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Santa Barbara

“A Way to Lift Each Other Up”:

Blackfemme-ininities and the Materiality of Discourse

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Linguistics

by

deandre a. miles

Committee in charge:

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June 2020

The thesis of deandre a. miles is approved.

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June 2020

“A Way to Lift Each Other Up”: Blackfemme-ininities and the Materiality of Discourse

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by

deandre a. miles

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!" and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it."

– Zora Neale Hurston

As the adage goes: *it takes a village…*Or two. Or three. This thesis is dedicated, however indulgently and insufficiently, to the various "villagers" who have supported, counseled, and nourished me to this point.

First, I thank my parents, grandparents, great-grandmother, siblings, friends qua extended family, track and field coaches, as well as the University of Maryland, College Park, Upward Bound program staff members, each of whom have been my unwavering supporters all along.

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Lastly, I thank my Black(queer)femme academic ancestors who have blazed the path that allows me to do this healing work. When folks say, "it takes a village," it turns out that that, at least in my case, in an understatement.

ABSTRACT

“A Way to Lift Each Other Up”: Blackfemme-ininities and the Materiality of Discourse

by

deandre a. miles

Where does language come from, if not from bodies?

Bodies that step, strut, and snap.

Black bodies beaten blue.

Captive bodies stowed away.

Whirling bodies rolling in song.

Speaking bodies that carry on. and on. and on. and on…

Scholarship on the organization and production of linguistic meaning has neglected to explore fully the reality that speakers interact through bodies yoked both to the past and to each other. This thesis intervenes in this separation of language from bodies and their histories by centering the linguistic practices and experiences of Blackfemmes, who have been consistently marginalized as both researchers and subjects in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological studies of race and gender. Working from an intersectional framework undergirded by Blackfemme-inist Theory, I insist that Blackfemme life and language be counted in the archive. Consequently, this thesis focuses on linguistic forms, metadiscourse, and metapragmatic commentary produced in interviews with Blackfemmes on experiences of education, language, and identity. Embodiment emerged centrally in these conversations with emphasis on physical aspects of Blackfemme Language on the one hand, and the sociohistorical-interpersonal contexts of misogynoir on the other. This thesis introduces two terms, *materiodiscursivity* and

sightation, as interpretive frameworks to explicate linguistic practices and experiences of Blackfemme-ininity. *Materiodiscursivity* characterizes the way embodied linguistic performances (i.e. materializations) of identity orient speakers to others in multidimensional physical and ideological (i.e. discursive) space. It allows us to conceptualize how raciogendered identities emerge specifically at the nexus of the body and language. *Sightation* describes a distinctly Blackfemme greeting practice involving visual and verbal acknowledgement. It also refers to the necessity of centering Blackfemme voices in the politics of academic citation. By studying Blackfemme-ininity though the lens of raciogendered embodiment, this thesis presents an instructive case for the study of language and identity that should inform all such research moving forward. [*intersectionality, language and race, language and gender, embodiment, performance*]

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Grounding

"[W]hat does it mean that blk folks cd sing n dance?" The late poet Ntozake Shange asks us to consider the significance of the moving and speaking body for Black folks (1982: 166). This thesis enters into conversation with Shange's work by paying due attention to the importance of embodied linguistic practices in the study of meaning-making in communication. Where does language come from, if not from bodies? Bodies take up the space where formalist perspectives on language fail. Shange continues, "what was the form of slavery [?] what was the form of jim crow [?]" If a syntactic tree can't answer that, then scholars of language must look elsewhere. As Toni Morrison (2004a: xix) writes, "to render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way". Morphemes cannot do justice to the hold of a ship, nor phonemes to the centuries of abuse and resistance that followed.

This thesis considers how we give voice to these indignities and the joy that endures nonetheless by paying specific attention to Blackfemme-ininities. On the one hand, most scholarship on the organization and production of linguistic meaning has neglected to explore fully the reality that speakers interact through bodies yoked both to the past and to each other; however, a similarly oft-elided intersectional perspective on language (Lanehart 2009a) offers much insight into the ways that language's embodied elements perform vital identity and community work. By attending to the linguistic experiences of Blackfemmes, this study demonstrates how the materiodiscursive quality of language discloses where the body conveys meaning in ways still largely cast aside in linguistic research. *Materiodiscursivity* characterizes the way embodied linguistic performances (i.e. materializations) of identity orient speakers to others in multidimensional physical and ideological (i.e. discursive) space. It allows us to conceptualize how raciogendered identities emerge specifically at the nexus of the body and

language. By attending to the histories of marginalization and resistance borne out in the linguistic experiences of Blackfemmes, I use materiodiscursivity as a tool to excavate the embodied qualities of language. The buried layers of communication reveal what it means that, in spite of white cisgender heterosexist capitalist patriarchy, we still sing and dance. In this exploration, I follow Toni Morrison (2004b), who said of Black womanhood, "I find that a very broad, deep, wide pool to draw from. It's richer than some other label… I really wanna take that territory, which is virgin territory, and just explore it. There's so many facets – it's limitless." This thesis adopts Morrison's desire to probe Blackfemme experiences in order to productively expand theories of meaning-making in interaction to center embodiment and materiality in analyses of language, race, and gender. In short, my sistas and I have come to slay.

> And while black women are often discouraged from claiming our right to be difficult, I'm asking you to wade through this recalcitrant disjointedness to bear witness to the difficulty of piecing together divinity from fragments of black queer life. (Tinsley 2018: 23-24)

This is a difficult text. For some, that is on account of the barrier to entry presented by highly specialized and interdisciplinary theoretical work. For others, it is a lack of familiarity with my uses of Blackfemme Language, which I deliberately refuse to translate. I take point from Audre Lorde (2007) in an attempt to transform silence into language and action by working out what I need to say and insisting upon saying it without hedges or apologies. For me this means, among other things, openness to devising the orthographic conventions that I need to accurately encode important aspects of material histories into words on the page. Two that stand out prominently here are my uses of capitalization and conjunction. For me, the former rather literally represents an imbuing of capital into symbolic relations. That process is significant here as "Blackness" originated specifically in the context of the profitable

enslavement of African peoples. In this sense, to inscribe this racial schema as inextricable from the labor history that structures it warrants orthographic capitalization as an index of the economic capitalization of Blackness. Following the geographic dispersal of Black bodies during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, some common social (e.g., spiritual, linguistic, musical) practices were retained across the Diaspora. The places of Gullah language and other creoles on a structural continuum between West African languages and African American English demonstrate this connection (Weldon 2003; Weldon & Moody 2015). Moreover, some embodied and discursive practices are also common across these geographically distant speech communities. Additionally, the stigmatization of linguistic varieties spoken by Black people is also prevalent cross-contextually such as in the educational systems of formerly-colonized nations like Jamaica (Nero 2014). I use capital-L "Language" not to reify a static linguistic system, but to represent these considerations of the global nature of the relationships between language and Blackness (i.e.; Black Language).

