[Music fades in and out]

Michelle McKinley: Welcome to the Kitchen Table. My name is Michelle McKinley, and I'm here with Shoniqua Roach and Rhaisa Williams. Rhaisa is a scholar of performance studies whose works engage Black feminism political theory to examine the intersections between Black motherhood, desire, and freedom in the United States. Welcome, Rhaisa.

Rhaisa Williams: Thank you.

Michelle McKinley: Shoniqua, I think, is going to ask the first question, right?

Shoniqua Roach: I am I'm going to kick us off with the first question, which you have. Rhaisa. So given the pandemic, that is devastating. Many Black, Indigenous and Latinx communities, coupled with the onslaught of state sponsored violence against Black people. How do we define a Black feminist ethic in this moment? What does this mean for activist and institutional based formations as we navigate the academy? What forms of praxis can we develop as some of us settle into disembodied teaching formats?

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. So I'll just skip this. I'll say this first. As I was thinking about the questions, that you both sent in advance, and I was like, I don't know if I should be on this show because I don't have any answers. Like, I feel like I should just be a listener because I'm like, I don't know, what is it?

You know? And it's just because, I mean,

Michelle McKinley: You always have a great way of speaking from your heart, and that's why you're on the show.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. And y'all don't get a lot of heart speak tonight.

Michelle McKinley: That's what we want. That's what we want.

Rhaisa Williams: Yes. What y'all going to get from me. But when I'm thinking about this question and I will admit the, the part about the disembodied teaching format, I have no idea.

Michelle McKinley: Because you're on leave. You're on leave.

Rhaisa Williams: I'm on leave. And I had to do it in just the second half of the spring semester. And it was just, it felt so weird to have to do it. It felt almost like a comedian who is on stage and you're delivering jokes, but you can't hear the audience, right? Or like a performer who the you have to engage with the audience, but you can't hear them because everyone needs to be muted, right?

So that you're not hearing the dogs in the background, and whatever going on. And also like some of the students articulated to me, and particularly like in their, their course evaluations, how much they value the in class, like how what it meant to be in the classroom with each other. Because I taught a class called Performing the Black 90s, undergraduate course.

Shoniqua Roach: Oh, that sounds amazing.

Rhaisa Williams: It is. It is such a fun class. And I really do push the students, but it's a class where they can just be their whole little Black selves. Because usually predominately Black. And there's always a lot of just that paralinguistic that, that banter that's happening that just absolutely could not happen on zoom, is couldn't happen. And so part of my self-care, actually, in this moment has been to not think about teaching until I have to.

So I'm like, you know, I can't, you know, the disembodied teaching. I need to start thinking about that, but at some other, point in the future. But, in terms of though thinking about the institution, and a Black feminist care ethic in this particular moment, is also very difficult to think about because there's such a racial and gender relationship to power and institutions.

And how we are one, how we are even seen what things are quote unquote normal. And then how we get seen and unseen. When we're in this heightened moment.

Shoniqua Roach: Rhaisa, it's beautiful. It sounds like for you right now, a Black feminist care ethic is rooted in rest, patience and careful observation. So. Oh, yeah. You know, when my institution, I was part of that cluster higher at Oregon, I'm now I'm now at Brandeis. But when Brandeis sent out a Black Lives Matter statement, I immediately went to my triple AS Department, so African and African-American Studies to ask, are we going to jump on this? Are we going to pen a statement, write a list of demands? And my chair very eloquently said to me, we've been making demands since 1969.

Which I heard very, very deeply because you're right. There's heightened attention to anti-Blackness at this moment. But this is essentially I've been calling it facetiously, Black Lives Matter 2.0. So, we've been seeing this, bearing witness. This is ongoing. And I don't know that we have to rush to a response, rush to, as Michelle said, labor on behalf of the institution.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. Because it feels very much in this moment. And it could be that I am just incredibly pessimistic, but it feels like lip service now is, like this to invoke thing, to have the as a program, as a department, as an institution, as a national organization, we are committed to. And it's just like this. Let's put that paragraph.

And, and especially working with some of the people where I'm like “I am in meetings with y'all and I hear what y'all say.” That again like the mission statements and how they, and some of my colleagues, I feel like overly rely on mission statements are put on the website, to say “we are committed to, you know, non-homophobic, non-racist,” you know, like all these things.

And then the students are dealing with issues. And when the students have complaints, because I'm in a performing arts, like a theater and dance department, and over the past two years our department has, we've got a new chair, which has been really great. And, we've been dealing with like, diversity issues. And so, like my first year on the tenure track, we were going through like diversity programing, through Art Equity that Carmen Morgan runs. And she's a really, really, really great, I mean, and resource. And also just a really great, like, came in to a two day workshop with us and really put white people to task, which was very great. But it's still where students complaints still fall on. Maybe not deaf ears anymore, or maybe I should probably use the word deaf, but on ear on basically that the students complaints. It's not like people saying, “okay, you're just being overdramatic”, which is what used to be the case. It's okay, I hear you. And “we'll do something about that, like a protocol”. And it's certainly those demands. Those issues get lost in a bureaucratic. But that's not the way to do things. And there's like a chain of command that needs to happen.

And so there's something to about institutions where they're able to hide behind, like a bureaucratic protocol. Right. That slows things down. And then other things can get sped up right, and get sped up in a way that is still within. They can pull the resources where it's now sustainable. And other things for some reason is like, you know, oh, we're in the moment and we're excited in the moment.

