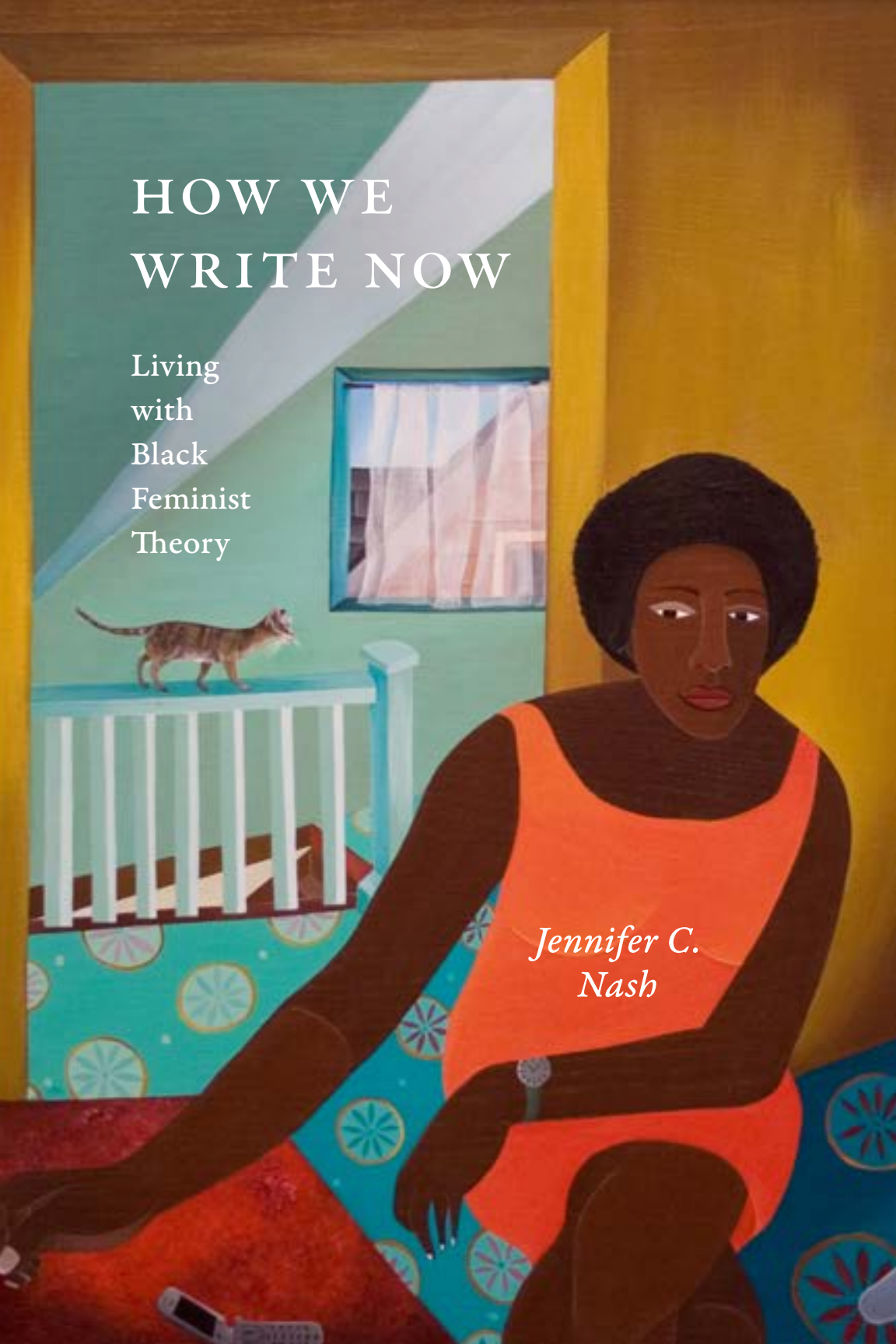
HOW WE
WRITE NOW
Living
with
Black
Feminist
Theory
Jennifer C.
Nash

