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### **The Radical Possibilities of Being Human: Exploring the Risk, Violence, and Rewards of Knowing and Being Known (A Survival Guide for Liminal Feminists)**

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The Radical Possibilities of Being Human:  
Exploring the Risk, Violence, and Rewards of Knowing and Being Known  
(A Survival Guide for Liminal Feminists)

by

Parvoneh Shirgir

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
The City University of New York  
2014



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PARVONEH SHIRGIR  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## Abstract

### The Radical Possibilities of Being Human: Exploring the Risk, Violence, and Rewards of Knowing and Being Known (A Survival Guide for Liminal Feminists)

by

Parvoneh Shirgir

Advisor: Professor Shifra Sharlin

Within this liminal feminist survival guide I present a collection of personal experiences and analysis of these moments in order to elucidate how and when violence occurs. I foreground my thought process and the ideas and figures that keep me hopeful, help remind me that our world is not concrete but instead changing, shifting, and malleable. What follows is a necessarily partial (and somewhat useless, somewhat useful) survival guide for liminal feminists, those who exist on the edges of boundaries and encounter all of the possibilities and fears that come with such a position. I present not so much a prescriptive guide, but rather a series of questions and explorations of the systematic, rhetorical, and epistemological foes that hide in plain sight, in our bodies, in our memories, as well as tools and ways of viewing that might challenge the authority of such foes.

## Acknowledgments

In some ways preparing a page of acknowledgments feels unnecessary, given the contents of the text that follows. Part survival guide, part love letter, I hope it speaks to how much the people in my life (family, friends, and strangers) have shaped me in large and small ways.

Still, I want to express heaps of gratitude to Shifra for tolerating my perpetual tardiness with good humor, for helping to shape firm and realistic (yet pliable) goals, for pushing me to explore different voices, topics, and styles, for soothing fears, suggesting smart questions, for avoiding solutions and celebrating process, for guiding in such a trusting way, for commiserating about names and complicated relations, for slogging through lists like these, and in so doing embodying the liminal feminist in our process together. I had not imagined writing a thesis could be fun, I had not imagined writing a thesis at all like this one, and I am grateful to have found these previously unknown wonders. Thanks also to the faculty and students in the Graduate Center who have exposed me to texts, methods, and insights that have greatly influenced the thinking I have done on these pages as well as in the wider world.

I worry about the limits of this endeavor, but I would like to give some additional, incomplete thanks. Thank you to my mom, dad, and brother for their love, for teaching me to care for tender, precious things, for letting me be an indoor kid, for imagining things for myself I did not yet believe possible. Thank you to Claire, Maabo, Grant, and Ernie for building homes with me during this project. Thank you to Em, Molly, Kye, Eleanor, Daniel, Aja, Vy, Kath, Sarah, Ali, and John for exploring worlds of ideas and possibilities with me; hopefully you won't mind if you see some of them reimaged here. Thank you to Jeannie for demonstrating how theorizing our own lives can be healing, exciting, and expansive. Thank you to my coworkers and my students, two groups of colleagues who have been inspiring and encouraging. Thank you to the friendfamily I have found in Minnesota, Iowa, Delhi, and New York.

Thank you to people who have engaged in debates and discussions on the internet and in our homes, those who have delighted and maddened me both. Thank you to the strong women and eccentrics in my world. Thank you to Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison and Jhumpa Lahiri and Carson McCullers and Lynda Barry and those who celebrate community, complexity, and survival, and share their imaginings with others. Unending thanks to a world that is difficult but ours, and the potentials that let me believe in the beauty and power of people, of living.

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## **Introduction: What do I know?**

I recently sorted through the “drafts” folder of my personal email account and found that I have gotten very good at holding back my anger. In the last few years, especially, I have drafted emails with my typical fervor and then paused, let them sit, let my emotions mellow, let the message languish and fade from my mind. Friends, old college acquaintances, city council members, university presidents, all have messages waiting for them, furious keystrokes turned still, held in a semi-fixed state.

At some point I quit putting recipients’ email addresses in the “to” field as a kind of self-monitoring security system, a safety measure to keep me from impulsively hitting “send.” Yet I let the emails sit, I do not delete them. In part I imagine this is out of my sometimes troublesome attachment to documentation and personal chronicling, a journal of sorts. Remember when a dear friend told me I needed to adjust my tone when I talk about race, that I was an ineffective writer because I was “irate” and therefore not “educating” my white former classmates about racism? Remember, self, when Speaker Quinn sent an email about healthier school lunches but focused primarily on obesity and fat-shaming rather than health? (The draft is short; I realized quickly that obesity rhetoric is too beloved, that politicians are not radical size activists.) Remember being called a bully for addressing racism, again. Remember your confusion, trying to respond to an acquaintance who perpetuated rape culture while attempting to show anti-racist solidarity? A call to maintain need-blind admissions at a rural Iowa liberal arts college, remember that? A blog comment turned email questioning a white woman’s analysis of HRA’s teen pregnancy prevention campaign in NYC. Remember? Remember every time you lost faith in the world? Remember every time you got angry about that loss? Remember every time you realized one person is not the world? Remember every time you moved on?

Certainly I am a Leo, certainly I am proud, much of the time I am an angry mixed (racially, emotionally, generally) woman in a world that constantly asks me to sit down and shut

up. Why is this asked of me? Implicitly and explicitly, I feel challenged on a daily basis to defend my subjective (angry, irate, irrational, proud) perspective, to stay quiet if I cannot prove myself to be impartial. I wish, instead, to focus on exactly how exciting it is to be necessarily partial, imperfect, unknowing and unknown.

What can I claim to know? Where can I claim expertise, at least enough to share with others? Who are “experts” and how did they become such? I am in my late twenties, have I seen enough to make observations on anything at all? On the other hand, haven’t children seen so much? Acknowledging and understanding my standpoint as such (being middle eastern and white, having dark hair, olive skin, and white privilege; being generally on the edges or in between categories of young and old, race and ethnicity, teacher and student; being a transplant in the city, a second generation immigrant, a person of diaspora; being uncomfortable with any of these categories, struggling with identity politics because I feel not “fully” anything; being mixed; being confused) I witness the hurts and rewards of a world that pursues concrete categories and yet is made up of liminal beings.

Though it is sometimes lonely to be particular, to be so subjective, mixed and mixing and so never quite fully in synch with others, this is not a uniquely personal situation. We are all at once fixed and solid and yet also shifting, growing. Accordingly our knowledge of our selves, others, and the world is also necessarily limited, but there this limit is not without its advantages. It is exactly these limits that allow us to know each other in imperfect, partial connections, and to take the radical risk to love and support each other when faced with this admittedly terrifying barrier. As Judith Butler explains, “we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself” 135). This humanity is given through a process: “To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to

be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven" (Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," 135). How moving, life-giving, to know at once that it is uncomfortable and even dangerous to engage with others we cannot fully know and to expose ourselves in the process while also knowing that this encounter can lead to possibilities we had not imagined, knowledge and meaning we could not have imagined on our own.

Derrida repeats this idea (or perhaps more likely Butler echoes Derrida and I have reversed them—in any case the repetition serves as a reminder that this paradox is persistent and of great import). "The structure of my relation to the other is of a 'relation without relation,'" he posits (14). This relation without a relation "is a relation in which the other remains absolutely transcendent. I cannot reach the other. I cannot know the other from the inside and so on" (14). Like Butler, Derrida notes the danger, the anxiety this unknown presents. Fortunately, his take is positive; being *related* but unable to fully *relate* to the other due to our limited, subjective perspective is "not an obstacle but the condition of love, of friendship, and of war, too, a condition of the relation to the other" (Derrida 14). Perhaps I am repeating one of the oldest unsolvable debates—how we might sacrifice individual freedom for the benefits of community (bestowing benefits on the community as contributors and also benefitting from the community created by this communal sacrifice). How much must we sacrifice? Are our sacrifices worthwhile?

I do not have concrete answers to these questions but I do find this paradox glimmers under the surface of so many of the violent moments I have witnessed or experienced in my life. Is my perspective more worthy than an other's? What happens when we disagree? How can we make decisions for ourselves while also being situated as social beings? How can we better survive moments of violence? How can we shift the conditions that lead to violent moments?

Knowing that we are both blessed and cursed by our interdependence, what futures might we imagine?

In writing about knowledge and the potential for violence, I choose to use my own subjective life to discuss theory, as this subjectivity is not a flaw but rather an integral part of reality, of any kind of knowledge claim we might aim to make. As a woman, especially, I have been socialized to feel shameful about prioritizing my own story. I have inherited the urge to deny my centrality from my mother, aunts, grandmothers, and cousins, who all prioritize others as a duty and desire, both (a trait I find both necessary and valuable, but also troublesome in its gendered burden). At the same time, I have inherited conversations from women I will never meet, Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and so many others who have grappled with voicing their personal, subjective perspectives.

I feel a sense of controversy when claiming my own importance in such a conversation, but at the same time it is exactly these glimpses into other lives that I have found nourishing, enriching, and enlivening in my brief, necessarily limited life. Instead of berating myself, using internalized systems of self-doubt, I hope to turn instead to the radical faith and generosity needed to challenge prevailing rhetorical modes so that we may demand a coherent but limitless worldview. I am full of doubts, surrounded by perceived and persuasive limits to my knowledge and experiences. Yet I am also—we are all also—full of possibilities. If there are other processes, possibilities unknown to me, I would love to know about them. It feels nourishing, if not imperative, for us to share, to help each other. I do not imagine that we can have too much of this work.

Accordingly I present a collection of experiences and analysis of these moments in order to elucidate how and when violence occurs. I foreground my thought process and the ideas and figures that keep me hopeful, help remind me that our world is not concrete but instead changing, shifting, and malleable. What follows is a necessarily partial (and somewhat useless, somewhat useful) survival guide for liminal feminists, those who exist on the edges of

boundaries and encounter all of the possibilities and fears that come with such a position. I present not so much a prescriptive guide, but rather a series of questions and explorations of the systematic, rhetorical, and epistemological foes that hide in plain sight, in our bodies, in our memories, as well as tools and ways of viewing that might challenge the authority of such foes.

## **I. What's wrong with you?**

### **The art of recognizing everyday violence**

People feel entitled to know certain things about each other. “How are you?” “What’s your name?” “Where are you from?” “Did you get enough rest? You look tired.” We face spoken and unspoken questions throughout our daily lives and typically think little of the rote encounters. Yet some moments linger, feel notable in some way. For me these are most often moments where I have felt a tone, a meaning, a desire that added to my understanding of a person or surprised my existing conceptions. I may not remember idle hallway chitchat with my coworker but I might recall these encounters if they add to a generally friendly and caring tone, or playful hijinks, or indicate a worried demeanor. At times these moments of minor revelation have even been about my own self.

When I was around six years old my family enrolled me in dance classes. I don’t remember much about the time except I was to practice between lessons by watching a tape and mirroring the motions in our newly carpeted suburban basement. As an adult, I have memories of my mother telling me I didn’t practice as much as I should, though I’m not sure if those conversations happened while I was enrolled or in our later reflections. The memories are connected and blurred with time. I do remember feeling excited about the costumes, wearing makeup and having photos taken at our big recital. There is also an aura of confusion in my memory—not that the memories themselves are confused, but that I was confused about my participation as the event went on. I knew I hadn’t mastered the steps, I wasn’t sure where to

wait, I had few friends in the class and mostly wandered alone, hoping I was in the right places at the appropriate times. And then I have a strong memory of standing on bleachers, perhaps for a performance with the full studio, and hearing two girls a few feet away snicker and call me a “witch.”

While dance recital, suburban Minnesotan, Middle Eastern, six year old me did not understand being called a witch, I understood from the tone, the separation of myself from the speaker, that it was not a desirable thing to be. Why would these near strangers pay attention to me at all? And why call me a witch? What did I know about witches? They weren’t pretty. The Wicked Witch of the West was the main cultural icon I knew (Glenda the Good Witch never quite captured the witch spirit in the same way). I hunted for reasons I would be connected to this undesirable figure. My dark hair? The dark circles under my eyes? What was different about me and why and how, exactly, should I feel ashamed?

Now I recognize a fear in that comment (“you are a witch—mysterious, powerful, dangerous in your unpredictable difference”), one tied to racism and gender both. That young girls have already internalized these fears and act as monitors of desirable gender and racial presentation is not surprising, though it is certainly painful, sad. When I am told not to worry too much about stereotypes, pop culture, representational politics I feel haunted by this exchange and others like it. A dark child witch in sequins and mascara and lipstick, feeling shyly pretty but then ashamed for imagining that the modes for presenting traditional (white) femininity could ever be read as anything but aberrant, violent, cruel, or despicable on such a specter.

In another context, however—in the early 2010s—witchy movies are popular, attractive, reclaimed by young people from their 1990s roots and lauded for the stories of women with transgressive power oftentimes accompanied by strong community. On an intellectual level I am wholly supportive. As I reflect I realize just how many witches figured in the media I consumed as a kid. Yet there is a certain distance between this rich history and me. I am fascinated, yes,

but I don't share in the joy of this tradition. My sequined self put up a boundary, unknowingly, and it has been difficult to breach.

Likewise for mustaches. Party stores are making incredible profit off of seemingly silly mustache party favors. Stuck on as realistic hair, held up by a stick as a paper photo prop, or blown up and filled with air as balloons, I feel like a killjoy as I frown at each iteration. My Iranian father wears a mustache, as do many Iranian men, in large part to minimize the size and shape of their noses. Iranian noses are grand and shapely and fit decidedly outside the western beauty mold, so much so that Iran has been named the "Nose Job Capital of the World" by media outlets. To live as one wants to live is a certain kind of freedom, but to want to live differently because of racist societal beauty standards is also a politically motivated want. How to carry these both at once? If the leap to the political feels too hasty, consider also that in political cartoons it is almost certainly an oversized, hooked nose that indicates Iranian nationality.

