

**Eat, Protest, Lift: Cultivating and Performing Positive Black Self-
Imagery
in Resistance to White Supremacy**
By Caleb Stephens

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Department of Theatre and
Dance and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

This dissertation and documentary maps my journey from being a disgruntled and disconnected social justice activist to a cultivator of decidedly Black active healing spaces for Black people in predominantly white communities. I argue that through social justice-minded organizing in the areas of food, physical fitness and social justice activism, positive and affirmed feelings of self and community can be forged through communal activity and fellowship. Using critical race theory, Black feminism and Black social work theories as theoretical frames, this dissertation asks: How do Black people create safe spaces that affirm their identities away from white ideologies of oppression that render Blackness negative? How do Black people learn to reframe negative narratives surrounding the projections of black racial stereotypes on their bodies through healthy eating, physical fitness and community activism to create positive social and cultural outcomes? How can social justice organizing with other Black people create more attuned physical and mental awareness about self and community care?

Lastly, how can Black people perform self and community love in their everyday lives in the daily wake of anti-Blackness?

Like so many realities of “living while Black,” results in feelings of disenfranchisement, depression and unreconciled grievances about how things

“should be” or what “could have happened differently,” this dissertation seeks to map routes of agency that empower everyday Black people to create and build safe spaces within and around whiteness without making comparisons to how and why Black people and their experiences should be validated by people who are not of the global majority. I contend that by performing healthy self-perception and affirmation in public space, Black people can gain agency and confidence to safely self-present in predominantly white spaces without the need to affirm whiteness as a defining factor of becoming legible. Using a combination of documentary filmmaking, participant observation work as an active facilitator and curator of safe Black space, and biographical narratives as a methodological approach, I contrast with three site specific case studies: Black Brunch, a curated African diasporic brunch gathering that I began in 2016 in Lawrence, Kansas; a national cohort of competitive Black weight lifters; and the Lawrence, Kansas chapter of #Black Lives Matter, which I am a founder and principal organizer. I use these sites to map my work creating safe Black spaces in the food, fitness, and local social justice arenas of Lawrence, Kansas and the greater Turtle Island¹ area. I include unedited biographical statement written by each person featured in the documentary in order to allow the subject to assert their agency in the process of making the film and the companion document. Together, both the film and written

¹ Here, I use the term created by the Iroquois nation, Turtle Island, to refer to North America.

companion supplement explore how I cultivated and nurtured these Black spaces over three years using social media invites and face to face invitations to gain the trust of Black people in the local community to foster self-reflection and community affirmation.

This investigation uses four sites of participant observation: my platform as one of the founders of Black Lives Matter-LFK (the Black Lives Matter chapter in Lawrence, Kansas), my organizing of a weekly Sunday event called "Black Brunch," my weekly workout regimen in competitive powerlifting, and my weekly community engagement in person and online towards intersectional Black liberation. This dissertation seeks to understand how cultivating a series of positive habits and rituals that are rooted in intersectionality and what Christina Sharpe calls "wake work" can redefine predominantly white and hostile space into safe spaces that encourage Black self and community affirmation.

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Introduction

Purpose of Study: Straight Out of Chaos into New Practices of Order

After I went to a predominantly white undergraduate college and a graduate program at The University of Kansas to obtain a master's degree in Social Work, I began to see that I could help communities change the experience of transracial adoptees by being a different type of social worker. As a cisgender, bi-racial African American man in a predominantly white graduate program, I had to learn to claim my Blackness as positive to counter the negative stereotypes I encountered on a daily basis in the curriculum, teaching from professors with little to no cultural literacy and the violence of being constantly referenced as "marginal" and/or "minority" knowing full well I am part of a global majority of people of color around the world. I learned how to incorporate important cultural literacies that could help me help communities raising disregarded children of color who were adopted by white families or who were left behind as wards of the state due to threatening family environments, poor foster care situations, or juvenile crimes and misdemeanors. I turned my attention to helping communities translate the anger and invisibility I (and many other children of color) felt as a child into a sustainable practice for wellness. I started to move towards

developing a practice that could help Black and Brown youth change their views of themselves as more than enough instead of never enough. I began to educate predominantly white communities about the cultural incompetence and violence they perpetuated simply because they did not choose to understand the extreme violence of living while Black in white social and cultural contexts that translate Black identities as problems to overcome.

My ability to connect to Black people is not just a gift but a survival mechanism and insatiable need that I that empower me to fill up the empty places in my cultural upbringing that brought me so much anxiety and social disconnection. I learned to cultivate my community through practices of healthy food preparation and dining in community, weightlifting and social justice. As I began to dig deeper, I found that these practices and spaces that I made drew others to join me, specifically Black people. These acts of breaking bread with other Black people, weightlifting and strengthening my body, and organizing social protests to help Black communities allowed me to think through much of the scholarship that I learned in my graduate work in becoming a therapist for socially disadvantaged youth—specifically working with Black and Brown youth. I began to notice a positive pattern of self-awareness and positivity that occurred when I gave the youth of color the tools that saved me—eating well, physical fitness and raising social consciousness. I started work to link the personal order and wellness that I found in the food, health and social justice community. I

wanted to share what I learned about connecting my physical, mental, and social wellness with those around me. A personal journey to incorporate my skills as a licensed therapist coupled with my new knowledge about social activism and performance in my doctoral work created an interconnected praxis of building intentional healing spaces, specifically for Black people.

This dissertation maps my journey from Black trauma to Black healing, utilizing community, and emphasizing continuity. I argue that through social justice-minded organizing in the areas of food, physical fitness, and activism, positive and affirmed feelings of self and community can be forged through communal activity and fellowship. Using Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist thought and Black social work, this dissertation asks, first: how do Black people create safe spaces that affirm their identities away from white ideologies of oppression that render Blackness negative? Second, how do Black people learn to reframe the negative narratives surrounding the projections of black stereotypes on their bodies through healthy eating, physical fitness and community activism? Third, how can social justice organizing with other Black people create more physical and mental awareness about self and community care? Lastly, how can we work to help Black people perform self and community love in their everyday life in the wake of anti-Blackness?

Like so many realities of Blackness that result in disenfranchised and empty grievances about how things should be or what could have happened

differently, this dissertation maps out routes of agency that empower Black people to create and build safe spaces within and around whiteness without making comparisons to how and why Black people and their experiences should be validated by people who are not of the global majority. I contend that by performing healthy self-perception and affirmation in public space, Black people can gain agency and confidence to safely self-present in predominantly white spaces without the need to affirm whiteness as a defining factor of becoming legible.

I use biographical narrative to compare and contrast three case studies that map my work creating safe Black spaces in the food and fitness areas as well as local social justice organizing as a founder of the Black Lives Matter chapter in Lawrence, Kansas. I describe how I curated and nurtured three Black spaces over three years using social media invites and face to face invitations to gain the trust of Black people in the local community and to foster self- reflection and affirmation. Though the organization of a weekly dining event called "Black Brunch," a daily workout regimen in competitive weightlifting, and my weekly community engagement with Black Lives Matter (in person and online), I interrogate how cultivating a series of positive habits and rituals that are rooted in intersectionality and what Sharpe calls "wake work" can redefine predominantly white and hostile space into safe spaces that encourage Black self and Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* coins the term 'wake work,'

referring to the work done within the wake of the slave ships. Wake Work is something that can uncover our ability to understand what hurts, what helps, and what space has always been needed. What pathways can Black people find to affirm the self and community in acts of positive and public performance joy?

Rationale: Why Write?

Why write this dissertation? Why create this project and why invest so much time and energy? Why, especially amidst an absolutely devastating global pandemic, during a time where financial stability is something only the 1% know, and coinciding with a time where the thought of being arrested, as a cisgender Black male, is most certainly more than just a thought?

I do this because I want my people to see we're still fighting. Black people. I want people to know the weather before they check the forecast. I want people to know that there is work being done by Black people even though they feel like they're frozen in time, in their illnesses, and in their struggle. I want people to know that the struggle is still, and will always be, a part of the journey towards intersectional Black liberation. Our work matters, even when it feels meaningless. I want people to be able to breathe in deeper knowing that there are spaces for them, cultivated intentionally and intergenerationally. I want people to know that feeling sacred and worthy is a right for our people. When we intentionally gather, we grow. I want people to know that even when the gatherings look different, the growth continues.

