

Troubling the Waters

Mobilizing a Trans Analytic*

KAI M. GREEN



IN 2012, I DECIDED TO TRANSITION from female to male with the aid of hormones. This occurred after a year of field research for my dissertation in South Central Los Angeles. Prior to my transition I was well known as a black lesbian activist; thus, all of my relationships were affected. Where did I belong now? As a black transgender man, I knew that my gender troubled many black lesbian and gay community spaces. I became less legible as a body fit for residence in black lesbian spaces. And while I was never formally asked not to partake in black lesbian events, I felt that my black transgender male presence disturbed certain members of the community. For example, an organizer of an annual black lesbian retreat that I had previously attended said that I could continue to attend the retreat after having top surgery, as long as I did not take off my shirt. Not having breasts was more of my *man* side, and that space was for *women* who loved other *women*. I decided not to attend the retreat, believing that the organizer's policing of my body in that space was a missed opportunity for this community to grow and be challenged. I was asked to conform to a narrow notion of "lesbian" rather than have a community respond to the varied ways a person might exceed the category altogether.

I open with my own personal story about my experience as a black trans man in a lesbian space as a jumping off point to think more seriously about the ways in which trans—as identity, trope, analytic—might be a productive way to trouble the waters of black sexual and gendered relations. More specifically, I want to explore trans as a productive site of possibility relative to black sexual identity politics and theories of black gender and sexuality—namely, black lesbian feminism and black queer studies.

The way my transgender body troubled black lesbian community is not necessarily *new*. Though they may have been unnamed, transgender people have historically always already been a part of the black gay and lesbian archive, but recognized only through what Ann Stoler calls complex “grids of intelligibility” that we may have yet to grasp because they, perhaps, went by some other name.¹ My project here, however, is not one of reclamation by which trans figures are rediscovered in the black queer archive and celebrated—as admirable as that project may be. Rather, I want to mine trans for its use value 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 reimagining new possible ways of being and doing.

Trans as a way of naming and identifying transgender people became a part of the lesbian and gay lexicon formally in the late 1990s.² “Trans” is short for “transgender,” an umbrella term that names a multitude of sexual and gendered identities, though it is most recognizable as a term that names a transgender man (FTM) or transgender woman (MTF). However, the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary provides the Latin origin of the term to mean “across, beyond, through, so as to change, from *trans* across, beyond.”³ And it is this latter definition that I would like to expand the definition from an identity category to a theoretical analytic. As such I find it useful to conjoin “trans” with another key term in transgender studies, the “asterisk,” which when added to “trans,” according to Avery Tompkins, may “open up *transgender* or *trans* to a greater range of meanings.”⁴ In this way, Trans* is an act of artfulness, an act of creation and possibility,⁵ or, similar to Treva Ellison and my definition of “Tranifest,” Trans* is the ability “to mobilize across the contradictions, divisions, and containment strategies produced by the state and other such large-scale organizations

of power that work to limit our capacity to align ourselves across differences in ways that are necessary for social transformation.”⁶ Based on these definitions, I employ Trans* on multiple registers: as a decolonial demand; a question of how, when, and where one sees and knows; a reading practice that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation. It is an analytic that has ontological, ideological, and epistemological ramifications. It is not perpetual alterity but perpetual presence. It makes different scales of movement or change legible. Trans* is the queer. Trans* is the colored.

I mobilize my capacious use of Trans* to also theorize the relationship between black, lesbian, and feminist in the term “black lesbian feminist.” Feminism was not ever just about white women, though they became the representative subject for its politics. “Black lesbian” can be understood as a Trans* modifier of feminism. In the same way that black lesbians critiqued white feminism for creating a politics centered in whiteness that invisibilized black lesbian women, I use Trans* to critique black lesbian feminist politics, which at times disavows the presence of black trans subjects in order to present a coherent category, “black lesbian.” I argue that “black lesbian” accommodates trans excess. A Trans* reading of black lesbian feminist texts illuminates those moments of fissure, contradiction, and coherence where the possibility of trans subjectivity troubles the coherence of “black lesbian.”

