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Black Women, Gender Nonconforming, and Nonbinary Folks' Resistive and Healing Practices:

Making a Way at Traditionally Oppressive Institutions

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of

Philosophy in Education

by

Mary B. Senyonga

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Women, Gender Nonconforming and Nonbinary Folks' Resistive and Healing Practices:  
Making a Way at Traditionally Oppressive Institutions

by

Mary B. Senyonga

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles 2022

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Chair

This work investigates the resistive and healing practices that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks enact in the face of daily racialized and gendered terrors as they navigate higher education. Central to my theorizing of academic spaces is the understanding of schooling as a contested space that reifies identity-based harm. I locate the impact of this reality within both a historical and contemporary context by reckoning with the substantiation of institutions of higher learning made possible by slave holding governing faculties, endowments bolstered by investments in the military and prison industrial complex, enduring racial stratification in the numerical and ideological presence of marginalized peoples, and the maintenance of interlocking systems of domination that undergird school policies. As Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks contend with academic spaces rife with systemized difference, they foster alternative relationships to the university that center their well-

being. Using Black feminisms and Critical Race Theory, my dissertation captured narratives that explore life histories and capacity to create affirming relations against the backdrop of educational violences within higher education. Undergraduate Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary students were recruited to participate in individual interviews, capturing their life histories inclusive of their educational trajectories, understanding of the impact of race and gender throughout their schooling, and their hopes for the future of education for their community. Findings reveal the significance of informal, student-initiated support spaces to mitigate the impact of daily antiblackness in both academic and social spaces on campus. Dorm rooms, group chats, passing periods, and other such counterspaces significantly combatted the effects of navigating “just the system itself.” Further, archival documents were reviewed using content analysis to explicate the foundations of the research site as a racialized project and identify Black student activists organizing in the 1960s. Both the foundational constructed difference and adavance in maintaining the status quo is a through line that helps to articulate the continued nature of racialized difference within higher education.

The dissertation of Mary B. Senyonga is approved.

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2022

I dedicate this to all who struggle to deal with a world that constantly demands our subjection, to all who find some way to imagine flight from this condition, and to all who are presently creating those new worlds we hope to live in.

Thank you.

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And I do not want to pretend as if I am now wholly restored and hopeful again about the prospects of our world. Rather, I feel an urgency to *still* commit to destabilizing the structures that impede our lives. No longer holding onto naïve hope, but audacious hope, a sense of hope that tries to glimpse at a different future is where I have now arrived. I did not get here on my own, much like I did not get through UCLA on my own. I did meet colleagues, better yet comrades. I was wonderfully guided by others to rethink the possibilities of liberation if contained only with the vocabulary of individuated success. And I did learn about how to devise insurrectionary moments.

To the amazing Black feminists that I got to share joy with, who I was so lucky to organize alongside and learn from, and who early on made me realize that it was far more important to center my wellbeing than being of utility. Bianca Beauchemin, Shondrea Thornton, and Sa Whitley you all impacted me so much. I cannot thank you all for the space to grow; to talk about what it means to build towards a world where Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks are centered; and to just laugh. Thank you all for giving me a space to be at ease, intellectually stimulated, and at peace. Thank you.

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Kenjus Watson, Nina Monet Reynoso, and Edxie Betts I am forever grateful for the space we had to think of the end of this world not as a tragedy, but as a beginning for something better. To be pessimistic about this world and hopeful for the next, to interrogate what freedom truly means, and to refuse incorporation – all of that has sustained me. Thank you.

And to my committee: Dr. Walter Allen, Dr. Aisha Finch, Dr. Tyrone Howard, and Dr. Daniel G. Solórzano it feels nearly impossible to incapsulate how grateful I am to you all. In each of you I found mentorship that changed my trajectory for the better. You all made me a better thinker, writer, and researcher. Through all of you I have witnessed what it looks like to be in the academy and remain committed to critical work that pushes us all to do better for our collective communities. You all have helped me to be less apprehensive about sharing my work, more confident to assert my perspective, and hopeful to meet scholars just as kind as you are. As scholars of color, I think of you all when I remember how I want to show up for emerging scholars that will come to me. Thank you all for the gift of being mentored by you. Danny, I especially owe you so much. I cannot find enough words to express my gratitude to you and all that you have done to support me. From the moment I told you I had initially wanted to study Black fat women’s experiences in academia to any new area of thought I have shared with you, you have been nothing short of supportive and enthusiastic. You helped me to not be shy about my ideas or fearful that they wouldn’t be accepted. You sustained a community that has been so crucial to my ability to get through academia. I will never stop thanking you for being an incredible mentor. I’ll never stop thank you for being in my life. Thank you a million times over.

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**Chapter One**  
**The Stakes are Always High: Redrawing the Margins, Rethinking Schooling, and**  
**Recentering Black Survivance**

**How I Came to this Work and Stayed in It**

What if the work of this dissertation didn't hinge on productivity? What if the living testament of my work was the rest that I took, the breaks that I sat in, the languishing in quiet? What if my survival was enough? In a year of global upheaval, the continuity of deadly antiblackness, and living within the ellipses of the unknown, this dissertation has shape shifted to slide along the contours not just of the current moment of the global pandemic and ensuing national unresponse to said pandemic, but also the slowing of my pace, the stretching of my intellectual trajectory, and the slippage of what I once deemed unproductivity and now understand as necessary cocooning to surface considerations of possibility that I had yet to imagine.

This dissertation is at once a shedding of old skin and inhabitation of a new form. A rebirth. In this rebirth, I hope to become fluid as a messenger. What I learned about survivance and thriving from the Black oral theorists who graciously shared their stories with me is the joy in letting go. In letting go the need to control the narrative. In letting go the ever present desire to be consumable, palatable, to be easily dealt with.

There is no plausible manner in which I could write this project at present without reflecting on the continued march of the pandemic. There is no way when the most vulnerable are unsurprisingly Black and multiply marginalized. How could I not tend to the way the pandemic has exacerbated what antiblackness has already underwritten – differential treatment in medical facilities, disparities in life outcomes, and continued exposure to unsafe conditions. Here, racism must be understood in the most explicit of terms. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has

posited, “racism, specifically is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007, p. 28). Rather than deeming racism to be a matter of individually enacted biases, in this case we see how the structural and ideological impetus of racism facilitates both the pandemic numbers of Black people not only being in professions where they are more likely to contract COVID, but also the ensuing treatment with medical professionals where Black lives are somehow not as worthy of saving as others.

We are already imperiled (Hartman, 2006). This reality was heavy to wrestle with and continues to be so when all I wanted these past eighteen months was to be with my family. Sit in the comfort of the home I grew up in and slip away from the world. Continuing on with this dissertation has been a feat made that much more difficult as I thought about the vulnerabilities my family face with my father working as a nurse and both my mother and brother being immunocompromised. To say the least, focusing on the task of finishing this project has felt impossible at times when the realities of life or death are all too present.

In a time when precarity feels all too present, I have leaned on healing. I came to healing from multiple vantage points. As a Black queer femme, I frequented community spaces that emphasized the necessity of healing not as an individualistic endeavor, but one that impacts the collective. Prior to the mass commercialization, healing within these spaces necessitated the difficult commitment to shadow work, wrestling with what we must unlearn to produce different outcomes, and of course understanding when to recharge in a world that demands continual labor. In these spaces, healing was definitively a process rather than a moment or end point. Within these spaces, we actualized Audre Lorde’s affirmation that to care for oneself is not an act of selfishness. We endeavored to heal to usher in the futures we hoped to edify. Collectively

envisioning and practicing freedom with primarily Black queer and trans people and broadly with other queer and trans people of color, has been the guiding directive for how I see healing and its importance for multiply marginalized peoples.

This healing imperative coalesced in the beginning of my graduate studies when I attended a campus event focusing on Black Panther Party members' organizing experiences. Following the documentary screening, the panel engaged us in questions. While the question posed escapes me, Ericka Huggins' response left an indelible impression upon me. Struggling against the state and finding herself imprisoned, Huggins relayed how spirituality became integral to her surviving through incarceration. She shared, "So, there I was locked away in that prison—this practice of meditation helped me to live. And not just to survive, but to thrive. Social justice work without spirituality creates illness. Many of us are now looking to ways to heal ourselves" (2016). My commitment to justice and organizing, of course, aimed to create a world wherein Black people could do more than survive. Yet, Huggins so simply emphasized the necessity of spirituality in tandem with freedom work, a convergence that until then was not apparent to me. Coupled with my cherished time engaging and learning from other Black graduate students on campus who came together as the Undercommons, I began to ask myself what it meant to move through a space such as UCLA as whole as possible. I asked what it would mean for Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks to survive the academy as they center their healing. I asked it of myself as a Black queer femme woman socialized to believe that education would be my certain path towards upward mobility. I asked this question as I felt the academy impinge on my wellbeing, thieving my joy as it demanded continual productivity.



In this introduction, I will explain who I call in as I engage this work, the limits of recuperating schooling within educational research, and provide a road map for the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. I begin by explaining how my language has shifted over time as I think through the imprecise phrase “Black women and femmes,” a phrase that for years helped define my work to an outside audience. I work through this language within text and not footnotes because it necessitates a larger discussion of how we define groups that cannot be contained within the margins. I then further discuss the importance of pushing back against educational research that attempts to recuperate schooling as means of racial redress. My training as both a Black feminist and Critical Race Theorist implores me to refuse the continual trend of positioning educational success as the means by which racial harms are assuaged and repair is actualized. I lean on scholars who interrogate the condition of U.S. universities, the endemic nature of racism, and the liberal gestures of progressivism that illuminate how universities continue to maintain power despite posturing otherwise. I end by providing a road map of the subsequent chapters of this project and offer insight on how each chapter elevates a critical lens on higher education and the possibilities of freer futures. The subsequent chapters of this project provide an overview of the areas of thought that ground this work, the methods of inquiry used to explore the substantiation of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and glean means of survivance in the academy, and finally think towards what else is possible as I look not only forward, but back to animate different conditions.

### **Who I’m Calling In: How Do I Explain Femme?**

Healing is important. But it is especially important for those of us at the intersections of multiple marginalities. When I began this project, I called in folks under the umbrella phrase “Black women and femmes.” Throughout my scholarly work within and outside of this

dissertation, I thus reflexively used the phrasing to name who I center in my work. Language is terribly imprecise and defining who I call in within this project has been difficult to name and had to necessarily shift. I first invoked the phrase Black women and femmes to call in those who are marginalized within a masculinist society. I leaned on Black queer feminists like Sydney Fonteyn Lewis (2012) to help explain femme as a distinctly queer identity to an audience who may be unfamiliar with its use. In using the phrase “women and femmes” I wanted to name how gender nonconforming and nonbinary individuals who self-identify as femme are marginalized.

First, I must attempt to explain femme. Femme presently is an intentional identity taken on by queer and/or trans people. Historically, within the context of the United States and Canada, femme is attributed to working-class cisgender white lesbian bar culture where lesbian women took on butch and femme identities to denote their self-fashioning (Buchanan, 2018; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Taylor 2018). Within these sites, butch and femme sociality was not understood as pantomiming heterosexual male-female relationships, but rather subverting the notion that assigned gender inherently inscribed one’s presentation and disavowing the centrality of cis men in women’s lives. At its inception femme disrupted the notion of proper womanhood and gender overall (Buchanan, 2018). While the standard genealogy of femme as a queer identity points to lesbian bar culture as the genesis, such a starting point obscures the historical fact of other sexualities present within these bar cultures and the longer histories of femme presentation, even if not self-ascribed by name, beyond cis women. Butch and femme have shared histories that often entwine the two within a butch/femme paradigm, however, attending to femme as an identity on its own further facilitates an understanding of its history separate of a specific gender.

Ascribing femme identity as generating from specifically cisgender lesbian bar culture while explanatory can likewise foreclose who is called into this history. Omise’eke Natasha

Tinsley meditates on the place of Black queerness within the formation of the Black Atlantic wherein same sex desire is not only a presupposition but a historical fact that disrupts the supposed “newness” of a Black queer diaspora (2017). Tinsley writes, “During the Middle Passage, as colonial chronicles, oral tradition, and anthropological studies tell us, captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships” (2017, p. 192). Locating this Black queer Atlantic, Tinsley refuses the imposition of Black queer studies in particular and a Black queer diaspora as anything new, but rather as integral to the formation of the black modernities that Paul Gilroy writes of in *The Black Atlantic*. As captive Africans were thingified in the brutal calculus of the transatlantic slave trade, Tinsley asserts that captive Africans in assigned sex segregated captivity “asserted the sentience” of their being through these erotic relationships (2017, p. 199). Declaring queer here not simply as the matter of sexual attraction, but a resistive practice, Tinsley proclaims these relationships as dislocating the violence done unto captive Africans where those who were made commodities insisted upon intimate relationships that demand Africans’ lives indexed within perpetual death. “Fomented in Atlantic crosscurrents, black queerness itself becomes a crosscurrent through which to view hybrid, resistant subjectivities—opaquely, not transparently” (2017, p. 199).

I do not mean to suggest that as captive Africans engaged queer relationships within and beyond the hold that some simultaneously self-identified as femme in name. However, I offer a disruption to the genealogy of femme where similar to the unnamed whiteness that proliferates queer theory at large, that histories of femme identity that singularly locate it within working class white cis lesbian culture must contend with race and gender seriously. I assert that our

queer and trans histories do not stem from a singular genesis and what we understand of femme cannot be neatly wrapped in an abridged history dating only back to the 1940s and 1950s.

Femme certainly encapsulates self-fashioning and in the case of multiply marginalized femmes it extends to relation and disrupting power. As Perrë L. Shelton asserts, femme identity can be understood as “[...] inherently renegotiating power dynamics associated with multiple spheres of interpolated identities” (2018, p. 24). In her analysis of the hold and the erotic relationships that took place, Tinsley illuminates the renegotiated power dynamics that demand captive African lives to be defined only in subjection. She meditates on the relationality within both platonic and erotic relationships that disrupt the normative order of bondage even for a fleeting moment. I offer Tinsley’s interruption to both Black diaspora and queer studies to consider what it would mean to think about the presence of femmeness within and beyond the hold not only as self-fashioning but through relations. I offer Tinsley’s necessary intervention to bridge her insistence of Black queerness as a “hybrid, resistant” subjectivity that evades transparency to lend the same opacity to femmeness. As much as I try to explain femme, I arrive at both its fluidity and at times indefinability. It is this indefinability that renders my use of “Black women and femmes” imprecise at best and a foreclosure to all those I had hoped to bring into my work at worst.

What is legible of a Black femme identity is its capacity to shift power relations, to offer flight from the surveillance of strict proper gender, and move towards new possibilities. As Treva Carrie Ellison suggests, Black femmeness operates as a “queer femininity that disorganize[s] and confound[s] the categories we often use to make sense of the world” (2019, p. 7). Gender and sexual identity categories indeed are destabilized when grappling with Black femmeness. Race, gender, and sexuality cohere as intersected points of marginality that leave Black gender nonconforming peoples vulnerable to the threat of incarceration (Ellison, 2019).

Defined as threats to the normative structures of civility, Black gender non-conformity is adhered to all Black people's where those who refuse to then assimilate to the strict paradigm of gender become marked by deviance (Ellison, 2019). It is this imposed criminality upon Black femmeness that, in my view, resituates the white centered genealogy of femme. At the same time as the white lesbian cis bar culture became a haven for women-loving-women to gather outside the specter of the male gaze, Black femmes negotiated hyper surveillance as race, gender, and sexuality defined their very existence as criminal and suitable targets for carceral violence.

Ellison employs "Black femme flight" as they analyze the case of Tisha, Rita, and Mary Lee, three Black gender nonconforming femmes arrested in Los Angeles in January 1950. In January 1950, Tisha, Rita, and Mary Lee were seen leaving the bathroom in a theater in the Wilshire district by LAPD officer R.E. Brown (Ellison, 2019). Officer Brown legitimized his surveillance of the three by suggesting that they're behavior was suspicious and indicative of potential thieving (Ellison, 2019). It is at the Los Angeles police station where through the invasive practice of strip searching, that the trio is "discovered" to be at odds with the strict notion of gender the officers used to define womanhood (Ellison, 2019). Tracing the trio's flight within news articles in both Los Angeles, CA and Reno, Nevada, Ellison discovers that the trio has traveled together since their migration from Toledo, OH to Los Angeles, and then to Reno. Following their departure from Toledo, OH; Tisha, Rita, and Mary Lee take on the same surname to signify to outsiders that the three should be assumed to be relatives (Ellison, 2019). Taking on survival tactics and forging kinship amidst the margins they are relegated to; Tisha, Rita, and Mary Lee invoke a Black femme praxis that evades the technologies of white supremacist gendered violence. Their "flocking," as Ellison describes it, encompasses the strategical methods of survivance through aesthetics and gestures they collectively use to evade

the threat of capture (2019). In print, Tisha, Rita, and Mary Lee's care for one another juxtaposes the violation of the strip search and the degradation of their Black queer genders within news articles. Extended hands to one another, painted nails that still signal Black femme gender, and a sly smirk evince the praxis of Black femmeness against the totality of imposed gender limits and subsequent carceral captivity (Ellison, 2019). In contrast to the white cis lesbian bar culture that is continually invoked in histories of femme, Ellison proffers a distinctly Black femme history that demands that race and gender be considered and centered simultaneously. It is at these intersections that I locate my use of femme. Femme is up against strict logics of gender and presentation and for those who are multiply marginalized, femme presentation and kinship is vulnerable to the state apparatus that enforces regulatory conditions.

Reading and understanding femme as a distinctly queer and/or trans identity helps to negotiate how it is historically and contemporaneously marginalized. Not to be confused simply as a synonym for femininity, femme as described by Black queer, nonbinary sociologist Blu Buchanan as, "a performance of femininity which subverted and rejected standards of heteronormativity and patriarchy – with an explicit focus on the ways femininity (often understood as excessive, artificial, and criminal) could be understood outside of a masculine/feminine dichotomy in which femininity is only defined as it's opposite" (2018). In particular, I am interested in the ways that femme is frequently read as "excessive, artificial, and criminal" to contextualize why I had used "women and femmes" to discuss gendered stratification. Within a society undergirded by cisheteropatriarchy, it is evident that "Femininity, as a form of expression, is denigrated and devalued on all bodies; no matter an individual's self-identification" (Buchanan, 2018). This denigration of femininity and femme expression is what brought me to "women and femmes." I used the phrase to signal how gendered stratification was

not only experienced by cis women. From the invisible feminized labor demanded within both interpersonal and structural realms and the violence that reinforces who is acceptable to harm, femininity and femme expression are marginalized in such a way that necessitates some means to discuss these shared experiences. Within queer and trans physical and digital community spaces, a number of us used the phrase when extending our analyses of gendered harm as we discussed the impact of cishetereopatriarchy on all peoples. It was an intentional move to expand our understanding of who is subject to gendered harm and the possibility of solidarity against such limits. As Buchanan argues, “If our goal is to produce solidarity and a society which is anti-patriarchal there has to be some frame for talking about gender violence which extends beyond sexed bodies into the realm of gender performance.” It is this denigrated gender performance that brought me to this imperfect phrasing. While I am still searching for a phrase or language to communicate such a necessary solidarity, the fact still remains that femininity and femme gender expression remain marginalized. Such a positionality can still be attended to beyond the invocation “women and femmes.”

A number of factors complicate the use of “women and femmes.” Among them is the notion that in this use, women inherently means feminized gender expression when adjoined to femmes. What we risk in using the phrase far outweighs the hopes we have as we invoke it. Boom succinctly posits, “A further problem with ‘women and femmes’ is the way in which it suggests that womanhood and femininity are concurrent” (2019). While using the phrase “women and femmes” what becomes of the masculine of center women? Are they now exempt from analyses of gendered harm under this moniker? Likewise, are nonbinary folks seen as “looks enough like a woman to me” and thus further misrecognized in this grouping. Buchanan offers, “Not all women are femme, and not all femmes are women, but they are all subjected to

the violence of the patriarchal gender order” (2018). I am continuously learning from my community about how to precisely name who I call in. As I call in cis straight women *too* and not primarily, I used the phrase to disrupt any notion that my work would center cis women first and all others secondarily. The identifier woman in this work calls in trans and cis women. So when I wrote “Black women and femmes,” I initially thought I was doing the work to tease apart what we assume about gendered realities within this society.

My attempt to bridge this condition did not posit gender nonconforming and nonbinary folks as an addendum to the category of “woman,” but rather refuse the idea that only those who are nominally identified as women are harmed under gendered limits. However, this desire to bridge these conditions was not doing the work that I hoped it would.

And I was wrong. Bailey is among a number of scholars who helped me to understand that the phrase was not doing the work that I had hoped it would do to name conditions of gendered stratification. Although it was a side comment within a larger discussion of Black queer experiences, Savannah Shange quickly explained at an National Women’s Studies Association meeting how the phrase erased more than call in. Following this comment, I had a conversation with a friend who attended this session with me. Both of us Black fat femmes, them nonbinary and myself cis initially were taken aback by the pushback on the phrase. Our generative conversation, however, was an important starting point for considering the use of the phrase. My friends have especially helped me to understand the failure in the phrase and through these conversations I am called to shift my language. I hope as I shift my language that I can more accurately attend to the nuances of gendered harm; hold myself accountable as a cis woman in relation to Black trans women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks, and open space to be responsive to critiques that push all of us to truly be in solidarity with one another.



As Bailey names the stakes of her work exploring digital resistance amongst Black women she writes, “I challenge you, dear reader, as you read this text, to think of Black women first when you see the word ‘woman,’ to think of queer and trans women first when you read the term ‘Black women’” (2021, p. 20). Likewise, I ask that as you read through this text, that “woman” and “Black women” are both thought of expansively and not limited to the paradigm of limited proper gender. Within this work, I hope to continue advancing a Black queer feminist aim of disrupting what we know and assume about gender and how it structures our intertwined experiences of marginality.

### **Schooling, Recuperative Measures, and Refusal**

Unsurprisingly, my upbringing as the daughter of Ugandan immigrants is stamped by the impression of educational success as a means of social mobility. In the wake of political upheaval, arriving in the states was a welcome refuge for my parents who saw their new home as rife with opportunity if not simply bereft of daily violence. I entered school sites with their encouragement of performing well and was met with educational violences that reinforced my subordinated status as a Black student in the classroom. Thus, I knew the intimacies of Black suffering at an early age. I felt the fatigue, pressure, and burden of being a Black student on a predominantly white campus from primary school to higher education and tried to use ineffective meritocracy geared efforts to combat conceptions of Black inferiority and unbalanced punishment. Educational violences curtail the agency and well-being of Black girls, women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks. As I examine the university, I look towards work that complicates what we define as racial redress, illuminates the inherently stratified nature of the university, and think through what else is possible as we reckon with the enduring nature of racism. Through Black feminisms and Critical Race Theory, I aim to push educational research

to consider conditions beyond numerical presence within the academy to advance an incisive critique of the very nature of the university as a site that reifies imperial arrangements (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014).

This work investigates the resistive and healing practices that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks enact in the face of daily racialized and gendered terrors. From microaggressions to structural inequalities, schooling as a site of trauma must be interrogated while validating the healing practices, counterspaces, and resistance that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks foster as daily acts of survival. Through a Critical Race Theory perspective, resistance and activism within collective spaces pose as generative ideological and spatial sites wherein radical imaginaries of conditions beyond the limits of oppression are fostered. In fact, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) argue, “[...] that transformational resistance framed within the tenets of a CRT and LatCrit framework allows one to look at resistance among Students of Color that is political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (p. 320). Even while racism remains endemic, collective struggle against racism poses as an ameliorative endeavor for Black students that find themselves within confined educational spaces. The space to envision and practice freedom disrupts the stability of educational violences that mandate low critical mass of Black students, disregard Black liberatory thought, and punishes Black students who call on universities to enact meaningful material change. In this way, we can recognize identity based organizations such as Black Student Associations and fugitive spaces in the university as sites where racial identities are affirmed, resistive behavior is encouraged and fostered, and the emotional well-being of Black students may be preserved in the face of racialized harm.

Counterspaces and counterlogics are critical means by which marginalized people activate alternative realities to subjugation (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Shaw, 1991; Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Collective organizing and life sustaining efforts have a long history among Black women with the Nadir period of American history serving as an important touchpoint for these efforts (Shaw, 1991). Historian Stephanie Shaw (1991) provides a historical account of Black women's organizing within and beyond Black Women's Clubs to highlight the genealogy of Black women's collective organizing. While the Black Women's Club movement is an important facet within the genealogy of Black women organizing in response to antiblackness, Shaw (1991) argues that this focus only encompasses a part of the intention and impact of that work. Of interest to Shaw (1991) is the consistent emphasis of collectivity within this work and desire to change the lived conditions for all Black people. Much like Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) articulation of transformational resistance as an effort to destabilize marginalization for more than just the individual, Shaw highlights "community consciousness and collective activity" (1991, p. 11) as a consistent thread in Black women's organizing. Moving through collectivity within slavery up to the Black Women's Club movement in the 1890s, Shaw illuminates the "[...] internal traditions of the African-American community rather than activities in the white community" (1991, p. 11). Even within the brutal calculus of chattel slavery, Shaw centers ruptures and discontinuities to the violences visited upon enslaved Black people. As enslaved Black people suffered incalculable violences, they created space for collective support through "plantation childcare situations, the forced secrecy surrounding religious ceremonies [...]" and surfaced "group consciousness" (Shaw, 1991, p. 11). As Shaw weaves through this history of collectivity, she situates Black women's organizing as an effort for racial uplift that provides mutual aid against the backdrop of dispossession. Lifting

up efforts within slavery and the Black Women's Club movement, illuminates the integral facet of Black women's organizing and Black feminisms' impetus to shift the conditions for the collective at large.

Collectivity has been and remains a fundamental aspect of Black women's organizing as evidenced within the Combahee River Collective's foundational statement in 1977. Following their departure from the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973, a group of Black lesbians came together under the name "Combahee River Collective" to address varying forms of oppression that they understood as intertwined (Combahee River Collective, 1977). From their organizing to the very choice of name, the Combahee River Collective exemplifies the aims of Black feminisms to disrupt all systems of power that beleaguer marginalized people and eschew any sense of pedestaling an individual over the collective. In a moderated conversation with preeminent Black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall, co-founding member of the Combahee River Collective Barbara Smith shared the history of how the group came to name themselves. At a time when other organizations and publications propped up Sojourner Truth in naming themselves, Smith came upon an inspiring biography of Harriet Tubman that highlighted the Combahee River uprising of 1863 (Smith, Guy-Sheftall, and Giddings, 2014). The success and importance of the Combahee River uprising led by Tubman cannot be overstated where almost 800 enslaved people freed themselves, set fire to the buildings of their enslavers, destroyed rice plantations, and took with them articles from pigs to produce as they journeyed into freedom (Gumbs, 2014). A year prior to the raid, Tubman was more than assured of the coming end of slavery (Gumbs, 2014). As she worked alongside members of the Union Army in Beaufort, South Carolina, upon waking from a dream she repeatedly proclaimed to herself "my people are free!" (Gumbs, 2014, p. 143). Her prophecy of freedom undoubtedly guided her work and year's

long planning of the uprising. This uprising was an action that shifted the tides of the civil war that had until then, been going in the favor of the confederacy (Gumbs, 2014). “My people are free!” was a proclamation of collective liberation that resounded through the acts of the enslaved who freed themselves. “And I thought, why don’t we name ourselves after an *action*, and not just a person?” (Smith, Guy-Sheftall, and Giddings, 2014, p. 128) shared Smith as she opined about the beginnings of the Combahee River Collective, elongating the proclamation Tubman triumphantly repeated to herself over 110 years prior.

