

00:08

Hello. Hey.

00:11

(Laughter)

00:12

As you just heard, my name is D-L Stewart, and I'm a faculty member here on campus at Colorado State University. But what's most important for you to understand about me right now is that I identify as both Black and as transgender, or trans. And yes, I'm going to talk to you today about how Black trans lives matter. As I do so, I'm going to share a few scenes from my own life, mixed in with the ways that race and gender have historically and currently intersected to shape the lives of Black trans people. Ready?

00:51

Audience: Ready.

00:53

DLS: Scene one. I am at home with myself. My body, a sovereign country. Sovereign meaning it is superlative in quality. Of the most exalted kind. Having generalized curative powers of an unqualified nature, unmitigated, paramount, possessed of supreme power, unlimited in extent, absolute. Enjoying autonomy, independent, royal. My body defies the restrictions of a society consumed by boxes and binaries and "are you a boy or a girl?" Independent of such conventions, my body clings instead to the long ago lore that understood its magic. I contain multitudes. From this supreme power to name myself, define myself and be myself, I stake a claim to myself and organize my resistance. A resistance that boldly proclaims that Black trans lives matter. My body is a sovereign country and my first site of resistance. End scene.

02:15

To say that Black trans lives matter is a claim to sovereignty. As much as Black Girl Magic, and #transisbrilliant, Black Trans Lives Matter is also a chorus of resistance. Because Black trans lives begin by defining our bodies as sovereign countries from which we first begin to resist the messages that we have no place here. We push whole movements forward on the strength of our

vision. We set trends and create new worlds. We are the vanguard. Black trans lives have always mattered.

03:02

And yet, caught at the time-traveling intersection of Juneteenth emancipation celebration and Stonewall's emancipation declaration, Black trans lives are both seen but yet unseen. Unseen by the antiblackness of queer and trans movements. Unseen by the transphobia and trans-antagonism of Black movements. Our sovereignty and resistance are blocked by layers of systems and structures that have always sought to contain, define and erase Black trans bodies.

03:42

Scene two. I am with my therapist. The one whose testimony I must rely on to declare me man enough to have my documents changed. The one who is to be believed. Despite my own declarations that I am not this body, that this body is neither hers nor yours to define, I sit with this doctor. And she fills out a form for me. And when concerning what all I've done to affirm my gender, "Has the patient's gender presentation aligned with their gender identity?" She decides that my gender presentation is more neutral, really. While I sit there, mind you, head to toe in clothing from the section of the store where the dress buttons go down the right side, and my pants give away the number of inches around my waist, and my hair is cut like Denzel's "Man on Fire," but I'm still more neutral. Really? Because she still sees, and you see, a Black woman. And Black women's bodies are always already made genderless. End scene.

05:13

From mammy and Sapphire, to Mandingo and Sambo, Black bodies and our genders have been caught in the white imagination. And the imagination of whiteness is fanciful, and powerful enough to turn its fancies into realities. Imagined as a thing, we were made to become that thing, and so we have been bred like horses, fed like turtles to alligators, branded like cattle, milked like sows, made into oxen to plow. Gender did not matter, so long as our body parts, our arms and legs and backs, our breasts and genitalia could be turned into profit.

06:01

The Black body was made not white and therefore not worthy of gender. And under the weight of the gentile tulle and virginal lace that dressed plantation mistresses, Black femininity has always been denied. Instead, she is either beast or porn star. Neither a proper gender, dehumanized. Made a social threat that endangers civility. That puts civilization in danger. The angry Black woman cannot be escaped. Not even by a first lady of these United States.

06:44

Likewise, ill-suited for chivalry and outmatched as masters and captains of fate, Black manhood lays flaccid in the hands of white man's dominance. Body measurements taken, speed measured, draft pick forecasted. This is the NFL combine. Body measurements taken, teeth and body cavities inspected, number assigned. This is the prison intake room. Body measurements taken, talents and abilities advertised, teeth and body cavities inspected, name and value assigned. This is a slave's bill of sale. Made either stud or farce, he is not for his own pleasure, but rather for profit and jest. Athletes and comics contained. Made not a threat.