There are areas of life where we can be and where we shall become. I want people to know how we manifest is powerful and absolutely unmatched. The dreams that were before us, the ones that live within us, and the fire that anchors us to this earth, is our Ancestors before us. I want people to know, and to be

absolutely certain, that the love that propels the fires which burn are the fires that were lit before us, and remain lit because of us. We are the smoke that preceded the match. I want people to know that no matter which way the winds (which in this case are the things that are out of our control) blow us, we will grow.

There are literal spaces for Black people at tables in restaurants where they can congregate, be free, be welcomed, and grow together. I want people to know that there are places at tables for them that they can make themselves and not just spaces where they are allowed to be for chance encounters. There is a place for them once they show up that is remembered, is anticipated, and feels like home. We have to show up for ourselves.

I want people to know that when we say we matter, we are manifesting those imagined realities and that we are not asking for permissions nor anticipating an answer, nor do we need one from anyone but ourselves. When you hear us chanting and singing and talking loud when we gather, we do so knowing that people do not believe us. I want people to know that we don't give a damn that they don't believe us and that we gather because we will be heard on our terms.

Our voices are a resounding drum emerging from the earth and echoing through cities, streets, and the world. I want people to know that we pause our

actual lives to march, to protest, to sit-in, to disrupt, to destroy, and to dismantle because while we aren't recognized as worth it, our legacies sure as hell will be.

There are spaces to show up and to grow our bodies into massive, powerful, dynamic, and loving entities. I want people to know there are spaces where we can yell and not be scolded, where we can cry and not be beholden. Working on our self and on our body (individually or collectively) is in no way a reflection of a rejection of the ways we were created, but a solidification of the thankfulness in how and why we were created. I want people to know that we can exist without being reduced to tropes, without being one-dimensional caricatures, without being the living breathing ramifications of the things we were made to do throughout chattel slavery. We don't have to be perceived as brutes, savages, and monsters. I want people to know that we can grow our bodies and maintain our minds and that we can hold one another up and be competitive at the same time. We are able to maintain both our sacred spirits and our humanity. I want people to know that the way that we lift in the gym or in competition is another type of lifting that we do on the daily.

I need people to see what I see, even if it's just for a moment. I want you to see the complexities, the power, the grace, the fire, the sacred, and I want you to be able to take some of it with you. I made this documentary because you need to hear us speak, and feel and exist off of a page. This accompanying document is a guide to help you understand why we are so tired of defending our existence.

We have to fight to live. I want you to see this because I know that maybe some of the audience for this dissertation and film are tired, too. I hope this project helps you to feel as if you can find the tools to make space feel a little more at home.

The written part of this dissertation is a supplementary guide to the film *Eat. Protest. Lift.* The guide provides the reader with a brief introduction of each section of the documentary as it connects to the literature that shapes my discussion in the film and the autobiographical testimonies written by each person interviewed. The dissertation project creates a multi-modal picture of the way the Black people featured in this film experience the world. My goal here is to use this guide to help the viewer better connect to their interviews shown in the film. After each interview transcribed or written by each featured activist, I provide a conclusion that provides each subject's autobiographical takeaways and an analysis of what creating safe Black space can inspire for individual and community healing. *Eat. Protest. Lift.* lives off the page, moves onto the screen in the world. This documentary and accompanying analysis are the forms I needed to be able to tell the stories of those in my community who are hurting, striving, and seeking answers to help them navigate and understand the trauma of living while Black in the African diaspora. Black people throughout the world are fighting daily to unravel the residual violence and trauma produced by anti-Blackness. This living battle is one that that we never asked for as a people. My

hope is that this project can be a road map that can begin a new journey towards sustained and intentional healing.

Intersectionality and Wake Work

This dissertation takes an intersectional standpoint and is multi-modal in its usage of the terminology, methodology and modes of theoretical inquiry. By multimodal, I mean I have created a documentary film project as my dissertation in order to allow each person interviewed to present their perspectives and to self-present the way they want to be perceived. Because I am also the director and author of the analytical text that accompanies the film, my subject position as a cisgender, Black man is also important to consider as I utilize Black feminist thought and Critical Race Theory to make meaning of the project. I center Black feminist thought to draw attention to how race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity and ability are synchronous parts of identity that cannot be separated to serve white, male patriarchy. This written and visual document explores, critiques, and questions the importance of an intersectional lens regarding healing, reclamation, and the exploration of how all Black bodies are to be included in this work of liberation (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality casts a net that catches all variations and standpoints of Blackness. Unless you understand how things are interrelated, you cannot understand the pursuit of liberation.

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who

are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (Crenshaw, 140)

Crenshaw's work is central to 21st century conversations about equity and inclusion, yet her perspectives are often excluded from discussions of intersectionality. Here, I invoke the essential need to return to the source and intention of the analytic lens of Critical Race Theory, and suggest that intersectionality is propped up in conversation but not indeed, such as the case of The University of Kansas firing Cody Charles² and "restructuring" the Office of Multicultural Affairs (Fox, 2020). The will to make change is not the same as the need to look like you're doing the work. Whatever the layer of Intersectionality, people find excuses to not utilize analysis and follow through with the determined needs. Contemporary conversations of feminism that center whiteness (especially in academia) exclude Crenshaw out of their discussion of intersectionality because the cost of admitting that white feminist scholars have strategically

² Cody Charles is a fat Black queer transfemme and former employee of the University of Kansas who was fired unjustly as a result of pushing back against upper management while protecting himself and his coworkers from racial micro and macroaggressions.

utilized and coopted the work of Black feminists suggest that they have manipulated their power and privilege to do so. I seek to engage the ways that trauma disrupts space and place narratives of Black people, as well as the ways in which non-global majority scholars often take the intellectual and emotional labor of Black women to buttress their scholarship, pedagogy and activism. We must consider the multiple intersecting oppression that exist in living while Black in a climate of anti-Blackness.

Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* created a space where I found a critical voice that helped me to analyze how public space could be curated to help navigate quotidian Black experiences of trauma. Utilizing what Sharpe calls "wake work," which in layman's terms is finding processes to navigate the residual daily trauma and reverberations of enslavement, premature death and anti-Blackness, the documentary and this supplement work to show the different ways that the wake of trauma can be reclaimed³ through a praxis of intersectionality which, according to Crenshaw, is a prism of identity negotiation that shows how we live simultaneously through the different layers of our identity as we work to reclaim who we are to ourselves. We can be reimagined. Sharpe articulates the idea that anti-Blackness is the climate of our everyday lives that is as inescapable as weather. Using the weather as a metaphor for anti-Blackness,

³ Reclamation in this case refers to taking up and creation of things to counteract the trauma; this is the ritual of healing.

Sharpe's work provides a useful paradigm to explicate that the behaviors, stereotypes, archetypes, systems, institutional practices, economic hardships and class disparities of the subjects in my documentary and their testimonies which mark who they navigate race-based oppression as people of African descent. Sharpe contends, anti-Blackness is always present. "In my text, the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black. And while the air of freedom might linger around the ship, it does not reach into the hold, or attend the bodies in the hold." (Sharpe, 2016, 104). In this dissertation project, both the documentary film and the written accompaniment attempt to underscore the underlying theme of my analysis which is built on the concept that racism is expressed through rituals of power that include the practice of hate and the systemic disempowerment of Black people in acts of supremacy that maintain the privileges afforded to those who possess whiteness. Sharpe argues that the wake of the slave ship is what holds Black people in the United States hostage to their unmarked and undocumented trauma because the evidence of this trauma is life primarily lost to the blood in the water left by Black bodies disposed of during the Transatlantic slave trade. Contemporary Black in the African diaspora continues to produce certain types of strongholds on Black people as a result of these unreconciled traumas. I build on Sharpe's argument to expand the idea of wake work as acts of claiming and cultivating Black spaces that allow vocalization and

visibility to those inaudible and invisible traumas of enslavement that manifest in Black people's lives daily. From disproportionate amounts of stress and anxiety to predispositions to physical and mental illness due to environmental and social stressor, Black people's wellness is contingent to access, education and time which are racially sanctioned by space and place. By intentionally creating space for the pursuit of mental, physical and emotional strength through food, exercise and protesting inequality, this dissertation addresses the daily trauma of living while Black under the threat of violence, imprisonment or premature death.⁴ These threats are constant reminders of the way the world interacts with Black bodies (M. Alexander, 2012). In "the weather," anti- Blackness and white supremacy are the total climate that renders Black life always vulnerable and fragile while Black death as normative and almost an "American expectation" for Black people living in America (Sharpe, 2017).

