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# “DREAMS/MYTHS/HISTORIES: ENVISIONING MORE LIVABLE WORLD”

A Transcription from the 2017 Queer  
Graduate Conference Keynote featuring  
CeCe McDonald and C. Riley Snorton

In 2017, UCLA LGBTQ Studies celebrated its 20th anniversary. In commemoration of the anniversary, the Queer Grad Conference organizers invited Dr. C. Riley Snorton and CeCe McDonald as duokenote speakers. Their work and activism spoke to the theme of the conference, “Radical Imaginaries: Scholar-Activism Dismantling the Politics of Hate.” Below you will find the edited transcripts of the conversation between McDonald and Dr. Snorton along with commentary by Dr. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, current Chair of the LGBTQ Studies Program and former chair of the UCLA César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies (2007-2010).

**Gaspar De Alba:** Okay, so I’ll be moderating our panel with the keynote. And I’d like to do something a little bit different. We’re gonna be in conversation with each other. So, I’m gonna actually read their bio and then you know, turn it over to them. And afterward, we can have a conversation with them and the rest of the room. Alright. So, we’re gonna start with CeCe McDonald, a Minneapolis based abolitionist and trans rights activist. She spent 19 months in a men’s prison for defending herself against a racist and physical attack that occurred near her home in 2011. Both local and national youth and activists rallied around McDonald bringing national attention to violence against trans-women of color and the particular institutional violence posed by gender segregated incarceration. The story resonated with actress Laverne Cox who has been outspoken on issues of violence against trans people and in 2016, she produced and released *FREE Cece* a partially crowdfunded

documentary directed by Jac Gares. The film follows McDonald over a period of three years from her incarceration in 2012 through her release and the aftermath [*interruption*] Okay, followed McDonald over a period of three years through incarceration in 2012 to her release and the aftermath in 2014–2015, including an interview with Cox in jail and a continuing advocacy for trans people. McDonald delivered a powerful critique of the prison industrial complex in conversation with Melissa Harris-Perry following her release. And later that year was awarded the Bayard Rustin Civil Rights Award by the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club. Following this award, McDonald teamed up with fellow prison abolitionist Joshua Allen from their Black Excellence tour and she continues to travel speaking against prisons and breaking borders around violence against trans-women of color.

[*Applause*]

**Cece:** Thank you.

**Gaspar De Alba:** She will be speaking with C. Riley Snorton who is, lucky for us, Visiting Associate Professor of American Studies and is visiting at USC this year (2017–2018). We don't hold it against you . . .

**C. Riley:** Okay, I'm glad. [*Laughter*]

**Gaspar De Alba:** Snorton's research and teaching expertise include cultural theory, queer and transgender theory and history, Africana studies, performance studies, and popular culture. He's published articles in numerous academic journals and his first book *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*, published by University of Minnesota Press in 2014, traces the emergence and circulation of the down low in news and popular culture. His second book, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* will be out next month.

[*Applause*]

**C. Riley:** So, I wanted to thank the organizers and profoundly thank CeCe for being here with me in conversation. We organized our talk today as a series of questions that we wanted to ask each other. And, the title of this keynote duet is Dreams/Myths/History which is drawn from the preface of Audre Lorde's *Zami*. So, we'll start with a question that's really about catching up—CeCe and I haven't been able to see each other in a while: so, how's everything and what are you up to right now?

**CeCe:** Yeah. I have been for the last couple of months been doing some organizing work, trying to figure out actually . . . you know figure out these solutions that we talk about when we think of like abolition work and really trying to build a coalition of like people to join this project and figure out what that will look like as a team with no levels of hierarchy, just as a unity. You know, moving as one. And that's kind of hard, because sometimes, you know egos and things can get in the way, that can be unfortunate at times, but you know, with you know, with somebody like me, I'm just like zero tolerance of people's bullshit. You know, like zero. So, you know, I'm always, you know, being called out for being a bitch, for being a boss, you know what I'm saying or for recognizing when something is wrong. Or you know, calling people out and you know, and that's important with organizing work. I don't think a lot of people feel like they have that in them to, you know, be you know, firm and fierce in the sense of figuring out what justice looks like fairly for everybody.

**C. Riley:** So beautiful.

**CeCe:** Yeah. So a lot of organizing work—I'm doing a *Black Excellence* tour with my best friend Joshua Allen.

**C. Riley:** Nice.

**CeCe:** Yass! And we are facilitating workshops and keynotes talking about our intersectional lives and what it is to be Black and trans and queer and gender nonconforming in a society that's hella biased, hella gendered, and doesn't, you know, allow for people to exist in a grey area in a world that's constantly telling you that everything is so black and white. And we all know that that is false. That not even that it's grey, but it's colorful as fuck, you know what I'm saying. Like there is so much in between black and white, you know, for people in society to think that everything is so, you know, minuscule in such a way, you know. I'm trying to just be the best me possible. I think that a lot of people misconstrue my life and really think that I'm a celebrity and I have to tell people all the time that is not my life, you know. Unfortunately, you know, being Black and trans is still a thing, you know what I'm saying. And I think people have latched onto this idea of seeing, you know, or thinking that you know, all trans people are successful because they see trans people in the media and there are so many of us on, you know,

in the background who are still struggling, dealing with homelessness, dealing with having no work and you know, that's a real problem in with trans womyn of color. And so, I'm just really trying to like survive and thrive and you know, get my coins and eat some food [*chuckle*], you know, pay my rent.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** And that's important. So, you know, I'm just out here struggling and it's really hard when you are a abolitionist and you do abolitionist organizing, because a lot of people don't want to fund radicalness. You know, like a lot of people like that mainstream, mainline liberal bullshit that you know, that really doesn't solve an issue. It just gives a façade that you know, things are working and we obviously see that it's false. We have a literal terrorist in the White House. No, he is! I don't think people really grasp how dangerous this person is right. Right now it's the little things like your healthcare, the rights to your body, where you live, and then it's gonna get bigger. So, you know, I'm also hella fucking militant, so I'm trying to start an army. [*Laughter*]

[*audience laughter*]

**C. Riley:** Yass! Let's talk.

**CeCe:** One of my idols is Octavia Butler and to think of like all of, you know, like black futurism, like I always envision myself as like this leader in a like *Hunger Games*-style world, which is not farfetched or implausible. Again, you know, with somebody that's like trying to strip away, you know, people's rights to food and accessible food and healthy food, we will be at one point stabbing each other for loaves of bread. So, prepare for that. [*Chuckle*] Y'all didn't like that one, y'all was like oh that went real dark.