Racializing factors never operate in isolation from those that function as gendering, sexualizing, and so on. The concept of intersectionality represents this reality while examining its legal ramifications for Blackfemmes (Crenshaw 1989). I use "femme" as employed by Omise'eke Tinsley, who recently described her use of the term in conversation with Tourmaline as "a response to the lived experiences of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia," especially revolving around being considered "too much" (Tinsley & Tourmaline 2020). Their conceptualization of *femme*, which highlights the interrelationships between womanhood, gayness, and transness, gets us halfway there. Troizel, a Blackfemme participant in this study, gets us the rest of the way. In our interview, they noted:

> …my Blackness and my gender come together because, on the one hand, Black people aren't supposed to gender themselves in a particular kind of

> way. But then, on the other, Blackness shows us that gender is a constraint. That even our relationship to gender, though often normative, could never actually be or operate in the norm or in the normative.

Through Troizel's description of their own gender, we see that Blackfemme-ininity is marked specifically by non-normativity. Blackfemme-ininities are therefore unified in their diversity. In addition to these semantic considerations, I follow Toni Morrison's (2004a) practice of lexically representing race and gender as conjoined. We therefore end up with *Blackfemme* and all variations thereof. This intersectional compound noun is meant to include the referents of more familiar phrases (e.g., *black woman*, *Black Feminist*) with an expanded scope that includes femme folks who are Black and cis-lesbian-trans-gay-nonbinary-queer-genderfluid-… .

One final preliminary consideration is that of audience. The intervention into research on the organization and production of linguistic meaning presented here is intended to be useful for scholars interested in the fullest possible picture of semiosis in interaction. However, this project would not have been possible without the interviewees, friends, family, and ancestors that comprise the communities I discuss below; this project is for them as well. I write with these multiply situated groups in mind, and the result is a style that weaves language within and beyond traditional academic discourse in deference to the folks around the way from whom my work and experiences emerge. Most of all, this text is an ode to my Blackfemme academic foremothers. Their work is most immediately relevant to this project and, consequently, I draw upon their scholarship exclusively via sightation, a way of *seeing* Blackfemmes through academic citation, which also refers to the embodied greeting practice I discuss below.

Excavation

Language varieties are inextricable from the social lives of their speakers. The soul and spirit of Black culture and history are bound up in our tongues, and so the struggle against underrepresentation, marginalization, and disenfranchisement has had linguistic consequences. This begins with exclusion from the archive – the institutionally sanctioned and often specious record of human life. With regard to Blackfemmes, "the archive is… a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" (Hartman 2008: 2). This project insists that Black Language, and Blackfemme Language in particular, be counted in the archive. June Jordan was shocked to discover while discussing *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) with her students that they had never seen a written facsimile of Black speech (Jordan 1985), at a time that preceded the current widespread use of Black Language on social media (Calhoun 2019). Decades earlier, anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston (1937) endeavored to combat this issue by representing the speech of Black folks with innovative orthographic conventions in her ethnographic and literary work. As Jordan put it, "forget about the spelling. Let the syntax carry you" (Jordan 1985: 128).

In sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological scholarship on Black Language, the voices of Blackfemmes have been historically even more restricted. The dominant trend has been to eschew our inclusion under the assumption that cisgender, heterosexual, working-class, urban-located Black men are the most adept users of African American Language (Lanehart 2009a). Marsha Houston Stanback critiqued this academic trope during the nascent stages of sociolinguistic studies of Black speech:

> Research on the Black English Vernacular (BEV) has so often focused on male interaction networks that scholars have tended to regard black men as the more

> proficient users of dialect structure, and to consider vernacular speech events to be the exclusive province of men. (1985: 177)

Nonetheless, a wide body of work within and outside of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has taken up the gauntlet to see Blackfemme "mother tongues untied" (Morgan 2015). Not only has this work advanced the study of language, it has been indispensable for the native scholars who have produced it. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "poetry is not a luxury" (2007: 36). In other words, language is inseparable from our quotidian realities and allows us to give form to and expel the poisonous misogynoir we might otherwise ingest. Bailey (2013), in conversation with Crenshaw (1991), coined *misogynoir* to describe the ways structural and interpersonal violence against Blackfemmes specifically has historically been backgrounded is discussions of misogyny in mainstream (read: white) femme-inist movements. By aiding resistance to oppression, healing through art, and archiving Blackfemme collective consciousness through storytelling, language is central to Blackfemme-inist Theory (c.f. Hill Collins 2000). This perspective demands that one reckon with, as Hurston (1928) wrote, "how it feels to be colored me". Because the affective and embodied dimensions of Blackfemme experiences are embedded in language, storytelling in the form of life-histories has been a primary avenue through which Blackfemmes' discourse has been studied (Etter-Lewis 1993; Etter-Lewis & Foster 1996; Lanehart 2002). In other words, to comprehend what our language means is to grasp the experiences that undergird side-eyes, clapped hands, and sucked teeth.

The nuances of race, gender, and labor have historically distinguished the communicative practices of Blackcisfemmes and whitecisfemmes. During the antebellum period, enslaved Blackcisfemmes were forced to labor both inside and outside of the home while whitecisfemmes' labor was largely restricted to the domestic sphere (Davis 2011). In fact, the plantation economy hinged upon both the manual and the reproductive work of

Blackcisfemmes who harvested crops and were raped by slaveholders for return on investment (Davis 1971; Spillers 1987; Davis 2002). This structure produced relative economic parity across Black genders, which Houston Stanback argues is evidenced by Blackfemmes' skill in verbal jousting with Black men through "smart talk" (1985: 181-182). She is quick to note that "women who communicate as equals with men may appear contentious, dominant, or even 'verbally castrating' to [white] researchers who are accustomed to encountering more submissive female speakers". This is only one example of the role of history in the deployment of Blackfemme discourse techniques.

Blackfemme linguistic repertoires extend to a wide range of other features and practices, many of which are materiodiscursive. For instance, Blackfemme speakers can use the proximal relationship between interlocutors in a room to pragmatic effect. Morgan (1996) identifies pointed and baited indirectness, reading dialect, and signifying as prominent practices able to conceal, project, and amplify meaning(s) as well as intentionality. Indirectness can be specifically activated by, for instance, addressing a (pejorative or accusative) statement toward one to whom it does not apply within earshot of someone to whom it does. Embodiment is particularly important here as eye gaze, manual gesture, and suprasegmental modulation can all be implicated in the production of a specific meaning or plausible deniability for several different possible readings of an utterance, some of which could be perceived as disrespectful. When a customer complained about her haircut to her stylist during Jacobs-Huey's (2007: 185) ethnographic work in a cosmetology school, one student nearby said to another, "acting like she the stylist … No she *didn't* ... Her hair was damaged to begin with!" When called on this remark by the client, the student in question denied any wrongdoing by retorting "I ain't talking to you." This type of pointed indirectness

has an *if the shoe fits* quality. Loud-talking, which “assures that intent will be imputed beyond the surface function of the utterance, which might be to seek information, make a request, make an observation, or furnish a reply to any of these,” can also serve these types of functions (Mitchell-Kernan 1972: 329).