What is wrong with me, that I cannot let others enjoy their photobooth mustache props, their drinking cups emblazoned with old fashioned mustaches at just the angle to appear part of their own face? Isn't it goofy? Isn't it harmless? In part I find it difficult to laugh along with a joke that feels rhetorically faulty. The humor seems to be premised on the seemingly ridiculous idea that the wearers would ever style themselves with a mustache. The reality of my dad, and of most of the men in my paternal family, is outrageous to a young Western audience. Or, perhaps, women without body hair find it humorous to imagine that they would ever have an old fashioned, masculine signifier like a mustache. Now the joke tramples on the bodies of gender nonconforming people, of hairy women (myself included), of anyone who may already feel surveilled, marginalized, maligned because of the transgressive signifiers they carry corporeally. Isn't it harmless?

One of the struggles and (unintended) skills of a liminal feminist is noticing hints of violence in seemingly friendly practices. Comments, trends, or jokes that reinforce norms and

call out difference at the cost of the different take part in the process of binding those deemed “other,” contribute to the limiting of the other’s personhood. Where do these limits come from, how are they initiated? From microaggressions to physical violence, these impulses are not natural, though they have become normed, normal. Perhaps, instead of asking what is wrong with a child witch, what is wrong with an Iranian nose, we might wonder what is wrong with the world, what is wrong with the systems that inform such thinking and actions.

Investigating the existing modes that harm through limits and bounds is a necessary step in surviving as a liminal feminist. Imagining the world otherwise is also imperative for our survival. The world I want is something I cannot even imagine, it is so far from the world I live in. I fear, sometimes, that I cannot aspire to this unidentified world because I cannot even articulate it. What do I want? Is it feasible? How will we get there? If I do not have these answers I worry I cannot ask for anything at all.

We live in a world with corporeal bounds (violence, death) but also shifting, malleable, constructed bounds (gender, race, sexuality, ability, ‘identities’ in general). Paradoxically, constructed bounds are often used to legitimize corporeal violence (racism and the legacies of slavery, violence against women and LGBTQ individuals, colonialism and imperialism). As these elements interact and intertwine it becomes difficult to distinguish any static bounds at all. We struggle to react to whichever bounds we encounter in order to avoid corporeal consequences. Larger, structural responses can be lost in the tangle.

This kind of living can be terrifying. Carolyn Heilbrun points out that many women writers have struggled to survive in such conditions. “For Sexton and Plath,” she writes, “suicide became part of life, so violent was the action necessary for rebirth and truth” (Heilbrun 70). Suicide rates for trans and queer individuals and rates of institutional violence (via police, prisons, poverty wages, and too many more) experienced by people of color reflect the real, harmful mental and emotional threats that come from a world full of restrictive regulations.

This violence can be outright or it can be the result of small, repeated, nearly unidentifiable moments of restriction.

Most (if not all) forms of oppression attempt to maintain boundaries that are protean but which are presented as static and unyielding. It can seem scary, living in an undefined, borderless, constantly shifting world. Indeed, some mobilize their distrust of ambiguity into norms, bounds, and regulatory systems that can be monitored and maintained across times and distances. Those who transgress these bounds subject themselves (willingly or not) to reproach through various forms of violence (ideological, emotional, physical).

If these constructed boundaries are questioned or challenged, however, their malleable nature is revealed, and change, once hidden, comes into view. To be able to control the discourse and ideologies surrounding change is to shape the ways in which we accept or push back against constructed boundaries (for if boundaries are made they can also be challenged and even demolished). I would like to define power as “access to or the ability to limit change,” meaning the ability to maintain, challenge, or adjust existing forms of knowing and being. Power, or control of change, might take the shape of reinforcing and policing boundaries, or perhaps deconstructing these forms, or, ideally, by creating something new, unknown, and liberatory. Within this framework I define “living” (the vitality—corporeal and otherwise—of life) as “constant change.”

There are certainly various forms of living (thinking, creating, becoming, being). Yet we move, grow, learn, integrate, merge, and adjust without fail. Science fiction novelist Octavia Butler wrote, “The only lasting truth is change” (1). My understanding of this quote, which appears in a dystopian black feminist bildungsroman, is that “truth” is being used literally (the only truth which can last is that nothing can last—all is change) and also as a placeholder for life and (re)production—in order to be alive we must be in constant states of change. Some things may be still for a period of time, and we enter both liminal spaces and periods of calm and rest, but nothing stays one way. Our lives, and living itself, are constantly in flux, motion, transition,

unrest. Death is the only state in which motion seems to end, a kind of permanent rest, but even death brings about life—matter rots, decomposes, and then renews the earth. Some creatures actually rely on the death of others for their living.

Dominant conceptions of static, perfect norms are false ideals that are constantly out of reach; those with power often write and rewrite the conditions for acceptable being (laws, school standards, educational requirements, beauty standards, manners and etiquette). Yet rather than inspiring inclusive achievement, the idea of perfection actually becomes the regulatory criterion that limits motion and growth. Instead I propose a feminist future in which we embrace change, the unknown, and the impossible. Whenever possible, it seems prudent to move beyond linear thinking or compartmentalized understandings of possibilities and boundaries in order to be expansive and creative. At the same time we must not reject histories, traditions, and corporealities that we might find meaningful, beautiful, or even hard and hurtful. We would only reinscribe the systems that harm if we attempt to erase, tidy, or simplify our realities.

I especially want to pursue connections between existing, unsanctioned, radical ways of knowing/being/becoming (transgressive figures, acts of resistance, relations and connections), and unknown, yet-to-be-determined but necessary ways of knowing/being/becoming that might support liberatory work. I am interested and invested in potentials and possibilities that may be known and restricted and also those that may be unknown but desired. I survive when I recognize others who share my struggle, who struggle in ways unfamiliar to me and thus expand my understanding of the world, or when I hope for things I have not yet envisioned but know may be possible because I have no knowledge otherwise.

But before we can speculate this future, we must realize that impermanence and a lack of certainty do not necessitate a lack of security or safety. We have learned to associate change and impermanence with insecurity, vulnerability, and lack. In reality I believe we are always vulnerable beings, and this vulnerability makes us susceptible to violence but also allows us to

adapt, grow, and know robust, life-supporting change. Nonetheless, we might have to grapple with typically discarded emotions like fear and faith as we speculate an expansive future.

### **What to do when you witness everyday violence?**

There are times when I know I have behaved badly towards others. At times others try to tell me that I have behaved badly. On a message board, for example, I expressed disappointment in a friend's younger sister wearing a Native American war bonnet as a costume in a photo shoot (she is a Hapa woman and so not as outrageous, in my mind, as the white people I have seen in traditional adornments from Native cultures that have been historically marginalized and even eliminated; she is not unimplicated, either). Later, anonymously, my distress was called out as inappropriate:

“Sun June 20th 2010, 12:38 AM  
i'm pro cultural sensitivity but people getting self righteous about hipster headdresses is too much for me. cultural appropriation happens all the time, visual culture and the meanings it produces change so fast and constantly. this is not something to throw self righteous tantrums about.”

I engaged for a while, discussing the ills of imperialism, the ethics of deferring to Native people who have asked outsiders not to wear headdresses, the possibilities of cultural exchange, the impossibility of exchange when one group appropriates from another. Yet in the end the issues were not related to the original photo, or Native rights, or even aesthetics. In the end, the issue was not the problem I raised, it was the way in which I engaged. Others mentioned that addressing this problem would wear me out, that my anger was counterproductive for myself, or for movements, or that my tone would alienate anyone I might hope to engage. If I follow this pattern to its logical conclusion, it seems the issues that I raise are not external issues at all. It seems the issue is me. I am too upset, too loud, too brazen. I'm a bitch, an infant throwing a tantrum, oppressive, a feminazi (to be so many things at once seems to also fuel the frustration).

It can be a blessing to know and be known by others, but it can also be challenging, even damaging. Yet being called wrong, being treated as if I have behaved badly does not feel like

such a slight if I remember the roots, the reasons I have become so. I am considered ill behaved because I am angry; I am frustrated that others have been denied possibilities, that some take possibilities at the expense of others (what is the appeal of a headdress after all—to look exotic, wild, and alluring? To “play Native”?). I am also angry (then, and often) when the possibility of my subjective truth is attacked. As a New York City teacher for previously disengaged young adult students, I revisit this anger whenever I remember that my students’ possibilities are constantly under attack, that their knowledge and expertise are undervalued or even dismissed by a testing-focused educational system, that their physical freedom is threatened by courts and the police, that their exuberance is quashed by a culture that loves to consume youth culture but does not stand for youth to be loud, inquisitive, challenging. If I trace these patterns I realize that my anger is not the issue. My anger is instead a warning sign, the canary in the cave informing me that there is danger, a threat to the practices and possibilities that help us survive.

In discussing headdresses as fashion accessory my audience seemed disturbed at my emotions and indeed, regulation of emotion has long been a way to put liminal bodies back within bounds. Women, for example, are not to be too loud or they are considered defective, leading to historical institutionalization of “hysterical” lunatics. Being black and loud is to risk being labeled “uppity” or unruly. Why are emotions and tone so vital to systems of regulation and violence? How are such mundane ways of being leveraged to assess one’s worthiness or safety from violence?

There is much to digest in Christopher Castiglia’s ambitious book, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*. Bolstered by psychoanalytic theory, Castiglia crafts a rich account of complicated, subtle shifts in antebellum American sociality that last today. Individuals—understood to be partial and thus a threat to unbiased democratic discourse—were moved out of the public arena, and institutions—which were posited to be impartial—now guide our public political lives. Democracy has been displaced in the process, he argues, but it is still active, and it is not lost: no longer housed in

outward public debate, democracy can instead be found in our bodies, in our management of tenuous emotions, in our conflicted interior selves. Spurred by the pressures of social reform, citizens interiorized the debates that were once social—tempering desires and urges in order to perform one’s democratic, patriotic duty. *Interior States* thus utilizes the concept of citizenship both literally and figuratively; citizens of the United States, in the name of democracy, locate the nation within themselves, becoming citizens of their own bodily micro-states. For a liminal feminist, for example, self-regulation is an impossible and restrictive requirement, but the traditional alternative is to face ridicule or violence. Thankfully Castiglia underscores how this system was created, indicating as he does so that this system is not permanent.

The move to interior states was obviously not without complication. “We have been encouraged to misrecognize the location of the social,” Castiglia explains, “finding it, not in association with others, but in the turbulent and conflicted interiors of our own bodies” (2). As if our (witchy, mustached) bodies were not under enough external scrutiny, we are also tasked with managing our emotional interior. This new conception of reality “overpopulates” the subject with the struggles of the state, asking the individual to perform social tasks of surveillance and self-management within their interior state. The task is impossible, and Castiglia outlines the fraught results, explaining that “the increasingly discordant human interior...becomes a microcosm of the equally riven sociality of nineteenth-century America,” a “*nervous state*” (2). Reform in particular created “types”—binaries such as good/bad, indulgent/restrained—that cannot be firmly located in actual human experience; citizens shuttle between these types. The interiorization of such incongruent social divisions results in what Castiglia has termed “nervous citizenship,” a citizenship that I would argue exists today (10).

Interiorizing also has outward political consequences. Individual participation in democracy is set up to fail. Not only do we lose our sense of outward democratic engagement, but the failure of self-management also predicates institutional intervention. Castiglia outlines the process of institutionalism which led to the production of the modern security state:

democracy should be impartial, but individuals, especially with their newly troubled interior states, are full of conflict, so institutions, which can outlast such fickle members, replace citizens in democratic decision making. The institution has a life of its own, and citizens have put the state at risk by failing to manage democratic interior states so institutional state security measures step in. In fact, in antebellum political theorist writings, the state is discussed primarily as a network of civil institutions rather than a participatory collection of people. If we follow this logic to our contemporary treatment of people and institutions we can see how the legal system might legitimize corporations receiving the benefits of personhood while women's bodies are controlled by the state.

By enunciating and celebrating counter-narratives and imagination, Castiglia begins a project of healing our ailing interior states. "The assault on imagination drove a wedge between invention and politics that became one of our most destructive inheritances from the period of popular reform," he writes (12). Yet he is also hopeful—in antebellum writing we see eruptions; interiority can be put aside. Debate and negotiation can be revived. His epilogue attempts to outline how we might evolve a "post-interior sociality" (298). This is not a call for an unsentimental culture, but rather one that does not reduce and bind affect to interior states, as such interiority leads to disenfranchised citizens and powerful institutions. We can join "the melancholic, monstrous, addicted, and dreamy who do the hard work of archiving abjected social possibilities in the face of interiority's normative rule" (297). We can interrupt our short-circuited cycles of desire and restraint by reimagining desire not "as an end in itself" but instead "as a means of achieving *pleasure*" (298). Instead of deferring justice to institutions or futurity we can reanimate democratic associations and pursue healthy public debate in order to attend to justice now.

Some of Castiglia's most poignant moments arise when he reminds us that we still live in interior states and that this displacement of democracy has had lasting effects. We are accustomed to the idea that the "personal is political," but Castiglia asks us to also note how the

political has invaded the personal—how we have taken in some very messy conflicts—and how we can alter this method of sociality. His project is ultimately an optimistic one.

Friendships, surveillance, and authenticity are themes throughout Castiglia's early American texts as well as today's interior, intranational, and international politics. In describing "The Politics of Being Friends with White People," black scholar and writer Brittney Cooper explains how certain differences are tolerable in childhood friendships that begin to be intolerable in later life. "At 30 or 35, the fact that your white friends now vote Republican alongside their parents strikes you as a choice that detrimentally impacts your material existence," for instance (Cooper). There are corporeal consequences to our interdependence. On an international level, the United States may be "friends" with some countries and have "poor relations," or even be "foes" with others. This may seem merely a metaphor meant to quickly and easily convey simple, intelligible versions of complex relationships, but there seems to be a loss in meaning, a collapsing through such a rhetorical analogy. International relations between countries are not the same as amicable relations between friends and yet they are presented as equal.