For the remainder of this essay I stage a conversation between black lesbian feminism and transgender studies. Through a series of close readings of editorials by Alycee Lane that appeared in *Black Lace*, a black lesbian erotic magazine, I demonstrate how black lesbian as a Trans* modifier of feminism indexes the contradiction of (white) feminist exclusion of black women, at the same time as it forges a space for the expansion of the category “woman.” Moving beyond the racial critique to one of gender, I use Trans* to rethink the category of “woman” beyond cisgender black women. While many scholars focus on the racial critique, I wish to highlight here the dynamic gender analysis that can be gleaned from black lesbian feminists. I am interested in the ways in which black feminists, by accounting for racial difference in their critique, opens its audience up to the multiple possibilities of gender within the category “woman.” Through a Trans* reading of black lesbian feminist texts, I demonstrate how this opening of the category “woman” allows for a potential trans, as in transgender, subjectivity to be, sometimes named but often not.

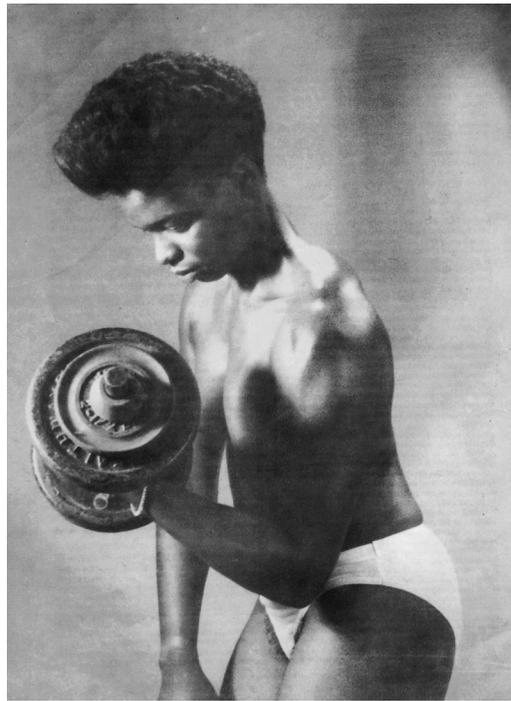


FIG. 3.1. Image of bodybuilder from *Black Lace*, Issue 1, page 6. Courtesy of BLK Publishing Company, Inc.

How “Black Lesbian” Trans*s Feminism, or Can Women Have Dicks?

Black Lace, a black lesbian erotic magazine, was one of the many spin-off publications of *BLK Magazine*, a back gay and lesbian newsmagazine and publishing office. *Black Lace* printed its first issue in the spring of 1991, and a total of four issues were printed between 1991 and 1992. This publication included poetry, essays, erotic stories, art, and photographs. The representations of black women here were varied along the spectrum of masculinities and femininities. *Black Lace* is a material example of the ways in which black lesbians were moving and shaping their identities and challenging confining notions of gender binaries. Figure 3.1 shows a black woman flexing and holding a masculine pose. Muscles protruding, this woman is strong and athletic. Her gender non-conforming body is viewed as desirable in this magazine, though this woman in another realm might be demonized for her embrace of masculinity. *Black Lace* staged debates around the representation of black lesbian sexuality and gender.

Each issue of *Black Lace* included an introduction by editor Alycee J. Lane, who was then a graduate student in the Department of English at UCLA. Lane envisioned *Black Lace* as a safe space for black women to interrogate and express their desires and love for other black women. Every issue included a section of letters under the title, “Hot Lace Letters,” which differed from usual letters to the editor because they contained sexual fantasies from black women. These scenarios included student-teacher role-play, steamy library scenes, and whatever readers were willing to come up with and share. All letters were published anonymously. Along with erotic fantasy, *Black Lace* also included advice columns that gave women sexual health information. This was especially important for black women, who in the late 1980s and early 1990s were not yet being addressed as an at-risk group for HIV/AIDS. *Black Lace* also featured socially current articles, such as “Oppression for Sale,” which asked black lesbians to make themselves conscious of the companies that supported South African Apartheid and to boycott and write letters to those companies.

