

Misogynoir Transformed

Black Women's Digital Resistance

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Transforming Misogynoir through Trans Advocacy

In an online video chat via Google Hangout with other trans women who read her first memoir, writer and trans advocate Janet Mock discussed her decision to retitle her 2014 book *Redefining Realness: My Journey to Womanhood*.¹ The book was initially structured as a very personal and singular journey of Mock's unfolding relationship to her identity as a Black trans woman, but in the process of writing, she realized that she wanted to animate her narrative and make it something that other trans women could find useful as well. She said, "I felt like I needed an action, so the act of redefining realness . . . allowed me to share the very complicated, nuanced idea of trans girls of color in a very emotional experience for me as a trans woman of color."² She also articulated her desire to use language that hailed the transgender community, citing *realness* as an homage to the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*, which first made trans women of color visible to a mainstream audience.

Realness is the way that trans and queer people of color describe aesthetic and sartorial choices that make them indistinguishable from cis and straight people. As Judith Butler and other feminists argue, gender is performative, meaning that gender is something we enact through the repetition of behavioral and sartorial choices.³ This representation is performative, though not a performance in a way that implies acting. Here, Butler means performative in that gender is something you do, that the behaviors, clothes, and mannerisms you choose to repeat "consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman."⁴

In the Ball scene—queer of color community, dance, and actual performance spaces—participants compete in categories like "school boy realness," in which they are judged for their ability to appear as real or as much like an ostensibly straight cis school boy as possible. In the 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, trans women and gay men revel in their ability to "serve realness," or "consolidate an impression of being"

these genders better than their cis and straight counterparts, effectively achieving the look and mannerisms the category describes. Ball culture brings these implicit practices of choosing clothes, mannerisms, and so forth to the foreground while playing with the notion of performativity in a literal way as participants walk different categories and are judged on how successfully they execute the look.

Mock expounds on the importance of realness in the book, stating, “To embody ‘realness’ rather than performing or competing ‘realness’ enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower level of risk of being rebutted or questioned, policed or attacked.”⁵ For Mock, gender performativity that is “unclockable,” or unable to be detected by cis people, can potentially mean safety in a transphobic world. “Embodying realness” becomes a way for trans women to move outside the relative safety of the Ball scene. However, this safety remains elusive for trans women, as being undetectable still means being subject to the violence that cis women experience regularly. According to the LGBTQ advocacy group Human Rights Campaign, 91 percent of all trans women murdered in 2019 were Black women. Cis Black women have the highest murder rate among cis women in the United States, at a rate of 4.4 murders for every 100,000 Black women.⁶ The statistic for Black trans women is even more sobering, with 1 murder for every 2,600 Black trans women.⁷ While perhaps offering a small reprieve from the disproportionate violence they receive as being identifiable trans women, “passing”—the idea that trans women are deceiving people by expressing their womanhood—provides only a conditional safety. Realness is both theatrical and practical, essential for creative expression and potentially the ability to live one’s life without being subject to the extra violence that transphobia elicits. Realness both reifies and troubles the gender binary by adhering to a normative gender expression for safety even as it may be mocked and playfully chided in Ball categories.

Referencing this world of realness is important for acknowledging the queer and trans people of color genealogy from which Mock descends, but her desire for realness transcends the boundaries of this community. Whereas early Ball performers engaged realness on glamorous imaginary runways in ways that sometimes mocked and made clear the performative nature of cishet embodiment, Mock wants a realness steeped in the everyday. By redefining realness in her book, she shifts at-

tention away from realness as spectacle, or even realness as subtlety for safety's sake, to a realness redefined by an acceptance of self and embrace of one's desired expression outside social expectations. For Mock, this looks like a "consolidation of an impression of being a woman," while for others it may not. The call for "realness" is a call for a performative gender of your choosing that does not require an attention to choices that facilitate safety because they adhere to established precedents. Realness is redefined to mean authenticity or choosing performative gender that is her truth as a Black woman independent of what others might wish for her gender expression or identity. Rather than realness being used as a metaphor for passing, realness transcends a performative goal and focuses more on a realness that aligns with self. As Mock puts it, "Self-definition is a responsibility I've wholeheartedly taken on as mine."⁸ For Mock, this self-definition is facilitated by her ability to meet traditional beauty standards and her ability to be perceived easily inside the bounds of the gender binary. Other Black women as well as Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks may not have the same ease with achieving self-definition as the world exists now.

For Mock, *Redefining Realness* involves her documentation of her own transformation into the person she is today, but also her creation of a touchstone work for other trans women of color on their own journeys. The catharsis that came through the process of writing her book is part of the reason she chose the medium. Despite being an avid YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr user, Mock used the comparatively old technology of the book to tell her story. Mock talked of the importance of getting her book to incarcerated trans women and making sure there were copies in local libraries so that anyone who needed her words could find them. Books have a comparative permanence and portability that lend them weight in society, as they are material artifacts of history. Books have a longevity and accessibility that might be undervalued by some in this digital epoch. Not everyone can access social media, and its impermanence can make it difficult to return to ideas and concepts years or even days later.

However, the ephemeral nature of social media serves the real-time concerns of the present in ways books do not. By employing a multimedia platform press plan that included the use of social media, Mock ensured that many demographics would know about her work. In ad-

ditional promotional YouTube videos for the book, Mock discussed different concepts and experiences that appear in the text, such as passing, sex work, and identity. The immediacy of the platform allows for dynamic, real-time engagement that the book itself cannot provide. By deftly using YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr to spread the book through the hashtagification of the book title, #RedefiningRealness was able to reach a lot of people. The book debuted at number 19 on the *New York Times* best seller list.⁹

Mock's book launched her down the path of celebrity as a visible trans advocate. Mock's narration of her own story marks a practice of Black women's media production that can challenge problematic mainstream representations of marginalized communities. From the films of Black women filmmakers like Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) or Aisha Shahidah Simmons's *No! The Rape Documentary* (2004), to Audre Lord's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and June Jordan's autobiography *Soldier*, Black women have been telling their stories through media in ways that challenge the limiting script society projects about who we are.¹⁰ Each of these works, like Mock's, helps to bring the reality of Black women's lives to the fore on their own terms.

Mock's book is her own form of harm reduction, a way of mitigating the trauma of her young life by retelling her stories. By writing a memoir, Mock can release and reinterpret the events of her life. Mock unpacks her depression, dysphoria, and relationships to her family, all of which significantly impacted her health and sense of safety. While she is not able to change the trauma she has already experienced, she is able, through writing, to transform her narrative about those events in light of adult wisdom. By sharing her personal narrative, Mock gives what her friend and fellow trans advocate Laverne Cox might say is a "possibility model" for other Black women. A possibility model is not a role model, not someone you wish to emulate, but someone who provides a vision of what life could be. By discussing her participation in group therapy, access to hormones through an accommodating doctor, and thoughts of self-harm, Mock provides a vivid picture of the health realities Black trans women must navigate. Mock grants access to her interior life and the material conditions that helped her become the woman she is today, creating a vision of possibility for other trans and Black girls.¹¹

While few would deny the popularity of social media sites, their significance as digital media platforms for activism is only beginning to be understood. In the last chapter I explored the ways that viral videos can invoke empathy for Black girls through the documentation of the misogynoir they experience. YouTube itself started because one of its founders had difficulty finding video of pop icon Janet Jackson's 2004 Super Bowl halftime show wardrobe malfunction caused by Justin Timberlake.¹² That the unintentional baring of a Black woman's breast, for which she was assigned the blame (or Nipplegate, as it came to be called), was the impetus for YouTube speaks to the embedded nature of misogynoir in social media. YouTube was and is a repository for video but now includes original content uploaded just for the site. Twitter began as a platform for small group communication and has grown from a default 140 characters (to match the length of text messages) to 280 characters in 2017.¹³ Tumblr, a microblogging platform that allowed users to curate and reblog each others' content, launched in 2007 and was at its height in 2013 before being sold to Yahoo!, the Internet search engine. YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr are marshaled to build networks of information and support by people multiply marginalized in society in ways that impact health and well-being beyond traditional health-seeking behaviors like seeing a doctor. These activities include Black women using Twitter to build networks of support that provide real, everyday solutions for problems that are not being adequately addressed by the institutions that should help, a process that values crowdsourced knowledge and the creation of images that subvert dominant representations of their communities.

