

Looking Forward to the Past:
Black Women's Sexual Agency in 'Neo' Cultural Productions

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Abstract

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This dissertation combines critical black feminisms, cultural studies, performance studies, and queer theory with readings of African-American cultural productions in order to consider how black women can and have reconfigured their non-heteronormative sexualities outside of the language given to us by white-dominated GLBT scholarship. The emphasis on “neo” cultural productions, that is projects that look toward the past to re-imagine a new future, speaks to Laura Alexandra Harris’s assertion that a queer black feminist methodology necessitates reclamation of one’s history and an affirmation of desire as a form of resistance to shame. This dissertation reads black female bodies as subversive. In embracing their bodies as pleasurable, these unruly women resist racist and heterosexist hegemonic discourses which silence or pathologize black female sexuality and negate black women’s agency.

Chapter One looks toward Barbara Smith’s 1977 publication, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” as an inaugural point for thinking about black female sexuality outside of normative

and pathologizing paradigms. It argues for a reading of *Sula* as a queer black femme novel, and from there develops a (neo) theory of black femme-inism which is indebted to and departs from Smith. Chapter Two reads Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledging* as neo-slave narratives which also narrate a queer politic. The black female vampires in these novels constitute a necessary departure from realism, which does not adequately narrate the complexity of black women's sexuality. The third chapter reads Cheryl Dunye's film, *The Watermelon Woman*, arguing that the film proposes a new methodology for reading lesbian sexuality in its historical and contemporary contexts. Chapter Four analyzes Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* and neo-burlesque performances by black women in order to suggest how black female performances, through the remaking of the black female body from spectacle to spectacular, can interrupt the historical and contemporary pathologization of black women. In all of these chapters I look toward neo-narratives as sites which connect the historical realities of black female subjugation with the contemporary moment in ways which usher in alternative possibilities for black female agency.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction or “Something to do with Beyoncé”	1
Chapter One: “Everything I know about being Femme I learned from <u>Sula</u> ” or Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.....	25
Chapter Two: Written in Blood: Slavery, Miscegenation and Realist Limits in Jewelle Gomez’s <u>The Gilda Stories</u> and Octavia Butler’s <u>Fledgling</u>	78
Chapter Three: Re-presenting Myths and Tellin’ Tales: Cheryl Dunye’s <u>The Watermelon Woman</u> and the Re-visioning of the Black Lesbian.....	116
Chapter Four: Revealing Venus: The Spectacle of the Black Female Body (Re)made Spectacular In Suzan-Lori Parks’s <u>Venus</u> and the Black Female Burlesque Performer.....	151
Conclusion or “A Diva is a Female Version of a Hustla”	204

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DEDICATION

For the bad.girls

Introduction or "Something to do with Beyoncé"

*"For Black women, ceding control over self-definitions of Black women's sexualities upholds multiple oppressions. This is because all systems of oppression rely on harnessing the power of the erotic. In contrast, when self-defined by Black women ourselves, Black women's sexualities can become an important place of resistance. Just as harnessing the power of the erotic is important for domination, reclaiming, and self-defining that same eroticism may constitute one path toward Black women's empowerment" - Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought**

"Bad girls, Talking about the sad girls (Sad girls), Talking about bad, bad girls, yeah"
- Donna Summer, "Bad Girls" (1979)

I remember in elementary school painting bright colors on a piece of white paper. I then colored over the painted mural in black crayon seemingly obscuring the artwork I just created. But, if I took a toothpick and scraped off the crayon, the bright colors peered through once more, and the new piece of art combined the dazzling colors of the first, the waxy black crayon, and the lines and shapes created by the two. So many textures and colors and shapes. The crumbs of crayon left dark stains on my fingertips, but that was part of the process and necessary to the final image. The texts that I look at in this dissertation are similar to my layered piece of art -- white paper, covered in colors, covered in black, scraped and created anew. Riffing on the language of neo-slave narratives I call these texts "neo" cultural productions, multilayered pieces of art which look toward the past in order to create new images. These new images require the previous ones for their brilliance and even the muted crayon, the dark histories, are needed to reveal new artistic possibilities.

New images must be created because the old ones are very much alive. To be clear, these new images do not erase or reverse the old ones, but like a palimpsest, write over them to create something else out of the previous script. If the "new racism [...] has not replaced prior forms of racial rule, but instead incorporates elements of past racial formations," it

follows that radically intervening strategies are needed to deal with these ever-present formations (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 32-33). The ever-present racial formation, or, as Patricia Hill Collins calls them, "controlling images," "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 77). The Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Hoochie Mama, Welfare Queen, and other black female stereotypes are intended to discretely undermine black women and inhibit challenges we might pose to the oppressive status quo. However, as much as I rely on and appreciate the work of Collins, we differ in that she implies that undermining controlling images can be done through the reversal of those images. She points to literature as one site where "emergent women" have survived the assault of controlling images by "turn[ing] it out" - or by inverting them (Collins, *Black Feminist* 106). But reversing one stereotype, let's say the Jezebel, may just be another form of oppression. As L.H. Stallings notes "one person's indefinable sexuality could be another's promiscuous sexuality" (2). She cautions, "as black cultural studies continue to address gender and sexuality, we must reconsider who gets to say what is and is not a valid form of resistance to stereotypes, and why" (2). Likewise, Homi Bhabha argues that stereotypes cannot just be reversed in order to create radical change to oppressive regimes but must be explored as potential sites of agency. He argues:

To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not the displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity, with the *repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs colonial identified subjects (both the colonizer and the colonized)*" (95) [italics mine].

In other words, if objectifying stereotypes provide one site of agency that is because of the multi-varied strategies of oppression. Oppression is not just a matter of top-down power, but a polyvalent site of power production. The combination of desire and derision that Bhabha explicates points to the exigency of studying black women's sexuality and sexual agency. Thus this project addresses how black women have responded to those controlling images through cultural productions which radically take control over those images, not to destroy them, but to enable black women to act as agents in their own self-definitions.

The neo-cultural productions - that is cultural productions which utilize a recursive structure for remembering the past while re-imagining the future - examined in this dissertation point to self-defining strategies used by black women. In it, I argue that black female sexuality has been defined primarily as a lack of agency, that is black women have been scripted as hypersexual or asexual, animalistic and masculinized; hence the stereotypical Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Bitch, and Ho. None of these positions are self-defined or self-created; rather they are products of various white heteropatriarchal regimes. I index these stereotypes and more importantly examine how black women have crafted themselves as sexual agents through a variety of cultural productions -- namely literature, film, theater, and performance.

Additionally, I question the limitations of realist narrative in understanding the black female body. As a body that has historically been scripted as not being able to speak for itself, as belonging to various oppressive regimes, the black female body has a fraught relationship to realist constructions. As I argue, the sensational and fantastic, rather than the realist, becomes a place of desensitizing and the beginnings of grasping black womanhood.

My critique of realism is based on exposing the false impression that the form adequately represents history. As Roland Barthes asserts, realism “consists not in copying the real, but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real” (55). This reference to the *depicted* copy of the real suggests that realism, and its supposed representation of a realistic history is rife with subjective values. These values, according to Walter Benjamin “empathize with the victor” which “invariably benefits the rulers” (Benjamin 258). As opposed to a historicist who fixes the past in a singular “eternal image,” my project aligns with Benjamin’s call to “blast open the continuum of history” (264). This explosion he associates with the exploited and “revolutionary classes” (263). If “the struggling oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge,” my project takes the idea of the “depository” seriously, locating this knowledge in the exploited bodies of black women (Benjamin 262). This particular knowledge is rooted in the histories of racial, gender, and sexual exploitation. The black female bodies reflected in the sensational texts I examine, “grasp the constellation which [their] own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (Benjamin 265). They are, in my words, neo-cultural texts which eschew the conventions of realism in order to propose a swinging historical continuum. It is within this pendulum that identities become unfixed and agency can occur.

Agency is a word that is often bandied around in academia; it’s both simple and complex. Agency can be thought of as the capacity to act, or acts of self-definition, but self-definition is difficult to break free from other oppressive regimes. bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* cautions that this process of “becoming subjects,” – of self-definition - has the potential to lead to further attempts at objectification. She warns “often when black subjects give expression to multiple aspects of our identity which emerge from a

different location we may be seen by white others as 'spectacle'"(22). However, multiplicity of identity is precisely the point. Essentialized limitations fix subjects into binaries, which perpetuate rather than critically engage stereotypes. Responding to colonialism, Bhabha notes "an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on" the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (95). In order to intervene into this oppressive fixity the "point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectivation made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse" (95). Bhabha's reference to the possibilities of the stereotype suggests that understanding the limits and boundaries of the stereotype in colonial discourse, "enables a transgression of those limits from the space of that otherness" (96).

These transgressions of limits can be thought of in terms of Dariek Scott's "heroism in disguise" from a place of "abjection" (5). He argues that "blackness is constituted by a history of abjection, and *is* itself as form of abjection," and he questions where within that space of abjection we can find "anything of value" (5). The most obvious difference between my project and Scott's project is that his primary concern is black male sexuality. My focus on black female sexuality is an attempt to intervene in the constant pull between hypersexuality and invisible sexuality attributed to black women, while contributing to a body of black feminist work that challenges the identification of blackness as male and either ignores the bodies trampled in the march to progress or figures them as obstacles to it. However, like me, Scott is interested in considering the potential "for useful political, personal and psychological resources" while thinking about racialization through abjection (5). As Avery Gordon argues, this turn to the

personal is “desirable in order to understand how the real itself and its ethnographic or sociological representations are also fictions” (7).

Also in line with my project, Scott looks at sexuality as a prime location where abjection is articulated. Given that black people are always-already defined by sexuality, it is illusory to think of sexuality solely in terms of "self-mastery," rather it is a place of difficult "choices" which are not really choices at all but more "decisions" (Scott 7). Given that choice implies a liberal subject and blackness is a position outside of liberal subjectivity (and in fact, one that makes the notion of a liberal subject possible), "decisions" about how sexuality is employed are fraught with historical and present abjection. Nevertheless, I am drawn to the fraught terrain of sexuality in order to "find something there that might be beautiful and progressively productive for a political project of cultural reform" (Scott 7). Drawing on psychoanalytic critiques, including Hortense Spillers, Fanon, Julia Kristeva, and Queer and Gender theory, Scott argues that:

Sexuality is a mode of conquest and often cannot avoid being deployed in a field of representation without functioning as an introjection of historical defeat; it is in and through that very domination and defeat also a mapping of political potential, an access to freedom. (9)

Judith Butler's take on agency is similar to Bhabha's "transgression of limits," and Scott's "heroism" in abjection in that the process of subjectification inadvertently opens fissures where agency can occur. Her complex theory of agency builds on Freudian psychoanalysis, Foucault's notions of power, and Althusser's theory of subjectivity. Butler claims that agency is produced through the process of subordination. In other words, the subject, who has already been

subordinated, must also be the subject who acts as an agent: "The subject, defended by some as the presupposition of agency, is also understood to be an effect of subjection" (*Psychic Life* 11). This paradoxical process is enabled by the polyvalence of power. Butler contends that "assuming power," or being an agent" does not imply a process of moving power from one location and seizing it, rather "the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible" (*Psychic Life* 13). This appropriation may also "at once retain and resist that subordination" (*Psychic Life* 13). The ambivalence of altering, retaining, and resisting is integral to my project which recognizes that black women's sexual agency is laden with risks. It is at once the seizing of power from white heteronormative discourses and transferring (in an altered state) that power into a self-determined sexuality, but at the same time there is the risk of reinscribing the images and stereotypes which dog black women's heels and in many ways define black female subject formation. Out of this fraught terrain emerges my emphasis on neo-cultural productions as sites of agency. Drawing on Butler's "temporal modalities" in subject formation, the ambivalent process "in which the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency," I argue that the neo-cultural productions that I address alter the power of subjugation and objectification through a multi-situated process of temporality (*Psychic Life* 14-15). They are at once 'before' 'during' and 'after.' It is at this site, the joining of past and possibility, that these productions enable black women to reclaim and radically alter those subject positions which haunt us.

Looking specifically at temporality and agency, Walter Johnson in "On Agency" argues that a generalized notion of "slave agency" elides difference, it "represents the alienation of enslaved people from the historical circumstances and ideological idioms of their own resistance [...] which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions"(117). In terms of my project this is why the call to history of the neo-cultural production is so important. History "conditions the meaning" of black women's actions and interpellates us as specified subjects, not merely black, or women, but black women. This womanhood, however, is always in question.

Similar to my imperative to look at neo-cultural productions as sites of agency, Johnson argues that one must "focus attention on the present-life of the past, on which elements of the past are drawn upon at any given moment in history and the power-structured processes through which they are selected and enforced" (119). He notes, "If we are to acknowledge the claims of the past and to frame our scholarship as an act of redress, it seems to me important that we do so in ways which engage the exigencies of the present" (121). Likewise, Timothy Spaulding, in *Re-forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, notes that the "re-formation of the past marks an interrogation of our postmodern condition" which "blur[s] the lines between historical subject and contemporary author," and between "historical and fictional reconstructions of the past" (21, 18). This insight informs my readings of neo-cultural productions not simply as texts which rehash the oppressive legacies, but also texts which emphasize a variety of sites where the past is in the present. Adopting alternative, non-linear, fantastic, or parodic strategies of narration, the producers of these works call into question 'historical' and 'realist' depictions of the past.

I propose that neo-cultural texts provide a rich space for grappling with the controlling images that continue to haunt black women's bodies. These images are often articulated through sexuality - the asexual mammy, the hypersexual Jezebel and Hoochie, the sexually domineering Sapphire, the overly procreative Welfare Queen. It's a no win situation. Like Collins, I emphasize that "studying Black women's sexualities reveals how sexuality constitutes one important site where heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender as systems of oppression converge" (*Black Feminist* 139). The neo cultural productions which I examine facilitate thinking about black female sexuality and sexual agency outside of discourses and narratives which construct black women as a problem – devoid of or overburdened with sexuality. While these neo texts do not necessarily provide answers to black women's sexual agency, they do provide new paradigms for thinking about agency as they reconfigure black womanhood as positively queer. As Hortense Spillers pointedly contends "actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name') [...] 'Sapphire' might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment" (85).

Although I call upon the neo-slave genre in order to formulate the idea of neo-cultural productions, it is imperative to my project to think through black womanhood through channels other than slavery. Heretofore, constructions of blackness and the black experience have been predominantly narrated through the logics of slavery. Spaulding argues "The slave experience – a hallmark of physical, intellectual, and spiritual perseverance as much as a testament to America's betrayal of its own democratic ideals – has always inspired African American writers" (1). But what of other logics, not directly related to slavery, which emphasize constructions of blackness. One problem with focusing on slavery is that the majority of slave studies and

narratives emphasize the experiences of black men. As Angela Y. Davis notes "conspicuously absent from this flurry of publications [about slavery] is a book expressly devoted to slave women" (*Women* 3). In addition, slavery, though important to constructions of black womanhood, is not the only historical site where these constructions have been produced. Although Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, a text that greatly informs my work, links the origins of the "Welfare Queen," "the Hoochie, and the "black lady" to the "breeder women," "Jezebel," and "the mammy," which were produced during slavery, I find these connections unfulfilling. Though potentially part of a similar legacy of "controlling images" of black womanhood, they are situated in different socio-historical moments, and accordingly, function within unique oppressive regimes. Even Collins notes that some of these images are "cut from an entirely different cloth" than their antebellum counterparts (*Black Feminist* 90). In the texts that I explore, black feminist responses to the Hottentot, miscegenation, Black nationalisms, and queer politics, are moments which are not directly related to enslavement, but are other instances in history that are resurrected, (re)enforced, and contested.

Thinking about the resurrection of history, Spaulding offers some useful tools for considering neo-cultural productions and the rejection of narrative realism. Though his text is specifically about slavery and neo-slave narratives, he notes that in neo-slave narratives "contemporary writers create an alternative and fictional historiography based on subjective, fantastic, and anti-realist representations of slavery" (2). He continues, "by deploying elements of the fantastic or metafiction in their texts, these writers force us to question the ideologies embedded within the 'realistic' representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction" (2). Questioning realist representation also interrogates dominant oppressive

discourses about the other[ed]. Bhabha notes, colonial discourse produces an "other" which is "entirely knowable and visible." He argues this "system of representation [...] is structurally similar to realism" (101). If realism is the discourse of the colonizer, it follows that one intervention into this discourse would be a move into the sensational and fantastic. All of the texts, and I use that term broadly, engage what Daphne A. Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* calls "afro-alienation acts." Afro-alienation is "a specific strategy of cultural performance" that "reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions as well as a tactic that the marginalized seized on and re-ordered in the self-making process" (4). In other words, afro-alienation acts enable agency from the abject space of alienation. These "anti-realist forms of cultural expression" can "provide a fruitful terrain for marginalized figures to experiment with culturally innovative ways to critique and to disassemble the condition of oppression" (5). Brooks refers to the figures in her book as "spectacularly 'eccentric'" where eccentricity implies being outside the dominant system of representation but also "*a freedom of movement*" [italics in original] through "working outside of constrictive racial and gender paradigms" (6).

This eccentricity, spectacularity, and call to the culture of the fantastic resonate with my project. I look toward speculative fiction, the "Dunyementary," Femme Theory, "spectacular" performance, and neo-burlesque as fantastic productions that "reconstruct an overtly oppositional, highly fictionalized form of history – one that allows them to claim authority over the narrative constructions of the past" (Spaulding 2). This authority is especially pressing for black women, who have historically and contemporarily been denied power over their representation. By this, I do not mean that black women have not represented themselves;

there are numerous excellent works and authors which disprove this point. What I am suggesting is that often these representations are in response to white heteropatriarchal depictions of black womanhood – the iconic stereotypes that I delineated earlier. In this dissertation, I examine cultural productions which work outside of the good woman/bad woman binary, and which refuse to be the stereotype or the anti-stereotype to paraphrase L.H. Stallings. These texts demonstrate black women's agency in the face of undermining racist and sexist assaults.

I like to think of black women's contestation of ever-present-history in bell hooks's and Stallings's language of "wildness." Citing bell hooks' description of wildness in radical Black female subjectivity, Stallings explains that wildness is "radical Black female subjectivity that consciously celebrates autonomy and self-assertion in the invention process of self" (3). Specifically in regards to Black female sexual subjectivity Stallings argues that "self-authored sexual desire and radical Black female sexual subjectivity [...] incorporates [wildness] as the context for rebellion" (3). As I brought up in relation to Judith Butler's theory of agency, trying to disaggregate representations of "self-authored" or agential sexual desire from the barrage of misogynistic, racist, sexist, and homophobic representations of black female bodies is not an easy task, especially when the black female body is defined by its lack of agency. However, as Butler might argue, agency cannot occur without subjugation. This ambivalent process, one that is not clear-cut, leaves open the possibility for radical transformations. It is the illegibility of the black female body which opens the door for sexual agency just as this illegibility also subjugates black women. In other words, to be clearly legible as positive/negative or good woman/bad woman, also entails an ability and willingness to conform to essentialist

classifications which, in turn, like Bhabha suggests, merely support oppressively hierarchical categorizations. The beauty and power in the productions that I explore lie in their unruly liminality which disrupts oppressive polarization. This “wildness”, is part of the reason that these texts represent a radical black female sexual subjectivity. They do not simply reverse the terms of the established order which “foster readings of difference as deviance,” but instead demand a new disorder in which “the stripper, prostitute, video vixen, gold digger, and sexual exhibitionist” are not the “deviant polarity to the working woman, wife, mother, lady, and virgin” (Stallings 6).

“Want my body, won’t you get me bodied. You want my body, won’t you get me bodied, hey” – Beyoncé, “Get me Bodied” (2007)

“Why now? What are the stakes of claiming black women’s bodies now?” asked Chandan Reddy. In a typical-me-move what pops in my head comes out of my mouth, “I don’t know, but I think it has something to do with Beyoncé” Indeed I *do* think it has something to do with Beyoncé, or at least the Beyoncé phenomenon. More than any other black female performer in the 21st century, Beyoncé has ushered black female sexuality into the mainstream limelight. She has paved the way for fellow black female sexual icons, Rihanna - with her controversial fetish-anthem “S&M” (“Cuz I may be bad, but I’m perfectly good at it. Sex in the air, I don’t care, I love the smell of it. Sticks and stones may break my bones but chains and whips excite me”) and Nicki Minaj’s black-Barbie-gone-psychotic persona. Like it or not she is an innovator and an inspiration to not only her entertainment peers but countless other men and women of all races. Like Josephine Baker, whom Ernest Hemmingway called “the most sensational woman anybody ever saw, or ever will,” Beyoncé is an icon of black female sexuality. In response to the Beyoncé phenomenon, Kevin Allred, a doctoral candidate at

Rutgers University teaches a class entitled “Politicizing Beyoncé.” This course combines readings from the black feminist canon with Beyoncé's music and videos in order to interrogate “how Beyoncé pushes the boundaries of [social norms] in order to make space for and embrace other perhaps more deviant bodies, desires, and/or politics” (“Schoolin’ Life”). The Beyoncé phenomenon prompts difficult questions about agency, sexuality, image, and black female bodies to enter mainstream discourse. This discourse may not be in the language of academia, but occurs in the patois of pop culture, which some may argue is more resonate.

In “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe” Daphne Brooks extends this analysis, critically exploring the work of Beyoncé and Mary J. Blige in relation to black women’s marginalization. According to Brooks, black women's disenfranchisement was made particularly evident in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Beyoncé and Mary J. Blige “mark a new era of protest singing that sonically resists, revises, and reinvents the politics of black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imagery” (“All That You Can't Leave” 183). Brooks’s emphasis on Re-inventing, Re-vising, and Re-sisting gels with my examination of neo-cultural productions as sites of reinvention and resistance to dominant social norms. Referring to the lineage of women who have influenced her, Beyoncé has been quoted as being inspired by the “intimate 'woman-talk'” heard in her mother's salon (Brooks, “All That You Can't Leave” 184). Acknowledging this legacy of women, who, as in the salon scene staged in *The Gilda Stories*, talk love, life, and politics, points to the historical influences of Beyoncé's work and a lineage of grappling with self-definition that informs it. According to Brooks, these women, and women like them express an “ever-sophisticated range of emotions tied to black women's personal and spiritual

discontent, satiation, self-worth, and agency" (184). Like Beyoncé's "Ring the Alarm" video, which Brooks argues reminds us of "the powerful women who have been chastised and punished for 'misbehaving' in recent years," the black women whom I use as examples in this dissertation are chronic misbehaviors - "bad girls" to mix the lyrics of black superstars - who despite chastisement continue to assert their own agency in the face of racist and sexist assaults (182).

Not directly related to Beyoncé, per se, but definitely connected to black women's self-definitions and bad-girl agency are the black feminist critiques of the 2011 SlutWalks. These critiques were less about the claiming of sexual empowerment through the term Slut, and more about black women's vexed racialized histories with those terms of objectification. Additional critiques of the SlutWalks argued that the white-organized protests represented a resurgence of the exclusionary and narrow practices of second-wave white feminism.

SlutWalks originated in Toronto in response to the misogynistic words of a Toronto police officer who claimed "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized" ("SlutWalks v. Ho Strolls"). This prompted world-wide protest in the form of SlutWalks in an attempt to reclaim the word from misogynistic discourses. While the protests were "creative, appropriate, and powerful," The Crunk Feminist Collective notes the subtle privilege embedded in the protests of "women who are in fact not used to being fully defined by negative sexual referents" (Crunk Feminist Collective). Whereas the word "slut" has historically been used to shame white women into normative categories of sexual behaviors, black women have historically never had access to these normative categories: "we have largely been understood as unable to practice 'normal' and 'chaste' sexuality anyway" (Crunk Feminist

Collective). Although black women have doubtlessly been called sluts, the word has functioned differently, not as an aberrant to the chaste norm, but as a generalized description of black womanhood. Like universalizing discourses of second-wave white feminism, the problem arises when white women assume that the word "slut" points to universalized female-bodied experience of misogyny, rather than an experience mitigated by histories of race and class privilege.

This critique of SlutWalks is echoed in "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk September 23, 2011." The signers of the letter call attention to the fact that "the way in which we are perceived and what happens to us before, during, and after sexual assault crosses the boundaries of our mode of dress. Much of it is tied to our particular history" ("An Open Letter").¹ The letter writers make a list of requests to the organizers of SlutWalk, mostly asking for an intersectional analysis of women's experiences of sexual assault and greater women of color representation on the organizational level. In addition, in order to reflect our varied histories with the term "slut" the letter writers request that the Walk be rebranded as one "critical step to become cognizant of the histories of people of color and engage women of color in ways that respect culture, language, and context" ("An Open Letter").

Both the "An Open Letter" and "SlutWalk v. Ho Strolls" note the way in which the ignorance of the specific historicized experiences of women of color mimic the failings of second wave white feminism in universalizing the white (predominantly middle class) female experience. Though I agree that sexual violence, especially in black and brown communities, is

¹ The many signers and endorsers of this letter are too numerous to delineate, but they include prominent Black women's organizations throughout the United States, Professors, Scholars, Artists and Poets, Bloggers, and business owners. There is also a general call for any readers who wanted to endorse the letter.

connected to institutionalized racism which is "tied to notions about our clothed or unclothed bodies as unable to be raped whether on the auction block, in the fields, or living room television screens" ("An Open Letter"); and I concur that the word slut represents a particular white experience of being outside of the norms of chaste sexuality, an experience that marks blackness as always-already deviant regardless of how we dress, I disagree with "An Open Letter's" stance that sexually objectifying words cannot be re-envisioned. In the letter they note the dangers of reclaiming the words "slut," and its counterpart, "ho" as in "Jezebel Whore" which was "meant to dehumanize" black women. One of their arguments against this reclamation is that "we do not want to encourage our young men, our black Fathers, sons and brothers to reinforce black women's identities as 'sluts' by normalizing them on t-shirts, buttons, flyers, and pamphlets" ("An Open Letter") To me this is a reactionary response, more concerned with what black males think rather than how black women view themselves. As I detail in this dissertation, the legacy of objectification will not be erased through denial or simple reclamation. Instead, we must acknowledge the histories of black women and take the risk to re-envision those histories in terms of objectification, yes, but more importantly agency. The Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Mammy, and the Ho can be re-examined as beyond good and bad stereotypes which black women engage in complex negotiations of white heteronormative violence.

Implicit in both the discussions of Beyoncé and the SlutWalk is the idea that black feminism in the 21st century still hinges on question of sexuality. Collins notes "Sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities" (*Black Sexual Politics* 6). She writes in

response to what she calls "the new racism" of the 21st century; however, the relationship between sexuality, gender, and social inequality has been theorized since the Sojourner Truth's oft-quoted "Arn't I a Woman" and Ida B. Wells anti-lynching and anti-rape essays. Of more recent note is the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, which acknowledges "the historical reality of Afro-American women's continued life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation" as the collective's origins (273). This statement celebrates such renowned figures as Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Truth, and Wells, as well as unknown women whose "shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity" makes "their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique" (273). This politic is reflected in the Collective's commitment to an intersectional struggle "against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (272). Evelyn Hammonds' 1994 "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" points to the public discourses of racialized sexuality as "shaped by processes that pathologize" women of color (128). These holes in discourse around black female sexuality and accompanying pathologization "produce the submersion of sexuality and the attendant silence(s)" which perpetuate the suppression of black women's sexual agency (128). Audre Lorde's iconic 1984 essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power" argues that harnessing the power of the erotic can undermine oppressive structures which seek to restrain that passion. Likewise, black feminism's focus on sexuality is indicative of a legacy of sexual power under conditions endorsing powerlessness. My dissertation seeks to intervene into the ongoing conversation on black women's sexuality and its relationship to racist violence by highlighting agency and power under stifling racist and heteronormative conditions.

"Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating

something else to be [...] they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for." - Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Critical to this creation of "something else to be" is Johnson's call for an examination of the ways in which "cultural forms functioned as mechanisms of creating the political solidarity necessary for to collective action." He continues, "it was through employing shared cultural forms – arguments, prayers, fables – etc. that enslaved people flourished even in their slavery, and set about forming the alliances through which they helped one another resist it" (119).

Chapter One, "Everything I know about being Femme I learned from *Sula*' or Towards a Black Femme(inist) Criticism," highlights how a cultural production can awaken a theory of femme identity, which can then be used to spur collective action. In this chapter, I look toward Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a site where the complexities of black femme identity are articulated and delineated. First, I examine Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a black feminist criticism" and the controversy that its proto-queer reading of *Sula* ignited. I look to Smith's essay, not only as a starting point for black feminist literary criticism, but also, in the words of Roderick Ferguson, as a "resource for epistemological and political practices that could express alternatives to existing social movement" (118). Next, I expand Smith's reading of *Sula* by framing the novel and its title character as a literary black femme-inist prototype. Finally, as exemplified in my reading of *Sula*, I suggest that Black Femme-inism opens up rich new forms of queer and feminist inquiry and praxis while acknowledging its indebtedness to those methodologies. This double gesture of innovation and preservation prompts my definition of Black Femme-inism as a neo-critical theory. Finally, as a black femme, I take seriously the need to write a theory of myself by writing myself into theory. Thus, throughout this chapter I model a Black Femme-inist critical approach by weaving the personal and the theoretical.

"Your body will speak to you [...] And as you take from them you must reach inside. Feel what they are needing, not what you are hungering for. You leave them with something new and fresh, something wanted. Let their joy fill you. This is the only way to share and not to rob. It will also keep you on your guard so you don't drain life away" - Jewelle Gomez, *The Gilda Stories*

Chapter Two, "Written in Blood: Slavery, Miscegenation and Realist Limits in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*," looks toward speculative vampire fictions as critical interventions in thinking about the relationship between slavery, miscegenation, and black women's identities. I engage with and expand upon Patricia Hill Collins prompt that "historical and social science evidence cannot definitively gauge Black men's and women's perceptions of how slavery affected their ideas about gender and one another" and that "fictional works provide another angle of vision" (*Black Sexual Politics* 60). Fictional works do, indeed, provide another angle on gender and sexuality under enslavement, an important angle given the "gender-specific forms of its overall organization" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 60). However, by eschewing realism, sensational narratives can further expand our understanding of race and gender formation through clear connections between the past and present of black women's exploited bodies -- a past that, to quote Benjamin is "filled with the presence of the now" (263). If "the effects of being denied economic opportunities and citizenship rights, and of being plagued by violence and images that justify poverty and powerlessness, continue to be felt under the new racism" then Butler's and Gomez's novels represent not only the old racism from which black women's present oppression stems but also ongoing resistance and alternative futures (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 60-61). More than that, however, these novels question the ability of a realist narrative to explain the peculiar (il)logics of white heteropatriarchal supremacy. They create an alternative "historiography based on a

subjective, fantastic, and anti-realistic representation of slavery" which "claim[s] authority over the history of slavery and the historical record" (Spaulding 2). This is done through what I am calling the "politicized vampire," a trope used for exploring pressing racial, gender, and sexual subjectivities. If, as Nina Aurebach argues "every age embraces the vampire it needs," then Gomez and Butler's vampires are needed vessels to interrogate the continued and continuous crisis of black women's sexual intelligibility (qtd in Gordon and Hollinger 2).

"It means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history, and most importantly, what I understand is that I'm gonna be the one who says: 'I am a black, lesbian filmmaker, who's just beginning.'" -- Cheryl, The Watermelon Woman

In Chapter Three, I read Cheryl Dunye's 1997 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, arguing that the film re-imagines and reinvents "queer" through a cinematic form which proposes a new methodology for reading lesbian sexuality in its historical and contemporary contexts. *The Watermelon Woman*, in its meta-pseudo-(auto)biographical-documentary form, appreciatively referred to by Cynthia Fuchs as a "Dunyementary," is as much concerned with cinematic form as with content. Therefore, I also suggest ways in which the film's form intervenes into dominant discourses of black lesbian sexuality through disruptions of other cinematic forms which Dunye, through parody, suggests have provided inadequate representations of black lesbian sexualities. As such Dunye's film redresses the inadequacies of the New Queer Cinema boom of the 1990's, by re-presenting the unrepresented in New Queer Cinema, the black lesbian.

In addition to interrupting the documentary form, Dunye intervenes into dominant discourses about the mammy. The image of the black mammy is a loyal, jolly, stern and decidedly asexual myth perpetuated to quell white anxieties about black women's sexuality

within the (white) domestic sphere. Dunye does not simply reclaim the mammy from pure servitude or objection, she refigures her as a desirous subject with a history that explicitly connects to Dunye's black lesbian present. In connecting to a black lesbian present, Dunye's film does not merely reclaim a black lesbian past, a project limited by its singularity, but provides a methodology for creating a history which can be used to scrutinize the structures that lead to the concealment of black women's sexualities in the service of creating a new discourse around black women's sexual identities.

"My body's too bootylicious for you baby" - Destiny's Child, Bootylicious (2001)

In Chapter Four, "Revealing Venus: The Spectacle of the Black Female Body (Re)made Spectacular in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and the Black Female Burlesque Performer," I enlist Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* as a creative rubric for thinking about black female agency within neo-burlesque. Drawing on riot-grrl post-feminism and correlated with sex-positivity, neo-burlesque is often considered a reappropriation of the classic art of striptease, allowing women to control and perform their sexuality on their terms. Of course, these assertions of female sexual empowerment through stripping are fraught with tension and contestation. My chapter intervenes into one aspect of this tension through thinking about the conspicuously absent *body* of work by black female burlesque performers in almost all narratives of burlesque and neo-burlesque. Through examination of Parks's play, I develop critical theories of the possibility of agency of the black female body scripted as abject spectacle. I then employ this critical rubric to look at three 'case-studies' of black neo-burlesque performers. These women utilize their performance content and personas to manipulate and intervene in dominant discourses around black female sexuality which erase black women as sexual subjects while making them hyper-

visible as sexual objects. I contend that the risky and risqué spectacles that these women stage exemplify an empowering and pleasurable alternative to existing discourses of sexuality.

Rejecting both the dominant narrative of sexual objectification and the counter-narrative of bourgeoisie respectability, these performances model a radical black female sexual subjectivity that does not simply reverse established hierarchies but demands a new (dis)order.

Let's talk about sex baby. Let's talk about you and me. Let's talk about all the good things and the bad things that may be" - Salt 'N' Pepa "Let's Talk about Sex" (1991)

My conclusion considers the locations and legacy of sex-positive black feminism. Responding to Shayne Lee's assertion that that black feminist scholarship "has yet to generate a discursive attack against middle-class systems of sexual regulation that monitor black female sexuality," I argue that the scholarship is there from both black feminist academics and from those outside of academia (xi). I stress the continuing need for this type of scholarship and the need to situate it within histories of oppression.

You may have noticed that my dissertation seems quite queer without explicitly being named as such. As Evelyn Hammonds argues, "the ways in which I am queer have never been articulated in the body of work that is now called queer theory" (126). One reason we can't 'see' black queer sexualities is that the language of queer theory is inadequate and limited(ing). Therefore, I am decidedly pulling away from mainstream queer theory in favor of what Laura Harris refers to as queer black feminist methodology. This necessitates reclamation of one's history and an affirmation of desire as a form of resistance to shame. Here, queer is more about a paradigm for thinking, than a GLBT affiliation. Drawing on Robert Reid-Pharr's argument that "If there is one thing that marks us as queer, a category that is somehow different, if not altogether distinct, from the heterosexual, then it is undoubtedly our relationships to the body"

(Reid-Pharr 85), I assert that a feature of black sexualities, particularly black female sexualities, is queerness. Reading Reid-Pharr's passage with the "us" as black people - black men, black women, black fags, queens, dykes, femmes, transpeople, straights and gays - suggests that he is making a claim that by the nature of "our" bodies, black sexuality is, in itself, inherently queer. Punctuating this reading, in the same essay from which the passage was taken, Reid-Pharr refers to the most "sacred" acts of "sexual normativity" as "white dominant male on white dominant female sex" (96). Indeed, what make black people's sexualities queer are our relationship to the body, and the body's relationship to normative embodiment. These relationships are marked by "not only intimacy, love, and lust but also importantly shame, contempt, despair, and hate" (85). Accordingly, in this dissertation I explore how black bodies, particularly black female bodies, can subversively serve as a site of pleasure and resistance to heterosexist hegemonic discourses which either silence or pathologize black female sexuality and negate black women's agency. The neo-cultural productions I examine acknowledge the "shame, contempt, fear, and hate" while simultaneously pulling from them desire, pleasure, and joy.

Chapter One:
 "Everything I know about being femme I learned from *Sula*" or
 Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism

"A darker shade'a Femme...I see the makings of my Femme(ininity) in history suppressed and rediscovered. The roots of my Femme(ininity) are real. Passed down for me. Motha to daughta. Sista to sista. And yesss, flamin' brotha to brotha. My routes lead way back. Cross continents and seas. Stretching, till eventually I find myself touchin' African Lucy. Essentially the first. The penultimate Femme. The Queen Motha of all who have come since and paled in comparison." -T.J Bryant (aka Tenacious) "It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in the Makin'"

"I came to Femme as defiance through a big booty that declined to be tucked under, bountiful breasts that refused to hide, insolent hair that can kink, and curl, and bead up, and lay straight all in one day, through my golden skin, against her caramel skin, against her chocolate skin, against her creamy skin. Through rainbows of sweaters, dresses, and shoes. Through my insubordinate body, defying subordination, incapable of assimilation, and tired, so tired of degradation. Through flesh and curves, and chafed thighs which learned from my grandma how Johnson's Baby Powder can cure the chub rub. Through Toni Morrison, and Nella Larsen, and Audre Lorde, and Jewelle Gomez who, perhaps unwittingly, captured volumes of black femme lessons in their words. Through Billie Holiday who wore white gardenias while battling her inner darkness. Through my gay boyfriend who hummed show tunes and knew all the lyrics to "Baby Got Back," which he sang to me with genuine admiration. Through shedding shame instead of shedding pounds, and learning that growing comfortable in my skin means finding comfort in her brownness." -Sydney Lewis, "I came to Femme through Fat and Black"

This chapter opens with two excerpts. The first is from TJ Bryant's piece, "It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in the Makin'" published in *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*. In this piece, Bryant locates the roots of her femininity in "an history suppressed and rediscovered" stretching back to "African Lucy...the penultimate femme." Bryant rewrites the fossilized corpse of Lucy, science's Neanderthal mother of human-kind, into a bountiful femme queen – not a just a mother, but a fierce "Motha" of a wealth of femme children who have "paled in comparison." The second is a piece is one that will be published in an anthology on fat women and sexuality. Similar to Bryant, I trace my black femme identity

through a history of black and brown bodies which guided me to Femme. Though they are not all overtly Femme, I (re)inscribe the texts of Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Nella Larsen, and Jewelle Gomez onto my developing femme body. Their words are akin to the chocolate, caramel, and cream lovers who shaped my Femme-ininity. Like Laura Harris who, in her essay “Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle,” supplements critical theory with personal narrative in order to write herself “into history, by writing [herself] a history,” both Bryant’s and my pieces are examples of writing an embodied history of queer black femme-ininity into practice (Harris 7). In my piece, I articulate the genesis of my queer black femme-ininity through my identities as a black and fat body. My femme development is shaped by the intersections of those identities as much as those identities shape my expression of femme. For me, Femme is both an unconscious approach and knight in glitter armor to oppressive regimes bearing down on and producing my racialized, gendered, large, queer body. Before I could pinpoint its name, Femme gave me strength and strategy to claim my decidedly non-heteronormative body. My particular articulation of femme results from my interactions with pop culture and the black femme images, which I find in the lithe body of Josephine Baker, the climatic whispers of Donna Summer, the uncontrollable curls of Diana Ross, the rasp of Billie Holiday, and the poetics of Toni Morrison, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Though I didn’t know at the time what I was looking for, I knew these images provided sustenance for my culturally malnourished queer of color body. As a proto-femme, there was a lingering something in these words, images, and sounds which shaped my later femme development. At the time, I had little language for this something; just quiet inklings. The key to deciphering these suggestions is not to be found in mainstream feminist or queer theory; in fact the black femme remains largely invisible in both

domains. I turn, then to culture as a site from which to launch a black femme-inist critique. Exemplifying my commitment to culture as a location of theory, throughout this chapter, I model a Black Femme-inist critical approach by weaving personal narrative and theoretical narrative. To be clear, I am not privileging one discourse as more authentic than the other, but using each to interrogate claims to authenticity.