In the second issue of *Black Lace*, many of the “Hot Lace” letters were filled with women’s fantasies of sex with dildos. Name Withheld from Norfolk, Virginia, wrote, “I’m glad to see that *Black Lace* is finally out! Reading the letters of the first issue has inspired me to set down one of my experiences. . . . Every woman has her fetishes and one of mine just happens to be that I love to be fucked in the ass. Fingers, vibrators, dildos, fists.”⁷ This column allowed women a safe space to share their sexual fantasies and build community while sharing explicit sexual encounters with other women. The erotic was accessed as a usable resource, and it freed black women from disciplining concepts of respectability and propriety.⁸ However, everyone was not always in agreement; in this issue, two of the three letters included dildos in their fantasies, and all included fantasies of penetration. These letters were all listed under the title, “Dances with Dildos.”

The dildo became a major site of antagonism in the magazine as it felt too phallogentric for some readers. One reader was disturbed by the images of dildos and black lesbians because they “played into stereotypes, particularly the one that claims lesbians want to be ‘like men.’” This quotation highlights a major disagreement on the meaning of lesbianism and womanhood. Do lesbians have to be women? What kind of women? This is a discussion that has been had in women’s and feminist studies as well.⁹ This challenge is further articulated in the “Editor’s Notes” in the first issue:



FIG. 3.2. Image of two people and dildo from *Black Lace*, Issue 3, page 7. Courtesy of BLK Publishing Company, Inc.

FINALLY! BLACK LACE AFTER TOO many late night and early morning conversations and political debates and asking should I? Or shouldn't I? And worrying about the devastating infinite measurements of political "correctness" and meditating on what it means, feels like to be an African American lesbian loving other African American lesbians, sex and multiple orgasms, knowing—do you hear me?—knowing that we have been and continue to be sexual animals to the Amerikan imagination, working our asses off to prove the perversion of that imagination all the while internalizing the frigid Victorian sensibility of no sex, I don't think about sex, I don't want sex, I don't even know what my own pussy looks like.¹⁰

Lane's opening to the magazine is forceful, directed to other black lesbians who love black lesbians. She is aware of the tropes, the controlling images of black deviancy that black people negotiate daily.¹¹ She notes here the ways in which that pressure, that knowing that you could easily

slip into the same popular trope of the *perverse Amerikan imagination*, puts disciplinary pressure on the black body. The quest not to be that deviant body often produces an overinvestment in politics of respectability, a detachment from the body, so much so that you might not even know *what your own pussy looks like*. On the other hand, embracing one's sexuality might play into that *perverse imagination*. In many ways, this is what Audre Lorde names as the bind that prevents black women and black people from being able to access the erotic as usable resource.¹² Yet, for Lane, the response cannot be to censure what is thought of as pornography, because that, too, becomes another kind of oppression. She proclaims, "Let us celebrate. Let us share our fantasies frankly and honestly even brutally let's do the safe sex thing the dental dams the latex gloves let's laugh and love sex or lovemaking if that's what you call it to hell with what Amerika thinks to hell with what we've taught ourselves to think pledge allegiance to your entire black woman selves let us fuck suck eat screw scream our heads off loud enough for everyone to hear."¹³

Lane wants to take her power back and encourages readers to do the same by embracing different kinds of sex while questioning how black lesbian pleasure might look, feel, and be. Pleasure might be *brutal*, it might be *sex* or *lovemaking*. Black lesbian pleasure might take the shape of deviancy and pathology in the *Amerikan* imaginary. Indeed, in the *Amerikan* imaginary, black women have not had the privilege of easy access to the category "women"; too big, too tough, too strong, too black, too masculine, black women have always had a precarious relationship to the term. Woman has historically been theorized as a white possession or endowment. The distinction between sex and lovemaking is a response to Lorde's distinction between sensation and sensation with feeling.¹⁴ For Lane, there is no judgment of either. There is, rather, a desire to make room for it all. Lane encourages the reader to let go of those binds and enjoy sex however you want it (as long as it is safe). In this way, I see Lane bringing a Trans* method or mode of being to her readers, she asks them to open themselves up to types of desire that might be demonized by the *Amerikan* imaginary, and instead of conforming to that fear, she encourages women to be bold and take risks. She asks that her readers free themselves from these controlling images, as such images work, with or without their self-discipline. Black lesbians were already viewed as excess to the category "black woman," just as black marked the limit of "woman," conceived in popular feminist (white) politics. So in many ways, the queer position of "black lesbian woman" functions as an opening up