Black women are repurposing the capitalist tools of social media into tools that allow them to grow community, share resources, and even advocate for each other's safety and health. This chapter explores Janet Mock's and other Black trans women's use of digital media platforms to create redefined representations of themselves outside the problematic lens of transmisogynoir.¹⁴ These images and texts counter negative stereotypes about the community in media through a process that addresses health and healing beyond the WHO definition of health. The creation of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs by Janet Mock and the proliferation of other hashtags for trans women, including #TWOC and #FreeCeCe,

are examples of how Black trans women transform social media into social justice magic that advocates for their lives.

#GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCeCe are hashtags that helped to share resources, distribute articles, and create connections that helped Black women survive and even thrive in a world that disproportionately roots for their destruction. Misogynoir is transformed through the everyday digital alchemy of those who use these hashtags to build community and advocate for change. I examine #GirlsLikeUs and #FreeCeCe as examples of hashtags that did more than create community. Both of these hashtags were instrumental in real-world transformations that include the creation of new media projects on- and offline that challenge stereotypes about Black trans women as well as a successful prison support campaign that fomented an activist career, all acts that mitigated misogynoir and led to better health outcomes for Black women.

#GirlsLikeUs

In March 2012, when writer and editor Janet Mock learned that Jenna Talackova—a multiracial trans woman contestant for Miss Universe—was being denied access to the pageant because Talackova was trans, Mock worked quickly to bolster a collective response. Mock wanted to show her support and called on her Twitter followers to send theirs when she tweeted, “Please sign & share this women’s rights petition in support of transgender beauty queen Jenna Talackova & #girlslikeus: <https://www.change.org/93-miss-universe-canada-donald-trump-reverse-the-unfair-disqualification-of-jenna-talackova>.”¹⁵ The linked petition explained that Talackova was one of sixty-five finalists for the Miss Canada competition, the winner of which would advance to the global Miss Universe Pageant. When pageant officials learned that Talackova was assigned male at birth, they removed her from the finalist pool and took her photo off the pageant website. Mock’s tweet helped the petition rack up nearly twenty-two thousand signatures of support for Talackova, ultimately resulting in her reinstatement as a finalist. Talackova made it to the top twelve in the competition before being eliminated.

Mock framed her support of Talackova as an act of solidarity for women’s rights, but lending support to a woman who wants to participate in a beauty pageant begs the question, Is this feminist online

organizing? Should a beauty pageant's discriminatory policies be the subject of a feminist campaign? It's not easy to classify this call for support as feminist given the inherently anti-feminist practices of traditional beauty pageants, particularly one owned by Donald Trump, who is known for his sexist and violent interactions with women.¹⁶ Pageant contestants are expected to meet a white, Western, able-bodied, and (though previously unarticulated) cis standard of beauty, conforming to the very performative norms that Ball culture transforms. While some communities marginalized by these aesthetic preferences elect to create their own pageants where beauty can be redefined, they, like Talackova, should not be summarily dismissed before even having the opportunity to participate in a traditional pageant.¹⁷

For women who are often denied social legitimacy as women, a win in one of the most gender-binary and normative spaces humans have created could be a move in a positive direction. It exemplifies the defensive digital alchemy that was employed by Black women responding to #RuinABlackGirlsMonday. A crown atop the head of a trans woman contestant conveys the message that trans women are women and there are a panel of ostensibly cis judges, viewers, and fellow contestants who support this assertion through their participation in the pageant. But trans women's participation in beauty pageants also sets the stage for an ideal trans woman, a trans woman who must uphold the same circumscribed beauty standards cis women must possess to win. But as actress Jen Richards argues in *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), "A lot of people will look at trans women's performance of femininity and see it as somehow reinforcing the worst patriarchal stereotypes of women, and it's really unfair and ahistorical to foist that same perspective on people who are just trying to survive."¹⁸ The performativity of the pageant expanding to include those who have traditionally been excluded does not change the social script of the importance of women's beauty. Would a woman—cis or trans—who challenged the gender binary make it to the top twelve or receive the same support that Talackova did? But, as Richards asks, would a trans woman who did survive?

Talackova's removal from the pageant and the subsequent support she received from trans and cis folks alike harken back to a point I made in the introduction. It is not easy to classify all the digital alchemy that Black women creators are working to achieve as feminist, but that does

not mean that it is not still transformative. Not all challenges to transphobia or heterosexism are feminist, but that does not mean that the work is not a necessary part of creating a more just world. Talackova's digital petition as well as Mock's support of it pushed boundaries and made space for those who would otherwise be denied entry to the elite club that is "woman." But access for one to an already exclusionary party also raises the question of whether this is the party to which we wish to gain access. I see the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag helping a community create what it needs for itself, without seeking this sort of external validation.

As Mock describes it, her initial use of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs was not a particularly calculated launch and was not specifically for Black women:

I didn't think it over, it wasn't a major push, but #girlslikeus felt right. Remarkably a few more women—some well-known, others not—shared the petition and began sharing their stories of being deemed un-real, being called out, working it, fighting for what's right, wanting to transition, dreaming to do this, accomplishing that. . . . #girlslikeus soon grew beyond me. . . . My dream came true: #girlslikeus was used on its own without my @janetmock handle in it. It had a life of its own.¹⁹

Mock thought of the hashtag and immediately saw its utility in attracting people to sign the petition in support of Talackova. What she did not foresee was its continued utility as she and then others started to use the hashtag for all sorts of conversations among girls like her. From beauty to safety, from health to harassment, the hashtag became an invaluable channel for women, particularly Black women, to find community and care.

Women deploy the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs in discussions of specific desires to medically transition, the banality of everyday living, and dreams of success, as well as the more general threats and realities of the violence related to being outed in unsafe situations. The hashtag crosses strict lines separating private and public spheres of concern. Furthermore, because trans women generally are not born into families where conversations regarding their health and social needs are addressed—unlike conversations about other types of identity, such as race—the use of hashtags like #GirlsLikeUs allows for a network where information

can be shared, communities formed, even with anonymity. #GirlsLikeUs can signal other trans women without necessarily making it clear that it is for trans women in the hashtag, an important feat given the deadly violence that trans women face. #GirlsLikeUs becomes a safe space through which a dissection of the misogynoir Black women endure can be discussed.

Computational scientist Alan Mislove created a database that collected a random 10 percent of all tweets tweeted since Twitter began.²⁰ With the help of computer science graduate student Devin Gaffney's script that gathered all instances of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs within this database, I examined all publicly accessible tweets using #GirlsLikeUs between Mock's first uses in March 2012 through October 2014. With over eleven thousand tweets in this 10 percent sample dataset that used the hashtag, I had enough tweets to begin to unpack how users were deploying it. I utilized the visualization software Gephi—an open-source platform that visually renders the connections between data points—to chart the network of people using #GirlsLikeUs. Because Gephi also generates nodes that correlate with the number of interactions between Twitter users and their proximity to other users, I was able to determine the most prolific users of the hashtag and their levels of interconnection. It is not surprising that Janet Mock and her friend Laverne Cox, actress on the Netflix hit series *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), are primary users of the hashtag whose growing celebrity helps propel the hashtag to new constituencies. Their Twitter handles appear with the greatest frequency in the corpus of tweets after one other user. Cami, a self-described “politically incorrect conservative t[rans] girl,” had her own network of followers who do not interact with Mock or Cox. Cami is a visible outlier in the network because of her conservative politics and her prolific tweeting.

Cami and her more famous white conservative peer, Caitlyn Jenner, have actively cultivated or been thrust into the spotlight as spokespersons for trans community. However, their political beliefs result in their continual distancing from the majority of the trans community. Cami and Caitlyn's conservatism is an important reminder that gender marginalization doesn't always translate into a transformative politic. While Talackova may have been the impetus for #GirlsLikeUs and while Cami was a prolific user of the hashtag, the content of the tweets tagged

with #GirlsLikeUs reflects the racial and gender justice politics of trans women of color on the left of the political spectrum.

The networks being built around #GirlsLikeUs are along lines of affinity and not only ones of identity—along lines of shared analyses of power or felt kinship rather than simply gender. Within the #Girls-LikeUs network, “like us” also means a left politic that is supportive and affirming of progressive stances regarding issues of race, sexuality, class, and of course gender. Rather than invoking cis women as the reference point of its discussions, the #GirlsLikeUs network places trans women’s experiences at the center of the conversation. Thus, #GirlsLikeUs does not function like other slogans of Black struggles for self-representation.

For instance, the iconic Freedom Struggle-era images of Black Memphis sanitation workers holding placards that read “I AM A MAN” were an attempt to reach the people who did not hold that truth to be self-evident. Historian Steve Estes writes that the phrase “I am a man” “represents a demand for recognition and respect of Black manhood and Black humanity” in the face of a white supremacist paternalism in southern mayoral politics.²¹ This marked a shift from the abolition-era question of “Am I not a man and a brother?” and a question generally attributed to Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a woman?” that fully brings Black women’s marginalization into view. The evolution from question to declaration is significant, but so too is the turn away from a white authorial gaze to which such inquisitions and demands are made. The conversations tagged with #GirlsLikeUs are most often between trans women and about issues that concern the community. It calls community forward by using “us” as opposed to “me.” #GirlsLikeUs signals a conversation that is for, by, and about trans women.

