

CHAPTER 5

Transliminality: Black Transfemmes and the Limit of Visibility Politics

Nathan Alexander Moore

I really don't understand why we need a Day of Visibility since for most of us, especially with Black girls, we are as visible as we need to be. Our visibility is getting us killed, you know, so, it's not that we need to be visible. I think the thing is the people who care about us, who are involved in our lives, and who know us, they're the people who need to become more visible.... They need to stop supporting us from the shadows, step out into the light.... Don't keep us in the dark, on the side, in some little secret place in your mind.

—Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, Facebook post, March 27, 2019

This wisdom from one of our Black trans elders serves as the beginning, the end, and the very core of this essay. Miss Major Griffin-Gracy's words demonstrate the limits and dangers of visibility politics for Black transfemmes. Moving from the space of this epigraph, I want to explore theoretically and materially how Black transfemmes are *placed* in society. Rather than interrogate regimes of mainstream visibility through a visual analysis of filmic and/or televisual representations of transfeminine subjects, I want to engage with the discourse of trans visibility through the idea of the places from which Black transfemmes come onto the scene. Rather than thinking of visibility as something that Black transfeminine subjects are doing, I want to delineate the ways in which Black transfemmes negotiate the *spaces* of their visibility—to take account of the position from which one is viewed and mis/recognized. As social geographer Katherine McKittrick states, “if *who* we see is tied up with *where* we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place” (xv, original emphasis). Therefore, I argue that it is impossible to think through visibility without reckoning with the places that Black transfemmes inhabit conceptually, materially, and experientially.

I contend that being “visible” and being “seen” are two very distinct phenomena. While the first denotes an acceptance by mainstream structures of power, privilege, and access, the second pulls from the lower register of the Black queer vernacular. While being “visible” is about checking boxes and filling quotas, this leaves the Black transfeminine subject alone, usually as a singular voice and narrative to present to a spectacle-consuming public. Alternatively, I assert 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. Rather than arguing for the denial of visibility, I wish to highlight the violence and unsustainable nature that a politics that rests solely on visibility produces. As Miss Major notes, it is not the work of Black transfemmes to make ourselves visible; this is not enough. As Black transfemmes, we need the people in our lives to step up and be visible as well. We need to move outside of the vertical integration of visibility and representation, as it is always tenuous at best, and think through a more fluid politics of coalition that can help make the lives of Black transfemmes more liveable and equitable. Through the imbricated writing styles of scholarly criticism, poetry, and creative non-fiction, this essay will integrate my own experiences as a Black transfemme and build upon the queer feminist of colour legacy that urges us to speak our truth, generate theory from the materiality of our lives, and sees creativity and artistry as essential to our collective freedom.

1: DEPARTURES, OR FROM WHERE I AM ARRIVING

Let me begin by charting the own space of my creative-critical thinking. When I speak of Blackness here and elsewhere, I am speaking of what Michelle Wright asserts is “the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in history and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined—the ‘now’ through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated” (14, original emphasis). Wright conceives of Blackness as a multidimensional phenomenon that references a when and where in space and time but connects to other locations across the globe and history. Taking a more ontological approach, Marquis Bey presents that “Blackness rests in the in-between, and this ‘between’ is also a movement of flight, of escape, of fugitivity from the confines of ontological pinning down. The pinning down requires fixation and definable locations, but as in-between, blackness is that elusive interstitiality” (279). With both authors’ points in mind, I conceive of Blackness as a form of placelessness, an outside, a location that is a location because of its fundamental exclusion. Locations and displacement are always already a point of critical importance to Black people across the African diaspora.

For Black transfemmes, placelessness is key to their navigation of space. I theorize this contradictory state of being as a *transliminality*, as the Black transfemme is always visible but on the brink of vanishing, observable but never fully recognized as requiring substantive care. This claim is supported by other assertions made by Bey that “trans* is elsewhere, not here, because here is known, ontologically discernible and circumscribable.