This is How We Do it: Intersectionality and Wake Work as Tools of Ritualistic Community Organizing

Intersectionality is an analytic tool used to view and process through the layers of identity, by exploring "the social divisions of class, race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality, and ability" (Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016). This

⁴ Premature death is referencing the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden gulag : prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*, 2007.

dissertation delves into my process of cultivating intersectional Black love and healing within a climate of anti-Blackness. I argue that Black people, can create, facilitate, and dissent from the pursuit of whiteness (i.e. being defined by their relationship to whiteness and its residual practices, regulations and violence) through the development of positive self and community-affirming performance rituals. I utilize my theoretical framework of intersectionality and create spaces for Black ritualistic reclamation, healing, and power. The spaces I identify as having capacity to incite ritualistic behaviors of healing are curated: eating space, gyms and community based social organizing venues. I assert that by eating together in intentional Black collectives, making social progress through acts of protest together, and lifting/exercising together in acts of kinship that Black communities can identify rituals of behavior that can greatly impact their sense of self and community agency. Using these theoretical frameworks, I explore how fellowship produces healing and strategic activism aimed towards personal and collective action can open opportunities for new community performances of Blackness that are empowered.

Supplemental Documentary Walkthrough & Biographies: Eating, Feeling, Living

This documentary shows Black bodies in community, in motion, in space, and in stillness. Utilizing the analytic tools of wake work, the lens of

intersectionality, and the understanding of epigenetic trauma, the documentary speaks to the ways in which healing can be reclaimed and pursued. This documentary shows the necessity of intersectional liberation and not meager pockets of acceptance through placating white supremacy and adhering to respectability politics. From the hood to the high life, this documentary shows the ways in which we claim space. This documentary shows that Black people need not wait for permission. This documentary shows the ways we make war in pursuit of liberation.

Eat: Productive Ritual of Curating Black Space

Eat, Protest, Lift. utilizes Nicole Fleetwood's theorization of psychic wounds and the impact of performativity when it comes to Blackness. Fleetwood's assertion that psychic wounds challenge how Black people attempt to create art objects such as film as acts of self and community healing is a useful framework to think through my work seeks to help people address and heal from trauma and step into Black self-love and affirmation (Fleetwood, 2011).

The "Eat" section of the documentary and this accompanying document, examine the necessity for Black people to gather and be in community with one another. The documentary speaks to the importance of mental health and situates Black Brunch as a site of healing through community gathering and engagement because of its focus on marginalized Blackness, and holding space for truth telling (Laymon, 2018). We need to know that we exist in a place like Lawrence, Kansas, where Black people steer clear of downtown and spend time in their respective homes and neighborhoods, segregated by race and class. This section shows the ways that reclamation lives as community healing, joy, and libation. This section of the documentary explores the ways in which reclamation looks like table settings in places of eating and fellowship for Black Queer and Trans folkx.

Darnell Moore writes that he is "more hopeful than ever before, not because I believe America will get over its abusive relationship with black people. No. I am hopeful because I have faith in black liberation, which is to say, the

freedom we dream and practice when we refuse to set fire to another's potential to love, to laugh, to live." (Moore, 2018, 234). The beautiful culmination of reclamation work and ritual work creates space for pain to exist, without the sugar coating that narratives usually carry, for the sake of the reader. What I have done in the film and this supplement is to create a space where we, Black people, can tell the truth in a way that it serves to further the validation of the pain that marginalized Blackness lives within, and as a call to action in the way of inclusion and equity work that we, as a community can do by gathering, loving one another, and taking care of our health and well-being needs. Truth needs to be told, regardless of the things it unsettles. The undeterred recalling of pain and the importance of truth telling, even though it doesn't want to be exposed, calls upon the beginning of a journey towards healing (Laymon, 2018). When it comes to the ritual and Black truth telling through pain, Laymon writes:

I wanted to center a something, a someone who wants us dead and dishonest. I wanted white Americans, who have proven themselves even more unwilling to confront their lies, to reconsider how their lies limit our access to good love, healthy choices, and second chances. I wanted the book to begin and end with the assumption that if white Americans reckoned with their insatiable appetites for Black American suffering, and we reckoned with our insatiable appetites for unhealthy food, we could all be ushered into a reformed era of American prosperity. (Laymon, 2018, 1)

This inspection of truth, pain, and how the wake the trauma presents itself as opportunities for grounded healing work is transformational. It also gives space for the realities of the pain and power of Blackness that the existence of Blackness is counter to whiteness, but whiteness, as it is placed on a pedestal, only exists in that way because it interacted with Africanism and African and American Africanists (Morrison, 1993). Each of the sections of the documentary explores the way Blackness, in its various expressive forms from daily living to social organizing, works to counter notions of white “normality” as it pertains to the climate of anti-Blackness. This framework of quotidian living while Black highlights epigenetic trauma and the healing that can be imagined when Blackness is centered by Black people in acts of affirmation agency not of social response to anti-Blackness.

Equally important to my film documentary is the discussion of legacies of betrayal and the preponderance of mistakes and missteps in life (Alexander, 2016), while recognizing the devastation of loss, Black people work to not create identities solely based upon surviving various types of trauma (Moore, 2018). As legacies of loss and betrayal are easily found within a marginalized and betrayed people, this reclamation, Black Brunch, is a reimagining of another way; this is a different legacy. A healing legacy. Black Brunch is the convening of all these Black narratives, heartbreaks, loses, hopes, love, and healing wrapped into the realities of community, and held tightly. Through Black Brunch, community

comes together to create a narrative that isn't merely Black trauma saturated, but Black healing focused (Sharpe, 2016).

This is the ritual reimagining of hope as movement, as ritual, and as wholeness. And in this documentary, with these Black people, we exercise our imagination, find ways to fulfil these dreams and turn them into practice. In the following section, you will read the self-authored testimonies of subjects in the film. Responding to questions about each aspect of the documentary (eat, protest, lift), these community artists challenged mainstream stereotypes and opened personal opportunities for reclamation and self-determination by engaging Black space. This section of the documentary tethers trauma, love, hope, and healing. Each interview in the documentary shows the authentic narrative so not to constrain their individuality and the integrity of their story.

Black Brunch- Interviewee Insight: Eat.

Katie Kelly

“Blood does not family make. Those are relatives. Family are those with whom you share your good, bad, and ugly, and still love one another in the end. Those are the ones you select.”

— Hector Xtravaganza

I absolutely hate writing about myself; I dread it so very much. But when someone I love and care for is asking me to do it, I can't say no. My name is Katie Kelly; my pronouns are She/Her/Hers. I am just a couple weeks' shy of turning 24 years old and I am a Wichita, KS native. I unfortunately lost my job recently and life really sucks right now but I'm hoping it's a sign that there are even better things meant for me and unknown career path down the line.

I don't remember the proper titling of the section I interviewed for but I believe it's was just over Black Brunch. I vividly remember when Caleb asked me to be involved in the process I received an email from him with a list of questions, so what did I do? I just typed out my answers and sent them back to him thinking that was that (haha). All that means is that I tried to sneak my way out of being filmed for his documentary because it makes me anxious to see myself on virtual zoom meetings.

Caleb Stephens is so amazing is the brightest light I've ever seen in this world and I'm truly grateful that he gave me opportunity and platform to speak my truth on the things that I've learned since being introduced to Black Brunch.

One of the most important things I've learned from Black Brunch is that you are truly able to create your own family. You don't have to keep giving fake energy to the relatives that repeatedly keep disrespecting your boundaries. Black

Brunch is a place where I learned a more deeper sense of the word community and that it truly doesn't have to be people that are close to you in radius for them to be considered a part of your community.