As with friends who vote for officials with restrictive politics, there are corporeal as well as psychological repercussions to international "friendships." The US has been on poor terms, sometimes not even on speaking terms, with Iran for the bulk of my life. Media, classmates, and even "educated" adults defer to the discourse of friendship, making assumptions about not just the country but also the people of Iran based on Iran's relationship with the US as conveyed by talking heads. This othering dynamic informs how we intend to interact with supposed foes—allows individuals to imagine it is just to use racial slurs, protest the building of mosques, sanction sales of vital medications to Iranian pharmacies, even consider war. What is forgotten is that the terms of friendship are created and not inherently just, that these foes are also part of the self through diaspora, that friendships are difficult and complex.

Forgetting seems to be a personal preoccupation—I create systems for myself so that I do not forget my keys, coworkers’ birthdays, friends’ culinary dislikes. There is joy to being prepared, being thoughtful, having a full menu of options, having access to all of these possibilities. Perhaps this preoccupation is also due to the times I have witnessed the unfortunate consequences of forgetting. When we forget that friendships, including international relations, are complex and reparable, we lose so many opportunities and restrict ourselves to an unnecessarily small, predetermined set of options.

Whether it is through intellectual restriction or physical exclusion, “a state in which there would be only *unum* would be a terrible catastrophe. And we have had, unfortunately, a number of such experiences” (Derrida 15). Derrida articulates one form of this tendency to limit through the lens of plurality: “A state without plurality and respect for plurality would be, first, a totalitarian state, and not only is this a terrible thing, but it does not work. We know that it is terrible and that it does not work. Finally, it would not even be a state. It would be, I do not know what, a stone, a rock, or something like that,” and while I object to Derrida’s belittling of stones and rocks (even the seemingly inert are consequential, and I value minerals and their impact on our water cycle, their role as habitat, their use as weapon, too much to stand their dismissal) it is a funny line, humorous at the same time as it is bleak (15). Like Castiglia, Derrida does not believe this is a permanent or given situation. Instead, “a state as such must be attentive as much as possible to plurality, to the plurality of peoples, of languages, cultures, ethnic groups, persons, and so on. That is the condition for a state” (Derrida 15). Liminal feminists, too, are inherently plural. We flourish as others discover their liminal natures and expand the criteria for relation.

Because relating will always be imperfect, the criteria for relating must also respond to our subjective and shifting selves and circumstances. Within this mode of thought, we might delineate between law (which is a static thing) and justice (which is an movement, an act). Derrida explains that law and justice are not synonymous: “You can calculate what is right. You

can judge; you can say that, according to the code, such and such misdeed deserves ten years of imprisonment. That may be a matter of calculation. But the fact that it is rightly calculated does not mean that it is just” (17). For those of us who believe in restorative justice and prison abolition this is a familiar distinction, though it does not fit in traditional discourse. “A judge, if he wants to be just, cannot content himself with applying the law. He has to reinvent the law each time. If he wants to be responsible, to make a decision, he has not simply to apply the law, as a coded program, to a given case, but to reinvent in a singular situation a new just relationship; that means that justice cannot be reduced to a calculation of sanctions, punishments, or rewards” (Derrida 17). We can expand this notion beyond the realm of law as such to apply this thinking to other codes, boundaries, or regulations we experience on a daily basis.

Mainstream ideas about gender, for example, are a code, but the unspoken rules of binary gender are enforced without attention to justice. A gender is assigned at birth and a series of assumptions and choices are made for that individual as parents, doctors, and strangers make calculations and apply restrictive codes (boy babies in blue, girls in pink to start). Traditional binary thinking assumes that all persons will fit within the binary (or can be coerced into fitting). If we investigate how codes are utilized we might see that “[j]ustice, if it has to do with the other, with the infinite distance of the other, is always unequal to the other, is always incalculable” for “[o]nce you relate to the other as the other, then something incalculable comes on the scene, something which cannot be reduced to the law or to the history of legal structures” (Derrida 18). Instead we must accept, even encourage situated and unidentical acts of justice instead of blanket application of (oftentimes arbitrary) codes.

### **Beware of domesticated capitalism: entrenched, invisible violence**

Before delving deeply into ideas of law, justice, and rights I would like to borrow Jane Flax’s definition of theory, wherein theory is made up of “a series of assumptions about the way

the world works, what's available (to me), and what isn't" (81). This conceptualization nicely articulates the everyday, implicit theory making we might make more explicit as we seek survival techniques and speculate a vivacious future. Notably, this framework includes discussion of availability, and thus resources, but it does not necessarily imply that what is available (or not) must be limited or scarce. Instead, we might focus on the assumptions we have been taught to make that imply that we must compete for vital resources, power, and status based on identity.

Hosting visitors is a tricky task for me. On the one hand I desire time with people I love, want to share the home I am creating. On the other hand (or perhaps a consequence of the first hand), I feel pressure to create as many meaningful moments as possible during our short time together. What this typically means is that I become anxious, feel our moments as almost a burden of love.

Sometimes I manage to think of an event or meal or activity that I feel surprised, excited, and confident about. I save reminders for myself in online spreadsheets, calendars, emails I send with my own address as the recipient. When my mom visited in early 2014, escaping Minnesota's extended winter for New York's grey spring, I had squirreled away a message about the *Wendy Williams Show*. An unread message sat at the bottom of my inbox, nudging me to make plans, reserve free audience tickets. At first the dates we needed were booked, but in the first day of my mom's visit we searched the website again and found a few seats available. Selections seem to be made based on application or perhaps a lottery, it was unclear. We decided to put in our application and hoped for the best.

As a tomboy child and a teenager hoping to disappear I never wore makeup much while living at home. In my adulthood I have found a beauty to traditions of adornment and camaraderie with friends and strangers who think about who they want to be and how to best represent that self to the world. My mom was surprised when I suggested a trip to a beauty supply store when we had some time to fill between outings, then. We were experimenting with

colors and rubbing expensive creams on our skin when I received a call from an intern at the *Wendy Williams Show* letting me know we should arrive for a taping early the next day.

The dress code for the *Wendy Williams Show* is more involved than any other daytime talk show (I had researched most shows that film in New York). Comedy tapings and pseudo-news programs request the standard “no white, no hats, no logos” (I believe, having grown up on a lot of reality television where squabbling housemates’ t-shirt slogans were blurred, that the latter is requested so that the network avoids paying royalties to the trademark owner). Wendy Williams, former radio shock jock, celebrity gossip lover, breast implant acknowledger (even celebrator), mother, and self-proclaimed Jersey girl insists on something more. “Think trendy, think chic, think Wendy!” the website urges. Wendy is known for featuring shots of her audience dancing to her signature “Woo, Wooo!” theme music and sweeping footage of the crowd greeting her with both hands tossed forward, as if to show off a manicure or jewelry, shouting “How you do-in?!” back to Wendy in almost a parody of the host herself. Wendy is in on the joke, just as she's in on how high maintenance she is, how candid and personal and subjective her entire operation may be.

Wendy knows her show is a guilty pleasure, and she relishes in the guilt of talking about the taboo openly. She is loud, she is black, she is feminine, she is proud. In other words, the “Wendy Williams Show” is fun. Wendy is unabashedly personal, flawed. She asks often if her audience disagrees with her, noting that she is sharing “my opinion and we’re all entitled to our opinion.” Her opinion carries weight, of course, but it is not final, fixed. And so my mother and I shopped for “trendy, chic” outfits the night before the taping, questioning whether prints were simply “bold” or crossed into the territory of “too busy.”

One of the features of the *Wendy Williams Show* is called “Ask Wendy,” wherein the host offers advice to audience members about sex, career, parenting, and the like. While in the audience waiting room we were explicitly encouraged to write down questions that were specific and personal. Even the title of the show reflects the personal and subjective. Wendy is a diva

figure, with her name and face printed on gaudy pink glitter board in the garage-like entrance to the studio holding room. It seems it is exactly this celebration of self—and invitation for others to do likewise—that draws Wendy’s audience to her and to the show.

While waiting in the audience holding room I noticed friends and family groups chatting together, fixing their hair, filling out the “Ask Wendy” questionnaire. One young woman about my age, of probably similar mixed heritage, seemed eager to be selected to appear on camera. A sort of nervous and excited energy pervaded the space as we all wonder if we will be selected, if the camera would ever stop on us for a reaction shot, if Wendy would call out to us to compliment our shoes. This young woman was selected to ask her question and stood at the far end of the room waiting to be coached by producers on the schedule for the day’s taping. She fixed her hair, adjusted her dress, had her friend check her makeup. I was surprised, as we looked on, to hear my mom say, “Wow, she sure likes herself a lot, huh?”

In part this was surprising because my mom and I had nervously shopped specifically for the show, had worried about our ability to walk from the subway to the studio in our shoes, had wondered where we would be seated and if the camera would capture our outfits or makeup. This stranger was more obvious about her excitement. Her primping belied a familiar paradox—insecurity but also a belief that she looked her best. I paused on my mom’s words and tried to evaluate why it seemed amiss. All day I had been vacillating between excitement and shame, worried about my appearance and engagement with this silly but enjoyable environment, and then worried about not being feminist or anti-capitalist as I consumed beauty products and department store goods to bolster my confidence. And I realized that it was exactly this system that led my mom to think that a stranger might have too much self-worth. “She sure likes herself a lot” implies that confidence and self-love have limits, that these should be limited resources. It is a comment that reflects an internalized capitalist discourse.

Capitalism presumes a shared system of values and a false belief in equal access, perpetuating the myth of American meritocracy. It posits that resources are scarce and

accordingly encourages high-demand items to carry extra value (and higher price). Feelings—like self-worth—do not escape capitalism’s purview. This person liked herself “a lot”—implicit in this comment is a belief that one might like oneself, but there is a limit, and going beyond that limit is greedy or excessive. When I thought on this idea for a moment it seemed absolutely outrageous—I do not believe there is a woman in the world who likes herself “too much.” If anything, women like themselves too little, are too hard on themselves, do not love the way they look or speak or feel enough to live easily. And what if a woman liked herself a lot, even too much—what is at stake? Traditional capitalist logic would have us believe that self-confidence is a limited resource and that those who have a lot of this resource are keeping the good from others. An anti-capitalist framework allows imagined resources like “happiness” to be not limited materials to compete over, but instead plentiful, regenerative feelings that we can share in and support, celebrate.

Rather than seeing our common relationship to resources and approaching this connection with competition, we can see our struggles as connected and interdependent. If we cannot all have the same relationship to resources, since we are situated beings, we have too often assumed that we are suffering an inequality. The problem of subjective equality is approached with erroneous attempts to make equal mean same, which causes competition and even violence (a regulatory force). This is shortsighted problem solving, to be sure. If we internalize a capitalist understanding of scarcity and limited production, we fall back on ideas of uneven distribution and competition. In order to survive we must promote problem solving that is inventive and productive, a problem solving that is creative. Through an imaginative lens we can see that resources are not currently distributed evenly and, instead of accepting the limits of scarcity and distribution, imagine alternative structures, alternative resources. There is pleasure to be found in creativity, in working towards something new that resonates. Creativity represents a kind of radical notion of unlimited resources, and thus a radical notion of freedom.

Perhaps Laurie Finke's call for a theory that is "formulated in practice rather than idealistically and prescriptively decreed," might promote this kind of inventive creativity while also being an explicitly "dialogic, nonauthoritarian critical rhetoric" (269). We won't further our survival efforts if we merely imagine updates to existing oppressive systems. For Finke, theory must be "tied to political action" and "founded on the assumption that institutional change is inevitable but inevitably uneven" (269). If we are to thrive we might remember that being uneven is inevitable but not limiting—we will always be dissimilar, uneven, but this does not mean we are in competition.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" uses discrimination lawsuits as entry points for analysis of an unjust legal system. In doing so, she finds a troubling "tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw 139). This "single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law" conceptualizes "subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" such as race or gender, but not both at once (Crenshaw 139). Centering black women in her analysis (a rarity in mainstream law, to be sure), she argues that "[t]hese problems cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure" because "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" and to treat this experience as equal to the sum lacks particularity and nuance (Crenshaw 140). Instead we must look at intersectional identities as unique and valid in themselves. Traditionally, however, courts have ruled against black women plaintiffs on the grounds of these plaintiffs' inability to represent either blacks or women.

In one such case, the judge ruled that black women "should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies [race and gender] to create a new 'super-remedy' which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended" (Crenshaw 139). The system relies on the intentions of "the drafters," who are so often in positions to ignore or even

disenfranchise others. It is furthermore astounding to me that anyone's experience of both racism and sexism at once could be treated as a "super" position. Crenshaw's even-tempered tone juxtaposed nicely with these feelings—she allows the absurdity and injustice of these practices to shine through on their own.

There are consequences to the traditional single-axis framework. "The refusal to allow a multiply-disadvantaged class to represent others who may be singularly-disadvantaged defeats efforts to restructure the distribution of opportunity," Crenshaw writes (145). She does not call for redistribution but rather a restructuring—resetting the bones of the system—as the single-axis system limits any efforts to claim discrimination or bring about change other than relief through "minor adjustments within an established hierarchy" (Crenshaw 145). This hierarchy validates a "top-down strategy of using a singular 'but for' analysis" which necessitates proof that an experience would not have happened "but for" someone's "racial or sexual characteristics" (Crenshaw 151).

Crenshaw points out that this issue dates back to Sojourner Truth's "personal challenge to the coherence of the cult of true womanhood" (153). Truth asks "Ain't I a Woman?" to her audience of white women suffragettes, asking if she might be coherent as black and a woman at the same time. We can expand this conversation to scrutinize issues of representation—in several class action suits black women have been denied the ability to represent a coherent class. There is no "pure" claim of discrimination, though the legal system requires a pure claim, and neither is there anyone who is truly impartial, and yet our systems operate as if these are achievable and real concepts (Crenshaw 145).