By now we know that trans but ... it also suggests the human” (285). If Blackness the Black trans subject is t realm that borders white h through the way histories unstable position that Blackizing bodies is central to t

Insights from African notes the ways in which t central to understanding the bedrock on which th view. As such, it invites a the gendered gaze” (4). M body through binaries of t the power dynamics betw because it provides import and transness. It is not my atemporal phenomenon. C both Blackness, as a globa variance, are indebted to t shadowed and erased othe Blackness or transness is n intersections of these catep cisnormative heteropatriar

Finally, a clarification essay, I use the term *transf* I use this term capaciously specifically and gendervari not in a gesture that collaps formity but as a way to sig aries of gender identity and negotiating the repressive p other transfeminine subject to consciousness of one’s g times in one’s life. By thin hope to expose the shared ment that is grounded in th cates multiple subjects in th exclusion. In conversation w problems of visibility as “ge

By now we know that trans* suggests, and has suggested, the unclassifiable and illegible, but ... it also suggests the pervasive moving nonmovement that precedes that which is human" (285). If Blackness is an a priori fugitivity and transness is an elsewhere, then the Black trans subject is theoretically beyond the bounds of sight, existing in an uncanny realm that borders white heteropatriarchal cisnormativity. Additionally, if we are to think through the way histories of colonization, enslavement, and white supremacy shape the unstable position that Black transfemmes inhabit, then visibility and the process of visible bodies is central to these social schemas.

Insights from African feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí are invaluable, as she notes the ways in which the West is a culture consumed with the visual and sight being central to understanding and interpreting the world. She posits that "since the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded, the body is always in view and on view. As such, it invites a gaze, a gaze of difference—the most historically constant being the gendered gaze" (4). Moreover, Oyèwùmí notes that Western discourses position the body through binaries of bodily legitimacy, in which there is only male and female, and the power dynamics between these categories are hegemonically stable. I bring this up because it provides important ground from which I come to understand both Blackness and transness. It is not my intention to place either of these categories as universal and/or atemporal phenomenon. On the contrary, I attempt to demonstrate the ways in which both Blackness, as a global racial denotative, and transness, as a construction of gender variance, are indebted to the history of colonization and white supremacy that has overshadowed and erased other ways of being in the world. Rather than assume that either Blackness or transness is natural and universally applicable, I wish to locate the ways the intersections of these categories reveal the colonial and imperial constructions of white cisnormative heteropatriarchy.

Finally, a clarification of the terms at play, a mapping out if you will. Throughout this essay, I use the term *transfemme* as a shorthand for transfeminine. It should be noted that I use this term capaciously to signify those subjects who identify as both trans women specifically and gendervariant people who are feminine of centre more broadly. I do this not in a gesture that collapses the experiences of both groups into an easy equation of uniformity but as a way to signal the fluid ways in which femmes (across the porous boundaries of gender identity and sex assignment) embrace gender creativity while resisting and negotiating the repressive powers that be. More materially, separating trans women and other transfeminine subjects can overlook the ways in which transitioning and/or coming to consciousness of one's gender can mean inhabiting all of these categories at different times in one's life. By thinking through broadly the experience of Black transfemmes, I hope to expose the shared vulnerabilities that this group suffers while making an argument that is grounded in the sociohistorical terrain in which Black transfemininity implicates multiple subjects in the paradoxical position of heightened visibility and intensified exclusion. In conversation with Che Gossett, Black trans artist Juliana Huxtable notes the problems of visibility as "getting ahead of dealing with the intricacies of what it means to

create a community within ourselves [as trans people], to create a community that then engages the outside world with a sense of cohesion (or not)... But most people don't know what the term 'trans community' means" (43). It is my hope that through this far-reaching conception of transfemmes, we can begin to recognize what connects the plight of Black trans women and other Black gendervariant people.

2: BEING OBSERVED, OR WHERE I STAND

I am an in-between and a beyond. I exist in-between normalised binaries. An in-between: something that does not quite sit in very well.... This is the in-between world of belonging. But I belong to myself and myself alone. Even if only sometimes.

