

”Go beyond Our Natural Selves”

The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald

CeCe McDonald

May 2017

Editor’s Introduction

Edited By: Omise’eke Natasha Tinsely

Curating this collection of CeCe McDonald’s prison letters has been the greatest honor of my writing career. In June 2012, Ms. McDonald was sentenced to forty-one months in prison for stabbing an assailant during a racist, transphobic attack against her in Minneapolis (detailed in letters that follow). Her arrest for an act of self-defense and subsequent placement in men’s correctional facilities galvanized local, national, and transnational communities of support who protested that McDonald “was the victim of a hate crime, a broken justice system, and a transphobic, violent prison complex,” in the words of the National LGBTQ Task Force (2016). During the twenty-eight months she served in Hennepin County Jail Stillwater and St. Cloud facilities—enduring significant time in “administrative isolation” or solitary confinement, allegedly to protect her from violence in the general population—she penned letters that her support committee published as a blog (McDonald 2016). The following is excerpted from those letters. McDonald’s

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prison writings join an established black intellectual tradition of works produced in what she calls the “concrete chaos,” including letters and essays by Martin Luther King Jr. (1994), George Jackson (1994), and Angela Davis (2016) that galvanized black radical analysis and activism in the 1960s and 1970s. They also fill a significant gap in the emerging intellectual terrain of black transgender studies. While figures like McDonald and Laverne Cox are well known as activists, black transwomen authors are almost entirely absent from academic publication. Black gender-nonconforming and nonbinary authors are similarly underrepresented. In the last decade, black transmen have published important scholarly monographs and articles, but the same has not been true for black transwomen. This absence results from institutional transmisogynoir, which, according to Demoya Gordon of Lambda Legal, limits black transwomen’s access to formal education and “robs transgender women of color of educational, employment, housing and other opportunities and makes this community particularly susceptible to violence both within and outside of the criminal justice system” (2015). McDonald is well known for her analysis of racism and (trans)misogyny in the criminal injustice system and her critique of the prison industrial complex—themes that emerge prominently in what follows.[1] In this introduction, however, I want to highlight two more rarely remarked hallmarks of McDonald’s thought that stand to contribute significantly to black gender and sexuality studies.

“I Use the Term Woman Broadly”: Black Transfemininity as a Practice of Relationship Declaring herself a “(trans)woman of the 21st century,” McDonald proclaims her desire “to be unmarginalized and recognized for who I am, and who we are: strong, wonderful, loving women.” The construction of this phrase exemplifies an important tenet of her thinking: McDonald’s “who I am” is always connected to “who we are.” Inviting readers to witness her experience of black transfemininity, she holds a mirror where we can see our gender expressions beautifully connected to her

own. The “mirroring effect” she describes in “Go beyond Our Natural Selves” resembles the work of Oshun, Yoruba deity of femininity, love, and art, who (in Joan Morgan’s words) carries a “mirror as the tool Oshun holds up to our faces when she requires us to do the difficult work of really seeing ourselves” (2016). McDonald seamlessly theorizes black transfemininity in relation to black cisfemininity. She embeds her account of the Minneapolis attack in a letter entitled “Violence against (Trans)Women Today,” which tells her story in the context of what Beth Richie calls the “violence matrix”: “the tangled web of structural disadvantages, institutionalized racism, gender domination, class exploitation, heteropatriarchy and other forms of oppression that locks the systematic abuse of Black women in place” (2012: 128). The letter begins by noting the ubiquitous “violence against all women, which also includes transwomen,” and it ends by linking her case to those of black ciswomen incarcerated for self-defense: “Patreese Johnson, Charmaine Pfender, Marissa Alexander, and Tanika Dickson. I LOVE YOU ALL! We are all victims of violence and the injustices and oppression of a faulty legal system.” At the same time, McDonald’s black (trans)feminism insists on recognizing the differences between women as lovingly as our similarities. The same letter reminds us, “I, and most transwomen, have to deal with violence more often and at a higher rate than any cissexual person, so every day is a harder struggle, and the everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk.” Through these differences, relationships with black women remain the cornerstones of McDonald’s understanding of the power of black fem(me)ininity. In her Mother’s Day shout-out to “moms around the globe,” she acknowledges, “I love you so much mommy, and I love both my grannies and all my beautiful aunts. These women are great examples of strong, fierce females and I’m so appreciative of them for being understanding and caring.” McDonald also theorizes transfemininity in relationship to masculinity. On the one hand, the frailties of unexamined cismasculinity become apparent in her in-

teractions with “masculine men.” Writing of partners who have been less than “secure . . . with their identities as masculine men” because they were dating a transwoman, McDonald remarks, “I would figure that a (masculine) man’s dominance and assertiveness would put him in a position to hold his ground, that as the ‘man,’ he should (or would) use his masculine authority to show his right to be involved with whoever he pleases. . . . For me, it comes off as if femininity, homophobia, or transgenderism is contagious and that the man’s masculinity is jeopardized with the association of the fem-man and/or (trans)woman.” On the other hand, she celebrates the love, desire, and pleasure that become possible when masculinity is untangled from normative gender expectations. These possibilities blossom in an erotic scene between McDonald and a female stud. She narrates, “Me, the girl who was penis obsessed, is kissing a stud in the middle of the walkway while the gaybies around us cheer and whistle. So there I had to admit that it wasn’t the fact that I was kissing a girl, because that didn’t matter anymore. Her masculinity was what turned me on. After I realized that I understood myself more than ever.” Just as masculine men stand to learn about their identities from being in relationship with a transfemme, McDonald learns about her gender and sexuality from being in relationship with the trans- and queer masculinity indexed by her stud’s masculine-of-center desirability.

“Love Is a Bustling Highway”: Love and/as Social Justice Movements “I love all of you, no matter what, and I believe in my heart that you love me too,” McDonald writes supporters. “We are all different with different beliefs and a different story to us all, but we are connected through that and our love for each other draws us closer.” From the isolation of solitary confinement, McDonald insistently theorizes love as a political force that can counteract multiple oppressions. In 1989, black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to describe how multiple power structures interact in the complex discrimination that black women face. Crenshaw chose the intersection

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changed.