I don't really know what I'm known for outside the perception of my own mind but what I would like to be known for is that I'm intentional and kind. At least once a day I question if I'm a good person, if my intentions are kind and genuine, or if I'm causing any type of emotional hard to the people that I love and care for. A majority of the time I feel like because I'm not vocal enough about the things I care about, it means I don't care at all, but I'm trying to be better at being more vocal but also learning that not everything needs to be said out loud for everyone to hear that aren't meant for them.

At this moment in time I'm focusing on becoming a better version of myself. Paying more attention to my mental health and the things that I'm feeling. Strengthening my self- discipline and figuring out how to balance out my love for the gym and body neutrality.

I don't think I would be the person I am now if it hadn't been for Caleb Stephens. Every day I'm grateful that the universe allowed for us to become family and for creating such an inspirational, kind, determined, and funny human being. Even though he won't let me gas him up he deserves to know all of these things ten times over. Thank you for everything.

Gian Louis Hernandez

My name is Gian Hernandez. I am a Black, Latinx, Queer person who was born in California, but has been living outside of the United States for almost a decade. I was made aware of the many ways I deviate from the white, straight norm very early in life, as a member of a family in which I was the only Black person present. My Latinx mom, non-biological Dad, and half-sister were a great family to be a part of, especially when it became clear that I also didn't conform to the heteronormative mores of Chicano culture. I remember going to school and family events and being the *moreno*, or dark-skinned one with always somewhat of a mocking undertone. This was worsened by the fact that I didn't speak Spanish fluently and felt alienated from that aspect of my heritage. As a teenager, I moved from a predominantly white/Latinx school to a predominantly Black/white school where, instead of being the *moreno*, I was the one with "good hair." At this point in my life, I also grew into my Queer identity, coming out for the first time. That period, like for so many marginalized youth, was a time when I really needed to see someone living their life authentically, successfully, and beautifully.

So, I decided to become that person.

I was seventeen years old when I told my mother that I was going to move to San Francisco to study music. Since we lived well below the poverty line, she simply told me "good luck." I then made it a goal of mine to apply for as many

scholarships as possible. Ultimately, I ended up getting a Bachelor's degree in Classical Music and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication studies. Nevertheless, I had also decided that I wasn't going to be able to be a professional musician. I had "failed" in the sense of fulfilling that dream, but little did I know that I was on the precipice of yet another major life transformation.

The life skills that I gained during music school: determination, discipline, breathing, served me well in this new step. I decided to move across the Atlantic Ocean to Germany where I became fluent in the language after a year. I also decided to attend Master's level courses upon realizing "if they can do it, I can do it." Deciding to do my master's after getting my Bachelor's degrees took me to India and Argentina, and ultimately back to Berlin where I also thought to myself "why stop there?"

The latest chapter of my life has seen me become a Ph.D. researcher at the Universita della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano, Switzerland. I am studying race, ethnicity, and nationality in international higher education, something in which I have both lived and academic experience. Being a Black, Latinx person of color living and studying in seven different countries has made me become the person I am today. I've learned that I wouldn't go back and change the experiences that I've had, I'd just wish they were a little easier for me and people like me. This is why I'm doing what I do. I hope to become that person that I needed to see when I was younger.

Kimberly Weaver

Hey, my name is Kimberly Weaver. My pronouns are she/her. I was interviewed for the Black Brunch section of Caleb's dissertation. One of my least favorite things in the world is having attention focused on me so writing this has been one of the hardest things that I have ever done.

I was born and raised in Wyandotte County, Kansas. I still live there. My county is one of the poorest counties in Kansas. Twenty percent of the residents live below the poverty line. That is higher than the state average of 11 percent and the national average of 13 percent. Our county is separated by Interstate 635 and life expectancy can be shortened by 24 years just by living on the east side of this highway. We are a proud community despite these facts. I often tell people that we are a big city with a small-town feel. Everyone knows each other and if we do not know you, we know someone who knows you.

I am the last biological child of a college educated woman and a man who was not allowed to go to school past the eighth grade. I say biological because we have a broad sense of family, and I was raised in a house that always had space for one more person. I honestly cannot remember a time that we were not sharing space with someone. All I know is community. We were always spending time and dining with other families. We even travelled together.

My parents focused on non-traditional education. Every day was a learning experience, from learning to negotiate with sellers at a garage sale to reading contracts early so I would know what I was agreeing to. I had the first of my four children as a teenager in high school. My family circled around me to help me complete high school. My father kept my daughter while I was at school. My mom, a former teacher, helped me with my homework. My friends became like family to us. That is something that has helped to shape me into the person that I am today.

I am one of two co-founders of WyCo Mutual Aid. Our mutual aid community is trying to shift how we relate to each other in the world. We believe that everyone has something to offer to the community. We do not believe that charity is the answer because often charity reinforces power dynamics and treats one party as less than the other. Instead, we believe in reaching across the table to our peers. We emphasize solidarity not charity. We focus on several different things in the community like tenant rights, food insecurities, energy justice, and criminal justice reform. I believe that food and shelter are basic human rights, and no one should be unhoused or hungry.

Black Brunch is a space where Black people can be free and authentic away from harm. We are a group of people who love each other passionately. It is more than just eating together. It provides a place of escape for people who may not see other Black people. Black Brunch is our extended family. It gives people a

place to rest. Black Brunch is like a cool rain against your skin. It soothes our souls. It washes the heaviness of being surrounded by anti-blackness away long enough for us to reset ourselves so we can face another week, day, moment, or breath.

Some days it is the only reason that we can continue to function in this world. It is our hope and joy. My prayer is that whoever reads this dissertation or watches this video understands that Caleb is his ancestor's wildest dreams. Caleb pushes himself every day to be better than the day before. The fact that he created this space where Black people could feel loved and safe. He has graciously given people a tiny view into his world, our world of being Black.

Niko Jameson Pacey

My name is Niko Jameson Pacey and this is a follow up of the interview I had with my brother, Caleb Stephens. These writings should serve to further expand upon the interview. Thank you for taking the time to read it.

Beginnings:

What brought me to Black Brunch?

I grew up in a predominately white space. White church, white family, white mindset: I was surrounded in white supremacy at all times unbeknownst to

me. Like many biracial children with white mothers, white supremacy showed itself in ways that would not occur if the father of a biracial child was white and their mother was Black. This upbringing informed me in many incorrect ways causing deep and lasting trauma that I've had to work towards remedying within my life.

How has COVID-19's impact us switching to virtual Black Brunch ?

I've come to know and love many people I would not have met otherwise. People from around the world that have helped me grow in profound ways. The opportunity for these folks to join this community of Black folks has also afforded me to learn more about the folks I already knew as well. In the setting of an actual, in person brunch, there is a lot of talking and many conversations happening all at once. This format allows everyone to speak and be heard, the conversation being had by everyone.

Blackness & Belonging

Impact from Black Brunch on life/Mental Health, when did you realize?

I knew the moment I left my first Black Brunch outing that it had impacted my life and mental health in a positive way. Interacting with Black folks from all walks of life and being seen in my truth was a life altering moment.

What is your favorite moment of Black Brunch?

Being a Black, Queer man around Black women has been incredibly validating and nourishing. This is not to say Black women are put here to make me feel some type of way. I say this because simply being in the presence of Black women is feeds my soul in ways I didn't know would be possible.

Space and Story:

What makes Black Brunch special?

There is such a diverse mix of people who attend Black Brunch. From academics, blue collar folks, mothers, students, children, and more: this vibrant mix of people really gives the experience that is Black Brunch a very unique flavor. There are no cliques. You can converse with anyone about anything and there is no judgment, only love and support. This would not be possible without the framework that Caleb has built. It is so easy for Black men to fall into toxic masculinity and create spaces that are harmful. This happens for a number of reasons and I'm sure it's broken down masterfully in someone else's dissertation, but I digress. It is Caleb Stephens who has cultivated a space in which Black Women, folks from the LGBTQIA community and beyond have found refuge and safety in and for that, I am forever changed.

What is your story to tell?

My story is unique and in the same breath, exactly the same as many

raised in white spaces. I am a Black Trans man who came into my truth at 29, but knowing full well who I was at the age of 5. I am the person who had to hide my many truths due to Christianity: a religion forced upon Black people and has done undeniable harm to the Diaspora as a whole. Outted as a teenager in a church that never saw me as whole, being one of only 4 Black people in the church, I was ostracized and suffered great trauma at the hands of religion. Transgender people are 40% more likely to attempt suicide than their cisgender counterparts and I am living proof of this fact. Now able to live in my truth, I am a father, a comrade, a masterful dad joke creator, and in many ways, very happy. In short, I am whole and I could not say that before I came to know the joy and peace I would find within the space that is Black Brunch.

