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Survival Praxis through Hood Feminism, Negritude and Poetics

Clareese Hill

ABSTRACT In efforts to protect my sanity while learning computational arts at a Western institution, I have established a subversive anti-conformist strategy where I activate the ideologies of Hood Feminism, Negritude and Poetics to survive. Hood Feminism explores Black womanhood in a different modality from Black feminist studies. I am activating Hood Feminism in its intended form as praxis of women of color who survive without access to resources and privilege. These are women who survive by all means necessary against the propagation of toxic ideologies of Western society. I am activating Negritude as a way of maintaining positionality to the desired behavior that is institutionally imprinted on students, especially students of color. Negritude is a way for me to constantly reject the efforts of the conformist hegemonies by connecting with what it means to embody Blackness. Poetics materializes as a method of connecting with computation and other students in a meaningful way.

Introduction

This article is an aspect of my practice-based research project where an inquiry is made into the validity of identity. My research is the establishment of a Post-Identity Dimension where rest is at the forefront. The heuristics toward the aesthetics of the Post-Identity

Dimension is supposed by utilizing emerging media and spatial computing. The article is a survival praxis that I established during a two-year period of my project I spent researching pedagogical methodologies of institutional programs concentrated on technology and art. The survival praxis activating Hood Feminism, Negritude and Poetics is an attempt at surviving institutional spaces where minority students are othered through the Western-centered pedagogy.

The GUIDE is a performative aspect of my research that embodies critical theory from Black studies, Black Feminist studies, Post-Colonial studies and Caribbean studies. The GUIDE is a recognition of how W. E. B. Du Bois describes double consciousness – a survival praxis of how the Black body performs in anticipation of being trapped in the gaze of being other. The GUIDE presents a commitment to what Christina Sharpe¹ addresses as “Wake work.” In this conjuring of a survival praxis in the patriarchally founded world, “Wake work” operates as a way of thinking about historical trauma in a transcendent future. The praxis queries the relevance of time and space in relation to the durational performance of Black female existence. The GUIDE is of a non-material matter of essences, an abstraction of Black mysticism² and critical theory, from the Post-Identity Dimension. A dimension where an identity can go to rest. This dimension is one that sits parallel to reality without collapsing into it. The GUIDE arrives, holds space, and introduces a new consciousness by acknowledging the complexity of the marginalized citizen’s ties to the land in its past, present and future lives.

The GUIDE collaborates with The BODY – a materiality that holds lived experiences as an Afro-Caribbean American woman. She serves as the auto-ethnographer that witnesses her existence through her diasporic ties to West Indian heritage. The BODY realizes its place as an occupant of a Post-Colonial landscape performing in a racialized body. The performance is concerned with fidelity, the social legibility that is held in the suffocating monolithic institutional structures of toxic Western ideologies. Collaboratively, they bring forth their proposal for surviving systemically driven toxic institutional spaces of the Western Landscape. They unpack how The BODY and other bodies that experience social dissonance do not have to endure habitual discomfort due to overt and subversive subjugation tactics. The GUIDE allows these bodies to realize how they can wield discomfort, anxiety, anger, disappointment and fear to conjure a space of restorative Otherness instead of occupying and being treated as the other. They acknowledge the unresolved, to be in, with and around otherness to work from the margins³ and the undercommons⁴ of the Western categories of bodily importance.

In existing in the category of the other, The BODY is weary from being a temporary occupant. She experiences her identity in shifting modalities in relation to the space she occupies, the ideas that she has and her audacity to voice them. Currently, she has been purposely destabilized by occupying the space of the educational institution. By

understanding the gaze that is projected on her and the unsolicited consequences that follow, she conjures a praxis for survival that includes collaborating with The GUIDE. The GUIDE and The BODY of The GUIDE collaborate through urgency.

The GUIDE conjures a survival praxis through activating and embodying Hood Feminism, Negritude and Poetics of Relation.

The GUIDE arrives in time. observes time's relationship to space and rejects its importance.

The GUIDE Speaks:

The BODY that I am collaborating with is an Afro-Caribbean American Woman.

