Coda

AFTERCARE

• • • This is a book about possibility, skepticism, refusal—and care. As we wrote in the opening pages, care is interwoven, invisibly or explicitly, with technoskepticism. Our thinking around the possibilities or perils that emerging technologies might present must be grounded in the care we have for our communities and for each other. In that sense, we see technoskepticism as an ethic of care: the possibilities we might seize from emerging technologies, as much as the power to be gained from refusing others, are meaningful because they enable us to better care for ourselves and each other. Of course, every community that we speak to and with in this book is different, and each articulates its own visions of technoskepticism-as-care, including our own community. As scholars and artists, we have striven to be intentional, to form and mold this book together as an experiment in care, a radical process of collective thought. This text initially emerged from a retreat to nature. It is perhaps a cliché to write about writing in nature, and perhaps doubly so when centering the technological. But out in the green spaces of Pennsylvania, we wrote about care in part because, as we came together in a strange and unfamiliar context, we struggled with it—care for the body, mind, and each other. Here, at the end, we want to make explicit some of the tacit thinking about care that structured this book. And we

want, too, to launch a final conjecture, asking one more question where most texts might be tying up neat conclusions.

At the end of every avenue of speculation we've walked in the pages you've just read, whether fixed on the possibility of an exit from the mire we find ourselves in or skeptical that none of the doorways that present themselves were made for us, are barred to us, we still find a place for care. Care is a recursive, curling concept. It takes this shape because care is linked to crisis, and, as we have argued throughout this book, we live in crisis: both the slow-motion crises of intergenerational racial oppression, exclusion, and state-sponsored violence, and the faster-moving emergencies of rapid AI development without oversight or cultural competence. In moving across space and place, we keenly feel both care and its absence. This is the contradiction of care. Care and its systems pervade our lives. Theorists of care point out that the provision of care and the labor behind it enables society to function. This foundational labor is often not recognized as such, and, as scholars such as Eva Fedar Kittay, Margaret Price, and Joan Tronto have shown, it is offloaded disproportionately to women, and, specifically, to women of color.[1] And, as Moya Bailey, Sarah J. Jackson, and Brooke Foucault Welles argue, this pertains equally to the care and upkeep of digital space and place as well.[2]

We all know this. And you, reader, having made it this far, likely know it, too. But, in the spirit of speculative inquiry that animates DISCO and this book, we leave you in these final pages with a series of provocations that push beyond the status quo. Here, we aim to push our collective understanding of care, and provide a space to butt up against what we might not currently know, and may never know. This is an essay in the etymological sense: an experiment, a trying out, a tangle of possibility. Many of these provocations have to do with our own attempts to think through care in the worlds we depend on, and they take the form of questions we've asked throughout the preceding chapters: How do we identify ourselves in ways that get us access to the care we need, and resist identifications that refuse that care to us? How will we care for a past that might enable a future that excludes us? When we can't say no to machines that aren't meant to care for or about us, how might we rebuild them, care for them, in the hope that care might be returned?

These are central questions that animate our thinking in these pages and beyond. In the preceding chapters, we proposed promiscuous self-diagnosis as a way of pushing back against diagnostic systems that try to hold us in place long enough to hurt us, and as a way of pushing toward new forms of care. We picked apart contemporary discourses of self-care and wellness, looking for ways to shake them loose of the neoliberal frameworks they so often serve, foregrounding relational care and wisdom in place of extraction. We investigated our own uneven ambivalence when it comes to caring for our digital pasts, where nostalgia can bind us to an archive that excluded us and enable political visions that have even less of a place for us. We asked how caring for these pasts could foreground the kinds of nonproductive relations that keep open the possibility of present joy and better futures. Finally, we experimented with and envisioned new kinds of machine intelligence that might take traditional AI—implicitly built on a foundation of whiteness—and jailbreak it, allowing it to be taught to care about Black and Brown bodies, languages, and cultures.

Even skepticism and refusal, as discussed in the preceding chapter, might themselves be practices of care—and perhaps the most important of them, in that they hold open a space for something yet to come. Since care is relational, its deployment or withholding is also about power. Skepticism and refusal are dispositions toward powerful institutions, technologies, and regimes that have historically benefited certain kinds of bodies perceived to be mainstream, unremarkable, and "normal."[3] Emphasizing skepticism and refusal as care, in this sense, is also about offering a corrective to the long history of marginalization and erasure that non-normative bodies experience in comparison—a history that sometimes self-congratulatingly calls itself "care."

This is not a new thought, but it is an important one. Skepticism and refusal, especially within communities, provide the seed for some of our most powerful models of how to move forward. Communities of color, disabled communities, and marginalized groups have long practiced the work of community care, work that often grows out of a skepticism toward or refusal of institutions whose "care" has historically been nothing of the sort. In part, what we mean to surface here is both deceptively simple and immensely important. The work of care

is always already ongoing. And practices of refusal and skepticism are essential to that work, especially within systems of violence, crisis, and precariousness.

As you can see, we're not quite finished with care. And how could we be, when it centers the bodies and relations that make us, that we depend on, that are so often refused, sidelined, undermined, or simply ignored? But here, at the end, we might start to try to think about what comes after it.

But what comes after care? To imagine an "after" is both laborious and joyful. We've so often been failed by state bureaucracies or our own families, if it isn't the case that those bureaucracies and families simply failed to exist in the first place. It's hard work to think past the often painful, sometimes deadly gaps in care we or those close to us may have encountered or where we find ourselves today. At the same time, there's a joy in thinking of an "after" to care, one that comes from the imaginary play of dreaming, speaking, and feeling the future that is essential to and immanent in our continued existence in our human, more-than-human, and technological worlds.[4]

As we imagine this joy to come, there's another kind of pleasure on our minds, when words or bodies run together. Claiming joy and seeking pleasure are themselves revolutionary and vital, especially when the oppressive systems we live under are so often pleased to see us penitent, or grateful, or worthy of their scant charitable attention, and so often dismayed to see us take our happiness into our own hands. We can, of course, critique these systems, but we also must still live in them. And as we grapple toward a more joyous world, a more careful world, we are not trying to reinvent the wheel. Rather, as Jack Halberstam suggests, we sit in (and with) the mess.[5] We take what we can where we find it, seeking out frames that help us understand the world as is, even as we imagine a world that might be.

When thinking of an "after" to care as a guiding framework for the world we wanted to imagine into being, we began to think of a different, orthographically proximate term: "aftercare." In kink—a catchall term for sexual practices that emphasize some aspect of BDSM—aftercare refers to the care that follows a choreographed scene of psychosexual or erotic roleplay.[6] It allows what happened in the scene, often intention-

ally violent and emotionally extreme, even traumatic, to be processed, and the body (and mind) to be soothed.[7] In its absence, the violence enacted as performance can desublimate to affective reality, harming both parties. If care so often elides the violence inherent in it, one of the utilities of aftercare is that it points to the mutual imbrication of power, violence, pleasure, care, and whatever else the fuck it is that gets us from one day to the next.

No one yet has met a concept walking down the street. Concepts matter *because* they are virtual. By which we mean, because they are wrong. A good concept is like a periscope: you use it to try to look just beyond the horizon of the world as it turns, to see what might be coming into view. Aftercare, as a concept, is virtual in the sense that it has a grip on a world of possibilities that may or may not come to pass. It's wrong, in the sense of morally bad, because how do we justify thinking through an "after" to something we've hardly ever had, or never had, or had precisely the wrong kind of? Thinking an "after" to care takes both risks: it imagines something at the vanishing long tail of the horizon of possibilities, and in so doing, it shifts our gaze away from what we still might fight for.

Seeing aftercare as a crowbar for getting out of the theoretical status quo is wrong in one straightforward way. We might as well say it: the violence of kink, at least in its idealized state, is consensual and negotiated. But kink is not without risk—indeed, the management of risk involves inviting the possibility that something might go wrong, as in Shibari or condomless sex. But if the violence that flows as an undercurrent to much of this book is staged as a permanent state of living, unchosen by us, unconsented to, aftercare might try to name the tacit agreements and arrangements we make that emerge from our desires for a communal bond in the wake of that ordinary violence. Borrowing Fred Moten's phrasing, it might name our consent not to be a single being in an era of intensified, datafied individualism.

Aftercare invokes risk. But care, too, is already haunted by the specter of risk because it reveals our vulnerabilities and insecurities. Risk and its management are more blatant in kink, but this visibility allows for a more conscientious caring for the self and for communities. One thing we suggest here is that, in the context of our precarious techno-

logical moment, in a world that is always already undergoing ecological collapse and economic crisis, there might be less daylight between care and aftercare than a casual glance could reveal. The kinds of mutualistic care ritualized in kink might be a model, in that they marry some degree of vulnerability with a willingness to communicate in ways that speak forth some narratives and bar others.