I used Voyant, a web-based textual analysis tool, to generate word visualizations and measure the frequency and occurrence of words in the corpus of the collected tweets as I did with the YouTube comments in chapter 1. The most popular hashtags used with the hashtag #Girls-LikeUs were other words of identity affirmation, including #Trans, #Transgender, and #TWOOC (trans women of color).²² Not surprisingly, “trans” was the most popular word in the corpus of tweets, occurring more than 2,600 times in the sample. Following far behind were “Transgender” and “LGBT,” with over 1,000 and 500 occurrences, respectively. The second most popular co-occurring hashtag was #TWOOC. Occur-

ring nearly 600 times, #TWOC signaled a mix of both affirming tweets and tweets designed to bring attention to the disproportionate amounts of violence and health concerns trans women of color face. I highlight the 600 times #TWOC is used to show that even though #GirlsLikeUs is for all trans women, the concerns of TWOC are central to the Twitter conversation. I examine the themes these hashtags and words highlight in the network, underscoring their ability to build connections both on- and offline.

Janet Mock used the hashtag #TWOC in conjunction with #GirlsLikeUs to amplify the voices and needs of other Black women and to celebrate the time she spent with other trans women of color. In May 2013, Mock tweeted a link to the GoFundMe for Egyptt, a Black woman who had dedicated her life to trans advocacy but now “needs resources to get back into housing, to replace lost possessions, and to cover outstanding healthcare costs.”²³ Because Mock’s Twitter presence was still nascent at this time, her tweet received only fifteen retweets. Egyptt’s virtual passing of the hat raised \$3,125, nearly \$7,000 short of her \$10,000 goal. Trans women and trans women of color struggle to find work and when they do, it often does not pay a living wage. The practice of using crowd-fundraisers to support the necessary expenses of life is an all too common and unsustainable occurrence in the community.

For Black women, misogyny and transphobia lurk in the background, informing their ability to successfully crowdfund and find gainful employment. According to the 2019 analysis of the 2009 National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and National LGBTQ Task Force data on the unique challenges faced by Black trans people, “Black transgender and gender non-conforming people had an extremely high unemployment rate at 26%, . . . over three times the rate of the general population (7%) at the time the survey was fielded.”²⁴ The survey results also revealed that nearly half of Black trans respondents were denied a job because of their trans or gender nonconforming identity. With these realities in the workplace, it is no surprise that Egyptt’s call to her community could not net much. When everyone is struggling, there is only so much to go around. With a third of Black trans and gender nonconforming people living in extreme poverty, #GirlsLikeUs crowdfunding has real limits. Despite not reaching the monetary goal, Egyptt’s GoFundMe exemplifies the kinds of material support the community who

uses the hashtag is able to provide to Black women. This act of solidarity was echoed by other Twitter users as several other crowdsourced fundraisers for #TWOC were shared with the hashtag.

But crowdfunding is not only used for the day-to-day survival of individuals like Egyptt. The hashtag #TWOC was also used alongside #GirlsLikeUs to raise funds for a documentary about the Black trans elder Miss Major. A popularly retweeted tweet from the project's Twitter account stated, "@theMAJORdoc: 5 days and \$6759 left to tell #Miss-Major's story. We can do this with your help! <http://t.co/GDJfhBkFhC> #girlslikeus #twoc."²⁵ Here, #TWOC is used to let potential supporters know a bit about who Miss Major is and who might also be interested in supporting her story. By tagging the tweet with these hashtags, the filmmakers are hailing a receptive—and hopefully financially supportive—audience. The filmmakers use these two hashtags to draw in the communities with which they are associated and provide an opportunity for these community members to support projects that speak to their interests. The documentary was successfully funded and has toured the United States and beyond on the film festival circuit in addition to being distributed by Amazon Prime Video.²⁶ This digital alchemy of crowdfunding a documentary is a tactic that Black indie creators perfected. The successful crowdfunding of the second season of the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, written by and starring Issa Rae, led to her successful transition into mainstream television, becoming a possibility model in her own way for Black creators who couldn't get studio backing. The success of the Miss Major crowdfunding campaign and the documentary itself offer more self-produced representation of Black women in popular culture.

The hashtag #TWOC was used by other users to celebrate #TWOC connections within the hashtag community of #GirlsLikeUs. In July 2013 Janet Mock tweeted, "Spent the day this far engaged in revelatory conversations with my dear sister [@tourmaliine]. Blessed to know you. #twoc #GirlsLikeUs."²⁷ Mock consistently posted pictures and tweets while out with her #TWOC friends. Similarly, trans advocate Cecilia Chung posted a picture of her with Laverne Cox and Bamby Salcedo while attending the 2013 Philly Trans Health Conference, with the caption, "See you next time ladies! @translatinbamby @Lavercox #twoc #sisterhood #girlslikeus #pthc."²⁸ While easily dismissed as self-

congratulatory tweets, these public displays of affection among trans women of color illustrate a solidarity that is being built both on- and offline. The ability to connect virtually and then in person builds the network in ways that belie dismissals of online activism as armchair activism or slacktivism. Community is being formed online, but it is also nurtured in real life (IRL). In a heterosexist world that wants to paint women as each other's competition, the real connections and sisterhood being developed challenge that limiting perspective.

Just three months earlier, however, #TWOC was used to amplify the tragic death of Ms. Cemia "Ce Ce" Acoff, a Black trans woman murdered in Olmstead, Ohio. Initial reporting in the local paper, the *Plain Dealer*, used Acoff's legal name, misgendered her, and also highlighted previous unrelated arrests. User @Cisnormativity tweeted, "Criminalizing the body of a trans woman of colour. This day must be ending with a y. #MsAcoffRIP #girlslikeus #twoc #nolessvalid."²⁹ Cisnormativity acknowledged the ubiquity of violence and unjust treatment trans women of color experience as a daily occurrence. The *Plain Dealer* implied that Acoff was responsible for her own murder because she was trans. The paper painted her as someone unworthy of sympathy because of her past interactions with the law. The diversity in the way the hashtag #TWOC was used speaks to a vibrant community experimenting with and exploring what the net can net in terms of tangible support. #TWOC signals both the joys of connection and the sadness of loss. For #Girls-LikeUs and specifically #TWOC, joy and sorrow are enmeshed, with one never too far from the other. #TWOC and #GirlsLikeUs make for a powerful pair that center trans women of color's efforts to support one another in life and the all-too-frequent instance of death.

After the hashtag #TWOC, another popular word within the corpus of tweets I analyzed was "love." Used 504 times (four more times than "LGBT"), "love" is used in a myriad of ways to show support to members of the network. In another tweet from Janet Mock to trans artist and activist Tourmaline, Mock wrote, "[@tourmaliine] thanks sis—the signal boost + love means a lot to me. #girlslikeus." Mock also lifted fellow hashtag super-user Laverne Cox, writing, "@Lavernecox Love you, Laverne. I was so elated to 'plug' you + #OITNB on #huffpostlive today :-)) <http://t.co/i7ZQmWcXvb> #girlslikeus."³⁰ These tweets from Mock are representative of many of the tweets within the network, where words of

affirmation signal solidarity and support among users. Other users loved other #GirlsLikeUs tweeters' pictures, outfits, and hair. Users tweeted about their love for the supportive nature of the network. Laverne Cox even offered a twist on Black gay activist Joseph Beam's quote turned tagline for fellow Black gay activist Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989), "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act," with "thanks for the love. Loving trans people is a revolutionary act #girlslikeus."³¹

#Love also brings to the fore discussions of romantic love and partnership, a sometimes dangerous proposition for trans women. According to a 2017 *ABC News* article about the murder of twenty-two-year-old Tracey Williams at the hands of her boyfriend, "A 2015 study by UCLA's Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law found that between 31% and 50% of transgender people have experienced dating violence at some point in their lives, compared to between 28% and 33% of the general population."³² A 2017 study by the Arcus Foundation examining intimate partner violence in LGBTQ communities found that "transgender women were three times more likely to report experiencing sexual violence and financial violence than survivors who did not identify as transgender women."³³ Of the LGBTQ homicides for that year, 46 percent of the victims were trans women, all of whom were women of color, 60 percent of whom were Black.