These models assume only one kind of discrimination can occur at any one time, or that discrimination of distinct, intersectional identities is impossible. What would this system do with me, a white privileged Middle Eastern woman? Am I Middle Eastern enough? What exactly constitutes my racial legitimacy in this system? And when are these tools deployed? If black women had attempted these suits a bit earlier in this country's history they would have been

subject to a one-drop rule, read as black immediately (and thus excluded from legal standing), and yet today's single-axis framework challenges black women's ability to state discrimination against their womanhood and blackness because the court cannot manage to see their gender and race both (again excluding any legal standing). This practice "erases distinct experiences" and sends the message to intersectional individuals and groups that they are uncategorizable and thus unworthy of justice (Crenshaw 146).

Given these conditions, "liberty and justice for all" must denote a strange, limited definition of "all." Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests we revisit our history, to think of "Emmett Till, who was slaughtered for not comprehending the rules. For failing to distinguish Chicago, Illinois, from Money, Mississippi. For believing that there was one America, and it was his country." Until we live in a world that allows us to be multiple, to be dynamic, to accept this as coherent and legitimate—to treat each other as worthy while also compound, multiplicitous beings—we risk terrible violence, even death. A world that gives rules for all but protection for some, utilizing unspoken rules to limit our personhood, is a dangerous world to be in.

### **Capturing the problem with and violence of "rights"**

When I say that liminal feminists must survive I mean so very literally—we must find moments to live while we also experience moments that encourage our end. At times the world seems so bleak that living feels less expressive and creative and more a series of challenges without meaning. That so many close to me have considered, attempted, or succeeded at ending their own lives reminds me that this struggle has corporeal consequences, that our struggles are complex and do not arise from distinct threats but rather equally complicated systems, collections of experiences, and bodily chemistries that do not always support our subsistence.

Law, in particular, relies on problematic "classification tools" like gender that can cause great harm (Spade 288). Trans legal activist Dean Spade is critical of not just law's treatment of discrimination cases, but of the system overall. "[O]ur ability to think about oppression and

domination has been limited by the narrowness of the legal concept of ‘discrimination,’” and categories that are treated as bound and static (Spade 290). Additionally, “every time we fight some particularly egregious policy,” such as discrimination, “and seek change, we are also legitimizing and stabilizing the system overall,” (Spade 295). “Law seems to push us toward these kinds of individualizing, divisive decisions that ultimately undermine our anti-oppression goals, weaken solidarity within our communities and across social movements, and restrict our vision,” Spade writes, implicating the legal system in worsening rather than remedying injustices (299).

Spade calls the legal system “vulnerability-producing,” a phrase that demonstrates that vulnerability is not inherent in any identity or category, but is rather produced along with the creation of categories (289). Law treats rights as something to be held, owned, had—it is a capitalist mindset that believes rights to be scarce and in competition.

The logic of rights seems to be useful, but in order to defend or protect our rights we are subjected to systems that attempt to classify us in order to determine who qualifies and whose rights have been corroded. This is impossible and in fact harmful because the process necessitates the creation of static identities and objective experiences that cannot exist. Those who cannot fit into dominant identity categories are deemed inadequate subjects. This attempt to create a generic, “average” citizen consumer asks not “What is wrong with this system?” but rather “What is wrong with you?” This one-size-fits-all rhetoric is not limited to the production and consumption of material goods, but also entangles our notion of rights and freedom.

The dominant “perpetrator perspective” requires that a discrimination case place fault on an individual with evidence of intent and thus “affirms the fairness of the status quo and makes it illegal to address systematic oppression” (Spade 292). This is an illogical system that purports to be the most logical and fair, relying on “proof” and “fault” and other concepts that are made up but treated as undeniable fact.

In legal settings and in daily interactions the delineation between thinkable/unthinkable subject is mobilized to exclude, oppress, and even destroy those who are imagined “unthinkable.” Judith Butler explicitly states that in feminist analysis “[i]t was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed” (“Preface” 10). “The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object,” she writes (Butler 7). This analysis relies upon the idea that those with normative ideas of gender reinforce those norms largely out of fear that their own identities (and life) would lose meaning if others were allowed to be incongruent.

Law relies on the idea of universal rights; in order to allow for this impossibility, law turns the problem outside itself and rejects subjects who do not fit, names them impossible instead. I am interested in unpacking the metaphor of “universality” as a critical intervention for myself and others who seek more complex ways of being and knowing in our world. Universality in the legal sense does not actually imagine connections to the universe, to other creatures and organisms, to variety, but rather collapses distinctions in an effort to normalize and made the dissimilar the same. How exciting would it be to develop systems of justice that admitted the variety of the universal?

Linda Alcoff might guide us when she asserts that “we must develop the means to address the wrongs done to us without reinvoking the basis of those wrongs” (436). If there are some “who live and breathe in the interstices” of binary relations, we may see that binaries or limiting conceptions of what is possible are “not exhaustive; it is not necessary” (Butler, “Doing Justice” 65). Instead of being forced to ask “Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me?” and feeling trapped, we might look for ways to expand our meaning making, discover ways to acknowledge that the boundaries are not as static as they might seem (Butler, “Doing Justice” 58).

We need to explore creative survival approaches to our limited world, but first I would like to linger on exactly what threatens our survival. In a capitalist world that promotes the creation of (non-innate) borders in order to make intelligible nation-states, violence is not only present but actually mobilized in order to legitimize the authority of those who regulate. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are actually “imagined communities” that create criteria for inclusion and then regulate communities so that they accept and internalize the criteria for inclusion. One may not necessarily wear red, white, and blue daily, for example, but one will recognize and identify with other so-called Americans while abroad, or will remove their cap to sing the National Anthem. These material and immaterial aspects of identity formation are created and recreated in the nation so that identification along nationalistic lines becomes tacitly accepted.

This is particularly worrying if we recognize the state as an entity with monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force. State-sanctioned legal, educational, benefits, and (in)justice systems ensure citizens’ compliance via citizens’ (violently-enforced) acceptance of this legitimate force. Those who object to the state risk institutionalization, sanctions, or death, all of which limit not only mobility but also living itself. Instead of accepting this rather bleak arrangement, however, I would like us to focus on the fact that state boundaries are *created*, and that the need to enforce or monitor compliance belies the idea that transgression is possible, and that we might pursue this mobility to pursue something else, something less rigid that embraces our states of constant change.

We should examine how violent forces work but this is not a goal in itself. Understanding how violence helps us to remember that violence is not part and parcel of oppressed identities but instead mobilized by vulnerability-producing systems. Violence is exposure to and execution of harm, a force that attempts to limit our growth, our ability to change, and thus our living. Dean Spade utilizes Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as “vulnerability to premature death,” in order to expand this definition to apply to other instances of oppression (293).

Discrimination and other acts of oppression promote “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Spade 293). This death may come at the hands of an other but might also come to be via compounded microaggressions, name-calling, racial slurs, dehumanizing acts, delegitimization of voice and experience.

Marilyn Frye’s essay, “Oppression,” aids in understanding how boundaries and violence can be unstable and yet operate as if they are static. Frye uses the image of a cage as a metaphor, explaining that oppression is not any kind of suffering (we all suffer at some point in our lives), but rather a suffering in which one is caged from “all avenues, in every direction” (4). She asks us to differentiate between isolated incidents of suffering and systems of oppression. While the cage metaphor is a bit simplistic (our boundaries, such as size, ability, or age, are not fixed at any given moment but instead constantly evolve as we and others evolve) and also ignorant of the literal cages in our world (those who are incarcerated feel the corporeality of a physical cage, not simply a metaphorical cage; many motions are not necessities in the lives of some people with disabilities), the idea that our “*continued* motion” is inhibited by some practices and encouraged by others is instructive.

This focus on continuation is surprisingly optimistic, given the topic. Oppression exists, yes, and complex systems attempt to limit our mobility, but our ability to continue, to proceed, to live, is inherent and undeniable. I don’t mean to dismiss violence or underestimate our struggles, but rather to look for liberatory tools within this framework—if we can be immobilized, our natural state must be motion. I am consequently interested in expanding Marilyn Frye’s image of oppression as a cage. Instead of the prison metaphor (which has its own political implications, a discussion missing from Frye’s analogy) or motion and immobility (which has ableist implications), I would like to discuss how these sorts of metaphors suggest imagery of struggle, and also, importantly, *change*.

**I hardly recognize you**

In order to understand how to reduce the violence we experience we might consider whose violent experiences we ignore and whose startle us into action. Judith Butler explains how “[c]onditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices...have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all” (“Doing Justice” 57). She is not accepting these presuppositions, but rather explaining how some individuals have become “inconceivable” in existing conditions of intelligibility, and how this positioning puts those “inconceivable” persons at risk of harm and violence (Butler 64). I have heard people I care about explain that a woman dressed “like a slut” brings catcalls upon herself, perhaps even invites people to assault her. Women, if they stray from the norms that constitute an intelligible (respectful, demure, passive) woman, risk losing their rights to personhood, risk losing their rights to safety. Others receive the benefit of reading and assessing intelligibility and are allowed to act accordingly. At other times I have overheard people say that they believe trans women should disclose their sex at birth, shouldn’t “trick” others by being unintelligible. If trans woman cannot or will not disclose, they explained, then these women subject themselves to ridicule and verbal (if not physical) harassment.

It is clear to me that we do not ask to be harassed or assaulted. There is nothing consensual about these scenarios. Yet intelligibility, and lack of compliance with the rules of intelligibility, is used to legitimize violence. Should we expand the criteria for intelligibility so that it is more inclusive, forgiving? I ask that we reconsider whether intelligibility is a necessary criterion for engaging an other, and also whether intelligibility is possible at all. What if we allowed others to be unintelligible? What if we pushed our imaginations further and actually speculated a future that not only allowed unintelligibility, but actually embraced the imperfection of our attempts to read or know others?

Norms like gender norms aim to establish “coherent personhood,” which might be easily read and understood by others, but what if we were to not only tolerate but also embrace incoherent realities? (Butler, “Doing Justice” 67). An imperfect feminism will attempt to

disavow identarian violence by undermining the categories used to qualify or disqualify one from (temporary) safety. It will not end at a kind of deconstruction of meaning, but will rather mobilize the malleability and change that (de)construction represents in less violent, more liberatory ways.

Though it is a difficult and at times harmful logic, it makes some sense that coherent personhood has become the credential for survival. The risk of partially knowing an other is that the other may be dangerous or that the self may be misunderstood and mistreated by the other. It may seem easier to demand coherence, but coherence is impossible. Instead, various levels of recognition and misrecognition set the terms for our engagement. There are joys and pains to being recognized and misrecognized. To be recognized is to have others claim to know you, at times to try to mold you into being known. When I tell others that I am Persian, for example, people often want to ask if I speak Farsi—to share with me that they have some familiarity with what they believe to be a major trait of this identity. When I explain that I never learned Farsi as a child I feel ashamed, as if I have let this other down by being a less coherent Iranian American. The subjectivity of my life gets in the way of our connection. At other times I am read as solely white and an important and confusing part of my identity is erased. Even as children we are hyper-aware of the types of misrecognition that are safe and the types that are to be avoided. When my mother had my hair cut short in my kindergarten years I remember being horrified that others might misread me as a boy. This worry was solidified when an elderly relative used masculine pronouns to refer to me during a family visit. What was wrong with me, I wondered, that others would misrecognize me? And what would happen, I wondered, if this mistake were to last?

While it sometimes hurts to be recognized and misrecognized, misunderstood in some way, I have also experienced how good it can feel to be read in a mistaken, inclusive way. That others want to know us, and make mistakes in trying to make us known, can be violent. But there can be a generosity to this effort. I spent six months at a university in New Delhi during

college and felt very aware of my position as a western visitor. I attempted to engage genuinely while also noting boundaries so that I would not claim too much as mine, so that I would not ask too much of a place that was not my home. Too often I have seen visitors romanticize a place, treat people as exotic, wanting to claim familiarity or difference without having the intimacy one gains from time. Yet often I found that strangers wanted to know me, wanted to claim me as familiar. Many auto-rickshaw drivers asked if I was Parsi, part of a community of Persian-descended Indians. New friends told me about ghazals that used my name in romantic verse, tying the Hindustani Parwane to my Persian Parvoneh. Years later, in a primarily Chinese and Latino neighborhood in Brooklyn, I ordered a red bean bun and bubble tea from a Chinese bakery. The clerk collected payment and said “Gracias!” to me as I packed up my snack. Being read as Latina in this moment was surprising but ultimately warm. I felt as though I was given an automatic closeness, a sense of belonging that did not actually belong to me.

Being recognized and misrecognized may remind us that identity categories are created, and also that these creations may be misapplied (to positive or negative results). If identity is created and therefore unstable, violent systems like slavery, predicated on racial identity, could therefore be challenged since race and the impact of racial identities are indeterminate. In other ways the creation of fictions, misrecognitions, in order to stabilize identities is a dangerous arrangement, since fictions masquerade as fact, and the ability to write or rewrite fictions is often protected by those who can use identities to write themselves into power. As a consequence of this power, identity—functioning as both a real and unreal narrative—has corporeal consequences that cannot be denied, yet are often ignored and erased. Racism and sexism, for example, are based upon unstable identities (race, gender) but can persist because fictions of power attempt to stabilize and legitimize identities and hierarchies of identity.

Disguising oneself is an act that relies upon the instability of identity in order to establish an alternate, seemingly authentic identity. This kind of chosen misrecognition emphasizes again the malleability of seemingly restrictive authority and therefore the creative possibilities

(including resistance or innovation) that emerge from instability. The problem of the unknown and its accompanying anxieties does not have to be a problem so much as an opportunity.

My problem is with the golden rule. For many occasions I try to imagine how I would like to be treated and extend that to others. At other times, however, I have a very difficult time doing onto others as I would have done to me. What if others are harmed by something that would leave me unscathed? What if others' boundaries are much looser than mine? Some of my students are ok with me seeing their Instagram accounts, and so they offer their usernames and ask for mine in return, but that is not the kind of boundary I want with them. Some people are not triggered by graphic abuse depictions but others may be. Since we cannot truly know the other we are tasked with anticipating the needs of others not as shadows of ourselves, but as unique and constantly shifting persons. If my white neighbors make jokes about the names of the African immigrant doctors in the local clinic it is not funny to me. What to do when an other expects unity where I feel discord? I might ask the other to refrain from that which hurts me, damages my values. When I have done this, or when trauma survivors have asked for trigger warnings, the response has unfortunately been more conflict. The other might claim they are being censored, that they shouldn't have to restrict their living based on the needs of other people. I wonder, in these moments, how we can best weigh someone saying "this hurts me" with others saying "this keeps me alive."