—Neo S. Musangi

As the above quote demonstrates, the sociocultural positions of the Black trans subject confounds the stability that is necessitated by Western cultural logics. Black transfemmes personify the anarchic fluidity that makes both Blackness and transness such potentially disruptive social categories. As Musangi notes, this location is one of displacement, of being placed not only at the margins, but an in-between-ness that only the word *liminality* can attempt to encompass. It is this politics of location that I want to extrapolate on further; and I want to demonstrate that for Black transfemmes, the notion of visibility must also be articulated through an understanding of *dislocation*. To turn to McKittrick once more, "social practices create landscapes and contribute to how we organize, build, and imagine our surroundings. Black subjects are not indifferent to these practices and landscapes; rather, they are connected to them due to crude racial-sexual hierarchies and due to their (often unacknowledged) status as geographic beings who have a stake in the production of space" (xiv). These landscapes and social practices are not just legacies of slavery and colonization but the very material, conceptual, and experiential territory that shape the realities of Black transfemmes. In this regard, Black transfemmes and their visibility (or lack thereof) must be understood through the conception of *the place from which* we are observed.

However, this is a difficult task both materially and conceptually, since Black transfemmes are fluid subjects. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley emphasizes that for Black queer subjects, "fluidity is not an easy metaphor for queer and racially hybrid identities but for concrete, painful, *and* liberatory experience" (192–3, original emphasis). The fluidity that Black transfemmes bring to the world opens up the space from which we can understand binary, calcified genders as constructed and constricting fictions. Moreover, Black transfemmes have served as some of the most inspiring and creative figures in terms of the cultural avant-garde. I personally cannot help but get excited when I hear Big Freedia announce, "I did not come to play with hoes! I came to slay, bitch!" The Queen Diva of New Orleans bounce music adds a simmering yet abrasive nature to Beyoncé's hit single, "Formation." Yet, as Freedia proclaims her movement to come forward into being, her physical body is left as even more immaterial than the echo of her voice. Big Freedia

does not appear in the music video for "Queen Bey. Although Freedia is featured on Beyoncé's album, she fails to appear in the video. Beyoncé's mother, Mrs. Knowles-Carter, is also featured in the video.

As a Black transfemme, my visibility and aesthetics may be appreciated differently than those of transfemmes frequently only visible in the media. It is more likely that we are to be celebrated for our living, strikingly consumed are the stories of those who have been killed. As of the writing of this piece, several Black trans people to be killed in the United States. Black trans people, nonconforming people that very same time that FX's *Pose* is airing, a fact, as it seems that being truly recognized as a person is a struggle. As notes, "what's interesting is that with real questions of structure and power (see Huxtable 44). Visibility is not just about that Black trans people are not just about beauty that align with whiteness, but about the visibility of transness that we see show up in the media. It is more easily into the category of being downplayed the strides that trans people have taken. It is dubbed the "transgender tipping point." It has always been, at best, a vexing question that needs to be asked: *what space* are we creating in the 21st century?

I'm left thinking about the question of what that visible difference is necessary for. It has been the practice for centuries of celebrating gender transgression and femininity.

*Hail Mary, Full of Grace
What will you show us about
What might you teach us of faith*

*The judge calls your saintly face
The constable wishes to break your
The papers try their best to score
and scour your flesh*

does not appear in the music video or on the Formation Tour, hosted by the reigning Queen Bey. Although Freedia may be talented enough to diversify the sonic landscape of Beyoncé's album, she fails to appear as a corporeal presence in any venue with the illustrious Mrs. Knowles-Carter. In essence and in substance, Big Freedia never actually arrives.