Given these realities, Laverne Cox also used the #GirlsLikeUs network to ask a vulnerable question that is an issue for many trans women: "For those trans women who are in healthy relationships with men, how did you meet him? Suggestions? #girlslikeus #transchat #bfsearch."³⁴ The tweet started a Twitter thread in which trans women shared both heartwarming and cautionary tales of relationships. Users discussed the pros and cons of telling potential partners they are trans up front, places where they met their boyfriends, and even their reluctance to date because of the violence they might face. The Human Rights Campaign's 2018 Anti-Trans Violence report noted that 54 percent of trans people report having experienced intimate partner violence, while one in six murders of trans people are suspected to have been committed by intimate partners.³⁵ Dating while trans is not only difficult but can also be dangerous and deadly.

One user even used Twitter to help identify an attacker, tweeting, "This is the guy who attacked me, can you help identify him? Please

share . . . #Brighton #girlslikeus <http://t.co/PTLQqmn1MJ>.” The link connected to a police website with a sketch of the alleged attacker. The tweet was shared 403 times and was accompanied by words of encouragement, though it was not clear whether the attacker was ever identified. By using the hashtag in this manner, the user expanded the initial utility of #GirlsLikeUs even further and hopefully helped some other women stay safe. Amplifying this tweet is a form of defensive digital alchemy in that it allows concerned community members to act collectively to identify someone who had caused harm in their area, a form of harm reduction. #GirlsLikeUs is transformed into an outlet for accountability and activism for the trans community.

On June 11, 2012, an episode of the TLC show *Cake Boss* aired in which an employee of the Cake Boss was to flirt with Carmen Carrera, unaware that she was trans. *Cake Boss* is a popular reality TV show that follows Buddy Valastro and his family-owned bakery as they make incredible cakes for high-end events. Carrera agreed to participate after talking to producers about appropriate language and what would make the prank insensitive. Despite these conversations, producers still elected to film the encounter and include a framing that implied that Carrera was “really a man.” Calling trans women men in dresses contributes to a culture of deadly violence. Carrera and her supporters along with GLAAD created a Change.org petition that was tweeted alongside #GirlsLikeUs, and by June 13, Carrera received an apology from the Cake Boss and TLC, and the show did not re-air the episode. The hashtag amplified the story internationally because of its global reach, making the Cake Boss’s behavior not only a national but international scandal for TLC. Again, the amplification of the story through Twitter, and specifically the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs, forced TLC to change its tune.

#GirlsLikeUs exemplifies the magic of generative digital alchemy through this practice of shifting from margin to center, utilizing established mediums to create literally transformative realities. Other Black trans activists, like Tourmaline, are using the Internet not to appeal to mainstream media about their humanity but to support and push for a community for themselves that promotes their own well-being and survival.³⁶ The added benefit of creating this community online is that it is visible to out-group members and does the work of humanizing inadvertently and without draining energy from the more important

work of supporting each other. However, this visibility cuts both ways. In the book *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Tourmaline and fellow editors and contributors make the sobering point that visibility can also lead to violence.³⁷ People are using digital media to create and support a network of connection among communities that have traditionally had trouble finding each other, let alone reaching a larger audience. By doing the work of community building online, groups are leveraging both visibility and education at once, while also risking exposure. Women are telling their own stories but in the process are forcing more recognition for their identities in mainstream publics.

Before Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, Black trans women's experiences were not very visible in mainstream media. The popular media trope of trans identity as a form of deception is iconized in the 1992 film *The Crying Game*, which shows a man throw up when he realizes that the Black woman he loves is trans. As Nick Adams, GLAAD director of Trans Media and Representation, notes, "In the same way that *Psycho* created this ripple-effect of cross-dressing psychopathic serial killers [in film], *The Crying Game* created a ripple effect of men reacting with vomiting when they see a transgender woman."³⁸ Additional representations of Black trans women were limited to daytime talk shows where trans identity was made spectacular and salacious.³⁹ *Paris Is Burning* (1990) is one of the few vehicles for Black trans women's representation prior to the wave that Mock and Cox helped to usher in. The advent of social media and other digital spaces has allowed for more "real" representations of trans life, including the vibrant community reflected in the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs.

But the real beauty of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs is in the networks that formed on- and offline. #GirlsLikeUs helped expand and nuance conversations that had failed to take stock of the unique impact of certain policies on trans women's lives. Health topics like the introduction of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), street harassment, and the dearth of resources for the health and well-being of trans women were popular subjects in the compendium of tweets. I explore some representative tweets related to these topics and how they indicate a network that is better able to address the healthcare needs of trans women than what is generally available elsewhere in the public sphere.

The Health of #GirlsLikeUs

How are members of the hashtag network using and talking about health and healthcare in their tweets? I wanted to examine how issues of health and well-being were discussed in the Twitter corpus generated using #GirlsLikeUs. Not surprisingly, these tweets offered a complex and multivalent representation regarding trans women's relation to health and well-being. Health was used to raise awareness about the physical and mental health concerns within trans community, while also highlighting the unique challenges Black women face regarding health. Twitter users adroitly made connections between transphobia, health outcomes, and early death that trans women face, making pointed connections between media outlets' negative portrayals and the health of their community. Anti-trans violence is a health issue because it leads to stress, which community members often respond to with self-medication, using illicit drugs and alcohol, and the violence itself can cause death. Trans women have more trouble navigating the world when negative tropes circulate about them, making housing, employment, and healthcare discrimination much more of a reality.

When Fox News used a photo of Robin Williams dressed in drag as his character Mrs. Doubtfire to illustrate a story about trans healthcare, one immediately begins to understand the life-and-death stakes of trans (mis)representation. Janet Mock tweeted, "Guess who used 'Mrs. Doubtfire' to illustrate a story on trans healthcare. <http://t.co/W2SQzw7k> #girlslikeus."⁴⁰ The tweet links to an article by TakePart Press that reports on the photo and its subsequent impact, citing Mock in the process. Mock is quoted as saying,

Trans people are not wearing a costume. Our lives and struggles are not jokes, and using such an image spreads damaging stereotypes that who we are is put on, entertainment and fictional. It's those same misconceptions and stereotypes that allow trans people to be discriminated against when it comes to access to housing, employment and healthcare.⁴¹

Mock's words indicate the importance of images in the real-world health outcomes for trans women. In the same 2011 National LGBTQ Task Force study of Black trans and gender nonconforming people,

“41% of Black respondents said they had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, more than five times the rate of the general U.S. population.”⁴² Fox News reduced trans women’s lives to a fictional movie character who dons a wig and padding to be able to interact with his children. Robin Williams’s drag is portrayed as funny because the audience knows he is a man. Much like the *Shit Girls Say* and *Shit Black Girls Say* videos discussed in chapter 1, the gag relies on the trope that a man in a dress is ridiculous and therefore comical. Society’s willingness to connect men in drag to trans women impacts the way trans women move through the world. It makes their real issues a source of comedy and their lives something to be made fun of and not taken seriously. When such images are used to illustrate a story on trans healthcare, trans women’s lives are made ridiculous by association and their health made trivial. When trans women go out in public they are at risk of life-ending violence. When trans women seek medical care, they are at risk of negative encounters with medical professionals because of the bias engendered by the trope of a man in a dress. The use of a picture of Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire results in the legitimacy of trans health concerns being called into question. If transness is only drag, then why would gender affirmation surgery be medically necessary? While it’s not clear how many people saw this article on the Fox News website, the Fox News Channel has maintained the highest watch rates of all basic cable channels from 2013 to 2018, a sobering statistic given this type of dangerously misleading and transphobic content.

This problematic representation of trans women is not limited to explicitly straight or conservative publications, as mainstream LG(BT) media coverage often neglects and undermines trans women as well. Janet Mock tweeted a 2012 article from the *Daily Beast* that acknowledged the ways that violence against trans women of color is ignored.⁴³ Mock wrote, “@thedailybeast challenges media & ‘mainstream gay community’ as to why CeCe, Paige & Brandy were ignored <http://t.co/7QKF4b1s> #girlslikeus.”⁴⁴ The tweeted article describes the arrest and trial of CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman charged with second-degree murder and incarcerated for defending herself against neo-Nazi attackers; Paige Clay, a Black trans woman from Chicago found murdered in a park; and Brandy Martell, another Black trans woman murdered and shot in the genitals and chest by the men who initially

hit on her.⁴⁵ The article reports that, “while [McDonald’s] sentence has sparked outrage in some circles, it has gone virtually unnoticed by the mainstream media, as well as in the mainstream gay community, which has been consumed by the same-sex-marriage debate,” among other issues.⁴⁶ These murders and the incarceration of McDonald have been central to Twitter conversations using the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs. Trans women are made both hypervisible, with their bodies measured against cis expectations, and invisible, with their lives and deaths absent from even queer community news.