And then it falls through the cracks because the infrastructure was never there in the first place.

Shoniqua Roach: We were never able to survive. Absolutely.

Rhaisa Williams: Exactly.

Shoniqua Roach: Make a proposal to a newly formed Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. Who will report to the dean and then the provost, and then.

Rhaisa Williams: Write the president or the chancellor and then. Yeah, right. Exactly. Right. Right. Which is then why the chair of the AAAS department is saying we've been making demands in 1969, the same thing at WashU. When, so ours is, so African of African African-American Studies when they became a program in 1969 as well. Right. 68 or 69.

But it was from a list of demands, and they've been continually having to make them. And it wasn't until Ferguson, the uprising, Ferguson, when the program became a department. So that was like 2016. Yeah. When AAAS became a department. Right. So you have 1968 or 69 your program. Then you had to have Ferguson Uprising happen in 2014, but then it's like, okay, wait, people are looking at us now, right?

Michelle McKinley: In 2020, you get a cluster higher and you're you have 48 hours to get there.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, 48 hours get there and it's and opine. Exactly. And it's also it's 12 hires for all the school staff for the med school as well for somebody. So, this is the business schools and the law school, the humanities. And we're like, wait, what? Well, I'm at least I'm like, it's just, you know, but yeah, that's another story.

Shoniqua Roach: So as a feminist center, CSWS is advocating for childcare relief and an institutional recognition of care work. As Black feminist, we are aware of the potential co-optation of the biological heteronormative family that threatens to engulf non-heteronormative family formations. Some of us are queer, some of us are parents, some of us are queer parents. We mothered the children of others. We care for family and relatives across the generations. Often, we are the only successful ones who made it in our families. We have responsibilities and obligations that should be factored into any feminist strategies of care work. How do we take this opportunity to articulate care work based on a Black feminist ethic?

Rhaisa Williams: That's also deeply yeah, it is, it is. It's a really important question because it is about equity amongst all these different aspects. Right. And so thinking about, at the during the diversity training, we had, in my department last year and Carmen Morgan was talking about wealth, because some of my white colleagues were like, well, I wasn't born to a trust fund family, so I'm not wealthy, you know?

And she was like, well, you know, we have to think about how whiteness is still tied to a structure of safety nets. So wealth is not necessarily how much money you have. Your bank account. It's about the access you have to credit and the credit lines and things of that nature. And one thing she said that I really liked is that, for a number of Black people or for number of people of color, period.

But, you know, talking about the Black folks that are bench, and she's using a sports metaphor, the bench isn't that deep. So it's not like you have a lot of players who, you know, you have the players who are starting on the field, and then you have other players who can step in. You know, once the other people get tired, it's like, you know, our our resources aren't that deep right at all.

And so, and thinking about that as a kind of safety net, and what that safety net was, knowing that you don't necessarily have to take care of your parents financially, or that's not something that's at the forefront of your mind. Right? That that changes everything. Like, you know, in my family, I am first generation high school graduate.

And so, you know, when I first got the job at WashU, I'm really happy about it. But I'm also having to think about my parents retirement because they don't have retirement plan. You know,

Michelle McKinley: And, or you could, it can be like a Caribbean immigrant thing where you are, their retirement, your child.

Rhaisa Williams: You know. Yeah. That's the plan.

Michelle McKinley: That is the plan.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. And it's the plan of just this different idea immensely about wealth. And then also too, materially about that wealth isn't something that gets passed down through the generations. It goes backwards. You send back. Right? And so, you know, when I first got my job here, I had my parents got into some some issues with some financial issues, and I had to help them for an extended amount of time.

So that's less time for me to pay off student loans. There's less time for me to be able to save for a hot home or whatever it was I had to do because I had to take care of my parents for, you know, almost a year. Right? I really helped them out, significantly. And that's something that I have been preparing for since I've been in college.

Shoniqua Roach: Absolutely.

Rhaisa Williams: And even before,

Shoniqua Roach: Some of us went to college for that reason.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, it's like, you know, I'm going to be the financial one. I always saw myself as that, like I'm going to be the financial one in my family. And by that it meant that, you know, maybe you I can't help in terms of the day to day. So my other sisters are like, "okay, you know, you would be the one to take care of the day to day, but I will be the one to finance that care, day to day." Right? And so,

Michelle McKinley: That is the true essence of care work. And that is a Black feminist ethic of care work. Yeah. Because you're dividing the labor, the emotional labor, the financial responsibility. Who's going to get the groceries? Who's going to do that? I mean, it is so essential you know.

Rhaisa Williams: This when I was in grad school and, there was a white woman who was the same age as me, and she had bought a condo. And so she's just talking like, “yeah, you know, the condo I think was like, just like a little over a hundred thousand”. And she's like, “yeah, put down 10% and blah, blah, blah”.

And I'm like, “wait a minute, you know, my math skills aren't all that good. But 10% of 100,000 is $10,000, right?” And she's like, “yeah”. And I'm like, so you just, you know, and I, I mean, there probably was, you know, inappropriate. I mean, it's like, you know, pry a little bit more, but I'm like, wait a minute, because she's saying this like, this was just kind of a because she was talking about something else, you know, and so this was just a like a random little background detail.