I am interested in the means of survival that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks sustain. “My people are free!” resonates through the actions of Black people moving against the totality of antiblackness. While spectacular moments such as mass uprisings are importantly lauded as disruptive, liberatory acts, I am particularly interested in the everyday means of survivance that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks engage in. As Saidiya Hartman (2016) postulates, “Mere survival is an achievement in a context so brutal” (p. 171). Reckoning with the weight of daily antiblackness is no small feat and as such I am interested in capturing the methods of survivance that disrupt the normalcy of such marginality. I argue that as Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks live through the age of “saving” Black men and boys, we co-construct resistive and healing practices within spaces of liminality. We continue to live in a moment where organizations focus on the safety, development, and success of Black boys and men despite Black girls, women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks simultaneously experiencing gendered violence and the weight of antiblackness. As a Black feminist intervention, this work attends to Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks who have traditionally been asked to either forsake our gender in Black liberatory spaces or racial identity in feminist spaces. In the tradition of the

Combahee River Collective and various Black Women's Clubs, Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks have consistently formed spaces on the margins of not only dominant society but liberatory spaces as well. This work is in that spirit of collectivity as a necessity for Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' life-making, daily survival, and our liberation as essential and not adjunct to other movements.

Centering Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks in this work necessitates a critical analysis of higher education. As more Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks are entering higher education, it is integral to examine the spaces they find themselves within that reproduce stratification all under the premise of individual financial success (Stein, 2021) The pursuit of higher education has traditionally been positioned as a promise of upward mobility for marginalized communities in the face of structural oppression (Bishop 2017; Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Dumas and ross 2016). Yet, matriculation into institutions of higher learning is not a guarantee of upward mobility, but rather further entrenches disparities as “[...] low- and middle-income students are either priced out of the academy or trade down in terms of status and prestige” (Stein, 2021, p. 84). The promise of putting in hard work to yield material and societal capital as redress for systemic subjugation is untenable within this arrangement for historically marginalized peoples. With higher education situated as a private good, much of the onus to destabilize subject positionalities falls on those at the margins despite increasing barriers to higher education. This logic of upward mobility fails to acknowledge the reality of schooling as a site that socializes students towards normative and dominant ideologies as human commodity for the marketplace and the individualized burden of the high cost of education with little promise of careers that will make good on the return. Dissimilar financial burdens annul the promise of upward mobility. Further, education as a

private good and meritocracy as the method of racial redress negates the presence of violences against those at the margins both in the maligned status of critical disciplines and the school policies that do more to protect the interests of institutions than of students (Dumas and ross 2016; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Such a material and discursive environment necessitates approaches to maintaining the livelihood of marginalized students.

Schooling as a site of trauma, enduring racial stratification in the numerical presence and ideological presence of the marginalized, and maintenance of interlocking systems of domination through school policies are essential to my theorizing the nature of schooling (Grier-Reed 2010, Ladson-Billings, 2004, Patton, 2016). I argue that language such as “predominantly white institution” or “historically white institution” normalize the over representation of whiteness in the academy and further reifies the subordination of People of Color as both students and faculty. Instead of using such language, I push for the use of “Traditionally Oppressive Institution” as a phrase that acknowledges the historical foundation of the university as an imperial project and its current position in maintaining oppression. In arguing for the use of Traditionally Oppressive Institution, I will examine the substantiation of universities as reifying difference and subordinated status for People of color, investments tied to further bolstering imperialism within and beyond the borders of U.S. that increase universities’ endowment, and the liberal gestures of progressivism that fail to enact justice at the expense of marginalized students and the beneficence of white students. In doing this work, I will look at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) as a case for how universities are substantiated and maintained through sustaining dominance despite marketization that postures towards progressive ideals.

Educational research has critically named racialized inequalities in schooling such as school tracking practices (Bishop, 2017), unbalanced funding to public schools with

predominantly Students of Color (Patton, 2016), and teachers' low expectations of Students of Color to name a few issues of racialized bias (Solórzano et al., 2000). However, we must also examine schooling itself and the practice of teaching as processes that have been founded upon racial subjugation and the current environment as a tool of discipline (Bishop 2017; Dumas and ross, 2016; Gumbs, 2014; Patton, 2016). In her move towards identifying a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective in the study of higher education, Lori D. Patton (2016, p. 318) argues that "U.S. higher education from its genesis, has been a primary force in persistent inequities. For example, Wilder (2013) examined linkages between Ivy League institutions and slavery." The emergence of Ivy League institutions was the ground upon which the governing and slave holding elite could not only propagate an image of the intellectual as white, male, and propertied, but simultaneously bolster their wealth through slave labor (Patton, 2016). As the university is born within the Enlightenment period, we can understand its impetus as a "[...] project of liberal Western modernity" (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014, p. 30) that simultaneously reified the parameters of civility. To be educated, white, male, and propertied is in distinct opposition to the constructed subordinated status of People of Color where enslaved Black people are both the human capital to bolster the finances of the institution and serve the educated elite, Indigenous people are displaced for the edification of these sites, and continued exclusionary practices bar all on the margins from attending such institutions. Such a history of explicit engagement in producing and reifying racial violence and stratification is often occluded from discussions of redressing the racism of higher education.

With an endowment of \$36.4 billion, Harvard has the largest endowment in the nation with a strong likelihood to increase over time (Patton, 2016). Yet, the accrual of their substantial endowment is due in large part to their past as a school for the moneyed and often slave holding



elite (Patton, 2016). When compared to Howard University's \$407.6 million endowment (Patton, 2016), it is more than evident that racialized marginality in higher education is not simply defined by the question of access. However, it's very exclusion and exploitation of People of Color historically continues to produce and maintain an environment that is sustained through the permanence of People of Color's subjugation. As colleges and universities presently employ the "student as customer" model of higher education, educational attainment is presented less as a public good and rather as a privatized, individual investment (Stein, 2021). Sociologist Sharon Stein (2021) argues, "Due to the growing view of education as a private rather than public good, the ways that colleges and universities are funded, and the "marketization" of higher education, students today *are* customers" (p. 80). Institutions from small liberal arts colleges to large research intensive universities are significant beneficiaries of and contributors to the military-prison-industrial complex in order to fund the commodity of education that is marketed to students as a transformational learning space (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Oparah, 2014). As beneficiaries of this arrangement, the university likewise adopts modes of carcerality that is evident in the retaliation against student, staff, and faculty activism (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014). As Chatterjee and Maira (2014) articulate, "When the University of California debates, the purchase of an army tank, as it did in Berkeley in 2012, it crudely reveals the profound strategic confluence of military science and militarized praxis in fortifying the citadels of higher learning" (p. 30). The neoliberal university thus finds itself with a dialectically opposed self-concept wherein it is posited as an ideal site of promoting diversity and inclusion yet the very practices that maintain its financial stability reify subjugated positionalities for People of Color globally (Oparah, 2014). The nature of the university as exclusionary and exploitative highlights the

depths to which we must understand schooling as structurally oppressive despite educational attainment continuously positioned as a method of redress and justice.

If we are to rely on Western conceptions of justice and allow the university to set the parameters for racial redress, it is then of no surprise that responses to racial injustice are envisioned as *simply* incorporating more People of Color into the university while leaving the infrastructure, logics, and ways of being untouched. In fact, our historical and present struggles for material and discursive access becomes subsumed by this arrangement. As People of Color fought for access to higher education and San Francisco State University saw the birth of Ethnic Studies, that struggle becomes incorporated such that numerical presence within the academy is assumed to be the *only* matter to be addressed. Derrick Bell's prescient concepts of "racial realism" and "interest convergence" incisively reveal the problems of diversity as the preferred method of "progress." Using *Brown v. Board of Education* as a case study, Bell asserts that the decision to end racial segregation rested not simply on the premise of providing civil rights to Black people, but most importantly was advantageous to middle and upper class whites to maintain social power despite posturing otherwise (1980). Bell (1980) argues, "Racial remedies may instead be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by the middle and upper class whites" (p. 523). Describing this as interest convergence, Bell asserts that race is thus endemic and unlikely to be eradicated as those in power confer civil liberties that continue to benefit hegemony while posing otherwise to assuage dissent. Within this landscape, higher education then cannot contend with the consistent affronts to critical disciplines, frequent exposure to microaggressions in curriculum and environment, and edification of the military-industrial complex in a meaningful manner unless it

truly relinquishes power. In other words, diversity as method and increased numbers of historically marginalized people in the academy is inadequate as racial redress or even justice. As Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013) articulates, “Knowing the limits of justice then requires critique and something else” (p. 44). It is that something else that a Black feminist and Critical Race Theory lens focuses my attention towards while envisioning an otherwise relationship to the university that refuses the position of being numerical evidence of the university’s shifting ideologies.

### **Arrangement of the Manuscript**

Turning to the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), I find what it means to engage in resistive efforts that offers space to heal from the constraints of an oppressive society. The Combahee River Collective Statement reveals the necessity of being attendant to various interlocking forms of domination as championed by Black Feminists who are engaged in grassroots organizing. As a collective that is critical of both Black liberation spaces that fail to recognize gender as a significant form of marginalization and feminist spaces that do not address race, the Combahee River Collective recognized political organizing and providing space for Black women to come together as necessary for the survival of Black women. Such recognition of communal space provides the possibility to understand the long tradition of Black women creating a way of life in the margins. The collective writes, “Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.” (1977, p. 212) In this declaration of Black resistance, I consider how Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks’ attendance to our well-being is itself an act of resistance. As we carve out spaces in the university whether through identity based organizations

or within communal spaces, we have survived in spaces that were not meant for us (Gumbs, 2010). In similar fashion to how we may understand poetry and radical imaginaries as a blueprint of worlds to come, we can position Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks spaces as a practice that evinces a possibility of healing despite daily racial and gendered terrors.

Resistance is of importance for Students of Color as they navigate historically oppressive institutions where they are confronted with racial microaggressions from peers and faculty, subject to tokenism in departments that do not center racialized lived realities, and are charged with performing well academically while dealing with such hardships (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano, 2006). Racial battle fatigue as explained by Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) highlights the impact of People of Color's experiences with the additive confrontations of racial microaggressions on their mental and emotional well-being. Smith and colleagues (2006) argue that "The stress from racial microaggressions can become lethal when the accumulation of physiological symptoms of racial battle fatigue are untreated, unnoticed, misdiagnosed, or personally dismissed" (p. 301). The psychophysiological effects of racial battle fatigue include but are not limited to lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal from perceived racial stressors, negative health complications, and diminished quality of life and shortened life span (Smith et al., 2006). With such a heavy impact on Students of Color's wellbeing, it's imperative that measures or spaces that facilitate the preservation of Students of Color's well-being are identified and supported. This work seeks to address the following research questions by using archival methods and interviews to understand the oppressive nature of schooling and the ways in which Black women and femmes disrupt their subject positionalities. As such, my dissertation asks: (1) *What are the particular methods that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks use to engage in resistive and healing practices as they navigate higher*

*education, and (2) What are the policies and investments that have substantiated and maintained UCLA's power?*

In chapter two, “Contesting Coloniality, Enlivening Disruption” I provide further context for the stratified educational landscape that impacts Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary students in higher education. I take both a historical account of the foundations of the university by privileging critical perspectives and a contemporary view to interrogate the limits of neoliberalism and progressivism as methods of redress. Here, like in the entirety of this manuscript, I employ Critical Race Theory and Black feminisms to accomplish this aim. I situate this review of integral literature as both a necessary context for my distinction between schooling as a formal practice of socializing students towards normative ways of being while explaining further my theoretical perspective and intervention. Within this chapter, I lean on scholars who have perceptively described higher education as an edification of white supremacy and investment in imperialism within and beyond U.S. borders. I ask what it would mean to disentangle the generative sites of counterknowledge under the umbrella of Ethnic Studies from the hold of the university to advance an otherwise position. In other words, I aim to reclaim the struggle for Ethnic Studies as fought for by the Third World Movement to strip the university of its claim to supporting these disciplines as only a matter of beneficence and not one codified by interest convergence. In this chapter, I work to connect Derrick Bells’ concept of “interest convergence” and Saidiya Hartman’s concept of the “nonevent” to illustrate the antagonism between what we perceive as educational progress and the reality of continued educational violences. Further, in thinking alongside Black feminisms, I articulate the multimethod means of survivance that reveal alternative relationships to the university that advance Black lifemaking against the enormity of antiblackness.

In chapter three, “And I Am Your Witness: Intersubjectivity as a Place of Commune,” I explain my methodological considerations. Taking seriously both Black feminisms and Critical Race Theory’s focus on experiential realities, I write through my interview methods. I use semi-structured interviews to engage with the collaborators of this study to witness and highlight their insights on schooling, the opposing forces that delimit their well-being in the academy, and their dreams that exceed the short temporality of reformist wins (Shange, 2019). As such, I center the collaborators modes of survivance to advance an alternative relationship to the university. At the same time, I use the archives to provide a critical context of the foundation of UCLA as inherently oppressive and the retaliatory measures employed against student, staff and faculty dissent. Through parsing through the archives, I name Janss Investment Company as central to the built environment of UCLA and the surrounding city of Westwood. I then pay close attention to student, staff, and faculty dissent against the stratified conditions of the university to collate instances of refusal as well as responses to these actions that further highlight the antagonism against structural change within the university. Through this mixed methods approach, I continue to advance my stance that higher education at its inception is an oppressive project and use the insight from the collaborators to highlight what else is possible against this climate.

Chapter four, “In the Archives of Brutality and Possibility: Searching for an Else –Where and –When” summarizes the archival findings of this project. I begin with the archival findings to articulate the constructed conditions of the university. As the governing faculties of the University of California looked south to extend the network of campuses from Berkeley to Los Angeles, the pamphleteering efforts and subsequent written deeds reveal the extent to which race heavily figured into the construction of the university. I then highlight the activism of the 1960s and 1970s and the ensuing backlash. Significant activism occurred at a time when students, staff,

and faculty of color did not comprise a critical numerical mass on campus. This critical time of social change blazed through the campus much like across the nation. Notably, Angela Davis' dismissal from the campus due to her political affiliations ignited considerable activism on campus ranging from demonstrations to racially affirming cultural productions. Here, I also highlight the student, staff, and faculty dissent that resisted the retribution from the university. Finding these individuals in the archive who resisted oppression and created compels me to consider Black lifemaking as a central focus of blackness, rather than only defining blackness within subjection.

Chapter five, “Re(-)Membering to See Me and You” covers the interview findings. Brilliant and insightful Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks engaged this study. While nominally described as interviews, these generative conversations were informed by E. Patrick Johnson's (2016) theorizing of interviewing as a moment of witnessing the embodied act of storytelling. Johnson (2016) articulates ““[...] the moment of storytelling is an epistemological and embodied experience of the self as same, the self as other, and the intersubjectivity between teller and listener” (p. 52). I witnessed my collaborators reflect upon their experiences as they recounted experiences within confined educational spaces, the levity brought to their lives by the everyday moments of joy in sharing space with other Black people, and envision what educative spaces can look like beyond the specter of antiblackness. Our intersubjectivity as teller and listener emerged through the affirmations of one another both verbally and nonverbally – from audible “mm-hhms” to head nods, breaking the traditional mode of qualitative researcher was imperative to building a non-extractive method of interviewing in my work. Likewise, member checking with collaborators was necessary to confirm that I accurately captured their storytelling.

And finally in the coda, “Crossing the Barrier” I connect the archival findings with the interview findings to surface the through line of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks responses to stratification. Within the archives, I happened upon fierce actors for justice who have been occluded. The methods of survivance amongst Black women within the archive and those shared by collaborators illuminate the forward facing efforts for liberation. Like a refrain, “my people are free!” proclaimed by Harriet Tubman comes to mind as I think about the moments of freedom that are glimpsed in the archive and presently. Even while antiblackness remains the fulcrum of civil society, these means of survival are integral discontinuities in this condition.

### **Another World Just Out of View**

In a landscape that appears bleak for the prospect of Black students, staff, and faculty in dissent of the neoliberal university, I offer resistance and healing as the alternative mode of Black existence in the academy. I came to this work through meditating on the importance of the #SayHerName campaign, which arose in response to the focus on Black men and boys who had been brutalized by police terror. This work celebrates the resistive and healing efforts that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks engage in because our well-being in an antiblack world is important. This work names the university as Traditionally Oppressive because it recalibrates our struggle for liberation by having sharper tools of analysis. Tina Campt puts into relief what it means to imagine a Black feminist futurity. She calls us to consider the *tense* of futurity and not just the vision. Campt (2017, p. 28) writes,

The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration. It is the power to imagine beyond current fact



and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of pre-figuration that involves living the future now—as imperative rather than subjective—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present.

This work is done in the hopes of bringing to light the freedom dreams that bring us closer to liberation. This work seeks to illuminate the life making that Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks do despite the weight of antiblackness, gendered violence, and life at large and to highlight the spectacular and mundane sustenance of Black life.

## Chapter Two

### Contesting Coloniality, Enlivening Disruption

To reckon with the state of the neoliberal university and the conditions that undergird it's being, I put Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminisms, and Black studies into conversation to meditate on the colonial nature of schooling, the necessity of exclusion to edify school systems, and the interventions made possible within the liberatory capacities of CRT and Black feminisms. Critical studies of schooling have crucially determined the foundation and reification of dominance as part and parcel to the project of schooling wherein normativity pivots on the undoing of Black students such that methods of redress oftentimes fail to actualize changed material conditions. Within the pursuit of racial redress in schooling, efforts for multiculturalism routinely fall short of incorporating the specificity of antiblackness and doing away with hegemony (Shange, 2019). Savannah Shange (2019) articulates that the assumption that racial redress is sufficient within the language of multiculturalism “fails because Black flesh is always in excess, uncivil, and marked by its incongruity with the progressive project, to which we remain narratively central, and yet materially surplus” (p.4). Black subjectivity remains narratively demonstrative of the violences emblematic of schooling (Bishop, 2017; Shange, 2019; Stovall, 2006), and yet amends for these matters of brutality is incommensurable with the maintenance of school sites. Afterall, what would become of the system of schooling without the negation of blackness? What matter of value would academic attainment hold if there was not a subjugated other that is routinely delimited from such gains? What would come of the marketplace of education that has fashioned learning as a privatized good with universities competing for students' purchase? Antiblackness rather than an anomaly within schooling, is

both foundational and contemporarily advantageous to the inequities cohered within the system of schooling.

In the case of higher education in particular, it is out of antiblackness that we find the constitutive nature of the plantation to the university, the racial other illegible in the grammar of Man, and the necessary subjugation of those racial others to legitimate the privileging of white material attainment (Bishop 2017; Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Patton, 2016; Wynter, 2013). Unsurprisingly, Black people whether enslaved or freed were barred from attending institutions of higher learning during their foundation. Few scholars would contest the seemingly historical fact of exclusion among universities. Scholars committed to critically examining the university have importantly demonstrated the structuring material and discursive outgrowths of dispossession, theft from, and commodification of racialized others to the project of the university (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Stein, 2021; Patel, 2014; Patton, 2016). The university as an institution is rooted within the “Enlightenment project of Western modernity” (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014, p. 30) and historically only served the white, male, propertied, and often slave holding elite (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). The brutal arrangement of slavery is still marked on universities with endowed chairs historically funded through the profits of slave owning benefactors keeping the doors open to institutions that were consistently on the brink of financial peril (Bishop, 2017; Wilder, 2013). While the foundational matter of exclusion in the university is seldom contested, more attention must be paid to the structural necessity of antiblackness to the institution. Increasingly so, however, universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton are presently “acknowledging” the centrality of financial accrual vis-à-vis the trafficking of enslaved Black people to the wealth of their respective campuses in the wake of uprisings for Black liberation (Dennehy and Gonzalez, 2021; Powell, 2022). With

research centers focusing on slavery and the university coming into fruition or receiving more robust support at the respective campuses and beyond, there may be a glimpse of perceptible reckoning with the constitutive nature of antiblackness to the state of higher education.

Conversely, less traction has been made in the effort of providing financial recompense to the descendants of those enslaved within the walls of the Ivy League universities, with Georgetown University stagnating on a reparation plan of fundraising \$400,000 a year to compensate the descendants of the 272 enslaved who were sold to save the institution from closing its doors (Swarns, 2019). Meanwhile, Harvard's multimillion initiative investigating the university's ties to slavery includes no plans to provide reparations to the descendants of those enslaved at the university (Reilly, 2022). In the case of material restitution, universities have yet to actualize such a commitment to directly benefit descendants of those enslaved further illustrating the limits of institutional redress.

If institutional redress remains inadequate as a means of repair, we must rethink the utility of schooling especially as it reifies dissimilar outcomes for the marginalized rather than upsetting systemic stratification. While some educational research continues to engage in recuperative efforts on behalf of the schooling system, Damien Sojoyner (2017) encourages us to "shift our framing from state-sponsored education as a redemptive structure of social progress to an understanding of education as one of the key sources of support for forms of structural oppression" (p. 517). With educational attainment positioned as a means of social progress, the responsibility to disrupt the conditions of stratification fall back on Students of Color who are tasked with achieving individual success in the education marketplace. Far from view are the very structures that erected and sustain such dissimilarity as schooling systems benefit from this arrangement and educational research continues to query why Black and other Students of Color

cannot simply perform well under these conditions (Patel, 2014). Thinking of schooling then not as the knowledge taught and produced, but as the assemblage of state-sponsored policies, socialized norms of hegemony, and advancement of individuated success compels me to distinguish schooling as system from learning or education as process.

Formal systemized schooling must be differentiated from learning, where the former is defined by coloniality and reproducing difference and the latter can be an emancipatory, transformative experience that circumvents the social order to announce other modes of being (Patel, 2014; Solórzano, YEAR; Stovall, YEAR). Foundational to my articulation of the condition of the university and its impact on Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' survival is the understanding that the university was devised and buttressed on the undoing of Blackness. That is to say, as the university came to be a space to educate the white, monied, male, slave holding elite, definitions of human that previously stood in contrast to the non-human state of Blackness were bolstered. With that, intellect and knowledge production in what was known as a time for modernity came to be intimately tied to the embodiment of white, cisgender, able bodied, male, heterosexuality. Knowledge production in the citadels of higher education defined as the "Colonial Era of College" by Geiger (2005) were influenced by antiblack logics fortifying the juridical, cultural, and economic landscape of the so called United States (Bishop 2017; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013).

Recognized as concomitant to the excess of colonial violence, formal schooling is inextricably tied to the legacy of slavery, with Craig Wilder suggesting that "The academy never stood apart from American slavery – in fact, it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage" (p. 12). Yet, despite this enduring legacy as beneficiaries of colonial violence, universities continue to be regarded as radical sites of social change. Much of

the reputation of universities as progressive sites of transformation is not due to the operations of the university, but rather the students, staff, and faculty who actualize otherwise perspectives and dissent against tradition. However, as described in 1963 by Clark Kerr, the university is indexed by “two great cliches” (p. 71) that are at odds where “The external view is that the university is radical; the internal reality is that it is conservative. The internal illusion is that it is a law unto itself; the external reality is that it is governed by history” (2001, p. 71). In spite of colonial legacies, violent rebuttals to struggles for civil rights, and present support of the academic-military-industrial complex, universities continue to benefit from the great cliché it has endeared where scholarly output legitimates its relevance and collusion in imperial arrangements financially sustain the operations (Chatterjee and Maira, 2014; Oparah, 2014).

Incisively examining the state of the university and its production of violence importantly contextualizes the aim of this chapter to name the academic violences of the university, illuminate dissent against structured difference, and think through interventions offered through alternative relationships to the academy. Rather than regard academic violence as a historic reality or present anomaly, regarding the university as persistently reproducing systemic difference sharpens our analyses such that recuperating the system of schooling becomes incommensurable with aims to unsettle hegemony. Arriving at this articulation of universities as traditionally oppressive reorients my focus to reanimate the other possibilities of navigating through the academy. What becomes possible when those of us who wish to remain recalcitrant in the face of university demands of incorporation when we are “in but not of” (Moten and Harney, 2013) the university? How may we better situate our dissent not as consumable and marketable for university legitimation, but actualize our wayward aims to ameliorate subjugation and materialize improved circumstances? I do not pretend to have the answer to these questions,

particularly when scholars that have long preceded me have grappled with this problem. What I hope to accomplish in querying the constraints of being within the university while in dissent of its arrangements is how we can better resist the attempts to incorporate our resistance to hegemony into the fold of the university. Announcing our dissent of incorporation alone will not destabilize these conditions. However, it is a vital step towards disavowing the attempts of the university to appropriate inroads towards liberation to appear progressive as it continually edifies difference.

Thus, this literature review explores thinking through the conditions that have and continue to maintain structural inequities and the liberatory capacities of alternative relationships to the academy. In this literature review, I explore how race is a necessary language that came to define the necessity and utility of the university, the liberatory critical thought that has resisted the limits of the schooling system, and the methods of survival that disrupt the condition of unfreedom.

### **Race and the Condition of the University**

Reflecting on the nature of schooling and its intimate relationship with Black marginality, Michael Dumas asks, “What does it mean to suggest that education policy is a site of antiblackness?” (2016, p. 16). This question suggests that we do not locate racialized difference beginning after *Brown v. Board of Education*, but rather look further back to understand the substantiation of schooling as a historically and contemporaneously antiblack project. In the case of the university, the system of schooling was predicated on valorization of the white, cisgender, able-bodied, monied, male as sole producer and beneficiary of knowledge production. The values of a supposed modern society were contingent upon ethos bound within whiteness. Modernity is defined narrowly within the scope of whiteness and as such defines the existence

and practices of Indigenous and Black people as savage and pre-thought (Oparah, 2014). While educational research has focused on the implications of racial difference in K-12 schooling, Lori D. Patton suggests that it is imperative to investigate higher education's complicity in the "creation of racial inequities in schooling" (2016, p. 316). Further, Patton suggests that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is particularly advantageous in this effort. With CRT's roots in legal studies and application in education, it is a generative theory that acknowledges the endemic nature of racism, the inextricable capital associated with whiteness, the condition of interest convergence, and the possibilities in illuminating People of Color's moves towards freedom (Patton, 2016; Solórzano, 1998; Stovall, 2006). CRT becomes essential in naming the violences that permeate schooling systems and the efforts on behalf of People of Color to negotiate stratified realities.