6. GRS is an acronym for gender reassignment surgery.

7. U of M is short for University of Minnesota. DOC is an acronym for Department of

Corrections. TTYL stands for “talk to you later.”

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as an “everyday metaphor that people could use to say: ‘it’s well and good for me to understand the kind of discriminations that occur along this avenue, along this axis—but what happens when it flows into another axis, another avenue?’” (quoted in Adewunmi 2014). In her letters, McDonald employs another everyday roadway metaphor to a related end. Her response to intersectional oppression is a highway of love: “Society says that love is one way and very black and white, but we all know that love is a bustling highway and bursting with all vivid colors.” McDonald challenges us to imagine what happens when we take our deepest, most intentional commitments not just onto another avenue but onto a highway—one that can take us miles, states, and countries away from where we began. Turning off the one-way street of intolerance onto the bustling, bursting highway of love helps to develop the emotional and intellectual motility needed to resist systems of oppression, McDonald believes. “Those who oppose us couldn’t stop the love which has, and was defined, to bring us all together. To give us the strength and the mental durability to go the distance and fight this evil who tells us we are wrong,” she writes. McDonald translates her theorizing into concrete terms in discussing plans for a leadership role in Minneapolis-based Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN). In a statement characteristic of her writing style—one that lovingly marries phrase after phrase into expansive sentences—she declares, “At TYSN we believe that we can bring the (trans) community together, that we can foster the creation of POWERFUL art, that we can change the world, that we can create empowerment, that we can work with existing systems and outside systems to create resources for self and community and importantly, that we can overcome adversity and build a whole, balanced, and successful life.” She punctuates this vision: “Get ready for a revolution, and it will not be televised!” The midline of McDonald’s bustling highway—the element that shapes it and keeps it safe—is self-love. For (trans)women, people of color, and queers living in (trans)misogynist, racist, and homophobic societies hos-

tile to our existence, self-love is an act of resistance necessary for survival. “I’m pretty sure most people heard the saying ‘you can’t love anyone, if you don’t love yourself,’ and that is true,” McDonald reminds us. “But it goes beyond that. You can’t LIVE if you don’t love yourself. The fears and hate of a patriarchal society have told us that we don’t fit the mold. . . . And in most cases these psychological manipulations work, and those who ‘don’t fit the mold’ try to fit it, or break themselves trying to.” The self-love McDonald describes is neither sentimental nor solipsistic. Rather, loving one’s black, queer, fem(me)inine self into existence is an art form that requires perseverance, discipline, and expansive vision. Instructing readers in the art of creating “love, joy, individuality, growth” for ourselves, McDonald metaphorizes, “With every stroke of the brush, we decide how our art of life will be. Pictures full of life’s achievements and the possibilities. Creators of our own masterpieces, how will you depict your picture? Will you leave your canvas blank and unfulfilled, or will your tableaux show all that life has to offer?” As her prison communications make clear, McDonald is an artist in this metaphoric sense as well as a traditional one. In addition to her letters, a series of photographs of McDonald were published online during her incarceration. These photos—taken through a window during visitation—show McDonald posing with hair, nails, and brows flawlessly done, her lips in artistic smiles or pouts. The most striking of these, perhaps, is a picture in which a radiantly smiling McDonald holds one hand to her heart and the other to meet the visitor’s on the glass.[2] As you read the following, I invite you to imagine yourself as the viewer on the other side of the glass and to meet McDonald’s mirroring image and out-

first “Beyonce’ Feminism, RihannaWomanism” class, which BuzzFeed rated number one in its 2014 list of Celebrity College Classes You’ll Want to Enroll In. She researches and publishes on queer and feminist Caribbean performance and literature. Her articles have appeared in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Small Axe*. She is currently at work on a book project entitled “Ezili’s Mirrors: Black Feminism, Afro Atlantic Genders, and the Work of the Imagination,” which explores spirituality and sexuality in twenty-first-century queer Caribbean literature, dance, music, and film. Her artistic work includes performance and collaboration with the Ananya Dance Theatre as well as a novel in progress entitled “Water, Shoulders, into the Black Pacific,” which explores relationships between black female shipbuilders during World War II.

Editor’s Notes

1. See McDonald’s introduction to Eric A. Stanley’s *Captive Genders* (McDonald 2015).
2. Some of these photos can be viewed on BuzzFeed (Karlan 2014).
3. CeCe’s nickname.
4. According to the CeCe Support Committee (2016), “this post was originally written to a gathering of CeCeMcDonald’s family, friends, and supporters, which she organized from within the Hennepin County jail. She asked that the letter not be read until everyone was gathered to hear her words together. She wrote this letter the week after she accepted a plea agreement to a reduced charge of second degree manslaughter.”
5. The Two of Bones indicates personal and societal change coming. The Instructor indicates spiritual leadership and expansive learning. The Mentor of Bottles represents calm leadership in the midst of change. The Code represents social codes to be embraced or

this struggle with me instead of backlash. I love these people. They have been here for me since day one, and regardless of what others say, they will be my support and my family and at this point you're either with us or against us and none of us have time for hate or divisive attitudes or ideas, especially at critical times like now. And that's not just directed at those who are commenting about me, my case, and my fam—but for all people across the nation and around the world. I feel a revolution is amongst us, and I know that there is no better time than now. I wish that I could march with the many of people who will be marching across Washington this August in honor of the 50th year anniversary for the Civil Rights March on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement of that era. I encourage everyone to join the march and the experience of unity amongst all people—races, genders, sexualities, social statuses, and cultural backgrounds. Even if you can't make it to the march still get active and get involved however that may be. Before I go, I just want to say that I love you all more than ever now. I couldn't be more conscious of the love and support you all give me—my family, and that's kin and chosen, and of course I have chosen all of you. You're all my family and I will love and cherish and appreciate you all until there's no more of me. We are the future, we are the revolution! Until next time my loves keep fighting, stay strong, and live out loud. Do you, cause no one can do it better!

xo
CeCe

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stretched reach with your own.