How We Write Now

BLACK FEMINISM ON THE EDGE

Jennifer C. Nash

HOW WE WRITE NOW

Living with Black Feminist Theory

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2024

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Bird Williams
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester
Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nash, Jennifer C., [date] author.
Title: How we write now : living with Black feminist theory /
Jennifer C. Nash.
Other titles: Black feminism on the edge.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. | Series: Black
feminism on the edge series | Includes bibliographical references
and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023040663 (print)
LCCN 2023040664 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478030461 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478026235 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478059509 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Nash, Jennifer C., 1980—Family. | African
American feminists. | African American women authors. | African
American authors. | African American mothers in literature. |
Feminist literature—United States. | Feminist literary criticism—
United States. | Feminist theory—United States. | BISAC: SOCIAL
SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / American / African American & Black
Studies | LITERARY CRITICISM / Semiotics & Theory
Classification: LCC HQ1197 . N38 2024 (print)
LCC HQ11977 (ebook)
DDC 305.42089/96—dc23/eng/20240124
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040663
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040664

Cover art: Laura James, *Upstairs*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas,
81.3 × 58.4 cm. © Laura James. All Rights Reserved 2024/
Bridgeman Images.

My loss was a tender second skin.
JESMYN WARD

*

I pray my mama don't forget about me.
NONAME

CONTENTS

PREFACE *Beauty, or All about My Mother*

In the time it takes me to write this book, my mother may lose her capacity to read this sentence. Every morning when I meet this work, I write against the cruel force of that realization.

This book's opening sentence contains the conditional: this *may* happen. Everything that conventional medicine has to tell us about Alzheimer's—which is surprisingly little—and how it manifests in those who are diagnosed before their sixty-fifth birthday suggests that my mother's near future holds steady cognitive deterioration. Our world comes to be shaped by statistics and risk assessments; we try to predict something about which predictions are likely to be faulty. We wait. We hope. We monitor. And in the midst of this, we live.

Through a combination of something I can only call luck and the immense generosity of a cadre of colleagues, in the third year of my mother's living-with Alzheimer's, I find myself working at an institution that is twenty minutes from my parents.[1] For the first time in my adult life, I live in the same city as them. I have grown tired of the "frenzied rituals of academic legitimation," rituals that have, at times, led me to places where I have not wanted to live—or to places I *thought* I wanted to live, only to discover I didn't.[2] The endless choreography of packing and moving, settling and orienting, has been in the service of credentialization. I have also told myself it has been in the name of a certain kind of freedom, inching toward more time and space for the things that I hold dearest, namely, writing every day. But there is a kind of fatigue that academics spend too little time describing, one perhaps more profound for faculty of color, who—in a moment that continues to be marked by anti-Blackness and our peculiar fetishization

and valuation in a marketplace structured by diversity's relentless logics—are moved, traded, shuffled, in an endless game of musical chairs whose results are announced each year on Twitter and Instagram. The previous sentence is not entirely true. We move ourselves. We shuffle ourselves. But we are also moved and shuffled by institutions who promise us *more*: freedom, time, money, autonomy. This all hides something that I think too often goes unnamed in academia: loneliness. *Gratitude* is too small a word to describe what I feel when I find myself simply watching the annual academic musical chairs, the elaborate dance of moving institutions, packing offices, and announcing new titles. I sit this one out, not out of resignation or disappointment, but out of something that academia has not taught me to recognize: contentment.

My parents have a key to our house, and at least three times a week, they stop by. We eat dinner together. We go for walks. We buy each other toilet paper from Target. We change each other's light bulbs, pick up each other's dry cleaning, ferry small boxes of food to each other's houses. This, to me, epitomizes what Christina Sharpe calls "sounding an ordinary note of care."[3] We don't sound it, though. We simply do it. And we do it again and again. In doing it, in repeating it, we make it.

But my mother's diagnosis and the slow pace at which these words are written means that this book might not reach her, or it won't reach her the way I want it to. I use the word *might* because I do not yet know if this project is an attempt to catch her—preserve her—in a moment when there are parts of her that are still recognizable to me, or if this is an effort to mourn her even as this loss is still unfolding. Perhaps, I admit to myself, there is some relief in the fact that this project will not make it to her. My mother would not like the fact of this book. She would not want to find herself the subject of my inquiry, and she certainly would feel some shame at the condition of her memory described in an academic text. I have struggled with what disclosure means for her as we navigate social spaces together—my father and I endlessly assess who needs to know about her diagnosis, until we reach a point when we realize that even if we do not disclose her diagnosis, it is already obvious—and as I navigate my own intellectual interests, which have always been shaped by the conditions of my ordinary life. Sharpe tells us that "there are other stories to tell here, but they're not mine to tell."[4] It is hard for me to ascertain which stories belong to me and what ownership means when we talk about the complicated entanglements of family history. I can't

discern the difference between her story and mine, the boundary between where her life ends and mine begins.