Higher education's complicity in the creation of racialized difference is evident in the foundation of the Ivy League institutions (Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Black captive bodies provided the currency that made it possible for slave holding families to fund the creation and maintenance of institutions of higher learning (Bishop, 2017; Dumas, 2016; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Patton quotes Wilder as stating, "Governors and faculties used slave labor to raise and maintain schools, and they made their campuses the intellectual and cultural playgrounds of the plantation and merchant elite" (2013, p. 138; Patton, 2016). At the same time as the white slave holding elite created the universities, Black people in bondage who dared to steal their freedom through learning to read were subject to brutal beatings (Dumas, 2016). Learning to read figures as a fugitive act amongst a people in bondage that has been defined as non-human and only of utility (Anderson, 1988; Dumas, 2016; Dumas, 2010). The unfreedom of Black people served as a necessary facet in the creation of the university and it may be argued that attempts to destabilize this subjected positionality by extension threatens the stability of the



system of schooling. As Black people steal their freedom in the act of reading and moving towards emancipation, they negate the validity of the university as the sole site of knowledge production. In this way, we can consider Leigh Patel's assertion that "Learning as fugitivity exists as dialectic to the stratifying cultures of formal education that insist on contingent possibilities for well-being for some and unmitigated safety for others" (2016, p. 397). The distinction between learning or education and schooling becomes important in investigating the antiblack nature of schooling.

Further, Craig Wilder offers a critical investigation into the Ivy League's foundation as tied to a history of violence against Indigenous and Black peoples. Wilder (2013) examines the relationship between the first American colleges and slave economies both regionally and globally, the influence of racialized difference on knowledge production, as well as westward expansionism that facilitated Indigenous displacement and deculturalization. Wilder reveals that the first five colleges established in the British American colonies, which includes Harvard (established 1636), William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Codrington (1745) in Barbados, and New Jersey (later named Princeton, 1746) were instrumental in expanding Christianity, served to violently displace Indigenous peoples, and received monetary benefits from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (2013). Wilder excavates the archive to paint a revelatory picture of the American colleges' ties to marginality. The governing faculties of the American colleges used their financial gain from the institution of slavery to fund the construction and operations of the colleges and further house enslaved Black people to serve the needs of the student population (Wilder, 2013). Wilder argues that with the introduction of slavery to the New England region, slavery was similarly introduced to Harvard. As he follows key figures in the construction of the first American colleges, Wilder uses letters, court documents, as well as slave trader ledgers to

reveal both the monetary entanglements and the ideological standpoints that bolster the university. Through this method, Wilder reveals that following its return from the West Indies in 1638, the ship *Desire* carried with it “goods” such as “cotton, tobacco, and negroes” (2013, p. 29). As the first slaver to depart from the British American colonies, *Desire* ushered in the transactional violence of trading captive Indigenous peoples for the exchange of enslaved Black people as well as goods such as cotton, tobacco, and salt (Wilder, 2013). As trading Indigenous peoples who were captured during wars for enslaved Black peoples became customary in Boston and Plymouth, Harvard proved to benefit from such an arrangement. Wilder writes “It is not clear if the “Moor” who served Harvard’s earliest students came to Massachusetts in the belly of *Desire*, but he remains the first enslaved black person documented in the colony, and his life more tightly braids the genesis of slavery in New England into the founding of the college” (2013, p. 29).

Even though universities owe their creation to slave labor, Indigenous displacement, and longstanding policies of segregation, higher education is posited as a prime means of redressing racial inequities. The individualistic mode of disrupting racial dominance obfuscates the necessity of interrogating the interlocking systems of domination that created and maintained such difference. In place of measures or policies that would shift the material condition of Black people, universities committed to neoliberal attempts to redress racism engage in symbolic gestures that serve to maintain the status quo while shifting responsibility on to those who have been subject to racialized dominance (Patton, 2016). That is to say, while universities continue to benefit from their complicity in domination, it is on Black people to “succeed” in school systems that continue to negate their humanity.

In the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black students are expected to succeed in schools that continue to degrade their existence. The symbolic gesture of desegregating schools is best understood through Derrick Bell's concept of Interest Convergence (1995). Bell argues that contrary to the belief that the Supreme Court conceded to Black demands of equitable education, the decision to desegregate public schools should be understood not as one of beneficence. Instead, the decision reveals the degree to which the outcome not only seemingly serves the interests of Black people but also the maintenance of power. Bell's concept of Interest Convergence reveals the self-serving nature of power. The symbolic gesture of "affording" rights to the marginalized allows the status quo to remain in place as small concessions are made to the demands of equality. As these concessions are made, the marginalized are expected to not only perform at the same level of success as their privileged counterparts, but are also chastised for acknowledged the history and continuing stratification that exists. Interest Convergence illuminates structural power's commitment to maintaining power.

Bell's assertion that any change to the condition of marginality is not without benefit to the system finds intellectual kinship with Saidiya Hartman's argument of emancipation as a "nonevent" (1997, p. 9). In Hartman's view, formal emancipation from slavery did not grant the supposed freedom that enslaved Black people sought after, but rather was a symbolic gesture of freedom was granted. The act of emancipation was also not of beneficence, but instead served the interests of the U.S. government as they suffered economic instability from such a lengthy war (Hartman, 1997). The freedom granted to enslaved Black people was not a move towards the destabilization of antiblackness. It is a freedom that in similar fashion to the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education*, did not mitigate the continuing violences to Black people's and cultures. Where slavery mandated servitude and exposure to unfettered beatings, emancipation was not a

moment that overturned the centuries long condition of antiblackness. Emancipation ushered in “burdened individuality of freedom” (Hartman, 1997, p. 9) wherein liberalism cast the onus to disrupt subject positionalities onto the shoulders of the marginalized.

### **A Liberatory Praxis: Disrupting Hegemony**

We were never meant to survive. Memory is the last(ing) danger. And these dangerous words survive, they survive in writing.

- Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2010, p. 18)

Liberatory praxis is essential in both naming the system of schooling as violent and offering alternatives to the subjection that the system mandates. As a system predicated on creating and maintaining difference, schooling is a “site of social reproduction and socialization” (Patel, 2016, p. 397) that is dialectically opposed to the process of education or learning. This distinction is necessary to consider as we recognize the generative work that has been done in the name of shifting marginalized people’s encounters with oppression. Critical disciplines under the umbrella of Ethnic Studies, which include but are not limited to Black Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Asian American Studies, and Chicana Studies, arose as a critique of Western civilization during a moment of varying political struggles against domination (Ferguson, 2005, p. 78; Hong, 2008). The deployment of these disciplines by those committed to the end of interlocking systems of domination cannot be overdetermined. Ethnic Studies became a tool through which student activists brought together critiques against U.S. war and imperialism as well as domestic manifestations of racialized terror (Ferguson, 2005; Hong, 2008). The field of Ethnic Studies entered the university intent on dismantling domination and not as a pacifying project. In other words, the current multicultural approach that universities take to seemingly redress racism pales in comparison to Ethnic Studies’ initial incendiary indictment of the university and its neoliberal imperialist role in sustaining structural oppression.

The struggle for Ethnic Studies continues to ring true when the systems at the heart of its critique continue to reproduce difference and its very presence in the academy is contested. Efforts to ban Ethnic Studies from K-12 to postsecondary institutions illuminates the danger that the field poses to the structure of domination. As Ethnic Studies is regarded as a threat, the “dangerous words” (Gumbs, 2010, p. 18) of the field evinces a disruption to what Patton (2016, p. 317) calls the “postsecondary prose.” In similar fashion to the use of Ethnic Studies as a means of disrupting hegemony in the university, Patton suggests that CRT serves a vital role “in *disrupting postsecondary prose*, or the ordinary, predictable, and taken for granted ways in which the academy functions as a bastion of racism/White supremacy” (2016, p. 317). CRT in Education has the powerful ability to negotiate the continued unfreedom that Black women and femmes move through as they navigate schooling.

CRT emerged within legal studies as a distinctly race conscious response to examine judicial and societal issues (Lynn and Parker, 2006). During the National Critical Legal Studies conferences taking place in the early to mid 1980s, law professors and students pushed back against the supposedly objective stance of the law and court room proceedings (Lynn and Parker, 2006). Calling into question the reification of stratified power that continued to protect the interests of the privileged, CRT posited racial difference as instrumental to the reification of subordinated status for People of Color (Lynn and Parker, 2006; Matsuda et. al, 1993). As they negotiated what it would mean to rethink marginality in the greater context of historical subjugation and the systemic power’s ability to shape shift to maintain power, critical race theorists further recognized the mundane forms of marginalization that is often occluded when addressing overt racist behavior (Lynn and Parker, 2006). Where a colorblind approach to the law would suggest that legal doctrine is objective or even race-neutral, critical race theorists

charged the law with evading race as a necessary analytic in determining the reality of People of Color's lived experiences. Within Critical Race Legal Studies, Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw (1993), identified six themes that define the theory's stance and application:

1. "CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life" (p. 5). In this view, racism is a natural and not abhorrent. Where post-racial rhetoric would suggest that there is a distinct "end" of racism following the Civil Rights movement and other such moments, CRT argues that racism is long lasting and is reified in all parts of life.
2. "CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy" (p. 5). CRT pushes back against the rhetoric of "equal opportunity" and historicizes racism and its impact on the lives of People of Color.
3. "CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law" (p. 5). CRT recognizes the legacy of marginality as it impacts current experiences with racial oppression. Critical race theorists argue that contemporary group difference is deeply tied to historical marginalization with issues such as incarceration, education, housing, and other such dimensions influenced by continued legacies of oppression.
4. "CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society" (p. 6). CRT recognizes that People of Color hold valuable knowledge regarding our experiences with marginality and how to disrupt such experiences. In opposition to the myth of objectivity, CRT posits experiential knowledge as an advantageous means to further understanding the reality of racism.
5. "CRT is interdisciplinary and eclectic" (p. 6). Borrowing from a diverse set of fields including feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, and other fields, CRT incorporates varying intellectual stances. By incorporating a number of fields to examine the state of racism, CRT is able to use different methodology to fight towards racial justice while remaining critical in the pursuit.
6. "CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression" (p. 6). While CRT focuses on the end of racial oppression, all interlocking forms of domination must fall in the pursuit of justice. CRT recognizes that People of Color experience varying forms of marginalization in tandem with racial oppression. As such, attentiveness to the intersecting forms of domination that People of Color experience allows CRT to fight against all forms of subordination.

As CRT has been used in the field of education, it has been a useful tool to disrupt majoritarian perspectives on race and racism in education by examining and challenging educational theory, policy, pedagogy, and practice that has been used to oppress People of Color (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001). In similar fashion to Matsuda and colleagues charge against the

law to recognize six unifying themes when addressing racism, CRT in education employs five tenets to address and challenge racism in education: (1) *The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination*, (2) *the importance of transdisciplinary approaches*, (3) *an emphasis on experiential knowledge*, (4) *a challenge to dominant ideologies*, and (5) *a commitment to social justice* (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Taking on the a CRT in education perspective thus allows this work to simultaneously address the legacy of systemic oppression that undergirds the university while illuminating the way Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks have articulated experiencing marginality in such sites. CRT in education poses as a generative analytic in its ability to name the marginality at hand while highlighting the theorizing about and beyond marginalization that People of Color have consistently engaged in.

Far from the pedagogical imperatives of faculty committed to inciting transformative learning, the governing bodies of the university are much more concerned with “mould[ing] students in the market-driven mantras of self-interest, harsh competition, unchecked individualism, and the ethos of consumerism” (Giroux, 2022, p. 148-149).

### **How We Survived and Continue to Survive**

The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of *a future that hasn't yet happened but must*. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration. It is the power to *imagine beyond current fact* and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of pre-figuration that involves *living the future now*—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present.

- Tina Campt (2017, p. 28)

Returning to Tina Campt's articulation of Black feminist futurity helps illuminate the legacy and contemporary state of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks creating visions of freedom in spaces that would limit our existence. While visions of freedom may include a complete upheaval of oppressive structures, Campt's articulation of a Black feminist

futurity emphasizes the importance of practicing the state of freedom now, in moments when new worlds feel beyond our reach. The practice to envision and create spaces outside the confines of marginality has been integral to Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' organizing. Looking to the Black Women's club movement and identifying contemporary methods of destabilizing marginality help conceptualize how this work will attend to Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' resistive and healing efforts.

Further, within group organizing to shift the state of marginality has provided spaces of refuge. At a time when her students were experiencing deep mental emotional pain, bell hooks co-created a space with her Black female students where they could gather and find ways towards healing (1994). Naming their group "Sisters of the Yam," the space was a site of refuge where they worked towards self-actualization and recognized healing as a collective and political endeavor. Theorizing healing as political resistance, hooks (1994) argues that "Black people are indeed wounded by forces of domination. Irrespective of our access to material privilege we are all wounded by white supremacy, racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system that dooms us collectively to an underclass position" (p. 2). In this perspective, healing posits not only as a necessity against the daily affronts of life, but as a method of redress in disrupting marginality. hooks (1994) suggests that the affronts of racialized terror manifest not "only in material ways, they affect our psychological well-being. Black people are wounded in our hearts, minds, and spirits" (p. 2). Further, given the gendered stratification that is present within even marginalized spaces, focusing on the healing possibilities of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks is integral. Healing as political resistance is grounded in practice and not a permanent state. As one of hooks' students suggested, "Healing occurs through testimony, through gathering together everything available to you and reconciling" (1994, p. 9). The will to



heal in this definition is a practice rooted in testifying one's truth and a commitment to the acts that will redress pain. Within the collective space of their group, hooks and her students were able to remain committed to centering the wellness of Black women in the face of antiblackness.

Further, healing as political resistance may be understood through our attendance to disrupting the confines that Blackness has been subjected to. In *Toward a Black Feminist Poethics*, Denise Ferreira da Silva asks, "Would Blackness emancipated from science and history wonder about another praxis and wander in the World, with the ethical mandate of opening up other ways of knowing and doing?" (2014, p. 81). The question suggests that the condition of marginality is not only imposed, but stands to be disrupted by thinking of Blackness outside of those limits. Ferreira da Silva resolutely responds, "yes" to the possibilities of Blackness to fathom a new praxis beyond the limits of scientific and historical entrapments. Ferreira da Silva suggests, "From without the World as we know it, where the Category of Blackness exists in/as thought—always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact beyond evidence—a Poethics of Blackness would announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing" (2014, p. 81). In other words, Blackness on its own terms, or rather a Poethics of Blackness that is contingent on an ethics of disrupting the normalcy of subjugation, is a method of reframing our approach to the world. Where Blackness is consistently signified as the embodiment of inferiority, confronted with violent foreclosures to life, and other such subjugated realities, Ferreira da Silva envisions an alternative position. Further, Ferreira da Silva explores the utility of Blackness and its capacity to shift the current condition of dominance. Rather than envision all new methods of disruption, Ferreira da Silva (2014) "turn[s] to the World as we know it with a reading that seeks to expose how the Category of Blackness already

carries the necessary tools for dismantling the existing strategies for knowing, and opening the way for another figuring of existence without the grips of the tools of scientific reason” (p. 82).

Similarly, Christina Sharpe asks us to consider Black life in the wake of slavery and beyond subjection. Using a diverse set of methodological approaches from using the personal as example to examining cultural productions that seek to disrupt the normativity of subjection, Sharpe (2016) advances what she calls “wake work” as “a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (p.13). In other words, in opposition to discourse that solely limits Blackness and even Black people to a continuous state of subjugation, Sharpe examines how Black people live beyond such a position. Where spectacular disruptions of marginality may be used as evidence of freedom to come, Sharpe’s attention to the mundane acts of living beyond subjection suggest that Black people create moments of freedom in spaces that would otherwise negate our lives. Recognizing the ways her mother used the mundane as moments of relief from subjection, Sharpe (2016) writes

She brought beauty into that house in every way that she could, she worked at joy, and she made livable moments, spaces, and places in the midst of all that was unlivable there, in the town we lived in; in the schools we attended; in the violence we saw and felt inside the home while my father was living and outside it in the larger white world before, during and after his death. In other words, even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply or only* live in subjection and *as* the subjected. (p. 4)

Following in Sharpe’s thinking, this work considers how Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks navigate an institution that historically and contemporaneously is in opposition to their being not simply as a means of documenting subjection, but to witness how they live or even thrive despite the confines of marginality. As Sharpe (2016) writes that she is “interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to the terror visited on Black life and the ways we inhabit it, are inhabited by it, and refuse it” (p. 116), I similarly take a position in

witnessing how Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks create spaces, moments, and realities outside the limits of subjection within the neoliberal university.

## Chapter Three

### And I Am Your Witness: Intersubjectivity as a Place of Commune

How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world.

Barbara Christian (1987, p. 52)

The black archive exists in the deep waters of memory. The black ethnographer eases into living memories of the witness and arranges them on the page. The black ethnographer is a portal between the here and the now, the then and the there. She finds the there there, and uses it to tell a story, or many stories about blackness. She believes in *nommo!*, the God-power of the word and the naming of life and the discerning of radical ecologies of protest and resistance.

Zenzele Isoke (2018, p. 154-155)

You can work through me  
You can say what you need in my mind  
I'll be your vessel  
I'll do it every time  
And I won't stop 'til I get it right

'I'm a Witness' Solange Knowles (2019)

Within my project I take the theoretical stance that to do this work necessitates careful attention to not only the methods employed, but the manner in which they are conducted. That is to say, while I use the term "interview" to describe my engagement with my collaborators, it only nominally describes how I chose to witness and collect their methods of survivance and dreams of an otherwise. And as I use the archives to illustrate the centrality of colonial and imperial entanglements to the university, I pay close attention to what is left opaque in an archive constructed through the lens of dominance and mine for the moments of refusal amongst students, staff, and faculty in the face of marginality. I lean on Black feminisms and CRT as they converge in this work to consistently affirm the importance of centering collaborator voice and taking materials that relay a master narrative to story new narratives. Through the two

epistemologies, I meditate on Leigh Patel's (2016) question of "How can educational research contend with being entangled with histories, currents, and do so in ways that engage futurities outside of settler colonial logics?" (p. 56) to come back to my responsibility as an interlocutor for my communities and not simply to edify the legitimacy of the university. In order to refuse the limits of traditional qualitative research in the academy, I must take up Stephanie Tolliver's (2022) insistence that relational qualitative inquiry surfaces "truths that refuse objectivity, require community, and remember responsibility" (p. xvii). As critical educational, feminist, and other similarly situated scholars remind us, the university is continuously bolstered through the research projects that allow the university to posture towards progressive ideals.

Critical research must then refuse both the traditional paradigms of what is considered "rigorous" research and the co-optation of such work by the university to position itself as on the cutting edge of groundbreaking revelations. Within the embodied practice of witnessing, I aim to bring the brilliance of my collaborators into relief. To witness is nothing short of a gift. And that gift must be cherished as collaborators enliven alterity in their responses to domination and articulations of what else is to come. Taking the position of witness seriously thus disrupts the researcher-participant divide that presumes critical qualitative inquiry is only possible as an extractive practice where the researcher alone determines the thematic analysis of data collected. Rather, as a witness, I recognize the collaborators in my work as the genesis of revelatory analyses of structures of power and the means to dislocate the normalcy of domination. As the oral authors of these revelations, they accomplish what Barbara Christian celebrated in 1987 in speculating on material conditions and unmasking of "the power relations in their world" (p. 52).

Likewise, the use of archival materials implores me to lean on scholars such as Aisha Finch, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiya Collier, and Tonia Sutherland to hold the tensions of the master

narrative embedded in the documents collated and the individuals occluded from view, while still searching for and announcing the otherwise perspectives and actions that resist such erasure. In the archives I encounter the enormity of antiblack terror that is a constitutive function within the university foundationally and persistently. It is within the indexed codices that I find the foundational practices of exclusion entrenched in the establishment of the village surrounding the university and the methods employed that was instrumental in upholding imperial arrangements. As universities contemporaneously position themselves as liberal sites that herald students into progressive standpoints, it can seem as though the brutality within the archives is at odds with this ideological stance. However, the two measures function to maintain power. The university can position itself as redressing its “past” with a present agenda to shape the minds of youth to transform society, belying the true obligation of producing workers to fit into the fold of market demands.

Thus, I take a mixed methods approach in my project to articulate the imperative of calling universities Traditionally Oppressive through archival excavation and announcing alternatives to these conditions through lessons gleaned from interviews practiced with a relational stance. In this chapter, I think through how both Black feminisms and Critical Race Theory disavow research paradigms that insist upon objectivity and instead give primacy to the subjective realities of marginalized people. I work alongside those who articulate the necessity to refuse research practices and aims that further make objects of study out of communities and reify hierarchies of researcher over participant. Further, I assert my position of not anonymizing my research site. All universities and colleges within the so called United States must reckon with histories and presents of racial terror. To anonymize our sites on the condition of protection of our participants is a smoke screen when the particularities of harm become obscured as sites

go unnamed. University of California, Los Angeles in this project acts, then, as a case study for the position and function of the neoliberal university. Situated within an assumed liberal locale of Los Angeles and California at large, UCLA has benefitted from its reputation as a progressive institution and proudly asserts its status as the “#1 public research institution in the country.” I negotiate what it means to name the university as a means to describe the distinct racial terrors embedded within the university’s history that give context to the unique organizing that took place in the face of such hegemony. My methods are an embodied practice that permeates through my archival investigation and interview relations. To excavate the archive is not a practice bereft of affective consideration when the instances of violence assembled are done unto people like me and mine. And interviews are expectedly communal spaces to listen, witness, and affirm collaborators who add to the litany of methods of survivance within and against the academy.

These methods do not produce an inventory of data to verify the reality of subjection. Instead, they operate as a constellation of affirming what we have known about subjection, what else we hope to know about our current conditions, and what we hope to bring into relief as multiply marginalized Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks against the demands of the neoliberal university. I look towards how Zenzele Isoke offers a Black intervention to ethnography where, “[...] black ethnography lives the interface between the ontologies and epistemologies of human life—the science of living and knowing life—and knowing and writing the episteme of blackness, which refuses exception” (2018, p. 161). In both archival excavation and interviewing, I refuse the excesses of antiblack brutality where blackness itself is a dislocation of the continuity of coloniality. Operating as a “portal between the here and the now, the then and the there” (Isoke, 2018, p. 154), I am a witness to both the present day

collaborators who generously shared their elucidations of freedom and the actors within the archives who resisted the flagrancy of university machinations to uphold dominance. A witness, portal, and vessel in the same breath, my aim is to continuously weave revelations towards liberation from the here and now and then and there.

### **Resisting the Coloniality Implicated in Educational Research: The Disruptive Capacities of CRT**

The field of education has been rife with methodological debates around the primacy of either qualitative or quantitative methods for decades with the division between either camp further entrenched as higher education has been fashioned as a marketable, private good and supported and thus funded research is dependent on market trends (Stein, 2021; Patel, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Qualitative research methods have been critiqued as it is deemed to fail the metrics of what constitutes “rigorous” empirical work (Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez, 2009; Seidman, 2013). However, if rigorous is devised simply as a referent to quantitative, it is then of no surprise that qualitative inquiry would be disparaged under this consideration. Where generalizability, hypothesis confirmation, and replicability are expected of quantitative studies, to apply these metrics to qualitative research is incongruent with the richness that is afforded through qualitative methods. The antagonism between the camps has placed quantitative methods as the prime paradigm for rigorous research and thus qualitative researchers must contend with defending methods employed and the validity of results found within the grammar of objectivity.

As qualitative researchers acquiesce to these parameters, incongruent demands continue to minimize both the impetus of and ensuing results from qualitative inquiry. Irving Seidman provides a brief overview of the “paradigm wars” (2013, p. 11) that dominated educational



research during the 1970s and 1980s and continue presently (Gage, 1989; Seidman, 2013). In an effort to legitimize the field of education during the 1960s, researchers modeled empirical work after the natural and life sciences in order to prove that education too could be a “science.” (Bailyn, 1963; Seidman, 2013). Appealing to such standards and modeling itself after the sciences, experimental designs, quantitative methods, and verifiable results constituted the standard of educational research for over a decade (Patel, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Yet, within the 1970s and 1980s, researchers responded to positivist assumptions embedded within quantitative research and the ontological presuppositions to advance qualitative inquiry (Seidman, 2013). At its introduction to the field, qualitative research methods were a disruption to the validated forms of knowledge production and means by which we as researchers can investigate phenomena.

A disruption in one sense and a reification of the normalcy of hegemony in another, a pronounced intervention to the coloniality of social science research is only possible if we also consider our own collusion within an educational system that thrives on constructed marginalization (Patel, 2016). Patel (2016) reminds us then, that as education operates under the logics of coloniality and systemically reproduces difference, “the practices of researchers, teachers, and policymakers have fluid interaction with the centuries-long processes that foment the privileged and the oppressed, the colonizers and the colonized, the vaulted and the marginalized” (p. 15). If market forces impact the delineation of correlative and causal forces regarding educational inequity, proposed interventions to mitigate such conditions are similarly under the heel of colonial logics. That is to say, even as we strive to produce alternative conditions for marginalized peoples, the constraints of an educational system predicated on coloniality dictates what is possible to shift and as such produces incremental change while leaving the system itself and the dichotomy of “the vaulted and the marginalized” intact. Bell’s

concept of interest convergence, again, prophesizes the limits of social science research without attention to systemic barriers that produce and reproduce social stratification. Afterall, “the system is, in many ways, doing exactly, what it is designed to do” (Patel, 2016, p. 17). How we respond to the system through qualitative inquiry then necessitates critical awareness of *how* we ask questions of inequity and what factors we designate as yielding these dissimilar outcomes.

While qualitative research potentiates deeper, heterogenous understandings of human phenomena, it has traditionally fallen short of capturing “the complex experiences of Students of Color, their families, and their communities” (Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez, 2009, p. 1). Moving beyond the methodological polemics that dominated the field of education, qualitative inquiry in practice must explicitly contemplate the sociopolitical landscape which has defined education as a good for sale wherein the privileged have unmitigated access and the marginalized have been barred from such attainment and subsequently assessed as insufficiently performing in these inequitable circumstances (Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez, 2009; Patel, 2016). Described alternatively by Gloria Ladson-Billings as “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Patel, 2016, p. 17); the purported “achievement gap” has bolstered the careers of scholars who point to Black and Latinx student “underachievement” as a concern for education (Patel, 2016; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Although qualitative research methods came as a rebuttal to the primacy of quantitative methods, with no regard to the structural realities of ongoing coloniality within all systems, educational research can replicate deficit notions of Students of Color such that social identities are deigned to be predictors of “underachievement” rather than indicting the barriers at hand (Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez; Patel, 2016). If we take Ladson-Billings lead and demand a debt repaid for this disenfranchisement, it would then follow that educational norms must be repudiated in hopes of evincing alternatives to the current conditions. In demanding the debt

owed to Students of Color at large and Black students in particular, educational researchers and scholars must then reconsider the utility of our research if the material conditions remain the same. That is not to say that research alone will shift the realities of marginality, but it demands that we must rethink how our research is positioned to further entrench dissimilar outcomes between the privileged and marginalized as our CV's balloon and financially backed opportunities arise. If we aim to intervene in the matter of educational disparities, our responsibility must be to those we do research on behalf of and in collaboration with, not the institutions that provide incremental change.

Bringing attention to community responsibility subsequently creates space to reconsider how and for whom we produce knowledge. María Malagón, Lindsay Perez Huber, and Veronica Velez (2009) offer an instrumental intervention to qualitative methods at large and grounded theory in particular within educational research to advance a race centered methodology.

Through leveraging CRT, they (2009, p. 7) assert CRT's function to

[...] deconstruct the narrowly-defined knowledge production process that has traditionally existed in higher education and provides researchers the opportunity to carve out a space in academia to engage in research that honors and learns from sources of knowledge outside the Eurocentricity of the academy.