And I'm like, “so you just have $10,000 to do”. And she's like, “well, you know, my parents, they started a house fund for me. Like when I was a baby”. And I'm like, “wait, what is the house fund?” You know, so this is like it's like a college fund, but also, you know, with wealth or people who, you know, have the know how.

Because, again, wealth isn't necessarily tied to like how much money you have. And it's also that you know, about these financial systems and you have access to these financial systems where you can say, “okay, I just had a baby, so let me put my money away in this like tax sheltered account that, you know, will increase, well, compound interest, blah, blah, blah, so that if my child, whenever they want to buy a home, they'll have a down payment ready for it. They don't have to wait and safe they can live in the present” because I've already been able that time is on my side, right? And times on my children's side and on their children side.

Shoniqua Roach: White supremacy is on your side.

Rhaisa Williams: And white supremacy is is a manipulation of time and time travel, quite frankly.

Shoniqua Roach: And resources.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, yeah, it's the ability to speculate and do things in the future, but then have the myth that, no, I did this on my own and it's very much a present moment. And I'm not, you know, like this idea about this entitlement that's about this, again, this deep wealth, this that was passed down from generation to generation.

But then you still had the bootstrap mentality of, “no, I did this myself. No one gave me anything. So why should we give you anything?” Right? So, it's this way to both just manipulate time and make people feel like and hide the fact that you have time on your

side that you were born into. Just. There's $10,000 waiting for you to buy a condo when you're in grad school, and you came straight out of undergrad.

So, it's not like this person graduated and then worked for a bit and then went back to grad school. No, this? No. Her parents had these great jobs and they were able to do that. And like, “never heard the term for my life like a house fund. Wait, what?” You know, and it's just it's a it's an interesting thing because I think so much about, like, my parents and also, in Black communities, you know, I think it's it may be shifting now, but the importance of life insurance and just the ability to bury your child.

Right. And that is kind of the future we can kind of think of, which is also something to think I tie to, you know, death in so many ways.

Shoniqua Roach: But that's tied to the inevitability of Black death or the continuous possibility of Black death.

Rhaisa Williams: So and that I need to be able to bury you. But the other things about life, you know, in terms of the other kind of nest eggs to have for you, that's not something I've ever heard of or if I wanted to do a for you, I cannot. But I can bury you. And even though now I, you know, even I think that the, the relationship to life insurance has changed a lot and I'm like, what?

Go Fund Mes and things of that nature where it's like, you know, we're trying to, you know, get up money or whatnot. But that's also, I think, just a really interesting thing to think about, like a future and thinking about wealth and thinking about care work. Right? And the ability to do that kind of care work.

And what and what does any look like when these are things you have to think about?

Michelle McKinley: Rhaisa, what would you what would it look like for WashU or wherever you land, to be an institution that responded to your parental and caring needs and your generational needs? You know, one thing is like, “well, they could pay me more money,” but it's not always money. It's a recognition. Right? So that a lot of times and I do think, you know, because the Academy is so pretentious and so upwardly mobile that a lot of people don't talk about stuff like this.

Right? It's it's taboo or it's stigmatized. And so when you ask for stuff like, I remember when I had to ask my dean for, you know, I had a tribe of kids and I was like, I need to do all of this stuff just to establish my career. She never, ever made me feel stigmatized, you know, because I needed childcare.

She was actually the one who told me, “look, apply for this because we've we brought you we've invested in you.” And, so, so that was a, an in like an insight for me that people can

pay it forward and the institutions have to be able to be nimble, be, you know, about these. But also I don't know if it if it's a question of just coming out and saying, “look, these are my needs, but these are also my obligations. And when you get me, you get the whole person.” And like, what would have to shift in the academy for that kind of conversation to happen.

Shoniqua Roach: Oh, we'd have to have real conversations about anti-Blackness and classism.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, yeah.

The one of the first things that come to mind is, because again, like I said, in my department, I'm the only non-white year tenure track person. And also in my department, being tenure track is kind of an issue. Because there's a lot of practice.

Michelle McKinley: You have a lot of contingent labor.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, yeah. And so there's also a lot of guilt around that as well, right. That, you know, we we get junior sabbaticals and, you know, that we get resources in that. Also at WashU, you can only only people who are tenured can, and really more so full professors can serve as chair. So, it's been an interesting thing because I have a lot like older white men and white women who are practitioners.

And so they're not contingent, like, they're not adjuncts, because they've been there for like 30 something years. So they're professors of the practice. But it's still they don't have the kind of security that someone with tenure would have.

And one would be that I am able to make the demands that I am, that are allotted to me and not feel bad about them, just period. That's just the first thing. Right? And that WashU really need to kind of really need to think about how they're using professors of the practice and, you know, an adjunct labor.

Right? You know, those are the kind of ways. But the other thing, too, is I feel like I don't have a space to say no, or just place boundaries with students of color or presumably Black students. And so I spend and have spent so much energy either just being like, okay, I'm going to take on independent study, even though I shouldn't, but I know why the students come to me.

The student is coming to me because they really just need a safe haven in this moment. And so the independent study is like an official way to have this ongoing relationship with me, because none of my classes are, at this point, at least, none of them are requirements. You don't need to take them to get the major, you know, like they're unlikely to be want to take you, but you don't have to take any of those classes.