**C. Riley:** It went really real.

**CeCe:** Oh my gosh, they was like, no, not, not that serious. But, yeah, I'm just out here, you know, being me. Living my authentic life, being a bad-ass organizer. You know, Black, beautiful, diva, goddess. You know, breaking rules and just deconstructing these institutions of oppression.

**C. Riley:** Alright, well we're done. No?

[*audience laughter*]

**Both:** [Laughter]

**CeCe:** But yes, you know, I haven't really been on the activism scene for too long and it's really surprising that I even have to remind myself like, "girl you know, you only been out of prison for three years. You know, like it hasn't even been, well it'll be four years in January. And to think how I just jumped into this activism work. Is that the case with you, did you just like get into activism work or was it something that you—like for me, I had to come to my awakenings, you know. Like I wasn't always, you know, blessed. And I can say that even as a Black trans-woman that I lived in my own bigotries, that I lived in my own internalized racism and things like that. And having to challenge that. But you know, some people have parents who are woke, you know, what I'm saying, and give them the knowledge unfortunate for not so many of us. But, what?

**C. Riley:** I mean, so I was politicized from childhood. I was actually raised on a Black separatist subsistence farm. So, yeah, the parents that are woke.

**CeCe:** Yes. Right.

**C. Riley:** And in terms of developing my own political sensibilities and commitments, I feel like so much of it has to do with the series of events that happened while I was in college,—I was in college in New York when 9/11 happened. I watched the xenophobic response on the ground. Watched the ramp up to the war. Was also coming to understand myself as trans at that time and so it was a lot of urgency around putting my body on the line, while also understanding my body is changing around me.

Before I ended up going to grad school, I was doing nonprofit work—I was working at Gay, Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network. It wasn't the path that I felt like I could take to be able to hone my voice in the, I guess, in the direction of justice. And so, I ended up going into graduate school. And you know, what I'm up to right now, actually is I have a book that's coming out next month that's actually also published on Minnesota Press.

**CeCe:** Come through.

**C. Riley:** CeCe's from Minneapolis so we were talking a little bit about that earlier. Some of *Black on Both Sides* was written at the Schomburg

Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, but a lot of it was written in Ithaca, New York. And I was feeling really disconnected from Black trans community there. And it became a kind of grounding practice for me to be in archives with Black trans people who have given us so many lessons on how to survive, who were dreaming things that we can still continue to dream with them. And so, the of impetus of the book for me was about reviving and then also inventing strategies for survival and oh, you're in the book. So, yeah.

**CeCe:** [*Chuckle*] Thank you. Oh my god.

**C. Riley:** [*Chuckle*]

**CeCe:** Yes. That's amazing. I didn't know.

**C. Riley:** You want me to?

**CeCe:** Yeah.

**C. Riley:** Okay, so the love note will continue, because my next question comes out of the fact Kai Green and Treva Ellison Matt Richardson, and I recentlu coedited a special issue on Blackness for *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, in which your letters were published. It was such an honor to be able to publish your letters from prison. And you know, and as the introductory note by Omise;eke Natasha Tinsley suggests, we have to regard your writing as part of the Black Radical Tradition alongside folks like Angela Davis. If you could bring us into the moment of what was inspiring you around your letter writing practice, how you feel about them as they circulate in the world now? Are there things that have surprised you about people's reactions or resonances or stories that people brought back to you?

**CeCe:** Yeah. I mean, at the beginning, so when I first had gotten incarcerated and you know, one being a person who has struggled with the acknowledgement of my mental illnesses right. So, when I was immediately put into solitary confinement, I was faced with it head on, like instantly. And actually the first letter that I wrote was a letter, excuse me, that I had wrote to the Star Tribune, which is the newspaper of Minnesota and in that letter, I had said that I wasn't the person who had stabbed Dean, which then became evidence in my case. And that had deterred me for a minute, because I was in denial about a lot of things, right. And so, when I was put into solitary confinement and after writing

that letter, people started to write me. Nobody knew about this letter. Nobody ever, I don't even know, if they ever even published the letter, but someone the State knew about it. So, I'm assuming that they either contacted them or they knew in some way or maybe Star Tribune did, you know, publish the letter. I wouldn't know. I wasn't really like, had access to news or media, because when you're in solitary confinement, you're literally only out your room one hour a day. So, you don't get access to TV. You don't get access to the news that's happening around you. So, if it was printed or you know, I wouldn't know. But anyways, people began to write me. And started to tell me like, how much they saw strength in me and how much they saw leadership in me and how much they saw all of these different qualities in me. And I wasn't really seeing them myself. I was really confused as to like why people were supporting a Black trans-woman who just murdered a White man, you know. How are, you know, that was the headline. That was my life. That was every headline, you know. The Black trans-woman that murdered the White man. And so, I couldn't find pride in that. I couldn't find my strength in that. I was literally beating myself up for surviving, because of what I felt and how I grew up and my ideas about human life and the ways in which I valued human life. And the way that I just value people in just the world and all of that. Like I was literally that kid—now mind you, I grew up in the hood and like, if you grew up in the hood, you know about roaches, you know what I'm saying. I used to get in trouble for not killing roaches. I felt like that wasn't my job, you know, what I'm saying.