In this chapter, I look toward Toni Morrison's *Sula* as one such site where the complexities of black femme identity are articulated and delineated. First, I examine Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a black feminist criticism" and the controversy that its proto-queer reading of *Sula* ignited. I look to Smith's essay, not only as a starting point for black feminist literary criticism, but also, in the words of Roderick Ferguson, as a "resource for epistemological and political practices that could express alternatives to existing social movement" (126). Accordingly, I offer one such alternative in discussing the Femme Collective, a political praxis which departs significantly from Lesbian and Gay nationalist movements. In the course of this discussion, I also delve into the complexity of femme identity and the black femme body with same and opposite-sex partners. Next, I expand Smith's reading of *Sula* in framing the novel as a literary black femme-inist prototype. Finally, as exemplified in my reading of *Sula*, I suggest that Black Femme-inism opens up rich new forms of queer and feminist inquiry and praxis while acknowledging its indebtedness to those methodologies. This double gesture of innovation and preservation prompts my definition of Black Femme-inism as a neo-critical theory.

"She knows where she's going and never forgets where she came from: a single-mother-no-father-big-bang theory of creation." – Elizabeth Ruth, "Quantum Femme"

Barbara Smith in "Toward a black feminist criticism" provides much more than just a title for me to riff off. Her essay is part of the inspiration and impetus for me to develop my

own Black Femme-inist Criticism. Admittedly, she does much of the legwork that enables me to read *Sula* as a femme text. She also takes a great deal of criticism for it. Smith opens her 1977 essay with the recognition that she is “attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous, merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all” (132). For Smith the necessity of black feminist criticism stems from the invisibility of black women’s experiences in the annals of history. Her stakes are to make some connections between Black women’s cultural productions and the politics of Black women’s lives. When black women’s cultural texts are examined at all, they are minoritized as subordinate to (white) women’s literature and (male) African-American literature, which is always already subordinate to the (white male) canon. As Roderick Ferguson deduces, Smith sees black women’s cultural productions as a form of political activism stemming from and extending black feminist movements. The main criteria of a black feminist criticism is that it has a “primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women’s writing” (Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist” 137).

She calls for interrupting the silence about black women’s writing – a silence which she attributes to Black male critics, white feminists, and Black women critics who lack a systematic feminist analytic for writing about black women’s literature and who virtually ignore black lesbian literature. The stakes of her project are to intervene in white dominated feminist politics and male dominated Black literary theory in order to institutionalize the role of black women’s literature through the development of a consistent critical theory which, according to Smith, makes “a body of literature recognizable” (133). She argues that history, literature, and

culture are crucial sites from which to interrogate the politics of race, class, and sex as they impact black women's lives. After establishing the necessity for a recognizable black feminist criticism, Smith introduces some tenets of the methodology. First, Black feminist criticism must attend to the roles of sexual and racial politics in black women's writing; second it must acknowledge Black women's writing as a distinguishable genre; third it must emerge from black women's own identities rather than the methodologies proposed by white/male literary critics (Smith 137). In this black feminist criticism "would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use" (Smith 138). Modeling this black feminist methodology in her reading of *Sula*, Smith proposes that, despite the sexual relationships between men and women, Morrison's "consistently critical stance toward heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships and family [...] poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives" in a "form and language [which is] nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects" (138). In her comments on lesbian readings of *Sula*, Morrison explicitly denies the presence of homosexuality in the novel: "Friendship between women is special different, and has never been depicted as a major focus of the novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*." (qtd in Tate 118) Her denial of "homosexuality" points to the homophobic fear of eroticization of black women's love, while the clear homoeroticism of the text suggests the radical possibilities loving relationships between black women pose to systems of oppression. Morrison's denunciation, according to Smith, "only shows the way in which heterosexist assumptions can veil what may logically be expected to occur in a work"

(140). Thus, reading the novel through Smith's Black feminist critical perspective enables radical meanings to emerge from the text, regardless of Morrison's proclaimed intentions.

Earlier I commented that Smith's essay received a fair share of criticism for her theory and reading of *Sula*.² Here I focus on a particularly influential response, Deborah McDowell's essay in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." In her essay written in 1980, McDowell contends that, though Smith's essay is groundbreaking, "it suffers from lack of precision and detail" (169). McDowell's objective is to illuminate these ostensible defects on Black Feminism's behalf. I agree with many of McDowell's finer points while, at the same time, contend that McDowell's reading of Smith does not adequately respond to Smith's proto-queer theory. To begin, McDowell questions Smith's citation of folkloric elements as a common trope in black women's literature, arguing that Black male writers utilize many of the same tropes and "If Black women writers use these elements differently from Black male writers, such a distinction must be made before one can effectively articulate the basis of a Black feminist aesthetic" (169). Contending that Smith's essay fails to pinpoint specific features that render black female language distinct, McDowell insists that black feminist literary criticism risks devolving into "mere critical jargon" (170). Of more immediate relevance to my argument, she dismisses Smith's reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel asserting that hers is "a reductive approach to the study of Black women's literature "which "is pressed to the service of individual political persuasion" (170). More precisely, McDowell contends that Smith's reading subsumes far too

² Also see Sherley Anne Williams "Some Implications of Womanist Theory" also reprinted in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Winston Napier ed. Hazel V. Carby in "'Womans Era': Rethinking Black Feminist Theory" concisely summarizes Smith's argument and rightly recognizes Smith's essay as "an important statement that made visible the intense repression of the black female and lesbian voice" (246). However, Carby critiques Smith for the implied essentialism in her assertion of a recognizable black women's experience and unique black female language. I agree with Carby's assessment of Smith's essay, and like Carby, acknowledge that project was an innovative reading at its historical moment and continues to be influential.

many Black women writers and some Black male writers into the “canon of Lesbian writers;” these include “Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Barbara” (170). Contrary to my reading, McDowell’s criticism of Smith’s essay as reductive relies on a reading of lesbianism as an identity solely based on sexual practice.

Ironically in her 1986 introduction to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand and Passing* McDowell makes an argument about *Passing* that is similar to Smith’s, declaring that in both *Quicksand and Passing*, Larsen indicts “the network of social institutions – education, marriage, and religion among the most prominent – all interacting with each other to strangle and control the sexual expression of women” (xxxi). Of greater resemblance is her reading of *Passing*, where McDowell purports that the relatively sexless marriages of the two protagonists combined with erotic imagery “flirt [...] with the idea of a lesbian relationship” between Irene and Clare (xxiii). Unintentionally echoing Smith’s comment that she is writing something “dangerous” by writing about Black lesbianism in literature, McDowell asserts that Larsen “uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a ‘dangerous’ story to tell: ‘safe’ themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots” (xxx). Either Smith’s “lesbian” reading of *Sula*, indeed proves useful for analyzing how some black women writers critique heteropatriarchy, or ironically McDowell succumbs to her own “individual political persuasion” in her literary criticism.

In his use of Smith’s “Toward a black feminist criticism” Roderick Ferguson understands Smith deployment of the term “lesbian” not as an identity, and not even in terms of same gender loving sexual behavior, but as a set of social relations which point to the instability of

heteropatriarchy. Ferguson explains how *Sula* “allegorized [...] the conditions of black women’s gender and sexual regulation [and] the desire to formulate identities and social practices that could withstand and provide alternatives to those limitations” (132). In effect he reads the novel as a response to black nationalist formations and liberal ideology, as represented by the Moynihan Report both of which point to “the emasculating effects of black women and the need for black men to resume their role as patriarchs” in order to achieve black liberation (123). Ferguson goes on to situate *Sula* and Smith’s essay within a tradition of “women of color feminists [who] attempted to devise notions of culture and agency that would alienate heteropatriarchy and liberal ideology.” These texts are a “resource for epistemological and political practices that [can] express alternatives to existing social movement” (Ferguson 116, 126). His conclusions are echoed in Kara Keeling’s description of the black femme who “offers a glimpse into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected” (Keeling 1). These social movements and existing organizations of life, at best, ignore the intersections of identity, or, at worst, pathologize difference (in this case gender/racial/sexual difference) as a deviation from and impediment to socio-political ‘progress.’ It is in this context that *Sula* proposes “something else to be” (Morrison 52). I argue that “something else” is a black femme identity that embraces the sexualized images of black women while eschewing the accompanying narratives of pathology. Therefore, in its critique of heteropatriarchy, *Sula* suggests an alternative to black women’s bodies as inherently deviant. Whether they are matriarchs or childless, involved in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, laboring outside or inside of the home, black women are trapped

in a bind that has the potential to pathologize their actions and identities as contrary to liberation struggles.

Opening the door to a more capacious definition of lesbian, one that does not solely rely on woman to women sex is not without notable stakes. The risk is taking the queer sex out of queer theory—sanitizing it for heteronormative consumption. Michael Warner in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, contends that the mainstream gay movement “has increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex” (25). Likewise, according to Judith “Jack” Halberstam the sanitization of gay sex inhibits “radical thought about sex” and contributes to queer theories “increasing distance from queer cultures” (257). Halberstam locates these queer cultures in “zines and community newspapers, in nightclubs and bars” where “queer communities look immensely more diverse than the theoretical work allows.” Halberstam continues “specifying sexual acts and their histories allows us to break with identity discourses that have the tendency to render some minority sexual practices completely unintelligible and to conflate still others with criminality” (261). Being somewhat of a theory pervert myself, I agree with Warner and Halberstam’s argument that queer sex needs to be in the forefront of queer theory. In fact, as I begin to delineate the terms of a Black Femme-inist theory, I contend that sex must be at the center of the project. My response to Warner and Halberstam is not so much a departure as a cul-de-sac – we get to the same point but by different roads. Warner’s point that mainstream gay movements have restricted their issues to those having least to do with sex is indeed a valid one. However, my split with both theorists is best explained by looking that Halberstam’s use of the word minority in her configuration of “minority sexual practices.” Halberstam’s “minority”

refers mostly to sexual proclivities – such as BDSM, intergenerational-sex, fetishism, and other queer sexual practices that don't fit in with the 'we are just like you' homonormative model. However, something else happens if we read minority as racialized. Sexuality and sex is never separate from racialization. In other words, sexual practices of people of color are always minoritized. Whether it is the predatory black man, the hypersexual black woman, the submissive Asian woman, the asexual Asian man, or the Latino continually reproducing "anchor babies," racial 'minorities' are repeatedly conflated with minority sexual practices. As for Smith's proto-queer reading of *Sula* which designates the novel as Lesbian not because of same-sex practices but because of its critique of heteropatriarchy, I argue that the critique of heteropatriarchy is embedded in the queer sex implicit in the novel. *Sula* by embracing her hypersexuality is queered by both white and black notions of respectability. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Smith's reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel as proto-queer because, though it was before the official inauguration of queer theory, the queerness of her reading is there in everything but the word. Meeting Halberstam and Warner at the close of my metaphorical cul-de-sac, Halberstam contends that the project of queer theory is "to judge the meaning of sex in any given historical [and I would add racial] location and to trace the development of notions of identity and sexual selves from within discourses of acts and pleasure" (265). Foregrounding discourses of acts and pleasures is what Femme-inist theory, and particularly my articulation of a specifically Black Femme-inist theory accomplishes, thereby putting the sex back into queer and feminist theory.

"We, Black Femmes, can often be masculin(ized) – automatically viewed, treated, and cruised as butches. And even if we are seen as Femmes, we can still be devalued or just plain not perceived as Femme(inine) in any sense but the sexual" – T.J. Bryan, "It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin'"

In their introduction to *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, Harris and Crocker point to three reasons why femme voices need to be acknowledged in feminist, lesbian, and queer theoretical models. First, they contend that femme voices have been overlooked in each of these critical paradigms. Second, they assert that “mainstream feminism has not analyzed femme as a model of critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality” which would be a useful model “not only for lesbians but for many women” (1). Third femme identity, when discussed, is put in relation to butch-identity, eliding Femme as existing in and of itself. Extending Harris and Crocker, I insist that for black femmes the exigency of theorizing Femme identity is compounded by their erasure from most queer, queer of color, and black feminist texts.

For black femmes the erasure of femininity and/or the usurping of it for sexual objectification are ever-present threats. When femininity is attributed to black femmes, it is an instrument for white sexual pleasure. Bryan suggests that finding a Femme tradition “enough to dwarf everything they think they already know ‘bout me and mine,” is one strategy for addressing the erasure of the black femme and the commandeering of black femme agency. Another? Being “an instigator, A shit disturber” who uses her “dark-skinned and conscious presence” to challenge “queer circles where white wimmin’s Femme(ininity) often passes for the epitome of female beauty” (158).

If black women have been ungendered, that is "out of the traditional symbolics of female gender," this erasure provides an unintentional space for rescripting black femininity (Spillers 85). Hortense J. Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" points to the "insurgent" potential of the "female with the potential to name" (85). Or, as

Spillers contends "'Sapphire' might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment" (85). I propose that this rewriting can occur in *Femme*. Sometimes "Sapphire," sometimes "Jezebel," often a "Bitch," *Femme* calls for "claiming the monstrosity" of self-defined black femininity (85). T.J Bryan affirms the complex relationship between *Femme* and appellations meant to demean black women:

Maybe this word *Femme* ain't all that. Could be *Femme*'s just some bull
 soundin' sweet in another colonizing master tongue. Two solitudes or two
 hundred, it's all the same to me.

Peut-être je dois trouver une autre langue. Quelque chose plus vivante. Fière.

Rempli de ma réalité. Rempli de moi. Comprenez-vous mes autres noms?

Répétez ceci après moi: Sapphire, HOO/chee Mama. Pidgeon. Skeezer. Heifer.

Ho.³

FEMME? SURE...I'M A FEMME. (155)

Femme has the potential to exclude black women from its charming femininity while the other degrading terms hypersexualize and de-feminize black women, thus in defiance, Bryan takes on both.

"My femme identity is a purposeful reclamation of femininity from the white supremacist classist heteronormative cis-patriarchy. It is a way of saying there is no contradiction being a radical anti-white supremacist feminist and supporting my local immigrant-woman-ran nail salon. There is no contradiction in being my own kind of pretty and getting work done". – Shanay Venicia, "Rethinking ideas around femininity: A queer femme of color's perspective"

³ Being "Bajan-born" it is of note that Bryan switches from "one colonizer's master's tongue" – English – to French, given both countries colonist histories with Barbados and the West Indies. This also points to the sexual colonization of black women's bodies and identities. The loose English translation is: "Maybe I must find another language. Something more living. Proud. Full of my reality. Full of me. Do you understand my other names? Repeat them after me: Sapphire. HOO/chee Mama. Pidgeon. Heifer. Ho.

Following Ferguson's proposal that for women of color and queers of color culture is "the obvious scene of alternative agency" outside of nationalist frameworks for liberation, I propose Femme as a contemporary site where some of these oppositional coalitions are being forged (Ferguson 117). Many of the current femme anthologies include extensive personal narrative, creative non-fiction, poetry, and transcriptions of spoken word pieces in their theorization of Femme. In addition, many of these Femmes are active participants in the Femme Collective where cultural production and femme organizing go hand-in-hand. This collective is an international organization intentionally comprised of a range of folks that identify as femme across the social fault lines of race, class, age, sexuality, gender-identification, and body. The goal of Femme Collective and their biannual Femme Conference is to "create a space to explore many of the complexities of Femme identity" for "building unity, coalition, and solidarity in and among genderqueer communities" ("Mission Statement", <http://www.femmecollective.com>). The Collective's use of genderqueer, and their insertion of Femme as one of many genderqueer communities, points to the transgressive ability of Femme to alter and intervene into heteropatriarchal gender limitations. The affinities between the Femme Collective's mission statement and that of the Combahee River Collective are striking. The latter opens with this declaration: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee 272). Extremely radical at its historical juncture and repeatedly referenced in black, women of color, and lesbian feminisms, the Combahee statement

anticipates the Femme Collective's demand to address "the intersection of queer Femme identity with issues of race, class, age, and body"(www.FemmeCollective.com). Women of color play integral roles in The Femme Collective. The founder of the collective, who goes by Miz Chris, identifies as a woman of color organizer and activist strongly involved in queer and people of color political movements; she describes herself as "committed to creating intentional space for Women of Color within a larger lesbian community context" (www.FemmeCollective.com).

Pointing to the role of culture in both the Combahee River Collective and the Femme Collective, both groups emphasize community development and culture as venues for change. For the Combahee Collective, consciousness raising sessions acknowledged "even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political." Black feminist writing became a means of "demonstrat[ing] the reality of our politics to other Black women" (276). Barbara Smith ,in "Doing it from Scratch: The Challenge of Black Lesbian Organizing," describes the activities of the Combahee Collective as "friendship networks, community and a rich Black women's culture where none had existed before" (172). Likewise, the Femme Collective grew out of the need to acknowledge and develop Femme social networks, connecting heterogeneous femmes and demanding queer visibility. During the Femme Conference, multiple caucuses and panels for differently-abled femmes, working-class femmes, bisexual and heterosexual femmes, trans-femmes, femme artists, "aging" femmes, and male-bodied femmes, point to the intersections and differences in femme identities. With panels such as "Community Accountability Approaches to Violence Against Femmes," "Creating Women of Color Spaces: Ownership and

Intentionality/The Color of Femme,” “Singing as Social Justice,” Starting the Revolution from Within: How to Use Meditation to Heal and Fuck Shit Up!,” “Sexual (R)Evolution: Exploring the Interconnectedness of Race, Sex, Violence and Pleasure for Queer Women of Color, and of course, “Dress and Express: Exploring Body Image and Self-expression through Fashion,” the political possibilities of the personal point to a development of a multi-varied femme culture “where none had existed before.” This comparison (but not equivalence) of the Femme Collective and the Combahee River Collective point to similar trajectories in politics and ways that each strive to interrupt white heteropatriarchal dominance through political and cultural organizing while acknowledging difference and strategic identification as a necessary component of that organizing. While members of the femme collective might also be involved in what could be called GLBT nationalists struggles, such as the struggles toward gay marriage, the repeal of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” and other gay civil rights initiatives, the Femme Collective, as an entity, does not organize around these struggles. Heavily influenced by women of color feminism, the Femme Collective also “reformat[s] culture as a site of oppositional agency that eschews nationalism, rather than facilitate[s] it” (Combahee 117). It does so through “build[ing] coalition among queer Femmes of every stripe” (www.FemmeCollective.com).

"Let's say that femme is dispossessed femininity. It's the femininity of those who aren't allowed to be real women and who have to roll their own feminine gender." – Elizabeth Marston, “Rogue Femininity”

Among those who explore Femme there is a consensus that the interruption of white heteropatriarchal dominance and its regulation of femininity is a defining factor of femme

identity.⁴ Thus Femme, itself, rather than striving to fit within heteropatriarchal paradigms, endeavors to interrupt those paradigms as much as possible. Femme's intervention into heteropatriarchy has a history of being misread as yielding to heteropatriarchy's fantasy of femininity, but that is part of Femme's mystical glamour, its trickery. Femme takes heteropatriarchal femininity and queers it – fucks with it (sometimes literally), turning it into a threatening parody of itself. While femininity is “the demand placed on female bodies,” Femme is “the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine” (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 13). Or, as spoken word artist Victoria Facelli warns, “Remember, Tinkerbell carries a dagger.” However, as reflected in the varied Femme Conference program, Femme is not homogenous. Femme identity can only be defined as indefinite – a swagger of beauty, pleasure, wildness that struts through time and place. For Brushwood Rose and Camilleri, Femme's “wildness is mercurial, encompassing the earthly and metaphysical” (12). It is “inherently ‘queer’ – in the broadest application of the word – as bent, unfixed, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated [...] femininity gone wrong’ – bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy” (12-13). Albrecht-Samarasinha attests that, for women of color, Femme in its “brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious[ness] [...] goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass [sic] feminine propriety” (“On Being Bisexual” 142). In order to realize its parodic threat, Femme must be a trickster -- constantly shifting, glamouring, dancing – the magician *and* her lovely assistant.

⁴ A variety of definitions of Femme, but all with a similar emphasis on the interruption of heteropatriarchal femininity can be found in Joan Nestle *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader* (Alyson, 1992), Lesléa Newman's *The Femme Mystique* (Alyson, 1995), Laura Harris and Elizebeth Crocker (eds) *Femme: Feminist Lesbians and Bad Girls* (Routledge, 1997), Sally Munt (ed) *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (Cassell, 1998) and Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri (eds) *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002) to name just a few.

The idea of troubling regulatory heterosexual gender formations through parody is rife in Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity. This now iconic critical theory continues to be read and misread as the last word *par excellence* on gender development and subversion. Butler, herself, comments on the questions raised resulting from the notion of gender performativity first introduced in *Gender Trouble*:

If I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject -- humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite the opposite of such notion.

(Butler, *Bodies that Matter* x)

In response to this “misapprehension,” Butler defines performativity “not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practices by which discourses produce the effects that it names [...] it is not the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies* 2). In other words gender performativity explains the repetition of socio-historical practices which constitute gender and its accompanying regulation. The normative sexed subject is already-always formed by this gender regulation, and this formation “requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings” who

“threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject.” These “threatening specters” are “a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (*Bodies* 3). Putting femme identity in conversation with Butler, I argue that Femme is the abject that haunts normative femininity: the hyperbolic, the whore, the slut, the BAD. GIRL. Femme reiterates femininity with a wrenching twist and thus exposes the performative production and regulation of heteronormative femininity.

But perhaps, I too, am misapprehending Butler. Considering her comment that one does not “peruse the closet” for a “gender of choice,” what should one do with Amber Hollibaugh who proclaims:

As a femme, you have made decisions about how you will appear as a gendered person. And when you are doing it, you don’t take a deep breath and say, ‘Ah, I’m finally me.’ Instead, you go “Ha, I finally actually look like the way I think a girl who isn’t a girl looks. (Albrecht-Samarasinha and Hollibaugh 219)

Surely, that suggests some kind of intentionality of Femme – a purposeful performance of bad girly-ness. But, as Lisa Walker argues, Butler’s theory of hyperbolic parody as a potential site of gender subversion “induces misreading [...] that we as individual subjects can authoritatively choose when and where we hyperbolize.” Walker points out that Butler “warns against conceptions of subjectivity that equate agency with intentionality [...] her theory of identity formation does not posit a subject who stands in front of their closet each morning contemplating which of their outfits might best subvert heterosexism that day” (Walker 72). Sometimes I do, though. That is, sometimes I look toward my closet for my undermining heterosexism costume choice of the day. Maybe it’s because I’ve read too much Butler, or not

enough, but some of my outfits have titles “Toddlers and Tiaras after a rough night of partying,” “Sexy-librarian from 1954,” “1970s secretary who goes to Women’s Consciousness raising groups at night,” “Victorian Gothic Carnivale Dominatrix” and of course “Inappropriately dressed professor with cleavage.” Sometimes I wear a hoodie and bandana and play butch, though I have been told that butches tend not to have shaped eyebrows and vestiges of mascara. In any case, my intent is to be inappropriately feminine – a freakish version of a stereotype, situated comfortably uncomfortable in the wrong time and place.

In a brief section of *Gender Trouble*, Butler acknowledges butch/femme identity, as well as drag and cross dressing, as cultural practices which parody “the notion of an original or primary gender identity” (174). Notably she is much clearer about how this parody functions in butch identity than she is in relation to femme identity. For butches, “‘being a girl’ contextualizes and resignifies ‘masculinity’” (Butler, *Gender* 156). As to the resignifying possibilities of femme identity, she suggests that “lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time (*Gender* 157). In Butler’s example Femme is predicated on lesbianism and is implicitly defined in terms of an erotic relationship with a butch. Thus the subversiveness of Femme requires a lesbian identification and a partner, presumably butch.

Because Butler places femme identity in the same category as drag and crossdressing, it follows that her comments on drag can be appropriated for thinking about autonomous femme identities. Drag is as a potential strategy for revealing the performative process that enables the naturalization of gender difference. This process entails the repetition of heteronormative norms and discourses, repetitions that are not a conscious choice but a “disciplinary

production,” that enforce the fallacy that gender is an essence inscribed on the body (*Gender* 175). The fabricated naturalness of gender difference precludes an analysis of the practices which produce gender. Butler’s model of gender performativity obliquely draws on language philosophies which define performative speech as language which, rather than being solely descriptive, brings objects into being through its utterance. Disciplinary discourses, rather than describing the bodily “truth” of gender, bring it into being. Gender as performative is related to, but not the same as, the performance of gender which Butler exemplifies in drag. Through parody, drag reveals the fabrication of gender. In this, drag performance does not imitate a cohesive ‘original’ gender, “but the very notion of an original” (*Gender* 175). Drag performance mocks, *if I imitate gender, what’s to say that you’re not imitating something as well* without ever fixing what is being imitated. In short, gender-as-performative is a regulatory fiction and the performance of gender holds the potential to either consolidate or reveal that fiction.

So when the femme, or the drag-queen, parody gender, we do, on occasion, open our closets and think about how to subvert heterosexism (the care in which we take in choosing our hair, makeup, and clothing certainly points to intentionality on our parts). But our parodic choice does not imply we are not “our gender from the start,” indeed the constructedness of our gender provides the tools to “locate the strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions” and “through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable to repetition itself” (*Gender Trouble* 188-189). Amber Hollibaugh recalls “...my role models for being femme have been drag queens, because drag queens construct female identity. I look at drag queens and I think, *That’s how I feel as a woman...*” (Albrecht-Samarasinha and Hollibaugh 215). Drag queen Sky Gilbert compares the excessively feminine

performance of drag queens to femmes; while traditionally feminine women may fear that their femininity can be used against them “for femme women there is liberation in playing with these dangerous behaviors, and liberation in drag” (Gilbert 75). Hollibaugh and Gilbert's narratives of personal liberation dovetail nicely with Butler's comments that by deconstructing the “naturalness” of gender identity, as represented in parody, “a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old [...] confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness” (*Gender* 189- 190).

In order to address the constructedness of gender without reducing femme identity to a big-girl game of dress up, Harris and Crocker put forth Femme as “a sustained gender identity, a chosen rather than assigned femininity.” As a sustained gender identity

Femme not only names a gender identity but is itself shaped by other aspects of identity. Rather than being defined by the outer trappings of femininity, femme gender is linked to a particular set of desiring relationships which occurs in butch-femme as well as other sites. By understanding femme as a sustained gender identity, we avoid the entrapment of femme as either too *stable* – one that sees femininity as biologically assigned – or too *flexible* – one that sees femme as one of many costumes – an identity category. (5)

Though Harris and Crocker do not specify the litany of other identities which shape femme, it seems to be an indirect reference to what Butler refers to as the “embarrassed ‘ etc’” – race, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness... - which invariably inflect discussions of identity configurations. Butler finds this “etc” instructive as it indexes how feminist theories of identity “strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete.” The “etc” marks the

excess of attempts to posit a cohesive identity and “the illimitable process of signification itself” (*Gender* 182). As she proposes in many contexts, repetitive processes of signification, unending in their quest to pin-down a subject, hold the possibility for inserting unforeseen subject positions which can critique normative identity formation. Thinking about the interruptive possibilities of femmes of color who uneasily inhabit multiple et ceteras, I turn to Roderick Ferguson’s black drag queen prostitute who appears in the introduction of *Aberrations in Black Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Ferguson describes this prostitute:

She has decked herself in a faux leather bomber and a white tiger-striped dress that stops just below her knees. Her face is heavy with foundation as she ponders into the distance. She holds a cigarette between fingers studded with cheap-press on nails, dragging on it with lips painted red [...] in the pleasure of her existence lies a critique of the commonplace interpretations of her life [...] Conceding to the meanness of her life, probably for her, is a far cry from assuming that her gender and sexual difference are the reasons for her poverty and that who she is attests to the absence of agency. (1)

This woman isn’t just fierce, she’s ferocious! Her red lips, clingy animal-print dress, and femininity-gone-wrong give her a style which some of us can only aspire to achieve. Her entire body possesses a wild wrongness. Ferguson suggests that her body manifests the estrangements of African-Americans from dominate narratives of American citizenship: “The country of her birth will call out to ‘the American people’ and never mean her or others like her” (1). Although there are “those who wish to present or make African American culture the embodiment of all that she is not – respectability, domesticity, heterosexuality, normativity,

nationality, universality, and progress” in her hint of pleasure and “alrightness” amid her estrangement lies a critique of those who would condemn or pathologize her body and condition (2). Ferguson introduces the black drag-queen prostitute as an embodied critique of narratives of heteronormativity and universalization within liberal ideology. Ferguson’s accomplished project is not my own. However, I am invested in thinking about non-normative sexual and gendered formations that challenge “the manifold restrictions of normative regimes,” especially those that are non-normative even under the rubric of queer (29). For me, the black femme, much like the black drag-queen prostitute, inhabits and challenges those normative sexual and gendered formations through her racialized, non-heteronormative, not-quite-right gendered body. Kara Keeling offers a similar interpretation of the black femme who

offers a glimpse into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected [...] she challenges each of the primary categories that have been constructed in response to racism, sexism, and homophobia (‘black,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘lesbian,’ respectively) to contend with what is excluded from that category in order for it to cohere as such. (1-2)

In short, an alternate title for this chapter might be “black femmes fuck things up” by posing alternative and contradictory possibilities to regulatory identity categories.

"WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER, RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE EACH OTHERS' WEALTH. HOS BEFORE BROS, ALWAYS! FEMME SOLIDARITY AND LOVE FOR EACH OTHER IS A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE." – Leak Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “Femme Shark Manifesto!”

Published in 1973, *Sula* is Toni Morrison’s second novel. The novel takes place in the mostly black community, the Bottom and chronicles the relationship between childhood friends

Sula and Nel from 1919 to the epilogue in 1965. Though in many ways opposite in their upbringing, Nel having a conservative home, while Sula's home is a swinging door of unconventionality, to say the least, the girls form an almost instant bond. After high school, Nel chooses to settle down and get married while Sula leaves the Bottom and gallivants through multiple affairs. Upon Sula's return to the Bottom she is made a pariah due to her promiscuity and disregard for social conventions. Initially Sula and Nel reunite, but their friendship ends after Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, Jude. After Sula's death, Nel remembers the friendship they had and mourns for the loss of Sula.

Anchoring my reading of *Sula* as offering a black femme-inist criticism is an early scene in which Morrison describes the meeting between Nel and Sula:

They felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be [...] they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for.

(Morrison 52)

The homo-social bond between Nel and Sula, tinged with sensuality, is a result of their awareness that neither is white nor male, neither is a normative body. This recognition leads to the realization that *they* can create who and what they want to be. As Morrison relays, Nel and Sula "had seen the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits" (120). In other words, since neither Nel nor Sula have to, in the words of Frantz Fanon "meet the white man's eyes" in each other neither "have to be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon 110). The debilitating relationship Fanon describes as occurring between black and white men becomes a

mutually formative relationship between two young black women. Through her relationship with Nel, Sula accesses “the closest thing to both an other and a self” (Morrison 118). In essence, the girls resist the subjection of their ‘queer’ (non-white, non-male) bodies through a libratory ‘queer’ identification “found in each other’s eyes.”

Histories of sexual, gender, and racial oppression hold up distorted mirrors through which black women often view ourselves. Karla Holloway encourages black women to shatter the “mirrored reflection of a prejudicial gaze” through a “reflexive, self-mediated vision of our bodies” (qtd in Collins, *Black Feminist* 180). In a tone suggesting both warning and exaltation, Patricia Hill Collins notes that “Black women learning to provide mirrors for each other [...] come face to face with the possible eroticization of such love” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 180). She cautions that, due to black women’s already-assailed femininity and racial and gendered othering, black women’s erotically tinged mirroring “can be highly threatening to heterosexual African-American women’s already assaulted sense of self.” However, loving relationships among black women also “pose a tremendous threat to systems of intersecting oppressions” which situate “Black women as a collectivity as so unlovable and unvalued” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 181).

Morrison underscores the radical potential of Nel and Sula’s eros. As young women, their relationship provides a “safe harbor” which enables them to “abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (Morrison 55). Nel casts off her devotion to racist and gendered beauty assaults when she refuses to pull her nose straight and ceases to aspire for the “smooth hair” of the hot comb (Morrison 55). Sula’s repudiation of racist assaults against black women is even more pronounced. Nel is described as “stronger and

more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes." Yet, Sula holds a grudge for weeks when it comes to defending Nel from the racist and sexual attack of four white boys. They accost Nel and, upon seeing Sula pull out a knife, the raised violent stakes of the confrontation excite the boys who imagine "this is going to be better than they thought [...] Maybe they could get an arm around one of their waists, or tear..." The ellipses interrupt their rape fantasy as Sula slashes off the tip of her finger with a knife and in quiet defiance threatens "If I can do that to myself, what do you suppose I'll do to you" (54-55). Sula's very real threat of castration is augmented by the symbolic threat the young women's loving relationship poses to the white male phallus and all that it represents.

As an older woman, Nel forgets the "safe harbor" of Sula's company in her acquiescence to her supporting role as Jude's wife. Jude marries in an attempt to fortify his manhood in the face of racist assaults. After repeatedly being denied construction work while countless white men are hired, Jude is filled with a "rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow;" this rage makes "him press Nel about settling down" (82). To him, Nel is "someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up [...] Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around the kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude" (Morrison 83). When she "discover[s] his pain" Nel is more than happy to play the role of the soothing and healing wife in whom Jude "could see himself taking shape" (83). In contrast to Jude's need to consume Nel for his own self-affirmation, Sula's relationship with Nel (before the affair) is a relation based on complement and reciprocity. Sula encourages "free reign" of Nel's "sparkle and sputter." She "seem[s] always to want Nel to shine" and a "compliment to one was a

compliment to another” (84). While heterosexist femininity encourages women to compete for the shiny stuff, Femme shares it, dousing all in glitter. Elizabeth Ruth in “Quantum Femme” contends that the femme “can make you comfortable in your skin even when you shouldn’t be” (16). “She is a body housing infinite possibilities for women, some of them [like Nel’s] snuffed out at a tender age” (Ruth 18).

Sula is a queer femme text not only in its woman to woman identificatory sensuality but also in Sula’s (im)morality of desire and her subsequent designation as a Jezebel. Harris and Crocker describe Femme as “a set of behaviors used as codes of desire [which] play with the idea of power” without disempowering the femme players (3-4). In the climate of 1970s lesbian feminism in which an egalitarian model of women’s relationships was promoted as a means to liberate women from oppressive sexuality, the femme’s perceived sexual objectification and reinforcement of gender roles were deemed to be degrading to women and inimical to lesbian feminism. In response to this anti-femme climate, Harris and Crocker argue that femmes “demonstrate that sexual play is not [necessarily] equivalent with a literal political position” (4). This does not mean that desire is apolitical, on the contrary, they point out that femme desire intervenes in a second-wave lesbian feminist discourse which, in attempting to promote an “egalitarian model of women’s relationships” cast lesbian relationships, in particular, as political unions rather sexual unions (3). In other words, Femme sexual roleplay, [i.e. bottoming, topping, switching] does not imitate heteropatriarchy; rather it defies both heteropatriarchal and feminist regimes which, in their joint efforts to police desire, are an unholy alliance.

More fundamental than their shared investment in regulating desire is their common point of departure. That is, both heteropatriarchal and lesbian feminist discourses are

predicated on the understanding that gender is the primary and originary human difference, and thus other social differences such as race, sexuality, and class are but so many manifestations of this fundamental inequality. This premise leads lesbian feminists to misidentify socio-political liberation with female empowerment and to ignore the power differentials of race, class, and embodiment that structure not only opposite sex, but also same-sex relationships. Rather than understanding Femme “as a critical approach to femininity” lesbian feminism fails to recognize “the range of femininities assumed for different purposes” (Harris and Crocker 3).

Femme sexuality isn't relegated only to same sex relationships, but evident also in ostensibly heterosexual relationships. The queerness of Femme stems from a desire that exceeds the assumed passive sexuality of normative femininity. *Sula's* reflections on sex, desire, and power are key contributions to the novel's black femme-inist critique. According to Sula no man is “worth more than me” (144). For the folks of the Bottom the primary difference between Sula's mother Hannah – who also slept with married men – is that “Hannah was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands,” whereas “Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow” (115). For Sula, sex is a means to access her inner consciousness, and not primarily a vehicle for male pleasure and pride. It is a complex matrix of vulnerability and power, but always accompanied by a self-awareness and discovery. She recognizes the “utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power.” Through sex with men, Sula accesses “what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow.” This sorrow is not connected to shame but a deep understanding of herself -- a

“postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (Morrison 123). Albrecht-Samarasinha echoes Sula’s sentiment describing her own femme sexuality as “a particular femme strength of sexual openness, vulnerability, and need [...] feel[ing] the touching burn through the layers of numbness [...] a vulnerability that can be both incredibly powerful and incredibly terrifying” (Albrecht-Samarasinha 143). Sula and Albrecht-Samarasinha’s access of an internal consciousness through sex dovetail nicely with Patricia Hill Collins contention that the “hidden space of Black women’s consciousness [...] allow Black women to cope with and, in most cases, transcend the confines of race, class, and gender oppression” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 108). That is, for women of color these moments of sexual catharsis become key moments of private introspection and self-care often denied to racialized women’s bodies.