You don't have to class by anybody other than like white people. To get a measure of like of the performing arts department. And so it's meant that I've said yes to a lot of things and I'm like, “man, I really, I really shouldn't do this right now. Because, you know, my first year on track, I'm just try to figure out what's going on right now.”

And there's also six articles I'm supposed to produce along with the book. Right, and to at least one of those articles need to be from the second book project. Right, and I don't, I don't, I don't know, and I don't have the space, but I, but there's no feeling, there's no sense of an outside of me for these students to be able to go to or to even feel like I can trust to send students to, to other colleagues, you know, if they have issues, it's because part of being an academic, I think that one of the great things is that we really do know this is my expertise and this is the limits of it. So I'm going to send you to this other person. And in my department there's like, you know, one person who comes to mind, but for the most part, it's like, even if the person has the intellectual expertise, I wouldn't want to send you there because I don't know what they're going to say to you.

So. So then it also feels like I'm limiting the students, right? Because I'm like, there's certain things I just don't know, but I don't I, I don't trust sending you to someone else or you're coming to me because that person didn't say some stuff to you that was real off. And have you have you feeling even more insecure than you already were feeling?

Right? Or planning insecurity and you that you were not feeling? And now you're like, oh, wait a minute, this is an issue for me now? And so thinking about how to have a network, right, that allows for me to not have to think about certain kind of things. That's something that allows for me to get this time that you're told, take your time and say, not set boundaries.

But then it's like, but structurally, how can I do that?

Shoniqua Roach: No, absolutely.

Michelle McKinley: I mean that that goes to the only question. Right. Yes it really does. It does.

Shoniqua Roach: Yeah it really does. I mean it sounds like it, it feels like in some ways a Black feminist responsibility to care for and love all these Black students and students of color. But that's also a role you've been relegated to.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah.

Shoniqua Roach: Which is unfortunate within that context. And I don't know to your point, Michelle, about, you know, feeling like you could be transparent with your dean about your concerns. I think that vulnerability is really beautiful. Something I've struggled with, I know

is this internalized imposter syndrome, which is racialized. It's gendered. It's classed. So, like in grad school, for the longest time, I didn't want to be the bag lady within the department we trained in, so not only the young black woman who is marked as not being from a middle class background, but someone with a kid who has her sister with her. So, you know, I can't ask anything of the institution. Actually, I'm going to hyper perform in relationship to, like, these expectations of failure. I know when can see that you've set up for me.

So like I've had to do a lot of work with that on the tenure track because it's impossible for me to show up for every Black student, but I imagine that we're always grappling with some of that imposter syndrome and don't want to come across as the Black woman making, like, yet another demand on the institution.

Rhaisa Williams: So yeah, because everything's like, “oh, it's a gift that they've given me, right?” Like, “oh, you know, you gave me this opportunity.” Yeah. You know, versus I got my PhD right, and I earned this. And my CV is something that, you know, you didn't give me anything. You know, like I look at my credentials, hold up, look at my CV, look at the work and look at the work done.

And then, you know, and, and you know, for me, because so I also thought that, well, in grad school, but, you know, differently. So, you know, a Black woman who's coming from a working class background. I was also, I went straight from undergrad, so I was also a lot younger than basically everybody, my cohort. So I felt I just felt stupid.

Right? Because I'm like, “wait, I don't have the like, I don't have a master's. I didn't come here with a master's. I didn't come up with work experience. And I don't understand what Foucault was talking about.” And people are just like “Black politics!”, and I'm like, “I don't, I didn't get any of that,” right. So, feeling so, you know, feeling that.

And then when I came to, you know, my postdoc and tenure track, my husband got hired at WashU first. And so through that, I was able to get a post. Well, not through that. But, you know, part of that was like a, you know, a postdoc. And then I had, you know, and luckily I was able to then get that matriculate into, a t-track position.

But then I'm feeling like, okay, now, not only am I this Black woman who it seems like I'm just a diversity hire here, but then I'm a wife now. And so not people, you know and I had this when,

Shoniqua Roach: I'm someone else's spouse.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. I'm yeah. I'm like I'm that tagalong. So now I really have to show yes, I earned this, you know, you or you didn't make a mistake and given this to me, and I

remember and actually, I remember like, like getting through that imposter syndrome that that part, I'm like, “you know what? That's just silly me to think and blah, blah, blah.” And I was actually a Black woman, and me and her, we have a very interesting relationship, but, we were talking about, because in my department, the departments dictate, you know, at the time I was a postdoc or.

No, no, I wasn't a postdoc at the time. I, I was my first year on the tenure track, but she was currently a postdoc. And I was telling her about, like, my postdoc experience. And, because we were in different departments, there were different teaching loads. And in my department I had 1-0 teaching load. And so because that's just through my department.

Michelle McKinley: And she's a postdoc too.

Rhaisa Williams: Right. And as a postdoc. Right, even even though in her department it was like one, one, and she said, “well, that's what happens when you marry a smart nigga.” And I said, “wait, what? Like you just call me up and her? And she repeated it. She repeated it. And that then just made me like, devolve like back.

And so I'm like, “wait, I just work through all of this. And now that's actually how people see me,” and it’s a Black woman who said this to me, right? And so she sees me this way. How am I expecting my white colleagues to see me? You know, it just was absolutely. It was something that, you know, how we all have our we also mean she's also told her own imposter syndrome in her own insecurities and how that also something like projecting.