With the implementation of US president Barack Obama’s Affordable Care Act (ACA) on the horizon, LGBTQ activists worked to educate community members about the plan and its potential benefits and shortcomings throughout 2012 and 2013. The organization Out2Enroll galvanized LGBTQ organizations to make healthcare coverage and the provisions of the ACA a community issue. However, as was evident in the dearth of reporting in mainstream queer publications about the murders of Paige Clay and Brandy Martell, as well as the incarceration of CeCe McDonald, trans women’s unique experiences were overlooked by the organization. One user implored the organization to pay attention to the unique needs of trans people prior to the 2014 enrollment deadline, tweeting, “#out2Enroll please mention the continued use of #trans specific exclusions in health care plans denying trans people coverage. #girlslikeus.”⁴⁷ When trans people sign up for healthcare coverage, medically necessary treatment is often illegally denied because of provider and insurance company bias. As a result of this public digital activism, Out2Enroll now has a dedicated webpage that provides trans insurance guidance that is broken down by state and plan.⁴⁸

Twitter user and trans advocate Cecilia Chung continued to carry this message of trans healthcare concerns, tweeting, “We want trans-competent health care that is also gender responsive. #srhr #aids2014 #transgender #girlslikeus #trans,” demanding care that also allows trans people of all genders to receive the care they need.⁴⁹ The type of care trans patients are trying to access is the same care that cis people take for granted; access to hormones and surgery that are medically necessary is routinely denied despite the state and federal mandates that prohibit such discrimination. Chung’s use of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs alongside #SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) and #AIDS2014

created a connection between activist communities that might not automatically see the resonance between themselves. One tweet of less than 140 characters is demonstrating the link between trans healthcare, HIV, and sexual health. Beyond the question of access to medically necessary treatment, this tweet is calling for trans health to be inclusive of trans sex lives.

The hashtag #GirlsLikeUs also made connections to other digital platforms. For example, the Google Hangout platform, referenced at the beginning of this chapter, was also used to address issues of health. A live Google Hangout called “Transgender Health: An Evolution to Understanding” was open and available for anyone with the link to watch, and a recording makes the video accessible to this day.⁵⁰ In addition, transitioning “vlogs” (video blogs) uploaded to YouTube provide recommendations for specific trans-friendly doctors and depictions of the bodily changes experienced during transitioning.⁵¹ Where some parts of the medical community have been slow to acknowledge the growing demand for gender affirmation services and publicly accessible transition documents, trans women are using such online networks to get what they need from receptive providers. Other YouTube videos identified with the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag include videos by TWOC discussing important issues, including the spread of HIV in the community and the challenges for trans women to simply live their lives unmolested. By sharing this information via the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs on Twitter, YouTube, and various other outlets, Mock has developed a new media network through which a message generally reserved for members of the transgender community can reach beyond its immediate context.

Another user of the hashtag discussed the challenges of “being trans in the UK where getting a doctor’s letter mentioning ‘. . . dressed & presented well in female attire’ is a thing :-/ #GirlsLikeUs.”⁵² This tweet illustrates the patronizing attitudes and potential humiliation that women endure when doctors are in a position to assess how they present as women for them to be able to access necessary healthcare. The sad perplexed emoticon at the end of the tweet is a commentary on the unease the Twitter user feels with doctors being able to decide that she is or is not performing her sex and gender well. Realness is again being managed by cis people’s expectations of how trans women should perform gender to be regarded as real. This sentiment was shared by another

user, who proclaimed, “Who I am is not decided by any doctor, country nor school. #GirlsLikeUs.”⁵³ These tweets provide a window into the way doctors are gatekeepers to trans women’s health and experience. In the United Kingdom, “‘84% of doctors think NHS funds shouldn’t be used to treat GD as it’s a lifestyle choice’ (gires). Ignorance or prejudice? #girls-likeus.”⁵⁴ Doctors’ thoughts are not simply individual biased opinions with no consequence. If doctors think that gender dysphoria is a lifestyle choice, the barriers to treatment for trans patients remain.

When trans people have difficulty finding accepting healthcare providers, their health suffers in other ways as well. According to a 2018 study by the Fenway Health organization for LGBT care in Boston, “HIV prevalence is as high as 50% for Latina transgender women and 48% for Black transgender women, compared to 4% among White non-Hispanic transgender women in the US.”⁵⁵ An important contributing factor to trans women’s reluctance to seek care is the negative attitudes of healthcare professionals they encounter. Even healthcare centers built specifically to serve women can be essentialist in that undertaking. A tweet from a disgruntled potential patient read, “If you missed it: ‘Open letter to Feminist Women’s Health Center on its refusal to treat trans women’ #girlslikeus,” which links to the author’s detailed experience of being denied care and access.⁵⁶ The Fenway Health study mentioned earlier concluded,

The 2015 national transgender survey found that one-third of its 27,715 respondents reported experiencing at least one negative event in a healthcare setting as the result of their gender identity. Additionally, an earlier version of the survey found that 28% of participants reported being harassed in medical setting and 2% reported being subjected to violence in a healthcare provider’s office. Overall, transgender women report fewer positive interactions with healthcare providers and have less confidence in their abilities to integrate HIV-treatment into their lives.⁵⁷

If women do not feel comfortable going to the doctor because of disparate treatment, how are patients’ health outcomes to improve?

Stereotypes about trans healthcare are apparent in the responses of doctors who don’t think that trans care should be covered by the national health service and in the tendency to conflate trans healthcare with cos-

metic or elective surgery.⁵⁸ Hormones, blockers, and gender affirmation surgeries are not unlike healthcare services cis people receive regularly, but when trans people seek these same services, they are understood as asking for more than they deserve. Cis women are prescribed hormones for menstrual regulation, birth control, and menopause, and they receive hysterectomies for various reasons. For trans people, having access to the medical services they need impacts not only physical health but mental and social health as well. Access to healthcare, particularly care that is gender affirmative, reduces stress for people. A 2017 study by researchers at Georgia State University found “a significant association between delaying healthcare because of fear of discrimination and worse general and mental health among transgender adults.”⁵⁹

Having no confidence in healthcare providers can lead to women taking matters into their own hands. Janet Mock posted a 2012 article from the *Los Angeles Times* about the dangerous realities for trans women wanting gender affirmation surgery, not being able to afford it, and subsequently submitting to unsafe treatments by nonmedical personnel. Mock writes, “Stop obsessing over our bodies. Start reporting on our lack of healthcare coverage: <http://t.co/kqcIscMc> #girlslikeus.”⁶⁰ In the linked article, author Laura Nelson mistakenly identifies people receiving silicone injections as trans men as opposed to trans women, further signaling the disconnect between cis journalists and trans people’s lives.⁶¹ The article does not contextualize the desire for butt injections with social expectations of women’s bodies to be curvy in certain places, nor does Nelson acknowledge cis women’s interest in these enhancements as well. Nelson describes a trans woman’s desire to fill out her jeans but doesn’t connect that longing to added safety or the embodied realness that Mock describes in her book. Realness, once again, is in the eyes of the cis beholder.

Nelson is not alone in her prurient interest in trans women’s bodies. The 2012 murder of Lorena Escalara was reported in the *New York Times* with a first sentence that read in part, “she often drew admiring glances in the gritty Brooklyn neighborhood where she was known to invite men for visits to her apartment.”⁶² One Twitter user posted a link to an alternative news website that critiqued this “sleazy” depiction of Escalara and called on the media to do a better job of representing women like her. Mainstream media maligned Escalara, subtly framing her death as

her fault by suggesting that her sex appeal ultimately attracted the kind of men who would set her on fire and leave her to die. Similarly, Black girls are blamed for unwanted attention from men and blamed for the violence they experience at the hands of the police. The fear of this type of violence, the resultant stress from this fear, and subsequent raised cortisol levels have made the already precarious lives of many women of color that much more difficult to manage. Nearly constant reminders of the dangers of living in a cis heterosexist world are made more real with the announcement of another trans girl's murder. Escalara did not make it to her twenty-sixth birthday.

