonging, belonging, tolerance, and acceptance, Newman fashions a text out of her life which

[135] Newman, *I Rise,* 61.
[136] Ibid, 166.
[137] Ibid, 154.
[138] Sally, review on Goodreads, April 29, 2011. Web.

urges the reader to consider how gendered desire for transformation can reside in the ways in which one takes up their embodiment as a canvas for self-determinative action.

Mental Health as Model: Narrative Self-Fashioning to Better Understanding

The narrated Newman's embodied and narrative self-fashioning practices draw the reader's attention to the spatial dynamics of gender transformation and how one's social position is impacted by the discursive position of their identity. Newman uses discussions of mental health to illustrate her narrative self-fashioning into an integrated transsexual subject. In other words, in addition to thinking about the binary of interior and exterior transsexual subjectivity, Newman also prompts thinking about the difference between public and private intimacies. Newman narratively flexes her awareness while getting box braids in a salon in Harlem. She observes, "Sitting there, listening to all these black women talk about their husbands and lovers and boyfriends, I wondered if they knew who their lovers really were."[139] The narrated Newman's experiences as a male-to-female transsexual sex worker mean she has experienced men in situations ranging from professional to pleasurable, from public to private. Newman's inclusion of this passage seems to gesture to the reader that a misalignment of self between public and private spheres indicates a person without integrity. In other words, during the hours of hair-braiding, Newman reflects on the presumption that some of the men she engaged with on the nighttime street could have wives and girlfriends who were unaware of this *particular* aspect of their men's lives and desires. Newman's pondering here is a critical trans* imagination

[139] Newman, *I Rise,* 116.

regarding interiority and exteriority, the publicness of certain kinds of affection, intimacy, and desire, and how others are cast to non-public or discrete spheres.[140]

While gender euphoria was the high of Newman's transformation, the low was the economic consequences. After quitting her job at Adolphus Fitness and losing her health insurance, Newman's survival sex work earned her only enough funds to cover her hormone replacement therapy and small amounts of food, clothing, and toiletries. In under a year of quitting and beginning her transformation, Newman could no longer afford her apartment in The Village and became homeless.

During her experience of homelessness in New York, Newman recalls:

> Till then, I thought all homeless people were mental and psychotic. I learned this was far from the truth….Most people from my past thought I had made a huge mistake, and I was too embarrassed to ask them for help….Somehow, I felt like I had truly found my inner self, but I was also really at my lowest point. The woman in me was blossoming and flourishing, but I had no home. The inner self was happy for once, but I was homeless and hungry and cold.[141]

In this recollection, Newman gives us access to her thinking and perspective in this interaction, showing how she held similar presumptions and assumptions as the young girl suggesting she needed something that she herself felt differently about. Newman gives us access to her inner life and perspectives. There is a clear juxtaposition between her previous self, a man who had resources and support, to now a woman with a clear sense of self but no resources. This shows us that Newman's inner life is valuable and clearly shows through the moments she finds herself in

[140] Here, I am thinking alongside Kevin Quashie's concept of *aliveness,* which he uses to describe "a state of being that moves beyond the trouble of a public-private binary as well as beyond the logics of an antiblack world" (2021: 142).
[141] Newman, *I Rise,* 122.

life. By being vulnerable with describing her previous preconceptions around mental health, transness, and community support, and juxtaposing her current clarity around gender with her lack of resources and support.

The narrated Newman recalls, "I remember one college girl told me I should get psychological help. I told her, 'Sweetie, I do not need mental help. I need cash and a place to stay.'"[142] There is more than just a vernacular difference between seeking therapy and psychological help. Though well-intentioned, this suggestion comes off as classist, racist, and presumptive. In the preface of *I Rise,* Newman states one of her autobiographical goals while enacting narrative self-fashioning. She addresses the psycho-medical discourses of illness trans and gender non-conforming people navigate by saying that though it is popular for doctors to tie the desire for transformation to mental and psychological issues. However, she combats this discourse with her own experience, claiming that her story is more about wanting to become whole and become who she really is. Newman states, "I am a sane, logical, thinking individual who has had to match the outside of my body with feelings inside my body. I'm not crazy, nor do I have any mental issues that clouded my mind during my transformation period."[143] Just as Newman recognized the need to work past her presumptions about mental health, homelessness, substance abuse, and the reasons they plague individuals, she pushes her reader to confront their own presuppositions on mental health and why gender non-conforming people seek to act in accordance with their internal desires. The therapy that Newman would go on to receive would come in the form of crafting *I Rise.* "I kept writing in my spare time between clients, and so I began this book," Newman recalls. "Late at night, during my only quiet time, I would write on

[142] Newman, *I Rise,* 122.
[143] Ibid, ix.

yellow legal pads. It felt good to get my thoughts and feelings on paper, *almost like therapy*."[144] To narrow in on the medium, Newman's use of the legal pad to cultivate autobiographical and legal/self-knowledge speaks volumes to the utility of both genres. Of course, the emphasis on transformation by way of integration is not reserved for Newman's medical and economic transitions. She is undergoing a significant philosophical and political transformation via integration of experiences as well. Integrating this awareness and knowledge into her political consciousness, she recounts:

> In my experience, transsexuals were perceived as a powerless group of people with low intellects. Society viewed them as weak and mentally disturbed because they transformed their genders. This was especially true for minority transsexuals. The whole incident in Las Vegas made me think of Tony, my male counterpart, and his drive to succeed at any cost. In this case, I had combined Terri with Toni and it had worked well. My two personae were no longer at war. It felt good to be in harmony with myself. I was competent and able to defend myself publicly.[145]

Newman achieves this overall harmony through her writing, claiming, "I felt Tony and Terri unite into Toni, the true me."[146] The unity of these selves results in the integration of desire, transformation, and agency that Newman and many other black trans women need to navigate an anti-black and transantagonistic society. The experiences that connect Newman's gender transformation and political awakening prove that regimes of unprotection show up in more ways than just the erasure of our histories, as demonstrated by tokenizing representation of marginalized folks. Readers of *I Rise* undergo a transformation alongside Newman, too. She

[144] Ibid., 166, italics mine.
[145] Newman, *I Rise,* 185.
[146] Ibid.*,* 213.

models how to transform preconceptions about marginalized people who are left vulnerable by the state and our communities—such as trans people, disabled people, people of color—through narrative. This transformation for reader and author alike makes it easier for readers to more capaciously understand the world black trasn women, as according to Newman in this moment in time, navigate in order to survive.

2.3 From Gender Transformation to Political Awakening through Regimes of Unprotection

Newman's lived experiences combined with a social analysis of power reveal the ideological regime of unprotection marginalized subjects live within under gender-racial-sexual co-constituted oppressions. Demonstrating a black feminist standpoint on social power, Newman recognizes that the experiences that color those of trans women of color are the product of interrelated racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. Therefore, her critical trans* imagination allows her to narratively show how integration of several forms can lead to some transformative work. This powerful act of naming and integration points to the critical path from practices of self-fashioning to self-determination. I am thinking alongside Marshall Green when he writes, "I am more interested in holding onto the potential of possible name changes than the actual *new* name itself, because it is the potential to be made anew and undone perpetually that marks ongoing transformation."[147] This naming is not the final stage of transition, not the telos to the journey. As Stallings posits:

> If transgender and transsexual history and culture depend upon what has been published, visible, legible, and authorized enough to be archived, then we might query what has

[147] Green, "Troubling the Waters," 79.

> been omitted as a result of the conditions of illiteracy, criminalization, or poverty. These are conditions that have made it difficult for some transgender subjects to be the absolute source, represent themselves, and write themselves into being. Recovering more black transgender narratives means making peace with improper bodies and texts.[148]

Readers of *I Rise* also note elements of the regimes of unprotection the memoir helps unearth and offer responses that make that connection clear. A Goodreads reviewer of the memoir thanks Newman for sharing her story through a medium that reminds readers that "sometimes we truly do not know the pain we cause," and that "at the end of the day, we are all human beings."[149] This ability to make people aware of the humanity of black trans women is a key rhetorical aim for Newman's autobiographical process. Newman writes,

> In addition to their poor treatment by the police, I found there to be absolutely no legal sensitivity for transsexuals. Because they were poor, most were stuck with public defenders since they could not afford private attorneys….I became aware of about ten cases involving black transsexuals who got a really bad deal in the legal system. Most of these cases involved self-defense, when a transsexual was defending herself from being hurt by another individual.[150]

In the early years of advertising of her memoir, Newman did not shy away from gesturing toward the big-name clientele she entertained while a sex worker and dominatrix. But over the years, this has become one of the defining aspects of her memoir, and some readers approach it for gossip and other personal details rather than embracing the struggle within the story of a person's life. I felt surprised by an online reviewer of *I Rise* which states: "This book was very

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[148] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* 224.
[149] Jerome, review on Goodreads, October 29, 2020. Web.
[150] Newman, *I Rise,* 196.

boring and no names, no juicy details to make the book enjoyable. The author did not allow you to journey along with her, there was no feeling or emotion in any of the pages." Despite disagreeing with the reviewer's perspective on the memoir, I specifically want to note the lack of what this reviewer presumes would or should be present in her memoir. By contrast, another reviewer writes, "I felt the author did quite a bit of gratuitous 'name-dropping,' particularly in the first half, that wasn't really necessary to the cause of the book. It seems that there wasn't much connection with the celebrities she encountered at the time, other than simply crossing paths with them."[151]

[151] Samuel Rafael, Amazon review of *I Rise,* May 6, 2011. Web.

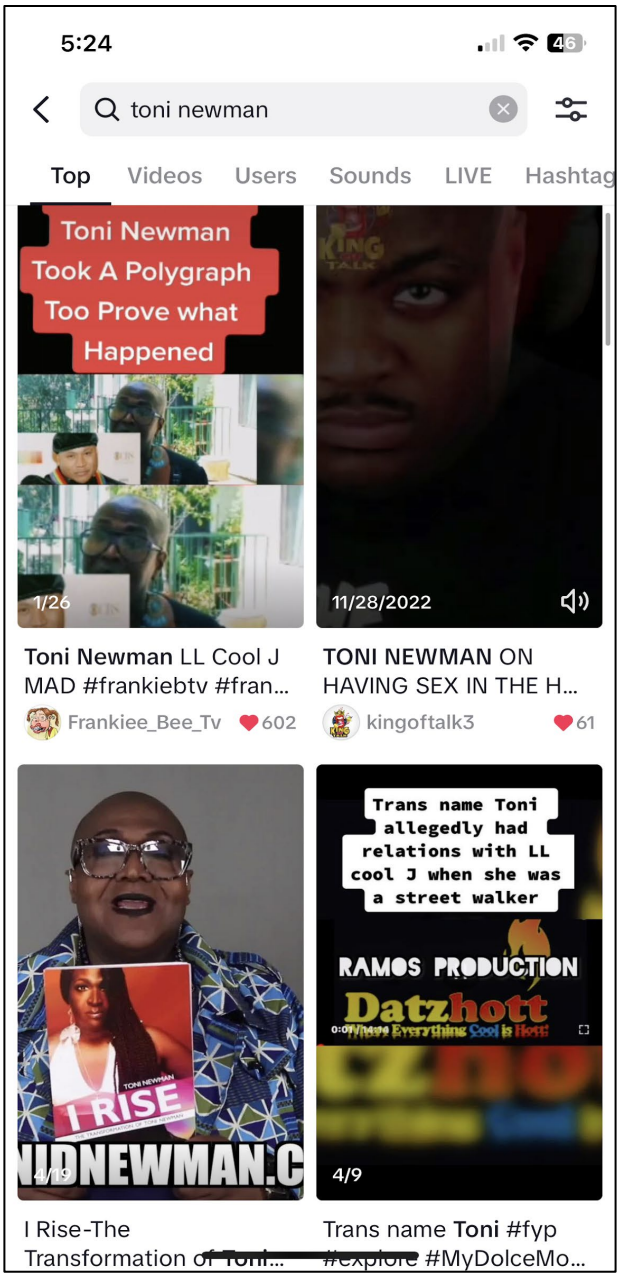

Figure 3: Screenshot of TikTok search results for "Toni Newman" taken by author on May 18, 2023.

Figure 3 depicts a screenshot taken of my search results for "toni newman" on the social media app TikTok. Though one video (shown in the lower left corner of the figure) features

Newman and her book[152], the other three, and a few more listed below, focus specifically on Newman's sexual exploits with notable black male celebrities, such as LL Cool J and Mister Cee. This collage of videos on TikTok further illustrates how the life writing—and lives in general—of black trans women are boiled down to their sexual engagements with others, as opposed to the survival strategies and experiences offered within their texts. This also shows how Newman's *I Rise* participates as an autobiographical part of Newman's narrative. Readers concerned most with the salaciousness of her confessions see her memoir thus, whereas other readers could see it as a self-help narrative, one which does not think it odd for a black trans woman to do something with her life other than survival sex work, hustling for gender affirming operations, and being listed as a murder victim on memorial lists for Trans Day of Remembrance.

So, how do self-fashioning practices lead to Newman's emerging journalist drive in her memoir? By investing in tech, documenting her interior experiences with transitioning and navigating life amid career shifts as a black transsexual woman, and her emerging anterior self as an entrepreneur and advocate for marginalized communities. By saying that she often did these things in order to "be able to do something else in the future," we can ascertain that Newman sees value in her experiences and evidences a desire to pass on the value of those experiences to a readerly public.

Conclusion

[152] This video comes from Newman's own TikTok account (@tonidnewman), where she has uploaded two videos promoting the 2023 hardcover release of the memoir and an anticipated documentary film *The Heart of a Woman* based on the book in 2024.

In May 2012, Newman held a conversation with hip hop memoirist Terrance Dean at *The Advocate.* Having done her research, Newman confesses during a conversation that she knows about Sharon Davis's 1985 memoir, but that it was a small publication and not much else has been published by that point in thirty years. Reflecting on this dearth of memoirs published by black trans women, Newman explains her revised reason for writing the book: "So I wanted to write a book to let other minorities, Asians, blacks, Latinos, know that these feelings that you have, they are normal. You are not odd, you are not peculiar, you are OK. And help guide young black kids through those things that [they] are feeling as a young black child."[153] Racial belonging is a central element through *I Rise,* and Newman's attention to race and class alongside gender and sexuality indexes her blacktransfeminist analysis. Newman's *I Rise* opens spaces of possibility for readers to cultivate understanding about being black and trans, which could include the development of embodied or narrative self-fashioning practices that lead to gender-racial-sexual self-determination.

The history and legacy of black trans women's writing is rich and more extensive than originally believed. To conclude, I turn to Newman's beginning. In the preface to *I Rise,* Newman asserts:

> I think my story is an interesting one. It is about a *hidden society within American culture*….I wanted to put a face to a group that is hardly recognized. Statistics say one out [of] every thirty thousand people is transgender in the U.S.A. That adds up to forty

[153] Diane Anderson-Minshall, "Gay and Transgender in a Hip-Hop World: Toni Newman and Terrance Dean." *The Advocate.* 14 May 2012. Web. https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/books/2012/05/14/toni-newman-and-terrance-dean-are-gay-and-transgender-hip-hop?xrs=RebelMouse_fb&ts=1447756080&fbclid=IwAR1ImVE56wwRIxRHCROyzOu4OfaKLvlZkIX5J3yr4z2CtsJmSC8Sw627v3s.

> out of every million people….I want everyone to respect transgender as people and to understand why they transform their bodies.[154]

As of late, numerous legislative bills have been introduced to municipal- and state-level bodies which explicitly intend to obliterate any state-sponsored support of critical race, ethnic, or gender studies, limit accessible medical care for queer and trans youth, and criminalize those who wish to provide such resources. These bills, and other attendant reactions to the "transgender tipping point" are introduced out of concern for children's safety, which is a conservative rhetorical move to maintain the status quo. According to a 2023 press release from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)—the largest LGBTQA+ civil rights organization in the U.S.—almost four hundred anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced to statehouses across the U.S. Of the introduced bills, ninety bills would "prevent trans youth from being able to access age-appropriate, medically-necessary, best-practice health care," eighty bills are "aimed to prevent transgender youth from playing school sports consistent with their gender identity," and seventy are "curriculum censorship bills [that] tried to…restrict teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ issues and other marginalized communities in their classrooms."[155] Arizona, Tennessee, and Florida have been particularly polarizing places for progressive moves in education and LGBTQ+ protection, as well as conservative backlash and high queer and transantagonistic violence. In fact, as of June 2023, HRC has declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans "for the first time [in history] following an unprecedented and dangerous spike in anti-LGBTQ legislative assaults sweeping state houses."[156] In my home state of Ohio, the State Senate

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[154] Newman, *I Rise,* ix.

[155] The Human Rights Campaign, "Human Rights Campaign Condemns Senate Passage of Anti-Transgender Bathroom Bill in Arizona," *Human Rights Campaign,* https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-condemns-senate-passage-of-anti-transgender-bathroom-bill-in-arizona?utm_source=sign...

[156] For more, see https://www.hrc.org/campaigns/national-state-of-emergency-for-lgbtq-americans.

introduced SB83, which would effectively ban university workers from striking, limit academic freedom, and restrict ethnic and gender studies curricula. Given this sociocultural context, *I Rise* is more than just a memoir accounting for Newman's transition. It is an inspiring text of how a self is shaped by the injustices she faced by police and other violent authoritative figures. If we are to return to a political landscape in which those who defy the norms of racial, gender, sexual, and classed comportment, as defined by the onslaught of these legislative attacks embedded within these bills, then, to me, it seems clear that we need tools like *I Rise* to help us identify bad things happening and appreciate the deep embodied creative good things we can do as those boundaries are transgressed.

As this project articulates, these writers are speaking back to specific, nameable discursive regimes. I'm speaking about certain sets of discursive things. There's a conversation I'm tracing through their works and the interplay between these writers, their texts, and reception to them. We are not secrets to be hidden, nor mistakes to be erased. These texts reinforce this idea and encourage the proliferation of the stories of trans women of color, those who struggle in navigating life and its structural phobias against us.

As the project argues overall, these writers—black trans women life writers—are speaking back to specific, nameable discursive regimes. In examining their writing and philosophy, I trace a conversation through their work which speaks to domineering and oppressive regimes of thought and practice. We are not secrets to be hidden, nor mistakes to be erased. These texts reinforce this idea and encourage the proliferation of the stories of black trans women and trans women of color, those who struggle in navigating life and its structural phobias.

Chapter 3: Redefining Certainty: Janet Mock and the Audacity to Write

With her Netflix deal, Mock makes history as the first trans woman empowered to call the creative shots at a major content company. She doesn't have a seat at the table; she's building her own.

- JanetMock.com

These practices of survival also oriented Black trans people toward revolution, of seeing themselves as part of a longer Black struggle, from slavery till the present, to be free. As Marsha P. Johnson, said of the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), "We believe in picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary."

- Blu Buchanan, "The Regular and Necessary Practice of Black Trans Necromancy" (2019)

Since 2014, the general optimism surrounding advances in trans cultural visibility and political advances has soured in the face of parallel sociopolitical queer- and transantagonism, particularly directed at trans and gender non-conforming youth of color. This social parallel creates a cultural tension around how to understand trans subjectivities politically, culturally, and spatially. Institutions such as the National Transgender Law Center and Sylvia Rivera Law Project produce statistics and reports that illuminate the uneven distribution of life chances

across these marginalized populations. This inequity further emphasizes the captive nature of the "tipping point" of trans visibility. Trans people are literally caught and locked into an already unequal system of visibility, representation, power, and privilege. For those unsatisfied with this status quo, we must dig deeper for more nuanced cultural relationalities occurring today to adequately and strategically address the intersectional harms faced by the most vulnerable members of any given community.