An unprotected identity of the Black woman occupying space in America.⁵

A physical body that has been habitually trained toward assimilation as a way of survival since it was born into the privilege of American citizenship.

To understand how this assimilation is indoctrinated, first The BODY must have an ontological revelation.

Experiencing the jarring moment when the recognition surfaces – the difference between her and the Western world because of her race and gender.

“After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁶

This societally spawned dissonance, this destabilization, causes the enacting of a twoness, a double consciousness,⁷ a fragmenting of the two unreconciled sides of the dichotomy of her blackness as a categorized materiality, and her Blackness in its mystical futurity and capability to transcend trauma.

Two thoughts, two ideals, two sets of behaviors, code switching, in one marginalized body. Viewing herself through the racially motivated lens of contempt or pity. The contention of these two fragments attempting to keep from being torn asunder in the trajectory of the Western gaze and its implicated expectations. An impossible task for The BODY to perform. A measuring that will always fall short because the system is designed for The BODY to fail.

This dissonance caused by the failure to measure the expectations is amplified in the educational institution.

She enters a space to learn computational practices, the pedagogy and the rhetoric of the ecology intentionally leaves her out.

Computation is seen as a commodity of the elite, as a privilege bestowed upon those born into their majority status and as a marker of societal progress of the West.

The BODY endures the role of “student.”

While obtaining knowledge, enacting a twoness is imperative.

It is an automated script that is triggered to protect her when she is fragmented because her body and ideas do not align with egotistical ideological homogeneity of the patriarchal administration who possess majority shares of social capital.

The feeling of being left out is reiterated through interactions with her peers and faculty as she is relegated to the periphery.

She is a tourist – a temporary occupant. Allowed to be in the space of the institution but that privilege is dependent on sanitized behavior and can be easily revoked.

From the margins,⁸ from the undercommons, she embodies a refusal of this fragmenting of her intellectual and ontological personhood. She disavows the sanitizing of her diversely informed ideologies for the stake of being institutionally legible.

“If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the ‘we’ who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after ‘the break’ will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.”⁹

The precarity is intensified through institutional hegemonic practices.

Practices around creating and maintaining toxic ecologies.

These ecologies are important to the façade of the brand, the branded body that makes it through the gauntleted curriculum, both academic and psychological.

Individuality and holistic identity are subversively discouraged.

“The institution is, however, a container technology. You reproduce something by stabilizing the requirements for what you need to survive or thrive in an environment. Once these requirements have been stabilized, they do not need to be made explicit.”¹⁰

Arriving at the institution from dubious origins, as the systematic architecture is not designed to care for her and will never be. Her being granted access is both a transgression on the system and a performance of institutional diversity initiatives. Fulfilling some kind of asymmetrical attempt at fabricating the illusion of equality.¹¹

The BODY is further fragmented into a gendered performance.¹²

Is the female identity expected to maintain a certain amount of agreeability?

How does a marginalized identity commit to a performance of cultural coherence?

A performance that operates around her role as a graduate student participating in institutional diversity as a woman of color and all of the labor that comes along with these categorizations?

Is it a performance of gratitude for being bestowed temporary privilege?

The BODY performs the repetitive duck, dodge, avoid of sparring against the infliction of institutionally spawned wounding. A process that is anchored in being one of the fewer than twenty women of color out of about 300 students. Enduring in the insensitive hubris of faculty and how they establish the order of the toxic ecology they govern through favoritism and the dangling of positions of prestige at technology companies, tech studios and residencies.

privilege vs angst.

As privilege is an energy-saving tool.¹³

Angst is just angst and is designed to distract.

The feeling that rises in her chest when a micro aggression is thrown her way.

The breathlessness caused under these conditions makes her angry and sad at the same time.

The Black female subjectivity is seen as one that can endure more trauma inflicted through a multiplex of racialized misogynistic practices.¹⁴

The Strong Black Woman is the role that The BODY has performed, is performing and will perform.

That performance has been successful so far as she has been given the position as tourist in spaces that her peers, who share the same category of marginalized identity, might not be granted access to.