of the category “woman” in the first place. At once this gives new meaning to the category and unhinges it from biology so that the question of, “Can women have dicks?” might be answered in the affirmative. In this particular instance, *to have* means to acquire in prosthetic form, that is, the dildo. But this conversation illuminates a feminist discourse concerned with the confines of a gender binary that seeks to discipline a subject’s actions based upon that subject’s unchallenged placement within the category “woman.” The “black lesbian as woman” is a direct challenge to the term’s ability to articulate a coherent, stable, identifiable category of people. The question posed, “Can women have dicks?,” then, is not just a question relevant to the *Black Lace* community but also a question continually asked in feminist spaces. Most notably, in the spring of 2015, the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival decided to answer the question in the negative and cancel a forty-year-old tradition instead of changing a policy that explicitly states that transgender women (who have not had bottom surgery) are unwelcome. Conversely, transgender men were welcomed in the space. What we can learn from these conflicts is that the gender category “woman” is a contested one. Others police who can and cannot belong to the category based upon biology and appropriate object choice. The question that *Black Lace* helps us understand is that despite women’s ability to have dicks, those women in possession of dicks may not be included within the category of “woman,” depending on who’s determining the qualifications of inclusion. Thus, the magazine’s discussion highlights the multiple ways that people make and remake the category “woman,” illuminating both its capacious and foreclosing potential.

The Dildo as a Site of Trans* Intersection

Though readers pushed Lane to present “softer” and “gentler” images of women, Lane refused to abide. Instead, she responded by interrogating the dildo even more. In her essay following “Hot Lace Letters,” she wrote, “What’s race got to do with it?” In this piece, she decided to take a deeper look at the relationship of the dildo and race, especially as so many women evoked the object in their erotic stories. Because Lane often fantasized about dildos, she thought it would be a great idea to photograph one for the magazine. She had her own that was “six inches, rubbery, cheap, mauve,” which she became self-conscious about when her friend told her she had race issues.¹⁵ Her response to this friend was, “A dildo is a dildo, not a dick.” She was satisfied with that response until it came time to find

a photo suitable for the magazine. She visited a sex shop in search of a black dildo to photograph for the magazine. This shopping trip provoked the question, “What does it mean, exactly, when white hegemony extends to the production of dildos?”¹⁶ The dildo was at once humanized, racialized, and “flesh” colored. Lane could not help but see how the black dildo’s function as commodity in the sex store had ramifications in the lives of black cisgender men. This was a moment of Trans* reckoning.

She discovered bright-colored toys that were called “‘psychedelic’” and “not human,” though what she wanted was a brown dildo, that had a tone similar to her own. When she asked the owner where she might find one, he told her that they had sold out, and those are the ones that go the fastest. He pointed her toward a bin sitting on the floor. The bin was labeled, “Big Black Dick.” The only ones available were “24 inches and thick as [her] arm.” She could no longer think of dildos without thinking about their relationship not only to race but also to notions of humanity and monstrosity. The dildos that most resembled her flesh were mandingo-sized. She concluded: “The entire experience forced me to more critically examine how race permeates American culture. A sex toy easily becomes the location for racial terror and desire because sex itself is that location. We confront the violence of history and its consequences. We speak our allegiances according to the color we choose . . . what really needs to change is not so much the dildo, but constructions of race and the power behind these constructions. After all, what’s race got to do with dildos?”¹⁷