Letters from Minnesota Correctional Facility—St. Cloud

By CeCe McDonald

November 5, 2011

Pursuit of Happiness

When I was a child, I knew where I wanted my life to head. And, of course, there are hurdles put to distract, detour, and mislead one from their pursuits of happiness. Now 23, I've never imagined my life to take the turns that it has. My life has been a constant roller-coaster ride, with all its loops and deep dives. But I refuse to let these rides make me feel that I have to back away from my own pursuit of happiness. As another day passes by, I thank God every day I get to see another one. When I was younger, and even now, I always tried to understand all things, it didn't matter what. I always like to dissect a situation, and piece it back together with full understanding. I never liked just knowing enough about anything, or what was only given, which caused me to do my own research or my own further investigations. I've always had a curious mind, and am always willing to learn something new. Because I realize that these people who live on the very same planet we do, have totally fucked the world, brainwashed humanity into their fake image of how society is (or should be in their eyes), and everybody wants to blame each other for the way we live, as if it was an actual decision to make for ourselves, for the economy crashing, for so many killings in the world, and in the U.S. right in our own communities, and all the hidden evil that lurks around us, and not many pay attention to because of their own ignorance or not caring enough to know what type of people could even be living next door to them. . . I was told that I should never worry about how a person feels, or thinks about me, because I would never be able to progress within my own life because of my fixation on what or how someone feels

about me. And that was true, because I found myself stressing over the fact that people actually hated me for their own reasons. And I would feel some form of wanting others to understand me, as a living breathing human being, just like everyone and everything else on God's green earth. . . . And fortunately, I had people in my life that were honest and told the truth. And not those candy-coated, bullshit stories people get throughout their life growing up. I was taught that we as people should embrace each other, and love each other as we love ourselves. And, of course, I know it's a challenge to love someone who is taught or manipulated into hating a certain person, race, or sexual preference and identity, but I heeded to what I was taught. And despite the challenge with all its complexities, I will never turn my back on anyone. Throughout my life there were people there who took me in, even when I gave up on myself, and I vowed to myself and God that I would help any and everybody in any way that I can. But I will no longer go the unnecessary lengths to make, or even try, to convince a person to like me. If someone, anyone, is going to be associated with me, then I want it to be from their own personal perspective of me, and not from their idea or assumption of me, but by getting to know me. . . . I can recall so many times dealing with being scrutinized for me wanting to be myself, most of these incidents happened within my own household with members of my family. I can recall an incident that happened when I was living with my grandma, during a family gathering. I had a letter in my backpack for this boy who I was talking to at my school. After writing the letter I put it in my bag in anticipation of giving it to my friend, and then I went to the bathroom. After leaving the bathroom I went downstairs where the rest of my family was together. But I noticed this look on one of my uncle's face, and before I could figure out why he was looking at me the way he was, he asks if he could speak with me. So we walk into the kitchen, and he tells me to have a seat. Next thing I know he's holding up the letter that I wrote to my friend. But as he's asking me what's with the letter I'm thinking

in this country. The insults aimed at the African- American and Latino communities are disrespectful, dehumanizing, ignorant, unintelligent, and very hurtful nonetheless. Indeed it's a blessing that the SCOTUS recognizes the rights for gays and lesbians to get married legally and have the same federal rights as hetero-marriages, but I don't want people to lose sight of the other issues that will affect us all in the long run. Their deliberate efforts to minimize the minority by restricting voters rights is a slap in the face of the civil rights movements of the past and present that fought so hard for the rights of minorities to vote. And the idea that sending all the immigrants back and building large fences will solve all of America's issues. But it seems that this policy only applies to black and brown people, and knowing all of this is the attempt of Republicans and right-wing conservatives to win elections that they're obviously losing. So I'm guessing that insulting and stereotyping us will bring them those votes they need? These people need to get a serious grasp of reality, like really soon. . . . Not that I care for them to ever take office. Actually, I just don't care for them at all, but I do believe we all deserve respect as humans, regardless of our race, gender, or social status. I really want people to start thinking on how we can help minorities and the poor to help us all grow as a community and united front. Can we challenge ourselves to unite all races of this nation by taking an initiative to end our own preconceptions of each other? I know that I was extremely upset after having a visit from a close friend, and he told me that people have been criticizing him and my other non-Black friends for being in pictures that they post online. That divisive attitude is why I ask for a mend in race relations. Have these people ever thought how it feels for them, and myself, to have to deal with me being in prison? It's always easy for someone to conjure up negative thoughts and reactions to my "white" friends who've gained popularity from their "black" friend in prison. First of all let me say that there is nothing glamorous or "popular" about being in prison. And why can't there be support for those who have went through

the Patreese Johnsons, the Marissa Alexanders, and the Chrisaun McDonalds. But no pain can bring back the Trayvon Martins, the Oscar Grants, the Matthew Shepards, the James Byrds, the Gwen Araujos, and all of our brothers and sisters who were victims of hate in this world. I can say that survivor's guilt is real. That I'm still, to this day, dealing with the fear and sadness of my experience with hate and discrimination. How blessed am I to have so much love and support from my family, and I say family which extends to all my friends and supporters around the world. My love and support is with Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin as they go through this journey of leaving a positive legacy for Trayvon. I couldn't help but to cry after hearing Sybrina tell an audience at the National Urban League to "wrap their minds around that there is no prom for Trayvon. There is not high school graduation for Trayvon. There is no college for Trayvon. There aren't any grandchildren from Trayvon" all because of George Zimmerman. When I went through my own incident, that was something that harbored on my mind constantly—how would my death have affected my family and friends, and how different would things have been if it were the other way around? That question was rhetorical. We know what the outcome would have been, just like we know what the outcome would've been if Zimmerman was black and Trayvon Martin was white. Or even if Zimmerman was black and it was just a black-on-black crime. Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin are catalysts for not just their own son's death, but for all those who have been victims of hate and violence. They are heroes in my eyes. Strong and brave, creating a voice that has been long overdue to be heard, and they deserve the acknowledgment and respect that some, not all, have given them. I love them as if they were my own mom and dad, and we should understand that their struggle is our struggle. Aside from the attention surrounding the Zimmerman trial, issues of racism and discrimination extend beyond that. The debates about immigration reform and the Voting Rights Act have pulled back the veil of intolerance of equality and acceptance