A Black female body that could end up like Sandra Bland¹⁵ if there is resistance against the system, the educational institution is not agnostic from this fact.

In this case, she just feels stressed to death in terms of sly comments from her instructors who should be teaching the nuances of code syntax. Instead, her education is weaponized to constantly reposition her into her minority identity. Reminding her that she is a tourist. Reminding her that she resides in the undercommons.¹⁶

Enacting a twoness and staying in her lane.

She is expected to take on the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman who does not have the need to express emotions.

Or more like, she is not given the space to express emotions.

She attempts to let those who administer and maintain the institution know how she feels in real and emotional ways, hoping they see how important it is to be equitable because it hurts to experience bias.

And when she does, those who enjoy their privilege, the homogeneous administrative identities, decide to ignore her in the halls and avoid eye contact at all cost.

The best result is the fake half-smile that is an insincere customer service mechanism to the student in the university.

Emoting means she is not strong enough to endure.¹⁷

So, The BODY makes the decision to let go of enacting a twoness through engaging with Black Feminist studies.

What does it mean to reject a system that sees her status as precarious in relation to their privilege?

Do they wield negative feedback when she activates the slippage in her performance of twoness, when they hear her true voice surface?

She must sustain an uprightness, a balancing act while being on colonized land fielding all of its traumatic geological memory.¹⁸

The BODY passes her experience through the lens of Transatlantic industry, dehumanization, inferiority.

To activate the slippage and disavow the trauma of the system, Hood Feminism, Negritude and Poetics are the tools to conjure a survival praxis for sustaining self-care through the trauma of the institution.

Hood Feminism serves as an embodied durational experience of the working-class female of color.

Hood Feminism becomes a strategy for unpacking all of the pitfalls of feminist studies and Black feminist studies as it operates in the Western academy without touching women who are not scholars.

Hood Feminism levels the verticality of privilege around the discourse that happens in regard to the mainstream cornerstones of traditional feminist theory and their place in canonical annals of the academy.

“A lot of the conversations happening then are the same ones happening now. That’s not good. If anything, it points to the stagnation of a movement so enamored with itself that it cannot be bothered to look beyond its reflection. While Big Name

Feminists are debating The End of Men, women on the margins – women like me – are sleeping at train stations and working double shifts for paltry wages. They are buying school supplies with rent money. They are fighting for citizenship because they aren't the 'right kind of immigrants.'

When mainstream feminists do deign to recognize these women, they always talk about them, never to them. They are problems to be solved, not actual human beings. At best, they are worthy of a 200-word blog post or a 10-minute segment on a Sunday morning show. But once the post is published, once the lights are dimmed, it's back to business as usual, and soon we're back to shaming women for taking their husbands' last names."¹⁹

Hood Feminism, for The BODY, means realizing her privilege and its precarity. Realizing that although she has done everything "right" in terms of attempting to capture the American Dream, of being legible, the value of her identity still hangs in the ontological balance of the Western societal gaze.

Hood Feminism is not a way of resisting the oppressive patriarchal systems that encircle women of color by appropriating those same ideologies and language.²⁰

This is what the mainstream corruption of the intellectual brilliance of woman of color would like us to believe through the labeling of Cardi B. and Rihanna as Hood Feminist.

Hood Feminism puts into practice life at the intersection.²¹

Life at the crossroads of survival, desire, gender and race.

How to persist.

How to negate the necropolitical.

How to live and be with the truth of anti-blackness without absorbing its toxicity.

How to reconcile the inequality in access to basic and economical resources because of gender and race.

How to shift ontological insecurity so that there is a balancing.

How to be a community of women who care for each other.

To embody strength and become grounded by activating Hood Feminism requires a return to Negritude to combat the projected complex of Black inferiority.

Returning to the precolonial site of Blackness.

To realize Blackness is mystical, sustainable and its transcendent possibilities.

To return to before assimilating into the gaze of whiteness was the only mode of survival.

Renouncing European Enlightenment.

A rejection of enacting twoness.

A rejection of the inauthentic life.

