

Black Lives Mutter

On the subway into Manhattan, black lives mutter. Two middle-aged African American women, on the way to work, are in conversation with each other. I'm pressed up next to them, obliged to overhear their conversation. They are aware, as are we all, that we are in semipublic conversation, convening a semisecret counterpublic seminar en route to or from another day's or night's labor. I am their student. The URLs are fictional.

—Have you read *The New Jim Crow*?

—Oh! [A knowing sound.] I haven't made time for that.

—I know, I know. Maybe I will get to that on my vacation.

—On vacation? Are you sure you want to be reading *The New Jim Crow* on your vacation??

—Well, you know how it can be to bring that kind of thing into work.

—Oh yes. Right. [Pause]

—I mean, I know I have to *really* take the time to digest what she is saying. Because after I read it, I know nothing will be the same again.

—Yeah. You know, maybe you could watch that documentary. You know, *Thirteen*? Because the author, she is interviewed there. I've only read like the first two chapters and already I'm . . . it's not easy bringing that into work. [Pause] I've been doing my genealogy.

—Your what?

—I've been doing my family tree. On familysecret dot com.

—Oh, on ancestry dot com?

—No! On familysecret dot com. I don't use ancestry dot com. I don't trust it. I don't know where they get those records from. I don't want to send them my DNA.

—What do you mean?

—Like on familysecret dot com, you just enter the name of a deceased person, and it tells you all this information about them. But where do they get that information? Military records and . . .

—The government!

—You know! So, that is why I don't go on ancestry dot com. I don't want

to give them my DNA sample, right? Where are they sending that sample? And, also, it's not just my DNA. It's also the DNA sample of my son.
—Right! What are they doing with that DNA? And where do they get that historical DNA anyway? We are supposed to trust them but . . .
—But why, because they say so? [Nods]
—Here's my stop. You take care of yourself okay?
—Mhhmm. Take care.

While I learn of the sense of fulfillment these women share from the possible attainment of information about our ancestors, I also hear one's real terror at the prospect of giving the state access to DNA, which she knows is also the DNA of her relatives. A futurity scored by paranoia is juxtaposed with a past of punishment. Vacations as “free time” are reserved for study and the perpetuation of an inherent black feminist revolt against biopolitical control, including against the use of new “family DNA search” techniques already being used to convict in Great Britain, California, and New York.¹

This fictionalized conversation above teaches us something. What do we learn? First, that the scene of feminist black study is everywhere, anywhere. Underground, our consciousness is raised. It is in the air, if we just tune in. Study is laden into stolen time, surveilled time, time snatched away from straphanging to talk about what reading about what racism does to your body, a body that you then have to bring into the white spaces where your black labor may be doing the work of maintaining the new Jim Crow. As Vanessa Agard-Jones might say, this purloined conversation points toward the “body burden” of toxic knowledge for the minoritarian subject.² Readers of *The Undercommons* already know this. But the scene—and my position in it—provides a potent reminder of the everyday activity of giving and taking care even as crucial information is given out under watching eyes and ears. We know the police, or Alice Goffman, may be listening.³ Second, we learn that such scenes can provide a scaffold for thinking through the way antiblack violence and structural racism preoccupy subjects who also bear ambivalent investments in state bureaucracies and biocapitalist speculation as counterknowledges of recollection, kinship, and relation. Third, we glimpse how black study can be a form of lifelong learning.

We approached writing this section with a deep awareness of the importance of citing black feminist knowledge practices, and of engaging an immanent critique of our own collective history mounted by Livia Tenzler in *Social Text*, no. 100.⁴

Indeed, reflecting on the necessity to #SayHerName in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter, a call-in within an ongoing movement against state and extralegal violence that highlighted and remedied the repeated occlu-

sion of black women and girl victims of abuse from many public campaigns, we understand how a generational movement galvanized by the murder of Trayvon Martin has been led by queer and feminist women and feminist men. The politics of the Movement for Black Lives opens out the possibility of revising canons of black struggle to demonstrate that we have always been here, even when our politics have not been enunciated in allegiance or alliance with white feminism and assimilationist LGBT politics. We also know that assumptions of a preexisting political unity among black women, black queers, and/or black transgendered people do not provide a solid ground for action or reflection. We also know the appearance of a collective *we* will always be fraught.

Black lives mutter about many things. Ungrievable death. Physical illness. Physical pain. Disability as everyday logistics. Mass incarceration as disenfranchisement. The things white people do. The sunken place. The kind of reading or viewing that is “not safe for work.” We also take care of each other, breathing and blurring as the subway lines hum.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Rosenberg, “Family DNA Searches.” On DNA in black life, see Nelson, *Social Life of DNA*.

2. See Agard-Jones, “Bodies in the System,” for a theorization of “the body and the quasi-human agents that constitute it” (184) within the context of an ongoing ethnography of gender, sexuality, health, and toxicity in Martinique.

3. For a critique of Goffman’s lauded ethnography *On the Run*, see Sharpe, “Black Life, Annotated.”

4. Tenzer, “Feminism.”

References

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