Right. And how you check that onto others. Right. That also and thinking back to terms like a Black feminist, care ethic.

Shoniqua Roach: That's beautiful.

Rhaisa Williams: How do we also how do we carry insecurities and how may we hurt each other in moments that we don't realize? Right. Because, I,

Michelle McKinley: Yeah. So I think about that like a couple stages of grief, right? One is, somebody says this to you and you have to respond. And I think I would have just been like you, which is to just be incredulous. And, but, you know, how do you take it from there? How do you realize that this is an institution, this is this structure that is doing this to both of you, to us?

Shoniqua Roach: Yes, absolutely.

Michelle McKinley: And how do we know that as the part of the beginning of a conversation, like if you say, “you know, why did you say that to me? This is how it made me

feel", you know, not in this kind of like, insular, therapeutic way, but like, can we just talk about what.

Shoniqua Roach: "What was that about?"

Michelle McKinley: What was it about and what is it? You know, what is it reflecting? And, you know, just I can't, I would've slapped her, actually.

I mean, I'm glad you did. You had to walk away like.

And then it would have just been another spectacular thing of like, two Black people fighting, you know, because I would it. Just like, yeah, the shoe would have come off.

Shoniqua Roach: Right. You know, I so appreciate you raising that. So we talk about a Black feminist care ethic in relationship to the institution in the context of institutions. But institutions. And this was that kind of dovetails with the point about class. And, yeah, folks have really different senses of themselves and relationship to the institution and their needs. But yeah, there's so much class stratification in the Black community, too, even as we can talk about like, Black folks being relegated to the global poor.

Some folks have made it. Some folks are sitting in institutions, and these institutions mediate these relationships. So, I don't know, sometimes it's hard to get a Black feminist ethic off the ground, if you will.

In the context of a group dynamic when. Yeah, white institutions are mediating so much of those relationships and kind of setting up the conditions of possibility for them.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, it's one of the things I have come to really start to think a lot about now, over the past couple of years is, I feel like this is now like a typecast rite of the senior Black woman in a department who people are just like, "oh, my God, you avoid her at all costs and blah blah, blah." And being in the academy for the short amount of time I have been in terms of not being a student now, I wonder what made her that way, because the narrative now is, "oh, she is just a horrible person", or she just, you know, whatever, and "she doesn't help people is crazy. She's crazy. She doesn't help people. She, you know, actively destroys people." And now I'm like, "wait a minute. But maybe she wasn't always that way. She probably wasn't, she was made that way through the institution." But now the institution is able to completely fall out of it, and it's now just not.

Michelle McKinley: Made that way. That's a resistive strategy on her part, right?

Rhaisa Williams: That is resistance strategy on her part. And that's part of or even and that's part of the making, right? In terms of like, "I gotta protect myself. And so this is how

I'm going to protect myself." And if it's doing more harm, if it's doing harm to other people, "well, right now I can't worry about that because I've had all this harm done to me."

"And so this is how, this is the facade I need to put up in order to maintain my sanity and or to maintain my health." Right? Or whatever it may be. But the institution and the processes through which she came to that place, it's completely out of there. Not it's not affect me more. So she was came out the womb like that. She just was always, you know, and maybe she was, but it's but it's something that like, that's not even a question anymore. And so, and I also am part of my, like, Black feminist ethic is like, and I don't want my resistive practices or my or my resistive acts to become that. So how can I protect myself in a way that sustainable, that isn't then hurting people, you know, in the long run, right?

Or even in the short run or whatever the case is? How can I do this in a way like, how can I make sure that this institution does not break me and then remake me into something that I don't like because it's so easy for it to happen? It it literally it can just happen. It happens like just magically underneath the surface.

And next thing you know, you're like, who am I? Who am I? You know? And I'm like, I'm can't give the institution that kind of power. But it isn't. But it also it's an individual thing, right? Because again, it's still like, "I can't give the institution that kind of power", versus "how can I hold the institution accountable so that they're not doing that."

But then in doing that kind of work then caused the breaking to happen. And so it's just feels like this rock and a hard place, where you're like, you know, and so again, it's like trying to think through the questions of how can we hold the institution accountable or what is the institutional response? And I'm just like, I really, I don't know without that then breaking our backs.

And again, and I understand like I'm, I'm really new to all of this. Right. But even women who are senior to me are like, "hey these institutions don't care about you", you know. And so we,

Michelle McKinley: And that's what we tell our students to. Right. You know, don't fall into that kind of false security, have your, have your guard up. I mean, I've been at this game. This is like my third career, right? So, I, I hear a lot of what you're saying, and I remember, you know, being on the job market, what, 14 years ago?

And of course, when you, you get a campus visit, they show you the other only Black woman, right? Right.

Shoniqua Roach: Scrounge her up from somewhere.

Michelle McKinley: Even if she's not in your school or department, there's like,

Rhaisa Williams: Scrounge her out from somewhere.

Michelle McKinley: And you know, the, the reason it's not like a stereotype, but if you are to say that there's a stereotype, one is they just held their noses down and did the work.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: You know, and they were tired. So, a lot of times it was like, oh, I can't wait till you get here. And I'm like, I don't want to end up like that.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: You know no joy, no community, no spark just worn out. Yeah. You know and then there were the bitter ones and then there were the, you know this at the other. And I was like what is this happening. What is happening. I feel like I went into a really dysfunctional Thanksgiving meal, you know, where like, all of these people had all of these like, crazy relationships with so much trauma.

