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Family Values: Pleasure Work, Black Genderqueers, and the Instagram Sphere

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FAMILY VALUES: PLEASURE WORK, BLACK GENDERQUEERS, AND THE

INSTAGRAM SPHERE

by

SUKHAI RAWLINS

Under the Direction of Dr. Lia T. Bascomb PhD

ABSTRACT

In accordance with traditional Western cultural logics that undervalue experiences of pleasure, empirical studies that explore the ways in which marginalized communities engage with pleasure often postulate such interplay as in need of scrupulous regulation. Specifically, traditional scholarship examining Black queer people's pursuit of pleasure tends to wed pleasure to lust or addiction in order to emphasize pleasure as intractable and ultimately corrosive. In contrast to the aforementioned pattern of engagement, this study will build upon diverging pedagogies of pleasure by examining Black genderqueer people's exhibition of pleasure on the platform of Instagram. Emerging from a lineage of pleasure activists, this research locates itself within geographies of discourse that germinate from Audre Lorde and center pleasure to illustrate collective liberation as not only urgent, but transformatively tasty.

INDEX WORDS: Pleasure, Perversity, Instagram, Black Trans* Feminism, Black Genderqueer

ANOTHER WORLD AT THE END OF THE WORLD: QUEER PERVERSITY,

INHUMANITY, AND DIGITAL AFTERLIFE

by

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INSTAGRAM SPHERE

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1   INTRODUCTION

"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."
– Arundhati Roy, the World Social Forum (2003)

Black trans and genderqueer people are currently witnessing growing representation and visibility in media, but unfortunately, increased visibility does not mean increased safety or access. Data from the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey finds disproportionately high rates of arrest and incarceration among Black transgender and genderqueer people, while the National LGBTQ Task Force identifies 41 percent of Black transgender and genderqueer people as experiencing homelessness.[1] Throughout America, discrimination against Black trans and genderqueer people isn't limited to increased arrest or housing exclusion, but can make simply existing in public a dangerous undertaking.

In what may be an attempt to intervene and support the survival of Black queer people, a substantial body of research studies has investigated "dangerous" behavior Black queer people engage in that may imperil their life expectancy. Studies with titles such as "The Tip of the Iceberg: young men who have sex with young men, the internet, and HIV" construct a verbal plane where the clause "young men who have sex with young men" is literally surrounded by the imminence of "The Tip of the Iceberg," (a veritable crisis), and "HIV."[2] Evinced in the phrasing of the title, for gay men, sex, one of the most pervasive conceptualizations of pleasure, is something like standing on the edge of an immense slope, seconds from slipping into an abyss of HIV, with the internet, ostensibly acting as the vehicle pushing the endangered gay subject toward his impending doom. When searching for scholarly research on genderqueer and

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[1]Jack Harrison, Jaime Grant, and Jody L. Herman, "A Gender Not Listed Here: Genderqueers, Gender Rebels, and OtherWise in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," *LGBTQ Policy Journal* 2 (March 2011): 13–24.
[2]Robert Garofalo, Amy Herrick, Brian S. Mustanski, Geri RachelDonenberg, "Tip of the Iceberg: Young Men Who Have Sex With Men, the Internet, and HIV Risk," *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 6 (June 1, 2007): pp. 1113-1117.

transgender experiences with pleasure on popular search engines like Jstor, some of the first

empirical studies exploring practices of pleasure in queer communities, such as engagement with

sex and drugs, hold similar titles: "Transgender Female Youth and Sex Work: HIV Risk and a

Comparison of Life Factors Related to Engagement in Sex Work"[3] and "Estimating HIV

Prevalence and Risk Behaviors of Transgender Persons in the United States: A Systematic

Review." Amongst these studies, it is important to note that, where race is explicitly named, the

most racially represented sample are *Black* transgender people; a reality which underscores the

racialized vectors of deviance, pleasure, and danger. I list these research titles, not to disparage

studies that seek to promote HIV intervention in Black queer communities, but to highlight the

popular correlation and seeming causality between Blackness queerness, pleasure, and calamity.