**C. Riley:** I hear you.

**CeCe:** Like they're minding their business. You know, when you get older you do realize that they have germs and all these other things, but you know, as a kid, I'm like you know, I was really fascinated with you know, life. And so, you know, I used to go outside and feed the ants in front of the house little pieces of candy and stuff like that. So, I was very like, the person who appreciated and adored and acknowledged and respected life, all life, human life, insect life, whatever, doesn't matter. So, to have to now be faced with you know, you killed someone was really hard, you know. That's like something really hard to digest at the end of the day. It still is for me. And, to see these letters, you know, from people saying that you know, it was nothing wrong with defending yourself. It's



nothing wrong with seeing value and worth in yourself and in your life and protecting yourself. And, then at that time, the Trayvon Martin case happened and two other significant cases happened literally all in 2011. So, it was mines. It was Trayvon Martin's. It was Marissa Alexander's. And it was Ky Peterson's.

**C. Riley:** Yeah.

**CeCe:** Is anybody familiar with Ky Peterson. So, Ky Peterson is a Black trans-man based out of Georgia who is now incarcerated for defending them self during an act of rape.

**C. Riley:** That's right.

**CeCe:** You know, the person died. But, the way that the system had demonized Ky and criminalized him in such a way was disgusting. Even going as far as saying that it actually wasn't a rape, it was robbery gone wrong. And so, the ways in which those things affected me. Also, at that time, I was in contact with folks from Virginia who were working on the case with a Black trans-woman that went missing there and still is missing. And Charlottesville Police Department did nothing to aid the family, but I believe there was like a really high profile case of a White woman that went missing from the University of Virginia. And they literally sent out the troops, you know. So, as I'm receiving these letters now, keep that all of this in mind, as I'm receiving those letters and these significant events were happening around me, while I was incarcerated. Now people are sending me reading materials. Now I'm reading *The New Jim Crow*. Now, I'm reading *Are Prisons Obsolete?*.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** I'm reading Audre Lorde. I'm reading Leslie Feinberg. You know what I'm saying? I'm reading about my transcestory. I'm reading my legacies. I'm reading about my black history, you know. The ways in which trans and queer people weren't highlighted in the Black Panther Party, but definitely were there, you know. The history that was there and never taught to me, I was now receiving that.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** And that kind of like ignited something, you know. Cause now, I'm getting . . . now I'm getting irritated and upset, you know.

**C. Riley:** Yas!

**CeCe:** I'm in prison reading about the prison industrial complex, so of course, you know, that really just kind of ticked me off. Like oh, so I'm really just a money bag scheme to these muthafuckers. You know what I'm saying. And so, that and people started to give me money. So, I bought me a TV, you know. But, I would literally just watch MSNBC and so, like now I'm being politicized in such a way where I wasn't really into politics or even really knew how politics worked. Because I really didn't care for that growing up. I'm like okay a bunch of White people talking, okay, not my cup of tea. No pun intended. But, [*chuckle*], but knowing that the personal is political, I had to invest some of my time in knowing who are these fools deciding what happens to my life. You know what I'm saying? And that's how everybody should wake up in their everyday lives. How are these fools deciding my life? And you know, I've always . . . so, in context I'm a rewind, you know, to when I was a youth and my mom, you know, really didn't believe in whooping us, you know what I'm saying. Which most parents don't beat your kids, like that doesn't solve anything. So, instead of beating us, my mom told us that we couldn't watch TV and we had to read books. Now, I was a Scholastic freak, like I literally had every Scholastic book, you can think of. *Goosebumps*, *Babysitter's Club*, anything, any and every book I had.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** I literally gambled to win money—y'all remember going to school and you can order your books in the little Schola—yes, I had every book. Cause I was a bad kid, so I was like I might as well stock up now. [*Laughter*] So, you know, I had lots of books. And, I feel like I am an envisionist. I feel like I am an empath and I feel like a lot of us are, but we don't tap into that. And the funny thing is, and I don't tell people this a lot, but I'm dyslexic, so I had a really time reading. It was frustrating for me. It still is to this day. You know, mixing up letters and shit, it really, you know, threw me off. But those words would like jump off the page and like take me to different places and I felt like it was real, you know. And so, you know, literature and reading and writing was just a part of my growing up. I think that was probably one of the best things I was good at in school was you know literature. And so, I guess that kind of came out during that time. You know, being frustrated, seeing everything that

was happening around me, being politicized, being radicalized, coming through, you know, coming to my awakenings, going through this journey. It was like, how am I not documenting this, you know, in some way.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** And I just started to write and I just, you know, whether it be responding to some of the letters or I was communicating with a lot of other prisoners. So, I would write them. A lot of people, you know, through the, you know, amazing work of the CeCe Support Committee, like there was not a time where a person wasn't like writing me or keeping in contact with me and that just motivated me to write. And so, then when they created the Support CeCe webpage up, I said can I do a blog.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** And I felt like that was a good way for me to communicate with the people on the outside and let them know, like ya bitch is back. I'm turned up, let me tell y'all what's going on. And I mean, it just . . . it was just like, you know, a part of me, and also just wanting to be like, you know, again I'm really into like sci-fi and fantasy and stuff like that. So, I actually want to create screen writes and stories about trans, Black and Brown trans, queer, gen-c superheroes and leaders and like we don't see that too often. And like, you know, every time I see a, you know, story or go watch a movie, it's always like this very cis-hetnormative bullshit that's like, that literally tells Black and Brown queers and youth, you know, what I'm saying, that you're not the deserving of like, to be grand or be super or be extravagant or see more in yourself, you know what I'm saying. And you know, having those narratives. Cause I feel like I had that, you know. My . . . the person I looked up to the most was Storm from X-Men right. I always wanted her to be a transwoman. I was like please be trans, please be trans, you know. Because you know, I can see that in myself.