In one of the rare tweets that discussed trans and health in a positive light, the late Black trans Twitter user Monica Roberts used the word *doctor* to describe the contributions trans women have made to society. Roberts tweeted, “#Girlslikeus rock & we have much to be proud of. We have doctors, lawyers, writers, artists, educators & beauty queens in our ranks.”⁶³ Another user mentioned a doctor who was doing right by trans kids, highlighting the work of Dr. Spack to ensure that kids are able to access blockers that delay puberty and/or get the hormones they need. “So many tears at how Dr. Spack has brought hope . . . & life! . . . to so many #trans kids & their families. <http://t.co/mohHfrcX> #girlslikeus,” the user tweeted.⁶⁴ The linked article goes on to describe how Spack's direct and routine treatment expanded to become a standard of care embraced by the doctors he mentored and trained. Celebratory tweets like “Vermont Requires Insurers to cover transgender healthcare! <http://t.co/jbOtd5KOqG> #girlslikeus @transadvocate” are rare but important.⁶⁵ They highlight years of on-the-ground advocacy that led to actual policy changes that should improve health outcomes for trans communities across the country. Unfortunately, more common are tweets that show the differential treatment that Black trans (and cis) women experience as a result of policies that are not equally enforced.

Twitter users' health concerns are also made visible in the hashtag through the discussion of the violence that Black trans women encounter in the world. User @Cisnormativity posted an infographic with the tweet, “Who is protected by ‘Stand Your Ground’? <http://t.co/5YAbDCEi7P> h/t @ThessalianHarp #girlslikeus #cwoc #twoc #racism #Trayvon,” calling out the way that trans women of color are outside the realm of people who can successfully “stand their ground.”⁶⁶ “Stand

your ground” laws give people the right to defend themselves, even with lethal force, if they are threatened, but as the infographic makes clear, Black women are not afforded that right. Three columns show Marissa Alexander, CeCe McDonald, and George Zimmerman with facts about their respective legal cases below their pictures. Marissa Alexander’s column includes that she was “—Abused by husband while pregnant.— Fired warning shot at a wall to defend herself in her own home.— Didn’t hit/harm anyone.—Prosecuted by the same attorney as George Zimmerman.—Told she should have run out of her home, not ‘stand her ground.’ 20 Years Prison.” CeCe McDonald’s column reads that she was “—Chased down the road by drunk neo-Nazis who were high on meth, shouting racist and transphobic slurs at her.—Slashed in face w/ bottle requiring 11 stitches.—Defended self w/ scissors as last resort. 41 Months Prison.” The three-column image ends with George Zimmerman who “—Stalked an unarmed child who was simply walking home to his family, even after being directly told not to by 9-1-1 dispatcher.— Murdered child.—Received donations to cover legal fees.—Used ‘stand your ground’ legal defense. FREE.”⁶⁷ Neither McDonald nor Alexander were able to “stand their ground” successfully, as both were incarcerated for their acts of self-defense, while George Zimmerman was found not guilty for the murder of Trayvon Martin. That Zimmerman and Alexander were tried in the same state by the same prosecutor heightens the outrage regarding their disproportionate treatment within the legal system. The juxtaposition of these three photos and narratives speaks to the ways that Black women are held to different standards and are routinely punished with far greater severity than others who commit more egregious acts.

Both hashtags #TWOC and #CWOC (cis women of color), which accompany the image of Alexander, McDonald, and Zimmerman, show that both trans and cis Black women find themselves outside the realm of believability when it comes to “stand your ground.” Misogynoir is at work when Black women are unable to successfully defend themselves against attackers. Both Alexander and McDonald were punished for their survival of altercations that could have led to their deaths. Both have been able to garner support from activists across the country and world and further their own activism despite their unjust incarcerations. In what follows, I examine the #FreeCeCe campaign that helped to support CeCe

McDonald before, during, and after her incarceration. #FreeCeCe is a testament to the power of online and offline networks working in tandem to support trans women of color, and would not have been possible without the proto-scaffolding of the #GirlsLikeUs network as a model.

#FreeCeCe

Free CeCe began as a local organizing effort called Support CeCe in CeCe McDonald's community of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2011. On June 5 of that year, McDonald and her friends were verbally and then physically accosted by racist, homophobic, and transphobic neo-Nazis as the friends walked by a bar on their way to a grocery store. McDonald kept a pair of fabric scissors in her purse for her own protection and was forced to use them during the attack, fatally injuring one of the men in the neo-Nazi group. McDonald was charged with two counts of second-degree murder, which carries up to a forty-year prison sentence.

McDonald and her lawyers decided to forgo a jury trial despite what many read as an obvious act of self-defense on her part. Her lawyers were unable to get the judge to allow into evidence the deceased's swastika tattoo emblazoned across his chest or the toxicology reports of the illicit drugs in his system at the time of the attack. His previous arrests for domestic violence and other violent crimes were inadmissible, while McDonald's previous conviction for writing a single bad check was admissible because the judge felt that it spoke to her character. McDonald was not permitted to have expert witnesses speak to the ways that transphobia and misogynoir impact her life as a Black trans woman, nor were her supporters, who were growing in number, allowed to show up with shirts or signs of support reading, "#FreeCeCe."⁶⁸ Expert testimony could have illuminated the statistics that realities in the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag bear out. As noted in the introduction, the average life expectancy for trans women of color is only thirty-five years. Additionally, Black women, young women, and lesbian and bisexual women report the highest frequency of sexual harassment, with more than a third of each group reporting being harassed in the six months prior to the release of the collaborative National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault.⁶⁹ That her attackers used misogynoirist and transphobic slurs to begin the altercation was not considered by the jury. For McDonald, a

young Black trans woman, these realities made her survival of the attack extraordinary.

Black women are never the “appropriate” victim.⁷⁰ The hashtag #Say-HerName, created by Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s African American Policy Forum, has been used to bring much-needed attention to the extrajudicial killings of Black cis and trans women. While hundreds of thousands of people around the country rallied in reaction to Trayvon Martin’s murder, much smaller gatherings were held in support of McDonald. Martin was shot by a vigilante, he was not armed, he was a good student, and he had some class privilege. He was doing something mundane, simply returning from buying Skittles and iced tea. He was “innocent” and was killed in cold blood. McDonald, as a working-class Black trans woman, was never innocent in the eyes of the law nor the eyes of a potential jury. Her legal team knew that her survival would be held against her. I point out the differences between Martin and McDonald not to pit their situations against each other but to illustrate the way that misogynoir operates to further disadvantage Black women when they survive it.

Supporters of McDonald were undeterred. Thirty friends, family, and community members showed up for the pretrial motions where these trial decisions were made. Using the FreeCeCe Tumblr page and the Support CeCe WordPress website, Support CeCe members indicated that they would shift their sartorial support from explicit messages of “Free CeCe” to wearing purple, McDonald’s favorite color. This inspired pivot did not come to pass, as McDonald decided to accept a plea deal, but purple remains the background color for both the Free CeCe Tumblr page and the Support CeCe WordPress website as well as a color utilized in #FreeCeCe mobilizations. That her support team listened and adapted its strategy to best suit CeCe’s needs is a model for how true solidarity works.

Support CeCe was started by members of the Minneapolis trans community, including Billy Navarro, who helped found the group. Navarro was clear that McDonald’s fate was not unique, stating, “This could have been any of us,” as any trans person could find themselves subject to the kind of violence that would force a defense that would make them the villain in their own story of survival.⁷¹ What Navarro’s statement misses is the anti-Black and sexist aspects of the attack that McDonald faced as

a Black woman. McDonald's gender and race together are what made the situation dangerous; racialized and gendered slurs were hurled at her. As a Black woman, McDonald was uniquely punished for her survival of a misogynoirist incident. The sense of solidarity and support for CeCe among the trans community rippled beyond Minneapolis, and as more people heard McDonald's story, a wider network developed. When Janet Mock tweeted the #FreeCeCe petition in April 2012, it had 9,514 signatures. It would grow to nearly 20,000 by the month's end.

Popular YouTubers, like HARTBeat, used their channels to express their dismay that McDonald was essentially being charged for surviving an assault. They created a video message to the governor of Minnesota asking that McDonald be pardoned and released.⁷² And though the plea deal did require McDonald to serve time for her defense of herself, the external support that she received lessened the time she served; McDonald served nineteen months in jail for the death, despite being sentenced to forty-one months. Thanks to a different online petition that was circulated through this digital activism, the Minnesota Department of Corrections agreed to administer the full regimen of hormones McDonald needed, though she remained quartered with men despite a transfer to a second facility.⁷³ Online activism shortened her sentence, ensured that she received hormones while incarcerated, and enabled her continued healing once released.

McDonald chronicled her thoughts and feelings while incarcerated through blog entries on the Support CeCe website. During the nineteen months of CeCe McDonald's incarceration, blog entries on Support CeCe demonstrate her developing political education via the books and shows she had access to in prison. Blogging gave McDonald the opportunity to share her thinking while incarcerated by giving her space to publicly process her feelings in a supportive digital environment. The blog drew people to it who were empathetic to McDonald's position, creating the type of space where McDonald felt comfortable telling her truth. Blogs are part of the digital women of color feminist story as they serve as a space for building connection and understanding through the digital word. For McDonald, blogging chronicled transformation, especially her rejection of internalized misogynoir.