Pervasively, empirical research mimes an insidious cultural logic that has criminalized

queer sex and debased forms of pleasure that fall outside of cisgender heterosexual coupling and

reproduction.[4] LGBT advocacy campaigns could normalize marriage between upright queer

denizens, could legalize gay marriage globally, they could even have every conservative in

America chanting "gay is good,"[5] but these assimilation tactics would never address the

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[3]Wilson, E. C., Garofalo, R., Harris, R. D., Herrick, A., Martinez, M., Martinez, J., … Transgender Advisory
Committee and the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions (2009), Transgender female
youth and sex work: HIV risk and a comparison of life factors related to engagement in sex work, *AIDS and
behavior*, *13*(5), 902–913; Wilson, E.C., Garofalo, R., Harris, R.D. et al. AIDS Behav (2009) 13: 902.
[4]Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
[5]In 1968, gay rights vanguard, Franklin E. Kameny, formulated the phrase "Gay is Good" in agn attempt to
recuperate the unfavorable dogma inundating conversations around homosexuality (Franklin Kameny, Gay Rights
Pioneer, Dies at 86, DAVID W. DUNLAP, October 12 2011, New York Times*).
Kameny set upon his crusade against homophobia in a social context where queerness was criminalized, journalists
popularly surrounded the term gay marraige with quotation marks, and where queer representation was typically
relegated to comedy at the expense of queer subjectivity. While Kameny coined the phrase "Gay is Good" as a
preemptive vie to combat the physical and psychological violence enacted against gay people who would most
certainly grapple with stigma and shame, the phrase has largely been used to ameliorate the perception
homonormativity and further integration, while eliding, and sometimes implicitly furthering the condemnation of,
more deviant expressions of queerness.

perversity and violence that shroud queer subjects who elide the label of respectability.[6] Queer theorist Juana María Rodríguez expounds upon this notion, noting, "[l]iving in closer proximity to poverty, violence, and disease, the bodies of racialized [queer] subjects are more vulnerable to forms of disabling harm, deemed less worthy of modes of care, and thought outside formulations of physical or emotional goodness."[7] Here, Rodríguez remarks upon the (un)intelligibility of queer people who do not or cannot espouse idealized modes of being. While the apparatus of cultural construction may interpolate those who occupy whiteness, other normative subsets of embodiment, or a closer proximity to respectability, as "human," hegemony depends upon refusing racialized and gendered subjects such a privilege.

Inextricable from the high rates of arrest, incarceration, homelessness, and violence among and against Black trans and genderqueer people is a patterned association between danger, threat, and queer desire; a circuitous matrix where queer lives and queer pleasure become nestled in a pathology of danger and abjection and thus subtend the perceived danger of pursuing queer pleasure. This is not to say that Black genderqueer people should (or can) wear a veneer of respectability to escape state violence, but rather, to emphasize an exigency for engaging with queer desire, pleasure, and perversity without reinscribing, what Sylvia Wynter refers to as, "a narratively condemned status."[8] Simply affirming "queer" as another identity marker will not address this reinscription – especially when many of the queer people most vulnerable to violence exist at the intersection of Blackness and genderqueerness. Those who seek to make this

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[6]JANET R. JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tole*. (New York; London: NEW YORK University, 2003), p. 123.

[7]Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York; London: NYU Press, 2014).

[8]Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues," Forum H.H.I. Knowledge for the 21st Century 1.1 (Fall 1994): 42-73.

world safe for queer people must also affirm queer pleasure as good, and we[9] must insist that

deprecated and "perverse" forms of pleasure may also be sites for the production of values.[10]

In order to combat narratives that dehumanize Black trans and genderqueer people and further

their disenfranchisement, we must expand the demographics of intellectual work and incite a

cultural awakening. On platforms like Instagram, by engaging in a public process of self

documentation, Black genderqueer people may work to challenge the patterned suppression of

queer desire. Throughout my archival work, I locate a reformulation of ethics within the posts of

Black genderqueer people on the platform of Instagram. My present research asks: How do the

profiles of Black genderqueer people on Instagram illuminate perverse pleasure as a potential

site for value production? I center Instagram as a salient site for qualitative analysis, specifically

because it is a repository for aesthetic surplus and exists as an informal and accessible platform

abounding in content. Within the context of racial capitalism, where an object's value is raised

based on its scarcity and Black trans people are often rendered disposable based on their

purported fleshy excess, my research focalizes Instagram posts to work against the hegemonic

valorization of restrictedness and propriety.