Blackfemme discourse also extends into the realm of staged/hyper-performance. Consider Adele Givens’ classic 2001 comedic bit, a raunchy monologue about Blackfemme experiences ranging from sexual interactions to being accused of stealing while shopping for clothes, which she concludes with the punchline: “I know whatcha thinkin, she’s such a fuckin lady”. This use of “bawdy language” in Blackfemme comic performances (Troutman 2006) subverts expectations of femme voices in public space in ways similar to the “smart talk” described above. While performance can be a staged event with genre-specific details that signal to the audience that the language it contains is not meant to be perceived as everyday speech, it is also found in quotidian activities. Jacobs-Huey (2006, 2009) takes a native ethnographic approach to the role of language socialization in Black women’s cosmetology practices, particularly around acts of hair maintenance and styling. As will be further demonstrated by my analysis below, the importance of bodily stylization for Blackfemmes can hardly be overstated (Banks 2000; Thompson 2009). For more important work on Blackfemme Language see Lanehart (2009) and Houston & Davis (2002). While other work certainly deserves mention, this brief overview indicates how Blackfemme scholars have considered the interconnectedness of race, gender, and embodiment in communication.

Listening to Blackfemmes

The background and positionality of a scholar inevitably influences their work at every step of the research process (Rodriguez 2001; Jacobs-Huey 2002). I am a gender non-

conforming Blackfemme; I relate to the interviewees in this study on the plane of shared Blackfemme-ininity. What that means for me is complicated as someone whose early gender socialization included hair-braiding and double-dutch, throwback-tackle and three-on-three, hand games and nail polish. As Tinsley notes, "cisfemmes & transfemmes are sisters, not twins" (2018: 30). While the interlocutors I engage with below come from a variety of raciogendered subject positions (e.g., cisgender woman, assigned-male-at birth, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid), sisterhood often transcends these apparent identity boundaries. These dynamics and aspects of my experience serve as context for the conversations analyzed below, which are grounded in my subject-position as a native vis-à-vis Blackfemme Language.

As a native anthropologist, I am attuned to the tensions and conflicts that arise in working professionally in a community with which one is intimately acquainted. I am aware that I am responsible for using my scholarship as a mechanism to forestall exoticizing and pathological discourses that have historically plagued representations of Black folks in anthropological research (McClaurin 2001). However, as a Blackfemme-inist outlook requires, I am equally responsible for addressing issues of oppression (e.g., sexism, queertransphobia) within our communities that are often regarded as "in-house conversations." This work requires that I venture into the breach (Jacobs-Huey 2009) to honor our ancestors' experiences with these problematics as well the joy that emerges in Blackfemme-ininities.

The interviews I discuss below were conducted during the summer of 2019, carried out in part as research for the Talking College study, an African American-student and African American Studies-centered research project led by Professor Anne Charity Hudley. By focusing specifically on African American student's experiences of language, this project models the role of linguistic research in advocacy and social change (Charity 2008). As such,

these interviews centered on participants' experiences of education, language, and identity. For my thesis research I included an additional focus on the intersection of race and gender. I recorded over ten hours of interview conversation with ten participants, all of whom were gracious and more than willing to help a sista out. While I had some previous acquaintance with each participant, the length of those relationships varied considerably: in some cases I knew participants as briefly as a few weeks and in others as long as ten years. As a requirement of Talking College, each interviewee was either a bachelor's degree holder or in pursuit of one. For my own study, I asked potential recruits if they identified under a broad umbrella of Blackfemme-ininity (e.g., Black cisgender woman, transgender woman, gender-non-conforming or non-binary femme) as a requirement for participation. The participants attended a diverse set of institutions – private, public, small, large, urban, rural, historically-Black, predominantly-white. A few participants were enrolled in advanced degree programs at the time of the interviews. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and took place in a variety of locations, from interviewees' homes to public libraries to an art gallery.

In order to understand how Blackfemme subjectivities are (wo)manifest in language, I analyzed the linguistic forms, metadiscourse, and metapragmatic commentary produced by my interlocutors. This method is undergirded by Blackfemme-inist Theory, which requires that we forcefully reject any notion that folks who are Black, Brown, femme, working-class and otherwise marginalized are not able to accurately reflect on and discuss our experiences. This work requires that we develop an anthropology that listens to Blackfemmes and enables our theoretical insights to shape the field. In my listening practice I iteratively attuned to recurring metapragmatic topics across interviews, of which embodiment was particularly noteworthy. My participants consistently referenced the Blackfemme body in terms of both

its utility in community discourse and the ramifications of inhabiting such a body in physical spaces that offer varying levels of comfort and safety. As a result, embodiment became a guiding focus of this study, which I then conceptualized through materiodiscursivity.

This thesis aims to redress, in some way, the paucity of the archive of Blackfemme language, life, love, and loss. As much as the interview conversations analyzed below are about language, they also provided avenues for my participants to reflect on and discuss experiences about which very few interlocuters would otherwise bother to ask. Given that histories of gendered racial subjugation have long obscured the chronicle of past experiences, memories, and lives of Blackfemmes, listening to us also means inscribing our existence through dialogue and theory. The following analysis demonstrates the necessity of intervening in linguistic-anthropological theory through Blackfemme-inist praxis.

Identity, Language, and Blackfemme Bodies

…we are people made of fire

we walk with ceremonial breaths

we have condemned talking mouths…

we run without legs

we see without eyes

loud laughter breaks over our heads…

– Sonia Sanchez (1987)

An interrogation of the relationships between identity categories (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality) remains largely absent in linguistic anthropology. While the Blackfemme-inist scholarship sighted above powerfully provides intersectional perspectives on language, identity is seldom examined as a construct which becomes elaborated as race,

gender, and so on. While the materiality of both race and gender are socially constructed, an intersectional vantage necessitates a discussion of significant differences between these categories of social identification which affects how they come together. Attention to gender-affirming practices such as use of correct pronouns and self-chosen rather than legally-imposed names frame identity as a function of agency and performance. Racial identity, on the other hand, is marked both by cultural tradition and practice (e.g., linguistic, musical, artistic, educational, spiritual, political) in addition to conspicuous suppression of agency via racism. Ontologically speaking, race is a social imposition that is inseparably bound to genders, bodies, histories, and languages (Spillers 1987). The following analysis explores how Blackfemmes reckon with the materiodiscursive qualities of language through identity construction, community building and demarcation, as well as resistance to misogynoir.