She was just shy of her twenty-third birthday when the attack occurred. It is a remarkable archive of her shifting sense of self as she is

buoyed by texts and experiences that complicate previous narratives she held around identity and survival. In McDonald's first post on the blog, she struggled with her incarceration for merely surviving. She writes,

I am truly sorry for the loss of a person who also was involved in the incident, but how would my mom and family feel if she heard that I was killed by a group of racist, homophobic/transphobic people only for walking to the store and being at the wrong place at the wrong time, which luckily I wasn't by myself. Or even looking at it in different aspects, would the situation have been the same. Would they have taken the same lengths to prosecute him if he had killed me?⁷⁴

McDonald asks the question that her supporters answer with their limited numbers. Her transness, her queerness, and—though not stated—her Blackness set her up to be an unsympathetic survivor. The man who died trying to kill her would not have been prosecuted the way she was. In the same entry, McDonald discusses the impact on her body and spirit as a result of the attack: “Now I have to deal with the repercussions of other people's hateful actions. To deal with the nightmares, the stress, and the PTSD. To feeling paranoid that someone might try to kill me, or my family. To be unsure of where my future lies.”⁷⁵ This fear and stress are the result of her surviving this misogynoiristic violence. As was the case with other Black trans women before her, McDonald's survival is not without cost to her health and well-being. She does not get to enjoy or process her saving of her own life but must deal with the repercussions of her defense of herself in her body and in prison. The trauma that so many women experience as a result of the misogynoiristic violence they have suffered goes unremarked upon and unaddressed, contributing to chronic health problems like depression, PTSD, and more.

In the same blog entry, she describes her family's negative reaction to reading a note she had written to a boy she was “talking to” in school. Her uncle threw her to the ground and choked her. Like Black lesbian poet Pat Parker, McDonald encountered the pain of intraracial violence. McDonald describes knowing that “my family would not be supportive of me in my life decisions, especially dealing with my sexuality.”⁷⁶ For McDonald's family, her transness was legible as aberrant queerness. Her desires were policed before she was even old enough to act on them or

truly articulate them. McDonald connects the gender and sexuality policing she experienced as a child to the reluctance of men to identify as gay. She acknowledges that the harassment she experienced in the home and at school was both physical and emotional abuse. In her own family, at school, and on a sidewalk in Minneapolis, other people felt the need to discipline McDonald for her gender. This violence at home and out in the world makes it difficult to know where or how to find safety. Despite this difficult content, which includes the violence that she suffered at the hands of family, classmates, and the neo-Nazis she survived, McDonald titled the entry “Pursuit of Happiness.” She describes the events of her life, and her pending trial, as loops and deep dives that will not deter her from her pursuit of happiness. How others feel about her also will not derail her from what is possible for her life.

In this first entry, McDonald’s articulation of her sexuality and gender are discussed through the binary frames of man and woman, gay and straight. She troubles those binaries in a later post, moved to do so in part by an episode of HBO’s *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). In the episode, the sexually aggressive Samantha talks about having sex with two gay men at the same time. For McDonald, this storyline became a possibility model that allowed her to reconsider her own sexuality. She writes, “I found myself saying I can’t like girls, that that ship has sailed and the attraction wasn’t there. That was until I became more experienced in the world, and learning about femininity and masculinity. The more I understood about myself the more I realized what it was I was actually attracted to.”⁷⁷ McDonald goes on to write that she realized what she was really attracted to was masculinity and that she could be and was attracted to masculine women. This episode-turned-possibility-model opened the door for her to consider sexuality beyond a straight/gay binary and embrace the identity of pansexual. Later, McDonald would reclaim bisexual as attraction to more than one gender as opposed to the dimorphic definition that “bi” implies to people skeptical of the identity. In chapter 3, I examine the term “bi” in the context of one of the web shows I analyze.

Even while incarcerated, McDonald was participating in lifesaving generative digital alchemy that helped other women like herself survive. McDonald’s thought processes about her life and the state of the world through the Support CeCe blog offer a special insight into the types of

pop culture and politics she was consuming and making sense of while inside. In wanting to pay forward some of the support she received, she created a “31 days of giving” list that included nonprofit organizations followers could donate to beyond the GoFundMe started in her honor. She uplifted other women of color, including Sage Smith, who went missing in November 2012 before being presumed murdered four years later in 2016.⁷⁸ McDonald posted a request to support a woman identified only as Estrellita, who was described as trying to seek asylum in the United States, only to be detained in Arizona by border patrol. McDonald asked supporters to donate funds in support of her bond so that she could leave the detention center.⁷⁹ McDonald’s organizing from prison was facilitated by the generative digital alchemy through social media platforms like her blog and the GoFundMes she supported.

While dealing with the PTSD of the attack and the bureaucracy of the Department of Corrections, McDonald was able to express her frustration with other seemingly less important pop culture situations. During rapper Snoop Dogg’s brief rebranding as Snoop Lion, he offered the opinion that gay rappers would never make it in the rap industry because rap is such a masculine arena. McDonald used her blog to offer a two-part rebuttal:

For one, it just goes to show that people still have a stereotypical idea of what “gay” is and that there is no possibility of masculine, or even hyper-masculine, gay and bisexual men in the world. Well, guess what? . . . THEY EXIST! For two, to say that “rap is a masculine arena” is an underhanded insult to both masculine gay and bisexual men and also to feminine men, trans, GNC (gender non-conforming) and cissexual women who are rappers. It’s clear that women are just as much of a force in the rap industry just as any man is, so why is it so unfathomable that someone that is QLGBT-GNC can’t be such a force in an “arena” that really have no gender “boundaries” or “guidelines”? How can one just say that a person can’t do something because of their sexual identity and/or orientation. That’s like saying we can’t have a black president. Well, you see how that turned out. Twice!⁸⁰

McDonald lays out two important fallacies in Snoop’s logic: that queer people cannot be masculine and that rappers can only be masculine.

The meteoric rise of out gay Black rapper Lil' Nas X and his hit "Old Town Road" belie Snoop's assertion. Rappers like Nicki Minaj and more recently Megan Thee Stallion further disprove his point with lyrics that celebrate and tease bisexuality. But at the time of McDonald's critique, these realities were not as readily apparent. And still, McDonald used Snoop's limited imagination to expose a broader truth about our social expectations of gender.

This same April 30, 2013, entry also features an acknowledgment of climate change in which McDonald laments that it is still snowing in Minnesota and that people need to change their behavior if we want the planet to still care for us. She connects global warming to the energy expenditures in prisons:

At any jail or prison I've been to I've noticed that they leave lights on 24/7! Now think about all the other jails, prisons, juvenile centers, etc., etc. around the world that does exactly the same thing. Now think about how much energy could be saved without them, hmmm . . . see where I'm coming from? We could save a lot of resources, actually, with abolishing prisons.⁸¹

McDonald deftly makes the end of incarceration a green initiative that could help save the planet. Her intimate knowledge of the prison-industrial complex provides insights that could push more dynamic collaborations between environmentalists and abolitionists.

McDonald's blog is a journey through her evolving perspective, and one can see her move from her individual feelings of guilt to global concerns for those incarcerated. McDonald transforms from someone who accepts her punishment with guilt and shame, to an international prison abolitionist. McDonald's blog posts vary widely, but they all signal a Black woman making sense of the many arrows being slung her way, whether directly because of her identities or indirectly as someone with little individual power in the world. However, McDonald's experience of communal support speaks to the power of just a few people working together to affect change. In pleasure activist adrienne maree brown's book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, she describes nine principles that inform her belief in organizing. Principle number seven calls for people to "focus on critical connections more

than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.”⁸² McDonald and her supporters were able to do exactly that by addressing potential allies through digital platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and the Support CeCe website. These platforms fostered critical connections that provided the sustained support that allowed folks to remain committed despite an unsuccessful petition to get McDonald freed or pardoned.

The Support CeCe Minnesota chapter organized a monthly book club in concert with what McDonald was reading. When McDonald began reading *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins on April 2, supporters made it the book of the month for April. The book club continued, and a separate list of books McDonald was reading while incarcerated was published on the Support CeCe website. These texts included *The Autobiography of Malcom X as Told to Alex Haley*, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, and *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* by Angela Davis.⁸³ While some might read the sci-fi dystopia of *The Hunger Games* as altogether different from the call to end prisons in *Abolition Democracy*, I would argue that these texts actually work well together. Collins exposes the evils of a fascist state as Davis calls forth the world we want by showing us a way out.⁸⁴ As Mock’s own practice of producing her book shows, books have the ability to travel in ways some other digital forms cannot. These texts speak to McDonald’s developing political consciousness and the way she understood her incarceration.