Black lesbian sex toy shopping was not simply about a sex act; it was also political, entangled with capitalism and labor. The black or brown dildo was not just a dildo; it could not be detached from the black body ideologically, the cisgender black stereotyped mandingo figure. Lane confronts her relationship to sex toys and black men. The relationship is about black lesbian women’s relationship to dildos, but also black lesbian women’s relationship to cisgender black men. In her search to understand black women’s sexuality, she encounters the stereotypes of black cisgender men, which not only affect black cisgender men but also black lesbians who are interested in finding toys that reflect their brown skin. Black women have always had to contend with their precarious relationship to the category of woman, as it has never been a category of feminine safety.¹⁸ This is an example of how the signifier “black lesbian” Trans*’s feminism as black women occupied this marginal space as individual black women when they tried to join feminist movements and realized that to be women they would have to, at least for the moment, forget

about race and the oppression that they felt as black people in America.¹⁹ *Black women* and *the black woman* become recognizable social and political categories by the very nature of their ideological persistence as pathological stereotype.²⁰

Black feminist thought and praxis has traditionally entered the conversation of feminism by critiquing the limiting way that white feminism conceives of womanhood. Black women put pressure on the category “woman,” pushing it to its conceptual limits relative to race, yet they circumscribe the same category relative to noncisgender bodies or non-heteronormative bodies who want to lay claim to the category. What is productive about black lesbian feminism, however, and especially how it manifests in *Black Lace*, is that it mobilizes the category “woman” to forge a politics of liberation that challenges a narrow heteropatriarchal conception of the term.

The erotic was not only a black feminist evocation to enact personal pleasure and liberate oneself sexually; for such black lesbians as Lane, this place of pleasure was being forged in a time of multiple crises. That material reality could not be escaped. Robin D. G. Kelley argues that in much of the scholarship on the working class, “play is seen as an escape from work,” but when it comes to oppressed poor people of color, “the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and creative expression is itself labor.”²¹ Lane’s analysis of the dildo allows for a better understanding of the relationship between work and play. For black lesbians, pleasure—finding, creating, and sustaining places of pleasure—is a battle against internalized and external heteronormativity and white supremacy. Lane argues that access to a liberated sexual self comes with a responsibility to do other kinds of work. She too makes a distinction between work and play. After encouraging women to fuck and screw, she goes on to say: “Then let’s get off our backs, dammit, there’s so much to do there’s crack young black kids hating themselves poverty homelessness murdered black children black men black women George Bush Jesse Helms it’s not enough to fuck not enough to search for the ultimate orgasm we have other lives to live other lives so wash your toys put your leather harness away kiss your lover(s) get up, I say, get up there’s so much work to do, so much power in our erotic selves . . . Enjoy.”²²

The black feminist politics that Lane articulates and circulates is one that does not end with sex. The sex act itself is not going to bring about social transformation; there are multiple interlocking oppressions that Lane names: crack, poverty, and homelessness. Although Lane articulates

these as struggles separate from sexual liberation, I argue that, with the placement of these social issues alongside an articulation of a desire for sexual liberation outside of deviancy or denial, the erotic is simultaneously work and pleasure, the erotic self does indeed exceed sex acts. The erotic self is not put away when a person *gets up* but is simply another place of erotic power. This inseparability of work and play is further inscribed in the text itself as the text rarely uses commas, periods, or grammatical markers to separate sentences or thoughts, demonstrating the messiness and complex dynamic of the erotic.

From the erotic knowledge comes a deeper knowing of self. What Lane learned and was able to articulate was the intimate relationship between the objectification of black men and the ways in which that has bearing upon black lesbian lives and living. Affirmation of this black erotic knowledge as a valuable resource challenges heteronormative valuations of knowledge production. Lane asks the reader to participate in an epistemological shift whereby we imagine the black lesbian outside of the paradigm of deviant, in need of discipline, or unseen.

When I interviewed Lane, I asked her about this debate, and she responded, saying, “I think some people were uncomfortable with the dildo stuff and were trying to get away from male representation blah blah blah. But you know, I wasn’t willing to censor sex that way. This is how women are having sex with each other. You can have your critique, but this is my representation, and I am not gonna sit there and it may even be more radical than you are allowing it to be.”²³ Lane challenged black lesbians to think seriously about representation, and she would not allow anyone’s desires to be policed, even if there was a fear that somehow they would be thought to be identifying with men. Rather, she asked her readers to engage in understanding the multiple ways that they were women, lesbian, kinky, dildo wearing, free and unfree in the ways in which their race, indeed, their blackness could be potentially commodified and sold.