I. (Dis)Entanglement

I simply could not, with purely classical ballet, say what I wanted to say… To capture the meaning in the culture and life of the people, I had to take something directly from the people.
– Katherine Dunham (2002)

The ideological space which Blackfemme-ininity inhabits is diverse and thoroughly textured. The following two examples represent two different perspectives on this unique variability. The words of Katherine Dunham, renowned Blackfemme dancer (and choreographer, anthropologist, educator, activist, and more), which appear as the epigraph to this section, stared down at me from high above a monitor playing excerpts of her performances on loop. I snapped a photograph of the quotation and continued exploring the "Cultural Expressions" exhibit on the top floor of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.. I wandered through a few more rooms before Jackie arrived. We chatted while heading down to the lower floors of the museum, passing through exhibits

on Black history around such topics as education, athletics, and activism. We proceeded to the ground floor and had lunch at the Sweet Home Café, where a wall-to-wall panel featured the earnest countenances of four Civil Rights-era lunch counter sit-in protestors. After some further reacquainting conversation, we headed outside toward a tree-lined courtyard in the center of the Freer Art Gallery, where we began the interview. The following excerpt comes from the end of the interview after I asked the final question: "What should I have asked you that I didn't?" In response, Jackie described the importance of sexuality working in tandem with race and gender in her experience and its consequent effect on her language use.

(1)[1]

1	deandre	This is my fi:nal question,
2		What should I have asked you,
3		That I didn't?
		<3 lines omitted>
4	Jackie	Asking about people's sexual orientation,
5		(.)
6		Could be an important factor?
7		Um,
8		Only because for me:,
9		An- an- an important part of my identity i:s my queer identity.
		<7 lines omitted>
10		And it's something that- that of course separates me from Black women.
11	deandre	%Right.
12	Jackie	[As opposed to] queer Black [women].
13	deandre	[We-] [Yeah].
14	Jackie	Not that (.) you know,
15	deandre	Right.
		<2 lines omitted>
16	Jackie	Like I know I'm a girl,
17		I feel very feminine?
18		But I think,
19		(.)
20		Because of the way I dress,

[1] Transcription conventions are listed in the appendix.

21 (.)
22 A lot of times people will assu:me a masculine part of me?
23 deandre [Mm].
24 Jackie [So:],
25 (1.0)
26 People will:,
27 (0.9)
28 Maybe even be confused @.
29 @Sometimes,
30 .h When I'm like–
31 Or like I think it's not until I- I'll say like "yes girl",
32 That that [they're like],
33 deandre [Sure].

On the basis of her experience, Jackie moves squarely away from a reductive or essentialist conceptualization of what it means to be a Blackfemme. While I did not explicitly ask about sexuality in the interviews, several of my interviewees brought it up in their discussions of identity. Queerness takes center stage in Jackie's interview as she explains that sexuality plays a crucial role in her identity (line 3), along with race and gender. Jackie's queer identity distinguishes her from otherwise-unmarked (i.e. assigned-female-at-birth, heterosexual, cisgender, femme-performing) Blackfemmes – however, she is quick to clarify before being interrupted by my assurance of understanding (line 15) that she had not meant to wholly separate herself from other Blackfemmes in any way (lines 4-9). Queerness adds nuance, rather than disjunction, to her community connections. This aspect of Jackie's identity manifests particularly in her choice of attire. While she prefaces her comments by saying that she is a girl and "feel[s] very feminine," she expresses a preference for wearing clothes that are often perceived by others as indexing a masculine identity (lines 14-16). The body is implicated here via adornment.

On the other hand, Jackie's embodied identity performance is confounded by language. In interactions where she draws upon a Blackfemme lexicon, language use can serve to clarify alignment along the lines of racialized gender (lines 30-32). While, from her perspective, these linguistic decisions construct Jackie's queer Blackfemme identity, she acknowledges that a mismatch between her professed identity and the identity ascribed to her can be confusing for others (line 28). The relationship Jackie describes between her body, her language, and her identity, exemplifies the intricacy of Blackfemme-inities. It extends to a range of gendered performances that are indexed both linguistically and materially.

However, while language can be used to build social connections along these lines, it can also disrupt them, as illustrated in my next example. Troizel appeared onscreen with a drying avocado-green face mask, their locs set up in a black wrap. I was wearing the jade green kimono-style robe embroidered with images of peacocks and blossoms that always reminds me of my Nana. It was a Sunday and we were both comfortable, having yet to approach the day's business. We had spent some time together three weeks earlier when I was still conducting interviews in New York. We ducked into a café to escape the heavy rain. There we discussed Blackness and gender at length, with particular reference to mediatized representations in the television show *Pose*. As a scholar of performance studies teaching at a large private university in an eastern U.S. city, Troizel commanded a wealth of insight on the topic. Their expertise provides some backdrop for our early-morning online conversation, in which Troizel commented on the tensions that can arise when shared raciogendered identity is not the only relevant factor in building community through language.

(2)

1 Troizel I'm teaching this semester,
2 Whatever.
3 A:nd I have most of the stu- I have a lot of the students of color.
4 deandre Mhm.
5 Troizel Um I have (.) I think (.) almost a:ll of the Black gender nonconforming students I think,
6 .h Um,
7 A:nd one of them said–
8 (.)
9 @@ Said something abou:t (0.8) vibes or energy or some shit,
10 And I was like "Oh this is ho:tep".
11 [@ And like],
12 deandre [@@@]
13 Troizel In my head I was like,
14 (1.1)
15 Right,
16 I was like "Oh no,
17 Like I can't do this".
<9 lines omitted>
18 When the person said it I was like,
19 "Oh y-" immediately I was like "oh we"–
20 Like "We are on the same page (.) to a point".
21 Right,
22 deandre [Right right right].
23 Troizel ["But like],
24 You're going a extra step (.) that like,
25 I'on know if I can go there",
26 Right,
27 And like ## and like "I don't even know the full scope of your political project,
28 But like the language that you're using is possibly telling me,
29 (.)
30 That we may not be",
31 (.)
32 deandre %R:ight.

The experience Troizel discusses in the above example provides a stark juxtaposition to that of Jackie's. In a space where Black gender-nonconforming folks are numerous, such as

Troizel's class, one might infer a unifying commonality on the basis of some shared embodied identity, particularly with a Blackfemme gender-nonconforming teacher facilitating the course. However, community is not forged solely on the basis of similar raciogendered identities. Personal politics and ideology also play important roles in determining the ways individuals build community. During a class Troizel was teaching, one student "said something about vibes, or energy, or some shit" (line 9). Clutching their pearls, Troizel recalls thinking, "oh this is ho:tep" (line 10). Their use of an elongated vowel in *hotep* emphasizes both their surprise and contempt for the student's perhaps unwitting admission. The following characterization serves to explain Troizel's strongly negative reaction.