In such cases we clearly have a struggle. How to proceed is unknown. Historically, I have witnessed each side attempt to prove their legitimacy and convince the other. In existing rhetorical systems it is common to desire proof (an impossible prerequisite) before valuing an unfamiliar argument. But what when proof is unintelligible due to difference, disconnect, misrecognition? We pursue figurative debates in a corporeal world, at times experiencing or perpetrating violence along the way. What also of the moments in which we have a feeling about our legitimacy but cannot substantiate through traditional modes? What, also, of assertions that speculate more than they explain? Memoirist and advice columnist Cheryl Strayed posits that

“[w]e like to say how things are, perhaps because we hope that’s how they might actually be. We attempt to name, identify, and define the most mysterious of matters: sex, love, marriage, monogamy, infidelity, death, loss, grief. We want these things to have an order, an internal logic, and we also want them to be connected to one another.” We value coherence so much that we might simplify or dull our understanding of our world in order to experience the satisfaction of sense and order. It is a hasty answer to unending and infinitely complex questions.

In *The Ones Who Leave Omelas* Ursula K. Le Guin presents a fictional demonstration of one such attempt to make sense of protean relations. The fictional society of Omelas features problems much like ours: “The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain” (Le Guin 276). The narrator continues, “If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas?” (Le Guin 276). As an often angry person I appreciate tendencies towards destruction; I fully support revolution, Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*<sup>1</sup> disrupting systems that harm. Yet I also want to recognize that anger and righteous violence are productive because they restore freedom and provide space for beauty and joy.

## **II. What keeps you alive?**

### **Observing role models in order to survive**

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<sup>1</sup> Fanon advocates for the colonized to use justified violence against the colonizer as an act of resistance against and liberation from oppression.

People I hardly know have kept me alive. Growing up, my mom told me stories about her coworker who ate “smelly” foods that my mom didn’t recognize, who listened to world music and owned an old Victorian house with his partner—they were unmarried, unusual—and collected antiques that covered their yard. My mom told me about another coworker who never had children but did have a pet rabbit named Flopsy, a rabbit who had a whole room to himself with paintings hung at eye level, a room my mom saw for herself when she attended Flopsy’s birthday party one year. In high school, my contemporary literature teacher asked us to each share a book others wouldn’t expect us to love (hers was *The Sandman* series of comics because Death was a “cute goth girl who wore a conch shell necklace”) and told us she had been divorced, had three sons, was remarried, had two stepsons, met her husband through online dating (in 2003). I ran into her and her husband at the nearest art house cinema (three towns away) when I went to see a foreign film in the theater for the first time. Each time I heard one of these stories my imagination opened up a little. I could see myself living these lives; I could hear in these stories some element of unsanctioned survival.

Though he cites porn stars, Manson Family members, fashion designers, and Little Richard, John Waters’ *Role Models* embraces my mother’s storytelling. My mother knew the figures she told me about were unusual. Her tone always belied how bizarre, untoward, and eclectic these acquaintances were to her and her friends. Yet she also knew that they were creative people, people she did not quite understand but did appreciate. At the time she focused on the presence of art in their lives, but I now realize that my mom was sharing something else, something hopeful. Here are your role models; here are the people unintelligible to me who might speak to you (also somehow unintelligible to me). Dennis Rodman, Dolly Parton, Prince Rogers Nelson are my role models. Mariah Carey, Fiona Apple, and Celine Dion for a time, fit this role for me. In some sense they are all divas who embrace their importance while highlighting their own absurdities, reveling in the artifice of their successes while always creating, exploring, demanding more from a world that so often tells us we deserve nothing.

In my adolescence I spent much of my time watching TV, reading, or arguing with my brother over computer time in order to explore the new world of message boards and instant messaging. I have distinct memories of watching Dennis Rodman with bleached hair, or green hair, facial piercings, makeup, and sometimes dresses, striding across the screen. It confused and delighted me that this man was famous for playing basketball, that he was tall and strong and known to be a rather vicious player, but also loved to challenge his audience and their concepts of strength. Some broadcasters claimed Rodman's appearance was for publicity, but there was a creative energy that struck me as genuine and incredible. People in my school warned me not to like purple or rainbow because they were "gay," and they snickered about teachers they presumed were gay because they were too butch or too femme, leading me to believe gender and sexuality must be monitored and normative at all times. Yet mainstream American media put this sports star on television and he didn't crumble under their gaze. He was incredibly unlike me and yet there was something energizing about his presence. Because I didn't follow sports I didn't think about Dennis Rodman often, but an impression of him hovered in the back of my mind.

Around the same time I watched an episode of *So Graham Norton*, a talk show hosted by a rather bawdy British man who loves to play pranks and ask impolite questions. Norton featured Dolly Parton as a guest and prepared an enormous breast-shaped pillow to present to her during her appearance<sup>2</sup>. I had primarily known Dolly Parton as a demure country singer who was on the *Lawrence Welk Show* reruns I would watch at holidays at my maternal grandparents' homes. When Norton presented the pillow I expected Parton to blush or scold. Instead she held the pillow up proudly in front of her own notable chest and laughed and laughed. Girls in my school were starting to wear bras, and those bra bands were snapped by others who wanted to tease and gather data. I was afraid of my body and embarrassed by the

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<sup>2</sup> The full episode from 2001 can be found online, as well as a follow up episode in which Graham visits Dolly in Dollywood.

idea that anyone would ever know about it, let alone see my underwear. Yet Dolly Parton laughed and laughed. She was so at ease, so comfortable with herself.

A few years later, in high school, my good friend wore oversized t-shirts and flared jeans like most of the girls in my school. One shirt featured an extreme close-up of Prince's face in a pensive pose. I thought it was outrageous and scary and I remembered Prince's name change to a symbol and I remembered that his signature color was a symbol of gay identity and so, after putting all of these elements together, decided Prince was an unfortunate outsider. In college I bought a record player from a thrift store and pulled out my parents' records. I put on "Purple Rain" and sat awed by this strange, catchy, experimental pop masterpiece. I read an article about Prince's veganism in *Vegetarian Times*<sup>3</sup> and revisited hits I had always associated with '80s radio and shiny cars (they were in fact, I realized, about sex). I remembered my mom telling me about an acquaintance who worked at Prince's Paisley Park Studios—she reported that Prince made everyone call him "Sir." He wore eyeliner and posed shirtless, he strutted in platform shoes and sequins, he played incredibly sensual and difficult guitar solos, he sang about being biracial and screwed up. I realized I was afraid of this person who was too confident in his incoherence, that I identified with him too much and so could not risk admitting any admiration at all. The affiliation was too dangerous.

Divas like Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston or Beyoncé or Fiona Apple or Rihanna create worlds for themselves, sometimes even alter egos (Mariah Carey becomes Mimi, Beyoncé becomes Sasha Fierce). They create languages for their fans (Mariah Carey's fans are her "lambily," Beyoncé's the "Beyhive") and for their music (Fiona Apple uses swirling metaphors, scientific figures of speech, almost familiar jazzy piano interludes, and speaks mostly about her pets and the birds she watches from her kitchen window). Apple sings "I can't stop changing all the time"<sup>4</sup> and her lyrics generally reflect the struggle and joy of being constantly in motion,

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<sup>3</sup> The October 1997 issue features an interview with The Artist Formerly Known as Prince.

<sup>4</sup> Lyrics from "Extraordinary Machine" on Fiona's 2005 album of the same name.

unfixed. Divas are also hybrid figures, at once creative and traditionally profitable, in control yet emotionally dynamic, vulnerable and strong, creators of worlds and personas. They perform with incredible strength and tenacity and in so doing expose the fissures in existing boundaries.

These role models have kept me alive. It has not always been explicit, but somehow the knowledge that figures in the world maintain incongruous, challenging, boundary-crossing lives helped me imagine myself beyond my suburban Minnesotan surroundings, beyond the social norms being shoved on me (and sometimes by me onto others) in school, beyond the traditional second generation immigrant careers my dad might prefer. In short they have demonstrated the fallacy of restrictive systems and even posited new, inventive ways of being. When I talk to my friends' children or coworkers' grandchildren or neighbor kids playing on the sidewalk, even the students I teach who are not so much younger than myself, I hope to be regenerative, to present my multiplicities genuinely in order to remind young others that I recognize them, albeit imperfectly, and that there are possibilities beyond our daily lives, perhaps even beyond our immediate imaginations.

Community and connection are vital to my survival. Language and community are slippery, presenting challenges but also unknown possibilities. Adrienne Rich writes of “[t]he poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor’s language sometimes sounds beautiful” (qtd in Heilbrun 67). Language is both beautiful—full of possibilities and tools for expressing one’s life and one’s aspirations—and also dangerous—oppressive, dishonest, limiting. Yet we should not give up on the riskier, unfamiliar, unauthorized ways of knowing and sharing our lives. Too often the malleability of the world is approached with fear, a call for more restrictions, boundaries, and definitions. Rich knows that existing tools are both freeing and binding, and she aims to make this double-edged sword known. Toni Morrison, too, knows that language has the power to fail us or move us. Instead of giving up, these writers encourage we explore what might be unattainable. “I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one

another,” Heilbrun suggests, also encouraging activity and expansion rather than enclosure (46). “As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own,” Heilbrun explains (46). We must risk pursuing the unattainable in order to find our tools for survival.

### **Locating reminders of unsanctioned survival**

My role models have not been role models to me in the traditional sense, given that I have not used their lives as maps for my own, but they have been instructive to me. Role models have helped me survive. For some it may not be role models but God, a belief in higher power, grace. Incomprehensible moments like unexpected death invite the invocation of this higher power. And what is faith if not a radical belief in things not known to the self? For others it may be Satanism, a belief in dark forces, in unknown power. Sometimes it may be the occult, or voodoo, or magic. Personally, I am almost always bolstered by small green plants, babies, puppies or sidewalk cats, small beings early in their lives, curious about the world, moving, growing, full of potentials.

I can see survival in ghosts, as well. That this is unexpected (finding life in death) makes it an even more pleasurable discovery. Like divas, ghosts demand more from a world that so often denies, rejects, quiets, muffles, stifles, and kills. Ghosts allow our one fixed end (death) to be liminal, a passage, a possibility, an opening to new potentials. In Castiglia’s early American counter-narratives we encounter characters who are “socially dead yet living—often persistently and even ragefully so—in the interior state” (11). To be dead in the public sphere but alive in private seems so much a ghost figure, a way to survive even when the social sphere cannot sustain life. Indeed, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon posits that “[t]o write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost

stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects” (17). How can disembodied ghosts have material effects? It is incredible and yet possible, much like the invention of bounds that persist as if innate. Gordon explains that “[w]hat's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” much like the systems that threaten our survival (19). We can recognize haunting as “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon 19). This activity impacts the living, for haunting “raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (Gordon 19). Ghosts force us to remember moments when survival was impossible and also interrupt our living to remind us of dangers as well as tools.

Ghosts, in Gordon's lore, “appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view” (19). As such they are threats to systems that harm. Ghosts, though ethereal, have a substantial impact on the living. Specters are not “invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention” (Gordon 19). As so many have articulated, the limits of our knowledge have often become limits enforced by others in order to keep us intelligible. I feel recognition when Gordon explains her response to these limits: “Ghostly Matters was thus also motivated by my desire to find a method of knowledge production and a way of writing that could represent the damage and the haunting of the historical alternatives and thus richly conjure, describe, narrate, and explain the liens, the costs, the forfeits, and the losses of modern systems of abusive power in their immediacy and worldly significance” (Gordon 20). How incredible, how heartening, to be ethereal and consequential at once.

Paolo Freire also explicates the violence that ghosts make known. “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence,” he explains (85). I disagree with his idea that “[t]he means used are not important” but I do believe that “to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire 85). Paired with Gordon’s specters we might better understand the systems that threaten our continued living. Systems that fear our malleability also preoccupy themselves with our malleability—in attempting to reign in our wild dynamism these systems draw attention to our multiplicity. Hauntings make this clear. Through hauntings we witness how complex personhood has been denied through time. “Complex personhood is the second dimension of the theoretical statement that life is complicated. Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others (Gordon 27). Like divas who create worlds for themselves, or my everyday role models who challenge existing plots in favor of inventive and evolving narratives, “[c]omplex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (Gordon 27). Our traditional characterization of ghosts as scary or violent may be a misinterpretation of their aims—where we often assume ghosts hope to perpetrate haunting for their own benefit it is possible that they instead want to wake us, shake us, reach for us and ask us to also reach out for possibilities that better support their living as well as our own.

Avery Gordon’s ghosts are political to be sure. In our less obviously political ghost lore I believe we might also find radical possibilities. Ghosts disrupt our notions of time. Death should be final, oftentimes the result of some violence. In the view of the living death is worthy of fear because it signifies the end to our constant change. There is a sense that we might run out of time, that it might be too late to accomplish all that is needed before death. Traditionally we

view living as the only time for action and the afterlife is viewed as too late to be saved. Ghosts suggest that this urgency may be unnecessary.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is an unlikely supporter of ghosts, but I believe his frustrations may be shared and productively addressed through haunting. “I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate,” he writes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” King unpacks this disappointment, stating “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

Ghosts, in popular imagination, personify tension. Many ghost traditions even posit that the ghost’s ethereal form is due to the deceased’s need for justice and inability to rest until justice is found. When the white moderate “constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’” the ghost, unlike the living, has the benefit of replying without risking death (King). When the white moderate is one who “paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season,’” the ghost may demand immediate attention (King). Ghosts may be eruptions of systems that harm or they may be those who have been harmed by the system reminding others of danger. They are as dynamic and multifaceted as the living.