in my head how rude are you, or whoever went through my bag to get my letter without my permission, and not only that I'm in no mood for any lectures. And as I got fed up with the argument we were having, I got up to walk away from the situation. But in my attempt, my very own uncle wrapped his hands around my neck, and threw me to the floor with force, and continued choking me. I was so shocked, I didn't even know how to process what actually was going on, because I expected behavior like this from strangers, but to have it happening in front of my family by my family was a totally different experience which I didn't know how to handle. I never felt so betrayed in my whole life. Later that very evening, after all was done and said, he tried apologizing and goes on to say that he did it out of anger and he was looking out for me because he didn't want me to die from AIDS, because gay people get AIDS. And of course everything he said went through one ear and out the other. Once again listening to the ignorant statements of a person, who in fact was in the medical field and still gave biased topics that many have just associated with being gay, as if straight people can't get AIDS, and for all the other reasons his statements were brushed off as ignorant and unworthy of being listened to. I wasn't sexually active, and if I was there were way better approaches to the subject, instead of putting a confused teenager in a hostile environment, where most should feel comfortable, which was with my own family. From that point in my life I knew my family would not be supportive of me in my life decisions, especially dealing with my sexuality. And not just dealing with the judgments of my own family, I dealt with it outside of the home. I remember being harassed everywhere from school to even the people in my own neighborhood. One incident where I came from a local store and being harassed there, but I spoke up for myself and I guess the men didn't like that. When I walked out the store I was followed and then jumped by 5 guys, who were in high school while I was only in the 7th grade. And it seemed that when I tried defending myself, they retaliated more. I can re-

member hearing them yell, “kill that faggot” as they stomped and punched me. I begged them to stop, but they continued. After they took my money, they ran off leaving me there. No one was there to help me, and I was scared to even move, even though I was only a couple feet from my house. When I walked in the house, my mom asked why it took so long, and then she turned around and noticed that I was bloody and distraught. It hurt me for my mom to have to see me like that. Her reaction was grabbing her shoes and the closest thing she could use for a weapon, and asked who they were and where they lived. I told her to forget about it, and she was furious that I could just let that happen to me and not retaliate. My biggest fear was my mom or siblings getting hurt in the process of defending me, or even being associated with me. I went to the bathroom and cleaned myself up. And as I washed my face blood continued to run, which is when I noticed that during the jumping my lip went through my tooth which caused me to have a scar over my top lip, and it’s still there. That was one of the many bashings I endured during my years growing up. And dealing with the bashings, being disowned by some in my family, my own confusion throughout the years caused me to grow angry, hateful, depressed, suicidal, hopeless, scarred and scared. I lost hope in others and myself. The best advice I got was pray that the lord makes you straight. And the younger naïve me did thinking that my life would be easier if I was straight. I was forced, literally, to go to church. I even remember being in the bathroom on my knees bawling, asking “God why am I like this? Please, please change me. Please make me straight.” And after all the praying I would still wake up attracted to men, even if I tried not to be. But later in my life and learned lessons he changed me in a way I never would have imagined. He changed me to accept me and love me for who I am, and not how others wanted me to be. And now, with the recent incidents that involved me, involuntarily, I feel that once again a single situation has blocked me from further reaching my pursuit of happiness. This time not only dealing with transphobia, but also racism which has never been

demonstrated for Florida’s Governor Rick Scott to call for a special session to reform or reject the “Stand Your Ground” law. As of late Phillip Agnew and the Dream Defenders have been occupying the capitol building there in Florida until FL Gov. Rick Scott calls that special session. He stands with the SYG law, and feels that it needs no reform. Now . . . this law that has let a man get away with murder, has caused a Florida woman to spend 20 years in prison! Marissa Alexander, a 30-year-old African American mother, was sentenced to 20 years behind bars after she was charged for firing a gun as a warning shot at her then-abusive husband who admitted to the allegations. She never shot anyone, in fact no one was even injured—well, except her at the hands of her husband, and a man who shot a teenage boy in claims of self-defense. In the case of Marissa, she was denied the right to use SYG—not killing anyone—and sentenced to two decades in prison. Can someone please explain to me how an injustice such as this does not make one question the biased laws and the discrimination that still exist in the “justice system?” And people wonder why the prison percentages between whites and non-whites are so disproportionate. More importantly when are people going to ACT on these injustices and fight for the equality of each person in this country, both free and in the “system?” It’s hard for me having to watch the trial and seeing everything unfold. Where all of us speculating knowing that this whole situation, from the incident itself to the trial, is all based on race—racial profiling and racism spewing from it all, regardless of what anyone says or thinks. I know that people have been comparing my case to Zimmerman’s, and yes it’s obvious that laws are biased. But even I can say I came out blessed knowing that (a) the system was against me to begin with, and that (b) looking at other cases similar to mine, I didn’t have to spent extensive time—even decades—in prison. People don’t understand that I actually feel a guilt for that. I know that nothing beyond the incident and getting arrested was in my control, as it is for anyone who is a victim of the system. But for me it hurts—a lot. My heart aches for

is questioned by others, because no one's individuality could never be taken away by another person. You are who you are, regardless of who you associate with. I figured that was the contributing factor that causes my relationships to fail. And I'm sure I'm not the only one who can attest to that. Also, I can say that the stereotypes and stigmas attached to fem-men and (trans)women are also a factor in the relationships between us and the (masculine) men. I would always think that the men I dated were ashamed of being with me when in reality they're ashamed of themselves. Their own insecurities, unassurances, and peer pressures cause them to fall into society's conformative gender identities and roles, but in reality who ANYONE associates with does NOT add or take away from who we are as individuals. It's all what we make it and how we view ourselves. I love you ALL! Thanks for checking in and the support! TTYL!