A hotep is a Black masculine character trope with historical indexes to such groups as the Nation of Islam, going as far back as the late nineteenth-century Back-to-Africa movement. While the word refers to an Egyptian concept translatable as 'to be at peace', in contemporary Black America it is usually deployed as a pejorative descriptor of individuals exhibiting associated tropes, such as over-the-top Afrocentrism and an embellished racial past, motivating their frequent description of Black people as "kings and queens." Hoteppery is also known for misogyny, homophobia, and belief in conspiracy theories, such as one proposing that melanin gives Black people immunity to the COVID-19 virus. One (hopefully artificial) example of hotep discourse often circulated in Black social media goes as follows: "If being gay is natural, how come there ain't any gay elephants?" You get the point.

Once again, language is yoked to the raciogendered body in the process of meaning-making. Troizel's shocked repugnance that "I can't do this," (line 17) evidences a disparity between aligned Blackfemme identities and disaligned ideological stances. On the one hand, the joint laughter following Troizel's declaration signifies our shared understanding of the

absurd amalgamation of hotep characteristics, including the use of words like *energy* and *vibes* to connote aspects of a faux pan-African spirituality. The common ground that Troizel and I share vis-à-vis Blackfemme gender nonconformity, community knowledge, and ideological stance toward hoteppery therefore coalesces holistically in the above interaction. While Troizel acknowledges that some commonalities do exist between theirself and their student, they draw the line where that student is "going a extra step" (lines 20, 24). Wherever that step is leading, presumably into the dusty provinces of Hotepland, USA, Troizel is not finna go there with them. Though Troizel admits that they cannot be certain of "the full scope of [the student's] political project" for certain (lines 27-28), language offers vital insight where identity taken at face value fails.

Crucially, again, materiodiscursivity is a locus where the complexities of identity are revealed. The multidimensionality of Blackfemme-ininities with regard to embodied language in both physical and discursive space is seen in both examples. For Jackie, race, gender, and sexuality come together with language and bodily adornment in critical ways. For Troizel, difference appears where materiality and identity clash with the politics of ideology. Embodied, linguistic, and political constitutions of Blackfemme-ininities provide a productive vantage from which to explore what Blackfemme Language is and what it does. In the next section, I present examples that explore embodiment in the Blackfemme lexicon.

II. Sighting Blackfemme Language

Where do we see Blackfemme Language? What does it look and sound like? How does it make meaning? This section takes up these questions by analyzing the linguistic practices that constitute Blackfemme-ininities. As my interlocutors demonstrate in their descriptions of these practices, the body is a crucial resource for the linguistic construction of their identities.

As I approached the front door of Amoni's residence I was greeted by Aubrey, her energetic Boston terrier, who was itching to be taken for a walk. Amoni and I exchanged hellos and how-ya-doins as I was welcomed into her home. She offered me a seat and I waited for her to finish dressing and join from her bedroom. In the meantime, I began setting up my materials – recorder, consent form, and the like. I was distracted by a fresh, sharp herbal aroma. I turned to see an oil diffuser I had not noticed before gently misting vapor upward into the room. Once Amoni ventured out and sat in the chair opposite me, I immediately asked, "Ooh girl, what is in that diffuser?" She revealed that it was eucalyptus essential oil, which I soon thereafter purchased to use in my own diffuser. After mutually checking in about life happenings and walking through the consent procedure, we began the interview. Around an hour into the conversation I asked Amoni, "What kind of language or communication makes you feel closest to your gender?" She responded as follows:

(2a)

1 Amoni I know when I hear:,
2 "Tch chile please",
3 deandre @@
4 Amoni I know: I'm in: (.) the comfort (.) %of (1.3) some good Black @women.
5 [@@@@@]
6 deandre [@@@@]
7 Amoni .h <smile> {Um},
8 It's–
9 I don't know I think,
10 (.)
11 Hearing like that phrase is something that's very: like (.) familiar.

Amoni identifies "tch, chile please" (line 2) as emblematic of her linguistic experience of Blackfemme-ininity. The phrase might be loosely described as a negative extralocal appraisal, where negative stance can be directed either at the conversational participant or at some unratified subject. The implicit referent of this phrase is often a romantic partner or social

institution (e.g., a place of employment, a bureaucratic governmental institution) both of which are likely to tap dance all over our nerves. In other words, it is a form of protest, lament, and indictment that serves to let interactants know that they are, as Amoni notes, “in the comfort of some good Black women” (line 4). The onset of our laughter before she completes the phrase, which carries into the following two lines, serves to demonstrate that this practice is also a source of joy (lines 4-7). So the adage goes: You gotta laugh to keep from cryin. Amoni goes on:

(2b)

12	Amoni	When I hear it I'm just like,
13		<whisper>{“Ah home”}.
14	deandre	[@@@]
15	Amoni	[@@@@]
16		So yeah,
17		So the “chile please:”,
18		And the “Tch”,
19		(.)
20		Those are things that feel very familiar,
21		%Uh,
22		I guess,
23		Amongst like different spaces that I'm in with other like Black women and femmes.

In order to attend more deeply to the embodied quality of Blackfemme Language, I focus on the first element of the paired phrase, the discourse marker *tch*. By using the conjunction *and* to describe both parts of a phrase that “feel[s] very familiar” (lines 17-20), Amoni implicitly reveals that *tch* can be separable from the vocal utterance “chile please.” This sound, a denti-alveolar click ⟨ǀ⟩, embodies meaning on its own terms. This sound is not phonemic in any known variety outside of the African continent such as Zulu and Hadza. Hence, it is not a word in the traditional sense, and yet as a linguistic form it communicates significant

information. While the Blackfemme Language variety I discuss above is nested within the purview of African American English and hence is not typologically closely related to those South African languages, it too uses this click to create meaning. Blackfemme Language situated both in West Africa and the Caribbean makes related use of the ingressive lateral fricative [ɬ↓], orthographically represented as *tchwww* (see NwandoWoman 2018). Like ⟨ǀ⟩ vis-à-vis Blackfemme Language endemic to the United States, [ɬ↓] is not included within the phonemic inventories of varieties spoken in these regions (e.g., Jamaican patois/patwa, Igbo, Yoruba, pidgin). My personal experience with the geographic reach of this practice developed over the course of my upbringing in an eastern U.S. metropole with large groups of Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, and Jamaican immigrants, in addition to the predominant African American population. Pragmatically speaking, *tch* and *tchwww* are synonymous and exemplary of linguistic variation. Taken together with Amoni's characterization, this form uses the body to index a familiarity that is Diasporic in nature. While the similar historical-ideological materialities of Blackfemme genders throughout the Diaspora motivate shared meaning-making through language, meaning in interaction also emerges from immediate local (both physical and geographic) context.