I'm like, "I'm not coming here". But I do think that, just in not just in the spirit of the conversation, but I do think that we should think through, you know, why are these, these spaces? They're spaces of work. They're spaces of labor. Why they, generate the same kinds of patterns, the same kinds of fights over resources, the same kinds of insecurities.

I think we have to think through that. You really long and hard, you know?

Shoniqua Roach: Yeah. So last question. We just want to know where you are right now, in the immediate brunt of our every day, every minute, every hour, it has often been outside the realm of possibility to construct a Black future, but maybe not for you. Riri, what are your creative projects? Do they feel urgent? Do they feel time sensitive? What are your responses to time right now for the watching? What are you listening to? What are some self-care practices that are feeling nourishing for you right now?

Rhaisa Williams: So, my biggest project right now is this baby inside of me.

Shoniqua Roach: You're baking a baby.

Rhaisa Williams: I'm baking a baby. That's the biggest project right now. And it is wearing me the hell out.

Michelle McKinley: How many weeks are you?

Rhaisa Williams: 27.

Michelle McKinley: Oh, you got 13 more weeks.

Rhaisa Williams: 13 more weeks. Yes. We are. Yes. And but it's it's it's exciting to even though its hard to be excited in the pandemic. It's just really weird being pregnant during this moment. But, I'll also say this is, you know, this would be my rainbow baby. So, last year, I suffered a miscarriage. So, the pregnancy feels even more, you know, like "I'm going to protect you. I'm going to protect you."

Shoniqua and Michelle: Absolutely.

Rhaisa Williams: And so, you know, the first trimester was just, "let's get through the first trimester. Let's just, let's just get the first trimester". The second trimester literally coincided once Covid hit Missouri. You know, and it's so, again, so interesting. Like, no, Covid was going on in like China. And it's like, "okay, you know, that that's that's over there". And then Italy, "okay. That's over there". And then Seattle when New York was like, "oh, okay". You know, you still just getting closer and closer, but you still don't think it's going to hit you. And then it was like, "oh my God". And so then any creative projects I was even thinking of, you know, in terms of like, how I'm imagining the pregnancy now that I'm no longer sick and I'm no longer tired anymore.

I have energy that got derailed in terms of like, okay, what the hell is going on in the world? And, you know, are there going to be shortages on eggs and pork and beef, you know? And like you're buying up beans and toilet paper and, you know, trying to and stuff like that. And now that the baby is incredibly active, and it's also getting more and more reactive.

I have been, in terms of music, like playing music for him. So, I'm like, there's going to be songs that you are going to recognize me, come out the womb. And one of them is Aretha Franklin, *Say a Little Prayer*. And I play that song a lot and you know, try to spice up the lyrics and things of that nature because it's just like, you know, the moment I wake up, when I put on my makeup, I say a little prayer for you.

There's another song by Fertile Ground called *June* that's, one of the band members wrote the song for his mom, who suffer from seasonal affective disorder. And June was her favorite month, the month that she could feel the most calm. And the last line of the song is, "When you're up against the world, I'll be your army. And when you're up against the world, I'll be your June."

So I like played that for the baby and like feeling him move that has become probably one of the the most effective self-care practices, because it really grounds me in the present in ways that and in your body, in me, in my body, in a way that nothing else has been able to.

Because you with pregnancy, you're thinking about like what can go wrong? And then how prepared am I? And thinking again about only this in terms of me and my husband, you know, we're both academics and we're the only ones in our family, our immediate families

who are not in the same region as our families. And so, you know, we've had to think long and hard about what does it mean to raise a kid and, and neither of our parents are nearby.

You know, we don't have people who we just can trust and who we love, right? Who are just.

Shoniqua Roach: And a Black kid.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. You know. Yeah. And, you know, kind of feeling that and, you know, in that kind of way. But those moments where I just play these meets like these songs or and like just feel the baby move.

And it's something now the moves are starting to hurt a little bit because now has, you know, they're not little taps anymore because, like, hitting that bladder. You know, I'm like, oh my gosh!

Michelle McKinley: Yeah. I can't believe you lasted like an hour without having to go to the bathroom.

Rhaisa Williams: I have to pee. But I'm not that bad yet, so, you know, so I'm like, I'm sipping my water real gingerly, like, you know, just wet the palate, but you're not taking too much liquid.

Michelle McKinley: Wait till the end of it, where you're just in the bathroom because you're like, I'm just going to have to go.

Rhaisa Williams: So I'm just like, yeah, yeah, like, just stay here. Yeah. And so that's that's been the most, the biggest project that I've been working. Well, you know, because I've been working on,

Shoniqua Williams: A really important project. Yeah, that's a huge project.

Rhaisa Williams: And it's been really important too, in terms of like me saying, being able to say no.

My therapist was like, “oh, you know, Rhaisa, you know, you have been, you have like just progressed so much.” You said this to me, last month and I'm like, “well, I guess I should get pregnant because now I'm like, no, I cannot do that. I can't do it.” And I plan to take my maternity leave very seriously.