As a Black transfemme, I struggle with the ways in which our femininity and cultural aesthetics may be appreciated but almost never fully valued. As we can see too often, Black transfemmes frequently only become visible after all breath has left our bodies. It is much more likely that we are to be known and recognized as dead bodies than we are to be celebrated for our living, striving, thriving, dreaming, and creating. More readily and easily consumed are the stories of Black trans death or the spectacle of Black trans violence. As of the writing of this piece, Brianna "BB" Hill is the most recent Black trans woman to be killed in the United States, in 2019. She is among 22 dead trans women or gender-nonconforming people that year. The rate of violence against trans people is rising at the very same time that FX's *Pose* is one of the most popular television shows. This is an unsettling fact, as it seems that being visible does not always translate into being "seen," being truly recognized as a person deserving of rights, care, and dignity. As Juliana Huxtable notes, "what's interesting is the way visibility is being used to sabotage actual engagement with real questions of structural negligence and discrimination and violence" (Gossett and Huxtable 44). Visibility is not about minimizing violence; it is part and parcel of violence that Black trans people are met with. Frequently, visibility is based upon standards of beauty that align with whiteness and the ability to pass as cisgender. Regularly, the images of transness that we see show people who align with a binary conception of gender, falling more easily into the categories of trans man or trans woman. It is not my intention to downplay the strides that trans people have made since 2014, the year that *Time Magazine* dubbed the "transgender tipping point." However, I can't help but be aware that visibility has always been, at best, a vexed and vexing strategy for Black transfemmes. Moreover, it needs to be asked: *what space* are we tipping into as we teeter toward the second decade of the 21st century?

I'm left thinking about the history of Black bodies, flesh that is gazed upon, and how that visible difference is necessary to maintain social inequities. I'm thinking of how this has been the practice for centuries. I'm thinking of one of the earliest figures of Black gender transgression and femininity: They went by the name of Mary Jones.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace
What will you show us about miracles?
What might you teach us of faith?

The judge calls your saintly face a macabre masterpiece
The constable wishes to break your iconography into mourning
The papers try their best to scorn your name
and scour your flesh

*At the margins you sew a grotto
In shadows you hold sacrament*

*I wonder how you move through a city so cold
How you float over cobblestone
How you evaporate into night sky
Does the hem of your skirts go frothing
As you spill off the sidewalk and across the street*

*I wonder if you ever saw the others
The ones just like you in their unlikeness
Your once and forever after unfamily*

*How did they look as they awashed on this shore?
A boatload of shuffled nakedness*

*Did the sight of iron ever chafe the fabric against your skin?
Did they ever offer a pitiful glance
A hopeless stare
Did you ever look upon a sea-sickened face
And behold your reflection*

Or

*Did they look upon your frontispiece
All rouged and reviled
And see only what their keepers would see
A monster of mannish deceit*

I know on a logistical and rational level that the story of Mary Jones and the stories of our current moment are distinct. I know that time has passed and—at least superficially—things have changed. I also know that it is uneasy at best, and anachronistic at worst, to call Mary Jones a transfeminine subject. Yet, as C. Riley Snorton advises, “a transversal approach to history, then, becomes a way to perceive how difference can take transitive form, expressed in shifting modalities of time and meaning from within the abyss” (10). Therefore, it is with this uncertain view in mind that I take Mary Jones’s case as one of many departure points through which to think through the history of Black transfemininity and its relation to visibility.

Mary Jones was born Peter Sewally and was a free Black person living in New York in the mid-1800s. At some point in their life, they took up the name Mary Jones and

began to live as woman clients. When one client for their crimes. The lithographs of *The Man* woman, but at the bottom Snorton notes that “re one become acquainted relationship to things it has been rendered in denoted some break w bility was completely e the carceral logics of th ant and a fungible com who walk in their lega

3: THE SPACE B WORLDING

*Dispossession is a c
self-sovereignty tha
wrapped up in white
sessed, we yearn to
—Che Gossett,*

As I heard the story o presented as part of a c My peers had decided African diaspora were book we were supposed of conversation. But I r burning tension of my classroom space. In 20 her native country of M story caught internation doned and fled to a new Malawians in South Af

I think about how a and flee to some new a suffering, but also her h ing for her, so I offer th

began to live as woman. As Jones, they were a sex worker and often stole money from their clients. When one client found this out, he decided to have Jones arrested and charged for their crimes. The case was highly sensationalized in both the newsprint media and lithographs of *The Man-Monster* were printed. The images show a seemingly unassuming woman, but at the bottom, her supposedly true name of Peter Sewally is listed. C. Riley Snorton notes that “reading ‘black’ and ‘trans’ in transitive relation, then, requires that one become acquainted with the social life of things, which is also to consider how one’s relationship to things and as a thing entails a confrontation and rethinking of the past as it has been rendered into History” (6). Jones’s visibility was not a form of recognition that denoted some break with the normative order of things. Quite the opposite, Jones’s visibility was completely enmeshed in the system of both transatlantic racial capitalism and the carceral logics of the US legal system. Black bodies being always already gendervariant and a fungible commodity, Jones’s case is eerily similar to those of Black transfemmes who walk in their legacy today.