Ghosts are not alive and yet they keep me living. A ghostly figure is active and engaged even in the afterlife, reminding us that restrictive boundaries—even one like death—can be eschewed. The things that keep me alive are rarely things—they are ideas, hopes, figures hinting at realities I might someday encounter myself. They are even figures associated with death. The problem with figures as my lifeline is not that they are sometimes dead, but rather that they are not tangible and therefore frustrating to those who might expect intelligibility, for those who

believe in impartial knowledge. So often I find myself being asked to prove that I am hurt, that I see harm, that my reality is real.

I was invited to a dinner party through a college acquaintance's partner. Towards the end of the evening the group transformed into small pockets talking about longform articles they'd been reading, plans for the weekend, transit options to take home. I found myself witness to a conversation about a new series in the *New York Times* wherein chefs explain how culinary techniques work in partnership with a scientist (or some variation on scientist/chef/expert) who can explain the chemistry and physics. The speakers were two people I know (both white, both cis-men, identifying with the sex assigned to them at birth). One spoke of how interesting and comforting he finds the series. "I always wonder why they tell you to do something in a certain order in recipes. I like knowing why that is."

I recognized, in that comment, a desire to know, to have intelligible and factual data. Because I love science at the same time that I love women's knowledge systems, I commented. "It seems kinda gross for the *New York Times* to have some dudes explain cooking even though women have been doing that unpaid work, passing on that knowledge, for years, isn't it? And they'll make a bunch of money explaining why cream of tartar is good for cookies. It's a leavening agent! I don't need the *New York Times* to tell me that. Talk to your mom, your granny." My audience said nothing in reply, shifting uncomfortably and looking both implicated and the slightest bit annoyed. I was getting more and more interested and angry as I thought about the workings of this cultural shift, our capitalist system's newest incarnation. I was following the ties, the twists of logic and ethics, but I had unwittingly ended the conversation. I felt bad, later, that I had perhaps made this person feel as if he's not allowed to like media that informs his worldview in some way, and that he might feel my anger directed at him personally rather than at systems. Yet my overarching feeling of displeasure remains.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak considers subjectivity and objectivity as applied by and to the global center and periphery. Perhaps her most striking and

well-known observation is the traditionally imperialist, paternalistic system of white men attempting to “save” brown women from dangerous brown men (Spivak 296). She describes an obviously faulty and paradoxically widespread and well-established framework that ignores the agency of brown women and mistakenly assumes that brown men are the dangerous element in brown women's lives. Some brown men may be dangerous, certainly. That white men are considered benign and even saviors, that white men take the position of the center while they act upon brown helpless savages in the periphery, should call into question the logic and ethics of the system as a whole. Given histories of colonialism and imperialism wherein white men have done incredible harm to brown women and men both, it is curious and angering that this system persists.

Though it is a different scale, I find the *New York Times* scientific approach to cooking, nourishment, this kind of domestic work, to follow a similar progression. White men explaining (brown) women's knowledge for financial profit and esteem. Though we have been cooking and eating for centuries, it is only when cooking is considered an art (as with chefs) or a science that men are interested. Women as cooks have been in service to men in order to feed the family and also in service as consumers, targeted by capitalism for our purchasing power. As creators, as knowledge makers, as informed people, our work has not been newsworthy. That women's knowledge would be in the newspaper but repackaged as new, treated as discreet scientific fact via the approving hand of patriarchy which simultaneously erases women's work and import, seems laughable and infuriating at once. That this wasn't obvious to my fellow dinner party guests made me feel lonely and mad. But, as with any good patriarchal capitalist maneuver, I also felt the residual impacts many women feel: doubt and self-loathing.

Was I wrong to point out these patterns, to bring up politics at the dinner table? To cast a shadow over someone else's joy? Is my discomfort equal to another's joy? More important? Less? Was my point valid or is it unnecessary, passé to notice capitalism at work in an obviously capitalist world? Is it worthwhile to start a conversation about problems with the very people I

believe are implicated with the problem? Is there any point to talking about problems without having any tangible solutions? Are there any great unanswerable dilemmas I have not considered as I mull over the past? Is the answer always “it depends” or “it's subjective”? What kind of action feels productive? What am I missing? What haven't I thought of, what haven't I imagined? Is the answer the very thing I cannot yet imagine? How can I speculate possibilities into being? (How does the man next to me on the train know this newly entered passenger? How long will it take before the next seat is vacant so that they can converse as equals, at least spatially? Isn't there something affirming about their middle-aged businessman first generation immigrant camaraderie? Where do they work, what do they do with their days? Is my immigrant father implicated in capitalism's ills as an upwardly mobile corporate engineer? Does the diaspora get a pass? It depends? How implicated are individuals in structural issues? Is the answer hidden in the connection between a second pair of middle-aged men, black New Yorkers, who have also found each other serendipitously on this train car? Are our answers found in the joy we share in community?)

Maggots and worms support human life cycles of growth, death, decay, and regeneration. These traditionally disgusting forms turn our disgusting byproducts into rich earth, into fertility, into possibility. Trash—the term we give to the things we utilized once their use is over, a term based on a relation and not on the thing itself—also deteriorates, matter returning to more basic elements. Waste is literally and metaphorically discarded and yet it is waste that supports our living. Epistemological systems may delegate matter into categories like food and waste, but these delineations are temporary and constantly shifting. Maggots can even provide life directly—maggots have been used medically to eat away at rotting flesh and thus prevent infection. Maggots, like human bodies, blur the lines between disgusting and amazing. Like maggots, our bodies work to regulate life and death, the beautiful and the repulsive. Think of the mouth, site of love, nourishment, illness, bile. Intellectually and corporeally our living is based in paradox.

Even my love of young flora and fauna is tinged with this complexity. My automatic reaction to seeing precious things is to let out a small pained sound. I have been asked on occasion if I am ok, if I am upset, when I greet these tender beings with a sound of disgust. What may be read as negative horror is actually a very close emotion, awe. How can I survive being so overcome with anticipation and optimism? I am pleased yet sound pained. It is understandable that others would struggle to understand.

Systems of regulation are likewise positive and negative at once. Legal systems surveil and punish, gender, race, and sexuality are “policed,” we are reminded regularly not to stray from the norm, which is impossibly balanced. At the same time our bodies regulate temperature, the cerebellum keeping us balanced on the ground, the bodily systems keeping us in harmony internally. We have been taught to seek a false sense of equilibrium in so much of our lives. To be “normal,” to be “healthy,” to be static. To be stable is to resist change, but change is our only lasting truth. Perhaps instead we may see that to be constant, stable, balanced requires consistent change (constant adaptation), which presents a tricky sort of paradox—to be constant, stable, static requires constant action, adaptation, recalculation. Homeostasis requires regulation and shifts through imperceptibly small changes. Capitalism borrows the belief in a natural balance but denies the need for change beyond the individual. Capitalism’s use of individualized change is a backwards kind of survival technique since belief in other, systemic change is a threat to the very institution of capitalism. We cannot thrive under the conditions that privilege the survival of capitalist, racist, sexist systems, but we may imagine something else.

### **III. Whatchu know ‘bout me?**

#### **How to learn through mistakes in a world focused on perfection**

My most anxious moments in life have been due to uncertainty. I don't know how to dress like everyone else, I don't know the answer to this talk show host's American history quiz, I don't recognize the band everyone is talking about, I don't know what the word "tautology" means, I don't know why we fund education for people in prison and haven't they done something wrong? (one of my most shameful conclusions). Girls at my dance recital called me a witch and I don't know why and can only imagine it has to do with my hair and the things they do not know but have assumed about me. I don't know why I am so terrified of depictions of sexual assault, I don't know if I know my own memory. So often not knowing something means feeling uneasy, self-conscious, vulnerable, and alone, or surrounded and hurt. I am loud but I am extremely quiet when I am insecure. Fake it 'til you make it. On the other hand, being confident in one's knowledge (especially as a child, a woman, or a person of color) carries extremely negative connotations. One becomes "uppity," a "smart ass," a "know-it-all," for having too much knowledge. Too little or too much, it is difficult to find the appropriate balance, and society's criteria are constantly shifting. And yet I ask my students to stretch, expose their soft bellies, ache, every day in our classroom.

When did we internalize that uncertainty brings harm, pain? At times uncertainty does bring harm, so perhaps it should be approached with caution. Don't talk to strangers. The unknown can bring violence, but familiarity can as well. And at some point we must risk talking to strangers if we hope for strangers to become friends. Perhaps it is helpful to know the shades of hurt. There is a difference between an ache and a hurt, for an ache—as in a stretch, as in a mending heart—shows growth, potential, what exists and where one wants to go. A hurt reflects injury, accident, violence. I can tolerate an ache, but too much violence limits my survival. I appreciate ghosts but I do not want to be one, or at least not for some time. So to be habitually hurt for not knowing seems a shortsighted and self-destructive system. I used to try to fake it, cobble together understanding, because I was so often afraid of being ridiculed, of being thought of as less worthy of humanity, if I were still learning. Over time I have found that it is helpful,

even beautiful, to admit my limits without self-criticism, without embarrassment or deference. More recently, as a teacher, I have appreciated students' willingness to admit gaps, seek solutions. Instead of fear, we might embrace an eagerness to learn and grow, to appreciate not knowing as an opportunity rather than a fault.

We need the safety to make mistakes, take accountability when necessary, and not risk constant violence. For my court involved students this is especially necessary, as being punished for making mistakes as determined by the legal system is at odds with a pedagogical request to try making mistakes in an educational setting. While corporal punishment in the classroom has rightfully fallen out of practice this violence has not gone away; instead it has been transformed to obscured forms of violence—tracking into high achieving or remedial groups, policing, expulsion, and incarceration. Our society desires the construction of (false) clarity and so attempts to violently interrupt the lives of those deemed deviant in order to compartmentalize and restore a very flawed, created order. Crime dramas present good guy/bad guy dichotomies and the accompanying “justice” brings pleasure. This categorization obfuscates realities, which are murkier. We all make mistakes. In fact, sometimes our mistakes are innovative and life giving.

bell hooks explains that “[t]he academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (“Teaching” 207). Learning is a liminal space where death and life both wait in the shadows. “In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (hooks, “Teaching” 207). Diaspora is another space in which we move beyond boundaries. To be blurred, in-between, knowing more than one home and knowing these homes partially.

Mistakes and learning might carry us back to the topic of rights, namely the erroneous limits put on the personhood of others, the denial of an other's rights if the other is unintelligible. Audre Lorde articulates how oversimplifications actually erase the knowledge we seek: "The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people" (119). In legal systems, equality is often treated as a concept that requires we compare subjects and look for constancy. Individuals are not identical, however, and so concepts of equality that require subjects be the same in order to be treated as equal will counterintuitively bring violence upon the dissimilar subject.

Traditional discourse teaches some strange lessons. On the one hand we may see that resources can be reused, repurposed, recycled. We reinvent as a response to the idea that resources are limited, perhaps even scarce. What's absent in this discourse is the very fact that reinvention is *creative, productive*. When visual artist El Anatsui takes scrap metal from his town in Ghana and creates tapestry-like sculptures, he has not only repurposed the material, he has invented something new. The physical properties may remain (aluminum cans pressed into smaller aluminum shapes), but the character, the message has changed. We must be careful not to collapse "equal" and "same"—the aluminum cans are equally aluminum in Anatsui's art, but they are not the same as they once were.

I cling to ghosts, divas, tricksters, and cyborgs for these figures get to escape harmful, fallacy-promoting capitalist systems. These figures get to be creative, adaptive, powerful, generative even in death. Fear of change (especially fear of death) leads to a desperate embrace of static, intelligible, limited knowledge (and thus bound living). Fortunately we have possibilities and alternatives even when they are not plainly presented. "[S]ubjugated knowledge names, on the one hand, what official knowledge represses within its own terms, institutions, and archives. And on the other hand it also refers to 'disqualified,' marginalized, fugitive

knowledge from below and outside the institutions of official knowledge production” (Gordon 21). Gossip is one such subjugated knowledge.

### **Communicating subjectively to know**

Many illegitimate practices help guide my survival. Noise, trash, and gossip are usually dismissed as raucous. This thinking has material consequences, as the way we think informs the ways we act. Radical politics have, at their linguistic base, the word “radical,” a preoccupation with roots, and I would like to use this root idea (the theory that the ways we think will inform the ways we act) to investigate how actions and interactions become limiting, binding, or violent, but also how actions and interactions might be creative, expansive, and liberatory.

Knowledge itself is not static or given. Lorraine Code uncovers how assumptions and implications about knowledge and epistemologies are taken for granted. Code very crisply explains that “academic philosophers commonly treat ‘the knower’ as a featureless abstraction,” and that there is an impulse to “determine the conditions under which a knowledge claim can be made” so that this claim can become a general claim that is “permanent, objective, ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral” (“The Sex of the Knower” 264). Code then asks who this objective knower might be, and complicates traditional conceptions of knowledge formation by noting the faulty claim that knowers are “self-sufficient and solitary individuals” (264). Code demonstrates that such claims are simplistic as they imagine that knowledge seeking is “an introspective activity of an individual mind,” which “accords no relevance either to a knower’s embodiment or to his (or her) intersubjective relations” (264). If we are to understand what knowledge is and how it is created, then, we must not pretend that knowers are impartial or alone in their pursuits, disembodied brains objectively regarding a very subjective world. This is a particularly feminist issue in that “alleged neutrality marks a bias in favor of institutionalizing stereotypical masculine values into the fabric of the discipline,” and in doing so “suppresses values, styles, problems, and concerns stereotypically associated with femininity” (Code 269).

We are in an excitingly subjective world, and epistemological systems are excitingly unstable, too. It may seem unsettling that “If the epistemology used to validate knowledge claims comes into question, then all the knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect” (Collins 9). Yet this instability of knowledge allows us to view rigid boundaries (definitions, modes of knowledge production) as permeable. We must remember, however, “[t]he goal of a feminist dialogism must not be the creation of a theory to be rigorously applied but the mapping out of strategies for analyzing what has never been analyzed before” (Finke 269).