You know, and part of this too, was thinking a lot about rest and how much with being pregnant, I've been forced to have to rest. And so, so taking and taking a serious like. Well, what is rest? What does that actually mean? What needs to be kind of in play for me to be able to rest and really have to think about myself more in the community, because that's also a very hard thing for me to think of.

So, I think of people as, as resources or like to ask for help. Part of this, the imposter syndrome part of it is like, “I'll be a burden”. And so, like, I'll just do everything on my own. Some of this impatience, some of it's control issues. But having to kind of relax a lot of those things, right?

In order for me to be able to take the breaks that I need. Because when I don't, I feel it. I feel it a lot more acute, acutely in a way that I didn't before. Right? Like, I can't I can't hide from straight, you can't.

Michelle McKinley: And you can't run your body ragged right now it's just a lot. No.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. It's it's it's just like it just break down. It's just like “okay, your hips don't lock up”, you know? And I'm like, “oh, God, my hips and they're locked up!” You know, you know, round ligament pain like all these things that, like, what do they just ground you like? I just got to sit here and sit in this one position.

And so it was also making me think, though, about how, like, how once the baby comes, how to also make sure that I still have a self that's there. Because, you know, being a mother is deeply important and, and it's already changing how I look, how I literally think about almost everything. But I also like, I don't want this to just…I don't want this to overtake me either. And I don't know how to say that without, you know. It seems.

Shoniqua Roach: So Black Motherhood. Nope nope nope!

Rhaisa Williams: But but but it is something where it is. It's like, you know, I remember my mom, one of the things that she said to me or I had, I had asked, so this is years ago, “what makes you happy?” And she's like, well, you know, I mean, “my kids are healthy, my mom is healthy, my husband's healthy.”

And I'm like, “okay, yeah, but I'm asking what makes *you* happy?” And she couldn't answer the question. And I remember being like, that is so sad that my mom doesn't know what makes her happy outside of “my family is good. And if y'all are good and I'm happy”, and I remember that,

Shoniqua Roach: I don’t know. Sometimes that feels a little like liberal individualism.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah…

Shoniqua Roach: Like the implication that like a household, like family caretaking, supporting community like, can't be a form of pleasure practice or pleasure work. And I think,

Rhaisa Williams: It's not to say that it's not a form, but I just feel like it when that's your only form.

Michelle McKinley: Because that is her imaginary, though, you know, that is like the place in which she feels that she might have some control over it. You know, like if my people are happy, my people are fed, my, you know, I hear what you're saying for sure.

Rhaisa Williams: I hear no, I hear what you're saying, too

Michelle McKinley: You know, both hearing it. But, I think that pregnancy does, because you're so in your body, you do worry like, "oh, my God, am I ever going to have the time and the energy to pick up Shoniqua's new book?" Yeah, right. Because I know it's going to take time. Right. And and that is a legitimate worry.

Shoniqua Roach: No, it's a totally legitimate worry. I guess I'm just marking out that,

I don't know, there are different life worlds and conditions of possibility for being here. And, I never want to hear or think about, like, caring for a Black family in particular. Like in the face of anti-Blackness. It's not it's not work that could be considered formative and crucial. Right.

Rhaisa Williams: So I'll say this because you not because it's not all saying, you know, that that that's not crucial or formative. Because it, because it is, you know, and I think well, and that's what really particularly we think about the second wave is what differentiates Black feminism from like mainstream feminism right, white feminism, that's like, "Oh my God, children are such a constraint." We're like, "Hey, we have a whole 'nother relationship to our children, right? Like we yeah, the ability to even say "my child" is something that, you know, legally, we could not say for very long. It's really, it's really precious. I still think so. And I'll think more about this from, you know, from the push back the both of you have given.

I will think more about this. Because right now I'm still like, I still think that it is still...it's still something that bothered me that my mother couldn't say one thing for herself

Shoniqua Roach: That makes sense.

Rhaisa Williams: You know, whether it's, you know, when I sew or just or just whatever, or when I go out, when I go to the movies or just whatever it is that has nothing to do with, because and maybe part of it too, I don't know, it just it. Yeah. So it's there's different life worlds and so. Okay, so to the point that you have both made, actually, it still makes me sad, but nonetheless that that was a life world that I'm like, okay, I don't necessarily want from us that I don't want that to be the defining thing.

But it's okay because, like, she's my mother and she took care. She took care of me. She still takes care. But I also, I want there to be a return for her. And that's. And that gets into,

like, the language of markets and blah, blah, blah. Like, you know, “I get a return on investment”, but I don't know, because the other thing too is then, and I'm wondering this, is that putting too much? Is that then putting some pressure on like your children or your people to then care for you in a certain kind of way?

And if they don't, is there a disappointment that's there? I don't know, right. If that's kind of like how you define it's like in this relationship, it's hard to find my happiness. And so if you don't give me something back in a certain kind of way, I don't know, I don't know. But I just know that for me, it's something that.

Shoniqua Roach: You have a different orientation.

Rhaisa Williams: I have a different orientation, and a lot of it, too, is because of class differences that my mother made possible for me, right? Yeah. Absolutely cared. And the fact and the cared and the way she cared and the fact that she had to work in the way she worked so that I didn't have to worry about those things.