The Power and Limits of Name Changing

In 2011, I went home to visit my family and friends in the Bay Area. While having family dinner at a local diner, my rental car was broken into, and all my things were stolen: laptop, archival magazines that had been gifted to me, hard drives that contained back-up copies of interviews, credit cards, IDs, and checks. I felt violated. I felt out of control. But what I felt more than anything was a deep loss. As I cried and continued to

have panic attacks and “breakdowns” over the next couple of days following the robbery, I realized I was crying from a place of pain and loss that was much deeper than my laptop or credit cards. I was crying and feeling loss of moments and pains I had never allowed myself to fully experience.

One evening during one of my “breakdowns,” I spent a couple of hours looking at myself in the mirror. I longed to see and know myself, but it was difficult for me to do. I felt my face and body morphing before my eyes and beyond my control. I talked to myself. I told myself I was strong. I told myself I was beautiful even as I tried to make sense of the contorted vision I was presented with. I told myself that I would come back to myself, put myself back together, even though I felt that I was “losing” it. I realize that it is sometimes necessary to “lose” it. It is necessary to feel pain and loss, for it opens up space for something new. When I came back to myself, I was no longer “Kiana.” I was “Kai.” During those hours I spent with myself in the bathroom of the house I had grown up in, I watched myself change and come into new being. I began hearing a voice. It told me that my name was now Kai. I started repeating it, “Kai, Kai, Kai.” Every time I said that name, I saw myself transform into a recognizable self in the mirror. Kai is the name the universe gave me, and it allowed me to see myself. From that moment on, I was Kai. Kai, a name that was Kiana taken apart and rearranged—I love them both.

Weeks later I looked up the meaning of the name Kai and found that it had multiple meanings in different places, but the ones that resonated with me most were the Japanese and Yoruba meanings. In Japanese, Kai may mean “big water,” “ocean,” “sea,” or it may also mean “change.” In Yoruba, it means “love.” From this traumatic experience a new name was born. A new name marked a new iteration of self.

Name changing has been a tool used by transgender and genderqueer people, often divorcing ourselves from the gendered names we were given at birth. Not all transgender people change their names, but for those of us who do, it becomes a moment of self-reclamation and not simply gender self-determination but also self-determination whereby we challenge and disrupt the influence inheritance has on our present and future; it is no longer pre- or overdetermined by biology or blood. Giving oneself a new name is not unique to the transgender experience. Many oppressed communities and individuals have articulated the importance of name changing as a political act. The change of name enables the possibility of a new articulation of self, a self that is detached from the name that was bestowed upon the subject by parents or through other kinds of

inheritances, such as slavery. This aim to break away from a given name is what Audre Lorde might also call an act of poetry, “for it is through poetry that we give names to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”²⁴ Articulation of self through naming is an essential component of a black feminist ethic, whether it be to name oneself or to name a group of people, black women, whose unique positionalities were not accounted for in dominant feminist movements that uphold a white cisgender female body as the representative subject. Black women were caught in a matrix whereby they were rendered invisible, because “women” implied “white” and “black” conjured “male.”²⁵

Renaming has a black feminist genealogy. In Toni Cade Bambara’s interview, “How She Came by Her Name,” she discusses the importance of renaming herself as an act of self-empowerment, a practice with a long history that she traces through black women writers. She writes: “Toni Cade Bambara—the minute I said it I immediately inhabited it, felt very at home in the world. This was my name. It is not so unusual for an artist, a writer, to name themselves; they are forever constructing themselves, are forever inventing themselves. That’s the nature of that spiritual practice. Maya Angelou changed her name. Toni Morrison definitely changes her name—Chloe Wofford?! Audre Lorde changed the spelling of her first and last names.”²⁶ There is great potential for empowerment in naming oneself, but the act of naming or renaming has its limitations. What happens when you rename yourself and those around you refuse to call you by that new name? A new name does not always mark a fundamental shift in being or the conditions that help to produce said being. A new name can trouble history because it changes the index. As people change names, it requires that we know all names if we want to locate them in the archive. In a similar way, as groups like “black lesbian feminist” separate themselves or assert themselves as cohesive category, they become a category separate from but still fundamentally connected to that which they came to critique, “feminist.” So Kai is a transgender man, but Kai is also all of the experiences that created and made manifest Kiana, though she is no longer the representative of my current manifestation of self. Tracing and understanding these transformation processes is important because it helps us understand and validate that which was already present, yet unnamed.