Extending Glaser and Strauss' charge against positivist notions in scientific inquiry, Malagón, Perez Huber, and Velez push grounded theory in particular further to advance subjectivity as an appropriate means of inquiry to produce theory rather than assert population representation. Rejecting the demands of quantitative research to produce testable hypotheses, affirm generalizability, and stand the test of replication, CRT in Malagón, Perez Huber, and Velez' use within grounded theory research foments nuanced understandings of marginality and responses to it.

Leveraging CRT within educational research demands that “We must be reflective of how we employ our methods including how we enter and leave research sites, design interview protocols, and think about reciprocity” (Malagón, Perez Huber, and Velez, 2002, p. 14). How we come to find and know our collaborators, the relationships we establish with them, and the reciprocity built within relations are all constitutive of community centered, critical race informed methodologies. Here “do no harm” becomes the barest minimum in our work as critical interlocutors for our communities. The limits of IRB approval do not extend to the beneficence we *must* provide towards our collaborators. As critical researchers we cannot simply invite participants to fulfill our research agendas without consideration for their well-being and benefit from the work. From both the individual to collective level, our work must actively operate from a counterlogic that asserts the primacy of individual and community well-being. How our work will be taken up in the larger field and used to advance collective benefit is of great importance when employing CRT. At the same time that CRT informed methodologies rebuff deficit circumscriptions of Students of Color’s abilities, it also importantly ruptures the lacuna existing between marginalized individuals who have yet to realize they are not singularly experiencing subjugation. As Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2002) suggest, “those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone in their marginality” (p. 27). Critical research must destabilize the material realities for marginalized people at both the individual and collective level. In doing so, those at the margins can find affinity with others who are similarly socially located to disrupt imposed isolation and generate possibilities in opposition to repression.

Highlighting the centrality of experiential knowledge within CRT, “we can use critical race methodology to search for some answers to the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and

pedagogical questions related to the experiences of People of Color” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26) to articulate conditions of and responses to race and racism as it intersects with varying, layered forms of domination (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez 2009). Disputing the “normalcy” and “natural” position of white supremacy ingrained within education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) remind us to consistently consider “whose stories are privileged in educational contexts and whose stories are distorted and silenced?” (p. 36). We as critical researchers are no less exempt from the socialization that has deemed those at the margins as tasked with the burden to disprove deficit impositions in the landscape of shifting educational disparities. We must continuously ask ourselves what stories we tell, how we tell those stories, and what impact it yields. For those reasons, collaborator counterstories are indispensable as we continue to work against the constrains of academic violences. As a Critical Race Theorist and Black feminist, I use storytelling because it gleans the anticipated futures of liberation that Black women, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary folks speculatively construct and co-construct. The collaborators in this work are not only knowledgeable about the contours of antiblackness, but also how they can destabilize the continuity of antiblack gendered violence in everyday, sometimes mundane practices. CRT’s disruptive capacities necessarily affirms my disavowal of researcher-participant binary and hierarchy where I look to my collaborators for speculations on the nature of dispossession, responses to it, and dreams of other realities. They are the experts I lean on, the critical inquirers who assess the thematic trends in the data, and the guiding living theorists that animate my work.

CRT researchers in education do not shy away from the realities of educational systems as contested sites that consistently marginalize Students of Color while at the same time calling on educators who hope to challenge this reality to teach through an informed, liberatory praxis to

offer counterspaces to empower students (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Afterall, CRT scholars continuously invoke a transdisciplinary approach as disciplines within the umbrella of Ethnic Studies foreground much of the theoretical underpinnings within the field (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Malagón, Perez Huber, & Velez, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) which lends the field space to grapple with the utility of critical disciplines against the structures of the neoliberal university. With schooling as a site that continues to reify stratified relations to power that subsequently entrenches dissimilar educational outcomes for Students of Color broadly and Black students in particular, CRT then recognizes the necessity of resistive research and practice to multiple manifestations of domination in education (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Thus, I use a critical race lens in this work to question the oppressive structure of schooling while reckoning with the liberatory possibilities and the resistive efforts that are evinced in the margins, counterspaces, and countersites of the university. Resisting the demands to validate this work due to its subjectivity, I meditate on how demands for objectivity circumscribe our analyses to make objects of our collective communities. CRT recognizes the power of knowledge generated from encounters with racism and the counterstories that arise to undermine majoritarian perspectives. These subjective realities illuminate the specificity of subjugation as experienced by multiply marginalized peoples.

### **Employing Black Feminisms to Become a Witness**

Black feminisms have pushed varying methodologies by centering the experiential reality of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks as living testimonies contemplate on the nature of suffering while devising plans for alterity (Christian, 1987; Isoke, 2021; Johnson, 2016; Lewis, 2011). Storytelling undermines the regularity with which colonial and white supremacist logics reinforce the “natural” order of hegemony that uses “verifiable” and

“reliable” arranged data to keep the marginalized in subordination in perpetuity. In her foundational essay *The Race for Theory*, Barbara Christian (1987) contends that “people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (p. 52). In theorizing the world around us, sociopolitical analysis is an active, embodied theory in continuous development that is contingent upon the material realities of stratification, encounters with such conditions, and incorporating lessons learned from those that precede us and pass on vital lessons on living in the indices of subjection. In the context of Black feminist literary texts breaking ground in the tradition of literary criticism, Christian argues that the race for theory to define the terms and practices of literary critique at a time when Black women’s literature was not seen as a robust set of texts, does not serve to validate the creative works. Rather, Christian views this race to define the parameters of literary criticism further locates Black women’s literature on the periphery in the field of literature and perpetually minoritizes such texts. In this way, the “canon” endures and single frames of knowing remain unchanged. At a time when literary critics were increasingly of academic prestige and came to be the primary progenitors of the terms of literary criticism, Christian argues that to engage with the literary work of Black women bereft of acknowledging embodied realities and ways of knowing, indentures Black women’s literature to subordinated status and special interest.

Against the grain of literary criticism traditions, counterlogics that are rooted in knowing that the personal is political and the political is personal lends itself to grounding literary criticism in the understanding of Black women’s work as “bursting with originality, passion, insight, and beauty” (Christian, 1987, p. 51). Pushing back against an increasingly disembodied practice of criticism, Christian (1987) suggests that instead of providing a prescriptive means of engaging with works, one should “remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language,

class, race, and gender in the literature” (p. 53). As the traditions of those ostensibly relegated to the margins of “minority” complexly interweave personal testimony, astute observation, and speculative futures the constraints of “objectivity” fail to consider the richness of such creative, embodied output. Majoritarian practices traversing all disciplines, and in the case of Christian’s focus on literary criticism, proliferate the myths of Western ecologies as the “major” against the specter of marginalized people’s designation as “minor” (1987, 54). Legitimizing this imposed hierarchy, Western logics attempt to reify this dichotomy “through force and then through language, even as it claims many of the ideas that we, its “historical” other, have known and spoken about for so long” (Christian, 1987, 54). Whether propagating a master narrative of Western supremacy or attempting to evince seemingly new, oppositional perspectives, Western norms of criticality render marginalized ways of knowing and being as fringe and othered. It is of no surprise, then, that embodied testimonies against hegemony endure as essential means of undermining the colonial paradigms that have been central to traditional norms within and beyond academia.

I open this section by engaging Christian’s essay because it is indispensable not only to Black feminists who wish to explore the rich literary tradition and contemporary work of Black women, but it is also instrumental for Black feminists engaged in scholarly work across disciplines who assert embodiment not as an addendum to critical inquiry, but as a necessary standpoint to illuminating responses to hegemony. Christian (1987) charged literary critical theory as “hegemonic as the world which it attacks” (p. 55) an argument that is similarly apt for the research methods that fail People of Color as rigorous too often remains synonymous with “objectivity” and quantitative practices that disregard experiential realities as knowledge production. Christian argues that theorizing should not be thought of as an endeavor that only the



academic elite can and have engaged in. Rather, she asserts that People of Color have consistently theorized about the world around us. Moreover, Christian (1987) intimates that “[...] our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (p. 52). Theorizing as an active and not static form of knowledge production thus adapts to the shifting terrains of the sociopolitical and individual landscape. Storytelling as a theoretical and methodological device is an evolving process, then, of observing the material conditions, how one makes sense of themselves and their place in the world, and what else can be done even in spite of antiblackness being necessarily built into the fabric of so called modern society. What can so often be relayed in abstract terms is made tangible by the professed lived encounters with racial terror. Embodiment in the dynamic theorizing and method of storytelling is vital. Without the body there is no story, no contemplation, and no speculation of what else may be possible. As a crucial text to Black feminist epistemologies, Christian cleared the static that made Black women’s theoretical and methodological literary devices in describing marginality illegible. Her essay evinces the history and contemporary methods that Black women have used to meditate on our encounters with and responses to oppression.

More than thirty years after this text was published, Black feminists continue to theorize in consideration of the intersections of identity and from an intimate place of knowing. As researchers, scholars, and educators grounded in the embodied traditions of Black feminisms, we understand how our very presence within the classroom, archives, or research site inherently influences content taught, materials found, and stories witnessed (Alexander, 2005; Isoke, 2018; Lewis, 2011; Saunders, 2008; Tolliver, 2022). Embodiment has been a generative form of

locating oneself within the structures of stratified power and a place to negotiate one's disruption of hegemonic power. In fact, as he details the material fact of Black queer educators in the classroom, Bryant Keith Alexander (2005) offers, "Our bodies are always already racially historicized, sexualized, physicalized, and demonized. In the classroom our presence is always already a disruption to the norms of our social construction" (p. 198) As always racialized, gendered, historicized, and othered our bodies as Black scholars, researchers, and educators inherently situate us as physical referents of subjection. Our positions as educators in spaces predicated on and sustained by antiblackness is at odds with the norms of the university and as such the corporeal and the material realities of our being cannot be ignored. We never enter spaces without our identities and navigate spaces as the "material fact" (Alexander, 2005, p. 199) of our distinct social locations. This is not an impoverished standpoint, but one that is latent with possibilities to unsettle the norms of the classroom. Alexander encourages us as Black queer educators in particular to attend to the tense occasions within teaching by using the "teachable moment" where we take the material fact of our Black queer bodies and merge it with the material content of the course to further illustrate the urgency of what we teach. As a pedagogical tool, we agentially use our bodies as an extension of theory engagement. We make use of our "racialized, gendered, historicized, and othered" bodies to do the work of identifying the embodied realities of subjection, the means of grappling with these matters, and guiding our students towards the methods of destabilizing this present condition.

The tangible, material fact of embodied Black educators stands to shift the classroom for instructor and students. For Alexander, the teachable moment and the subtext of a Black queer body necessitates responses to the tensions that arise as students may vilify queer people or intimate their displeasure of "chosen lifestyles." To be in the classroom as a Black queer

educator demands that we address these exchanges rather than shy away from the tense nature of conflict. In doing so, we not only attend to our well-being as othered bodies and guide students towards unlearning hegemonic values, but we open space for our students who are similarly identified to claim and speak their truths. Mel Michelle Lewis (2011) further explores the advantageous use of her embodiment as a Black lesbian feminist professor as she teaches within Women's Studies courses. Lewis (2011) expands on her position as a Black lesbian feminist professor as one that can be understood through the phrase "sista-professor."

As she teaches courses focusing specifically on Black women's studies, Lewis connects with her students who are primarily Black women. Using relationality and vulnerability as pedagogical tools, she develops meaningful relationships with her students that envelop both personal intimacy and academic mentoring. Her youth and social location draws connection between her and her students, she understands their cultural references, receives compliments on her fashion choices, and importantly has been entrusted with her students' intimate testimonies (2011). Fusing relation and vulnerability with educating, Lewis crafts a learning space wherein her students learn the material content of the course while enlivening the theories learned through their own material realities. Describing her teaching as a "Black queer feminist pedagogy" Lewis shares, "My body is an illustration, a site of knowledge; this makes me deliberately vulnerable" (2011, p. 55). Embodiment is vital in Lewis's classroom as she redefines the parameters of rigor and imparts the critical tool of understanding one's self within the world. Encouraging her students to contemplate on the nature of their lived realities as a source of knowing, Lewis asserts the body as a site of knowledge production that is just as integral as material content. Employing embodiment is fundamentally reconstitutive as students leave the

classroom understanding more deeply how Black feminisms provide an essential lens to make sense of the world.

Embodiment has been and continues to be central to my scholarship and pedagogy. My Black, fat, queer, femme, woman body is a disturbance in the classroom whether I am situated as student or instructor. The discursive terrain of educational sites consistently forecloses those who are deemed suitable and legitimate academics. Historically and staunchly exclusionary, the norms of the university continue to proffer the white, cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied male as preferred academic bestowed with the right and claim to authority in classroom space and knowledge production. When I enter the classroom, conduct research, or engage with my larger fields, I am always imbued with an acute perceptiveness of how I am read, responded to, and at worse rebuffed should I seem to evade my natural “place” within the social order (Mitchell, 2018; Pierce, 1974; Senyonga, 2017). And yet, my standpoint is still not an impoverished site. My body is the first site through which I come to my research imperative and the intuitive, embodied nature of listening to and sensing information is only achievable with my body/mind/spirit deployed as both an analytic and bridge. My embodiment as a Black queer fat femme woman is abundantly generative and similarly affords what Toni Morrison described of her own social location, illuminating that “Being a black woman writer is not a shallow place, but a rich place to write from. It does not limit my imagination, it expands it.” (Selvaratnam, 2019).

It is through my embodiment that I articulated my own version of Lewis’ “Black queer feminist pedagogy” in classroom space and mentorship that displaced disembodied university conventions and modeled to students how our distinctive yet related experiential realities inform our varying ideologies. My vulnerability in announcing the evident fact of my fatness liberated

my body's corporeality from the confines of only being relegated as in excess, illegible, and unsuitable for the rigors of teaching, knowledge production, and mentoring. It is within the space of intentionally remaining connected to my body that I have been and continue to build relationality into my pedagogy and scholarship. Embodiment is the means through which I have activated what Isoke (2021) locates as "the interlocutory tradition of black women's writing" whereby I excitedly "explore the beautiful, interior act of "being with" black female others" (p. 103). The act of witnessing is not a passive mode of qualitative inquiry. "Being with" the collaborators in this work is an affective, engaged place that is neither extractive nor voyeuristic. To witness is to dynamically receive chronicles recounted. As a witness I disavow the need to remain objective and free myself up to emotively respond to these accounts whether subtly with a head nod encouraging the oral theorist to continue or authentically mirror just as much incredulity at moments of subjugation. In the practice of embodied witness, I arrive at Tolliver's (2022, p. xxv) insistence that forgoing the researcher and participant divide produces "reciprocal and synergistic" relationality. My embodiment remains a rich place to write, relate, and speculate from. It expands my imagination and challenges my ego to reaffirm the generative possibilities of relationally gathered responses to racial terror in the face of individual research goals and prestige.

Qualitative research methods are thus transformed when embodiment and relationality are centralized modes of research. Collaborators' responses are of course deeply rooted in their lived experiences. Hinging our research imperative not on accumulated academic prestige but on relationality "enable[s] us to follow through on our commitment to archive the geographical complexity and interconnectedness of black knowledge and ethnographic worldmaking" (Isoke, 2021, p. 108). If relationality and embodiment necessarily impart a distinct subjective

perspective, it follows then that my material presence as a witness influences the interview space. The collaborators themselves are no less informed and guided by their embodiment. Staging the encounter through an interlocutory stance and proclaiming both of our embodiments in the event of the interview, the moment of storytelling imparts more than just the narratives recounted.

The intersubjectivity between witness and oral theorist emerges and produces other registers that cannot be contained simply within transcripts. E. Patrick Johnson (2016) succinctly articulates the evolving affective experience of interviewing where researcher presence crucially moderates data gleaned as collaborators narrativize their accounts. Informed by Performance Studies and Queer Theory, Johnson uses oral history in his work and contends, “I am committed to attending to the storytelling act itself by ‘co-performatively bearing witness’ [Conquergood, 2002, p 149]” (2016, p. 52). The act of storytelling in Johnson’s articulation extends beyond the recount of lived experiences, encompassing the very space of narrativizing and being witnessed in that act. Johnson argues that “[...] the moment of storytelling is an epistemological and embodied experience of the self as same, the self as other, and the intersubjectivity between teller and listener” (2016, p. 52). When witnessing my collaborators, the content of their responses were underscored by the affective nature of narrativizing their lives. Reflecting on their encounters with racialized terror, their voices would lower, beats between words elongated and silence relayed contemplation. Conversely, I delighted in the way their faces would brighten as they reminisced about the people and spaces that offered them refuge as they negotiated their place in the academy. Quickened voices, dancing hands, and bright eyes would surface at these moments. Their revelations evinced an intertextual reading of their lives, rife with prescient indictments of domination and celebrations of mundane, otherwise methods of being. As a Black woman being with and witnessing other Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary

folks about our experiences of marginality and practices of survival, I felt how our related experiences diffused the hard line of researcher and collaborator, allowing for a shared space of recounting and affirming. Our intersubjectivity fostered through embodiment and relationality allowed my collaborators to announce their practices of creating freedom in sites of unfreedom.

These methods center collaborator voice as they theorize methods of survival, rupturing the majoritarian perspectives that sideline marginalized people's accounts of subjection and responses to stratification as unimportant while advancing objectivity as the predominant means of producing knowledge. Collectively, my methods are embodied as both collaborators' and my embodiment heavily mediate our encounters with one another, the manner of storytelling, and the reading of those accounts by myself and the collaborator. My role as a researcher in this work is to bear witness and be with my collaborators and not merely "study them." Working within the transformative tradition of Black feminisms and CRT, I engaged reflexivity to engage an "explicit and introspective analysis of [my] relationship to social constructs" (Ohito, 2020, p. 522) to sharpen my analysis of structures that delimit our lives and refuse the instilled norm of researcher as the sole authority in research. Thus, I looked to my collaborators as the experts of living through the terrors of the neoliberal university and endeavored to meticulously capture their proclamations. As a witness, I write to weave the interrelated stories of my collaborators, lovingly interlacing their voices together as a chorus against the normality of antiblackness. I offer their generous gifts of insight and aim to not "stop 'til I get it right" (Knowles, 2019).

### **Refusing Anonymity in Pursuit of Naming Harm**

Anonymizing research sites has been a methodological orthodoxy in research including human subjects and particularly within qualitative research (Moses, 2021; Nduna et. al, 2022). At the behest of members of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) that determine study approval,

anonymization stands as a normalized prerequisite that scholars oftentimes acquiesce to in favor of approval even though it is not formally mandated. Within the context of the United States, the emergence of IRBs as the tangible intervention of the Belmont Report suggests that the genesis of these review boards was an outgrowth of responding to research brutalities against human subjects (Moses, 2021; Nduna et. al, 2022). While the genesis of IRBs may be contributed to attempting to “right” research wrongs, the ensuing ethics that are socialized as research norms restrict research that aims to disrupt hegemony.

What becomes lost as site anonymization proliferates and continues to be the socialized custom amongst research with human subjects? The right to privacy and confidentiality for research participants figures heavily as a prime argument for those in favor of site anonymization (Nduna et. al, 2022). Of course, as community responsible researchers we must be mindful of maintaining protections for our collaborators as we complete our work. In cases where participants may face retribution for the stories they share, it is of tremendous importance to consider in what ways we can mitigate such harm. However, those considerations and decisions do not have to be made solely by the researcher. In the practice of liberatory focused research, we are tasked with considering Mzikazi Nduna and colleagues’ question of what we lose as anonymization is unilaterally fortified as the gold standard of social science research. Writing collectively as Black South African scholars committed to social change, Nduna and colleagues (2022) reflect, “As Black scholars who often work in economically marginalized communities with participants who may already be involved in efforts to reclaim their fundamental human rights in order to change their circumstances, we sometimes find ourselves faced with the question of whether imposing institutional rules of anonymity mutes the voices of participants, rendering invisible the very issue/s that they are eager to transform” (p. 2). While research ethics



have been determined as universal requirements for research with human subjects, the matter of who's ethics goes unnamed as these requirements rarely account for geographical or cultural specificity. How may we differently understand the practice of ethics without the unnamed strictures of a majoritarian perspective? Nduna and colleagues (2022) relay, "Quandaries embedded in sociopolitical contexts make it difficult to disentangle an understanding of ethics from the very society and/or community" (p. 3) such that there is a mismatch of ethical perspectives between socially just aligned researchers and review boards that delineate blanket ethics for all.

What becomes lost in the routine of anonymization is the propensity to speak to specific histories and encounters of hegemony as locales become an unnamed "suburban town in Northern California" or universities are refashioned as "West Coast University in Southern California." The realities of stratification become abstractions as the specificity of how race and racism is experienced in these sites are illegible under the new, indeterminate moniker (Moses, 2021; Nduna et. al, 2022). Our responsibilities as researchers to upset the normality of oppression is undermined when research sites go unnamed. In the case of Nduna and colleagues (2022), they assert that "communities may simply become researched entities whose identity and being are meant to be concealed and therefore dehumanized" (p. 4) contradicting their aim as Black South African scholars to "re-humanize" (p. 2) their collaborators and their responsibility to effect change. In the case of investigating racial harm within universities, anonymization occludes the precise racialized terrains that have assembled and reinforced distinct universities. All colleges and universities are entrenched with histories and presents of dispossession, exclusion, and retaliation. If I were to name UCLA as something else, as something unspecified and general as say "Southern California University (SCU)" how do I account for the student,

staff, and faculty organizing around Angela Davis' dismissal as a faculty member from the campus? Where does the response of the California Regents go in an indeterminate site? What becomes of the fact of Black Panther Party members' slayings on the campus? How do I bring into relief the protracted struggles of the collective Ethnic Studies departments against the machinations of the university? What can be made of the archival testaments to struggle without site articulation? These realities are suspended within ambiguity in the methodological practice of site anonymization.

Demands for anonymization can be a foreclosure for work that attempts to name and disrupt harm. In fact, Nduna and colleagues argue that "The unethical uneasiness among others with the conditions that slavery, colonialism and apartheid created ought not to be transferred to the scholarship of indigenous researchers and communities who have had no culpability for the human onslaught that these political systems created" (2022, p. 6). Despite the discomfit that may arise as university representatives or others in power are met with the historical and present realities of continued systemic oppression, the onus to alleviate this unease does not fall on the shoulders of the perpetually marginalized. As such, I align with Nduna and colleagues' (2022) insistence upon "situated ethics" grounded in "the notion that all ethical acts are constructed and practiced in particular contexts" (p. 7) where decisions about anonymity figures as true choices and not imposed research norms. I do not suggest here that another prescriptive mode of naming our research sites must be enforced, but rather as researchers we must contemplate the aims of our work and how anonymization benefits or undermines these aims. We must recognize participant autonomy should they choose to be anonymized or identified for their contributions. If our work is attendant to disrupting the discursive and material conditions for our communities,

then we must be responsive to how those we seek insight from determine to be (or not) named in the work.

Site anonymization further troubles our ability to acknowledge our relations to the land itself and our responsibilities to Indigenous peoples whose homes we are visitors to. Theresa Stewart-Ambo and K. Wayne Yang (2021) promote a “beyond” logic in the practice of land acknowledgements as the practice among settlers has become akin to a script and deprived of action. Further, troubling land acknowledgements is imperative for scholars committed to critically examining universities, with Stewart-Ambo and Yang (2021) asserting that “Theoretically, it is also important for critical university studies to interrogate what land acknowledgement does, where it comes from, and where it is pointing” (p. 23). As scholars committed to critical perspectives of universities, it behooves us to demonstrate the inextricable relationship between Indigenous dispossession and universities’ dependency on coloniality. Rethinking how we engage land acknowledgements is especially pertinent for us scholars who are not Indigenous to the spaces that we live and work in. After all, land grant acts proclaimed the legitimacy of universities and colleges claiming land as sites for campuses against the theft of Indigenous homelands (Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021; Wilder, 2013).

While land acknowledgements have become more common place in academic spaces taking shape in conference openings and university website acknowledgements, Indigenous scholars caution against empty postures that do little to suggest perceptible solidarities with Indigenous people and further index Indigenous peoples as historical and not contemporarily present (Asher, Curnow, and Davis, 2018; Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021; Vowel, 2016). In the case of UCLA it is “located within Tovaangar, otherwise known as the Los Angeles Basin. The Tongva are the first people Indigenous to this region, sharing parts of the territory with the

Tataviam, Chumash, Serrano, Acjachemen, and Luiseño” (Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021, p. 35). Sprawling across 419 acres nestled between mountains and the coast, the university has previously not been shy about proudly claiming this expansive stretch of land. Currently, front facing declarations of land claims have shifted as land acknowledgements authored in part by Theresa Stewart-Ambo (Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021) feature on departmental websites across the campus.

When practiced with a sense of relationality, land acknowledgements can recognize not only the land that we are visitors to but the history and continued impact of colonialism. Interrupting the silence of Indigenous dispossession and persistent coloniality, Chelsea Vowel (Native Land, 2018; Vowel, 2016) of the Métis nation suggests that

If we think of territorial acknowledgments as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgments discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of Indigenous presence should force non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands. Thus, stated land acknowledgements from visitors cannot serve as a perfunctory performance of justice. If the utility of land acknowledgements is to serve as a disruption to the normality with which coloniality upholds Indigenous dispossession and erasure, then the practice and function of land acknowledgements must result in materially evident shifts in the name of explicit solidarity. Stewart-Ambo and Yang (2021) present an abridged collation of UCLA’s tangible commitments to Indigenous solidarities, particularly to the Tongva people, including land repatriation, refashioned first year student orientations featuring a more robust land acknowledgement, and collaborative efforts to amend primary school curriculum within the social sciences. The decades long commitment to Indigenous solidarity vis-à-vis material action by the university highlights what may be perceptible means of disavowing colonial university machinations.

The beyond of land acknowledgements is a generative analytic to surmise what else may be possible and what else must be considered to evince alternative realities. Thinking of the land not as a static site to which ownership can be appended, but as a living relation further indicts universities' claims to property and tradition of exclusion. The construction of Man as a political subject vested with juridical validity is divorced from the human as species and connected kin of the land and non-human animals (Gumbs, 2021; Wynter, 2003). To think of the land as a living relation then further illuminates the exigencies of colonial subjects to the edification and proliferation of U.S. settler colonialism (Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021). That is to say, as colonists inaugurated Indigenous and enslaved Black people to the status of racial others, the very nature and definition of Man was predicated on whiteness and property to which Indigenous and Black peoples could not claim.

Settler colonialism is intimately tied to antiblackness whereby the racial capitalism of this social order was exacted through the brutal arrangement of the plantation and is continuously reified where antiblackness remains the fulcrum of race relations (Hartman, 1997; King 2016; Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021). Here, Stewart-Ambo and Yang (2021) suggest then that as land acknowledgements are practiced, attention must be brought to the endemic nature of antiblackness as well. How can we speak of the land, of the so called United States without the condition of Black peoples remade as commodity and constitutive to the financial accrual of the colonial state? Thus, I call in UCLA as my site to unremittingly resist against the erasure of Indigeneity and demonstrate the constitutive nature of antiblackness to the social order in the university. In the pursuit of critically examining universities, the violences of coloniality are indispensable to this aim and must be made legible in lieu of abstraction.