xox<3,
CeCe

August 4, 2013

Injury and Insult: Trayvon Martin, Racism in the System, and a Revolution amongst Us

As I sit and watch Michelle Alexander and Chris Hayes have a conversation about race, as well as all of the nation in light of the George Zimmerman acquittal, it can't be any clearer that the injustice system has failed us once again. So with that it's obvious to know how I feel at this time. Not just for myself but for all the "minorities" who have been affected by this faulty judicial system that treats us as second class citizens, even less than that. To be looked down upon and to add injury to insult, laugh in our faces, throw salt on our wounds, and even piss on our graves. Rapper Lil' Wayne said it best, and I quote, "God bless Amerika, this ol' godless Amerika . . . sweet land of kill 'em all and let 'em die." . . . After the Zimmerman trial, many activists and organizations rallied and

an issue that I've had to deal with. Me being of different ethnicities, I never found room to discriminate or judge someone racially, even though I know that I have been indirectly judged by many of different races, along with being discriminated for my sexual preference. But to deal with racism and transphobia directly and upfront is very hard. Even hearing the words being said left me in total confusion and shock. And to have to be attacked in my own community by individuals who felt it was their duty to yell hate speech at not only me, but my family who was with me, and attack me for their own satisfaction of making someone else's life miserable. I felt that I've worked very hard from where I started, to where I'm at now in my life, just to have it all taken away from me. . . . And now I have to deal with the repercussions of other people's hateful actions. To deal with the nightmares, the stress, and the PTSD. To feeling paranoid that someone might try to kill me, or my family. To be unsure of where my future lies. I feel like the person I used to be, who didn't know what life was about, or how to handle it. But I know with the support of my family, which is everyone who has been with me through this tedious journey, I will be better in time. I won't let the actions of hateful people detour or distract me. I will continue on my path to loving myself, and others. But most importantly, continue in my pursuit of happiness.

Love,
Honee Bea[3]

February 14, 2012

Sometimes I feel blank, like a canvas. Waiting for its oils and pastels and watercolors to help bring out its true colors. To become the Monet or Mona Lisa of this reality. I dream for the paints of life to create my beautiful existence. Where vibrant colors aren't just seen, misunderstood. But taken for all their glories. Bright and Beautiful like you and I . . . we are the colors. And without the col-

ors our lives will be blank. Like the untouched canvas, mundane and lacking. Our canvases are created to be filled, which is condign. And the colors of our lives are to consume the canvas to express love, joy, individuality, growth and all the pictures that express our lives. And as we are the canvas, we are also the illustrator. And with every stroke of the brush, we decide how our art of life will be. Pictures full of life's achievements and the possibilities. Creators of our own masterpieces, how will you depict your picture? Will you leave your canvas blank and unfulfilled, or will your tableaux show all that life has to offer? And so, I ask that you all will not leave your canvases undone. Use every color imaginable to show who you are inside and out, for every tint and every hue counts. And as you create your picture remember you are the illustrator, so no one can create your picture but you. So make it the most precious and most beautiful picture that you can, with love, truth, and joy in every color.

Love,
Honee Bea

April 12, 2012

A couple of days ago I woke up and felt drained so I found some inspiration in the Bible. I usually don't read the Bible, but that day it called for me. And as usual I don't go looking, yet I let it lead me, and it took me to 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1 through 13, which gave me strength & peace. It talks about love, which is the best way of all. It says, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I had the understanding of a child. When I became a [wo]man I put childish ways behind me. Now we see only a dim likeness of things. It is as if we were seeing them in a mirror. But someday we will see clearly. We will see face to face. What I know now is not complete. But someday I will know completely, just as God knows me completely. The three most important things to have are faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them is love." This passage was

Thank you for being a top notch mom.

June 29, 2013

Masculine Men and "Outside Speculators"

After having a conversation with a close friend of mine about masculine men and their identities as individuals and their involvement with feminine gay men and/ or (trans)women, I figured I'd use this for a topic for this post. It all started when the subject of my male friends came up, which included someone I've been involved with for three years. I was explaining each of my involvements with each guy and how they all differed. But the common factor with them was how secure each of them were with me with their identities as masculine men being questioned by "outside speculators," and how that affects the relationships I have with them. For all of them it varied with different results, and I can say that men's masculinity is very important to them and that their relationships with others do indeed affect their masculine identities apart from their individuality. So the underlying question here is, why do masculine men get so caught up in the opinions and ideas of others? And not saying that all (masculine) men are like that, but the majority are. I can say that there has only been one (very) masculine man that has not let others' ideas affect our friendship, and that has actually made us grow closer and now I can say he is one of my closest friends. Anyways . . . I would figure that a (masculine) man's dominance and assertiveness would put him in a position to hold his ground, that as the "man," he should (or would) use his masculine authority to show his right to be involved with whoever he pleases. Right? . . . My idea is that when a man's ego and reputation are at stake, they fold into the pressures of society's idea of what masculin/ity is. For me, it comes off as if femininity, homosexism, or transgenderism is contagious and that the man's masculinity is jeopardized with the association of the fem-man and/ or (trans)woman. But that's not at all the case. A masculine man should never get hung up on whether his identity as an individual

equality. And it is up to us to show that we are concerned and that none of our struggles will go in vain. . . .

xoxo
CeCe

May 17, 2013

A Major Milestone: My 25th Birthday!

