From Black Transgender Studies to Colin Dayan: Notes on Methodology

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Smoldering in the rage and grief ignited when Trayvon Martin’s murder was ruled self-defense, activists and bloggers nationwide raised pointed comparisons between George Zimmerman’s trial and that of CeCe McDonald. “While Zimmerman Walks, CeCe McDonald Is Still in Jail for Self-Defense,” Yi Wu titled his July 2013 article on news site PolicyMic.¹ In June 2011, Wu informs his readers, then twenty-three-year-old Chrishaun “CeCe” McDonald, a black transgender woman studying fashion at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, was walking to the grocery store with friends when a group of patrons smoking outside the Schooner Tavern lanced racist and transphobic taunts in their direction.² As the conflict escalated, the attackers included Dean Schmitz; his ex-girlfriend, Molly Flaherty; and Jenny Thoreson, Schmitz’s current girlfriend. Flaherty threw a drink, then broke a beer glass in McDonald’s face, leaving her with lacerations to the left cheek deep enough to cut a saliva gland. Schmitz jumped in to join the assault, and McDonald, surrounded, grabbed a pair of scissors from her purse and stabbed him in the chest, puncturing the right ventricle of his heart. McDonald—who flagged police to the scene herself—was immediately arrested. She was shackled


² Throughout the article, we alternate between transwoman and woman to refer to McDonald. We do this to match how McDonald uses these terms to describe herself. We read McDonald’s swift movement between the two as a practice of destabilizing an imagined difference between them, which is a challenge that we would like to mirror in our essay. See supportcece.wordpress.com.
to her hospital bed while getting stitches in her cheek, then charged with two counts of second-degree murder. Despite her plea of self-defense and the credible threat she faced, McDonald was brought to trial and eventually accepted a plea deal with a forty-one-month sentence. She remained in a Minnesota men’s correctional facility for two and a half years.³

A dedicated activist and analyst, McDonald penned a moving letter from her cell, reflecting on the racial and gender injustice evident in the Zimmerman verdict. While she acknowledges the parallels and asymmetries between her case and Zimmerman’s, she also gently discourages supporters from painting her as a particularly persecuted victim of the criminal justice system. “I know that people have been comparing my case to Zimmerman’s, and yes it’s obvious that laws are biased,” she writes. “But even I can say I came out blessed knowing that (a) the system was against me to begin with, and that (b) looking at other cases similar to mines [sic], I didn’t have to spend [sic] extensive time—even decades—in prison. People don’t understand that I actually feel a guilt for that. . . . I can say that survivor’s guilt is real.”⁴ Her survivor’s guilt, as she goes on to describe it, is not only for surviving the criminal justice system relatively intact. More to the point, it comes from having survived the June 2011 attack at all, when so many other black, queer, and transgender people die in assaults like the one in front of the Schooner. If racism, as Ruth Gilmore famously defines it, is characterized by “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,”⁵ then what words can we find to explain the kind of racist transphobia that leaves a twenty-five-year-old black woman feeling guilty for having survived so long—guilty for having cheated premature death for nine years after her transition?

This is not for us a rhetorical question, but neither is it one we would attempt to answer in so short an article. Instead, we want to use this space to think about how we might approach this question—to strategize methodologies for theorizing the intersection of racism and transphobia. In his work on gender queerness, Jack Halberstam has developed a generative “scavenger methodology” that collects, deconstructs, and recombines a variety of cross-disciplinary methods in order to “produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior.”⁶ To analyze a case like McDonald’s, we suggest we consider pushing this approach one step further to develop a “graverobber methodology.” We mean absolutely no disrespect in employing this phrase. Nor, of course, do we advocate digging into the literal or figurative tombs of Trayvon Martin, Gwen Araujo, or Sakia Gunn. Rather, we are suggesting that we figure out how to delve into the purposely and accidentally immolated pasts of a variety of times and sites, in order to unearth the skeletons of racism, misogyny, and transphobia that dominant narratives keep invisible and disconnected in our understanding of times and places.

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³ CeCe McDonald was released on 13 January 2014, to serve the remainder of her sentence on parole. See “CeCe’s Release: What a Welcome,” Support CeCe!, 17 January 2014, supportcece.wordpress.com/2014/01/17/ceces-release-what-a-welcome.


⁵ Ruth Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 261.

like Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 2011. While this approach is akin to a Foucauldian practice of exhumation, the theoretical act of graverobbing deliberately incorporates the transgressive element of *thieving* that Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley has explored elsewhere. And in order to develop this graverobber methodology, we propose that we turn to the wide-ranging, historically iconoclastic, ever-challenging work of Colin Dayan as one possible model. In engaging Dayan’s body of work in this way, we are suggesting that, yes, her analysis can be employed to glean important insights into CeCe McDonald’s case. But we are also making a broader claim. Dayan’s work has been called on by analysts in a number of academic fields, including Caribbeanists, African Americanists, religious studies scholars, legal theorists, and prison abolitionists. We want to suggest that those of us who work in black queer studies might also find, in the arc of her work, a rubric that helps us navigate the complicated intersections that we travel.

Stretching down Lake Street between Cedar and Twenty-First Avenues sits the Minneapolis Pioneer and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery. Opened in 1853, this historic burial site is the final resting place not only of several of the city’s European settlers and Civil War veterans but also of many of its early African American residents and abolitionists. Continue down Lake Street, under the light rail tracks, and you come to the shopping center housing the twenty-four-hour Cub Foods where CeCe McDonald and her friends came for groceries around midnight on 4 June 2011. Earlier that evening, McDonald, her roommate Latavia Taylor, and three friends—Larry Tyaries “Ty” Thomas, Zavawn “Zay” Smith, and Roneal Harris—had been barbecuing in the yard of their apartment complex, and, just before midnight, they decided to stroll over to Cub Foods to get something else to eat. As they approached Lake Street, they were stopped by the catcalls from the Schooner that would become the beginning of the attack against them. In police interviews, Thoreson said she didn’t remember exactly what she and others called out, only that it was something “derogatory” and “sarcastic”: “They were very feminine guys,” she said, “something about their walk.” Flaherty claimed no memory of what she said at all, only that one of the passersby “was wearing booty shorts and a tank top . . . [and] looked like he was ready to go to a recital.” Thomas’s recall, in his police interview, was much more specific: “[They said,] ‘Oh you faggots, you nigger lovers, and whoop-de-woo, you ain’t nothing but a bunch of nigger babies.’ . . . So as they said all that, I go over there and talk to [Schmitz]. I backed into the middle of the street, drop my belt like I am ready to fight. He just walk off. And that’s when he started talking this stuff, like, ‘Oh, look at the tranny over there, look at that tranny.’” McDonald’s courtroom testimony echoes Thomas’s recollections and adds that Schmitz shouted, “Look at that boy dressed like a girl tucking her dick in.”

In response to the questions posed by McDonald’s lawyer at trial, as well as in media reports of the incident, people recall two distinct kinds of insults lanced at CeCe and her companions that

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8 Quoted in Andy Mannix, “CeCe McDonald Murder Trial: Behind the Scenes of a Transgender Woman’s Case,” *City Pages* (Minneapolis), 9 May 2012, www.citypages.com/2012-05-09/news/cece-mcdonald-murder-trial, 2. This article provides the most in-depth coverage of McDonald’s case.
9 *State of Minnesota v. Chrishauhn Reed McDonald*, 2 May 2012, 12; supportcece.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=1661.
night: first, racist, and then, transphobic. Instead of separating these, though, we might hear them as irremediably intertwined, as forms of hate speech with a common historical genesis: the history buried in the graveyard up the street, that of a chattel slavery system that “turned humans into things, beasts, or mongrels.” This last quote comes from “Gothic Americas,” Dayan’s tour-de-force conclusion to her second monograph, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. And we now want to turn to this work to help open these graves, to mine the interconnected traces of racism and transphobia that rot there, still choking the air on Lake Street.

Nigger lovers, Thoreson, Flaherty, and Schmitz called out. A strange insult, since this epithet is usually reserved for whites in social or sexual relationships with blacks, while McDonald and her companions that night were all African American. Then again, maybe this insult isn’t so strange at all. After all, the white supremacist terror of miscegenation often targets not only race-mixing itself but also what *recalls* or suggests the crossing of racial boundaries. Dayan documents such fear of the specter of race-mixing as pervasive in eighteenth-century Europe and the Americas, where an irrational phobia of *métissage* was elevated to the level of “natural” science in order to rationalize slavery’s racial divisions. Dayan dissects Georges Buffon’s “Of the Varieties in the Human Species,” in which, “along with [stories of] giants, dwarfs, and porcupine-men,” Buffon tells the story of Geneviève, “a ‘white negresse,’ born to ‘perfectly black’ parents on the island of Dominica in 1759” (237). Geneviève looks like a mulatta, even if she isn’t, and this possibility of unexpected hybridity elicits strong reactions from her observer. Buffon characterizes “deviations” such as these as “sterile branches of degeneration” and labels Geneviève a “monster by default,” so, as Dayan puts it, forcefully “expelling real whiteness from anything faintly redolent of black blood” (238). The need to maintain a hard—and impossible—line between black and white, enslaved and free, in the context of chattel slavery, leads to a horror of all suggestions of hybridity, whether that of the white negress, the porcupine man, or the (phantom) “nigger lover.” You don’t have to really be hybrid in any way to elicit this terror; you just have to remind white supremacist patriarchy that hybridity exists.

The fear of the hybrid extends, too, to the specter of gender variance. The logic of slavery depended on fictive, polarized divisions not only between African and European but also between woman and man. Analyzing the bizarre contortions given to the concept of heterosexual “love” in the slaveholding Americas, Dayan traces the overlap between the master’s two most prized possessions, his slave and his wife:

Love is made better when what you love is what you own, whether slave or wife. Here is George Fitzhugh, writing in 1850 what would become part of his acclaimed *Sociology for the South*; he gives his readers some sense of the tight weave of dependency invoked by women, children, blacks: “A state of dependence is the only condition in which reciprocal affection can exist among human beings. . . . A man loves his children because they are weak, helpless and dependent. He loves his wife for similar reasons. When his children grow up and assert their independence, he is apt to transfer his attention to his grandchildren. He ceases to love his

wife when she becomes masculine or rebellious; but slaves are always dependent, never the rivals of their master.” (191–92)

How could any man who knows the pleasure of owning ever-subservient slaves settle for a masculine, assertive wife? If “natural” laws are crossed such that women can become men or men can “degenerate” into women, well, then, the imperial epistemology that strictly separates humans into two categories—those naturally dominated and those who naturally dominate—shatters like a glass on concrete. Transphobia becomes as necessary to the logic of chattel slavery as the fear of the racial hybrid.

In this white supremacist patriarchal gender system, the category of womanhood—like that of blackness—is especially policed, Dayan points out: “What happened to women in this contentious, reversible space? Whether nuns in Cap Français, mulatto courtesans, black slaves, or white Creole wives, women . . . were vessels for the taxonomic vocations of white male supremacy. Alternatively etherealized and brutalized, represented as angels, virgins, furies, or wenches, they carried the symbolic weight necessary to the learned discourse on race and the justifications of slavery” (267). But what if a woman—say, a black transwoman—cannot or will not carry this weight? What if she defies these etherealized/brutalized divisions and thus the tenuous logic of white male supremacy—the only force that someone like Schmitz, a poor, substance-dependent veteran, had to rely on? Then you have an outrage great enough to provoke attack. Look at that boy dressed like a girl tucking her dick in, Schmitz shouts right before the altercation in front of the Schooner turns physical, and then he follows McDonald down the street when she turns to leave: Oh, look at the tranny over there, look at that tranny. The interpolating demand of “look at that tranny” and Frantz Fanon’s “Look, a Negro” together form an expectation of extrahumiliation and death for women like McDonald. That is, an expectation that a transwoman on a street where males and females are “supposed” to be immediately and recognizably distinct, that a black person in a northern city that is “supposed” to be white, has to be violently herded back inside strict lines that divide sexes and races—an expectation that leads to the conclusion that because McDonald cannot be etherealized by Schmitz and his friend, she must be brutalized.

“Slavery,” Saidiya Hartman writes, “established a measure of man and a ranking of life that has yet to be undone.” 12 McDonald’s attack and Dayan’s analysis do more than reiterate the slavery-inspired ranking of life that Hartman describes. They underscore that the “measure of man” she writes of is, in fact, a gendered one, in which white cisgender masculinity measures itself simultaneously against gendered, sexualized, and racialized others. On 5 June 2011, this meant that law enforcement measured Dean Schmitz against CeCe McDonald and found the former more deserving of life than the latter. When the police arrived on the scene of the Lake Street attack and saw two injured individuals—a white cisgender man and a black transwoman—“it wasn’t hard for them to assume who the aggressors were,” as McDonald writes on her blog. Schmitz was immediately put into an ambulance while McDonald was seated “in the back of a squad car in handcuffs while

bleeding badly and in very bad pain," then finally transported to a hospital where she was interrogated, shackled to her bed, then treated.\textsuperscript{13} Law enforcement and medical professionals both assumed McDonald must be the "monster by default," to reuse Buffon’s words, because this is still how white supremacist heteropatriarchy imagines any black woman who belies white masculinity’s impenetrability.

CeCe McDonald was held in a level-four, close-security men’s prison, the Minnesota Correctional Facility at St. Cloud. Built in 1889, this romanesque revival structure boasts the world’s second-largest wall built by prison labor, surpassed only by the Great Wall of China. Here, McDonald was placed in a condition that hunger strikers in California describe as “living tombs”:\textsuperscript{14} “administrative isolation” or solitary confinement, ordered not for disciplinary reasons but (allegedly) to protect her from possible violence in the general population. Prior to her incarceration, McDonald was prescribed a hormone patch as part of her transition, and the court ordered that this treatment continue. However, the prison violated the court’s order by denying her the prescribed hormone dosage—as well as women’s underclothes—until a call-in campaign helped her gain regular access to medication in July 2012.\textsuperscript{15}

McDonald’s experiences speak to the transphobia pervading US prisons, where transgender inmates—particularly women—are routinely placed in solitary confinement. When Lambda Legal appeared before the US Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights in 2012, its testimony put forth, “Solitary confinement has become US correctional facilities’ quick fix for ‘protecting’ transgender inmates from the unsafe conditions of the general prison population that remain unaddressed, effectively punishing inmates for their identities and for being victims of abuse.” The physical and psychological harms of solitary confinement, as this testimony outlines them, are multiple. Twenty-three hours a day alone in a cell denies inmates access to prison services, programs, and the “human interactions upon which they rely for survival.”\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, while solitary confinement purportedly protects transgender inmates from assaults by the general population, it increases their risk for assault and harassment by prison staff. In 2011, the National Transgender Discrimination survey found that the “combination of anti-transgender bias and persistent structural and interpersonal acts of racism was especially devastating for Black transgender people.”\textsuperscript{17} Among transgender inmates surveyed, 37 percent report harassment by

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\textsuperscript{13} CeCe McDonald, “Violence Against (Trans)Women Today,” Support CeCe!, 12 May 2013, para. 3, supportcece.wordpress.com/2013/05/12/violence-against-transwomen-today.


\textsuperscript{17} Jack Harrison-Quintana and Sharon Lettman-Hicks, with Jaime Grant, \textit{Injustice at Every Turn: A Look at Black Respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey} (Washington, DC: National Black Justice Coalition, National Center for Transgender Equality, and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 15 September 2011), 1.
correctional officers; for black transgender inmates, the rate rises to 47 percent. The rate among those who experienced harassment by other inmates rises from 35 percent in the general population to 50 percent reported by black respondents. Black respondents reported the highest incidence (34 percent) of sexual assault by other inmates or prison staff. 18

In addition, as Senate testimony notes, “The denial of medical care that is often inherent in use of solitary confinement may have additional disturbing consequences for transgender people.” 19 While 17 percent of inmates overall reported being denied hormone treatment, black inmates reported 30 percent denial, and American Indians, 36 percent. 20 The refusal to provide hormones means that, over time, the body changes to become unrecognizable to the self. For transwomen this means that many masculinizing features blocked by hormones come back, while feminizing effects recede. Facial hair returns, softness of muscle tissue subsides, hips and breasts lose their fullness and definition. In short, part of the torture of the mind takes place in the slow unmaking of the body. Punished for their transgender identity, these inmates are then denied the right to embody that identity in the way they choose—a violent, concealed instance of “the remaking of persons through solitary confinement,” as Dayan describes it her most recent monograph, The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons. 21

The solitary confinement units of the St. Cloud prison were literally and figuratively built as part of the nineteenth-century (re)construction of the US penitentiary system that Dayan observes in The Law Is a White Dog. In the chapter “Rituals of Civil Death”—unearthing the skeletons that feed the current overuse and abuse of solitary confinement—she notes that this form of punishment emerged in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, at which point observers were already protesting its cruelty in terms similar to those Lambda Legal would use two hundred years later. Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, in On the Penitentiary System in the United States, conclude that “this absolute solitude, if nothing interrupts it, is beyond the strength of man; it destroys the criminal without intermission and without pity; it does not reform, it kills” (qt. 65). Charles Dickens’s American Notes warns of Philadelphia’s Cherry Hill penitentiary: “I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body” (qt. 66). As Dayan reports, solitary confinement was unfavorably compared to the routine tortures committed against the enslaved: “The depression, insanity, and suicide they observed led Beaumont and Tocqueville to contrast the ‘punishment of death and stripes’ for slaves with the separate system for criminals, implying that the unique deprivation fixed in the mind was crueler than corporal discipline” (65). Dayan goes further to suggest that, in fact, these two forms of punishment may be intimately linked. “Slavery in the United States brought about a new understanding of the limits of human endurance,” she writes, “so that new, more refined cruelties could be invented” (57). That is, having learned

19 Lambda Legal et al., Testimony of Organizations Supporting LGBT Equality, 3.
20 Grant, Mottet, and Tanis, Injustice at Every Turn, 169.
from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave rebellions that corporeal tortures alone could not break human beings, jailers pioneered new, psychic forms of debilitation in the prisons where the enslaved and their descendants would be disproportionately detained.

The logic undergirding the routine use of solitary confinement for transgender inmates, however, owes even more than this to the systematized depersonalization attempted by chattel slavery. If we can read through Dayan’s early work to theorize how and why racism is imbricated with transphobia, we can also read through her recent work to theorize how transphobia is imbricated with racism in the prison system and beyond. After initial placement in “administrative isolation,” McDonald was summoned before a committee of prison health officials and wardens to determine, first, her gender, and, second, whether she would continue to be housed in solitary confinement. Minneapolis activist Katie Burgess describes this process as a “remarkably abusive” examination that considers three factors: “physiology—meaning your genitals,” sexual practices, and prior placement. McDonald was declared male and returned to administrative isolation.22 Arrest makes it possible for her to be stripped of her right to determine her own gender because, as Dayan writes, “the prisoner lacks the right to himself” (57)—or in McDonald’s case, herself. This lack of a right to one’s self is an aspect of felons’ civil death—the state of a person who though biologically alive “has lost all civil rights” (58)—that Dayan describes in terms of its outgrowth from the social death of the enslaved. That is, the incarcerated could be recognized as undeserving of full personhood because slave codes provided legal precedent for recognizing certain people as less than human, a kind of living dead.

According to Orlando Patterson’s comparative study Slavery and Social Death, “social death” is the condition of the slave’s alienation from the rest of society that characterizes chattel slavery. This alienation includes coercion through violent and direct force, the loss of any “legally enforceable” ties of family, the withholding of independent social existence except through the master, permanent degradation, “pervasive indignity . . . [and] endless personal violation.”23 As Matt Richardson has argued elsewhere, another component to the indignity, cruelty, and violation of slavery is the master’s power to define gender parameters, to limit slaves’ gendered self-expression through a variety of means including forced work, sexual subjugation, and the general control over every aspect of the slaves’ physical being.24 Denial of gender self-definition as part of transgender inmates’ civil death, then, is a “natural” extension of the denial of gender self-definition codified in black social death: where chattel slavery refuses the socially dead the right to determine their own gender, the prison system extends this refusal to the civilly dead. McDonald’s body, as it “fails” its gender examination, undergoes a type of extra violence designed to keep its pathology (read, determination for self-making) from spreading to the other prisoners—lest they, too, demand some

22 Katie Burgess, quoted in Akiba Solomon, “Where Will CeCe McDonald Serve Her Time? The Devil Is in the Details,” Colorlines, 8 June 2012, para. 7, colorlines.com/archives/2012/06/when_it_comes_to_where_cece_mcdonald_will_serve_her_time_the_devil_is_in_the_details.html.
23 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7, 12.
24 Matt Richardson, “’My Father Didn’t Have a Dick’: Social Death and Jackie Kay’s Trumpet,” GLQ 18, nos. 2–3 (2012): 361–79.
dignity and acknowledgment of personal identity from a system devised to extricate all vestiges of humanity from the prisoner.

Counter to dominant imaginations of prison abuses, this extra violence is inflicted primarily through deprivation. In 2004 the world was shocked by the leaked photographs of American soldiers inflicting torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. The photographs displayed evidence of physical torture and sexual humiliation and suggested rape. Dayan argues that, far from representing a wartime exception, these tactics are “routine and entirely familiar to those who follow the everyday treatment of prisoners in the United States—in prison and in court.”

For transgender prisoners, the gendered dimension of civil death creates the opportunity for increased liturgies of dispossession and rituals of torture that include and go beyond the “routine” practices of rape and torture in the prison. Transgender prisoners experience additional tactics of deprivation that extend to denial of gendered effects that help sustain personal identity and allow one to relate to oneself on the level of dignity, even in a context of structural negation. The refusal of preferred names, pronouns, underwear, and hair length make each interaction an opportunity for ridicule and denigration.