The pivotal act which nails Sula to the Jezebel cross (to mix biblical metaphors) is sex with Nel’s husband. For her, sex with Jude isn’t about love, vengefulness or even lust, but another vehicle to access her inner self: “There was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That’s all. He just filled up the space.” Jude is merely a penis that fills the space inside her body and mind – the space that Nel evacuated when she married. In this, the novel suggests that in Sula’s mind, sex with Jude is also a means to regain her girlhood closeness with Nel who “was the closest thing to both an other and a self.” It doesn’t occur to Sula that sleeping with Jude would hurt Nel since “they had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line her used with one and then the other. But, now Nel “belong[s] to the town and all its ways” (119-120). Morrison’s language, that Nel belonged *to* the town as opposed to merely *in* the town indexes that the town has

subsumed Nel's individuality. She is not an individual resident in the Bottom but has been seized and consumed by the town.

Privately, even Nel struggles with the expectation that she condemn *Sula*. In her attempts to mourn for Jude, Nel collapses in the bathroom "wait[ing] for something to happen." She thinks about the shrill, vociferous cries of the women at Chicken Little's funeral and recognized them as "a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead." The mourning is more about "good taste" than debilitating grief, and the women's cries are an expected habit rather than a real rush of emotion (107). Nel, struggling to mourn for Jude as the women would, as she believes *she* should, lies in the bathroom "trying to feel [...] but it [doesn't] come." Instead her mind continually returns to Sula – things that Sula said, what Sula would do, and the pain of losing Jude "and not have Sula to talk to about it" (110). The loss of Sula and the loss of Jude overlap as she struggles to mourn her husband but returns to her perceived loss of Sula. The ambiguous grammar Morrison employs to frame Nel's struggle suggests that both the loss of her husband and her female other half involve sexual loss. Directly after Nel bemoans her separation from Sula "because it was Sula that [Jude] had left her for," Morrison writes "Now her thighs were really empty" (110). And later "For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart [...]" (110-111). If *now* Nel's thighs are *really* empty then what were they before she started thinking about her separation from Sula. If Sula is the one who "had taken the life from them," is it because she has "taken" Jude or because Sula is the one who has originally put life in them. Emphasizing the sexual ambiguity of Nel's loss, Morrison

closes the paragraph with her lament “both of them [had] left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (110-111).

"Whores, like queers, are a society's dirty joke [...] Whores and women who look like whores became the enemy, or at best, misguided oppressed women who needed our help." – Laura Harria and Liz Crocker, “Bad Girls: Sex, Class, and Feminist Agency”

The ambiguous space between homo and heterosexuality framed by Nel and Sula’s relationship is echoed in Sula’s appointment as the town Jezebel. Patricia Hill Collins reasons that, due to her excessive sexuality, the jezebel exists within a liminal space between homo and heterosexuality. Since

heterosexuality is juxtaposed to homosexuality as its oppositional, different, and inferior ‘other.’ Within this wider difference jezebel becomes the freak on the border. Her insatiable sexual desires help define the boundaries of normal sexuality. Just across the border stand lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women who are deemed deviant in large part because of their choices of sexual partners. As a sexual freak, jezebel has one foot over the line. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 92)

Collins acknowledges that “sexual practices and groups who diverge from the [white heteropatriarchal] norm are labeled as deviant and threatening” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 182). But she also asserts, “Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black sexuality” (*Black Feminist* 89). This suggests that deviance poses a threat to the oppressive norm in that it disturbs attempts to control black women’s sexuality. Whereas Nel admonishes Sula for “act[ing] like a man” “walking around all independent like, doing whatever

you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't," Sula reasons that "being a woman and colored [is] the same thing as being a man" (Morrison 142). Since white heteropatriarchy denies Sula, and other black women, the femininity it grants to white women (for better or for worse), being a black woman masculinizes Sula. However, rather than submit to politics of respectability as a futile defense mechanism Sula reclaims the stereotype of aggressive sexuality associated with black masculinity as well as the jezebel image. Her aggressive sexuality "masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 91). Given Spiller's contention that slavery ungendered blackness, and since "the gendered female exists for the male" the "ungendered female" encases "an amazing stroke of pansexual potential" (Spillers 79). In other words, Sula grasps that her race and gender have ungendered and therefore "queered" her body, and she uses her queered body as a liberatory strategy from both restricting respectability and its connection to white racist misogyny.

In a world which "taught her there was no other that you could count on" and "there was no self to count on either," Sula focuses on her own desire with "no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). Like many femmes whose "self-definition, insofar as it includes the conscious giving over of sexual control to ultimate desirability" is "a major component of their power," Sula's power stems from her desire and her desirability (Kennedy 25). This erotic power, according to Audre Lorde must be stifled by oppression which in order to perpetuate itself "must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (53). The distorted and pathologized Jezebel exposes heteropatriarchy's anxious attempts to reframe black female

sexual agency in order to undermine the threat that erotic power poses to racist and sexist regimes.

Cast as the jezebel and the town pariah, Sula consolidates the heteronormativity of the townfolk who begin “to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117-118). Her sexual desires delineate the bounds of ‘normal’ sexuality. As opposed to Sula, who embraces an “experimental life,” the folks in the Bottom, and the women in particular, are more fearful of the consequences of straying from normativity, then they are of the stultifying norm itself (118). They are “more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below” and “if they were touched by the snake’s breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role” (Morrison 120). Citing essays by M. Jacqui Alexander and Evelyn Hammonds, Collins argues that black women, in a misdirected effort to protect themselves from racist and sexist oppression, may inadvertently feed into that oppression by denouncing black female erotic autonomy. Within a historical legacy in which “certain expressions of Black female sexuality [are] rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the group” self-imposed sexual silence “makes it acceptable for some heterosexual Black women to cast both openly sensual heterosexual Black women and Black lesbians as ‘traitors’ to the race” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 183). While Morrison implicates white heteropatriarchy in the construction of black female deviance, she more pointedly suggests how the black townspeople of the Bottom have adopted white heteropatriarchal discourses thereby implementing their own terms of regulation. Sula becomes the pariah of the Bottom because the misfortunes of the Bottom are displaced onto Sula and framed as “disgust for the easy way she lay with men” (122). Her sexual

promiscuity, Sula's powerful connection to her vulnerability, should be her disgrace. Instead, it enables Sula's "full surrender to the downward flight" that the other folks fear (120). Sula is, to use Elizabeth Ruth's words, a "Quantum Femme" "a ball-busting bitch from the planet of no apologies, her molecular structure defying gravity" (15).

"The act of moving deliberately between society's prescribed roles, in opposition to the gender categories, even if only in wardrobe, remains a profound political statement. The blurring is not just of the lines between what we wear but ultimately implies a toppling of the barriers to what we can do as women" – Jewelle Gomez, "Femme Erotic Independence"

Despite Harris and Crocker's caution that "femme identity is not simply a role playing in which certain sets of clothes or behaviors are on a daily basis easily assumed or discarded," I cannot in good femme consciousness talk about Femme without exploring fashion (5). Harris and Crocker acknowledge that in the face of various power regimes which mark bodies, femme can be a way to "mark your own body, as well as a way to strategically pass across, translate between, connect, and complicate various boundaries of identity" (5). Precisely because of the historical difficulty for women of color to mark their own bodies and their already-lack of proper femininity, I particularly want to address the ways in which femmes of color utilize a disruptive hyperfemininity in order to insert themselves into a feminine identity which has been denied to them. Through claiming and naming their own femininity, femmes of color defy patriarchal structures that define femininity as a lack of power and racist structures which define women of color as lacking acceptable femininity (without gaining any power in exchange for their lack). Fashion provides a critical strategy for marking their own complex terrain of identities. I have a friend, Dulce Garcia, who identifies as a queer Chicana femme. She often talks about hitting the town in her red "cha-cha" heels and "Cholita makeup." She jokes that

moving from her primarily Chicano/a neighborhood in L.A. to the more laid-back San Francisco Bay area was a real fashion culture shock. When people see her crimson lips, red heels, and tight jeans they tend to ask why she is so dressed up, to which Dulce responds, “This isn’t dressed up, in my old neighborhood this is Tuesday.” For Dulce, and many other femmes of color whose bodies are further marked by race, fashion becomes an arena to negotiate and express a cultural heritage of femininity.

In thinking about her black femme legacy – a legacy of unidentified (and historically unidentifiable) black femmes, T.J Bryan imagines her inheritance passed down from black woman to black woman through a metaphoric dress:

Smooth cinnamon silk and velvet. An ebon’ outfit hanging in my boudoir just waiting to make a showing. It was passed down way back till it found me. No, I don’t mind wearing the gowns that Eartha and Billie and Nina and Diana and Chaka and all the rest don’t need no more. I just adore the way they invoke my past and present ... round out my Femme(ininity) with a history that smells and sounds and walks like ME. (155-156)

Bryan’s legacy is passed down through an “ebon’ outfit” evoking brown skin, which holds within its folds her black femme ancestors and her femme present. Suggesting that the excessive femininity of women of color disturbs notions of correct, and therefore controllable, feminine behavior, Albrecht-Samarasinha describes feeling her Femme strength and “loud, take-no-prisoners-take-no-shit” power most “when I have on eyeliner and lipstick and am wearing my red silk garter belt and little black dress” (139). While the “little black dress” is a clothing staple that ‘must’ be in every respectable ladies closet, the flash of a red silk garter belt underneath is

a dangerously trashy accessory. The red garter belt suggests a sexual license that purposely peeks out from Albrecht-Samarasinha's quintessential Coco Chanel mandated womanhood.

Also turning to fashion as a site for disruptive femme-inity, self-described fem [femme] Laura Harris brazenly maintains "I planned early on to be looking good and acting sassy for the revolution" (8). Although in her essay Harris doesn't specifically theorize femme identity, her account of her personal femme identity, as well as references to multiple femme theorists and writers, suggest that a femme framework shapes her visions of queer black feminism. Harris's unnamed femme-inist framework is clear when she acknowledges "Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, Amber Hollibaugh, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Jewelle Gomez, and Barbara Smith " as key to her "feminist education and counter-education" (17). Of these women, Nestle, Allison, Hollibaugh, and Gomez identify themselves as Femme. Harris's other feminist influences include references to her mother and her mother's friends. Though also not explicitly named as femme, they are implicated in Harris's framework of erotic pleasure which is integral to femme identity. In delineating her mother and her mother's friends own brand of feminism, Harris puts the women's dress at the forefront of their femme-inist (un)consciousness:

They were high-heeled, painted, cleavage, and perfumed images of women feminism wanted to wash off and liberate. And when these women refused a liberation that appeared to them as just another brand of repression – feminism rejected them [...] Claiming and naming her own desires, this was my mom's feminist revolution. (13)

Harris acknowledges that her mother did not consider herself a feminist; in fact, she made fun of them. Nevertheless, in tune with the rest of her project of reclaiming feminist voices "not

articulated through feminism,” Harris describes these women’s behavior and dress as an expression of subversive feminism: a counterattack on both feminist paradigms that miscategorize their dress as an effect of patriarchal oppression, and patriarchal paradigms that unsuccessfully lay claim to their desire and pleasure (17).

Published in 1973 and situated in the first half of the 20th century,⁵ Morrison’s novel attends closely to the significance of dress and its relation to feminist politics of proper womanhood. The first chapter of *Sula* is titled “1919.” While 1919 marks the federal granting of women’s voting rights, it is also an era in which the leaders of the black women’s club movement rallied for racial and sexual justice. A key to the club women’s social uplift strategy was to counter racist attacks on black women’s sexuality through a politics of respectability. Noliwe M. Rooks in *Ladies Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture that Made Them* quotes an article by black clubwoman, Mary Church Terrell, who advocates that it is important for every black woman to “look as well as her means will permit” but cautions that black women should always be demure and mindful to avoid “the excruciating discord between the color of the trimmings and the complexion of the wearers” (50). Similarly, an article in the black women’s magazine *Ringwood’s Journal* advises “Women who eschew the garish and gaudy in dress may demand more consideration and respect than those who violate this principle” (qtd in Rook 52). As Rooks explains, the policing of fashion underscores the conjecture that “how [black] women appear in public bears not just upon her, but upon her family, her friends, and indeed, the entire African American race” and that fashion provided the

⁵ To be specific, the novel is set i 1919 – 1941 with an epilogue set in 1965.

“means to make an African American woman into a lady whose appearance was capable of refuting charges of immorality” (50).

A slightly more contemporary example of black women policing the respectability of other black women’s bodies can be seen in Coreen Simpson’s photograph *Club Savage*. In this 1980s photograph, a slender black woman clothed in bourgeois respectability looks askance at a voluptuous black woman adorned in a form fitting short sweater dress and large jewelry. This photograph, which I encountered in a collection edited by Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, is accompanied by their commentary that the piece “explicitly refers to the censorship within the black community, especially regarding bodies that are consistent with stereotype many regard as derogatory” (71). The juxtaposition of the slender conservatively dressed black woman with the body of the voluptuous and showy black woman, also suggests that her ‘inappropriate’ dress instigates the condemning glance.

Both the aforementioned early 20th century and late 20th century examples point to black women policing other black women’s fashion, however the role of whiteness in the policing of black women’s bodies cannot be neglected. However dissimilar in the particularities of style, fashion police of the early and late 20th century agreed on one thing: dress determines who does and does not count as a woman. The theme of respectable dress as a questionable attempt to circumvent histories of black women’s sexual objectification is still relevant in late 20th century cultural politics.

In *Sula*, clothing is a signifier of the struggle between respectable and dangerous sexuality. When Sula returns to town in 1937 after a long absence her dress is the first physical signifier of her return, she “was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as

anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye" (90). Suggestive of a black femme lineage, the color yellow and the flower and bird imagery are used earlier in the novel to describe Helene's mother, Rochelle, who is first referred to as "the woman in the yellow dress." Rochelle's entrance is marked by "the sweet odor of gardenias" and her "canary-yellow dress." Rochelle's dress differs markedly from Helene's "heavy but elegant dress with velvet collar and pockets" made of "deep-brown wool and three-fourths of a yard of matching velvet" (19). Helene takes pains to distinguish herself from her mother, a "creole whore," and is warned by her grandmother "to be constantly on guard for any sign of [Rochelle's] wild blood" (17). Although Helene is dressed as an emblem of respectable femininity, that doesn't keep her from being banished to the Jim Crow car. In other words, despite the pressures put on women to dress respectably as a means of achieving racial and gender liberation, Helene is still stripped of her womanhood. She is belittled through being called "gal" and subsequently haunted by "the old fears of being somehow flawed" (20). In the eyes of the train conductor, and the heteronormative whiteness he represents, Helene, despite her respectable dress is no different from her "creole whore" mother (17).

Emphasizing the flower imagery associated with both Rochelle and Sula, the brothel in which Rochelle works is described only by its "red shutters" and "flowered carpets" (17). Flowers are fairly stock sexual imagery associated with women and the parallels between Rochelle being a whore and Sula's sexual license are pretty self-evident. In theoretical and historical models, femme identity and prostitution are often linked. In "Gender Warriors: An Interview with Amber Hollibaugh," Hollibaugh, a sex worker and founder of the Lesbian AIDS

Project declares “I don’t think it’s an accident that so many femmes I’ve known have histories of sex work, because we have the attitude to pull it off.” That attitude, according to Hollibaugh is “a real kick-ass ball-buster attitude,” a woman who “cares about her erotic identity on the street, who does not drop her eyes” (Albrecht-Samarasinha and Hollibaugh 213). In their reading of femme prostitutes who liberally pepper Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Harris and Crocker call attention to how these women “renegotiate the role of whore in relation to gender role constraints” concluding that they “affirm the autonomous sexualized power of a femme woman who has agency to manipulate her surroundings just as often as she is oppressed by them” (“Bad Girls” 98-99). By manipulating the economic potential of heterosexual desire, the sex worker, if she chooses, can become fiscally independent without the more-encompassing constraints of heterosexual marriage (including homemaking, childbirth, limited travel, and subservience) and therefore is more free to pursue her own independent erotic pleasures – she “establishes control over her status as a sexual object.” (“Bad Girls” 101).

The threat that femme identity poses to heteropatriarchy is foregrounded in *Sula*. Paraphrasing M. Jacqui Alexander, Collins notes “the prostitute and the lesbian have historically functioned as symbols of threat” (182). In the novel, Sula and Rochelle are associated with phenomena that upset the natural order of things. Sula’s return to Medallion is accompanied “by a plague of robins [...] yam-breasted shuddering birds” “flying and dying all around...” (89-90). She uses her pumps “edged in bird shit to push dead robins into the grass” (91). That her return isn’t marked by ominous vultures, or destructive crows, or a raven’s portentous “Nevermore,” but red-breasted robins -- the same “rockin” little creatures that go “tweet,

tweet, tweet”⁶ is precisely the point. The conjunction of these small creatures and their appetizing breasts with plague, death, and shit is jarring.

Rochelle is also likened to a bird, in this case a charming domesticated pet that is, in fact, more resolute and fiercer than we recognize. In Morrison’s words she is a “tiny woman with the softness and glare of a canary” (25). What springs from this description is the disjunction between “softness” and “glare.” While more muted than the threat posed by the subsequent plague of robins and the current generation of femme gender warriors that are epitomized in Sula, Rochelle’s combination of “softness and glare” figure the black femme threat emanating from these women’s glamorous bodies.

"WE REMEMBER OUR DEAD – SAKIA GUNN, GWEN ARAUJO, AND MANY OTHER QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOUR WHO DIED BECAUSE OF RACIST, HOMO/TRANSPHOBIC VIOLENCE. NOT AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT, BUT AS WOMEN WE LOVED IN REAL LIFE, WOMEN WHO COULD’VE BEEN US OR OUR LOVES." – Leah Laskshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “FEMME SHARK MANIFESTO!”

On her deathbed Sula tells Nel that, despite everything that the townspeople think she has done, they will learn to love her:

After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jail-birds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindberg sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norman Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have

⁶ Rene, Leon. “Rockin’ Robin.” *Rockin’ Robin*. Class Records, 1958.

fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to
mount the hogs...then there'll be a little love left over for me. (145-146)

She prophesizes that once every Body who does not have normative desires succumbs to their latent 'deviancy' then they will love her, for she was the one to expose normative regimes that regulated their desires and actions. Sula's presence exposes the black community's 'dirty little secrets.' Indeed, her sexual and gender license is a dirty little secret that the folks of the Bottom cannot keep under wraps. They had no desire to destroy Sula, "the presence of evil was something to first be recognized, the dealt with , survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118). However, in death, Sula (im)morality is what triumphs, "mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's score for the role) now had nothing to rub up against [...] Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity" (153-154). As Ferguson points out, Sula reveals "the contradictions of 'normativity,' between the presumed universal nature of normativity and the actual discrepant fact of non-normativity" (Ferguson 128). For Keeling, the appearance of the black femme serves a similar function: "when [the black femme] becomes visible, her appearance stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different, or differently" (2). Like Morrison's description of Sula, the black femme offers "something else to be" (Morrison 52). Sula is not the pathologized hypersexualized black subject of pseudoscientific discourses and national mythologies,⁷ but a black subject for whom the never-attainment of white normative heterosexuality enables a degree of agency. Sula, as a

⁷ For examples of some of these pathologizing pseudoscientific discourses see Margaret Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted;" August Forel "The Sexual Question;" Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero "The Female Offender" and C.G Seligmann "Sexual Inversion Among the Primitive Races" reprinted in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

black woman, is a body with pleasures that have already be subject to white heteronormative regulation and abjection. In her acceptance of her failure to achieve heteronormativity, Sula finds the freedom to follow her own desires and pleasures.

Both Sula and Nel's final thoughts are of each other. Sula's death brings the peaceful self-awareness that she could only achieve through sex. The novel narrates Sula's death in language that is indicative of both a rebirth and a sexual climax. Suggesting birth, dying allows Sula to "draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls." Pointing to sexual climax, as Sula waits in "weary anticipation [...] a crease of fear touch[es] her breast." She expects a "violent explosion in her brain" but realizes "that there was not going to be any pain." Like a young woman anxious to share the details of losing her virginity, Sula's post-mortem thoughts are "Well, I'll be damned [...] it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149). Nel's final thoughts of Sula close the novel. Her struggle between mourning Jude or mourning Sula ends as Nel realizes "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." The loss of Sula "press[es] down of her chest and came up into her throat as she wails "We were girls together [...] Oh Lord, Sula [...] girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." The cry that Nel couldn't reach while mourning Jude, finally erupts for Sula "loud and long" with "circles and circles of sorrow" (174).

"There is nothing tidy or peaceful here [...] Here, and outside of these pages, we are dangerous and pleasure-seeking, we are volatile matter. We find danger in our search for pleasure, on our own terms. We give good danger, we warn, we warn of danger, of dangerous times. WE are harbingers, harlots, heroes. We are troubled and troubling. Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of femininity. Here, we indelibly mark ourselves femme." -Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, "Introduction: A Brazen Posture"

Morrison traces the early formation of black female subjectivity through the character Sula while also providing a backdrop which historically delineated that subjectivity as deviant. *Sula* opens in 1919 at the end of World War I and the midst of the Great Migration and closes in 1965 at the peak of the Black Civil Rights movement. Both these period are marked by rampant rioting, civil unrest, and highly publicized racial tension. The chapter titles, marked by dates, quietly emphasize these historic benchmarks as Sula's life unfolds. Amidst a slew of changes in the nation's racial landscape, the sexual and racial expectations for the women in the novel remain the same. Sadly, for black women, not much changes. *Sula* engages with these cultural moments through a black feminist lens (which I argue is also a black femme-inist lens). In eschewing nationalist narratives of black female subjectivity in which black women are 'naturally' available for sexual exploitation or black nationalist narratives in which black women must always be victims. Morrison suggests the ubiquitous need of the townspeople for black female victimhood when Sula is made a pariah for sleeping with white men. To the folks of the Bottom, Sula is not only an oversexed Jezebel, but worse, a race traitor. She is "guilty of the unforgivable thing [...] she slept with white men" (112). Sula's "guilt" is augmented by her refusal to be made a victim for her sexual exploits; the black men of the Bottom "insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In the same way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did." The men of the Bottom even concoct lynching fantasies involving "elaborate ways to torture Sula" for her treason (113). Cheryl Clark explains that black people may adopt the oppressive structures of white heteropatriarchy in "trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved" (199). In this, the novel suggests that the

black men's insistence on black women's victimhood is part and parcel of white heteropatriarchal regimes which negate the possibility of black female sexual agency.

To be sure, Sula is not an infallible heroine. She can be read as selfish, vain, heartless and treacherous. She is not a character that facilitates an easy connection; she interrupts all that is good and proper: she's an ungrateful daughter, a selfish lover, and patently refuses to be a mother or a wife. But there is something about her that is intriguing, charming, even seductive. Sula is complex – neither “tidy nor peaceful” – a quintessential femme. What Morrison describes as Sula's “elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior” holds a subtle secret: “Her poker face delivers a heavy hand – in femme's look away, she appears” (Morrison 127; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 12). Sula –Femme - “is the blade – fatally sharp; a mirror reflecting back fatal illusions” (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 12).

“...as a Black woman, I have to do everything I can to assert my femininity because every single day, I hear the phrase, “Blacks and women,” as though they are mutually exclusive. My identity exists in the forgotten space between the two.” – Kpoene' Kofi-Bruce, “Femme Queening – An Identity in Several Acts”

It's always scary, especially in academia, to claim that you are doing something completely new. Undoubtedly, there are haters who hastily discredit those who claim to be innovative. So I respectfully concede that I'm not inventing a new kind of critical approach. Instead, I see this chapter as positing a neo-critical paradigm. I am indebted to Barbara Smith in my imagining of a Black Femme-inist Criticism – a neo entry point into black women's cultural productions – that engages the past for sustenance, guidance, and finally, flight. Like Smith, I look toward *Sula* to plot the contours of Black Femme-inist Criticism. These features are not meant to be prescriptive or essentialist. Rather, I think of them as starting points which can be built upon and changed (after all, we femmes can be rather capricious). First and foremost, a

Black Femme-inist Criticism should investigate the ways that black women's cultural productions critique white heteropatriarchal construction of black women's race, gender, and sexuality; they delve into the "open space" between "Blacks and women." As Kofi-Bruce explains, Black women have always had to struggle to maintain control of the way our bodies are perceived: "the polarities of mammy and prostitute constantly dog my steps" (54). Thus, the policing of femininity and black women's sexual agency, by and in necessary response to white heteropatriarchy, should be a locus of Black Femme-inist critique.

Mirroring the dangerous elusiveness of Femme, a Black Femme-inist critical approach avoids the trappings of essentialism. It does not seek to pin-down textual meaning, rather it probes the promiscuity of Black women's cultural productions, looking toward that openness as an entrance into a critique of white heteropatriarchy. If, as Smith contends, Morrison's repudiation of lesbianism in *Sula* points to the mechanisms through which heterosexist assumptions mask far-reaching textual possibilities, then a Black Femme-inist reading lays bare a viable framework for critiquing white heteropatriarchy as well as heterosexist sexual essentialism. Alex Holding, in "This Femme's Users Guide" admonishes the white queer community for their "history of classism and racism" that is "responsible for the ignoring and invisibilizing of images and histories of femme that have come out of the working class and communities of color for decades" (48). Black Femme-inist criticism makes visible the sexualities of these women while avoiding the pathologization of the 'closet' embedded in gay liberation thinking. This discourse of the closet is so pervasive that it has also been adopted by otherwise radical black feminists. For example, Cheryl Clark, quoted earlier explaining the propensity of black people to adopt white heteronormative oppressive ideologies, espouses

homonormative principles in “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance.”⁸ Clark accuses black women of “hid[ing] in the closet of heterosexual presumption” if they only refer to themselves as lesbians to “certain communities” yet otherwise “pass as heterosexuals” (243). Femme critiques the “rigid dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual” which is present in heteronormative sexual paradigms as well as “embedded in gay liberation thinking” (Kennedy 16). Albrecht-Samarasinha voices her irritation at “‘queer theory’ lesbians of all genders” who condemn her for betraying Femme identity for sleeping with men.” For femme of color, Albrecht-Samarasinha, Femme “desires in a queer, [but] not solely lesbian context, where my lover’s race and class are equally a factor in my desire” (139, *Bisexual Femme*). Within homo- and heteronormative context where femmes are assumed straight and “femininity means less queer” and a racist context in which black femmes are marginalized to say the least, Clark’s remarks can be read as “heterosexist (straight until proven otherwise), sexist (femininity cannot possibly have the agency to define itself)” and I would add, decidedly, homo-normative (gay liberation demands that femmes come out) (Kennedy 16). I do not intend to be overly harsh in my critique of Clark; I understand that the stakes of her argument are to promote lesbian visibility within a context where the black lesbian is rendered masculinized and black femme non-existent, rather, my point here is to tease out the pervasive discourse of the closet. This rhetoric can contribute to an oppressive essentialism that is inflicted upon femmes, and in particular, femmes of color by heteropatriarchal and homo-normative discourses, white and black. As Jewelle Gomez protests, Femme’s “have to deal with the social issue of having to come out practically all the time”

⁸ “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in Black Communities” was originally published in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) whereas “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance” was originally published in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). So her critique of black people espousing white heteropatriarchal values was published two years after her homonormative remarks about black “closeted lesbians.”

(Findley and Gomez 146). Black Femme-inist Criticism eschews the confines of sexual essentialism, instead engaging the openness of Femme as a possible space intervening into normative sexual regimes.

Femme critiques the “rigid dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual” which is present in heteronormative sexual paradigms as well as “embedded in gay liberation thinking” (Kennedy 16). Halberstam critiques this polarity maintaining that it “clamps[s] down on sexual excess and insists on clear sexual distinctions between perverse and normal sexual behavior and between male and female sexualities” (266). By denouncing the unyielding polarity of heterosexual and homosexual and accounting for the role of other identity categories in desire, Black Femme-inist criticism can facilitate a discussion of the multifaceted sexuality of women who may have spent a considerable part of their lives in ostensibly heterosexual relationships and/or have children.⁹ Rather than pathologizing these women as closeted, fence-sitters, or greedily wanting both worlds, Black Femme-inist criticism centers pleasures and desires in sexuality allowing for changeability and fluidity as opposed to strict categories.

Secondly, riffing on Smith’s call that Black Feminist criticism “embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers,” I draw from Smith’s use of the word “embodies.” As such, Black Femme-inist Criticism looks toward the black feminine–identified body¹⁰ as a prime site where the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality are regulated and subverted (134). By

⁹ A “fact sheet” of same sex couples of Georgia distributed by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force shows that “black lesbian couples were raising children at nearly twice the rate of white lesbian partnered households (67% to 38%)” www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/fact.../black_same_sex_georgia.pdf

¹⁰ Language is difficult when describing the complexity of identity. I use female-bodied here to suggest that Black Femme-inist criticism can encompass cisgendered as well as transgendered women, genderqueers, “sissy fags,” queens and anyone who regularly engages a rogue femininity.

turning to the body I take seriously Robert Reid-Pharr's assertion that "If there is one thing that marks us as queer, a category that is somehow different, if not altogether distinct, from the heterosexual, then it is undoubtedly our relationships to the body" (Reid-Pharr 85). Reading Reid-Pharr's passage with the "us" as black people - black men, black women, black fags, queens, dykes, femmes, transpeople, straights and gays - suggests that he is making a claim that by the nature of "our" bodies, black sexuality is, in itself, inherently queer. This fits well with Spillers claim of the "pansexual potential" of the ungendered female body (79). This potential marks the black body as a site of regulatory abjection but also as a place of possible subversion of racist heteronormativity.

To exemplify the bodily experience of racism and (hetero)sexism as well as shift from theory to body, I have an anecdote. I was driving to a drag king show and looked Fab-U-Lous. I won't go into full sartorial detail but part of my outfit included elaborately applied bright fuchsia eyeshadow (this will become relevant later). I was stopped at a light when the driver in the left turn lane decided that he no longer wanted to turn and started backing up at an angle. When he was mere inches from my car I honked my horn, at which point he rolled down his window and demanded that I "Chill the fuck out." There were three people in the car, the white male driver, the white female in the front seat, and a white male in the back seat. I asserted "you almost hit my car" as the driver kept cussing and the male passenger in the back attempted to subdue me with a drunken "ignore him baby, ignore him sweetie, he's sorry baby, look at me, look at me...." "You almost hit my car" I repeated, as the driver retorted "You mean I almost hit your makeup." His plainly dressed female companion laughed at his cleverness. His retort was sophomoric and inane, but it set me off. Cuss at me if you want, but don't insult my

makeup. I went off, throwing out tidal waves of profanities that I didn't even know existed. As he pulled away, the driver yelled out the window "Go back to Mexicali, bitch." To which I screamed, "I'm not Mexican, I'm black you racist idiot!" He was gone. I hyperventilated -- waves of nausea flooded my body and my heart raced -- the panic attack set in. I pulled over, forced my body and brain to slow down and recentered. I then went to the show, shaken but still fabulous.

Through a Black Femme-inist lens, multiple points can be taken from this vignette. First, the driver's initial line of attack was to insult/assault my body, specifically my feminine body. Of all the possible invectives he could have doled out, he turned to my makeup, which suggests that he not only noticed it, but it upset him. There was something dissonant and unsettling to him about a woman (and a brown woman no less) embracing a femininity that wasn't for him or his drunken Cassanova friend in the back seat. There was no way he would know that I was going to a drag king show, nevertheless he read my body as not-right, queerly feminine. In this, a Black femme-inist theoretical model necessitates looking at bodily aesthetics as sites implicated in the naming and regulation of desire. My makeup intentionally named my femminity and his reading of me as queerly feminine prompted the driver's attempts at derisive regulation.

As inane and laughable as his comment is in retrospect, in the moment I felt it as an attack on my embodied femininity and responded in kind (the words "tiny prick" and "motherfucker" may have slipped from my tongue). Neither sex, nor gender are the locus of black femme-inist criticism rather femininity and masculinity are the points of departure. I've been calling the driver's attack (hetero)sexist and misogynist, but his actions weren't solely

based on his disdain for my sexuality or gender but my display of femininity. Third, when his heterosexist assault didn't thwart me, he added an extra shot of racism to his punch, demanding that I return to whatever foreign land produced me – in his mind “Mexicali.” Throughout this anecdote, it has been difficult to distinguish the driver's (hetero)sexism, from his disdain for femininity, from his racism (with a xenophobic kick). Was my makeup offensive because it was 'queer,' because I was brown, or because fuchsia doesn't work for me? Did I look like I was from “Mexicali” because of the way I was styled that day, because I am ambiguously brown, or because geography was never his strong suit? Black femme-inist criticism demands that identities be acknowledged as shifting and intersecting, and oppression as an imbricated strategy of subjugation. Heterosexism was a work even though there is no rainbow sticker on my car, disdain for femininity was evident in the words of the male driver and the laughter of his female companion, and all of these are inflected with racism and xenophobia.

While acknowledging the body as a site of regulatory regimes, Black femme-inism also looks toward the body as a site to subvert or dodge subjugation. The driver's nefarious aim, to tear me down and put me in my place, was both successful and unsuccessful. Sadly, I did break down. His assault on my gendered and racialized body prompted a momentarily debilitating physical response, a panic attack. As far as putting me in my place, I did not return to Mexicali as he desired, but took my place at the drag show, makeup still intact.

Finally, drawing from Smith's mandate that black feminist criticism draw from the personal lives and experiences of black women and Halberstam's fear of the “division of labor” in which “literature is the practice and queer the theory [of sex], I insist that Black Femme-inist

criticism must be sexy (Halberstam 261). I acknowledge that promoting "sexy theory" is a hazardous terrain for black women who are multiply subjected to the racist and sexist demands of white-male dominated theory. Anxiety about my present and my future threatens to arrest my typing fingers. In a context where femininity is derided, black women suppressed, and erotophobia reigns it is understandable that for many women of color "the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fad" which are endemic (perhaps a pandemic) in white-dominated academia (Anzaldúa 167). Nevertheless, I extend this fraught proposition for sexiness by locating it with Gloria Anzaldúa's call to "unlearn the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing" in order to write with "intimacy and immediacy" (165). Given the array of black women's experiences and myriad of ways in which our experiences are inflected with other identities (and non-identities) it follows that sexiness cannot be precisely defined nor policed. When I call for sexy criticism, I'm challenging critical regimes which demand separation of mind and body for intellectual rigor. Given the ways in which presumptions of rational disembodied subjects perpetuate the invisible domination of white knowledge production and erase the voices of subordinated subjects always-already defined by their bodies, I insist that the sensory body – resilient against its pressing hailings – be the heart and tongue of Black Femme-inist Criticism. Sexiness entails pleasure and sensory stimulation, thus Black Femme-inist criticism needs to draw from senses in its presentation. I want to hear our various patois and see, touch, smell and perhaps even taste black bodies. I want criticism that reflects our sadness, anger, jubilation, and, of course, pleasure. It is important to designate approaches that are rife with sensuality as theory in order to interrupt the racist and sexist misconception that black women represent while white men theorize. Barbara Christian observes that "people

of color have always theorized” though sometimes “more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is more sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative” (281). Black women writing ourselves is a radical act. Marking (both textually and physically) black female bodies can be seen as acts of self-definition in the face of racist and sexist regimes which mark black female bodies as a form of subjugation. Thus, despite the dangers, or perhaps because of them, Black Femme-inist criticism needs to be both intellectually and sensory provocative.

Just as Smith suggests that a critical examination of black lesbian writing can open the door to thinking about all black women’s oppression, a Black Femme-inist Criticism is not just applicable to black femmes, black lesbians, or even solely black women, but could be foundational tool for examining and intervening into regimes which subordinate femininity and the multi-faceted and intersecting tactics (racism, (hetero)sexism, misogyny, classism, transphobia) through which that subordination occurs. Black Femme-inist criticism examines how black bodies defy, embrace, and negotiate femininities which have been circumscribed by variously intersecting racist and sexist regimes. These regimes cast black bodies as improperly or unfeminine. Black femme-inist critique embraces feminine agency including sexual agency as a strategy for negotiating racist and gendered oppressions. As a strategy, Black Femme-inism engages with culture in order to supplement and contest traditional theory. Finally, Black Femme-inist criticism, as a neo-critical theory, looks toward the past – theory, history, culture, and bodies – as sites which shape the present and can point to new trajectories in the future.

Chapter Two:

Written in Blood: Slavery, Miscegenation and Realist Limits in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*

"You guys know about vampires. You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, "Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist? And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might seem themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it." -Junot Diaz¹¹

"A figure that both promises and threatens racial and sexual mixing, the vampire feeds off the normalized human, and the monster finds such contaminated food to be nutritious. The vampire also insists on the nightmare of racial violence behind the fantasy of purity in the rituals of kinship." – Donna Haraway, Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse

Located between life and death, vampires exist at the margins of humanity. They are nightmarish, sustaining themselves through human flesh and blood, yet also sensual as that same flesh yields to their bite. The vampire "is a source of both erotic anxiety and corrupt desire" (Gordon and Hollinger 2). From Bram Stoker's quintessential *Dracula* to the *Twilight* saga's dashing Edward Cullen the archetypal vampire is a tall, slender white male. These heterosexual white vampires obsess over their white female prey, eventually turning them in an act of control and love. They are economically privileged and blend in with larger society until their vampiric origins are discovered. However, if as Nina Auerbach discerns "every age embraces the vampire it needs," it follows that in multicultural 21st century America we might need some new vampires (qtd in Gordon and Hollinger 2). These new vampires are no longer

¹¹ Junot Diaz quoted on NJ.com, October 21, 2009.
http://www.nj.com/ledgerlive/index.ssf/2009/10/junot_diazs_new_jersey.html

the "relatively uncomplicated evil" of Count Dracula, but complex sites for exploring pressing racial, gender, and sexual subjects (2). Hollinger and Gordon argue that the vampire "can tell us about sexuality, of course, and about power; it can also inscribe more specific contemporary concerns, such as relations of power and alienation" (3). These 'politicized' vampires are particularly evident in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* where the fantastic is reinvested with overt racial and gender politics. If, as Donna Haraway suggests in *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse* the vampire interrupts the fantasy of racial/blood purity, threatening normalized white bodies, then the threat of Gomez's and Butler's vampires lie not only in their penchant for blood, but also their black female bodies. Like the racialized body, the vampire "carries the power to expose [white heterosexual males] and their anxieties – about blood, about boundaries, about kinship and purity and control, about the racing of sex and the sexing of race" (Winnubst 9). Thus, while the evil of quintessential Dracula is fairly clear cut, the new vampires, here represented in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*, problematize "the boundaries between 'human' and 'monstrous'" (Gordon and Hollinger 5). These vampires are thoughtful, strong, sensual, and, most importantly human(e). They are in contrast to the inhuman(e) assaults on racialized, gendered, and queered bodies. In the novels, the evil monsters are not those who share blood, but oppressive systems bearing down on black female bodies. Like Junot Diaz suggests in the quote opening this chapter, making one a monster entails taking away their reflection, removing their self-determination. Gomez and Butler not only give the 'monster' back her reflection, but in doing so highlight the agency of black female bodies. In both novels the black female vampires exercise their capacity to expose heterosexism and white anxieties over blood; however, since

they are black their race and gender contradict the traditional vampire and further destabilize white heterosexual male privilege. As Jewelle Gomez describes in "Recasting the Mythology: Writing Vampire Fiction," "The challenge [...] was to create a new mythology, to strip away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure within the narrow, Western, Caucasian expectations, and to recreate a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient frame of reference" ("Recasting" 87-88). Through these vampiric women, Butler and Gomez intervene into the fantastical and ahistorical vampire genre using it to emphasize black women's agency in the face of racist and sexist assaults.