One of the most visible figures during the cultural moment encapsulated as the "transgender tipping point" is writer and editor Janet Mock. In May 2011, journalist Kierna Mayo published an exposé-style profile of Mock titled "I Was Born a Boy." This profile changed the course of Mock's life and career; she went from editor at *People* magazine to overnight trans celebrity and critically recognized voice in the fight for black and trans liberation. A talented writer, Mock is also known for her urgent cultural work. Yet the reductive and exploitative effects of the transgender tipping point often reduce Mock's work to a tokenized trans women of color narrative. Without a capacious enough framework to understand the interrelated nuances of race, gender, class, and culture, readers risk leaving with a reduced version of Mock's cultural politics and impact, ripe for easy consumption rather than a substantial fullness which demands critical engagement.

Mock gets underestimated in wider cultural circles for three reasons. First, the genre of trans memoir is no longer *en vogue.* This view of the genre proves limiting for black trans women. There's constant discourse about the trans memoir boom being over. For example, Mock observes this shift when attending a conference panel on trans women's literature. Regarding the genre of trans memoir, cultural theorist Aren Z. Aizura comments that it has "largely been

abandoned in the public imaginary."[157] This abandonment of the trans memoir genre suggests other forms of abandonment as well. Second, as many have observed, the "transgender tipping point" is shaped by the neoliberal multiculturalism invested in condensing complex subjects into legible figurations, such as wearing a blue dress on a magazine cover or playing a trans criminal on a television drama series. This reduction demonstrates the incorporability of the trans woman of color figure heralded by the "tipping point," reducing her to her "legible essence."[158] Certain conditions make it easier for figures like Mock to become incorporated into the discursive construction of trans women of color as perpetually destined for violence, sex work, and death. As black feminist scholar Julian Kevon Glover notes, certain forms of power such as respectability, transnormativity, and media bias make this incorporation possible. Journalist Laurie Penny argues that a lot of trans people wait to come out or never do so at great personal cost. A defining aspect of the "trans tipping point" is its reductive understanding of trans subjectivity, reached not by thorough explanation or illustration, but by boiling the concept down to its assumed essence through its incorporability into the liberal popular market. I agree with Lucas Crawford that we need a next step for conversations on transgender subjectivity that consciously avoid reproducing the friendly token of neoliberal future conferred through mainstream visibility.[159] Third, this easy neoliberal multiculturalism that defines the "tipping point" flattens the figure of the trans woman of color to its seeming irreducibility, priming figures such as Mock to be taken over privileges through which they unfairly receive benefits but have no control over in regards to their image.[160]

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[157] Aren Aizura, *Mobile Subjects,* 89.
[158] Aizura, *Mobile Subjects,* 90.
[159] Lucas Crawford, "What's Next is the Past," 148.
[160] Mecca Jamilah Sullivan captures this phenomenon by writing, "The erasure of subjective nuance from dominant conceptions of black identity occurs largely through ideological structures and practices that disaggregate black

Perhaps an additional reason critics assume Mock has little to offer critical conversations on weighted topics like the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality has to do with her "pretty privilege." In a 2017 *Allure* magazine online post[161]Mock urges readers of the magazine, who are concerned with beauty, aesthetics, and the navigation of social relationships, to attend to an overlooked aspect of beauty, what she calls "pretty privilege." Mock defines this as an experience of "social advantages, often unearned, that benefit people who are perceived as pretty or considered beautiful."[162] Mock understands that viewing one's attractiveness as being commensurate with or even related to their worth is a fantasy. Nonetheless, through its reiteration through enduring discursive figurations of trans women of color, this fantasy "communicates our culture's misconception that equates cisness with attractiveness and equates one's ability to been seen as cis with being seen as attractive—as real." Thinking about pretty privilege here tunes us in to operations of power. Mock writes that the pretty privilege she experiences—understood through the matrix of colorism, fatphobia, and heterosexism—is always situationally specific in its effects. This highlights how trans women of color are subject to discursive spaces which render them objects to compare to other standards of beauty and living. Race, class, sexuality, and other vectors of difference are key components for understanding pretty privilege; those who underestimate Mock do so using her pretty privilege because a nuanced understanding of such vectors of difference would result in a more capacious understanding of Mock's work. She concludes the piece by suggesting that we "recognize our

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bodies from the complex capabilities of the human voice. The overwhelming and enduring presence of stereotypes of black women in American and global narrative culture attests to dominant cultures' structural resistance to imagining black women speaking in multiple different ways, about multiple different things, individually or collectively" (2021: 77).

[161] This post is part of Mock's biweekly column *Beauty Beyond Binaries,* which discusses the intersection of beauty and identity on allure.com.

[162] Janet Mock, "Being Pretty Is a Privilege, But We Refuse to Acknowledge It, *"Allure,* June 28, 2017, Web. https://www.allure.com/story/pretty-privilege.

positionality across all of our intersections and experiences." Advocating for the recognition of our position among the matrices of identity, power, and oppression, connects Mock's work around beauty and gender to her overarching autobiographical project of expanding the discursive frame for trans women of color.

Critics generally underestimate Mock because of an inability to handle all the complexities she offers through all her autobiographical engagements, written, visual, and discussed, while acknowledging the power systems impacting the approach to her work. This inability to consume complexity stems from the discursive power of the "transgender tipping point." Many readers who misread Mock do so because they feel compelled to draw arbitrary and finite divisions between groups, life stages, trans/cis, and straight/queer. In *Histories of the Transgender Child,* Jules Gill-Peterson claims the division between trans children and adults (largely cis adults) is arbitrary and harmful to those children, and existing social conditions of racism, sexism, and classism exacerbate their condition. One of the defining features of the "tipping point" is its attempt to divide the normal from the not normal—and the myriad knowledges and meanings we can cull from them—into legible entities that can be marketed in such a way. By addressing us, the readers, as her "Phoeby," or addressee to her story, Mock obliterates the division between herself and her reader, deepening public understanding of trans subjectivity and possibility within storytelling. In doing so, she does not position herself as "the real" one or position her reader as "real" for witnessing her.

The rhetorical direction behind Mock's autobiographical works points towards her desire to shift the cultural register associated with the contemporary category of "trans woman of color." Often, "trans woman of color" stands in for the dead or dying street walker, limited to only a few parts and archetypes in mainstream visibility. Instead, Mock embodies the audacity to

be as capacious a symbol as possible, nuanced in her own self-representation. Through her example, memoir and other forms of self-referential cultural production become fertile ground for trans women of color to create aesthetic, epistemological, and discursive shifts that can lead to transformative sociopolitical outcomes. As a cultural tool, autobiography provides Mock the opportunity to respond to a host of social and political forces that discursively construct the black trans femme as a fixed position within the existing global racial capitalist schema of representation and value.

Mock begins *Redefining Realness* with the refrain "I was certain" or "I [always] knew,"[163] which could signal her lack of authenticity or experience in describing her trans girlhood experiences. This repetition signals Mock's desire for the reader to note the notions of certainty, authenticity, and truth as they evolve over time for young children existing at the precarious intersection of so many violently persistent histories. We are supposed to contest this certainty, as Mock reflexively does. It is no surprise then, that her second memoir would be titled *Surpassing Certainty,* further gesturing that we need to look past the mask one puts on in order to survive as best as possible. Just as in *Surpassing Certainty,* Mock points to "the pronouns, the penis, the Ninja Turtle pajamas, the pictures of hours-old me wrapped in a blue blanket"[164] as proof of her gender outside of her sense of self, the information being told to her and reinforced through these embodied and material effects, she again turns to her own body and materials to make her way toward gendered self-discovery and self-fashioning. Through embodied practices of self-fashioning, Mock reveals the material nature of her particular experiences as a young trans child of color raised in low-income neighborhoods across the Pacific and Western U.S.

[163] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 15.
[164] Ibid.

coast. Claims to certainty, and *surpassing certainty,* then, suggest that this autobiographical act is Mock's "original generative act," to borrow from Hartman.

If, as I have suggested, Mock's second memoir is about surpassing certainty, then the "realness" she is defining—and later surpassing—is the realness we assume lies in the certainty one must have to claim authentic experiences along oppressed racial, gendered, sexual, and classed lines. Certainty substantiates her knowledge and experience, and it offers her protection from others who insist otherwise, who would leave her unprotected and vulnerable. In other words, professing certainty can also be an act of narrative self-fashioning, communicating an internal truth to an external audience. Mock challenges certainty's assumed fixity with action-oriented practice, largely informed by her observances of the women in her family networks. I am not arguing that Mock merely mirrored the actions of the black women around her, though to do so would still leave Mock a complex and dynamic character. Rather, I am interested in what Mock conceptualized and made legible for herself in order to further explore her gender, to move closer to her "certainty." Instead of debating internally about what gender meant and how it should be performed, she noted the full and active lives the black and indigenous Hawaiian women around her lived. When she was eleven and living with her father's side of the family in Dallas, Texas, young Mock noticed that the actions of the women around her were not always uniform, respectable, or predictable. Reflecting on descriptions of their vivid personalities in *Redefining Realness,* Mock observes, "They rarely talked about the unfairness of the world with the words that I use now with my social justice friends, words like *intersectionality* and *equality, oppression* and *discrimination.* They didn't discuss those things because they were too busy living it, navigating it, surviving it." Here we see the seeds for Mock's own embodied practices of self-fashioning: gender as something that is done and navigated, not simply discussed and

theorized. Mock's family permits her to explore gender and her place within her family community, a key aspect to her budding self-confidence as a young femme of color. Mock generates an ideological assurance by noting the permission to shape-shift and self-shift as part of her black womanhood.

Mock's willingness to be uncertain, to shapeshift, to have faith despite conviction, radically disrupts the fixed transgender figuration the "transgender tipping point" presents.[165] The "tipping point" wants us to believe that the ideal transgender subject is tall, black, with long, straight blonde hair and high heels, and very "passable." Meanwhile, Mock's practices constitute the accumulation of personal embodied knowledge, which can speak back to the notion of certainty with which Mock opens *Redefining Realness* and which she further complicates in *Surpassing Certainty.* Mock's introductory pillow conversation with Aaron illustrates another example of embodied knowledge.

As an autobiographical coaxer for *Redefining Realness,* or the cultural object that solicits the fuller story from the author, Mayo's exposé in *Marie Claire* is not Mock's full story, and it is not told fully through her own framework. She explains that she needs trust in order to build the intimacy for full disclosure of her fullest self. By this point in their dating, the narrating Mock *feels* enough trust to share her story with Aaron. She recounts, "The self you know, the you deep inside, is obscured by a stack of untold stories."[166] Here, stories are not just the words we configure to describe other people and their experiences; they are truth we see in the world and their accompanying discursive explanations. Despite the neoliberal trappings of the popular

[165] My thinking here on uncertainty is informed by Aimee Meredith Cox's description of *shapeshifting* as a simultaneously embodied and psychic concept. See Cox, *Shapeshifts: Black Girlhood and the Choreography of Citizenship* (2015). Additionally, writer and activist Michaela Angela Davis credits shapeshifting as a defining element of "Black girl magic." See Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, eds., *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (2017).
[166] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 10-11.

genre Mock and her life writing often fall into, Mock's writing intervenes in mainstream conceptions of trans youth and trans women of color by reshaping how we think about coming-of-age narratives and trans literature in general. Her writing addresses what it means to be a gender non-conforming child impacted by poverty, substance abuse, academic success, domestic violence, sexual assault, personal integrity, sex work, and self-exploration.

3.1 "Get Me Bodied:" Pop Cultural Influences and Embodied Self-Fashioning Practices

Embodied practices of self-fashioning encompass those self-directed, repeated actions that illustrate one's gendered-racial-sexual self-determination and commitment to self-exploration with compassion and honesty. These practices are represented narratively on the pages of *Redefining Realness.* How might we understand the role imagination plays in both Mock's development as a young trans kid and in her life writing? What are the thresholds of girlhood for Mock? What practices constitute her movement through these thresholds? More specifically, what do Mock's embodied self-fashioning practices reveal about trans women of color's ability to harness creativity in order to more fully theorize and thus embody their personal "self-shifting truths"? *Redefining Realness* offers a unique analytical perspective with its focus on Mock's multiracial trans youth and adolescence; it is one of the most prominent, if not first, memoirs circulated from this vantage point. The memoir offers what funk studies scholar L.H. Stallings calls "trans-strategies for resisting the destructive mapping of bodies, knowledge, and cultural products."[167] In other words, her narratives enable us to understand the

[167] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* 206-207.

shapeshifting aesthetic and cultural practices that constitute gender-racial-sexual self-determination for Mock growing up in the late-twentieth century U.S. empire.[168]

Mock's self-fashioning and development of her gendered self-consciousness are informed by her observations of her family during her adolescence, and by her relationship with her friend Makayla, the "first young woman who made an imprint on [Mock]."[169] Through her budding social relationship with Makayla and boys at school—one named Alan in particular– Mock develops an alter ego named Keisha. "In the guise of my alter ego, I daydreamed out loud about my life as a girl…I let myself inhabit the lie of the teenage girl I yearned to be. Talking on the phone was my first bit of storytelling and Keisha was my heroine."[170] Keisha would talk to boys who did not know that it was actually Mock speaking through the alter ego of Keisha to connect ultimately with her own felt sense of gender. Keisha, then, connects Mock to boys but also brings her closer to Makayla and Veronica, other girls her age. Keisha's existence strengthens Mock's relationship to her own girlhood as well as her friendship with Makayla and Veronica. Despite not being her given or first chosen name—and Mock not being a cisgender girl as assumed by the alter ego—Keisha assumes a material form through mattering to Mock. Keisha produces material consequences for Mock and others aware of this secret self, providing an epistemological shift for the reader. We can understand Keisha as, to borrow from trans writer Jennifer Finney Boyland, "the best draft of the self"[171] for Mock in her adolescent years.

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[168] I find it especially useful to mark the U.S. along with empire here due to Mock's transcontinental navigation of trans adolescence across different locales within the U.S. empire: colonized Hawai'i, Oakland, CA, and Dallas, TX. For more on geography, coloniality, and gender, see Maria Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" (2007) and Leela Fernandes, *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, Power* (2013).

[169] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 68.

[170] Ibid, 68-69.

[171] Jennifer Finney Boylan, "The Age of Memoir" *The New York Times.*

Mock explains, "Keisha was more real to me than I was to myself. There was no doubt when I was in the moment as Keisha. She was fully me, the me I knew myself to be in those quiet instances when all I had to do was merely be."[172] We must remember that this embodied self-fashioning over the phone constitutes Mock's entryway into threshold, and that this entryway is not just a way for her to figure herself in relation to other people. According to Mock, Keisha and her vocal performance on the phone with boys is a literal and figurative vocal act of self-creation.[173] Theorized together, these other dimensions of transitioning enhance traditional understandings of social and medical transitioning. The next section further shows how Mock's discursive reframing relies on narrative breaks from inherited discursive queer and trans concepts.

If Janet the author is the narrator of *Redefining Realness*, then we can understand the adolescent self about whom she is narrating to be the narrat*ed* Mock. This distinction matters so that audiences are able to distinguish the present-day Mock that is narrating through these autobiographical texts, and the narrated self through which self-fashioning practices are performed and interpreted. In other words, the narrated Mock is doing narrative work herself with the invention of Keisha. Keisha constitutes an autobiographical act, a practice of establishing the self through a self. However, I argue that Mock's autobiographical narrating as an adolescent indicates that we can move beyond these things which seem immovable. Thus, *Redefining Realness* becomes more than just a memoir. The narrative Mock crafts indexes the expansive capacities of trans women of color beyond the figure rooted in the image of the

[172] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 77.

[173] By speaking on the phone, trying out new words and tonalities, Mock practices with vocality and vocabulary, as narrated and narratively. This is a very trans spin on the standard (white) trans femme dilemma around voice where it may prove too deep to effectively "pass" as feminine, femme, or female. It is common for trans people, especially trans femmes, to avoid speaking up because of patriarchy and the literal problem of the sonic depth and tone of voice.

"transgender tipping point." In *Second Skins,* Jay Prosser describes reading (trans) autobiography as "constituting one's own mirror scene."[174] There's a relation between each autobiographical instantiation. Jian Chen further develops this idea about trans women of color's embodied storytelling and mobilizing oppositional sense of subjective relation.[175] One of Prosser's most significant observations is that "gendered realness" constitutes a realization of ongoing foundational power operating through gender, race, and other social categories. Matt Richardson highlights the act of becoming through a variety of experiences, histories, and circumstances.[176]

Keisha is a multivalent being in *Redefining Realness.* In addition to being an autobiographical act narrated by Mock, Keisha, as a material entity, constitutes an intersubjective exchange between self and others for the narrated Mock. This structure illuminates the memoir's textual relationship with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* particularly the aspect of the narrator relaying her life stories to her friend, another autobiographical actor in the memoir. This intersubjectivity, I argue, is *Redefining Realness'*s "mirroring scene," or, in other words, a classic scene in trans life writing in which the narrator/author exposits a relationship with recognition when looking into a mirroring surface, such as mirror, compact, body of water, or even the eyes of another. This recognition could be identifying with what's seen, saying goodbye to what is seen, or something else entirely. For Mock, this mirroring scene defies normal time, taking place constantly in intersubjective sites of storytelling (e.g. telling her truth to Aaron, speaking to friends like Wendi and Veronica).

Mock claims, "The boundaries of gender, I was taught, were unmovable, like the glistening white rocks that surrounded Grandma's crawfish ponds. Keisha proved, though, that

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[174] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins,* 103.
[175] Jian Chen, *Trans Exploits,* 86.
[176] Matt Richardson, "Ajita Wilson: Blaxploitation, Sexploitation, and the Making of Black Womanhood," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7.2 (May 2020): 193.

self-determination—proclaiming who you were to others—wielded the power to lift those rocks toward a more honest place."[177] Those rocks did not just arrive there and arrange themselves so. It took time, effort, practice, and creativity to construct the glistening white rocks around the ponds' edges. Staying with the metaphor, Mock suggests gender similarly takes time and effort, through practice and cultivation toward honesty, or, in other words, surpassing certainty. Mock gives us some of the answer. The white rocks in Grandma's ponds—we know, as does the narrated Mock—are moveable. They had to be put there by someone to make the crawfish pond look nice, shiny, and inviting. With this example we see Mock theorizing gender as seemingly immovable, natural, and omnipresent in fixed notions, but actually malleable.[178] By imagining herself as Keisha in order to sonically create relationships with boys on the phone and gain femme self-awareness, Mock engages in an embodied form of self-representation and exploration that constitutes the erotic and imaginative elements of gender transition. Here, I'm thinking alongside black trans studies scholar Dora Silva Santana, who underscores, "Transitioning is our movement along that space of possibilities that produces embodied knowledge,"[179] extending this analysis into other spatial logics as well.

The distance and intimacy of the phone, and the sonic/vocal intimacy of not only words exchanged but emotional registers as well (giggles, smacked lips, unseen rolled eyes, etc.). There is more going on than just adolescents speaking over the phone. Writing similarly about black queer women writers, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan notes, "Undoing the boundaries between body and voice allows black queer women writers both to represent the processes by which their voices are un-written and to develop new language that can write against the erasure of their complex

[177] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 77
[178] Calvin Warren argues this ontologically, claiming that what "black transgender [as a category] is teaching us is the impossibility of finding symbolic coherency in the world" (2017: 271).
[179] Dora Silva Santana, "Transitionings and Returnings," 183.

subjectivities, desires, and lives."[180] Mock's vocal self-fashioning allows her to bring a complex self-representation to her autobiographical presence, and speak against the ways in which she gets misread and misunderstood by transphobic media figures, like Piers Morgan and Charlemagne Tha God.