The people administering this justice—the employees of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex—are, like the inmates they discipline, overwhelmingly poor and black. For these employees, McDonald may be an embarrassing example of black and working-class self-creation that the state labels pathological. McDonald, as a black transperson, confounds detention procedures based on the assumption that gender expression, gender identity, and anatomy all “follow” in a predictable way. After antagonizing the criminal justice system by declaring herself a transgender woman at trial, she continues to insist that black womanhood deserves self-protection while maintaining a nonbinary sense of her own gender. In letters to supporters, McDonald writes about violence against transwomen as part of patriarchal domination: “Women have a higher rate of experiencing violence in all its forms—physical, verbal, and/or sexual. In most cases we are the victims of murder, and in the act of defending ourselves we are subjected to time, even life in prison. How can society say that it detest[s] and challenge[s] violence against women, when there is very little, if any, real help for us, and the help we give ourselves result[s] in punishment?”

She puts herself in a history of women who defend themselves despite the insistence that women’s self-defense is a punishable act. Even as she places herself in a genealogy of wronged and incarcerated womanhood, she also connects with definitions of gender that celebrate its fluidity. Quoting an Illinois newsletter, she writes that “Gender is NOT” defined by anatomy or “chromosomes” or restricted to “male and female”; it is a “personal identity” and is determined by how “you relate to yourself.”

The state’s response to her creative trans self-definition—initiating an effort to “make its own determination of [her] gender”—is an extra layer of punishment and humiliation that discards personal identity in favor of degradation, torture, and ignominy.

27 CeCe McDonald, “Shoutout to Black and Pink Newsletter,” Support CeCe!, 6 May 2013 (emphasis in original), supportcece.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/shoutout-to-black-and-pink-newsletter.
Despite the physical and systemic violence that she has survived, McDonald refuses to concede her right to herself. Still an activist, throughout her imprisonment she composed letters and essays from prison that supporters then posted on the *Free CeCe McDonald* blog. Still a beautiful woman, she posed in pictures taken by visitors not only “femme-ing it up,” as one caption puts it, but *black* femme-ing it up, her hair in braids and eyebrows arched.29 While McDonald’s letters expressed thanks to her many supporters for their call-in campaigns, media blasts, protests, and letters, she specifically discouraged two long-term campaigns launched on her behalf: petitions asking Minnesota governor Mark Dayton to pardon her or move her to a women’s facility. These campaigns, she feels, exceptionalize her all-too-unexceptional situation as a black transgender woman in the criminal justice system. Such exceptionalization, she believes, draws attention away from systemic problems surrounding race, gender, and incarceration. As the CeCe McDonald Support Committee writes,

> Even if the emotional hardship of the [pardon] process was something she felt up for, and even if the slim chance of it working actually succeeded, the outcome of her getting a pardon while others sat in prison is antithetical to her values and the whole reason she is struggling against this racist system in the first place.

> . . . For supporters to push for [this] only serves the purpose of misdirecting energy away from the real problems of incarceration in [A]merica, and the problem of the Prison Industrial Complex as a whole.30

That is, it misdirects energy from finding ways to articulate how and why transphobia, misogyny, racism, and hostility to immigrants work together. In place of these petitions, we need strategies for connecting the lives of black transgender women to others: strategies that may include storytelling, history-remembering, line-crossing, improvising, scavenging, and, yes, graverobbing. We write these reflections from where we have lived and where we still live. Where we have lived, literally: one of us (Tinsley) for six years resided a short walk away from Pioneer Memorial Cemetery and Cub Foods in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And where we still live, figuratively: both of us insistently choose to house our academic work in the fields of black queer studies and black transgender studies. Where we live, we, like all black queer and black transgender people, need more resources than we easily have access to. And so in this essay we have gone graverobbing to exhume tools that might help us explain what has been going on in our own backyard. We have gone graverobbing like Dayan, following her methodology for uncovering the skeletons of racism, misogyny, and other systemic violence and piecing them together. And we have also robbed Dayan herself, gathering shards and fragments of her work and reassembling them to speak to the intersections that haunt and inspire us. This we have done as the sincerest of homages to Dayan’s work. And this we have done out of the most outraged, desperate concern for CeCe McDonald and the black transgender women trying every day to cheat death, that we might find new tools for imagining their continued lives.