Protest: Black Rage

The protest section shows reclamation through the truth telling necessary to implicate those doing the work in their need for rest, and those not doing the work as parts of the oppressive system we have said we are in agreement to dismantle. The section shows the absolute exhaustion from those historically and literally doing the work while fighting everyone and shouldering all the burdens of epigenetic and contemporary anti-Black trauma.

The interviewees speak on anti-Blackness and how it seeps into every crevice. Each person interviewed reclaims that space to reclaim space and thrive

as resistance. This reclamation lives like the celebration of Blackness in totality, including the journey towards self, the rage and admittance of hurt by others. This in-depth look into these systems of oppression serve as foundational knowledge for exploration of how Black bodies move in space in both the “Protest” and the “Lift” section, and specifically the way that Black Queer and marginalized genders move in the space of Black Brunch, detailed in the “Eat” section. It’s about the ways in which oppression forces the life out of bodies and the struggle in. Black marginalized bodies have always existed in spaces, they were effectively exterminated in thought and presence.

We have always been here. Black queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming people loved and fucked on some racist master's plantation. We wrote theories debunking white racial supremacist ideology. We, too, were architects of Black liberation, women's justice, antiwar movements, and the Black arts. We are the unnamed black sisters, brothers, and non-binary people who lived queer theory before it was popular among those in white academe. (Moore, 10)

The documentary details the importance of narratives often discarded or buried. The importance of the stories told by the interviewees, whether they are Queer, Trans, loud, quiet, triumphant, or simply doing their best: All Black Lives Matter. Focusing on the narratives erased, avoided, and decentered, like Crenshaw, Barnes, and hooks, and Toni Morrison, Morgan Jerkins' *This Will Be My Undoing: Living At The Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist In*

(White) America says,

We deserve to be the center; our expansive stories are worthy of being magnified for all their ugliness, beauty, mundaneness, and grandeur. I will not baby you. Instead, I will force you to keep your eyes on me and, in turn, us, and see the seams of everyday life that you have been privileged to ignore but that have wrecked us. Some of us are still wrecked. I am admittedly so in some ways, which you will know about soon enough. But in many other ways, our community has been strengthened and that's why I am here and you are continuing to read my words. And to that I say, welcome. Let us begin. (24).

And out of this looking at the truth of the way people feel, following acknowledgment and affirmation, the space for active healing can exist.

The “Protest” section may appear to be filled with calm and even quiet reflection. However, that section is filled with generations of Black Rage. The impact that the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and the intergenerational abuse, disenfranchisement, murder, torture, and horror that slavery perpetrated enslaved Africans experienced, are manifested in the mental health and the biopsychosocial-spiritual model realities of Blackness.

This model, based in the practices of social work, takes into consideration all of the ways that a body is linked together: biologically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. This approach in mental health and wellness mirrors the

ways in which Intersectionality shows the layers and intricacies of people (Crenshaw, 1989). “It is a terrible place you come to; I’m not sure I can hearten you in any way, Although I would like to. I can only say I have survived- I honestly don’t know how- And you must also survive.” (Grier & Cobbs, 1968, 86)

Grier and Cobbs detail case studies that include the intergenerational impact of slavery and epigenetic trauma in the lives of their Black clients who reported experiences such as hypervigilance, anxiety, dysregulated sex drive or lack thereof, a feeling of isolation, a perpetual sense of rage, and/or a perpetual sense of avoidance. In addition to the realities of imminent disaster and what unresolved and unrecognized trauma does do not only the person, but the impact it has on the descendants of enslaved people of the Black Diaspora. There is a specific way that Black rage is accepted as a condition of being Black by the white public. In the Lift section of the documentary and the biographical narratives shared in this written companion, you will hear about the ways Blackness, power, and presence are accepted in sport, but in the “Protest” section, you’ll see the ways in which Blackness is oftentimes a accepted and celebrated post-mortem. But this documentary is not for the viewing pleasure of white people, it is for the healing of Black people. And while each person was given a chance to yell, scream, and curse, they chose calm, they chose quiet. We are tired. Each of these sections speak to the power to be able to choose, and how it feels

when our choices are taken from us by the chaos of whiteness and anti-Blackness.

Protest- Interview Insight from Black Lives Matter

Tanay Adams

In an attempt to accurately describe myself in this autobiography I am writing well before I believe I have earned the right to the task; I feel it best to use the words from my poem “Please Excuse My Scorpio Moon”.

“These here ain’t shallow waters.

I’ve got soul older than time.

I’ve got love deeper than the seas.

My mind wanders further than this Earth.

My Love, where are you going to hide from me?’

This idea of announcing the absence of shallow waters serves as my “swim at your own risk” sign when it comes to being in relationship with me, and when it concerns my politic in approaching life, love, and people. There is always more going on below the surface than what’s happening above, and that, right there, is what fascinates me as well as what feels more like home.

My name is Tanay M. Adams, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. I was born a Tuesday baby, into a military family, and spent the majority of my years growing up between Germany and South Carolina. With being a Black American

woman; my early socialization into a militaristic and patriotic culture and society never seemed true to me. The songs, protocol, and aversion to questions reminded me of a never ending church service – which I usually found myself feeling lost, unrepresented, and damned in as well. I studied Political Science and International Relations in undergrad, as well as abroad in Winchester, England; focusing on political and religious themes in the Middle East. Though I was studying to become either a humanitarian lawyer or Foreign Service officer; I worked in my university's writing center, and it was there where something truly sparked for me.

As the only Black woman writing tutor in the center, the majority of the students I got to work with were also Black, which allowed me to begin hearing and seeing similar themes. They all expressed stories of teachers belittling their writing styles, language, and chosen topics even when left up to the students' discretion. I'd see heavily red marked papers of Black students expressing their trauma's and white teachers circling it and simply writing "incorrect comma usage". One of my Black woman students came to me because her teacher told her that her writing had no voice, another came to me because she needed to edit the story of her father's death, but wasn't comfortable rereading it that many times by herself, and another just came to me to talk through her essays because sometimes words get jumbled in her head.

Understanding the violent history between Black folks, language and

writing, white folks, and America; hearing these jabs the teachers were taking at Black students lit a fire in me. I loved writing, and it loved me when I didn't think I was anything worthy of loving or listening to, and I've been held by a pen more than I have by hands. As the most constant and cheapest form of therapy I know; I needed to heal this relationship between the Black students I was working with and their own writing. I began working in higher education, and received my master's in higher education administration, because I wanted to cultivate the place where I had, had so revelations. But just like I'd seen a trace of in undergrad, I quickly learned that the institution, just like the federal institution I had spent four years learning, was not built for, does not care for, and will further oppress marginalized folks; yet, we get the fuck up every day, and try creating our own beautiful experiences despite everything... literally everything.

I've now moved on and am currently a contributing writer for the Pedestal Project, an online all Black woman publication where we celebrate Blackness and sisterhood. I do natal chart readings, and I make teas and jewelry because that's me creating my own beautiful experience despite. The love of my life right now is an eight year old Black cat who I am certain has soul older than time, and a lot of my time is now dedicated to deepening my waters; pouring back into myself until I've overfilled cups, buckets, tubs, and oceans. My activism and my resistance is just that; deepening the waters of what we as Black folks understand about ourselves, our experiences, and our power. It is much more than what education

will teach and much more than a government can dictate. So I live, move, and write for the Black folks who have tried splashing in the puddles of mediocrity their entire lives, but simply just couldn't get wet enough.

Creighton Leigh

My name is Creighton Leigh, pronouns she/her/hers. I am a Black, fat, queer woman who was raised in Southwest Philadelphia – a TRUE Philly jawn (please stop gentrifying it). I love the hood, and I love Black people. I was raised in a huge family that took care of each other, so the sense of caring for people and making sure that their needs were met has always been an important part of my identity. Even more importantly, I believe that white people owe us Reparations. Being labeled an activist and organizer is not something that I am always comfortable with. I desire to take care of Black MaGes (Marginalized Genders, especially my LGBTQIA+ family) and Black children. The platform that I have now is not what I had originally intended for my social media presence. I wanted to write and had a few published articles for some well-known publications. I eventually wanted my own platform, so I started a blog. One day, a good friend of mine sent me a Facebook message saying that her son's shoes had been stolen at his daycare, and they were not willing to fess up to who had taken them, or to even replace them. I made a post asking for donations, and I raised enough money to replace not just one pair of shoes, but nine! And that was the start of my

Reparations platform.

I used to be a member of a well-known “Reparations” group on Facebook, but I deeply disliked three aspects of the group: 1) The group did not cater specifically to Black people, 2) recipients of said “Reparations” always had to justify their need and their worth, and 3) the white people in the group weren’t giving cash, but offering various services and oftentimes used items. Black people are OWED reparations and do not have to justify their worthiness to any fucking body. Moreover, we need MONEY and financial resources to buy whatever we need to buy, not hand-me-downs and charity work. This was my inspiration in creating Voix Noire (“Black Voices”) – to get money and supplies directly to Black people.

Initially, Voix Noire focused on getting pallets of bottled water to Black folks in Flint, MI (THEY STILL DON’T HAVE CLEAN WATER!). Then Hurricane Harvey struck the coast of Texas and Louisiana, and I started to place online grocery delivery orders to Black folks in that area. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I couldn’t keep up with all the requests, so I just started to give cash with “Rona Rations”. Out of all of Voix Noire’s initiatives, I am most proud of Rona Rations. It is the only social program that I know of where Black MaGes can get direct cash with immediacy and no red tape. The only requirement for receiving aid from Voix Noire is that the ask be for Black MaGes or Black children. I don’t care or need to know what the funds are for. We can buy our own

groceries and take care of our own needs. We are stripped of our dignity daily and I want to give that back to us in whatever way I can.

Alex Kimball Williams

Hi, my name is Alex Kimball Williams. I use she/her or they/them pronouns, & I'm currently 30 years old. I was born at Lawrence Memorial Hospital in Lawrence, Kansas, as were my parents. I've lived in Lawrence, Kansas most of my life, with short departures in Topeka, Kansas & Asheville, North Carolina. I'm grateful to my ancestors whose lives & decisions led to my life here in Kansas. I'm Black, Aleut Alaskan Native, Portuguese, Italian, Hungarian Roma- a little German & French. My Black family descends from enslaved people on the Kimball plantation likely in Mississippi. My great-great-grandfather George Kimball travelled to Weaver, Kansas nearby & eventually we began living in Lawrence. My Alaskan grandmother came to Lawrence, Kansas from King Cove in the Pribilof Islands (Alaska) to complete her nursing degree at Haskell. She moved back when my dad turned 11, left him here with my grandfather.

She had a hard upbringing involving violence & squalor. My mother's family immigrated & continues immigrating from Portugal & Italy. Many bounce back & forth & do not make a permanent residence. There are several wanderers in my family. I've been lucky to meet many great-grandparents & lost my last

great-grandparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (non- COVID death).

I take pride in understanding my family histories, as well as learning their languages, music, recipes, & stories. I consider myself multicultural in addition to being multiracial. I've been the most avid researcher among those in my family, looking into ancestry particularly. I'm interested in how cracks & closures develop in families. Who beat whom, who loved whom, who abandoned their child, who was forced into child marriage, who lost their parents at a young age, who moved away & "lost contact", who poured themselves into their children, who takes care of the elders, who was enabled in their destructive behaviors, who was silenced, & who doesn't say much. These kinds of questions let you see how the world works just by understanding a part of it.

I would say I'm a scientist & artist. It's important to me to see things logically then work my way through others' feelings. Anything that's solely about me is dealt with logically (& artistically), but other people come with feelings. The vibe I've gotten from the world is that I don't belong, that I'm wicked & dirty. The worst time of my life was between the ages of 8-18. I had an evil stepmother (those are real) who physically harmed me, emotionally abused me, socially isolated me, interfered with my grades & goals, & at her discretion she could prevent me from having access to running water, electricity, food, technology, or social contact. This part of my childhood was characterized by terror, threats, indecent exposure, beatings, police, & a deep- seated sadness.

Sprinkled throughout I had good times, but it's hard to really say if those made any kind of dent. I got through it because I knew when I was 18 I could be free & I was. I have spent time processing this period of my life, often I'm moved to days or weeks of stillness. I'm so grateful to be out from that spell & free to talk to friends, live free of (some) fear, drive a car, have a job, walk outside, all the things I was denied before. Through this experience, I've come to appreciate that each day is new, my decisions are mine. Each day can't be happy, but I strive for joy, usefulness & good work each day. You don't get these days, any of them, back. It's critical to enjoy what you've got, whatever that is.

Family, deep thought, logic, hardship, & gratitude are what make me me.

On paper, I have a B.S. of Environmental Science, M.A. of Indigenous Studies, & work within health equity & social justice.

Lift: Creating Sustainable Spaces of Power

The lift section of the film shows personal reclamation of power by experiencing Blackness as hope, presence, and greatness while envisioning a freedom never meant for us that is claimed through creating and sustaining a community that is inclusive, consistent, and actualized. In conjunction with how Black rage brings about the constant and versatile reality of rage as a people, the "Lift" section suggests the importance of softness, of vulnerability, and of connectivity's ritual that can foster personal liberation. Disrupting the tropes of

brute, buck, and Black spectacle, this section walks us through the ways in which reclamation looks like direct action against the people who make war against our bodies. This section calls for those at the forefront to shelter those left behind.

Reclaiming Lifting As Revolutionary Power

Unapologetic Blackness, and the pursuit of greatness in athletics is highlighted in the “Lift” section of the documentary by each speaking about the ways they excel despite specifically harmful and apparent instances of anti-Blackness within their realm of participation.

The lift section, in word and in the act of lifting serves to explore the impact of Black bodies in motion, and how survival isn't good enough. In the documentary, Black Rage is discussed within the realm of powerlifting, with the reclamation being that of presence and excellence (Grier & Cobbs, 1968). Dunn speaks to the realities of entering into his first meet and someone announcing that “it just got a lot darker.” More than that, they say that you cannot ignore greatness, and in turn, their Black greatness. Their performances and their execution speaks for itself, and then they're also gonna talk shit. And while that is motivating or at least it pisses Black people off enough to train and be better than white people, because all white people benefit from systems of white supremacy and anti-Blackness, it is also incredibly painful, because those memories and trauma imbed themselves in our forever memory and DNA (DeGruy, 2005).

The reclamation is this: Existing is not merely enough. Gathering from the ways that Black Brunch cultivated community, the ways that protesting helped to divest in the reliance on marginalized genders and invested back in the teaching of Black feminism, strength sports have a call to action that encompasses all. From the ways in which Trans athletes are sequestered to small, individual, and often obscure federations, to the way that Blackness is either fetishized or forgotten completely, powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting are not doing enough. There is work to be done. There is a ship, there is a wake, and there are spaces for reclamation and healing that aren't unseen, they aren't pursued because of the way they will impact those with the ability to do the work. This section disavows the current way as equitable, and I claim this space as a work in progress. If Blackness matters, Black Trans lives matter. If Blackness matters, Black marginalized genders matter (Moore, 2018). If the Black feminist men, including myself, don't like the way that racism impacts us in the sport, then we are also to inspect and engage with the dismantling of the ways that patriarchy and transphobia impact strength sports (Hooks, 2004). We are to tell the truth even if the truth costs us something. Because the power and privilege in being able to tell the truth will help to liberate those who lack the power and ability to speak their truth to power (Laymon, 2018).

This section utilizes Trauma-informed care, layout the ways of transgression, love, and intentionality, and create a clear picture of engaged

pedagogy, all the while viewed through analytic lens of intersectionality and Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (Crenshaw, 1989) (DeGruy, 2005). Through the reclamations of the space, language, and engagement with the atmosphere of creation and intentionality, this documentary paints a picture of all the ways that should no longer be an issue of will, but of accessibility and practice. Strength sports lack the inclusion of Queer, Trans, and gender non-conforming narratives and lifelines. These individuals interviewed, however, outline the ways they fall short, the needs that are apparent, and the willingness to change. And these things, the willingness to empower freedom through transgression are good moves; these the moves that ain't weak (hooks, 2004). To move in such a way that is calculated and intentional is to be Black in predominantly white spaces.

Building off of the way Black people educate through movement, ritual, and song, one of the ways that blackness moves in particular is through spoken word poetry. Spoken word is an essential part of resistance, because, like music, it serves as a way of expression that can both burn and heal. Like protest, like lifting, and like eating, the shared narrative is a major part of the healing. Black resistance, rage, fire, pain, truth, healing, the search and searing drive towards justice are also the things that drive his truth forward.

Anti-Blackness seeps into every crevice of many Black people's lives and it has been my calling to reimagine healing by creating and uplifting the unique and sacred space of Blackness, and the life and living that Blackness has always

deserved, but seldom received. Reclamation looks like healing, hope, the celebration of Blackness, skin, body, the journey towards self, the rage and admittance of hurt by others, and what all that means in the grand scheme of things, as Black bodies move, learn, survive, and grow in this world (Sulaiman, 2014; Chisala, 2020; Davis, 2012).

The “Lift” section of the film is about how Black bodies of all gender identities, navigate through the spaces in which they excel. The realities of Blackness as unwelcomed, uninvited, yet dominant begs the question of how do we maintain our wholeness while not recreating the systems of oppression that crush Black people in our everyday lives: homophobia, patriarchy, and transphobia. In particular, as powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting are majority individuals who identify as men, the “real world” and these areas of focus recreate systemic oppression; powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting are complicit in the oppression of marginalized genders. I created this section to delve into what strength meant to three individuals who are excellent in their sports. For the first Black humans who excel at powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting respectively, the questions asked and answered were questions of what strength meant, how anti- Blackness shows up in their sports, and how their Black excellence impacts other Black bodies in their sports. Those questions were important because Blackness has a target on its back and anti- Blackness is the climate, regardless of what the temperature feels like. It’s always there, and it’s always intent on

annihilation. (Sharpe, 2016) In the same spirit, bell hooks writes:

To write about men and love, I must speak of war. Time and time again we have been told that civilization cannot survive men's loving, for if men love, they will not be able to kill on command. However, if men were natural-born killers, hardwired by biology and destiny to take life, then there would be no need to patriarchal socialization to turn them into killers. The warrior's way wounds boys and men; it has been the arrow shot through the heart of their humanity. The warrior's way has led men in the direction of an impoverishment of spirit so profound that it threatens all life on planet Earth. (169)

Hooks writes about war to reclaim peace, and in this same way, this “Lift” section seeks to begin the integral journey towards peace in sports that look like war. In communities that look like. In bodies that have been labeled as war.

Concluding the “Lift” section, the last two questions of the interview tie together truth telling (Laymon, 2018) and the importance of the stories of those unable to share or the stories that need to be unearthed (Moore, 2018), and utilizes the Black feminist lens of hooks (2004) to ask about who’s not included, who isn’t showing up, and who has been buried. The questions implicates the realities of Black men in the struggle against everything, and how that impacts the realities of other marginalized genders, Black and otherwise. The questions were as

follows: “What are some ways in which you are able to work for better relationships across gender identities and realities while participating in your sport and using your platform?” and “How do strength sports and combating the realities of patriarchy, in particular the “will to dominate” as hooks talks about, interact?” For Jackie, as they identify as a woman, their question was geared towards the critique of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia within powerlifting, their sport, and how that has impacted them.

“Most groups of men I knew were good at destroying women and girls who would do everything not to destroy them” (Laymon, 2018). The quote speaks to the realities of how male-dominated sports assume the destructive and alienating role that patriarchy, misogyny, and misogynoir cultivate, with the added layers of class, ability, and race. In the responses by Jackie we see the ways in which reclamation lives for Black marginalized genders. Not that it is the role of marginalized genders to do the work, but there is something about the way hope transcends the trifling aspects of men. It’s also a call to action for the men in these spaces to step the fuck up. Respectfully.

The results were a call to ongoing action, and for the prolific men that I interviewed, me, and other men in and outside of strength sports to hold ourselves accountable for the impact of our actions and lack of action. “Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community.” (hooks, 1994, 8)

Powerlifting and Olympic weightlifting are very much communal spaces and spaces that are declared open, welcoming, and sometimes even progressive. However, patriarchy has a hold over men, that it's fear that keeps men from breaking the chains of patriarchy. hooks writes that "It is not true that men are unwilling to change. It is true that many men are afraid to change. It is true that masses of men have not even begun to look at the ways that patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving" (hooks, 2004, xvii).

This call to action is intersectional in that it is beneficial for all parties, but it is also a way to do the least amount of harm to those around you. In this case, it's Black folkx, and specifically marginalized genders within strength sports. In creating and cultivating spaces where truth telling can occur, what we are welcoming is challenge as well as growth (Laymon, 2018). Healing comes through growth. These aforementioned spaces must become sites of actualized communal learning, so that when the people who are experiencing things and who possess the energy and willingness to share their truth. The willingness to let go, as hooks says, of the need to dominate, a learned behavior, and to lean into existing together in an empowered and whole reality.

Interviewee Insight: Lift. Reclaiming Lifting As Revolutionary Power

Tyreé Dunn

Hello, my name is Tyreé L Dunn, and I am a 32-year-old BLACK man. People just call me Ty, mostly because I do not put my government name on the internet. My pronouns are “He’ and “Him”. I interviewed for the Powerlifting section and it really challenged me. Even though I have inserted myself into a white space and have noticed sometimes I am not welcomed with open arms, I have never given it as much thought as I have answering these questions. Being black in America is very difficult and it is even more difficult when you “invade” the subcultures of white America as well. That goes well past powerlifting and into neighborhoods, bars, jobs etc... You are stared at; side conversations are had about you and you will leave with a sour taste in your mouth. However, if it is truly something you want to be a part of, then FUCKING do it. The truth is you will never be truly accepted by everyone, so might as well make so a ruckus while you are here.

I grew up in a small town in southeast Ohio, by the name of Steubenville. I was raised by a single mother and grew up with two brothers, me being the middle-child, which probably explains my personality to this day. My mother fought tooth and nail to provide us with everything we could need. We struggled at times and I think that is why I chose the career path I am on today. I played

three sports growing up and did very well in all three. Even got the opportunity to continue with one of them into college. Which looking back, is the only reason I even attended college. Which I appreciate because it helped me obtain a degree and get out of my hometown. I attended Ohio Dominican University in Columbus, Ohio. From its name, you can probably guess it was a religious based school, but NOTHING about what we did on campus was by the bible. I graduated college with a degree in criminal justice and psychology.

After college I helped run a community corrections facility for five years. After the first year I hated that place so much, but I was “comfortable”, and I do not like interviewing for new jobs. After five years I was just tired, stressed and felt as though I was not helping anyone as previously thought I would. So, at 3am on January 5th I quit and never looked back. Took three months off work and that was amazing for my mental health. That was about the time I got serious into powerlifting and began to make a name for myself.

I was new to the sport, but I was good at it. My first powerlifting meet I totaled 1800 pounds and “beat” everyone. It was also the first time I dealt with racism in the sport. That is all talked about in the interview I did with Caleb (so watch that). Even with that major roadblock, I did not let it deter me from moving forward. Since then, I have placed 1st in every meet, but two and even won a world championship. Which is cool. Since Covid has hit, I have not stepped foot on a platform, but plan to very soon. It is an itch that needs to be scratched.

Since leaving my corrections job, I spent a year working for children's services. That opened my eyes to a whole new world that I "knew" about but had no idea how sad and stressful it was. That lasted a year and then I up and decided I was moving to Wisconsin (I do not fucking know why) and took up a job helping families get safe and stable housing. I have been here for going on three years and this honestly feels like where I am supposed to be right now. The joy I get and the happiness in the voices and smiles on faces, when a family gets housing is a good feeling. Being able to bring a family from the streets into their own space. This is not what I am going to be doing forever, I have so much more to do and so many more lives to impact. Like I said, for now this feels like where I should be.

While here on this earth, I would like to just leave a positive impact on the people around me. No one is going to remember the sports I played, the amount of weight I lifted, but they will remember how good I made them feel. For me, that is a pretty good ending.

Jalen Shabazz

My name is Jalen Shabazz and I am 28 years old. I was born in Texas, raised all over the world, and I currently live in the state of Washington where I work as a personal trainer full time. I was interviewed for the Weightlifting

section and shared my experiences as a black man in strength sports. My experiences have been shaped by my childhood as the grandchild of a member of the Black Panther Party and the son of a former member of the Nation Of Islam. I have always been very aware of my race and how I could possibly be treated differently than some others in this world. I was never raised to see myself as a victim, on the contrary my dad made sure I looked in the mirror and said I was a strong black man daily. The fact that I was made to do that let me know that there were many others in the world that would try to change my views of myself. I grew up as a military child surrounded by all sorts of races and ethnicities and my parents told me to never treat anybody as any less than a human being and to treat them how I wanted to be treated and I think growing up in such a diverse setting helped me understand how hate and biases work. I still remember kids saying things like the N word to me or my friends, but they literally had no concept of what that word meant. One time my friend called me that word and I told my dad and he confronted my friends parents and they said he must have learned it from the rapper Eminem. As I grew older I realized that racism and bigotry was not some innate thing and kids have no idea what it is, they just repeat things their parents and other adults say. They realize that we have differences naturally of course, because its easy to see that our skin isn't the same, but they don't care. They have to be taught to care or to hate or anything else. I also had a roommate in college from Alabama who told me I was the first black person he had ever

talked to, and that he was surprised I didn't act like or say stuff that his parents told him all black people did. That further drove home my thoughts and feelings on this subject. Keeping this in mind, all I do in life is educate when I can, and realize that ignorance can explain more than maliciousness can. I give people the benefit of the doubt and will engage in discussions if the participants are civil and I also seek to understand their point of view. I'm unapologetically black and I won't change my behavior or thoughts to make anyone comfortable, but I will try to understand why they are uncomfortable with it and what can be done in the future to try to nullify that and make this world a better place. If I can improve myself and the world even just a little bit every day then I am happy. I'm currently creating and distributing videos and podcast episodes on YouTube and Spotify to talk about my life experiences and other people that I know in order to educate them and give them another point of view that they might not have otherwise gotten.

Jackie Sims

Jacquelynn was born in Kansas City but credits being raised between Kansas City and Miami, Florida. She grew up in a God-fearing home with pretty dope parents and two biological siblings. She chose to carry on her own life as a God-fearing woman, no matter how imperfect she may be. In being an academic

and Christ-follower, she's encountered arguments of sexism, racism, classism, and intellectualism against the Bible, and is currently juxtaposing the fallacies of secular Christianity, Christian liberalism, against mental health in the black community and what it means for the effectiveness of the Gospel of Christ. She welcomes critical thought conversation about how all of these intersections are not only legitimate, but much needed intersections to discourse and understand. In 2017, she wrote and taught Seminary writing intensive courses opening the conversation with local pastors and laymen about these intersections and how they can take action to ensure the purpose of the Gospel is served.

The household that fostered that kind of critical thinker also fostered one that bred athletes. Good ones. She excelled in a number of sports since she was old enough to participate, including volleyball, soccer, golf, and basketball. But in high school, her desire to be in the weight room was detoured or discouraged by lazy teammates, sexist gym coaches, uninformed women, and undesired men. Her first bench max-out was in a high school conditioning class, at 100 pounds. The coach didn't have kind, encouraging, coaching words to offer, so she ate them as a challenge. In college, she decided that the weight room would be her poison of choice. She hasn't left it since.

When bodybuilding training began in 2012, it was initially to simply lose some weight before graduation. This turned into losing nearly 60 pounds over the next four years and being the leanest she'd ever been as an adult. Even though she

started out lifting alone, she was taken in by a group of lifting partners that helped her push her limits further, showing her what they already knew: lifting heavy came pretty naturally to her. The anaerobic style of bodybuilding coupled with the heavy pulls of powerlifting morphed her lifting style to power building, and her results were proof that she was exactly where she needed - and wanted - to be. The weight room proved itself to be no respecter of persons, no matter what race, religion, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and the level ground they provided made lifting that much more fun.

But after enjoying many rewarding years of bodybuilding - and an attempt at hitting the competition stage - she'd collected enough scars, injuries, war stories, and general lethargy to jump ship to powerlifting in fall 2018. Since then, she's competed in five meets and become one of the heaviest active female lifters in the state of Missouri. In the USPA Women's Superheavyweight /90kg+ class, she currently holds the state record for squat (419) and bench press (281), and trades deadlift records with a friend who currently holds the record at 507, breaking her record of 501. Her current recorded total is 1185. She is a member of Strong Barbell Club in North Kansas City, Missouri.

She dedicates all of her record-breaking lifts to every coach that never gave her the time of day. Turns out she didn't need it.

Conclusion

Because I Needed to Survive

What impact does this documentary have and why does it matter that I did this? Healing is paramount for living and survival of trauma. What we know as a society is that we are at a point where everything can be sought and found through the internet. Trauma can be found, identified, critiqued, and validated. But healing. Healing is not something that is accessible. Not readily accessible. Not sustainable. Healing is not this miraculous thing that we earn. The kind of healing that Black people are searching for must be pursued and cultivated. We aren't looking for God to swoop down and heal us after five hundred years of forgetting us, nor are we looking for white supremacy to finally realize it's wrong and give us our communities and legacies back. Nor are we expecting white people to suddenly realize they owe us reparations. No, well, yes. We are demanding Reparations but that is another project. What I am saying is that this is important because we know what it takes to heal our communities, our bodies, and our spaces. We know what we thrive on. We know what we want. We are gaslighted every day and yet we still know how to laugh, how to create joy, and how to take up space, when given the opportunity or when we see an opening.

Truth telling opens the door for people who didn't want to be the first one. We should never have to fight for our own liberation. Yet here we are, fighting; here I am fighting for Black people to realize their right to heal themselves and

one another. This entire project, from the beginning, when I walked into my doctorate program mad as hell, to now, has been a journey in surviving.

Predominantly white universities are not built for us. This is apparent. All of the diversity programming in the world can't fix venomous programs that only seek to include us, not accept us in our wholeness for who we are. Why is this project important? It's important because it helps to create an outline, a journey, and a narrative of the reimagined healing and reclamation of Black bodies in motion, in space, and in stillness as spaces of ritualistic and intentionally communal healing. We are despite the venom. Despite the pain. Despite the suffering. Despite the trauma. We will heal. We will be whole. We have to be.

As Black people, we see the struggle, we see the pain, and we watch trauma weave into our framework on a daily basis. This is the story this documentary tells. This is the journey I have been telling each day I have been in my doctoral program in Theatre & Dance studies. My work in this program has been to examine social activism as performance. Over the years of creating my research platform, I have navigated all types of trauma. This "wake work," me swimming to survive in the wake of anti-Blackness that represents itself daily like huge waves in the ocean meant to drown me, produced anger and disenchantment. My anger comes from the urgency of the protection I was never afforded. That we, as Black people, are never allowed. I had no expectation of protection, respect or capacity. I had to wade through the work alone save the support of a few allies

and one Black professor who saw me. I had to learn under the threat of pre-mature death in acts of survival as I watched my peers be lauded, never questioned, always supported, funded and lifted. Interestingly enough, you hear these same traumas in each interview in this documentary and these biographical statements that accompany it. There was neither care nor concern regarding access to my own healing. This project is dedicated to the realities and healing of my work, my healing, and my body, and the space it needed to be safe within a program and a climate that privileges work that systematically ignored my contributions and humanity. Living in the wake is scary. But we must not be afraid. We must imagine and curate healing spaces. The voices of those who weren't allotted this space echo. And they sound like this:

We are the alive. The dead. Lovers. Fighters. Movement builders. Cultural producers. We are the everyday, ordinary magicians who learn to create life amid death-dealing cultures of hatred and lies. We maroon ourselves. And we birth freedom, but many of us are still denied our rightful place in the master narratives of Black history and American life. Even in these progressive, Afro-futuristic-oriented times, our life stories and contributions are still refused. And that is why we must tell as many of our stories as we can. *No Ashes in the Fire* is mine (Moore, 2018,11).

Eat. Protest. Lift is about the different ways that I have created spaces of

healing because I would have died if I had not.

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