Patricia Hill Collins is well aware of not only a male bias in epistemology, but also a white hegemony in knowledge creation and assessment. In “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” Collins investigates “the philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth” (1). Truth is not static, but rather comes about via a process, perhaps even a struggle, and this process determines “which version of truth will prevail and shape thought and action” (Collins 1). Epistemology is not purely ideological, then, but has material consequences, too. Whether survivors of sexual assault are believed, for example, is in large part determined by such struggles for primacy in truth telling efforts. Too often perpetrators use exactly this struggle for truth in order to silence others. Collins suggests a long list of oft-disregarded epistemologies, including experience, that might become the “criteria of meaning” instead of the abstractions that have long been viewed as subjective and thus dismissed (5). Knowledge can be found in experience and wisdom, concrete knowledge, common sense, dialogue and connectedness, expressions, emotions, and empathy (Collins 5). In this way Collins follows Code’s epistemological inquiry, and further posits a way to promote versions of truth that will shape less oppressive thought and action. In doing so, she provides a much needed “challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims” (Collins 9).

This is lofty and beautiful, but is it practical? How might a liminal being endorse alternative epistemologies? One way we might pursue an expansive knowledge system is by uncovering dominant biases and revising our value systems. Gossip is typically viewed as unauthoritative knowledge, even uncouth behavior. Gossip has long been associated (though most often in a negative light) with women and women's spaces. While activist meetings and academic environments provide formal spaces for critiquing and rewriting the world, gossip exists in our daily lives—at work, the grocery store, the beauty parlor, church, parties. While gossip is often dismissed as idle chatter or catty behavior, gossip is actually productively unruly: “unruly in the literal sense that it obeys no rules: it is unpredictable, attentive to the unexpected, the surprising, the aberrant” (Code, “Rhetorical Spaces” 152). Although gossip has existed for as long as we have been social, verbal people, this kind of knowledge and communication has been socially devalued for being too subjective, for being biased or incomplete truths.

Gossip is gendered, though all persons participate in it from time to time. bell hooks explains that “One reason women have traditionally gossiped more than men is because gossip has been a social interaction wherein women have felt comfortable stating what they really think and feel” (“All About Love,” 59). It is often safe to speak for those who are privileged by empirical knowledge systems but it is risky for anyone who might stray from the norm. “Often, rather than asserting what they think at the appropriate moment, women say what they think will please the listener. Later, they gossip, stating at that moment their true thoughts,” typically in unauthorized environments (hooks, “All About Love” 60). For gossipers to have to split themselves between formal environments and the rhetorical codes required there and then informal environments where they are freer to speak seems unnecessarily complicated. We might instead value gossip for its potentials. New knowledge often results from gossip, where one person brings their knowledge, spurs another's thoughts, combines with the other's knowledge, and creates a greater understanding than the individual's knowledge alone.

In this more forgiving light, gossip, “for all its randomness, produces knowledge so valuable it can contest the paradigm status of scientific method as the only reliable means of establishing truth” (Code, “Rhetorical Spaces” 150). Science and truth are considered the domain of patriarchy, but gossip, long dismissed like most of the realm of the feminine, questions this arrangement. Indeed, gossip is “always specifically located, attuned to nuance and minutiae,” and so proves “a finely-tuned instrument for establishing truths—albeit often corrigible, renegotiable truths” (Code, “Rhetorical Spaces” 147). What would it look like for a legal system to trust survivors of abuse at their word, for example? For sexualities to be accepted as true rather than “a phase” or a biological aberration? What would our world look like if our corrigible lives were embraced rather than restricted, bound up, and enclosed in order to be more “intelligible” to a patriarchal, racist, capitalist epistemological system?

One hurdle in establishing gossip’s legitimacy is its lack of singular authorship, which our current knowledge systems demand to establish information as true and honest and authentic. Knowledge is considered more reliable if we can find its source, but gossip, “almost by definition, has no identifiable author, but scores of eager retailers who can claim they are just passing the news” (Scott 142). Hearsay, even if true, is inadmissible in our knowledge systems. Yet multi-authored texts are incredibly powerful, as they collect multiple experiences and gather more information into a singular text. There is risk and reward in gossip’s imperfection.

Gossip is one way of celebrating a process of creating knowledge that has typically been deemed illegitimate. These kinds of illegitimate ways of being “insist on noise and advocate pollution” (Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto” 176). Rather than being negatively dirty or impure, Donna Haraway suggests we may “rejoice” in “illegitimate fusions” (176). Shifts in language (i.e. eliminating the use of “retarded” or “so gay” as pejoratives, adding gender neutral pronouns to daily conversation, questioning binary logic) might demonstrate the reimagining, the change, and the radical creativity needed for constant motion toward a liberatory future.

If our world is fabricated—and life giving as well as harming in that fabrication—we are able to make adjustments to the pattern, the materials, we may revise. We may even value this ability to revise. Kwame Anthony Appiah uses cosmopolitanism as a modality for expansive thinking, wherein cosmopolitans embrace “what philosophers call fallibilism—the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence” (Appiah). “If we want to preserve a wide range of human conditions because it allows free people the best chance to make their own lives, we can't enforce diversity by trapping people within differences they long to escape” or epistemologies that limit our being (Appiah). Appiah takes on tradition, especially, and notes that so often we view tradition as static and thus trap those we view as “traditional” in a fabricated reality, one that we have imagined and continue to reinforce. We often try to preserve tradition, at times binding those deemed “traditional” to a limited realm. “This tradition was once an innovation. Should we reject it for that reason as untraditional?” Appiah asks, underscoring the faulty logic of stagnation. “Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead,” he adds (Appiah). Trapping others within bounds like tradition is thus violent, a block to the innovation and change needed to keep us alive.

Appiah wonderfully embraces the abject, hybridity, and the complex. “When people speak for an ideal of cultural purity, sustaining the authentic culture of the Asante or the American family farm, I find myself drawn to contamination as the name for a counterideal” (Appiah). He praises Salman Rushdie for embodying these challenging concepts in his fiction: “The ideal of contamination has few exponents more eloquent than Salman Rushdie, who has insisted that the novel that occasioned his fatwa ‘celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs’” (Appiah). Contamination as counterideal “rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure” (Rushdie qtd in Appiah). My liminal feminist heart beats quicker. “No doubt there can be an easy and spurious utopianism of

‘mixture,’ as there is of ‘purity’ or ‘authenticity.’ And yet the larger human truth is on the side of contamination - that endless process of imitation and revision” (Appiah).

Impurities are natural and not always harmful. What would it look like to have “dirty” be purely descriptive without negative connotations, or for “garbage” and “waste” to be simply realities rather than disgusting elements to be eliminated, for “trashy” to be neutral or even positive? What would it look like for connotations to reflect a thoughtful embrace of contamination and multiplicity? We do not need to create new hierarchies of knowing, telling, and living in the world, but we may find pleasure in the process of destabilizing old systems and pursuing new creations.

Andrea Smith warns against creation of new, seemingly progressive bounds. “Postfeminist is an ideology of how women should be in the world, and all ideologies are contradictory, impossible, unlivable, and impossible to replicate in real life,” she writes, revealing the ills of authoritative ideologies (Smith, “Problem with Privilege”). She understands where this impulse comes from, explaining that even in our struggles to be free “we still like to consume things that suggest that they are achievable — hell, that’s how aspirational, capitalist-based media culture works” (Smith, “Problem with Privilege”). We should absolutely be aspirational, but we can’t aspire to new, static goals. In order to survive in a world where change is life-giving we must constantly aspire for something new, something shifting, at times even something unknown.

#### **IV. Where have you been all my life?**

##### **How to convince others you are worthy of respect as an unlocatable being**

In my previous career in academic publishing I received a phone call one day from a professor who was trying to request a desk copy of a book despite not meeting our policy

requirements. After telling him my name is Parvoneh he said, “Oh, I don't hear any accent. Are you from the East?” to which I simply replied “No,” and nothing more.

I could never really play the traditional rhyming “Name Game” when I was growing up because my name had too many syllables. I could never find a souvenir with my name pre-printed and I never had any classmates with the same first or last name. I do have another name game, however, a private warning game whenever I have to introduce myself to someone for the first time. I wonder, each time, what they will do and what I will do, how I will respond to someone reading roll, calling me on the phone, announcing my name at graduation, repeating my name upon first meeting, looking for me in the doctor’s office. Sometimes I try to predict what will happen—they will stop and stare at one name halfway down the attendance list and I will know it is me, or, they will say something apologetic like “I know I’m getting this one wrong...” and call out a mispronunciation in a nervous voice, or my favorite, they will make a confident attempt and let me correct pronunciation if needed.

Oftentimes strangers make some kind of comment about my name being unusual, pretty, or exotic. Exotic is especially othering, but perhaps not as bad as “Whoa, your parents didn't think that one through, did they?” Sometimes people pursue a conversation, stumbling as they do so. “Do you speak...um...that language?” or “Where are you from? Here? No, you know what I mean, where are you *from*?” Sometimes this feels like a genuine curiosity, a desire to connect. Other times I feel as if strangers are presenting me with a series of demands; they want to know, they want clarity, facts, background. I have been especially surprised how upset strangers get when I am unenthusiastic about their “well-intentioned” invasive questions, especially in professional environments. And you know, usually I smooth that out for people. I say “Oh, I know, it's a hard one!” or “My dad is from Iran, but I don't speak Farsi, it's a shame” or “Yeah, I used to think it was a tough name but now I like it a lot.” Why am I explaining myself to these strangers? Does having a “different” name mean that I am now responsible for educating them, that I am required to expose myself to others without reciprocation? I usually play nice, but all

the while I know that I am right to be mad, that I am making others feel good at my own expense. I want to reiterate bell hooks' message about gossip: when faced with conflict women (and people of color, and most marginalized groups) are expected to take a "nice" tone in order to maintain peace. Yet taking a "nice" tone often comes at a cost. It is not positive or even neutral. The cost is a personal cost but also a cost for us all in that casual racism feeds and perpetuates all other forms of racism.

I am very tempted to start talking to these people on the phone the way they do to me, asking "Jane Doe? Where's that from? Are you white?" or "Joe Jefferson? That's so bland." These questions will never come to be, however, because a simple role reversal is impossible. Relations between self and other are not reciprocal. Names from non-white backgrounds receive different treatment because whiteness serves as the norm in the US. "Parvoneh" doesn't carry the cues of, say, a Biblical name, and because my name is unfamiliar the other may find themselves afloat, untethered by the norms that typically guide. Those who cannot tolerate this ambiguity make some assumptions about my race/ethnicity. If I am willing to give up this information (and this information is itself complicated, personal) then the stranger is able to proceed accordingly—consciously or not, they may put me in a category and begin to treat me the way that they treat others in whatever category they have assigned to me. It is especially disturbing that this happens with some anxiety on the stranger's side, and yet they often pursue the topic. They really really need to know how to read me, if I am intelligible, what care or harm I deserve according to internalized calculations determining personhood.

I love my name. I would not change it, but I would change the expectations, the grounds for being knowable that we feel entitled to. This is the anger I carry with me all the time, these everyday moments remind me that I've got that anger stewing in me always, even when I forget. That I am not alone is both heartening and bleak. The desire to know a coherent other is not limited to race but also gender, sexuality, ability, so many categories that are not coherent or simple. It would be invigorating to be treated as unknowable and still complete.

Hybridity provides a guide for living in incoherent ways. Hybridity is manifest in many ways but can be found especially in diaspora, communities that maintain ties and yet are transient. Diaspora can be a place of obscured violence, as in the microaggressions I experience with my name, but they are also rife with possibility. Diaspora connects people across huge physical distances and also connects cultures. The resulting hybridity can be rich with innovation. Language, music, family are all impacted by distance from one home and creation of another home. Strangers become familiar through shared experience of diaspora. There is a grand mixing, the creation of a sum that is not identical to its parts.

Diaspora is one crystallization of hybridity. Donna Haraway also suggests the cyborg as a hybrid being who might challenge boundaries and promote a different kind of living. Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" attempts to "build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism," and figures the cyborg feminist as a potential aspiration (149). Haraway unabashedly rejects identity politics and any stable notion of the self, delegitimizing the power of the dominant epistemologies erase one's subjectivity. "This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia," she writes (Haraway 182).

Haraway identifies the challenge of "learning how to craft a poetic/political unity without relying on a logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification," since such categorizing efforts are dangerous and violent (158). Haraway playfully introduces "cyborg feminists" as a potential alternative to generic, nuanceless epistemologies. Because the cyborg is "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," the cyborg is an ethereal body, akin to Gordon's ghost, who might be able to address the troubling impulse to regulate selves through categorization (Haraway 150).

This alternative being, the cyborg, serves to map "territories of production, reproduction, and imagination," and in so doing becomes a guide to a place, a map that "suggest[s] a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 182). Dualisms are troubling in that they simplify, and moreover because they are

presented as natural and right. Cyborg feminists “have to argue that ‘we’ do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole” (Haraway 158). In a cyborg feminism, bodies may become places, but the places are not concrete; rather, they are moving and complex, less stone fortress and more shifting tectonic plates.

Much like the limits that I struggle with, Haraway uses border and boundary imagery in her manifesto in order to elucidate the multiple manifestations of restriction on the feminist. Her manifesto is “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (150). Not only are borders and wars created, and thus susceptible to change, Haraway finds this instability to be pleasurable. This focus on pleasure is notable. While writers who seek change often recount the way that we have gotten to where we are today, their demand for something else is typically generic and based on necessity. Haraway’s call for pleasure in confusion belies a kind of hope as well as an excitement about how we might develop and who we might become.

Authorized, erroneous interpretations of nature are lost in building a cyborg feminist, but fortunately “the alternative is not cynicism or faithlessness” (Haraway 153). On the contrary, “[w]ho cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival” (Haraway 153). Haraway desires destruction of existing taxonomies but also the creation of connections. “[I]n the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection,” Haraway warns, again noting the challenge and necessity of finding something else, something better (173).