Greetings my loves! Well, despite the shitty circumstances I'm in, I'm excited to say that I'll be turning 25 this month . . . YAY! Forme being in prison for saving my own life is worth celebrating another year, even if it's in a fucked up environment. I feel blessed—no I am blessed to say that I've lived for a quarter of a century. That through my trials and tribulations, through my life's quarrels, that when I never thought I'd make it past the age of sixteen, I triumphed over all obstacles and that in itself is a victory. So for me, this is a major milestone, especially considering the violence against transwomen and the injustices of a faulty "judicial system" and a society that's been hijacked and distorted by radical-religious ideas. I can say that through all the adversity I faced over the course of time I lived so far, I've evolved and accomplished more than I would have ever imagined. And I can only go up from here! And it's also a blessing to have such wonderful, loving, caring people in my life. I want to take this time to thank those people who have grown to know me and love me as I do for them. I love you all so much, there aren't even words to express my love and gratitude for you all. Also to all the supporters around the world I LOVE YOU ALL! I also want to give a major shout-out to my mom, and all moms around the globe in honor of Mother's Day. I love you so much mommy, and I love both my grannies and all my beautiful aunts. These women are great examples of strong, fierce females and I'm so appreciative of them for being understanding and caring. And for my mom who is supportive and helping me through this tough time, you've been a great mom and I love you.

almost poetry to me, but most importantly I acknowledged and understood what the scripture was telling me. For a long time in my own life I struggled to know the identity of love. I searched high and low, and the wanting of love resulted in me conceiving a false love for others and myself. And like the scripture said, I saw things more clearly and I've seen those things face to face in reality. When I have given up on love, whether it be with me, my family and friends, or even my partners, I realized that love is unending and cannot be avoided. And it started with myself. And all the while I searched and longed for love, and didn't even love myself. So that's where I started, and now I have enough love within me to love myself and all of you. I love you all because you all invested in me what I could have not done on my own. Your own time, dedication, and emotions. And wherever it may have come from, it has given me the motivation and inspiration to fight for all of us. Society says that love is one way and very black and white, but we all know that love is a bustling highway and bursting with all vivid colors. They tell us who we can and can't love, how we should love them, and why. And well, that's not love at all because love is natural, organic, how it was intended to be before it was used for greed and manipulation. Love can never be manufactured! Those who oppose us couldn't stop the love which has, and was defined, to bring us all together. To give us the strength and the mental durability to go the distance and fight this evil who tells us we are wrong. We all were made in the image of God, and he makes no mistakes I love all of you, no matter what, and I believe in my heart that you love me too. We are all different with different beliefs and a different story to us all, but we are connected through that and our love for each other draws us closer. What's most important is to love those who hate you and have wronged you, for they are wrong and they only see love on a one-way street. But they are still lost and do not know love at all. This situation I'm in would have made one second guess their own faith, trust, and love but I know where my heart and mind is. Plus, the support of all those I

love lets me know there is no situation or hardship that I or any of us can't overcome. . . . I love you all, and I give much thanks and appreciation.

—CeCe

May 11, 2012

“Go beyond Our Natural Selves”

Hi everyone! Before I start, I just want to thank all of you and everyone who has invested their time, dedication, perseverance, and most importantly, the love and willingness to be open and allow the most personal parts of your inner-beings to be involved with this case and the metamorphosis of myself into a more spiritual, grounded, loving woman. . . . I love you all and I thank you from the bottom of my bottomless heart with truth and sincerity. One thing I've learned, which was brought to my attention from a close friend, was that throughout this case, from the beginning to end, all of us have played a part in this “mirroring effect,” where we see each other as we saw ourselves, giving to each as we would, or have wanted to, for ourselves. And in each of us was that struggle, and that was also seen, so like we would have tried for ourselves we uplifted and encouraged each other to go beyond our natural selves and to have the faith to move mountains. And know that every day I look in the mirror, not only do I see myself, but I see all of our beautiful spirits together with one voice in a continuing struggle against hate and oppression, where we speak of love and TRUE FREEDOM. I want everyone to know they had a part in my evolution, whether it was a visit or a letter in the mail. Just know it made a difference in my life. And just as you did for me, I hope that I did the same for you. Now, I know circumstances have taken a turn, and it probably wasn't expected, or probably was.[4] None of that actually matters. But what does was to know that even though there were those who thought they defeated us, we never threw in the towel. And to know I still had the support of all of you

ness. A woman from the other group decided to throw her alcoholic cocktail in my face, and to add insult to injury, she smashed her glass cup in my face which lacerated my cheek deep enough to cut a saliva gland which caused painful complications later on after getting 12 stitches. When the police arrived it wasn't hard for them to assume who the aggressors were—surely, for them, it had to have been the group of black kids who started all this drama. At least that was the feeling I was receiving by the way they were treating me and my friends. And instead of taking me directly to the ambulance, they made me sit in the back of a squad car in handcuffs while bleeding badly and in very bad pain. When I was finally transported to the ambulance, I was immediately bombarded with questions, even before I could get the medical attention I needed. And when I got to the hospital it didn't go any better. I was told to take off all my clothes, after that I was shackled to a hospital bed, and poorly examined hence the large deformity that was on my left cheek from a saliva gland being cut. From there I stayed in an interrogation room for over 5 hours. And it all went downhill from there. I can say that I'm so blessed to have such wonderful, caring, loving friends, family, and supporters that helped me through this injustice. But it does go to show that there is nothing really in place for women to protect themselves—ourselves. We need to unite to make a voice for all those who have become a victim of violence. I want to shout-out all the organizations and programs that are doing just that. To all those who showed up to the 1 Billion Rising event in Pittsburgh on Valentines Day I LOVE YOU ALL! I also want to shout out all the victims of violence that were honored at the event: Patreese Johnson, Charmaine Pfender, Marissa Alexander, and Tanika Dickson. I LOVE YOU ALL! We are all victims of violence and the injustices and oppression of a faulty legal system and the PIC. And in memoriam of all our fallen sisters, this is for you! Our flames of resilience and tenacity burn bright in the efforts of a revolution for women. We will not give up until there are the necessary changes in this world for better protection and

(trans)women that I initially did for a panel for the U of Mbut because of the DOC drama, I never got a chance to finish it . . . until now. I hope you all enjoy it. I love you all! TTYL![7] A major problem in the entire world is violence against all women, which also includes transwomen. Throughout time, women have been subjected to the cruel “iron fist” of the male species’ ever-inflicting egos. The violence that has been upheld for centuries has affected us all, whether it be a tyrannical leader’s harsh rule over a nation or domestic rule inside the household. Women have a higher rate of experiencing violence in all its forms—physical, verbal, and/or sexual. In most cases we are the victims of murder, and in the act of defending ourselves we are subjected to time, even life in prison. How can society say that it detests and challenges violence against women, when there is very little, if any, real help for us, and the help we give ourselves results in punishment? Street violence and transwomen go hand in hand, and I’m sure that if asked any transwoman can agree that most of her conflicts occurred outside of her dwelling. For me, all of the incidents that I’ve experienced were outside of the home. I, and most transwomen, have to deal with violence more often and at a higher rate than any cissexual person, so every day is a harder struggle, and the everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk, even something as simple as taking public transportation. Street violence has affected me drastically, and I think—no, I know—that if I never learned to assert myself that I would’ve never gained the courage to defend myself against those who have no respect or gratitude towards others in the world, I would have met my demise years ago.