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[9]Within this study, I use the word "we" to invoke José Esteban Muñoz's logic of futurity; a speaking into existence a "we" that is "not yet conscious" (453). Throughout his research, Muñoz implements first person collective as an "invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence" (455). Expounding upon this "collectivity" and future "horizon," Muñoz argues, "The listing of particularities [...] 'race, sex, age or sexual preferences' are not things in and of themselves that format this 'We,' indeed the statement's 'we' is regardless of these markers which is not to say beyond such distinctions or due to these differences but, instead, beside them." In this regard, by postulating identitarian particularities as existing in apposition to polyvalent manifestations of belonging, Muñoz highlights markers of distinction as a sort of viscocious membrane working alongside the collective "we." Specifically, Muñoz's use of "we" illustrates the future as a sort of queer ideality called upon by those of "us" who may not meet specific identity particularities, but are invested in "multiple forms of belonging in difference and belonging in collectivity" (453). Throughout this study, the language of first person collective is similarly used to invoke a belonging in difference and to propose an oneiric image of what the "not yet conscious" could look like (453). For this work, readers may understand the use of "we" as appealing to those who exist across identitarian categorization and reach for the ecstasy of queer futurity in critique of our present moment's suppression.

[10]JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin,* p. 123.

Throughout history, Black scholars have often reflected upon the alienation that accompanies education. In seminal texts such as *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois describes the pain inextricable from one's realization of "the veil"[11] and in *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson describes the sadness and estrangement that complicates Black individuals' re-entrance into their community after formal education.[12] Contemporarily, with the emergence of social media, one's education may occupy a more liminal space. While the hegemony undergirding normative curriculum does not elide social media, Black masses have the opportunity to participate in social platforms to share their stories. Affirming this notion, a recent poll reports Black young adults as one of the most active demographics on Instagram.[13] In this regard, Instagram's accessibility was a significant impetus for its employment in this research.

While perversity and Black genderqueerness hold important implications for Black Studies, there is a dearth of scholarship validating the existence of Black genderqueer people and an even scarcer amount of research crediting Black genderqueer people who contribute to knowledge production by engaging embracing perverse gesture. This is not to say that the concept of genderqueerness is abandoned by Black Studies. Black feminist scholars such as Tourmaline, Riley Snorton, and Kai M. Green, to name just a few, have rigorously engaged Black transness and gender nonconformity.[14] Drawing from the canonical work of Black feminist theorists such as Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Cathy Cohen, and Saidiya Hartman, Black feminists have

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[11]W. E. B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Mineola, (NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 1994).

[12]Poll: Black teens biggest users of Instagram, Snapchat *Woodson, Carter Godwin, 1875-1950. The Mis-Education of the Negro. Trenton, N.J. :Africa World Press, 1990.*

[13]The Associated Press, "Poll: Black Teens Biggest Users of Instagram, Snapchat," *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 20 Apr. 2017.

[14]Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017, p. 324. Riley, C. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides : A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017. Julia R. Wallace, and Kai M. Green, "Tranifest: Queer Futures," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 568-569.

intervened upon normative epistemologies to attend to the idea of genderqueerness as a register

of race implicating, not only those who self identify along the LGBTQAI spectrum, but all Black

people "ungendered" through the Middle Passage.[15]

Within Black Studies, much of the Black feminist engagement that challenges the

conceptual framework of Humanism specifically highlights gender as an agent of subjectification

that is discontinuous with the positionality of Black flesh.[16] In this regard, Black people's

inability to cohere with normative gender has been used to explain the quandary of sovereign

subjectivity and humanity for Black people.[17] Black feminist interventions have worked to

unpack the ways in which dominant archives subtend anti-Blackness by reproducing phantasms

of Black femininity as queer, inverted, and pathological.

While a growing amount of Black feminist theory highlights Black people as queered by

the logic of slavery,[18] within this study I foreground those who self align with Black

genderqueerness because I observe a pattern of Black genderqueer figures participating in radical

action which critically labors to "remake Black social life."[19] In regards to gender, a lineage of

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[15]Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987),
"On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in the Unbearable Wrongness of
Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project," In The Companion to African-American Studies,
edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, 107–18., Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, PUNKS, B., &
QUEENS, W. (2001), Cathy J. Cohen. *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics*, 200, Hartman, S. V. (1997), *Scenes of
Subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*, Oxford University Press on Demand.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Here, I am referring to the crisis of political representation for Black people when the body stands on the side of
the sovereign. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, (NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[18]Dariek Scott's, *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), which explains the "counterintuitive power" of Black subjugation
provides a critical framework for reordering an interpretation of queerness, abjection, and subversion. Specifically,
Dr. Scott's close reading of Black men who choose to embrace shame foregrounds my own analysis of Black
genderqueer people on social media who find life in death by reappropriating the visual economy of the inhuman.
As I engage the cultural demarcations which traffic Black "ungendered" subjects as ever-abject and subaltern, It
feels apt to name Scott as a vanguard for the generative capacity of Black perversity.
Scott, Darieck, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary
Imagination,* New York: New York University Press, 2010.
[19]16:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGxZQ3Py4-A&t=3s.
Hammer Museum, "Saidiya Hartman & Arthur Jafa," June 10 2019.