**C. Riley:** Yes. I like that.

**CeCe:** But you know, like, you know, having that and wanting that, kind of like motivated me to write. And you know, hopefully I'll be working on some things in the future. I'm not gone say what, but I'm definitely working on some projects, stories and stuff.

**C. Riley:** Wow! There's so many questions that are percolating for me from what you were saying.

**CeCe:** Yes.

**C. Riley:** I guess I want to pause where you were just finishing up around Afro-futurism. My mind is on fire thinking about a trans-woman Storm changing the weather, that's absolutely it. You know?

**CeCe:** Yeah.

**C. Riley:** : But, I want to just pause a little bit and talk a bit more about all the ways you feel radical imagination speaks to your life work. So, you were talking about it in terms of art, but also when we started this conversation, you were talking about it in terms of defining what abolition looks like and that takes radical imagination as well. So, can you talk a little bit more about how radical imaginaries, whether ones that you're borrowing or ones that you're generating relate to your politics?

**CeCe:** I think there are different things that shape my ideas. The actual things that happen, not just to me, but to people in history, right. I remember reading the Assata Shakur Biography and the part where she was talking about she was in the men's prison. And, I felt like when I read that, that like her soul jumped into mines or something. And that I was in that place, but I was really in that place. But it was like I was at two places at once. Here and there, you know, what I'm saying, that's time travel.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** You know, what I'm saying?

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** To read about, you know, Ms. Major, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, in a time where it was literally illegal to you know, identify as the person that you are. That you know, if you were caught with three items that was presumed to be something of another gender that you were thrown in jail. And to hear her talk about the stories of how they would, you know, as she would say . . . she would have a bag and you know, she would have to run down the street and leap over cars and have, you know, take off a wig, and have a change of clothes and do this and do that. And it's like, I think of like Foxy Brown or you know, like one of

those, you know, what are they called Blaxploitation films where you know, it's like, "get down sucker." You know, like I see that. But that's history, you know what I'm saying. And to think about like how nonfiction and fiction are somewhat the same thing, you know what I'm saying, that you know we're all having like these human experiences. But I see, you know, this world, this universe in a multiverse, as like one.

**C. Riley:** Yeah.

**CeCe:** And so, having, I think like having that . . . having imagination. You know, even when I was locked up, one of the things I think—okay y'all, don't judge me. But okay, so, when I was locked up, I would literally be like, uh, I just wish like a comet would come down and it had some type of like gem or crystal in it and it comes literally in my room and it comes in me and I can kick this fucking wall down and I can like free the people. That's literally why I'm like universe, are you hearing me universe. I know it can happen, I watched Steven Universe.

*[audience laughter]*

**CeCe:** I know it can happen. *[Chuckle]* So, you know, having that imagination and you know what, I grew up in the early 90s, so I had like the original Power Rangers. I had, you know, the old X-Men cartoon and you know, I don't know if y'all remember like the Beetleborgs and VR Troopers, but it was . . . those were things, they existed. Trust me. They're on Netflix if you want to check them out. But, you know, to have that and to grow up with that and again to not have any representation of you in that.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** You know what I'm saying? So, all I had to grow up, you know, was to create these ideas of you know, this world both fictionally and nonfictionally. You know, cause sometimes you have to navigate society through a nonfictional lens. So that . . . for me, so I wouldn't kill myself. You know what I'm saying? And for a lot of people it's a escape to not have to deal with the fucked up realities we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. To have that imagination, to need to go to somewhere safe. To feel like you have some autonomy somewhere. You know what I'm saying? And that's what's, you know, important about, you know, not just, you know, generating imaginations, but borrowing them. Thinking about

your, you know, your ancestors. Thinking about, you know, that they thought about the same things that we thought about on a different level or in a different way. And you know, that's important.

**C. Riley:** Yeah. Yeah. The final chapter in *Black on Both Sides* is a narrative around Phillip DeVine who is frequently made invisible in relation to the Humboldt Killings. Brandon Teena is perhaps the person who's most talked about in relation to that. And you know, one of the things that was really clear to me in an archive that consisted of a true crime story that was about Brandon Teena but had two chapters about DeVine and a film that mentions DeVine was that I was going to need to do some imagining to address what it was about DeVine that is so critically important for us to understand about how anti-trans and anti-Black violence work in relation to each other.

**CeCe:** Mm hmm.

**C. Riley:** And so, one of the areas that I went to was poetry. In moments where I didn't know a lot about DeVine's childhood, I went to Nikki Giovanni and her lyrical depiction/description of black childhood. The degree to which like we use art and fiction and imagination both in the fashioning a kind of life (ala Lucille Clifton) but also like what it means to write with archives that have been put under erasure really resonates with me.

**C. Riley:** I have more questions, but I was like, you know, I don't want to be the only person who decides.

**Emcee:** No please. Oh yeah, I think we can talk for about another 10 minutes as a matter of fact.

**C. Riley:** I'm going to combine my other two questions that I have then and ask you a little bit about the Black Excellence tour you are doing with Joshua Allen. Could you share a bit more about that collaboration and about how intersectionality figures into your public conversations?

**CeCe:** Oh yes. That's my babycake.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** My best friend. I love him so much. They are . . . they actually opened my eyes to how I fell into like this binary world and was like you know, part of a binary system and Josh is my first friend that

identifies as trans and gender nonconforming. And that means so much to me, because I'm like you know, a person that can hold these identities and not give a fuck what anybody thinks. One is amazing and inspiring everyday. But for me to see them and have to actually challenge the binary even for myself, within myself and say you know, what's your gender now again? You know? And, I think that you know, working with them and having conversations with them have brought me to a different understanding about the ways in which I even have privileges and have to interrogate them. And when I experience my friend, my best friend being chased into a bathroom, because the security officer misgendered them and not just chased them in there, but began to harass them really was a eye-opening incident. And really after that, we really were able to have conversations about intersectionality. And when I realized that intersectionality and the realizations that our lives are kind of intersecting in such ways that, you know, even one would say I'm living this type of life in this part of town away from these people. That you are still somehow connected to me and to you and to you and we can't recognize that because we're living through our biases. We're living through our bigotries. We're living through our privileges. And even some marginalized people live in those same ways, right. You know, me having to grow up and have to deal with like transphobia and trans misogyny, and misogyny from other trans people.