3: THE SPACE BETWEEN US, OR BLACK FEMINIST WORLDING

Dispossession is a queer feeling and a racialized relation, to be without the self-sovereignty that accompanies modalities of heteronormative belonging wrapped up in whiteness. As queer and/or trans people of color, already dispossessed, we yearn to be with one another; our search and seeking is a be-longing.

—Che Gossett, “Pulse, Beat, Rhythm, Cry”

As I heard the story of Tiwonge Chimbalanga, I couldn’t help but want to cry. It was presented as part of a class discussion in one of my graduate classes in the spring of 2019. My peers had decided to share her story as an example of how Black queer people of the African diaspora were treated. I do not remember the lecture; I do not remember the book we were supposed to have read for the week; nor do I even remember the exact topic of conversation. But I remember the way my breath caught in my chest; I remember the burning tension of my eyes slowly salting over with tears that I refused to shed in the classroom space. In 2010, Tiwonge Chimbalanga, a trans woman, was imprisoned in her native country of Malawi for getting engaged to her partner, Steven Monjeza. The story caught international attention, and after much sensationalism, Tiwonge was pardoned and fled to a new life in South Africa. Her fiancé left her, and she met with some Malawians in South Africa that recognized, scorned, and berated her in public.

I think about how alone Tiwonge must have felt, having to leave her home in Malawi and flee to some new and uncertain land. I want to hold space to recognize not only her suffering, but also her humanity. I am still unsure of the most proper way to attend to caring for her, so I offer this space.

*Did you think you had found refuge
in the palms of his hand?
Had you built a small asylum
within the crevice of his embrace?
Would your shared home be a consulate
for all the discarded but beautiful things?*

*When the men came with their will like daggers
and the bullets in their eyes,
When the men came with their blood boiling
with righteous fire
Did you hold onto your him?*

*When you left
Were you hurtling like some purpled comet through the night?
Or did you drift through the air like some uncertain wisps of smoke?
Were you sure that you would land
on softer soil?*

*How do you begin to build a life
once your world has shattered
One long and bitter sea with no shore nor sunlight.*

This poem is part of a failure on my part. In part, my failure is based on not being able to fully answer these questions myself, but also in the difference between my own experience of transfemininity and that of Tiwonge. In writing this creative-critical piece, I am attempting to understand, inhabit, and model what Chandra Talpade Mohanty would call “the politics of location.” In this way, I see my struggle for freedom and dignity to be tied to that of Tiwonge’s, without collapsing the monumental differences that shape our distinct experiences. It is clear and unavoidable to me that I am a Westerner, specifically an American citizen. From this standpoint, I am able to understand the ways in which my proximity to resources, therapy, housing, and education is shaped by the capitalist and imperialist exploitation that this nation-state has meted out against people in the Global South, people like Tiwonge. But this recognition also allows me to see that we both struggle against the religious zealotry of right-wing conservative Christians that speak of narrow, stable, and normative conceptions of gender, family, marriage, and humanity. That these ideologies first came to Africa during initial periods of colonization centuries ago is on my mind, but I am also aware of how these principles have become reified through a modern form of cultural neo-imperialism through the American means of transnational media, outreach, and missionary work.

But these connections between both Black transfemmes and white supremacy. Mohanty notes, “In politics, it is the current struggles that we need to understand and critical analysis” (120). If white supremacy is dismantled, the system in which human life is held space for Tiwonge because of transphobic antagonism. and care was illuminated for my mind.

In the very same class that the diaspora, I was the target. I felt the most visible and I decided to explore and present this class, and my graduate work in all my transfeminine globe began to first think through are forced to navigate. I submit/mis/recognition. Even though sor, this was the most unsafe after question, emotional and Every presentation I gave was posing the questions I had in my final paper at the midterm. a project was. I was left quiet for graduate school. I was not believed myself to be. I bring affective chords it may struggle in its aftermath, I had to do a Black transfeminine subject.