Young Mock's fear of confrontation from Keisha's existence further demonstrates the realness Mock finds within her alter ego. She explains, "I didn't approach Alan because I was scared he'd find out the truth and Keisha would be dismissed as a fraud. She was no longer imaginary to me; she was the most authentic thing about me."[181] Mock intentionally chooses to hold on to the truth of Keisha instead of relinquishing this truth about herself and her erotic desires. Truth and realness, then, are thrown into obscurity when it comes to Mock's emerging girlhood. She continues: "Keisha was more real to me than I was to myself. There was no doubt when I was in the moment as Keisha. She was fully me, the me I knew myself to be in those quiet instances when all I had to do was merely be."[182] Keisha's felt authenticity for Mock's narrated younger self is a critical threshold for Mock's girlhood development. The confidence and self-assurance, and even fear of discovery, put affective registers behind her self-fashioning practices, or that these practices can evoke. "Articulating of self through naming," Marshall Green contends, "is an essential component of a black feminist ethic,"[183] one Mock carries through in her self-naming in these disparate spaces.

As the most and, according to Mock, "only visible sign of girlhood,"[184] hair is a critical aspect of her self-fashioning for her narrated younger self. What might this mean visually for

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[180] Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference,* 78.
[181] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 70.
[182] Ibid, 76.
[183] Marshall Green, "Troubling the Waters," 77.
[184] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 78.

Mock that she considered her curly hair to be her *only* visible marker of girlhood? Hair is a vibrant and visible marker for Mock because black women's appearances—hair, especially—were an integral part of pop cultural discursive and aesthetic frames while she was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s and they continue presently. Images of black women of varying shades and hair styles saturated mainstream imagery. In Hawai'i, California, and Texas, Mock was exposed to particular influences on black womanhood, namely Asian and Pacific Islander, antiblack, and colorist standards of beauty. Mock's understanding and treatment of her hair underscore one way in which black people create strategies to stay materially connected to their blackness across space.[185]

Autobiography studies scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson contend that cultural discourses determine which aspects of bodies become meaningful.[186] It's no surprise, then, that a young black trans girl influenced by the pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s—whose namesake is Janet Jackson, a black female celebrity known for her voice, figure, and hair—would find significant cultural, and therefore racial-gendered, value in her wavy, feminine hair. In *Surpassing Certainty,* Mock displays a moment of raised consciousness regarding her hair in particular and black women's hair in general:

> Hair is political and personal. The way we wear our hair is a statement we make about ourselves. I'm not one of those people who have deep opinions about how other women style their hair, because it's *their* hair. What I do know is there were a lack of images of women with hair that grew up above their heads, occupying space, daring to stick out in a

[185] Black feminist scholars have made significant contributions to how we think about hair, black female bodies, and the construction of black female identity and subjectivity. For more on this topic, see Matt Richardson, "Ajita Wilson: Blaxploitation, Sexploitation, and the Making of Black Womanhood" (2020) and Jasmine Nicole Cobb, *New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair* (2023).
[186] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Reading Autobiography,* p. 50.

world that was forcing all of us toward sameness. It took me years to grow comfortable with my curly fro—and myself.[187]

This is a clear connection between the personal and political, with Mock drawing from her own embodiment as a site of political and social agency. By addressing a lack of images—or what is even at times a saturation of images—of black women and women of color more broadly.[188]

Another embodied practice of Mock's narrative self-fashioning is her femme style and adornment in school, which helped her navigate the femmephobia and transantagonism she faced from classmates and teachers. Her femme expressive ensemble included her "most prized possession…[a] lanyard of Lip Smackers," a piece of what the narrating Mock described as "a balancing act to express my femininity in a world that is hostile toward it and frames femininity as artifice and fake."[189] She emphasizes this femme object's importance to her self-fashioning, claiming, "These elements, though small and insignificant to passersby, made up my girlhood, and I fought hard to ensure that they were seen."[190] This creativity both permitted a position from which to understand her "own self-shifting truths," but also to survive institutions by forging community and demonstrating resilience. Black trans studies and trans of color studies scholars such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Jian Neo Chen, Jaden Janak, and Amira Lundy-Harris underscore the centrality of femme embodiments to narrative self-fashioning.[191]

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[187] Janet Mock, *Surpassing Certainty,* 44.

[188] My understanding of saturation here is informed by its deployment in C. Riley Snorton and Hentyl Yapp's collection *Saturation,* in which it's defined as referring "both to a materiality of pigment and to the sense of something becoming so full that it is weighed down, rendered immobile, or unable to be added to—a reading that suggests current paradigms cannot fully encompass the complex contemporary reality of race" (2020: xii).

[189] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 124.

[190] Ibid.

[191] See Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors* (2018)*;* Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits* (2019)*;* Jadan Janak "(Trans)gendering Abolition" (2022); and Amira Lundy-Harris, "Necessary Bonding" (2022)

Tools and practices of self-fashioning can save lives.[192] In *Trans Exploits,* Jian Neo Chen describes Mock's pursuit of gender-affirming surgery as "another gender practice"[193] for survival while Lundy-Harris observes Mock's description of this process of seeking freedom with help from others.[194] In *Surpassing Certainty,* Mock says, "I was my best in words—clear and secure in what I felt, what I believed, who I was."[195] Though nervous at first, Mock becomes comfortable expressing herself as Keisha on the phone with Alan and other adolescent boys. Mock is figuring out who her evolving feminine self is in relation to other people, not just in her own head with her own understanding of things. Using her voice to connect with others on the grounds of her self-determined femininity constitutes an embodied practice of self-fashioning, or, in other words, a way of making one's self using the self itself. Embodied self-fashioning practices such as telephone exchanges as Keisha, confident display of her curly hair, her "only true mark of girlhood"[196] and other femme-leaning objects help Mock actualize a world in which she can externally express her femininity. Embodied self-fashioning practices constitute key sites of gendered-racial-sexual self-determination and help marginalized folks like the young, narrated Mock imagine and work towards alternative life paths.

3.2 Not Passing, but Excelling: Refusing Epistemological Inheritances

In *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low,* theorist C. Riley Snorton illuminates the connection between the closet and passing:

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[192] As I show in Chapter 4 on CeCe McDonald, tools and practices of self-fashioning—such as McDonald's scissors in her purse with which she used to defend herself in 2011—can literally save lives.
[193] Chen, *Trans Exploits,* 92.
[194] Amira Lundy-Harris, "'Necessary Bonding': On Black Trans Studies, Kinship, and Black Feminist Genealogies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9.1 (2022): 95.
[195] Mock, *Surpassing Certainty,* 91.
[196] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 78.

> The closet as a metaphor to describe the concealment of homosexuality materialized around the end of the nineteenth century as a "historical subject" alongside the homosexual. It was at this time that same-sex desires were undergoing codification in arenas of secular authority such as medicine, psychiatry, and the legal courts. Thus, the closet emerged to describe a nascent condition of surveillance and regulation; its protective measures—ensured by a person's ability to pass, to be read as something other than his or her identity—guarded against the constitution and criminalization of a new kind of person, "the homosexual."[197]

More than just a space for not-out homosexuals, the closet functions as a tool of surveillance, discipline, and regulation. Moreover, it's a tool dependent on racial and racist logics, as passing is. Indeed, the closet's racializing function as a place of sexual indeterminacy provides a fertile place to examine how racial logics underpin notions of sexuality and gender. The illumination of this connection, then, is critical for reading *Redefining Realness* as Mock narratively delineates her philosophy on these concepts, emphasizing how her trans girlhood narrative disrupts the commonplace ideas of passing and the closet and how trans women of color's subjectivity gets wrapped up in notions beset with racist epistemic foundations.

As *Redefining Realness* attests, a thorough-going history of public conversations about race, gender, sexuality, and class occurred prior to the mid-2010s "transgender tipping point," and these conversations influenced receiving audiences' ability to understand the intricacies of Mock's multilayered media presence. By this point, audiences would be familiar with concepts such as "passing" or being "in the closet," or not publicly out with one's orientation.[198]

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[197] C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 2014): 17.

[198] Allyson Hobbs notes the contemporary shift of passing as a phenomenon largely associated with race to that of gender identity. See Allyson Hobbs, "Passing," in *Keywords to African American Studies* (2018).

Therefore, it would be very easy to describe Mock's experiences as a young multiracial trans girl as an experience of passing *as a girl;* however, this is an incomplete assessment. In fact, it is through her autobiographical writing that Mock expresses her position on passing as a false practice rooted in cisheteronormative Eurocentric expectations about looks and comportment. Indeed, this returns us to Mock's notion of pretty privilege, its roots in mainstream culture, and how such notions perpetuate the erasure and silence of thinkers like Mock. By reading Mock's assessment of the reality of passing alongside Snorton's investment in the psychic realm of passing, we might reimagine the capacities of black girlhood narratives to shift our understanding of the consequences of how our bodies show up in the world.

Further reflection from Mock in *Redefining Realness* pushes us to reckon with our understanding of what constitutes being in the closet and what such assumptions reveal. Following the description of her "political awakening," Mock continues:

> This widespread visibility has shifted culture and challenged misconceptions. People often transpose the coming-out experience on me, asking how it felt to be in the closet, to have been stealth. These questions have always puzzled me. Unlike sexuality, gender is visible. I never hid my gender. Every day that I stepped out into the sunlight, unapologetically femme. I was a visible woman. People assume that I was in the closet because I didn't disclose that I was assigned male at birth.[199]

Mock's wording here is key. By describing others' attempt to compare her narrative to that of a coming-out as "transposing," which means to "cause (two or more things) to change places with each other," or to "transgender to a different place or context," Mock suggests that both passing and being in the closet are concepts that depend on an element of hiding or covering over

[199] Mock, *Redefining Realness,* 257

something to be shown. Mock thus argues that an unapologetically open femme stance toward gender does not mean passing as a woman or "being in the closet."

Mock's narratives about her multiracial trans girlhood reveal the limits of the traditional concepts used thus far to differentiate non-normative desires and behaviors around gender and sexuality. Broadly, Mock's self-fashioning practices and knowledge-making processes illustrate how black trans life writing helps us see gaps and insufficiencies with inherited knowledge of gendered-racial-sexual non-normativity, and the regimes of unprotection that often lurk in those gaps. Her refusal of inherited conceptions and her desire to discursively reframe the trans woman of color in the U.S. demonstrates Patricia Hill Collins's four tenets of black feminist epistemology (lived experience, dialogue, ethics of care, and personal accountability) at work in blacktransfeminist thought.

Mock's position on passing, as espoused in *Redefining Realness,* shifts the center of passing from desiring cisness or proximity to "normalcy" to a radically independent subjectivity. In other words, while centering the embodied knowledge and experience of trans women, Mock suggests we shift our attention away from the hegemony of passing as secretive or illusory in nature to the professed and practiced realities that we embody. "If a trans woman who knows herself and operates in the world as a woman is seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman, isn't she just being herself? She isn't *passing;* she is merely *being*."[200]

Returning to Mock's position on beauty reveals how she transforms our thinking on passing. In *Redefining Realness,* Mock admits, "Objectification and sexism masked as desirability were a bittersweet part of my dream fulfilled."[201] Despite this harassment, Mock

[200] Ibid, 155.
[201] Ibid, 156.

finds validation in receiving sexism, as it affirms her perceived womanhood. However, she understands that pretty privilege contributes to this dilemma as much as sexism and objectification.

There are positive and negative aspects of passing for Mock. The positives are the presumption of safety, being more readily perceived as her gender, and a psychic satisfaction that ensues from such validation. The negatives are that passing encourages the policing of appearances and external beauty, and Mock becomes distant from some of her friends in the development of stealthier social movements. Mock's divestment from the supposed "ease of life" associated with passing as cisgender is epistemologically embedded in her narrated belief that cisness is "not more valuable or legitimate"[202] than transness.

Mock's epistemological refusal does not end with passing. She also offers a different understanding of what constitutes being "closeted," or not explicitly or actively out about one's non-normative gender and sexual identities. Her position as a young mixed black girl in Oahu, Hawai'i provided both safety and clarity, but also caused antagonism around her gender non-conformity. If we understand the closet as Sedgwick and other queer theorists have theorized it, then such a space would not apply to Mock, whose treatment of her gendered experience rarely, if ever, included concealment, denial, repression, or inhibition of her femme gender and how it manifested in her embodiment, sexuality, and fashion. Mock's narrative is about the many practices she undertook to either fit, explore, or resist gendered assignments placed upon her and their attendant consequences.

The perspectives on passing and being closeted that Mock explores in her life writing reveal how embodied knowledge and narrative imagination can structurally shift the terms of

[202] Ibid, 237.

conversation regarding trans visibility and subjectivity. As social marginalization is structured by varying interconnected apparatuses of power and domination, Mock's structural critique reveals how transmisogyny, colorism, and other attendant forms of power assigns meaning to the subjectivity of girls like Mock. Trans women of color reclaim their agency in their life writing by pointing to the structural ways in which they are impacted by compounding oppressive regimes of control. Understanding Mock's engagement with race becomes especially crucial. As Mecca Jamilah Sullivan notes, "Reimagining social and bodily worlds through a poetics of difference requires imaginative feats of language. Creative, secret, furtive acts of linguistic reinvention in African Diaspora women's literature work to inscribe community, articulate intimacy, and create space for subversive modes of collective engagement through disallowed expressions of the erotic."[203]

3.3 Writing Herself into the Black Feminist Literary Tradition through Narrative Self-Fashioning

We can best understand Mock's theorizations on the interrelated systems of race, gender, class, and sexuality by turning to her intertextual conversation with other black writers. Her reliance on the black literary canon constitutes another form of self-fashioning that critically (re)imagines and refigures the discursive trans woman of color figure.

Searches for *Redefining Realness* on platforms such as Google, YouTube, and TikTok yield results that mostly consist of reading lists, top tier books of a genre or identity category, or a celebratory list of a month dedicated to recognizing cultural groups, such as Black History

[203] Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference,* 158.

Month in February or Women's History Month in March. Often included on these lists are authors such as Maya Angelou (see Chapter 2), James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde.

While interviewing Mock about her first memoir, literary scholar Tim Lyle asks about the author's connection to Baldwin, specifically her inclusion of epigraphs from Baldwin and Ralph Ellison in the memoir given that both are black cis men. Baldwin's influence on Mock comes in the form of nuanced perspectives on civil rights as cultural moments unfold, situate queerness as non-normative as key and not contradictory to black liberation. Perhaps turning to Mock's second memoir might shed some light. In *Surpassing Certainty,* as the narrated Mock deepens her reading and writing practice, working through heartache and loneliness, she quotes Baldwin: "All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up." She continues: "His words were a salve, encouraging me to tell myself stories. These writings—some fiction, some memoir—gave me a chance to give testimony to where I had been. For so long, I had believed that pretending I had come from nowhere would protect me, save me."[204]

Looking to cultural forebears draws our attention to how racialized gender blocks off revolutionary struggle and that to succeed in resisting oppression. For example, in the 1970s, black feminist writer Toni Cade Bambara called for black androgyny in *The Black Woman.* This call for black androgyny was echoed years later in a piece by James Baldwin. In his essay "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin connects his experiences as a young black gay man living in Harlem to a theory of androgyny, linking enslavement and anti-black racism to the assumption of normative masculinity as the "American ideal of sexuality."[205] This particular ideal becomes clearest in

[204] Mock, *Surpassing Certainty,* 212.
[205] Baldwin "Here Be Dragons," 197.

American society after its "vast and deep and sinister" change: the violent capture and enslavement of Africans. Prior to this sinister change, Baldwin writes, "One may say that this was nothing more than the ancient and universal division of labor—women nurtured the tribe, men battled for it."[206] As Bambara did in *The Black Woman*, Baldwin draws our attention to the serious and persistent rupture of the Atlantic slave trade and the capitalist, white supremacist roots it would grow in the "New World," and the way in which, as Hortense Spillers would say, the black body became ungendered. In "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin turns to androgyny, both figuratively and literally, to illustrate the weakness and falseness of American masculinity, particularly when it comes to sexuality. He describes being approached by other young men who seemed straight but would proposition him sexually when they were alone. To Baldwin, it did not make sense for men to openly express heterosexist ways but harbor secret desires for other men. He celebrates public figures who embrace their androgyny, such as Michael Jackson and Boy George, about the latter of whom he writes, "Such figures as Boy George do not disturb me nearly so much as do those relentlessly hetero(sexual?) keepers of the keys and seals, those who know what the world needs in the way of order and who are ready and willing to supply that order."[207] Additionally, the concept of androgyny permits Baldwin to describe how slavery, colonialism, and racism continue to shape the lives and experiences of all people, and not just in a gendered sense. He declares, "But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other."[208] Here, Baldwin's interpretation of what androgyny reveals about us in

[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid, 208.
[208] Ibid, 209.

American society seemingly responds to Bambara's call for taking on an androgynous self in the pursuit of social transformation and true self-autonomy. Baldwin reveals how processes of racialization and imposition of the gender binary attempt to divide, categorize, and manage us, and therefore, resistance to that binary system permits a more radical form of political and social self-determination.

These earlier perspectives on blackness and gender draw our attention to how gender, particularly racialized gender, exists as a roadblock to revolutionary struggle and that in order to resist oppression, we must deconstruct and resist the trappings of the cis/trans gender binary. Contemporary black feminist, queer, and trans scholars and activists, such as CeCe McDonald, have absorbed these ideas and politics and continued to press on the cis/trans binary's usefulness for radical thinking and struggle. As Barbara McCaskill notes of Bambara's insurgent politics, we must "rely upon a 'chorus' of genres and speakers not only to unify Black women around collective concerns but also to problematize that unity and present a range of viewpoints and even sometimes competing perspectives."[209]

The literary foundation Mock cultivates as an adolescent and teen with writers like Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker—black women who experienced harm and desired freedom, acted on those desires and established their own agency—helps her understand Baldwin as she's figuring herself out, or, surpassing her own certainty. She then lands with Lorde, finding the strength she needs to be herself in all her complexity. Her gender-racial-sexual self-determination follows a similar progression, at least the narrative mirrors this progression, this movement towards truth, Mock's truth.

[209] Barbara McCaskill, "Life Writing of Contemporary African American Women," in *A History of African American Autobiography,* ed. Jocelyn K. Moody (New York: Routledge, 2021), 213.

In *Funk the Erotic,* L.H. Stallings claims that black writers' "fabrication of the transgender body serves as a spiritual decolonization to cease the continuous separation of spirit from body that Western embodiment perpetrates and that imperialists manipulated to enslave and terrorize."[210] I believe this spiritual dimension of being manifests in trans narratives in Lorde's conception of *the erotic,* if we can consider the erotic as that which helps connect Mock's self-fashioning practices to the politicization of her autobiographical aims as she negotiates the discursive terrain of black and brown trans women in the twenty-first century.[211] Stallings reminds us that black trans and gender non-conforming people have long been employing discursive practices that illustrate "black traditions willing to theorize illusive flesh as a form of metaphysical gender, less attached to the notion of a unified body."[212] By giving attention to the spiritual, and therefore erotic, self-fashioning practices Mock depicts in *Redefining Realness* and expands upon in *Surpassing Certainty*, we can better understand Mock's discursive framing of possibilities for young trans girls of color. Lorde's influence over Mock aligns with the latter's autobiographical aim of rhetorically shifting the discursive figure of trans women of color shifting from one of violable visibility to open capaciousness, able to evade discursive capture. As described by Amber Jamilla Musser, Lorde "was unapologetic about claiming a multiplicity of identities—mother, poet, warrior, lesbian, feminist, black—these identities made her aware of multiple forms of marginalization and enabled her to imagine a feminism robust enough to tackle difference and create authentic community."[213]

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[210] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* 216.
[211] Musser, "Re-membering Audre," 350.
[212] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic,* 216?.
[213] Amber Jamilla Musser, "Re-membering Audre," 351.