Both novels are formally transgressive, not only in the vampire conventions they upend but also in the generic boundaries they cross. *The Gilda Stories* is simultaneously (and sometimes paradoxically) a neo-slave narrative with a chronological (albeit episodic) progression as well as a fantastical work of speculative fiction. It's slavery with vampires. Likewise *Fledgling* is simultaneously a neo-miscegenation novel, a mystery, and vampire fiction. Referring to *The Gilda Stories*, Miriam Jones notes "artists from groups that are culturally disenfranchised must by definition have a complicated relationship to the traditions within which they produce their work" (152). The vampires in these novels function as metaphors for the marginalization of black women, but they also function to highlight their strength and resilience. The use of multiple genres enables the authors to explore what cannot be contained within a realist narrative. In addition to critiquing the supposed authenticity of realism and the objectivity of history, the fantastic genre and vampire form precipitate a metaphorical bridge linking the past, present, and future. Vampires are relatively immortal and thus easily cross time and space. This articulation the past, present, and future through a narrative style which

critiques objectivity is the means through which both authors write black women's bodies into history. It provides black women with reflections of themselves as empowered and cherished subjects whose existence is a legacy of coalitions formed across racial, gendered, and sexual lines. These images are in sharp contrast to those in the Bible and newspapers in which neither Gilda nor her Lakota companion, Bird, "could see themselves reflected" (Gomez 21). They allow them to "claim authority over narrative constructions of the past," and I would add, present, and future (Spaulding 2).

There is a reason why both novels are speculative fiction. In addition to asserting authority of the past through creative co-opting of realist narrative, perhaps even more importantly, is holding authority over the future of black women's representation. In this sense both novels can be seen as utopic. This may seem paradoxical, especially given the seemingly dystopic final chapter of *The Gilda Stories* in which greed and environmental abuse have turned the United States into a wasteland of hunger greater than any vampire's. The usual problem with utopia is the marginalized groups - queers, people of color, anyone who is 'less than' the white heteronormative - have died. How many science fiction movies have we all seen that end in white heterosexual love as the supposed ultimate utopic vision? However, understanding the utopic as "less an image of a perfect society than a tool to assess critically the society in which [we] live" gives a utopic dimension to both *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling* in that the novels expose and then intervene into the limits of black women's representation through complex historical relationships (Tally 110). In other words, while slavery is fundamental to the black present, so are miscegenation battles, black nationalisms, black feminisms, and black queer identity just to name a few. This is what I mean when I call to de-essentialize blackness

which also requires a de-essentialization of black histories. Within narrative limits where black women's representation seems to be an impossibility, a black (w)hole to use Evelyn Hammonds term, these novels use the speculative as place of possibility - a utopia. Though not specific to black women, this is echoed in Robert Tally Jr.'s assertion that "the dimension of utopian thought have real value" in situations where "radical alternatives to the actual existing system seem inconceivable" (Tally 110).

Central to this utopic vision are the novels' reinscription of the vampire. White anxieties around black women's sexuality can be thought of in terms of the image of the succubus vampire and its dangerous predation. Patricia Hill Collins points to three white heteropatriarchal fears associated with black women: "(1) rampant and uncontrollable female sexuality; (2) fear of miscegenation; and (3) independent Black female desire" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 71). Behind each of these fears is the assumption of predatory black women -- hypersexual women who prey on white men. The plots of both novels point to these white fears while subverting their meaning. For example, in *Fledgling* miscegenation is indeed a fear of many of the white vampires, but Shori's miscegenated body is the source of vampire survival as opposed to leading to the destruction of the (white) vampire race. *The Gilda Stories* opens with the potential rape of the enslaved Girl by white slave catcher. It is clear that he is the sexual predator whom the Girl must fight off, thereby overturning the image of the all-too-willing black female, and addressing the prevalence of the rape of black women by white men. In both novels, independent Black female sexuality is a source of the vampire's empowerment. This suggests that the fear of black women's sexuality is rooted in, to reference Audre Lorde, the power of the erotic to upset systems of oppression.

In addition, in both novels the literal bloodsuckers are the antithesis of hegemonic stereotypes of vampiric black women who feed upon the state, sucking its resources dry. The welfare queen image springs from the same lineage that produces the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire; these images are tools to control and exploit black women's sexuality. Suggesting this lineage, Patricia Hill Collins notes:

From the mammies, jezebel, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima's on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous black prostitute, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 7)

A controlling image of Black womanhood, the welfare queen, "represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure's problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction for the American way of life is attributed to it" (Lubiano 337-338). Because the 'welfare queen' tends to have many children from multiple men, her sexual (im)morality becomes a matter of national concern. Forced sterilization has been one of the real consequences from this assault on black women's bodies. The image of the welfare queen labels black women's bodies as dangerous to the wellbeing of the state and America's 'moral fortitude.' The women and their children are labeled as succubae greedily draining state resources and feeding off of 'good (White) American taxpayers.' It is within this context that *Fledgling* and *The Gilda Stories* offer counter narratives of black vampires who don't drain the (national) body but offer exchanges for the resources they fairly consume.

In both novels, taking blood ethically requires some sort of exchange; pleasure is the currency. In *The Gilda Stories* blood is taken for sustenance; however the vampires instill pleasant thoughts into their targets. The original Gilda instructs, "There is a joy to the exchange we make. We draw life into ourselves, yet we give life as well. We give what is needed -- energy, dreams, ideas. It is a fair exchange in a world full of cheaters" (Gomez 45). Unlike the mythical welfare queen who saps the system, the economy of the vampires is based on trade -- life for life. Desire is the tender in *Fledgling*. After feeding Shori, her human, Wright, immediately desires to be bitten again. Although Shori is hesitant to take too much blood, Wright exclaims "Shit you can do it right now if you want to" (Butler 18). Likewise, a human named Theodora's responds to Shori's bite ecstatically. Shori bites Theodora asking, like a concerned lover, "Is it good?" In response Theodora "moaned -- a satisfied little sound" (Butler 25). Despite losing her memory, Shori's recalls the importance of exchange in taking blood. She is pleased that "[she] could at least help the people who helped [her]. That felt important" (Butler 26). The long-term relationship between the Ina and their humans is completely defined by exchange. Long-term human companions are referred to as symbionts, a term suggesting "mutualistic symbiosis" (Butler 63). The Ina cannot live without the blood and companionship of their symbionts and the symbionts are kept young and disease free by the venom of their Ina. Shori doesn't understand traditional myths in which vampires are murderous bloodsuckers: "Who could need that much blood? Why kill a person who would willingly feed you again and again if you handled them carefully?" (Butler 37). In this, Butler reverses the welfare queen myth. It is not the black women who greedily feed off the state but voracious others who take more than they need by exploiting those who sustain them.

In addition to the pansexual and lesbian relationships between Gilda and her lovers, and Shori and her symbionts, the novels use the vampire as a metaphor for queering heteronormativity and questioning deviance. Living at the margins of the normal(ized) world while maintaining secret identities and secret liaisons are ways in which vampire fiction and queer fiction coalesce. Miriam Jones, in "*The Gilda Stories: Revealing the Monsters at the Margins*," cites Gilda's transformation into a vampire as "like nothing so much as a neophyte dyke contemplating her expanding horizons" (Jones 161). Gomez writes: "There was a certain knowledge of the world around [Gilda], excitement about the unknown that lay ahead, and comfort with her new life" (50). The coming out metaphor is continued in the "Rosebud, Missouri: 1921" chapter through Gilda's relationship with Aurelia. Explicitly making the connection between queer identity and vampires, Winnubst notes "Jews, like whores and blacks and queers, are vampiric—in the fantasy life of Western European and North American psyches" (7) However, both Gomez and Butler suggest that queerness, while existing at the margins like vampires, builds relationships as opposed to perverting them.

Briefly, *The Gilda Stories* centers around the Girl/Gilda, a former slave who, by choice is turned into a vampire by a brothel madam named Gilda. The novel chronicles the Girl/Gilda (who after her change takes the name of her vampiric "mother", Gilda) as her immortality takes her through time -- 1850s Louisiana, 1890s Yerba Buena, Missouri in the 1920s, 1955 Boston, New York in the 1971, New Hampshire in 2020, and 2050 "The Land of Enchantment" which has become an apocalyptic hunting-ground for those in search of vampire blood. She creates and chooses her family including her primary lover/creator, a Lakota woman named Bird. Throughout the novel, Gilda observes (and struggles with) race, sex, and gender politics as they

affect, through many centuries, her and the black mortals around her. For Gilda, "The inattention of her contemporaries [vampires] to some mortal questions, like race, didn't suit her. She didn't believe the past could, or should, be so easily discarded" (Gomez 180).

In *Fledgling* Shori is a young vampire (called Ina) who has lost her immediate vampire family in arson attacks. In the course of them, she also loses her memory. While searching for the culprit in her family's murders and knowledge of her Ina identity, Shori finds out that she is the product of an experiment to breed an Ina child from a black human mother in order to create offspring who can withstand the daylight. Later, it is revealed that this experiment is what led to her family being murdered by another Ina clan who disapproved of Shori's 'tainted' blood.

Both *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling* open with a sense of urgency as we are thrust into dangerous and unknown territory. Both women seem to be on the verge of being attacked (I say seemed because later it is revealed that the man who comes for Shori is a friend, not an assailant). In *The Gilda Stories*, the Girl staves off her capture and rape by stabbing a slave-catcher with the knife she has hidden near her breasts: "she entered him with her heart which was now a wood-handled knife [...] Warmth spread from his center of power to his chest as the blood left his body" (Gomez 11). The imagery foreshadows later representations of vampirism. Instead of being forcefully entered by her captor, the Girl enters him with her blade. Her virgin blood is not spilled, instead the blood from where the Girl has gutted the man from his "center of power," his penis, to his chest washes over her body" (12). The Girl is not disgusted by the blood for it signals "the death of a beast and her continued life" (12). Almost immediately the narrative of black women being defined by victimization is questioned; the Girl fights off her

attacker. She is literally released from slavery, and as a narrative metaphor, released from the enslavement to the victimization narrative. Though Gilda is the one who finds the Girl and offers her shelter, the Girl has already freed herself by running away and by killing the man who would enslave her. In addition, Gomez has freed the girl from the narrative constraints of victimization.

Although in *Fledgling* it turns out that Shori was not in danger of being attacked, her vulnerable state sets us up for thinking of her as a victim. In imagery suggesting a coffin Shori awakens in darkness, "lying on something hard and uneven" with nothing but "hunger and pain." It seems she has barely escaped something, but that something is unclear. Like the Girl who seizes her chance the moment before she is attacked, Shori waits for "the creature" to come to her. It touches her face, wrist, and throat until her hunger takes over her pain and she springs at it. She "clung to it, rode it, found its throat, tasted its blood, smelled its terror [...] until it collapsed" (Butler 2). Here again, the blood is a sexual motif, this time a brutal scene of violent ecstasy and satiation. The narrative structure of both novels prompts the reader to think of both black women as potential victims of their male attackers. Instead, both black vampires flip the script killing their would-be attackers in intense moments mimicking sexual exaltation. In this, the women exhibit agency in the face of male victimization. This is not to undermine the very real threat of misogynistic violence, but to demonstrate acts of resistance against it. In Shori's case, her vulnerability is genuine, but so is her strength. In the case of the Girl, Gomez points to the many black women who fought off their white male attackers and she denies a history of pure victimization. As suggested earlier, both novels intervene into the repeated narrative of black women's victimization by setting that narrative up in order to

overturn it. They do this through the vampire who acts, not as a predator, but as an agent of freedom from those who prey on black women's bodies both literally and through generalized narratives of victimhood.

Naming, or lack of names, is used metaphorically in both novels to meditate upon the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, or more pointedly, the past in the future. Gilda, in the beginning known only as "the Girl," is an escaped slave on the verge of being seized by a slave-catcher. Whereas Shori, unnamed as *Fledgling* opens, awakes in a cave to find herself blind, greatly incapacitated, and ravenous. In both novels the lack of a name suggests an unknown history -- a lineage that has been lost. In *The Gilda Stories* this loss is a metaphor for the histories brutally severed across the middle passage. The Girl tries

to remember some of the stories that her mother, now dead, had pieced together from the many different languages to describe the journey to this land. The legends sketched a picture of the Fulani past - a natural rhythm of life without bondage. It was a memory that receded more with each passing year."

(Gomez 10)

Although her connections to a pre-slavery past have faded, the moniker "the Girl" and her bequeathed name "Gilda" point to the creation of a new woman-centered lineage, a lineage that does not disregard the violence of slavery but does not rely on chattel slavery as an origin for black female identity. Lynda Hall argues, "The Girl/Gilda, whose story provides the central voice, links women across time through taking on the name of Gilda and by way of her original, all-inclusive name of 'Girl'" (396). In the frame of the novel, the Girl's given name is not the name likely given to her by her enslaver, but the name given to her by Gilda, who helped free

her from enslavement. Although her name marks a new beginning, the Girl/Gilda's past is not forgotten. While teaching the Girl/Gilda to read, Bird "wondered what creatures, as invisible as she and the girl were, did with their pasts. Was she to slip it off her shoulders and fold it into a chest to be locked away for some unknown future?" However, the girl's past is incorporated into her daily lessons where they share and record stories of their childhoods in order to create "a legend or memory" of themselves (Gomez 21). These legends and memories etched on paper are tangible proof of the women's existence which colonization tried to erase, including the Girl's memories of enslavement and Bird's memory of colonizer occupation and disease. Bird suggests that these historical scars are part of white people's fears that they'll be forgotten; little do they realize "that we easily forget them, who they might be. All we ever remember is their scars" (23). Although these scars are etched into the bodies and psyches of women of color, the legends and memories etched on paper are more significant to the women's identities. Gomez's novel participates in etching these (re)memories through her narrative.

Although the original Gilda appears white, her racial and ethnic origins are never clearly revealed. She is described only as having a "dark eyes and pale skin" which was "painted in colors like a mask." Upon sensing the Girl's fear Gilda silently says "*You needn't be afraid. I'll take care of you. The night hides many things*" (13). It is possible that one of the many things that the night hides, besides vampires, is Gilda's ethnic origins. The presence of the Girl reminds Gilda of her childhood a "place whose name she had long since forgotten":

She saw a gathering of people with burnished skin. She was among them. The spiced scent of their bodies was an aura moving alongside them as they crossed

the arid expanse of land. She couldn't see much beyond the curved backs and the dust-covered sandals of those walking in front of her [...] All that seemed left was the memory of a scented passage that had dragged her along in its wake and the dark color of blood as it seeped into the sand." (18)

The original's Gilda's story may have been of the Jewish exodus from Egypt, a story that often resonated with black slaves. The language of "scented passage" recalls the phrase middle passage. The dark blood marks the countless lives lost on this forced migration. Gilda's story also resonates with forced migration of the Lakota (Bird's tribe) and other indigenous people at the hands of white settlers. Through these parallels Gomez makes connections between these stories and the women, often silenced, who lived through colonization and enslavement -- the original Gilda's unknown story of survival, Bird's recovery from the pox, the Girl's escape from slavery, and her mother's survival of the deadly middle passage." To Gomez, it doesn't matter whether it is "one war or another" "Which Sovereign? Whose Nation?" the perpetuation of cruelty and violence from one people to another continues, and the women who resist and rebuild remain (18).

In *Fledgling*, Shori's injuries have resulted in memory loss including the loss of her name. Like the Girl who is named Gilda at the end of the first chapter, Shori does not receive a name until almost the end of chapter two. After Wright picks her from the side of the road, the white male renames her Renee. At first this name change may seem to mimic the relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved. However, their relationship is one of mutual symbiosis rather than possession. The name he gives means reborn, pointing again to the

concept of (re)memory. Through Shori's name and apparent youth Butler is exploring the relationship between names, memory, and trauma.

Her birth name, Shori, is given to her by black human mother. The name is taken from that of an East African crested nightingale. It hearkens back to her mother's African origins and forward to her daughter's Ina tendency to stay up at night (nightingales are known for their nighttime songs). Thus her name is an amalgamation of Shori's human and Ina characteristics whose loss cuts her off from her human and Ina past. The murder of her Ina and black human mother compound this loss severing her connection to a biracial identity. Since all Ina are white Shori's blackness erases her Ina identity but her Ina identity also separates her from (black) humanness. Shori doesn't even recognize her blackness until she Wright points it out to her: "I was about to protest that I was brown, not black, but before I could speak I understood what he meant" (Butler 31). Toi Derricotte writes about how the crisis of identity inflects her experiences as a biracial person:

I'm sure most people don't go around all the time thinking about what race they are. When you look like what you are, the external world mirrors back to you an identity consistent with your idea of yourself. However, for someone like me, who doesn't look like what I am, those mirrors are broken, and my consciousness or lack of consciousness takes on serious implications. (25)

Unlike in traditional lore where vampires have no reflection at all, Shori does not see herself as a black person but sees her characteristics in neutral, non-racialized language. Looking in the mirror for the first time after her narrow escape she sees a "lean, sharp-faced, large-eyed, brown-skinned person - a complete stranger" (Butler 18). The neutralized language of race may

seem to point to an advocating of colorblindness, however it is important to note that this image makes Shori a "complete stranger" to herself. Shori's temporary crisis of identity due to her mixed race body marks her estrangement from her origins and precisely the black mother who named her. Far from an endorsement of colorblindness, this erasure is an indictment of it. Shori's protests that she is "brown, not black" are immediately met with understanding of what blackness means as a racialized category. This recognition prompts another memory of Shori being an experiment to withstand the sun better than other Ina do. Thus her blackness becomes an important source of memories about her body, her origins, and their potential.

Although I argued earlier that slavery is not the end all defining force of black identity, it is one of many locations for black development. Vampire imagery in *The Gilda Stories* enables Gomez to consider how the specter of slavery haunts blackness. However, unlike many contemporary neo-slave narratives, which tend to hold up slavery as the deciding cultural force of blackness, Gomez demonstrates how slavery overlaps with other cultural moments. This is an integral expansion of A. Timothy Spaulding's claim that "slavery resonates in the entire oeuvre of African American literature" (1). Yes, slavery resonates here but it intersects with equally important enduring events.

In *The Gilda Stories*, "the horror of slavery appeared to reap endless returns" (180). With the mass imprisonment of blacks and Latinos and the exponential rising of women of color prisoners since the Reagan war on drugs, incarceration has become an unfortunate site of black identity formation. Angela Davis connects the prison industrial complex to slavery through her use of the term prison abolition. Davis writes: "I choose the word 'abolitionist' deliberately [...] through the prison system, the vestiges of slavery have persisted. It thus makes sense to use a

word that has historical resonance" (Davis, "Incarcerated" 26). Gilda compares the Attica uprising to her "memories of the slave quarters: dark men with eyes full of submission and rage. Their bodies plumped with bullets were the same ashen color as those fallen besides the trees to which they had been tied as punishment" (169).

Slavery also haunts nationalist movements whose promotion of black power is its ostensible opposite. Black nationalisms would seem to be the antithesis of slavery, however black men's self determination was at the expense of the freedom of other marginalized peoples. Patricia Hill Collins remarks "the Black male leadership of Black civil rights organizations found it difficult to see Black women as leaders in the civil rights movement" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 232). She also notes, "with the exception of Black women's organizations, male-run organizations have either not stressed Black women's issues, or have done so under duress" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 10). Gilda extends this critique explaining that, while the male champions of black nationalism had "a big dream about black men being free," they "didn't have a full vision - you know, women being free, Puerto Ricans being free, homosexuals being free" (Gomez 170). Thinking about the black women who did thankless work toward the goal of black liberation, she comments "a row of cotton is a row of cotton" and remembers working in the cotton fields with her sisters who, when she fell, "lifted her effortlessly and dragged her along as if she were just another burden like the sack of white cotton" (Gomez 170-171). Despite her race, gender, and sexual marginalization, Gilda is supported by a history of women who can "effortlessly" take on her burden (171). This support becomes literal at the end of the novel. In the post-apocalyptic "Land of Enchantment: 2050" the world teems with disease; resources are scarce and only the very rich can survive in the

decimated wasteland. They do so by commissioning Hunters to catch vampires whose regenerative powers and eternal life the wealthy plan to appropriate. Recognizing this exploitation of vampire bodies for what it is, Gilda observes "slavery [has] come again" (235). She decides to escape to South America where Bird has informed her they will be safe. Crippled in fighting off a vampire, Gilda "and their burdens" are carried across a canal to safety by her newly created vampire, Ermis (249).

The "burden" in both examples is the weight of the exploited black female body. However, in both the example of Black Nationalist exploitation and the case of the vampire hunters, the joint efforts of black women supporting each other interrupt patriarchal attempts to break them. According to Collins, the "collective historical experiences with oppression may stimulate a self-defined Black women's standpoint that in turn can foster Black women's activism" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 33). Communities of other black women are able to take on (in the sense of carrying but also combating) the burden when one falls.

Gomez makes connections between the history of slavery, the conditions of black men's imprisonment, and most pointedly the downtrodden position of black women within both capitalist exploitation of black women's bodies and cultural nationalist struggles. She shows how slavery inflects these struggles but argues that slavery does not encapsulate their meaning or the meanings of black people. Avery Gordon, in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* argues that we need to refute the idea "that slavery created so total a condition of subjection that all traces of humanity vanished; that slavery became these African-Americans as the totality of their ontology" (149). Although Gordon is referring specifically to conditions in the United States during original chattel slavery, it is easy to extrapolate that, just

as slavery did not inform the conditions of black's totality then, it certainly does not form them now. However, although chattel slavery has been ostensibly abolished, "something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where people reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity" (Gordon 139). Slavery's presence continues to haunt despite its officially ending, but "something of it continues to live on" in an array of other experiences which begin to outline blackness.

Fledgling also highlights the presence of slavery in other social histories, the most notable of which is miscegenation. Butler, however, does not do this through the traditional narrative in African-American literature of the rape of black women by their slave owner, a narrative which, though important, is not the only way to talk about miscegenated bodies. Instead, Butler argues for Shori's agency and power even under conditions that suggest slave breeding. Shori is the product of an experiment mixing Ina and black human genes. She is faster than members of either race, can withstand the sun better than other Ina and, unlike them, can stay awake during the day. Admittedly, this experiment suggests that Shori is the prototype of a new, enhanced breed of slaves, and Butler initially entertains this reading of faster, stronger, and more alert slaves in order to implode it. The dialogue begins with Shori's father, Iosif, who ventriloquizes racial science in explaining "We're not another race, we're another species. We can't interbreed with them. We've never been able to do that. Sex, but no children" (67). Here Butler expects her reader to grasp the gist of 18th and 19th century arguments about whether blacks were a different race of human or a completely different species and to recognize that these arguments were used to perpetuate the 'natural'

enslavement of blacks while maintaining white racial purity and superiority. Under this racist logic, Shori is a classic mulatto, a term I use to denote 18th and 19th century white American terror of black and white mixing. Like the mule, a cross between the horse and donkey, mulattos were thought to lead to the extinction of both the white and black races. Although the mule, when bred with another mule is functionally infertile, the mulatto is symbolically infertile in that they can only produce another mulatto; hence the fear of white extinction through interbreeding. Although I wouldn't call *Fledgling* a neo-slave novel, the links between slave breeding, Shori's experimental breeding, and enslavement are apparent.

In contrast, Butler's uses these links in order to argue for Shori's agency even under conditions that hearken to slave breeding. In other words, yes Shori can be read as victim of a breeding system similar to slavery, but ultimately that reading is undermined by Shori's superior strength and intellectual abilities. These attributes are not in service of other Ina, but are what enable her to avenge the murder of her family and assert her own autonomy. Even more pertinent is that Shori has the potential remedy to the extinction of all Ina; she makes them "less vulnerable" since she can withstand the sun and stay up during the day (66). Unlike the classic mulatto of racist pseudoscience who leads to race extinction, Shori is the solution to the vulnerability of the Ina species because she is able to pass on these traits to her descendants.

Although she has Iosif's DNA, it was three women, Shori's elder mothers, who made it possible for her to be created: "They were both 350 years old, and biology fascinated them [...]. They understood more about the uses of viruses in genetic engineering than anyone I've ever heard of, and they understood it well before humans did" (Butler 78). Their age puts them as

adult Ina right in the middle of scientific racism's monogenesis versus polygenesis race debates - debates that they use to understand genetic mixing long before any humans. Shori, being human and Ina and also being black and white can be regarded as a hybrid species, a species that no one thought possible. Despite fears that "mixing human genes with ours[Ina] would weaken [Ina]," it is because of Shori's strength and ability to stay awake during the day that the Ina village at Punta Nublada is saved from attackers (although it is also true that the attackers are there because of Shori) (225). When caught, one of the attackers, Victor, refers to Shori as a "Dirty little nigger bitch [and a] "Goddamed mongrel cub" (173). Notably, the dehumanizing language, "bitch" and "cub," are not his words but those of other Ina which, under their control, he cannot help but repeat. These Ina are incensed by Shori's "dark-skin" and her Ina and human mixture. Victor continues, "That's not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn't let you and you...your kind...your family...breed" (173). Despite the claim that "the Ina weren't racist [...]. Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them" (a claim that is echoed in *The Gilda Stories*), it is the breeding of dark-skinned vampires which some of the Ina fear (149). Since the dark skin is to the Ina advantage, this is due solely to the illogics of racism and fears of the decimation of the white Ina race.

Like Gomez who draws connections between the legal system and enslavement, Butler comes to a similar conclusion in terms of the bodies of women of color. Once Shori charges the Silk family with the attacks on and murder of her own family, a Council of Judgment is called to determine their guilt or innocence. At this council two members of seven Ina families act as a jury. The Ina are quite self-righteous about the integrity of their legal system and its superiority to the human justice system. Daniel Gordon smugly tells Shori, "Human trials are often games

to see which lawyer is best able to use the law, the jury's beliefs and prejudices, and his own theatrical ability to win" (Butler 220). Despite his arrogance, as the trial progresses it is clear that Ina trials are just as subject to games and favoritism as human trials. In Shori's case, the game is her humanity as an Ina, that is, whether or not she can even be counted as an Ina. Shori understands Milo Silks questioning as an attack on her Ina-hood. The trial quickly becomes an argument whether or not she has the right to be a plaintiff in a trial against Ina. Milo Silk's bursts "You're not Ina [...] and you have no more business at this council than would a clever dog" (Butler 238). This echoes antebellum sentiments regarding black people's mental capacity to withstand a trial as well as whether or not they could be counted as people at all. Despite her desire to return the emphasis of the trial to her murdered family, the Silks continually play out their case over Shori's body. She is questioned on her height, which is 4'11," compared to the adult female Ina average of 5'6", and Milo asks that she be examined by a physician. The result of these legal maneuvers is that Shori becomes the defendant rather than the plaintiff; she must prove her case as well as her Ina-ness. In fact the case against the Silks can only be proven if she is first able to prove her Ina-ness. This calls upon the 1857 *Morrison vs. White* case in which a former slave, Alexina Morrison, ran away from her slaveholder claiming that she was white and enslaved illegally. During the trial the white men used the language of scientific racism in order to examine her physically down to minute details. They "treated Alexina Morrison in ways a white woman at the time -- even a dancing girl or prostitute -- would never have been treated, publically disrobing her and touching her body" (Gross 2). These similarities point to the ways in the legal system has, and continues, to play out over the terrain of black

women's bodies.¹² Patricia Hill Collins notes "the system was designed to stamp out agency and annex black women's bodies as systems of profit" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 7). However, Shori's success in the trial and her repeated questioning of the white vampire's Ina-ness keeps the legal system from stamping out her agency. In response to Milo's questioning of Shori's memory and his demand that she see a physician, Shori retorts "What are those notes you're making there Milo? No one else is taking notes. Are you having difficulties with your memory too? (Butler 238). Shori refuses to be silenced by a system which attempts to shut her mouth and assault her body.

Continuing the theme (which functions throughout the novel) of interrogating slavery as the incipient and end all be all of black identities, Gomez looks toward the black women's club movement as foundational to black women's identities as thinkers and activists. Though it is often criticized for its narrow bourgeoisie moral codes and doctrine of social uplift (a critique that I have drawn on), Gomez envisions the Black women's club movement as a potential space for a Black lesbian feminist politic. Reflecting on the origins the Black women's club movement, Angela Y. Davis argues "Black clubwomen were not simply emulating their white counterparts [...] They had come together to decide upon a strategy of resistance to the current propagandistic assaults on Black women and the continued reign of lynch law" (Davis, *Women* 133). Although this movement is haunted by the legacy of slavery, it is more importantly a site of black women's activism. Collins notes, "the activities of nineteenth-century educated Black women intellectuals [...] exemplify this tradition of merging intellectual work and activism"

¹² Although In the *Morrison vs. White* case, Alexina was ultimately found to be white, during the trial, as Gross notes, she was treated as one would treat a black woman.

(*Black Feminist Thought* 37)¹³. She associates this work with "Black feminist thought's contours as critical social theory" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 37). Thus, the black women's club movement can be read as a site of an incipient black feminism where black women are not reducible to victims of slavery, but create spaces of agency amidst its specter.

Gomez narrates the domestic sphere of the club movement, the home of women's supposed "talk and twitter," as a potential space for female erotic bonding (Gomez 103). Writing about nineteenth early twentieth century romantic friendships between women is not a new phenomenon. For example, in *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, Lillian Faderman details the romantic relationships between Bluestockings "women who took themselves seriously as intellectuals in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries" (5). However, none of the sixteen authors who wrote tales of romantic friendships in Faderman's volume are women of color. One argument for these omissions might be that women of color weren't writing about desire in their fiction. However, as Deborah McDowell's analysis of lesbianism in *Passing* (1929) and the clear homoeroticism between Sappho and Dora in Pauline Hopkins *Contending Forces* (1900) demonstrates, this simply is not true. Gomez acknowledges these exclusions and writes these women, and indeed these relationships, back into literary and cultural history.

At the opening of chapter three of *The Gilda Stories* "Rosebud, Missouri: 1921," Gilda's friend, Aurelia, is nervous about hosting the Church Circle with black writer, activist, and club woman, Alice Dunbar. Upon Dunbar's departure, Aurelia is struck by her "unwavering gaze and

¹³ Collins is careful to note that working class black women "also engaged in a joining of ideas and activism," pointing to the performances of Blues women as a place where black women "gathered and shared ideas especially germane to them" (37).

her piercing eyes, a look that felt both challenging and seductive" (Gomez 103). Dunbar has been noted to have romantic relationships with women. Recounting her process researching Dunbar, Akasha (Gloria) Hull remarks that part of her reasons for doing research into Dunbar was to "uncover and (re)write our own multistoried history" (15). Romantic relationships between black women are part of this history. Likewise Gomez asserts, "The Black lesbian must recreate our home, unadulterated, unsanitized, specific and not isolated from the generations that have nurtured us...so that we, who have been lost in the shadows of the past, can be revealed and appreciated for the powerful legacy that we bear" (qtd in Hall 396).

Gilda becomes an integral part of Aurelia's domestic space. Even when not in the room she is "everywhere;" "her favorite chair was angled in the corner next to the ornate reading lamp where she sat many evenings, first as Aurelia's comforting neighbor, later as a special friend" (104). The Rosebud chapter reads like a coming out story as Gilda struggles throughout with whether or not to reveal herself to Aurelia. Gilda "longed to share much with [Aurelia] but wasn't sure she would be able to hold back anything once she began" (105). It is not clear whether Gilda is hesitant about revealing that she is a vampire, a lesbian, or both. Later, as she considers leaving Aurelia, Gilda remains "unsure of how to know when one she cared for might be suited to this life, or when she might simply be thinking of her desires and not the needs of others" (119). Like her ruminations on coming out, this reflection remains ambiguous. Her unspecified desires could be for a lover or an addition to her vampire family or both. The phrase "suited to this life" evokes the life of vampires as well as approximates "in the life," slang for homosexuality.

Gilda's fantasies of turning Aurelia are also rife with sensuality. She imagines Aurelia as "acquiescent, eager, letting Gilda draw the blood and return it in the ritual of sharing that would bind them together forever" (120). During their goodbyes Gilda kisses her and Aurelia recognizes "the feeling that had been with her too much in the past." (126) Again, the nature of this feeling is unclear. Is it Gilda's fear of loneliness that Aurelia recognizes in herself? Is it sexual longing? In the end Gilda reveals her vampirism to Aurelia in a letter -- the secret she had been warned against sharing with anyone "outside of the family" (128). Gilda writes about how she is "different from them all, a part of them yet apart from them" (128). The ambiguity, and sensuality point to the literature of romantic friendships. In the Rosebud chapter, Gomez intervenes into the white literary genre, and, by extension, into the cultural history of black women-identified sexuality.

Though less apparent, elements of the coming out narrative are also present in *Fledgling*. Shori's memory loss makes her unsure of her own vampiric identity and unfamiliar with Ina customs. Like a young, isolated queer, she even goes onto the internet searching for information about her identity. Yet sex, as it is connected to her feeding, seems to come instinctually. She matter-of-factly tells Wright, "I don't know enough about myself to say what my age might be or even whether I'm human. But I'm old enough to have sex with you if you want it" (21). She finds sex "familiar and good" (22). Though she has ostensibly heterosexual sex with Wright, the same instincts apply when she sensually feeds off of Theodora. She doesn't understand the pleasure that she and her human feel from feeding yet she does it "in a comfortable, knowing way" (26). Questions about Shori's and other Ina's sexuality are dispersed through the novel. Upon finding out about Shori's affection for Theodora, Wright harshly asks

"Swing both ways, do you?" Shori doesn't understand his bitterness. For her sex with male and female symbionts is natural "if both they and I want it" (85). When Shori does question the relationships between same-sex Ina and symbionts it is not because she finds same-sex attraction difficult to understand but because it seems to be a human concern. Just as Wright asks her if she swings both ways and asks Brook if she minds being a symbiont to a female Ina, Shori asks Martin "Did you mind that you would be a symbiont to another man? [...]" Remembering the question that Wright had asked Brook" (203). For Shori, and for Ina, pansexuality comes naturally. Here, I am not trying to debate whether gayness is a biological or a choice. That question is of no interest to me. Instead, the novel and I emphasize that those kinds of questions are not relevant to actual queer lives.

The queerness of the vampire metaphor extends to the created families in both novels. Since immortality makes it difficult for vampires to maintain birth-family relationships, they must construct their own. In addition, as Collins argues, extended families made up of "bloodmothers and other-mothers" challenges capitalist family structures. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 197). She explains that under capitalist models women "who can 'catch' legal husbands, who live in single family homes, who can afford private school and music lessons for their children, are deemed better mothers than those who do not" (*Black Feminist* 197). In an economy where children are considered property, children can be treated as privately owned, rather than as part of a community. Extended families give "othermothers [sic] and other nonparents 'rights' in child rearing" which "challenge prevailing capitalist property relations" and pose a threat heteronormative family structures (*Black Feminist* 197). Through these families, women "activate some networks for socialization, reproduction, and consumption and

others for emotional support, economic cooperation, and sexuality" (197). These "African-influenced understandings of family [...] help African-Americans as a collectivity cope and resist oppression" (197).

Both Butler and Gomez critique the normative heterosexual family structure through families who are linked by blood, though not heterosexual procreation. In *The Gilda Stories*, the relationships between mother, child, and lover are collapsed. When the Girl is turned into a vampire the experience is both motherly and sexual. The Girl becomes "weak" under Gilda's "flowing energy." Yet, at the same time, the Girl hears "a soft humming that sounded like her mother" as she "curled her long body in Gilda's lap like a child safe in her mother's arms" (Gomez 46). Pulling the Girl to her chest Gilda then bites her and, in return, the Girl suckles the blood from Gilda's breast. This maternal sensuality is augmented during the second part of The Girl's change. Bird must "complete the circle" in order to make The Girl their "daughter" (47). As with Gilda, Bird has the Girl suckle from her breast. Like lovers, their breathing and heartbeats become synchronous as Bird "lay her head back on the pillows, holding the girl in her arms, and rest[s]" (48). The Girl is dubbed Gilda, suggesting a maternal, as opposed to a heteronormative paternal lineage. Later Bird and the Girl/Gilda become lovers changing their early relationship from mother/daughter to sexual partners; more precisely Gilda still feels Bird's lovemaking "almost as motherly affection, yet there was more" (139).

Gilda's relationship with Julius and his eventual turning into a vampire is also familial as well as sexual. Although Gilda senses Julius's attraction to her, she responds that she just wants to be friends, intuiting Julius's loneliness and need for "a friend more than a lover" (172). However, later as she takes blood from him, she plants sexual dreams into his head giving "his

mind" the "gratification his body hungered for" (178). The transformation scene between Gilda and Julius is similar to her own. As she slices the flesh on his neck, she gives Julius "a kiss both passionate and chaste, leaving Julius feeling like a child in her arms, yet still a man" (192). It is appropriate that earlier in the chapter Julius refers to Gilda as "sisterlove" (184) since at the end, Gilda sends Bird a message: "We've finally delivered a brother for me" (194).

Rather than read the relationship between the first Gilda, Bird, and the Girl/Gilda or the relationship between Julius and Gilda in terms of a pathologizing Oedipal complex, I instead offer them as critiques of the psychoanalytic and literary emphasis on heteronormative family structures. If, as Teresa DeLauretis argues "the Oedipus complex and its correlative, the castration complex, are two of the structuring fantasies of psychoanalytic theory" and "sexuality is indeed the central contribution of psychoanalysis to contemporary thought," then it follows that a critique of the Oedipal complex is a critique of how sexuality is thought (DeLauretis 54, Laplanche qtd in DeLauretis 1). Despite the all too common empty nod to racial difference, canonical theories of the sexual tend to emphasize white bodies. The families in Gomez's novel are not white families with a husband, wife, and 2.5 children. Although they are literally linked by blood, they are not linked by heterosexual sex (including Gilda and Julius who never actually have sex). From taking the name of the Mother, to the daughter/lover relationships, the purported Oedipal stage is women-centered removing the envied phallus. Whereas in Freudian psychoanalysis, the unresolved Oedipus complex results in perversion or neurosis, in either case a pathological fixation. In *The Gilda Stories* the female-to-female relationship are both life-giving and transformational.

Like *The Gilda Stories*, the vampires in *Fledgling* are also matriarchal. The venom of Ina females is more potent than male venom, thus females are the aggressors when it comes to mating. One of Shori's symbionts, Brook, notes, "It's like the way males have competed among humans" (109). Sex-segregated communities secure the autonomy of Ina women and symbiotic relationships between the Ina and their symbionts are pansexual and normative. Shori's symbionts include the males Wright and Joel and the females Celia, Brook, and Theodora. Other Ina also have both male and female partners. Although most Ina are created through heterosexual contact between male and female Ina, Shori is an experiment, a black Ina born through genetic mixing between a white Ina and a black woman. Even those Ina born in ostensibly heterosexual unions live in sex-segregated communities until it is time to mate at which time the mating between Ina is for procreative purposes only. Though this may seem to be the ultimate in heteronormative sexuality (sex only for procreation) there is actually no Ina-to-Ina sex in the novel. The only sex acts we witness are sensual scenes between Shori and her symbiont lovers. These scenes are completely about mutual pleasure. The novel itself, by limiting sex acts to queered pansexual unions, intervenes in the heterosexist telling of sexuality. Under Wright's touch, Shori feels her "own eagerness and growing excitement." With Celia, Shori desires nothing more than to pleasure her. Theodora moans in ecstasy and Joel orgasmically proclaims that with Shori he "hit the jackpot" of pleasure (158). In addition since the Ina depend on their symbionts for feeding and companionship and the symbionts are sustained by Ina venom, the relationships between Ina and symbiont are the ones that produce life in the sense of maintaining Ina and human lives, not the merely procreative relationships

between male and female Ina. In their affirmation of queer sex, alternative kinship structures ,and female dominated genealogies both novels break from heteronormative family romances.

One sexual 'hurdle' in the novel is Shori's age and appearance. When I teach this novel many students are dismayed by Shori's young appearance and her sexual relationships with adult humans. She looks to Wright like a pre-pubescent child -- small statured and with no body hair. Wright isn't even positive whether she is a girl or a boy until he sees her naked, yet he eagerly agrees to have sex with her. Later, we discover than Shori is 53 years-old, a young adult in Ina years, though much older than Wright in human years. It is difficult for some readers to wrap their heads around Shori's young appearance, her sexuality, and the seemingly pedophilic relationships. The blog "Womanist Musings" reflects one critique of the novel focusing on pedophilia. The author, cited as Renee, questions the "total acceptance of paedophilia [sic] [in *Fledgling*]" which "is not only seen in those having sex with children – but also by every single other character."

Rather than engage Renee's response, I would rather explore why Butler made the choice to make Shori young looking. Firstly, Shori's age has to be considered within the context of the novel, in human years Shori is a late middle-aged adult, far older than her symbiont, Wright. More importantly, however, through Shori's young appearance Butler explores the relationship between time, age, and trauma. For example, although Shori looks like a child and begins with essentially no memories, she has a physical strength, hunger, and a history that far surpasses that of Wright, the other humans she's surrounded by, and even other Ina. She has also experienced a significant amount of trauma that has impacted her understanding of her own sense of age, time, and identity. This trauma complicates the notion of age from a

(Western) perspective. The trauma has split her from an awareness of herself, and her Ina understanding of age. African diaspora, in so many cases, has been a traumatic experience that has separated Black people from their original cultural understanding of age, time, and gender. It has created a collection of new and bastardized cultures (various African cultures mixed with European colonialist cultures mixed with indigenous cultures, mixed with cultures of oppression and resistance) that seem extremely fresh and young in a global notion of time. However, the violence of trauma has added an age that so many blacks as well as our oppressors, do not acknowledge or recognize. Although that age has made us wary, resistant, and jaded, it has also made Blacks more attuned or aware of our own oppression. This historical experience of oppression which is lodged in our bodies and histories is not recognized or validated by mainstream white culture, especially in 'post-racial America.' Therefore this experience, our combination of youth (African-Americaness is a relatively new amalgamation of various older cultures) and trauma-induced age becomes pathologized. Hence the idea racism is 'crazy-making' because it split us, in a Fanon-ion sense, from knowledge of ourselves. Neither Shori nor Wright can understand the maturity, insight, and power that she possesses, and thus the reader (as does Wright) attempts to pathologize their attraction and relationship.

In addition, readers are also forced to question why we are uncomfortable with who should be with whom when the characters fully have the intellectual agency to make those decisions for themselves. To read a consensual relationship between adults as pedophilic readers have to buy into the racist and sexist notion of black Shori as less mature and sophisticated than white Wright. Her strength, mental acuity, and the lives she saves

continually undercut this assumption. In Shori's and her human relationships, Butler offers readers a complex understanding of black cultural time and its relationship to trauma.

If heteronormative family structures are an important locus of Butler's and Gomez's queering critique, it follows that gender formation is also a target. One way Butler and Gomez critique white heteronormative gender formation is through their representation of fashion. The protagonists of both novels don masculine or androgynous clothing as a means of protection, and as practical personal choices. While traveling west in the late 1900's Gilda wears a "guise of boyhood...releasing her from the pretenses and constrictions of womanhood" (66). She remarks in pleased astonishment "four times I met others just like me. I mean women dressed like boys. Just going around from place to place trying to live free" (66). This points again to the insertion of queer subjectivity into the annals of history. Dressing like boys is not pathologized, but a means of freedom, agency. While dressing like a boy is a practical choice which offers Gilda and her *fellow* travelers freedom, Gomez does not frame this as a rejection of femininity but a strategy for expanding the fashioning of womanhood for racialized subjects. Gilda rejects the seductive Eleanor's assumption that she will wear dresses because:

[Gilda] recognized immediately what she would feel most comfortable in: pants - whatever effect that had on the society that Sorel proposed to introduce her into. She decided she was already outside of it. Most would only see her as a former slave, so why should she force herself to emulate them unnecessarily. (Gomez 72)

Defined by her race and former enslavement, Gilda is "already outside" of the conventions of white womanhood so she chooses not to forsake her personal comfort in an effort to conform

to those standards. Even the clothes that Eleanor convinces Gilda to have made "from a distance looked like a skirt but was, in fact, split like pants and afforded Gilda the freedom of movement she would not forego" (72). Pants offer Gilda a material and metaphorical "freedom" that she cannot achieve in constricting women's clothing.

Gomez in "Femme Erotic Independence" describes this deliberate movement "between society's prescribed roles, in opposition to the gender categories" as "a profound political statement. The blurring is not just of the lines between what we wear, but ultimately implies a toppling of the barriers to what we can do as women" ("Femme Erotic" 109). The title of Gomez's essay clearly specifies the femmes as her subject matter. The emphasis on "movement" implies fluidity and a spectrum of queer gender identifications which open pathways to freedom from essentialist gender confinement. This movement within queer genders is illustrated in Gilda's "Bloomer Girl" outfit. She luxuriates in the custom made lavender two piece suit whose "rich color" belies the more masculine cut. The split skirt "softly [falls] over her thighs [...] moving around her body, as if a breeze attended her" (83). She pairs the suit with "small combs with pearls on the side carefully decorating her hair" (83). The combination of the more masculine suit, the rich feminine lavender, the sensuousness of the material, and the pearl combs unites masculine and feminine clothing. Gilda does not spurn femininity rather crafts her own version thereby becoming "a woman of style and purpose" (83).

As it is for many black women, hair also is an indicator of racialized gender politics and identity. Laden with meaning, hair is connected to prevailing white standards of beauty. From the "good hair/bad hair" binary to Angela Davis's politicized afro, hair, like skin, "is a highly

sensitive surface on which competing definitions of 'the beautiful' are played out in struggle" (Mercer, "Black Hair" 105). Kobena Mercer in "Black Hair/Style Politics" questions "*why do we pour so much creative energy into our hair?*" Answering his own question, Mercer argues "the ways we shape and style hair may be seen as both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society's norms, conventions, and expectations" ("Black Hair" 105). Black hair is a paradoxical site, those with "good hair" or straighter longer hair, are often favored for being closer to white standards of beauty. While those with "bad hair" or kinkier textures are often marginalized for failing to live up to these standards. At the same time, black folks who straighten their hair or get weaves may be accused of denying their literal and metaphorical *roots* in favor of assimilation, while those with natural hair are associated with a more radical black politic. Singer/songwriter Lauryn Hill makes this association in her song "Doo Wop" (1998): *It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in/ Look at where you be in hair weaves like Europeans/Fake nails done by Koreans*. For Hill weaves indicate selling out to whiteness, a selling of black essence and "soul." Mercer argues against the binary of good hair/bad hair assimilation/radicalization calling them "two logics of black stylization -- one emphasizing *natural* looks, the other involving straightening to emphasize *artifice*" both of which point to the value of plurality in black identity and politics ("Black Hair" 105).

Gomez also takes the hair bind to task. Gilda fondly remembers having her hair braided by her mother and later Bird. Noliwe Rooks and Bill Gaskins describe black hair braiding practices as a symbol of "closeness, comfort and community" (286). As evident in multiple literary and personal accounts, when black children sit between their mother's legs as they carefully arrange thick braids or precise cornrows they "learn a way of looking at the world [...]"

they learn a history, which in many instances may ensure their survival" (Rooks and Gaskins 286). Both Gilda's mother and Bird pass on lessons of history, survival, and womanhood while completing daily tasks. In the "South End: 1955" chapter Gilda recalls one such moment of "her mother's hands combing and braiding her hair [...] then the touch was Bird's, who had unbraided the rows and brushed into one long, tight braid ending at the back of her neck. Their hands had been hard, worker hands; self-sufficient hands that still knew how to be tender" (Gomez 131). Gilda remembers the act of having her hair braided while working in her hair salon. Her client, Savannah, keeps her thick hair bleached white blonde. The blonde hair against her brown skin is inspired by an image in *National Geographic* of an African tribes-man whose "dark skin [was] in stark contrast to the stark plainness of sun-bleached hair" (130). Savannah's pressed, curled, and coiffed bleached and straightened crowning glory is the ultimate artifice. However, Gomez does not allow us to judge Savannah, on the contrary her artificial styling is inspired by what some strains of black radicalism might frame as natural and essential blackness -- an African tribesman. This paradoxical combination of natural and artificial rejects any notion of an essential black body.

It is important to emphasize that Savannah's hair is not a simple stylistic choice divorced from politics. Not only does her style reference Africa (or at least the *National Geographic* version of African people), but Savannah is also politically savvy. Critiquing political rhetoric, Savannah urges:

Don't listen to a thing [politicians] got to say. It's all lies. I know, 'cause I see 'em up close, if you can understand me [...] Watch what they be doin', fuck what they

be sayin'! Just like Moms Mabley say: 'Watch the cars, damn the lights. The lights ain't never hit nobody! (130)

This on-point tirade is followed by an "unstoppable stream of conversation" where, as Gilda cares for Savannah's hair, Savannah "ramble[s] on [...] leaping back and forth between the latest schemes of Skip, her youthful pimp, and memories of her mother's cooking years ago in Gulfport Mississippi." The progression of the description of Savannah's bleached hair, her critique of politics, Gilda's quiet listening to Savannah's stories, and Gilda's memories of her mothering point to a link between the stories of identity, strength, and survival learned as Gilda's mother braided her hair, to similarly themed stories as Gilda bleaches and straightens Savannah's. Here, Gomez belies the distinction between natural hair as a sign of true blackness and straightened hair as a mark of assimilation, showing that it is the careful ritual of doing hair, rather than the end result which fosters a black female identifications.

In *Fledgling*, when Wright find Shori she is wearing too big boys' jeans and a t-shirt. Stroking her flat chest, he questions "Are you sure you're female?" (Butler 18). The clothes that Wright later purchases for Shori are also androgynous -- "two pairs of jeans, four t-shirts, socks, underwear, a pair of Reebok athletic shoes, and a jacket with a hood" (34). Similar to Gilda's androgynous travel clothing, Shori's clothing is practical; the jeans and hooded jacket protect her from harmful rays. However, Shori's androgyny is also signifier of her pansexuality. Despite her androgynous appearance (or maybe because of it) men and women are immediately attracted to her as exemplified by the heterosexual Wright's questioning of Shori's gender but his sexual contact with her anyway. Though she identifies as a female Ina, her gender presentation is fluid. Shori is a new generation of Ina, the future. This gender fluid future is a

present place of possibility where gender presentation is divorced from sexual practice. Butler proposes a similar space in her novel *Wild Seed* whose Patternists, Anyanwu and Doro, have the capacity to transform into any body, any gender, they choose. Judith Butler argues "intelligible bodies" are those whose sex, gender, and sexuality maintain a causal relationship. She continues "the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female' (*Gender Trouble* 23). Shori intervenes in and interrupts this causal relationship contributing to her status as an unintelligible body. This unintelligibility as Butler argues can be a site of radical socio-political transformation of prevailing gender and sexual norms.

However, just as gender incoherence "provide[s] critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility," Shori's racial incoherence also exposes the limits of regulatory binary racial systems (*Gender Trouble* 24). Judith Butler does not account for race in the policing of sex and gender coherence. However, in an Ina context where pansexuality is common, Shori's racial presentation -- a mixed race/black vampire -- rebuffs intelligibility among her Ina (and indeed within the human) community. Shori's Ina identity and humanity are questioned: "You're not Ina! [Milo] shouted [...] You're not! And you have no more business at this Council than would a clever dog!" (238). Like sex/gender/sexual coherence which Judith Butler notes, "requires that certain kinds of 'identities [...] appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain," Shori's race marks her as a developmental failure (a clever dog) (*Gender Trouble* 24).

Both Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Butler's *Fledgling* index the limits of narrating black women's bodies. Thus, both novels turn to the fantastic in order to draw connections between past and present bodies, highlighting the lingering specter of slavery. Gomez and Butler, as A. Timothy Spaulding notes, "set out to correct the limited historical record on slavery and to critique traditional histories reliance on objectivity, authenticity, and realism as a means of representing the past" (Spaulding 2). Augmenting Spaulding, I argue that, in turning to the futuristic genre of speculative fiction, both authors disidentify with realism as a normative genre within which black women can only appear as reflections of controlling images. Both novels emphasize the black female body as a site where oppressive legacies endure, while also pointing to the representational limits of realism to adequately address that embodied legacy. The vampire becomes an allegory for black women's engagement with bodily life. Vampires prioritize the body, and in these novels mark a heritage of shed blood and trauma, but also, ultimately sustenance, resilience, and black women's immortality (they can knock us down, but they can't knock us out). As the original Gilda tells the Girl, "There are only inadequate words to speak for who we are. The language is crude, the history is false" (Gomez 43). In creating politicized vampires, Gomez and Butler re-write history. This new imagery reflects black women back to ourselves, making us feel less monstrous for it.

Chapter Three:
Re-Presenting Myths and Tellin' Tales: Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* and the Re-Visioning of the Black Lesbian

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and the privations in the national treasure of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. – Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

Referring to the works of prominent female novelists and poets of color, AnnLouise Keating in "Myth Smashers, Myth Makers: (Re)Visionary Techniques in the Works of Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzalda, and Audre Lorde" argues that their use of "mythic material destabilizes the monolithic definition of (white heterosexual) female identity" and challenges "hegemonic concepts of (white) womanhood" (76). According to Keating, "myths embody a culture's deepseated, often unacknowledged (and therefore unquestioned) assumptions about human nature" (76). As such, myths can provide a place for "woman poets and novelists to subvert hegemonic descriptions of female identity" by "challeng[ing] the traditional accounts' false representation of women" (Keating 74). Separately, but I argue, relatedly, in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michele Wallace suggests that the black "superwoman" myth is one of the many limiting and "confounded identities" that form the "privations in the national treasure of rhetorical wealth" as described by Hortense Spillers. Wallace uses "myth" to refer to the stereotype of black females as "oversexed, physically strong, and warlike" as well as a play on her multiple hailings – "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire," "Aunty," "Jezebel," or "Mammy" – which make the black woman more than one woman; she's a superwoman (Wallace xx). These names, myths, and stereotypes of black women allow for a policing of sexuality, resulting in limited

options for black women's representations. As opposed to Keating's use of myth, which primarily refers to cultural mythologies, Wallace's use of myth as a "confounded identity" allies myth with the stereotype. Thus, there is a strong sense in which the affinity between myth as cultural tale and myth as stereotype calls for a reading of how black women artists can create new meaning through re-presentations of old tales. These re-presentations of stereotypes can perform the displacement of boundaries necessary in order to provide "radical alternatives to existing social structures" (Keating 76).

I align my definition of the stereotype with Homi Bhabha who holds in "The Other Question" that the stereotype is the product of the colonist's ambivalent desire and the will to power. For Bhabha it is the ambivalence of the stereotype "that gives the colonial stereotype its currency" through the processes of repetition, individuation and marginalization, and sense of 'truth' (Bhabha 95). In this, Bhabha's use of "currency" stresses the contemporaneity of the stereotype, and, in the same vein as Wallace's "privations in the national treasure," the hegemonic 'value' of the stereotype. Bhabha argues that the stereotype "is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always already 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (95). He continues, "the recognition and disavowal of difference [the fetishized stereotype] is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction" (Bhabha 116). The repetition, necessary for the colonizer to maintain the fixity of the stereotype, is anxiously threatened by the conditions of its re-presentation.

Both Keating, in reference to mythology, and Bhabha, in reference to the fetishized stereotype, suggest the subversive possibilities resulting from re-writing or re-presenting myths. Bhabha specifies that his project is not to put a moralistic judgment on the stereotypical image as positive or negative, which only serves to “dismiss it, not to displace it” but to launch “an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (95). Keating writes, “By displacing the boundaries between inner/outer, subject/object, spirit/matter, and other dichotomous terms, the new myths [that women of color] create provide radical alternatives to existing social structures” (Keating 76). Also, emphasizing the necessity of displacement of the stereotype rather than an emphasis on positive or negative portrayals, L.H. Stallings in *Mutha Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* insists that it is only through total displacement, instead of a mere reversal, of binary logic that “real resistance to negative stereotypes” that “which threatens to crack black women’s backs” can occur (Stallings 2). Through these two separate but converging descriptions of myth and stereotype, I want to highlight how black women’s cultural productions, through a re-presentation or re-visioning of myth, can create new narratives which do not simply replace the old narratives, often marked by their hetero-patriarchal white-supremacy, but which instigate new ways of thinking about the mythic object and necessitate a reconsideration of the historical myth-making process.

Mythic resignification can function as a disruption of dominant narratives partially through the fusion of fact and fiction, resulting in a new reality entrenched with the fantasmatic. This re-newed realism enables a more cogent examination of African-American subject positions than a strictly realist presentation. While traditionally, race studies, even

those, that focus on the psychical and psychological dimensions of race, tend to turn “with more comfort to sociology, anthropology, and history rather than literature or philosophy,” through this emphasis on more ‘factual’ and ‘realistic’ epistememes “we often sacrifice discussions of all the immaterial, pressing, unquantifiable elements that go into the making of ‘reality’” (Cheng 25). Specifically regarding black women, Barbara Christian asserts that black women have always theorized , that is “unmasked the power relations of their world,” but this theory has often occurred in “narrative forms” eschewing “the Western form of abstract logic” (Christian 281). For Christian, much of black women’s narratives convey them in their multiplicity of experiences thus avoiding a monolithic definition of blackness which can all-too-easily result in an inadvertent replication of white supremacist power structures. In regards to narrative genres, James Baldwin in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” warns that “protest novels” whose “avowed claim [...] is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed” are actually fantasies, connected nowhere with reality and “trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American Dream”(13-14). Baldwin asserts that the supposedly realist form must give way to narratives form which “journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims” in order to “find ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (Baldwin 11).

In a reading of Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, I will draw upon theories of black women’s resignification of myths and theories of the stereotype to argue that Dunye’s film eschews the essentialist trap of positive or negative portrayals. Though the film chronologically fits neatly within the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s it also makes a vital intervention in to New Queer Cinema through its representation of the heretofore

unrepresentable – the black lesbian. In this, the film subverts stereotypical classifications of black women, and displaces dominant ideologies which silence black women’s sexual subjectivity while attempting to instantiate a new paradigm for thinking about black female sexual subjectivity. This is accomplished not only through the narrative of the film but also through its uniquely “Dunye” form and structure. As such, *The Watermelon Woman’s* distinctive and enduring presence lies in its creative analytic for promoting possibilities for re-visioning black lesbian subjectivity.

At its most basic, *The Watermelon Woman* involves Cheryl (played by Dunye), a video store clerk and filmmaker, in her quest to make a documentary about an unknown black actress who performed in early 20th century cinema.¹⁴ The actress, who is fortunate enough to be named at all at a time when some of “the black actresses aren’t even listed in the credits,” is billed only as the Watermelon Woman. Cheryl narrates that she is particularly fascinated by this actress because “something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves, is serious, is interesting.” As she uncovers details about the Watermelon Woman’s same-sex romantic relationships, including a relationship with fictional white director, Martha Page, Cheryl simultaneously contends with the trials and pleasures of her own interracial relationship with white video store patron, Diana.

In its initial reviews, *The Watermelon Woman*, is described as “groundbreaking and rulebreaking” (Sullivan 448) and “simply fascinating” (McAlister qtd. in Sullivan 448). Agreeing

¹⁴ Due to Cheryl Dunye’s multiple identifications as character and director, I will refer to the character in *The Watermelon Woman* as Cheryl and the director of the film as Dunye. Similarly, in an attempt to avoid confusion, when talking about the character The Watermelon Woman the name will not be italicized while the film title is italicized.

with these accolades, Mark Winokur, in “Body and Soul: Identifying (with) the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye’s *Watermelon Woman*” adds that Dunye’s film accomplishes “what both queer and race critics demand as primary goals of contemporary texts: on the one hand recuperating history, while on the other postulating that historical repression renders full recuperation impossible” (232). Winokur’s appraisal of Dunye’s film suggests the specificity of the racialized and gendered interventions that Dunye makes in New Queer Cinema.

Coined in the early 1990s, New Queer Cinema describes a cinematic moment characterized by a proliferation of queer images that resisted the confines of positive representation in favor of what B. Ruby Rich calls, in her seminal text “New Queer Cinema,” a “Homo-Pomo” style characterized by “appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind” (16). To continue, Rich remarks “these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive,” or, in other words, Queer (16). The ‘newness’ of New Queer Cinema implies a departure from humanist identity politics hampered by a realist imperative, instead turning toward creating works which “‘queer’ the present by reconstituting the notion of ‘reality’ itself through multiple juxtapositions of histories remembered, forgotten, and repressed” (DeAngelis 46). Aligning its irreverence with the burgeoning queering and undisciplining of the discipline formally known as Gay and Lesbian studies, New Queer Cinema contests and critiques hetero- and homo-normality liberating itself from conventional cinematic forms, just as the promise of queer is a liberation from conventional constraints of behavior and normativity. However, just as ‘queer’ has been criticized for its failure to address racialized sexualities with the same liberatory assurances it offered to unmarked, and therefore white, sexual identities, New Queer Cinema’s

wanton claims of inclusivity and proposed overarching, if vague, queer aesthetic nevertheless relegated black filmmakers “to specific discussions about race and representation and not the more general discussion on queer film itself” (Contreras 120). Race, when addressed in New Queer Cinema, was consigned to the sidelines -- segregated from otherwise keen explorations of sexuality and representation. For instance, despite the persuasive argument that Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* and Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* “deserve to be understood not only as forerunners to, but also as a vigorous sources, for the New Queer Cinema that would develop after 1989” (three years before Rich’s essay and the subsequent moniker New Queer Cinema), the title of Louise Wallenberg’s essay “New Black Queer Cinema” tellingly minoritizes these films, which, Wallenberg concedes, “most critics have chosen to read as black and/or gay films”(140).¹⁵

Also suggestive of critical oversights in discussions of New Queer Cinema is the silence around black lesbian filmmakers and more broadly, black lesbian subjectivity. In “New Queer Cinema and Lesbian Films” Anat Pick laments the failure of “gender-neutral queer” to “adequately acknowledge a lesbian presence” (105). This failure is due in part because, quoting Amy Taubin, Pick asserts that queer cinema “is figured in terms of sexual desire and the desire it constructs is exclusively male” (105). If queer is figured in terms of sexual desire and black female sexuality is figured as void of desire, or as Evelynn Hammonds argues “described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a ‘void’ or empty space,” then both gender

¹⁵ Obviously there are practical reasons for specifying the blackness of these films. This specification enables Wallenberg to accentuate these films’ explorations of specifically racialized sexualities which are an important and neglected intervention into New Queer Cinema. However, I argue that this racialized designation, though clearly necessary, reinforces the particularity of these films within a queer paradigm which is supposed to (though doesn’t) address the multiplicity of queerness.

and racial difference uphold the inadequate representation of black lesbian sexuality within New Queer Cinema (Hammonds 132). Even Wallenberg, who critiques the racial exclusivity of New Queer Cinema, neglects to extend her discussion of New Black Queer Cinema to black lesbian filmmakers. Wallenberg locates Riggs' and Julien's films as part of the "black gay male cultural productions [which] experienced a boom in the late 1980s and early 1990s," and though I don't want to reconstruct Wallenberg's project in accordance with my own interests, I find the exclusion of *The Watermelon Woman* suggestive of the more general silences around black lesbian cultural productions as part of the queer 'canon.' Wallenberg argues for the inclusion of *Looking for Langston* and *Tongues Untied* as integral to New Queer Cinema's artistic impulse due to their revelations of the performativity of gender and sex through a style which, quoting Thomas Waugh, integrates "a mixture of particular inflections of standard interviewing, editing, and expert testimony styles ...reconstruction, statements, and monologues" (132). In an assertion which distinctly also describes *The Watermelon Woman*, Wallenberg praises Riggs' and Julien's films for their "re-telling of the past" though "many identities spoken of [which] are both imaginatively rediscovered and produced within the film[s]" (132). Yet, despite *The Watermelon Woman*'s resonance with the stylistic and content choices which Wallenberg aligns with New Black Queer Cinema, *The Watermelon Woman* is conspicuously absent from her characterization of the genre.

To further illustrate the lack of black lesbian visibility in discourses around New Queer Cinema and the subsequent importance of Dunye's cinematic intervention, in the text in which the Wallenberg essay appears, authoritatively named *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* edited by Michele Aaron, the few side references to Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* refer to

it (at the most disparaging end) as part of a range of “fairly innocuous and often unremarkable films” of the latter part of the 1990s “targetting [sic] a narrow, rather than all-inclusive, new queer audience” and (in an only slightly less dismissive light) “in the spirit of *Go Fish*, Smith [*Chasing Amy*], and the black cinema of Spike Lee, came Dunye’s spoof docu-comedy *The Watermelon Woman*” (Aaron 8) (Pick 108).

In staging this “spoof docu-comedy,” Dunye interweaves styles and genres, creating what can convolutedly be called a meta-pseudo-(auto)biographical-documentary, which has been dubbed a “Dunyementary.” This complication and combination of genres, enables Dunye to produce a revisionist history, with emphasis on re-vision. Thus *The Watermelon Woman* is not simply a history in which previously silenced voices are given space (a reclamation project), but a film which provides an alternative historical vision. The “Dunyementary’s” most obvious break with the conventional documentary genre is revealed at the end of the film in a postscript. Interspersed with the credits and Cheryl’s documentary, *The Biography of The Watermelon Woman, Fae Richards, Faith Richardson*, Dunye reveals that the Watermelon Woman, the object of inquiry driving the film, is Dunye’s own fabrication. Simple white text across a black screen declares:

Sometimes you have to create your own history.

The Watermelon Woman is fiction. – Cheryl Dunye, 1996

With the phrase, “Sometimes you have to create your own history” Dunye acknowledges the categorical invisibility of black women’s sexualities, and more specifically black lesbian sexualities, in both many dominant and counter-narratives of history. According to Evelyn

Hammonds in her critique of queer theory and its inadequate analysis of racialized sexualities, the “sexualities of black women have been shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility in dominant discourses” making “black lesbian sexualities doubly silenced” (130). However, by creating her own history through both the fictive biographical-documentary of Fae Richards and the meta-documentary tracking the creation of that biography, Dunye suggests possibilities for not only making visible the “pleasure, exploration, and agency” of black lesbians, but also (an even more important mission according to Hammonds) shows “how the dominant view [of black female sexualities] was established and maintained and how it can be disrupted” (Hammonds 134, 141).

By introducing realist elements of the documentary film, such as interviews with experts, excerpts of archival-appearing film footage, actual archival photographs, and the narrator voice-over, but in the end displacing the documentary form through the revelation that the “*The Watermelon Woman* is fiction,” the film confronts documentary realism in order to challenge the audiences' expectations as well as deny an monolithic ‘realistic’ portrayal of black life, or specifically black lesbian life. As such *The Watermelon Woman* functions as a critique of documentary-as-ethnography and the historical violences that the form enacts on oppressed, minoritized, colonized and third world subjects. At the same time it instigates a departure from documentary realism which, according to bell hooks “reduce[s] [black subjects] to some narrow notion of ‘real’ or ‘accurate’” (qtd in Sullivan 456). The “Dunyementary” form in *The Watermelon Woman* facilitates a specifically black queer re-newed realism which, in accordance with Mercer’s description of new black cinema, disrupts essentialist politics of representation. Mercer argues black representation “has moved away from a homogenous

sense of a unified and unifying black community, and beyond the binarism of the 'positive/negative images dichotomy' towards a more pluralistic sense of black identities" (*Welcome* 221). In *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye does not simply use the documentary form in order to dismiss stereotypical myths on the basis of their negative untruthfulness and insert a 'true' representation of black female sexuality. Instead, the use of the documentary form accompanied by its parodic re-visioning encourages an exploration of black representation and the unsettling of the stereotype as either 'truth' or 'untruth.'

The black mammy is the primary mythic stereotype unsettled in *The Watermelon Woman*. The mammy is a reductive explanation and cultural assumption which is fraught with ambivalent desire. It has been used historically, and in the present moment, to exploit, silence, erase, and disenfranchise black women, as part of domination strategies which attempt to negate black women's humanity. The mammy, like any stereotype "is always simultaneously (if conflictually) inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power" (Bhabha 96). In the film's re-presentation of the black mammy, Dunye does not merely dismiss the stereotype through a moralistic questioning its 'realness' or 'truth,' instead she explores the fissures that threaten to crack the veneer of the stereotype's fixity. Dunye constructively exploits the ambivalence of the stereotype which is both fixed, yet, anxiously repeated, by re-visioning the conditions of its repetition. In this, she manipulates the anxiously produced asexuality of the mammy in order to reveal the latent sexual desire which necessitates the mammy stereotype. This latent sexual desire is not only the desire for the black female body, but also the desire of the black female body, both of which must be contained.

Often considered as a jolly but stern asexual mother figure, the mammy can also be interpreted as a nexus of projected anxieties and desires related to miscegenation. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Film*, Donald Bogle contends that the mammy stereotype along with toms, coons, and mulattoes dates back to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a house servant, keeper of the children, and caretaker of domestic affairs, the mammy is in many ways the identical opposite of the white lady of the house. "Overweight, middle-aged, and so dark, so thoroughly black that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object" the mammy, according to Bogle is "representative of the all-black woman," or, as I would argue, as one of the haunting images of black womanhood, the mammy is representative of All Black Women (15). Bogle differentiates the mammy from her twin, Aunt Jemima, who is "a bit more polite than mammy" (9). Regardless, the two are offshoots of each other and overlap in their characterization. Portrayals of the mammy in dowdy aprons and prim head scarves serve to quell white anxieties about the black woman's sexual potential within the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, despite their attempts to desexualize the black woman, these portrayals leave a trace of white sexual fixation on the trusted mammy. Jo-Ann Morgan in "Mammy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century" describes the mammy-figure in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as:

[...] the ultimate loyal retainer, sleeping on the floor near her mistress. Like her predecessors in the doorways of genre paintings and her successors in advertising promotions, this fictional servant is ever available lest her mistress might need some service. (92)

Though homoerotic imagery was likely not Morgan's intent, her description of Stowe's quintessential mammy nevertheless seeps a peculiar eroticism, leaving the reader to ponder exactly what late night "services" the mistress might need in her bedroom.

In the film, Cheryl's initial fascination with Fae "The Watermelon Woman" Richards occurs upon seeing Fae in a fictionalized 1930s Hollywood film, *Plantation Memories*. The plantation film was a popular form of depression era entertainment. Scenic plantations complete with lush fields, jubilant southern belles and happy singing 'darkies' provided much needed distractions from economic and social impoverishment; these films "reaffirm[ed] for a socially chaotic age a belief in life and the American way of living itself" (Bogle 36). In accordance with early cinematic romanticized accounts of the antebellum south, Fae "The Watermelon Woman" Richards, plays Elsie, the dutiful and doting servant. Cheryl, intrigued by "the most beautiful black mammy," invites the viewer see a clip from the film. The camera then focuses on Cheryl's television screen where, in fuzzy black and white film, Elsie consoles her delicate white mistress: "Don't cry Missy, Massa Charles is comin' back. I know he is." Rather than giving an all-too-easy critique of the racist, sexist, black mammy imagery, Cheryl responds to the film with praise of Fae/Elsie: "Girlfriend got it goin' on!" Initially, it is not merely Fae that entices Cheryl, but the image of Fae as "the most beautiful black mammy."

Although Cheryl quickly repudiates the mammy's asexual unattractive image in a phrase which would almost seem to be an oxymoron, "beautiful mammy," Dunye, through on-point satire, cautions against a too-quick reappropriation of the mythic image. In an interview scene with "Camille Paglia, Cultural Critic," the white feminist scholar remarks of the mammy figure:

I am really distressed with a lot of the tone of recent African-American scholarship. It tries to say about the Mammy that her largeness as a figure is, degrading, and de-humanizing, and this seems to me utterly wrong. Where the large woman is a symbol of abundance and fertility, is a kind of goddess figure...even the presence of the mammy in the kitchen it seems to me has been misinterpreted: 'Oh the woman in the kitchen is a slave, a subordinate.' Well my grandmas, my Italian grandmothers, never left the kitchen. In fact, this is why I dedicated my first book to them. And Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* is the spitting image of my grandmother, in her style, in her attitude, in her ferocity. It brings tears to my eyes.

Later in the film, Paglia performs similarly painful maneuvers to recast racist 'pickaninny' imagery:

And I really dislike this kinds of reductionism of a picture of, let's say, a small black boy with a watermelon, him smiling broadly over it, looking at that as negative. Why is that not, instead, a symbol of joy, and pleasure and fruitfulness? After all, a piece of watermelon has the colors of the Italian flag - red, white, and green - so I am biased in that extent.

I quote these segments in length because these scenes exemplify the potential for white feminism to slip into racist and sexist cultural criticism. Paglia's analyses are humorously painful to endure, but are, in her eyes, genuine. Through these segments, *The Watermelon Woman* suggests that recovering and resignifying mythic images needs to happen thoughtfully,

cautiously, and most importantly, specifically -- taking into account the socio-political contexts which foster the image, or as Bhabha argues, these stereotypes must be “realized as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse, always demanding a specific and strategic calculation of their effects” (Bhabha 96). Through Paglia, *The Watermelon Woman* also criticizes the recent and multiple attempts in feminists’ productions to reject phallogocentric values through a willy-nilly rewriting of well-known tales and mythic figures. Though the aim of such rewriting might be to challenge patriarchal representations of women, the end results don’t necessarily make any kind of meaningful interventions into the intricate structures which make those representations possible. More bluntly, by making every woman a fertility goddess, feminists may then reinscribe a heterosexist biological imperative, putting a woman’s strength in her ability to reproduce. In more specific reference to *The Watermelon Woman*, careless myth resignifiers (as exemplified in Paglia) can end up reifying white western female mythic images in their quest to reject (white) phallogocentrism, and thus denigrate or erase the experiences and histories of non-white women.

As a black lesbian who regards Fae as having it “go on,” Cheryl is positioned in a space between desiring whatever services Fae-as-mammy might offer and realizing that she is also expected to offer those services. In a later scene which highlights the identification with/desire for the mammy, Cheryl appears with a green kerchief wrapped around her head enthusiastically lip-synching Fae’s lines in *Plantation Memories*. This particular scene is consistently examined in the few published critical analyses of the film. For example, Laura L. Sullivan in “Chasing Fae: The Watermelon Woman and Black Lesbian Possibility” suggests that this scene “invites the reader to connect the history of the black lesbian actress who rose to

fame through a series of denigrating roles as servant and slave, with the present black lesbian filmmaker before us, Cheryl Dunye, who is playing a version of herself” (459). Sullivan further states that through the name of the faux antebellum romance, *Plantation Memories*, “Dunye comments on the historical continuity of the oppression of black women” and demonstrates “that the early stereotypical depictions of black women [...] continue to delimit the options available for black women producers of contemporary cultural texts” (459). In another analysis of the film, “Body and Soul: Identifying (with) the Black Lesbian Body in Cheryl Dunye’s *Watermelon Woman*,” Mark Winokur argues that this scene should be read as one in which “Dunye creates a representation of the negative oedipal stage of both identification with and desire for the body of the black lesbian mother” (244). While I agree to an extent with both Sullivan’s and Winokur’s readings of the scene, I suggest that the scene must be read both socially and psychically. The gist of Sullivan’s reading is complicated by Cheryl’s desirous identification with Fae-as-Watermelon Woman and the multiple layers of identification and desire between Fae, the Watermelon Woman, Cheryl, and Dunye, while Winokur’s reading neglects to fully explore the prevailing socio-historical context of the mammy stereotype and how Dunye utilizes identification and desire to unsettle the stereotype itself.

Sullivan suggests that in *The Watermelon Woman*, the mammy is one of the “haunting images” of black womanhood which dwell in Fae, Cheryl, and Dunye (449). Thus, through the lip-synching scene, Dunye overtly links the historical past and present of representations of black women. However, if, as Sullivan contends, the viewer is made to connect Fae playing a version of the mammy to Dunye playing a version of herself the analogous relationship is that the mammy stereotype is a version of Fae just as the character Cheryl is a version of the

director Dunye. Neither the stereotypical character nor the 'real' actress reflect the 'truth' of black womanhood. In fact, in her unearthing of *The Watermelon Woman's* history, Dunye discovers that her real name is Faith Richardson, her stage name Fae Richards, and, of course her Hollywood nickname, *The Watermelon Woman*. The title of Cheryl's final documentary refers to Fae as all three of these names. These multiple layers of naming are suggestive of the complexity of Fae Richard's identity – the many figures she inhabits in one body – and none of these figure trump the other. This reading, like the film's style and structure, further destabilizes the concept of real/essential versus stereotype/fragment and any attempt to uncover the 'truth' behind the stereotype. In other words, in *The Watermelon Woman* the mammy figure is re-presented in the film as more than just a (negative) stereotype that Fae is performing; it is more than a "haunting image" which limits and fragments Fae. Instead through the collapsing of boundaries between the character and the actor, the stereotypical character is re-visioned to be, in itself, as complex as the actor performing it. To be clear, I am not arguing, like Donald Bogle, for an analysis of "what certain talented actors have done with the stereotyped role," instead I am interested in what certain talented directors, namely Dunye, have done to interrupt the fixity and knowingness that give the stereotype its currency through manipulating the means of repetition that attempt to fix the stereotype in the first place (Bogle xxii).

While Sullivan focuses more on the mammy stereotype in the film, the majority of Winokur's emphasis is on the relationship between desire and identification, specifically the desires of Cheryl, Dunye, and the narrator whom he calls Cheryl/Dunye and the desire of the lesbian audience, whom Winokur somewhat problematically assumes to be a white lesbian

audience.¹⁶ Applying the methodologies of Kaja Silverman, Winokur argues that “Dunye creates a representation of the negative oedipal stage of both identification with and desire for the body of the black lesbian mother” (244). What interests me about Winokur’s analysis is that he makes equivalent desire for and identification with “the black lesbian mother.” While I ultimately agree that desire for and identification with Fae “The Watermelon Woman” Richards becomes analogous in film, the process through which this happens is integral to the end result. The collapsing of the boundaries between subject and object ultimately displaces the white (male) ‘objective’ and ‘objectifying’ gaze and the accompanying certainty of the stereotype.

In thinking about identification and desire, I need to, very briefly, turn to Lacan. In “The Mirror Stage” Lacan suggests that the bodily-ego develops at the same time as the child’s first recognition of himself in the mirror. Lacan’s mirror can be interpreted metaphorically to refer to any reflective apparatus, including the eyes of another person. Upon self-recognition, the child initially experiences aggressiveness at the image which he sees as a rival to his sense of self. This aggressiveness is quickly resolved through the child’s identification with the image in the mirror. At this point, the perceived wholeness of the mirror-image evokes joy as the child recognizes itself in the reflected image. This recognition of wholeness is actually a false-recognition, a *méconnaissance*, since the still developing child is far from the whole individual that he sees in the mirror.

Franz Fanon suggests another path, one of fragmentation that results from the mirror image being less than the ideal. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon describes the psychically

¹⁶ To me, without interrogating the spectatorship of black audiences, Winokur’s assumption of white lesbian audience and their tendency for “racial tourist’s identification,” while on point, reaffirms the connection between whiteness and lesbianism which Dunye interrupts.

violent experience of seeing himself in the 'mirror' of the white other. Aptly referring to the experience of attending a movie as one instance of this psychological violence, Fanon observes, "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself [...] I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me" (140). The "me" that the people are watching and waiting for is both the Fanon watching the film and the inevitable black man in the film; the one who represents Fanon's "seeing myself." Both the movie-goers and Fanon identify Fanon with the black man on the screen, a man who, no doubt like Fanon, is subjugated by "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'" (112). Fanon's experience of "being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes" leaves him fixed and fragmented (116). His "corporeal schema crumble[s]" as he becomes aware of his body "in a triple person" and is "completely dislocated" (112). For Fanon, the experience of identification, even a possible mis-identification, with his image mirrored in white eyes leaves him splintered and bare to the public. As opposed to imagining himself whole and individualized, as in Lacan's paradigm, he is fragmented by the stereotypes which batter him down.

Useful for my purpose here is Fanon's direct engagement with the stereotype and the clear delineation of the disintegration of subjectivity which occurs upon identification with the stereotypical image. Kobena Mercer, on the other hand, in his initial comments on Robert Mapplethorpe's black male nude photographs, is interested in how the stereotype affects the dominant 'stereotyper'. In "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," from 1986, Mercer, like Fanon, suggests the "fixity" of the stereotype in the construction of otherness. Referring to the work of Homi Bhabha, Mercer then explains how

Mapplethorpe's photographs reflect the colonial fetish producing the "fundamental *ambivalence* of colonial fantasy, oscillating between sexual idealization of the racial other and anxiety in defence[sic] of the identity of the white male ego" (*Welcome* 178). Later, in his 1989 "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary" Mercer revisits the Mapplethorpe images and his 1986 reading "not because those arguments were wrong" but because he wants to suggest "how ambivalence cuts both ways" (*Welcome* 189). In his 1989 reconsideration, Mercer admits his ambivalent identification with the racially fetishized images:

I felt identified with the black men depicted in the field of vision simply by virtue of sharing the same "categorical" identity as a black man [...] But on the other hand, and more difficult to describe, I was also implicated in the fantasy scenario as a gay subject – a desiring subject. That is to say, there was also another axis of identification in which I was identified with the author insofar as the visual image objectified an object-choice that was already there in my own fantasies and wishes. (*Welcome* 193)

Mercer openly acknowledges the anxiety that arises from the ambivalent desire to be both object and subject, signified through his identification with both the black object and the white producer of that object. The idea of identifying with both the black object and the white gaze which produced that object strongly resonates with both Fanon and Homi Bhabha. Explaining one of Fanon's scenes of ego-splitting in *Black Skin, White Masks* in which the black child is forced to identify with the ideology of white heroes and black demons, Bhabha remarks "in the act of disavowal and fixation the colonial subject is returned to the narcissism of the Imaginary

and its identification of an ideal ego that is white and whole” (Bhabha 76). To this Mercer adds, “Thus, sharing the same desire to look, I am forced to confront the rather unwelcome fact that I would actually occupy the same position in the fantasy of mastery that I said was that of the white male subject!” (*Welcome* 193).

The Watermelon Women intervenes into this primarily male-centered discourse, and, through Dunye’s take on the “fantasy of mastery,” resolves Fanon’s sense of fragmentation due to identifying with the stereotyped object and Mercer’s uncomfortable identification with and desire for the stereotyped/fetishized object. Dunye’s particular “fantasy of mastery” enables her to re-present the objectified black female body as exceeding the bounds of fixity of the stereotype. Black female sexuality is consistently portrayed as solely object, devoid of sexual subjectivity. Instead of yielding to this stereotypical portrayal, Dunye emphasizes the complexity of Cheryl’s identification with the black woman as object and subject. Cheryl identifies with Fae-as-mammy due to sharing the “same ‘categorical’ identity,” but as lesbian subject, the image of Fae is “already there in [her] own fantasies and wishes.” As a black woman, Cheryl identifies with the mammy stereotype and the sexuality that stereotype attempts to contain through objectification, and as a lesbian she desires the “beautiful mammy” who, according to Cheryl, is “serious” and “interesting”. The mammy’s beauty and seriousness, “the way she looks and moves” suggest to Cheryl sexuality beyond the objectified mammy stereotype. These subtle clues to the Watermelon Woman’s sexual identity are later confirmed through Cheryl’s excitement that Fae is a “Sapphic sister, a bull-dyker, a lesbian;” Cheryl “knew something was up when [she] saw *Plantation Memories*.” Socially, this image of the mammy as a sexual subject, never mind a queer one, is impossible by definition. Just as it is

oxymoronic for a mammy to be beautiful, in hegemonic discourses of black womanhood a mammy cannot be conceived of as anything more than servant or object. Since the mammy of Cheryl's fantasies -- with wants, desires, sexuality, and a personal history -- is an impossibility in the American socio-political landscape, Dunye's creative "mastery" of the film makes possible her formation in Fae Richards. Thereby Dunye is not merely eradicating the harmfully pervasive images haunting black women's history, but actually re-visioning those images by recovering the black mammy as a queer desirable and desiring subject. What has the potential to be an uncomfortable identification with a stereotype is circumvented through re-visioning Cheryl's mirrored image.

The nexus point between Cheryl's identification with and desire for Fae-as-mammy is Cheryl's subject position as a black queer woman. This sets up both her identification with the erasure of black women's sexualities, as represented by the mammy, and her desire for a black female mammy myth even though that myth has been defined by hegemonic discourses as undesirable. In her fantasmatic identification with the mammy, Cheryl becomes both the desiring subject (because she desires Fae) and the object of her desires (Fae, who is defined as undesirable), and, through this, displaces hegemonic social narratives which say she can be neither. Dunye's re-presentation of Fae as a queer subject emphasizes the necessity of fantasy in black lesbian identity formation. As Mercer elucidates, "the loss of access to the object of desire [is the] very source of fantasy itself as a space between the psychic and the social, in which relations of 'race' polarize and dichotomize the positions of subject and object associated with the dialectic of seeing and being seen" (*Welcome* 225). Due to the mammy's black womanhood, her sexual subjectivity must be recovered in fantasy, making her the lost object

which Cheryl desires. However, Cheryl's desire is complicated by her own blackness and gender which interrupts the possibility for Cheryl to be represented as a subject with desire, since to have desire is the purview and privilege of the (white) male. The black woman may be an object, or asexual, or hypersexual in "an absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality," but she cannot be a desiring subject (Hammonds 129). As such, the lip-synching scene emphasizes Cheryl's identification with as well as her desire for the "beautiful mammy." Through this desire and identification, Cheryl sees herself and Fae-as-mammy as both a sexual object and a sexual subject based on the complex relationship Dunye has facilitated between queer black women as both subjects and objects of desire. To clarify, due to being a black woman, Cheryl identifies with the mammy stereotype which is defined by undesirability and lack of personal desire. Normally, this would be a fragmenting experience. Instead, by making the mammy a "beautiful black mammy" in Cheryl's eyes, the mammy is re-visioned as desirable ("beautiful") and desiring ("serious...interesting"). Thus the terms of Cheryl's identification are changed; her identification is with a desirable and desirous black woman. Her desire is also for that same woman (Fae's "got it goin' on). Thus her identification and desire are configured, not through white hetero-patriarchal stereotypes, but through her own re-visioning. Dunye's "fantasy of mastery" is on her own terms.

Dunye's re-presentation of Fae and Cheryl as queer desiring subjects serves as a prime example of the displacement of boundaries between subject and object that new myths use to interrupt existing social hierarchies. Dunye supplants the boundary that reinforces hierarchical structures of dominance and subordination which rely on stable differentiations between subject and object. The radical instability that Dunye puts in its place unfixes the black female

body from voiceless object, not through careless reappropriation of the victimized, but through resignifying object and subject outside of white hetero-patriarchal parameters. The Watermelon Woman might be the object of Cheryl's desires, but she is not *objectified*. Instead, it is the sexual subjectivity of the Watermelon Woman that Cheryl desires (and literally searches for) throughout the film. In this, Cheryl is also a sexual subject with desires of her own. As Winokur states "[Dunye's] bodies are self-determining rather than victimized" where self-determination makes possible a re-visioning of what it means to be subject or object (237). To be sure, Dunye does not merely turn a negative stereotype into a positive figure of identification. Discourses around black women's sexuality have been shaped, by black women, by a "culture of dissemblance" in which "shielding then truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" helped black women to "accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own" (Hine 915). Dunye radically breaks this "culture of dissemblance" re-visioning sexuality for her lesbian predecessors, and in doing so, re-visions sexuality for herself. If, as Teresa de Lauretis asserts, queer theory calls on us to "examine, make explicit, compare, or confront respective histories, assumptions, and conceptual frameworks that have characterized the self-representations of North American lesbians and gay men, of color and white," Dunye's methodology is truly queer (v). One could say that Cheryl, re/en/genders Marlon Riggs' famous declaration, thereby transforming black women loving black women into a revolutionary act.¹⁷

The form of the film, the "Dunyementary," also disrupts dominant discursive and cinematic forms, enabling a subversive space where queer black women can begin to articulate

¹⁷ In *Tongues Untied* (1989) Riggs proclaims "black men loving black men is a revolutionary act."

their own sexual subjectivities. Through the dislocation of character, narrator, and director and the ways in which *The Watermelon Woman* both breaks with and conforms to the realist documentary form, the film, like the resignification of myths, also displaces subject/object boundaries. The disruption of subject/object through recovering the mammy from simple object and making her a complex subject with desires has already been delineated. However, these same subject/object disruptions occur through the film's form and structure producing a film characterized by, to use Kobena Mercer's term, a "radical and promiscuous intertextuality" which "foreground[s] the plural and hybrid" sources of identity (*Welcome* 223). Concretely, the director of the film, the invisible presence who controls the film's presentation from outside of the screen, in this case Dunye, overlaps with and is made visible through the main character, Cheryl, the "inner" presence in the film. This displacement of inner and outer in form can also be thought of in relation to Karla Holloway's use of the "pluralsignant" in black women's myths which "complicates the identities of tellers of the stories the boundaries between narrative and dialogue become obscure, merging into one another" (86). In this case, the boundary between character/director becomes dislodged in Cheryl/Dunye who, too, becomes both subject and object. In a visual economy in which black female bodies are conventionally used to represent someone or something else, Dunye disrupts this by collapsing the presenter with the represented – the holder of the gaze with the object of the gaze. In this, Dunye intervenes into essentialist representations of black womanhood by making it impossible to pin her down. Like the complexity represented in Fae and her multiple names, the convergence of Cheryl and Dunye interrupts the fixity of a black lesbian stereotype through abolishing the white male eyes that would fix and/or erase her, the eyes which Fanon describes as "the only eyes."

The racialized sexual politics of desire/identification and subject/object are differently manifested in Cheryl's relationship with white store patron, Diana. Through this relationship, Dunye illustrates the critical necessity of supplanting the subject/object boundary, in that, even the most well-intentioned lesbian relationships can be affected by the pervasive legacies of sexual and racial dominance. Diana initiates a relationship with Cheryl after a flirtatious encounter in the video store where Cheryl works. She boldly invites Cheryl back to her apartment where, in the next scene, we see them watching a Race Film featuring Fae Richards, which deals with passing, *Souls of Deceit*. Sitting on the bed next to Diana, Cheryl comments that it "feels like a set-up...all this dinner and friendly conversation." Diana admits to Cheryl that she "had the hots for her" upon seeing Cheryl shelve tapes at the video store. As they come together in a passionate kiss, dialogue from *Souls of Deceit* plays in the background. The darker-skinned woman, played by Fae, admonishes the light-skinned passing woman: "You're a no good lying tramp that's what you are, committing a sin that will surely send you to hell." To this, the passing woman melodramatically responds, "I am going to hell, but not for being a tramp, but being poor and living on the streets like I have had to do. Why can't I be happy fitting into their world. God made me this color and he did it for a reason!" Winokur aptly refers to this scene as foreplay to the sensually erotic sex scene between Cheryl and Diana that follows it, and the two scenes together instigate another difficult exploration of the racial politics of black female sexuality and the omnipresent potential for black female objectification.

Through the two scenes, *Souls of Deceit* and the sex scene, Dunye reflects on the possible ramifications of crossing the color line. Representations of the mulatto, like the mammy, are indicative of white anxieties about miscegenation. Unlike the mammy, whose

sexuality is made containable through discourses of asexuality, the mulatto's body poses considerable danger due to its deceitfulness, the taint of blackness under an alluring white exterior. The mulatto's body forces even stricter regulation of the colorline since she is the product and purveyor of perilous racial mixing. Navigations of and responses to interracial sexuality are addressed several times in *The Watermelon Woman* to different ends, which makes it difficult to uncover Dunye's final pronouncement on interracial sex. In the scene from *Souls of Deceit*, Fae slaps the mulatto woman for the sin of passing and presumably sleeping with white men in order to "fit into their world." She is disgusted by her perception that the mulatto woman is objectifying herself for material gain. The mulatto woman's response, however, suggests that her sexual objectification is the only means that she has to avoid "being poor and living on the streets." At another point in *The Watermelon Woman* there is an awkward and uncomfortable scene in which Diana has dinner with Cheryl, Cheryl's black best friend Tamara, and Tamara's girlfriend, Stacy. Tamara divulges to Cheryl that "Stacy doesn't like Diana either" – suggesting that Tamara also does not like Diana. Earlier, Tamara had dismissively commented that Diana "has nice bone structure...if you are into white girls." In another reference to interracial relationships, Fae 'The Watermelon Woman' Richards and her white director, Martha Page, had a tumultuous lesbian relationship which is denied by Martha's sister, Ms. Page-Fletcher, this denial is humorously undermined by the black maid who exchanges glances with Miss Page-Fletcher as Miss Page-Fletcher demands that Cheryl and Diana leave her home. The aforementioned Camille Paglia, upon hearing that Fae Richards and Martha Page were lovers bewilderedly pronounces, "the idea of, um, any kind of interracial relationship at this time is mind-boggling..." while, during Paglia's voice-over Dunye, again,

undermines her academic 'expertise' with a montage of archival photographs of black and white women socially intimate situations. The array of messages related to interracial relationship including suspicion, turmoil, bewilderment, and the danger of sexual objectification are difficult enough to untangle, and then there is the stunningly erotic sex scene.

In this scene, Dunye makes cinematically visible Diana's attraction to Cheryl's dark skin, which, as Homi Bhabha notes is, "the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype [...] the most visible of fetishes" (Bhabha 112). In this scene between Cheryl and Diana the only marker of difference between the two women's cropped and intertwined bodies is one woman's black skin upon the other's white. Cinematically seductive, this scene is later troubled by another bedroom scene in which Diana proudly announces that she had "three black boyfriends" and her "father's sister's first husband was an ex-Panther" named "Tyrone Washington." Clearly uncomfortable with this announcement, Cheryl climbs out of bed ostensibly to continue to work on her film, leisurely declaring to Diana, "You're such a mess." It is significant that Cheryl leaves to return to the film, given that it is the film (both Cheryl's and Dunye's) which works to upset the sexual objectification and fetishization of black women's bodies. To Cheryl, Diana is much too anxious to relay her love of and identification with blackness without interrogating her own privileged position as a white woman and how that position is only made possible through an association with Cheryl's black womanhood. In other words, racial difference serves the role of sexual difference in consolidating Diana's gender identity. This imagined relationship between blackness and masculinity has the effect of defining "black women's bodies as not feminine, as not woman" (Harris 6). Directly after the sex scene, Cheryl who is navigating through the city taking video for her film project, is accosted

by the police who accuse her of being a crack-head thief and call her “boy” because she “sure look[s] like a boy.” The masculinizing effects of stereotypes of blackness, strip Cheryl’s of her femininity, making her akin to Diana’s “three black boyfriends.” However, it is the combination of race and gender which marks Cheryl as Diana’s productive other, and therefore a needed object for Diana’s desire. Cheryl provides the black foil for Diana’s white femininity and it is quite literally through her relationship with Cheryl’s body that Diana is able to construct herself as a (white) lesbian, something that the three black boyfriends could not provide. As a black lesbian, Cheryl serves as Diana’s desired and disavowed other. Diana desires Cheryl because her (Diana’s) sexuality is “theoretically dependent on the absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality” (Hammonds 131). However, in Diana this knowledge is disavowed and only leaks through the subconscious in her forced and anxiously repeated associations with blackness. More concretely if “the term ‘lesbian’ without the racial qualifier is simply to be read as ‘white’ lesbian” thereby making whiteness the lesbian norm, then there has to be an invisible black lesbian for whiteness to be the norm against (Hammonds 130). However, this need for black female sexuality to constitute white female sexuality, just as the stout black mammy image consolidated the delicate sanctity of white womanhood, is generally disavowed and rarely theorized in representations of female sexuality, producing yet another silence. In both the Diana/Cheryl example and the parallel Mistress/Mammy relation in *Plantation Memories*, Dunye’s film conceptualizes “the power relations between white and black women as expressed in the representations of sexuality” (Hammonds 131).

However, despite what I hope is a persuasive reading of the scenes between Diana and Cheryl, my reading does not constitute Dunye’s final declaration on interracial sex and lesbian

women. The beauty and seductiveness of the sex scene, combined with Dunye's photographic tribute to interracial lesbian relationships during Camille Paglia's "mind-boggling" diatribe troubles any clear-cut pronouncement. Instead, I contend that both the sex scene and the photographs commemorate the emancipatory potential of interracial lesbian love when projected through Dunye's gaze as opposed to the objectifying gaze of the white other for whom black and white bodies intertwined are the subject of fetishistic desire or repulsion. Dunye navigates a complicated and fraught ground, where she doesn't succumb to a segregationist politic which demands racial exclusivity in sex, nor does she assert a liberal colorblindness which suggests that interracial sex is the pathway to and product of racial egalitarianism. The significant detail is that both of the scenes that can be read as celebratory are from the perspective of Dunye's camera. In other words, both the archival photographs and the erotic scene between Cheryl and Diana are part of Dunye's re-visioning project. The photographs, like the archival footage of Fae Richards, were likely Dunye's creation, and while Diana's motives may be suspect, the sensuality of their sex scene is not. This sensuality is projected through Dunye's lens. The clearest pronouncement Dunye makes in regards to interracial sex is when Cheryl demands "Who's to say dating someone white doesn't make me black? Who's to say anything about anybody I fuck in goddamn first place?" Dunye repudiates those who attempt to racially define her by who she has sex with. Regardless whether they are angered, confused, disbelieving, or fetishizing; Dunye can imagine sexually liberating possibilities outside of essentializing discourses. In the end, Dunye acknowledges the historical and contemporary prevalence of racial difference substituting for gender difference in interracial lesbian relationships resulting in black women's sexual fetishization, yet she refuses

a simple narrative of objectification. Dunye refuses dominant discourses' dialectic of being the stereotype (interracial sexual relationships are problematic) or be the reactionary anti-stereotype (interracial sexual relationships will solve the problem). Instead, she uses her power as a director to re-vision a history, through the lens of a black woman, in which that dialectic collapses. This re-vision is not the deluded liberal colorblindness of Diana with her "three black boyfriends" but an analytic for imagining black lesbian desire divorced from racist objectification. It is another instance in which Dunye had to create her own history from fragments of what should've-could've been.

*I know [Fae] meant the world to you, but she also meant the world to me and those worlds are different [...] What she means to me, a twenty-five year old black woman means something else. It means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history, and most importantly, what I understand is that I'm gonna be the one who says: 'I am a black, lesbian filmmaker, who's just beginning...' -- Cheryl, *The Watermelon Woman**

If the dominant view of black women's sexuality is made hypervisible through objectifying racist ideologies, which still serve to erase black women as sexual subjects, and invisible partially due to black women's attempts to counter those ideologies, Dunye's formidable project is to make black women visible as sexual subjects while interrogating and working outside of racist ideologies which serve the dual purpose of amplifying and negating black women's sexualities. Sullivan suggests that in *The Watermelon Woman* "there is no unified lesbian subject position, either black or white. Cheryl, Tamara, their white video store coworker Annie, Tamara's black girlfriend Stacy, and Diana are all very different types of lesbians" (451). While Sullivan insists that "the film moves beyond merely presenting a wide variety of lesbian subject positions" her argument that it does this without essentializing black

lesbians only touches upon the ways in which *The Watermelon Woman* provides radical alternatives for the articulation of black lesbian subjectivity (451). Sullivan argues that the film refuses to

accept the heritage of racist and heteronormative Hollywood cinema by interweaving questions of sexuality and race, and presenting lesbians who have a conflicted relationships to dominant ideology [while avoiding] simply reversing the dominant characterizations that attribute positive connotations to straight and/or white people and negative ones to gay and/or black people. (451-452)

Certainly not merely reversing established binaries is important to “to create and sustain radical Black female sexual subjectivity” (Stallings 6). But simply making visible a multiplicity of black lesbian subject positions, even without resorting to reversing binary oppositions, is not sufficient in that “visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination [...] that determines what can and cannot be seen” (Hammonds 141). Hammonds suggests that the goal of black feminists should be to develop a “politics of articulation” built on “the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (141). A “politics of articulation” is what Dunye’s fictive history is all about, making it possible for black women to “speak and act” through histories which may not have been formally documented, but nevertheless exist in traces in the ephemera surrounding black women. In a scene in which Cheryl holds up to her face pictures of black women performers - Hattie McDaniel, Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Ella Fitzgerald, and the fictive Fae Richards – Cheryl’s questioning gaze lingers on the camera. Although part of her face

is concealed by the photographs, her just visible plaintive expression suggests her desire to find her black lesbian self in those Hollywood images. After Cheryl disappointingly puts those pictures aside, the scene switches to a black screen reading “South Philly” and Cheryl’s voiceover exclaiming, “Great news! [...] We found info on [my mom’s] old friend Shirley, *Miss Shirley*. Never married, worked in a factory most of her life, I think she’s in the family.” During the Hollywood photograph scene, Cheryl does not speak; the images of the iconic “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” and “Aunty” that she holds up to her face and her silent, but communicative, expressions are her only means of articulation. Both the un-revised mammy-fied Watermelon Woman and these stock Hollywood images are one part of Cheryl’s sexualization as a black woman. On the other hand, the “Great news!” that Miss Shirley might be “part of the family,” is also part of Cheryl’s sexual legacy. While the photographs, representative of racist hetero-sexist Hollywood’s conceptions of black women, demoralize Cheryl, Miss Shirley enables her to jubilantly speak. As the filmmaker behind the filmmaker, Dunye’s creation of Fae, and *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye’s meta-documentary of Cheryl’s documentary) are the means through which Dunye creates a possibility for herself to “speak and act” outside of the confines of white heteropatriarchial discourses which otherwise would circumscribe the ‘language’ that Dunye can use. The point is that it is only through the interrogation of dominant portrayals of black women’s sexualities *and* the re-vision of the fragments of portrayals of black woman, can the black lesbian, Cheryl, and ultimately Dunye herself “speak and act” (116).

But, what does it mean that Dunye’s interrogation of black women’s sexualities necessitates the creation of a fictive black lesbian starlet? Whether I am referring to Fae or

Cheryl as Dunye's black lesbian starlet is purposefully left ambiguous, for it doesn't matter as they are both characters with ties to reality. Cheryl, the cinematic persona, obviously exists in Dunye herself. At the very least, their shared name, profession, age, and sexuality reveal autobiographical traces of Dunye. Likewise, Fae exists through the interrogation of the silences around black lesbian sexualities – the longing gazes in the black and white photographs, Ma Rainey's wails, and Nella Larsen's textual ellipses. It is the interrogation of these silences that make Dunye's project not simply one that makes the previously invisible, visible, and not merely a reclamation project (the uncovering of an heretofore unknown black lesbian whom we can call our own), but a re-visioning project that takes fragments and rumor, bodies and representations, and compiles them into figures of possibility through which Dunye, like Isaac Julien in *Looking for Langston* can "initiate an investigation into the ambivalent structures of fantasy and identification as being constitutive of black gay subjectivities as much as anyone else's" (Mercer, *Welcome* 223).

[Fae] paved the way for kids like you to run around making movies about the past and how we lived then. But, please Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone [...] If you are really in the family you must understand that our family will always only have each other. - June Walker, The Watermelon Woman

A guiding principle of black cultural studies is that culture provides a space of political articulation and action which may not be available in dominant national discourses. More specifically, according to Roderick Ferguson, "black lesbian feminists gravitated toward culture as a means of formulating a political alternative to heteropatriarchal and nationalist constructions of non-heteronormative difference as deviance" (111). As an important intervention in New Queer Cinema, Cheryl Dunye's, *The Watermelon Woman*, does not merely

reclaim a black lesbian past, a project limited by its singularity (once you've found the black lesbian, what do you do with her?), but provides a methodology for creating a history which can be used to scrutinize the structures that lead to the concealment of black women's sexualities. Thus, through re-visioning projects, black lesbian feminists (and black 'straight'-identified feminists) are able to both formulate a "political alternative" to "nationalist constructions" of black female sexualities as deviant and/or non-existent, as well as provide alternatives to those same nationalists constructions in the service of creating a new discourse around their sexual identities.

Chapter Four:
Revealing Venus: The Spectacle of the Black Female Body (Re)made Spectacular
In Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and the Black Female Burlesque Performer

Act 1

It was 1989 the first time I encountered Josephine Baker. I was 11. I remember, not because it was particularly groundbreaking at the time, but because Mademoiselle Josephine almost got me suspended from the bus. My mother had brought home a copy of Donald Bogle's Brown Sugar, a used library book that she was trying to establish as a coffee table book, which made little sense since we didn't have a coffee table, never mind one which would have necessitated a book. I grabbed the book one day and slipped it into my backpack, probably because Donna Summer was on the cover. Even in 1989, I still sought out images of Donna Summer. Precocious then (as opposed to now) I was attracted to glamorous black women – the requirements were a fabulous wardrobe, sultry eyes, and boobs. Donna Summer, Wilona, Jackée, and Diana Ross were some of my secret idols; therefore the picture of Josephine Baker decked out in a beaded gown with a leopard in tow seized my attention. But it was the blurry image of Baker's nude lithe body which really seized my "attention," and in a philanthropic gesture I thought I would share the pleasures of chère Josephine. I wasn't completely naïve to childhood social mores; I understood that I had to reveal my Josephine quietly, away from disapproving adult eyes – she was, after all, nekkid. I grabbed my 'bus friend' Erin, as blonde-haired blue-eyed girl who vacillated between being my BFF and ignoring me completely. I opened the book cautiously, disclosing Josephine. Behind us, a be-speckled little twit, whose name I remember but refuse to mention, hollered "Hey you guys, Sydney's got a book with naked black ladies." And yes, he specifically said "naked black ladies." At the next stop, the bus driver confiscated my precious contraband and threatened to report me to the principle. He never returned my "naked black ladies" book.

Act 2

African American Studies 101 question, June 2009:

"What are the similarities in the ways Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, and Beyoncé have portrayed themselves as entertainers?"

Answer:

They appear scantily dressed, dance provocatively and wear animal print, thereby objectifying black women.

Act 3

The Venus

Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss

--*Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks, Scene 1: Final Chorus

In 2009 I was the teaching assistant for African-American Studies 101. I had been looking forward to working closely with African-American culture and history and interacting with an undergraduate population who was as enthusiastic about the subject matter as I was. However, due to the ideological assumptions of the professor whom I was working under, the experience was miserable. For my protection (more than his) I will call him Dr. K. In nice terms Dr. K was anti-sex positive feminism (he out and out laughed when I proclaimed myself to be a sex-positive feminist), in less nice terms Dr. K was a misogynistic jackass. Revealing his latent misogyny, Dr. K declared to a class of 100 undergraduates that women need to be “responsible” for how they dress and act; though, after protest, he later conceded that patriarchal structures played a role as well. Decidedly institutionalizing his skewed principles, on the final exam Dr. K asked a short answer question, quoted exactly in the preface to this chapter; the “correct” answer forced students to indict Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, and Beyoncé, for their sexual display as well as the objectification for *all* black women. Not only are we 'responsible' for the individually detrimental results of our own sexual display, but we are also responsible for the objectification of black women as a collective. If only we behaved better! This incident points to the exigency of the following chapter. Despite a continuing history of colonization, objectification and exploitation of black women’s bodies and black women’s strategic contestation of that history, not only are black women in the 21st century

still situated as solely victim, but they are simultaneously responsible for their own victimization.

In response to the historical and contemporary exploitation of black female bodies and the elision of black women's sexual agency, I will examine black women's manipulations and reclamations of their sexualized and racialized bodies in order to explore how theatrical texts mitigate the historical legacy of domination over black women's bodies. These texts assert sexual agency within constraining conditions. The texts central to my inquiry are Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and the performances of three black female neo-burlesque performers. Though initially, these texts may seem poles apart in genre and modes of presentation, both Parks's play and the neo-burlesque performances are linked through their theatricality, spectacular use of the unclothed black female body (in both the sense of spectacle and fantastic), and their engagement with the sexualized legacy of Saartjie Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus.'

The dominant narrative of American burlesque history begins when Lydia Thompson arrived on US shores in the fall of 1868, a moment that burlesque cultural critic, Robert C Allen marks as "a watershed both in the history of American burlesque and in the history of the American theater" (Allen 28). Thompson and her "British Blondes" popularized women with stocking-covered legs on stage. Their sheathed but exposed limbs combined with bawdy songs, humorous imitation, satire, and gender-bending performances shocked and titillated 19th century American audiences.

There are many origin stories for the rise of Neo-burlesque. Some histories attribute the second-wave of burlesque to the riot-grrrl culture, performance art, drag and the club-kid scenes of the 1990s. Other's see the burlesque revival springing from strippers, like Dita Von

Tease, who in 1994 began to headline at strip clubs across the USA with her signature lush and glamorous acts.¹⁸ Though these women - and the countless white burlesque performers, vaudevillians, cabaret acts and chorus girls that succeeded them - are important to burlesque history, the archive about them is firmly in place and steadily growing. From photographs to essays, performance tributes to an entire museum, these women steadfastly hold a place in the history of striptease. Instead of further reifying the glamorous subversiveness of white female burlesque performers, both legendary and contemporary, I want to highlight the fraught terrain of performances of sexualized blackness.

Though identifying both past and present performers of color is important in facilitating a more complete and rounded burlesque archive, my objective is not to reclaim these women for burlesque history, but to examine how black performers utilize their performance contents and personas to manipulate and intervene in dominant discourses about black female sexuality. These white heteropatriarchal discourses have constructed black women as mummies and jezebels, sexless and hypersexual objects. Rather than inhabit either stereotype, the black burlesque performers that I examine in this chapter model what bell hooks refers to as “wildness.” Citing bell hooks’ description of wildness of radical Black female subjectivity, Stallings explains that wildness is “radical Black female subjectivity that consciously celebrates autonomy and self-assertion in the invention process of self” (3). The performances that I address here provide examples of the ways that black women artists delineate alternative relationships with discourses of sexuality outside of the good woman/bad woman binary that has historically circumscribed black women’s acts and identities. In other words, where the

¹⁸ See Michelle Baldwin. *Burlesque {and the New Bump and Grind}* (Denver: Speck Press, 2004) and Jacki Willson. *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

options are, to paraphrase L.H. Stallings in *Mutha is Half a Word* be the stereotype or be the anti-stereotype, where both have been defined by white hetero-patriarchy, the black burlesque performances that I address in this chapter refuse to be determined by that dichotomy.

Specifically in regards to Black female sexual subjectivity Stallings argues that “self-authored sexual desire and radical Black female sexual subjectivity [...] incorporates [wildness] as the context for rebellion” (3). To be sure, trying to disaggregate representations of “self-authored” sexual desire from the barrage of misogynistic, racist, sexist, and homophobic representations of black female bodies is not an easy task, especially when the terrain of the black body is already over-determined and multiply hailed. This difficulty is furthered when one cannot rest solely on the laurels of authorial intent in order to come to a consensus on meaning. It’s a good thing then, that consensus is not the goal. Instead, neither the texts that I examine nor their producers, fall within easy categories of legibility. To be clearly legible as positive/negative, or straight/gay, or black/white, or good woman/bad woman, also entails an ability and willingness to conform to essentialist classifications which, in turn, supports oppressively hierarchical categorizations. The beauty and power in the texts that I explore lie in their unruly liminality, which disrupts oppressive polarization. This unruly liminality, this “wildness”, is part of the reason that these texts represent a radical black female sexual subjectivity. They do not simply reverse the terms of the established order that “foster readings of difference as deviance,” but instead demand a new disorder in which “the stripper, prostitute, video vixen, gold digger, and sexual exhibitionist” are not the “deviant polarity to the working woman, wife, mother, lady, and virgin” (Stallings 6). In their disorder Parks’s *Venus* and black neo-burlesque performances are texts that do not merely mimic prior representations but claim and reclaim wildness.

In *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* Robert Allen contends that burlesque, as a popular form of American entertainment, posed a threat to American middle-class cultural norms through its transgressions of 'proper' feminine behavior. The performances of women of color are, not-surprisingly, absent from Allen's work as they are almost completely absent from the conventional burlesque archive. In addition, Allen's definition of 'proper' feminine behavior is firmly ensconced in the feminine as unmarked whiteness, necessitating an invisible black woman for the white feminine to be marked against. However, some of Allen's contentions about the transgressive potential of burlesque and the (white) female burlesque body provide an apt theoretical starting point for thinking about the transgressive potential of the black female body. Arguing that burlesque is "grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque" Allen draws from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* by suggesting that the burlesque performer represents a construction of the "low other" marked by both repulsion and unworthiness while, at the same moment, being the object of desire. Stallybrass and White describe this "low other" as "a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others who are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level" (qtd in Allen 26) In other words, the burlesque performer is the "abject" or, as defined by Judith Butler, the "unthinkable," "unlivable" body against which the dominant norm composes itself (*Bodies* 3). She "constitutes that site of dreaded identification against, which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life" (*Bodies* 3).¹⁹

¹⁹ Throughout I use female pronouns in reference to burlesque performers. This is primarily because this piece

Butler frames abjection as the psychosocial lynchpin in the formation of heteronormative sex and gender systems. Race and class are not her object of analysis. Thus even in Butler's theory of abjection falls short in terms of racialized gendered subjects. However, putting the theory of the abject in conversation with race, black feminists have more specifically theorized the relationship between the abject body, liminality, and black womanhood arguing that in historical and contemporary discourses of black womanhood, black women serve as the gendered and racialized abject against which white women's subjectivity is defined. For instance, though Carby does't use the word abjection, I read her explication of the "cult of true womanhood" in terms of abjection. Hazel Carby argues that the moral and socio-political precepts regulating white women's sexuality were to enforce the woman's duty to her husband to provide him with heirs and enforce her duty to her nation to provide (white) citizens. Obviously, since whiteness conditioned good citizenship and proper marriage, and since for much of the nation's history these two institutions were effectively been denied to black women, these stringent conventions of womanhood were only applicable to white women. Since they lived under very different material conditions, black women were expected neither to achieve nor be capable of achieving ideal womanhood. To be sure, this does not imply some sort of gender emancipation bequeathed to black women. Instead, "existing outside the definition of true womanhood, black female sexuality was nevertheless used to define what those boundaries were" (Carby 30). Radhika Mohanram also defines the woman's role in the nation as boundary-making: "her body must be used to maintain ethnic/racial/national differences" (Mohanram 85). Therefore, in terms of gender and nation,

looks at female performers. There is, however, a burgeoning field of boylesque or male burlesque.

the role of black women is to define the boundaries of white womanhood, and with help from the rule of hypodescent, to maintain racial differences through her offspring in the service of sustaining racial hierarchies.

Furthering this idea of the constitutive function of black female sexuality, in “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” Evelyn Hammonds utilizes the trope of the black “(W)hole” and its dual signification of nothingness (hole) and fullness (whole) to represent the “absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality” through which white female sexuality is constituted (Hammonds 131). Thinking about agency from the abject subject position of the black (w)hole, Hammonds calls for black feminists to develop a “politics of articulation” built on “the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (141). This “politics of articulation” is based on “disavowing the designation of black female sexualities as inherently abnormal, while acknowledging the material and symbolic effects of that appellation” (138). In her reading of Hammonds, Claudia Schippert in “Too Much Trouble? Negotiating Feminist and Queer Approaches to Religion” sees “something like ‘agency’” in Hammond’s use of disavowal. Schippert reads Hammonds call to disavow pathologized subjectification as an active “refusal reiterate/reintegrate” that appellation that can “interrupt the very process through which the abnormality is materially and symbolically effected.” Schippert refers to this as “taking on the abject position” where “taking on” contains the double meaning of “embodying” and “defying” (57-58).

The Spectacular in Black and White

The “black and white” in the title to this section is a pun on both black and white bodies and black text on a white page. The relationship between the spectacle of Venus’s body and contemporary representations of black women’s bodies as well as the potential subversive reclamation that occurs in both Parks’s project and the body baring burlesque performances points to a suggestive link between the texts. In the apropos spirit of full disclosure, I admit that I have not seen *Venus* performed. However, the form of the written text is as integral to the play’s meaning and the dramatic performance. Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman in “The Page Refigured: The Verbal and Visual Language of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*” proposes that *Venus* demonstrates a new model of dramatic writing, which promotes “the (re)distribution of dramatic information in the text, from purely verbal language to a fusion of verbal and visual languages” (90). Jennifer Johung expands Lyman’s argument, maintaining that the visual markers in the text belie formal dramatic conventions and

necessitate an adjustment in the way that readers and producers of Parks’s work think about the intersections between the activities of writing and performing, as well as the interactions between the interpretation of the written marks on the page and the embodiment of the corporeal markings of performers onstage. (41)

In short, reading the play’s elusive form mirrors the elusive bodies onstage. Venus’s body is one whose intent and meaning cannot be pinned down; she is wild. Thus, my goal is to place the more abstract, continually in flux burlesque text in conversation with a written text in order to explore, through literature and through performance, the black female body as spectacle.

Like the elusiveness of Parks's black script on white page the early and neo-burlesque traditions cannot easily be encapsulated. As Allen remarks, "what made [and makes] burlesque 'remarkable' was its performance: the costumes, bearings, gestures, tone, inflections, an attitude of the performers themselves and their rapport with the audience," in other words, its spectacularity (40). Like Allen, Jayna Brown in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* acknowledges that trying to talk about responses to the body "poses tenacious conundrums" yet Brown also insists that "studies that prioritize aural vocabularies or literature miss what is important about bodies in motion" (Brown 59; 13). In privileging performance as a vehicle for both embodiment of identity and the denaturalization of identity, Daphne Brooks figures the body in motion as possible site of identity contestation, a place where "racially marked women used their bodies in dissent of the social, political, and juridical categories assigned to them" (Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent* 162). Quite often, feminist performance studies emphasize white women's bodies and the disembodied, de-racialized, male gaze. Brooks critiques this white-centered discourse on female performance and embodiment for perpetuating a narrative of white women's victimization in which the availability to be seen becomes a distinct problem for white women. Brooks then suggests that, since black women's bodies have, within hegemonic western patriarchy, always been available to be seen the significance of black women's performance "resides in its ability to exacerbate that moment, to disrupt and obfuscate spectorial desire precisely through a creative use of 'embodied art.'" (Brooks. "The Truth" 60).

Mastering the Venus Narrative

Saartjie Baartman, disparagingly known as the "Black Venus" or the "Hottentot Venus," can be regarded as the master narrative through which black women continue to be constructed. Janell Hobson asserts that the pseudo-scientific study of Baartman's body "shaped the ways in which black female bodies are viewed: with an emphasis on the rear end as a signifier of deviant sexuality" (Hobson 92). Likewise T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting beckons toward the abject in characterizing Baartman's body as the "master narrative" through which subsequent black female bodies are produced, and Baartman's (re)presentation as evoking "primal fears and desire in European men, representing ultimate difference, and inspiring repulsion, attraction, and anxiety" (Sharpley-Whiting 6). As a work that explores the limits and possibilities for black women to have choice and control of their bodies, Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* takes on the abject position in rewriting the Saartjie Baartman story. As such, I want to suggest that Parks's play can be read as a critical rubric for reading the sexualized black female body in other contexts. Parks's reinscription of Saartjie Baartman's saga is suggestive of a larger project to explore the agency and desire of black women on spectacle within the constraints of racist and sexist representations that have produced hegemonic ideas about the black female body. If, as Judith Butler claims, the body is not only "a historical idea, but a set of possibilities to be continually realized," then it follows that these possibilities include the possibility for reworking the black body from object into a desirable and desiring subject (Butler "Performative" 521). The theatrical texts that I delve into, both the literary drama and the burlesque performance, call upon the history of black female spectacularized subjugation in order to rework that legacy into transgressive sexual agency.

The objectifying spectacle of the black female body both preceded and proceeded from Baartman's display. In many ways black female sexuality is defined by its spectacularity. "Emblematic of the naturalized spectacle," the black female body is dually subjugated by the normalization of "survey[ing] and evaluat[ing] the female body" and the naturalizing logic of racial subjugation (Stevenson 143). Accordingly, there exists an enduring history "of the spectacle of nonwhite women and the assumed sexual availability that involuntary role suggests" (Stevenson 143.) Resistance to this objectifying spectacularity has historically taken the form of concealment. This "politics of silence," to use Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's language, is a resistant strategy implemented in moments of crisis in a self-protecting gesture against patriarchy. However, like many strategies of resistance, it runs the risk of replicating the terms of oppression that it seeks to defy. The imposed silence around black women's sexualities and the expunging from black 'ladyhood' those who are unabashedly sexual provide examples of the ways in which resistance against oppressive structures may merely solidify other oppressive structures. In the case of the "politics of silence," black women who were bolder in their sexuality were made outcasts in the nascent constructions of respectable black femininity. As opposed to resisting-through-reversing the spectacularity of black female bodies, the new spectacles that I discuss here avoid the essentializing probability of discourses of resistance through destabilizing categories 'pure' or 'true' black femininity. This destabilization comes about through subverting the objectifying connotations of spectacle while refusing to silence black sexuality.

This subversion is not easily won, as it risks being read as replicating the conditions of objectification. Indeed, the Afam 101 exam question that I quoted at the beginning of this

section succumbs to this easy reading. After arguing in hushed tones with the black male professor who wrote the question, he revealed that his wealth of knowledge on black female sexual subjectivity was derived from one book chapter in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* by bell hooks. In this chapter, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representation of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace" hooks laments that "popular cultural provides countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the representations or at least reap the benefits of it" (65). The grammar of this sentence reveals hooks' uncertainty on how to determine whether these appropriations are forms of "assert[ing] control" or furthering exploitation. hooks clearly demands that black women must "confront the old painful representations of our women's sexuality and "make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented," but aside from a case-by-case evaluation it's difficult to decipher what hooks would define as making that "oppositional space" (77). In an earlier text by hooks, the 1990 *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* hooks describes "creative, expansive, self-actualization" in the service "mak[ing] oneself anew" as constitutive of radical black subjectivity (15). She cautions that this process of "becoming subjects" has the potential to lead to further attempts at objectification in that "often when black subjects give expression to multiple aspects of our identity that emerge from a different location we may be seen by white others as 'spectacle'" (22). Yet hooks stands firm that part of the decentering racial and sexual oppression is to assert the right to determine when and how one will be seen and "not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy" (22). Thus, as articulated in *Yearning*, while the oppositional space required for claiming black sexual subjectivity may be a space fraught with contestation over meaning, this tension is due, in part,

to the dangers that accompany non-essentialist expressions of the multiplicity of black identity. Essentialism facilitates the fixity of the subject and a particular way of knowing that becomes part and parcel of colonialist domination. Therefore, refusing that fixed way of knowing interrupts one strategy of white hetero-patriarchal supremacy, which then scrambles to instantiate new means of knowing and control. Thus, the danger making one's self a spectacle refers to both the risks of an objectifying reading and the threat the spectacle creates to ways of knowing.

Akin to my reading of hooks, Pascha A. Stevenson describes the black female body on spectacle as having the potential to both experience and produce anxiety and discomfort. On one hand, the Caribbean carnival is a site where "the object of the gaze," the reveling black bodies, are the "agent[s] of the spectacle." This shifts the usual power dynamic within the spectator-object relationship. Like Chela Sandoval's description of a "methodology of the oppressed," this upheaval is a strategy "wherein the oppressed appropriate and revise oppressive systems for their own subversive objectives often through postcolonial mimesis" (referenced in Stevenson 143). On the other hand, the spectacle may uphold the traditional object-spectator relationship "in which the (most often) white, imperialistic onlooker is made to feel superior to and somehow in control of (usually through the economic power to consume) the nonwhite figures he or she observes" (Stevenson 143). A defining factor in differentiating between whether the spectacle sets or upsets power relations is desire. As Fanon asserts, "as soon as I desire, I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken" (Fanon 218). Though the black female body as spectacle is always already entrenched in

discourses that seek to reaffirm its objectification, the black female body also has the potential to be disruptive in its expression of desire. Because it is antithetical to the project of black female objectification, black female desire calls the terms of the objectification into question and upsets the subject-object boundaries that are integral to white hetero-patriarchal domination. Since consumptive display is a primary vehicle through which black female bodies have been and are produced, the power to re-appropriate and revise oppressive systems of display and insert new meanings of that display are integral to black female bodies creating oppositional spaces for radical black sexual subjectivity. Both Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and the performances of black female burlesque artists, intervene in objectifying discourses of display thereby redefining black women from spectacle to spectacular.

From History to a Show: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*

In tackling the pseudo-scientific racism and sexism that is the basis of Baartman's story, Suzan-Lori Parks writes that her play, *Venus*, follows the words of Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." Parks refers to her "angle" in *Venus* as "History, Memory, Dis-Memory, Remembering, Dismembering, Love, Distance, Time , a Show" thereby highlighting the complex relationship between memory and history and referencing both the "show" that Parks has written, but also the "show" that was the spectacularized body of Venus both pre- and post-mortem (Parks "About the Author" in *Venus*). Parks's play utilizes the constructedness of history in order to reconstruct a voice for Saartjie Baartman, thus reconfiguring the memory of Baartman in a move that implicitly emphasizes the bond between Baartman's story and the contemporary constructions of black women that are marred by the past.

The appalling tale of Saartjie Baartman, also known as the ‘Hottentot Venus,’ has been repeated often in literary, artistic, historical, and scientific discourses. Born in 1789 in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, Saartjie Baartman was a member of the Khoi-san people.²⁰ Although Baartman’s story has been the subject of a variety of conflicting accounts, common facts are that in 1810 she was brought to England and put on carnivalesque display in Piccadilly for her *steatopygia*, or supposedly abnormally protruding buttocks. Spectators also took great interest in Baartman’s vulva, which resembled “the skin that hangs from a turkey’s throat” (qtd in “The Hottentot Venus is Going Home” 63). Clad in only a small cloth, which could be pushed aside to reveal her pubic area, Baartman became a popular attraction in London freak-shows and private showings in upper-class homes. Debates continue as to the moral and legal validity of Baartman’s exhibition ‘contract,’ but in 1814, amidst protests by British abolitionists, the British courts found that Saartjie Baartman’s exhibition was consensual and contractually legal. Her contract was then sold to a French operator of a traveling circus. In France, Baartman’s physicality came to the attention of George Cuvier, the chief surgeon to Napoleon Bonaparte, who examined her anatomy and concluded, among other racist inferences, that Baartman’s body proved that blacks were “sexual animals” (qtd. in “The Hottentot Venus is Going Home” 63). After Baartman’s death in 1815 at the age of 25 or 26, Cuvier made a plaster cast of her body and dissected Baartman’s corpse. Baartman’s preserved brain, genitals, and the replica of her corpse remained on display in the *Musée de l’Homme* in

²⁰ Some accounts list Baartman as a member of the Quena tribe. See, for example, “The Hottentot Venus is Going Home” in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (Spring 2002). In an endnote to her essay, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” Janell Hobson notes “Saartjie Baartman’s ethnic origin is disputed. George Cuvier (1817), who dissected Baartman’s cadaver, described her as belonging to the ‘Bushman race,’ known as San. Z.S. Strother (1999) believes that the term “Hottentots,” referred to in European travel narratives, describes the Khoikhoi tribe.

Paris until 1976. These “objects of curiosity” were then stored in the museum until 2002, when, after lengthy debate, the French Parliament agreed to return Baartman’s remains to South Africa for proper burial (“The Hottentot Venus is Going Home” 63).²¹

In an interview in the *New York Times*, Parks explains her interest in intervening in the prevalent discourse on Saartjie Baartman and connects her textual intervention to her own experiences as a black woman:

I could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. But she’s multi-faceted. She’s vain, beautiful, intelligent, and, yes, complicit. I write about the world of my experience, and it’s more complicated than “that white man down the street is giving me a hard time.” That’s just one aspect of our reality.

(Williams C1)

Parks’s refusal to cast Venus solely as a victim demonstrates her focus on giving subjectivity to a woman who has been repeatedly physically and textually objectified. In addition, Parks’s description of Venus as “multi-faceted” followed by her contention that she writes about her own experiences, suggests a connection between complicating the Saartjie Baartman narrative and representing the complexities of black women as, yes, sexualized and objectified, but also agents with desires divorced from and exceeding their objectification. In Parks’s narrative “The white man down the street” is a real, but not a totalizing threat to a black woman’s sense of self. Baartman’s “complicit[y],” in Parks’s retelling of her story, does not

²¹ Biographical account of Saartjie Baartman compiled from Hobson (2003), Gilman (1985), Young (1997), “The Hottentot Venus is Going Home” published in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, and the film *The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus”* (1998) directed by Zola Meseko.

erase Baartman's violent objectification; rather it breaks with that legacy by giving voice to Baartman's complex humanity -- her vanity, beauty, intelligence, and desire.

In even contemplating Baartman as a beautiful, intelligent and vain woman, Parks acknowledges human characteristics that Baartman's monstrously carnivalesque exhibition disavows. Nevertheless, Parks's refusal to succumb to a narrative which reinscribes and perpetuates Baartman's victimization has ignited controversy. In "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," Jean Young takes issue with Parks's description of Venus as "complicit." In an analysis that reads Parks's play against historical testimony and documents that supposedly reveal what 'really' happened, Young concludes that Parks's depiction of Saartjie Baartman endows her with the "freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain," and that the play therefore implicates Baartman in her own exploitation (Young 699). While I respectfully acknowledge Young's emphasis on the necessity of performing a "historicized reading" of *Venus*, I argue that it is equally necessary to read the play as intervention into Venus's exploitative history and contemporary exploitations of the sexualized black female body (699). Close reading the text itself reveal that the work explores agency and choice for black women as limited, but with possibilities for self-defined subject formation. Although Parks utilizes Venus as the preeminent trope for historical and contemporary discourses of black female deviance and hypersexuality, she skillfully avoids the trap of romanticization of the oppressed through the play's complex negotiations of Venus's desire within a violently objectifying context historically and contemporaneously defined by an absence of desire. Thus, Parks's play grants

Venus a degree of subjectivity within historical and contemporary discourses which, some quite forcefully and others perhaps inadvertently, continue to objectify Baartman as a silent body.

In her diatribe against *Venus*, Young falls into the trap of focusing on the readings of white male critics in order to make the argument that the play re-objectifies Baartman. Like many productions exploring radical black female subjectivity, Parks's play can potentially be read as reaffirming forms of racist and sexist domination. However, by relying on these readings for her critique Young reaffirms the power of white knowledge production in determining subjectivity. Young quotes two white male theatre critics who praise Parks's play for "not present[ing] Baartman as just an uncomprehending victim." One critic proclaims *Venus* is at its best "when it drops its sweeping condemning historical perspective...this woman is clearly an accomplice in her own humiliation." The other critic, Robert Brustein applauded Parks for "wisely avoid[ing] pushing sympathy buttons" and for "portraying the humiliation of Blacks in white society without complaint or indictment" (700-701). These reviews misread *Venus* by suggesting that Parks's play ignores the culpability of colonialism and racism in Baartman's violent subjugation. Focusing on these men's racist readings of the play, Young proclaims that the play, itself, creates a negative stereotype of Baartman (her idea of re-objectification). In this, Young succumbs to a potential trap of identity politics by castigating the play for supposedly fueling negative stereotypes; she ignores the unruliness of the text in its refusal to engage the positive/negative dialectic of black womanhood.²² Though this refusal can

²² This scene is a prime example of what New York Times writer Monte Williams divulges is an issue with Parks's work. Williams reveals that "some blacks have complained that Ms. Parks's work is too abstract to accurately capture the black experience" (qtd in Johung 40). I agree with Williams, Parks's work does not capture an essential black experience. Its dialogue, form, and structure defy essentialist logics, neither pinning down Baartman or a singular black experience.

lead to possible readings which support racist domination, the risk taken by unruly texts points to the necessary complexity of cultural productions that destabilize harmful sexual dichotomies, and deny essentializing constructions of blackness.

Additionally, Young foregrounds two main issues in her argument that Parks's play re-objectifies Baartman. The first is the absence of Baartman's point of view; the second, which is related, is her agency. In this regard, Janell Hobson in "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body" concedes that, "because no records have been found that provide Baartman's story from her own point of view, we can only speculate about what choices she may have had, especially considering that she died penniless at age twenty-five in Paris" (Hobson 90). For Young, Baartman's textual silence is the product of a system in which "discourse is power, and this power is self-validating" (Young 704). She refers to court testimony in which Baartman's silence is deemed to signal her willing participation. Through this, Young argues that "the power over Baartman was created and maintained by a monopoly on discourse" (Young 704). However, Young does not read Parks's telling of the Venus story as providing any meaningful intervention into history's violent silences. Instead, she argues that Parks's "mythic historical reconstruction subverts the voice of Saartjie Baartman" (the voice that Young takes pains to show that Baartman didn't have in the first place) (700). Contrary to Young, I argue that, Parks fills those violent silences with Venus's voice and telling ellipses marking her silence, not as "power over Baartman" but as a way for Baartman to claim power through silence.

As I suggested earlier, my reading of *Venus* emphasizes the text of the play rather than a particular performance. This is due, in part, to Parks's sometimes precise and other time's

purposely vague stage directions. These stage directions not only affect the interpretive decisions of the director and actors, but also reflect the ambiguity of Baartman's life – an elusive story of a silenced woman punctuated by the scientific 'fact.' Some of Parks's "unconventional theatrical elements" are spelled out in the "Author's Notes: From *The Elements of Style*." These notes are not meant to be read aloud in the performance, but are a road map for actors and, I argue, readers.²³ Some of these of directions in the Author's Notes are clear and relatively straightforward. A (*Rest*) means to "take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition." Brackets indicate "optional cuts for production." And, asides are marked by parentheses around the text. The most unconventional stage direction is "A Spell," which Parks explains as "an elongated and heightened (*Rest*). Denoted by repetition of figures' names and no dialogue." A Spell is marked in the text by its textual appearance, what Parks refers to as its "architectural look" which is "denoted by repetition of the figures' names with no dialogue." In *Venus* a Spell is not merely an elongated rest, as in the black vernacular phrase, 'I'm gonna rest a spell,' but an experience – "a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state" (Parks "Authors Notes"). Scene 19 "A Scene of Love (?)" is completely made up of these spells.²⁴ Jennifer Johung in "Figuring the 'Spells'/Spelling the Figures: Suzan-Lori Parks's "Scene of Love (?)" points to these spells as "open[ing] up a potential space outside of dramatic conventions that may gesture more precisely to the processes of cultural and historical revision so urgent in Parks's work as a whole" (41). In other words, by intervening into and opening up dramatic conventions, Parks uses form as one strategy for re-envisioning the

²³ That Parks refers to these notes as "From the Elements of Style" the quintessential and authoritative guide to rules and properties of conventional grammar and writing points to the textual importance of the play. Parks's "Authors Notes" are essentially the grammar of the play.

²⁴ The play is written backward, starting at Scene 31 and ending with Scene 1. Therefore, Scene 19 is chronologically scene 13 not counting the overture.

Baartman's story. At the same time, these silences or "spells" hold the key to the figures' humanity, their "pure true and simple state." For Parks, spoken language cannot adequately convey Baartman's paradoxically simple and complex humanity and silence, or spells, which become a powerful opening for that humanity.

The Limits and Possibilities of Choice or "Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss"

Whether Baartman chose to enter a contract to freely exhibit herself is directly related to the idea of silence. Since Baartman remained relatively silent during the trial in which her handlers were accused of violating anti-slavery laws, her sparse yeses and no's were ruled adequate evidence that her display was of her own choosing. While Young condemns *Venus* for presented Baartman as a free agent, Parks', by neither writing a story of pure victimization nor unmitigated agency, refuses to give an easy answer to the question of Baartman's ability to choose. Instead, Parks's suggests the limits of Venus's volition by subtly implicating the larger structures that constrain her. In this, Parks avoids textually erasing all possibilities for Venus's agency, thus merely re-inscribing her objectification, and instead represents the limits of agency and choice while providing a vehicle for the previously silenced Venus, and subsequent sexualized black female bodies, to speak through their silence.

The question of choice arises at two key points in the play. Reconstructing the circumstances surrounding Venus's migration from South Africa, Parks depicts Venus as a servant girl whose domestic duty of scrubbing the floor arouses the interest of The Man and The Brother who later bring Venus to England:

The Brother. How would you like to go to England?

The Girl [Venus]. England! Well. "England." What's that?

The Brother. A big town. A boat ride away. Where the streets are paved with gold.

The Girl. Gold, Sir?

[...]

The Brother. 2 yrs of work and yd come back rich!

The Girl. Id come back rich!

The Brother. Yd make a mint!

The Man. You wouldn't have to work no more.

The Girl. I would have a house. I would hire help. I would be rich. Very rich. Big bags of money!

The Man. Exactly

The Girl. I like it.

The Brother. Its settled then!

The Man. Yr a rascal, Brother.

The Girl. Do I have a choice? Id like to think on it.

The Brother. Whats there to think on? Think of it as a vacation! 2 years of work take half the take. Come back here rich. Its settled then.

That Venus has to ask if she has a choice demonstrates the power of colonial domination; the mere asking of whether she has a choice suggests that the implicit answer to the question is no. As a matter of fact, The Brother never supplies Venus with an answer to her question but coercively suggests the senselessness of Venus's inquiry. However, to portray Venus as more than victim Parks illustrates Venus's self-advocating attempts to negotiate the terms of her subordination. Similarly, when The Baron Docteur offers to buy Venus's contract from THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN, his offer entails escape from the literal cage in which Venus has been held and displayed, but it does not allow her to completely escape her sexualized exhibition:

The Baron Docteur. Sweetheart, how would you like to go to Paris?

The Venus. “Paris.” Well. “Paris.” What’s that?

The Baron Docteur. A big town! Only a short boat ride away!

The Venus. “Paris.”

[...]

The Venus. “Yr hands. Theyre clean. Are you rich?”

The Baron Docteur. Very.

The Venus. I like rich.

The Baron Docteur. Its settled then. I find you quite phenomenal. Hell, you look like you need a vacation. Say “yes!” Say “yes” and we’ll leave this minute.

The Venus. Do I have a choice?

The Baron Docteur. Yes. God. Of course.

The Venus. Will you pay me?

The Baron Docteur. I could pay you, yes.

Written similarly, the two scenes between Venus and the men suggest the limits of Venus’s choice: between complete subordination, and subordination with a possibility for a change in the terms. Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* marks desire of the enslaved as always “ensnared in a web of domination, accumulating abjection, resignation and possibility [...] of releasing or redressing the pained constraints of the captive body” (49-50). Though, to a large degree, Venus does not have a choice in her exploitation, Parks makes it clear that the limitations of choice are not due to individual acts of domination, but a result of a web of racist and sexist colonial structures of power and oppression. Nevertheless, there exists within this web a possibility for agency. In “Recasting ‘Black Venus’s in the ‘New’ African Diaspora,” an

examination of the traffic of Nigerian female sex workers, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe addresses “the extent to which women can be both victims and exercise agency” (206). She argues:

The victimization [of Nigerian sex workers in Europe] stems from their plight as unemployed or unskilled young women with a limited range of available options ‘back home.’ Even if agency is partial, delayed or never achieved, for conscripts and their extended families back in Nigeria, (in)voluntary conscription for participation in the migrant sex worker industry in Italy holds ‘the promise’ of economic empowerment. (Ifekwunigwe 207)

In the case of Saartjie Baartman, to whom Ifekwunigwe compares the Nigerian sex workers, Parks portrays Venus's attempt at agency through her hope for economic empowerment, but, as Parks implicitly suggests, this attempt must be examined within the limits of Venus's available options.

In thinking about agency, particularly sexual agency, *Venus* can be considered within the breadth of contemporary black women's texts that attempt to reconstitute the black female body from the dismembering influences of white supremacist patriarchal discourses that seek to dehumanize and oppress black women. Farah Jasmine Griffin, in “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery” asserts that by “claiming the body, scars and all, in a narrative of self-care” textual healing enables a re-imagining of historically despised black female bodies as sites of pleasure and resistance (524). Although Young argues that “Parks's stage representation in *Venus* creates the illusion that Baartman was a free and liberated woman who enjoyed her status as a sex object” (Young 703),

my reading is more in line with Hartman's reading of the agential possibilities for the black female body under slavery. Hartman explores "the meaning of [sexual] consent from the perspective of the dispossessed" and the "possibilities for agency that exist under conditions of duress, coercion, dispossession, manipulation, and constraint" (103). She points to pleasure and desire of the dispossessed as a fraught space to challenge power even as it reaffirmed the limits of their subjectivity. In a close reading of the same scene that Young critiques, I contend that, rather than merely portraying Venus as enjoying her status as a sex object, Parks represents her as assiduously desiring, but never finding, pleasure and love within the racist and sexist constraints that seek to objectify her. Thus she pursues her desire regardless of the oppressive powers that lay claim to her desiring body:

The Baron Docteur. Don't look! Don't look at me. / Look off somewhere. / Eat yr chockluts/ eat em slow/ that's it. /Touch yrself./Good./Good.

(He's masturbating. He has his back to her.

He sneaks little looks over his shoulder. He cums.)

The Venus. Whyd you do that?

The Baron Docteur. Im polite (Rest)

The Venus. Love me?

The Baron Docteur. Do I ever

[...]

The Venus. Love me?

The Baron Docteur. Yes. You don't want to go home?

The Venus. Not inny more. (Rest) Love me?

The Baron Docteur. I do.

The Venus. Lie down/And kiss me/Here./And here. /And here. /And here. /And here, you missed a spot, /Dearheart.

(Parks 107)

In an attempt to counteract the violent pawing of the many who paid to see her exhibited --“One pinched her, another walked round her; one gentleman poked her with his cane; uh lady used her parasol to see if all was, as she called it, ‘natural’” -- Venus demands the healing kiss of the man she has taken as her lover (Parks 69). Through the repetition of the question, “Love me?,” Parks reveals that Venus knows that her desire for love is not fully met by The Baron Docteur and emphasizes the unrelenting persistency of Venus's desire. Trapped by a situation in which, as Venus laments, “After all Ive [*sic*] gone through so far to go home penniless would be disgraceful,” Venus yearns for a degree of subjectivity, which can only come through non-objectifying love and reclamation of her body as a site of personal pleasure (Parks 75). Just as The Baron Docteur dictates that Venus touch herself in order to facilitate his own masturbatory pleasure, Venus dictates that The BARON DOCTEUR kiss her thereby seeking pleasure for her otherwise scarred body. Although the dominant racist and sexist discourses of black womanhood make it difficult for Venus to negotiate her desire, Parks asserts Venus’s right to that desire by giving voice to her need for pleasure. In short, the very real likelihood of her objectification does not deter Venus from pursuing her needs.

Earlier, I briefly mentioned “Scene 19: A Scene of Love (?)”, which is written completely in spells. Textually, the scene appears as follows:

Scene 19: A Scene of Love (?)

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The difficulty in determining the nature of the relationship between Venus and The Baron

Docteur is reflected both in the question mark of the title and the open silence of the scene.

This scene leaves out of the audience completely, as it is an ambiguous exchange between The

Venus and The Baron Docteur – a moment of their pure true selves. Compare this scene to the

final two lines of the play:

The Negro Ressurrectionist

A Scene of Love:

The Venus

Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss

In these final lines “A Scene of Love:” is not accompanied by the telling question mark.

Instead the colon suggests that the next line is the actual scene. Unlike the ambiguity of Scene

19 with The Baron Docteur, this final line addresses the audience with Venus’s demand to “*Kiss*

me.” There are no spells and no rests, merely a command to the audience.

By reclaiming and rewriting the Venus story, Park’s demonstrates that “remembering acts as a means of confronting [painful racialized legacies] and re-imagining a different future for their characters and for the readers as well” (Griffin 535). This process can provide a space for resignification of the “controlling images” which “distort the ways in which black women see themselves and each other” (Hobson 89). Rather than romanticizing the oppressed or celebrating Venus as a free agent, thereby ignoring the reality of racist and sexist ideologies that continue to construct black female subjectivities, Parks deftly demonstrates the historical

structures and circumstances that limit Venus's agency while still paying homage to Venus's hopes, desires, pleasures, needs, and attempts at asserting self. Her ardent desire to be loved and her closing refrain, "*Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss*" express her demand to be seen and pleased regardless of the tangled web of white patriarchal exploitation (Parks 162). Venus insists that she be looked at, remembered, and kissed.²⁵

In *Venus* Parks re-envision the spectacle of the 'Hottentot Venus' through a creation of a new type of spectacle – her play. Although I have primarily read the play as a text as opposed to a particular performance, the spectacle of Venus's body is at the center of the play. According to Parks's stage directions, Venus starts facing stage right, she then rotates 270 degrees to face upstage, then 90 degrees to face stage right, and later 180 degrees to face stage left. The audience is implicated early in the first scene with the line "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead [...] There won b inny show tonight" (Parks 3). The last scene of the play repeats the same line about the death of Venus. With 31 scenes which follow the 'death' of Venus, there obviously is a show. But the *show* isn't the exhibition of Venus but Parks's re-vision. Parks reimagines Venus as a complex subject complete with her own desires, even under conditions of exposure that define her solely as an object. The show is a burlesque – a biting and sometimes controversial satire.²⁶ Like a common saying about burlesque, the opening of the play invites you to watch then makes fun of you for watching.²⁷

²⁵ Related to Venus's demand to be kissed, earlier in the final scene of the play she commands "Miss me Miss me Miss me" indicating her desire to be remembered not as a silent object but as someone whose presence is missed.

²⁶ Indeed there is a satirical play within Parks's *Venus*, "For the Love of Venus" loosely based on the 1814 vaudeville burlesque satire "The Hottentot Venus or The Hatred of French Women" is interspersed throughout the play.

²⁷ This is a definition of burlesque that is passed around many performers and recapitulated in many burlesque texts.

Black Venuses and World Fairs

The conditions of objectification under which Baartman was displayed and the repressed racialized origins of burlesque are historically linked. For example, part of Baartman's display entailed her singing and dancing in sparse clothing and flesh colored tights. The connection between the two displays points to how black women's burlesque performances can instantiate counter-narratives to the black nude female body exploited and rendered grotesque. Parks's play, complex in its desire, sexuality, accountability, and objectification is one text through which I read black burlesque performances.

World's fairs have played a crucial role in the spectacularization of imperial and colonial fantasies about Africa and Asia. With the 19th and early 20th century boom of racist pseudoscience as political and popular "knowledges," World's fairs, ethnographic villages, and human zoos became key venues for entertainment and scientific inquiry.²⁸ Pseudoscientific racism provided the justification for imperialism and slavery, with Black women's bodies as a key site for enacting these exploitive politics. By investigating the assumed lineage between Black people and apes and promoting evolutionary ideologies of Black animalism, dehumanization became scientifically justified. In his *Notes from the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson proposes that Black's supposed preference for the white forms is as universal as "the

²⁸ The "hootchie coochie," often cited as an originary dance of burlesque striptease, is credited to "Little Egypt" one of many "Oriental Dancers" who shocked and entertained in venues such as World's Fairs. "Little Egypt" made her US debut at the Chicago's World's Fair in 1893 as part of the Algerian Village. In part, due to the production of multiple Little Egypts, there is still confusion around her identity. The first Little Egypt was either Farida Mazar Spyropoulous, who was actually Syrian, or Ashea Wabe, whose ethnicity is unknown. The proliferation of Little Egypts mirrors the production and display of multiple Hottentot Venuses and points to the collapse of racist science and entertainment within the Fair arena.

preference of the Oranootan [sic] for the black women over those of his own species.”²⁹ Indeed the bestial sexuality of black women was common within both scientific and literary discourses. Jayna Brown cites and “early eighteenth-century rumor” that “a group of French scientists had gone to Africa to experiment with breeding an orangutan and an African woman” (223) In a statement widespread in popular 19th century discourse, scientists also claimed that the “orangutan was born of the lust of the women of the Indies who mate with apes and monkeys to satisfy their detestable desires” (cited in Brown 224). The aberrant and uncontrollable lust of black women, their hypersexuality, was a key object of investigation in the study of Saartjie Baartman. The public display of Baartman’s genitalia and buttocks, described as abnormal appendages, was definitive proof in scientific and popular discourses of Baartman’s hypersexuality. Baartman was only one of subsequent Hottentot Venuses put on display. Depictions of nude African women, especially of Khoisan decent, in multiple 19th century literary and artistic circles suggests the extent to which their bodies became an object of worldwide fantasies of black women’s sexual availability rendered as grotesque. This phenomenon was later mapped onto the body of Josephine Baker, perhaps the first well-known black burlesque entertainer. In a 1927 essay by Andre Levinson entitled “The Negro Dance: Under European Eyes,” also cited by Jayna Brown, Levinson both derides Black dance as a “frenzy” that is “completely devoid of any nobility and almost ‘pre-human,’ if not actually bestial” yet also applauds the “positive grandeur of Josephine Baker.” Before we get too excited about Levinson’s comparable praise of Baker, he continues:

²⁹ Africans in America/Part 3/Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia”
www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h409t.html

“[Baker] is an extraordinary creature of simian suppleness – a sinuous idol that enslaves and incites mankind...there seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movements, a gushing stream of rhythm.” (qtd. in Brown 226)

Levinson’s reliance on bestial metaphors, even in a supposedly positive review, demonstrates the extent to which the Black female nude body was already-always imbued with sexual animalism. His words about Baker who “enslaves and incites [excites?] mankind” are almost clever in their irony.

Re-Envisioning the Black Female Body in Neo-Burlesque

With names like Alotta Boutté, Sahara Dunes, Perle Noire, Ginger Snapz, and Vagina Jenkins many black burlesque performers playfully highlight their skin, flesh, and bodies as sources of inspiration and identity. By choosing these names, the women emphasize the historically subjugating hypervisibility of black female flesh while reclaiming that hypervisibility as a source of power and personal identity. Alotta Boutté’s stage name comes from a play on her mother’s maiden name, Boutté and a pun on Alotta’s luscious physique. Sahara Dunes references her African ancestry and the landscape of her ample bosom. Perle Noire calls upon one of Josephine Baker’s monikers the “Black Pearl,” which may also be a play on the jewel of sexual pleasure. Ginger Snapz developed her name from the tantalizing images of shades of blackness as described in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. And Vagina Jenkins is flat out Vagina Jenkins.

Like many other aspects of burlesque, there are many origins stories for Neo-burlesque. Most neo-burlesque historians point to the 1990s as the comeback of burlesque striptease.³⁰ Michelle Baldwin connects the rise of neo-burlesque to the swing and rockabilly revivals of the 1990s that then expanded into an interest in pin-up culture and classic striptease. While Baldwin acknowledges the 1994 *Fallen Woman Follies* (a Seattle forum for strippers and sex worker to perform women-centered creative erotics) as proto-burlesque show, she neglects to situate the rise of burlesque within other socio-political phenomenon. On the other hand, Jackie Wilson positions neo-burlesque in relation to the feminist ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s. A backlash to a feminism that seemed antisex, middle class, and “frigid,” neo-burlesque rose out of riot grrl, gothic Lolita, and rockabilly subcultures that yearned for “a context for their desire to be both the sexy (even down and dirty) object of the gaze *and* the empowered subject who gazes” (Wilson 5). Neither of these origin myths adequately account for the role of women of color in neo-burlesque. In fact, both Wilson and Baldwin only mention a handful of neo-burlesque performers of color. This is a widespread phenomenon in all burlesque histories and biographical texts, and beyond the scope of my present project. However, my present intervention is to critically engage black women’s “unruly” neo-burlesque performances in light of the long history of racist sexualization of black female bodies. If, as Wilson contends, “the unruly woman becomes utterly unmanageable when she as a subject becomes the author of her desire, of her own spectacle,” then the performances of black neo-burlesque performers, whose bodies are always already subjected to racist spectacle, intervene into an array of oppressive regimes (and counter-oppressive strategies) with a wink, smile, and a lot of T&A

³⁰ See, for example, Michelle Baldwin. *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*. (Golden, CO: Speck Press) 2004. Jackie Wilson. *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co) 2008,

(Wilson 5). Using a multifaceted theoretical approach, including theories of black female sexual objectification, subject formation, burlesque history and critical analysis, and histories of women of color's cultural productions, I want to turn to three "case studies" of black neo-burlesque performances.

Miz Ginger Snapz "Got Back"

Oh, my, god. Becky, look at her butt.
It is so big.
She looks like one of those rap guys' girlfriends.
But, you know, who understands those rap guys?
They only talk to her, because
she looks like a total prostitute, 'kay?
I mean, her butt, is just so big.
I can't believe it's just so round, it's like,
out there, I mean - gross. Look!
She's just so ... black! –Sir Mix-A-Lot, "Baby Got Back," 1992

Main Entry: **ste·a·to·py·gia**

Pronunciation: \stē-a-tə-pi-j(ē-)ə\

Function: *noun*

Etymology: New Latin, from *steat-*, *stear* + Greek *pygē* buttocks

Date: 1879

Definition: an excessive development of fat on the buttocks that occurs chiefly among women of some African peoples and especially the Khoisan³¹

Steatopygia -- there is nothing about the word that is sexy; the syllabus don't easily trickle from the lips like a term of endearment. It's not a name I would call my cat or whisper urgently in my lover's ear. I wouldn't tell a friend that those jeans make her steatopygia look great and I highly doubt that the newest exercise trend will trim and tone women's unsightly steatopygia. The word is cold, clinical, and purposefully pathologizing. Its thin scientific veneer barely protects the ambivalent colonialist desire the word attempts to contain. Steatopygia signifies sexual and racial dis-order and dis-ease -- a contagion that must be catalogued, documented, and watched

³¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/steatopygia>

(but, in the name of science, never completely destroyed). It's a complicated word for what would seem to be a simply concept – a big black booty. By definition the word is specifically black, largely female, and in practice always othering. The body of Saartjie Baartman, racist pseudoscience's pin-up of the Khoisan woman, is the preeminent body which haunts subsequent representations of black female bodies, and constructions of Baartman's steatopygia echo in ambivalent discourses of the black booty.