A rejection of the notion of a habitual state of struggle.

A new consciousness is brought to the forefront.
 A saving from societally inflicted madness.
 A welcome unfurling of the colonial hold.

“[a]ssimilation ... is a dangerous affair ... [B]orn of fear and cowardliness, [it] always ends in disdain and hatred, and it carries within it germs of struggle; struggle of same against the same, that is to say, the worst of struggles.

It is because of this that black youth turn their backs on the tribe of the Elders.

The tribe of Elders says, ‘assimilation,’ we respond: resurrection!
 What do Black Youth want?

To Live!

But in order to truly live, we must remain ourselves.

Negro history is a three-episode drama, and we are touching upon the third.”²²

The BODY processes these forms of rejection and return through Poetics.

Poetics as an afterlife of colonial conquest and the ideologies of racial bias.

Poetics as a way of communicating from the rhizome negating the medium’s Humanist ties.

Poetics acts in opposition to when cultures, African and indigenous, were disregarded because of their lack of being able to map historicity due to the embodied, ephemeral and oral practice of culture by restoring them to their valid position of knowledge production.

Poetics understands relation with others and respecting their right to opacity undertaking a creolized intermingling.²³

Poetics as a way of exploring relation in everything that is interwoven and interrelated, all that happens in between, the interstitial.

Poetics as a way of closing the gaps in culture, race, gender; disrupting the carrion of Western problematics.

“Starting from the moment that cultures, land, men, and women were no longer there to discover but to know, Relation represented an absolute (that is, a totality finally sufficient to itself) that, paradoxically, set us free from the absolute’s intolerances.

To the extent that our consciousness of Relation is total, that is immediate and focusing directly upon the realizable totality of the world, when we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what?”²⁴

Poetics rejects the Western social architecture of the periphery and the center.

Poetics is a way of connecting with different cultures and citizens.

Poetics collapses the dichotomy of twoness.

Poetics amplifies the provocative relation and to create conversations between her and I.

Poetics maps the relations to the internal self that vibrates outward.

Exploding the disruption of rejection and all of the heaviness.

Poetic fosters relations and connecting in the center of the Wake and the work to be done.²⁵

Pushing past the topology of contemporary Western society in all of its present arrogance informed by its past conquest.

Poetics of relation operates as a way to collapse time, space, territory, landscape, ownership and hierarchies.²⁶

Poetics creates a new vantage point of experiencing, past, present and future standing in the same place all at the same time informing the now moments, the moments where authentic being is activated. Foreclosing on the impoverished condition of segregating cultures and race by extorting its inherent hierarchy by pitting those who are othered against their fellow dwellers of the undercommons.²⁷

This disrupting through the praxis of Hood Feminism, Negritude and poetics allows The BODY to collaborate with The GUIDE opening up the dialectics of consciousness so that we can collaborate.

Exchange experiences and observations in a creolized form so we can complete our "Wake work."²⁸

As Christina Sharpe explains:

"We must be (and we already are) about the work of what I am calling wake work as a theory and praxis of the wake; a theory and a praxis of Black being in diaspora. I am trying to find the language for this work, find the form for this work."²⁹

Clareese Hill is a practice-based researcher. She is interested in exploring the validity of the word "identity" through her perspective as an Afro-Caribbean American woman and her societal role as projected on her to perform as a Black feminist academic. She has given performance lectures in London at Royal College of Art, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, University of Sussex, CUNY Graduate Center, The Chicago Art Department and Smack Mellon in Brooklyn. In May 2020, she co-organized *Occupying the In-Between*, a day-long interactive art research platform that questioned the validity of knowledge production and the body disseminating the research. She has exhibited her research internationally in Chicago, New York, California, London, France and cyberspace. Clareese was a 2020 Eyebeam Rapid Response fellow (phase 1). She holds a Master of Professional Studies in Digital Photography from The School of Visual Art (SVA) in New York City, an MFA from The

School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and a Master of Professional Studies in Interactive Telecommunications from New York University (NYU). She is currently completing a practice-based research Ph.D. across the Art Research and Computing departments at Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

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