**C. Riley:** Yeah.

**CeCe:** Right. Having to deal with antiblackness from my family to have to live in a society where everybody . . . I hate that people even think that there is a middle class. That doesn't exist. I want y'all to understand that. There's no such thing as middle-class. You're either poor or you're rich. There's no middle ground. People are literally working two and three jobs to maintain a middle-class lifestyle and that means that you're poor. [*Chuckle*] Anytime you're working three jobs to pay a fifteen hundred or two-thousand-dollar mortgage with a 8% APR and you know, you're poor. And a lot of people don't understand that, you know. So, we've been also given these fake constructs in society to make us feel superior or to be a part of a hierarchy and people disconnect from each other when they're . . . when a person can say oh, I have more than this person or these issues don't pertain to me. Or you know, whatever blasé blasé. Whatever you wanna think, you know. That's false. When I think

of, women's rights and the rights of their bodies a lot of people would say oh, well that doesn't concern you. Well that's false. Because you know, doctors and politicians get to make the same decisions about trans-women's bodies that they do with cis-women's bodies, as well as trans-men. So, when people don't acknowledge that you are denying the, even the idea of intersectionality. You're not saying that oh this issue is pertaining to me in some way, because it doesn't pertain to you. Islamophobia affects all of us in here.

**C. Riley:** Absolutely.

**CeCe:** Transphobia affects all of us in here. Racism affects all of us, well, not all of us. Unfortunate. But, I really want people to understand and with the Black Excellence tour that's what we've tried to get people to understand. Now, specifically with the Black Excellence tour is you know—White people cover your ears. No, I'm just playing. *[Laughter]* No, I really like to save dialogues about Black issues, but I usually like to save those conversations for like just Black people, but I can say specifically that you know, I feel like with the Black community the cis-het-Black community and the Photeps, that this narrative that Black, I mean that trans and queer and gen-c and intersex folk don't exist within Blackness.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** When I look at Photeps and they say shit like, womb-man, that's w-o-m-b. That, that denies the right of Black women to—both trans and cis—to their bodies. Because not all women are able to conceive and to carry children or want to. And so, these narratives are very detrimental to the existences of those identities.

**C. Riley:** Yeah.

**CeCe:** And so, when people try to separate my Blackness from my transness, I gotta say hold on hoe. Let me tell you somethin'.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** I don't navigate as two separate identities. When I walk outside of my house, I'm Black and I'm trans. I can get shot by the police just like any other Black person. And it has happened to trans-women. Maya Hall. There was a kid—somebody just told me recently that a trans-woman



was just shot in front of her home and her husband who is also trans is incarcerated. And so, now their kids are in the system, right. But those narratives are never shared. You know what I'm saying? Cause it's always a cis-normative society that's, you know, and that's why I hate when, you know, the alt-right and you know, these cissies—and I call 'em cissies, that's a c-i-s-s-i-e-s, create. Yeah the cissies, they created this idea that like gay people, they didn't include everybody else in that, but gay people have an agenda. I'm still trying to figure out what the fuck that is. Like, what is the gay agenda, I'm still trying to figure that out, because I'm like shit, gay people are evil too. [Laughter] Y'all know Milo Yiannopoulos, I mean, you know, he's gay and he's White and he's, you know. I've seen videos, you know, and that's why I hate that people think that because a person is marginalized that they just get it. And that we all kumbaya with each other. And I'm not friends with these hoers. I don't trust half these girls. They don't get it. They laugh in your face and they kee-kee and they act like they get it, but they don't. You know what I'm saying? And that's also intersectional.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** You know what I'm saying? Racism in the LGB . . . why aren't there more conversations about racism within the LGBTQIA community or anti-Blackness in general within the LGBTQIA community. Why aren't people, nonblack PLC people having conversations about anti-Blackness within their communities? Why aren't, you know, what I'm saying, why aren't cis-people having conversations with other cis-people about transphobia and queerphobia and homophobia. Like that's intersectional.

**C. Riley:** That's right.

**CeCe:** You know what I'm saying? And we want . . . that's the basis of our work is to get people to see that. Anytime, you can wake with a privilege . . . I don't think people even take time . . . and that's how you know society is selfish. Because a person, even a marginalized person, as myself, can wake up and say this is my privilege. So, if you're so selfish as to can't go and recognize when you have male privilege, when you have White privilege, when you have cis-privilege, when you have cis-passing privilege, when you have class privilege, when you, did I say race privilege already? Well I'm a say it again. When you have race privilege. You

know what I'm saying? That if you're not challenging that then there is no room for intersectionality in your life. You can't even challenge the idea or theory on that. You know what I'm saying? So, for me to have to wake up and be Black and being trans and still have to say damn, well I do have a privilege. I even get to sit on this fucking stage and have somebody record me that I'm sure lots of people are gonna watch. Now I could've sat up here and talked about, you know, what new reality TV show I was gonna be on or whatever, but no, that's not my life and that's not my narrative. Well not yet.

*[audience laughter]*

**CeCe:** Not yet. You know, I'm gone hop on, you know, Housewives of Atlanta or somewhere for once. One season. I gotta give 'em one.