Currently, I am in a men’s state prison for the death of someone I accidentally stabbed in the act of defending myself. It all started around 12 a.m. on June 4th, 2011, when a group of racist drunks began to verbally bash my friends and I on our way to a local 24-hour grocery store. After being called everything from faggots to niggers, tempers escalated and I was caught in between the mad-

made my decision worthwhile. There were many reasons for my decision, but the most important things that mattered were being able to continue my works and the battle against hate in my freedom rather than in oppression, and also, just being able to be with all of you again. When I thought about all things, considering the situation, I realized that my true nature is to take responsibility for my part in the incident. That was the hardest part for me because I didn’t want to have that association of those ideas or even the feeling of knowing what I knew because I knew it wasn’t of my nature. But I realized trying to deny or escape it wouldn’t make it go away, as I have done with most things in my life. Once I was able to understand, acknowledge, and accept things as they were, I was able to grow from it and even attain the compassion and empathy for those who have wronged me in this situation, as well as those that have troubled me all my life. I know that this incident will always be a part of my life, but I made the decision to not let it continue to be a burden in my life, and no matter what path I may take after this I will not go into whatever may come with extra baggage or any regrets. And hopefully you all can also evolve and progress in life without holding on to the things that keep you from achieving self-enlightenment. I’m pretty sure most people heard the saying “you can’t love anyone, if you don’t love yourself,” and that is true. But it goes beyond that. You can’t LIVE if you don’t love yourself. The fears and hate of a patriarchal society have told us that we don’t fit the mold. But no two people are alike, so what mold do they speak of? They implant in the mind and heart that if we aren’t them, then we’re wrong. And in most cases these psychological manipulations work, and those who “don’t fit the mold” try to fit it, or break themselves trying to. I was one of those people. On the verge of suicide trying to figure out why I wasn’t normal. Unfortunately, unlike myself, many young teens and even adults destroy themselves, whether it be mentally, spiritually, or even physically, trying to live up to something or someone they are not. But being true and loving yourself is true living and loving. Then in

that a person can go beyond their natural selves and do things that were unimaginable to their own mind. Never doubt or underestimate your own abilities. We are all stronger, smarter, talented, more beautiful and resilient than we were told. Now I know this for myself, as I want all people to know for themselves. The best things in life are truth, love, and knowledge. Even in the Bible it says, "There is gold. There are plenty of rubies. But lips that speak knowledge are a priceless jewel" (Proverbs 20:15). What I try to give back is the knowledge I have attained throughout my lessons in life, and even though I'm only 23 years young, I've been around for hundreds of thousands of years (LOL). And I just want to share what I know with all of you, and also to leave for future generations who will need these words to be people of love and understanding. My love now is unconditional and everlasting. My pride is still intact, but my humbleness is overflowing. I know things about myself that I never imagined. I hate that it took an incident of this magnitude to show me, and all of us, who we really are and what we are capable of. My message to everyone is to go beyond your natural self, live and love freely, be true to your heart and never hide who you are! Love is eternal and will always prevail. I love you all sooooo much, and whatever awaits my future I know the love and support will keep me pushing for inner strength and knowledge. I want to thank everyone again for EVERYTHING! Now, go live and love freely!

Love,
Truth Power Princess A.K.A.
CeCe

November 16, 2012

On Trans Day of Remembrance

In light of Trans Day of Remembrance, this letter is more of a proposal to the LGBTQI community, specifically to my wonderful sisters of the "transnation." My objective is to share ideas and

reactions between me and a close friend who was a very masculine stud. She would always compliment me on my prettiness, or my body, or my fashionable style. The flirting became something of the norm, and it really made me contemplate my feelings for her, and how different it felt that it was a her. Then one night, after me and some friends left the gay club downtown, there she was. Was it even more a "coincidence" that we were both at the same club that night? We shared a couple of dances, but mostly were with those we came with. As I stood there, being P.G.T. (Pretty Girl Tippy), she came over to tell me my dress was fitting right and how good of a dancer I was. All I could do was smile and blush. As the club poured out from closing, and people mingled, there we were making jokes about her fucking me and it didn't seem weird at all. That led to her kissing me and to me it felt good. Me, the girl who was penis obsessed, is kissing a stud in the middle of the walkway while the gaybies around us cheer and whistle. So there I had to admit that it wasn't the fact that I was kissing a girl, because that didn't matter anymore. Her masculinity was what turned me on. After I realized that I understood myself more than ever. I was starting to see people as individuals, and being attracted to both men and women was all in the case of femininity and masculinity. So there is the possibility that pansexualism can be the evolution of the world, but that can only proceed through acceptance of others and ourselves, and I know that that is something that I try to reiterate as much as often in these posts. With acceptance comes love, and with love comes happiness. And who doesn't want to be happy? Just something to think about.

CeCe

May 12, 2013

Violence against (Trans)Women Today

I wrote a short essay on street violence against women and

up and get ready for a revolution, and it will not be televised!

January 15, 2013

Embracing Pansexuality?