Black feminist intervention attends to the "queer" position and potential of Blackness,[20] but much of this research engages Black people's alienation from gender in conjunction with their alienation from desire.[21] In this regard, there still exists a paucity of research centering those who gesture towards the generative capacity of queer desire by aligning themselves with the genderqueerness potentiated by their Blackness.[22] As Black feminist theorist, Evelyn Hammonds reflects, "to date, through the work of black feminist literary critics, we know more about the elision of sexuality by Black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of desire."[23] While this study doesn't specifically center Black people aporetically assimilated into womanhood, I work to address "the possible varieties of [...] desire" by examining the ungendered Black people who identify as genderqueer.

1.1 Background

Within this study, I understand queer pleasure and perversity as contiguous formations. Throughout my analysis, I specifically hone in on stigmatized pleasures such as drug use, nudity, and "depraved" sexual expression, because of the ways in which substance use and deviant sexuality have been racialized, attributed to queerness and pathology, and inundated with a language of danger. In light of this dominant cultural logic, I am grateful for the opportunities provided by this research to habituate dialogue on the potential of perversity. At the same time, it

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[20]Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003, p. 315., Hartman, Saidiya M. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, p. 184., Humanities Futures. J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Cervenak, "The Black Outdoors After Property and Possession," Duke University and University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 2017.

[21]Saidiya Hartman, Scenes Of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, And Self-making In Nineteenth-century America, New York : Oxford University Press, 1997, Frank B. Wilderson, III, 1956-. Red, White & Black : Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, Durham [NC] :Duke University Press, 2010.

[22]Just because there is a paucity of research does not mean that it does not exist. Later, I will expound upon the scholarship attending to the productive potential of both genderqueerness and pleasure.

Evelynn M. Hammonds,"Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, Ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge), 1997, p. 99.

[23]Thank you Dr. Lia Bascomb for this helpful reminder.

feels important to note that, though Western epistemes may devalue pleasure's productive potential, the affective positions engendered by pleasure can't be neatly categorized as either negative or positive. They are much more nuanced.

Bringing up the concept of desire in conversation often reminds me that pleasure cannot be politically neutral. When people ask me about my research, more often than not, my use of the words "pleasure" and "perversity" is met with awkward confusion. Typically, my response is to explain that I find value in naming and engaging the longings we are so often forced to stifle. But largely, this too is met with averted eyes or an embarrassed smile.

I understand why the subject of pleasure could be a point of tension. It makes sense that pleasure, a word indicating ecstasy and relief, might call attention to the ways we've been estranged from these feelings of wellness. Blissful remembrances often adhere to those of despondency. Such is the quandary of modern signification – representation depends upon the visual economy trafficked by its negation. Under the suffocating repression of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, pleasure is always politically pregnant, poised to rebirth old memories, affective histories, and culturally inscribed associations. In this regard, the deployment of pleasure coheres with the deployment of race, gender, sexuality and the other registers for approximating one's humanity, or lack thereof. For reasons like this, pleasure is a touchy subject (no pun intended). Right now, for me, writing about pleasure feels comforting; something akin to sipping a mug of tea while watching a storm rage outside of my window. But even when thinking about pleasure feels cozy and safe, a loaded phrase, smell, or sound, can pull that warmth from me like a blanket, leaving me feeling cold and naked. Sometimes, without warning, engaging pleasure is a cacophony of warmth and terror and delight and confusion. Sometimes, it is the feeling of nothing at all.