The dimmed incandescent lighting and backgrounded Hip-Hop and R&B tunes of Bedford Manor, the Bed-Stuy bar and lounge in which I waited for Felicia to arrive, provided an easy atmosphere. These tranquil elements were accentuated by the venue's exquisite decór. From my vantage point in a mahogany leather chair. I could see a plush red velvet-upholstered sofa in front of a wall-to-wall bookshelf lined with volumes. Unexpectedly, I turned to see laughing children at play under the gently watchful eyes of their guardians. In short, this place was dope. When Felicia arrived, I immediately noticed that she was wearing elegant rose pink cat-eye

frames the same color as my own. I remarked, “Okay glasses!” and explained that I had purchased mine only a few months before. Animated by our stylistic coordination, we began to shoot the breeze. After a while we realized that we would not have enough time to transition to a quieter environment for the interview, so we went over the consent protocol, signed the requisite forms, and rescheduled for a virtual interview the following week since I was heading out of town. While the interview was not conducted in the setting described above, it provides important context for the relationship between Felicia and me (e.g., where we chose to meet, prioritizing our personal conversation over my research concerns) that structures the interview excerpt analyzed below.

During our interview, Felicia reached back to discuss the ways her high school teachers communicatively engaged students. Felicia and I had attended the same high school in the DMV, the predominantly Black Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, which includes sectors of Maryland and Northern Virginia. Nearly sixty percent of the students and the majority of our teachers were Black. When I asked about her interactions with Black educators in academic contexts, Felicia reflected on that experience in the following way: “they knew the language that was going around the school…these teachers knew about *guh* and, you know, and they would say it jokingly, but the fact that they even acknowledged it…something about that makes you feel safe.” Teachers’ use of then-current DMV Black youth slang constructed a “safe” environment for students through use of culturally relevant language (c.f. Ladson-Billings 1995). Felicia noted that this community-building practice stood in stark contrast to what she experienced at Riverside College (pseudonym), the Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in a former colonial town on the East coast from which Felicia received her bachelor’s degree.

Having taken a class with only one Black professor and having interacted with only two Black administrators at Riverside College, Felicia recalled during our interview that communication with her college professors comparable to those in high school was nonexistent. She then described the following highly significant interactions with one Blackfemme administrator:

(3a)

1 Felicia She doesn’t work there anymore,
2 But also our associate vice president at the time Dr. Shelton <pseudonym>.
3 (0.9)
4 Also was someone like sh- in public.
5 (2.2)
6 The salutations,
7 The “hey girl:,
8 How you doin:”,
9 Just like (.) the energy.
10 # but why I- I appreciated her,
11 Was that she did that in public.
12 So in the presence of white people.
13 deandre [Mm].
14 Felicia [It wasn’t] that happened–
15 That had to happen behind closed doors,
16 But she greeted me in those I guess (.) Black (.) ways,
17 Or she greeted me like another Black woman would greet me (.) in public.
18 deandre [Sure].
19 Felicia And [#### for] me that's the reason I was able to connect with her,
20 As a person.

The historical realities embedded in language mark its materiodiscursivity through its significance for Blackfemmes as we move throughout the world as speaking subjects. This is what Felicia illuminates in the above excerpt. Dr. Shelton acknowledges her, *sees* her, in the public domain of a PWI (line 4), in which Blackfemme-ininities are suppressed at every turn: in the classroom, communal spaces, and elsewhere. The publicness of the greetings Felicia

identifies, “Hey girl! How you doin?” (lines 7-8), serves as a key element of their meaning in that context. It dialogically produces a kind of energy, a Blackfemme-inine energy, that engenders a sense of appreciation in Felicia (lines 9-10). Felicia’s resistance draws on the broader context of white people surveilling Black folks dating from before so-called Emancipation and the mechanisms we developed to undermine it, such as embedding hidden meanings in religious songs and sermons (Browne 2015). Felicia is aware of the unspoken expectations of white passersby that Blackfemmes should restrict intra-community forms of language to private spaces (lines 14-15). She and Dr. Shelton nonetheless refused to capitulate to these expectations. That Felicia was able to connect with a Blackfemme administrator through a shared greeting practice in white public space evidences the materiodiscursive dimension of Blackfemme Language.

Prompted by my request for more explicit examples, Felicia goes on to illustrate precisely how this genre of language is engaged in interaction.

(3b)

21	Felicia	Like something s- you have to talk about–
22		Even if you don't like it,
23		You pick one article of clothing that you like.
24	deandre	@@
25	Felicia	<falsetto> {“Oh I like that scarf”!
26		“Oh I s- okay new hair:”!
27		“Okay nails:”}!
28	deandre	Mm.
29	Felicia	That.
30		<falsetto> {“Okay shoes:”}!
31		You know (.) that.
32	deandre	Mhm.
33	Felicia	That was like,
34		You know,
35		(1.1)
36		That's what I love:.

37 (.)
38 Cause it was so genuine.
39 And it- I kn–
40 It was a way: to lift each other up,

The greetings that Felicia performs highlight the Blackfemme body. She explains that you gotta gush over the elements of your interlocutor's appearance, be it their clothes, hair, nails, shoes, whatever (lines 25-27, 30). This linguistic commentary on physical characteristics indexes Blackfemme identity in dialogue, exemplifying the tangible element of materiodiscursivity. Given this aspect of Blackfemme Language, my response to noticing the identical color of our glasses was a foregone conclusion. The simultaneously visual and verbal acknowledgement that these embodied greetings confer is what I term *sightation*: in this practice, the telling is just important as the seeing. Felicia even begins to articulate a presumable "Oh I see you!" in line 26. This phrase, which exclaims positive recognition of the addressee's personal achievements, has longstanding use in African American English. As these examples suggest, Blackfemme greetings utilize the body's full capacity to dialogically constitute meaning.

Felicia moves in and out of falsetto voicing throughout the excerpt as she reports several examples of sightation (lines 25-26, 30). Falsetto, raising the pitch of the voice to a markedly high frequency, is inseparable from the meaning of the lexical items uttered, as Geneva Smitherman pointed out over forty years ago in her description of "tonal semantics" (1977: 134). Funny enough, actually liking the items you highlight through sightation is beside the point. Felicia lets us know that it is, more importantly, "a way to lift each other up."

III. Amplitude

The participants' performances of Blackfemme Language discussed above brim with feelings of joy, warmth, and comfort. These kinds of heightened emotions are typically

expressed by corresponding speech volume. The “loud Black woman” trope immediately comes to mind (Fordham 1993). I argue that this construction of the white racial imaginary says less about any actual Blackfemmes and more about the materiodiscursive construction of sound and space. The excerpts in this section highlight how Blackfemmes’ dialogic experiences of embodiment and language situate us both in relation to each other and our physical surroundings.

In example (3b), Felicia describes the uplifting and joyous function of sightation. She did so with a series of exclamatory utterances (lines 25-27), beaming throughout. Her enjoyment in communicating with other Blackfemmes in this way was not always welcome at Riverside College. Felicia was a member of a dance club there that performed one major show for the campus community each semester. She recounted memories of this significant aspect of her time at Riverside in relation to the embodied and spatiolinguistic qualities of misogynoir that she experienced there.

(4)

1	Felicia	So we had rehearsals in dance club.
2		We had um: rehearsals before ## the big show.
3		The week before the show is when we have our rehearsals the week before,
4		Dress rehearsals,
5		And I just remember if like a group of Black girls got together,
6		Congregated together and were too: loud,
7		You could (.) almost feel: the energ–
8		The- the disdain,
9		The,
10		(1.1)
11		“What over there that you all are doing could be that interesting”?
12		(.)
13		[Um],
14	deandre	[Mm] right.
15	Felicia	Yeah.
16		I definitely felt that.

17 (1.2)
18 Or if a group of my friends were together and were too loud,
19 It's like you could feel people like almost <whisper> {watching} you,
20 Like,
21 What are th- what are they- “what are they enjoying so much”?
22 (.)
23 Or “what are they saying that could possibly be that interesting”?
24 I definitely felt that a lot at Riverside.

To put it bluntly, many white people do not know what do with themselves when they see and hear Black people, let alone Blackfemmes, enjoying ourselves or simply minding our business. It drives them up a wall, leads them to describe our joy as excessive, and what’s worse, frequently causes them to dial 9-1-1 (e.g., Alison Ettel, a.k.a. “Permit Patty”; Jennifer Schulte, a.k.a. “Barbecue Becky”; Stephanie Sebby-Strempel, a.k.a. “Pool Patrol Paula”) (Edwards 2018). Felicia’s anecdote speaks to this state of affairs. She describes her experience of the dusty trope “Blackfemmes are too (insert pejorative adjective).” Felicia discloses how this construed too-much-ness is embodied materiodiscursively. She and her fellow dancers perceived that they were being heard as “too loud,” overstepping in amplitude (line 5). Loudness is capable of conveying myriad types of heightened affect (e.g., happiness, surprise, anger, confusion), but the friendly conversations Felicia had with other Black girls were surveilled and negatively, however silently, appraised (lines 17-18). The wrong language in the wrong space.

As they prepared to perform the culmination of months of hard work to perfect their choreography, Felicia and company were made to feel as if they did not belong. Gathering in public space to revel in one another’s company attracted an “energy,” a “disdain,” that invoked a perception of inappropriateness (lines 6-7). Felicia’s use of *energy* is crucially distinguishable from Troizel’s use in example (2), where the term indexed the hotep trope. Rather, Felicia

speaks to a tangible sense of animosity that was perceived yet remained unvocalized. The circumstances she describes are not unlike the slave codes that barred Black people from assembling in groups without a white person present. When it comes to Black folks, some white people just be so nosy. As my mother would say, “All up in the Kool-Aid but don’t know the flavor.” Slaveholding whites harbored a ubiquitous (and accurate) fear that enslaved Black people would congregate to plan escape, rebellion, or both. Even earlier, white captors separated newly enslaved Africans from others who came from the same geographic areas in the hopes they would not be able to communicate with one another on account of linguistic differences (Hurston 2018). Felicia’s account displays a cultural vestige of this antebellum anxiety, a constant wondering of “what … [we] are doing [that] could be that interesting,” and “what [we] are enjoying so much” (lines 10, 20). Vocalizing merriment under the “watching” (line 18) eyes of the white gaze is frequently understood as excessive (Morrison 1993). As with sightation, this perception does not go unchallenged. Elsewhere in the interview, Felicia said, “I always got ‘Why are you yelling?’… and I’m like ‘I am not yelling. Do you want to hear me yell? It’s my voicebox, I don’t know what to tell you.” Her experience demonstrates that misogynoir is directly implicated in the linguistic perception of sound.

The following example underscores the persistence of sociolinguistic misogynoir and resistance to it. Sitting at an outdoor table at Peaches, a Brooklyn restaurant that offers a “modern spin on Southern comfort food,” Harmonie and I began to catch up. She ordered French toast with sides of berries and bacon while I got a salmon egg scramble. Naturally, we both had grits and sweet tea. Since we last came together a year and a half earlier, she had moved to New York and accepted a teaching position, and I had moved to Santa Barbara to begin my graduate program. Details of these adventures composed the majority of our brunch

discussion. After our meal, we embarked on the several-block walk back to her home, my four-inch heels clacking rhythmically on the pavement along the way. Harmonie genially offered me a cup of tea as we got situated. Once the lemon ginger blend I chose finished brewing, we began the interview. Toward the end of our conversation, Harmonie narrated her experience of Blackfemme communication on our college campus.

(4a)

1	Harmonie	And it's funny too.
2		So my best friend Flo <pseudonym>,
3		She's like from (.) Georgia.
4	deandre	I did know that.
5	Harmonie	Ye:s,
6		A:nd,
7		Is just like the loudest person.
8	deandre	@
9	Harmonie	The li- you- the loudest person you will ever meet,
		<10 lines omitted>
10		But there were so many times when I would be with her on campus,
11		I'd be like,
12		<whisper> {"Flo like you're talking so loud like ### like come on like"}–
		<14 lines omitted>
13		Me and Flo would always go,
14		And she would just like be being herself and like being [loud].
15	deandre	[Right].
16	Harmonie	And I'd be like <whisper> {"Flo like everyone's staring at you:,
		<10 lines omitted>
17		And I'm like Flo like come o:n↑,
18		Like we're in a public pla:ce",
19		She's like,
20		(0.6)
21		"I don't care,
22		They can look"!

Harmonie begins by describing memories of commonplace occurrences at our woodsy suburban PWI, which is located in a large, predominantly-Black, Southern city. Walking

through public spaces such as dining facilities with her best friend, Flo, Harmonie was initially concerned that the volume of Flo's voice attracted negative attention to the two of them (lines 10-11). Harmonie reports that Flo is "the loudest person you will ever meet," which is her natural disposition when she is "[just] being herself" (lines 9, 13). Harmonie remembers chastising Flo, concerned that her style of communication could disturb others occupying the space. As in Felicia's account in example (2c) above, these perceived disturbances manifested visually with bystanders "staring at [her]" (line 15). Rather than any generalized discomfort with Flo's communicative style, Harmonie's concern was constituted by knowledge of likely negative onlooker perceptions in such a white public space (line 17). Nonetheless, Flo was unbothered, suggesting she was not responsible for observers' subjective response to her volume. She put it plainly: "I don't care, they can look!" (lines 20 -21). She, as a tuition-paying student, insisted on her belonging in the space. Others would have to deal with it.

Before becoming a teacher in New York, Harmonie completed a graduate degree at Harvard University. The raciogendered dynamics of the Northeast contrasted with those she had navigated in the Midwest and South, where most of her early life was spent. There, Harmonie found herself in the doublebind of being a Blackfemme with neither the surround of a predominantly-Black city nor Flo consistently by her side. However, Flo's resistance to the pervasive discourses that frame Blackfemme-ininity as excessive became instructive for Harmonie in her postgraduate life.

(4b)

23	Harmonie	And so:,
24		@@
25		As much as like she used to piss me off when she would do:↑ that,
26		(1.4)
27		I also like always admired her [for just] like always being herself no matter where she was,

28	deandre	[Mm].
29	Harmonie	Or who was around.
30		And I think I took a lot of that from her,
31	deandre	Mm.
32	Harmonie	In spaces that like I went without her.
		<4 lines omitted>
33		So even like in–
34		(.)
35		.h In: Harvard settings where like I would get really really frustrated with people who were talking?
36		It would take me awhile to speak up,
37		But once I did:,
38		(1.2)
39		It would be like [lou:d,
40	deandre	[Mm # yeah].
41	Harmonie	And we would]–
42		Like I would be ready to–
43		Okay like this is–
44		"You were wrong$_a$,
45		Thank you for that$_b$,
46	deandre	[@@]
47	Harmonie	[But] you were wrong$_a$,
48		And like this is why you were wrong$_b$,
49		And like if you wanna talk about it after class like we ca:n,
50		So I can make sure like you don't say it again".
51	deandre	Mm.
52	Harmonie	Like it would be a very like quick gathering,
		<4 lines omitted>
53		Li:ke I just need to get you together real quick,
54		And like if you still wanna talk after like I'm here↑.
55		But you're not just gonna like,
56		Just spew me:ss,
57		And think that you're just gonna get away↑ with it".

Flo's responses to others' indignant looks and stares evoked a sense of admiration in Harmonie and, before long, she began to internalize a similar stance and use her own amplitude to flip the script (lines 26-31). At Harvard, Harmonie frequently found herself in classroom settings where others, particularly white males, dominated conversations on topics about which

their knowledge was insufficient or erroneous (line 27; she also comments on this elsewhere in the interview). Rather than being silenced in a space where Blackfemmes are minoritized and therefore hypervisible, she responded loudly with correction, pointing out where they had misstepped in their argumentation and offering clarification (lines 35-46). Harmonie explained that she used to her advantage the knowledge that raised speaking volume is viewed as unacceptable when produced by Blackfemme bodies. She recounts conveying to these classmates, "I just need to get you together real quick" (line 51). And it didn't take long. As Harmonie put it, "it was a very quick gathering" (line 51). She thereby harnessed vocal amplitude as a resource to assert herself. Additionally, in her account of what she might say in these instances, Harmonie uses a series of terse and rhythmically parallel utterances (represented by superscripts) (lines 42-46). This structure signifies her declarations as definitive facts not up for discussion. Harmonie's embodied and linguistic enactment of her firm resolve demonstrates the subversive power of Blackfemme Language.

"What does it mean…?"

The preceding analysis takes us back to the conundrum described by Ntozake Shange at the outset: "what does it mean that blk folks cd sing n dance?" This question itself hints that potential avenues of investigation are situated in the resource through which our semiotic feats such as song and dance are accomplished in spite of white supremacist oppression: the body. By focusing on the materiodiscursive elements of interaction vis-à-vis embodiments of Blackfemme-ininity, I have argued in this thesis that linguistic meaning is thoroughly corporeal. While the body has thus far been marginalized as a crucial site from which linguistic meaning emerges, my interviewees' metapragmatic commentary as well as their language use shows this neglect to be misguided. For one, as Amoni and Felicia demonstrate, indexical

vocalisms (e.g., *tch*) and prosodic modulation (e.g., falsetto) in Blackfemme Language can serve to build and reinforce community. These phonological processes enlist the body in ways that are important to the linguistic construction of Blackfemme-ininities. Further, as materiodiscursivity insists, speaking bodies communicate in physical space in relation to others both inside and outside of their speech communities. Felicia and Harmonie present us with the sociolinguistic construction of Blackfemme bodies as "too much," specifically in terms of volume in white public space, and resistance to such misogynoir. A nuanced note of caution is added by Jackie and Troizel who illustrate how the identity-categorization functions of language do not operate as unilaterally aligning or disaligning.

These cases are instructive for the study of language and identity by revealing several principles that should inform all such research, not only on Blackfemmes. Most immediately we see that fullest account of communicative events involves bodies in space and, as a consequence, studies that elide this aspect of communication risk incomplete analyses. Moreover, community-building with regard to identity is linguistically manifest through social proximity, which occurs along multiple axes (e.g., racial, gendered, political) simultaneously. Conversely, abstract community boundaries that exclude and distance others are also constituted by language. Further, these boundaries are discursive in the theoretical sense, but they are also thoroughly material. Finally, communicative events take place in physical space which are deeply embedded in the material histories of identity categories and their relationships to the places where interactions take place. Taken together, the tenets of this materiodiscursive perspective lay the groundwork for a multidimensional framework for studying language and identity in a holistic linguistic terrain. This study has shown specifically how an intersectional vantage provides the impetus for this crucial intervention. As a

Blackfemme-inist undertaking compels, I conclude by returning to the insights of foremother Lucille Clifton (1993, 25):

> won't you celebrate with me
> what i have shaped into
> a kind of life? i had no model.
> born in babylon
> both nonwhite and woman
> what did i see to be except myself?
> i made it up
> here on this bridge between
> starshine and clay,
> my one hand holding tight
> my other hand; come celebrate
> with me that everyday
> something has tried to kill me
> and has failed.

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Appendix

1. Transcription Conventions

Line break	Intonation unit (IU) boundary; determined by pauses and prosody
.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation; functional finality
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation; functional continuity
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation; functional appeal
!	raised pitch and volume throughout the intonation unit
↑	pitch accent
underline	emphatic stress; increased amplitude; careful articulation of a segment length
:	length
–	self-interruption; break in the intonation unit; truncation
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(x.y)	measured pause of greater than 0.5 seconds
@	laughter; each token marks one pulse
nh	nasal outbreath (e.g., sigh)
.h	inbreath
.nh	nasal inbreath
[____]	overlapping speech
#	unintelligible; each token marks one syllable
< _____ >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
{ _____ }	stretch of talk to which transcriber comment applies
<[_____]>	phonetic transcription
"_____"	reported speech or thought
%	Creaky phonation
______x	Isotony; shared rhythm across intonation units