The cyborg feminist initially struck me as a rather bleak image, futuristic and cold, but Haraway is careful to remind us of the exciting potentials such a form presents. Instead of “longing to resolve contradiction” she suggests that “we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos” (Haraway 173). We already live in a bleak, monitored world, and there is hope in finding challenging alternatives.

Not only is there liberation in this ambiguity, we might find “pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions” (173).

Gordon’s ghosts, Code’s gossip, and Haraway’s cyborg serve as reimaginings, creative projects that expose the pervasive compartmentalizing and violent rhetorical practices in our world and work to undermine their supremacy through hybrid, changing, malleable, social and interdependent forms. By unpacking the potentials and complexities of an imagined cyborg being, we uncover many of the boundaries we do not typically discuss or acknowledge. “I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality,” Haraway explains, with this cyborg fiction providing “an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” (151). An “imaginative” resource must be creative and innovative, and thus a resource which could explore possibilities that we do not yet know. If we are struggling to survive using existing tools then perhaps we need to invent new, adaptive ones.

### **What’s so tricky about living?**

Living is not easy. Our brain stem tries valiantly to make it so—breathe in, breathe out, pulse, pulse, pulse, blink, swallow, digest. Send the warriors of the immune system to destroy invaders, maintain, start again, adapt. So what does an uncountable, robust life look like? Our own bodies, sites of physical violence, are not as static as they seem. Our bodies grow, stretch, and change; they heal and are regenerative. Living requires that our bodies maintain complex systems of change and exchange. Our inhalation of breath requires that our ribcages and trunks expand and contract to accommodate air, and our respiratory system connects with our circulatory system to make this breath potent and valuable. Digestion breaks down and transfers energy, organs sort through and adapt the contents to be circulated, and our innards determine what should be disposed of. We have different needs, day to day, and different byproducts, as well. If we embrace impurities as byproducts of living, as I have mentioned, then even this elusive mobility is valuable, perhaps even beautiful.

Just as there are normative conceptions of knowledge, however, there are also normative conceptions of bodies and the ways they live. Disabled feminist Harilyn Rousso explains that she “came to understand that...many of the problems I was facing in my life—the rejection, the staring, the isolation—were caused not by my disability, my CP, but by prejudice against my disability” (6). The delineation between her disability itself and disability *prejudice* helps us understand how disability becomes activated and (mis)understood in our social world. “Ah, the misconceptions we both held about ourselves,” Rousso laments (36). In this instance Rousso is referring to a very specific instance of misunderstanding, but also about larger misconceptions we have about our abilities based on our social and individual experiences.

For disabled feminists to try to participate in mainstream feminist conversations, for example, Rousso notes her struggle to avoid being considered “dependent” or in need of care, when so many feminists have argued that women are not dependent and should not be burdened with caretaking roles. How have we misconceived dependence? There is ongoing and harmful “stigmatization and devaluing of the care-giving relationship in traditional liberal orders” (Garland-Thomson 599). Dependency does not have to be a burdensome, negatively charged attribute, and Rousso suggests that this conception is actually a *misconception*. She investigates her feelings about dependency when she writes, “My reluctance to depend on others has been costly for me as a disabled and now aging woman who tends to refuse help because of its associations with dependency—and for me as a partner and lover, who tends to resist the pleasures of dependency that are part and parcel of intimacy” (Rousso 55). Dependency and independence both come with costs and benefits, then. In this moment Rousso unpacks mainstream assumptions and questions the privileging of independence over dependence in a feminist movement that seems as if it should embrace our reliance on one another.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s critical concept “misfit” shows us that “*fitting* and *misfitting* denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction” (592). “When the shape and substance of these two things correspond in their

union,” when there is sameness or congruence, “they fit. A *misfit*, conversely, describes an incongruent relationship between two things” (Garland-Thomson 592). Incongruence is not inherently bad, however: “The problem with a misfit...inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together” (Garland-Thomson 593). This critical conception is much like the “unthinkable” Butler uses, and both concepts describe how misfitting or being unthinkable might result in violence. While Garland-Thomson uses misfitting to particularly speak about disability experiences, she reinforces the idea that misfits are not undesirable or flawed. “Vulnerability is a way to describe the potential for misfitting to which all human beings are subject,” and “[t]he flux inherent in the fitting relation underscores that vulnerability lies not simply in our neediness and fragility but in how and whether that vulnerable flesh is sustained” (Garland-Thomson 598). Our vulnerable flesh, like sweet pups, curious babies, is almost too much for me to bear at times, and yet it is also so glorious. We are surrounded by a world of others and know our possibilities through others, presenting the opportunity for a misfit, a moment of violence, or a fit, something rewarding and remarkable.

Though many limits attempt to keep us bound and unable to locate alternatives, we do often have the opportunity to make choices in how we engage during moments of disjuncture. While I disagree with Garland-Thomson’s view that “[t]he point of civil rights legislation, and the resulting material practices such as universally designed built spaces and implements, is to enlarge the range of fits by accommodating the widest possible range of human variation,” since I believe legislation and rights-based movements are limiting rather than expansive, I do appreciate that this practice acknowledges our environments are “built and arranged,” and thus malleable (594). Indeed, if “fitting and misfitting occur on a spectrum that creates consequences,” we do not have to view those consequences as static or predetermined (Garland-Thomson 594). Misfitting and such dynamic encounters signal the constant possibility of change.

A misfit framework embraces the idea of opportunities, for “[e]ach meeting between subject and environment will be a fit or misfit depending on the choreography that plays out” (Garland-Thomson 595). There is no universal choreography, which is actually rather exciting. The opportunity to speculate and then pursue a known or unknown possibility reflects our ability to live actively. We are vulnerable in our living, and “[o]ur enfleshment certainly makes us mortal, open to loss, and exposed to suffering” (Garland-Thomson 600). Yet “our bodies are also the agents of our lived experience and subjectivity. An embodied engagement with the world is in fact life itself” (600). Being vulnerable to violence is not something I want to belittle. Instead, in order to survive we imagine an end to violence, we must imagine opportunities and possibilities into being beyond existing, permeable boundaries.

Nothing is prescribed or given. My role models, ghosts, divas, cyborgs, and misfits remind us of that seemingly rigid systems have been built to be so, they did not simply appear. Folk tales and tricksters also remind us that many kinds of living are possible, if not overt in their availability. In the introduction to *Uncle Remus*, Robert Hemenway explains that the trickster, Brer Rabbit, “exhibits the revolutionary consciousness necessary to survive in an oppressive system. He suggests that no order can be depended on for very long, that there are no certainties, that goodness may win this week but power the next” (Hemenway 29). Tricksters constantly act and react, antagonizing systems of power and finding humor in the process. Brer Rabbit suggests that little is certain outside “the need to improvise, to hang loose, stay cool, avoid sticky situations, shun rigid interpretations of events. Brer Rabbit shows that anarchy undermines all systems which mask reality” (Hemenway 29). Brer Rabbit is a hybrid character who experiences violence and also perpetrates violence and in so doing highlights the necessity of resistance. “His lessons inculcate a revolutionary consciousness because they teach that one never has to accept limitations on the self, that one can never be denied the radical possibilities of being human” (Hemenway 29). The radical possibilities of being human are not so easily

gotten, though with effort we can reduce many of the threats to these possibilities and articulate those that we have ignored or not yet discovered.

Being contingent and social means that we gain from our interactions with each other, but we might also experience hurt and harm when our ideals or intentions do not line up, when we find ourselves to be incongruent with others. How we deal with this interdependence relies in large part upon how we conceptualize this relationship. Knowing and being known by and through others can be a kind of embrace, a potentially soothing and warm encounter. Yet an embrace can also be stifling, a hold or constraint. When we feel constrained, limited, we are especially tasked with “finding a route, access to that which is marginalized, trivialized, denied, disqualified, taxed, and aggrieved” so that we can enact “redistributing respect, authority, and the right to representability or generalizability—the right to theorize, one could say—which among other things entails the capacity to be something other than a local knowledge governed or interpreted by a putative superior” (Gordon 21). This task will be easier if done in community, for we need “a shared and practical standpoint for negating dispossessions, disabilities, and dehumanizations” (Gordon 21). A shared standpoint will not collapse our differences, will not try to force us to be coherent or identical; a shared standpoint will celebrate the radical subjectivity of the individual and the necessity of theorizing each other as subjective, communal, and human.

### **Conclusion: Survival through daily innovation**

Everyday violence distracts us from our living, may even kill us. Liminal beings need surroundings, rhetorical practices, and modes of relating that are expansive and creative. “The only lasting truth is change,” is a quote that comes from a speculative fiction novel by a black feminist, and I do not believe that genre is accidental here. Science fiction, speculative fiction,

and other forms that challenge norms and dominant epistemologies realize the pleasure and excitement of encountering something new, previously unimagined yet somehow resonant.

Judith Butler explains that “the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met,” detailing how generalization is circular and self-validating and, importantly, conjured or created (“Preface” 9). Her use of “conjuring” is particularly poignant, as this verb belongs in the realm of magic and spells—things that are not typically viewed as possible or real. When used in relation to norms, “conjuring” shows that norms are impossible and unnatural. We can also give “conjuring” a more positive connotation by using it to describe possibilities. Butler is aware that “possibilities” are slightly vague and perhaps unimportant to readers of theory, but she capably disarms anyone who might discredit the importance of possibilities: “One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question” (3). In this instance, the impossibility actually lies in anyone being unthinkable, unreal, or impossible.

Boundaries are not inherently bad, and change is not inherently good. Accordingly, we should not install or dismiss either systematically without first having an opportunity to speculate their place in a complex future. As we speculate our future we will certainly make mistakes, cause harm, and fall back on limiting epistemologies. I believe this is inevitable but not irreparable. How can we imagine being disjointed selves, interacting with incoherent others, being bad at some things, making mistakes, having varied and asymmetrical talents? We can change, and even if some change is unavailable to us at times, we do not have to project those limits or (re)create boundaries or binds for others. Our liberation will not be limited to a simplified rights-based equality, but rather complex and shifting relationships with each other. It is not only unjust but also incredibly sad to accept a reactive, bound, and limited worldview.

Where else might we find survival in a disjointed world? How might we thrive knowing that corporeal and constructed boundaries persist, paradoxically, and that this paradox must be incorporated into our living? We can work to identify that which we do not have but need, that which we may not even know how to define (and perhaps never will). Commitment to the unknown, and perhaps unattainable, presents the kind of radical optimism required to struggle and survive in an unfriendly world. I am encouraged by figures who have taken on this struggle before me and so feel encouraged to pick up this work, build upon and destroy legacies as needed, in order to constantly change the unattainable to the attained and find new unattainables to pursue.

Andrea Smith explains that “the project of decolonization requires a practice of what Audra Simpson calls ‘ethnographic refusal’—the refusal to be known and the refusal to be infinitely knowable” (“Problem with Privilege”). Smith recognizes the erasure and violence of attempting to be knowable on another’s terms, especially on the terms of a colonist. “The politics of decolonization requires the proliferation of theories, knowledge, ideas, and analyses that speak to a beyond settler colonialism and are hence unknowable” (Smith). We cannot pretend we live outside settler colonialism and so we lack established knowledge systems or tools for dismantling settler colonialism. Instead “our project becomes less of one based on self-improvement or even collective self-improvement, and more about the creation of new worlds and futurities for which we currently have no language” (Smith). We might apply this future-seeking approach to many other limiting forces that keep us from living.

Smith characterizes this kind of work, organizing itself, as “a work of art” (Smith, “AMC 2009”). “When we start to create communities that are beautiful, we start to rethink the way we see ourselves,” and thus organizing nourishes our communities and our selves. In so doing we begin “recognizing the artist within us all, because what we are doing is creating a world that we can’t even fully imagine...and that’s why we need artistic work: to unleash our political imaginary” (Smith, “AMC 2009”). Imaginations are powerful, especially when shaken free of the

false limits we have internalized. Whether through organizing, haunting, creating diva aesthetics, or developing epistemologies or theory, we may “elevate principles that seem impossible, or that have the status of the impossible, to stand by them and will them, even when it looks highly unlikely that they’ll ever be realized” (Butler, “Willing the Impossible”). Knowing we may be nervous about the potential futility of this work, Butler eases our fears: “that’s okay, it’s a service. What would happen if we lived in a world where there were no people who did that? It would be an impoverished world” (“Willing the Impossible”). A world without this kind of exploration would be difficult to live in at all.

By tracing paths, revisiting conflicts and fascinations, I have realized that I have long been preoccupied with imagining possibilities. When I was around ten years old the house next door to my family home went up for sale. I took a brochure from the realtor mailbox and sat on our driveway with my neighbor friends, plotting ways to buy the house and keep a home together. Realistically (that is, based on the reality in which I believed I lived) I did not imagine we could actually buy the home as a group of ten year olds. Still, with chalk and cushions from the patio we created floorplans on my driveway and discussed chores and wall color preferences. After a day or two I could tell my companions were tiring of the game, but I was transfixed by the idea of shaping a future for myself and those I cared about. As a slightly older person I still find myself drawn to intense friendships, interdependence. I try to privilege my friendships as much as I do my romantic partnerships or my family bonds. Yet to ask a friend or group of friends to make life choices together outside the romantic partnership model is nearly unthinkable, as well as financially untenable. The world in which I live does not support unmarried adults raising families together, sharing healthcare, or making career or location decisions with multiple voices.

When does a thought become unthinkable and what is lost in that process? When my hopes become unthinkable I am overwhelmed with sadness, loneliness. I begin to feel I am not fit to live in this world. Most of the time I am able to push back, to ask that I change a little

myself but also that the world shift to let me fit. I am afraid, at times, of this grand challenge. In small and big ways the unknown can terrify. I am even more afraid, however, that we might give up on the unknown, on our ability to create and change. Ghosts, parties for bunnies named Flopsy, lyrics about hybrid families, so many figures swell my heart, remind me that struggle is a necessary part of change, a requirement for all of the beauty we find in living.

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