Pleasure can engender a dizzying array of affect. In the present study, I interrogate what *I* determine to be depictions of perversity and pleasure, but it feels important to acknowledge that the people performing in the indices I apprehend may not describe their experience in these terms. For instance, while the Instagram profiles I examine may present Black genderqueer people smiling while engaging in drug use or risky sex, this does not mean that the experiences depicted were pleasurable. For some, engaging in drug use or risky sex is a form of self punishments. For others, these things may be both pleasure and punishment.[24] Throughout this study, I lay out how socially deviant behaviors have been hegemonically overdetermined as alarming and unhealthy and as I work to contest this narrative I want to be careful not to participate in positive judgements that are similarly totalizing.

In this text, when I examine the perverse performances of Black genderqueer people on Instagram, I am looking for the ways in which their gestures may work to expose the multiple and complex power relations hidden under dominant topographical geographies. I am also looking for performances that may gesture towards queer futurity and strategies for surviving hegemony. This is not to equate my interpretation of Instagram posts with the feelings experienced by the Black genderqueer people they depict, but rather, to offer a reading of Black genderqueer perversity that intervenes upon assumptions which foreclose the capacity for its generative potential.[25]

Pleasure is polyvalent and complex – there are numerous reasons this terrain might bring up tension. Acknowledging this nuance feels critical for the present research, which seeks to contravene dimorphic models for meaning making. At the same time, when I've discussed my

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[24]Thank you Dr. Lia Bascomb for this helpful reminder.
[25]Julia R. Wallace, and Kai M. Green, "Tranifest: Queer Futures," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 568-569, p. 48.

research socially, in large, people have not commented on the complexity of such conversations, but have questioned its propriety. Subliminally, perversity traffics the visual economy of Blackness, queerness, and pathology, and throughout my encounters, it seems like many feel wary about associating with these representations. Although not all discomfort with perversity stems from an allegiance to normativizing law, subconsciously, I think much of it does. In my experience, "social decorum" has been the most explicitly deployed logic for occluding discussion on pleasure. Here, unease around pleasure discourse feels tinged with reproach – a corollary to the "family values" which buttress civil society.

Most recently, the issue of perversity and social propriety arose at a gathering with the PhD candidates at my partner's university. As a social mixer for graduate students, attendees were encouraged to discuss the basis of their research, and in customary fashion, prolonged silences followed my thesis description. When the time came to give feedback, the students with whom I spoke provided comments like: "Isn't it weird to talk about that with your professors?" and "I'm not saying drugs and sex are bad, but I couldn't think about them as good, you know? It's just not how I was raised."

The discomfort in the room had been palpable. At the end of the night, my partner asked if there was any other way I could describe my research in "group settings" that didn't require my mentioning perversity. Specifically, they asked me to discuss my research in a manner more "family friendly."[26] When my partner made this request of me, it was clear they weren't referring

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[26]I don't recount this interaction to shame my partner for the boundaries they put on conversations with their classmates. I know that as a Black trans person, my partner is acutely aware of the perversity always already inscribed to their existence. I know that for them, in social settings, probing glances are plentiful and inexorable, and that bringing up Black queer perversity in a group of white cis graduate students can feel like soliciting needless disdain.

to my family – they knew that even with conservative relatives I rarely redact myself. We both knew what kind of "family" they were referring to.

The specter of "the family" haunts civil society, looming over phrases like "traditional values," "the general public," and "social decorum." All of these concepts are constructed with fidelity to Mom, Pop, and their two and a half children.[27] When conducting this study, the phantom of this family was both omnipresent and invisible – sneaking up on me over cocktails with my partner's classmates and hiding in statistics explaining Black genderqueer people as more likely to face housing exclusion.[28] Queerness and perversity are not family friendly. In order to highlight the importance of this research and its attempt to challenge the nostalgic family values covenant of contemporary American politics, I find it necessary to highlight "the family's" dependence on Black and queer pathologization.

One nexus between the dissemination of rhetoric characterizing queer desire as dangerous and the dehumanization of queer subsistence is the way in which the apparatus of cultural construction[29] permeates a hierarchy of kinship. Pervasive understandings of "citizenship" rely heavily upon rhetorical strategies where a separation between the private and public is encouraged and where naturalized forms of kinship are allowed to occupy the public sphere. Historically, the values asserted as belonging to the "general *public*" depend upon the *privatization* of behavior that falls outside of a naturalized ethical subsistence.[30] As juridical systems of power portray the cisgender heterosexual family as constituting the natural, and thus, ideal and positive form of existence, the idea of value and ethics becomes married to cisgendered