I cannot be sure, but the femme was about visibility. In words, I suspect that my path to a place he had fought for his own. Again, I cannot and invest in only a few Black that academia is built on opportunities, or tenure p

But these connections do not make our experiences the same, even though we are both Black transfemmes attempting to survive in the wake of colonization and white supremacy. Mohanty notes, "Instead of privileging a certain limited version of identity politics, it is the current intersection of antiracist, anti-imperialist, and gay and lesbian struggles that we need to understand to map the ground for feminist political strategy and critical analysis" (120). In this way, I cannot be free until Tiwonge is free, until white supremacy is dismantled, until cissexism is dissolved, until capitalism is replaced with a system in which human life is held higher than profit accumulation. But more than this, I hold space for Tiwonge because I came to know her story when I was facing my own time of transphobic antagonism. Her story of adversity, of attempting to find home, support, and care was illuminated for me when those very same questions were at the forefront of my mind.

In the very same class that I was learning about Black queer people and cultures across the diaspora, I was the target of queer violence. It was the first semester in my life where I felt the most visible and invisible all at once. It was the semester that I had consciously decided to explore and present my femininity more explicitly and proudly. I thought that this class, and my graduate program more broadly, would be the space to stand delighted in all my transfeminine glory. But that semester, and that class, became the space where I began to first think through the *place* of Black transfemmes, the *location* of liminality we are forced to navigate. I suspect that all these issues are inextricably tied to visibility and mis/recognition. Even though the class was taught by a feminine Black gay male professor, this was the most unsafe space for me. Every time I spoke, I was berated with question after question, emotional abuse masquerading as an intention to promote scholarly rigor. Every presentation I gave was scrutinized to the point that I was asked if I should even be posing the questions I had come to share with the class. When I talked about my idea for a final paper at the midterm point in class, I was asked quite plainly what "the point" of such a project was. I was left questioning my own worth as a scholar and whether I was cut out for graduate school. I was worried that perhaps I was not as prepared and thoughtful as I believed myself to be. I bring forward this incident not for sympathy or pity or any other affective chords it may string. I offer my own experience because during this course and in its aftermath, I had to do the hard work of thinking through my place in the world as a Black transfeminine subject.

I cannot be sure, but I suspect that my presence in the classroom as a Black transfemme was about visibility and how the academy is so inequitably structured. In other words, I suspect that my professor saw my presence as a Black transfemme as a challenge to a place he had fought so hard to secure for himself, that my visibility might unsettle his own. Again, I cannot be sure, but I know that academia is built to spotlight, support, and invest in only a few Black queer scholars at a time. Moreover, I know without a doubt that academia is built on the idea of scarcity, whether that be job openings, fellowship opportunities, or tenure promotion. As bell hooks suggests when writing about feminist

solidarity, “we are taught that women are ‘natural’ enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well” (127). I would suggest that the same holds true for Black queer femmes. Again, I cannot be sure, but I know what it *felt* like, and I know what it *looked* like. Most importantly, I know this experience hurt.

I left that class and that semester feeling damaged, with anxiety, worsening depression, and utter exhaustion. To make matters worse, many of my peers in the class did not see this violence as violence. Often, the majority of my classmates did not even acknowledge my pain or vulnerability. Again, I cannot be sure, but I suspect that my peers could not see past the strong front I put forth, the way I refused to show how hurt and anguished I felt. Again, I cannot be sure, but I suspect that my genderfluidity, my lack of legal name change, and my use of both masculine and feminine pronouns somehow facilitated my transness being dismissed, if not erased entirely. Many times, after this class was over, I thought about what would I need to do, how would I need to *look*, for the abuse I was experiencing to be recognized. As (I hope) you can see, uncertainty is the standard, not the exception for Black transfemininity. Precarity is the rule, not the exception. Commonly, Black transfemmes are disregarded at the very moment that the violence meted out against us is at its most visible. For many of us, we have no stable ground on which to stand.

But for all the neglect I felt and faced, I was not entirely alone. I had one classmate, a close friend who I call my sister. She was there for me. After class she would listen to me rant; she would hold space for me to cry and curse. She would encourage me to yell or scream if necessary. She recognized that what happened to me was not my fault and that it was unnecessary. She checked in on me when I told her I was tired or depressed. And when things got to their worst, she did what she could to advocate when I was too weak to do so. It was my sister that called out some of our peers for not recognizing that I was a particular target of this professor’s malice. It was my sister who asked our peers to interrogate why they did not think that I was hurt. It was my sister who modelled what a real coalitional politic can look like between Black cis women and Black transfemmes. In these small but unsure ways—between my sister and myself and myself and Tiwonge—I have begun to think and attempt to enact what McKittrick notes as how “poetics, real and imagined geographies, put demands on traditional geographic arrangements because they expose the racial-sexual functions of the production of space and establish the new ways to read (and perhaps live) geography” (143). To put this another way, these contingent practices of making space and resistant initiatives attempt to provide Black transfemmes a more stable position from which to be seen.

However, I do not wish to overly romanticize these practices. Any attempt at connection is never guaranteed. Opening one’s self up to others can always potentially mean being harmed, disregarded, or neglected. For Black women and femmes to connect and begin the process of rethinking and reshaping the space between us, we must first acknowledge that this space exists at all. I believe a lot of this begins with a reshaping of the space of

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Africa. It means being conve

feminist discourse. We are at a moment in which transgender people and the issues facing our lives are very visible in popular culture and mass media. Yet the backlash against this representation has intensified as the media has become saturated with narratives of transfemmes. As more and more trans women's and femmes' stories, voices, and bodies are circulated, the attempt to reposition us outside the realms of womanhood and femininity are heightened. It is too easy to find the stories of transfeminine subjects being hailed as the minimization or delegitimation of "real" women's issues. When statements such as "not only women menstruate" or "not only women get pregnant" or "not all women have vaginas" are made, there is too often a reactionary discourse that women's issues are being dissolved or co-opted. Rather than passing these comments off as simple transphobia, we need to take them seriously as cisnormative feminists attempting to police the material and discursive boundaries of womanhood. Furthermore, these transphobic discourses are attempting to place trans women and femmes back into a space of the invisible, on the marginal territory of the unthought of and disregarded. It is high time that we attempt to reshape feminism beyond the confines of biology and the simplistic binary of man/woman.

I suggest that we move to a queer politics as described by Cathy Cohen, one where "a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. ... If there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin" (438). Rather than viewing womanhood and femininity as categories bound to biology, we can conceive of the connections made possible by one's alignment to the dominant powers of exploitation and subordination. Rather than viewing womanhood as ground that is owned and *occupied* by only the bodies of cisgender women, we can understand how Black trans women and transfemmes are also marginalized by the governing structures that would have women subordinated to men through systems of white heteropatriarchy. As bell hooks notes of feminist solidarity:

To actively struggle in a truly supportive way to understand our differences, to change misguided, distorted perspectives, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity. Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment. (138)

Moreover, this also means moving beyond the bounds of the nation-state and its territorial legacies of colonial conquest and fetish for borders. This means acknowledging and recognizing the connections between my place in Texas and Tiwonge's in South Africa. It means being conversant in each other's struggles without collapsing them into

singularities. It means attempting, perhaps for the first time, to unsettle regimes of visibility in the task of seeing one another.

In this essay, I have attempted to articulate how a politics of visibility is uncertain at best for Black transfemmes. Additionally, I have suggested that these issues are not just centred in the United States but are a problem of global concern as Black people across the African diaspora are surviving regimes of visibility that are located within legacies of colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Finally, I have gestured toward a politics and practice that allows Black transfemmes to step out from the unstable positions of marginality and onto firmer ground from which to be “seen.” In this way, the politics of visibility for Black transfemmes cannot be divorced from the material, conceptual, and experiential effects of *the place from which* we are observed. Moving forward, we must continue to struggle against the connected systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and cisnormativity; and we build that space to create and imagine between each other.

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