I move to another editorial piece by Alycee Lane that highlights the tension between naming as empowerment and naming as surface change.



FIG. 3.3. Image of word collage from *Black Lace*, Issue 4, page 26. Courtesy of BLK Publishing Company, Inc.

In the fourth and final issue of *Black Lace* she wrote an article entitled, “Queerness and Other Identities.” The article was first given as a talk at the 1991 Creating Change Conference. This was a time when “queer” was a term being mobilized and emerging in academic discourse, prompted by radical HIV/AIDS activists who articulated a radical intersectional politic. The term “queer” troubled lesbian and gay studies, as it asked the field to account for more than nonnormative sexualities. Queer named compulsory heterosexuality, a result of nuanced interlocking webs of power that relied on patriarchy and a rigid gender binary.

The image that accompanies this article lists a multitude of identity categories that people may use to self-identify or may be identified as whether they want to be or not.²⁷ People use these identity categories to reclaim power over their image. For example, Lane discusses the use of the term “nigga” or “nigger” and how it can be “counterhegemonic”; at the same time, “niggers in the context of hateful lyrics or any other context are not affirmed, empowered niggers but niggers you lynch on the streets . . . Blacks. African Americans.”²⁸ There are many ways to name a black person

(nigger, black, negro), and some of those names are put to use to demonize a whole group of people. What Lane shows us is that those very same names can be repurposed to call forth subversive reinvention. Lane argues that those names that they, black lesbian women, call themselves are limited if they do not change the state-sanctioned violence that black people are subjected to. To name oneself is powerful but limited if others do not affirm that name or value it. Lane concludes: "And with all these words to confuse and disorient me, I still have to worry, finally, about the frequency with which my names—empowered or not—are recited over LAPD airwaves, each and everyday of my life."²⁹

Naming can be a powerful act, but the names that we use to call ourselves into community might be the same names used to keep us captive or the same names used by our captors to demonize and pathologize. If this is the case, then we should not be so concerned with the empowerment of giving oneself a new name, a new category, fixed and coherent. We should instead be invested and committed to making space where the ability to constantly change one's name, the power to constantly transform, and shift is an option. I am more interested in holding onto the potential of possible name changes than the actual *new* name itself, because it is this potential to be made anew and undone perpetually that marks ongoing transformation. The new name marks both a beginning and an ending, but these are not fixed or always clear either. The moment I became Kai was also a moment of becoming a different iteration of Kiana. I am not suggesting an end to new identities through naming but that it might be useful for us to pause on the ways in which we are always already in the presence of absence at every new iteration of self or selves. No one has said it better than Marlon Riggs when he asserted that black both is and it ain't.³⁰ A Trans* method asks that we not be so invested in what follows black is or black ain't but rather that we be attuned to the ways in which black is made present or not, when, where, how, why, and, most important, in relation to what. A Trans* method requires that we be more attuned to difference rather than sameness, understanding and declaring that our sameness will not protect us. We must 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 required to live, named and unnamed. A Trans* method show us how people become representable as things, categories, and names because it shows us the excess as a perpetual challenge to containment.

Conclusion

We must listen for the fullness embedded in the silences and gaps, the moments of existence before the name or the category came to do its work upon the body. We must be more attuned to the present absences which calls for a Trans* method. One of the ways in which black queer studies scholars have challenged us to engage black sexuality and gender is through simultaneous black and queer acts of (re)remembering. Black queer studies staged this work in the gap and in the silence of queer studies and black studies, which articulated themselves as mutually exclusive. Black queer studies helped us call out the missing, the ones who are with us, but neglected. A Trans* method further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence. A Trans* method is a tool that helps us embark on the work of listening, understanding, and reading as both intellectual and political practices. It allows us to see certain things that might not normally be seen. It also enables us to understand how that seeing is being shaped.