Black trans activist Ashlee Marie Preston has written in many print and online forums, and in one particular essay published online by *AFROPUNK* titled "a transwoman of color's guide to survival—self-care is key,"[214] her offerings resonate not only with Mock's rhetorical aim but with Lorde's work as well:.

> We're now shifting toward an existence that knows no boundaries. We are no longer accepting censorship over our identities. The process of erasure begins in the mind and works its way outward. It guts us of our potential, dreams, and our sense of self. We can combat it by imagining ourselves in places other than an open casket.

The language of "no longer accepting" and processes working their way outward allows us to think alongside Lorde's concept of the erotic. The erotic connects thinking about Mock's participation in neoliberal publishing conventions, the limits of resistance and discursive re-framing, and how we move forward with different conceptions than before. As Grace Hong argues, Lorde' erotic helps us understand and feel "the ways in which contemporary power operates principally by producing 'surplus people'—those whose lives are rendered unprotectable because of their departure from norms—under neoliberal capitalism as organized by race and gender as well as sexuality."[215] Given these connections, the connection between Mock and Lorde as life writers is considerable. Not only does Lorde inaugurate the genre of biomythography with her 1987 book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, she mobilizes autobiographical imagination through the multivalence of "Zami." As Mecca Jamilah Sullivan notes, *Zami* "(as self-naming, as genre, and as proof of a black queer history), Lorde retools the term to link processes of self-definition, genre innovation, historical self-location, and coming-

[214] Ashlee Marie Preston, "A Transwoman Of Color's Guide to Survival—Self-Care Is Key," *AFROPUNK*, 7 July 2017, Web: n.p.
[215] Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal,* 75.

of-age. 'Zami' thus serves not only as a 'new spelling' of Lorde's name, but also as a new way of writing black queer processes of being, belonging, and becoming."[216] I contend Mock's rhetorical moves mirror those of Lorde's in *Zami*, as demonstrated by Sullivan. Mock, too, is engaging in cultural practices of self-naming, engaging with current and ongoing discourses around trans autobiography, and providing a sense of relationality and continuity among black, queer, trans, feminist, and other marginalized writers.

3.4 Tensions with Mock's Narrative Self-Fashioning

As one of the most notable memoirs written by a trans woman of color, Mock's *Redefining Realness* accomplishes the rhetorical goal of multicultural pluralism, an attempt to equalize everyone through spreading information and raising awareness in a compassionate and experience-based way. However, power imbalances are of note here. Jian Chen mentions the populism in Mock's memoir, which shows through her definition of terms, and other clear gesturing toward readers who may be unfamiliar with the vocabulary and sociality of LGBTQ+ communities. I contend that Mock and her autobiographical writing maintain the potential for radical action, namely the creation of literary counterpublics where the experiences of trans women of color are accepted and understood as having something to teach us about our society and how we might change it for the better. These counterpublics rely on intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches. Mock's autobiographical work, coupled with blacktransfeminist analysis such as presented here, demonstrates the strength of what Kara Keeling calls "interdisciplinary knowledge—that is, knowledge that transforms the disciplines while creating

[216] Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference,* 31.

other forms of knowledge—might still be fashioned into a weapon directed against the investment in interdisciplinarity as a strategy of control."[217] This project, then, attempts to hold space for the capaciousness of Mock's autobiographical accomplishments along with the tensions that the tokenization of her narrative engender.

Mock's desire to depict one of many possible life paths for low-income trans girls of color and to speak for and to those girls is a key factor in the writing and publication of *Redefining Realness.* One can imagine both the sadness and joy Mock experienced when she learned that CeCe McDonald, a black trans woman incarcerated for justified self-defense, knew who Mock was and thanked her for centering McDonald and incarcerated trans women in a recent feminist speaking engagement. In an open letter to McDonald published on Mock's website on January 13, 2014, Mock expresses her gratitude for McDonald's recognition and solidarity by spreading awareness about the case, sending books to McDonald, and keeping correspondence with her, which, as I discuss at length in the next chapter, is a major political goal in McDonald's emerging abolitionist practices of defying the isolating mechanism of the U.S. prison industrial complex. Beyond being concurrent temporal moments, the tears Mock cries over the violences McDonald suffered shapes how and why Mock begins to tell her own story. In fact, by attending to McDonald's case, Mock can recognize her own position as a trans woman of color perceived as "acceptable and appropriate"[218] enough by the mainstream to represent (all) trans women of color on the public stage. This recognition signals what Mock describes as her own "political awakening,"[219] and thus the literary and political connections between Mock and McDonald evidence why black trans life writers matter, and how life writing

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[217] Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures,* 13.
[218] Janet Mock, "Because of You: My Letter to CeCe McDonald on Her Release,"*Janet Mock,* January 13, 2014, Web. https://janetmock.com/2014/01/13/open-letter-to-cece-mcdonald-prison-release/.
[219] Ibid.

can be a vehicle for conveying the significance of their connection. Mock is expanding the discursive figuration of trans women of color through the narrative practices in her life writing, through traditional publishing and online life writing in blogposts. As Aimee Meredith Cox states, "but being held in a discursive frame…allows you to speak back to it."[220] And as Matt Richardson reminds us of the "gendered act of becoming: through a variety of experiences, histories, and circumstances."[221]

One cannot help but compare Mock's open letter of solidarity to McDonald to James Baldwin's open letter to political prisoner Angela Y. Davis in 1970. The epistemological and spiritual bridges between Baldwin, Davis, Mock, and McDonald, I believe, suggest a strong and thorough literary and political inheritance that animates today's movement toward social progress and liberation for black, brown, queer, and trans people.

[220] Cox, *Shapeshifters,* 26.
[221] Matt Richardson, "Ajita Wilson," 193.

Chapter 4: Redefining Prison Abolition: Critical Imagination in CeCe McDonald's Prison Life Writing

One thing I've learned, which was brought to my attention from a close friend, was that throughout this case, from the beginning to end, all of us have played a part in this "mirroring effect," where we see each other as we saw ourselves, giving to each as we would, or have wanted to, for ourselves. And in each of us was that struggle, and that was also seen, so like we would have tried for ourselves we uplifted and encouraged each other to go beyond our natural selves and to have faith to move mountains.

- CeCe McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves": The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald

On the quiet night of June 5, 2011, three drunk neo-Nazis[222] exiting a bar verbally, and then physically, harassed a group of young black passerby as they were leaving a twenty-four-hour market in Minneapolis.[223] Among the black youth was CeCe McDonald, a twenty-two year old black trans woman and fashion student at the Minneapolis Community and Technical College.

[222] I intentionally name the instigators of this attack as neo-Nazi white supremacists not only because of the swastika found on Dean Schmitz's chest post-autopsy but also to clearly mark the power structure upheld by their actions despite their intoxication (or possibly because of it). Individual instances of interpersonal bias based on antagonistic reactions to gender/sexual nonnormativity and racial capitalism uphold ideologies of hegemonic power structures, the consequences of the invisibilizing of gender/sexual nonconformity and the routine violences that accompany it. For more on these connections within the prison industrial complex, see works by Liat Ben-Moshe, Angela Y. Davis, and Sarah Haley.

[223] Throughout this chapter I repeatedly return to the story of McDonald's attack and experiences with the prison industrial complex. For other academic accounts of the attack, see Julia R. Johnson, "Cisgender Privilege, Intersectionality, and the Criminalization of CeCe McDonald: Why Intercultural Communication Needs Transgender Studies" (2013), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson, "From Black Transgender Studies to Colin Dayan: Notes on Methodology" (2015) and Mia Fischer, *Terrorizing Gender: Transgender Visibility and the Surveillance Practices of the U.S. Security State* (2019).

White supremacist Dean Schmitz[224], along with his former girlfriend Molly Flaherty and at-the-time current girlfriend Jenny Thoreson, spat insults at McDonald and her friends, referring to them as "nigger lovers,"[225] "faggots," and "trannies," indicating their intersecting anti-black racism, homophobia, and transantagonism. Refusing this degradation, McDonald and her friends verbally responded to their harassers, and the altercation soon escalated to physical violence. Flaherty initiated the physical element of the altercation, throwing a drink at the group, and then breaking a beer glass in McDonald's face. McDonald suffered deep lacerations and needed immediate medical attention. Schmitz came to Flaherty's aid, and, in an act of self-defense, McDonald pulled a pair of fabric scissors[226] from her purse and fatally stabbed Schmitz in the chest. McDonald and her boyfriend flagged down the police and, despite her compliant initiative during the conflict, was immediately arrested, eventually handcuffed to her hospital bed, and charged with one count of second-degree murder. She remained in custody throughout the duration of her trial until she posted bail on October 6, 2011. From the beginning of her court hearings, McDonald maintained a plea of self-defense given the threat she faced from Flaherty and Schmitz. Despite McDonald's clear need to protect herself and her friends from white supremacist transphobes, the state criminalized her act of self-defense.

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[224] Interestingly, though Schmitz's autopsy report revealed the swastika tattoo on his chest, and despite the public knowledge of the swastika as a symbol of racism and white supremacist ethnocentrism, the tattoo was ultimately deemed inadmissible and not used as evidence to validate McDonald's claims of self-defense against someone with clear antagonistic intent against the gender-racially-sexually oppressed. Numerous previous criminal charges aside—it is imperative to maintain an abolitionist analysis here by not placing faith behind state-sanctioned criminal charges—it is bizarre that the sociohistorical bearing of this symbol did not lead to the presupposition of *his* guilt. For more on this aspect of McDonald's trial, see Andy Mannix, "CeCe McDonald murder trial: Behind the scenes of the transgender woman's case" (2012), https://web.archive.org/web/20131005083617/http://www.citypages.com/2012-05-09/news/cece-mcdonald-murder-trial/3/.

[225] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson address the peculiarity of a group of black people being called "nigger lovers" and suggest that it could relate to the white supremacist fear of miscegenation and an attempt at solidifying racial boundaries. For further explanation, see their essay "From Black Transgender Studies to Colin Dayan: Notes on Methodology" (2014).

[226] Of importance, I think, is the fact that the tool of survival McDonald wields is also a tool for education and training.

Rapid news coverage of McDonald's case led to her elevated public profile; she gained thousands of nationwide supporters. Her case attracted other trans public figures, such as writers Janet Mock, Kate Bornstein, and Leslie Feinberg, reigniting a spark in public discourse around trans people and the prison industrial complex.[227] McDonald's conviction of her worthiness and her claims of self-defense connects discourses of racialized gender violence directed toward trans women of color and the prison industrial complex. Through her involvement with the Minneapolis-based organization Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN), the CeCe McDonald Support Committee was established both digitally and locally to provide updates on McDonald's trial proceedings and requests from community as the number of supporters continued to increase. The Support Committee's online blog archived all the moving parts of McDonald's case and created a nationwide system of support. On May 2, 2012, McDonald accepted a plea deal of forty-one months in prison for second-degree manslaughter. During her time in prison, McDonald kept extensive letters and journal entries documenting her experiences while incarcerated. Her letters touched on an array of topics, including her family history, medical and social transition, violence, relationships with traditionally masculine cisgender men, and her evolving sexual and personal identities. "CeCe's Blog" on the Support Committee's website consistently updated community members about McDonald's case and provided direct access to the letters she produced while incarcerated. During McDonald's trial proceedings, a second count of manslaughter was added to her sentence, resulting in a plea bargain and twenty-eight months spent captive inside the Hennepin County Jail Stillwater and St. Cloud facilities—a

[227] Scholarship and activism around trans and gender non-conforming people and the U.S. prison industrial complex has steadily gained traction since the first edition publication of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* in 2011. For more on these connections, see: Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (2nd ed., 2015), and Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (2021).

significant fraction of time which was spent in solitary confinement given her trans identity inside men's prison facilities. On January 13, 2014, McDonald was finally released from prison, and she almost immediately became a highly visible individual in the public eye.

McDonald's public profile as a formerly incarcerated black trans woman and emergent voice for prison abolition led to the production of various narratives about how the violence of the prison is connected to anti-blackness, gender normativity, and sexual stigma, all of which increase the likelihood and severity of violence for trans and gender non-conforming people of color in carceral spaces. In collaboration with McDonald and actress Laverne Cox, filmmaker Jac Gares began filming the documentary *Free CeCe!* in order to document McDonald's experiences and make a case for how the prison industrial complex harms trans women of color and others ensnared by the matrix of gender-racial-sexual oppression. In this way, the PIC functions as a site of the distribution of queer necropolitics, or a site of "mundane and normalized violence of racism and gender normativity."[228] In the same year of 2014, McDonald penned the foreword to the second edition of Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith's groundbreaking anthology *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. In May 2017, the leading non-medical transgender studies journal *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* published a selection of McDonald's prison letters, prefaced with an introduction by black queer studies scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley who contextualizes the letters within larger conversations around racialized gender violence, femmephobia, and alternative ways of resisting the long durée of violence and oppression against black queer and trans folks.

[228] Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Siliva Posocco, eds., *Queer Necropolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2014): i.

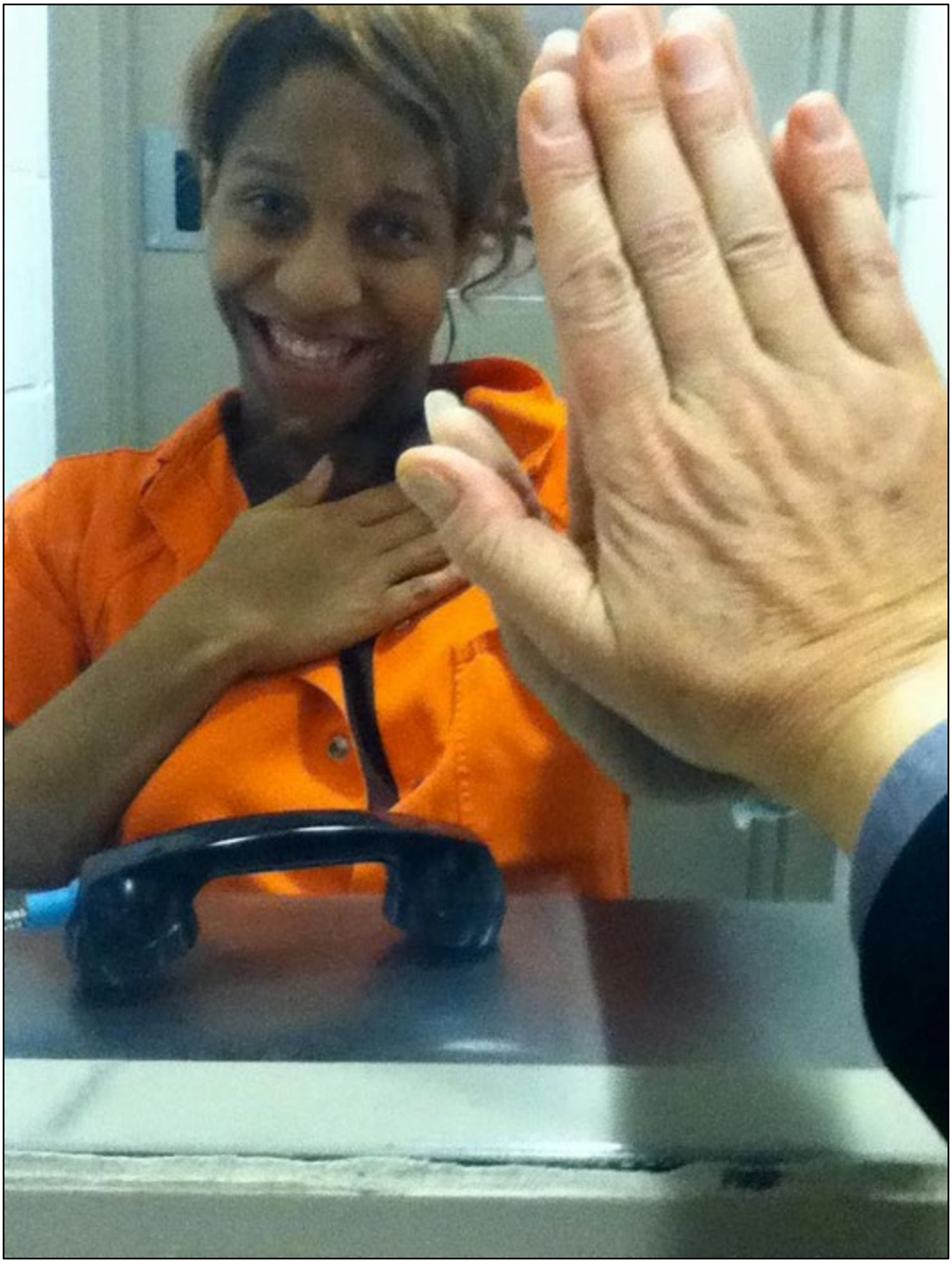

Figure 4: Photograph of CeCe McDonald and Leslie Feinberg at Hennepin County Jail, May Day 2012

Each of McDonald's cultural texts—the documentary, the anthology foreword, and prison letters—evidence her ongoing narrative engagement with her own experiences of assault

and criminalization and how writing, art, and film contextualize and make legible those experiences within larger discourses about historical legacies of violence against black women and trans and gender non-conforming people, the prison industrial complex, and the tools needed to struggle against all of it. While her prison writing is a clear demonstration of life writing and thus exists comfortably under that label, I contend that McDonald's foreword in *Captive Genders* can also be classified as a form of life writing. McDonald describes how her experiences of self-defense and incarceration, understood through the prism of her youth, blackness, transness, and femme-ness, offer a generative frame for the why, when, and how of prison abolition, specifically in racialized queer and trans communities.

This chapter addresses these questions in three sections. First, I argue that McDonald shifts the definition of self-defense, demonstrating that writing can be an act of self-defense because it centers her layered, nuanced experiences of transmisogynoir[229], granting her agency in furthering her political goals, and evading the prison industrial complex's aim to sever incarcerated people's connection to broader community support and stability. Self-defense can be embodied as well as literary and artistic. Writing, especially imaginatively, helps make McDonald's vision clearer for herself and her reading audience. Next, I show how McDonald's writing participates in Marquis Bey's conception of blacktransfeminist thought. She accomplishes this by employing imaginative language to make her politics accessible to wider audiences. Furthermore, she ruminates on her experiences of interpersonal and structural

[229] The Transgender Law Center defines transmisogynoir as "a term coined by writer Trudy as the specific oppression of Black trans feminine people where anti-Blackness, cissexism, and misogyny form a unique system of oppression. The term comes from 'misogynoir' coined by Black Queer feminist Moya Bailey, who created the term to address the unique experience of misogyny directed toward Black cis women in American visual and popular culture." This term brings our attention as closely as possible to the ever-shifting location of black trans women and femmes in an anti-black, racial capitalist patriarchal world. For more on trans/misogyny/noir, see https://transgenderlawcenter.org/black-trans-women-black-trans-femmes-leading-living-fiercely.; Julia Serrano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2016), and Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (2021).

violence and identifies contradictions within political structures that circulate on interpersonal as well as institutional levels. These structural conditions constitute a violent and willfully neglectful ideology I term *regimes of unprotection,* one that purposefully constructs gender-racial-sexual minorities as "Others," unworthy of the protection, felt or material, available in the dominant social schema of value. The chapter concludes by[230] emphasizing how integral community is to McDonald's story, and how storytelling and imagination fuel her desire to take up and sustain political work.