Now there is simply the magnitude of loss, and its long duration. I live my life imagining what it will be to lose her, and with that loss slowly unfolding. I watch her face, carefully record her answers to questions, always, I realize, wondering one thing: What will happen if—when—she forgets me?[5] This is what you should know about me: I bring to this project a dense set of desires for my mother to live on in a form that is familiar to me.[6] I know those desires will not be met. This is the critical and affective energy that animates this book.

I often sit in the uncomfortable space between the theoretical work I teach and my embodied experience. Perhaps many of us do, measuring the complexity of existence by the distance between the text and the body, between the word and the lived. I try to name this space for my students, but I find I often fail to do justice to it with words. I can explain it here like this: I spend this past semester reading feminist texts with graduate students. We circle again and again around the limits of generational logic for feminist inquiry and imagine the possibilities of anti-generational feminist thinking. We talk about the "stories" feminists have told and about feminists' enduring preoccupation with telling time in ways that uphold normative logics of kinship.[7]

I hold secret that I am still seduced by this logic, that the idea of generationality structures my thinking and living in profound ways. I come to write about my mother only after I have a daughter. I feel an invisible thread woven around the three of us, and I feel it tighten as the years pass. We are three generations of only children. We are three generations of only girls. If I let that thread weave one generation back, I see my mother's mother, my grandmother, also an only child. I barely knew her. By the time I was old enough to be curious about her existence, she had already been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and she managed it by retreating from anything that we might call social life. I remember a conversation I overheard where she confessed to my mother—her daughter—that she thought I feared her, that I was uncomfortable around the lapses in her memory, the questions she repeated, the long stares she would cast in my direction as if trying to memorize my face. I was ashamed, and I tried to channel that shame into a kind of contrived generosity. I sat with her. I held her hand. I tried desperately to find a way to comfort her. But I was too young to understand the sheer

pain of a grandmother who felt that the granddaughter right in front of her could not see her. She felt herself disappearing. Or, perhaps worse, that I was disappearing her. Now, nearly thirty years later, as I "gather my ghosts," I realize that I have to contend with this history as part of what binds our four generations.[8] These women are in the room with me as I write, as is my daughter, sitting across the table from me, staring at me with dark eyes that are a mirror image of my own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been made possible by the kindness of the people I hold dearest.

I owe more than I can say to Samantha Pinto, my ride or die and my treasured writing and thinking companion. I thank her for all the times she read this and helped me find a way forward. I am also grateful for our ongoing conversation, for a year of walks around the mid-major, and for the many collaborations that remind me why I do this thing.

Thanks to Emily Owens, my beloved sister, forever homegirl, and deeply generous reader. We started a conversation in the Gato Rojo two decades ago, and we've been talking ever since: celebrating books and babies, exchanging ideas and pages, supporting each other through all of life's challenges and complexities, and chatting about the wondrous stuff of the everyday.

Robyn Wiegman, my dear friend and trusted mentor, read many drafts of these chapters and met their incompletion with her incomparable brilliance, rigor, and willingness to believe in the possible. I am especially grateful for everything she has taught me about feminist institution building, for the way she has made Duke an intellectual home for me, and for the doors she has generously opened at every step of my professional life.

I owe so much to Mishana Garschi, editorial GOAT, queen of all details, and George to my Jerry. I am thankful for her smart feedback, her brilliant editing and copious indexing, and a treasured friendship cemented over cookies, escapes from Evanston, veggie samplers, and *Seinfeld* references.

When I walked into my first day of a new job in 2010, I had the tremendously good fortune of meeting Katie Rademacher Kein. We spent the first six years of our friendship as two kids navigating American studies. We have

spent the last eight years as two kids navigating feminist pedagogy, parenting, and our ongoing attempts to predict who will win March Madness. I am grateful for the many years of daily texts and for her wise and generous feedback on this manuscript.

Thanks to my colleagues in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist studies and friends at Duke University. I owe special thanks to Jolie Olcott—my extraordinarily supportive department chair during my first years at Duke—for friendship and walks, and for Making Things Happen.

Thanks to Durham friends: Chaunesti Webb, Lisa Levenstein, Lauren Henschel, Suzanne Katzenstein, Paniz Musawi Natanzi, Julien Fischer (Duo family), Pete Sigal, Emily Wang, and Sarah Jane Cervenak. Thanks to Anna Storti, Emily Wang, and Pete Sigal for reading an earlier version of this work and offering helpful feedback.