Being a (trans)woman, I constantly have to deal with men, now more than ever since being in here. And with that I'm always faced with having to explain the "laws of attraction," and why they have these feelings. As of recently I've become very close with this guy and we've become the best of friends. We discuss our dreams, goals, relationships or anything that we might want to share with the other. Then one day he says to me, "I don't like men—" I butt in "I don't identify as male." "But . . . I want you to know that if I love you, it's for you . . ." At that moment I really didn't know how to feel because for the first time, in a long time, a man can admit to falling in love with me or anyone for who they are. As he identifies as "straight," and so do most of the men I date . . . or, "other." I know that they are attracted to my femininity, and I know I'm as femme as they come. But, as a bonus, if the person is willing to really get to know me, then they are intrigued and attracted to my intelligence, my independence, and even my meek submissiveness. It's even funny sometimes to see men become hypermasculine creatures to assure themselves of their own "straightness" by proclaiming their love for vagina or by challenging another man to push-up competitions. I just think it's about time for masculine men to embrace who and what they are attracted to, and learn to stop going for physical and focus on mental, emotional, and spiritual connections. This is also true for women, so don't think you all got out of this easily.

Even for myself, I found myself saying I can't like girls, that that ship has sailed and the attraction wasn't there. That was until I became more experienced in the world, and learning about femininity and masculinity. The more I understood about myself the more I realized what it was I was actually attracted to. And this all became very clear to me when I kept encountering actions and

ignite a spark in the women (and I use the term woman broadly to express all women and not having to put "trans" in front of the term. We are all WOMEN, be it that that's what you identify as, and I don't speak for all women but those who identify as such) to change our perspective of our communities (be it our neighborhoods, abroad, and the LGBTQI communities) and ourselves. . . . Now, prior to this we've had many conversations with my lovely friend and colleague Katie Burgess (Executive Director of Trans Youth Support Network - TYSN) about my future beyond the "concrete chaos," which includes my position at TYSN and how my position of leadership can bring a change to TYSN and how the "world" views (trans) women, for the better. And after [Trans Day of Remembrance events], it felt that I wanted to take on this challenge of being a leader now more than ever. It was fate that at the moment of having these feelings, I received a review packet of TYSN's Leadership Program with all these wonderful ideas and solid policies. And of course, me being the optimistic and sometime overly-anxious person that I am, I was so charged to get to business. And like any person with optimism, sometimes it can be scary and overwhelming, especially when it's a job or craft that one enjoy and cherish, like this is for me. And I don't know how to handle it, all these ideas and feelings and wanting to go all in. So I felt a little lost and had all these questions that felt unanswered. For me, I go to my faith which is anything spiritual. From prayer to yoga, I do it all. For this, I was drawn to my Tarot cards (thanks Kat!) and it seemed like they read into my soul and hit dead on. I asked the deck: "How does leadership and my future come together and how do I handle it, and is this where I should be (referring to being a leader)?" After I asked, I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths. I pulled four cards and laid them out. I opened my eyes and there was the Two of Bones, the Instructor (aka the Hierophant), Mentor of Bottles, and The Code.[5] After giving myself such a relevant and accurate reading, I know that this is where I belong (referring to being a leader). That most times in our lives we

question our greatness, and sometimes feel that we won't or can't deal with the pressures of being leaders, to own the power to have authority and make changes, even if it's what we want the baddest in life. And from the Leadership Development Program review, I know that our beliefs can be passed on and taught to our future leaders of the LGBTQI community. To have rights and a voice. To be able to walk in this world, not afraid and actually feel like a human being and not a shadow in a corner. At TYSN, we believe that our trans youth know themselves, believe in each other, can create the basis of respect by understanding our fears, are all teachers and learners all the time, that we are all mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, daughters and sons, but most importantly we are all worth it, worthy, beautiful, strong, more than a binary, are able to become self-actualized, can and have already succeeded as a person, and of course, leaders. We need to understand this now more than ever. We need to not only celebrate for Trans Day of Remembrance, but also become self-aware and ready to put an end to our community being the focus of violence. Of course it is more than important to recognize and pay homage to our fallen, but we also need to put our feet down and start being real leaders and making this stand. And personally speaking, if it's true that this is my personal journey as a leader, I want to lead my troops to victory. I can't continue to say "how bad" that another brother, sister, mother, father, partner, friend is gone from blind-hatred. From ignorance and discrimination. I would have rather been punished for asserting myself than become another victim of hatred. No, I'm not saying violence is key or all people should react the way I did, but our communities, whether here or abroad, have become the victim of malicious and hateful crimes. We need to start now. Make your voices heard. Reach out to the lawmakers, hell get it to the president if we have to. But we need to stop and work from inside out. We need to find strong leaders who can handle the pressures of being just that. Also we need to stop "throwing so much shade" to each other. All that anger that we direct towards each other should be directed at its

true source, the people who treat us badly. The politicians who act like we don't exist and don't focus on the rights and safety of the LGBTQI people, especially (trans)women. I would be lying if I said that I once wasn't a shady girl, but now I am a woman who wants to be a role model and a leader for the (trans)woman of the 21st century. To be unmarginalized and recognized for who I am, and who we are: strong, wonderful, loving women, and that we are people. That femininity can be as, if not more, strong and resilient than masculinity. That we deserve the same rights as any heterosexual, cissexual, or any person who objects against our being. It kills me to know that a man, or any person with a penis, can get a "genital pump," with medical insurance, but we as (trans)women have to struggle with costs for GRS[6] and other trans related medical issues, some of which are not even considerable for insurance coverage. Crazy, right? So my proposal is for all the organizations who are for growth of the (trans) youth, for the growth of OUR communities and such, to now take a collaborative into effect. To connect and extend to other organizations. To start building leaders and making changes for the better. At TYSN we believe that we can bring the (trans)community together, that we can foster the creation of POWERFUL art, that we can change the world, that we can create empowerment, that we can work with existing systems and outside systems to create resources for self and community and importantly, that we can overcome adversity and build a whole, balanced, and successful life. And I know we want that for all our (trans)women around the world. We need for our mission to promote racial, social, and economic justice for trans youth, with freedom to self-define gender identity and expression. I love my people and I want us all to succeed. It won't be long before I'm out and I want to be involved with all those who are willing to step