Aftercare as an escape hatch might be wrong in another way, too. Care, as a concept, can serve as a kind of universal solvent. Who doesn't like care? Who doesn't want or need it?[8] Aftercare, on the other hand, is particular enough to risk exclusion. It's uncomfortable, as an idea and as a praxis. Within the frame of kink, it acknowledges that BDSM is a fantasy, an escape that we must all return from, however willingly. As we mean to apply it here, as a backward glance on systems of care (and control), it suggests that care, even "perfect" care, is somehow *not enough*.

This is a useful discomfort, stemming from aftercare's entanglement with practices and bodies that we and you may not all be comfortable with—that may even confuse or distress or disgust us and you. Here, those heightened senses might even be the point. In the late 1990s, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant described a Wednesday night visit to a live performance at a leather bar, a series that typically hosted "the usual: amateur, everyday practitioners strutting for everyone else's gratification, not unlike an academic conference."[9] That night's entertainment promised something not even Warner and Berlant wanted to see—erotic vomiting. So they decided, as they wrote: "Let's stay until it gets messy. Then we can leave." It certainly got messy, but, transfixed, they did not and could not leave until the performance was over. Warner and Berlant do not describe any aftercare they witnessed that night. Instead, "breathless," like tongue-in-cheek "good academics," they say they "have some questions to ask." The journal article of which this anecdote is the keystone, "Sex in Public," might itself be thought of as critical aftercare—for the authors themselves and for their readers.

Let's stay until it gets messy. Then we can leave. If aftercare is a risky concept, a risky or risqué frame, there is pleasure to be found in the risks we seek out. Pleasure in setting the conditions of risk, of courting risks that we might avoid in our everyday lives. Care is often imagined

as a series of incremental, sensible steps toward a universally unobjectionable goal. We want to loosen our grips, and yours, on this path, to meander into other temporalities of care, resisting the illusion of an "after" yoked to a "before" and vice versa. Aftercare, messy as it is, helps us crack this open, precisely because it is a kinky concept. This kinky point of view might help readers see what we've written in the preceding chapters differently. Kinky minds and bodies—kinky as in curved or broken, reshaped by their contact with beds in homes and hospitals—invite us to consider the possibilities of *staying sick*, of taking a counter-diagnostic disposition to its limit. Aftercare might also take cues from what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha names "bed activism," the political, ideological, and cultural tools that advocates and activists can use to imagine otherwise.[10] Likewise, the desire to pull backward, to reflect upon our memories of what was in virtual space is a curved approach. That is, curling back upon the early or at least earlier internet—and the digital refuges we found there—resists a straightforward reading of technological progress. Finally, the exploded temporality of aftercare might help us think beyond a relationship between Blackness and AI that is more extractive than it is careful. Refusing to participate in algorithmic systems that appropriate our identities with one hand and dole out access to communities we desperately need with the other: this is already a risky act of self-care. But we might also imagine adopting AI as queer kin, as part of our chosen family: a vessel for Black memory and agency. We might imagine Black AI through aftercare as a living archival practice spun from access for, maintenance by, and participation of Black folks across space and time—one that ineluctably intertwines AI development and the future of Black life.

It's gotten messy but let's stay. We couldn't tear ourselves away and there was nowhere else to go in the first place. We can never be rid of risk entirely. Living—the one condition we're all sure we've got—is a function of risk. As is written above, care and aftercare are pervaded by risk. The risk of loss, yes, but also, as we think about them now, the risk of being misunderstood. As we wrote, this coda is a trial, but we mean it not as a trial for the reader. What do we risk in the answers to our questions? What do we embrace when we ask what it means to use and be used by technology today? Or how to rebuild the technological and

cultural landscape in which we live, and to do so with care? The payoff for these risks isn't—can't be—in the reassurance that finding these answers is the progressive and responsible thing to do, like checking your work against the back of the book. We hope it might be in the pleasure and possibility of imagining otherwise, and the care we promise each other afterward. You, reader, have taken the risk of reading alongside us this far. Even while we can't predetermine your understanding, this is what we hope you leave us with.