The Free CeCe campaign organized letter writing and book deliveries for McDonald. Still visible on the Support CeCe website is the exact address to which to send books to CeCe in the prison where she served the last of her nineteen months. In the foreword to the book *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, McDonald describes wanting to create curriculum for incarcerated folks that opens up the false history of the United States that is taught through public education. McDonald goes on to critique the idea that this work is done only in isolation or through the Internet. She writes of folks who call themselves activists, advocates, or allies, “If you showed up to a meeting once and spend your day online, that’s not activism.”⁸⁵ For McDonald, good words are paired with continued actions, which was the true alchemy of the Free CeCe movement, which sustained an organizing effort through McDonald’s trial, release, and beyond.

The hashtag #FreeCeCe moved digitally to support work on the ground in Minneapolis and other parts of the world. #FreeCeCe announced rallies and protest marches in support of McDonald and other trans women caught in the crosshairs of transphobia and misogyny. When Paige Clay, a Black trans woman in Chicago, was found murdered on April 16, 2012, Twitter users like Janet Mock called for more support for McDonald, stressing that Clay's murder was potentially McDonald's fate had she not defended herself. As Mock put it on Twitter, "We can't bring Paige back, but we can save CeCe. Please sign, share & RT this #freeCeCe petition: <http://ow.ly/1LoXlc> #girlslikeus."⁸⁶ At the May Day 2012 protests in support of workers' rights, activists carried signs in remembrance of Clay and in support of McDonald. The late trans activist and author Leslie Feinberg visited McDonald in jail and was later arrested for support actions in Minneapolis, which included tagging the jail with "Free CeCe" in purple spray paint.⁸⁷ #FreeCeCe was used to announce Facebook events of local Support CeCe chapters that organized letter-writing campaigns and workshops.

#FreeCeCe also enabled practical support at the local level. In addition to imploring people to write to McDonald in prison, Support CeCe organizers used the #FreeCeCe hashtag to fundraise for bus passes for McDonald's family members so they could visit her in prison. The hashtag also carried the petition asking the Minnesota governor to pardon McDonald following her sentencing. When it became clear that the prison was in violation of court orders to allow McDonald her medically necessary hormones, yet a third petition was drafted and shared via #FreeCeCe. Over the course of her nearly two-year incarceration, #FreeCeCe kept the community aware and responsive to McDonald's needs.

Not only did Support CeCe inspire digital activism, including a GoFundMe campaign that went directly to supporting McDonald and the letter-writing and book-sending campaign, the group also transformed how McDonald was discussed and who took up her story in mainstream media outlets. While the early #FreeCeCe tweets were from Black and non-Black trans women, by the time of McDonald's incarceration, mainstream Black publications like *Ebony* began to tell her story. Award-winning journalist Akiba Solomon's piece for the digital edition of the magazine, titled "CeCe McDonald: Attacked for Her Identity, Incarcer-

ated for Surviving,” laid out the context of McDonald’s survival and the way her gender led to her subsequent incarceration. “If she weren’t a Black transgender woman, she wouldn’t be expected to stand for that kind of abuse. Actually, she would be considered a survivor,” Solomon wrote.⁸⁸ Just a month later, scholar Marc Lamont Hill wrote an article in support of McDonald in *Ebony* as well, titled, “Why Aren’t We Fighting for CeCe McDonald?”⁸⁹ Hill called on Black organizations like the NAACP and Urban League to take up the effort to rally for McDonald as they had done for Trayvon Martin. These explicit calls for Black support in a Black publication opened dialogue about who is a member of the Black community. While the goals of this activism are not to appeal to those with comparatively more privilege, visibility in alternate circles helps to foster the type of solidarity necessary to move institutions to behave differently. Days later, on June 17, a silent march on Father’s Day to protest stop-and-frisk policies brought together activists in the Black community and LGBTQ youth workers who recognized the disproportionate police attention given to Black men and LGBTQ youth of color. The NAACP, GLAAD, and other LGBTQ organizations began working in concert to uplift these concerns, making misogynoir an important issue to address when addressing police violence.⁹⁰

Free CeCe grew relationships among Minnesota activists who wanted to support McDonald but had not previously worked together. The local collective was then able to access its multiple networks to leverage digital spaces to bring international awareness to McDonald’s situation. Digital pictures captured Free CeCe protest signs at progressive protests around the United States and the globe, including Canada, England, India, and Germany.⁹¹ On both the local and international levels, McDonald’s disparate treatment galvanized communities to actively resist the transphobic and misogynoiristic message that she and other Black trans women do not deserve to fight for their lives.

Though McDonald was released on January 13, 2014, the advocacy networks built to support her while she was incarcerated persist. Laverne Cox teamed up with McDonald to create a documentary about her time in and after prison. The *#FreeCeCe* documentary was named one of the best LGBT documentaries of 2016 by the *Advocate*. McDonald has become an outspoken advocate in the prison abolition and gender justice movements. She joined fellow Black trans activist Joshua Allen

for the #BlackExcellenceTour, taking full advantage of hashtag activism in the promotion of their speakers' series. The Tumblr-powered website that organized support for McDonald while she was incarcerated remains and is an incredible archive of the work they supported and helped blossom. #FreeCeCe became a model campaign for how to support someone who is incarcerated and spawned numerous #FreeCeCe chapters as well as new support campaigns for others.

Whether through #FreeCeCe or #GirlsLikeUs, Black trans women were able to mobilize Twitter and other social media to support themselves but also created the digital networks that supported others. Janet Mock's #GirlsLikeUs became a vehicle for amplifying #FreeCeCe, and #FreeCeCe led to the documentary produced by Laverne Cox as well as a new career for McDonald. McDonald is now a highly sought-after speaker on prison abolition. In September 2019, McDonald was awarded a Soros Justice Fellowship to support her work in developing a curriculum "for grassroots education that builds community support and power for transgender women, particularly transgender women of color."⁹² #FreeCeCe's legacy includes the political activation of people who wanted to support McDonald, but grew to wanting to support prison abolition. McDonald herself is an abolitionist fighting for the end of prisons, not just reform that would make them "safer" for Black trans women. #FreeCeCe shows the permeability between online and offline activism, through a digital alchemy that moved organizers to use strategies in multiple arenas to aid their activism.

As Janet Mock's star continues to rise, so does the reach of #GirlsLikeUs. Mock went on to publish her second book, *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me*. She also had a short-lived digital web show with MSNBC called *So POPular* (2014), where she tackled the latest celebrity happenings as well as important issues within marginalized communities in a few minutes at a time. Just a decade earlier, such representation seemed impossible; by building a digital audience, Mock made herself—and the stories of her communities—marketable to the mainstream. In 2018 she began to write and direct for the FX television show *Pose* (2018), which chronicles the lives of Black and Latinx trans women and gay men involved in the Ball scene of late 1980s New York City. The show is unprecedented, with trans characters played by trans actors and a majority cast of color. Mock has also inked the first over-

all deal with Netflix by a trans person, allowing her to green-light and produce the stories that matter to her and her communities.⁹³ Formerly marginalized, trans of color media is moving to the center. Mock's commitment to storytelling and narrative reiterates the power of media to transform the world around us.

Twitter and Tumblr are two social media platforms that have facilitated organizing and exchange for Black trans women who might not otherwise be able to connect. Twitter enabled both Mock and McDonald to achieve greater visibility, thus propelling their work into new markets. And yet this visibility is a double-edged sword: As much as we want to celebrate the successes of trans women of color in the public sphere, that excitement is tempered with the deadly reality of trans women of color's lives being cut short by violence. Visibility also means that Black trans women's health is at risk when they are unfairly discriminated against when trying to secure and maintain housing, healthcare, and employment.

Social media is not limited to Twitter or hashtags. Queer web shows on platforms like Vimeo and YouTube allow creative content producers to build audiences that sometimes translate into traditional platforms. Whether it is the web success of a show like *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011) transforming into the hit HBO series *Insecure* (2017–), there is something to be said for the specific kind of incubation that the web makes possible. Janet Mock was able to translate her web savvy into contributing to a groundbreaking television series and an unprecedented deal with the leading digital streaming service. For queer and trans people of color, these web projects are not solely for incubation, but they may be where projects live. In the next chapter, I explore queer Black women's web shows and their proliferation in the last ten years.