### **Archival Excavation: Ethics of Care and Repair**

In the archives, I looked for documents pertaining to the foundations of UCLA hoping to better articulate my aims of defining colleges and universities as traditionally oppressive and illumine the castigatory measures against those in resistance of the university. My aim was to assemble the exclusionary construction in both the material and discursive sense, attend to the occasions of retaliatory efforts against change, and most importantly recover and announce the actors in the archive that are so often occluded as major figures predominate the narrative amidst collected documents. I knew my charge going in and yet, found myself struck by the weight of this task where the instances of violence felt innumerable and the actors for change were often made invisible and minor. I thought about how to follow various named and unnamed actors in the archives from collection to collection, box to box, with nothing more than my intuition and no research guide at hand. A sense of overwhelm flooded me at times as I read through document after document hoping to find the Black women embedded in these histories of resistance, searching for names and testimonies. That is not to say that there was no concrete evidentiary fact of Black women in resistance within the varying collections I mined, but the scant identifications of and accounts from Black women compared to more visible figures struck me. Struck me not because I was in disbelief, but rather because I yearned for more. Or maybe even hoped for more.

Hope is an audacious thing to have and in the context of archival searching, it felt almost foolish to hope for more when the archives are stewarded within normative ideologies. Black feminists engaged in archival work have written extensively on the affective reality of searching within the archives for Black women in narratives, accounts, or as actors (Collier and Sutherland, 2022a; Finch, 2019; Saunders, 2008). Taking my intuition and sensing as an archival method, I lean on Aisha Finch's (2019) assertion that "black feminists often have not known where to

begin, or even what they were reaching for, but have slowly felt their way into theories, epistemologies, and subjectivities” (p. 2). And so I reached, searched, and felt what else needed to be done in my reparative objective.

The work of witnessing does not end with the physical presence of those I learn from. As I read through collections ranging in focus from “Student Resistance” to the “Center for Afro-American Studies (CAAS)” I became witness to those who storied another sort of resistive practice. The terrors they went up against felt entirely consuming as I wondered what precedence lay before them to struggle in such ways with no model, no certain promise of changed conditions. In witnessing, I had to contend with Zakiya Collier and Tonia Sutherland’s (2022a) question of “how are we better able to care for those lives in the present and in the archives?” (p. 2). What care *must* I extend to those I encounter and how can a Black feminist and Critical Race praxis dislocate the traditions of archives that have already dispossessed and negated those who I wish to recover?

I set out to live Saidiya Hartman’s insistence of disciplinary disruption to “be able to tell a story at another level” (Saunders, 2008, p. 5) even while the endeavor remains difficult. Likewise, I pondered on her elucidation that “women often attempt to embody an archive or be it. They are willing to make the body a vehicle; courage and recklessness are required to be a host of history” (Saunders, 2008, p. 4) thinking through how my witnessing and response to the witnessed may be a portal. This portal of visiting the then and there and arriving back at the here and now, made the throughline of Black women organizing that much more apparent. From my own experiences of struggling for Black liberation, I knew all too well the myopic narrative that centers masculinist ideals of leadership erasing the Black queers, trans folks, and women rising against brutality. I remember the silence that was forced upon us, the accusations of causing

division, and ultimately our departure from spaces that refused to hold the heterogeneity of Blackness as we strove for something else. Arriving back at Finch's assertion of sensing through, I used my intimate knowledge of organizing within such constraints to look elsewhere to find the actors I hoped to recover and listen closely for utterances of their testimony.

I could not take for granted how working through the archives would impact me. Using an exploratory, sensing, and critical method of engagement, I parsed through over four hundred archival documents housed within UCLA to further articulate the nature and utility of the university while celebrating the counterhegemonic actions of staff, students, and faculty. Coming to the archives, I knew that I would confront violences so vicious that I would be haunted by their existence. Nevertheless, I was also fortunate to come across the actors who pushed back against the university, struggled for collective freedom, and affirmed one another despite the burdens of subjection. Reflecting on Collier and Sutherland's (2022a) objective in their special issue to explore "not only how Black people enter and encounter the archives but how we are transformed by these encounters" (p. 2), I avow that I have been transformed. After all, "encountering archival testimonies—a complex network of silences, shouts, whispers, vibrations, contestations, and counter-histories—demands more of the witness" (Collier and Sutherland 2022b, p. 12). Responding to these testimonies I had "to feel, 'to be affected,' 'do something,' to recognize the testifier as an authority [...] to truly *bear* witness and take care, take responsibility, and take action" (Collier and Sutherland, 2022b, p. 12). In feeling the testimony and witnessing the testifier, I recognize deeply the gratitude I have to these actors. I hope to steward their testimonies in this work to demonstrate the long history of Black women organizing that has made freedom that much closer for us all.

### **Methodological Practices: Meeting and Staging the Encounter**



In pursuit of finding collaborators for this work, I engaged purposeful and snowballing sampling. Crafting a research flyer detailing eligible collaborators (originally designated as “Black women and femmes”), I shared my call for collaborators with colleagues, departmental listservs, affinity groups, and elsewhere to bring together eight individuals to witness their narratives. Some collaborators came to me through colleague recommendations of thoughtful students they had taught, others I had known and thought they would bring insight to the project, and others were altogether new and wonderfully generous with their time and narratives. The boundaries I drew for criteria inclusion were few to purposefully invite in those who felt called to discuss how they resist and heal in a space like UCLA. Beyond the social identities of race and gender, I asked that participants had been enrolled at the campus for at least one semester. This restriction was put in place in hopes that their time on the campus would facilitate some contemplation on the nature of the campus beyond the institution’s persistent declaration of being the “#1 public research institution in the nation.”

Through individual interviews I explored how collaborators made sense of UCLA and their place at the university and how they center their well-being against the demands of being tokenized evidence of diversity. Two individual interviews were conducted with eight participants, with interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. Collectively, the interviews covered background information on their social identities, familial influence and discussions about higher education, what brought the collaborators to UCLA, if and how their perspective of the university has shifted, and how they engage in resistance and healing within the confines of the campus. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA. Following my own analysis of emergent themes, I shared both transcripts and these initial findings with the collaborators to ensure that I captured their narratives accurately. While

data collection spanned years as I took my time to establish rapport with each collaborator, I took intermissions when needed for reflection and restoration. Most importantly, I had to pause my interviewing in light of the onset of the continued COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings for Black liberation for myself and in ethical consideration of the impact of both these moments on my collaborators. I took a recess on reaching out, scheduling, and establishing new connections despite the insistence of the university to remain ever productive even as the world burns. Remembering my work as a mode of relationality and not one of accruing academic prestige, I allowed myself to return to the re-humanizing capacities of socially just research that Nduna and colleagues (2022) animate in their work. The work would be there. Our collective wellness, however, will always be paramount.

## Chapter Four

### **In the Archives of Brutality and Possibility: Searching for an Else –Where & –When**

I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance.

Saidiya Hartman (1997, p. 6)

What would it mean to consider black aliveness, especially given how readily—and literally—blackness is indexed to death? To behold such aliveness we have to imagine a black world...we have to imagine a black world so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary. This equation of blackness and death is indisputable and enduring, surely, but if we want to try to conceptualize aliveness, we have to begin somewhere else.

Kevin Quashie (2021, p. 1)

Entering the archives was at once a space of possibility, a hope to uncover the otherwise methods of being engaged by Black women in the archives organizing against the workings of a university that inherently refused to incorporate their existence. It was a hope to witness the blueprints that precede our current moment of charging universities to do more than the gestural, perfunctory performance of “justice,” to make good on promises of unsettling perpetual antiblackness perceptibly in both the material and discursive sense. While I hoped to witness these occasions of disruption, I also knew that to enter the archive was to be met with “perils and dangers” (Hartman, 1997, p. 6) that continue to index Black student, staff, and faculty life in the academy to marginality, the status of othered. I knew that despite UCLA’s current acts towards redress, though few are fully actualized, that race inherently structured the foundation of the university, which was officially founded in 1919 following its initial role as a teachers’ college (Dundjerski, 2011; Stadtman, 1967, 1968).

Originally founded as the southern branch of the California Normal School, the campaigning of UC Regent Edward Dickson and Director of the Normal School Ernest Carroll Moore earned the campus entry into the UC, joining UC Berkeley as the second school within

the system (Stadtman, 1967, 1968). Storied within alumni newsletters and centennial celebrations, the founding years of UCLA stray towards a sanitized narrative where the establishing governing faculties are exalted in spite of the racially exclusionary measures taken to garner support for the construction and sustaining of a southern UC campus. The archives, however, reflect a different narrative, one that frankly recounts the students impeded from attendance as the surrounding built city of Westwood burgeoned as a white site and the ensuing measures used against student, staff, and faculty to thwart dissent against the university's hegemony in the following decades. Assembled in the vocabulary of a master narrative, the collated documents of the archive are instrumental as they reveal the normality of stratification embedded in the university.

And yet, the archives have glimpses, utterances, sometimes even shouts of what else was made possible even in the face of endemic antiblackness (Collier and Sutherland, 2022a; Finch, 2018; Saunders, 2008). As Kevin Quashie (2021) relays, blackness is readily “indexed to death” (p. 1), this relegation is apparent in the brutal retribution against those in resistance of the university as seen in the attack of students at Campbell Hall on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1970 (Department from Special Educations Program, 1970). Following violent repression of student protestors at Kent State in opposition to the invasion of Cambodia ordered by President Nixon, campuses across the country were host to protests in defiance of such escalating violence (Department from Special Educations Program, 1970; UCLA in the 1970s, 2019). With students taking action and attempting to seize administrative buildings, Chancellor Young declared a state of emergency, thus allowing for Los Angeles police department officers to serve as the retaliatory force against such demonstrations (Department from Special Educations Program, 1970). While white students predominated the demonstrators, the university allowed police forces to storm the

campus and target Students of Color across campus even as they hid in Campbell hall. Students of Color who sequestered themselves away from demonstrations found themselves caught in the fray of police violence and with numerous individuals subsequently arrested under the guise of inciting a riot (Department from Special Educations Program, 1970).

The wholly apparent proximation to death plagues archival collation of, narratives about, and present conditions of blackness (Quashie, 2021). Against the totality of antiblackness, the hope that I audaciously brought with me afforded me the will to continue to search within documents for those utterances. Hope stewarded me towards finding what Quashie (2021) describes as black aliveness despite the incalculable occasions of violence. I wrestled with how to story the foundation and operations of UCLA and not simply replicate the Black suffering embedded within this account. What work would merely reproducing the fact of such suffering do when as Hartman argues, “The nature of black suffering is all too familiar” such that recounting the matter of Black suffering and pain “doesn’t mobilize a response, it doesn’t arrest the reader, and it doesn’t incite a crisis” (Saunders, 2008, p. 10). I am reminded, here then, of the scores of scholarly work focusing on the supposed “achievement gap” beleaguering Black and Latinx student academic attainment that Leigh Patel (2016) identified as bubbling just under one million records. Yet, what manner of change is perceivable after these accounts? How have educational sites shifted to better provide for students that are deemed to be “underperforming” in conditions set up to produce “skewed life chances” (Hartman, 1997, p. 7)? Said another way, what is the function of such research that announces Black and Latinx school performance as failure and repeats, over and over to the accrual of academic promotion and honor and unaffected conditions? How, then, may I account for the evidentiary fact of UCLA’s violence without reproducing suffering to meet readers who may remain unmoved by these realities?

And while I affirm that antiblackness permeates throughout definitions of who is and is not human and thus indentures certain beings to abjection, I strive towards announcing the lifemaking projects that Black people, and women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks in particular, make apparent in the archive. Meditations organized under the name of Afropessimism posit that “antiblackness excludes humanity in at least two ways: the antiblack world is built to be against the human, and the idea of the human it permits is built to be against some of us (black people) who are exactly that—human” (Quashie, 2021, p. 8). This perspective of the world facilitates an understanding of social order as predicated on defining blackness out of the possibility of humanity, creating a category of human that is all together exclusionary and stripped of relation. However, despite the persistence of antiblackness continuously demanding that Black people be detained to a state of nonliving, Esther Ohito proclaims that “We have refused to be robbed of our aliveness by death and decay” (2020, p. 521). Black life, then, cannot be reduced to subjection. How Black people make inroads to living beyond the state of subjection is also glimpsed in the archives in spite of the registers of terror that fill assembled documents. If I am to respond to Collier and Sutherland’s (2022b) charge that to engage the archive demands more of the witness, an ethic of care to extend to the actors within collected documents, then I must attend to the “life in the midst and aftermath of those interminable conditions” (Quashie, 2021, p. 8). It is through attending to the occasions of Black lifemaking in the archives that I can do more than just collate the instances of violence done unto Black people. Bringing into relief the modes of resistance, being with, and caring for other Black people is an opportunity to extend care to the actors in the archive.

Centering Black lifemaking, rather than defining blackness only in subjection and proximal to death, illustrates that “the racist thing is not the beginning or end of being, and what

matters is not only what is done to the subject but also *how* the subject is” (Quashie, 2021, p. 5). It is the “how” of the Black subject that comes into view when Black suffering no longer holds the focus of our meditations on blackness. That is not to say that to center Black lifemaking or aliveness disavows the reality of subjection and the endemic nature of antiblackness. Rather, to hold a both/and analytic attends to the state of subjection as it hangs over us all and *still* center the ways that Black life is made beyond it. Afterall, a distinction of blackness and antiblackness is necessary, where we come to understand and affirm that “Antiblackness is part of blackness but not all how or what blackness is” (Quashie, 2021, p. 5). To announce Black lifemaking in this work, then, accounts for how the university wields its power to exact academic violences from its inception and presently while centering the modes of resistance both spectacular and mundane employed by those found within the archives. Those who acted against the machinations of the university manifest what Tina Campt (2016) calls for as a “prefiguration” of freedom.

In chronicling the results of my traversal of the archives, I write of both the university’s imperial arrangements and of Black lifemaking. Evincing my both/and analytic, I necessarily highlight Black lifemaking even as I make it evident that UCLA has employed violence to found and sustain the university in order to reveal what other sort of life may be lived even as racism marches on. Derrick Bell reminds us that racism is endemic with institutions shapeshifting to maintain such disenfranchisement. While this is a reality that Black scholars across fields agree with, what is even more palpable are the methods of creating lives beyond the indices of subjection that these scholars pronounce. Christina Sharpe’s (2016) “wake work” remains an integral intervention to instantiate how to witness Black life made and lived in the mundane, everyday moments. I take up scholars from Sharpe, Quashie, Hartman, Campt, Bell, Ohito, and a

litany of others to similarly announce the ways that we must take up Black lifemaking against the terror of totality. Because what function does it serve to only recount Black suffering that is all too ubiquitous, as Hartman describes, if we are not to think of what else blackness may achieve or take up?

And so I present the university as the archives reveals it's true nature against the front facing, marketed image it currently displays. I do this to advance a critical examination of the university that allows us all to think more about what forms of justice are possible that stem from the university. I do this to consider how we can better understand the university's collusion with domination and ask for something more, something else. Reflecting on the struggle for Ethnic Studies and the inherently fugitive nature of learning, I want to stress the antagonism that exists between colonial educational sites and the demands for access for learning sites that include blackness rather than regard it as an aberration. Further, in revealing the machinations of the university I hope to sharpen our calls for redress so that we ask for more than just greater access to institutions. The current examples of universities attempting redress, where faculty lines for historically marginalized scholars and fellowships for Black and other students of color are funded may illustrate some perceptible forms of recompense. Yet, we must still consider the longevity of these initiatives and what work they do to destabilize the power of the university, if at all, as they appear to concede to the demands of the marginalized, as Bell instructs us.

Within this chapter, I excavate the archives and highlight the foundational years of UCLA, overviewing the shift from the school as the southern branch of the California Normal School to the proposed first southern campus within the University of California system. I accomplish this by analyzing correspondence between governing faculties and committee members, such as James R. Martin, William Campbell, and other key stakeholders to illustrate



the political aims of the campus's construction. Additionally, I review the pamphleteering efforts to determine a site for the campus, to highlight the integral nature of race as subtext in these campaigns for support amongst white Los Angeles locals. Through that review, Janss Investment Company, for which the prolific Janss Steps at the UCLA campus are named, surfaces as a critical figure in developing the surrounding city of Westwood and campus as an exclusively white site. Relying on scholars of Black Los Angeles and critical views of racial covenants, I argue that Janss Investment Company's construction of Westwood Village fortified the burgeoning city and thus campus as an exclusively white site, which circumvented Black presence on the campus.

Then, I take my focus towards the organizing during the 1960s and 70s amongst students, staff, and faculty against the domination of the university. I relay the antagonism between the university's efforts to maintain dominance and the activism amongst those in dissent of these conditions to further reveal the traditionally oppressive nature of the campus. Of this focus, Black women students emerge as fierce agents for social change as they engage a wide-ranging set of methods towards justice. In particular, student, activist, and cultural producer Sonja Walker emerges from the pages of the archives, enlivening a beautiful Black lifemaking project against brutality. The utterances of Black women in the archive were exciting to find as the archives overwhelmingly disappeared so much of their presence. As such, I write through wrestling with the unknowability instantiated by such erasure. Looking towards Finch and Hartman, I meditate on how collation of documents constructs imbalanced collective memories, although it does not entirely foreclose potential enunciations of resistive perspectives. This chapter advances a both/and analytic to reveal the enclosure of educational sites while simultaneously celebrating the otherwise methods of being that produce an else –where and –

when amidst such terror thus disrupting the continuities of subjugation. I argue that this sense of an else –where and –when refuses the totality of antiblackness by insurrecting alternative states of being where to be with *and* for other Black people articulates a sort of relationality that demands attention to naming the structures that delimit our lives and creating moments and glimpses of freedom.

### **Mythologizing the West and Southern Branch: Racial Subtext and Imaginaries**

The history of the University of California coexists with the nascent years of so called California as an official state within the settler colonial nation. In fact, Verne A. Stadtman relays that “The hope for a University of California was expressed at the first Constitutional Convention in Monterey in 1849—a year after the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill and a year before California’s admission to the union” (1967, p. 1). The University of California finds its roots at the merging of two colleges, both with histories of Indigenous dispossession. Beginning with Contra Costa Academy founded in Oakland in 1853, the institution arose to educate residents of the surrounding mining sites and rapidly developing towns, populated by eager prospectors hoping to find gold in the state that had been premised as an opportune space for relocating whites. The college was then incorporated in 1855 as the College of California (Stadtman, 1967).

Following the passing of the 1862 Morrill Act by President Lincoln, California received 150,000 acres of stolen Indigenous land to establish institutions to teach agricultural and mechanical arts (Adams and Newhall, 1967; Lee et. al., 2020; Stadtman, 1967). The state legislature then instituted the Agricultural, Mining, and Mechanical Arts College in 1866 to capitalize off of the seized lands that had been parceled off for colleges and universities. With the College of California facing financial peril and the Agricultural, Mining, and Mechanical

Arts College deprived of a physical campus, the two institutions were combined as a single university to teach humanities, agriculture, mining, and mechanics (Stadtman, 1968). In 1868, then Governor Haight signed the Organic Act thus ushering in the creation of the University of California and stipulating the governing capacities of the Board of Regents to be free of political influence in the governance of the university (Assembly Bill No. 583; Dundjerski, 2011; Stadtman, 1968).



Los Angeles State Normal School (Foxley, 1886)



Vermont Avenue Campus (Hoover, 1928)

Fifteen years after the founding of the University of California, the foundation of UCLA begins first in 1881 when state senator Reginaldo Francisco del Valle proposed an expansion of the California State Normal School southward to Los Angeles to train the teachers who would educate the growing population of southern California (Adams and Newhall, 1967; Stadtman, 1967). Opening in 1882, the southern branch of the California Normal School grew quickly and soon became independent of the California Normal School system in 1887, changing its moniker to Los Angeles State Normal School (Stadtman, 1967). The southern teacher's college enrolled upwards of five thousand students on a campus built to accommodate just a few hundred (Address Folder 1925). The growth of the Los Angeles State Normal School exceeded the physical campuses in both downtown Los Angeles and in East Hollywood thus compelling the

governing faculties to look elsewhere for a larger school site to house the growing population of students (Address Folder 1925).

At the same time as the governing faculties of the Los Angeles State Normal School looked for a new site, residents of southern California demanded that a southern university be established to serve the needs of high school graduates in the lower half of the state (Dundjerski, 2011; Stadtman 1967, 1968). As the only UC Regent representing southern California, Edward Dickson was sought out to provide support for the establishment of a southern branch of the University of California (Dundjerski, 2011). Dickson along with Director of the Los Angeles State Normal School Ernest Moore subsequently issued this request to the state legislature, to the displeasure of university representatives in the north who feared that a southern branch would divide resources amongst the sites (Address Folder 1925, Dundjerski, 2011; Stadtman, 1967).

University accounts of the southern campus's founding depict Dickson and Moore as courageous underdogs facing off against the established Board of Regents to establish a campus for Los Angeles residents. Their efforts to bring southward a state university are heralded in centennial celebrations of the University of California system and founding narratives about UCLA, yet the eventual site of the southern campus reveals the subtext of racial animus underwriting the choice of location and built environment of the surrounding Westwood Village. Scott Kurashige (2008) argues that “developers, realtors, and residents of Los Angeles coalesced around the notion that their city offered the ideal location for white settlement” (p. 14) inspiring a flow of white migration to the city that began in the 1880s. As the city experienced exponential population growth, racial covenants became instrumental in drawing and maintaining racial boundaries between neighborhoods, barring People of Color from the “white havens” fashioned particularly on the western side of the city (Address Folder 1925; Kurashige, 2008).

Differentiating the Westside from the Eastside, the Westside of Los Angeles increasingly became noted as an idyllic suburban escape from the “congested” eastern side of town (Address Folder 1925; Kurashige, 2008). The influx of white residents to the city from across the country, migration of Black people from the South, and immigrants resettling in the city pushed the population to just under one million by 1910 (Dundjerski, 2011; Kurashige, 2008). As racially restrictive covenants erected and enforced exclusively white enclaves throughout the city, People of Color found themselves relegated to neighborhoods that once served as rife with financial opportunity to then living in conditions insufficient to lodge the mounting number of residents in those areas in the following decades (Kurashige, 2008).



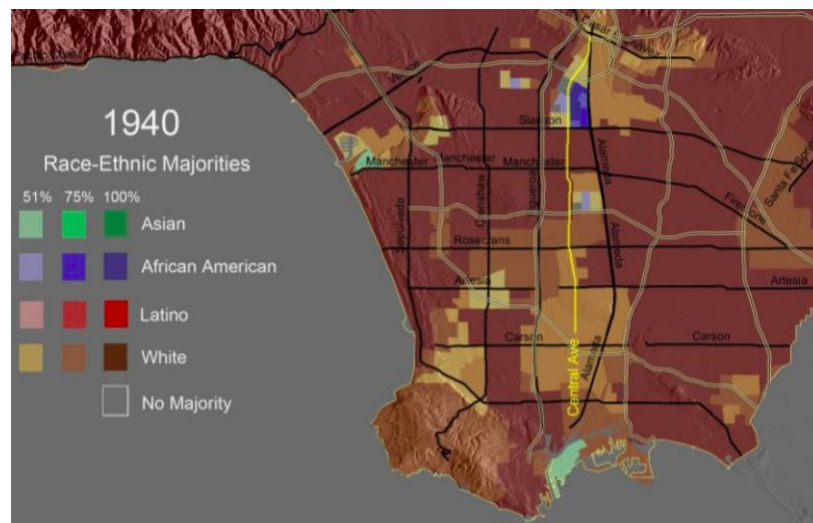
Moving to Westwood campus (Hoover, 1929)    Aerial view of UCLA & Westwood Hills (Hoover, 1930)

Initially designated as a two-year junior college, the southern branch soon outgrew the Vermont campus shortly after its founding in 1919 (Dundjerski, 2011; Stadtman, 1967). In 1923, talks of expanding the Vermont campus or moving to an entirely new location arose to contain the over six thousand total students in attendance (Address Folder, 1925; Dundjerski, 2011). With increasing desire to enroll at the campus from across the city, regent members representing the interests of Los Angeles, including Dickson, George I. Cochran, Margaret R. Sartori and John R. Haynes; called for an extension of the degree granting authority of the campus to award

bachelor's degrees (Addresses Folder 1925, Dundjerski, 2011). Granted a third, then a fourth year, and the authority to bestow the bachelor of arts, the problem of finding a larger campus became ever more pressing. Addressing their concerns to the greater Board of Regents, the southern representatives relayed, "The present site on Vermont Avenue, in the City of Los Angeles, consists of 25 acres, with the probability of an additional 15 acres. The rapidly increasing property values, the building up of the City and the growth of the registration convince the Regents that some provision would have to be made for a new site, greater in area and more remote from the congestion of the City" (Addresses Folder 1925). Reading "congestion" here as a proxy for the racialized view of the eastside thus contextualizes calls to move to a new more remote site. These appeals for relocating the campus cannot be decoupled from the vision and dream to manifest a white ideal space. The white imaginary of California as the state of opportune potential wealth for migrating whites similarly arises in the language used to campaign for a new location.

The need to build a larger campus exhibited calls for relocating to sites that similarly sought to escape proximity to the supposed "congested, dangerous" (Kurashige, 2008, p. 26) locales where People of Color resided. The Vermont Avenue location was ten miles away from Central Avenue, which was known as the "Black belt of the city" for the high density of Black people living amongst one another (Chapple, 2010; Kurashige, 2008). With jazz clubs, Black owned businesses, and a critical mass of Black people living amongst one another, Central Avenue certainly was an epicenter for Black Los Angeles at the time (Chapple, 2010). The financial prosperity that was possible for Black people living on Central Avenue between 1900 and 1930, including access to homeownership and entrepreneurship, has been defined as "the Golden Era of Black Los Angeles" (Eckford, 2004, p. 1). Prior to the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer*

Supreme Court decision, Black residents of Los Angeles found it nearly impossible to move west of Central Avenue, facing racially restrictive covenants outright or white retributive violence if they succeeded in securing a home (Robinson, 2010). Central Avenue was accordingly a vital site for Black self-sufficiency despite the enclosures drawn around the area due to racially restrictive covenants that limited Black residence to the neighborhood.



Map of Race-Ethnic Majorities in Los Angeles (Central Avenue Collaborative, 2015)

The Vermont Avenue location's proximity to this Black enclave thus allowed Black residents in the area to attend the university, even though not in great numbers. In fact, the Black run newspaper *The Liberator*, reported on Bessie Bruington's graduation from the Los Angeles State Normal School in 1911, making her the second Black woman to graduate from the institution and the first to receive a teaching post in the city (*Liberator*, 1911). Accounting for Black life at the time from social gatherings, individual successes, and racial brutalities, the *Liberator* importantly highlighted when members of the small, but growing Black population completed laudable achievements. To graduate from the Los Angeles State Normal School within a class of 350 students as the only Black female student was undoubtedly worthy of attention for the community. Bruington's graduation from the school comes almost twenty five

years after the institution formally opened its doors as a teacher's college in 1888. That she was the second Black woman to graduate from the campus further illustrates that while the university did not explicitly bar Students of Color from enrolling at the campus, it was neither a site that was wholly welcoming to Black enrollment.