As the T in LGBTQI becomes more apparent in popular culture, it is important that we still hold fast to a Trans* analytic, knowing that representation is not enough. We know that it is not enough, for just as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock have become the popular beautiful women of color representing the transgender movement, there have been countless other unnamed (and named, but names we are not familiar with) transgender women and men who have been harassed, violated, and murdered in the streets. At the heart of black feminist praxis is a push to make the lives of disappeared black women matter.³¹ In order to make that argument, black feminists showed us how the category of woman failed to account for the unique experience of black women. This critique both challenged and clung to the category itself. I consider the identities that have not yet come to cohere as nameable but are ever present with us. How do we carry those not only as simple additions to an ever-growing acronym, LGBTQI, but instead hold them up as future Trans* operations that will come to do work and further open us up to new possibilities? This is the charge of a black queer studies *for now*, and by now I mean in this current historical moment, but I also use “for now” to imply the temporariness of this method as one that is unfixed so that we might always be open and ready for a name changing considering what is necessary for now is not necessary for always.

NOTES

1. Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2 (March 1, 2002): 91, doi:10.1007/BF02435632. I interviewed Archbishop Carl Bean, founder of Unity Fellowship Church and cofounder of the Minority AIDS Project. In our interview he describes himself as transgender, always feeling kinship with his trans sisters. He stated that even though most would not accept his trans proclamation, he still held on to it. He did not change his pronouns or medically transition, which makes his trans illegible to many who might not have the tools to read or know his trans presence that exists under the moniker of "gay cisgender male." Carl Bean, interview by Kai M. Green, February 11, 2013.
2. Stephen Whittle, "Forward," in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi.
3. "Trans-: on or to the other side of: across or beyond," accessed April 8, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trans->.
4. Avery Tompkins, "Asterisk," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 26–27, doi:10.1215/23289252-2399497.
5. Trystan Cotten, *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Trans- ition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 103.
6. Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, "Tranifest," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 222, doi:10.1215/23289252-2400082.
7. See "Dances with Dildos: Hot Lace Letters," *Black Lace*, Summer 1991.
8. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–60.
9. Alycee J. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?," *Black Lace*, Summer 1991.
10. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?," 3.
11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, rev. 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).
12. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."
13. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?," 3.
14. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."
15. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?," 21.
16. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?"
17. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?"
18. Gloria T. Hull, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982); Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Jacob Hale, "Are Lesbians Women?," *Hypatia* 11, no. 2 (May 1, 1996): 94–121, doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb00666.x; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Katherine

McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

19. Anita Cornwell, a black lesbian, joined the Radical Lesbians in 1971 and started writing for a mostly white lesbian feminists' journal, *The Ladder*. She was hopeful about coalition building but was disturbed at a conference when a Black Panther was shot and that murder seemed not to have relevance in the white lesbian feminist world. By 1974 she had changed her tone of hopefulness in that she realized more and more that to be a lesbian feminist she would need to forget her blackness and that would mean death for her. This is just one example of what many black women were experiencing in the women's movement (http://sitemaker.umich.edu/lesbian.history/lesbian_feminism, accessed March 15, 2012).

20. Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Cade Bambara, and bell hooks have examined the role of the masculinized and/or emasculating black female tropes—from Mammy to Sapphire to Hoochie Mama—in the U.S. imaginary.

21. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 45.

22. Lane, "What's Race Got to Do with It?," 3.

23. Alycee J. Lane, interview by Kai M. Green, May 24, 2011.

24. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider*, 36.

25. Hull, *All the Women Are White*.

26. Toni Cade Bambara, "How She Came by Her Name," in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 206.

27. A similar move was made by Facebook in 2014. See Aimee Lee Ball, "Facebook Customizes Gender with 50 Different Choices," *New York Times*, April 4, 2014, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/fashion/facebook-customizes-gender-with-50-different-choices.html>.

28. Alycee Lane, "Queerness and 'Other' Identities," *Black Lace*, 1992, 26.

29. Lane, "Queerness and 'Other' Identities," 27.

30. Marlon Riggs, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* (DOCUMENTARY, 2009).

31. Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).