*[audience laughter]*

**CeCe:** But, I just feel like I think people take life as a joke, even when they think that they're serious or when they think that they're woke, that they're very much sleep and they're very much a clown. And so, I just want people to understand that. You know what I'm saying? Like if you're not, if you're literally not waking up in your life and saying, you know what, these are the privileges I have, I'm gonna try to uplift and center the voices of these people in some way, you know, what I'm saying. Not go on Twitter or Facebook and try to tell a Black woman not to be angry or tell somebody to compose themselves or you know, what I'm saying. Like girl, you're more of the issue than the solution. So, stop talking to me. You know what I'm saying? And these literally are the people who think they woke, you know, what I'm saying. Like you know, these girls with their respectability politics and stuff, I be like, you know, have seats. Have seats.

**C. Riley:** And on that one we should.

**CeCe:** And before you have that, right, and before you have that seat make sure it wasn't made by somebody in prison for 10 cents.

**C. Riley:** Oh, thank you.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Thank you.

*[audience clapping]*

**C. Riley:** Thank you.

**CeCe:** I think I went over 10 minutes.

**Gaspar De Alba:** It's alright. It's alright. It's all very inspiring. And I'm taking a lot of notes. But, I'm sure that people have comments or questions that they would like to jump into the conversation with.

**Audience Member:** Alright. Thank you, CeCe and C. Riley. I mean, I'm honored to, you know, be here gathered in this space with y'all. I'm really, you know, as I mentioned before how, you know, with labels and, right, where you mentioned that you know, there was this urgency to put your body into alliance right. Well, at the same time, your body was changing, right. And also, CeCe, you speak about, you know, you know taking risks, right, both of you. And I'm wondering, what are your thoughts about risk-taking, you know, during, you know in this idea of this maximum, you know, under this administration? Is it putting our bodies on the line again?

**CeCe:** Yeah, um, you know, for me, all I can do is just think about the ways in which my ancestors and you know, transcestors have endured pain and trauma and violence and death. You know what I'm saying? That, that is something that isn't, you know, that well that is accustomed to my lineage. That is something—that pain and that trauma is something that trickles down and has been for decades. And so, it's something that I can't deny or reject or deny or pretend that isn't there. Because it is. And so, you know, I embody that and know that in life and in death, regardless of what that I can't . . . and the reason why I do the work and that I can't deny that is because everyday I'm affected by it. So, it's kind of like something that is involuntary, you know, what I'm saying. It's something that isn't really a choice. Again, everyday that I walk out my house I face death. You know, when I see trans-women of color being murdered, you know, everyday, you know what I'm saying, how can I not think about death. You know? I tell people all the time, like I'm at a point in my life where I have come to grips with death. We all have to die at some point. You know what I'm saying? I think a lot of people are in denial about that, you know. And that they live through fear because of that. And I can't live through fear. I can't live thinking about the, you know, the wouldas, shouldas, and couldas. You know what I'm saying? I can't fathom me just sitting back, right, knowing that the violence is

gonna happen anyways. So, why not confront that head on. Why not say fuck it and literally go against that. And say that in life and in death that I did my job. That's all. I'm only carrying the torch what people were already doing, you know. And what type of pain did they endure, you know what I'm saying. Like I said, there was a point in time where it was illegal to be trans. So, I have to embody that. You know what I'm saying? When I think about my ancestors on slave ships, I have to embody that. I can't just like think that, that didn't happen. And of course, that's what society wants. But I have to endure that. I have to embody that and know that these people didn't die in vain and neither will I.

**C. Riley:** Yeah. Awesome. Yeah. I mean there's so much to respond to in your question but all I'll say is that I think and maybe this is part and parcel of the title of this conference and this gathering is that I think about risks and I still do organizing work. But also I think about risky ideas in the realm of scholarship. And so to me, there are certain debates I'm no longer invested in, because part of what I'm interested in now is writing toward liberation. That becomes the context for trying to think about what kinds of projects I want to pursue and how I want to do my work. to think about what kinds of projects I want to pursue and how I want to do the work.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Awesome. Go ahead.

**Audience Member:** Thank you both so much for this conversation. It really is an honor to be here. And actually, my question follows up on what C. Riley said, which is risky ideas and how do you think the abolition, it's really not necessarily something that someone who has survived either in person or state violence would come to right. I mean, that's not something that necessarily happens. So, I'm wondering how that became part of your work, the life work, the job that you were describing?

**CeCe:** I don't know. I think I've always been a risk taker growing up. I grew up in a very, I guess like assimilating, Black, Christian family and I was literally called ghetto growing up, because, you know, I was loud. I was obnoxious, you know, I was just out there. And I was a risk taker. I wasn't scared to confront people. I wasn't scared, you know, like I listen to stories all the time of like trans and queer and gen-c folk, you know folks, who were like bullied growing up, and like I tell people all the time, like yeah, I was bullied at one point, until I cracked somebody in

their head. And they kind of got the point. Like, you know, like you can't pick on everybody right. And so, you know, I think that a lot of trans . . . and that's because a lot of trans, queer and gen-c folks, a lot of us know that like the violence that our bodies face come with a different type of repercussion. You know, what I'm saying. That the retaliation that cis-folks, you know, try to inflict on us is extreme, right. I mean, we see this when we look at murders of trans folks. Right? All the time. And we know that, that's because or in most parts because they're trans. And so, I had to go through life saying like, you know, if somebody give me bullshit, I can either walk away from this or I can punch 'em. You know, what I'm saying. And, I felt that the response that I got from punching people for trying to bully me has been greater, so that's where my risk taking came from. Is like literally punching on nasty cis-men for being, you know, nasty cis-men. And so, but when it came to my work, you know, and I had to tell somebody last night, like organizing work is definitely dangerous. You know what I'm saying? Like, we know that there are people who are in prison, you know, political prisoners who are in work. I mean who are in prison for doing the same organizing work that I'm doing. You know what I'm saying? And envisioning the same type of world that I'm, that we're envisioning. And so, like I think about the ways, you know, those people were risk takers and how I want to embody that too. Like, I want to burn down, you know, chemical testing labs. I'm like, eh, you know, how can I do that. You know what I'm saying? Actually. But, you know, it has to be something in you that literally says, yes. Like we can't keep telling ourselves no. Like you have to say yes. Say, yes to yourself. That sound like something from like, one of those corny ass motivational speaking, you know, keynotes. But, no, literally you have to say yes to yourself. Because if you keep denying your right to risk, then you will live a assimilated life.