One of the “standard tropes” of pornography is that “women's bodies are dismembered, reduced to parts for easy consumption” (Davies 334). True, this definition rests on the assumption that pornography is in itself and by definition a bad thing, always exploitative and misogynistic, but for the time being let's go with it. From dismembered my mind wanders to dissected and the violent inspection of Baartman's body for the consumption of scientists, doctors, ethnographers, and anyone else willing to pay to see Baartman's body made pornographic. In this serious game of free association, my mind travels to images of black tits and ass on the television, money and gold raining down on dismembering close-ups of black booty splayed across a bed or gyrating in painted-on shorts and I shrink because I am a child of hip-hop and this is a primal scene I'd rather keep repressed.

Other black feminist thinkers have made similar links between Baartman's eternal present and black female representation in commercialized hip-hop. In “Carnivalized Caribbean Female Bodies: Take Space/Making Space” Carole Boyce Davies applies the dismembering tropes of pornography to “some extreme versions of black male popular culture [where] women are reduced to chained-up bitches, and pornographically located as body parts” (335). In the same essay, while not specifically referencing Baartman, Davies refers to “the use of

African slave women for gynecological experimentation” and surgical dismemberment as one of the “various ways in which the female body serves the male” (338). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks focuses in on the butt as a sexualized sign to draw connections between Baartman’s body where “much of the racialized fascination [...] concentrated on her buttocks,” Josephine Baker whose “dance moves highlighting the ‘butt’ prefigure movements in contemporary black dance, and popular music’s representations of the butt, which may attempt to “challenge racist assumptions that suggest it is an ugly sign of inferiority” even as in the lyrics the butt “remains a sexualized sign” (63). For hooks, Baartman, the burlesque of Josephine Baker, and some hip-hop are multifaceted sites in which the butt functions as a complex signifier of racist and patriarchal domination even as attempts are made to reclaim it from oppressive discourses. Janell Hobson, through theories of the carnivalesque and feminist disability theory, argues that the black female body is rendered grotesquely outside normalcy and therefore their “‘disruptive’ bodies provide further justification for their devaluation and discrimination” (89). Hobson then turns to Baartman’s body which, “epitomizes connections between grotesquerie, sexual deviance, and posteriors” (89). Later Hobson uses the example of the 1992 Sir Mix-a-Lot hit “Baby Got Back,” which “uphold[s] and celebrate[s] the black body” while still reducing black women to a single body part and continuing to fashion them “as inherently ‘more sexual’” than white women (90). It is in this context of the congruence between Baartman’s violently objectified and fragmented body and the continuing objectification of black female bodies in *some* examples of rap and hip-hop that I turn to Miz Ginger Snapz’ performance.

A golden gloved hand slinks its way out from behind a curtain, with each punctuating blow of the horn comes another hand, a leg, another leg, and a full body wrapped in

gold. Gold and pink sequined flowers and feathers are firmly pinned in Miz Ginger Snapz full curls. As the music swells to its conclusion, Ginger peels away the sides of her gold wrap to give the audience a tempting view of short fringed skirt underneath. Ginger quickly turns with her back to the audience, as she unties the wrap from around her midsection. The next song begins with the well-known phrase "Oh my God, Becky, look at her butt; it is so big." Ginger turns her face to the audience, hurt and appalled, then with a smile, drops her wrap to reveal her fringed-covered ample backside. Richard Cheese's lounge lizardly cover of Sir Mix-A-Lot's iconic 1992 hit, "Baby Got Back," begins in full piano-swing: "I like big butts and I cannot lie." Ginger, still facing the curtain, slowly swivels her hips side-to-side mesmerizing the audience with her ample ass-ets. Peeling off bedazzling layers of pink and gold the song swells at the bridge as Richard Cheese crones "LA face with an Oakland Booty/LA face with an Oakland Booty." Ginger removes her fringed skirt to reveal tassels (which Ginger refers to as assels) on her butt. As she shakes her rear end, the assels twirl in sync with the music. With a 'proper' nod and curtsy, Ginger acknowledges her daring feat of assel twirling. As the song closes, Ginger removes her bra, covering her breasts with the pink feathers she has just pulled from her hair. She begins to walk off stage, giving her assels one final twirl signaling to the audience the, pun intended, end.

Miz Ginger Snapz piece, pointedly called "Back to Burlesque," draws on discourses of the black female body as spectacle and refashioning it into something spectacular. The "back" in "Back to Burlesque" is obviously a pun on Ginger's backside, which is the erotic focal point of the performance. However, the title of the piece also suggests a return, going back to classic burlesque in order to reclaim the black female body largely erased in burlesque histories. One of the main indicators of this return to classic burlesque is her over-the-top costume. The feathers, sparkly bra and panties, elbow-length gloves, and luxurious golden wrap are indicative of classic burlesque queens whose glamour, far-removed from the girl next store, was a major aspect of burlesque's allure. Ginger's elaborate pink and gold costume suggests a feminine lavishness that, in both racist and counter-racist narratives, excludes black women's bodies. Stephanie Camp argues that "such indulgences as making and wearing fancy dresses" endowed enslaved black women with a sense of "the body as a site of pleasure and resistance" to constructions of the black female body as solely a laboring body" (544). Though the present

conditions are temporally removed from those of chattel slavery, slavery's legacy of the black female body defined in terms of ungendering labor, whether sexual or physical, continues. Carol Dyson notes that glamour has historically carried different meanings for white and black women. While white women's lib groups in the 1960s protested the Miss America pageant, the NAACP protested that the previous 48 Miss Americas had all been white. Within this context "glamour was being claimed as a right rather than regarded as a form of repression" (Dyson 131). Even within counter-racist discourses that strive to contest the sexualized (and laboring) black female body, flashy feminine accoutrements are discouraged. For example, nationalist narratives of black bourgeoisie racial uplift tend to look down upon decadently-fashioned women who are seen as straying from protestant work values and sartorial demureness. The feminine extravagance of *Quicksand's* Helga Crane, enrobed in such decadence as "vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules," is regarded as "vulgar" by the other teachers at the social-uplift educational institution, Naxos, at which Helga works (Larsen 2, 17). Within the burlesque performance genre, glamorous costumes "frame the wearer in terms of certain social and economic privileges" while lush and sparkly fabrics "produce an 'intimidating otherness' that repels touch" even as it entices (Liepe-Levinson 82-83). While the tease is a defining element of burlesque, the juxtaposition of seduction and denial, when performed by a black woman takes on a particularly empowering valence. With the black female body always already available, Ginger's costume accentuates her feminine sensuality while denying unsolicited access to her body.

The musical inspiration for Ginger's performance is Sir Mix-A-Lot's 1992 hip-hop/rap hit "Baby Got Back." Patricia Hill Collins points to "Baby Got Back" as part of the "dramatic shift" in

the early 1990s where artistic and cultural “celebration[s] of Black women’s bodies and how they handled them [...] became increasingly replaced by the *objectification* of Black women’s bodies as part of a commodified Black culture” (128). Collins locates Mix-a-Lot’s hit at the crossroads of this shift in that it simultaneously celebrates and objectifies black women’s buttocks. Though “Baby Got Back,” according to Collins, leans more on the celebratory side than some other 1990s hits (“Doin Da Butt” and “Pop That Coochie”), the video was banned MTV during the daytime hours due to its close-ups of black women’s shaking rear ends and giant upturned buttocks looming in the background. The video, however, is more over the top and humorous than explicit. Tomatoes, lemons, and peaches indented like butt cheeks and phallic bananas dance across the screen. The DJ’s turntable is equipped with a butt shaped record holder, and Mix-a-Lot and his backup dancers inhabit a blue-skied butt-mountain landscape. The campy amped-up sexuality of the video suggests that the song is ripe for a burlesque. It is this space between the campy and the explicit, the joker and the punch line, and the subject and the object that Ginger’s performance occupies.

Ginger’s act is not performed to the original “Baby Got Back,” but to its 2002 cover by parody-lounge performer, Richard Cheese. Cheese has made a career of covering rap, hip-hop, rock, and heavy metal songs in his crooning lounge style reminiscent of Dean Martin. His tiger print tuxedo jacket and slick hair complete the retro-feel. Cheese’s version of “Baby Got Back” edits out some of the racialized elements of the Sir Mix-a-Lot original. For one, while Cheese’s cover does include the valley girl-esque opening “Oh my god, Becky look at her butt” the subsequent details of looking like “one of those rap guys girlfriends” or being “so Black” are removed from his version. Cheese’s cover also edits a couple of verses, one of which includes

references to getting with a “big soul sista.” The sole overtly racialized line that is included in Cheese’s cover is “Even white boys got to shout/ Baby got back.” This line and Ginger’s use of the Richard Cheese cover accentuate white male’s repudiated desire for black female bodies. While racist beauty standards dictate that “white boys” admiration and desire for black women is usually silenced and disavowed, Ginger’s booty is one that entices “even” white boys to “shout.” Of course, being a demonstrated object of white male desire does not, in itself, produce Ginger as an agent. It is her use of her butt, Ginger’s active “asseling,” which calls into question black female’s objectification, even after she has received the white male “shout” of approval.

As indicated earlier, theories of the abject and carnivalesque body acknowledge a space for that same body to defy the ordering constraints of normalcy. Hobson’s allusion to black women’s “‘disruptive’ bodies” suggests both the ways that bodies are penalized for that disruption and how the disruption reveals the potential for the same bodies to generate an “oppositional stance” in order “gesture toward a new aesthetic of the black female body” (89). One example that Hobson gives of black female artists creating a new aesthetic is through the performances of the dance troupe “Urban Bush Women.” In the piece “Batty Moves,” the dancers assert their sexuality through performances that at once acknowledge the dancers’ racialized objectification through costumes that accentuate their derrieres, but which resist the historical legacies of objectification through “their mobile, energetic bodies” (102). There is not a much more glaring way of accentuating the butt than through pink and gold spinning tassels hanging from each cheek. Yet, these assels also disrupt passive objectification through winking absurdity and energetic maneuvering. Referencing classic burlesque elements, Ginger reinvents

tassel twirling by moving its location from the more traditional breasts to the butt. Burlesque lore suggests that tassel twirling began as 1926 as a gimmick by Carrie Finnell of Cleveland, Ohio. The history and nature of burlesque dictates that new gimmicks quickly become stock elements of the genre, and tassel twirling is often the grand finale of a traditional act. While Ginger Snapz is not the first, or the only, burlesque performer to twirl on her butt as opposed to her breasts, it is not overly pervasive. While traditionally, pasties and tassels, the ultimate final reveal, point to a woman's breasts as the decisive signifier of female sexuality, Ginger's assels relocate that signifier to the seat of black women's sexuality – the butt. However, through her twirling Ginger does not offer herself up as a passive sexual object, instead her energetic display of ass-prowess point to her as a sexually active subject. Describing strippers who perform similar feats, Liepe-Levinson argues "through their maneuvers and pleasure in their prowess" these women demonstrate a "kinesthetic control and mastery of the body" (115). In Ginger's case, the assels' glittery revolutions, force the audience to watch her butt then makes fun of them for watching and wanting it. Her position as a passive spectacle is belied by her spectacular ass aptitude.

All hail the Nubian Queer: Sahara Dunes

Sahara Dunes struts on stage to infamous hip-hop star Kanye West's "Stronger." In contrast to Kanye's forthright lyrics, Sahara wears a sweet black pencil skirt and corset-like top trimmed in girly pink. The rhythm pulsates as Sahara defiantly reveals signs – large gold glittery words painted on black poster board – bitch, fatty, slut, dyke, and nigger. Each sign is emphasized by Kanye's staccato spitting "Th-th-th-that don't kill me/ will only make me stronger" blazing over his sample from Daft Punk "Work it harder, makes it better, do it faster, makes us stronger." The audience cheers and applauds as Sahara reveals and claims the identity-positions that have marked her only to defiantly toss them aside. Depending on the audience, that cheering becomes awkward silence at the sign that reads "Nigger." The final sign Sahara reveals has the words "Fuck you" hand-written in the same sparkly gold, eyes wide and sweetly grinning she flips the sign over to reveal the words "No Really, Fuck you!" then agilely breaks into dance.

By the end of the act, Sahara has stripped down to the illusion of complete nudity. She turns around so the audience can see her bare bottom fully revealed with no g-string. A large sign reading "Confident, Curvaceous, Sensual, Queer, Nubian" covers her front. After teasing the audience, who wonders if her front is as bare as her back, she flips the sign revealing, in large letters, the word "Queen" and holds it above her head. Her nipples are covered by flesh-toned pasties declaring and her pubic mound is barely concealed with by a brown triangular merkin. Boldly, Sahara saunters off of the stage to, of course, wild applause.

The driving narrative of Sahara's "Stronger" act is the process of reclaiming injurious hailings. In "Ideology and the State Apparatuses" Louis Althusser's identifies interpellation as the mode through which ideology "'transforms' the individuals into subjects" (Althusser 174). In his now iconic example of the individual who is hailed by the police call, "Hey, you there!" and recognizes himself in the hailing, Althusser stages a "theoretical theatre" of the "ideological recognition function" (181). Althusser's "theoretical theatre" is teased out and further dramatized in Sahara Dunes's burlesque act.

Though she doesn't specifically use the word interpellation, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* contends that there are no pre-discursive subjects. For Butler, signification itself, the interpellation that always-already subjectifies, "harbors within itself what the epistemological discourse refers to as 'agency.'" This is because signification is not merely an originary act, but is enforced through repetition. As such, agency can be located in the "possibility of variation on that repetition" (*Gender Trouble* 184-185). Sahara Dunes' restaging of interpellation, her Hey you – 'bitch,' 'fatty,' 'slut,' 'dyke,' and 'nigger,' spotlights the processes of subjection by which she is always-already defined. The lyrics to the Kanye West song to which Sahara performs, "'Th-th-th-that don't kill me/ will only make me stronger" don't suggest that Sahara is merely mired in the discourses, but is made by them. They constitute her. This, according to Butler is

the critical difference between individuals who are then culturally subjected in certain ways, and subjects whose “identity is always already signified” (*Gender Trouble* 185). Either Sahara’s hailing will kill her, or she will be *made* stronger; there is no returning to a state before them.

The moment that trips the audience up is when Sahara reveals herself as a ‘nigger’ (which is also the last sign that she holds up). There is something about the overdetermination of this word that tends to provoke a blaring speechlessness in the audience. This discomfort is doubled because Sahara not only uses the word, but reveals her interpellation as such. In *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, Randall Kennedy looks at historical, legal, and social context for nigger, as well as briefly meditates on what ‘we’ should do (if anything) about the n-word. This text is not meant to provide deep critical insights on the word and ends up being more of a polemic against hate-speech regulation than anything else. However, Kennedy addresses some of the controversy over nigger including its reappropriation, which has enabled some blacks to add “a positive meaning the *nigger*, just as women, gays, lesbians, poor whites, and children born out of wedlock have defiantly appropriated and revalued such words as *bitch, cunt, queer, dyke, redneck, cracker, and bastard*” (Kennedy 48). The awkward silence of Sahara’s audience, especially after the approving hollers at Sahara’s other glitter-encrusted word signs, suggests that Sahara’s use of ‘nigger’ is more than a simply reclamation. By now, particularly in light of hip-hop being such a global and cross-racial phenomenon, the re-purposing of nigger, as a term of black solidarity often pronounced ‘nigga,’ is a commonly seen by both blacks and whites. Though the word may still make some whites uncomfortable (especially the white neoliberal queer audiences for whom Sahara often performs), I contend that the speechlessness associated with Sahara’s nigger sign is more than white people’s

discomfort at the word, but a sense of being implicated as the forces spearheading Sahara's subjection. Homi Bhabha suggests that colonialist subjection functions through mimicry in which the colonialists' desire is "for a reformed recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 122). This "repetition of *partial presence*" displaces colonial authority and the myth of white wholeness. In other words, if an identity can be partial then that identity must have always-already been constructed, and if the identity of the other is constructed then the notion of a unique and absolute whiteness must also be constructed. Or, as Bhabha explains, "Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into *signs* [italics mine] of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body" (131).

To return to Sahara Dunes, her simultaneous interpellation in a colorblind society as like-a-white-Subject, and as a bitch, fatty, slut, dyke, and the quintessential other – a nigger – has within it the seeds of destabilizing the hegemonic whiteness. Bhabha's theory of partial presence takes on a slightly different valence in colorblind America where 'post-racial' suggests that the material effects of racism no longer exist. Racialized subjects are produced simultaneously as 'like' and 'not-like' since race purportedly is immaterial yet racism continues. In her nigger sign, Sahara, to use Bhabha's words, returns the "look of surveillance" which marks her as a nigger thereby "displacing gaze of the disciplined" (127). The form and function of this displacing gaze is further enhanced by Sahara's "Fuck-you" signs where the first "Fuck-you" can be interpreted as a kiss off to the words themselves, but the second "No Really, Fuck You!" suggests it's not the words themselves but the audience that Sahara is fucking and fucking with.

In the end, in addition to all the word-fucking, it's a burlesque act and, as such, clothes come off. Unlike most burlesque acts, which end in, at least, glittery pasties and a sparkling g-string, Sahara strips down to the illusion of complete nudity.³² This is a purposeful break with the burlesque genre in which the tease is about what is revealed and what is still covered. Instead of the usual burlesque accoutrements Sahara's "Queen" sign enables her teasing concealment and subsequent "reveal." The juxtaposition between the "Queen," particularly the "Nubian Queen," and Sahara's nudity performs another tease. Associated with strains of Black Nationalism, discourses figuring Black women as "Nubian Queens" attempted to counter white patriarchy's racially and sexually exploitative stereotypes. At its worst, these discourses may put black women on a pedestal, but that pedestal is still at the foot of her Nubian king. Further, the Black queen exists in contrast to her antithesis, the jezebel or the whore. Whereas, "'real' black women are constructed as 'queens,' or women who are deserving of respect, Black women who are not queens, who do not treat their bodies as temples, disgrace both their black king and the black race" (Reid-Brinkley 247). An assumed heteronormativity undergirds the rhetoric of the black queen; her royalty depends on her "commitment to the elevation of black manhood" (Reid-Brinkley 247). The diametrically opposed position to the queen 'whores' herself out in the service of white racist agendas meant to undermine black masculinity. These (black) 'man-hating' women, those who "attack black male power structures directly and publicly are marked with the label of "lesbian" to reduce them to silence" (Reid- Brinkley 250). As a self-proclaimed "dyke," "queer," and "Nubian queen," Sahara emphasizes the hybridity of her identity. Her queer sexuality does not undermine her blackness, nor does the public

³² Whether or not Sahara can actually strip to 'real' complete nudity depends on the local laws where she is performing.

exposure of her body undercut her status as a Nubian queen. Through her sexy strut offstage, she defies anyone to claim differently.

Through her piece, Sahara Dunes performs what José Esteban Muñoz calls a “disidentification” – a strategy “the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere” (Muñoz 4). Disidentification highlights the multiple subject positions through which individuals are interpellated, many of which “are often neglectful or antagonistic to other minoritarian positionalities” (Muñoz 8). Disidentification is neither a full identification, or assimilation, nor a complete rejection, rather it is a “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it” (Muñoz 11). Through her glittery signs, Sahara holds on to the hailings through which her subjectivity has been conferred, yet “invests [them] with new life” (Muñoz 12). She boldly concedes to the 'bitch, fatty, slut, dyke, and nigger' which hail her while stressing her 'sensual, queer, Nubian, queen' hybrid subjectivity. Like Saartjie Baartman whose near-nude body inspired desire and derision, Sahara’s sensual striptease combined with her derisive signs reveals the process of subjection which interpellation endeavors to conceal, teasing out heteropatriarchal racism as she teases her audience.

Shaking in Ecstasy: Harlem Shake Burlesque

Legs together, closed at the knees, in big church-lady hats, white gloves, and conservative-but-sassy church dresses, Simone de la Ghetto and Alotta Boutté of the original Harlem Shake Burlesque sit side-by-side in a mock pew. The music is a tinny piano and horn number, sounding straight from a southern juke joint. Alotta and Simone are caught in the spirit, waving and raising their hands to Jesus, testifyin’ and gossiping in the pew. Like a southern choir, the ladies stand up, stomp their feet, and clamp their hands in unison to the music. In-raptured and burning up from the heat, Simone reveals her toned thigh through the slit in her skirt, as both ladies seductively remove their gloves – finger by finger with their teeth or sliding them across and down their bodies. The audience has joined into this impromptu church service, clapping in

time with the ladies as Simone unzips the back of her dress and Alotta removes her suit. It appears that both ladies have been taken over by the spirit, and in a state of abandoned ecstasy they reveal skimpy red-fringed triangle bras and panties and shimmy and shake with wild abandon. The audience erupts in scream and applause. The ladies give the sign of the cross to Jesus, pick up their folded fans, and pose back-to-back hip out and hands in the air.

In a scene, which occurs near the end of the film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the excommunicated blues singer Shug Avery returns to her father's church in a jubilant gospel parade starting at the juke joint across the water and ending at the pulpit. Her sinful body and corrupted soul are redeemed as she is embraced by both her literal and spiritual Father, bringing her blues congregation with her back into the fold. Harlem Shake's act reminds me of this scene – with a significant difference. For Simone de la Ghetto and Alotta Boutté, it is not spiritual redemption for the sins of the body that they seek, but a unification of flesh and spirit through a revealing ritual of sexual salvation channeled through religious ecstasy.

The impetus for Harlem Shake's stripping in this act lies in a visual pun on spiritual and sexual ecstasy. Ecstasy, in both senses, floods the body with intense sensation blurring the boundaries between the self and the outside. Freud describes this feeling, as that "oceanic" feeling, a "feeling of that indissoluble bond. Of being one with the external world as a whole" (*Civilization* 11-12). The friend who described this "oceanic" feeling to Freud (a feeling which Freud contends he has never felt himself) proposes that it is "the source of religious energy that is seized upon by the various churches and religious systems" (*Civilization* 11). Freud postulates that the only non-pathological state in which this feeling occurs outside of religion is "at the height of being in love" when "the boundary between the ego and object threaten to melt away" (*Civilization* 13). He connects religious zeal with romantic zealotry through this

overpowering orgasmic feeling, which he describes as occurring in “trances and ecstasies” (21). Connecting religious ecstasy with the black church, Anita Gonzales in her descriptive analysis of Jawole Zollar’s theatrical production, *Praise House*, claims that the musical uses motifs of the African-American church to express “spiritual ecstasy” onstage and suggest the potential for black women’s spiritual renewal and liberation through divine creativity (123). Quoting Telia Anderson, Gonzalez proposes that “black women, through calling the spirit (also known as 'getting happy,' 'shouting,' or 'stomping'), employ a radical Africanist performance strategy that accesses and enacts a personal and corporeal divine authority” (123). Thus the process of “getting happy” at least partially relocates the patriarchal authority of God in the women’s own ecstatic bodies. In their performance, the women of Harlem Shake locate their “corporeal divine authority” in the divine 'reveal-ation' of their black bodies.

In many ways, the Black church has historically been a site of resistant-community building, and for African-Americans, has played a libratory function in the face of American racism. However, while the organized church provide fortification in the fight against racial oppression, it is also a “critical site for the subordination of women and the perpetuation of conservative gender ideologies”(Cole and Guy-Sheftall 104). Rules about virtuous women and wifely duties within a (of course) heterosexual union are supported by some church doctrine, which teaches that “the relationship between women and men in everyday life is to be like God and His church” (104). God is the head of the church and his flock is to follow His word. However, according to Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall in “The Black Church: What’s the Word?,” despite the influence of overtly hetero-patriarchal church doctrine the church also serves as site for Black women to resist patriarchy through patterns “that date back

to early church women and continue in contemporary womanist and feminist theologies and progressive Black churches” (104). Cole and Guy-Sheftall locate some of Black women’s challenges to patriarchal church authority in the establishment of women’s social and political clubs and institutions which facilitated a degree of influence within the church. What is elided in their discussion of Black women’s agency through the late 19th- early 20th century Black women’s club movement is the degree to which these clubs were regulated by an emphasis on bourgeoisie respectability - as reflected in dress, hygiene, homemaking, family, public behavior, and sexuality – as the means to racial an gendered uplift.

Founded in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) held fast to their motto, “Lifting as We Climb” (Giddings 97-98). According the Paula Giddings in *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, similar to the White women’s club women, the Black women’s club movement consisted mostly of middle-class women, steeped in the Protestant ethic who strongly adhered to the belief of “the importance of the home and the woman’s moral influence within it” (95). “Moral women” formed the “cornerstone of ‘good’ homes” which led to the uplift of good, moral, and therefore, deserving people (99). For the Club Women the personal regulation and discipline of the home became the preeminent site for Black racial uplift. While acknowledging the extent to which Black women had to contend with “representations of Black inferiority [...] bound up with notions of racial hypersexualization,” Angela Davis comments that “in the process of defending Black women’s moral integrity and sexual purity [prominent Black club women] almost entirely denied sexual agency” (*Blues Legacies* 44). In response to this denial of Black women’s sexual agency by the religiously-inflected club movement, Davis argues that brash, flirtatious, and

overtly sexual blues women were “precisely those who were perceived by the club women as in need of salvation” (44). Accordingly, women’s blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class Black women in which “the coercions of bourgeoisie notions of sexual purity and ‘true womanhood’ were absent” (*Blues Legacies* 44). Thus, for working-class Black women, the blues may have provided the space for community-building and female sexual agency that the Black church did not provide and the Black Women’s Club movement refused. Explicating the historical links between religious spirituals and the blues Davis quotes theologian, James Cone, who characterized the blues as “secular spirituals.” They are secular because they “affirm the bodily expression of Black soul, including its sexual manifestations” and spiritual “because they are impelled by the same search [as religion] for the truth of Black experience” (Cone qtd in *Blues Legacies* 8). As such, the blues tended “to appropriate previously religious channels of expression” and, according to Davis, female blues singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith “preached about sexual love” at “revival-like gatherings” (*Blues Legacies* 9). Although Harlem Shake performs to blues music without lyrics, which may be male authored, their bodies take the place of the blues songstress. The clapping, stomping, and shimmying women, moving to the blues beats, become proxies for Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Like the blues rhythms, the women’s pulsating bodies “convey details of sex”, which to quote Ralph Ellison “touch on the metaphysical” (qtd in *Blues Legacies* 10).

Sitting primly in wide-brimmed hats and pure white gloves, Simone de la Ghetto and Alotta Boutté look like the epitome of respectable church women. The women they portray on stage, however, are not cold and overly proper, but are made immediately likeable through their whispered gossip and giggling camaraderie at some imaginary member of the

congregation. It is evident that the women of Harlem Shake Burlesque mean for their piece to be a tribute, not a condemnation, of Black church women. Like the “ancestral storytellers” who connect the present to the past and whom Anita Gonzalez describes as an important motif in the African American spiritual worldview, Simone and Alotta’s church ladies are the women’s metaphoric Mothers, taking the place of the preacher-Father in communications between the material and the spiritual (Gonzalez 125). As such, the ladies interrupt the patriarchy of the church through their direct bodily communication with the spiritual world, or, as Anderson writes, “with Black women’s voices, bodies, spirits, and minds as moveable orchestrations, Black women can set up ‘church’ anywhere” (qtd in Gonzalez 130). If “getting happy” is a vehicle for Black women to usurp the patriarchal privilege of the preacher, the women of Harlem Shake push this one step further by connecting ownership of the spirit with ownership of the sexual body through their striptease.

To be sure, the act is not a comment on the potential hypocrisy of the Black church – an all too easy critique that is often lobbed at “the double standard of sexual morality,” the love-the-sinner hate-the-sin church dogma (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 115). Instead they, look toward both the motherly church lady and the motherly blues women as models for Black female agency. Within their bodies the women of Harlem Shake bridge the historical and contemporary divide separating the deviant “stripper, prostitute [...] and sexual exhibitionist” from the “working woman, wife, mother, lady, and virgin.” As Stallings has argued the emergence of radical Black female sexual subjectivity depends on undoing this binary.

The Final Reveal

A star of film and stage, Mae West is an iconic grandmother of burlesque. West is often credited with inventing the shimmy or at least being the most skillful shimmier. Rachel Schteir notes “no performer was more adept at then shimmy than the young Mae West” (75). Schteir continues “like many popular dances of the Jazz Age, the shimmy was stigmatized by its links to African American culture” (75). It wasn’t until later in life, years after she stopped performing on Broadway, that West admitted that she first saw the dance performed by Black dancers. West comments: “There was a sensual agony about it...and if you ever saw it performed, you would know that no white woman could create such a dance” (Hamilton 26-27). Schteir undeservedly praises West for “link[ing] burlesque moves with African American culture” as if West’s appropriation was an equal cultural exchange (98). Jayna Brown, who suggests that black entertainer Ethel Williams produced the shimmy, is more distrustful of the relationship between white and black performers. Brown cites Ziegfeld choreographer, Irene Castle, who in an interview in *Dancing Times*, calls the shimmy a “crude” “nigger dance” which Castle “may try to make something of” (171). For Brown and me, these examples point, not only to the erasure of black women from early burlesque, but also to the presumptuous right of white women to represent Black women’s sexualized bodies. Black women are codified as the abject through whom white women produce their own sexuality.

Venus and the Black neo-burlesque performers cited here refuse to have Black women sexuality defined by Whiteness. They reinsert erased black female bodies into sexualized narratives disabling absolute “abjection” and revealing and instantiating alternative histories. These alternatives not only disrupt the codification of Whiteness, but also disrupt essentialized blackness in both dominant and counter-narratives of Black womanhood. Wanting

and pursuing, Park's *Venus* and Black burlesque artists are sites of complex negotiations of Black female sexuality, which complicate essentialized Subject/Object binaries and put these complications on spectacular display.

Conclusion or "A Diva is a Female Version of a Hustla"

Since fifteen in my stilettos been struttin' in this game/ What's your age? Was the question they asked when I hit the stage/ I'm a diva, best believe her, you see her, she getting paid/ She ain't callin' him to greet her, don't need him, her bed's made - Beyoncé, "Diva" (2008)

The dictionary definition of Diva is a female singer who has enjoyed great popular success. But the pop culture definition of a Diva is a woman who gets what she wants. Queer ("she ain't calling him to greet her"), gender bending "(a female version of a hustla)", and as fierce as she wanna be ("struttin' in this game"), the black women who swagger through my project are definitely Divas.

From literary Jezebels to fantastical vampires, starlet mummies to spectacular strippers, the thread that holds these disparate elements together are their reliance on the sensational in order to put forth black women's sexual agency. These sensational productions and the theory drawn from them kick essentialism to the curb one leather heel at a time. If essentialism fixes subjects, then the productions that this dissertation examines fully unhinge them, releasing black women from the bind of fighting stereotypes with counter stereotypes.

Paying homage to my black feminist elders, both living and passed, I seek to begin to map out a trajectory of black sex-positive feminism. Historically, sex positive feminism has been seen as a discourse shrouded in whiteness. In the annals of (white) feminist history, prominent white women such as Carol Vance, Camille Paglia, Gayle Rubin, Kathy Acker, and Annie Sprinkle spoke largely in response to anti-porn feminists, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. These sex-positive and anti-pornography feminists maintained a focus on white women's experiences of sexuality. In a review of Shayne Lee's work *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women*,

Sexuality, and Popular Culture, Tamara Lomax argues that the primarily white pro-sex feminists ignore that "context metes out costs differently, usually according to gender, race, class, sexuality, power, ethnicity, location, profession, age, etc..." ("Erotic or Thanatic"). Thus, an intersectional approach is necessary in any pro-sex analysis. For Lomax, "[Shayne] Lee's sex-positive feminism, which is a little too dependent on third-wave white feminist sexual liberalists, misses this altogether" ("Erotic or Thanatic").

Unlike Lee, who in *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* contends that black feminist scholarship "has yet to generate a discursive attack against middle-class systems of sexual regulation that monitor black female sexuality," I argue that this complex scholarship is there both from black feminist academics and from those outside of academia. The works of Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Hammonds, L.H. Stallings, bell hooks, Daphne Brooks, Jewelle Gomez, and Audre Lorde (Lee gives credit to the latter two) to name a few, acknowledge the push for a politics of respectability while also critiquing the ways it limits volitional desire. In addition, Lee doesn't acknowledge that, to paraphrase Barbara Christian, black women have always theorized, sometimes within and sometimes outside of academia. Perhaps some of those spaces of sexual agency and theorization are not open to his probing eyes.

Many of these theories have come out of a queer politic which is in direct contrast to Lee's decidedly heteronormative text.³³ In Angela Davis's study of blues women she points to the blues as "a privileged discursive site" for considering "the historical politics of black sexuality" (*Blues Legacies* xvii). L.H. Stallings, in *Mutha' Is Half a Word* explores folklore,

³³ For example as a gauge of black women's sexual attitude, Lee calls upon "two prominent studies on black sexuality" which infer that black women are "less probable to engage in oral sex" (x)

vernacular, and "trickster-troping" in conjunction with queer theory in order to reflect on sexual difference without hierarchical classifications. For Stallings the "trickster converges the discourse of desire, gender, and the other as a way to speak about sexual encounter" (27). Desire is what allows black women "to exist and represent themselves outside of prescribed social boundaries of nationalist thought, racial discourse, and limited gender constructs" (Stallings 32). Similar to my work, both Davis and Stallings privilege the popular as sites where sex-positive black feminisms are articulated. The works of these black feminists disprove Lee's assertion that pro-sex black feminist scholarship is not happening within academia. My point is not to lodge a full-scale critique of Shayne Lee's scholarship, but to point out that sex-positive feminisms have been part and parcel of the work of both black women academics and those not officially affiliated with academia. One of my interventions is to bring these works together in a mapping of sex-positive black femme-inisms, thereby untangling and consolidating a variety of black feminist theories of the erotic.

While black feminist theories of the erotic are not a new phenomenon, mainstream (white) queer theory still struggles with black female subjectivity. As Evelyn Hammonds asserts "the ways *I* am queer have never been articulated in the *body* of work that is now called queer theory" [italics in original] (126). Indexing the normative underpinnings of contemporary queer theory and Gay and Lesbian political battles, I suggest that not only does queer theory continue to virtually ignore black lesbians and elide black women's sexual formations, but it seems contemporary queer theory has taken a few steps backward. It has become more concerned with producing homo-normative bodies than transgressive identities. Michael Warner describes this turn to the homo-normative in terms of the "Good Gay" and the "Bad

Queer." Warner contends that "the image of the Good Gay is never invoked without its shadow in mind - the Bad Queer, the kind who has sex, who talks about it, and who builds with other queers a way of life that ordinary folks do not understand or control" (114). This split between the Good Gay and the Bad Queer is similar to the dichotomy between the Good Black Woman/Bad Black Woman that my work seeks to undermine. The Bad Queers (or are they extra good at being queer) are the bad girls and divas that I examine here. They are sexual and sexualized, exhibiting an uncontrollable wildness that belies easy comprehension. Calling on Hammonds italicized "*body*" of work, I argue that black female sexuality needs to become a central site (rather than periphery) of a transgressive queering of bodies.

As indicated in the first chapter, I use black femme-inist theory for thinking about the transgressive possibilities of black female bodies. This theoretical rubric is indebted to black feminisms, queer of color theory, and gender theory in order to articulate alternative readings black female bodies --an array of bodies which do not fit neatly under any of these individual theoretical paradigms. A key component of a Black Femme-inist critique demands that lived bodily experiences of black women be the center and focal point of any cultural inquiry. This theory relies on black women's sensations channeling them into something sensational. Black femme-inist theory engages with the stereotypes that can plague black women's identities. In a personal act of engagement I have business cards with the words "Tragic Mulatto," "Jezebel," "Video Vixen," "Welfare Queen," "High Yella," and "Uppity" emblazoned in colorful script. The other side of my card has my contact information including email address and academic title: Sydney Lewis, Doctoral Candidate, University of Washington. These business cards encapsulate my dissertation. I am the "but/and" represented by the dual-sided card. I recognize the role

that these words have played in my subjugation, while also recognizing the women (including myself) who seized these words in an act of defiance. The terms are not mutually exclusive. To be clear, I am not talking about simple reclamation, but recognition, in the sense of both realizing and lauding the past-in-the present.

I have argued that the sensational or fantastic becomes an important site for examining the ever-present-past of black women's identities. This follows Walter Benjamin's call that "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (263). The sensational narratives that I employ question the linear structure of history endemic in realist narratives. Speculative fiction, faux-documentaries, experimental theater, and burlesque reclaim and reinscribe stories of black women's subjugation, inserting us into a history-denied while, at the same time, radically intervening into historical and contemporary representations. Drawing on A. Timothy Spaulding, I contend that "by deploying elements of the fantastic or metafiction" these texts "reconstruct an overtly oppositional, highly fictionalized form of history -- one that allows them to claim authority over narrative constructions of the past" (2).

Continuing the theme of inserting reinscribing black women's bodies in history by inserting myself into history (and in a sense "coming out") I am a fat, queer femme of color, burlesque performer maintaining a slew of other intersecting identities. Since I started performing in 2005 I have been searching for my black burlesque foremothers - a search which, with the exception of Josephine Baker, has turned up not much more than ephemera. Recently, I discovered the Jet magazine archive on Google Books and combed through hundreds of pages of gossip and pictures of old school "shake dancers." The stakes of this personal project was not

to reclaim black burlesque performers for history, but rewrite the history of burlesque by including these performers. I needed the history to reflect how the success of white performers relied on black 'others', whether at the forefront or backstage. More importantly, and related, by reinscribing the history I want the contemporary face of burlesque to acknowledge the black and brown women who made the neo-burlesque movement possible. But most of all, I needed to prove that white women did not invent sexual agency. This, above all else, is the primary stake of this project. By inserting black women into narratives of sexual agency, I hope to rewrite those narratives, keeping in mind the racialized stakes specific to black female sexuality. In looking forward to the past, I pay tribute to those women who skillfully navigate the dangerous terrain of pleasure and desire.

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