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THE FLESH IS WEAK: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND THE
UTILITY OF TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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In "The Flesh is Weak: African American Women's Sexuality and the Utility of Trauma,"

I argue for a reconsideration of the ways in which trauma and sexuality are often conceptualized as mutually exclusive states of being in black feminist theory. By tracing a brief history of the sexualized violence exacted against black women throughout slavery and onward into the present, I illustrate how black women's erotic pleasure has always been embodied and experienced in tension with a contradictory assortment of emotions and physical states: pain, obedience, trauma and unequal power relations, for example. I analyze black women's sexual representations in television shows and I utilize some of my own personal experiences with sexual violence via autoethnographic methods. Expanding a view of trauma in black women's sexual lives and not assuming that it precludes the possibility or potential for sexual pleasure is theoretically useful in the quest to excavate black women's sexual histories, and practical in that it can offer assistance to black women and girls that have experienced forms of sexualized violence, sexual assault, and/or rape. Taking special care to not assume that experiences with

generational, literal, or figurative trauma necessarily foreclose potential for erotic enjoyment allows black feminist theorists to explore representations of black women's sexual lives unencumbered by the binary of entirely liberated sexual agents and abjectly subjugated victims.

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Introduction:

There is a rich and expansive body of black feminist literature detailing the effects of various forms trauma on the sexual expression and sexual experiences of African American¹ women: from Harriet Jacobs' narrative of strategic confinement, to the reform-based theorizing of Anna Julia Cooper; from Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance"; to Hazel Carby's historiography of the policing of black women's bodies in public areas². In her essay "Soul Murder and Slavery: Towards a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," Nell Painter uses psychoanalytic frameworks to illuminate the sexual trauma that enslaved persons suffered, and she traces how that violence has become engrained in American culture through quotidian means such as the conflation of love and ownership. Like Painter, I am interested in moving "towards a fully loaded cost accounting" of trauma and its impact on the sexual subjectivity of African American women (15). A broader conceptualization of trauma will not only "yield a fuller comprehension of our national experience," but more specifically our national collusion to designate female sexuality as receptacle for shame, violence, and dispossession (Painter 15). The intricacies of trauma animate two central questions for my research: What does an overemphasis on trauma foreclose for African American women? What

¹ Throughout this project, I use the descriptors 'black' and 'African American' interchangeably. I take special precaution not to "essentialize Black American womanhood," echoing Ariane Cruz's discursive goals, I look to refer "to African American women for whom the history of chattel slavery in the Americas has produced the socio-historical conditions that uniquely inform Black female subjectivity and sexual politics" ("Beyond Black and Blue" 409n1). Cruz further contextualizes her use of black women by referencing Patricia Hill Collins' sociological classic *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*: "a common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent" (Cruz 409; Collins 22).

² See Carby, Hazel V. "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 738-55; Cooper, Anna J. *A Voice from the South*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print; Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 912-20; McKay, Nellie Y. (editor). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Harriet Jacobs*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. Print.

experiences or preferences in desire does trauma affect and shape? Lamenting the fixedness of feminist preoccupations with exploitation and suffering in discussions of female sexuality, Sharon Patricia Holland asks "...how do we get past (get over?) the exasperating static situation of the (black) female body" (53)? I argue that a reevaluation of that the space of injury that the black female body seems to be suspended in, both theoretically and corporeally, will reveal that pleasure and trauma are not mutually exclusive states of being. Perhaps it's not a matter of getting past, getting over, or moving beyond; but instead, a change in how we move within, around, and in tandem with vestiges of sexualized violence and trauma that holds potential for black feminist theorizations of black women's sexual expression. My word choice in the title of this project is selective: I am attempting to interrupt the manner in which black feminists typically theorize trauma. I believe that within black women's everyday lives, experiences with trauma (sexualized or not) are held in tension with other experiences, with other actions, with other feelings. While this is often a coping strategy because black women are so rarely afforded the time or space to process trauma and violence, sit with it, or heal from it, this lived dichotomy can alter the totalizing approaches we sometimes have when theorizing victimhood in black feminist theory. Let us consider what it means to think through the possibility of historicizing pleasure (which Lindsey and Johnson work towards in "Searching for Climax"), and the work that does for black female subjectivity. For the purposes of my project, the term "pleasure" most explicitly encompasses sexual ecstasy and erotic release. Intimate satisfaction through touch, massage, or gesture can be interpreted as pleasure as well. These are by no means the only manifestations of pleasure that black women experience, but can serve as a short list

of concepts or experiences that readers of this work can refer to throughout to ground and provide context for some of my speculative questions and theoretical analysis.

In the first section of this project, I will do a close reading of several texts on the topic of black women's specified experiences in slavery. Establishing U.S. slavery as the originating context through which black women were routinely constructed and deconstructed as amorphous figures existing outside and within the confines of race and gender, I focus in on the ways in which historical trauma indelibly shapes conceptualizations of black women's pleasure present-day. Slavery lasted for centuries and its aftershocks resonate clear-as-ever through contemporary culture, so I engage impolite and for some, unimaginable questions of whether or not enslaved black women experienced sexual pleasure within the extreme frameworks of brutality and domination that they toiled within. This section also touches upon the infamously divisive imbalance in perception that typically results in the categorization of black women's issues in the African American collective cultural imagination as separate from and secondary to paramount issues of race that black men face. This prevailing ideology derails discussions that center black women's experiences, and subsequently, black women's eroticism and sexual pleasure. The following section blends personal experiences and cultural critique together as autoethnographic analysis. My own experiences are one example of the contradictions and negotiations of erotic desire, traumatic memory, and emotional unrest many sexual assault and rape survivors live with following their experiences with sexualized violence. There is a dearth of critical engagement offering victims of sexual assault and rape, especially black women, any guidance or analytics with which to attempt to explore eroticism or sexual pleasure in the wake of their attack.

What gap in our cultural imagination does this silence illuminate and how do the implications of this silence affect black women writ large?

The third section is comprised of a rich engagement with traditional black feminist perspectives on representations of black women in popular cultural and ways in which tendencies to label depictions as uplifting or derogatory deny us the opportunity to read paradox and tension as a space of innovation. Given historical legacies of trauma, sexualized violence, and racist stereotypes, theorizing black women's erotic pleasure demands imaginative labor and a theoretical commitment to blurred areas that lie in the cracks and crevices of categorization.

Ariane Cruz explores “how the “slime” – a staining sludge of pain and violence – becomes a type of lubricant to stimulate sexual fantasies, access sexual pleasure, and heighten sexual desire” (410). I too am interested in the blurred places where experiences of trauma and pleasure in black women's sexual lives may meet, overlap, or occur simultaneously. While Cruz explores “how Black women facilitate a complex and contradictory negotiation of pain, pleasure, and power in their performances in the fetish realm of BDSM,” I aim to draw attention to how Black women enact many of these same negotiations outside of fetish enclaves (410). The contradictory nexus of trauma, shame, discipline, obedience, pleasure, and desire is at the fore in my consideration of African American women's eroticism and sexuality.

Among a host of contemporary scholars exploring the field of popular culture studies and black women's sexual expression is Shayne Lee. While his 2010 release

*Erotic Revolutionaries*³ is a “third wave black feminist” text that purports to celebrate a diverse range of black women’s sexual expression, (women who choose to “cover up” or “let it all hang out”), many of the claims laid in the project galvanize binaries of respectability and hypervisibility (18-19). Jennifer Nash interrogates Lee’s discursive aims in her the essay “Theorizing Pleasure: New Directions in Black Feminist Studies.” The African American women who Lee “deems erotic revolutionaries” live up to the label because they “effectively wage war against the politics of respectability” (Lee, xiv), and Nash surmises that “Lee’s rhetorical choices suggest that his political utopia is one where all traces of respectability have been expunged” (Nash 510). Like Nash, I am arguing for a “black feminism invested in paradox” that “might have room for respectability and sexual agency,” and, a reconceptualization of sexual trauma and its affect on sexual desire and sexual expression in post-trauma settings as well (510). I am constantly confronted with cultural products (memes, songs clips, music videos) that can be critiqued as problematic characterizations or limiting representations of black women’s sexuality, however I would like to avoid the familiarity of identifying weaknesses, challenges, and perceived failures as solely limiting. In search of a “politics of articulation” as Evelyn Hammonds famously called for in her 1994 essay *Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality*, I shape the questions that guide

³ Shayne Lee’s personal practices and the ways in which much of his argument is constructed in *Erotic Revolutionaries* are deeply problematic. I make mention of the project here to emphasize Jennifer C. Nash’s point of departure. ‘Third wave black feminist’ appears in quotation marks here because the ways in which Lee threatened Tamara Lomax after she reviewed *Erotic Revolutionaries* are not indicative of a commitment to black feminism at all, and neither is the ways in which Lee oversimplifies the stakes of theorizing black female sexual expression by suggesting that white feminists have comparatively been more successful at theorizing pleasure. For further reading on why Lee’s actions as a self-proclaimed black feminist are troubling and why how *Erotic Revolutionaries* leaves much to be desired in its characterization of black women’s sexual lives, see “Shayne Lee, Your Revolution Will Not Happen Between These Thighs: An Open Letter” published April 11, 2011 on the Crunk Feminist Collective website. More than twenty black feminist scholars contributed to and cosigned the sentiments of the open letter.

my research in an attempt to analyze and make space for negotiations of pleasure. What theoretical muscles can be flexed to make space for black women to embrace the multivalent ways they produce and experience pleasure, desire, and erotic fulfillment despite suffering past and present trauma?

I am not attempting to write a black woman's guide to radical sexuality (though I would be eager to read one); I endeavor to make space to trouble understandings of 'good' and 'bad' representations of black female sexuality. In order to explore generative iterations of black female sexuality that rupture narrow categorization I will take up the query of other black feminists in considering the potential of pleasure in even the most extreme frameworks of exploitation, and I will analyze bell hooks' critique of Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* to demonstrate the ways in which a black feminist embrace of contradiction is generative.

In the realm of pop culture, recording artist Beyoncé's latest audio and visual effort, *Lemonade*, pieces together strong imagery, the work of women of color poets, and intentional lyrics to speak to the interior experiences of black women. Beyoncé, an international icon who's amassed a five hundred million dollar empire, is indeed a cog in our nation's capitalist machine. Her ties to various corporations along with the general perception that she and her name in and of itself constitute a commodified brand often cast a dubious shadow over her self-identification as a feminist and her recent push to celebrate blackness. These critiques have traction, and I understand well how revolutionary language can easily become co-opted or absorbed into otherwise exploitative agendas. Taking the above perspectives into serious consideration, I still find Beyoncé's embrace of pro-black aesthetics, imagery, and rhetoric useful in the context of

refashioning how black women approach and are able to articulate their relationship to eroticism and sex. The interventions in the imagery and lyrics of the album poignantly hold spirituality, experiences of trauma, and sexual expression in tandem with one another. My research is centered on exploring and embracing contradictions, examining complex negotiations, and troubling binaries, therefore I am committed to digging deeply and appraising both the transgressive cultural impact of *Lemonade* and Beyoncé as an artist, and the ways in which she falls short or inadvertently promotes agendas that are counterrevolutionary or complicit with the status quo. In the interest of fashioning “a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays,” I argue that cultural products and performers be interrogated and viewed in the round, rather than from the angle of blind praise or condemnation (*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 59).

In addition to an examination of black women’s sexual auto-narration on social media and a close reading of *Lemonade*, I have chosen to use autoethnography as one of my central methods for this project. My experiences with sexual violence have shaped my life. I had to confront the scathing gender and racial biases of the American judicial system when I was fifteen years old and my mother decided we should press charges against my rapist. I ended up choosing to attend an all women’s historically black college because after the harrowing three-year legal effort to prosecute my rapist, I felt that Spelman College cultivated an academic space in which I could heal emotionally and learn to let my pain guide my research and praxis. I became a transparent writer, learning to desert any false sense of objectivity from my studies, all because I had to write an appeal letter to the judge presiding over my rape case when I was a senior in high school. The recommended sentence for my attacker was 90 days in boot camp; and prior to this

sentence announcement, I had been adamant about not having to testify before a jury because I did not want to face more ridicule than I already had. Once we received a call from the district attorney explaining this development, I knew I had to break my silence. In the letter I wrote to Judge Turner in 2009, I declared that my rapist had “sentenced me to a lifetime in prison on March 11th, 2006” and that “I have served dutifully, being denied at every parole hearing.” I closed my letter by stating that “I believe that it is only right that he serve some time too.”

At the time, it was crucial that I squarely established myself as a victim and make my injuries plain to the judge and jury because they interpreted my blackness and mature figure as inviolable, though I was a young teenager. As the years passed on, my own words echoed in my head, resonating more deeply with every revictimization I experienced: Was sexual intimacy going to feel physically and emotionally like a punishment for the rest of my life? Nothing about my violent introduction to sexual contact was rectified by sending my attacker to prison, though the court’s eventual acknowledgement of the abuse that I had suffered was meaningful. I had myriad questions swirl in my mind endlessly, and I found silence as a response to each of them. Are rape victims supposed to stop having sex? Can they ever enjoy sex again? What if rape was how you were first exposed to physiological arousal and sexual situations? And even murkier and more difficult questions to answer, still: What if something that your attacker did before or during the attack is something you come to be attracted to later on? What theory, guidelines, resources are available to help someone navigate these negotiations? What analytics are there through which a black feminine body, so often subjected or made intelligible through acts of violence, can work towards and experience

pleasure? As a black feminist researcher dedicated to recalibrating how black women and femmes approach and experience sexuality, approaches to black female sexuality via the oversimplified agential vs. oppressed binary is futile, because negotiations with pain, pleasure, trauma, shame, and autonomy are made on a major and minor level in every interaction. Injury is not the sole identifier of black women's sexual existence.

Queer Theory and Reading Black Women's Sexual Expression and Representation

I am invested in healing; and this research, similar to José Esteban Muñoz's characterization of disidentifactory performances and texts, "requires an active kernel of utopian possibility" (25). At the turn of the 21st century, Muñoz urged those invested in feminist and queer of color critique to "hold on to and even *risk* utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld," despite the fact that "utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking" (25). Both Muñoz (*Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Politics of Performance* 1999) and Sharon Patricia Holland (*The Erotic Life of Racism* 2012) theorize queer temporalities and speculative queer futures that disrupt positivist linear timelines. My investment in queer futurity as a framework for bringing imagination and speculation to the fore in my consideration of trauma and black women's sexuality is shaped by these texts.

In the third chapter of *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* entitled "The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung's Queer Hybridity," Muñoz executes a close reading of two of Richard Fung's autoethnographic films. In the opening sentence of the chapter readers are polled as to whether "queens are born or made," and Muñoz explains that Richard Fung's childhood memory of imitating

the British queen's royal wave as a queer Chinese Trinidadian "undoes the either/or bind that such a question produces" (77). Fung's at-home impersonation of the queen's greeting to her colonized subjects signifies "an ambivalence to empire and the protocols of colonial pedagogy" as well as a push "against the forced gender prescriptions that such systems reproduce" (78). Rather than critique Fung's imitation of the delicate, precious, and prized physical female embodiment of imperial power in the West within the confines of a good or bad, either or binary – Muñoz deftly unpacks the intersectional specificity of Fung's proximity to power and his experience of identity as a minoritarian queer subject. This process of unpacking representations in texts and exploring their implications without classifying them into any discrete category is central to this project. I seek to shift the focus of theoretical energy from whether or not depictions of black women experiencing erotic pleasure are inherently injurious or redemptive and instead emphasize the places where autonomous pleasure is exerted even in the context of patriarchal, exploitative, or heteronormative power structures; even in the aftermath of figurative and/or literal sexual violence.

Continuing on, Muñoz references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of the term queer "as a *practice* that develops for queer children" and quotes her as explaining "We [queer youth] needed for there to be site where meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest in these sites with fascination and love" (78). Subjects that identify as any combination of queer, racialized, feminized, or colonized are all affixed the "status of terminally 'other' object," and the process of learning to live in the

break⁴ is a “prime resource of survival” for marginalized people that manifests in multivalent ways and varying degrees of intensity (78). To “perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly “line up”” and black feminist imaginings of sexuality, by adopting an analogous method for reading performances of pleasure, can be enriched instead of stymied by the black female body’s precarious position in the American imagination (78). Black women have had to disidentify with dominant culture to survive, thrive, and dare to experiences pleasure (erotic and otherwise). Approaching the issue of silence in and about black women’s sexuality under the summation that black women are always already “disidentifying” and “finding themselves thriving on sites where meaning does not properly line up” frees black feminist theorists from the burden of labeling a sex act or representation as unilaterally negative or positive. More than moral evaluations, the articulation of black women’s autonomous erotic and sexual pleasure deserves emphasis. Especially in the more complex, contradictory and controversial forms that pleasure may take. The aforementioned examples of analysis will provide me with queer models and parallels for approaching my reading black women’s sexuality and eroticism in the wake of trauma. I am able to apply correlating interventions in queer theory to my project via Sharon Patricia Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism*. To return to the issue of moving beyond stagnant perceptions of the female body, Holland asks this question of feminism

⁴ In the essay “The Case of Blackness,” Fred Moten characterizes “impossible black social life poised or posed in a certain intransitive evasion of crossing, in the way mood or fugitive case that ensues between the fact of blackness and the lived experience of the black and as a slippage enacted by the meaning – or, perhaps too “trans-literally,” the (plain[-sung]) sense – of things when subjects are engaged in the representation of objects” as being posed “in the break” (179). Moten encourages us to investigate what meaning the presumed impossibility of being poised in “the break” makes. I apply this theoretical concept to conceive of the multiple intersections marginalized people inhabit spatially. The black women and black femmes whose bodies have historically been sexually exploited, overwritten, and manipulated are poised in this space of always-present vestiges of injury. I hope for us to articulate and experience erotic pleasure, despite its seeming impossibility given our precarious and vulnerable sociohistorical positioning.

and the female body writ large, but specifies that the black female body is especially mired in the discursive space of suffering. Far from arguing for the neglect of historical trauma in considerations of black women's sexual lives, Holland insists that the burden of that historical trauma is not black women's alone. She warns that "if we tie the black female body to the inevitability of slavery's abusive sexual terrain so that every time we think of enslaved black women and sex we think pain, not pleasure, then we also fail to acknowledge our *intellectual* responsibility to take seriously how the transatlantic slave trade altered the very shape of sexuality in the Americas for *everyone*" (56). In concert with Nell Painter's assertions in "Soul Murder and Slavery," Holland is focused on exposing the ways in which the transatlantic slave trade and centuries of white supremacist ideology has embedded itself into our (Americans') most intimate expressions of choice and desire. This is not to suggest that the physiological abuses enslaved African women and their descendants faced apply to everyone – it is a call to assess the intersectional impact of slavery on various subjects and their sexual articulation. In other words, the shared history of the transatlantic slave trade has resulted in a trend towards assessing the sexuality of black women within the confines of its legacy while neglecting to confront how white male sexuality, white female sexuality, and black male sexuality were also shaped by it and created through it.

Through interdisciplinary and multi-modal methodology, I endeavor to weave together a varied cast of sources to continue in the rich tradition of women of color feminism of centering imagination. My methodological choice to integrate questions of representation, materiality, and personal authorship is an attempt to demonstrate the necessity of innovation when tracking black women's pleasure-making activities in the

midst of traumatic experiences. Methods that overemphasize the role of representation seem to miss the experience of embodied contradiction, while strategies that rely on historical archives lack the imaginative speculation necessary to approach something that is as obscured, degraded, and kept-secret as black women's erotic intimacy and sexual pleasure. I am interested in the uncomfortable spaces that lie in between representation, material embodiment, and historical legacies of trauma.

Section One:

“Humble as a Mumble”: The Sexual Politics of Silence

“To claim privileged access to the lives and literature of African American women through what we hold to be the shared experiences of our black female bodies is to cooperate with our own commodification to buy back and sell to the dominant culture its constitution of our always already essentialized identity. On the other hand, to relinquish claim to the experiences of the black body and to confirm and affirm its study purely as discourse, simply as a field of inquiry equally open to all, is to collaborate with our own objectification. We become objects of study where we authorized to be the story but have no special claim to decoding that story. *We can be, but someone else gets to tell us what we mean* [emphasis mine].”

(80)

The litany of overlapping questions and issues Ann duCille expertly pinpoints within the text of “The Occult of True Black Womanhood” in response to rapidly spreading interest in black feminist studies in the mid-nineties and its dubious origins still resonate today. Perplexed and alarmed by the sudden interest in black women’s lives and theory about black women in the academy, duCille’s “Occult” is a layered and honest piece that exemplifies the embodied paradox of being a black feminist academic. Debates over perceptions of authenticity and essentialism being conflated with blackness, and authority and objectivity being ascribed to whiteness, the ways in which academic notoriety seems to shadow whiteness, always, and maleness are just as relevant now as they were twenty years ago. Her description of the dilemma that black women researchers face when writing about themselves is unapologetically blunt. DuCille’s acknowledgment of the rock and hard place that black feminist theorists labor betwixt looms as heavily in my mind now as it did when I first read her words months ago. Given the choice between “cooperating with our own commodification to buy back and sell to

the dominant culture” thus bolstering long-held beliefs in our rigid identity, or “relinquishing claim to the experiences of the black body,” “affirming its study purely as discourse,” and “collaborating with our own objectification,” I squarely choose the former and not the latter. If the game is to be sold, at the very least black women ought to be able to determine how it is told⁵. I labor to affirm that black women can be *and* articulate what our existence means. I use collective pronouns without presumption of any identical life experiences, and instead in the spirit of closeness and commonality: Let me say now that I am unequivocally aware that black women are no monolith and that extreme care, intersectional accounts of power, and attention to nuance are a prerequisite to this sort of intellectual pursuit. That being said, what follows is a messy, complicated, and necessary exercise in self-definition. The group of sources I consult for this project is intentional and the manner in which I introduce and engage them is as well. The cast of characters that I rely on to establish the theoretical bedrock of my thesis are nearly all female, queer, and black or of color. Following the intentionality of my adviser, Brittney Cooper⁶, I approach them as the theorists they are.

⁵ I paraphrase here from the title of a rap album released in 1998 by California rapper Snoop Dogg entitled “Da Game Is To Be Sold, Not To Be Told.” duCille, in characterizing the scenario under which black feminists must either collude with their own commodification or participate in their own objectification, implicitly engages in profound critique of capitalism. To trade in the academic market that thrives on the supposed fixedness of black female identity is analogous to erasing black female subjectivity altogether by her estimations. I do not disagree with this paradigm; however, I deliberately deploy an infamous hip hop capitalist mantra to support my unwillingness to “relinquish claim to the experiences of the black body” and establish it as a “field of inquiry open to all.” As a lower middle class black woman, I have a vexed relationship with capitalism. I disagree with unequal distribution of wealth and monetizing/commodifying any and everything, while I simultaneously believe labor, especially the labor of marginalized people, (women, femmes, LGBTQIA people, etc) should be compensated. So I embrace Snoop Dogg’s words. If the game is ultimately to be sold, at the very least, black women should be able to tell it themselves.

⁶ I open the first section of my thesis with this Ann duCille quote, modeling my acknowledgment of black feminist knowledge production’s precarity after Cooper’s. See her article “Love No Limit: Towards a Black Feminist Future (In Theory)” which begins with the same excerpt from Ann duCille, for more in-depth consideration of the context of duCille’s words and their

In “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” Evelyn Hammonds famously asserted that “the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed” (134). A recent swell⁷ of innovative books and articles are strategically challenging this silence from a variety of angles; however the reproduction of silence and the preoccupation with injury that Hammonds identified in 1994 is still overwhelmingly present today. I will revisit additional portions of the essay shortly, but for right now, I want to focus on a charge leveled in the very last paragraph which I will quote here at length: “...in overturning the “politics of silence” the goal cannot merely be to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal *should* be to develop a “politics of articulation” [emphasis mine] (141).

Hammonds identifies the unilateral discussions of black female sexuality that seem to dominate black feminist circles as the “politics of silence,” and situates its remedy in discursive efforts, rather than solely visual ones. Representation alone “does not erase a history of silence” or alter “structures of power and domination,” either figurative or literal. Black women who appraise any outward representation of black female sexuality as either detrimental to the overall perception of black women in

implication in a contemporary academic landscape. Cooper, Brittney C. "Love No Limit: Towards a Black Feminist Future (in Theory)." *The Black Scholar*. 45.4 (2015): 7-21. Print.

⁷ For examples, see Mirelle-Miller Young's *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, Jennifer C. Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, L.H. Stallings' *Funk the Erotic*, Ariane Cruz's "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality," and Joan Morgan's "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." This list is by no means exhaustive; I am deliberately highlighting some of the contemporary sources in the field of sexuality studies that I consulted for the purposes of this research.

America or useless because of the stereotypes and archetypes that exist in the national imagination may agree with this portion of Hammonds' critique. She takes it further though, and calls for a directly oppositional "politics of articulation" that "builds upon the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to be, speak and act" (141). By specifying her claims for what opposition to prevailing silences about black female sexuality would have to include, it becomes clear that Hammonds is calling for an intersectional analysis of black women's sexual expression. In other words, because visual representation is inadequate in combating silence and invisibility by its lonesome, an intersectional account of what makes some black women's sexual and erotic expressions "seen and not seen," both "symbolically and materially," is what will allow for a more complete and freeing articulation of the nuance of black female sexuality.

The distinction that visual representation alone cannot counter the long history and smothering effects of the politics of silence is a pivotal point, especially given that more varied examples of black female sexuality have appeared in the media over the past four decades. What work does visibility alone do? Why, as Nash inquires in her review of Lee's *Erotic Revolutionaries*, "is visibility the hallmark of liberation" and "what makes visibility more liberated than restraint or respectability" (509)? To answer the first of her questions, visibility is not the pinnacle of liberation. Not without a detailed exploration of how black women's sexual expression is made visible (for example, an analysis of Beyoncé's sexuality is incomplete without mention of her medium/light complexion and how it alters the manner in which her sexual brazenness is interpreted by audiences and how as an international pop singer, sex appeal is one of if not her most valuable asset). In a similar vein, the revolutionary articulation of black female sexuality that Hammonds is

calling for is not unbalanced with an oversaturation of heterosexual perspectives. Along with nuanced readings of the material and ideological structures that allow different kinds of black women to “speak and act,” black queer female sexualities “represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency” (141). L.H. Stallings is interested in the “ways that Black women use culture to explore sexual desire that is spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and fluid so as to avoid splits or binaries that can freeze Black women’s radical sexual subjectivities,” and this focus on fluidity and sexuality without narrow categorization will attribute to a decentering of heteronormativity in consideration of black women’s sexual selves (1).

Nash’s second question, which interrogates the thinly-veiled conclusion that sexual “visibility is more liberated than restraint or respectability” by Lee’s estimations, is digging at the intervention I am attempting to make with a reconsideration of trauma in the sexual lives of black women. Past experiences - violent, life-affirming, and everything in between - can take root in one’s flesh and psyche and become a part of who a person is. Visible sexual expression, sexual restraint, and respectability can all occur against the backdrop of heteropatriarchy or another ideology of domination; by the same token, each of these potentially problematic modes of sexual embodiment and expression may still be pleasurable. In his essay “The Subprime and the Beautiful,” Fred Moten ruminates upon some of Frank Wilderson’s and Sadiya Hartman’s arguments about blackness and arrives at the conclusion that “if the ‘tremendous life’ we have is nothing other than intermittent respite in what Hartman accurately calls the ravages and brutality of the last centuries, *then feeling good about ourselves might very well be obscene*”

[emphasis mine] (240). Black women daring to pursue “feeling good” - black women in search of pleasure despite consistent silencing and the lingering after effects of trauma both literal and figurative - are obscene. Feeling good when one is long-suffering, is indecent, explicit, depraved, offensive; so it is no wonder that debates among black feminist theorists about black female sexuality tend to take on a high-stakes, all-or-nothing ferocity. Exposure is no more a designator of black women’s sexual liberation than invisibility. The hallmark of liberation is black women abiding by their own sexual desires and articulating what brings them pleasure. Black women toying with and articulating the obscene, whatever that may be, is the hallmark of liberation. That articulation need not occur via an internationally released album or a twitter account with thousands of followers reading along; it can occur between partners, in a journal, in one’s mind. The challenge is to make space for and honor all of these.

A politics of articulation demands specificity and consideration in the round. For example, Hammonds commends black lesbian writer Ekua Omosupe for contesting the assumed whiteness of lesbian identity when it is not qualified with “black” as a descriptor. Yet, she is left wanting more from Omosupe’s contention that Audre Lorde was an outsider in her own community, asking “What sexual practices, discourses, and subject positions in her black community was she railing against?” (130). The energy behind the aforementioned questions is almost tangible, and to address them would require one to say exactly what they mean while explaining exactly where they are. I imagine having Hammonds pose the same inquiries to me, motivating me to sharpen and situate my perspective in the context of structural critique. First and foremost, what is my black community? What sexual practices am I railing against? I am aggravated and

impassioned by black women's sexual silence, an inability to articulate what feels good, unenthusiastic sex or sexual encounters before which a woman sighs deeply and says to herself "I might as well"... I am railing against the silence around masturbation and self-pleasure, the resignation that a partner's (especially a cisgender heterosexual male partner's) pleasure is paramount to a black woman's own enjoyment, and internalized sexism and homophobia that can lead some black women to forgo their own erotic fulfillment and disparage other black women that revel in sexual satisfaction. What discourses am I railing against? Any and every conclusion that reifies the mythically deviant status of a 'hoe' reminds me that communal attempts to regulate black women's sexual and erotic expressions are alive and well. I take issue with the lack of resources and conversation about how rape and sexual assault survivors view and move within sexual situations in post-trauma settings and absences of discourse surrounding black female sexual enjoyment, as well as the narrow minded assumption that black women are either consumed with sex or wholly unconcerned with it⁸. And lastly, I imagine Evelyn Hammonds asking me to explain the subject positions I am railing against in my black community. My answer is simple: I am against any subject position that devalues the vital importance of black women's pleasure; sexual and otherwise. Of the same mind as Pleasure Ninjas Joan Morgan and Brittney Cooper, not only do I hope black feminists can "move past damage to claim pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights," I truly believe that "There is no justice for black women without pleasure" (Morgan 36).

⁸ Though asexuality is a completely valid sexuality and celibacy is, of course a valid lifestyle choice, embodiment, and perspective for any person, it has historically been imposed upon black women (especially fat black women and black women with darker complexions). The mammy archetype has been wielded as a means to erase the sexual desires of certain kinds of black women and render their desirability unintelligible.

My responses to these questions directly relate to structure obstacles that black women of varying socioeconomic statuses, differing regions, and a wide array of ages struggle within. The problem of silence in black women's sexual lives did not emerge in the nineties, or even the seventies: it is seldom discussed legacy of the sexual economy of American slavery.

Slavery in the United States: A Site of Trauma, Exploitation, and Erotic Interiority, Too

Hortense Spillers calls the "conditions of the "Middle Passage...among the most incredible narratives available to the student," and I too believe that this is the proper place to begin a discussion of African American women's sexuality (72). Through a survey of Adrienne Davis' "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle: The Sexual Economy of Slavery" and Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," I will compile a layered, but by no means comprehensive consideration of American slavery and the literal and ideological conditions created during this era that continue to stifle black women's sexual and erotic subjectivity in the present. A full acknowledgment of slavery as the paradigm of abject domination within which notions of racialized blackness and gender identity were produced as a means of social, sexual, and behavioral control foregrounds my rethinking of the ways in which black women who have experienced both literal and figurative trauma navigate sexual expression and desire.

The transatlantic slave trade (alongside colonialism and imperial conquest) is the historical moment during which notions of objectification and blackness as racial signifier emerged relationally, and Spillers deftly unpacks these emergences. While Spillers theorizes the ways in which the black female body was made and unmade in both

the disorienting brutality of the Middle Passage and within the paradigms of violence and domination inherent in plantation life, the focus of my examination of pleasure, intimacy, and eroticism for enslaved black women is based on the plantation enslavement. Flesh is a “primary narrative” preceding that of the body, and trauma enacted onto the flesh of African captives during the transatlantic slave trade took varied and heinously brutal forms (67). Spillers offers explicit imagery of the forms of trauma the captive African body was at risk for at all times: “eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet” (67). The mutilation and ultimate destruction of African “human tissue” is recorded in the cargo logs of slave ships and the diaries of crewmembers with the “objective description of laboratory prose,” making plain the decisive impact the “magic of race” had begun to exercise in all human interactions; especially in the conceptualization of pain, culpability, guilt, and harm (67, 70). Harm done to the captive body creates a “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” eviscerations and wounds rendered invisible because of “skin color” (67). Spillers explains that it is this corporeal site of violence, “this “flesh and blood” entity... that is essentially ejected from “The Female Body in Western Culture”,” but that through its omission, we are doomed to repeatedly overlook or forget “that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape – in one sense, and interiorized violation of body and mind – but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males” (68). Mechanisms of both sexual and nonsexual violence unmake the body of the captive African woman as “ungendered female flesh” thus offering “a praxis and a

theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse meditations” (Spillers 68). Although the “ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation” considers the “captive flesh/body...liberated,” through American culture the “originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation” are reproduced so much so that it is as if “neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again” (68). Spillers answers a question she poses earlier in “Mama’s Baby,” asserting that “the phenomenon of marking and branding” does indeed transfer generationally “finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments” (67). I seek to establish the transfer of enfleshed trauma from enslaved African captives to their offspring through a close reading of “Mama’s Baby” and emphasize the specific impact of this enfleshed generational, figurative, and literal trauma on the black female body. To elaborate upon the myriad sexual ramifications of black women’s ungenderness in the context of American slavery, I turn to legal scholar Adrienne Davis.

“Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle”: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” opens with the assertion that “through language, we can represent, and thus reclaim, our intimate selves” (215). Committed to addressing the problematic of silence in black women’s sexual lives and tracing its genealogy, Davis argues that “...slavery, like our sexuality, lies continually at the periphery of our consciousness; eluding representation” and explains that “black women often avoid speaking of sex and intimacy,” discursively “mimicking the American conspiracy of silence around slavery” (216). This repression leads to the construction of a binary between “unidimensional cartoons of “respectable good girls”” and “rejects” left vulnerable to sanction by the

African American community, evoking the uselessness of the binary that I mentioned early in the essay between hypervisibility and invisibility, between licentiousness and respectability (216). Davis contends that “without language, slavery and black women’s sexuality each remain unspeakable” (216). I echo her and specifically argue that the lack of exploration of African American women’s sexual lives post-victimization is reproducing foreclosures and silences at the nexus of trauma and pleasure, ultimately overriding African American women’s navigation of pleasure in larger contexts of pain as impossible. I argue that “in the break,” in the “zone of perceived “unattainability,” an analytics and discourse around the way that trauma shapes the active sexual desire of African American women can be forged (“The Case of Blackness” 179).

Davis declares that the use of black women’s bodies during American slavery is still unspeakable because in addition to the harrowing labor all enslaved persons were forced to complete, “American slavery extracted from black women another form of “work”: reproducing the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced sexual labor to countless men of all races” (217). Quoting Nell Painter and Chris Tomlins, Davis explains that “enslaved African women’s substitution for white women field workers (occurring far earlier than the late 17th century/early 18th century ‘transition to slavery’ would suggest) then increased opportunities for white women’s participation in household formation, stabilizing white culture with an approximation of ‘good wife’ domesticity,” and she further elucidates the ungendering of enslaved captive African women by reminding readers that “within a society that enforced strict adherence to sex roles, only enslaved women were compelled to labor consistently across gender boundaries” (219). Sexual and reproductive labor was compulsory for enslaved women,

and through this systematic cycle of economic exploitation, their trauma became hieroglyphics of the flesh that would come to be inherited by their African American descendants.

Through the analysis of an 1859 Mississippi case in which an enslaved girl under ten years old was raped by an enslaved man, Davis is able to illustrate “how the law and market of the antebellum South seized enslaved women’s intimate lives, converting private relations of sex and reproduction into political and economic relations” (225). The descriptions and definitions of enslaved women in American law effectively depersonalized the black female body and black women’s sexuality (217). The lawyer representing George, the enslaved defendant in the case of *George v. State*, believed the charge preposterous, plainly declaring that “the crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves...their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners” (225). In American slavery, the *act* of rape most certainly existed between enslaved persons although the *crime* of rape did not and while “many black men of this era respected black women’s sexual integrity and rights over their own bodies even in the absence of legal dictates to do so,” some did not (227). It is imperative to note that “black women’s sexual vulnerability was created and legitimized by white institutions of social power,” but that black men took advantage of it too in various ways (Davis 227).

As Davis stresses at the outset of her essay, it is necessary to speak these silent, repressed realities that existed during the American slave trade and have been recapitulated every since. I argue that the navigation of active desire as a body that has experienced trauma is one such recapitulated silence. To return to the 1859 *George v. State*, legal pundit Thomas Cobb agreed that the “...violation of the person of a female

slave, carries with it no other punishment than the damages which the master may recover for the trespass upon his property,” meaning that a slave owner could prosecute the rape of an enslaved woman as a case of vandalism or damage of property, but that for enslaved women, rape was not prosecutable as a personal crime (226). Ultimately, “within slavery’s sexual subtext, the female slave was an extralegal creature” unable to evoke the law in service of her own protection (216). Davis explains the profound impact of this court ruling and others like it in the slaveholding American south: “...criminal laws of rape define the boundaries of sexual access to bodies, especially women’s and children’s. And the doctrine in *George v. State* shows how white institutions, including law, created and legitimized black women’s sexual vulnerability. The refusal of law to protect enslaved women from rape institutionalized access to their bodies. Their exclusion from rape doctrine enabled their sexuality to be seized for multiple purposes,” none of which were their own (226). At the close of the “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle,” Davis identifies the tendency of many African Americans to “still view sexuality as something to be kept private and not spoken about” as a major issue (232). She asserts that in order for “black women to reclaim our sexuality, our intimate selves, from all of the people and forces who would seek to expropriate it, regulate it, define it, and confine it, we must first become comfortable speaking about it” (227). Lamenting the “black women’s magazines filled with stories of the trauma and loss of self-esteem this repression causes,” Davis is alluding to the need for a black feminist sex-positive praxis around the utility of trauma.

The distinct gendered and racialized horrors that enslaved black women experienced are oft examined and revisited in black feminist theorizing, and rightfully so,

as they are easily erased or ignored by the general public. But even in the context of this abject abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation – compromised and complex negotiations of sexual expression and erotic pleasure had to have existed. Asserting that enslaved women had experiences of sexual release and or erotic pleasure is more than just conjecture – as Joan Morgan declared during a panel discussion in Florence, Italy on theorizing black female pleasure, agency, and desire within black feminism, “...there had to be pleasure on the slave ship. There had to be orgasms during slavery. If there weren’t, we simply would not have been able to survive” (The Sweetest Taboo). The space of possibility within the deadening structure of plantation enslavement was liminal⁹, and I am not in any way demanding that all enslaved black women experienced intimacy, expressions of eroticism, or sexual pleasure. As a scholar interested in the nexus of trauma and pleasure, obedience, pain, and eroticism, I have to wonder, though: What if some of them did? What would enslaved black women’s experiences of sexual pleasure or intimacy, as few and as far between as they may have been, mean? The process of commodification forced upon African captives that obliterated their humanity with logics of utility and fungibility¹⁰ is no less horrifying if we embrace the precarious existence of erotic pleasure in the lives of these refuse historical subjects. Morgan asks “Why is talking about that,” the erotic pleasure that enslaved persons must have experienced at some level, as compromised as it may have been, “seen to be threatening or destabilizing?”

⁹ My discussion of “liminal subjects” and understand of slave-owners’ and white peoples’ general perverse enjoyment in spectacles of black suffering (what Hartman calls “the politics of pleasure”) is derived from Sadiya Hartman’s scholarship. I take up Joan Morgan’s iteration of “pleasure politics,” an inversion of the debasement that Hartman details. See Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ I gathered my ideas about a specific process of commodification imposed upon African captives when traveling on slave ships from a course entitled Refuse Bodies, Ungrievable Lives taught by Marisa Fuentes. One of the first texts we read in the course was Stephanie Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery*, in which the multi-step process of dislocating, disorienting, and commodifying African captives on ships as they journeyed toward enslavement in the Americas and Caribbean was detailed.

What about acknowledging the possibility that enslaved persons, namely enslaved women, enjoyed sexual release or forms of sexual expression seems to cheapen or take away from the well-documented trauma we know they experienced? This acknowledgment does not disrupt the sociohistorical salience of trauma in black women's sexual lives, but it does open up the potential to investigate experiences of pleasure as an equally viable avenue of academic inquiry as the tracking and analysis of trauma. Resisting the inclination to privilege a reading of one over the other, I seek to hold "pleasure and trauma in a productive tension" as Treva B. Lindsey suggests, and mine that generative space of overlapping contradiction for practical and theoretical interventions (*The Sweetest Taboo*).

The question of "whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived "pleasure" from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask," and it seems the question of whether or not enslaved women experienced any sort of sexual pleasure at all is equally impolite (Spillers 76). In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" Spillers admits that "whether or not "pleasure" is possible at all under the conditions that [she] would aver non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled," and goes on to specify that "under these arrangements, the customary lexis of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire" are thrown into unrelieved tension" (76). It is of note that Spillers does not completely foreclose the possibility that enslaved women may have experienced some form of sexual satisfaction within the context of slavery in the United States, and that she alludes to the tension between pleasure and trauma that Lindsey would identify as productive decades later. What exists in this space of unrelieved tension cannot be disregarded or overlooked;

and what stands to be “attained in this zone of unattainability,” these fleeting erotic scenarios that enslaved women were a part of but did not own, is possibility (Moten 179). Possibility, yes, and more specifically, permission: to not only interrogate and theorize carnal pleasures, sensations and experiences deemed irreverent, indecent, frivolous, or unnecessary for black women, (especially outside the framework of a heteropatriarchal familial structure¹¹), and even in the face of life-threatening physical and psychic turmoil, but to enjoy them ourselves. We can explore pleasure in the midst of trauma because they did; because Joan Morgan’s politics of pleasure need not be a theoretical intervention tethered to a 20th or 21st century conceptualization of popular culture and media representation; because complex negotiations of pleasure that are comprised of contradictory positionalities, murky experiences, and competing ideas are as much a part of our history as trauma is. Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson’s “In Search of Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom” is a work of speculative history that leads readers to the nebulous spatiality between pleasure and trauma. Lindsey and Johnson encourage imaginative praxis and push readers to consider the uncomfortable and previously unfathomable erotic interiority of enslaved women, exploring the life and motivations of Harriet Tubman as a starting point.

“Searching for Climax” is “a call to explore and a foundational excavation of the sexual lives of black women during slavery, and more specifically, historical narratives of pleasure” in black feminist scholarship (169). Grounding narratives and explorations of pleasure within the condition of enslavement is an intellectual project that addresses

¹¹ In “Searching for Climax,” Lindsey and Johnson repeatedly refer to the ways in which enslaved women’s sexuality was and often still is only legible in the context of a heteropatriarchal familial structure. Here, I allude to their assertion.

critiques that contemporary black feminist preoccupation with pleasure is a relatively new and unrelated deviation from the rigors of addressing structural inequity¹². Lindsey and Johnson take Russell Simmons' poorly executed spoof video "The Harriet Tubman Sextape" as their point of departure, and while they agree that it was an unsuccessful attempt at satire that was ultimately offensive, they contend that public response to the video still revealed a "collective contempt, discomfort, and disdain among African Americans for eroticizing liberatory struggles and revered historical figures such as Tubman" (171). Portraying a fictional historical universe in which Harriet Tubman exchanged sex acts to barter for her own freedom and the freedom of others "was read as disrespectful and challenged a collective desire to wholly memorialize and historicize US chattel slavery as a site of suffering, violence, death, trauma, dehumanization and exploitation," and seemed to make light of the sexual exploitation enslaved women faced (171). Beyond the comedic failure of the video, a cultural commitment to a fixed perception of the experiences of enslaved persons becomes evident. "Searching for Climax" challenges these ossified commitments by "introducing the possibility of an erotic mapping of slavery and resistance" and "visualizing enslaved blacks...as sexual subjects," thus putting forward the concepts of "sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and erotics into a historical era in which dehumanization and dispossession messily complicate the meaning of consent, complicity, and agency for enslaved black people." Complex negotiations of pleasure, agency, consent, and complicity are the crux of my argument concerning the ways in which black women can experience pleasure despite having

¹² In addressing the "polarizing resistance" that Evelyn Hammonds' "call for a "politics of articulation"" has been met with in the years since she identified the recapitulation of silence about sexuality as a problem in within black feminist theory, Joan Morgan expresses that "iterations of *Certain black feminists need to stop talking about twerking and pleasure and turn their attention back to structural inequalities* have grown common in feminist digital terrains" ("Why We Get Off" 38).

experienced trauma or even in the throes of a traumatic scenario. These states of being are not at all mutually exclusive.

Lindsey and Johnson assert that “reimagining Tubman, and enslaved black women and free women of color more broadly, as historiographically erotic subjects opens narratives of slavery to a radical black sexual interiority” and boldly challenges the “erotophobia so deeply entrenched in our collective historicization of US slavery” (171). While there have been depictions of romantic partnerships between enslaved black people on television in the 1970s *Roots* mini-series and now, on the runaway hit series *Underground*, this sort of intimacy has seldom been explored in on the silver screen. Whenever I ruminate on the dearth of representations of romance and intimacy within the context of US chattel slavery in comparison to those in the context of a concentration camp during the Holocaust, the immense impact recasting enslaved persons as erotic, feeling subjects could have becomes clear to me. Despite the actual lack of on screen representations of the lives of enslaved persons, I am accustomed to hearing the refrain that African American people are “tired of seeing slave movies.” I think the more pointed articulation of that sentiment is that African Americans are tired of seeing one dimensional portrayals of the lives of enslaved people that primarily showcase the suffering and trauma that we know took place but do little to infer or speculate as to the life-affirming quotidian practices that enslaved people took refuge in. One such under-investigated and overlooked commonplace survival practice had to have been sexual expression and erotic release of some kind. To relegate enslaved persons (especially those who we memorialize as heroes and renegades that helped others escape the physical

and ideological confines of bondage) to an unchallenged asexual terrain of iconicity is to erase a part of their humanity.

Despite there being record of her having been married twice, the second time to a man some twenty years her junior, Harriet Tubman's interior erotic life still remains an unexplored historical site. Tubman's iconicity as a "sacred historical figure" renders it near-impossible to imagine her as an "erotic subject with desires and intimate needs situated in the profane" (175). Amid the unending turmoil of interlocking gender and racial domination and exploitation in the United States, an enslaved black woman feeling good about herself would most definitely be considered profane; obscene; monstrous; unique. The sheer amount of risk involved in any expression of erotic or sexual pleasure on the part of an enslaved black woman recasts what is reductively perceived as frivolous or better left unexamined as a spectacular instance of self-definition. The vitriolic public outrage in response to the Tubman sextape's albeit crude, but plausible suggestion that "sex may have served as a liberatory tool for enslaved blacks" is only topped by the idea that "sexual exchanges among slave-owners and enslaved blacks blurred boundaries among consent, power, pleasure, desire, coercion, and violence"; but knee-jerk reactions elide the "possibility that sex could function as a tool of resistance as well as a vehicle for affirming humanity" (175). To echo Adrienne Davis, our inability to speak about the sexual precarity of enslaved black women – including traumatic exploitation, sexualized violence, and fleeting experiences of erotic joy and pleasure – are mirrored in contemporary discourse concerning black female sexuality. Even the suggestion that enslaved black women had sexual lives beyond forced breeding and rape offers me a theoretically related lifeline as a black female victim of sexualized violence in a differing

era, context, and degree of intensity. Lindsey and Johnson are not calling for a rewrite of every act of miscegenation and brutal sexual exploitation that occurred throughout chattel slavery in the US, but rather for approaching the possibility of sexual enjoyment for enslaved persons with a critical generosity¹³. It is imperative that we accept Lindsey and Johnson's charge that "black women's erotic lives do not stand apart from a project of liberation" and take seriously the erotic interiority of black women in slavery and in freedom (179). It is imperative that we "*visualize* black female sex as flesh and sensation in bodies betrayed and violated, participating and initiating" as this dissolution of purely good or bad representations and encounters will revolutionize the ways in which black women's erotic autonomy is made legible in the present. To escape the binary of racial detriment or racial uplift when analyzing representations of black women's sexuality is, to riff off of Anna Julia Cooper's famous declaration, "to know when and where [the black woman] climaxes" so that "the whole race may climax with her" (180).

One of the most "shocking, uncomfortable, and...sexy TV scenes" from the 2016 television series *Underground* is an example of exploring the sexual lives of enslaved women with speculative and critical generosity (Houston). The second episode of the series, "War Chest," portrays an intense sexual encounter between Ernestine, (an enslaved woman and head house servant of the Macon plantation) and Tom Macon (slave-owner and master of the Macon plantation). Earlier in the episode, Tom Macon's wife Suzanna spitefully suggests that Ernestine's youngest son James begin to work in

¹³ Treva B. Lindsey references this term of her creation during the Sweetest Taboo: Theorizing Black Female Pleasure, Agency and Desire panel discussion at the New York University Black Portraiture{s} II: Imaging the Black Body and Re-Staging Histories conference in Florence, Italy on May 29, 2015. Lindsey introduces this phrase as a theoretical approach to evaluating and analyzing black women's scopophilic practices when engaging with representations of other black women in popular culture. Rather than approaching an image or portrayal from the moral judgment of "goodness" or "badness," Lindsey suggests that we as black feminist theorists lead with critical generosity and engage in layered readings of images and texts.

the fields because she resents Ernestine's homemaking, cooking, and cleaning prowess. While it is not explicitly revealed to viewers whether or not Suzanna knows Tom has fathered two of Ernestine's children (a daughter in her late teens named Rosalee and James, this young son), it is easy to infer that she has her suspicions and that they may partially be the source of her ire for Ernestine and Ernestine's children. Ernestine is horrified at the suggestion that James work in the fields; he's a young child standing at barely three feet tall and the only life he's ever known has been inside the plantation home being carefully looked after by his mother. Thus, in the scene between Ernestine and slave-owner Tom Macon in the cellar, we bear witness to an enslaved woman negotiating her son's fate during a sexual rendezvous.

Soft light melts onto the walls of the cavernous wine cellar, flickering here and there as drafts intermittently pester the flames of the many lit candles in the room. Tom Macon steps into view from a staircase just out of the frame, and once he arrives in the room and takes in what the audience has yet to see, he chuckles softly to himself, smiles, and gently shakes his head as if in amazement. The camera then cuts to Ernestine, her shoulders bare, her chin lifted and tilted to one side in a half-glance towards Tom, beckoning him. The soft glow of candlelight casts pools of brightness and shadow along the curve of her neck, the elegant crown of her braided hair, her angular cheekbones and jaw line. The shot widens, revealing Ernestine's complete nudity – save a pair of heeled shoes and dangling earrings. She turns to face Tom with a seductive stare and one playfully raised eyebrow. The camera turns back to his awe at the brazenness of the woman standing in front of him. Clutching a bottle of wine she had refused to pour for guests of the plantation that had harassed her daughter earlier that day in one hand,

Ernestine uncorks the bottle with dramatic and jerky movements with the other. As Tom moves closer to her, she challenges him in a slow and deliberate drawl: "We don't want to waste something this fine on your rude guests, now do we?" While her question lingers in the air, she begins to drizzle red wine all over her naked self and Tom responds by undressing as quickly as he can and closing the space between them. He grunts in appreciation as rivulets of wine cascading down the small of Ernestine's back and the crack of her behind flash across the screen. Tom grabs her and tries to kiss her, but Ernestine snatches her head back, refuses his kiss, and slaps him hard across the face. Pointing a finger in his mildly confused face, Ernestine taunts him, exclaiming "I didn't say you could touch me yet!" Although Tom is not permitted to lay a hand on Ernestine, it is obvious that she is touching him, and the camera zeroes in on her facial expressions. Her tongue dances across her lips and she stares Tom down; stares him into submission. Mouth agape, Tom's head lolls back on his shoulders as he moans in ecstasy. Ernestine caresses the nape of his neck pulling him close, leveling eye contact and then demanding plainly that James not work in the fields as Suzanna has proposed. She provides Tom with lines to say directly to his wife: "You tell her he been showin' some skills with woodwork. He can go work with Sam," (Sam being her oldest son who works in the woodshop on the Macon plantation). Tom drowsily concedes, mumbling "He'll be wherever you want him," but this is not the sort of reassurance that will satisfy Ernestine; not when the fate of her child is at stake. Her tender caress of Tom's profile hastily turns into a stiff and twisted grip on his bottom lip. She says again, heavy delivery punctuating each word: "He ain't... going...out...in the fields," and then commands Tom to "say it" and repeat after her.

The slightest bit taken aback at her seriousness, Tom repeats that James, their son, will not work out in the fields, his delivery muffled by Ernestine's still-tight grip on his bottom lip. Without another word, Ernestine smiles for the first time during the scene, pulls Tom's face close to hers, and finally graces him with a deep and passionate kiss, letting his hands roam over her body wherever they may. He lifts her up and seconds after Ernestine is perched atop a table they begin to have sexual intercourse. The scene ends with various shots of Ernestine and Tom's exhales, gropes, and contortions of pleasure. Ernestine's eyebrows raise in a final tent as the scene fades to black: whether they are knitted in orgasmic surprise, concerns over her son's fate, or both, the audience is left to decide.

This scene boldly depicts the sort of erotic interiority that Lindsey and Johnson assert is essential to our collective reimagining of slavery. Amirah Vann, the actress that portrays Ernestine, has a lighter complexion and traditionally beautiful features – factors that need be taken into account when considering how an audience may have received her involvement in such a provocative television scene. Vann's attractive appearance undoubtedly softened the shock of seeing an enslaved woman exercise sexual autonomy, with the white man who owned her, no less. And even still, I am certain there were people upset or outraged at the suggestion that enslaved black women leveraged their sexuality to barter for more humane treatment on their own behalf of and for others. But imagine the same scene I examined above with a black actress of a darker complexion, with kinky coiled hair, with a physique not taunt and slim like Vann's, but instead large and not molded in the form of an hourglass. Imagine a scene of comparative explicitness with a woman who resembled Harriet Tubman as the erotic agent and primary subject.

In “Searching for Climax,” Lindsey and Johnson contend that “we end up at two substantive conclusions” if we regard black female sexuality with the gravity it deserves as a realm of theoretical inquiry and imaginative praxis (181). The first, that “present-day constructions of black female sexuality are inextricably tied to slavery,” takes on new meaning if we suppose that enslaved black women engaged in negotiations of erotic pleasure with themselves and others within the context of US chattel slavery (181). While the analysis of the impact of “subjugation, exploitation and dehumanization” is necessary, it “cannot preclude fuller incorporation of pleasure and erotic possibility in the lives of enslaved black women” (181). Full acknowledgement that enslaved black women maintained sexual lives and experienced sexual pleasure in varying manifestations greatly disrupts the binary of good and bad, right and wrong in discussions of black women’s sexual expressions and sexual representations. A wealth of commentary on the sexual lives of enslaved black women in the *Underground* between Ernestine and Tom Macon would be untapped if the scene were immediately dismissed as a unilateral negative representation of black female sexuality. To use Nell Painter’s phrasing, in order to move toward a fully loaded cost accounting¹⁴ of the impact of the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved black women’s sexuality either wielded as tool of resistance or enacted as a “life-affirming practice” need be rigorously investigated. The second conclusion we arrive at if we take black women’s sexuality seriously, is that “black women had sex, and not just with the heads of their households, whether white or black men – not just, even, with men” (181). While the enslaved black family of the collective African American imagination is “abused but resilient, violated but transcendent, heteropatriarchal but content to be so,” heteronormative nostalgia blinds us to the array of family constructions

¹⁴ Painter, Nell Irvin. *Soul Murder and Slavery*. Waco, TX: Markham Fund, Baylor UP, 1995. Print.

and sexual preferences that undoubtedly existed among enslaved populations. Theorizing queer desire and heterogeneous sexual expression among enslaved black women (and enslaved black persons of any gender presentation) offers yet another productive way to speak back towards generational silences shrouding black female sexuality in legacies of trauma and trauma alone. There is no contemporary ‘gay agenda,’ there is no two-parent man and woman headed naturalized household and family construction that centuries of racism and slavery robbed from us. Black feminist interventions that call for a focus on black women’s erotic pleasure and assert that it takes multivalent, murky, and sometimes contradictory forms are grounded in an expansive theoretical project of historical reclamation and revision.

In their reading of the opening scene of Steve McQueen’s film adaption of Simon Northrup’s narrative *12 Years a Slave*, Lindsey and Johnson offer a meticulous assessment of the competing emotions and physical sensations that they speculate would characterize erotic encounters within the context of slavery’s brutality. I will quote them here at length:

“However, the film departs from the narrative in depicting Northrup in a prurient sex act with an unnamed enslaved woman. In the very first scene of the film, the audience encounters an enslaved woman lying beside Northrup in what appears to be mass housing of some kind. She turns to him and initiates an act of mutual masturbation, forcefully guiding him to please her sexually with his hand or hands. After some resistance, he acquiesces, bring her to climax. The sight of her, anonymous and silently demanding to be pleased, is visually unfamiliar and a departure from the original text. This moment conjures discomfort, not merely because of her forcefulness, but because her desire for sexual satisfaction finishes with her tears. The arousing sensation she seeks brings both physical pleasure and emotional pain. Her sexual encounter unveils her desire to be felt, seen, and aroused. Yet she cannot fully reconcile her sexual act with her emotional well-being. This filmic encounter with an enslaved black woman’s interior life offers a point of departure for imagining the ambiguity of creating sexual lives and performing sexual acts that might fulfill a desire for pleasurable sensation. These sensations arguably offered fuel for surviving slavery’s horrors, provided corporeal and embodied resistances to dehumanization, and caused real anguish.”

(182-82)

This scene, as is noted in the passage above, was the creation of McQueen for the purposes of the film adaptation. What affective response was McQueen looking to garner from the viewers? And does that intended response mesh with the response audiences actually had? When asked about for the rationale behind including the anonymous erotic encounter as the opening scene in *12 Years*, McQueen explained that he "...wanted to show a bit of tenderness... Then after she climaxes, she's back... in hell" (Berlatsky "How *12 Years a Slave* Gets History Right: By Getting It Wrong). With no soundtrack scored over the images in the scene, the desperation and intensity of the sexual encounter between these two enslaved persons is nearly palpable. *12 Years a Slave* centers the experiences of a black, male, and named protagonist, and yet this unidentified black woman embodies and represents a contradictory web of desire, vulnerability, sorrow, and loneliness that is relevant throughout the duration of the film. McQueen's description unequivocally corroborates Lindsey and Johnson's thesis: this unnamed enslaved woman reaches out to another body in search of an outlet for her arousal, her climax is an escape lasting for only a few seconds, and then she is thrust back into a hellish present. This speculative historical sequence "creates a psychological truth by interpolating an incident that isn't factually true," and proves the impact of imagination in reclaiming the erotic interiority of enslaved black people (Berlatsky). The confounding interplay of sexual longing, emotional pain, and physical release that Lindsey and Johnson articulate in their interpretation of the scene is powerful; not only because it offers an intimate lens through which to better understand the minutiae of enslaved people's inner lives, but also because it touches on the seldom explored crisis of physical arousal and emotional distress that many people, particularly women who have endured forms of sexual violence, rape,

and/or molestation, find themselves entangled in. Speculative work that recreates and reimagines the collective condition of enslavement in film, black feminist theorizing, popular culture and other realms of cultural production can dramatically change the ways in which black women contemporarily approach and articulate their sexual pleasure. If we are courageous enough to accept that enslaved black women felt, fantasized, touched and were touched, reckoned with the subsequent emotional turmoil, and pursued pleasure... who are we to shy away from the task?

Expansive Perspectives: Why Research on Pleasure is Timely

At the Black Portraiture{s} II: Imaging the Black Body and Re-Staging Histories Conference hosted by New York University in Florence, Italy last year, Mark Anthony Neal moderated a panel discussion entitled “The Sweetest Taboo: Theorizing Black Female Pleasure, Agency, and Desire Within Black Feminism.” Towards the end of the fruitful and provocative session, Neal asked panelists Joan Morgan, Treva B. Lindsey, and Brittney Cooper about their participation on a panel earlier that year at Duke University on the topic of respectability and depictions of black women’s eroticism in Shonda Rhimes’ television shows. Neal situated the two panels within the larger liberatory context of recent unrest against police brutality and acts of state-sanctioned violence against black people, asking Morgan, Cooper, and Lindsey how they respond to “critics that might look at the labor that you did that day and have been doing in your work, that would suggest somehow that your talents should be better served in the labor of the movement?” Each panelist was visibly and audibly exasperated by the inquiry, and Neal smiled knowingly as they responded, asserting that theorizing black female pleasure

is liberatory work and is not separate from a movement invested in justice for black people.

The question posed touched a nerve with the panelists because it was an iteration of a complaint that black feminists are confronted with all too often. In the context of the generalized struggle for racial liberation that many black folks labor towards, assumptions that work centering black women or work concerning gendered issues that do not directly affect cisgender heterosexual black men are inconsequential abound. Recognizing the multitude of ways black women's pain and suffering has been excluded from a narrative of collective racial struggle throughout the years makes black feminist theory's preoccupation with injury and trauma easy to understand. One of the most polarizing events of the past several decades divided black people along lines of race and gender and plainly demonstrated how black men are typically prioritized in the collective African American imagination: Anita Hill's 1991 hearing for sexual harassment allegations against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Patricia Hill Collins devotes the seventh chapter of her germinal project *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, ("Assume the Position: The Changing Contours of Sexual Violence") to an examination of the parasitic imbalance between gender and racial issues that is routinely staged in African American ideology, and her point of departure is Anita Hill's hearing and the retribution she suffered afterwards. Collins recalls how Clarence Thomas' now famous rebuttal to Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment swayed the already dubious, all-male and all-white jury. Framing Hill's complaints about his inappropriate behavior ten years earlier and the highly-publicized hearings that followed as a "modern day lynching," Thomas

opportunistically evoked a narrative of black male injury and endangerment that resonated with many African Americans as a call to unite under the banner of race to protect him (Collins 215-216). His high profile status as a Supreme Court justice only reinforced the festering conspiracy theories that Anita Hill was corroborating with the State (code: white people) to bring him down and tarnish his name after he had realized what many conceptualized as success. Collins explains that “for Black women and men, the Thomas confirmation hearings catalyzed two thorny questions,” the first being “Why did so many African Americans...reject Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment?” And the second: “Even more puzzling, why did so many African Americans who believed Anita Hill criticize her for coming forward and testifying” (216)? The primary reaction of many African Americans was to dismiss Anita Hill’s claims altogether and even those that believed her did not want to have to hear about it – the belief was that it was better left unsaid, regardless of whether or not harassment had taken place. This returns us to the problematic of silence; it is a state in which black women’s grievances are buried or talked about in fashions that do not disrupt dominating narratives of racial uplift or proper (strong black) womanhood. Hill and the tumultuous aftermath of her testimony reveal the cultural and communal force with which silence, resilience, and absorption of pain is demanded of black women. Clarence Thomas’ supposed “lynching” roused ideas of racial collectivity in the minds of many African Americans because of the public and grotesquely spectacular history of the term. In the binary established in the African American imagination, “*either race or gender was primary, but not both,*” and “within this logic of segregation, race and gender constituted separate rather than intersecting forms of oppression that could not be equally important” (Collins 216). Because lynching

was a public act of “ritualized murder” and rape and sexual assault often occurred out of the public eye or among a set person or group of individuals, it was and still is popularly believed that “Black men carry the more important burden of race” while “Black women carry the less important burden of gender” (216). These beliefs are what led so many black people to either entirely refute Anita Hill’s allegations or argue that she should have never come forward or exposed what she experienced in the first place. Hill was, as black women still largely are, interpolated as bearing the negligible weight of gender, while in contrast, Clarence Thomas courageously refused to buckle under the immense burden of race; still managing to achieve a seat in the highest court in the United States. The latter sentiments justifiably infuriate black feminists well-versed in intersecting matrices of oppression, relations to power, and domination. The divisive narrative that came to characterize lynching as a public gendered race issue and rape and sexual assault as a private gendered individual issue is how the tradition of excavating black women’s trauma and suffering was granted its place of prominence in black women’s academic and cultural products, and more specifically, black feminist theory. Black feminist intellectuals have devoted massive amounts of intellectual labor to emphasize the overlapping effects of racial and gendered oppression¹⁵ and toil against the assumption that racial injustices black women face pale in comparison to those of black men.

Collins expounds upon the unequal gravity with which lynching and rape are regarded, writing “lynchings, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence against African American men operate as consensus issues within African American politics,”

¹⁵ For a few examples, see *Arn’t I a Woman: Female Slaves and the Plantation South* by Deorah Gray White; *A Shining Thread of Hope* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson; *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* by Paula J. Giddings; and Angela Davis’ “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.”

taking “precedence over those that seemingly only affect black women” (217). In the cultural imagination, black men are attributed racial martyrdom, while issues of sexualized violence that affect black women, black men, and queer and/or non-binary people are feminized and thus devalued. A heartbreakingly demonstrative example of the contrast between how the African American community mobilizes in the wake of police brutality against black and in comparison to when black women are the victims of sexual violence and/or rape is the 2015 trial and conviction of ex-Oklahoma City Police Officer Daniel Holtzclaw. Holtzclaw was sentenced to 18 counts relating to rape, sexual battery, forcible oral sodomy, and more in December of 2015 and was sentenced to 263 years in prison after four days of jury deliberation¹⁶. Convictions in trials involving rogue law enforcement officers are rare in and of themselves, but what made this scenario distinctive was that all 13 of Holtzclaw’s accusers were black women: black women who had had prior convictions or legal infractions related to drug use, active warrants, or prostitution¹⁷. His deliberate predation on black women with criminal histories, black women of certain socioeconomic standing, the obvious assumption being that black women with the aforementioned characteristics are easy targets because people are less likely to listen to them – all of these things are indicative of a deliberate flurry of racial and gender motivated sexualized attacks. Holtzclaw was able to continue working as an officer even after excessive force complaints began piling up, was able to sexually assault black women up into the double-digits, not only because of his own close proximity to power as a cisgender non-black heterosexual male law enforcement officer, but also

¹⁶ Joseph Diaz, Lauren Effron, Alexa Valiente, Eric M. Strauss, and Susan Welsh, “Ex-Oklahoma City Cop Spending 263 Years in Prison for Rape and His Accusers Share Their Stories,” *ABC News*, April 21, 2016, accessed August 17, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/oklahoma-city-cop-spending-263-years-prison-rape/story?id=38517467>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

because of black women's precarious position of powerlessness within frameworks of racial and gender domination. I followed the four week trial, jury deliberation, and sentencing closely and was amazed at how the serial sexual assaults were largely conceptualized outside the realm of the movement for black lives in the public African American imagination. Daniel Holtzclaw's strategic attacks on vulnerable black women were not readily included under the umbrella of police brutality that has garnered increased national attention since Trayvon Martin's murder. The convictions in this case vindicated 8 of the 13 women¹⁸ who were sexually assaulted, raped, and victimized by Holtzclaw and represented an unprecedented judicial victory in the struggle to hold law enforcement officers accountable for crimes perpetrated against African Americans and in the ongoing struggle to prosecute and convict rapists. Ideally, this would have represented an opportunity for African Americans to unite in support of the black women who found themselves sadistically targeted because of their lived experience in the nexus of gender, lower socioeconomic status, and blackness. This should have been an opportunity to rally around Holtzclaw's accusers and expand our cultural understanding to include sexualized violence such as this as *both* a racial *and* gendered issue of paramount importance. But, save for a tight-knit group of concerned citizens and black feminist academics and activists, these women did not become household names or idyllic examples of racist brutality as so many black men slain by police officers have. There was no large-scale parade celebrating their courageous testimonies after Holtzclaw was sentenced to 263 years in prison for assaulting, harassing, and raping them; yet there was a homecoming parade for former boxer Mike Tyson after he was acquitted of raping Desiree Washington, a black woman.

¹⁸ Ibid.

This severe imbalance in representation and cultural concern has been the catalyst for black feminist interventions and herstories that detail the traumatic, resilient, and painful experiences of black women. Black women have had to organize, write, and labor in defense of ourselves. As Deborah Gray White wrote in 1999¹⁹, the burden would be too heavy a load to carry by oneself. One of the unforeseen consequences of black feminist commitments to disrupt the prevailing assumption that gender is a lesser burden than race, and that black women don't equally bear the burden of race with black men, is an inattention to joy and pleasure. The decades-long mission of establishing black women as intersectional subjects constantly victimized by acts of racialized and gendered violence has inadvertently resulted in the elision of other facets of black women's experiences as multidimensional beings. While externally, communal iterations of "Black gender ideology that routinely elevates the suffering of Black men as more important than that of black women" are stubbornly circulated despite the plethora of statistical and empirical data to the contrary, within black feminist theory, the fixation on injury and trauma has stymied conversations that center black women's experiences with pleasure and joy (Collins 223); especially in sexualized contexts. It is almost as if an argument identical to that Mark Anthony Neal had in mind when asking what Morgan, Lindsey, and Cooper would have to say when addressing the critique that their work is irrelevant in the context of a movement towards *racial* liberation has been inverted and applied to most explorations of sexual expression and erotic pleasure in black feminist theory. Assumptions that theoretical considerations of black women's pleasure are secondary, tertiary, or wholly irrelevant to black feminist theory again project a subjective binary

¹⁹ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

onto black women's experiences that rooted in perceptions of utility and merit. Just as black women's issues are consistently interpreted to be less pressing, less dire, less important, and even damaging in comparison to black men's experiences with racist state-sanctioned violence, interrogation of the ways black women revel in erotic agency and sexual pleasure is cast asunder as frivolous and often times even detrimental to the overarching goals of black feminist theory.

But if black women had to organize in defense of their own safety, their own womanhood, their own right to disrupt and challenge the deity-like status of black men... then why would we collectively fail to see that if black women's interactions and experiences with sexual and erotic pleasure will ever be taken up as a topic worthy of interrogation by anyone, we will have to do it ourselves? Examinations of how black women experience pleasure are integral to broadening conceptualizations of black womanhood beyond the scope of "the ability to absorb mistreatment" and/or articulate experiences of suffering both within and outside the realm of black feminist theory (Collins 228). The more recent group of scholars mining sites beyond resilience, victimhood, sexual strife and crises of representation are producing intellectual work that, as Treva B. Lindsey argues, hold both pleasure and trauma in a productive tension and view them as equally viable and efficacious theoretical lenses through which to examine the intricacies of black womanhood.

Examination of what lies beneath, beyond, and entangled with generational, literal, and figurative experiences of trauma in black women's sexual lives is necessary in moving discourse beyond the problem of silence and articulation of pain and pain alone. I personally identify with this shift because in my own struggle to bring charges against

and convict my rapist, I was at first so consumed with dispelling the perception that I was an adult and I was sexually active that I became preoccupied with proving being raped had ruined my life. I had to establish myself as a victim and go into great detail about every physical and emotional hardship I had suffered in the wake of my assault to prove to the judge presiding over my case that punishment more severe than a few months in boot camp was in order to avenge what I had endured. But now, ten years later, I am ready to articulate more than trauma and suffering alone. It was up to me to prioritize my trauma and demand that it be considered as a teenager toiling to have my case seriously pursued, and I have had to make the same sort of concerted effort to prioritize my own pleasure as well; even in the complex, contradictory, and potentially problematic ways I experience it in the wake of the sexualized violence I have experienced. The parallel is the same for black feminist theory: black women defend themselves, vindicate their own injured, create worlds for themselves, and theorize and celebrate their own rapture and enjoyment. As Treva B. Lindsey declares in “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture,” “black women must contend with an exploitative and denigrating history that in many ways continues to police a more expansive continuum for progressive and liberatory black female-centered sexual politics” (57). This revisionist history was wrought of the desire to offer black women’s lives the sort of critical engagement they deserve, and now, with a critical attention to the politics of pleasure, black women’s history and experiences can be read through the lens of both pleasure and trauma.

Centering Pleasure in Contemporary Black Feminist Perspectives

Revisiting slavery and the raced, sexed, and gendered scripts that still persist in its wake are integral to understanding the interventions that a thoughtful consideration of pleasure can potentially make in black women's sexual lives. A more capacious treatment of trauma, one that recognizes it as sculptor – continuously shaping and molding the contours of desire, fear, sexual expression – but not as executioner, snuffing out the very possibility of pleasure with a heavy blanket of victimhood, would not only afford survivors of rape and sexual assault, but all African American women, with an analytic to confront the often co-existing contradictions of trauma and desire. Perhaps greater fulfillment and/or enjoyment in sexual expression and sexual embodiment can be gained through that understanding.

Joan Morgan's quip, that "getting to black feminist pleasure is tricky business," is quite the understatement ("Why We Get Off" 36). Morgan is fully aware of the entanglements of history, sex positivism, sexualized violence and representational wars that all come to bear in black feminist²⁰ approaches to black women's sexual expression, and "pleasure politics" is the theoretical culmination of her individual research as well as that done in conjunction with the "Pleasure Ninjas": a sex-positive black feminist collective of which Esther Armah, Yaba Blay, Brittney Cooper, Treva B. Lindsey, and

²⁰ Several times throughout this essay, I address the popular misconception that black feminist interest in pleasure is a new fad, a contemporary obsession, or a frivolous endeavor. Sex positivism as it is characterized in mainstream media does, however, have some pitfalls (for example, the oversimplified idea is often circulated that sex is 'good' as long as it is consensual; of course consent is a prerequisite for any and all sexual encounters, but there are more factors that play affect having a satisfying and life-affirming experience with eroticism, intimacy, and sexual expression beyond consent itself). Sex positivism is sometimes entangled within post-feminist rhetoric of self-empowerment, individualized liberation (that is based on mimicking or adopting behaviors of patriarchal heterosexual cisgender men), and choice-feminism. I situate my interrogation of black women's sexual expression and experiences with eroticism and intimacy as a decidedly feminist inquiry because it takes into account structural and historical factors that impact black women's sexuality, and it addresses interdependencies in black women's erotic experiences due to imagined or factual shared histories of enslavement. To further explore scholarship on post-feminism, specifically the political trappings of post-black feminism, see Alexander-Floyd, Nikol G. *Gender, Race and Nationalism in Contemporary Black Politics*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Kalia Story are members (36). The Pleasure Ninjas have “made a commitment to reframe the existing narrative about black female sexuality by positioning desire, agency and black women’s engagements with pleasure as a viable theoretical paradigm,” and through this endeavor, Morgan birthed the methodology of pleasure politics (36). Pleasure Politics, parallel to Hammonds’ politics of articulation, simultaneously demands specificity and broad considerations, new questions and a reconsideration of old assumptions, in the future of black feminist research and writing about black women’s sexuality. When adopting Pleasure Politics as an analytic for analyzing black women’s sexuality and eroticism, black feminist theorists must consider the ways in which a “deepened understanding of the multivalent ways black women produce, read and participate in pleasure complicate our understanding of black female subjectivities in ways that invigorate, inform and sharpen a contemporary black feminist agenda” (36). New considerations of pleasure do not at all discredit the “compassionate rendering of the difficult and compromised space black women’s sexuality occupies” that has heretofore dominated black feminist discussions of black female sexuality (“Why We Get Off” 36). Instead, pleasure politics seeks to build upon that compassionate reading and emphasize “the complex, messy, sticky, and even joyous negotiations of agency and desire that are irrevocably twinned with our pain” (36). Pain, trauma, desire, and sexual agency are not mutually exclusive states of being for black women. If we as black feminist theorists are to accept the opposite, than we potentially foreclose the possibility of African American women’s sexual pleasure and eroticism writ large, because given our shared history of sexualized and gendered trauma, pain is indelible part of who we are. A serious

interrogation of the utility of trauma in black women's sexual lives is a high stakes example of walking and chewing gum at the same time.

Throughout this project, the politics of both pleasure and articulation will guide my research and determine the interrogations I pursue and the intersectional specificity with which I attempt to address them. In addition to these theoretical interventions and methodological techniques, "theory in the flesh" as defined in the 1981 radical feminist classic *This Bridge Called My Back* offers a method by which to engage the psychological trauma that I discussed earlier in my reading of Spillers, spirituality, and physical behaviors as all contributing to theory that is created through lived experience.

Enfleshed Theory: Deconstructing the Intellectual and Corporeal Divide

Concepts of embodied understanding and performative knowledge are nothing new. The trendiness of recent academic investment in affect is not reflective of the commonplace spaces in which these phenomena exists for everyday persons, nor does affect current status as a buzz word serve to reinstate the place of spirituality or intuition in purportedly objective academic work. "Theory in the flesh" is akin to affect, and in discussions of black women's sexual and erotic expression, what our bodies do, how they act, who acts upon them and how, and what our bodies feel is of utmost importance²¹. Epistemologically based in the flesh, in one's being and lived-experience, "theory in the flesh" is described as "one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the

²¹ For varied critical approaches to affect theory, see Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004; Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011; Shouse, Eric. "Feeling, Emotion, Affect." *M/C Journal* 8.6 (2005). 23 Aug. 2016.

land or concrete we grew up on, *our sexual longings*²² – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity [emphasis mine]” and as a means by which one can “bridge the contradictions” of their lives and experiences (19). This capacious construction of theory in the flesh pushed me to interrogate the concept of sexual longing. When it comes to sex, something that a body participates in, how can theory in the flesh function for black women?

Cherrie Moraga credits “heart” as the entity that “brought her to feminism” decades ago (xxi). By her definition and understanding, “feminism allowed ‘heart’ to matter. She explains that “It acknowledged that the oppression we experienced is not always materially manifested, and that we also suffered spiritually and sexually. Women of color have traditionally served as gateways – the knowledge holders – to those profoundly silent areas of expression and oppression: domestic abuse aggravated by poverty; patriarchal structures that distort the ‘spirit’ of religious practice; false familial hierarchies that deform our children’s potential, erotic desire deadened by duty” (xxi). The latter quote again speaks the psychological vestiges of slavery that I established earlier as having a profound effect on black women’s sexual subjectivity in my analysis of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” and it is worth noting that Moraga too, in concert with Hammonds’ and Morgan, identifies the problematic of silence as thwarting explorations and experiences of and with pleasure. When black women’s bodies have historically been a site of contestation and violence, theory produced in our flesh and through our actions, not developed elsewhere and prescriptively mapped onto us, is revolutionary.

²² While the phrase “sexual longings” is present in the original quote from *This Bridge*, my concept of sexual longings was also heavily influenced by Juana María Rodríguez’s *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press 2014).

What are the sexual longings that black women have? What if longings are not feminist at all? What place do they have in our politic, then? I argue that a consideration of seemingly incongruous erotic expressions can provide black women with one of many strategies to embrace contradiction and generate expressions of sexuality that are shaped and/or influenced by trauma, but not foreclosed by that acknowledgment. I am committed to embracing contradiction and nurturing a “feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays” (*Chickenheads* 59). I do not think it is necessary to judge whether or not a longing is feminist or debate if a sexual practice is either. What is transgressive and feminist in and of itself in the context of black women’s experiences with sexuality and eroticism is a pursuit of pleasure: be it obscene, concealed, visible, messy and/or controversial or everything all at once.

Section Two: Imagining Testimony and Bearing Witness

won't you celebrate with me
 what i have shaped into
 a kind of life? i had no model
 born in Babylon
 both nonwhite and woman
 what did i see to be except myself?
 i made it up
 here on this bridge between
 starshine and clay,
 my one hand holding tight
 my other hand; come celebrate
 with me that everyday
 something had tried to kill me
 and has failed

“won't you come celebrate with me”

Early on in my young life, I found myself curious about sex. My mother and father were never very strict about censoring movies and television shows for my sibling and me, but certain things were continually off-limits. And most of those things involved sex. For example, my father was an avid moviegoer and he established watching current movies as a ritual in our home; the 1997 release *Soul Food* quickly became a family favorite. There were a few violent situations in the movie that my mother or maternal grandmother might fast-forward through, but their vigilance about fights and arguments between characters lacked consistency and after the fifth or sixth family-screening session, we watched them all the way through without any censorship. Scenes that were policed without fail though, all involved sex. We had to cover our eyes when Lem (Mekhi Phifer) lifted Bird's (Nia Long) leg up in the air as she stood at the pedestal sink in her mother's house and deftly removed her panties, stuffing them in her mouth to muffle her moans of pleasure. We had to turn our heads when Bird discovered Lem had lost his job by stumbling in on him getting out of the shower one afternoon, completely naked. We absolutely had to turn around in the opposite direction of the television when

Miles' (Michael Beach) round, brown buttocks rhythmically pressed against the icy glass of his at-home dance studio as he thrust in and out of his cousin-in-law, Faith in a fit of adulterous abandon (Gina Rivera).

Given my rich descriptions of the aforementioned 'forbidden scenes,' I was clearly sneaking peeks. *Soul Food* is, to this day, one of my favorite films. Not just for the intense nostalgia the classic movie and legendary soundtrack stir up in me, but also for all the steamy situations! I was too young then to realize how few and far between onscreen representations of sex, romance, and intimacy between black people were, especially those that depicted black women enjoying themselves. I was, however, old enough to know that my interest in sex was taboo and even though I was not explicitly criticized for it. When my mother found out I had a stash of my stepfather's pornography underneath the bed my sibling and I shared, she kept it to herself, but silence was signal enough to feel ashamed.

I model the introduction to this section of my thesis after Mireille Miller-Young's acknowledgements in *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. Miller-Young brazenly opens her project with a preface entitled "Confessions of a Black Feminist Academic Pornographer," and a few pages later kicks off her acknowledgments with a personal anecdote about finding "Vanessa Williams' famous layout in the issue of *Penthouse* magazine published in November 1984" (xiii). She recalls the "exhilaration" she felt, describing "seeing Williams in an array of erotic poses with another woman" as "both shocking and titillating," and explains that *A Taste* is born of her "longtime fascination with porn and the women in the images" (xiii). Miller-Young's decision to share these details at the outset of her project resonated deeply with me in several ways.

To divulge that she was captivated by pornographic images at the tender age of eight is intentionally sex-positive and transparent. Instead of attempting to establish a false barrier of objectivity with her subject matter or with the black sex workers and performers she worked with to conduct her research, Miller-Young chooses to revel in the memory of her childhood fascination and (then unnamed) attraction to another black woman's body. Her decisions signify a dedication to challenging cultural and scholarly perceptions that black women's representation in pornography is always denigrating, and she deftly deploys her own personal experience as a model.

After my first year in graduate school, I truly began to commit to the theme of black women's sexuality in the majority of my writing and research. My enthrallment with sex early on in life was greatly affected by the sexual violence I experienced as I got older; but it was not erased. I invite you to celebrate that with me. Sexual trauma has indelibly marked the ways in which I relate to my sexuality, explore sex, and experience sexual pleasure. But I have managed, in the words of Lucille Clifton, to "shape" it all – pain, academic interest, sexual fascination, the pursuit of pleasure, earning an income – into "a kind of life" for myself. I take pride in the contours of this project, that "I made it up" from bits and pieces of repeated trauma that tried to kill me and have failed.

Autoethnography: Bridging Creativity and Academic Rigor

In the co-edited collection of essays *Critical Autoethnography*²³: *Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe explain that

²³ As an avid reader and a fiction aficionado, my writing has always maintained a narrative quality: thick descriptions come to me naturally, and I have had many a professor critique my propensity towards 'fluff' and 'floweriness.' With practice I learned to place limits on my use of adjectives and conceal some of my flare for dramatic imagery in academic prose. When envisioning my future, I set aside retirement as the moment in my life when I could allow my creative writing to flourish. In deliberated the methods I would use to carry out my thesis research, my adviser Dr. Brittney Cooper introduced me to cultural autoethnography. It is a methodology through which I can mix feminist cultural critique and storytelling.

“autoethnographers research themselves in relation to others” (17). Utilizing this methodology has allowed me to marshal my own conflicting experiences with the interstices of sexual trauma and pleasure as material for my master’s thesis. In other words, critical autoethnography offers me the opportunity to assert my personal investment in my research up front instead of falsely claiming objectivity. *Critical Autoethnography* is a methodological guide that focuses in on the “blending of cultural and interpersonal experiences of everyday interactions with others, intersectional components of identity, and the critical treatment of autoethnography as a method” (15). Having established the historical foundations of a distinct collective trauma exacted upon racialized and feminized bodies with a close reading of Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” and Adrienne Davis’s “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle,” I analyze some of my own experiences against a backdrop of generational trauma. I do not suggest that my experience is ‘the’ experience of all or any other black woman, but I rather I “write as an Other for an Other” (*Critical Autoethnography* 15). Seeking to situate myself within in an emerging community of feminist thinkers that Joan Morgan identifies as “demonstrating a dual commitment to rigorous, thoughtful engagement with the foundational tenets of black feminist theory (particularly its preoccupation “with the logics of injury and recovery”) and using pleasure as an interrogative lens,” I will read expand and build upon a bell hooks’ review of *Lemonade* to reveal the ways in which contradiction and complexity are always already a part of black feminist analysis (“Why We Get Off” 38).

Boylorn and Orbe explain that critical autoethnography is closely related to D. Soyini Madison’s “conception of critical ethnography, which “begins with an ethical

responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain”” (15). Operating from this point of awareness and acknowledgment, autoethnographic researchers are required to “acknowledge the inevitable privileges [they] experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity” (Boylorn and Orbe 15). For example, I offer a brief characterization of my family life, and though it was tumultuous, I fully acknowledge that my experience is one of nuanced privilege. I would be shortsighted in assuming that having a parent or invested adult who was able to dote on my sibling and I the way that my mother did and still does is commonplace. Also, I must emphasize that having a mother who believed me when I told her what happened to me and helped me name my experience as rape is an act of validation many people who suffer sexualized attacks never have. My attack turned into a way for my mother and I to get to know one another better: she shared with me times that she had been molested as a child and the isolation and pain she felt with her mother, my grandmother, scolded her for being too friendly and bringing it on herself. My mother also chose to press charges after I had been raped, despite the fact that I did not tell her about the attack until six months after it had happened. Her tenacity in gathering evidence investigators were unconcerned with finding and remaining in constant conversation with the district attorney during the three years that it took to get a conviction in my case was extraordinary. At the time, I was unaware that the impact having her stand up for me in all of the ways she did was profound and uncommon.

Many people, especially black women against whom sexual violence is normalized, never have anyone stick up for them like my mother did for me. Some

victims are never given the language to absolve themselves of accountability for their attack; some are continually revictimized, face intense physical retribution, die at the hands of an attacker, or may never tell anyone at all about what they have endured. I understand that these factors designate my story as distinct and I do not, in any way, assert that mine is ‘the’ experience of black women who have been raped or sexually assaulted; as I mentioned above, it’s just one. In the context of their project, Boylorn and Orbe define critical autoethnography as “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (19). The scope of my narrative offers personalized examples of how cultural phenomena such as the politics of silence in black women’s lives, observing dysfunctional partnerships as a child, learning to associate sexual expression with shame, and of course, sexual assault and rape and the ways in which black girls’ pain is rendered invisible in many contexts, manifests. In *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz quotes Mary Louise Pratt’s designation between the concepts of ethnography and autoethnography, clarifying that:

“I use these terms [*autoethnography* and *authoethnographic expression*] to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways which engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means in which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations”
(81)

In the case of my autoethnography, the dominant or metropolitan discourse that I am writing against is one that surmises experiences of sexual trauma (generational, figurative, and/or individual episodes) foreclose the possibility of sexual pleasure for black women. I seek to make space for iterations of black women’s sexuality that are impolite, possibly obscene, and do not fit squarely within the narrow and subjective confines of ‘positive representation.’

Personal Experiences, Cultural Critique

The life events I share as part of my critical cultural autoethnography begin with an origin story. I watched my mother prioritize her own pleasure after that of everyone else in our household and nearly everyone else in her life. She is an amazing woman, a complete and dependable provider, and the unconditional love she has for me, my sibling and so many others renews my faith in spirituality daily. From her examples of selflessness and her capacity to seemingly persevere regardless of any situation, I gleaned that black womanhood was about acceptance of duty and being dependable to others. This conceptualization of what black women are supposed to do and who they are supposed to be is widely referred to in popular culture and academic study as the “strong black woman²⁴” trope. I align my critique of the strong black woman stereotype with that of countless black feminists who have emphasized how it obfuscates the multidimensionality of black women’s emotional and physical responses to myriad circumstances and ultimately erases our humanity. In the context of this project, I stretch my assessment of the violence the myth of the strong black woman inflicts upon black women to the realms of sexual pleasure and expression. The same infallible caricature of black womanhood that is unable to express need or show weakness also tends to relegate pleasures, recreation, and releases the nonessential margins of luxury. The strong black

²⁴ A plethora of writers, scholars, and theorists have written about the myth of the strong black woman. Many volumes could be written cataloging and analyzing every mention of the strong black woman stereotype, but for reference, I will list some notable writers and works on the subject. See Bambara, Toni Cade. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *The Black Woman; an Anthology*. New York: New American Library, 1970. 90-100. Print; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009. Print; Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. Print; Jones, Charisse, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden. *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Print; Noble, Jeanne L. *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978. Print; Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Dial, 1979. Print.

womanhood that I inherited from my mother (and she from hers), leaves little room for the articulation of pleasure, especially pleasures related to intimacy and sexual desire. The strong black woman's "erotic desire is deadened by duty," and though she is the result of racist representational agendas, adopting this façade is a real-world survival strategy for black women on whom many other people are dependent (*This Bridge* xxi).

Experiences of pleasure and sexual expression are a right, not a privilege, and they can, must, and do occur: even amid backdrops of generational trauma, sexual violence, familial upheaval, and economic insecurity. I present portions of my individual, unfinished journey towards articulating pleasure as a testament to the ways in which having endured sexual violence shapes subjects but does not have to foreclose the potential of enjoyment. And regardless of the messy, contradictory, tangled forms that that pleasure takes, I write to assert that black women have a right to experience it any way they choose.

Daddy Lessons: Childhood Observations on Intimacy and Relationships Between Men and Women

I grew up in a primarily black suburb of Atlanta, Georgia in the mid-nineties and early 2000s. My mother and father were married for twenty-three years, and they stayed together until the summer after I turned sixteen. Carefully observing their interactions, I developed a growing collection of misconceptions about love, relationships, and intimacy. Public displays of affection between my parents were few and far between and they typically came off as forced or staged for comedic effect. My mother covered all of the heavy lifting when it came raising me and my sibling: from carpooling to PTA meetings, school projects to various field trips. My father worked full-time on a night

shift during my formative years, and I remember wondering who the man that I saw briefly every morning as my mother helped my sibling²⁵ and I get ready for school really was. He always seemed to be irritated. Before he left for work at night, it was like the house was under siege. No loud noises, footsteps, television programs, music playing. Silence during the day so he could sleep. But any moment the three of us had to ourselves was an opportunity to kick our heels up and let loose. My mother would go over the ways in which he was hateful and unfair, the ways he chastised her about spending money on things for the household but indulged with gadgets and electronics for himself. We would fantasize about our escape – a possible divorce – or at the very least we would plan something fun to do while he was at work or away from the house. I remember many a car ride after weekly our trip to the grocery store (a pseudonym for any place goods are sold), the atmosphere between my mother, sibling and I growing more dismal by the mile as we journeyed home, knowing that an argument was likely to erupt or a snide comment would be made after my father examined the receipts. Once I grew old enough to realize my mother was and had been the primary breadwinner throughout she and my father's relationship, the insult of her having to justify necessary expenses to him almost became too much to bear.

Aimee Meredith Cox gave a talk at Columbia University in December 2015 on various topics that come up in her recent book, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Entitled ““Your Obedience Will Protect You” And Other Myths of Black Girlhood,” Cox delved deep into the life experiences of the black girls

²⁵ I use ‘sibling’ throughout to refer to Naomi. While they identify as genderqueer, they perform and present as femme, and the gendered experiences of our childhood, though I may sometimes refer to ‘black girls’ and ‘black women,’ still encompass the overall devaluation of femininity and black gender ideology that we were enculturated within.

she interacted with while conducting research for her project and expanded upon the ways in which some of their experiences reflect majority trends among African American girls. Cox mentioned that she would often hear girls at the Fresh Start Shelter in Detroit, Michigan where she served as director for a period of time, repeat “Act like a boy, love like a man” as a mantra to live by (“Your Obedience Will Protect You”). She asked her audience that day to consider how the aforementioned phrase relates to notions of disobedience, and how disobedience is characterized when rearing black girls. Being whisper quiet while my father was sleeping; spending exactly what he demanded and adhering to the inaccurate budget he handed out to my mother, sibling and I; Always endeavoring to not be any trouble, to stay out of the way, to do well in school without any issues: these were the ways in which obedience was demanded from black women in my household. Considering Cox’s question, I immediately recognized the correlation she was making between gendered conceptualizations of obedience. Boys were expected and encouraged to pursue individual interests, not typically reared to nurture others or anticipate their needs, and were ultimately expected to act out, with rogue behavior waved-off with euphemisms like “boys will be boys.” But girls? Black girls? The expectation is such that you have multiple duties, duties of representation and prioritization that some people don’t even experience in adulthood. It is expected that black girls will accept these tasks and responsibilities regardless of any hardship they are experiencing; and to eschew the demands of others upon your time as a black girl or woman is to “act like a boy and love like a man.” Janice, one of the most central subjects of Cox’s *Shapeshifters*, often referred to her decision to leave the home she shared with her mother and extended matrilineal family to live at the Fresh Start homeless shelter the

“most mannish thing she’s ever done.” Deciding to do something in her own interest, to be what might be considered selfish in the gendered context of familial expectations typically saddled upon black girls, was mannish in Janice’s understanding. Men had the freedom to consult themselves when making decisions and think about their needs first, hence my father’s tyranny.

Cox delineated the ways in which endurance and struggle are passed down through generations of black women, and went on to specify that the analytics of endurance rarely include clues or discussions of practices that are life-affirming rather than premised upon the acceptance of struggling as a never-ending ontology. A life based on more than survival includes some aspect of erotic fulfillment. Through observations in their household, black girls like Janice and I learned important lessons about *who* was allowed to pursue pleasure. Cox went on to further specify the concept of “acting mannish” and theoretically labels in “critical entitlement” (“Your Obedience Will Protect You”). Black girls like Janice exercised when they asserted their right to value people over property or resources, to acknowledge their desires and act on them in ways not traditionally expected of them. The expansiveness of their thinking was revealed in “everyday refusals” and “quotidian rejections of slow death” that provide evidence of the ways “black girls imagine protest beyond what we think of as singular or spectacular events” (“Your Obedience Will Not Protect You”). The brazenness that drives the black girls at the fore in Cox’s study and their determination to resist cycles of perpetual struggle and discomfort is indicative of enfleshed determination to pursue a politics of pleasure, both in practice and in theory. As a young black woman, my own disobedience

manifested in my love for dancing and going out to teen parties held at small venues around my city or house parties thrown by classmates from school.

Going to teen parties with my cousin was the highlight of my week, every week. By the time I approached fifteen, I had been an avid fan of southern rap and hip hop music for several years. Dancing, specifically twerking, (shaking of the behind and hips), became one of my favorite things to do. Dancing was fun for many reasons, and at the time it provided a physical outlet for me to celebrate the body I found myself within after puberty abruptly began. Everything I felt ashamed of in everyday situations or at school, for example – my wide-set hips and big thighs, in particular – were suddenly assets that allowed to me have bigger payoff with less physical exertion than my more petite homegirls. I remember studying music videos, learning new techniques and fad dances that came out periodically, and feeling like I made a touchdown after dancing with boys my age at parties. My cousin and I would tally up how many people we danced with in an evening as friendly competition, and I reveled heartily in my victories. I did not explicitly acknowledge that twerking or grinding on someone sometimes mimicked sexual activity, but I did notice that more and more frequently I would dance on someone and feel something firm press into me. I was initially repulsed when I realized these stiff things I felt as I danced on boys were erections, but it was not very long at all before I was fascinated that something I was doing aroused someone else. It felt like I was a superhero and like I had a new power to wield. I never wanted to touch their erections or get any closer to them than I was while dancing, but the sheer sport of anticipating whether or not I might feel one was fantastic. I kept this exhilaration to myself, not wanting to voice it aloud for fear of judgment and punishment. I began to wonder what an unclothed erection

looked and felt like in person, but for the time being I was satisfied with watching pornography and letting my imagination roam where it may.

One Friday evening, I danced with a boy that introduced himself to me afterwards and asked me for my telephone number. My parents had purchased cell phones for my sibling and I to communicate after school and coordinate picking us up from various places, but I had yet to give it out to anyone that I did not go to school with. I was on the fence about giving my number out, but this boy was so persistent. He assured me multiple times that he really liked me, did not want anything from me, and only wanted to be able to talk to me often. I eventually obliged, and he began to call me primarily in the evenings. For a month or so, he called every night and we would talk for hours on end discussing our families, favorite movies, places we wanted to go, favorite songs. Protectively watchful over the amount of time I spent talking to anyone - especially someone she had yet to meet - my mother picked up an adjacent receiver in her bedroom one night and admonished me for being on the telephone so late. I was mortified! I had been embarrassed in front of this boy I was interested in, and I seemed every bit the child I was despite the mature vibe I attempted to give off. Once she was finished fussing at me, my mother addressed the boy directly, reminding him I was only fourteen and he was a child too and that both of us had school in the morning. He 'yes ma'am'ed and apologized, and we hung up. Fast forward a month later and we are still talking, but now, later than ever. I was a very obedient child, so defying my mother was uncustomary; but the thrill of sneaking and the verbal affirmation I got from this boy when I did what he said was too good to pass up. I would call after everyone else in the house had gone to sleep, and out of nowhere, he began to initiate sexually explicit exchanges. This was a

new feeling for me. Prior to this moment, I had never expressed any sexual feelings or thoughts with anyone; I scribbled furiously in one of my many journals, but I never ever told a soul. This boy was telling me to tell him the things I thought and also telling me about all the sexual things he wanted to do to and with me. I marveled at the change I felt in following someone else's instructions in comparison to masturbating myself. I found I really enjoyed both, but because of the spontaneity of having another person involved, listening to this boy's dirty talk over the phone really made my heart race. He began to tell me how to touch myself and if I told him I was doing what he asked, he would demand that I prove it. I was ashamed of the conversations we had, and often shuddered at the thought of anyone finding out about them. Nevertheless, I was hooked.

The most commonly circulated discourses around black female teenagers and sexuality usually have to do with pregnancy and STI prevention, and for heterosexual black girls, cautionary tales about how to avoid teenage boys that only want to 'take' your virginity. This fear-based predator-prey paradigm leaves no room for a discussion of how to prioritize, articulate and revel in experiences of sexual pleasure. Even as I put this research project together, I was apprehensive about sharing intricate details of the phone calls because recognizing adolescents and teenagers as subjects with erotic autonomy is a blurry space potentially rife with the potential for exploitation and physical danger. However, my adult impulse to protect my teenaged-self from exposing what she really felt and admitting the arousal and excitement I felt when this boy and I would have sexually explicit conversations is rooted in shame and misplaced protective sentiments. Confronting a teenaged black girl in existing in the margin between girlhood and womanhood, feeling surges of hormones and likely relating to her body in very different

ways depending on her experiences with puberty is tricky work and it dredges up a host of conflicting emotions in many people. For example, in Aimee Meredith Cox's chapter on "Sex, Gender, and Scripted Bodies," from her 2015 release *Shapeshifters*, an uncomfortable scene at a coffee shop open-mic night is described and analyzed.

LaTonya (hereafter referred to as LaT), was seven months pregnant and approaching twenty two years of age when she took the stage at the Brown Bean, a small coffee shop, and performed an original poem: "He Fucked Me" (*Shapeshifters* 157). Cox's transcribing of the poem includes lines like "He fucked me all night long/He fucked me hard and strong/He licked me from head to toe and my body was screamin' out for mo'," and she describes LaT as playfully ending her recitation with some twerking (157). The smattering of applause after LaT finished her dance and the conversations with other girls that live with her at the shelter afterwards demonstrate the ways in which outward expressions of black female sexuality are responded to with desires to shame, conceal, and confine. Two of her fellow housemates chastised LaT on the ride home after her performance, saying "You is so nasty, just nasty" and incredulously asking "But answer me this: how is it in any way okay to get up in a public space, unless it is a strip club, and do the booty clap?" (Cox 160). Rachel and Crystal, moral interlocutors, agreed that LaT's explicit display was "trifling" and continued to voice the discomfort that the patrons of the open mic night and Cox herself along with her colleague Lynette also felt (160). "Why did LaT's performance make some of us feel so uncomfortable?" Cox asks; and the answer she arrives at through astute cultural and historical analysis of stereotypes that plague black women and leave black girls illegible is simply that it was a public display of something people typically relegate just out of

their frame of vision (160). If articulations of black female sexual pleasure are risky for adults, imagine for a moment the ridicule both spoken and unspoken visited upon LaT's young, pregnant, black and female body declaring enjoying a sexual encounter.

Furthermore, LaT's performative declarations were punctuated with a seductive and sexually suggestive bout of ass-shaking. Resolute in her position, LaT responded to detractors saying only that "I thoroughly enjoyed myself. End of discussion" (160).

Cox acknowledges the way in which this open expression of sexuality caused the majority of people who witnessed in to bristle in embarrassment and/or surprise. I have to admit, because of Cox's gifted imagery and description in her writing and my own deeply entrenched ideas about sexual expression in public, I too felt slightly uncomfortable while reading the account of LaT's performance. Despite how it may sit with readers, spectators, and other external parties, what is important to highlight here is that LaT said she enjoyed herself. Though she never performed during an open mic night prior to debuting "He Fucked Me" or afterwards, she consistently said she enjoyed herself and had fun and that the poem was a reflection of real sex for her (157). LaT's "Black, pregnant, barely adult" body was sexualized during her poem recitation and on her own terms. Her youngness should not obfuscate the theoretical tension between how young black women's expressions sexuality function for the subjects themselves, and how crowds are hardwired to interpolate them. My revelry of phone sex at fourteen with someone I had met once or twice represents an equally uncomfortable but real-life negotiation with eroticism and sexual expression. Looking past the historical burden of archetypes and stereotypes and tropes, it is interesting to consider LaT's poem and dance and my own adolescent revelry in sexually explicit phone calls as Moten's definition of

obscene²⁶: if black women's fleeting experiences with sexual pleasure are nothing but a brief respite from centuries of brutality and oppression, that *feeling good about ourselves may very well be obscene*. The generative space of obscenity in black feminist analysis of pleasure and eroticism cannot be shied away from because of discomfort or moral dilemmas. And so, I share my enjoyment of these phone sessions with my soon-to-be rapist as evidence that pleasure entangled in systems of domination and exploitation need still be mined for erotic agency.

The main thing I loved about these raunchy telephone calls was the freedom I felt. At this point, the boy's appearance was a distant memory. It was his voice that sent a tingle down my spine. I felt safe in my bed, in my house, on my telephone because ultimately any direction I took was a choice, I did not actually have another person physically present to whom I was beholden to. My imagination was free to run wild, and I was free to enjoy a different kind of masturbation with interesting effects. I repeated what this boy would tell me he needed me to say for him to feel as good as I did, and I thought nothing of the words. Sometimes he would ask that I repeat his name a certain way, or say that he would be the first man I ever slept with, but all of it was inconsequential to me. This was a fun, stress-free game that was, I felt, mutually beneficial. Even though I was content with our arrangement, this boy became irritated with only talking on the phone, and asked that I meet him at the mall one day. I was inexplicably apprehensive: in hindsight, I can see how I felt strangely about seeing someone whom I had come to think of as a disembodied voice in person. The potential for feeling vulnerable was high. But, as I characterized him when we met, this boy was persistent. He almost begged and begged and I was eventually motivated by pity and a

²⁶ Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness"

modicum of guilt to agree to hanging out. Upon looking at him in broad daylight and then again under the fluorescent lights of a shopping mall, I was not attracted to him at all. I could scarcely believe the voice that I could have such a strong physical and mental reaction to came from the person I was looking at. Despite my true feelings, I suffered through the hang out. At the very end, to my horror and amazement, this boy leaned in for a kiss.

I was panicked and by this time I had heard a million stories and watched as many movies depicting what should happen in this crucial moment. I could not muster up a reaction that I thought was appropriate, so I just stood there, lips closed and body rigid. This boy still tried to kiss me, though I did not respond. I decided then and there that I did not like kissing, a misunderstanding that plagued me for some time afterward. It was not that I hated kissing, it was that I was uncomfortable having someone force themselves on me (though I would not come to learn that until much later). I came home and told my mother that I saw him and I decided I didn't like him anymore. She said it was okay to feel whatever it was that I felt, and that I did not have to see him again. She was relieved about my decision because she told me she had a bad feeling about anyone that would be so adamant about talking to me and mysteriously refuse to come to the house. This boy agreed to come over many times but something always fell through. I did not want to lead him on and thought it was better to be honest and break things off with him up front. I left him a voicemail explaining all of this, and felt guilty but ultimately better that everything was out in the open. To add insult to injury, my birthday had just passed and he had told me he was going to get me a birthday gift but didn't even bother to call on the day of. I was disappointed but please with my decision to let it all go. Despite my message,

though, just after midnight, the boy called at his regular time. He begged and pleaded for me to stay with him and I had never considered us to be an entity, a couple, because all we did was talk on the telephone. He sounded like he was on the brink of tears and told me stories about how he had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina and that he was looking for someone reliable to care about him. This boy was an expert emotional manipulator, and before I knew it, we were back to our nightly routine. My resolve eroded away almost completely. Again, he suggested meeting up. I adamantly told myself I was not going this time, especially after how I felt the first time, but he was so persuasive; so convincing. Again I overrode my own reluctance, deeply concerned about what was 'fair' to him and how my actions 'made' him feel.

My sibling dropped me off at the mall, (I asked them because I knew my mother was away from the house and would have been dead-set on meeting him). After we awkwardly strolled around for about a half an hour, he asked me if I wanted to take a ride with him. This boy had told me he was seventeen, and while I still did not find him physically attractive, I tried to focus on his voice and I was easily impressed by the fact that he could drive. We were only in his truck for a short time before we ended up in the parking lot of an apartment building. The boy asked if I wanted to come inside and again, I was persuaded into following his lead, believing him to be safe and trustworthy. The boy's mental grip on me had really tightened in our four months of contact. Once inside his apartment, I stood up near the kitchen counter and sip a glass of water. He walked into his living room and turned on a movie that still makes me feel nauseated to this day: *Poetic Justice*. I sat uncomfortably on the sofa, and he inched closer and closer to me until his hand was on my thigh. The boy mentioned something about me kissing 'like a

grandma,' and then asked if I wanted to prove him wrong. I felt I would disappoint him unless I gave kissing another shot. I remember not understand how and why people enjoyed kissing and got in trouble for skipping class to make-out at school. It really didn't seem like anything to write home about. Eventually he got up and suggested we finish the movie in his room. I stalled around other parts of the apartment; I asked for juice; I pretended to continue to watch the movie in the common area. Something was closing in on me, and it seemed the longer I stayed the more likely bad things were to happen. I mentioned to him that this was the last time I was allowed to see him without him meeting my parents, and that they were expecting him to come to the house and introduce himself at my birthday celebration in about a week. The boy violently pushed me up against a wall in his bedroom and forced his mouth over mine as a response.

I told him he was hurting me, but he wasn't listening to anything I said. He turned and pushed me down on the bed and began to take off my clothes. I recoiled, explaining that was embarrassed and didn't want to be naked. My apprehension was ignored. This same voice that was titillating over the phone, that seemed to push me to new heights in sexual exploration from a safe distance, was demanding that I perform oral sex on him. Demanding that I bend over, turn over, do this, do that. I felt removed from what was happening once I realized that I was alone in a strange place with only him. No one knew where I was or what I was doing. Even if I called for help, I could not tell anyone that cared about me where I was, because even I didn't know. And so, I did everything he said. I was frightened and could not keep up with all the sensations I was feeling. My body was physically responding to the situation with signs of arousal, while mentally, I retreated further and further away from reality. The boy's actions were careless: he did

not use a condom; his nails were jagged and cut me; he poked, prodded, mashed and hurt me. My ringtone cut through my thick silence the boy's grunting, heavy breathing, and endless demands. I answered my cell phone while I was being sodomized. It was my mother calling, a little worried and upset that I had not discussed going to the mall with her directly. She told me to be home in the next half hour and reiterated that this boy was going to have to meet her and my father if we were to maintain contact. I tried to sound upbeat and was very apologetic about not having asked permission to come to the mall. My mother and I exchanged "I love you's" and she hung up the phone. A few moments later, the boy ejaculated. I waddled to the bathroom, bleeding. After getting dressed again, we walked back to his car in silence and he dropped me off in front of the mall without saying a word. I called my cousin, and luckily, she and my aunt were out and about in the area and they gave me a ride home. As soon as I hit the door I took a scalding shower and threw away the shirt I had worn that day. Everything I was wearing seemed to be drenched with the scent of Old Spice.

I was raped six days after my fifteenth birthday, and that attack was my first introduction to sexual touch with another person. I never had a first kiss with a high school date or fumbled around in the backseat of a car to eagerly find an answer to the secrets someone else's body keeps. Afterwards, I literally and figuratively embraced silence as a coping strategy to repress any and all engagements with my sexuality. I kept all that had happened to me a secret for six months, accepting culpability for what had happened and accruing guilt with each passing day. I stopped interacting with and talking to boys at all, because close encounters seemed to rob me of the ability to speak. Too young to understand the difference between vaginal and anal penetration, I wondered if I

was about to bring a child into the world. I thought I had been infected with a sexually transmitted disease because of the stinging pain I felt when I used the restroom or sat down too quickly for weeks afterwards. And aside from all of my physical health-related concerns, having experienced physical arousal and mental anguish conterminously left me reeling.

Why did I want to feel some of those feelings again, despite the circumstances under which I came to know about them? Why did I wonder when I would find myself in a sexual situation with a boy again? I was experiencing the embodied dissonance of difference as theorized by Grace Kyungwon Hong: “the simultaneous existence of mourning” about what I felt I had lost sexually and may not experience again for a long stretch of time, and “skepticism about that mourning,” because of the violent circumstances under which I came to know physical arousal in the first place (Hong *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, 32). I finally told my mother what had happened and she introduced the language of sexual assault and rape into my understanding of the experience. I was not sure what had happened to me, just that I would never have chosen it for myself and that I did not agree to it. Litigation dragged on over the course of three years, and we learned that the boy was really a man – a twenty three year-old man – that intentionally lied about his age to prey on young girls at events for teenagers.

It is estimated that every minute and forty-seven seconds²⁷ a rape or sexual assault takes place in the United States, and 68% of these attacks go unreported to police. Roughly nine of out ten²⁸ of all victims are women and girls, although across the gender

²⁷ U.S. Department of Justice. *National Crime and Victimization Survey*. 2009-2013.

²⁸ U.S. Department of Justice. *National Crime Victimization Survey*. 2003.

spectrum, black people experience higher rates of rape and sexual victimization than their white counterparts. Communities of color are always rendered more vulnerable to inequality of any kind because of structural and ideological manifestations of white-supremacy: occurrences of rape and sexual assault disproportionately affect these demographics as well. 18.8% of Black women are raped in their lifetime, as opposed to 17.7% of white women²⁹. While the difference between the figures may seem marginal, taking into account that black people make up only 15.2%³⁰ of the national population in comparison to white people's 63% makes these percentages even more devastating. Black women and girls that are raped or sexually assaulted tend to consistently underreport their attacks or seek legal vindication. Patricia Hill Collins further contextualizes black girls' close proximity to sexual violence explaining that "Black girls are especially vulnerable to childhood sexual assault," because within their families and communities, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, brothers, and other male relatives are a part of a general climate of violence that makes young Black girls appropriate sexual targets for predatory older men" (*Black Sexual Politics* 226). It goes without saying that every instance of rape is not perpetrated by men against women, but Collins' conclusions do offer context for the ways in which I was emotionally manipulated by my assailant and how I had come to conflate harassment and romantic interest, as many young black

²⁹ U.S Department of Justice: Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Crime Victimization Survey*. 2007. It is important to note here that 34% of Indigenous American and Alaskan women are raped in their lifetime, a staggering statistic for a demographic that makes up so little of the national population. I do not seek to do research that further elides or obscures the experiences of these women and this population, regardless of the fact that my chosen subjects are black women in the U.S. 24.4% of women of mixed race will experience rape and sexual assault in their lifetime, as well. I wonder here, if there is any specificity in how these women ethnically-self identify. Do some or a majority of these 'mixed' women self-identify as black or African American? I think that these statistics are generally conservative, and that unanswered questions such as the one I have posed would greatly impact the quantification of instances of rape and sexual assault across ethnic and racial groups.

³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Facts for Features, "Black (African American) History Month." 2015.

women are socialized to. 32.4% black victims of sexual assault, the majority of whom are women and girls, cited “police would not want to be bothered” as their primary reason for not reporting their attacks (Table 103, Nation Crime and Victimization Survey 2007). This confirms that many black women and girls that are victims of sexual assault and rape believe that reporting the attacks against them is futile because of prevalent beliefs that law enforcement negligence and nonchalance.

A painfully similar negligence is reflected in common African American communal responses to rape and sexual assault as well, due to the entrenched black gender ideology that Collins defines and I examine in the previous section. Attempting to “grapple with long-standing community sanctions that urge them [African American women] to protect African American men at all costs,” I thought that not sharing my experience would inflict less harm on everyone around me, including my rapist (but in retrospect, I made this failed resolution to my own detriment) (Collins 226). I was concerned with not creating too much of a fuss, with “remaining silent about male abuse” out of fear that if I came forward, I would be considered an accomplice in the racist hierarchies of the criminal justice system that so ruthlessly persecute black people, and most specifically in the cultural imagination, black men (226). Like so many black women who have experienced literal or figurative trauma or inherited a warped gender ideology of prioritizing oneself last and measuring merit in the amount of pain one can absorb and still function in spite of, I believed for months following my attack that no one would want to be bothered with what had happened to me.

A 2005 U.S. Department of Justice report, *Criminal Victimization in the United States*, revealed that while 44% of white victims of sexual assault and rape report their

attack, only 17% of black victims do. Various historical factors, the fear of reprisal both physical and ideological, distrust in law enforcement agencies, a prevailing disbelief in their interest in black women's general safety, and the gross misconception that speaking out about or against the sexual assault and rape of black women and girls is somehow an attack on black men, are all factors that contribute to the extreme underreporting of black female victims of rape and sexual assault. Many emerging studies are being conducted, such as the *Sexual Assault on Campus* blog maintained by the Morgan School of Global Journalism, that offer critical engagement with the aforementioned factors and how they have influenced black women and girls that have experienced rape and sexual assault not to report their attacks. This particular project offers current statistics, information about the frequency of rape and sexual assault on historically black college and university campuses, and general self-care resources for victims. *NO! The Rape Documentary*, directed by Aishah Shahidah Simmons in 2006 with footage and testimonials she had been collecting for over a decade, is a testament to the crippling effects of silence in black women's sexual lives, especially in the case of sexual victimization and rape. Countless black women interviewed explain that feelings of isolation from their community, fear of being blamed for their own victimization because of the situation in which their rape or sexual assault occurred, and anxiety about whether or not anyone would believe their stories prompted them not to tell anyone about their attacks for long stretches of time.

At the outset of this project, I shared some excerpts from the letter I wrote the judge presiding over my case when I was 18. He had recommended 90 days in boot camp as an appropriate punishment for the man who raped me, and though the thought of

testifying made me sick to my stomach, I simply was not willing to go out like that. In the letter I wrote to Judge Turner in 2009, I declared that my rapist had “sentenced me to a lifetime in prison on March 11th, 2006” and that “I have served dutifully, being denied at every parole hearing.” I closed my letter by stating that “I believe that it is only right that he serve some time too.” At the time it was paramount that I emphasize the emotional and physical pain and suffering I had endured because when the judge looked at me he saw a sexually active adult, not a naïve child. Years passed and I went to therapy many times; but, as I wrote in the introduction, questions only seemed to multiply in my mind: Was sexual intimacy going to feel physically and emotionally like a punishment for the rest of my life? Are black women rape victims supposed to stop having sex? Can we ever enjoy sex again? What if rape was how you were first exposed to physiological arousal and sexual situations as a black woman? And even murkier and more difficult questions to answer, still: What if something that your attacker did before or during the attack is something you come to be attracted to later on? What theory, guidelines, resources are available to help black women navigate these negotiations? What analytics are there through which a black feminine body, so often subjected or made intelligible through acts of violence, can work towards and experience pleasure? While therapy did make working through the intense emotions I repressed about the entire ordeal easier, none of the resources I had ever come across offered sex reeducation after sexual assault. Books that did offer methods to relearn touch and tips for neutralizing automatic triggers that correlated to an episode of sexual violence, such as Wendy Maltz’s *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, seemed to promote very specific kinds of sex as “healthy.” Watching pornography is treated as an unhealthy behavior in the

guidelines offered in *The Sexual Healing Journey*, and varying forms of kink and pleasure play are completely omitted from the text. Sources such as Maltz's books also did not address the sociohistorical significance of my rape as a black girl. There are differing implications and side effects, varying specificities that affect people, and I felt that through the generalized language of the book, I was not the intended audience.

While I struggled to speak what I wanted, or even really write it down for years afterwards, I knew that I wanted to feel pleasure again. After I was raped I stopped masturbating for many years, and I missed the tactile relationship that I had lost with myself. I had a boyfriend at seventeen and after we fizzled out, then a string of brief sexually unfulfilling partnerships. Unable to say what I wanted plainly, I felt obligated to an erection, felt trapped in the same way I had as a fifteen year old every time I found myself in an intimate situation with a man. Sometimes I had good sex, sometimes I regretted it. Often times I felt my needs were ignored or not met. Orgasms were like an old friend I happened to spot around town every once in a while. I would chase after them, trying to familiarize myself with ecstasy again. What was constant in all these interactions, though, was my inability to speak during or about sex. I dreamt aloud with friends and pondered endlessly when alone, but during sex I was always unable to verbally articulate what I wanted. The shame I had accumulated from peeking around my fingers watching *Soul Food*, to being ashamed of having a rapidly developing body and a child's mind: all of these feelings of shame and guilt seemed to culminate in these moments when I could not articulate what I wanted. The memory of me saying how I felt and being ignored while I was raped made me *feel* silence in my core.

I still feel like I am whispering or speaking at the end of a hallway the length of a football field when I try to explain what feels good to a partner now. After attending Spelman and sharing stories with other black women, I found that many of the women I knew had vexed relationships with pursuing pleasure and expressing themselves sexually. The strong black woman trope that fallaciously characterizes pleasure and enjoyment as unessential has affected countless black women. And if a rehearsed nonchalance regarding sexual pleasure was not resulting in a stifled erotic life, other black women, like a contributor named Pam in Tricia Rose's *Longing to Tell*, had their "first sexual experiences in violence" (218). Associating sexuality with intrusion, assault, or violence is not uncommon, and Pam explained having "a strong sensitivity to being sexually mistreated," and conceptualizing outward expression of sexuality to be dangerous or an invitation to violence, "...some of my first sexual experiences I associate with being harassed. So my first idea of sexuality was harassment" (218). Another contributor, Soupi, reflected on the utility of the sexual trauma she has experienced saying "...I guess that's good for me; that's the one good thing that came out of being molested – I realize that sex has nothing to do with how I feel about a man" (Rose 199).

Soupi's assertion is decidedly different from popular black feminist theorizations about sex and eroticism that "imply that the erotic can only be achieved by a transcendence of mere sex, or by eschewing sex that isn't regulated to the realms of romantic love or the spiritual" ("Why We Get Off" 39). Joan Morgan disagrees with the contrast Patricia Hill Collins establishes between "erotic" and "sex/fucking," and rejects the claim that eroticism requires the "reclamation of an honest body" (39). Advocating a capacious reading of sexual expression "that includes black women's variegated sexual

and non-sexual engagements with deeply internal sites of power and pleasure – among them, expressions of sex and sexuality that deliberately resist binaries,” Morgan will settle for nothing short of “an erotic that demands space to be made for honest bodies that like to also *fuck*” (40). The binary that Collins’ reading bolsters seems to suggest that fucking is dishonest and devoid of eroticism or spirituality. Like Morgan, I labor towards a theory of black female sexuality that makes space for bodies to do what feels good without shame and moral judgments.

Morgan cements ““Pleasure Politics” as a liberatory, black feminist project” that “elevates the need for sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame to the level of black feminist imperative,” and offers that the black feminist project of theorizing pleasure could include but is not limited to “non-heteronormative submissiveness, hyper-masculinity, aggression, exhibitionism, and voyeurism.” The politics of pleasure include the sticky, messy, desirous and uncomfortable places where black women find sexual and erotic release and simultaneously emphasizes the ways in which “narratives of black female sexuality in the United States not only erase queer and transgender subjects, but also ignores black multi-ethnicity” (39). This latter charge is one that I must strive to reconcile in my own research. While I write from and for the perspective of an African American feminist researcher, I understand that patriarchy and anti-blackness are global projects that operate in tandem with one another. The basis of my argument, that past or present trauma does not have to represent a static obstacle to experiences of pleasure, is applicable to myriad racialized and sexualized subjects. Making space for and asserting the theoretical heft of contradictory sexual desires is as well. I am reminded of a scene from Byron Hurt’s 2006 documentary *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* that we

discussed in a seminar about agency, subjectivity, and social change. Brittney Cooper was leading our discussion and had the class watch a clip from the documentary to better understand disidentificatory performances in action. These femmes admittedly still loved homophobic hip hop music and expressed how irresistible they found hypermasculine black men that outwardly projected intolerance but were sexually adventurous and not heterosexual. The transphobia and homophobia that runs rampant in everyday situations was heightened at this car and bike show with performances by several famous rappers in Daytona Beach, Florida. These queer men, unashamed of their embodiment and erotic desires, were vulnerable; and when constantly live in close proximity to danger, the pursuit of pleasure can be deadly. For these subjects, black and femme, the stakes for their experiences of pleasure could quite literally be characterized as life and death. Their open embrace of conflicting performances of masculinity and of contradictory rhetoric cannot be discarded as “frivolous or irrelevant” (“Why We Get Off” 38).

In addition to elisions of queer experiences in black feminist theorizations of pleasure, Morgan also echoes Melissa Harris-Perry’s impetus to interrogate the effectiveness of “feminist standpoint theories and interpretative practices that are over-reliant on “individual biographies and fictional narratives as entryways to understanding collective race and gender experience” at a point in our history, when black womanhood is more diverse than ever” (42). In order to avoid the seduction of being a black feminist academic attempting to use the stories I have shared throughout this project as some sort of universality for all black women, I have tried to be intentional and transparent about my own positionality. Evoking Stuart Hall’s “politics of enunciation,” Morgan asserts that “the black female subject is never an essential one” and thus it is imperative to

address “who this emergent subject is and from where does (s)he speak” (42). Sharing my own experiences of sexual trauma and disruptions in intimacy within my immediate family plainly offer a reader or evaluator of my research some insight as to why I have chosen this topic. My investment in a capacious conception of black female sexuality is personal and passionate; writing about questions that had grown moldy in the recesses of my mind is cathartic. As Muñoz elucidates, “Autoethnography is not interested in searching for some lost and essential experience, because it understands the relationship that subjects have with their own pasts as complicated yet necessary fictions,” fictions that people of various intersections may find community in and with (83).

Section Three:

Spaces for Discovery: Generative Readings of Black Women's Representation

"I do not imagine pleasure as existing outside of inequality, violence, or pain, nor do I imagine pleasure to circulate outside of the systems of domination which constrain us. My readings of black female pornographic protagonists' pleasures have emphasized that pleasure is often shot through with pain, that desire is often fraught and complicated terrain, and that "speaking sex" is always shaped by the conditions of profound racial inequality that shape the unfolding present."

- Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*

When it comes to sexual representations of black women's bodies, the black feminist inclination to categorize images as exploitative, damaging, or controlling³¹ has become as strong as it for good reason. Historical depictions of black women as animalistic, primal, sexually insatiable and unrapeable all weigh heavily on the ways in which black women's erotic expressiveness is contemporarily engaged in both academia and the African American cultural imaginary. While this historical slime³² undoubtedly has an impact on the forms black women's sexual expression takes and how it is interpreted, it cannot and does not make experiences of erotic pleasure impossible. As Nash elucidates, reading representations of black female sexuality for the rapture and erotic agency that may be readily apparent or perhaps require speculative excavation is not to suggest that structural oppression has disappeared or is inconsequential. As Nash

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins famously coined the term "controlling images" in "Core Themes in Black Feminist Thought," Part 2 of her germinal volume *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. The phrase refers to dominating tropes in representations of black women in the sub-section "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images." Hill, Collins P. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

³² In "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality," Ariane Cruz defines "slime" as "a staining sludge of pain and violence" that coats representations and iterations of black women's sexuality inherited from slavery and consistently refashioned in its wake. Rather than contend that this "slime" impedes black women's experiences of pleasure or eroticism, Cruz counters that that same staining sludge of violence and pain can "become a type of lubricant to stimulate sexual fantasies, access sexual pleasures, and heighten sexual desire" (410). Cruz, Ariane. "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality." *Feminist Studies* 41.2 (2015): 409-36. Web.

explains, “I do not imagine pleasure as existing outside of inequality, violence, or pain”: I know from lived experience that pleasure and pain often coexist (Nash 103). Accepting generational, literal, and figurative trauma as frameworks through which black women’s sexual expression is compromised does not require ruling out or invalidating ephemeral flashes of erotic rapture. Rather than either/or, in black feminist analyses of black women’s erotic representation both/and must become the default operative. My theoretical commitment to reading spaces of seeming impossibility for their generative potential intensified greatly after reading Grace Kyungwon Hong’s *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Polices of Difference*.

In the chapter “On Being Wrong and Feeling Right: Cherrie Moraga and Audre Lorde,” Hong attributes “the ability to maintain contradictory impulses at the same time without resolving them” as a “unique” feature of the “sphere of culture” (63). This suspension without resolution is what she identifies as the “impossible politics of difference”; in the context of her critique of neoliberal necropolitics, the two “epistemological positions that are constituted as mutually exclusive and mutually negating” are “life” and “death” (64). In the context of this project, the presence of erotic enjoyment, pleasure, or sexual satisfaction is posited as impossible within the context of individual and/or collective trauma, violence, or problematic representation. Hong “insists that they,” these states of being that are theoretically impossible to experience at once, “be held in suspension alongside each other” in order to “insist on something that should be impossible” (64). To argue that pleasure can emerge in and through pain and that the inverse is equally plausible, as Nash does, is traditionally approached with intense skepticism if not outright dismissal in black feminist theory. But Hong urges us

onwards towards the unknown and the seemingly preposterous, espousing contrariety and avowing that “in the very process of insisting on impossibility, texts are able to create, if only contingently, an alternative epistemological, political, and ontological possibility that does not depend on the dichotomizing of life and death” (64). This both/and approach that demands confrontation and does not require tidy resolution creates space in black feminist theorizing of black female sexuality for analysis of representations that are not dependent on the dichotomizing of trauma and pleasure. To refute the possibility of experiencing sexual pleasure within overarching contexts of domination or in the wake of trauma is to forfeit black women’s sexual lives altogether. A both/and approach in black feminist readings of black female eroticism leads with generative speculation, asking: Where is agency located in this text? How does this representation expand understandings existing boundaries that confine black women’s sexual expression? What work does this example of black female eroticism do?

Jennifer C. Nash acknowledges that in her reading of black women in racially-themed pornography, she has “emphasized that pleasure is often shot through with pain” and “that desire is often fraught and complicated terrain” (103). Trauma, as I argue throughout this project, sculpts the contours of desire, may alter the form it takes; how, if, or when it is articulated; blurs prevailing binaries demarcating healthy and unhealthy sexuality, good and bad representation. Theoretically courageous approaches that embrace contradiction offer more expansive analytics for women to understand the material reality of their own sexual lives in which experiences, longings, and events are rarely clearly categorized and neatly contained. Engagement with black women’s interior lives has always been a key intervention of black feminist theory, and prioritizing

readings of sexual pleasure offers an exciting and generative perspective through which we can read women's lives. Approached by popular media as being autobiographical, recording artist Beyoncé Knowles' visual album *Lemonade* is a ballad of black women's inner musings, anxieties, fantasies, and longings. While it stands to reason that many of Beyoncé's personal experiences provided inspiration and material for the project, interpreting marital infidelity as the sole theme of *Lemonade* is reductive and inaccurate. The lyrical content of the majority of the tracks that appear on the album explicitly reference a heterosexual marital union in strife, but when matched with the imagery of the short film, a wealth of potential interpretations and implications emerge. Beyoncé is, of course, an international superstar that produces work for mass consumption and for monetary profit – that notwithstanding, the lyrics, audio, and visuals of *Lemonade* provide rich fodder for critiques of voyeurism, target audience, and erotic autonomy in relation to representations of black women's sexuality. This cultural product provides a perfect opportunity to apply a black feminist both/and approach to representational analysis and search for what lies beyond and beneath unilateral categorization.

A few weeks after Beyoncé's *Lemonade* premiered on HBO the weekend of April 23rd, 2016, abiding black feminist intellectual and activist bell hooks published an essay reviewing the album entitled "Moving Beyond Pain" on her website. hooks writes that her "first response to Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade*, was WOW – this is the business of capitalist money making at its best" ("Moving"). Beyoncé is indeed an extremely wealthy capitalist performer, and her self-proclaimed brand of feminism does focus heavily on women earning money and maintaining financial independence. Continuing on, hooks contends that "viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created

solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point” that “Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color.”

Approaching *Lemonade* as a project and Beyoncé as an artist with critical generosity means that I, following hooks, call attention to her positionality as a half-a-billionaire, but it does not mean that because she accepts payment and seeks compensation for her labor making music and compiling, starring in, and producing her own accompanying visual feature, the representations and messages in her work are invalid. Beyoncé’s popularity among diverse demographics and *Lemonade*’s international release via HBO does not minimize the impact of visual and lyrical content tailored in numerous ways to resonate with African American women.

What nuanced readings emerge when the possibility that *Lemonade* is, in fact, a widely disseminated internationally popular audio and visual album that centers the interior experiences of African American women is seriously considered? For one, an interesting relationship between images of black women, voyeurism, and consumption is revealed. Black women’s bodies have, for centuries, been recast as spectacle for the entertainment of others; an infamous example being the kidnapping, enslavement, and dehumanizing display of Saartjie Baartman in 19th Century European ‘freak-show’ attractions. Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes in “The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination,” her chapter from the black feminist anthology *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, that “being black and female is characterized by the private being made public” and that black women’s bodies “are not off limits, untouchable, or unseeable” (4). Given the historical legacy of who develops and directs images of black women, is it not worth emphasizing that in the

case of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, she was the chief director of the film? To return to my quip in the first section of this project, if the game is to be sold, at the very least black women ought to be able to determine how it is told. And furthermore, if the game is being sold, that a black woman is selling it. Let us also consider the impact of *Lemonade* being a mass-produced product that centers the experiences of African American women from another angle. Marginalized peoples have been forced to innovatively disidentify with overdetermined images in popular culture and mainstream media that portray white heteronormativity as the quintessential ontological perspective (Muñoz 2000). What happens then, when this paradigm is inverted and dominant cultures must engage with the particular lived experiences of marginalized demographics? *Lemonade* both fits within a historical trajectory of black women's lives and bodies being consumed by large audiences, and it also disrupts these longstanding black feminist critiques while still existing within them. Rather than find a lyric of a song that speaks to us, rather than have to imagine the characters in a movie were black, rather than have to sit and wish something meant for us would be released via a large platform, black women saw themselves in *Lemonade*. Non-black people saw black women in *Lemonade* as well; and again neither of these contentions refutes the other. When these assertions collide, a generative space of discord becomes available for black feminist speculation and analysis.

hooks reads the centering of black women in *Lemonade*'s imagery as a "positive exploitation," a phrase that arguably encompasses the embrace of contradiction in black feminist analyses of sexuality and trauma that I am intervening with. She writes: "In this visual narrative, there are diverse representations (black female bodies come in all sizes,

shapes, and textures with all manner of big hair). Portraits of ordinary everyday black women are spotlighted, poised as though they are royalty...Real life images of ordinary, overweight not dressed up bodies are placed within a visual backdrop that includes stylized, choreographed, fashion plate fantasy representations” (“Moving”). hooks concludes her description of aesthetics and imagery in *Lemonade* declaring that it “offers viewers a visual extravaganza – a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries” and explains that the album’s purpose, “to seduce, celebrate, and delight – to challenge ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body” is neither “radical,” “revolutionary,” nor a “new offering.” I don’t read this as dismissive; instead, I interpret it as hooks (perhaps inadvertently) situating *Lemonade* within a tradition of life-affirming representations of black women the likes of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* and the photography of Carrie Mae Weems. The imagery in the visual album “shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture” though, by hooks’ estimations, “this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity” (“Moving”). From my black feminist perspective, when evaluating representations authored by black women in popular culture, I do not measure their merit by their capability to completely overturn or overshadow centuries of sexism or racist representation. The centering of black women’s bodies, the privileging of a black female aesthetic – the transgressive interventions that hooks locates in *Lemonade* are, again, not invalidated if we hold them in tension with the ways in which *Lemonade*’s narrative exists within larger systems of oppression, patriarchy, and economic exploitation. These systems comprise the

unfortunate environment that all cultural products are birthed into both in the United States and abroad.

hooks concludes that visual depictions of trauma and black female victimhood “are part of a stereotypical framework” that is delimiting, but I would add the caveat that imagining black women as victims and as subjects that have experienced tremendous suffering is only limiting if that label, (for the interpreter), snuffs out the possibility for any other emotion, feeling, state of being, or experience. I identify as a victim and survivor of rape and sexual assault – I also enjoy decidedly explicit and often misogynistic hip hop and rap music; I am a desiring subject; I enjoy discussing sex as a topic with close friends and strangers alike; fantasies including scenes of unequal power distribution, despite the literal sexual violence I have experienced, excite me. To showcase depictions of black female multidimensionality in a larger narrative that details the ways in which a black woman has been betrayed, hurt, victimized, and/or abused is to reflect the quotidian embodied experiences in mass-produced cultural phenomena. The “many mixed messages embedded in *Lemonade*” that include a “celebration of rage” and simultaneously, “a central message...that violence in all its forms, especially the violence of lies and betrayal, hurts,” represent the overlapping webs of complexity and contradiction that make up people’s, and more specifically, black women’s lived experiences. Audre Lorde famously wrote about the “Uses of Anger,” citing her rage as a primary and typically untapped source of power and action. Her acknowledgment of the potential functions anger and rage can serve did not erase or damage the intimate ways with which she understood and experienced violence as a black lesbian who came of age in the mid-twentieth century. Violence does indeed hurt; and the sting of that pain is

always contingent upon intersectional specificities of power and of identity. As the saying goes on social media, “get you somebody that can do both”: both “boldly strut the street with baseball bat in hand, randomly smashing cars,” and traverse the pains and anxieties of intimate romantic partnership and betrayal.

While I, following hooks, share a personal aversion to scenes of destruction and acts of violence (fictional and literal), I want to push her assertion that “violence does not create positive change” and that the “sexy and eroticized” violence depicted in *Lemonade* “does not serve to undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce domination” (“Moving”). It is not up for debate that this album exists within the same overarching structures of violence and domination that all of us do; perhaps even more insidious and nuanced ones given the inner machinations of the music industry and media. However, approaching the scenes in *Lemonade* in which Beyoncé is smashing car windshields, windows, and store fronts with a baseball bat as reinforcing violent domination is misleading because of her subject-position as a black woman and the material things that she ends up destroying. The only casualties of Beyoncé’s glamorous rampage are a fire hydrant lid and smooth panes of clear glass. Property damage and vandalism are indeed violent acts, but the bat is not used to harm other living beings, and nothing about the visuals endorse violence against adulterous lovers or their third party interlocutors. Beyoncé’s eroticism in these scenes of destruction add another layer to her angered agency that challenges her character’s and black women’s corporate representation throughout the film as victims. Her vandalism is not reinforcing domination over anything or anyone; she is wreaking havoc on parts of the urban

landscape, and other subjects in the scene (men and children, specifically) join in the revelry and abandon.

hooks argues ultimately that “showcasing beautiful black bodies does not create a just culture of optimal well being where black females can become fully-self actualized and be truly respected” and that “concluding this narrative of hurt and betrayal with caring images of family and home do not serve as adequate ways to reconcile and heal trauma” (“Moving”). hooks is dubious about Beyoncé’s personal embrace of a feminist politic that “insists on equal rights for men and women” rather than “an end to patriarchal domination,” and she reminds us that though “women gaining the freedom to be like men can be seen as powerful,” that power is actually “a false construction... [because] so many men, especially black men, do not possess actual power.” The latter assertion is a charge to resist the powerful seduction of post-feminism’s language of empowerment, individualism, and its tendency to conflate imitations of patriarchal masculine behavior and freedom or liberation. Let us think back to Aimee Meredith Cox’s study of black girls and the mantra for living that they repeated among one another: “act like a boy, love like a man.” Feminism is predicated on a commitment to interrogation, and so I ask: Is what Beyoncé and the black girls centered in Cox’s study call for really the mockery of violently dominant men? My distilment of Beyoncé’s undergirding sentiment is akin to that of Cox’s assessment of the girls’ beliefs: this is a call for critical entitlement. For women and really any feminized subject relegated to continuous devaluation for existing outside the realm of cisgender heterosexual maleness to engage in what is life-affirming for themselves, even at risk of coming off as “mannish” or “disobedient.” I theoretically agree with hooks’ commitment to dismantling patriarchy and I endeavor to put it into

practice daily; at the same time, I also validate the perceptive association of masculinity with self-preservation and freedom of movement and action. I absolutely echo hooks' assertion that "men must do the work of inner and outer transformation if emotional violence against black females is to end," and to her point, any transformation on the part of a partner is not explicitly referenced in the lyrics or the imagery of *Lemonade* ("Moving"). She cautions that "if change is not mutual then black female emotional hurt can be voiced, but the reality of men inflicting emotional pain will still continue" and then expresses suspicion at the depiction of Beyoncé's husband, Jay-Z being a doting father and husband towards the middle and end of *Lemonade*, asking "(can we really trust the caring images of Jay Z which conclude the narrative)" ("Moving"). Consideration of the latter argument brings a generative tension between fictional representation and representations of reality to the fore. Beyoncé could have, as hooks suggests, included depictions of Jay-Z apologizing for the infractions and pain he inflicted that is implied throughout the narrative of *Lemonade*; this is a possibility, a point of expansion, a speculation that stretches the potential scope for future representations and puts forth a concept for others to build upon. In the act of decrying a perspective other than our black woman protagonist played by Beyoncé, hooks inadvertently affirms that this narrative is one told from the perspective of a black woman about black women. I am personally and politically dedicated to eradicating violence, physical and emotional, against women; however, just as Beyoncé, our black woman protagonist in *Lemonade* did, I have had to do internal work to find serenity about violence done towards me without the arbiter of said violence asking for forgiveness or offering apology. Patriarchal violence wreaks havoc in the lives of women and femmes, and men are primarily responsible for its

perpetuation, yes. Offering a representation of a black woman working through internal struggles with reconciliation, with confronting anger, with longings and desires she simultaneously resents and avows does not negate the aforementioned assertion. Not only does it not discredit the reality of patriarchal violence in the lives of women, it offers black women the rare opportunity to see the immensely complex negotiations with violence, pleasure, and pain we make in everyday life reflected in an internationally released album. Highlighting nebulous spaces of emotional and political impossibility do the indispensable work of deconstructing traditional representational categories of black womanhood: strong and weak, (presumably) healthy and unhealthy, positive and negative. Many black women's lives are constituted of the same "gendered cultural paradox and contradiction" that hooks credits *Lemonade* with "glamorizing" ("Moving"). Paradox does not always exist in our black feminist imaginaries as frivolous terrain; Hong, quoting Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, reminds us that "the blues is characterized by "the ability to contain several sets of contradictions" and approach "paradox as "an ongoing process rather than a problem to be resolved"" (113). The process of paradox portrayed in *Lemonade* both encompasses black women's "capacity to endure pain" that hooks critiques and the "real life mixture of the bitter and the sweet...a celebration of our moving beyond pain" that she imagines as truly freeing ("Moving").

I engage hooks' comments on Beyoncé and *Lemonade* extensively because centering a politics of pleasure and a politics of articulations is sometimes misconstrued as a contemporary project not rooted traditional black feminist theorization. In actuality, reading with critical generosity and a both/and approach not only reconfigures the ways

in which black women's pleasure becomes legible (even and especially when it appears in concert with trauma), but also how an embrace of contradiction is entrenched in black feminist thought, even when unintentional. Hong testifies that "Black feminist *knowledge production* has inherent within it an analytic that connects it to Black feminist *bodies* [emphasis in original]" in protest of the mobilization of black feminist concepts and the concurrent erasure of black feminists themselves in academic spaces (*Death* 130). True to her proclamation, embodied tensions of black women's lives are always already manifested in black feminist work: whether through the triumphant irony of a black feminist intellectual creating intellectual work historicizing the trauma inflicted on the black female body, a body which she moves through the world in, or the stickiness of a black feminist espousing speculative theory that she knows is hardly feasible as praxis in the lives of African American women outside of academia. Interrogating impossibility and making space for the seemingly improbable is what black women do. Always leave it to one of us "to make something out of nothing."

Conclusion:

This project has been concerned with several major themes: black women's sexual pleasure, black women's expression and pursuit of that pleasure, and the ways in which all of the above are marked and affected by forms of trauma or violence, but not foreclosed by forms of trauma or violence. My commitment to black feminist theory is a constant motivation to do research and create work that has the potential to impact black women's material lives. My hope is that some of the questions I have raised will complicate binaries between sexual agent and victim and between quintessentially 'uplifting' and 'negative' representations of black women's sexual expression in the service of making space for black women who have experienced rape or sexual assault to articulate their truth. Making theoretical space for black women to articulate desires and pursue sexual and erotic pleasure even amid a backdrop of pain, trauma, or violence, means that a woman who has experienced sexual violence does not have to cede her eroticism or sensuality in order to fully acknowledge her experiences with victimization. It means that programs, individuals, and collectives that offer resources to black women who have experienced sexual assault or rape need to include discussions about living sexual lives in the wake of an attack or assault, and do so in a way that does not shame or discourage sexual exploration on the part of the survivor.

Choosing not to conceptualize generational, figurative, or literal trauma as an indefinite foreclosure of sexual pleasure can greatly change the ways in which black feminists theoretically approach black women's sexual histories. Rather than an overdetermination of the circumstances under which sexual pleasure is possible for black women, we can instead focus on what eroticism does for black women: What does it

make more bearable? In what ways is it articulated? How do black women assert their sexual selves and pursue pleasure in spite of it all? As Carole S. Vance wrote in 1984, “the tension between pleasure and danger is a powerful one in women’s lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency” (1); and the closeness danger and pleasure are plainly evident in black women’s lives. This closeness does not call for the reification of boundaries between positive and negative depictions or expressions of black women’s sexual pleasure, but rather nuance and a “tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa 79). “To focus only on pleasure and gratification,” Vance warns, is to “ignore the patriarchal structure in which women act,” and “yet, to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experiences with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live” (2). Analysis of expressions and portrayals of black women’s sexuality in popular culture grounded in critical contextualization can focus in on what images do for an audience, how consumers reciprocally engage with them, *and* how they may play into historical tropes or be progressive. Vance locates this theoretical commitment to critical generosity (as coined by Lindsey and discussed earlier) back to the body, writing that “Women – socialized by mothers to keep their dresses down, their pants up, and their bodies away from strangers – come to experience their own sexual impulses as dangerous” and through this paradigm, “sexual abandon and impulsiveness acquire a high price” (4). Representations of black women experiencing open eroticism are often characterized as liberating for the individual (actor or singer), yet detrimental to black women categorically. A black woman choosing to deemphasize her sexuality and eroticism can serve as a strategy to

maintain safety and avoid sexualized violence, and if a black woman chooses to openly perform and express sexuality, that transparency does not make light of the threat of violence or characterize women who deemphasize negatively. Positions at either end of the spectrum or anywhere in between should not be stigmatized, because the “hallmark of sexuality is complexity: its multiple meanings, sensations, connections” (Vance 5). While “it is all too easy to cast sexual experiences as either wholly pleasurable or dangerous,” black feminists must forge ahead into the gray and resist rigid categorization (5). If we choose not to, we forfeit both practically and theoretically black women’s sexual experiences that are a mixture of pleasure and traumatic residue. And I argue that because of the pervasive impact of literal sexualized violence, generational stories of violence experienced by other women, and figurative trauma done through the perpetuation of damaging historical stereotypes rooted in the barbarism of slavery, most black women’s expressions and experiences with sexual and erotic pleasure lie somewhere in between the poles of pleasure and trauma.

To theorize black women’s sexual pleasure in spite of all this is not to relinquish hard-won recognition of black women as human, as subjects worthy of protection, as historical and contemporary subjects characterized marked by state-sanctioned and culturally-endorsed subjection. To theorize black women’s sexual pleasure is to accept that “the rich brew of our experience contains elements of pleasure and oppression, happiness and humiliation,” and “rather than regard this ambiguity as confusion, we should use it as a source-book for how women experience...desire, fantasy, and action” (Vance 6). Competing emotions and physical experiences are characteristic of the actual sexual encounters that black women have in their everyday lives. Rather than label

certain expressions of black women's sexuality as 'uplifting' or 'damaging,' a more capacious black feminist analytic seeks to investigate the multifarious ways black women seek and find pleasure, and examine what that pleasure does. Does it liberate? Does it allow an oppressed subject a moment's respite? Does intimacy or ecstasy provide a realm of escape? Michele Wallace reminds us that the "negative/positive schema discourages us from looking at Afro-American mass and popular culture from the crucial perspectives of production and audience reception" (Wallace 3), and this is exactly why I was compelled to reexamine hooks' review of *Lemonade* – because a cultural product that garnered that strong of a reaction from black women deserves a closer look.

In the quest for feminist futures that generate spaces for women and femmes to present and embrace their full selves, black feminist analysis and theorization of pleasure has to take on wider dimensions. Mirelle Miller-Young's concept of "erotic sovereignty" (17) takes on special significance in this context, given that it emphasizes how subjects experience and embody sexual subjectivity interdependently. Moving forward, I ask: How can black women support one another's sexual expression and exploration of their sexual selves? What tensions are we made aware of once we accept that pleasure and pain occur conterminously? What does this alter about how we rank erotic enjoyment and pleasure, (both sexual and non sexual), in black women's lives? How might we resituate the pursuit of pleasure in the midst of interlocking contexts of subjugation and exploitation as a liberatory project? And how can black women be socialized within that liberatory project so that we come to divorce representations of black women's sexual pleasure from shame, frivolity, and risk-only discourse? As I admitted in the introduction, I have not sought out to create a black feminist guide to revolutionary sex; but I do

endeavor to answer or elaborate upon some of the questions I was plagued by in the wake of my own experience with sexual violence. A capacious view of trauma and its entanglement with expressions of erotic desire and sexual pleasure would have drastically changed my 15 year-old self's view of my body and my sexuality as 'damaged goods.' The right to erotic interiority that I embrace now might not have eluded me for years. Maybe I would be less inhibited by shame.

If my theoretical exercises can help protect black women immortalized in black feminist theory from imposed asexuality and also invite black women to view themselves as sexual subjects despite forms of sexualized violence they have endured, I am satisfied.

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