07:58

"My gender is Black," said Hari Ziyad, because Black bodies and our genders have been caught in the white imagination, and we have always been transgressive. Transgressive meaning a violation of accepted and imposed boundaries of social acceptability. Blackness is transgressive. And once set free from social acceptability, blackness challenges the limitations of what gender can be. We have always been fugitives here. Escaping from gender surveillance to claim our sovereignty and right to exist and to live free, to proclaim as beautiful that which was made ugly, to defy convention, Black lives and trans lives and Black trans lives.

08:55

And yet, in this world, that fact that Black trans lives make a difference, make differences and make a matter of mattering is doused by the fire hoses of past and current denials of our rights to exist and resist. We must fight to be seen as we see through fences into the play yards that we are kept out of.

09:22

Scene three. I am at school. The bell rings, it's recess. We line up to go outside. Those made boys on one side, those made girls on the other. We file out of the doors. The boys stopping to fill in the closed off street. The girls and I, walking across the street. "Keep your eyes straight ahead," we are told. Because there's a park across the street. But there is a wrought iron fence that encloses that park. This is where the girls and I play. Mostly, I stand at the fence and watch, as my fellows play ball in the street and be loud and be rough and be sweaty, and I am behind the fence.

10:22

Accused of thinking naughty thoughts. They have no idea. End scene.

10:32

Sissified and bulldagged, we are all made up. Just boys in dresses and girls in suits, the Black transgressive body caught in fantasies of boxes and binaries that make our genitalia representative of our gender, and our mannerisms our sexuality. Black trans lives are therefore written off as merely gay effeminate or lesbian butch. And the overlay of femininity on bodies marked as male, and therefore as man, adheres like a "kick me" sign, except the consequences are much more deadly.

11:08

The majority of trans people murdered in this country are Black trans women. Because when manhood is located between one's legs, and defined in opposition to womanhood, what's between one's legs cannot be seen as having anything in common with womanhood. And this same acidic wash serves to blanch trans masculinity, making it fade into nothingness. Black trans men become illusions of manhood, women merely playing at being men because you can't get a real man.

11:47

Forever put in our place, we are indelibly marked as "woman." And at best, the looming threat of Black trans manhood is contained, inoculated, made more neutral, really.

12:06

Scene four. I am with my therapist. I tell her what I think about, as my body begins to slowly morph into another version of itself. What will happen as I move from the social threat of angry Black womanhood to the physical threat of looming Black manhood? When will my neighbors forget to recognize me and my pit bull? They've seen us nearly every day, predawn or after twilight, for what will have been over two years by then? When and how soon after I am no longer misgendered woman will the cops be called to come and contain and erase my presence? How soon before the purse clutching, the sidewalk crossing? What does it mean to become a brute? To turn my body into another kind of threat?

13:12

She's stunned that I'm already recognizing this. I can't afford not to. End scene.

13:20

Who can see me and my Black trans kin in the skin we are in? Who dares to love us, who holds us close? To whom do we matter other than to ourselves? We're not looking for saviors. We have each other. As Lilla Watson said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because you recognize your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together." Let us work together to make Black trans lives matter. The lived experience of Black trans people out into the world. And if you believe that your liberation is bound up with mine, then I invite you to make Black Trans Lives Matter your personal ethic by being transformative, loudly and mindfully.

14:13

You can do that in three ways. Transform your thinking about blackness and gender. Be loud by taking the risk to confront false assumptions and other's fears and biases. Be mindful and pay attention and believe what Black trans people say about our own lives.

14:35

Being transformative loudly and mindfully takes practice. Just like getting someone's pronouns right. Mine are they, them, their, and he, him, his, by the way.

14:47

And getting someone's pronouns right and being transformative loudly and mindfully matters. Because Black trans lives matter. My life matters. My body is a sovereign country, and my first site of resistance.

15:04

(Applause)