4.1 Self-Defense as Radical Creative Praxis

Returning to the night of June 5, 2011: McDonald recounts the ease with which the police "assume[d] who the aggressors were—surely, for them, it had to have been the group of black kids who started all this drama."[231] McDonald's initiative of flagging down the police scene was rewarded with antiblack and anti-trans bias which resulted in McDonald not receiving timely or adequate care for the injuries she sustained while defending herself. This presupposition of guilt evidences gender-racial-sexual ideologies that position young, black, gender deviants as criminal whereas the white, straight, gender conforming parties are presumed innocent and rarely offer accountability.[232] McDonald's writing both counters the idea that trans women of color are not

[230] See Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 26; and Grace Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 77.
[231] CeCe McDonald, "'Go Beyond Our Natural Selves': The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4.2 (May 2017), 258.
[232] For more on the presupposition of black criminality, see Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012), Carl Suddler, *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* (2020), and Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (2021).

consciously theorizing about their own lives and disrupts the notion that violence is the ultimate, or most likely fate for such women.

McDonald's criminalized practice of self-defense is an ideological product of the historical violences of racialized gender and white supremacist notions of property. Works such as Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here* (2016), and Emily Thuma's *All Our Trials* (2019) discuss at length why the matter of self-defense was and remains critical to black women's agency and conceptions of freedom. Employing interdisciplinary methods, this body of work illuminates why self-defense remains a politicized act for black women, and it offers social and historical contexts that link moments across time that reveal the paradoxical nature of what historian Sarah Haley terms the "gendered-racial-sexual ideologies"[233] that continue to govern the dominant social order. Additionally, this body of scholarship suggests that discussions of self-defense, agency, and black women's history are vital to contemporary theorizations of black trans women's navigation of racialized gender violence and the prison industrial complex. For example, the 1855 legal case *The State of Missouri v. Celia, A Slave*[234] determined that the defendant, an enslaved black woman named Celia, had no legal right to defend herself against her master, whom she testified had raped her for four years until she killed him. That same year, Celia was convicted and executed, upholding the ideology of the slave codes in effect at the time, which suggested that while enslaved people were property of their owners and thus incapable of any true legal autonomy (and thus ontological autonomy as well), they did, possess some degree of rationality. As literary scholar

[233] As a quick and quirky shorthand, I recommend thinking about gender-racial-sexual ideologies as GRS, which also refers to gender reassignment surgery/genital reconstruction.

[234] For more discussion on *The State of Missouri v. Celia, A Slave* (1855) and historical examinations of black women's engagement with and resistance to state punishment, see Nishaun T. Battle, "From Slavery to Jane Crow to Say Her Name: An Intersectional Examination of Black Women and Punishment" 2016).

Saidiya Hartman observes, these slave codes "acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave but only as it assumed the form of criminality."[235] Moreover, this denial, as Hartman points out, is always without "*white* culpability" or "*white* offense."[236] The intentionality and actions of white people are rarely considered in narratives saturated with the presupposition of black guilt. This lack of accountability, then, suggests that the dynamic between black women's self-defense and the racial-gendered-sexual ideologies that continue to dictate modern U.S. imperial sociality is inherently contradictory. If we understand the law and other normative operations of the state in service of the status quo as "an active archive, or technique of self-making and the making of selves,"[237] as Chandan Reddy claims, then we must be critical of how such institutions produce knowledge. The refusal to acknowledge enslaved black women's experiences of nonconsensual sexual violence continues to shape the presupposition of a black trans woman's guilt in a late-night altercation with drunk white supremacists.

Self-defense is an evident central theme in McDonald's political narrative; however, self-defense here is much more than just an embodied practice. It is also a radically creative and narrative process of self-making. Self-defense's shifting register here indicates McDonald's ability to harness imaginative modes of narrative to mobilize community building and political education, hallmarks of her blacktransfeminist politics.

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[235] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 80. For more on the historical linkages between blackness and criminalization, see Marquis Bey, "'Bring Out Your Dead': Understanding the Historical Persistence of the Criminalization of Black Bodies" (2016), Carl Suddler, *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York* (2020), and Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (2021).

[236] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 83.

[237] Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 166.

4.2 Imaginative Language and Regimes of Unprotection: Mobilizing Blacktransfeminist Analysis

Language in all its imaginative capacities lies at the heart of McDonald's political narrative and message. Throughout her political life writing, McDonald identifies numerous contradictions within the dominant sociopolitical ideologies that resulted in her incarceration because of necessary self-defense. Since childhood, McDonald experienced high levels of surveillance and policing around her sexual and gender expression. She describes a moment in her childhood when her uncle physically assaulted her because he found a personal letter she wrote to a boy in her class. After the assault, her uncle explained to her that he reacted that way because he did not want her to die from AIDS because "gay people get AIDS."[238] McDonald responds to this exchange in her November 5, 2011 letter titled "Pursuit of Happiness": "And of course everything he said went through one ear and out the other. Once again listening to the ignorant statements of a person…as if straight people can't get AIDS."[239] McDonald discredits her uncle's presumptions by reminding us that HIV/AIDS is not an illness unique to gay and queer people; rather, it is an epidemic that impacts millions of people around the world, most of whom are statistically not gay and queer.[240] McDonald directs our attention to the uncle's contradictory behavior. McDonald, claiming that she was not sexually active at the time, was the recipient of violence from a family member who claimed he exerted such force over her to

[238] McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves," 249.

[239] Ibid. There is danger in this narrative, for, as Gayle Salamon claims, "it uses a familiar narrative of sexual orientation to obscure and ultimately erase a less familiar one about gender expression" by justifying violence based on the logic of "characterizing non-normative gender as itself a violent act of aggression" (2018: 4-5).

[240] For more on the relationship between HIV/AIDS and black queer/trans communities, see Cathy Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (1999), Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender and Performance in the Detroit Ballroom Scene* (2013), Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture" (2015), Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani's *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (2020), and Che Gossett and Eva Hayward's forthcoming special issue in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* on HIV/AIDS.

protect her from a disease that *he* believed she was destined for should she continue to live with what he perceived to be a gendered-sexually deviant lifestyle. By inflicting harm on McDonald with the professed intention of keeping her from harm (i.e. contracting HIV from queer sexual behavior), her uncle helps root in McDonald's (sub)conscience what he and others who deploy homophobic and transphobic violence presume to be natural and true: the inevitable threat or presence of omnipresent violence for gender nonnormativity, specifically black fem(me)inity.[241] Because of her gendered-sexual nonnormativity, McDonald is aware that she must always expect and be on alert for violence or discrimination. In the seventh grade, this lesson proved true again when McDonald was jumped by high school boys because she spoke up for herself.

After recounting these violent events in her childhood, McDonald details her responses to this trauma, such as asking God, "Please, please change me. Please make me straight," a common response queer youth, especially black queer youth, have in reconciling their nonnormative gender and sexual identities with expectations to meet cisheteronormative standards. While both moments taught McDonald that being gender variant was deserving of punishment, the latter demonstrated how offensive defending one's gender variant self from others who would enforce gender and sexual normativity is. According to her uncle's logic, someone perceived as deviant is always guilty and in need of punishment, or correction.[242] McDonald's reflections on these moments to illustrate how normative gendered-racial-sexual ideologies posit self-defense as nearly impossible for those who exert gender self-determination and refuse to follow normative gender and sexual scripts. Through self-education in prison,

[241] McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves," 245.

[242] The next section explicitly links this idea to the imaginative ways in which McDonald disrupts the intended logics of the prison industrial complex in her political life writing, how her theorizing of trans women of color's lives attempts to evade systems of capture and containment.

McDonald develops a political awareness in which she links her early experiences of transmisogyny to sexism and self-defense in her blacktransfeminist analysis.[243]

One of the intellectual links between black feminist thought and trans feminism is the development of a political analysis based on material experiences of systems of harm designed to become invisible due to their normalcy and frequency.[244] As trans studies scholars Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah affirm, "[Trans people] can articulate critical knowledge from embodied positions that would otherwise be rendered pathological, marginal, invisible, or unintelligible within dominant and normative organizations of power/knowledge."[245] McDonald's letters convey her own consciousness-raising by highlighting how the contradictions she observed since childhood inform larger power structures that govern our social realities. In her letter titled "Violence against (Trans)Women Today," she queries, "How can society say that it detests and challenges violence against women, when there is very little, if any, real help for us, and the help we give ourselves results in punishment?"[246] The contradictory position McDonald critiques here is one that maintains that violence against women is wrong and should be challenged *unless* women dare to defend themselves from violence. This begs the following question: what is it

[243] Here, I'm thinking specifically alongside Chandan Reddy's use of immanent critique in which he "positions queer of color critique as the dialectical politicization of these contradictions" (2011: 18).
[244] By focusing on this particular linkage between these two bodies of thought I am far from suggesting that this is the only linkage. Black feminism and trans feminism have co-formulated theories of nonnormative embodiment, politics of labor and care, the usefulness of the category "woman," and even the social organization of the "Human." For more, see Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto" (2003), Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (2014), Marshall Green, "The Essential I/Eye in We: A Black TransFeminist Approach to Ethnographic Film" (2015), Marshall Green and Marquis Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation" (2017), Nat Raha, "Transfeminine Brokenness, radical Transfeminism" (2017), Treva Carrie Ellison, "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender" (2019), Cameron Awkward-Rich, "Thinking Black [Trans] Gender" (2019), and V. Varun Chaudhry, "On Trans Dissemblance: Or, Why Trans Studies Needs Black Feminism" (2020).
[245] Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014), 9.
[246] McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves," 258.

about women's self-defense that is so offensive to such social orders that profess to value women's safety?

Though she offers no clear answer, McDonald helps move us closer to an answer by emphasizing both her own right to defense and the ways in which women are connected through criminalized self-defense. The letter begins by defining the issue of violence against all women as a global one: it is "a *major* problem in the *entire* world" and a dilemma that plagues "*all* women, which also includes transwomen."[247] By noting that violence happens to all women on all scales of society, from "harsh rule over a nation or domestic rule inside the household"[248] to all forms of street violence, McDonald reinforces the position that trans women are included in the category "woman," and she illuminates how universal and commonplace violence against women actually is. Recognizing the scales of violence against women in the world here aids McDonald in developing her own questions about women and self-defense in her prison writing. She specifies that trans women statistically experience higher volumes of violence than cis women, numbers that only worsen when racial bias and anti-blackness are also considered as factors to violence. She encourages her reader to understand that "everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk" for trans women of color,[249] such as using public transportation, going to the grocery store, or even walking with friends down the street. McDonald explains, "If I never learned to assert myself…I would've never gained the courage to defend myself against those who have no respect or gratitude towards others in the world."[250]

[247] Ibid, italics mine.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid.

By emphasizing the need to assert herself, she means more than just standing up to a middle-school bully; McDonald posits that one must have a unique sense of oneself—especially the racialized, gender nonconforming self—as valuable and worthy of defense when needed. Without this deep self-awareness, McDonald suggests, she and other trans women of color "would have met [our] demise years ago."[251] I do not read this statement as suggesting that women who experience violence, whether they attempt to defend themselves or not, do not have this self-awareness. Rather, I argue that McDonald interprets the deep self-awareness that led to her acts of self-defense as evidence that other modes of living and being for black trans women are possible and worthy. As I discuss later in this chapter, McDonald's determination to build up black trans leadership is an avenue through which she articulates the marginalized subject as valuable and worthy of defense. When describing the values and mission of the Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN), she emphasizes the need for members of the queer and trans community:

> to have rights and a voice. To be able to walk in this world, not afraid and actually feel like a human being and not a shadow in a corner…But most importantly we are all worth it, worthy, beautiful strong, more than a binary, are able to become self-actualized, can and have already succeeded as a person, and of course, leaders.[252]

By extending her own courage to her community and advocating for this deep self-actualization through self-defense, McDonald begins to construct what bell hooks names a "a liberatory paradigm of black subjectivity," one that moves beyond resistance and oppositional worldviews and toward more radical and liberatory modes of knowledge.[253] Indeed, hooks would label

[251] Ibid.
[252] Ibid, 255.
[253] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 18.

visions such as McDonald as a successful deployment of what she yearns for, a "critical imagination,"[254] and so we can see how McDonald's blacktransfeminist analysis here, through imaginative autobiographical and narrative acts, embodies the critical trans* imagination I argue is inherent in the texts I examine in this project. Identifying contradictions is a critical first step in McDonald's political development, one that then allows her to deploy a politics of interruption[255] in her political life writing, which exemplifies how imaginative counternarratives produce new modes of thinking around black trans women's relationship to violence and freedom.

Just as Janet Mock invokes the alter ego "Keisha" when speaking to adolescent boys on the phone, so McDonald, too, has alter egos that allow her to connect with different community members in different ways. In select parts of her letters, she refers to her herself by one of her familial nicknames "HoneyBea." When asked about the self she presented in *Free CeCe!,* McDonald responds: "In the documentary, that's me; that's genuinely me. But that's not to say that I don't have multiple personalities, which I do. You know, you've got CeCe; you've got Chrishaun; you've got HoneyBea; and they all have their own personalities. I feel like you got a sense of all those people in the documentary. It's kind of like Beyonce's Sasha Fierce factor."[256] These distinctions among her "multiple personalities," I contend, constitutes another critical form of self-fashioning and self-making for McDonald. These distinctions allow McDonald to understand her subjectivity in all its nuance. In part, this falls in line with Marshall Green's contention that a critical Trans* method can "show us how people become representable as things, categories, and names because it shows us the excess as a perpetual challenge to

[254] Ibid, 19.
[255] For more on politics of interruption/disruption, see…
[256] Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, CeCe McDonald, and Toshio Meronek, "Cautious Living," 29.

containment."[257] The promotional images shot for the documentary *Free CeCe!* index McDonald's imaginative abolition and self-defense through embodied and creative avenues. The background is blue fading to white, and the bottom reads "Laverne Cox presents a documentary on one of the most controversial imprisonments of a trans woman in America." Her hair is braided back and her lip piercing and upper left shoulder tattoo are visible. The words "Free CeCe!" hang above her winged image, further emphasizing the need for freedom.

In the image itself, McDonald stands on a grassy field overlooking a city highline. A construction crane is also centered in the image, though obscured. McDonald is clear in the forefront, wearing a salmon pink silk dress with a hammer tucked into her belt. She's wearing wings that also appear to be braided into her braided hair somehow. She looks a bit dirty, as if dirtied by the hammer or wings or some combination of both. The dirt on her image seems as if it might be coming from the construction going on in the back, or perhaps from the dirt of the prison industrial complex. It seems that this hammer and these wings are imaginative tools that allow McDonald to aestheticize her demand for prison abolition. Tear it down!

4.3 Redefining Genre: Political Life Writing and Critical Trans* Imagination

The act of gaining literacy and producing an account of one's life and one's right to be free is at the foundation of black writing. These narratives illustrate how committing one's life to study and struggle is in the name of our collective liberation, and they provide sites of exploration for how to radically reimagine the terms on which our political structures are maintained. The fugitive slave narrative is one of the first uni9quely American literary traditions,

[257] Green, "Troubling the Waters," 79.

and it forms the foundation for understanding the cultural phenomenon of blackness and the political circumstance of black people in the Americas following the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[258] According to literary scholar Angelyn Mitchell, the fugitive slave narrative is unique as a foundational literary "genre of interruption"[259] that disrupts notions of the enslaved black person as incapable of producing a nuanced and moving account of their own life or a persuasive plea (or outright demand) for freedom. Mitchell demonstrates how contemporary black women's fiction, functioning as what she calls *liberatory narratives,* intertextually redefine concepts of freedom and liberation, focusing on freedom instead of enslavement, thus interrupting the hegemonic interpretation of slave narratives within black literary criticism.

Considering McDonald's political life writing as contributing to the literary and political traditions passed down from the fugitive slave narrative, then, we see how her writing deploys a politics of interruption that moves past dominant ideologies toward more liberatory possibilities. In recalling her difficult life experiences coupled with self-mediated political education, which included reading "the autobiographies of Assata Shakur and Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and the first edition of *Captive Genders,"*[260] McDonald mobilizes blacktransfeminist analysis to shed light on regimes of unprotection. I formulate this term

[258] Life writing constitutes the foundation of both black literary and cultural study, as well as transgender studies as an institutionalized field of study. By examining black trans women's life writing, which is situated among all these overlapping literary and political traditions, black feminist perspectives inform the legibility of trans life writing. This orientation urges us to question the genealogical roots of trans studies as a(n) (inter)discipline and offer more consideration to what could be considered the black feminist roots of the field. For more on this point, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Matt Richardson, "From Black Transgender Studies to Colin Dayan: Notes on Methodology" (2014), Treva Ellison, Marshall Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, "We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies" (2017), C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), V. Varun Chaudhry, "Trans/Coalitional Love-Politics: Black Feminisms and the Radical Possibilities of Transgender Studies" (2019) and "On Trans Dissemblance; Or, Why Trans Studies Needs Black Feminism" (2020), and Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies of Movement* (2019).
[259] Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 4.
[260] CeCe McDonald, "Foreword," *Captive Genders,* 1.

alongside Sarah Haley's contention that in the Jim Crow South "gender ideology was constructed and reiterated through discourses of protection,"[261] meaning that the category of gender is maintained by understanding white women as the protected class of subjects and thus the proper inhabitants of "female gender." If the proper inhabitants of gender are considered a protected class, then those who continue to experience lack of protection or defense in this social schema because of their difference must therefore be considered unprotected. Given this sociopolitical reality, regimes of unprotection is a biopolitical naming of how dominant structures of power purposefully construct certain populations of subjects as legally inviolable yet vulnerable to persistent violation.[262] In other words, groups negatively impacted by dominant gendered-racial-sexual ideologies, such as trans women of color, are contradictorily unprotected by the law and social status quo. I do not mean simply that trans women of color and other oppressed groups are left out of legal protections;[263] rather, I intend to draw attention to the specific ways in which trans women of color—or even those who are perceived approximate to that figure—are purposefully left unprotected by the law when they exert some form of self-determination. Regimes of unprotection, then, rely on the vulnerability and indefensibility of marginalized subjects and communities to construct an arena of precarity for those populations.

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[261] Haley, *No Mercy Here,* 8.

[262] I am grateful to Ruby C. Tapia for offering this language which helps shape my concept of *regimes of unprotection.* Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death* (2012) also informed the term's intention.

[263] Even when laws and policies are created with the intention of protecting individuals based on the myriad categories created for social management (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, etc.) the end result is rarely a significant decrease in violence experienced by such individuals, but rather an increase in such violence as well as incarceration rates. With the advent of the "transgender tipping point" around 2014, hate crimes legislation, specifically, has been a major discursive topic within trans studies. For more perspectives on hate crime legislation within the humanities, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of the Law* (2011), Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (2011), Eric A. Stanley, Dean Spade, and Queer (In)Justice, "Queering Prison Abolition, Now?" (2012), Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture" (2015), and Gayle Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* (2018).

More insidiously, such regimes rely on their circulation throughout general society as commonsense, therefore going unexamined.

McDonald demonstrates her abolitionist politic by highlighting the connection between former and current forms of captivity, stating, "Like slavery, there is no way around the violence of the PIC."[264] Furthermore, she asserts: "Millions of other people also get caught up in this system that evolved from the slave trade and is still maintained through racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and every other form of hierarchy."[265] McDonald's exploration of these historical relationships evidences how dominant institutions continue to contribute to regimes of unprotection through oppressive gendered-racial-sexual ideologies. McDonald's childhood experiences with abuse and assault, her treatment by the police despite seeking their aid for her urgent medical needs, and the inadmissibility of Schmitz's Nazi tattoo during her trial all fall under regimes of unprotection, calculated ways in which she was left vulnerable to violence because of racialized gender bias.

In this light, self-defense, particularly routed through McDonald's explained need for deep self-awareness, represents an epistemological rejection of these regimes. This rejection constitutes a politics of interruption by illuminating systemic ideologies that purposefully go unexamined. By questioning why self-defense is so precarious for women, despite political entities' claims about protecting women from violence, McDonald reveals the regimes of unprotection at work within dominant political institutions, such as the "faulty judicial system."[266] In her August 2013 letter "Injury and Insult: Trayvon Martin, Racism in the System, and a Revolution amongst Us," McDonald claims the broken system "treats us as second class

[264] McDonald, "Foreword," *Captive Genders,* 2.
[265] Ibid.
[266] McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves," 261.

citizens," with the "us" referencing "minorities."[267] and she personifies this system as an entity that systematically seeks to "laugh in our faces, throw salt on our wounds, and even piss on our graves."[268] This provocative imagery attests to McDonald's sense of abandonment by the institutions that protect some but not others. She creatively summarizes her understanding of regimes of unprotection by quoting lyrics from rapper Lil' Wayne's 2013 song "God Bless Amerika:" "God bless Amerika, this ol' godless Amerika…sweet land of kill 'em and let 'em die."[269]

McDonald enacts self-defense as a form of embodied interruption that cuts through the presupposition of black and trans criminality and makes visible the political net that attempts to ensnare her and other women punished for necessary self-defense. In her November 2016 letter "On Trans Day of Remembrance," McDonald maintains: "I would have rather been punished for asserting myself than become another victim of hatred."[270] This firm resistance to victimhood demonstrates McDonald's interruption of regimes of unprotection by way of their reliance on complicity in victimhood. This return to McDonald's originary declaration "that if I never learned to assert myself…I would've never gained the courage to defend myself"[271] signals her development of a radical, blacktransfeminist perspective which allows her to critique and imagine life beyond regimes of unprotection. Her perspective reveals why women's self-defense, especially trans women of color's self-defense, is so heavily criminalized and penalized by dominant institutions of power. Furthermore, McDonald's refusal to succumb to defenselessness and her ability to transform that refusal into validation of her genuine self-exemplify Audre

[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid, 255.
[271] Ibid, 258.

Lorde's notion that to be "in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, *self-denial*."[272]

McDonald acknowledges the lack of social or structural support for women's self-defense. She also includes the names of other black women incarcerated for self-defense: Patreese Johnson, Charmaine Pfender, Marissa Alexander, and Tanika Dickson. She follows this list with a declaration: "We are all victims of violence and the injustices and oppression of a faulty legal system and the PIC. And in memoriam of all our fallen sisters, this is for you! Our flames of resistance and tenacity burn bright in the efforts of a revolution for women."[273] Here, McDonald links black women's self-defense to gender self-determination by "collectivizing the struggle against both interpersonal and state violence."[274] McDonald links her struggle to other black women and in doing so she highlights a regime of unprotection in what critical prison scholar Stephen Dillon terms the "neoliberal-carceral state." As Dillon defines it, the neoliberal-carceral state is "the intimacy between the possession of life by the market under neoliberal economics and the exponential expansion of systems of racialized capture and caging under law-and-order politics."[275] At the same time, McDonald highlights the potential of revolutionary action in coalition across differences. Her letter thus reveals the need for a critical trans* imagination in resisting and moving beyond persistent historical ideologies that pressure black women to remain in cages, both physical and psychic. This radical desire situates McDonald's letter as an artistic expression of blacktransfeminist freedom/world-making. McDonald is

[272] Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 58, italics mine.
[273] McDonald, "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves," 259.
[274] Eric A. Stanley, "Gender Self-Determination," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014), 90.
[275] Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

operating not from a position of including trans women in dominant discourses around violence against women (or drawing cis women into her discussion of brutality against black trans women); rather, she is coming from a place of honoring differences while understanding that we are all similar in that we are all here, ensnared and captive, brutalized and disregarded.

According to autobiography studies scholar Margo V. Perkins, black women autobiographers rely on descriptions of pivotal moments in their early life and theorize them as a part of their radicalizing narrative.[276] Like many queer and trans youth of color, McDonald experienced violence and abuse at home as a result of her gender presentation and sexual orientation. This experience falls in line with Haley's declaration that historically "the home was sometimes a site of black female abjection." Despite the violence McDonald experienced at home, it did not deter her from forming long-lasting communities of support. This drive to maintain strong communal bonds follows McDonald through her incarceration, and ultimately, I argue, fuels her development as a prison abolitionist. One of the primary ways in which the prison industrial complex harms communities, especially queer/trans communities and communities of color, is by removing individuals from their communities and therefore cutting them off from material and emotional support. McDonald's radical blacktransfeminist project, as evidenced in her prison letters, indexes how her critically trans* imagination informs her desire to build and empower herself and her community, and to stay connected to that community despite the persistent violence of the prison industrial complex throughout her life.

Feminist geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore claims that there are many kinds of abolitions, not one monolithic political vision and praxis. Having consulted books such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and *Are Prisons*

[276] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 4.

Obsolete?, McDonald formulates a narrative of prison abolition that stresses the importance of imagining a world without prisons. She names this approach *imaginative abolition,* emphasizing imagination's centrality to prison abolition. I argue that imagination is perhaps the most difficult and queerest aspect of prison abolition, the most elusive and full of the most potential, and McDonald's framework of imaginative abolition demands that we dream of different ways of being in the world, namely a world without prisons, carceral logics, or punitive ways of addressing social need. "Indeed, one of the defining traits of contemporary Black women's writing is the presentation of the self as central rather than marginal,"[277] writes Mitchell. This perspective is situated along a tradition of black feminist attempts to recuperate the image of black women via modes of self-representation that highlight the agency of black women. By centering her experiences and those of trans women of color and women punished for self-defense, McDonald shifts the epistemic relationship between trans women of color and violence, opening up other relational possibilities. As a fashion student, McDonald embraces art and beauty as expressive modes. Her imaginative declaration "You can be cute, and wear talons, and be an abolitionist"[278] registers her affective relationship with beauty and fem(me)ininity as inseparable from her political relationship with prison abolition. Being cute, having long, talon nails, and being an abolitionist are all priorities for McDonald that help her navigate the world and exist in the world as a black trans femme woman. Her own relationship to prison abolition exemplifies her belief that "we have to make prison abolition inviting, so people can see it from their own perspective," as well as her didactic approach to building community and black trans leadership through her own life lessons and experiences. In doing so, McDonald contributes to a

[277] Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember,* 9.
[278] McDonald, "Foreword," *Captive Genders*, 2.

history of abolitionist thought that aims to shed light on what Stanley names the "affective common sense of carceral life that we all inhabit," and that it sinisterly "works in part by naturalizing its own necessity and by not allowing us to imagine beyond its domain."[279]

The political life writing of CeCe McDonald is a central artifact in the corpus of black trans women's life writing. In this writing, McDonald expands our political consciousness by demonstrating how a radical blacktransfeminist perspective can illuminate hidden structures of power and imaginatively work towards other possible forms of freedom/world-making. Similar to the other texts under examination in this project, McDonald's political life writing aims to enhance the livability of black trans women and trans women of color by theorizing alternative epistemological angles from which to creatively deepen one's self-awareness and value despite regimes of unprotection and other biopolitical forms of management, capture, and disposability. McDonald interrupts the intended function of these regimes by writing about her black trans femme life in expansive and colorful ways. She creates images, draws on literary and political traditions, and develops useful concepts and frameworks while surviving and working toward liberation—hers and others—in her life writing, emphasizing the creative power life writing has for helping trans women of color envision and actualize freedom. This creative power, then, transforms her political life writing from a collection of prison letters and forewords to a record of hope for girls like her.

[279] Ben-Moshe, Gossett, Mitchell, and Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture," 267.

Figure 5: "Trans Liberation: Building a Movement (CeCe McDonald)," a one-woman art piece created by Andrea Bowers

Conclusion; Or, How CeCe Says We Get Free

Figure 6 depicts the photographic portrait "Trans Liberation: Building a Movement (CeCe McDonald)" by Andrea Bowers. In the portrait, McDonald stands upright, her arms down to her sides, and outspread gray and black wings spread across her back with her hair weaved into the wings.[280] She wears a silky peach-colored dress and a belt with a hammer strapped to her side. Her makeup is beautiful and glowing, and she seems to be covered in some black dust or

[280] Here is another example of art symbolizing the importance of hair as a freedom-making aspect for black women and their self-fashioning.

soot. With McDonald foregrounded in the image, the background depicts a wide view of the metropolitan skyline. This portrait communicates complex symbolism of escaping the prison industrial complex and building something new while pursuing freedom. McDonald's hammer is a weapon, a tool with which to enact her *imaginative abolition.* "Art," C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp declare, allows figures like McDonald "to imagine modes of being that cannot be encompassed by their activist practices. This becomes a moment to reimagine how we structure not just the art world but also political work."[281]

Since education, community-building, and mobilizing power towards black trans leadership are key elements of McDonald's autobiographical and political goals, a key site of counternarrative she has cultivated is the launch of the #BlackExcellenceTour in 2015. As a collaborative project associated with the Black Excellence Collective, McDonald worked alongside black nonbinary activist Joshua Allen to create a tour that employed "art, activism, and storytelling to raise awareness and combat issues of systemic, intersecting oppressions faced by trans, gender nonconforming, and queer people of color, in order 'to broaden the narrative about what it means to be black and excellent at the same time."[282] Through this collective, McDonald, Allen, and other participants create a radical counterpublic that prioritizes the needs of queer and trans youth of color and advocates for centering creative expressions as "important means of self-care, healing, and community building."[283] We see here, then, how McDonald's concept of imaginative abolition mobilizes marginalized communities towards consciousness-raising, critical imagination, and gender self-determination. She extends the capacities of transgender

[281] Snorton and Yapp, eds., "Sensuous Contemplation," 7.
[282] Mia Fischer, Sarah Slater, CeCe McDonald, and Joshua Allen, "Transgender Visibility, Abolitionism, and Resistive Organizing in the Age of Trump: A Conversation with CeCe McDonald and Joshua Allen," *QED* 5.3 (Fall 20198), 182.
[283] Ibid.

studies and critical trans politics by urging us in our understanding of "the ways the gender binary and the powers that binary upholds are central to the ordering of modernity."[284]

Though McDonald and her political life writing is the center of my analysis here, it cannot be overstated how integral her sustained connection with community behind and beyond bar was to her ability to survive and engage in freedom-making through writing. Her work constitutes a particular kind of archive, what we might call *a record of hope,* proof that the difficult work of valuing one's gender-racial-sexually marginalized self within carceral racial capitalism is achievable.[285] Returning to the chapter's epigraph from McDonald's letters, this sustained hope is how we might develop the "faith to move mountains." McDonald's narrative demonstrates how integral and generative storytelling and creative acts of writing and theorizing are within the struggle for the liberation of oppressed people. Building upon the radical legacies of black feminist political life writers, such as Angela Y. Davis and Assata Shakur, McDonald connects her struggle with those of black cisgender women, survivors of varying forms of assault and abuse, and broader movements such as Black Lives Matter.[286] As the author of the foreword to *Captive Genders,* McDonald "remembers these radical histories and movements as evidence that our legacies are fiercely imaginative and that our collective abilities can, and have, offered freedom even in the most destitute of times."[287] Through these illuminated connections we can more readily understand how these interlocking forms of racialized gender violence manifest

[284] Ben-Moshe, Gossett, Mitchell, and Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture," 282.
[285] The work of crafting new kinds of records and archives is important for, as Syrus Marcus Ware notes, "we need to consider what we want to remember and how we want to remember it, building an archive of our movements going forward to ensure that intergenerational memory can inform our activism, community building, and organizing" (2017: 171).
[286] The texts McDonald draws upon to develop her abolitionist position are part of what Erica R. Edwards calls a "1970s surge of radical textuality," during which "Black women writers continued to draw necessary links between counterinsurgency abroad and policing at home, between selling books and selling out, between the canon wars and the drug wars, and between the war on terror and the war against Black radicalism" (2021: 36).
[287] Stanley and Smith, eds., *Captive Genders,* 14.

material consequences and how we can harness imagination as a form of resistance and struggle. Imagination sharpens our ability to create a world that no longer requires the punitive metrics of prisons, police, or surveillance. Furthermore, such a world allows transgression beyond hegemonic discursive figurations, such as that of the criminalized black trans woman. As critical theorists Liat Ben-Moshe, Che Gossett, Nick Mitchell, and Eric A. Stanley contest:

> The figure of the criminal so central to neoliberal carceral culture is one that the public is urged to turn away from in disgust, fear, and hatred—fear, disgust, and loathing of blackness, of the poor, of gender-nonconformity, (dis)ability, and queerness. Yet queer and/or trans abolitionist critical theory provide us with a counterdiscourse…which might be thought of as both offering a queer and/or trans abolitionist discursive frame and working within an emergent queer and/or trans abolitionist discursive field—where ableist, antiqueer, and antitrans dimensions of the figure(s) of the criminal are demystified.[288]

McDonald's life writing displays processes of self-making and self-loving over time, demonstrating how trans women and femmes of color critically imagine and construct innovative approaches to address transmisogynoir and other intentional structures of precarity. She harnesses several tenets of blacktransfeminist thought, such as a politics of interruption and the myriad theoretical frameworks about sociality, violence, and structural oppression, and mobilizes them through her critically trans* imagination to model possible paths for building power for queer and trans of color communities and continuing the struggle for creating more livable and joyful lives.

[288] Ben-Moshe, Gossett, Mitchell, and Stanley, "Critical Theory, Queer Resistance, and the Ends of Capture," 280-281.

Chapter 5: Redefining Technology: Venus Selenite's Digital Self-Fashioning Through Literary Technology

In the 1978 film *The Wiz*—an Afrofuturist reimagining of the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*—the protagonist Dorothy, played by the multi-talented Diana Ross, is whisked away from her home of 433 Prospect Place in New York City to the magical land called Oz. In Oz she must find her way home with her ragtag group of friends, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. On her journeys through Oz, Dorothy and her friends follow the Yellow Brick Road all the way to the Emerald City where the Wiz lives. Upon arriving in the glamorous city, the travelers are met with throngs of Emerald City citizens dancing in choreographed unison. Dorothy and friends look on in amazement as the citizens dance, twirl, and strut majestically around the perimeters of the city's center. The rhythm and beat of the music combined with the intricate choreography and opulence of the citizens reminds me of the fabulosity of Ballroom culture, where houses compete in balls in various categories, reimagining, and reshaping ideologies around racialized gender performance. It is this display of dynamic black excellence that constitutes the black queer awakening of interdisciplinary trans femme writer Venus Di'Khadijah Selenite, as described in xyr[289] personal essay "Finding Oz." This allusion situates Selenite's life story and need for imagination and self-expression as a black trans woman struggling while growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. By conjuring the affect

[289] Selenite identifies as an agender black queer disabled trans femme artist, abolitionist, sex worker, and musician who uses the neo-pronouns xe, xym, and xyr. For more biographical information on Selenite, see xyr website at https://msha.ke/venuskiithomas.

surrounding Dorothy's journey of self-discovery, Selenite demonstrates the interconnected importance of cultivating imagination, belonging, and self-making through the antagonistic structures she encounters in living and navigating the world.

Faith is part of Selenite's thinking, too, as "Finding Oz" is featured in the 2020 self-published collection *The Black Trans Prayer Book,* edited by J Mase III[290] and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi[291] two prominent black trans writers and cultural workers. In the essay, Selenite describes xyr movement from the traditional Baptist faith of xyr southern family to the more personally liberating practices of Nichiren Buddhism.[292] Selenite suffered a lot because of the rigid social norms around gender and religion maintained by the family, but while moving towards Buddhism, Selenite embraces the faith as one that "recognizes the paths of many people without the hailing judgments from fundamentalist and violent religions."[293] This is how Selenite feels about the Baptist faith imposed on xym since a young age growing up in Baton Rouge. This movement from Baptism to Buddhism, from the values with which xe grew up to a more self-determined path, accompanies practices of self-fashioning that carry faith as another dimension of self-determination and self-creation. In "Finding Oz," Selenite shows how the development of faith and spiritual practices is intimately tied to the search for sexual and gender self-

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[290] J Mase III is a Seattle-based Black/Trans/queer poet and educator, and author of *And Then I Got Fired: One Transqueer's Reflections on Grief, Unemployment & Inappropriate Jokes About Death as well as White Folks Be Trippin': An Ethnography Through Poetry & Prose* (2019). For more, visit https://jmaseiii.com/aboutmase/.

[291] Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi is a Nigerian, Cuban, Indigenous American performance artist, author, educator, and advocate, choreographer, priestess, speech writer, and healer. She is the first trans woman of color to be nominated for a Helen Hayes Award (2016) and the first in Washington, D.C. to publish a work of fiction, *Yemaya's Daughters* (2013). For more, visit https://www.ladydanefe.com/

[292] For more on the specificity of black women, Buddhism, and autobiography, see Tracy Curtis, "Born Into This Body: Black Women's Use of Buddhism in Autobiographical Narratives," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 27.1 (Summer 2012), 183-210.

[293] Venus Selenite, "Finding Oz," in *The Black Trans Prayer Book,* eds. J Mase III and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi (Self-published, 2020),120.

determination for black people. Here, the black aesthetic excellence of *The Wiz* inspires Selenite's discovery of imagination and its centrality to crafting xyr own life path.

The imagination that informs xyr own creative identity also led Selenite to make use of digital tools and technologies that further the rhetorical mission of elevating the livelihoods and stories of trans women of color. For Selenite, *The Wiz* was an" anointing," gesturing toward the spiritual ramifications of her need for imagination as a young black queer person. Selenite needs a fresh start, adding further meaning to xyr chosen surname and its relationship to selenite, a crystal known for its cleansing properties and help with ushering in new beginnings. This cleansing element, read alongside Selenite's need to leave Baton Rouge for a queerer, freer future, illustrates xyr autobiographical goal of demonstrating how seeking imagination, despite xyr enduring narratives of dis/affiliation, or narratives that attempt to describe the movement between active affiliation and disaffiliation with family.[294] As black feminist writer Akasha Gloria Hull contends, "The union of politics, spirituality, and creativity holds tremendous potential for both personal and collective transformation."[295]

Expressive examples of pre-Afrofuturism such as *The Wiz* plant seeds of imagination in the minds of writers like Selenite. Selenite's use of *The Wiz* as a conceptual foundation for xyr own story of leaving home, cultivating belonging, and imaging new life paths illustrates imagination's ability, through storytelling, to evoke other worlds. The retelling of the classic *The Wizard of Oz* tale through black musical, aesthetic, and narrative envisioning fulfills a set of rhetorical aims for black queer viewers, like Selenite. These aims include transmuting imagination into gender-racial-sexual self-determination. For, as Matt Richardson argues in *The*

[294] Smith and Watson, eds., *Reading Autobiography,* 155.
[295] Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2001), 8.

Queer Limit of Black Memory, "Retelling history in a way that places Black queer experience at the crux of Black life can challenge the dissociative absence of queers in Black memory. In the retelling, the queer becomes a source of strength and a cause of celebration of resistance."[296]

The allusion also weaves in elements of family and belonging, demonstrating Selenite's autobiographical writing here as what Smith and Watson call "narratives of filiation." However, given Selenite's need to grow past the fixed notions xyr family instilled, we may consider these narratives of *dis*affiliation, or moving away from the biological/established family and creating a more nuanced, queered understanding of chosen family and relationality through writing. Through Selenite's writing on digital platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Patreon, xe mentions the need to move away from family in Baton Rouge, geographically and emotionally. We see the rhetorical aims behind xyr narratives of disaffiliation in xyr collection of essays and poems *The Fire Been Here,* self-published in 2017. First, the collection shows that circumstances and relationships are not set in stone and fixed, but rather mutable, flexible, and malleable. Second, it demonstrates that rethinking an archetype, or something thought to be solid or fixed culture can be reimagined, and that such capacity shows that reimagining is central to the development of the gender-racial-sexual self-determination that Selenite is chasing.

As with Dorothy, this scene encapsulates the importance of leaving the nest to develop an inner strength, a core strength, that otherwise would not emerge. This connection between Dorothy and Selenite, then, suggests that being able to imagine, or at least cultivate an imagination, will aid in moving to the next level, where true transformation can take place. In other words, imagination is not simply the recreation of still images in the mind in service of play. Imagination is a critical facet of black queer and trans development, socially, politically,

[296] Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory,* 105.

and artistically. Dorothy finds the glitzy, glamorous Emerald City promising. Even if it is not her ultimate destination, it at least got her beyond her own doorstep of 433 Prospect Place. Planting seeds of imagination is crucial because it leads to further key developments for the trans woman of color writer.

Selenite's insistence on the need for imagination and its ability to inspire new ways of being in the world comes into view later in xyr career when they become involved in multidisciplinary art and activism. In 2013, black trans entrepreneur and technologist Kortney Ryan Ziegler created Trans*H4CK, a social justice project that "encourages the development of technology that will socially empower trans people."[297] The project launched with a hackathon, traditionally an event populated by "technophiles with interests in coding, data, and computer programming."[298] Ziegler takes the format of the hackathon and repurposes it specifically for innovation geared towards servicing transgender people. The winning innovation of the hackathon was the "Trans*ResourceUS, a searchable and editable Web and mobile wiki that provides information on employment, housing, and health,"[299] while second prize went to "Dotify.me, a social media mapping service that streamlines and makes anonymous trans surveys to better curate data."[300] Monica Roberts, as one of the judges of the competition, plays a significant role in the overall development of harnessing technology in service of trans women of color's elevation, which I discuss more later in the chapter. Through this organization, trans and allied technologists convene for hackathons, or community-scale digital resistance. In

[297] Tobias Raun, "Interview with Kortney Ryan Ziegler of the Trans*H4CK Project," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014), 280.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Raun, 283.
[300] Ibid.

September 2013, Trans*H4CK was "the first transgender hackathon that aimed to address issues specific to the transgender community."[301] In the interview with Raun, Ziegler asserts:

> I think one of the faults we have as cultural critics is to focus on things that might bring us harm in order to prevent it. In doing so, we block out the power inherent in seeing the bigger positive picture that expanding modes of communication through technology affords. I hope that we do continue to critique technology, especially as it concerns digital divides, but to also see how certain types of tech keep us alive.[302]

As a digital platform, Trans*H4CK allows for different modes of entrepreneurship, community-building, innovation, and social justice organizing.

Similarly, Selenite's work reminds us that digital spaces allow for different kinds of storytelling, too. This is the intersection that Selenite's innovative concept of the *literary technologist* highlights.[303]

Selenite participated in the organization's 2016 iBuild4 Virtual Conference, delivering a speech titled "Using Tech to Elevate Trans Women of Color Authors." Selenite shared the speech with patrons on Patreon via PDF and the speech is available on YouTube, another key site for digital self-fashioning.[304] In the speech, Selenite champions technology as a harnessable tool to support trans women of color authors. By declaring xyrself a literary technologist,

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[301] Raun 280.

[302] Raun 283.

[303] For scholarship that attends to the ways in which queer and trans people engage in worldmaking through digital practices and spaces, see K.J. Rawson, "Transgender Worldmkaing in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet" (2014), Eric Darnell Pritchard, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy* (2016), Reid Lodge, "Trans Sites of Self-Exploration: From Print Autobiographies to Blogs" (2017), and Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (2021).

[304] For further consideration of how trans people engage with YouTube as a site of self-fashioning and digital counterpublic, see Matthew G. O'Neill, "Transgender Youth and YouTube Videos" (2014), Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality"(2014), Tobias Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube* (2016) and Jordan F. Miller, "YouTube as a Site of Counternarratives to Transnormativity" (2019).

Selenite imagines an "alternative image…of individuals whose jobs are to use technology to advance healthcare, education, and architecture." This aligns perfectly with the overall aim of Trans*H4CK. In his interview with Ziegler, Raun explains that hackathons, such as those which inspired Trans*H4CK's creation in 2013, were traditionally envisioned as "events exclusively for technophiles with interests in coding, data, and computer programming." In other words, they were for a specific demographic of technology users that used digital data and innovation for specific—oftentimes neoliberal and capitalist—purposes, ultimately furthering the status quo. Selenite's conception of literary technology, then, aligns with the mission of the organization overall: to embrace technology as a form of community support, political solidarity, and artistic elevation for creatives in marginalized demographics, specifically trans women of color authors. Both Trans*H4CK and literary technology resist norms surrounding the distribution of stories and envision radically different futures for authors like xyrself. Selenite offers literary technology as a method of survival for trans women of color authors and for showing community solidarity for such authors.

As a form of digital self-fashioning, Selenite's literary technology champions innovative uses of technology in service of marginalized authors and creatives. These practices aid Selenite in the development of a digital counterpublic that serves online black queer and trans communities.[305] Of course, many kinds of authors and writers use digital platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Patreon, and CreateSpace. Selenite's specific contention here is that technology is not and should not be the assumed sole property of white, economically privileged, cis, straight technophiles, colloquially referred to as "techbros." Within the status quo, technology

[305] Eric Darnell Pritchard devotes a chapter of *Fashioning Lives* to the digital-social networks created by black LGBTQ people and the practices and politics of self-fashioning accessed therein. For more, see Pritchard, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy* (2017).

functions like what radical trans writer Jamie Berrout might call, alongside the publishing industry, "a culture of death."[306] Therefore, literary technology encompasses a set of social justice-oriented strategies deployed in the technological and digital spheres to elevate and advocate for marginalized communities, specifically trans women of color here.

As Ziegler's organization Trans*H4CK shows, the 2010s were a flourishing decade of cultural production and entrepreneurship in trans communities across the U.S. and abroad. Just as 2014 signaled a key moment in U.S. history for trans communities with the publishing of Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness,* the launch of the first non-medical journal of transgender studies *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* and Laverne Cox's historic cover of *TIME* magazine, 2017 similarly marked a flourishing year of trans political and cultural production, especially for trans people of color. Alongside significant publications and legislative shifts in 2017[307] Selenite published xyr first nonfiction book, *The Fire Next Time: Essays and Prose.* Just as with Mock, James Baldwin is a significant cultural and philosophical influence on Selenite as a black queer trans writer invested in elevating and advocating for trans women of color writers and advancing writing as a freedom-making practice. The collection reflects Baldwin's legacy both in title and the tone with which the author addresses readers. Whereas the title of Baldwin's essays—*The Fire Next Time* (1963)—ties Biblical reference behind figurative language, gesturing toward the

[306] Berrout's articulation of "a culture of death" suggests a material relationship to what critical ethnic and queer studies scholars have termed "queer necropolitics," which, according to Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, illuminates the "everyday death worlds, from more expected sites such as war, torture or imperial invasion to the mundane and normalized violence of racism and gender normativity, the market, and the prison-industrial complex." For more, see Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco, eds., *Queer Necropolitics* (2014).

[307] 2017 witnessed impressive cultural products, scholarship, and shifts in legislative and political leadership in the trans community. Publications include C. Riley Snorton's field defining *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* and Janet Mock's second memoir *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me;* magazines such as *National Geographic* and *Playboy* featured their first openly trans individuals either on cover or profile; and Andrea Jenkins, Tyler Titus, Danica Roem, and Tomoya Hosoda became the first openly trans elected officials to city councils and legislatures in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Iruma, Japan, respectively. These events signal shifting cultural and political landscapes concerning trans individuals.

political unrest surrounding the civil rights movement and its future, Selenite's title performs different rhetorical work. *The Fire Been Here,* shifts the temporal importance of the title from the impending future to an enduring present that continues to persist, and a present that needs drawing attention to, based on the direct language and address to different readerly publics, such as cis men of color or liberal American Democratic voters.

Selenite's speech engages with narrative tropes and conventions directed towards specific rhetorical aims. Selenite's bold declaration of self-identification as a literary technologist shows an active occupation of the role, showing its possibility. Furthermore, publishing the speech in non-conventional avenues, such as posting a PDF transcript of the comments to Patreon and uploading a recording of the speech to YouTube, registers self-publishing as another self-fashioning practice for Selenite's art. Using the self-publishing journey of xyr first book of poetry *trigger,* Selenite offers self-publishing as a fruitful type of literary production. By repeatedly envisioning radically different futures for trans women of color writers, Selenite emphasizes the urgent need for forms of resistance and autonomy in creating and circulating urgent stories. Rhetorically, the speech achieves the goal of its subtitle—"Using Tech to Elevate Trans Women of Color Authors"—by explicitly tying trans women of color to the already black trans origins of Trans*H4CK, reconceptualizing who and what is deserving of authorship, and elevating the writing and livelihoods of trans women of color creatives. Documenting the history of trans women of color literature and disseminating it to a large digital audience helps to evade the regimes of unprotection surrounding traditional publishing practices and advance more flexible and freeing practices for a more diverse and equitable kind of authorship.

Tracing Selenite's writing non-linearly—from "Finding Oz" in 2020 to xyr 2016 Trans*H4CK speech—illustrates xyr writerly practices, beliefs about self- and freedom-making,

and emphasis on imagination as essential to creative practice. This chapter explores the practices of critical imagination and spiritual practices of self-fashioning that lead Selenite to develop digital practices of self-fashioning, self-crafting, and self-curation, establish xyr own platform as a writer, freelancer, and sex worker, and reveal the insecurities and unprotection within the publishing sphere when it comes to the stories of trans women of color. In the first section, I turn to "Finding Oz" and describe how xyr co-mingling of critical trans* imagination and practices of self-fashioning lays the foundation for the digital practices Selenite relies upon in xyr later writing career in order to reach and commune with other black trans and queer writers, creatives, sex workers, and advocates. In the second section, I focus on self-publishing as one of Selenite's primary strategies as a literary technologist and explore the tensions between traditional publishing conventions and what radical allowances self-publishing offers trans women of color writers, centering the knowledges of trans women of color writers and thinkers such as Vivek Shraya and Jamie Berrout. To this end, this section reveals the regimes of unprotection inherent in publishing venues and illuminates how an abolitionist approach to conceiving of and producing literature by trans women of color, as defined by multidisciplinary artist-scholar micha cárdenas, evades the unprotection inherent in traditional publishing. The chapter concludes by considering the self-deterministic politics inherent in Selenite's deployment of literary technology as a key node in constellation of trans women of color knowledge and practice.

5.1 Self-Fashioning Practices, from the Spiritual to the Digital: Critical Trans* Imagination as Catalyst

Selenite's essay "Finding Oz" documents Selenite's shifting relationship to xyrself and xyr family dynamics. Xe describes: "We juggle having to exceed in our studies because we were expected to go to college and make sure we made room for God. There was no time for imagination and creativity, except in my mind, and I know I wanted more."[308] This quote underscores how crucial imagination was to xem, especially at this young age, and how central it would continue to be in Selenite's life. Xe writes, "Imagination wasn't just wonder for me. Imagination meant creating myself. Imagination meant being more than okay with my sexuality and gender. By the time I graduated high school, imagination already meant I needed to leave Louisiana and find my own Oz."[309] Given xyr elders' take on imagination as simply a form of play and recreation, Selenite's multifaceted need for imagination in navigating life as a maturing black queer person who needs to leave home to engage in xyr own self-making practices, particularly writing.

The sociocultural context of "Finding Oz" demonstrates how Selenite's narrative moves from narratives of dis/affiliation to political autobiographical writing. The changing economic landscape of Baton Rouge, combined with xyr mother's deafness and the staunch need to observe Baptist religious practices. It's clear that Selenite is not able to cultivate the kinds of belonging needed to comfortably remain in the family. Reducing xyr critical imagination to "maladaptive daydreaming" diminishes as much as it attempts to explain its necessity. After describing the need to study hard and remain faithful to God and not "play pretend" anymore—

[308] Selenite, "Finding Oz," 119.
[309] Ibid.

something only children or immature people do—Selenite realizes that the central tension between xem and xyr family is how they understand imagination and its role in creating a life, especially as a black person. Imagination becomes a vital practice for Selenite, functioning "not as an escape from the real-world materiality of living, breathing bodies, but as a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable," as Juana Maria Rodriguez writes of fantasy.[310]

The narrative tropes of "Finding Oz" include portraying youthful disdain for gendered/gendering activities, such as Scouts; the discovery of imagination as not only playing make-believe but a place and space to escape, craft, practice, and hope; and the struggle and subterfuge that encompass Selenite's evolving spiritual practice, including hiding xyr Buddhist altar, and overall movement toward self-determination. I argue that this movement is key in Selenite's ability to refuse the cycle of forsaking happiness xe believes paints xyr family dynamic. This dynamic's illumination through the genre of personal essay aligns with black studies scholar Kevin Quashie's understanding of the essay as "an intimacy of black being, an openness of self-study that is not authority but something wilder and more fragile."[311]

Rhetorically, "Finding Oz" demonstrates the power of creative nourishment, which is a worldmaking aspect of critical trans* imagination. Selenite clearly finds imagination and imaginative practices nourishing and supportive of the kind of "black queer self"[312] xe is attempting to cultivate. This love of imagination further clarifies Selenite's allusion to Dorothy and *The Wiz* and the knowledge that "Black adaptations can make stories better for Black people." Imagination is key to elevating xyr life and moving away from Baton Rouge and

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[310] Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 26.
[311] Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness; Or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 97.
[312] Selenite, "Finding Oz," 117.

towards more liberatory ways of thinking, writing, and being. After establishing xyrself as a creative needing nourishment from imagination, Selenite continues self-fashioning, but through digital spaces. By using social media platforms to support xyr writing and musical endeavors—and for financial support, in the case of Patreon—Selenite begins xyr inauguration into what Kate O'Riordan calls "queer digital culture," or "the many ways in which LGBTQ+ identities, practices, and theories have been mixed up in the emergence, design, and constitution of digital technology.[313]

5.2 Self-Publishing and Cultures of Death for Trans Women of Color Writers

we are routinely

four five seconds from dying

then rising at dawn

- "survival haiku," Venus Selenite, *trigger* (2016)

The memoir boom of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries provides fertile ground for considering the norms and conventions of traditional publishing, and the ways self-publishing practices intervene therein.[314] Traditional publishing, also known as commercial or mainstream publishing, relies on connections among authors, agents, and editors at the publishing house to put a product out into the world, something commercially valuable and marketable. Authors

[313] Kate O'Riordan, "Queer Digital Cultures," in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies,* ed. Siobhan Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 185. O'Riordan also highlights Afrofuturism's connection to black queer digital practices and cybercultures.

[314] According to *Statista,* as cited by Jocelyn K. Moody in the first chapter of her edition *The A History of African American Autobiography* (2021), in a 2015 survey, thirty-one percent of readers ranked biography as their preferred genre.

submit their writing to processes of editorial and peer review, receive feedback and revise, and then have access to established reading audiences and media publics. Self-publishing, on the other hand, offers more autonomy and creative license to authors; however, the resources and support systems for most self-publishers, especially those who come from marginalized backgrounds, look very different. On-demand printers like Lulu and CreateSpace help creatives to style, structure, market, and distribute their work, and help streamline the publishing process for individuals or small organizations. The differences between the norms of both forms of publishing come down to power. More established presses—such as the five presses that have become known as the Big 5: Hachette, Penguin Random House, Macmillan, Simon and Schuster, and HarperCollins—have deeper resources and wider, established readerships that aid in an author's rise to success. Clarifying these norms illustrates how power dynamics around race, class, gender, and sexuality still impact the circulation and reception of certain kinds of texts and authors. As one of the few books written by a trans woman of color and published by a major U.S. publishing house—Atria Books is a division of Simon and Schuster—Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness* accomplishes the mission aligned with contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices: educating interested yet ignorant or unexposed readers to other worlds and styles of life, providing language for new and evolving terminology, and making distinctions between how we understand categories like "gay," "queer," "trans," and "gender non-conforming." Regarding self-publishing, Canadian musician and writer Vivek Shraya explains in an interview:

> When you self-publish there's this idea, "Oh, a publisher didn't want you, so your work isn't good enough." Which is strange, because I've read a lot of published books that

> aren't very good, but there's this assumption that if an institution has funded you, your work is better.[315]

As one of the most prolific trans women of color public figures, especially in Canada, Shraya's experience with self-publishing speaks volumes because it helps us both understand the risk for marginalized writers to work with traditional publishing venues and the autonomy that comes with self-publishing.

In *The Fire Been Here,* Selenite claims, "Queer and trans people of color have always been deprived of life, either by suicide or murder. I see suicide as murder here, because hateful and intolerant language acts as a malicious gun."[316] By metaphorizing the violence of language as a "malicious gun," Selenite illustrates social patterns formed and sustained through regimes of unprotection. As legislation and educational policymaking continues to take shape around recent, more intersectional understandings of race, gender, and class (or not), this metaphorizing brings our awareness closer to seeing how language is an active form of violence against queer and trans people of color, and that such a viewpoint, then…

When Selenite published *The Fire Been Here,* xe was also working on another text in what we might call the canon of trans women of color literature: the Tumblr-published *Nameless Woman: An Anthology of Fiction by Trans Women of Color.* First published in 2016 under the subtitle alone, and then republished with a second preface and additional chapters (and the addition of the primary title *Nameless Woman*), this anthology is the first documented anthology of writing by trans women of color in the U.S.[317] I humbly accept being wrong about this

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[315] Nia King and Elena Rose, eds., *Queer & Trans Artists of Color, Volume Two* (biyuti publishing, 2016), 188-89.
[316] Selenite, *The Fire Been Here,* 14.
[317] Here, I specifically mean substantial collections of writing. For more online archiving on collected writings, zines, and magazines featuring black lesbian, trans, and gender non-conforming, see Ky-Ky, an online digital archive at http://www.kykyarchives.com.

statistic, in the event I did not do my due diligence in researching the archives. In *Nameless Woman,* the coeditors note the social atmosphere that affected the production of the anthology:

> In the preface to the original anthology, we referred to the condition of "permanent crisis" faced by trans women of color—if nothing else, the story of this book is that of crisis: multiple crises, overlapping crises, emotional crises caused by loss and the violence done to us and the people in our lives, recurring financial crises with roots so deep in the interconnected poison wells of capitalism, anti-blackness, white supremacy, and settler colonialism that we can never truly escape them, crises of health which at their least severity still threaten to separate us from our communities and our creative work.[318]

Writer, cultural worker, and translator Jamie Berrout provides an apt analogy for regimes of unprotection in her critical essay "Against Publishing." She writes:

> All of us understand that this world is out to destroy trans women….It's damn near everyone, because most everyone finds it advantageous to treat trans women badly—every stare, every slur, every single rule that makes it harder for us to live makes it easier for them to maintain those arbitrary (but clearly colonial in origin) lines known as the gender binary. For them to feel disgust at the presence of a trans woman or the thought of their kids being trans must also mean that they feel relief at our absence, a sense of sureness, normalcy, security in their actions.[319]

This position relates not only to regimes of unprotection, but also to Mock's "surpassing certainty" [320] and how our actions, fueled by our emotions, reproduce the same structures of

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[318] Berrout, Selenite, and Pena, eds., *Nameless Woman: An Anthology of Fiction by Trans Women of Color* (2017), 15.

[319] Jamie Berrout, "Against Publishing: A Letter to Trans Women Writers," (2021): 1.

[320] Nathan Alexander Moore confirms Mock's position here with (un)certainty, claiming, "uncertainty is the standard, not the exception for Black transfemininity. Precarity is the rule, not the exception. Commonly, Black tranfemmes are disregarded at the very moment that the violence meted out against us is at its most visible" (62).

domination, as theorized by Angela Y. Davis in conversation with CeCe McDonald. Berrout further illustrates Davis's claim by underscoring that "the colonial project has burrowed its way into all our hearts."[321]

> Many trans women of color that I know as sisters, friends, and/or professional acquaintances, have resorted to taking their work to zines, chapbooks, and e-books for digital download, for whatever legitimate reason. But one thing is absolutely clear: popular and acclaimed publishing houses are unwilling to offer proper residence for our stories. So when I decided it was time to publish *trigger,* I made the conscientious decision to self-publish

The agency in self-publishing is evident, allowing the creator to control their own narrative and fashion the discursive (exterior) image and self (interior) image needed to reach desired audiences and create cultural counternarratives. Berrout continues:

> Publishing after all is a culture of death. It is rooted in the fascist notion that there are people who deserve to write and those who don't…and their willingness to perform literariness and craft, all of which are arbitrary, racist ways of determining what is proper and what is improper, human, and less than human. Where tech culture presumes a right to use the land and sees it as a resource to be exploited, publishing culture presumes a right to filter through people and their narratives, it sees every person as a resource to be exploited, whether as a source of books, book purchases, or book material.[322]

"Refusal to perform literariness" in a certain way, as Berrout puts it, bars many marginalized writers from accessing ways of circulating their stories to wide, interested audiences. This

[321] Ibid, 2.
[322] Berrout, Against Publishing,"3.

reminds us how lacking access to publishing and circulation constitutes a discursive rendering of unprotection, a purposeful gatekeeping of stories that need to be told and elevated. After naming Sharon Davis's 1986 memoir *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood: A Transsexual Speaks Out,* Selenite says:

> This means that since 1986, there have only been a handful of our published narratives. Since 1986, erasure has been a frequent visitor of our history. Thirty years later, and since the beginning of time, we trans women of color remain discouraged from publishing our own works through the mainstream publishing industry. And yes, one can say that Janet Mock published *Redefining Realness,* a[n] immaculate memoir, but our existences, experiences, and truths are heavily nuanced, so we cannot stop at one book and one resource from one person. This lack of archive is connected to the continuing violence and genocide of our lives.[323]

The systemic and institutional erasure of trans women of color's ability to create and circulate their work, as highlighted by Selenite, is a direct result of the regimes of unprotection in which they are creating these narratives. Blogger and archivist Monica Roberts mobilized her own forms of literary technology when she corrected the claim that Toni Newman was the first black trans woman to publish an autobiography in the United States, an honor that actually belongs to Sharon Davis. Correcting this error—surely fueled by intended erasure of trans women of color's stories and accomplishments—means that Newman, echoing Selenite in xyr speech, is not starting a tradition but joining an already rich body of autobiographical and documentary writing. By harnessing literary technology to alternative modes of storytelling and community building,

[323] Selenite, "Using Tech to Elevate Trans Women of Color Authors,"2016. Web.

Selenite offers a model of digital innovation in service of elevating the voice of a marginalized community of writers.

Cultures of death surround trans women of color in the U.S. and abroad, and Selenite confronts xyr readers with this fact in xyr writing. Another aspect of life for black trans women Selenite confronts in xyr work is the rampant murder and violation of black trans women and femmes at the hands of black cisgender men. Instead of centering respectability politics in xyr autobiographical project, Selenite writes furiously to the men who harm our communities because of their own vulnerabilities, which the state exploits. In an entry titled "When Our Sister Islan Fell: The Threat of Black Cisgender Men," published April 7, 2016 in *The Fire Been Here,* Selenite narrates the last moments of Islan Nettles, a black trans woman murdered by a black cis man, James Dixon, in 2013 in Harlem. Selenite lovingly celebrates Nettles's life and uses this example to argue for broader political intervention on behalf of trans women of color. Selenite blames Nettles' murder not just on her gender expression, "but because she navigated a world conditioned to violate her and people like her." In a world which is, in Selenite's description, a "minefield for trans women of color,"[324] subjects are shaped by discursive frames and mediascapes that rely on the figure of the denigrated trans woman of color to maintain the status quo of cisheteronormative hegemony. The murder and violation of black and brown trans women has been so commonplace that Dixon and other such men find it necessary to harm trans women because of their own "uncomfortable feelings." In thinking about the processes of accountability for Nixon that followed Nettles's murder, Selenite boldly characterizes Dixon as "a pawn for white supremacy."[325] Xe continues: "In exchange for murdering another Black person, also a

[324] Selenite, *The Fire Been Here,* 9.
[325] Ibid., 25.

trans woman, he will be given a lighter backpack to carry in prison and will still leave a jail cell at a young age."[326] This participation in the oppressive gender-racial-sexually regimes that govern social life

I assert that Selenite's literary technologist strategies require what micha cardenas calls an "abolitionist trans politics" must be put into use. For cardenas, this requires "that visibility for trans people of color not be promoted in the absence of anti-prison, antipolice, and anticolonial critiques, because it is precisely this absence which allows neoliberalism to manage the determination of which trans people are acceptable…and which trans people are disposable." In other words, we must attend to the power dynamics that undergird our actions. The personal is always political, and, as Angela Davis and CeCe McDonald remind us, the state as the harbinger of the status quo, relies on material consequences of white supremacy and heteronormativity to flow from the actions fueled by harmful ideologies. While writing directly to cis men of color, Selenite describes what an abolitionist trans politics that centers trans women of color looks, feels, and smells like:

> Your shackles cannot fall off unless you exhaust yourselves for the removal of ours. And because respectability politics is not an agent in changing any world, if you have not come here to fuck shit up for trans women of color, you are not ready to be our accomplices. If you think this will be peaceful and pastries will be awarded, you are not motherfucking ready to be our accomplices. And if you are ready, you must be prepared to be down in the fucking dirt and grime for our liberation.

[326] Ibid.

Figure 6: "Blessed Are the Sex Workers," photograph of Venus Di'Khadijah Selenite, April 2019

Conclusion; or, Affording the Price of Hope[327]

Patreon, Tumblr, CreateSpace, and other digital platforms enable users to more easily create and circulate their work, as well as connect with like-minded individuals in search of such content. The narrative conventions, tropes, and rhetorical aims Selenite uses demonstrate how a critically trans* imagination fuels the ability to develop faith and digital self-fashioning practices that allow trans women of color to flourish and reach their personal potential as authors, creatives, thinkers, and political organizers.

[327] The subtitle comes from a line in the second preface of *Nameless Woman* where the editors describe their process of writing the book as: "we moved forward knowing we could not afford the price of hope" (13).

Throughout the development of Selenite's writerly identity, notions of imagination have significantly fueled the desire to self-fashion, resist, and use digital tools to create new possibilities for trans women of color. Through xyr self-referential writing, Selenite shows how strong needs for imagination fuel the development of using technology in unique ways. Critical trans* imagination lays the foundation for self-fashioning and self-crafting practices that lead to the development of resistive strategies to institutional forms of erasure for trans women of color, such as traditional publishing industries. This self-deterministic politic, intimately tying together gender transition, racial justice, and digital self-fashioning, Selenite's deployment of literary technology is a key node of knowledge in the constellation of trans women of color's knowledge and praxis around self- and freedom-making.

Selenite reminds her audience:

> At this time in history, we are writing more than ever before. We are not the first to write. Before *trigger* manifested, trans women of color wrote poetry, fiction, memoirs, and short stories, but we lack a historical documentation of these works….With the power of social media and technology, we are better equipped to undertake this problem ourselves. We can all be literary technologists.[328]

In Selenite's 2016 speech at Trans*H4CK, we see a clear and hopeful future for trans women of color authors. Through various tactics of literary technology, Selenite claims:

> I envision poetry writing workshops held through applications such as Skype or Google Hangouts for trans women of color who may not be able to afford to attend a writer's retreat or residency, who may have intense anxiety from walking out of their homes….I envision more calls for submissions on the Internet to anthologies centering, and are

[328] Selenite, "Using Tech to Elevate Trans Women of Color Authors," 2016. Web.

> edited by, trans women of color. I envision crowdfunding and ongoing demand for financial capital to fund our own online presses and publications, for trans women of color to be rightfully compensated for our craft….I envision a proper syllabus accessible to our trans children of color in places such as blogs and the iTunes store…We can all be literary technologists and it starts with supporting trans women of color writers in revolutionary ways.[329]

The multi-faceted vision Selenite describes here brings our attention simultaneously to the existing and the possible, the here and the elsewhere. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Selenite and other collaborators crowdfunded support for the creation of the WAP! House, which serves as a "black trans led and owned creative sanctuary for artists and sex workers of the Black diaspora, specifically those on the queer & trans spectrum." As Selenite's own home base for creative praxis, WAP! House demonstrates the critical work happening at the intersections of creativity, spirituality, and social justice for marginalized communities. Naming the house after Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's song "WAP," a song which aims to elevate and empower women, especially black women, further cements its power in the Baltimore black queer and trans creative scene. Just as sonic resistances like "WAP" speak against slut shaming and other harmful perspectives against black women, renewed symbols and imagery help provide a sense of integrity and community for marginalized groups. The photograph in Figure 6 depicts Selenite wrapped in the Black Trans Pride flag, designed by activist and life writer Raquel Willis in 2015 as a response to the lack of inclusion of trans and gender non-conforming people in discussions of systemic oppression.[330] Willis created the flag along with some hashtag activism: the flag is in

[329] Ibid.

[330] Raquel Willis is a black transgender activist, award-winning writer, and media strategist dedicated to elevating the dignity of marginalized people, particularly black transgender people. She is the Director of Communications for

celebration of #BlackTransLiberationTuesday.[331] Through Selenite's embodiment, the image weaves the fight for black and trans liberation in with the digital counterpublic and creative practices utilized to reach these ends. This project shares affinities with micha cardenas's trans of color poetics, which understands that by "shifting my body's state, [one is] able to produce new knowledge and new material output."[332]

Given the often-overwhelming disaster we face as the gender-racial-sexually oppressed, how do we afford the price of hope? A return to Afrofuturism might help provide the answer. "Afrofuturism," claims Princess Reese in a Telly Award-winning YouTube video essay on the concept, "is about reclaiming our past in order to craft our future."[333] We afford the price of hope because we are rich in imagination. As black feminist writer Akasha Gloria Hull argues, "The union of politics, spirituality, and creativity holds tremendous potential for both personal and collective transformation."[334] Selenite's narrative path to self-discovery and autonomy by way of self-deterministic practices, as reflected in xyr digital self-fashioning practices in the cultivation of literary technology, expresses a mode of writing and creativity overall as a practice of freedom-making. This freedom-making, as routed through xyr literary technology and digital counterpublic, allows the growth of what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas might call "digitally intimate virtual communities."[335] Building more radically just worlds requires not only critical forms of

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the Ms. Foundation and the former executive editor of *Out* magazine. Her memoir *The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation* is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.

[331] See Raquel Willis's Instagram post: https://www.instagram.com/p/CH3RfyhAZrD/?hl=en.

[332] micha cardenas, "Pregnancy: Reproductive Futures in Trans of Color Feminism," 56.

[333] Äfrofuturism: From Books to Blockbusters | It's Lit,"YouTube, 2020. Web. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI1xmwqGEBw&t=1s. For more black feminist accounts of Afrofuturism, see Susana M. Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's 'Fledgling,'(2012), Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Amandine H. Faucheux, "Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson's Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism"(2017), Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), and Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (2021).

[334] Hull, *Soul Talk,* 8.

[335] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic,* 161.

imagination, but available modes of expression that help us radically enact and continue to transform those worlds.

Conclusion: Records of Hope Save Lives

Figure 7: (L-R) Janet Mock, Amiyah Scott, and Brian Michael Smith in conversation at the University of Michigan's 4th Annual William S. Trotter Multicultural Center Event "My Life, My Story!: Centering the Voices of Trans Lives," February 9, 2018.

A deep desire to center the lives and experiences of black transgender women in their life writing and participation in the academic life of the University of Michigan led to the cultivation of this project's inauguration. In 2018, I emceed the 4th Annual William S. Trotter Multicultural

Center event "My Life, My Story!: Centering the Voices of Trans Lives,"[336] which featured three black trans public figures: Janet Mock, actress Amiyah Scott[337], and actor Michael Brian Scott[338]. This event was pivotal in the development of this project, its aims, and methodological approaches. While Mock and Scott discussed their experiences with passing, beauty standards, and colorism, Smith spoke to his experiences as a black trans male actor and how black trans men experience precarious discursive positioning in dominant mediascapes as well. Their collaborative autobiographical project here on stage planted seeds of imagination that sprouted into this project. I found their collaborative, on-stage narrative self-fashioning as evidence that the self-referential narrative acts black trans people can be interpreted as records of hope for other black trans and gender non-conforming people, such as myself. Attending to the critically trans* imaginative self-fashioning practices of Black trans women, in a way, is my way of being able to talk about the practices that literally saved my life. And, like Kevin Quashie's estimation of black women's fiction, I take as the center of my study the "black female subject philosophizing life through *her* life, a one engaged in being and becoming."[339]

In this project, I have centered the lives of black transgender women and staged a conversation amongst ourselves to illuminate the political terrain we navigate daily and the ways in which our imaginative practices around self-fashioning save our lives. As a black feminist scholar and teacher, I share the autobiographical aim of my primary interlocutors: to write with the young trans girl of color in mind, for whom such cultural products might very well be life-

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[336] A video playback of the hour-long event can be found on Facebook through The Michigan Daily's page. See https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=10156296139019171.
[337] Amiyah Scott is a New York-native, New Orleans-raised black trans actress, model, and staple of the ballroom community. She is known for her role as Cotton in the teleivion series *Star* (2016-2019) and her appearance during the eight season of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta.* Scott self-published her book *Memoirs of a Mermaid* in 2019.
[338] Brian Michael Smith is an Ann Arbor-native black trans actor best known for his roles as Paul Strickland in *9-1-1: Lone Star* and Toine Wilkins in Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar.* Smith is the first openly black trans man to in a series regular role on network television.
[339] Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 40.

saving tools and examples of blacktransfeminist freedom-making. Being "seen" in the doing is of equal importance as self-fashioning through imaginative acts. Black trans studies scholar Nathan Alexander Moore asserts that "being 'seen' pulls from the coalitional politics of Black feminism to support and provide care for Black transfemme subjects through the sociopolitical intimacies of sisterhood."[340] These means a lot for me in this project.

The stories we tell ourselves matter, and how those stories change and shapeshift in time and space affects our material realities. It is crucial, therefore, to remember that creating counternarratives and counterknowledges can be acts of community survival as well as imaginative play. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas reminds us that "black people have always counterstoried the whole of US life, from slave narratives through the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement."[341] These books hold great value, and they help us see, as Patrisse Khan-Cullors writes, "the quotidian nature of state violence" but also "how art and activism can transform such tragic confrontations into catalysts for greater collective consciousness and more effective resistance."[342] Working against the grain is a creative resistive strategy, as Syrus Marcus Ware claims, noting, "Counterarchiving highlights the problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand its own power in the present into the future, without letting go of the past or the future." This relates to regimes of unprotection as well, for the mobilization of power in service of status quo power by erasing subterranean knowledges constitutes an affective unprotection given discursive violence.

Though the writers examined in this project engage in multiple forms of physical, emotional, and social labor, the fashioning and circulation of their life stories is also a form of

[340] Nate Moore, "Transliminality," 54.
[341] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic,* 68.
[342] Patrisse Khan-Cullors, *when they call you a terrorist,* xii.

labor. As scholars of cultural production, we must remember, as Robin D.G. Kelley argues, "the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and creative expression is itself labor."[343] The scholastic labor that went into this project is accompanied by a sincere admiration for the writers and interlocutors with whom I engage. I wholeheartedly agree with Sarah Schulman when she affirms that "people in struggle are the most fascinating people on Earth. They produce new ideas and new formal strategies and transformative visions of social and artistic possibility that are the soul of new ideas in art and culture."[344]

An aspect of blacktransfeminist thought I underexplored here is how the aspect of disability, embodiment, and neurodiversity impact these critically trans* imaginative practices and ideologies. In an article centering the madness, blackness, and transness of Marsha P. Johnson, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes,

> "Disability justice" is the word/mind/body/house that allowed me—like "queerness" did—to look at my whole entire life and reimagine it. Disability justice is the framework that allowed me to look at my sad, trauma-surviving, shaky-hipped, weird-brained mixed brown femme bodymind at nineteen, at any age, and respect her, not hate her for failing at normative (even normative queerpunk) queerness.[345]

Thinking through bodyminds and how such articulations of embodiment, consciousness, gender, and race, critical trans* imagination can illuminate how imagination informs those matrices as well. This study constitutes, in many ways, what Eve Tuck has described as a "desire-based research: the need to root our considerations in a 'framework…concerned with understanding

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[343] Marshall Green, "Troubling the Waters," 74.
[344] Sarah Schulman, "Being a Success in a Corrupt Society," 98.
[345] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Disability Justice/Stonewall's Legacy, or: Love Mad Trans Black Women When They Are Alive and Dead, Let Their Revolutions Teach Your Resistance All The Time," *QED* 6.2 (Summer 2019), 57.

complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives' in order to 'document…not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope."[346] We need the wisdom and hope, too, in order to further social movement that advance our collective liberation.

Though these texts speak to the specificity of the black trans femme figure, their narratives matter for more than just girls like us. Speaking alongside Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, CeCe McDonald exclaims, "Our narratives aren't really for those people, you know what I'm saying? They're not for them to consume in such a way that makes them feel better about themselves. Our narratives should make them get their shit together, not be like, 'Oh, trans people exist—how fascinating!'"[347] Black trans women and their stories are more than just fascinating or titillating, even for non-black and non-trans readers. These stories of resilience and survival offer blueprints for life and survival for readers invested in a vision of the world in which black trans women are not experiencing a genocide. Rather, I propose we embrace these stories, uplift black trans women, and recognize how imagination helps us to fashion a better world for all of us to live in.

[346] Ware, "All Power to the People?," 174.
[347] Griffin-Gracy, McDonald, and Meronek, "Cautious Living," 37.

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