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Mm. Nice. Yes.

**CeCe:** That's it. I'm like denying your right to risk, you will live an assimilated life. That's it. Yeah. Wow.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Yes.

**Audience Member:** You know, the theme of this talk and a lot of things that I've encountered in this conversation has been the idea of

community and choosing community and collaboration and I think some of think queer subjects, specifically like, trans or Black trans narrative, like I think it creates like a pain and hurt and a like of memory and collected memory, but I'm sure that you mentioned that community. But I just wanna think about like how you like find joy in the world and like the politics of that and being joyous and being as happy as a much more powerful form of dissent and like the fuck you. And like we live in a world where we're told that we're nothing, that we're not meant for anything and that we're not good enough, and I think like that's something that I guess like every community . . . I guess some people just wanna like . . . every community like cross-culturally can relate to that of like the White man or like the government or just people always telling us that we suck or that we're not good enough or that we aren't supposed to these like and the possibilities, I don't know, like a more radical agenda, like of positive. So, I just wanted to know, like what . . . how does joy function as like a politic in your lives? As like the ultimate form of resistance. And like, I mean this in like the most like silly sense, like laughter, form of like, you know, like resistance, like laughing and like being with like amigas and your queer friends going out and just dancing or whatever. Like how does that look like for you and how do you implement that as a form of as a form of survival on a day to day? I mean that's so difficult to just exist, you know, for you all. And also, for like, all the shit that y'all have gone through and like, you know, and like being in prison, like how did you like survive? And that just to me is like, you know, like a very big question that if you could respond to that, that'd be great. And thank you so much for sharing. You are so inspiring. Like you don't know again how much you've touched everyone and everyone here and like the world you know. So, thank you for that.

**CeCe:** Thank you. Thank you though. I think that my biggest joy is making people uncomfortable.

**[audience laughing and clapping]**

**CeCe:** I get off on that. Like, I just love going to the airport and all the White people are looking at me with their funky, stink face. And I just go sit in the middle of them and pull out my bag of hot flame Cheetos and talk loud on the phone and talk about the White people. Like, yeah girl, these muthafuckas is crazy. They looking at me like I'm crazy. I stare

at them back. See, I feel like a lot of people go, navigate through society walking on eggshells. Like, ooh, I have to make to these people happy. I have to make them feel comfortable. Like fuck these hoes. Like why I got to compromise myself to make you feel comfortable in a society that was based off of your comfortableness? You know what I'm saying?

**C. Riley:** Yes.

**CeCe:** Like why do I have . . . why do I have to literally, you know, deal with the microaggressions and not say shit about that. I tell, if a White woman grab her purse by me, I be like yes bitch, grab that cheap ass purse, cause don't nobody want it, but you. I make these girls gag. I do not care. I do not . . . I don't give two shits, you know what I'm saying. Because I have to live my life. You know what I'm saying? And everybody, look y'all, y'all look. When I mean say yes to yourself. That means making people uncomfortable. That means, literally just being your faggy, gay, lesbian, dyke, trans, PLC self. That means just literally going into a restaurant and being you. I know a lot of my friends they literally will not go into certain places because they're like, oh it's too this or it's too that. No, you have to, you have to make that place mold around you, honey. Don't let these institutions and these people try to mold you, because that's what you're doing. Again, you're wanting to assimilate or not even assimilate, but you still are in the assimilation process by allowing people to not let you be you. You know what I'm saying? And if you can't navigate . . . and I understand that it's fearful. You know what I'm saying? It is fearful, when you live in a society where we literally are seeing people be killed for, you know, just standing up for basic human rights. You know what I'm saying? And that shit is scary. But you can't live in fear. And I literally have to tell myself that everyday. You know what I'm saying? When, you know, and I'm a person that deals with like high anxiety and you know, I have really bad panic attacks and when my PTSD, you know what I'm saying. And like, one of the hardest things that I had to deal with was like, being around like large amounts of White people. You know what I'm saying? After that incident. And I was having like anxiety attacks and panic attacks more often. So, one of my friends gave me some nice strands of weed and then I also, mm hmm. And then I also had to, you know, along with seeing my therapist and talking with doctors and but, I had to, you know, realize that these people hate my guts. They hate me. And the more people recognize that and not

. . . and realize that not everybody is gonna love you. See I'm a Gemini and if there're any Geminis in here, we're people pleasers. Like that's one of our biggest faults are like we want to please everybody. We want to make everybody happy and that's not necessarily a bad thing. But a lot of people can take that and abuse it. A lot of people don't see that and don't care. And so, like I had to realize that I was trying, you know, growing up I always wanted to be the cool kid and I would do stupid shit to be the cool kid. And literally compromise myself in so many ways by doing that. And when I just started saying like give a fuck and you know, saying shit I don't need these people. If anything I can be my own best friend. You know what I'm saying? And loving yourself is important. You know what I'm saying? You can't, you know, you can't love nobody else if you don't love yourself. So, you really have to think about, you know, because you know, I hated myself for different reasons. You know what I'm saying? But when I realized that, you know, that this is me, that if people don't like that, if people can't see that. If people can't acknowledge that, then fuck them. You know what I'm saying? I had to realize that I had to live for myself more and not for other people. You know, specifically with my family, I compromised myself in so many ways, because, you know, growing up in a Christian household, you know, even, you know, not even just being trans.