Thanks to friends from the many places that have been home: Durba Mitra, Justin Mann, Jonathan Evans, Amy Siniscalchi, Peter Geller, Amber Musser, Ramzi Fawaz, Meghan Morris and Nate Ela (Chicago family), Attiya Ahmad, Marquis Bey, Emily Hirsch, Tom Guglielmo, and my beloved *co-madre* Maria Duran Pino.

Thank you to my students for asking questions that keep me thinking. And many thanks to the generous participants in the Black Feminist Theory Summer Institute at Duke University in 2022 and 2023 for collectively forging a generative space. I learned so much from moving exchanges with Kevin Quashie, Samantha Pinto, Emily Owens, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Justin Mann, LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Sharon Holland, Sarah Jane Cervenak, Erica Edwards, Jovonna Jones, Tiffany Lethabo King, Sherie Randolph, Mercy Romero, Bianca Williams, Marquis Bey, Antonia Randolph, and Danielle Purifoy, and from engagement with two cohorts of incredibly brilliant graduate students. Thank you is too small for what I owe Kevin Quashie, not just for the gift of his beautiful scholarship, but also for his generous engagement with my work at the Summer Institute and beyond.

Duke University Press has been a central part of my intellectual life, and I am grateful for the labor and intellectual commitments of everyone there. Thank you to the anonymous readers who offered their smart feedback on earlier versions of this work. And many thanks to Elizabeth Ault for generous intellectual conversations and lunches from Toast.

Many thanks to my teachers: Liz Roncka for much-needed doses of pandemic Pilates sanity, and Adeline Sussman for many hours spent in the studio working steadily on the practice and helping me keep my mind and body strong.

Thank you to *Signs* for publishing an earlier version of this work, to *Lit Hub* for an opportunity to write personally about loss and family history, and to *Boston Review* (especially Adam McGee) for space to try out ideas that are developed here.

Thanks to my family:

Thanks to the ones who came before me whom I carry in my heart. I keep telling stories about them so that they can live on in my daughter's heart.

My father, Douglas Nash, has traveled with me to this terrain we didn't expect to inhabit, with grace and patience, with good humor and an unyielding commitment to his family. More than that, he has supported me in every way imaginable and taught me so much about the small acts of daily care that underpin love.

This book was motivated—from beginning to end—by a desire to hold my mother, Carolyn Nash, close. I carried her in my mind and heart each morning when I met this work. I am grateful for her affection and her beautiful spirit.

Mom and Dad, thank you is far too small to express my gratitude for your loving presence in every single day of my life. All I can say is come over on Sunday and I'll make you some salmon.

Thanks to Amar (BBD) Ahmad for knowing when to get deep and when to keep it light, for delightfully quirky animations, and for our precious friendship.

Thanks to Naima Ahmad Nash for modeling what it means to be brave, bold, and deeply open to the world. She has opened my heart wider than I ever imagined, taught me that growth and change are possible, and reminded me that kitchen dance parties and macaron afternoons are the stuff of everyday magic. Because she asked for it: "Naima, I love you, more every time."

This book was made possible by Amin Ahmad's steady love. I thank him for getting me, for always knowing how to make me laugh, for sanity walks and cuddles, and for the millions of small gestures that show his affection. More than anything, I thank him for the gift of his companionship and the pleasure of spending every day talking to each other. The years pass, the memories multiply, the roots deepen, the adventures continue, the love grows, and we hold on to one simple philosophy: *twenty years, one mic*.

NOTES

Preface

1 Endless thanks to Robyn Wiegman.

2 Williams, *Rooster's Egg*, 219.

3 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 133.

4 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 6.

5 My thinking here is shaped by Patricia J. Williams's insight. "So all of this leaves me feeling porous, unsettled, having lost the coherence of an identity I had thought of as my own. It brings felt meaning to the koan that novelist and Zen master Ruth Ozeki frequently cites as her meditative inspiration: 'What did your face look like before your parents were born?'" Williams, "Gathering the Ghosts."

6 I am channeling the opening pages of Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. She writes, "You should know you are dealing with someone who is writing this in an old terry bathrobe with a little fringe of blue and white tassels dangling from the hem, trying to decide if she is stupid or crazy" (4).

7 My understanding of feminist stories is indebted to Clare Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter*.

8 Williams, "Gathering the Ghosts."

Chapter 1
Beauty, or, All about Black Feminist Theory's Mothers

1 As I write this, I am deeply grateful for Janelle Taylor's formulation. In "On Recognition," Taylor notes: