

BOACHIE, DANIELLE ACHIAA, M.A. *Forbidden Vitalities: Black Femme Sex Work and Possibilities of Resistance* (2017)
Directed by Dr. Danielle Bouchard. 94 pp.

In this project, I make fluid the relationship between sites of inversion and sites of resistance, emphasizing instances where spaces of trauma can double as realms for recovery. I posit that the white supremacist violence used against hood-based, poor, queer and/or alternative subcultures has the possibility, for those with the capacity and/or desire, to be recuperated for liberatory purposes. My lens of analysis confronts some of the Black feminist scholarship that conceptualizes this form of resistance as forbidden or impossible. I focus on Black femme sex workers, centering their narratives and pleasure(s) in ways that are often invisibilized. While sex work, in general, is criminally devalued and rendered abject, I find Black femdom and the street-based labor done by Black trans femmes as two distinct niches that are further othered and neglected. My work has two objectives: (1) I position BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) as an experimental playground for Black femmes to not only find (non)radical healing through domination over white cisgender men, but to reclaim femmehood and/or (re)appropriate the category of “woman” as a way to dismantle cisgender heterosexism, and (2) My unconventional reading of *Tangerine* — done through the contextualizing of still images from the film — expands the cultural tropes of trans femme sex workers of Color, making room for the complexities of their agency and humanization. In all, my methods of intervention call for a restructuring of Black feminist discourse that centers the most aberrant practices of sex work, and I argue

for the acceptance of forbidden vitalities. What possibilities of pleasure and resistance
can breathe within our wounds?

FORBIDDEN VITALITIES: BLACK FEMME
SEX WORK AND POSSIBILITIES
OF RESISTANCE

by

Danielle Achiaa Boachie

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Danielle Achiaa Boachie has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my committee — Dr. Sarah Cervenak and Dr. Alexandra Moore — for believing in me enough to embark on this process with me. I am at a loss for how to thank my chair Dr. Danielle Bouchard. Without your help and insight, I am not sure in what shape this project would be in. Thanks to all my friends, cohorts and family that continuously motivated me. Sherronda and Amber: you two were an amazing support. Thank you Zeus for being by my side during every step of this process. And of course, where would I be without my loving partner Andy? You were always there to read my drafts in the middle of the night and assure me that I would, indeed, complete this project. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	v
CHAPTER	
I. NAVIGATING TRAUMA, IMAGINING RESISTANCE.....	1
Deconstructing our Truths	14
II. “FUCK BACK” AND OTHER PHILOSOPHIES	27
“Catching bullets in her buttocks”	32
Black FemDom as Healing	45
III. READING TANGERINE THROUGH AYANAH MOOR.....	57
“Still”	62
“We Refuse Service to Prostitutes”	68
Pleasure in a Green Passat	73
Black Hair Complexities.....	79
IV. EPILOGUE: TOWARD A BLACK FEMINIST ACCEPTANCE OF FORBIDDEN VITALITIES	84
Hope.....	88
REFERENCES	90

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1 Beyoncé on the Cover of Time Magazine.....	5
Figure 2.1 Eric Stanton, Masterful Maid Tames Bondage Slave!	46
Figure 3.1 Ayanah Moor, Clap, [from Still series], 2006, digital print, 18” x 24”.....	62
Figure 3.2 Ayanah Moor, Glow, [from Still series], 2006, digital print, 18” x 24”	66
Figure 3.3 We Refuse Service to Prostitutes [from Tangerine], 2015, digital still.....	68
Figure 3.4 David Lagerlöf, Fotot på Tess Asplund, 2016, digital	70
Figure 3.5 Johnathan Bachman, Unrest in Baton Rouge, 2016, digital.....	71
Figure 3.6 Pleasure in a Green Passat [from Tangerine], 2015, digital still	73
Figure 3.7 Black Hair Complexities [from Tangerine], 2015, digital still	80

CHAPTER I

NAVIGATING TRAUMA, IMAGINING RESISTANCE

Indeed, the architecture of the black feminist theoretical archive is undergirded by twin logics of injury and “protectionism,” marked by what Carol Henderson calls “signs of wounding and signs of healing.” These “signs of healing” presume that the labor of black feminism is to adopt recovery strategies which shield black women from further visual exploitation. Black female cultural producers like Cox use the imagined terrain of violent objectification — visual culture — as the space of recovery, so that their own self-representation is imagined to resolve (or, at the very least, expose and circumvent) the trouble of representation. Black feminist cultural producers’ belief that the visual field is both a problem and a site of remedy constitutes its own theory of representation...¹

Jennifer C. Nash

The camera pans over a deserted landscape. Sunlight occasionally breaks through the overcast sky. A wheat field stands seemingly untouched in its erratic perfection. Trees feather the horizon and wind cloaks the scene in an uneasy tranquility. A weathered building lies in the distance. Music and vocals begin, breathing life into the visual album. Beyoncé stands in the field with an illegible purpose. *Lemonade* opens with the pained line: “You can taste the dishonesty. It’s all over your breath as you pass it off so cavalier...”² Eventually, the word “Intuition” appears, evoking a sense of unforgiving retrospection. *Lemonade: The Visual Album* pulls its audience into a story of trauma and

¹ Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.

² Beyoncé, *Pray You Catch Me* (2015; Los Angeles: Columbia, 2016), MP3.

healing. With eleven chapters — Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, Redemption — the viewer lives through Beyoncé as her grief turns into aggression, aggression into emptiness, emptiness into absolution and, finally, healing. The narrative is informed by the truth of Black femme pain, a bitter violence that collides with the sweet complexities of our lived experiences and untethered resilience. Black women draw from this bittersweet lemonade as it mediates the paradoxes of Black and African femmehood.

Through imagery and poetry, music and emotion, many found *Lemonade* to be an aesthetic manifestation of all that is #Blackgirlmagic, a contemporary term used to illustrate the excellence found among Black girls and women. Somewhere within Beyoncé's tragic vulnerability lies a story of our experiences. We are all at once sexualized and desexualized, forbidden and empowered, past and present. We are Beyoncé as she tries to reconcile her irrevocable love with the realities and consequences of the patriarchy. We are part of those lynched by the white supremacist police state. We are Oshun, the Yoruban Orisha that walks in stride with our anger and heartache until we are ready to be nurtured, if only temporarily. Finally, we are ourselves, watching our memories as they are painted on the face of every Black woman in this album. *Lemonade* takes on the task of telling the familiar story of the violence experienced by Black women and femmes — a reality that resides in the history of the u.s. south, and echoes continuously from the coasts of Africa.

As countless articles and responses were generated after the album's debut, there was only one voice that piqued my curiosity. In a piece titled "Moving Beyond Pain," bell hooks offers her thoughts and insight on *Lemonade*. Her analysis of the album was met with criticism from a hyper-defensive fan base. While hooks' concerns rightfully range from Beyoncé's simplified form of feminism ("*Lemonade* glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction"³) to *Lemonade*'s superficial engagement with race ("there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality"⁴), my interest lies in her discussion of Beyoncé's reliance on a sexualized femme aesthetic as a form of empowerment. Is the critical assessment of what Black women's empowerment should look like under capitalism actually a case of "femmephobia" and "whorephobia?"⁵

hooks begins by dismissing *Lemonade* as "the business of capitalist money making at its best,"⁶ reminding us that the album is a commodity. While hooks notes that the production emphasizes Black femmehood and celebrates its variety, she is not impressed by the album's attempt to empower the Black body:

³ bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," *bell hooks Institute*, May 9, 2016, <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Janet Mock, Facebook post, May 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/janetmock/posts/10154228113096522>.

⁶ bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>.

Lemonade offers viewers a visual extravaganza — a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It’s all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold.⁷

For hooks, the construction of Black womanhood presented in *Lemonade* neither challenges nor varies from the stereotypes of Black femininity. There is no empowerment in the tired narrative of Black women's victimization. This Black femme pain that is cloaked in sexualized, emotional havoc remains within the confines of a system that refuses to acknowledge the breadth of Black womanhood. We cannot find self-love or worth in the glamorization and romanticization of our pain, but through our ability to move beyond it.

“Moving Beyond Pain” is reminiscent of hooks’ concerns during the 2014 panel, hosted by The New School, titled *Are You Still a Slave?* The discussion, which was centered around images of Black and Brown women in media, featured bell hooks, Janet Mock, author Marci Blackman and filmmaker Shola Lynch, and was the setting for hooks’ controversial declaration that Beyoncé is a “terrorist.” When the conversation turned to the singer’s Time Magazine cover and whether the image was subversive and liberatory, or a tool of white supremacist patriarchy, hooks had this to say:

⁷ Ibid.



Figure 1.1. *Beyoncé on the Cover of Time Magazine, 2014, print.* Image courtesy of Time Magazine, <http://time.com/collection-post/70716/beyonce-2014-time-100/>.

I think it's a fantasy that we can recoup the violating image and use it. I used to get so tired of people quoting Audre [Lorde], "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." But that was exactly what she meant that you are not going to destroy this imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy by creating your own version of it. Even if it serves you to make lots and lots of money.⁸

Again, hooks is critical of the use of traditionally violent images as a source of empowerment. How can we expect hyper-sexualized bodies to transgress our subjugation when it is necessarily these archetypes that contribute to our oppression? hooks later

⁸ *Are You Still a Slave?* Livestream video, posted by The New School, May 6, 2014, <http://livestream.com/accounts/1369487/Slave/videos/50178872>.

notes, “What I’m concerned about constantly in my critical imagination is why we don’t have liberatory images that are away from, not an inversion of, what society has told us?”⁹ bell hooks calls for an emancipation that is separate from the violent images and objects Black women and femmes are forced to navigate. She is weary of the use of or reliance on these spaces where violence is enduring and normalized.

It is precisely this inversion that I want to examine. What becomes of those who pursue liberation through the constructions that have been used to oppress us? Can the very images intended to control us be repurposed as weapons for our emancipation? In other words, can Black women find liberation at these sites of inversion? Certainly, resistance beyond the realm of pain — the spaces that are defined by *what society has told us* — would be ideal, but I question whether completely removing ourselves from social constructions is even possible. Perhaps, but prioritizing this form of liberation reeks of an ideological ableism that both erases and devalues those of us that are necessarily contingent upon the inverted object for survival. I am invested in the Black and Brown, queer, trans women and femmes who choose to or can only find vitality at our sites of trauma, violence and pain.

In this project, I make fluid the relationship between sites of inversion and sites of resistance, emphasizing instances where spaces of trauma double as realms for healing. I claim that the violence used against us can be recuperated by hood-based, poor, queer and/or alternative subcultures who have quite a different relationship to production and

⁹ Ibid.

capital than Beyoncé. I find this to be an important method of intervention because it can expand the possibilities of Black women and femme's engagement with our history, our oppressions, our liberation, ourselves, and each other. Making room for this form of rebellion can uncover new ways of nurturing our psyche. With it comes the potential for pleasure and catharsis, and narratives of resistance that center our well-being. Can our Black femme sexuality, which has been systemically used to repress and invisibilize our bodies and agency, be utilized by us as a way to confront this pain? I argue so, for to expect our pleasure to eternally exist in a space separate from our trauma is utopian. I should note that an engagement with Black femme healing does not presume a damage inherent to our psyche. As Daryle Michael Scott examines in his book *Contempt & Pity*, there has been a phenomenon of assumptions that "blacks are and historically have been psychologically damaged."¹⁰ This frame of thought, used by both racists and anti-racists, has been used to reify Black pathology and justify notions of rehabilitation. I am not suggesting that we are in need of rehabilitation, but am instead probing the multiplicity of ways that empowerment can look.

I understand hooks' weariness, for dominant culture continuously perpetuates images of Black femme excess. Our representation is a prominent and critical site of violence. It is where we experience sexual and racial subordination. It is within this realm that we have been constructed for the pleasures of white supremacy. Our "controlling

¹⁰ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880 - 1996* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xi.

images,”¹¹ to reference Patricia Hill Collins, normalize the prevailing ideas that are circulated to reinforce white supremacist hegemony. Since the onset of u.s. slavocracy — the economy of slave-based production — imaginings of Black women’s sexual aggression and excess not only made us distinguishable from enslaved men, but reinforced the purity of white womanhood through juxtaposition. As Collins mentions, “This race / gender nexus fostered a situation whereby White men could then differentiate between the sexualized woman-as-body who is dominated and ‘screwed’ and the asexual woman-as-pure-spirit who is idealized and brought home to mother ... this entire situation was profitable.”¹²

I am indebted to Collins, whose theoretical analyses have not only shaped this work, but Black feminist scholarship as a whole. Yet, it is important to note that she falls into the same respectability politic that hooks succumbs to. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, Jennifer C. Nash recognizes that “the very idea that black women might locate pleasure of any sort — aesthetic, sexual, political, or racial — in controlling images is an impossibility for Collins, showing her investment in the idea that black subjects never take pleasure in what confers pain or perpetuates subordination (and her investment in the idea that pleasure and injury are mutually exclusive).”¹³ One could say that these fields of trauma only serve to inflict violence on

¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 145.

¹³ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 82.

our tired bodies, but I would argue that everything — our pain, our pleasure, our existence — is ignited within the larger system of violence that has been thriving for centuries. At the risk of sounding nihilistic, Black femme violence is eternal and all encompassing. Even the most healing or pleasurable spaces we inhabit can be deeply violent. Our own pleasure, until it is decolonized, cannot escape this. The violence we experience is not self-contained in neatly assembled representations and controlling images. It is messy. It forgoes borders, claiming fluidity in all areas of our Black femme existence. I, therefore, not only find it possible to counter our objectification through the violent field(s), but that healing can be done at these sites of injury, pain and trauma.

This does not mean that healing must be or can even be aspired to, for our relationship to and position within our violence determines the capacity in which we can resist our oppressions. In considering the work of countering the trope of monstrosity in trans subjectivity, for instance, Anson Koch-Rein acknowledges that the “reclaiming [of] such a figure faces the difficulty of formulating resistance in the same metaphorical language as the transphobic attack.”¹⁴ To even conceptualize this, much less attempt this work, is a feat that cannot be undermined. Our wounds are fresh, and while it has potential to provide us with strength and motivation, resistance in our trauma can be one of the hardest pursuits we engage in. My call for a Black feminist acceptance of using our pain as resistance includes the realities that this task is daunting, arduous and triggering. It means that some of us may never even desire to reopen our scars, and that is okay. For

¹⁴ Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2014): 134, DOI 10.1215/23289252-2399821.

others propelled by this work, we cannot dissolve it with theoretical respectabilities. As Koch-Rein goes on to say, "...we cannot simply dismiss the monster for its history or injurious potential. It is precisely the monster's ambivalent ability to speak to oppression and negative affect that appeals to trans* people reclaiming the monster for their own voices."¹⁵

An investment in the liberatory images that exist both within and outside of societal constructions takes into account the forms of strength and power that can thrive, and makes room for those who use the master's tools. With this project, I am thinking specifically of Black femme sex workers and the possibilities of this labor as a source of knowledge for understanding our personhood. Sex, in and of itself, is a complicated social phenomenon that exists in its own unique category within the fantastical realms of life. It can be a powerful emotional force, but/and has been a vital tool in the regulation of specific bodies. Its historic, moral demonization has been used to govern, restrict and exploit us. Yet, I find the embracing of the historically pathologized image of Black femme sexuality to challenge reductive notions of complicity that attempt to impose a superficial respectability on our already tattered bodies. Compounding this with the inevitable (at least within capitalist imperialism) commodification of sex allows sex work the potential to become a site of pleasure and knowledge production. To clarify, it is a significant feat to acknowledge sex work as an epistemology that uses our flesh as the material resource for the construction of our representation. As a result, I am curious

¹⁵ Ibid., 135

about the advantages of centering Black femme sex workers as a means of countering the limitations of how we are understood. I view my chapter two, in particular, as a continuation of this important work that I see beginning, in many ways, with Ariane Cruz and her deep investigation of the ways in which a Black Dominatrix uses a violent space for pleasure.

The motivations of my thesis stem from my position as a sex worker and my desires to humanize the field, acknowledge its many layers and forms, and examine its capabilities as a space where Black women and femmes can reclaim ourselves. While the constructed discursive nature of sex work has been, in many cases, historically demonized and criminalized, the contemporary repression of this form of labor is particularly subtle and insidious. There is an inverse relationship between the degree of femme sexualization and the subsequent worth ascribed to our bodies. This worth is directly quantifiable as the value of our labor. To quote Karl Marx, “Money is the alienated ability of mankind.”¹⁶ Since value is an abstraction of the forms of human labor that have been prioritized under colonialism, slavery and capitalism, the lives and labor of Black women and, in particular, Black femme sex workers have had and continue to have little value institutionally.

This strategy of oppressing women and femmes, who make up the majority of the field, takes the form of seemingly well-intentioned abolitionist or anti-trafficking non-profits and organizations that fail to recognize sex worker rights as a labor rights issue.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844), 61.

Plus, the continuous conflation of sex trafficking and sex work results in the systemic criminalization of sex workers which, in turn, produces unsafe work conditions. Exposing the violence that these organizational frameworks cultivate counters dominant paradigms that position non-profits as generally progressive, and separate or independent from state and corporate interests. The nexus of non-profit and state generated epistemologies requires the repression of sex work in order to maintain white supremacist hegemony in a post-colonial period. Important work is being done on this front, and I would be remiss to not attribute scholarship like Elizabeth Bernstein's "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism"¹⁷ and *Temporarily Yours*¹⁸ to my own understanding of the relationship between the non-profit industrial complex and the criminalization of sex work.

It would be grossly inappropriate of me to examine sex work, especially trans femmes of color engaged in street-based labor, without acknowledging the ways that the repression of our work through state violence disproportionately impacts Black and Brown trans women. As found in the 2009 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, "transgender people overall experience high levels of discrimination in every area of life,

¹⁷ Elizabeth Bernstein, "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism," *Signs: Feminists Theorize International Political Economy* 36, no. 1 (2010): accessed November 7, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/652918>.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

as well as ... negative interactions with police, incarceration, and violent victimization.”¹⁹

Structural and institutional aggression from local or federal government, as well as the military, manifests through police brutality, incarceration, deportation, raids, and anti-prostitution policies. Yet, different racial and gender legibilities in the same space have distinctly different relationships to and experiences of state violence.

Racial and gender profiling means that Black and Brown trans workers are routinely targeted and harassed by officers and, according to The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects, are 6.2 times more likely to experience violence from law enforcement.²⁰ Not only are trans women or femme presenting individuals inappropriately searched and touched in order to “determine their gender,”²¹ the trauma of their mistreatment impacts their ability or desire to seek help from police. On a judicial and legislative level, abolitionist policies negatively impact the agency and safety of those in the sex trade, and court-based biases consistently work against trans workers. Black trans women who are sex workers have higher rates of incarceration and longer

¹⁹ Erin Fitzgerald et al., *Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade*, December 2015, 4, http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/Meaningful%20Work-Full%20Report_FINAL_3.pdf.

²⁰ Osman Ahmed and Chai Jindasurat, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2014*, 2015, 56, http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/Reports/2014_HV_Report-Final.pdf.

²¹ Center for Constitutional Rights, *Stop and Frisk: The Human Impact*, July 2014, 12, <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/08/the-human-impact-report.pdf>.

sentence durations, and are more likely to be harassed by prison staff, as well as other inmates.²²

State violence also shares fluidity with the interpersonal violence that trans women of Color face. Black and Brown trans women, in general, are subjected to intimate partner, stranger, customer, or familial violence at alarming rates, and this further increases when they are part of the sex trade. *Tangerine*, the focus of chapter three, broaches on this slightly through the interaction Alexandra has with her customer, as well as the hate crime that Sin-Dee experiences at the end of the film. I find the reclamation of the inverted image — resistance at sites of trauma — particularly important when considering that for Black trans sex workers, liberation at this site means the resistance of structural violence. While not the focus of my analysis in the chapter, it is a crucial aspect of trans sex work agency that must be noted.

Deconstructing our Truths

Nash's concept of *truths*, through her analysis of Black female cultural producers who use the "imagined terrain of violent objectification ... as the space of recovery,"²³ speaks to the ways I wish to challenge the privileging of some strategies of liberation over others. She engages with representation as a pedagogy, epistemology, metonymy and site of recovery within Black feminist archives.²⁴ Black femme abjection in dominant

²² Fitzgerald, *Meaningful Work*, 18.

²³ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

visual culture reproduces, reinforces and replicates the truths constructed about us within white supremacy, because our bodies are the literal material resource for this production of knowledge. Nash notes that “controlling images are also structures of knowledge which shape how black female bodies are known and knowable both on-screen and, perhaps most problematically, off-screen.”²⁵ Larger, dominant portrayals of both sex work and our sexuality create truths that are applied in a way that is homogenous and violent. These truths impact how we are interacted with and related to even though our humanity lies beyond these normalized constructions. Yet, even in our Black feminist archives, we are capable of reproducing the types of knowledge productions that center certain voices and experiences over others, contributing to this overarching and violent manifestation of truth.

It is not enough, however, to simply center Black femme sex workers as feminist subjects, but to accept the work we do in a way that is committed to deterring respectability politics. This means recognizing that our existence not only includes our bodies, but the ways that we use them. Sex work praxis is also a site of politic and must be included — i.e. who is engaged in this subversive sexual practice, in what ways are they engaged, and why? The Black Dominatrix, for instance, is not just an aesthetic, but a process of actions and beliefs that have the potential to bring healing. We must recognize the possibilities of Black femme sex work as a form of Black feminist cultural production.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

We can begin to accomplish this work when we deconstruct the truths that drown us. To do so means to undo a historically oppressive process that necessitates our dehumanization for its power. In “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone asserts that “Given this circumstance in which a minority discourse comes to ground in the physical, a counter discourse is critical.”²⁶ She is referring to the challenges and complexities of a transgender narrative that is subjected to a violent purification that reinforces the cis-hetero-patriarchy. While Stone’s general theorizations of the concept of passing have been rightfully contested by writers like C. Riley Snorton, I find the concept of a counter discourse to be a useful theory that informs my discussions of the ways that Black feminist discourse can include those that are othered in sex work. While sex work already exists on the periphery of discourse, certain bodies and activities within the realm are further invisibilized and “programmed to disappear.”²⁷ I aim to contribute to the countering of the erasure of those of us on the margins of the margins.

I am also left thinking about the work of Terrion L. Williamson and her interrogation of the 2007 incident when radio host Don Imus referred to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed hos.”²⁸ She aptly confronts discourses

²⁶ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 230.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Terrion L. Williamson, “In the Life,” in *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 114.

surrounding stereotypes and the ways in which the intense need to separate the athletes from the Imus' statement ironically reified Blackness as something to be rejected. Yet, what does it mean to embody the literal manifestation of a nappy-headed ho, especially when this degraded image, forbidden in its existence, provides vitality? It is these questions that Williamson contends with, which becomes increasingly important as she analyzes the serial murder of Black prostitutes in Peoria, IL around the same time. It goes without saying that to exist, much less find life within, spaces that are utterly devalued and rendered abject is violent. We see this in the very fact that the systemic murder of Black sex workers — events that were specifically racialized and gendered in their nature — garnered little national attention when compared to the widespread need to disassociate the Rutgers team from the stereotype.

I begin in chapter two with a brief contextual framework on the historical construction of the category of womanhood, and its inherent exclusion of Black femmes. The formulation and existence of white womanhood necessitates our systematic othering in order to be actualized, which then reinforces white masculine hegemony. Under white supremacy, we are without access to this theorized gender, rendering us obsolete and perpetually abject. I am curious about how and in what contexts or locations femmehood or “womanhood” can be accessed or appropriated in a way that is pleasurable and healing. I argue that BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) offers an experimental playground for Black femmes to find healing and, possibly, claim ownership of our bodies. Femdom is a form of BDSM

centered around sexual domination by women. I focus on Black femdom over submissive white men as a way to co-opt a degraded sexuality not only for pleasure, but as a means of resisting cisgender heterosexism.

What are the benefits of an erotic interracial play that utilizes the concept of Black femme superiority and the inferiority of white cisgender heterosexual masculinity? Thinking back to bell hooks, what happens when empowerment is sought at sites of trauma instead of away from it? I find femdom to fit hooks' idea of a violating image in that it often requires us to navigate traumatizing spaces and tropes in a way that is emphatic, yet it can also be a space of resistance to work through the complicated intersections of race and sexuality. I assert that BDSM is a place where this work can be done because, like our sexuality, it exists in a peripheral space. It is an othered sexual space that often exists in an elsewhere separate from traditional, legitimized sexuality. This characteristic has made it possible for me to explore my body and interrogate or transgress racial and gender boundaries in an elsewhere that encompasses subaltern sexualities. I also note that while power is (arguably) not radically redistributed between Black women and white men, the pleasure, healing or catharsis that can be experienced through this experimentation is important and necessary.

Chapter three examines the 2015 indie film *Tangerine* about two trans sex workers of color. While *Tangerine* relies on traditional portrayals of trans characters as street-based sex workers, I challenge the relegation of the film as a "trans movie" to explore what vitalities can exist within this narrative. That is, what other truths can be

uncovered when we make room for alternative readings? My mode of analysis is inspired by Ayanah Moor's art series *Still*, a beautiful testament to the kinds of stories that are erased in traditional scripts. The series captures still frames from music videos that allow for unconventional and subversive readings of the trope of Black women as a video vixen. As Moor notes, "captured frames imply moments unintended by the larger music-video narrative,"²⁹ a tool that brings with it new possibilities of understanding our subjectivity without erasing its existence in the cultural production of Black femme excess. These appropriations vary from more traditional readings such as the Black woman as a hyper-sexual accessory, to scenes where confidence and agency are acknowledged in ways not usually done in videos. These readings challenge the monolithic normativity of video vixens, humanizing them in ways not expected.

I mimic this art form in my analysis of *Tangerine*, cutting out three scenes that, when paused, offer alternative stories to the movie's script. I want to simultaneously celebrate the importance of a film that has heavily underrepresented characters, and also sift through the movie to find other avenues of humanization. My analyses, at many points, intentionally situates the film outside of its script in order to draw more complex, overarching conclusions. This is the case with the first scene I examine. It lays the ground work for the rest of the chapter by including the actions of one of the main characters in the broader political conversation of Black femme resistance. Next, I take a close look at the white, cisgender heterosexual displacement of what is constructed as aberrant

²⁹ Ayanah Moor, "Still," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 205.

sexualities into an elsewhere as a way to other non-white cis-heterosexuality and also absolve themselves of their complicit engagement with these othered sexual expressions. Finally, I analyze the film's tense and emotional ending, capturing the laden complexity of Black hair in regard to our liberation, and the nuances that exist when centering Black trans women.

In my epilogue, I consider some of the strengths and limitations of my work with the hopes that it will inspire more conversation on Black femme sex work as a liberatory form of Black feminist cultural production. I urge for the restructuring of Black feminist discourse that centers the most aberrant practices of sex work. I revisit bell hooks' notion of the inversion, and reflect on the ways that healing can be sought within it. I also call for a Black feminist acceptance of our forbidden vitalities. That is, the resistance, healing and pleasure that takes place at sites of injury is complicated but necessary.

Sex work as a form of labor has a dualistic positionality in that it has always existed and been desired — spanning countries and time periods — and yet is considered, in many cases, a societal taboo. Sex workers have been mythicized in classical literature, fables, religious texts, mainstream media, etc. though the motivations of a sex worker (to become a sex worker) and the societal demand for commercialized sex are seldom considered or evaluated when sex workers and the sex trade is considered. At the same time, sex workers are rendered into a singular category that erases all other aspects of our personhood. We are often incapable of being understood as anything else but sex workers. My goal is to counter and/or add to these narratives, filling in the gaps of

scholarship that simplifies sex work, and injecting race into the overall conversation. In chapter two, I intentionally center Black femme healing and resistance in BDSM, a gravely neglected territory that posits female domination as a space that can be cathartic and beneficial to our psyche. I speak less to the monetizing of this labor, though I distinguish between the consequences of a space made by a white man for profit, and the results of a realm cultivated by a Black woman for women of Color. Instead, I focus on the ways in which anti-Black misogyny can be appropriated for our pleasure.

On the other hand, my objective in chapter three is to escape the trite yet familiar relegation of Black and Brown trans women to a one-dimensional street-based worker in cultural production. The pervasive fetishization of Black and Brown trans women in popular culture limits their characterizations and functions to reify cisgender heterosexuality. Alternatively, I expand the conceptualizations of *Tangerine's* main characters, examining the personal as well as the political with the aim of humanizing trans women of Color. We can validate those that are engaged in sex work and also recognize that Black and Brown trans women are a multiplicity of other things and are just as deserving of nuanced characterizations as cisgender individuals. I should restate that my choice to dissect femdom and street-based work is informed by my thoughts around which forms of sex work, a criminally undervalued form of labor, are further othered. This is not to suggest that other forms are not subjected equally, if not more, to this violence, but that my lived experiences has led me to this conclusion about these two forms in particular.

In chapter three, for instance, my analysis of the mythicization of strippers exists solely to support my examination of “Glow,” yet it is ripe for deeper analysis. As a cultural trope, strippers have been the subject of countless songs that aids in their delineation from other vixens, hoes, sluts and whores. They embody a duality of being spectated (subject to the gaze) and (potentially) used (for sex). As singer T-Pain explains in his song “I’m in Love with a Stripper,” he not only enjoys the performance aspect of these dancers, but also the ability to later have sex with them: “She coming down from the ceiling (to the floor) / Yeah, she know what she doing ... / I need to get her over to my crib and do that night thang.”³⁰ Strippers are so sexualized that they are incapable of being a part of the already hyper-sexualized category of womanhood. In verse three, rapper Mike Jones makes the claim, “Women they love [strippers] too, that’s what you call a woman’s worth.”³¹ The combination of being able to embody multiple forms of sexuality (vixen, dancer, sex toy) and being intimately understood through their relationship to the pole reifies strippers as mythical goddesses.³² The fact that strippers are constructed as a euphemism for different forms of sex — and, by extension, masculine desires — makes them a poignant symbol of consumable abjection.

What further complicates the mythicization of strippers is, in most cases, the presence of a stripper pole. Strippers exert skill and grace as they intertwine themselves

³⁰ T-Pain, *I’m in Love with a Stripper*, (2005; New York: Jive Records, 2005), MP3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

with the pole, yet because most forms of women's labor are completely devalued, the amount of strength and ability that is required for pole dancing is ignored. What is instead focused on is the ways in which pole dancing insinuates hetero-sex. The pole, large in its height and girth, is the pinnacle of the hetero-erotic imagination. In the music video for "Partition," there is a scene where Beyoncé puts on a provocative show for her husband Jay-Z. Jay-Z watches while in an empty theater, surrounded only by the smoke of his cigar (another signifier of power). On stage, Beyoncé — and at times, other women — dance behind a figurative cage (which also implies multiple poles) while lighting techniques imprint cheetah prints on her body. At one point, she artistically and seductively slides one of the bars of the cage between the cheeks of her buttocks, the bar curving delicately to the shape of her body. Throughout this scene, Beyoncé sings, "Take all of me / I just wanna be that girl you like."³³ Bars, poles and other phallic objects not only signify female sexual excess, but specifically a sexuality that connotes extreme insatiability. While this is a theme found in various depictions of women's hypersexuality, the presence of the pole makes it particularly palatable. As demonstrated in "Partition," our animalistic desires cannot be tethered or confined.

With all of this in mind, I arrive at the crux of what separates strippers from other vixens: strippers, by definition, do not offer sex to their clientele. The fact that sex is not provided offers men a challenge that is eliminated with the purchasing of an escort or

³³ Beyoncé, *Partition*, (2014; Los Angeles: Columbia, 2014.), MP3.

street-based worker. While buying sex is an option, to have sex with a stripper not only fulfills hetero-erotic desires, but is the final step in (re)confirming one's masculinity. Under heterosexism, the duality of strippers' insatiable sexual appetite and the realities of their sexual availability reifies them as mythical hoers. The labor of tipping and engaging with the stripper is for the goal of achieving an orgasm, but also plays into masculine performativity. This process in its entirety is part of the larger structural construction of binary gender roles that maintain men as diametrically superior to women. This maintenance necessarily requires the continuous (re)establishing of sexual dominance and legitimacy. Men must always perform their gender to remain "men" amongst themselves and in relation to each other, and to perpetuate and conserve the category of masculinity.

* * *

Throughout my exploration, I use terms like "woman," "womanhood," "femme," "femmehood," "female" and "femininity" in different ways that change and vary depending on the context. When I discuss the colonial construction of white womanhood in chapter two, I am referring to the traditional, dichotomous conceptualizations of gender expression, presentation, performance and sexuality of white cisgender heterosexuality. Unless otherwise specified, my understanding of gender in relation to Blackness and Brownness is unequivocally inclusive of non-masculine and/or femme-identified gender variations not limited to trans and cisgender, gender queer, gender non-conforming, non-binary and/or agender expressions. In making claims about "Black

femdom” or “Black femmehood,” I am not only referring to Black cisgender women, but Black trans women and any other gender expression that navigates anti-Black misogyny. I use “femme” often, for I find it to be a useful term to encompass those of us who cannot or refuse to claim “woman,” and it helps to detach and separate gender and sexual identity and expression from problematic fixations on anatomy. At the same time, there are times when the term “woman” can be used to reclaim or (re)appropriate racialized gender in a way that dismantles and decolonizes cisgender heterosexism. I make room for this work as well.

Conversely, when I refer to Black trans women, I am cultivating a space solely for Black trans women and femmes and their experiences. In general, femmes of Color have been continuously impacted by the violent ownership of our bodies by our oppressors. It stems from a legacy of sexual policing and bodily surveillance, in conjunction with the white supremacist need to explore and conquer, which positions certain bodies as a site of sexual and racial difference, codifying cis-white heterosexuality. Yet, this violence has different ramifications, and, at times, I aim to discuss them specifically. While I find the tendency to separate trans women and femmes from categories of womanhood and femmehood othering, it is useful to emphasize trans specific trauma or conditions as a way to illuminate them. Ultimately, my goal is not to contribute to the erasure and invisibilization of trans or gender non-conforming femmes, but to attempt to confront these issues in my writing and recognize the limitations of my own work which relies on processes and language that exclude these voices and experiences.

A final trait of my work is that I intentionally decapitalize textual signifiers of contemporary oppressor groups such as “the united states,” “europe” and “white.” It is a touch that pays homage to Audre Lorde, and has become increasingly important to me in its own right as a form of resistance. These are all parts of my praxis of Black femme liberation. Many of us cannot rely on a resistance that exists in an elsewhere, often beyond the realms of access. For some, like myself, sex work exists as both a site of violence, and a space ripe with the potential for healing and agency. Finding vitality in our trauma has been deemed a forbidden possibility. Yet, I do not wish to abandon that which can liberate me.

CHAPTER II

“FUCK BACK” AND OTHER PHILOSOPHIES

As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends.³⁴

Farah Jasmine Griffin

For many submissive white men, the experience of being owned by Lady Jade,³⁵ a Dominatrix, is a high priority. With fetishes and specialties ranging from corporal punishment to sissification, bondage and foot fetish, sessions with Jade work for novices in the BDSM community, as well as those with years of experience. She describes Herself as sensual, seductive and firm, and prides Herself on offering safe spaces for individuals to explore their submissive side. Lady Jade’s clients — Her slaves, pets, subs, house bitches and fuck bois — are almost exclusively cis-heterosexual (or abashedly hetero-flexible) middle-aged white men who have corporate jobs and identify as alpha males in their “normal” lives. They reach out because of a long-lasting, unsatiated internal sense of submissiveness that they want to explore or grow within.

³⁴Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women’s Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 524, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299218>.

³⁵Name changed for privacy.

Many of Her slaves have wives that are either oblivious to this aspect of their husband's sexual desires, or are repulsed by the thought of it. Most of her pets feel a deep sense of shame about their beta tendencies, for despite their desires they still subscribe heavily to normative standards of masculinity. Many of those that seek out Lady Jade also have an untamed fascination with and fixation on being owned by a woman that is Black, and in many cases, specifically African. That is, they are not satisfied with merely transgressing their binary gender norms, but are also enticed by the crossing of racial borders. Though Lady Jade is one of the few Domes of Color — much less Black Domes — in her city, Her specialty of Black femme supremacy and white male inferiority is in demand.

Over the past few years, I have crafted and cultivated my persona as Lady Jade. This has included a deep exploration of my personal kinks and boundaries, as well as an examination of the internalized notions that I have reluctantly carried in my flesh. While I have engaged in other types of sex work, I now exclusively work as a femdom (female domination) provider for submissive white men. My domination may take many forms, but its foundations lie in a race play that focuses on the ownership and enslavement of white men. This literal playing with and disruption of standard racial comforts and scripts works in conjunction with my femdom to upset systems of straight, cisgender, white male hegemony; it lurks on the fringes of erotic performativity — a perversion rife with history and trauma. Yet, the intersections of being a professional dominatrix who is also a revolutionary feminist means that I often experience a perpetual vacillation between

feeding into the fetishes, tropes and exotifications that are specific to my clientele, and critiquing the very kind of BDSM that I engage with.

While the practice of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) exists on the margins of idealized, puritan heterosexuality, it has been a site of growth, contradiction and resistance when it comes to me understanding my race, gender and sexuality. A consistent assumption that is made by others is that the expression of a dominant Black sexuality and the owning of white male slaves is inherently empowering. I speculate that bell hooks would disagree, arguing that Lady Jade's power over submissive white men does not necessarily challenge or radically change stereotypes and tropes of Black femininity, nor does the inversion of power result in the dismantling of oppressive norms. In some ways, I agree. To regard Lady Jade as powerful necessitates an othering that is not only fixated on Her perceived difference(s) from other Black women, but Black women's relationship to the arguably immutable category of (white) womanhood. The choice made by clients to be submissive to a Black woman is a product of the eurocentric fetishization of women of Color. My value as a Domme comes from a fluid yet dualistic construction of me as different (read: institutionally educated, attractive, accessible) from other Black women, yet also different (read: racially and sexually exotic) from white women. When submissives make statements about choosing me because I am *smart* or *not ghetto*, they are conceptualizing me as an anomaly to Black femmehood. When they insist on Black female superiority over white women, they are relegating us to a mysteriousness rooted in colonialism. This

is where the fallacy of Black femdom empowerment lies. Being a Dominatrix is not inherently liberatory even if it has social currency and, to borrow from hooks, “serves you to make lots and lots of money.”³⁶

This does not mean that femdom and BDSM do not provide a valuable and critical space for Black women to center ourselves, our bodies and our needs. Where hooks falls short is in her narrow interpretation of liberatory images, and subsequent dismissal of all forms of resistance that do not look like the kind of empowerment she envisions. In this case, I am less interested in devaluing work that arguably may or may not institute systemic change, and more invested in elevating the multi-faceted ways in which Black women can experience liberation both individually and collectively. In this chapter, I argue that Black femdom is a site of inversion that can bring forth pleasure, catharsis and healing. I focus on the kind of race play that I engage in — Black femme domination over white male submissives. The establishment of Black women’s sexual excess — a trope that we see repeatedly throughout our history — is a foundational technology in this erotic interaction, for its perversion is reclaimed and recuperated for our benefits. While the power possessed in these instances is not radically redistributed from white supremacy, the co-optation of our abject sexuality for the development of a Black Dommehood within BDSM is one of the few spaces where our sexuality can be used on our terms. I see Black femme sexuality as a peripheral sexuality, and BDSM as a space where peripheral sexualities can exist.

³⁶ hooks, *Are you Still a Slave?* <http://livestream.com/accounts/1369487/Slave/videos/50178872>.

My analysis begins with a brief look at the history of the (de)construction of the category of woman, and the fact that it was not only built to exclude Black femme personhood, but that it could not exist without our exclusion. Our position as a racial and sexual other necessarily reifies the production of white womanhood, the only space where one can categorically be or become woman (or theorize against it). This then begets my question of where or within what realms and avenues can Black women access our own womanhood. I draw from my experiences as a Dominatrix to argue that BDSM, as a playground of experimentation, is a space where the inversion of power between Black women and white men can result in healing for the Black femme psyche. I find this analysis particularly important because, as I express later, there has been much work on the healing benefits of BDSM for those that receive the play, but not for those of us that provide it.

My concept of healing is informed heavily by Farah Jasmine Griffin, whose theoretical understandings of healing as a way to reimagine the Black female body relates to my work. Through a juxtaposition of Black Domme aesthetics created by a white male artist, and Black femdom cyberspaces created by a Black woman, I argue that Black femdom can be healing and liberatory when developed by and for Black women. Race play can provide us with a site to access our autonomy, regardless of whether this is done through the claiming of a womanhood (to claim Black womanhood and our sexuality is to engage in a form of social protest that dismantles a foundational feature of the stability of our oppressors) or through the embracing of our femmehood. Furthermore, the

exploration of interracial aggression can be a form of Black erotic catharsis and can provide a space for us to cultivate our own version of a gendered or non-gendered sexuality.

“Catching bullets in her buttocks”

In her 1981 piece “One is not Born a Woman,” Monique Wittig uses materialist feminism to reject the idea of “woman” as a category. Instead of womanhood being an assumed, immutable, natural state applied to the dualistic non-male body, Wittig offers a challenge: “...not only is there no natural group ‘women’... but as individuals as well we question ‘woman,’ which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth.”³⁷ She goes on to quote de Beauvoir’s famous line: “One is not born, but becomes a woman.”³⁸ Both de Beauvoir and Wittig’s work is landmark in feminist canon, interrogating the very premise on which female personhood is expected to be built. Womanhood is not innate but is, rather, an identity imposed and obtained through the diametric counterpart of manhood. This radical reformulation of what it means to be woman destabilizes traditional ideals about the invariable nature of sex and gender, unmasking, instead, its arbitrary qualities. This is necessary work, but I question the ways the category of “woman” is essentialized, excluding Black femmes from this theorizing. To clarify, under white supremacy we are not able to *become* woman as Wittig and de Beauvoir suggest, because our existence as the other to the othered reifies the category of white cisgender

³⁷ Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10-11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

womanhood. We cannot become woman because woman necessitates the exclusion of Blackness. It is a cultural construction that, since its inception in western colonialism, relies on the abjection of Black femmes to remain viable. Cis-hetero-patriarchy is anti-Black and misogynistic at its very core.

1890's united states was dubbed "the Era of Woman,"³⁹ a time of the simultaneous evolution of social Darwinism and the rights of middle class white women. White cisgender women were increasing their visibility in the public sphere and within political affairs, proving themselves capable of penetrating and engaging in male-dominated spaces.⁴⁰ They stood against social evolutionist theorists who dismissed womanhood and maintained (white, cisgender, and heterosexual) manhood as fundamentally superior. However, those that supported the struggles of white women linked the expansion of womanhood to an evolutionary progress that likened the united states to "the higher civilizations of Europe and far superior to the primitive cultures of Asia and Africa."⁴¹ Many activists and feminists dedicated to the issues of women's suffrage appealed to the white male ruling class in a way that necessarily rejected Blackness. They adhered to traditional gender norms and idealized notions of womanhood, holding themselves responsible for the conservation, preservation and progression of the white race. These white women emphasized their differences from

³⁹ Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Black and African women — and women of Color in general — in order to emphasize similarity to and solidarity with their male counterparts. Gender norms were not deconstructed but rather enforced, and the differentiation of white women from Black women became synonymous with the perpetuation of whiteness. White women strategically reframed discourses surrounding womanhood and, using evolutionist theories to reinforce their arguments, positioned traditional female roles and traits as central to civilization.

The use of and strategic othering of Black women to legitimize womanhood as a category specific to white women certainly predates the Era of Woman. There is a historic legacy of dominant groups constructing Black women as “everything that is not white.”⁴² The fear of Black female sexuality, and the use of it to maintain pious white womanhood, is an ongoing product of slavery. We have been rendered as objects of pleasure: commodifiable and, most importantly, without access to womanhood. We can see this manifestation, for instance, in the three day Memphis Riot in May 1866, where white officers and primeval klan members terrorized Black neighborhoods as a way to restore their racial power. Homes and establishments were burned, unarmed individuals were murdered, and women were sexually abused. The rape of Black women by white men was not included in the legal definition of rape, for Black women were seen as simultaneously not able to consent and always consenting. The women were denied the

⁴² Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 96.

ability to claim both their identity and their autonomy which suggested that white law saw sexual availability as inherent to the essence of Black womanhood. Through cis-hetero masculinity, the white men “enacted a fantasy of social subordination that echoed an existing gendered discourse of racial inequality.”⁴³

I raise these brief yet important historical points to challenge the essentialization of womanhood by Wittig, de Beauvoir, and others, for what applies to white women cannot and does not apply to us. The work of deconstructing traditional notions of gender and sexuality, while critical, belies the complexities that races adds, and the violence that Black women face because of it. Our skin color further tarnishes an already abject category. As white women struggle to gain an agency that forgoes the detrimental equities of sex and gender, the violence they attempt to escape is reproduced on our bodies. We are trite images of hypersexuality and sexual excess — the converse of a white womanhood that values its position within white male hegemony. Because, as Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins notes, “[w]hite women’s sexuality could not be constructed as it is without corresponding controlling images applied to U.S. Black women,”⁴⁴ white womanhood reinforces white masculinity, the epitome of white superiority. In other words, we are incapable of even becoming woman, much less being

⁴³ Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South (Gender and American Culture)* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 73.

⁴⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 131.

included in its subsequent deconstructions. If whiteness marks all that is “normal,”⁴⁵ then we are pathological deviance — monstrous in our aberration, grotesque in our essence.

With that said, there is power in the grotesque, for it can be used for resistance. What has been continuously employed to repress Black women can, when used by us, offer potential. Our bodies have been a source of our abjection and otherness, as western and eurocentric notions riddled it with difference. While we cannot escape the history of this treatment, we can redefine our alterity for ourselves. In “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” Janell Hobson considers the Black female body, particularly the historically pathologized buttocks or “batty,” as a site of political and emotional resistance in working-class dance troupe and performative discourses.⁴⁶ This concept is especially poignant in Hobson’s analysis of *Nanny of the Maroons*, a Jamaican legend full of strength and possibility:

A fugitive slave in the eighteenth century who forged her own community in the Jamaican rainforests with other fugitives known as maroons is credited with defeating English armies by catching bullets in her buttocks and hurling back their ammunition. In this myth, Nanny’s batty, much like those of our contemporary Jamaican dancehall “queens,” suggests possibilities for the black female body as a site for decolonization. She also serves as a powerful contrast to the enslaved black woman, whose exploited sexuality fueled the economies of slavery and colonialism through forced reproduction and labor, and to the Hottentot Venus,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁶ Janell Hobson, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 88, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810976>.

whose powerful batty was diminished by freak show display and scientific dissection.⁴⁷

This myth of Nanny does not attempt to veer away from the historically problematic imaginings of Black female bodies as vessels of excess, but instead uses that very site of violence to shift the paradigm of the buttocks from abnormal, deviant, and grotesque to powerful, necessary, and liberatory. She does not reject her Black body, but takes ownership of it in a way that dismantles respectability and convention. Nanny uses her constructed monstrosity to her advantage, using the bullets of her oppressors for her survival. The pursuit of decolonization within the hyper-colonized Black female body is political disobedience. We are told to embody the purity of cisgender white female heterosexuality, despite the fact that we will never be that which we strive for. Yet, what does it mean for Black women to strive to be *ourselves*? I am interested in the possibilities of strength, power and healing that can exist when we, instead of distancing ourselves from the spectacle of our body, sexuality and essence, become like Nanny, using the very spectacle to develop an autonomy that seeks to celebrate all that constructs us as the racial and sexual other.

The means through which we can catch the bullets that aim to maim us cannot be through the traditional, white-washed, violent category of woman. Without a complete and radical deconstruction of woman — one that is fundamentally anti-colonial — we will not be able to inherently be part of a category necessarily built on the subjugation

⁴⁷ Ibid., 101.

and otherness of our Blackness. If woman is a myth even for those that are white, to revisit Wittig, then it is not a place that supports Black personhood and autonomy. Yet, to claim ownership of Black femmehood and/or womanhood is to reject white supremacy which positions us as not actually woman. Where and how, then, can we be? I posit that Black femdom BDSM is an overlooked niche and sexual institution where we can develop sites of resistance and find healing. As an erotic subculture, BDSM celebrates power dynamics and non-normative sexual practices while prioritizing the informed consent of all involved. It cultivates a variety of sexual scripts, often — though certainly not always — with an emphasis on those that deviate from traditionally expressed and represented sexuality. In these moments of deviation, non-heteronormative sexual play and non-cisgender, non-traditionally heterosexual, non-able bodied bodies can be centered. This positions BDSM as a subversive peripheral sexuality where taboos can be explored. Of course, the concept of taboos is rife with a respectability that separates purity from the monstrous other.

I consider Black femme sexuality to be a taboo — a peripheral sexuality — for we have never been constructed as pure. If Black womanhood is intentionally othered and perverted under white supremacy, then what benefits can come from a place that necessitates, or at least attempts to include, sexual alterity? Within BDSM, our alterity is given space to exist among other deviances. It is not without its complications and violences, and for some BDSM can trigger sexual traumas and anxieties. Yet, for those with a more positive relationship to the scene, I see it as a site of potential for us to thrive

in ways not previously experienced. In an interview conducted by Dr. Robin Bauer, one of his respondents referred to the social playground created through BDSM as a “field for experimentation.”⁴⁸ It is a space where curiosities can be quenched, fantasies can be actualized, boundaries can be extended, and norms can be transgressed. Having access to a place of experimentation is particularly crucial for Black women, for many of us lack spaces where we can even claim ownership of our sexuality, much less one that is not deemed rebellious or exotic. Most importantly, the parameters of this ownership and expression of sexuality, particularly with Black femdom, is established by and for Black women. This differs from historic scripts of controlling images that are externally imposed onto our bodies.

Ultimately, I am arguing that Black femdom offers possibilities for Black women and femmes to find healing. My notion of healing — the reconfiguration of Black women’s bodies by Black women in order to deal with trauma in a way that is safe, positive and therapeutic — is heavily informed by the work of Farah Jasmine Griffin and her project around textual healing in the work of some Black women writers:

If white supremacist and patriarchal discourses construct black women’s bodies as abnormal, diseased, and ugly, black women writers seek to reconstitute these bodies. Some black women have arduously documented the impact of artificial standards of beauty on black women's lives. They have also explored the consequences of black women’s efforts to meet these standards. While these writers document the pain, domination and exploitation of black women’s bodies,

⁴⁸ Robin Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 233, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649798>.

in the past decade many other black women writers have started to explore female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance ... They are engaged in a project of re-imagining the black female body — a project done in the service of those readers who have inherited the older legacy of the black body as despised, diseased and ugly. I want to refer to this literary project as “textual healing.”⁴⁹

I am rejuvenated by Griffin’s documentation of the writers who challenge normative Black female discursiveness in order to find pleasure and resistance at the very sites of pain and violence. I relate this to the overlooked, ignored or erased realm of BDSM, for this mode of analysis serves to expand the narratives that we can have about our bodies, our sexualities and our desires. Like Griffin, I want to reimagine the Black femme body. I want to counter the “older legacy” that is incapable of conceptualizing our body as pleasurable for ourselves instead of pleasurable (read: exploited) for others. My focus on Black femdom as healing for Black women stems from the fact that there is limited work done to examine the ways that these avenues of sexual exploration can prove to be therapeutic for practitioners and providers, much less those of us who are Black.

As I will explore shortly, there is research that examines the healing properties of BDSM and the ways it allows clients — consumers of sex work — to confront trauma. The same focus, however, is not extended to workers. I imagine this to be, in part, due to the fact that not only is BDSM on the periphery of normative sexual practices, but that it is clouded with perceptions of violence, subversiveness, and lack of safety. As Bauer notes, “...the pushing of individual and sociocultural boundaries and the quest for intense bodily and psychological experiences [sic] situates BDSM practices in a complex and

⁴⁹ Griffin, “Textual Healing,” 521.

sometimes paradoxical matrix of danger and safety....”⁵⁰ The proximity of BDSM to the matrix of danger makes it incapable of being considered as a legitimate healing process and source of resistance; this sentiment is precisely what I plan to challenge. Griffin continues on, speaking directly to her meaning of healing both in general, and within the context that she is writing about:

I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. Of course, the body never can return to a pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a “truer” self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all — in a narrative of love and care. As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends.⁵¹

Black women are often understood through the pain of our violent history in a way that is stagnant and mutable. Our bodies are visual reminders of our abnormalities. Our sexuality serves as a confirmation of our inferiority. Less often are we given the opportunity to seek growth and possibility in a way that is dynamic, complex and, most importantly, pleasurable. Less often is *Black* healing permitted to exist. We are scarred. We are ripped. We have been mutilated. Yet, it is in these scars that many of us can claim or have access to our self. Because I find Black femme sexuality to be a particularly poignant site of mutilation — at the very least, this is the case in my lived experiences —

⁵⁰ Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges,” 233.

⁵¹ Griffin, “Textual Healing,” 524.

it is where I seek self-care and love. This is what I mean by Black femdom BDSM as healing: we recognize the existence of our scars and use our resistance to heal the wounds.

In *Kinks and Shrinks: The therapeutic value of queer sex work*, Cassandra Avenatti and Eliza Jones explore how BDSM and sex work confront trauma in ways that can promote or provide healing. This analysis is done through a queer framework of understanding BDSM. To queer BDSM is to recognize it as a space that can be “radical and transformative, challenging normative expectations of sexuality, gender and relationships.”⁵² Practitioners are equated to “healers,”⁵³ and BDSM is contextualized as relating to, an extension of, or operating in tandem with psychotherapy. These ideas are not new for, as the authors note, much has been written on BDSM relationships as therapeutic “in not only healing sexual difficulty and trauma, but in assisting with other mental and sexual health issues.”⁵⁴ BDSM, in particular, allows clients to deconstruct internalized shame often specific to childhood power hierarchies. This is certainly true in my experience. Many betas reach out with stories of parental abandonment or desires for a strong female figure to be present in their life because of strained maternal or marital

⁵² Cassandra Avenatti and Eliza Jones, “Kinks and shrinks: The therapeutic value of queer sex work,” in *Queer Sex Work*, ed. Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher and Nicola Smith (London: Routledge, 2015), 92.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

relationships; their fetishes stem from that which is lacking. Avenatti and Jones

humorously note:

If an individual entered a traditional psychotherapist's office and explained his interest in re-casting the roles of his parents in order to play-act scenes in which they instructed and disciplined him, he would likely be labelled pathological and advised to seek other therapeutic options.⁵⁵

Kink spaces welcome the damaged to examine their pathologies. Of course, I am less interested in what benefits BDSM provides for my white male clients, and more invested in how Black femdom as a whole can benefit providers.

Studies also suggest that BDSM practitioners tend to have better mental health. Ethical kink spaces necessitate ample communication and boundary establishment, and these skills are useful in a variety of settings not exclusive to sex work. Providing a safe and accessible space for both clients and workers to interrogate and explore sexual needs and desires requires introspection. Yet, if finding research supporting the mental health benefits of sex work in general is sparse and fleeting, then work around the benefits of BDSM for Black providers is virtually non-existent. Much of the analysis on (inter)racial erotic play is fixated on Black women as submissive. Female submission already dominates BDSM, but Black female submission is the focal point of much of the dialogue surrounding Black BDSM. This is understandable, for it provides a visceral extension of existing social power dynamics. In "The Dark Side of Desire," Ariane Cruz examines polarizing opinions on Black women and BDSM from two prominent voices in

⁵⁵ Ibid., 90.

conversation around Black female sexual politics.⁵⁶ Audre Lorde's critique of BDSM is rooted in the ways that the practice mirrors and perpetuates hetero-patriarchal power.⁵⁷ For Tina Portillo, writer and practitioner, BDSM does not have to be "at odds with [the] claiming of black womanhood."⁵⁸ Both voices, perhaps inadvertently, speak to the outcomes (both positive and negative) of Black women's contentious engagement with submission.

Moving past the fixation on Black women as submissive in BDSM counters a larger focus on female submission in general. Black domination is a site of inversion that allows us to unpack and act upon our (conscious, unconscious, subconscious) feelings about white masculinity and patriarchy. We become viable as woman through the subjugation of our slaves, especially if they are cisgender white men. While controlling images render us hyperbolic through the perpetuation of our hyper-sexuality, ownership of our controlling images upsets power structures founded on our inability to consent to them. By embracing the images and tropes used to control us, we are able to cultivate scenes of Black femme sexuality that exists by and for us. It can no longer be a controlling image if said images are accepted by us. I am not suggesting that Black female domination of white male submissives can undo white supremacy and traditional power structures on a systemic level, but that it has the possibility to heal Black wounds.

⁵⁶ Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 34.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

Black FemDom as Healing

I wanted to totally dig in on the girl power. I was able to take all of my ladies and empower them to fuck the way they have been getting fucked in previous movies.⁵⁹

Vanessa Blue

Let us consider Eric Stanton, renowned fetish artist and illustrator. Though he created his art in the mid-twentieth century, his legacy still thrives in contemporary femdom communities. Much of his work features dominant women exerting power over unsuspecting men through intense caricatures of violence. The majority of his subjects were white women and men, though he illustrated a few comics focused on interracial dominance. In these cases, a muscular, sadistic Black woman — often much larger in stature than her victims — tortures her subjects relentlessly, seeking retribution that is both unnamed and drenched in reparations. Similar features exist in his art featuring white female Dommies, but when inscribed on the Black body, it nevertheless portrays a different story. In “Masterful Maid Tames Bondage Slave!” a Black woman responds to an ad placed in a newspaper for a house maid. The initial interaction between her and the white man depict her untethered anger and desire to punish. What ensues is gratuitous, violent domination and obedience training through physical and verbal humiliation, corporal punishment, and bondage. While these scenes are commonplace in femdom play, the exaggerated, quasi-comical mocking of a Black woman’s superiority over a

⁵⁹ Cruz, *The Color of Kink*, 82.

white man suggests that these images exist, not for Black women, but for white men. As is often the case, white male desires are centered at the expense of Black women.

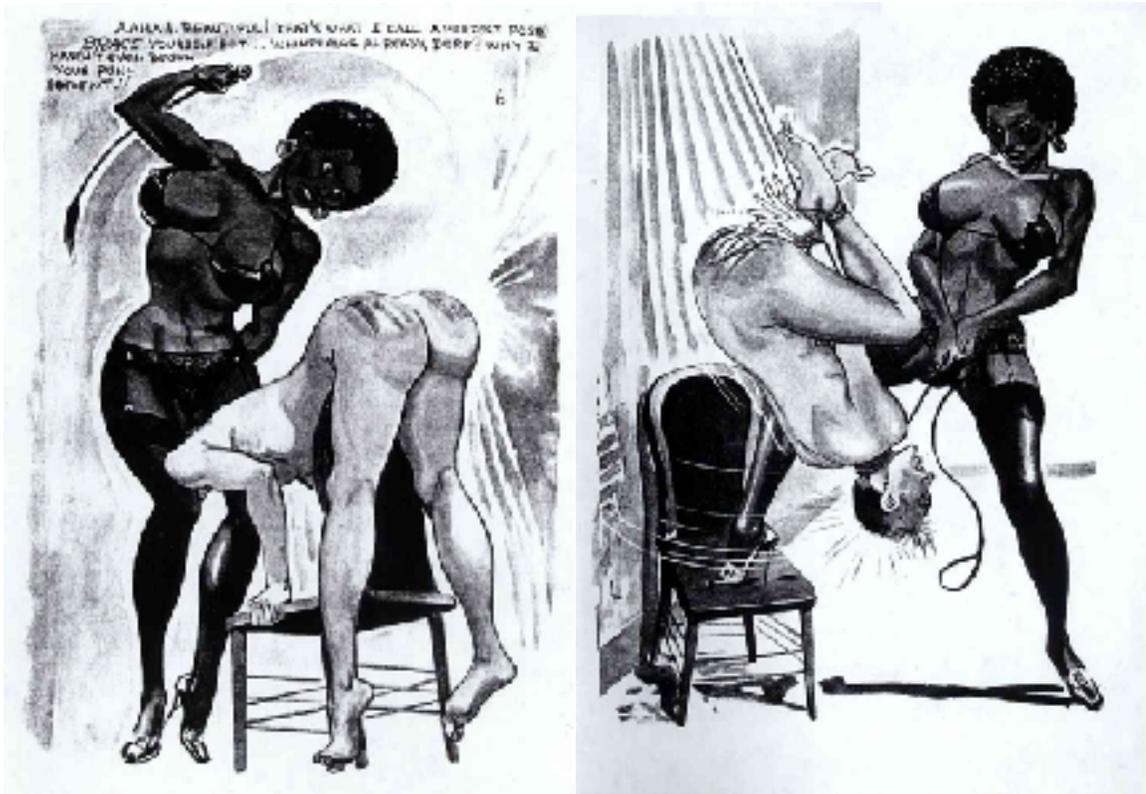


Figure 2.1. Eric Stanton, *Masterful Maid Tames Bondage Slave!*, 197?, print. Image courtesy of Eric Stanton Archive, <http://www.ericstantonarchive.com/picture-sequences/eric-stanton-interracial-femdom>.

Aggressive, hyper-sexual, lascivious and capricious, Stanton's Domme shows that even in this reversal of hierarchy, true power does not exist for us in this caricature of Black femme domination. When the portrayal of Black femdom is not created by or for us, it serves to perpetuate us as the exotic other. The voluptuous body of Stanton's

Domme suggests an innate sexuality that contrasts the constructed self-respect, purity and morality of white women. Her consistent fierce expressions imply a one-dimensional characterization focused solely on exacting revenge on white men. The presence of the afro, in this case, pays homage to the “Sapphire” controlling image, the predecessor to the now popular trope of “The Angry Black Woman,” where her innate bitterness shoots venom at those who draw her ire. The obedience training and subsequent emasculation of the white man by Stanton’s Domme divests her of femininity. Again, this is not a site where Black women can claim our sexuality. Stanton’s Domme exists for the pleasure of the white male fantasy.

There is another critical feature missing from his depictions of Black domination: pleasure. His illustrations portray the rage and conviction that is often reified on the Black female body, and subsequently expected from us. This is particularly noticeable when juxtaposed with his art and comics that feature white women. Stanton’s white Dommies express a myriad of emotions: anger, satisfaction, deviousness, curiosity, desire, to name just a few. When compared to their white counterparts, Stanton’s Black Dommies’ — of which there are few — embody a one-dimensional characterization that seldom includes a desire that is intentionally attributed to Black femme pleasures. Our pleasure, though rarely given space to thrive, is a radical tool that centers Black women and our needs. In sites like BDSM, where experimentation gives way to ignored or erased sexual scripts, Black pleasure and catharsis has room to live. It is within Black femdom

specifically, when used as an instrument to nurture our desires and confront our racial-sexual alterity, that the mutilated Black femme body can find healing.

In “Pornography’s Play(ing) of Race,” Ariane Cruz focuses on Vanessa Blue, a Black performer, director and owner of femdomx.com, a hard-core BDSM pornography website. Also known as Domina X, Blue has been a source of inspiration in my own journey to becoming a Dominatrix. Her website features primarily Black and Brown actresses in positions of power, navigating through and engaging in complicated, sometimes contradictory, racial and sexual landscapes that distort and/or redefine the dominant knowledge production of Black femme sexuality in pornography. The “self-authorship”⁶⁰ of her work means that she has cultivated a (cyber)space for Black women that both challenges our imposed scripts, and makes room for other varieties of our existence. Vanessa Blue is intentional about the kind of space she is building via femdomx.com. She asserts a “‘fuck back’ philosophy”⁶¹ where Black and Brown women get to move beyond traditional conceptualizations found in mainstream pornography and engage in art tailored to centering our bodies in ways chosen by us. Blue maintains that she “will never shoot a scene where the girl is anything less than in a position of power. There is enough product like that already.”⁶² This is a testament to the ways in which BDSM can nurture Black healing.

⁶⁰ Cruz, *The Color of Kink*, 82.

⁶¹ Ibid, 83.

⁶² Ibid, 82.

Ariane Cruz uses *Door 2 Door*, a video starring Blue and a submissive white male, as her object of analysis in this chapter. Cruz notes the ways that racial hyperboles and “corporeal excess”⁶³ work in tandem, resulting in a film that utilizes the very parts of Vanessa Blue’s alterity to empower her. The Black femme body is both a physical and metaphorical “weapon;”⁶⁴ as Blue suffocates her white male subject between her breasts and buttocks, her (racial and sexual) excess results in what Cruz recognizes as a white male deficiency and lack that specifically makes room for Black female pleasure. Cruz goes on to quote Blue:

Indicating the affective catharsis such role-playing permits “women of color,” [Blue] states, “As far as girls, I just try to shoot beautiful women of color. Most of us have a lot of pent-up anger anyway. It’s just a matter of getting her to the point where she’s comfortable enough to release it.” Blue presents the act of delivering pain as a release for pain carried in the flesh ... Blue “imagines an interracial desire in which white[ness] can be objectified” as a vehicle for black pleasure and power and as a perverse remedy for (black) pain.⁶⁵

Blue’s thoughts and Cruz’s analyses are reminiscent of Farah Jasmine Griffin’s concept of healing the ripped, scarred and mutilated Black body. For Blue, the release of pain that comes through the reversal of racial and sexual power dynamics is necessarily healing. While it is not always an easy catharsis for some women to access, it is an important feature of her work. It also speaks to the ways in which our pleasure and resistance thrive within our alterity and amongst the pain we experience from it. Everything about this

⁶³ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 85.

realm of Black femme healing and liberation — the objectification of whiteness; white male deficiency; Black sexual excess — does not exist in an elsewhere apart from our trauma and violence. It takes place within sites of inversion, and this is both intentional and radical. The source of our pain is where we can find healing.

This is not to say that BDSM is the perfect or ultimate space for Black femmes to experiment with resistance, especially for those of us who also subvert gender and sexual dichotomies. Blue's response to the assertion that her work combats centuries of systemic oppression was, "only when I am fucking [white men] in the ass."⁶⁶ Cruz attributes Blue's retort to her awareness of the racialized nature of sexuality, but neglects to confront the problematic aspects of the statement. The concept of using anal sex to bring the subordination of white men feeds into the following notions: (1) the penetrator is inherently dominant over the penetrated, (2) anal sex is effeminizing, (3) effeminization should be equated to subordination and submission, and (4) submission is an inferior state of being. These ideas not only imply that a femme position is not inhabited in the space of topping, but also perpetuate femininity and femmehood as deficient. This is especially counterproductive when we are attempting to elevate spaces that celebrate the multiplicity Black femme existence. The work to destabilize gendered power dynamics should not reproduce problematic binaries and discourses, and cannot come at the expense of queer sexual liberation. For many of us, the pain we are desperate to release is multi-faceted.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 86.

Cruz says in her final thoughts on Vanessa Blue's form of femdom: "...power is not radically redefined ... however it may be reclaimed for the black female..."⁶⁷ Black female domination over white betas simply inverts the traditional hierarchy, and this inversion of an oppressive dynamic will not inherently bring systemic change. Outside of our sessions, my slaves still embody positions of power and still have access to material conditions that most Black women and femmes will never experience. Our exchange of power does not radically change the structural spaces that we occupy. In fact, it is their social and class positions that give them the freedom to afford to explore their fantasies in this way. I agree with Griffin in her statement that "clearly the reclamation of the sexual body and affirmation of the spiritual self are not in and of themselves enough to constitute acts of resistance; in and of themselves they do not alter the conditions that oppress black women."⁶⁸ Changing the institution of Black women's oppression requires the overthrowing and/or radical reformation of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

The reclamation that both Cruz and Griffin refer to, however, is a dynamic process for us to engage in, and it is for this reason that the power of this inversion should not be dismissed so quickly. In the case of Black femdom, a socio-political realm of healing is created that allows us to interrogate our relationship with white male

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Griffin, "Textual Healing," 533-34.

supremacy. This is palpable with Blue's website femdomx.com, where Black domination videos are made viable amongst a vast array of Black female subjugation. What we, as Dommies, are doing when we enter this space of domination is slicing the tightly knit web of our colonized race, gender and sexuality that has constricted us for centuries. We are fucking back. We are shooting back. Our guns are our very bodies that have been used against us. It is significant poetic resistance and resilience intertwined with trauma, pain and a lifetime of scars. To be able to provide domination, one must have an intimate relationship with submission. Black women and femmes certainly do. It drenches the tip of my tongue as I hurl the same abusive, objectifying language at my slaves that has been used to slice my flesh. I see it in the glint of Vanessa Blue's eyes when her excess transforms into a weaponized manifestation of retaliation. She wraps her breasts and buttocks around her pets, suffocating them with her history. And for once, this work is not done (at least exclusively) because of the pleasure it provides the recipients, but because of the therapeutic benefits it provides Black and Brown women and femmes.

It is because of this that Cruz and I ultimately share sentiments on the uses of our alterity to transgress normalized hierarchies. While her focus is on its impact on BDSM pornography and cyber spaces, I extend these notions to include other playgrounds of Black femdom exploration, such as those I cultivate in the dungeon. Cruz's analysis of Vanessa Blue's work speaks heavily to my points on the importance of the creation and/or existence of a sexual landscape for Black women to experiment with finding healing, receiving pleasure, and achieving catharsis. Imagining an erotic playground where Black

femdom can exist by and for Black femme desires requires a space conducive to this kind of radical (re)envisioning of a Black sexual body politic. The idea of an experimental space like BDSM gives room for change depending on our needs, but ultimately allows us to even have access to this process. BDSM and Black femme sexuality have parallels in that they both exist on the margins of normative sexual behaviors, not because they are inherently problematic, but because they have been constructed in this way. My own experiences lay the foundations for my examinations, with Blue's additions affirming my positions. Without forgetting the violences that I have experienced to be reproduced within BDSM, the past three years as Lady Jade have shown that there are possibilities for Black femmes to counter the trauma we face on a systemic level. This is not to say that Black femdom is inherently liberatory or without complications, but that it offers possibilities that Lady Jade, Domina X, and many others have found to be a way of tending to our wounds. To focus on its supposed (non)radical changes both erases the value it has on the Black femme psyche, and instigates the notion that we should be engaging in work that is exclusively systemic.

Who is to say what quantity of radicalism Black femme healing is? Is not the notion of our self love radical in and of itself? Colonialism disposed of our flesh and clothed us instead with a criminally counterfeit simulacrum of Black femmehood. To undo this work, acknowledge our scars, and love ourselves in spite of it all is supernatural. To then foster a collective and community for other Black femmes who are wanting to find healing in this way is resistance. As Griffin says:

In this way it is no longer a case of individuals suffering from their individual dissatisfaction with themselves. By coming to terms with the ways they have been constructed by racist ideologies and historical acts of torture, they can begin to release the elements of those ideologies that they have internalized. This is most definitely an important step toward a political consciousness which in turn is the most necessary step for active resistance.⁶⁹

The epistemological and pedagogical erasure of Black womanhood is a historically embedded process that continues to shape and distort our understandings of what it means to be Black and woman. Certainly, our skin has been degenerated to the point that a our (non)gender(s) and (a)sexualities are barely cognizant. The reconstruction of our discursive subjectivity — at the very least on an individual level — is a crucial step in our collective resistance against oppression. This work can only be done by and for Black women and femmes, for western attempts to make room for our voice further reinforces our silence.

Lady Jade ends every session by reminding her slaves of the burden of their submission. Once a slave has entered into a contract with Jade, he relinquishes aspects of himself not only to Her, but to every Black woman he encounters. It becomes his duty to reevaluate the ways in which he interacts with us. Jade uses a combination of theoretical study and obedience training to educate Her slaves and mandate that they recognize and actively work to unlearn their racist fetishizations and unpack their anti-black misogyny. At the beginning of each session, the slave recounts his interactions with Black femmes, in whatever

⁶⁹ Ibid., 534.

capacity they may be, since the last time he shared space with Jade. He is forced to explain what work he did to subvert Black femme oppression rather than perpetuate it. These ventures have varied from slaves purposefully opening doors only for Black women, to pets starting foundations for homeless Black mothers. These are not radical changes, for they are rooted in a chauvinism that is everlasting.

These are the ideological limitations of my work. Their niceties to other Black femmes are rooted in the same misogynoir that keeps them engaging in a race play with a persona I laboriously embody. My niche of BDSM and sex work could not be sustainable without the specific kind of fetishization that I am instructing them to unlearn. The irony lies in the fact that their desires to submit to a Black woman is a consequence of their misogyny. The homework I provide them and the unpacking that I impose on them cannot bring forth an abolishment of our oppression. Despite these restrictions, our existence is so fraught with repression that there is pleasure in claiming every minuscule liberatory space and process available to us. It is for this reason that being Lady Jade has been such a source of healing in my life. Having nuance about the work I do allows me to both critique and enjoy its many aspects. While there is much to analyze, it ultimately serves as a site for me to confront white supremacy and find unique ways to challenge my internalized notions about my race, gender and sexuality.

Alice Walker once said, "healing begins where the wound was made."⁷⁰ For me, Lady Jade is both a site of violence and a site of resistance.

While Jade has heavily informed my understandings of BDSM, the primary purpose of the following chapter is to counter the narratives around Black trans femme sex workers that I find to be pervasive and limiting. The act of adding to the scholarship of and opposing traditional rhetoric around sex work makes for a more complete and diverse conceptualization of this form of labor and the ways it exists to benefit Black women and femmes. I shift from analyzing pleasure to engaging with resistance within the larger context that spaces of trauma can have a multitude of purposes for Black femmes.

⁷⁰ Alice Walker, *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 234.

CHAPTER III

READING TANGERINE THROUGH AYANAH MOOR

If transgender and transsexual history and culture depend upon what has been published, visible, legible, and authorized enough to be archived, then we might query what has been omitted as a result of the conditions of illiteracy, criminalization, or poverty. These are conditions that have made it difficult for some transgender subjects to be the absolute source, represent themselves, and write themselves into being. Recovering more black transgender narratives means making peace with improper bodies and texts.⁷¹

L.H. Stallings

The scene begins with a striking yellow backdrop. As the opening credits roll — white cursive letters adorning the otherwise empty screen — a delicate rendition of the song “Toyland” plays. A crossed pair of hands appear, resting on what is soon revealed to be the surface of a yellow table. A sprinkled glazed donut accompanies another set of hands as Sin-Dee opens the film with a holiday cheer: “Merry Christmas Eve, bitch.”⁷² Set on December 24, 2014 in Hollywood, CA, *Tangerine* is a fast-paced dark comedy about two femme transgender sex workers of Color. The main character, Sin-Dee Rella, is

⁷¹L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Dwight A. McBride (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 224.

⁷² *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker (Hollywood, CA: Magnolia Pictures, 2015), DVD.

newly released from a 28 day stint in jail only to find out that her pimp and fiancé, Chester, cheated on her with a white “fish” (cisgender woman) while she was away. The film details Sin-Dee’s rage-fueled quest to find the woman, Dinah, and confront Chester. While they each play a crucial role in this primary narrative arc, the other prominent characters are given life through complex stories of their own. Alexandra is torn between supporting her best friend Sin-Dee or avoiding entanglement in the continually escalating drama, all the while passing out flyers for her Christmas performance that evening. Razmik, an Armenian taxi driver who is a friend and client of the local street-based trans workers, is compelled by his feelings for Sin-Dee to make decisions that ultimately prove detrimental to his family.

A peculiar aspect of the film is not only the intentionality behind casting Black and Brown trans women to play Black and Brown trans women (instead of relying on the likes of cisgendered men like Jared Leto and Eddie Redmayne), but the ways in which it is both a “trans movie” — as it has been described repeatedly — and not so. As review after review raves about this “trans comedy,” I am left questioning what it means for it to be *rendered* into this category. Is *Tangerine* capable of occupying other spaces? Can it be identified as a movie about sex workers, or even a just comedy, left unqualified? What does it mean to be a trans movie, if it seems that the only attribute that necessitates this categorization is having a trans actress? What violence occurs from this rendering and how does it impact the way we view / understand / relate to the characters?

As noted by film critic Matt Zoller Seitz, "... we rarely see transgender characters in movies who aren't prostitutes."⁷³ In some cases, *Tangerine* falls victim to a hetero-erotic violence that not only fetishizes trans bodies, but reduces them to specific scripts and narratives. For this reason, trans movies can become a spectacle for non-trans viewers to consume in a way that perpetuates trans exotification. Trans sex work becomes a cultural trope with trans sex workers reduced to one-dimensional figures. I am curious about finding other readings as a form of resistance to these characterizations. What kind of possibilities become available when the readings are done by those of us who have grown accustomed to the limited scopes of our subjectivity, and are looking to expand our discursive nature? What kind of potentialities are made legible when the readings are done in ways that differ from the violent mainstream constructions that serve to limit transgender agency and dehumanize sex work and sex workers?

It is with these thoughts that I embark on my analysis of *Tangerine*. I intentionally abandon traditional, more conventional forms of film critique and observation, and instead take scenes out of context as a way to offer a different reading. I find this to be important because it allows for types of analyses that may not otherwise be possible. Reading certain parts of the film in a different form helps the audience move away from tropes of victimization, and instead find understandings that are complex and healing. My method of intervention pays homage to Ayanah Moor's art series *Still*, where scenes from hip-hop videos are paused in order to discover hidden vitalities. As Moor writes:

⁷³ Matt Zoller Seitz, "Tangerine," *Roger Ebert*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tangerine-2015>.

Still is a series of artworks that address representations of women in contemporary music video. The mediated appearance is a literal appropriation, as the imaging process involved capturing video photographically in real time. Captured frames imply moments unintended by the larger music-video narrative. Compositional choices reduce the depiction of once-dominant male performers to supportive background visuals, if they are represented at all. The images' focus exclusively on women offers a second look at the so-called music-video vixen. Formerly images based in time, the video characters, now frozen, permit unconventional portraits. Some photographs reveal agency rather than victimization, inviting readings of women's willing participation in sexualized constructions of identity. Within the feminist critique of hip-hop, is there room to consider women's embrace of sexually provocative performance forms?⁷⁴

Moor's "appropriation" uses creative ingenuity to uncover forbidden narratives I find myself deeply enthralled with. Segmented isolations of empowerment are capable of existing within a larger framework of victimization, though these voices are often left unheard. Unlike bell hooks' call for images that move away from societal occupation of Black women's (hyper)sexuality, this form of story-telling necessitates the larger constructions in order to exist within their juxtaposition. In this series, the archetypal music-video vixen demands recognition, and invites us to queer and reconfigure the way we think of Black women's sexual excess. Particularly with regard to the stills that reveal agency, I am left thinking about what imaginative localities and spaces Black women's sexual pleasure can exist within and/or among.

I see parallels between the trope of video vixens and the trope of trans femme sex workers. Similarly and consequently, the way that Moor intends for her viewers to read and engage with vixens through her appropriation of music videos speaks to the

⁷⁴ Moor, "Still," 205.

ambitions of my (non)contextual readings of *Tangerine*. The two address an overarching dilemma pertaining to Black femme cultural constructions, and the ways in which a Black feminist critique can undo, or at the very least, confront this violence. I find Moor's work to upset the aspects of these constructions that then become reified as specific to Black femme personhood. Nicole R. Fleetwood's assessment of *Still* reflects my own sentiments on how it situates "a moment of dialogue between video performer and the artist as audience member and consumer."⁷⁵ It moves the discourse of Black women performers away from a hyper-sexual abjection, and towards alternate story arcs.

As Fleetwood notes, "Moor visualizes these bodies not as a state of being but as one of enacting, offering new possibilities of seeing pleasure and play in the hip-hop music video, even while attending to the ways in which excess performance plays in to dominant conceptions of racialized sexuality."⁷⁶ It is these reasons that I utilize Moor's method of intervention for my analysis of *Tangerine*. The capturing of still images allows me to expand the characters of the film outside of the tropes of a trans movie and into the larger discussion of Black feminist cultural production. This, in turn, reconfigures our relationship to the film as viewer and spectator and allows us to uncover narratives forbidden in normative constructions of meaning.

⁷⁵ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 135.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 136.

“Still”



Figure 3.1. Ayanah Moor, *Clap* [from *Still* series], 2006, digital print, 18” x 24”. Image courtesy of artist.

Ayanah Moor’s “Clap” features at least five femme presenting vixens occupying a patterned hallway. One woman, in a short pink or peach dress that is cut to reveal body jewelry, serves as the focal point of the shot. To her right is a woman in a silky blue halter top paired with short shorts. To the focal woman’s left, a darker skinned vixen in an asymmetrical black outfit, leaning against the wall. Each woman stares straight into the

camera, dancing in her own individual style. The main vixen is frozen in a clap that has neither a beginning nor an end. Long nails, large earrings, hair pulled back and a neutral facial expression, she commands the scene with her presence. Besides three pieces of art on the wall, there appears to be nothing else in this hallway besides the women.

Without the presence of men or masculine presenting individuals, it is difficult to read — gaze at — these women in the usual context. They escape the palpability of a hyper heterosexuality that specifically defines them in relation to men. As we — the audience — look at these vixens, examining every inch of their body, undressing the reasoning of their occupation of this space at the given time, they look right back at us, challenging our thoughts drenched in preconception. Perhaps a more apt title for this still is “Clap Back,” a colloquial slang term that refers to the act of returning fire when one is the target of ridicule or insults. A clap back is often harsher and more effective than the initial insult, leaving the person receiving the clap back defeated. The term was made popular with rapper Ja Rule’s song “Clap Back,” a “diss track” that targeted rappers Eminem, 50 Cent and DMX. In the song Ja rule says: “What do you do when niggas spit at you? / Clap back, we gon’ clap back,”⁷⁷ referring to his retaliation against the other artists. Like Ja Rule, the women in this still are clapping back.

Heterosexual trauma is not immediately apparent in this visual protest, though the protest necessarily exists within the violence of the gaze. To quote bell hooks circa 1992:

⁷⁷ Ja Rule, *Clap Back*, (2003; New York: Def Jam Records, 2003.), MP3.

“The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally.”⁷⁸

Yet, for these women, looking back — or returning the gaze — is not enough. They take it one step further, for the clap back is more acute in its defiance. These women challenge our notions of their abjection through the conspicuous breaching of the spectators’ comforts with the role of a video ho. Pleasure and resistance flood the expressions of each woman in this queered exhibition of excess and (non)sexuality. There is an intentionality in their appearance, their positions and their actions.

The absence of men in this shot does not result in the negation of Black female sexuality, nor does the affirmation of femme personhood in this context necessitate the exclusion of masculinity. It neither endorses nor rejects sexuality, but instead demands recognition for the different kinds of stories women and femmes can embody. What makes this scene so powerful and visceral is how each woman claims *and* is granted her own form of agency and expression. The dresses, jewelry, makeup, body stance, etc. are drenched with external scripts that do not take into consideration individual performativity. At the same time, the women do not have to forgo their sexuality to achieve agency. While they remain in the spectator / spectacle tableau, it is as if they find empowerment within the very space that seeks to dehumanize them. In “Clap” (“Back”), the women are allowed to simply *be* in whichever way that looks for each person. This is critical in that it arguably forces the viewer to examine the evaluations of the spectated,

⁷⁸ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

and confront the problematic ways in which we consume (and the subsequent thoughts and feelings we have). Spectators must grapple with the fact that there is not anything inherently sexual about these women's bodies.

A similar defiance takes place in "Glow." Again, there is a woman that arguably serves as the focal point of this snapshot, though in this case her backdrop offer much more of a distraction. The woman, with a long fringe and an expression as if she is forever halted mid-sentence, is surrounded by countless figures with hands raised. With the exception of the person directly to her left, it is difficult to tell how many people are in the room, and the assumed gender of everyone. While the viewer is drawn to the central woman's face, there is another focal point that cannot be ignored: the stripper pole that lingers in the center of the shot. Unlike in "Clap," where the castration of masculinity through its absence rendered a clap back that was not acutely about the vixen's (non)sexuality, "Glow" forces the spectator to engage with this symbolic representation of female sexuality. The phallic pole erected in the middle of the room is a site where sex workers, particularly strippers and exotic / pole dancers, are mythicized. A myth can be a traditional story or lore used to explain a phenomenon, or a widely believed fallacy. While there does not have to be overlap between these two definitions, this is certainly the case for strippers. Strippers occupy an interesting periphery (within or under the realm of racial and sexual oppression, yet vehemently outside the already complicated

category of Black womanhood) as a recurring character and theme that are all at once dehumanized / objectified and glorified / idolized.



Figure 3.2. Ayanah Moor, *Glow* [from *Still* series], 2006, digital print, 18” x 24”. Image courtesy of artist.

With “Glow,” we can visualize what purpose the pole is supposed to have on the scene; it implies male pleasure and fantasy, and female sexual excess. Yet, an alternative story lingers in this appropriative image. Here, heterosexuality is mimed, mocked or, at the very least, ignored. Instead of occupying the center of sexual fantasy, the pole gets lost in the almost gender neutral amalgamation of figures in the background. Every

person's presence in this scene becomes *in spite* of the pole, not *because* of it. Just as the focal woman lacks an apparent sexual relationship to the pole, the man behind her is devoid of any obvious erotic needs or attachment to his surroundings. Like in "Clap," each person is given the opportunity to simply be, without the constraints of structural sexism and scripts.

What is called for in "Clap" ("Back") and "Glow" is a psychic and cognitive (re)imagining, (re)envisioning and (re)articulation of the roles that women and femmes can occupy. Empowering, liberating, or simply non-oppressive spaces can exist within sites of trauma, and to acknowledge this is to accept the complexity and nuance of women's oppression. It is with all of this that I will interrogate *Tangerine*. Through the same appropriative process that Moor engages in, I investigate three scenes for hidden narratives, alternative stories and vitalities. I examine the forms of dissident resistance and friendship that become viable within these untold contexts. I begin with a short yet foundational homage to Black femme resistance by including *Tangerine* in the overarching discourse of these struggles. Then, I move into a scene that is ripe for analysis on how othered sexualities are relegated to an elsewhere. I end with a heartfelt moment from the film's conclusion where the strength of Black trans femme history is made palpable. The three still images that I choose involve (what I read as) moments of resistance, resilience and solidarity. The scenes, in context with the film, are important points in the story line. At the same time, they thrive independently, telling new stories

and offering new insights. These are the trans femme narratives that are often forbidden in our hetero-erotic imagination, but capable of flourishing when given the chance.

“We Refuse Service to Prostitutes”



Figure 3.3. *We Refuse Service to Prostitutes* [from *Tangerine*], 2015, digital still.

I begin my analysis with the scene where Sin-Dee finally comes to the end of her search for the “fish” who Chester had sex with. With unwavering determination, she approaches the informational window of a motel, asking the attendant “what number is the party room,”⁷⁹ terminology that suggests that the crack-house brothel she soon bursts into is not an unusual gathering. In this shot, Sin-Dee displays five fingers, a sign of acknowledgement of the room number she is headed to. The scene is brief, and her emotions, fueled by betrayal and vindication, are heightened as her quest draws to a

⁷⁹ *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, 2015.

conclusion. She smiles quickly before heading off to one of the darkest turning points of the movie. Yet, as I watched this scene, I felt another narrative seeping through. This shot evokes power and resistance. Her disposition seems to challenge the sign “WE REFUSE SERVICE TO PROSTITUTES.” Her “5” gets lost into a wave that demands she be recognized as both a sex worker and as a trans woman. Her smirk, out of context, is less about her resolve of finding the person she’s looking for, and more about confronting the sign that attempts to invisibilize her.

Sin-Dee’s moment of resistance evokes aspects of recently viral images of Black femme rebellion. These acts of protest are often in response to the oppressive nature of white supremacy and structural racism, and these shots capture Black femme determination in the face of repression. Tess Asplund, a 42 year old Afro-Swedish activist, places herself in the center of a neo-nazi, anti-immigrant demonstration in Stockholm on May 2016. Ieshia Evans, a 28 year old woman from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, stands defiantly at a July 2016 BlackLivesMatter protest as officers approach to arrest her. In both images, the Black women are solitary figures in opposition to an apparatus of violence and oppression. Asplund defies an organized manifestation of fascist ideology, while Evans directly confronts agents of state repression. They both embody a power that rejects the systems that devalue Black femme personhood and agency. We see this same unwavering determination with Sin-Dee who stands against the institution of anti-sex work policies and frameworks.

All three of these oppressive apparatuses — the right-wing faction of Sweden, the u.s. carceral state, and the criminalization of prostitution — work to repress Black women and femmes. They profit from our existence, whether through the undervalued labor of African immigrants, the legal slavery of the prison-industrial complex, or the lucrative exploitation of sex workers. Yet, what we see in these images is not characterizations of marginalization and victimhood, but Black femme resistance. Sin-Dee becomes part of a dialect of oppression and liberation, adding to the discursive nature of our survival.



Figure 3.4. David Lagerlöf, *Fotot på Tess Asplund*, 2016, digital. Image courtesy of photographer, <http://www.fotograflagerlof.se/foto-tess-asplund/>.



Figure 3.5. Johnathan Bachman, *Unrest in Baton Rouge*, 2016, digital. Image courtesy of photographer, <http://www.jonathanbachmanphotography.com/portfolio#I00007etAq7Y001A>.

These portraits of resistance are even more crucial when we consider that Sin-Dee is not only a Black Latinx, but also a trans woman who engages in sex work. When we take into account the high rates at which Black trans sex workers are targeted by racism and trans-misogyny by both the state and individuals, this image of rebellion takes on a greater meaning. I find her inclusion in the larger photographic narrative Black femme resistance to insist upon not only Black trans femme visibility, but its intersections with class. Che Gossett notes that “All too often the violence of representation ... evacuates the radical potentiality that can emerge out of collective anguish and outrage in response

to violence.”⁸⁰ Representations of rage and resistance, often shunned due to a respectability that prioritizes niceties over survival, more closely corresponds to the reality of queer and trans oppression. Moving away from tropes of trans victimization, while still recognizing the existence of trauma, expands the rhetoric of trans femmehood and humanizes them in ways that are multi-faceted. Gossett goes on to say:

Our communities, poor, black, queer and trans — women in particular — face malign neglect and social abandonment, from homelessness to job discrimination and criminalization. So many lives have been extinguished by barrages of police bullets, suffered under police brutalization, been left to perish and die while in police and/or state custody, or killed by other penal technologies of torture and execution.⁸¹

When I reflect on the still of Sin-Dee, it is as if she is refusing to be essentialized by such manifestations of her oppression. She, along with Asplund and Evans, is asserting her agency and demanding recognition. The photographs provide a glimpse into the hood-based, queer and trans inclusive, Black femme struggles against white supremacy. They are not deterred by the conditions that Gossett laments but, in many ways, have no choice but to resist as a means of survival.

⁸⁰ Che Gossett, “We will not rest in peace: AIDS activism, black radicalism, and queer and/or trans resistance,” in *Queer Necropolitics*, ed. Jin Haritaworn (New York: Routledge, 2014), 40.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

Pleasure in a Green Passat



Figure 3.6. *Pleasure in a Green Passat* [from *Tangerine*], 2015, digital still.

The scene opens with Alexandra approaching an old, green Volkswagen Passat parked on a deserted street. “Let me see your dick,”⁸² she says to the driver, a common way for street-based workers to ensure that their clients are not law enforcement. He obliges begrudgingly. Once she enters the car, the two engage in tense negotiation. The man asks for a “BBBJ” (bareback blow job: oral sex without a condom) though, to Alexandra’s disdain, he only has \$40. After his continuous pleas, she agrees to simply hold his scrotum while he manually stimulates himself. Several moments pass and Alexandra’s patience thins as her customer continues to pleasure himself. Despite their

⁸² *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, 2015.

agreement, he asks her to stroke his penis. She swiftly reminds him that he did not pay for that. “Come on, you know you want it,” he coos, to which she sarcastically replies, “You see right through me, don’t you?”⁸³ Several more moments of pleading pass by and the exchange eventually ends in the client refusing to pay because he did not orgasm. A struggle ensues between the two as he attempts to retrieve his car keys that Alexandra took in an effort to receive her payment. Punches are thrown and the scuffle continues down the street until they are in front of a police car. The cops separate the brawl, threatening arrest but ultimately allowing Alexandra and her bedraggled customer to go their separate ways since, after all, it is Christmas Eve.

I paused the scene at a moment of juxtaposition between the client’s heightened pleasure and Alexandra’s visible disdain. This shot speaks to the layered and nuanced violence that thrives at the intersections of race, class, and gender. What I find interesting is the fact that Alexandra’s client *specifically* seeks out a trans woman (the movie implies that cisgender and transgender sex workers occupy different locations, and customers know where to find who they are looking for), and yet not only does he refuse to pay for her service, but resorts to violence. Brutality against femme presenting bodies of Color is fueled by a hetero-erotic compulsion within cisgender heterosexual white supremacist patriarchy to explore and conquer femininity. It is based in the fragility of the hetero-masculine psyche that relies on the cyclical production of its self-constructed dominance

⁸³ Ibid.

over races and identities deemed weak or illegitimate in order to actually manifest power. In its continual violent exploitation of women and femmes, it exposes the fraying threads of its composition: the source of cis-hetero-masculine power lies specifically in its terror of what it is not — queer(ed) Colored femmehood and sexuality. Yet, its pride and ego prevents it from ever being able to admit this to itself. Cis-male anxieties suggest an inferiority complex that has latched on to femininity at first in desperation, then, over time, out of habit.

This sport, fraudulent and colonial in its essence, possibly dates back to the early eroticization of native people that occurred during the centuries of european global exploration:

For centuries, the uncertain continents — Africa, the Americas, Asia — were figured in European lore as libidiously eroticized. Travelers' tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands, where, as legend had it, men sported gigantic penises and women consorted with apes, feminized men's breasts flowed with milk and militarized women lopped theirs off. Renaissance travelers found an eager and lascivious audience for their spicy tales, so that, long before the era of high Victorian imperialism, Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination — a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Anne McClintock, "The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism," in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 22.

Masculine women and feminized men in Black and Brown countries disrupted the normalcy of the western gender binary, making it an easy target to dehumanize, other, and render illegible.

Western anxieties, already too fragile to accept the prospect of thriving non-white cultures, forced the rest of us to occupy an existence of difference through what we were conceptualized as lacking. Within these European tales of “uncertain continents” lies a forbidden confession that deconstructs the validity of the straight, cisgender, paternalistic white male imagination: the desirability of non-western sexuality. What has been constructed as the monstrous sexuality of nations of Color is the western male ego’s desperation to conceal or reconcile its attractions by repositioning its insecurities into a metaphysical *far-off land*. The projection of “forbidden sexual desires and fears” onto Africa, Asia and the Americas allowed Europe to place the aspects of their sexuality deemed immoral into an elsewhere that absolved them from ownership of their own perversions.

The concept of an elsewhere comes from the Foucauldian idea of taboos and “illegitimate sexualities”⁸⁵ (queered, Colored) being excluded from dominant images of imperial sexuality, while still existing in order to produce profit. Before the rise of Victorian imperialism, Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality*, (what was later deemed as) non-traditional forms of sexual expression were less stifled or considered

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 4.

immoral. Since the inception of Victorian bourgeois society, sex and sexuality were moved into the private domain, prioritizing sexual relationships that were solely reproductive in nature. Illegitimate sexualities were confined into the “elsewhere: [sic] a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit,”⁸⁶ noting psychiatry and prostitution as outlets for Steven Marcus’ ““other Victorians””⁸⁷ to exist. Foucault goes on to say:

Only in those places would untrammelled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse. Everywhere else, modern puritanism imposed a triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence.⁸⁸

What is neglected in this narrative is the complex role that indigenous nations played in European men’s examination of their sexuality. These countries were transformed into a playground for the west to not only exert their sexual dominance, but interrogate the realities of their sexuality in ways not previously done. Like psychiatry and prostitution, these illegitimate sexualities were projected onto oppressed nations in a way that was both detached and profitable.

Colonial fornication with non-western countries existed both outside the established realm of a repressed puritan sexuality, and amongst it. It occupied a

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

psychosocial space rife with contradiction. On one hand, european anxieties gave rise to the fear of the “‘barbaric’ institution”⁸⁹ of miscegenation because it was thought to destroy the purity of the european race through the production of bi/multi-racial children. At the same time, As Katrina Chludzinski notes, europe did not want to admit the possibility that western men could be attracted to non-western bodies — “that European men were part of the problem...”⁹⁰ Instead of acknowledging this fact, the discourse around european and, eventually, united states sexuality needed to be constructed through the explore and conquer rhetoric in order to be legitimized (and not fully integrated into the category of other Victorians). This perpetuated the narratives of indigenous people’s — especially women or femme-presenting individuals’ — hyper-sexuality and its conflation with consent. If non-western women, inferior in their positionality, were either always consenting — or unable to consent through their abjection — then sex with them did not have to be included in the overarching understandings of western sexuality.

This history, lengthy and violent in its existence, is further amplified when we consider the recurring theme of otherness in trans subjectivity. In a response to hip-hop DJ Mister Cee’s 2013 comments on his occasional “urge to have fellatio with a transsexual,”⁹¹ Janet Mock said:

⁸⁹ Katrina Chludzinski, “The Fear of Colonial Miscegenation in the British Colonies of Southeast Asia,” *The Forum: Journal of History* 1, no. 1 (2009): 54, accessed March 2, 2017, DOI 10.15368/forum.2009v1n1.8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹¹ Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, 208.

We, as a society, have not created a space for men to openly express their desire to *be* with trans women. Instead, we shame men who have this desire ... In effect, we're telling trans women that they are only deserving of secret interactions with men, further demeaning and stigmatizing trans women.⁹²

Alexandra's client is navigating a violent terrain that exoticifies and demonizes the intersections of race, class and gender, sex work. We cannot be surprised that he fetishizes trans femme sex workers enough to seek out Alexandra, yet does not value her labor enough to even compensate her time. The payment represents an actualizing of the sexual activity, and his refusal to pay is a symbolic absolving of his sexual desires. It speaks to the devaluing of femme bodies and the relegating of trans women into a category of abjection. He is able to project his sexuality onto Alexandra who, as a sex worker and a Black trans woman, exists in an elsewhere. As Mock says, men are forbidden to desire trans women. Coupled with the forbidden history of desiring women of Color, Black trans women are dehumanized and forced to bear its consequences. The streets where he solicits her labor are as remote an elsewhere as the far-off othered nations that European travelers pillaged. Once conquered, it is on her flesh that he both explores his desires and relinquishes his guilt.

Black Hair Complexities

I end with the laundromat scene from the final moments of *Tangerine*. Before this, the film culminated with a clash of characters and interests at the donut shop, which served as the setting for both the first and last scenes. Alexandra, Sin-Dee and Dinah

⁹² Ibid.

arrive at the shop where we finally meet Chester. Chester is a young white pimp who successfully dodges Sin-Dee's accusations. "Shit, I did not motherfucking cheat on you," he says "I'm a businessman ... sometimes I gotta test the merch is all."⁹³ We learn shortly after that he ended up having sex with Dinah ten times. Meanwhile, Razmik's infatuation with Sin-Dee is brought to an abrupt halt when his suspicious mother-in-law confronts him at the donut shop for lying about where he was going. She wonders first if he takes drugs with Alexandra and Sin-Dee, but later concludes that he is cheating on his wife with "gay prostitutes." The scene at the donut shop is messy, dramatic, and finally ties together the various narrative threads between the characters.



Figure 3.7. *Black Hair Complexities* [from *Tangerine*], 2015, digital still.

⁹³ *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, 2015.

After they are all forced to leave (the donut shop worker called the police), Sin-Dee, Alexandra, Chester and Dinah linger in front of the building, where Chester reveals that he also had sex with Alexandra. For most of the movie, Sin-Dee was uninhibited in her need for answers about Chester's infidelity; in this scene, however, her pain quiets her as she walks away from a teary-eyed Alexandra. Sin-Dee tries to pick up potential clients in a car, but they instead harass her and call her a transphobic slur: "Merry Christmas, you tranny faggot. We pissed on your friend, bitch!" This takes us to this final moments, where Alexandra leads Sin-Dee to a nearby laundromat to get cleaned up. The two sit together, quiet in their thoughts, as they wait for Sin-Dee's urine-soaked clothes and wig to dry. After a few minutes, Alexandra decides to give Sin-Dee her own wig. "That actually looks good on you," Alexandra notes as she now sits wigless. This gesture of friendship is symbolic of the transformative acts of resistance and survival that can exist in opposition to trans-misogyny, and speaks to the ways in which *Tangerine* extends past its relegation as merely a trans film. The interaction between Sin-Dee and Alexandra uncovers the complicated dynamics found in race and gender.

In *Funk the Erotic*, L. H. Stallings analyzes Toni Newman's raw autobiography, capturing the intersections of spirituality, sex work and trans discourses. Newman, who was once a Dominatrix and street-based worker, notes how, at different times in her life, clothing and the embodiment of aesthetics shaped her understanding of her "erotic subjectivity."⁹⁴ Newman's autonomy over her external appearance made her "feel true to

⁹⁴ Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, 220.

self,”⁹⁵ a reminder of the importance that this kind of agency can have for certain bodies. Throughout her life she navigated various aesthetics that felt intrinsic to her overarching and fundamental desires to “embrace transition over an immobile state of being.”⁹⁶ Stallings later relates this to the historic need for enslaved Africans in the diaspora to inhabit and perform clothing in a way that kept them connected to their cultural roots, and distinguished them from their captors. I agree with Stallings’ sentiment that the “black diasporic styling of illusive flesh [sic] is especially relevant to black transsubjects and their narratives,”⁹⁷ for I feel that it relates heavily to the scene with Sin-Dee.

The wig is a complex source of history about Black femmehood. As countless others have examined, the relationship between Black women and our hair is profound. During colonialism, Black and African women’s hair was devalued by our oppressors, often compared to animals. The kinks and curls of our hair were unsurprisingly constructed as inferior to western hair. In considering “transsubjects,” the wig becomes a critical tool for trans women to claim themselves, making the exchange between Alexandra and Sin-Dee even more meaningful. When the two arrive at the laundromat, Alexandra helps a reluctant Sin-Dee to remove her urine soaked clothes and clean up. As she is about to touch Sin-Dee’s hair, Alexandra remarks, “This has to come off too.”⁹⁸ A defiant Sin-Dee, filled with anger and sadness, grabs Alexandra’s wrists, preventing her

⁹⁵ Ibid., 221

⁹⁶ Ibid., 220.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁹⁸ *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, 2015.

friend from touching her hair. A few tense seconds pass until Sin-Dee relents, removing her wig and throwing it on the ground. In this moment, we are offered a glimpse into the depth of the wig's importance to Sin-Dee. Not only are Sin-Dee and Alexandra navigating past and present nuances of Black hair, but the wig fosters self-determination of trans bodies that contradicts the systemic politic of trans erasure. Compounded with the violently complex history of Black femmehood, colonial discourses force Black trans women into an elsewhere that is outside both the gender binary and racial normativity. Yet, Black trans femme vitality not only lives within this violently erased history, but can thrive through its assertion. Alexandra's gesture affirms Sin-Dee's personhood in a way that illuminates Black trans femme existence.

* * *

L. H. Stallings notes the devastating condition that leads to transgender subjects' inability to "write themselves into being."⁹⁹ It is an unfortunate circumstance, especially for Black trans femme sex workers, that results in limited narratives and narrow conceptualizations. I cannot and do not claim to do this work, for I am not trans. However, I pay homage to Black trans sex worker existence through my attempt to counter narratives and offer a brief glimpse into Black femme history and sex work subjectivity. This is critical work that cannot replace the writings of Black trans femmes themselves, but merely presents an alternative to understanding the discursive nature of Black trans sex work, which, due to its representation in mainstream media, is often

⁹⁹ Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, 224.

CHAPTER IV
EPILOGUE: TOWARD A BLACK FEMINIST ACCEPTANCE
OF FORBIDDEN VITALITIES

Throughout this thesis, I have referenced and challenged bell hooks' comments on the recuperation of the violent image. Her call for Black femmes to move away from or outside of societal constructions and sites of inversion served as the basis of my analysis of sex work. These theorizations are not specific to hooks, for many other Black feminist thinkers, in their own unique style, have come to the same conclusions. It felt vulnerable to contest the theories of scholars I am indebted to but, ultimately, I feel that it is necessary work. My qualms with these notions lies in the implicit assumption that said constructions are contained in a boundary that we are able to navigate in and outside of. Not only do I find it politically and ethically suspect to make this claim, its prescriptions are an impossibility for many.

I was drawn to Ariane Cruz's prolific work on the many ways that Black women can and do exist within BDSM and pornography. Her explorations are, in a variety of ways, ground-breaking and needed. I long for theory that not only encompasses these deep nuances, but includes in depth conversation on the politics of our labor, and more analysis and celebration of our erotic sexual practices. It would also be interesting if more Black feminist scholarship afforded time to unpacking these practices. It was illuminating

necessary work. My qualms with these notions lies in the implicit assumption that said constructions are contained in a boundary that we are able to navigate in and outside of. Not only do I find it politically and ethically suspect to make this claim, its prescriptions are an impossibility for many.

I was drawn to Ariane Cruz's prolific work on the many ways that Black women can and do exist within BDSM and pornography. Her explorations are, in a variety of ways, ground-breaking and needed. I long for theory that not only encompasses these deep nuances, but includes in depth conversation on the politics of our labor, and more analysis and celebration of our erotic sexual practices. It would also be interesting if more Black feminist scholarship afforded time to unpacking these practices. It was illuminating and rewarding for me to temporarily shift the paradigm of BDSM as healing for clients, to BDSM as healing for Black femmes, since aspects of our pleasure are often left unimagined. This concept is gravely neglected, but is fertile for more discussion beyond what I offered. Additionally, we must make room for these conversations to center and be authored by Black trans femmes.

A limitation of my work is that, despite my position as an African immigrant, it lacks an analysis or exploration of African and indigenous gender and sexuality as it relates to sex work. This may stem from my own inability to tackle and unpack this realm of my identity at this time, but perhaps it will be a project for me to pursue in the future. I find Black feminist theory to often be complicit with a western essentialism that neglects Black African narratives. It is tricky, however, because we (in the west) must take care to

not reproduce colonial discourse that speaks for and about women and femmes in oppressed nations, especially when contemporary western knowledge production is rooted in neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and imperialism. Again, space must be made to include those with the capacity to speak on these subjects.

I also hope to further probe the concept of queerness in relation to sex work in the future. In chapter two, I briefly reflect on queerness as a framework of understanding BDSM as a radical space. When we enact or engage in queer sex work, we are embodying an intentionality that is incompatible with colonialism's repression and regulation of our bodies. This is in addition to, or perhaps interconnected with, genderqueer identities that resist traditional gender expressions and sexual orientation. What various forms of vitality can surface when queer sex workers elevate the queering of their profession? The authors of *Queer Sex Work* ground their book with this thorough explanation on their use of the verb and adjective forms of queer, as well as the way it relates to the broader term:

The overarching aim of this collection is to 'queer' debates about the sex industry by enriching the existing body of scholarship in empirical, conceptual and methodological terms. First, we aim to shine a spotlight on queer sex work (using the term 'queer' as an adjective) by exploring diverse forms, practices and embodiments of non-hetero/homonormative sex working in order to broaden the empirical focus beyond that of analyses which, whether explicitly or implicitly, are predicated on the imaginaries of the female worker and male client ... Second, we seek to queer sex work (using the term here as a verb) by exposing,

interrogating and disrupting the heteronormative gender logics that continue to underpin academic and policy debates about commercial sex.¹⁰⁰

These types of frameworks expand the notions of queerness, situating it in larger political interrogations. It becomes a complex concept that encompasses our ways of resistance, relating to ourselves and our communities, and understanding our history. I am interested in interrogating queerness, less in terms of it as a sexuality, and more as a historically embedded process that reifies the abjection of Black femmes's bodies. Black womanhood exists outside of hegemonic conceptions of racial, sexual and gendered norms to the point that we are inherently fetishized by white supremacy. This is to say that the essence of Black womanhood, in my critical imagination, has been and is automatically queered because of the trauma enacted by white supremacy, and our subsequent inability to access the theorized category of woman.

My understandings of the fluidity between sites of inversion and sites of resistance is not new. I have used Nash as the backbone of my theoretical developments, but there are many others who also do this critical work. My uniqueness comes from me calling for a Black feminist intervention that has three specific attributes:

I. A politic that not only centers Black femme sex workers, but is accepting of the most othered aspects of our work.

¹⁰⁰ Nicola Smith, Mary Laing, and Katy Pilcher, "Being, thinking and doing 'queer' in debates about commercial sex," in *Queer Sex Work*, ed. Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher and Nicola Smith (London: Routledge, 2015), 2.

II. A theoretical lens that recognizes the differences in marginalization amongst Black femmes, and the subsequent ways that our relationship to and experiences of sex work vary.

III. A Black feminist acceptance of the possibilities of resistance at sites of injury.

I center my work around our forbidden vitalities, and I am calling for a Black feminist acceptance of this mode of healing. There are times when the spaces that exploit us, cause us pain, and/or are rooted in our trauma can be necessary sites for catharsis, healing and vitality. The resistance, healing and pleasure that takes place at sites of injury, though certainly complicated, must be legitimized.

Hope

That night in a dream, the first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals into a smile. The man I love pulls the stitches out with his fingernails. We leave black sutures curling on the side of the bath. I wake as the second girl crawls headfirst up my throat, a flower blossoming out of the hole in my face.¹⁰¹

Lemonade

Why are we forbidden to lick our wounds? To taste the sweetness of our blood? To spread the lips of our scars in search of healing? My body is mutilated. Trauma exists both inside and around me. It bites deep into my flesh for reasons I can understand but will never comprehend. I catch a dagger, harnessing its energy. Flooded with a desperation reserved for those that must survive, I am complicit in causing my pain. I toy

¹⁰¹ Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, directed by Beyoncé Knowles (2016; Los Angeles, CA: Magnolia Pictures, 2016), digital video.

with the fresh cuts and revisit their elders. My blood fills the Atlantic, a reminder of an existence pre-injury. Remorse overcomes me as I question my actions. Just as I am about to concede — drenched in my defeat — the pain turns to euphoria. Hope embraces me. My skin hardens, though my body remains mutilated, points of a constellation. Vitality emerges out of my ripped flesh, fueling my resistance. I welcome my strength rooted in my trauma. I know no other source.

My scars heal into a smile.

REFERENCES

- Are You Still a Slave?* Livestream video. Posted by “The New School.” May 6, 2014.
<http://livestream.com/accounts/1369487/Slave/videos/50178872>.
- Ahmed, Osman and Chai Jindasurat. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2014*, 2015. http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/Reports/2014_HV_Report-Final.pdf.
- Avenatti, Cassandra and Eliza Jones. “Kinks and shrinks: The therapeutic value of queer sex work.” In *Queer Sex Work*, edited by Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher and Nicola Smith, 88-94. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Bauer, Robin. “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2008): 233-53. Accessed March 20, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649798>.
- Bernstein, Elizabeth. “Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism,” *Signs: Feminists Theorize International Political Economy* 36, no. 1 (2010): 45-71. Accessed November 7, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/652918>.
- . *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Beyoncé. *Lemonade*. Directed by Beyoncé Knowles. 2016. Los Angeles, CA: Magnolia Pictures, 2016. Digital Video.

- . *Partition*. 2014. Los Angeles: Columbia, 2014. MP3.
- . *Pray You Catch Me*. 2015. Los Angeles: Columbia, 2016. MP3
- Center for Constitutional Rights. *Stop and Frisk: The Human Impact*, July 2014. <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/08/the-human-impact-report.pdf>.
- Chludzinski, Katrina. "The Fear of Colonial Miscegenation in the British Colonies of Southeast Asia." *The Forum: Journal of History* 1, no. 1 (2009): 54-64. Accessed March 2, 2017. DOI 10.15368/forum.2009v1n1.8.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Cruz, Ariane. *The Color of Kink*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
- Fitzgerald, Erin, Sarah Elspeth Patterson, Darby Hickey, and Cherno Biko. *Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade*, December 2015. http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/Meaningful%20Work-Full%20Report_FINAL_3.pdf.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Gossett, Che. "We will not rest in peace: AIDS activism, black radicalism, and queer and/or trans resistance," In *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn, 31-50. New York: Routledge, 2014.

- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 519-36. Accessed March 19, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299218>.
- Hammonds, Evelyn M. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 93-104. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Hobson, Janell. "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body." *Hypatia*: 18, no. 4 (2003): 87-105. Accessed March 19, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810976>.
- hooks, bell. "Moving Beyond Pain." *bell hooks Institute*. May 9, 2016. <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>.
- . "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 115-31. Boston: South End Press, 1992.
- Ja Rule. *Clap Back*. 2003. New York: Def Jam Records, 2003. MP3.
- Koch-Rein, Anson. "Monster." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2014): 134-35. DOI 10.1215/23289252-2399821.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844.

- McClintock, Anne. "The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism." In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, 21-61. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Mock, Janet. Facebook post. May 9, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/janetmock/posts/10154228113096522>.
- Moor, Ayanah. "Still." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 205-10.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Newman, Louise Michele. *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Rosen, Hannah. *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South (Gender and American Culture)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Scott, Daryl Michael. *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880 - 1996*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Seitz, Matt Zoller. "Tangerine." *Roger Ebert*. July 10, 2015. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tangerine-2015>.

- Smith, Nicola, Mary Laing, and Katy Pilcher. "Being, thinking and doing 'queer' in debates about commercial sex." In *Queer Sex Work*, edited by Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher and Nicola Smith, 1-9. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Stallings, L. H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Edited by Darlene Clark Hine and Dwight A. McBride. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 221-35. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Tangerine*. Directed by Sean Baker. 2015. Hollywood, CA: Magnolia Pictures, 2015. DVD.
- T-Pain. *I'm in Love with a Stripper*. 2005. New York: Jive Records, 2005. MP3.
- Walker, Alice. *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.
- Williamson, Terrion L. "In the Life." In *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*, 113-34. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.
- Wittig, Monique. "One is Not Born a Woman." In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 9-20. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.