**C. Riley:** Right.

**CeCe:** Just mental health itself was demon possession. So, it was like, I can't even talk about my mental health let alone me being trans, because then they would literally think I'm Satan. Which is probably not even a bad thing, because the God, I know is a victimizer. So, ooh that was a deep read. I know it was.

**C. Riley:** I was like, yeah, no, because. Yeah.

**CeCe:** I mean, no if you go to the Bible, this White man was asking these people to kill they kids, give up they foods.

**C. Riley:** Yes. Yes.

**CeCe:** Live a lifestyle they didn't want to live. Like that is a victimizer. That sounds like a cult leader.

[*audience laughs*]



**CeCe:** And so, yeah. You know, I had to live for myself, you know. I grew up most of my life people telling me I'm going to hell. And I just realized shit, if that's where I'm going then I might as well take a bottle of wine and my good bikini, you know. And, I stopped living in fear and I stopped and I start not giving a fuck. And I start seeing that my life is just as valuable as the next person's. And if I can't get on the elevator in a fancy hotel and somebody don't look at me like why you here? Bitch because I can, just like you. Ding! I'm going to the 5th floor! Good day! You know. And people have to have that. You know what I'm saying? And that's, you know, I commend and appreciate students and people of the greater academia, because like y'all have to put up with a lot of shit. And a lot of y'all want to say what I'm saying right now but can't. And, you know, I want to be y'all voice. And so, if, you know, if y'all can't say it, then I'm gonna say it.

**[audience clapping]**

**Gaspar De Alba:** Thank you.

**CeCe:** And that's sad that y'all can't say it. It's sad that anybody in any institution have to mold their lives and compromise themselves due to, you know, these racist, xenophobic, capitalistic, and very toxic institutions. And that y'all have to embody that and y'all have to challenge it in a different way. But y'all have.

**C. Riley:** And also, not get sick from it.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Yeah, that's a big one.

**CeCe:** And so, like I commend y'all so much and I appreciate y'all for even being here. You know what I'm saying? I do call out a lot of places I go just like I was at DePaul University last night. And I told them, I know a lot of y'all here for credits, don't play in my face.

**[audience laughing]**

**CeCe:** I be gagging the kids. I don't care, you know, because . . . but regardless of if you're here for credits or if you're here to actually be here, that you're getting this knowledge and you can't say that you did not hear it. You cannot leave this room and say I didn't hear that girl say none of that. Cause you did.

**Gaspar De Alba:** *[Laughter]*

**CeCe:** And if you don't challenge yourself when you leave here, if you don't say you know what, maybe she was right, maybe I need to have a conversation with my mom about some anti-Blackness shit she be pulling. Or maybe I should have a conversation with my grandpa about that, you know, transphobic shit he said today. Or maybe I should talk to my friends about that classist ass bullshit they be pulling. You know what I'm saying? And that's real. A lot of people don't do that. They literally be like, oh CeCe was amazing and they go lay in their king sized beds and pull over their plush down duvets and they dream about their trust funds and say, oh, oh, I'm sleeping comfortably. And so, yes, if that's any of you, cause a lot of people like damn she just told my whole life story, dang. [*Laughter*]

[*audience laughter*]

**CeCe:** But no like, my joy comes in just living authentically and not giving a fuck. That's literally have to be the basis of your life. Actually hashtag I don't give a fuck needs to go viral. You need to . . . people need to center themselves, center their communities, center their spirits. Don't feel like you have to conform to any idea or ideology. Live your authentic life, like I'm trying to do. And then you'll feel just like I'm feeling. You will literally be like, oh now, I get what CeCe was saying. You smile more. And let me tell you, right now I'm homeless, I'm jobless, my aunt just died of cancer, like I have a lot of shit that's going on in my life. You know what I'm saying? And I can literally be letting that shit eat me up, but organizing work, making people uncomfortable, living my authentic life is keeping me here. It's keeping me present. It's keeping me sane. You know what I'm saying? And also weed. And so, you know, and so, yeah, cause big farmer got it out for y'all. I'm a tell y'all that right now. So, just think about this. Just be like damn if CeCe is that happy or at least she's presenting to be that happy, I want to at least present that happiness too. You know what I'm saying? And so, like you just go to say, fuck it and say yes to yo' self. Say yes! Just do that! And I guarantee you, you're gonna start hitting people in their face. You're gonna [*laughter*], you're gonna be making America indigenous again. It's just gonna be amazing.

[*audience clapping and hollering*]

**C. Riley:** I love it.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Well, unfortunately this hour is finished. We're closing up the conference, but we will continue this conversation downstairs.

But however, before we go, let me just say that this conversation right here completely embodies what I think the organizers were getting at with their title of *Radical Imaginaries: Scholar Activism Dismantling the Politics of Hate*. Because that activism that you're talking about, right, involves engaging your radical imaginaries, engaging radical knowledge and taking radical action.

**CeCe:** Yes!

**Gaspar De Alba:** And without those three steps, you're not gonna really be doing scholar-activism. And I really loved how real you kept it in terms of what that activism looks like, starting with just get out the door.

**CeCe:** Yes.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Get out the door. Take risks.

**CeCe:** Yes.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Right. Don't get . . .

**CeCe:** Tell your school stop investing in prison systems.

**[audience clapping]**

**Gaspar De Alba:** Mm hmm. That's right. And punch back.

**CeCe:** Right. Exactly.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Right and we can punch back physically, and we can punch back with our minds.

**CeCe:** Exactly.

**Gaspar De Alba:** And with our research and with our scholarship. And so, that . . . this has just been tremendous. You have really set everybody on fire here, both of you.

**CeCe:** Thank you.

**Gaspar De Alba:** Thank you so much.

**C. Riley:** Thank you.

**CeCe:** Yas! Thank you Riley.

**[audience clapping and screaming]**

**CeCe:** Thank y'all.