Race was not exempt from the ideologies that solidified the delineation of preferred students at the baccalaureate institution. I argue that language of affinity such as “our sons and daughters” and the simple inflection of “we” cannot be read as raceless invocations particularly when the surrounding built cities and populace of Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and Venice reveals the implicit intended beneficiaries of the proposed move to the Westwood campus site. In a letter requesting James R. Martin's participation in the committee for a new campus for the southern branch, William Campbell writes “The Regents of the University of California, with apparent unanimity, are of the opinion that the present site of the Southern Branch of the University, on Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, is inadequate to meet the needs of the great institution of higher education into which the Southern Branch will develop in the near future” (Campbell, 1924). He goes on to write, “Further, a university location in the heart of a very large city is far from ideal” (Campbell, 1924). Although other much larger sites within San Diego, Santa Barbara, Pasadena, and Fullerton were offered at no cost to the Regents, the Westwood site offered by the Janss brothers of the investment company garnered more favor from regents of the south who wished to keep the university within the city to accommodate the present city residing student populace (Address Folder 1925). At 700 acres, the Pasadena tract of land far exceeded the 383 acreage tract offered by the Janss Investment Company even at a reduced price compared to the market value of the land (Address Folder 1925). However, the sprawling hills, proximity to the coast, and natural beauty of the expansive tract further compelled the regents of



the south to choose the Westwood site while maintaining a state university within the city (Dundjerski, 2011).

Racial subtext emerges from the correspondence of key stakeholders in the search for a new site, the public calls for support of the effort, and the ensuing historical narratives they create to story the university's establishment. As a member of the search committee, James R. Martin primarily liaised between varying city municipalities and investment companies to procure a suitable site at no cost to the university. Between 1924 and 1926, Martin sought the favor of leaders in chambers of commerce across the city, investment company owners, and insurance companies in this effort. While the offer from the Janss brothers rapidly eclipsed other proposed locations due to the surrounding natural beauty and comparative proximity to the original site, the offer was extended not only to the beneficence of the search committee and student populace. The Janss brothers' investment in the area, prior to the bid for the southern branch's new campus, was proving to not be the financial success they had envisioned. Hoping to develop a "Second Hollywood" the company sought to build studios that would similarly draw motion picture companies out west to an as yet heavily developed area (Dundjerski, 2011; Kelly Music Heritage, 2019). Further, the commercial businesses in the area stagnated until the announcement of the southern branch's relocation to the Westwood setting. Betting on the increased potential clientele from students, faculty, and both groups' families, the Janss brothers foresaw the surrounding area of the campus location as fitting for a shopping district and desirable homes.

The subsequent Westwood Village came to provide the investment company with the financial successes they anticipated. Within twenty-four hours of the Westwood site being declared as the new home of the southern branch campus, the investment company sold over

\$600,000 in homesites prompting the company to release a second unit for sale south of Wilshire (Kelly Heritage, 2019). This second unit likewise sold out rapidly within forty-eight hours accruing the company \$1,000,000 in profits (Kelly Music Heritage, 2019). Holding the authority to control the development of the surrounding Westwood Village, Janss curated a space through both legal dominance and architectural design to solidify the racial enclosure of west Los Angeles for white advantage.

The white racial imaginary of Los Angeles continued as an appeal to whites outside of the city and state to draw in more migrants to the developing city. In fact, in describing the enduring fictive genealogy of the city, Kurashige (2008) offers, “By the end of the nineteenth century, Anglos wanting to provide a sense of place and depth to the city’s marketing efforts would declare themselves the rightful heirs of the Spanish colonial past” (p. 16). Drawing on false genealogies of inheritance and mimicry of Spanish-Mediterranean design, the Spanish Colonial Revival style that predominated structures built in the 1920s (Kelly Heritage, 2019) relatedly extended the mythology of Los Angeles and California overall as “the Mediterranean shores of America” (Starr, 1990, p. 191).

The idyllic descriptions of west Los Angeles hinged on such narratives and the establishment of Westwood Village likewise employed this mythology. Designing Westwood Village in an incremental manner, rather than constructing all the commercial buildings in a single year, the investment company initially constructed between twelve and thirteen buildings in 1927 and devised strict stipulations regarding building styles (Kelly Heritage, 2019). Although prospective owners could build their own buildings following purchasing land from the investment company, the strict aesthetic guidelines for the village compelled many buyers to simply allow the investment company to erect the buildings for them (Kelly Heritage, 2019).

Thus, the investment company maintained sole control of the establishment of the village, creating it in their view and instantiating the space as a white ideal through design.

Likewise, representatives of the southern branch campus wielded mythologies of Los Angeles to garner support from local residents. As Martin created narratives to demonstrate the “natural” choice of west Los Angeles for the new campus, the genesis and history of Los Angeles itself became a critical touchpoint. In relaying historical data on both the city and school, Martin (1925) wrote “Los Angeles is the frontier of the United States. It is the land of promise; just as America was the land of promise to those Europeans who left a crowded country to come to the freedom and opportunity of new land.” Employing similar narratives of the land of opportunity and manifest destiny, Martin situated the city as one prime for white spatial claim. Likewise, the invocation of a “crowded” Europe to be fled coalesces with white westward movement away from urban centers “plagued” by high density living arrangements and immediacy to industrial factories. Further, the mythic Spanish inheritance of the city by white residents was reinforced as Mexicans were cast as insufficient stewards of the space to which whites could better regulate. Writing of the city preceding mass white migration, Martin (1925) declares “The little pueblo of Los Angeles was founded 1781 and continued for many years to be only one of the several sleepy little Mexican towns in the region.” Here, race emerges as a rationale for the white predominance of the city and accordingly the authority to shape it according to white will.

While the new campus’ location was secured through the Janss brothers’ donation of the land below market value, the search committee still needed to fundraise for the purchase of the tract. Faced with the matter of securing bonds from Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Venice, and Beverly Hills, Martin interacted with varying figures both in person and through letters,

addressed public speeches, and wrote newspaper articles to convey the significance of the campus moving westward. In order to secure the Westwood campus at no cost to the regents, the search committee settled on collecting bonds from locals neighboring the proposed campus location, which would divide a taxation of \$0.12 a year for a period of forty years amongst residents of these areas (Address Folder 1925). While chamber of commerce representatives within Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Venice eagerly agreed to put the proposition regarding the approval of bonds up for residents to vote on, representatives in Beverly Hills were not as keen to lend their support to the matter. Although Martin promised that with the campus moving west that the city of Beverly Hills could anticipate financial gains from increased residents of students and faculty, S.M. Spaulding of the Beverly Hills chamber of commerce was unconvinced and speculated that such prosperity would funnel towards the emerging Westwood Village (Address Folder 1925).

As such, Martin published his appeal to residents of the city to push for an affirmative vote on the proposition within the Beverly Hills Citizen newspaper proclaiming that, “The climatic and scenic beauties of this particular section of Southern California have been so well advertised that thousands of families in less favored districts, and many professors of the highest standing are coming or looking forward to the opportunity of coming to share in our good fortune” (1925). Gesturing towards the cities of the east as “less favored” districts that citizens of the “highest standing” are fleeing from, Martin suggested that the presence of such future residents would boost the overall culture of the city. By proximity of the university, Martin postulated that there would be “benefits to be derived from having an important and integral part of such a well recognized and dignified institution.” The “cultural atmosphere” that Martin suggested stood in stark contrast to the perceptions of the urban centers of the east that had been

regarded as “dirty, congested, dangerous, and vice ridden” (Kurashige, 2008, p. 25). Further, the “less favored” districts of the east and the departure from such locales surfaces the realities of white flight that struck communities that were host to rising residents of color. As Central Avenue remained a color line up until the late 1940s, white enclaves moved further west to distance themselves from “what they perceived to be the physical decay of urban industrial centers” (Kurashige, 2008, p. 24).

Despite inherent racialized views of the budding Westwood Village and new campus location, the front facing declarations of a welcoming, inclusive university proliferated throughout public statements on the potential benefits of the larger site. President of the University of California William Campbell’s (1925) statement on the school for a volume detailing the genesis of the southern branch states,

Both common sense and sound public policy require that the doors to the university shall be open to all sons and daughters of California, who applying for admission, are prepared to meet the admission requirements. The State’s University must be democratic as to the provision of equal opportunities for all Californians who seriously desire to be students with its walls (emphasis in original text)

What weight can “democratic” and “equal opportunities” hold while the regents of the university colluded with investment companies, both Janss and E. Bell, to establish a white “haven” in the west? While Campbell asserts that “all sons and daughters of California” are welcome to attend the university, the case of racially restrictive covenants rooted in the deeds of both the adjacent Westwood Village and initially within the very deeds of the supplementary acreage provided to the university by Alphonso Bell indicates otherwise. As Kurashige (2008) argues, “Privileging property rights over human rights, the 1919 *Title Guarantee and Trust Company v. Garrott* case provided the legal rationale for the usage of racial restrictive covenants” (p. 27). Racially restrictive covenants were so commonly used that middle and upper class Black city residents

hoping to flee the “ghettos” of the east, were unable to use their class status to move west to lower density populated areas. Even as Campbell declared the university welcome to “all sons and daughters of California” the encompassing space to which these students would venture was not similarly posturing towards nor actualizing such acceptance. The racially restrictive covenants that organized residential and commercial segregation palpably underwrote the persistent racial reality of west Los Angeles.

The implicit racialized border around “equal opportunities” of the Westwood campus are further exemplified by the racially restrictive covenants entrenched in Westwood Village and initially on campus owned land. Alphonso Bell who contributed fifteen additional acres to the Janss’ donated 300 acres provided the university with a deed (Corporation Grant Deed, 1925) stipulating,

4. That neither the whole nor any part of said premises shall be sold, rented, or leased to any person of Ethiopian, Chinese or Japanese descent or shall be occupied by any such person excepting as a servant or employee of the person using said premises exclusively for residential purposes

The campus residential units that were to be built on this adjoining land were consequently limited to white inhabitants. The “democratic” nature that Campbell suggested is a flimsy pronouncement of tolerance in the face of such restrictions. And yet, such ideologies were not an anomaly principally when the state and federal supreme court advantaged residential and commercial racial segregation. If California broadly and Los Angeles in particular represented to whites the unbridled potentials of manifest destiny and Spanish inherited land claimed, then racially restrictive covenants served to protect their interests in the west from the “encroachment” of industrialization and the high density neighborhoods that People of Color were limited to in the east. Racially restrictive covenants not only forbade the selling to and inhabitation of People of Color in

these white locales, but they were further bolstered by retribution towards white buyers who defaulted on any of the explicitly stated covenants. As such, Bell's deeds mandated in the fifth and eighth constraint,

5. It is further agreed by said purchasers that each and all of the said restrictions set forth in the foregoing paragraphs numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, shall, as between the parties hereto, their heirs, successors, and assigns, be deemed to be and construed as express conditions subsequent, upon each of which this conveyance is made; that if said purchasers shall neglect or fail to perform and strictly comply with and keep the several restrictions on their part, or any either of them, the seller above named, and its successors may at any time thereafter serve upon the purchasers a notice in writing specifying the particular or particulars in which default has been made, and directing them to remedy such default [...]

8. Each and all of said covenants, conditions, restrictions and limitations shall continue in full force and effect and be binding until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1998

Maintaining the white racial imaginary of west Los Angeles seemed to be a goal in perpetuity. As successor to successor were to honor the restraints stipulated and a period of at least 73 years would codify such standards, the southern branch machinated with the widespread desire to instate a remote, white exclusive region. While Bell's racially restrictive covenant was removed from the final deed presented to the university, the Janss Investment Company maintained their own racial restrictions for the commercial and residential sites built in the village. In fact, the company sued white owners who attempted to sell their homes to Black buyers as evidenced by *Janss Investment Company v. Walden*. As the school was built, the burgeoning village buttressed the exclusively white domain of region, fortifying the enclosure against the remaining "sons and daughters of California."

### **Whispers and Glimpses of an Else –Where & –When**

The archives occlude more than they illuminate in the way of Black women existence against the university. As I perused documents hoping to find more than short mention of the Black women in defiance of the university, I thought of Saidiya Hartman's rumination on what

can be known in the short occasion presented in a document (2007). The desire to know and proclaim more compelled me to request box after box to hopefully find something to add to the brief news clippings I chanced upon. Hope drove me to page through more documents than I could count in a single sitting numbering anywhere from over one thousand documents collectively read to just *maybe* find an utterance, a proclamation of a life lived and fought for despite the repression of the university. The disappearing figure of Black women in the archive is at once a fading shadow, a sharp disappointment, and a juncture to impart more care than has been extended by those who index, or do not, their accounts and marked fact of living.

Reminding myself that Black feminists before, alongside, and following me have and will continue to wrestle with the unknowability produced by such erasure, I had to return, then, to their directive as I thought of what more could be done or recovered in a landscape so seemingly bleak. While interventions to parochial resistive histories can fail when a truly feminist standpoint is not engaged, Finch advances an analytic that goes beyond mere inclusion to rethink how another register of defiance may be announced. Establishing an alternative method of recounting resistance, Finch (2014, p. 113) writes,

My larger objective is to go beyond a traditional model of female inclusion that focuses primarily on finding and inserting the missing women. Instead, this piece explores how privileging enslaved women in histories of organized resistance can shift, if not profoundly transform, the larger production of knowledge about slave resistance movements and other oppositional struggles. Centering an analytical focus on gender can shift the parameters of how we understand leadership in enslaved people's political struggles and, ultimately, what we understand a slave insurgency to be.

My mode of recovery, then, cannot simply rest on inflecting Black women's presence where traditional narratives of student organizing occludes their disruptive work against domination. Instead, it means sensing through the archive to arrive at other modes of struggle, defining such methods just as imperative as the glorified protests that dominate narratives of dissent. The



student poet, the thoughtful student access administrator, and the bold faculty all emerge as another note of resistance is heard in the archives. While this method of retelling still does not offer a reparative suture to the wound of Black women's fading figure in the archive, it does, however, underscore the acts of disruption and the actors of dissent despite such occlusion.

Afterall, archival documentation and assemblage remain entrenched in majoritarian perspectives, reflective of the institutions that house archival collections. If as Katherine McKittrick (2006) suggests that "Practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups "naturally" belong" (p. xv), it is of no surprise that collected documents would likewise proclaim a naturalization of othered status such that Black women are obscured within institutional memory generated by the archives. My work here is to listen and sense other stories and to take care in searching for other glimpses of freedom. In doing so, I focus on three registers of dissent through student, staff, and faculty. Witnessing each arena of struggle, I came to appreciate the bold insurrection in both the loud and "quiet" (Finch, 2014, p. 113) of resistance. In developing student access programs, speaking back to the UC Board of Regents, and meditating on the state of subjection, these actors present resistive modes altogether important and beautiful. They express what form Black lifemaking can take against the threat of subjection within the academy. Moreover, they fashion the else –where and –when that exists within the ephemeral moments of destabilized hegemony, the protracted struggle towards freedom, and the privileging of collectivity. Suspending the continuity of subjection even momentarily is a profound realization. And so I present these actors, attempting to pronounce their speculative prefigurations of freedom despite an arrangement so brutal.

*The Hopeful Community Conjurers*

Summer bridge and college preparedness programs have importantly facilitated historically marginalized students' transition to campuses that lack a numerical critical mass of those marginalized in the academy. Emerging from the efforts of concerned staff and faculty, these academic counterspaces contain the important convergence of academic preparation and attention to the lived realities of marginality. The High Potential Program (HPP) at UCLA, however, uniquely arose out of student initiative. Daniel Johnson, the first BSU president, moved to Los Angeles from Alabama in 1964 to attend UCLA (Nommo, n.d.). While he was eager to begin his studies at the institution, Johnson failed his placement tests and was thus not extended admittance (Nommo, n.d.). Recognizing the deeply entrenched disparities within the educational system, Johnson conceived and constructed the plan for the HPP (Nommo, n.d.). Johnson successfully presented the proposed program to Chancellor Young with the program staffed by student canvassers who sought participants from South Central and faculty and staff teaching courses to prepare the participants for college courses (Nommo, n.d.).

Although the program was later combined with UCLA's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) in 1971 to create the Academic Advancement Program (AAP Facts, n.d.), HPP importantly served as a distinctive Black academic counterspace even as it provided necessary academic support to other students of color. Writing collectively as "four distinctly different Black teachers" (Turner et. al, 1970, p. 1) to matriculating fall 1970 class, Seneca Turner, Floyd Hayes, Thais Aubry, and Adrienne Smith reflected on contested intentions and produced outcomes. Beginning with an assurance of honesty, the teachers story their difficulties in negotiating disinterest, resentment, and even blame from students they had anticipated to mentor through their preparation for university learning. While the letter to the matriculating class

initially presents as a frustrated lecture, it is the assumption of responsibility that marks the document as unique.

Following a summary of the tense situations that arose throughout the summer, the teachers relent and indicate (1970, p. 2),

We have had to admit to ourselves that in a many areas we have failed you.

Nobody likes to admit that they have failed but we must because we failed to give you the kind of program you deserved.

Recognizing the fallacy of creating a program fit for their demands and not reflective of the students' needs, the teachers importantly offer apology to the matriculating class.

While this academic counterspace did not instate the collectivity that the teachers sought, what remains fascinating and instructive is the issuance of apology. The fact of expressed apology, of course, does not erase the reality of conflict, but rather refusing the presumption that as educators they are the vested authority of curriculum design, the four Black teachers illuminate the necessity to admit fault even as it bruises the ego.

Often we foisted our own shortcomings on you and rationalized our sometimes myopic vision as your faults.

So as you embark upon your four year journey through white academia, try always to remember who you are, what you are and what it is.

Admitting to failure, the collective teachers then go on to impart guidance to the class.

Focusing their directive to remain mindful of the Black communities they had to physically depart from as they attend UCLA, the teachers emphasize relationality amidst the standardized acquiescence to university norms. Rather than adopt the goals of an individualistic, market driven academy, the instructors remind the students that as Black people they are, "Chosen because we will one day rise above and beyond the bourgeoisie values and ethical schizophrenia that is America" (1970, p. 3). An imperfect, gathered community, yes. But, one illustrative of the capacity to offer apology in an effort to

maintain what amount of community can be spoken for. The historical actors of this account story a mode of resistance that is inflected with self-reflection.

If the tradition of western ideals refuses accountability for the incalculable terrors exacted against the marginalized, then apology figures as a disruptive act of fostering and sustaining relation amongst those at the margins. Rather than adopt the depersonalized modes of relation prevalent within white ideals, the Black teachers of the HPP 1970 course model what work meaningful redress can do.

### *The Chorus of Dissent*

Unsurprisingly, Black faculty at UCLA consistently organized on campus to receive resources promised to them during the 1960s and 1970s. Addressing the stagnancy of UCLA's plan for Black Faculty Development, the assembled faculty indicated how many years had passed since the college pledged a commitment to Black faculty member without any perceptible changes to the condition. In three years, reassessed appointment measures had not been implemented, retention of Black faculty was displeasing, and Black faculty still bore the brunt of excellency in a circumstance so skewed. While there are contingent faculty and advanced doctoral students who would meet the restructured stipulations that barred internal candidates for employment and even scholars whose stars are yet on the rise, the university had hired no such faculty falling within those demographics since the public declaration of the Black faculty development plan.

Their collective scholarly opposition to acquiescing to purposeless appeals of redress, demonstrates the faculty's bold refusal to accept disingenuous change. At varying levels of institutional affiliation, from student, staff, to faculty, Black people within the university persistently advanced an incisive critique of the limits of institutional redress. Importantly

demanding more and that these be demands be fulfilled, Black faculty illuminate the necessity to see beyond the pretenses of university strides towards justice. The Black faculty assembled against the university and calling by name Chancellor Young, highlight the unflinching resolve to remedy institutional initiatives that lack tangible effect on the lived realities of Black faculty. As such, I read this report to the Chancellor and UC President as a clear indictment of the university's propensity to deceive the historically marginalized all the while sustaining the status quo.

### *The Poet*

Angela Davis' dismissal from UCLA as a faculty member justifiably is a major touchpoint within the campus' history of Black resistance against domination. Her unceremonious dismissal by the regents due to her political affiliations coalesced with the preexisting heightened attention to antiblackness permeating throughout the country and within the maintenance of the university, inspiring action amongst marginalized people in varying positions. Knowing how integral student mobilization around her firing and particularly Black student organizing was to demanding that course credits be restored to her course following reappointment, I started first with reading through the seven boxes assembled on the topic. Primarily containing newspaper clippings, I read through the attending articles to gain a sense of a more in depth understanding of this moment that is so persistently recounted necessarily from the vantage point of Davis who faced subsequent state and nationwide vitriol.

I wanted to become acquainted with the minor figures of the story. The students protesting at "an illegal rally" (Lees and Maddison, 1969, p. 3) numbering at least one thousand in the Royce Hall quad, the writers of plays portraying Davis' following case, and the ones I would have to wait to know that they too were instrumental in the events that transpired to effect

change. Starting here in a collection dedicated to Davis' dismissal was a revelatory gift and guided my proceeding excavation of documents. It is through the chance finding of one Black female student who not only engaged in what is traditionally noted as resistance through protest, but also produced cultural artifacts storying the realities of subjugation and the capacities of collectivity.

Let me introduce to you, Sonja Walker, as she was introduced to me. Reporting on the student led demonstration demanding an open senate meeting on the matter of Davis, we encounter Walker as one of the named figures at the rally. A member of the BSU and spokesperson at the large assembly, the Daily Bruin (Lees and Maddison, 1969, p. 3) details,

Sonja Walker, the next speaker read a position paper from the Black Students' Union (BSU). "The attack that has been launched against our sister Angela Davis is another example of racism and Neo-Facism [sic] in America," the paper began. "We see the vicious attack as an attempt to undermine and subvert black self-determination once again, the Western white power elite is trying to tell black people what is good for them."

That Sonja was a named figure in the archive excited me and I anticipated to find more about her role as a BSU member, later learning that she was specifically the Chairman of Cultural Affairs for BSU and further served as "First Vice-President of the undergraduate student body" in her senior year (Ufahamu, 1971, p. 70). Evidently, Sonja was active on the campus since her speech at the Royce Hall rally in October, 1969. With such a visible presence on campus through organizing and student government, my hope was that surfacing Sonja's methods of freedom would be not only possible, but would produce some assortment of documented actions.

Yet, even as Sonja organized and took on visible positions within these efforts, the archives casted a shadow where some knowability may had been conceivable. The limits of the library special collections housed in the Young Research Library all too

often produced an impasse where I searched for more indication of otherwise methods, of lived else –where’s and –when’s. And while other collections exist on campus stored within the intercultural centers, the clear lack of provided resources generated additional barriers where access could not be granted to as yet processed documents. Taking up a Black feminist reading and sensing through the archive, I searched elsewhere to continue to witness Sonja’s movements towards freedom.

I came to know Sonja the poet as I read through the African Studies Center’s journal *Ufahamu*. Within the journal, I found two of Sonja’s poems published in 1970 (republished from *Nommo*) and 1971. Focusing on blackness as experienced through both repression and liberatory possibility, Sonja weaves contemplations on the nature of systemized stratification, the enduring maintenance of such difference, and the alterity generated from centering blackness in lifemaking. Through her poems, I witnessed her astute considerations of how white supremacy endures to maintain power as evidenced by Angela Davis’ case within the poem “In My Version: A Different View.” Likewise, her care to naming the conditions that make spectacle of blackness and presented intervention to this reality was beautifully announced in her poem “Black Eyes.”

Presenting both her poems below, I read them to reveal Sonja’s Black lifemaking project that attends to the conditions of stratification while still centering blackness beyond subjection. Sonja enlivens what Quashie reminds us about blackness. While antiblackness imperatively is part of and in some ways inseparable from blackness, it is not the total of blackness (Quashie, 2021). Within her artful articulations of marginality and possibility, I witness Sonja’s else –where’s and –when’s that yield an alternative state of being despite the enormity of oppression.

I begin first with “In My Version: A Different View.” Originally published in the Black student run journal *Nommo*, “In My Version” was later republished in *Ufahamu* in 1970. It was in *Ufahamu* that I came to know that not only was Sonja a poet in her own right, but that she attended to matters of culture in her role as BSU Chairman of Cultural Affairs. Her short bio following the poem provided another glimpse into the life she lived and created while at the campus. A history major and a senior at the time of the republished poem, Sonja was invested in the arts. Could her training as a young historian facilitate her nuanced considerations of domination and the enduring legacies of white supremacy? Did she come to poetry following her organizing? Before? Maybe she had been a lifelong writer, skilled in storytelling. What other cultural productions may she have overseen from her fellow comrades in her role? How may she had used her own intuiting as a conjurer of words to better preside over their artful endeavors? These questions may be never truly known, yet is impossible to not speculate on what else she may have done herself as a poet and for others in role stewarding the cultural affairs of the BSU.

Sonja starts the poem by describing Angela Davis in both physical form and personality. Speaking first in the third person, interjecting with the first as she shares frustrations and resignations, and ending with the second, the transition between addressee ushers the reader from observance, to confidant, and finally momentarily holding the place of Davis at the poem’s close. Sonja (1970) writes,

***In My Version: A Different View***

*She came in summer  
Controversy surrounding her.  
Tall, slender and graceful  
Her afro fitting like a golden halo*

*Of her people  
Of oppressed people  
Sometimes when she lectured in the classroom  
It was difficult to grasp the full meaning*



*Abundantly defiant  
 And she, aware of who she was  
 Of whence she came  
 Of where she must return  
 When one talks of intellectual honesty  
 One instinctively thinks of her  
 Remembers hearing her say without hesitation  
 I am a member of the Che-Lumumba Club  
 Which is an all black collective  
 Of the Communist Party  
 One recalls how Ronnie  
 And his regimental regents  
 Reacted to these words  
 In a most vicious and cruel manner  
 Subjecting her to the most blatant forms  
 Of political harassment  
 Dragging her through a series of  
 Of court battles  
 Many black people wondered why she  
 Was a communist.  
 They disagreed with her party affiliations  
 But that did not stop their admiration of her  
 And they continued to show  
 That they were not afraid of the word  
 communist  
 For such neurotic paranoia  
 Could only be found in white suburbia  
 She would not allow  
 Her academic and professional success  
 To stifle the commitment  
 She felt for her people  
 She spoke at rallies  
 Participated in community press conferences  
 Organized defense campaign committees  
 For political prisoners  
 Wrote classroom lectures  
 All of which contained realities  
 That frighten certain elements of affluence  
 I wonder why????  
 She lived in the community  
 Where she could always feel  
 With astute accuracy the pulse*

*Of a specific concept,  
 Because of her extensive vocabulary  
 But she would bring the ideas home  
 By using clear cut examples  
 Based on the day to day experiences  
 Of real people  
 People engaged in social change  
 She often said that she was still a student  
 Forever learning new things about the world  
 She would laugh at her clumsiness  
 Because she was just plain folks  
 One did not could not relate to her  
 As just another professor  
 But on a much higher level  
 As one human being to another  
 She did not especially glory in all  
 The publicity and notoriety accorded her.  
 She would frequently ask,  
 Why don't they leave me alone?  
 But they can't Angela  
 Because leaving you alone  
 Means they must admit their atrocious crimes  
 And no one likes to commit political suicide  
 Especially when one has a whole system  
 Of profitable arrangements,  
 When if disturbed will destroy  
 The reality of the American nightmare  
 The nightmare that plagues all of us  
 I wish you could explain  
 But I guess that is not cool for now  
 There are so many things  
 That aren't cool for now  
 Besides I can wait  
 Because if your flight  
 From the immediate, oppressive situation  
 Means that I will never see you again  
 Then I never want to see you again.*

As Sonja writes, she details the conditions that befall Davis as she is relegated as a political adversary by “Ronnie” (Governor Reagan) and the “regimental regents.”

*One recalls how Ronnie  
 And his regimental regents  
 Reacted to these words  
 In a most vicious and cruel manner*

Reading regimental here as discipline in reprimand and disciplined determination to enact violence, Sonja makes it apparent that under the influence of Reagan’s regime, that the regents

although deigned as an apolitical governing body of the UC system, are more than acquiescent actors in exacting “political harassment” (1970, p. iii) to uphold white supremacist ideals. The regents in accordance with Reagan, were none too pleased with Davis’ admission of being a card carrying Communist party member. Retaliating against Davis’ political affiliation in a “most vicious and cruel manner” (p. iii), Sonja demonstrates the unrelenting battle to which Davis fought against the regents and Reagan. Here, Sonja reveals the governing forces that aim to circumvent Davis’ educational and political work, first providing the reader with an impression of the conditions of the matter before moving on to her analysis of the hegemonic arrangements that reify “vicious and cruel” reprimand of political ideals.

Sonja goes on to consider the “why” of retribution, the “profitable arrangements” (p. iv) that precipitate such circumstances. This time, Sonja directly responds to Davis expounding on the nature of stratification. As Davis wonders in the poem why she has been made a target of unrelenting reprimand and if they will “leave [her] alone” (p. iv), Sonja expounds

*But they can't Angela  
Because leaving you alone  
Means they must admit their atrocious crimes  
And no one likes to commit political suicide  
Especially when one has a whole system  
Of profitable arrangements,  
When if disturbed will destroy  
The reality of the American nightmare*

Intimating the inextricability of “atrocious crimes” to the “profitable arrangements” cohered in the system of stratification, Sonja succinctly names the indispensability of engineered violence to the durability of the current system. Advancing the “atrocious crimes” as a victimless offense is integral to the continuity of subjection that has sustained dissimilar life outcomes. The crimes exacted are the imperative methods of penalizing Davis for abandoning her ascribed location in the social order. A disturbance to the “American nightmare” and threat to the “profitable

arrangement” is reason enough for the regents and Reagan to continue their attacks against Davis and the mounting dissent inspired by her treatment.

In ending the poem, Sonja relays almost an acceptance of the “flight” (p. iv) Davis must take from the campus and the brutalities of the persistent fight. Rather than issuing a mournful farewell, Sonja privileges Davis’ well-being, hoping for freedom from the “oppressive situation” (p. iv). Ending the poem with,

*Besides I can wait  
Because if your flight  
From the immediate, oppressive situation  
Means that I will never see you again  
Then I never want to see you again.*

Sonja envisions an alterity to the present condition Davis navigates as the regents, Reagan, and broader public collude to rebuke her political ideals. Davis’ flight towards something else, leaving behind the “oppressive institution” speculates on an else –where that is shielded from the machinations of dominance. Sonja writes of the conditions as the “immediate,” suggesting that Davis’ flight else –where is of a future to come, an else –when just out of view. The “immediate, oppressive situation” may be undisputedly consuming, presently. Nonetheless, Sonja acknowledges and even manifests an alternate state of being, one where the enclosure of antiblackness is not an all-encompassing matter of being. In this way, she determines escape, the flight, from this reality as possible even if such flight means staggered departures from the repressive space. Within “In My Version,” Sonja thoughtfully interweaves criticism of systems of oppression, reflections on relationality, and envisions freer conditions than the ones at the time.

“Black Eyes” likewise attends to subjection and possibility, surfacing Sonja’s (1971) focus on the dissimilarity between blackness as looked upon and blackness as *seeing/being seen*. As such, she articulates the mirrors visible as Black people see (*to know*) one another in a world

where blackness is to be looked upon, surveilled, and made spectacle. “Black eyes” as a referent to both Black peoples and the portal to which mood and disposition can be sensed, thus offer an enunciation of relationality constitutive of shared lived realities and commitments to building the world anew. Sonja (1971) writes,

### ***Black Eyes***

*It is through black eyes  
That I know where you are coming from  
It is through black eyes  
That I feel you are concerned  
It is through black eyes  
That I see your eyes are filled with anger*

*Black eyes burning with hatred  
Black eyes reflecting all the years of pain,  
torment, and confusion  
Black eyes, eyeing of blue with disgust  
and disdain  
Staring into blue eyes, in a pigs eyes  
The eyes that inflicted the pain again and again  
Eyes of blue, eyes of terror eyes of greed*

*Eyes that when they look at you  
Seem not to be seeing who you really are  
Blue eyes that spy at you from black  
and white cars in the day, and  
helicopters at night  
Blue eyes that do not see the real you  
Because guilt ridden consciences behind the  
eyes refuse to allow a true view of you to  
come through.  
Eyes of blue that look over you, under you, past  
you,  
around you, in front of you, behind you  
Never really catching sight of you  
But that is not reality*

*Reality is brown eyes, black eyes  
Clear eyes, beautiful eyes  
Deep, dark, mysterious eyes  
Eyes filled with a new awareness  
Eyes that will witness the destruction of many  
blue eyes  
When millions of dark eyes all around the  
world take aim  
Crystal clear aim at the eyes that dared to  
claim  
To search, explore and take that which was  
yours*

*Eyes rediscovering justice  
Eyes that see with new insight and hind sight  
Eyes that are out of sight  
Black eyes making periodic observations  
Analyzing, scrutinizing, and correcting present  
phenomena  
Then rearranging these things into a coherent form  
reflecting a new direction  
Black eyes that now realize  
That new vision is necessary  
Eyes that will see to it that justice is done  
Eyes that defy contradictions of human suffering in  
a world of wealth  
Attempting to change these things*

*Black eyes, Black eyes  
Finally seeing me  
As I see thee  
Through eyes that stare with wonder and mutual  
affection  
Eyes that peer into the depths of one's soul  
Hoping to reenvision a trace of the creative life that  
was  
once a continuous part of civilization  
Black eyes, Black eyes,  
It is you. Beautiful, universal black eyes.*

*Black eyes, sensitive eyes  
Serious eyes, expressive eyes, descriptive eyes  
Visioning at time when you can just be eyes  
gazing off  
into space  
Black eyes perceiving of new ways and  
methods to fashion in a new era*

Starting with naming the marginality delimiting blackness, Sonja declares that she “know[s] where you are coming from” (p. 69), addressing the assumed Black reader and kin. Establishing this alliance of shared relegation to the peripheries of the social order, Sonja thus intimates that she knows through seeing into the other’s eyes (*witness*) the burden of of being a watched subject.

*It is through black eyes  
That I feel you are concerned  
Eyes that when they look at you  
Seem not to be seeing who you really are*

In contrast to the interconnection of seeing and being seen by other “Black eyes,” Sonja identifies the watchful gaze of others. Eyes that may “look over you, under you, past you, around you, in front of you, behind you” (p. 69) anywhere but at the true sight of the addressed “you.” Dancing around the figure of the “Black eyes” addressed in the poem, these other eyes are set on watching from a distance, surveilling “Black eyes” from either cars or helicopters. Watching, observing, and anticipating an act of immorality, these eyes do not see (*affirm*) the humanity of blackness.

While the eyes of others are incapable of witnessing and affirming the humanity of blackness, Sonja reveres the eyes that look back, reflecting shared realities, observations of the world, and visions of something else. She witnesses eyes that are “analyzing, scrutinizing, and correcting present phenomena” that renounce the naturalized “contradiction of human suffering in a world of wealth” (p. 70). Refusing the naturalized hegemony that has engineered difference, Sonja advances that Black eyes seeing in this way the falsehoods of stratification can “fashion in

a new era” (p. 69). Seeing and being seen, then, are bound within collective witness, affirming, and responding to the inequities of the world. Finally, it is through the relation of shared realities and visions of freedom that Sonja revels in the wonder of being truly seen against a world that insists on simply watching.

*Black eyes, Black eyes*

*Finally seeing me*

*As I see thee*

*Through eyes that stare with wonder and mutual affection*

*Eyes that peer into the depths of one’s soul*

*Hoping to reenvision a trace of the creative life that was  
once a continuous part of civilization*

*Black eyes, Black eyes,*

*It is you. Beautiful, universal black eyes.*

It is the Black eyes that “stare with wonder” (p. 70), not reproach that Sonja reveals the kinship made possible in seeing (*witnessing/affirming*) one another. The mutuality of affection is perceptible as Black eyes “peer into the depths of one’s soul” (p. 70) where glimpses of another life are gleaned. Once more, Sonja enunciates another world that is to come, one that through the return of “creative life” will create the world anew. The alterity within relation and witnessing reveals the suspension of continuous subjection. The act of seeing/being seen evinces a reprieve from the contradictory, stratified world.

#### *In Gratitude of the Named and Unnamed*

The found actors of the archive advanced distinct approaches to dislocate subjection. To witness their insurrection against the university and the endurance of antiblackness at large transformed me. What I have known about struggles to refuse dominance has been impacted by their methods of freedom. Working in defiance of the university, the historical actors refused to be constrained by the maneuvers of threatened power. While, I yearn for more in the way of Black women’s pronouncements in resistance of systemic oppression, I am grateful for the utterances I came upon. Grateful to the resistance that makes possible my and other’s living. Their organizing as students, staff, and faculty continue to be a through line that illuminates

the necessity of Black women speaking back to power. In spite of the ever shifting maneuvers of power, what is palpable amongst the archives is the even more determined commitment to devising alterity to the stability of stratification. Disrupting at any point the endurance of hegemony even for a moment, Black women in an insurrectionary fashion are gifts to witness in the archives.

## Chapter Five

### Re(-)Membering to See Me and You

In remembering, we return to that which was stolen, that which we have been forced or seduced into ignoring. In remembering, we center our full selves, heal and uplift our communities, and create new worlds in which we might live life more fully. In remembering, we rupture traditional ideologies and standard paradigms to grasp at the roots of who we are and how we've come to know ourselves, others, and the world

Stephanie R. Tolliver (2022, p. xvi)

Relation is what opens the black ethnographer to narrative—to how black femmes imagine and remake the present by centering our blackness, our queerness, our out-of-placeless, our pain, our joy, our black need. Where one story ends, another begins circling back around, and offering incompleteness and possibility, where once tragedy once stood in as finality, as totality.

Zenzele Isoke (2021, p. 110)

I want to tell a story. It is not a story of a single narrator or one that is easily mapped on linearly arranged time. I want to tell the story of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' dislocations of subjection in the here and now, the then and there, and the else – where and –when. It is my, yours, ours, and their story. A story that I hope will evince what more is to come. While I nominatively use “hope” as a signifier to illustrate my aim of disruption, I think alongside Tina Campt (2017) as she implores us to think of futurity and the entanglement of hope not as static, but as a tense in both the temporality of space and the “tense relationship to an idea of possibility” (p. 33). I am compelled just as Campt (2017) to tether myself to the stakes of insurrecting and witnessing the chance of alterity with “an urgency to see possibility in the tiny, often minuscule chinks and crevices of what appears to be the inescapable web of capture for black women and men alike” (p. 33). This is the story that I endeavor to animate. One that does not pedestalize a single actor, but follows the throughline of Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks' rebellious maneuvers against dominance.

It is a story that reaches to artful rebellion of Sonja Walker as she sees us while we see her. Extending to the utterances of Ms. Bessie Bruington, celebrating her life even with the short



announcements of graduation and employment, only to slip into the shadows of the archive. And assembling the speculations of the oral theorists, collaborators, visionaries that I interacted with to learn more about how to survive UCLA, the university, the totality of antiblackness. These are stories that relatedly confront “the necropolitical inclinations of a global order organized around white supremacy” (Isoke, 2021, p. 108). Refusing to index blackness only within death and perpetual subjection, the narratives shared surface life that is lived even as containment attempts to expunge Black lifemaking. Said another way, as Sonja (1971) would instruct us, it is the cognition of defiance that refuses “the contradictions of human suffering in a world of wealth” (p. 70) and envisions the world anew.

As a witness to these enunciations of freer conditions, I aim to share the present oral theorists’ narratives with care. To break from the traditional mode of data analysis disciplined within the social sciences, I turn to Tolliver who likewise refused to analyze narratives and sessions within the confines of standardized qualitative inquiry. Tolliver (2022) shares, “Rather than just reading the transcript, I continuously listened to the whole of our workshop sessions and our individual interviews while walking, driving, and sitting” (p. xxv). And so, I listen to the recorded interviews in the everyday moments of life. Similar to Tolliver, I would drive while listening to the recorded interviews, transporting me back to the occasions of our encounters. Remembering how it felt to hold space with other Black people as they recount their life histories and share their mundane, yet profound gestures towards freedom. Relistening to the interviews, I found myself yet again responding to the collaborators. Nodding along as they share their primary school experiences and reflection on the impact of such racialized encounters or sighing at the regularity of microaggressions experienced at the university, relistening to the accounts felt like being back with the collaborators. They were still teaching me. Like replaying a favorite

song over, and over, and over again hoping to memorize lyrics, feeling the reverb of a struck chord, I returned to the interviews hearing again the revelatory moments and finding newness in the registers I had yet to observe.

It was through relation that I witnessed the collaborators “remake the present by centering our blackness, our queerness, our out-of-placeless, our pain, our joy, our black need” (Isoke, 2021, p. 110). Here is where I found the else –where and –when I anticipated, in the centering of Black lifemaking against the enclosure of domination. Interrupting the permanence of subjection, the stories told merged as a chorus such that “where one story ends, another begins circling back around, and offering incompleteness and possibility, where once tragedy once stood in as finality, as totality” (Isoke, 2021, p. 110). It may approach redundancy, but I cannot overemphasize the gift of witnessing. The chance to actively and not voyeuristically witness as someone narrativizes their life. To see how the collaborators contemplated the conditions of educational violences and the endurance of such matters, reflect on the influential figures in their lives who stressed the importance of pursuing higher education, and the spaces they found that offered refuge as the university revealed and continued to reveal itself as against Black life.

I aim to do justice by the oral theorists who generously shared their stories, time, and presence with me. To capture their storytelling was to witness how they fashioned “the autobiographical example” that Hartman describes as “not a personal story that folds onto itself; it’s not about navel gazing” (Saunders, 2008, p. 4). Rather than self-aggrandizing, the personal testimony is a “window” into the conditions that structure our lives, the inroads made to evade them, and celebration of such evasion. Privileging these narratives necessarily destabilizes the normativity of knowledge production as an objective, disembodied practice. Embodying defiance and possibility, the shared narratives provide indispensable insight.

And so I share three out of the eight collected portraits in hopes to fully demonstrate the varied methods of living announced by the visionaries that allowed me to learn from them. I do this to allow each theorist to take center as they narrativize their lives and speculate about what more is possible as blackness it moves unencumbered, even temporarily. The three oral theorists that I present in this work include the Educator, the Curse Breaker, and the Storyteller. While presented individually they, alongside the other five visionaries, wove together a collective story against hegemony. Together, they enliven the will to survive in a world that would demand otherwise, creating new worlds wherever they stage resistance against totality.

### **Black Portraiture Against Subjection**

Black portraiture in the sense of the visual arts importantly disrupts the normalcy blackness as looked upon by the watchful eyes Sonja Walker (1971) describes. Observing, surveilling, anticipating behavior that must be regulated, the watchful gaze that Sonja contrasts with the relationality possible with “Black eyes” has similarly produced visual collections of blackness on display, codified, and managed (Campt, 2017). In the assembly of colonial collected photos, Campt attempts to recuperate the Black subject from the confines of objectivity. Likewise, Black artists of the visual arts from photography to painting have destabilized the normality of looking upon Black people to create a relational encounter (Robinson, 2019). Whether the Black subject looks back upon the visitor or is storied within the visual narrative, Black portraiture is a Black lifemaking project that memorializes the spectacular and the everyday of Black life where “they are in love, at work, they are playing” (Robinson, 2019). I begin this section with a reflection on Black portraiture, because oral storytelling, similarly, paints a portrait of Black life as living and lived. While Campt deepens her reading of images by *listening* to what they proclaim as the sitter may look back in defiance or evade the

capture of the camera, I consider how words allow us to see. To see in the sense of witnessing and envisioning.

I want to surface the parallels between the affective experience of witnessing Black portraiture that is produced to be seen and to see the onlooker and storytelling that invites the witness to see the collaborator and also be seen in the shared realities of experiencing and contemplating the nature of stratification. I want to approach this reading of the two encounters as occupying a similar function of establishing Black lifemaking against totality. Pairing portraits by multimedia artist Courtney Alexander with the narrative portraits, I hope to illustrate the livingness of their testimonies. Alexander's portraits are used within her "melanated" tarot deck *Dust II Onyx* (Alexander, 2017). Exchanging traditional Eurocentric visual archetypes within tarot for her own newly created figures fashioned after Black spiritual figures and amalgamated features from Black cultural producers, Alexander's tarot deck beautifully transforms tarot for the Black conjurer. The oral theorists I engaged, in my view, certainly conjure new worlds and manifest freer moments. I use Alexander's portraits to visually signify the collaborators below. Providing eyes to look back at the reader, seeing us as we see them.

For myself as the witness in the encounters with collaborators, I felt the collaborators' words come to life, imaging both incisive considerations about dominance and storying survivance in the everyday. Their words were not static, they were as active as the Black subjects within thoughtfully created Black portraits. I hope that you too can feel the aliveness of their narratives. I hope that as you read the following portraits that you may wonder what new world is possible in the recognition of the great contradictions that structure our lives and the announced everyday, sustaining moments of alterity.

*The Educator*



Temperance by Courtney Alexander (2017)

The Educator, wise, and reflective is a California local, growing up in Long Beach.

Paired with Alexander’s portrait of “Temperance,” the Educator surfaced the uses of balance and nuance. She provided introspective considerations on what it meant to navigate racialized spaces. When drawn during a reading in its exalted state, the temperance card indicates purpose – whether currently manifested or to come. Alima not only recounted her experiences of containment in schools designed to further solidify inequities, but also reflected on how her experiences motivated her to intervene in such matters. Balancing both the profound impact of shared storytelling on her healing and the need to un/learn the violences of hegemony, Alima illustrates the continual process of centering herself and her community. Moving briefly with her family to the Central Valley then back to Long Beach, Alima calls the south bay area home. Spending her formative years, particularly during high school, in the area where her family continues to reside, Long Beach as a space has deeply impacted her. I had known Alima prior to our interview encounters. Witnessed how she thoughtfully nuanced intersecting conditions of domination, used her social location to illuminate how stratification impacts everyday life, and

extend grace to others as they learned these truths. Attentive, admirably committed to justice, and empathetic it was no surprise that Alima had her sights set on becoming an educator herself, hoping to one day be a guide for students like herself that found themselves in spaces all too white and all too hegemonic. Sitting outside of Campbell Hall, we took space at the tree sheltered tables to engage our interview.

Easing our way into the interview after briefly catching up with one another and explaining the nature of the questions that will be asked, I first asked Alima to describe where she calls home. To describe Long Beach, the school she attended within the city, and how she made sense of her presence in that space. As a San Fernando Valley local myself, my intimate knowledge of Long Beach was scant. I knew there were pockets of spaces, much like Los Angeles, where people of color resided in critical mass. I knew that the shifting terrains of space and inhabitation had been facilitated by an influx of often white, wealthier new residents, very much like Los Angeles. Alima brought depth and specificity to the image of Long Beach as it was and sharing that while Long Beach is complex to capture,

It is divided. It's something that I'm still trying to grapple with because (pauses) like, I'm still trying to kind of grapple with the idea of, like, what it means to be, like, where I grew up, which was, like, a very, very, like, white dominated – well, yeah! A white dominated area of Long Beach and, and going to school where I'm trying to, like, pull those pieces of myself together to have like – there was a lot of folks of color because it was LBUSD [Long Beach Unified School District] is like an opt in kind of school. So even if you're out of district, like you can go to the school, right, so there's a lot of folks coming from like other parts of Long Beach. But the reality is, like a lot of like, the, the programs were still like, very divided. So like, the, the program I was in was in was like very white. And so like that was – I don't know, it's still something I'm thinking about and like what that's meant for my like identity development as a whole.

A deeply divided space, Long Beach produced a fractured sense of self for Alima. While she attended schools with other folks of color, the educational division between the “gifted” and “not” further enmeshed her in white majority spaces. With both residing in and attending white

dominated spaces, Alima negotiated racialized, gendered encounters. As an Afro-Latina, she stood amongst the few students of color in her Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The opt in nature of LBUSD while potentiating some form of greater opportunity for historically marginalized students, fails to actualize any disruption of educational violences. Students of color were regularly funneled into courses outside of AP, while programs focused on students tracked into such placement greatly benefited from the skewed dispersal of resources. Creating a school within a school, the whiteness of educational discipline emerged throughout her time at the school.

Often being silenced by the norms of prioritizing white student success, Alima was only prompted for response when asked to stand as a spokesperson for either the “Mexican perspective” or the “Black perspective.” Racial and gendered microaggressions were too common. Further, white peers and faculty would note how seemingly dissimilar she was to other Black and Mexican folks they had encountered. Backhanded “compliments” of not appearing “that Mexican” were prevalent, further impacted her. Meditating on the circumstances, Alima shares, “I think that it took me a second to realize how, like, ingrained that got in my psyche, like, almost—what’s the word?—not associating myself with my own community and just distancing myself from my own community.” Educational violences such as these racial microaggressions reflected the naturalization of othering present within the school.

Where there was no space to contend with the discomfit of experiencing these microaggressions, Alima had to find spaces elsewhere to reckon with this reality. Throughout her contemplations about her educational experiences, she interrogated the spatial conditions of varying sites – the city of Long Beach, the high school, UCLA – she relayed how these sites were inherently shaped by the norms of who seemingly *belonged* within these spaces and who

did not. Reflecting McKittrick's (2006) reading of space, Alima likewise understood the contested nature of such sites and the resistive geographies of a Black stake in such arenas. Further, she employed space/spatiality in a twofold manner, 1) the production of space and its attendant meanings (McKittrick, 2006) and 2) the figurative space of embodying oneself fully – living more freely.

Alima gestures to the “Black women’s geographies (such as their knowledges, negotiations, and experiences)” that McKittrick (2006, p. x) theorizes within her vital text *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Foundationally reconfiguring our understandings of race and space, McKittrick (2006) relays the expository nature of subjugation and the capacity of black subjectivity to not be engulfed by dispossession. Alima’s ability to name the subjugation she navigates and contextualize it in her current understandings of power dynamics is remarkable. Succinctly detailing her journey towards un/learning she reveals how necessary it was to be in a space where other folks of color similarly share their experiences of marginality. Reflecting on the new vocabulary she acquired, Alima details,

And I only realized now being in college and being in spaces with other students of color, how, how healing that is. And, like, how, like, we have similar experiences that we can speak to, and, and there’s just, like, there’s just like, not these certain assumptions that white people make sometimes and just like these weird power dynamics, that it’s like, it’s this place where I feel *more free to be myself and I feel like loved and accepted*. [emphasis mine]

Evading the gaze of eyes that seek to surveil and categorize (Walker, 1971), Alima found healing within relationality. Alima embodies the impact of shared counterstories that Solórzano and Yosso (2006) surmise. In the act of storytelling, Alima and the other students of color she met within the Academic Advancement Program (AAP), as roommates, and in select courses demonstrate the power of seeing and being seen. Being



witnessed and witnessing others allowed her to apply salve to the wounds of microaggressions, the daily indignities (Pierce, 1978) levied at her within majority white spaces. The ameliorative effect of being seen and her experiences was “very powerful, that, that change, that shift.” Not watched, but fully witnessed in their truths, the exchange of storytelling allowed Alima to “feel more free to be [herself]” and truly feel “loved and accepted.”

Further, inhabiting a space to be seen and feel free *to be* herself, imparted the capacity to consider her internalization of racial hierarchies that affected her view of her own community. The uneasy circumstance of un/learning and facing the fact of one’s own limitations was not avoided. Rather, Alima realizes that her healing necessarily coincides with recognizing how she views others through the lens of majoritarian ideals. Realizing the weather as Sharpe describes the everywhere-ness of antiblackness, Alima contemplates how she allowed herself to name and un/learn the internalized racism she adopted as fortified by the white majority spaces she navigated. Admitting that she was impacted and acted upon such socialization she shares, “I feel like that I’ve internalized and judgement that I even passed on, in folks in my own community, because I haven’t always interacted with folks from my own communities.” Recognizing the necessity to undo this encoding, she affirms that is continually work sharing, “And so for me, I think, like, I’m just trying to undo that, because I realized it doesn’t serve me at all. And it’s, it’s bullshit honestly.” Destabilizing the “script,” as she called it in her interviews, of internalized racism and inferiority, Alima demonstrates the indispensability of alternative geographies produced by marginalized peoples. While the terrain of the white dominated spaces she moved through demanded her othering, the alternative configurations

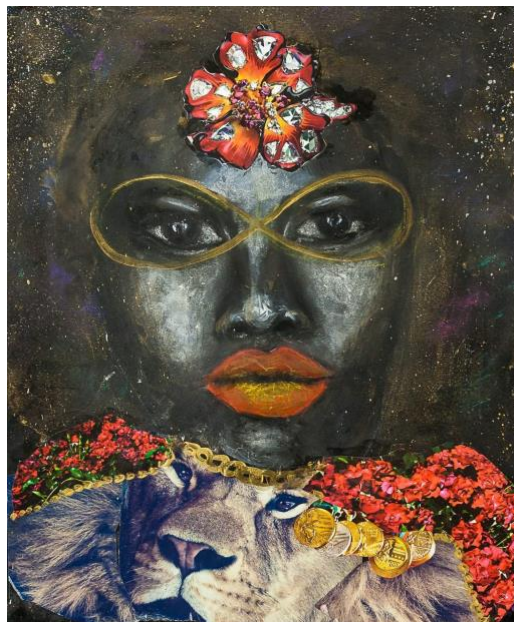
advanced by marginalized peoples allowed her to recognize the “seemingly natural spaces and places of subjugation” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xviii) for what they truly are.

The predominance of whiteness at UCLA was not a shock to her after navigating home and school spaces so controlled by whiteness. The “seemingly natural” state of subjection did not strike her as an anomaly. Rather Alima intimates, “The culture shock for me was like, recognizing folks in my own community and seeing like, like seeing that I am also reflected in and seeing that I have a community to lean on.” To be seen was so new for her and to be able to see others without the prescriptions of assumed inferiority allowed Alima to not only feel free to be herself on campus, but to return home and live more freely there as well. While aware of her queerness since middle school, she took her time in coming out. Coming out felt risky then and while she engaged in spaces geared for queer and trans students and their allies, Alima still considered what it would mean to come out in a space so committed to supposed “normalcy.” In finding space to be herself more fully and freely, she came back to Long Beach with friends who created space to see her to go to her first Long Beach pride. Excitedly sharing, Alima reveals, “I didn’t go to Long Beach pride until I was in college. And then I was like, “Oh my gosh, we’re going home!” Like, what a full circle moment, you know.” Taking with her those that see her to be seen in her home, Alima declares, “And it was one of the best experiences to go with friends from UCLA.”

Alima reveals the fruitful encounters that emerge as Black women find those that truly see them, witnessing the expansive of their full selves. In Alima’s accounts of un/learning constraining, majoritarian ideals, she enlivens an active commitment to refusing the totality of subjection. I am left with Alima’s proclamation as she reflected on

her trip to Atlanta, GA with her research cohort members. All of them of color, and many of them Black, they intentionally visited sites that affirmed their marginalized ways of knowing. As they visited the Martin Luther King Jr. monument, Alima reflected on how powerful it was to visit the site with people like her, both in social location and political ideals. She felt the palpable histories and presents of resistance that made her life possible and relayed, “Our persistence is resistant.”

*The Curse Breaker*



Strength by Courtney Alexander (2017)

The Curse Breaker knows just where to strike to unsettle the grasp of dominance. A local to the Inland Empire, she astutely recognizes the machinations of dominance such as the shifting landscape of her home community that has been fortified through engineered difference. As she made sense of her place on campus and the factors that influenced her educational journey, she masterfully interwove interrogations of systemic oppression and the roles that individuals take in maintaining the status quo. Moreover, she persistently stressed how her journey was not hers alone and thought about what she could do to clear the path for those that follow her, both known and unknown. I came to think of Issa as a curse breaker as she revealed to me just how

intertwined all our paths are towards freer conditions as Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks. When she would respond to questions concerning how she thought about blackness or the enclosure of schooling, she never stopped with just her own experiences with marginalization. She persistently expounded on how the structures affect us all, intimated the heterogenous, yet interrelated experiences with marginality amongst Black people, and always stressed the need to unsettle these conditions.

Issa is deeply passionate about Black freedom. She thinks about it in the everyday sense of our lives and the momentary rebellions that destabilize marginality. Working in residential life, Issa shared about how often she witnessed Black women and herself being used for their excellence, expected to go above the demands of a task for little recognition. She was not afraid to address gendered stratification within Black spaces. She was especially excited to learn more always endeavoring to do better.

Pairing the Curse Breaker with Alexander's (2017) portrait of "Strength," I want to release the concept of strength as tied to Black women from the archetype of the "strong Black woman." Rather than invoke strength as an individuated burden foisted onto Black women to continuously labor for others, I use strength here to mean the strength found in relation, that Issa so frequently advanced. Working within residential life as a student, Issa witnessed and experienced herself the burden of being regarded as "strong." Pushing back against this conscription to servitude, she asserted that she refuses to take on slack of others and likewise supports other Black women as they similarly refuse the imposition. In Alexander's portrait of "Strength," a golden infinity encircles the figure's eyes as Strength gazes back upon us. Holding one another's gaze as onlooker and figure, the immeasurable space of seeing/being seen surfaces, again reminding me of Sonja's ode to witnessing and recognizing one another through Black

eyes. This gaze of looping back from looker to looker, witness to witnessed visually captures my reading of Issa's commitment to see herself in others and them in her. That is not to say that she is mistaking this recognition for total sameness, but rather that so long as she can witness and be witnessed she will revel in that shared relation.

I began my interview with Issa by asking her to share what identities felt most important to her and their impact how she views herself in the world. Thinking only for a moment, Issa shares,

I think, something that has always been an important to me, I guess I'm like, how do I phrase it, like, the background I come from as, like – we were low income. And so our setting that like, informs just like a lot of the decisions I make, like for myself, and then like, I realized, like, constantly everyday how some of those things are not the healthiest and like, it's something I think about consistently in the sense of I'm like, "What do I want to pass down to the next generation in my family." Like this relationship, like, not only to finances, but just like to well-being and this idea of work yourself into the ground because your family's reality growing up, and everything like that, that came with it. So I think also too, it's, it's really important to me in the sense of like, it's very representative of my community.

Within her response, Issa reveals the ways in which survival, while an achievement in itself within a world so brutal (Hartman, 2006), had socialized her and those around her to work themselves "into the ground." Producing a sense of urgency in response to the conditions that constrained their lives, the compulsion to work oneself past the point of breaking no longer aligned with what Issa wanted for herself and others. Centering instead well-being, Issa considers what new ways of being can be modeled as subjection doesn't totalize hers and other's lived realities. Stressing that this is "very representative" of her community, Issa illustrates how the impact of systemized difference substantiates inequitable life circumstances.

As the structures of inequity compel people in her community to persistently work, Issa also analyzes how the conditions that befall her community are perceptible within educational sites. Educational sites reproduce systemized difference such that material resources are scarce in

school sites primarily attended by students of color. Issa reflects on her K-12 experiences and shares

It gave me time to grieve and reflect on like the people who like just really kind of let me down on the way, like my counselors and some of like my teachers like leading up to this but after like that period, I was able to be like “dang, like that was just not – I did not have the best road here” and so I'm struggling here. I'm like okay, now I have an experience to inform, like, what can I do for, like, not only the students, but my family members, like, coming up behind me. Like, even something that was just, like, so touching to me the other day is, like, to have one of my nephews, he's the one who named my dog, like telling me, like, “UCLA is my goal.” Like, it's not like that I'm like, “you have to go here.” Or, like you have to have pride from going here. Like, it was just such a like genuine thing of, like, “oh, like my, my aunt did this, like, I can do it too.” Whereas like, I didn't have something like that. And yeah, I think just like navigating as first gen struggle there's a lot of like negative like self-talk that you have and like, you just don't think you're gonna be able to do things. Even though like you've proven to yourself that you have done them in the past.

In her response, Issa both mourns and explores what more is possible. As she relays how disappointing her educational experiences were, Issa reminds us that educational sites predominantly operate under logics that determine which students are of opportunity and which are acceptably sidelined. In her grief, Issa considers how she can best intervene these matters as others follow behind. She decenters the importance of UCLA itself from her intervention and instead focuses on what it means to have other Black people envision themselves within higher education, to have agency to do so by seeing others in such positions. In contemplating the inequities ingrained in education as a system, Issa is able to intimate what it means to offer representational evidence that Black students too are worthy of pursuing education on their own terms.

Issa expertly described the benefits of community and finding space to just be rather than to be of use. Simply existing with other Black people was juxtaposed by her experiences in spaces where she was one of few Black people present. All too often she was looked at to provide the “Black perspective” in such sites. Whereas her enunciation of inherent disruption in

Black presence hinges on agency, her experiences of tokenization instead essentialized her blackness making her an unwilling spokesperson to provide a summary Black response. Issa shares,

I was in sociology, which I don't regret being in that major at all, it was a really great experience. But I definitely felt very tokenized in a lot of those spaces. And SOC spaces more so because it is such a big major, so you have so many different people there. Um, but even in that there was often times where I was the only person who kind of resembled what other people had kind of like constructed as blackness in their mind. So then, you know, it was very awkward, like, you know, we'd be talking about issues relevant to black experience, or like, you know, acknowledging like, our very messed up history of this country, and they would kind of be looking at me to be saying something, and, you know, that's what I came in with as an 18 year old. So it's like, very quickly you're like, "Oh, okay, well, I need to talk on behalf of the entire community." Then you realize later, like, this is not fair at all. I can't. We're going to have drastically different experiences and points of view, like, I mean, sure, like, I'll share, but it's also not my job to, like, give you this, like education and like history, but I didn't really like realize that for myself until later

Moving with such sites demanded that Issa do the work of educating nonblack others about the supposed "Black experience." While other classmates were simply allowed to learn in the course, Issa relays that her conscription as the race representative demanded that she perpetually educate others. This unease as the appointed spokesperson on Black experiences followed her throughout her courses where she found herself as one or very few Black people in attendance. As one of the few Black students in these courses she initially addressed these demands within her compulsory role to hopefully mitigate repeat occurrences of this situation for other Black students. While she had intervened in hopes that others who are similarly socially located will not experience such microaggressions, she also understands that her own wellbeing is important. Expressing that "this is not fair at all" she emphasizes the inequitable load she is forced to carry in classroom spaces that fail to adequately teach through race and racism. She goes on to advance that it is also impossible for her to serve as a spokesperson when there are "drastically different experiences and points of view." Refusing to essentialize herself and others, Issa steps

away from the imposed role as Black experience spokesperson. Her refusal to continue to occupy this role reveals her perspective of what blackness is outside of the limits of essentialism.

Within Issa's responses, she consistently intimated the profound power of collective refusal and affirmation. Her responses and speculations about freedom were revelatory. She juxtaposed her experiences within sites that demanded her labor to educate others with her enunciations of what blackness is and the capacities of communal refusal. She masterfully thought through her own experiences of finding community and using collective refusal to navigate through spaces within UCLA. At the same time, she announced how widespread intrinsically embedded refusal was to Black living against forces that would demand otherwise. In describing blackness, she brings our focus to the affective rather than the physical archetype of what blackness is. She centers disruption in the everyday practice and shares,

there's these things I just, um, Black folks, no matter where we come from, do to disrupt like unjust things in the society that we've been told we can't do. Like sometimes it's literally just showing up to the space and like, being the only one there. Although that can be incredibly exhausting, just like showing up to that space is just kind of like embodying your blackness, like we're still here, even though you've thrown all this stuff out our way, like we have ancestral trauma that we still have survived. So when I think about that, I think about blackness, I think about like, a really special form of community, I think about endurance, I think about just like, this ingrained ability to just get pushed through things. And then with that, I also think about the need to like care for ourselves more, because so many other pockets of just where we exist, just don't and *won't*. [emphasis mine]

In Issa's enunciation of Black resistive practice she parallels Denise Ferreira da Silva's (2014) intervention where Ferreira da Silva "seeks to expose how the Category of Blackness already carries the necessary tools for dismantling the existing strategies for knowing, and opening the way for another figuring of existence" (p. 82). Against forces that would index blackness to total subjection, Issa affirms that "just showing up" figures as an embodiment of blackness, thus articulating disruption as a method of living much like the dismantling that Ferreira da Silva illumines in her thinking. Blackness is also relational in Issa's view where it can be understood

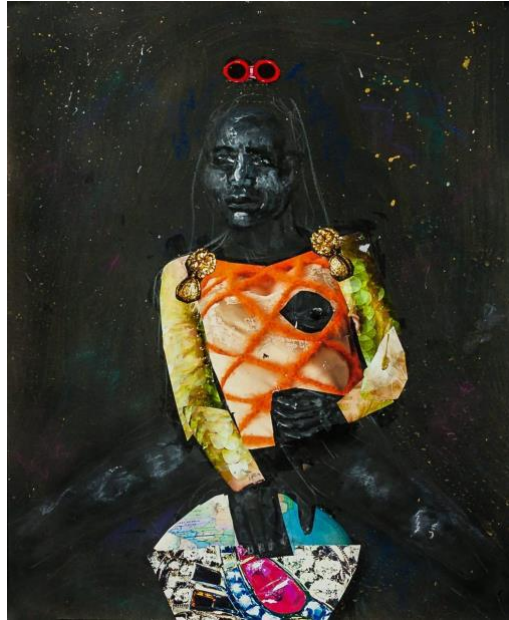


as a “special form of community.” In her enunciation of blackness as disruptive and communal, Issa likewise advances living against forces that would demand our perpetual subjection while still proclaiming care as a necessity. Issa advances the “opening a way for another figuring of existence” in her description of blackness as relational. In centering the communal over physical descriptors, she summarizes the profundity of such a community as “just like a way of being like existing with other people. That feels like really special.” To exist with other people has been an instrumental means of getting through life at UCLA that so often tokenizes her and others like her.

For Issa, relationality was the healing balm she looked for throughout her educational journey. In describing Black communal capacities, she helps us to understand how integral just being with one another is. That to be seen in the way that Sonja Walker (1971) so succinctly describes is an ameliorative effect to the condition of always being watched. Looking for other eyes to witness and see her, Issa named how she looked for that in her classroom from educators, relaying how important it was for her to be seen her too. In need of a juxtaposition of her sociology courses where eyes would turn to her in demand of an answer, a summary brief of Black experiences, she looked for eyes that would see her and understand the conditions she navigates. In looking for these sites of witness, she shares that she does not forget when she is seen. Issa discusses one such moment of being witnessed by an educator through their intervention to class conflict and expresses, “At least for me, I’m like, I’ll never forget that like how other people make me feel, how educators make me feel. But I was like, really looking for moments like that, like, towards the end of my time there because I was like, so often just felt like disregarded.” Where she had been disregarded, she looked for moments that reminded her she was important too. In looking to be seen she used relationality to find those spaces. In the

special community that she defines, she reminds us that it is how others make us feel that manifests a collective out of individuals.

*The Storyteller*



The Conjurer by Courtney Alexander (2017)

Nia proclaimed herself a storyteller early on in our interview. An actress and theorist, I learned from Nia how to name the specificity our Black gendered positionality and the wealth of meaning making embedded in our being. Originally from historic South Central, Nia would poetically describe how she was seen in such a constructed white space and how in turn she would respond to such readings. Like all the collaborators in this work, the Storyteller advanced her social location not a static fact, but one that she had come into and described as “Black woman-ness.” In it, Black woman-ness was not the mere fact of appearing to phenotypically be Black, but rather was informed by her reading of the world and assembling for herself what her embodiment of her race-gender would be.

Nia’s masterful storytelling and poetic descriptions instantly made me think of “the Conjurer.” Weaving arts together to story her journey of embodiment, conjured deeper considerations of being seen within me. In engaging with Nia, I learned about how to precisely

take a both/and analytic about our place in the university where can name the life sustaining relations we developed and at the same time remain watchful of the ways that the university opposes our being. She storied ways of coming into oneself.

We began by catching up. It had been a few quarters since I last saw Nia and witnessed her budding interest in research. We sat comfortably outside of Campbell Hall, enjoying the warm weather and ease of a waning day. Sitting at the tables between Campbell and Rolfe Hall, we waved at other Black women we knew as they made their ways across campus. Moving to the interview only momentarily disrupted our conversational encounter as I explained the questions to be asked. Slipping into the interview, I asked how Nia identified and especially which identities were important to her. Like her co-theorists in this work, Nia relayed that her race and gender were important. She described them in an inextricable manner using “Black woman-ness” to relay her location. Nia expresses,

Um, well, my identities that are most important to me, are like my, Black woman-ness. And I think that's really hard to like, parse through. But I think that that is really significant on like, how significant to how I view my experiences, and I view the world or like the world, how I interact with the world, and vice versa. But more recently, I don't know, I'm, I'm an African American studies major, I minor theatre. So, I spent most of my time -- Well, at first I was in research, and then I transitioned into just performing so I'm an actor. And the more that I make my transition into being an actor was really rooted in like, the lack of the lack of like, the lack of like—what does it mean for a Black woman's body to be like perceived in performance? That was really interesting to me, like, that's where my research kind of started. And then it moved into, like, what does that mean for me personally, so the more I interact with my Black woman-ness in terms of me being an artist, it sort of changes how I view like my Black woman-ness, which is really interesting.

Nia emphasizes how her Black woman-ness inherently impacts how she reads her experiences and thus the world itself. Her reading of experiences and the world from a Black woman-ness positionality in turn effects how she interacts with it. As she deepens her performative practice, Nia is able to use her attention to story and craft to further

tease apart the conditions of being seen and perceived within the world as a Black woman. Her theorizations on the topic of a Black woman's body place in performance disrupts a normalized, taken for granted circumscription of what space Black women can occupy in performance. As she considers what it means to be perceived in these areas, she likewise thinks what this means within the world. Her speculations on the topic offer a disjuncture in the sense of Ferreira da Silva's description of unsettling the assumption of presumed thinker. In this case, Nia enlivens what Ferreira da Silva suggests regarding Black feminist refusal, where such a refusal to the limits of marginality is a (2018) "dis/ordering of the modern grammar in which the patriarch remains the presupposed bearer of self-determination in its ethical and juridical renderings, respectively liberty and authority" (p. 22). In her emphasis of the ever revolving nature of her reading of the world and her place in it, Nia engages an intertextual reading of herself "as same" and herself "as other." (Johnson, 2015, p. 115). She helps us to understand the revelatory capacities of artful embodiment to understand the world around her.

Nia further emphasizes the fluidity of her work as a storyteller. In her response she consistently advances that her reading of herself and the world is not static and responds to the shifting conditions around her. In growing as a storyteller, she likewise decides what her Black woman-ness encapsulates, rather than rely on enunciations of the location from others or the world. She centers her agentic decisions on embodying her identity sharing, "And I think maybe part of it is just age too like, I'm like, not tied to like [*gestures hands around*] I can be whatever I want to be I can do and say, you know." In deciding to her embody her identity as a Black woman, Nia emphasizes the importance doing so outside of delimiting forces from the conditions at odds with Black woman

survival and the “have strict ideas of what like a Black woman was” instilled in her by her “my mother and like the Black woman who were around.” Her emergence into her identity at this race-gender nexus was illustrative of the other theorists in this work.

Where for some blackness was a simple fact of life living alongside other Black people or was persistently a point of othering, all collaborators relayed how important it was to decide for themselves what blackness at large means as well their own blackness. In describing growing into “*Nia’s* like Black woman-ness is,” *Nia* details the impact of defining one’s embodiment.

Further, *Nia* simultaneously celebrates the spaces where she connects with other Black women as she critiques the university. She names the spaces where she finds Black women in critical mass and asserts the importance of such counterspaces. She indicates spaces such as First-Year Student Program (FSP) and the Afro floor. As she talks about the spaces where she felt affirmed, she easily names the sites. Almost laughingly pointing to the “hidden curriculum” that she has been repeatedly instructed on. She happily shares the spaces that witnessed her in her Black woman-ness. An easy smile graces her face as she discusses these spaces. *Nia* shares,

But as a Black woman, I’m really glad that I found a group of like, friends who are mostly Black women who like as we navigate this together, like figuring out like, you know how to do it and like, just like small like little things that make a difference, like the hidden curriculum [*dances fingers around*] like FSP really helped. That really, really helped. And then like then living on the Afro floor and like my roommate was a Black woman. Like a lot of Black women lived on Afro floor.

The summer bridge program, FSP, has been a critical space for new historically marginalized students coming to UCLA. An outgrowth of the High Potential Program started by Black students in the 1960s and 70s, FSP is a vital academic counterspace for Black students. Although *Nia* laughingly gestures towards the academic interventions offered by FSP, she likewise gratefully reveals how the space was vital to her connecting

with other Black people, especially Black women, prior to engaging with the larger student populace. Gaining a sense of community prior to experiencing the prevailing whiteness of the campus was a necessary tool of survival that she leaned on throughout her time on campus. Further, her living space became an additional buttressing force to the conditions of the larger campus in curriculum and peer to peer experiences.

Her easy smile and joking manner slowly fade as she continues discussing the spaces of affirmation. As Nia finishes by expressing gratitude to her relationships to Black women, her demeanor shifts again. Contemplative now, Nia illuminates the “opposing forces” that contest “the good things” found within relation. Nia shares,

I think my relationships to Black women in college have really made a difference. And even like the Black community in general, like at UCLA has heavily influenced how I navigate how I have navigated. I'm almost done -- like my Black woman-ness in the context of like a college student at UCLA. Yeah. So that's the that's the good thing. But then real thing too is like, like having to like combat all the opposing forces like, classes and like professors. Yeah, like, random crazy stuff. Like just the system itself.

While Nia takes time to extend gratitude to the life changing relationships she has developed with Black women, she sharpens her focus to the forces that demand such ameliorative methods of survival. Instrumental to her ability to move through UCLA is her Black community, influencing her navigation of the space and know-how of the space. The site of UCLA has been a fundamental space to further understand her Black woman-ness in context and thus understand the shifting terrains she moves through in response to her Black woman's body. Yet, while she has coalesced her understanding of race and racism through an embodied experience in this space and developed meaningful relationships, she identifies the opposing forces throughout the university that reify her subjection. The entire system, assembled by classroom spaces and varying interactions is at odds with her wellbeing. The system itself is never far from view in the collaborators' eyes as they celebrate the life sustaining spaces they find. They remain attendant

to the fact that while at UCLA, they are not incorporable. As such, they do not delude themselves in understanding how their space on campus is contested.

### **A Whole Universe in Just a Moment**

The collaborators in this work capture the antagonism between the university and Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks while still announcing methods of survivance to provide necessary recourse from daily marginality. They relay the process of coming into one's embodiment and the capacities of community to effect healing. In talking with the collaborators, I consistently learned from them about what it means to survive UCLA. I come back to Sonja Walker's "Black eyes" so often within this chapter because each collaborator provided new iterations for emphasizing the importance of being truly witnessed. It is this "special form of community" that Issa described that I am reminded of as I see them story their lives.

## Coda

### Crossing the Barrier

You, too, are alive, having defiantly survived the violent beatings of life's vicissitudes. You, too, have mourned somebody or something; you, too, have inhaled the sorrow and suffering of loss. Heed this Black feminist researcher's advice: exhale before you die. Devastated, depressed, or desperate—downtrodden or doused in despair—resist the lull of disillusionment. Arise from your slumber and refuse to perish. Refuse to be deprived of the wisdom of your ways of loving, hurting, healing, grieving, and surviving; refuse to decay. Be compassionate with your human/e nature, and hard on neoliberal academe's heartlessness. Devote your precious time and energy to sowing your sorrow and suffering into a survival strategy. To create is to survive. Create something, anything, 'whether painted, danced, written, spoken, sung, rapped, and/or expressed by hands, bodies and minds in various ways' (Morrison, quoted in Stella Adler Studio of Acting, 2016). Create something with all the courage you can siphon from your vibrant cells' vital membranes, and then re-member; return home, to a heart housed in a body that is buoyed by breath.

Esther Ohito, 2020, p. 530

In 2017, just before I left to present at the Critical Race Studies in Education Association annual meeting, I learned that my uncle Moses, my father's older brother, had passed away from prostate cancer. His prognosis in November of 2016 was not good, yet his protracted fight against cancer as he still worked up north in Salinas, CA, traveled between there and here in Los Angeles, and his voice messages to me promising that he would be alright did not make his passing any easier. My blood family is small here within the states and he raised me alongside my parents, my uncle Abdul and his wife aunt Jalia on my mother's side, uncle Peter on my dad's side, and uncle Musa who has no blood relation to either of my parents. I knew this grief was haunting me throughout the year. Every call from home felt urgent. I couldn't let those phone calls go to voicemail. And yet, somehow this call from mom evaded my watch. Listening to her voicemail telling me to call her back, I couldn't sense a shift in her voice, but I knew. I knew that the time with my uncle had come to a close. What she said in that call was a blur. My uncle Moses never wanted me to worry about him even though I knew that a stage four diagnosis



is not something to be optimistic about. A man of deep faith, he frankly told his son Wilson that he hoped that God would soon let him rest. How could I be angry at a wish granted? But, I ached to be near him again. Just to have one more hug. Have him tell me about the childhood he never discussed. Remind me of what it I was like with him when I was young and not so weary about the realities of this world.

In my grief, my mom still encouraged me to go present, if anything as a momentary distraction before the rituals of honoring a life passed began. But as I presented my work on Black resistive and healing while navigating through the university, I could no longer keep up the façade of doing well while in mourning. My voice broke, tears welled, and I was thrust into the middle of eulogizing rather than presenting. My embodied grief was a disjuncture in the space even though it is not beholden to the rigidity of the academy, to weep rather than present on the scheduled work was not an anticipated moment for those in attendance or myself. I had become accustomed to quieting parts of myself that felt inappropriate within academe, comfortable with emoting just enough, and hoping to not overshare or be too vulnerable for my comfort. But my grief had no regard for these constraints. So I wept. I spoke through my grief and proclaimed that resistance and healing was no light matter, but was urgent as the university would continue to thief as much as it could from those of us who have been perpetually sidelined to only be made of utility. Like Esther Ohito (2020), I have grieved someone and also refuse “to be deprived of the wisdom of your ways of loving, hurting, healing, grieving, and surviving; refuse to decay” (p. 530). In surviving, I hope to create. To create in ways that are animated by the lessons of the Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks that allowed me to witness how they refuse to be deprived of all the ways they make life in this world.

In interviewing Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks as well as excavating the archives, I witnessed how creation manifested in their lifemaking. My encounters with Sonja Walker in the archives revealed a Black feminist strategy of organizing where both protesting and art are constitutive of refusal methods against the totality of university machinations. Writing to and for Black people, Walker artfully interrogated the conditions that sustain stratification, yet advanced alterity in relation. I reveled in her craft, her ability to lovingly speak to her community. She created where domination would hope to stamp out such subjectivity. Likewise, the collaborators in this work shared varying methods of creation, lifemaking in a world that did not have them in mind. Issa consistently advanced that we must care for ourselves in a world that will not do so for us and simply refuses to. Nia enlivened storytelling as a way of seeing the self in one's own vision. And Alima persistently advanced community as the necessary balm to navigating a world dependent on antiblackness. These collaborators and others celebrated the everyday practices of resistance and healing. It was the head nods in the hallways, the boisterous laughter of the Afro floor, walking to class together and taking space on campus, refusing to be the spokesperson of the race that were instrumental in their movements through campus. They reminded me of the importance of these daily insurrections, momentary rebellions in the face of endemic antiblackness.

I want to continue to celebrate these methods of survivance against the academy. I hope to continue to think of Sonja Walker alongside the collaborators of the present. In many ways, I looked to Sonja for answers. Within her two poems and speech at Royce Hall quad, I found considerable answers on how to live and fight against a world set on reproducing violence. She was a storyteller in the same way that I encountered storytellers in this work. She advanced relationality like Issa, interrogated systems of domination like Alima, and engaged the poetics

like Nia. Organizing at time when significant social change was called for, Sonja's methods reminds us that we cannot only listen to the archives for the loud shouts of protests. We cannot only look at the photographed leaders that all too often reveal the continual gendered slant in histories of resistance. Through Sonja, I reflected on my own experiences of organizing and was reminded of how critical it is to refuse a masculinist perspective of resistance.

In linking Sonja with the collaborators of today, I hope to demonstrate the throughline that became so evident to me. As Sonja fought back against the university's machinations, she provided the necessary dislocations to destabilize the continuity of hegemony. Her work makes our presence at this campus as Black women, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary folks more livable. Her organizing alongside other Black students was part of the collective efforts of resistance that brought forth programs like the High Potential Program that turned in the Academic Advancement Program, saw the birth of NOMMO the first Black college student newspaper in the country, the founding years of BSU, and so many other counterspaces and sites of counterlogics that have necessarily buttressed the opposing forces of the university. I know it is not Sonja alone who pronounced a Black sense of place, at odds with the hegemonic geography of the campus. But she is someone to celebrate. She and all the Black women that I had brief encounters within the archive, who I hope to later better recover, and may never glimpses all made our lives in this space that much more livable.

Coming back to Zenzele Isoke (2018) and her enunciation of a Black feminist ethnographer intervention, I think about what is possible in holding both the here and now and the then and there to story the else –where and –when. Expanding the constellation of methods of survivance by weaving both the past and present together, I hope to continue looking forward to

the world that is to come. I hope we all enjoy the alterity that awaits us as Black women, gender nonconforming and nonbinary folks continue to refuse the constraints of liminality.

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