Right. Like, my mother is, you know, part of the oldest of, of of, of eight kids. So she had to go on the mother role very early in her life. Right. So, also two part of the care that she feels is because she had to take on that role once her father left at 12, and she had like all these little sisters and brothers, and my grandmother is illiterate.

So, my mother had really become my grandmother was like eyes and ears, you know, at the welfare department, the part that my mother was filling out the welfare forms. Right. And so my mothers had to care so much because they were poor, right? And she was placed into a responsibility, into a role.

That also differently that allowed her to differently imagine certain kind of things for herself. But then I was able to then, you know, I'm the youngest. I was also born at a point where my parents were more just like they were ready to have a kids. They were financially more ready to have kids. They also were immensely more ready to have kids.

And that gave me a freedom to, you know, I guess, be wrongfully critical of my mother in a certain kind of way, even though, again, I'm like, still like, “I still want you to be able to say if there's something that makes you happy?” No, I hear that. That's, I hear that,

Shoniqua Roach: I don't know. I feel like I'm constantly pushing my sisters on what I view from my standpoint, which is class at this point. And my mother did the work to make that possibility possible for me. But, you know, what I sometimes see is these codependent relationships. And, you know, it's like, “oh, she did this to me”. And I'm like, set a boundary using my, like, therapy language.

Right? And my sister's like that worldview. She said to me recently, “It just doesn't cohere for me.” You know? So she and I may have our issues, but her kids are my kids and my kids are her kids. So when it's time to go to bed, I'm going to step up and do that work because that's my definition of a sister. That's what it means to participate in community in a particular way. And I'm like, “okay, that's not my orientation, but I see you, and I think you see me too.” Taryn Williamson *Scandalize My Name*. Have you read that?

Rhaisa Williams: I have, well, yeah, a couple like the intro, a few chapters. Yeah.

Shoniqua Roach: That's a really beautiful book, but I feel like I did meditating with that book for a couple years now, just, you know, thinking through the beautiful work she does to outline like poor Black women's world making practices within the context of home, Black community, mothering, etc. So, she's like, “alright, if we reconstruct the world as one that is and has been anti-Black and set up to like claim Black life or render it fungible, like there's nothing more special than the work my mother is doing, to like sit in the home and care and tend to like these Black bodies.” Yeah, right. Our Black bodies. So, Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: Special. Right? So, so special. Okay, so before we hand it over to the tech guy, can we see the baby bump?

Rhaisa Williams: Oh, yes. Let me move this. Okay. Let's see. Can you see?

Michelle McKinley: Oh. Hi, mama. Yeah. Oh, there's so much more I wanted to chat with you about. I. I'm super. I sent Rhaisa a text message recently. Just saying, like, how she's always been such a rich possibility model for me. We were in grad school together and performance studies at Northwestern. But when she told me that she was expecting, I had to check myself on the, “Oh, this is not a tenure baby, where does the book stand?” Etc., etc. So no, like the institutional speak and way of thinking about like Black women, pregnancy, motherhood like grabbed hold. But I'm like, “this is silly Shoniqua”. What, like you moved through grad school as a young mom. You know, your, your kiddo is nine and you're maybe thinking about more soon. And that's okay. So, thank you for being a possibility, model racer. And yeah, for pushing assumptions about, like, the appropriate time to have a baby.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: Specifically on the tenure track.

Rhaisa Williams: Right. Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: Because it sounds like being pregnant is already doing so much work for you to set necessary boundaries and a relationship to a great boundary institution, and it's gonna be it's, you know, it's the time.

Rhaisa Williams: It's wonderful. Yeah. It's wonderful. And it's part of the wonderful also the Black feminist, my Black feminist care ethic, whether or not, you know, it's written somewhere else is like, no, you I dictate my time. I have I have the space or I have the power to dictate more of my time. I'm not giving, other people can, the people who I may want to, but the institution

Shoniqua Roach: The institution to have my reproductive clock?

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah. Because I'm never going to make you happy because you're always going to ask, "Well, what's the next? You wrote the first book. Okay. So what's the next one coming out? What's the next one coming out?" Will not come up for full professor, you know, and I'm just like,

Shoniqua Roach: That's really powerful, mama.

And it really taught me a lesson, like actually. So to the naysayers and haters in grad school who thought that I wouldn't achieve because I had these burdens like, no, my family actually kept me grounded knowing that I had to pick up my kiddo from daycare at 6:00.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, because you like, you finish quickly, like four years. So, you know, like you came in and it's so interesting. I know we got to wrap up soon. Like hearing the, the imposter stuff. I hear you talk about your imposter syndrome, because you came in like a storm and a storm that knew exactly the direction it was moving in.

You know, it was like, I know I'm going from east to west, you know, these miles an hour, you know, like you knew that.

Michelle McKinley: She's actually a tornado. It's not a storm.

Rhaisa Williams: Yeah, yeah. There we go. There a better that's a lot more.

Shoniqua Roach: And and I had to know that just theory necessitated that. I know that. Danny, my little sister who was living with me at the time, I got her through high school in Evanston, like I had you know, that I had to do. Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: You did, you did. Yeah.

Rhaisa Williams: So thank you for you provide a model for me as well in grad school and even, like, looking back, it's like you did it. You did it then, like. Yeah. Yeah.

Michelle McKinley: Well, I loved having this conversation. Yeah. I love seeing you. I love seeing the baby bump. This is this was great.

[Music fades]