

## preface

# *“Be a Mystery”: (The Infinity of) Black Feminist Thought*

SOMETIMES, EVEN THOSE OF US WHO HAVE ORGANIZED OUR ENTIRE LIVES around the transformative possibilities of Black feminist thought can sit back in wonder at the expansiveness of this intergenerational transnational practice. This special issue takes a moment to imbibe where we have been, where we are, and where we have yet to journey. The contributors to this special issue on, or more precisely, *of* Black feminist thought find Black feminist thinking in a wide range of times, places, and forms. Each of the contributors invites us to bear witness in a distinct way to the pushes and pulls of critical engagement with Black feminist thought. Biomythic origin point “mitochondrial eve” brainstorms the archive and admonishes those of us looking back to “be a forest of your own / dreams.” Gladys Bentley sends unrequited texts to . . . Gladys Bentley. Everything is possible here, even what should never have happened.

In *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*, Farah Jasmine Griffin, one of the most dedicated and prolific stewards of Black feminist thought as a liberatory practice, cites Rita Dove's poem “Canary” to evoke the protective strategies Black women employ to hold something (ourselves, each other) sacred in an unfree world.<sup>1</sup> The lineage we participate in through our Black

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1. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 155–56.

feminist intellectual labor is sacred to us. For generations, even before the name “Black Feminist,” it has existed as a form of love, communion, protest, and prophecy, often far from the spotlight. Nurtured by the warmth of imagination, practices became praxis. Griffin and others have ensured a tradition wherein, to invoke Griffin’s paraphrase of Toni Morrison in her tribute to Nellie McKay, “the mothers may soar and the daughters may know their names.”<sup>2</sup> We are some of the daughters.

But we are living in times that neither we nor our mothers would hardly recognize. Abolitionist queer Black feminists are topping the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Our scholars and experts speak on the nightly news. Some of what were once our most marginalized proposals have become policies, funding keywords, and even memes. The Movement for Black Lives, one of the largest and most visible social movements of our time, or any time, explicitly connects its vision to the foundational Combahee River Collective statement.

We do this work now in the light of recognition. Masses of people think they know what Black feminism is, and yet, this is not the world that we dreamed. We, the current generation of practicing Black feminist thinkers, are faced with the consequences of Black feminist practice feeling like less of a mystery. We celebrate the legacy our foremothers have made possible, and we must also think creatively, lovingly, and sometimes even cryptically about what this moment can and must *mother*—or bring into being. It has to bring into being something we cannot describe from here, something we have not yet known.

It is exhilaratingly beautiful to look upon what’s been made possible, but we know there is so much more than recognition. Undaunted by a world still hellbent on not caring for or loving us, even as it consumes our insights, theories, and modes of organizing, we create worlds filled with an abundance of joy, affirmation, and ingenuity. It is from this robust, ancestral practice of world-making that this special issue emerges. The pieces found here provide insight into one of the most dynamic aspects of Black feminist thought: its generative power.

The range of topics included in this special issue encapsulates the breadth of this interdisciplinary, transnational, multimodal, and

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2. Farah Jasmine Griffin, “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” *Signs* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 483–507.

intergenerational practice. Given the seemingly infinite nodes and entry points of Black feminist thought, it is befitting that this issue coheres because of an unboundedness and porousness among the pieces. The art essays, articles, field reviews, and conversations converse, dance, and harmonize with one another. What unfolds on these pages is a queerly motherful offering to the Black feminist tradition.

In “mitochondrial eve brainstorming the archive,” poet and scholar Bettina Judd speaks directly to us, the voracious readers and researchers of Black feminist theory, and plays with our archival desire for origin and reference. Her poem, in the voice of the original person, resists all the categories we place on being, including the term “person.” Mitochondrial eve encourages us to “be a mystery / to your own children.” In the complicated voice of the being we would want to claim as mother of us all, Judd offers connection beyond explanation or classification.

Offering another take on revolutionary African mothering, Nadine Naber’s “The Radical Potential of Mothering during the Egyptian Revolution” uses interviews with women activists to challenge nationalist ideas of mothering by looking at the work of care, change, and solidarity engaged by women parenting children in the midst of the 2011 uprising. She focuses on how mobilizing care is a crucial part of making change possible. Naber emphasizes that the question is not *if* mothers can participate in revolution, but following the lead of the activists themselves, the question is *how*. How do they choose to participate? How do they make their participation and the participation of others possible? How does their activism *mother* or create, nurture, and grow a changed political field?

In “Black Lactation Aesthetics: Remaking the Natural in Laki-sha Cohill’s Photographs,” Jennifer C. Nash highlights the breastfeeding portraits of photographer Lakisha Cohill in the context of her theoretical work on the idea of “birthing Black mothers.” In Nash’s reading, Cohill’s work makes visible not only the act of breastfeeding, but also the aspirations and complexities tied to it in the contemporary market. Nash also points to the complicated consequences of the necessary awareness-raising work done by Black women in resistance to a medical-industrial complex that turns Black maternal health into a commodity. She reads Cohill’s work within her critique of an existing narrative about Black women’s bodies as both crucial property and devious excess. Nash argues that Cohill’s work uses the glamour and daring of

Black breastfeeding in layered images that show the possibilities for new worlds that are nourishing for Black breastfeeders and their communities.

In “*Behind the Scenes: Elizabeth Keckley, Slave Narratives, and the Complexities of Queer Agency*,” Candice Lyons offers a thought-provoking analysis of the account of formerly enslaved person, writer, and activist Elizabeth Keckley as well as her life and labor for Mary Todd Lincoln. Lyons provides a distinct opportunity to unveil queer(ed) possibilities for finding queer ancestors and queer histories. Lyons identifies Keckley as an insurgent in remapping slave as well as post-slave spaces and places and pushes us to closely examine the complicated relationship between Black women and white women by imagining the queered and queerable realities of these relationships. Lyons focuses on queer intimacies and the engagement of archives to unearth interiority, connections, and possibilities for pleasurable interracial intimacy. This article contributes to rapidly growing fields of inquiry including, but not limited to, critical race and feminist studies, queer history, feminist geography, and feminist pleasure studies.

Jalynn Harris’s hybrid poem, “Gladys Bentley Leaves Gladys Bentley on Read” imagines an impossible conversation between gender-nonconforming Harlem Renaissance musical icon Gladys Bentley and another version of Bentley removed from the gender restrictions of the early twentieth century. Using the twenty-first-century technology of the text message, “on read” but also evidently “unread,” Harris speaks to the longing of present-day queer Black artists to reclaim Bentley’s silenced masculinity, deviance, and power. Harris’s innovation and forestalled reclamation loop us back to Judd’s “mitochondrial eve,” who generates our existence but also resists our attempts at naming.

In “*Siyakaka Feminism: African Anality and the Politics of Deviance in FAKA’S Performance Art Praxis*,” Jordache A. Ellapen also looks at the birthing of a new world, but in this case, through the disruptive performance of queer bottom sexuality as a healing practice for Black male femininity in an anti-queer world. Linking FAKA’S audacious cultural performances to legacies of queer utopianism and erotic politics, Ellapen celebrates how FAKA’S performance art breaks down the postcolonial suture of Africanness to cis-heteronormativity. He also explores how FAKA’S cultural work, centered in radical vulnerability, is more liberating and fertile than a normative, human-rights-based political agenda.

In “The Representational Necropolitics of Black Women in Zombie Dystopia Video Games,” Eric Andrew James explores images and narratives of Black women in video games in the wake of “Gamergate.” James uncovers a “constitutive relationship between the figure of the Black woman, her history of representative silence, and the zombie-dystopian genre in which she is commonly evoked.” Furthermore, James moves through questions of the abject, intersectionality, Blackness, gender, violence, and speculative fiction. James’s article demands that the reader critically consider representational violence against Black women as well as the significance of diegetic and nondiegetic genres. The growing subfield of feminist gaming studies within the broader field of feminist science and technology studies necessitates thought-provoking work informed by Black feminist ideas, which James delivers.

In “Masked Violence against Black Women and Girls,” Ashley L. Smith-Purviance takes us into the schools and homes of Black women and girls to explore their unique vulnerability and violability. Smith-Purviance unmaskes the forms of victimization that Black girls, in particular, encounter. Building onto and with the burgeoning field of Black girlhood studies, Smith-Purviance illuminates the significance of specificity when grappling with the contours and modes of violence that Black girls endure. Her ethnographic approach to this “unmasking” provides a distinct and painfully necessary entry point for analyzing the effects of interconnected oppressive forces, such as anti-Blackness and misogyny, in the lives of Black girls and women. Smith-Purviance’s article taps into the urgency of Black feminist thought and praxis in dismantling destructive and too-often fatal systems of oppression.

In “Censoring Anglogynophobia: Reconsidering the Disappearance of the National Alliance of Black Feminists,” Ileana Nachescu proffers a lesser-known and understudied history of Black feminist organizing. Nachescu critically considers the history of cross-racial feminist solidarities and the politics of erasure in how we remember a formidable organization of Black feminists who pushed back against the racism of white women’s organizing efforts and the sexism of Black men in the 1970s. The lack of public consciousness about NABF plays out at the intersection of historical censorship and a politics of erasure that too often befalls Black women’s organizing efforts. NABF was defiant in its strategies and unabashed in its pushback against anti-Black racism and white supremacy. “Censoring Anglogynophobia” is instructive for unpacking

tensions and fragile solidarities in multiracial feminist organizing. Nachescu demands that we look back to better contextualize women-of-color leadership in contemporary activism.

Black feminist thinking is happening right now in an unlimited number of venues and forms. Nneka D. Dennie offers a window into one such site, a conversation on “The State and Future of Black Women’s Studies: The Black Women’s Studies Association and the National Women’s Studies Association,” which took place as part of the NWSA’s current Kitchen Table Series. This conversation between Black women practitioners in these fields reveals some of the concerns and possibilities of this historical moment. The primary strategy that the discussants, including NWSA President Kaye Whitehead and core BWSA officers Stephanie Andrea Allen, Jacinta R. Saffold, and Erica Williams, agree on is association itself. This applies to both the actual founding and sustaining of an association dedicated specifically to the field Barbara Smith, Akasha Hull, and Patricia Bell-Scott named “Black Women’s Studies” as well as to the collaboration of “different factions” of Black women scholars situated in varying relationships with existing institutions. “When Black women come together, we have superpowers,” Saffold affirms.

In “Defense, Redemption, Care: Black Feminist and Queer Studies,” James Bliss reviews groundbreaking new work in Black feminist studies. Bliss identifies a connective thread among Jennifer C. Nash’s *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Kara Keeling’s *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Stephen Best’s *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*, and Amber Musser’s *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*: a “collective elaboration of Black invention and inventiveness.” Bliss weaves an insightful and rich exploration of these works via points of both “contention and contestation.” Questions of how we envision, imagine, create, dismantle, let go, or disrupt permeate this deep engagement with the work of some of our most dynamic scholars in the fields of Black feminist and queer studies.

What we offer here is something that is beaming with possibility, rich with overlaps and possible contradictions, complicated and committed to a world where we are all free.

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