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[27]Cacho, L. M. (2008), "The Rights of Respectability: Ambivalent Allies, Reluctant Rivals, and Disavowed Deviants." In *Immigrant Rights in the Shadows of Citizenship,* (New York: NYU Press) pp. 193.
[28]Jack Harrison, Jaime Grant, and Jody L. Herman,"A Gender Not Listed Here: Genderqueers, Gender Rebels, and OtherWise in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," *LGBTQ Policy Journal* 2 (March 2011): 13–24.
[29]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Taylor & Francis Group (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.8.
[30]JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin,* p. 33.

heterosexuality and a reproductive imperative that proliferates the nuclear family.[31] Within this context, cisgender heterosexual families can be understood as comprising the "general public" and as these nuclear families perform cisgender heterosexual coupling as the apogee of citizenship, civilization, and humanity, they reinforce the perpetuation of this juridical assertion.[32]

I find that on the public platform of Instagram, Black genderqueer users who openly create and disseminate images of themselves engaging in pleasure work to disrupt this privatization of queer desire. By focusing on the public performance of Black queer pleasure on Instagram, this study interrogates the ways in which Black genderqueer actors labor to reinvent standards for value and knowledge production which do not rely on the valorization of nuclear kinship. In contrast with the regnant system of valuation which pathologizes pleasure that falls outside of a heterosexist impulse, Black genderqueer people on Instagram who flaunt their queerness demonstrate the possibility of a life for queer people where shame and secrecy aren't inherent ramifications of queer desire.

Throughout this process of privatizing and normalizing, as the nuclear family becomes the nucleus of the state and reproduces citizens who support the state, the state concomitantly supports these citizens. By way of belonging to the nuclear family, one simultaneously belongs to the state and is thus, a citizen, or a human that the state is tasked with both recognizing and supporting. Conversely, those who do not constitute the "general public" or belong to a nuclear family are simultaneously barred from the categories of citizen and human. This group of people, far from garnering the benefits that accompany perceived citizenship or humanity, comprise a

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[31]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.2.
[32]JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin,* p. 145. Cacho, The Rights of Respectability, NYU Press.

devalued population forced to navigate sites of necropolitics, a term defined by political theorist,

Achille Mbembe as excluding certain bodies from body politics in ways that promote mass

injury and death.[33] Through juridical process that legitimize certain bodies as human by deeming

them capable of producing or belonging to a normative family, the nation also establishes a

valued population of citizens who deserve protection and prosperity, while dehumanized

populations are condemned to suffer the bio-necro-political implications of this cordoning off of

"ethics," value, and humanity.

Through the co-buttressing of the state and nuclear family, cisgender and heterosexual

nuclear families are posited as constituting citizenship and humanity through the exclusion of

queer others. I spend a considerable amount of time here unpacking this implicit function of the

state, because by regulating sex, sexuality, and who gets read as belonging to a "family," state

regulation becomes central to cultural taxonomy, illegibility, and the perceived inhumanity of the

queer other. In this regard, biopower and the state sanctioned regulation of legitimacy become

methods through which the state can control social relations more broadly.[34] In its exacting

management of what constitutes family, citizenship, humanity, and realness the state is also able

to manage the kinds of existences and futures that become understood as worth striving for and

attainable. As this study seeks to use the documentation of queer self actualization to imagine a

world outside of imperialist binaries, the deconstruction of this distinctive political technology is

integral. As said by trans activist and prison abolitionist, Tourmaline, "we must be critical of

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[33]Jessi Lee Jackson, "Sexual Necropolitics and Prison Rape Elimination," *Signs* 39, no. 1 (2013), p. 14 doi: 197-220. doi:10.1086/670812.
[34]JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin,* p. 7.

such a discourse that marks the nation state as a protector of the people rather than the very thing that puts bodies, especially trans bodies of color, at the forefront of imperial nation building."[35]

Knowing the system of stratification on which a system is predicated is vital; it is essential to make visible, and thus available for reimagining, the normally invisible constructions of citizenship and humanity.[36] In his influential essay, "Queerness as Horizon," Muñoz elaborates on this critical impetus by suggesting that "the there of queer utopia cannot simply be that of the faltering yet still influential nation-state."[37] Here, Muñoz reminds us that any attempt at liberation is futile as long as its work functions to subtend the authentication of an imperialist social order. Now that we have named "the nuclear family" as a juridical construction which intertwines heteronormativity, citizenship, humanity, and value, we can see that the "natural social order" isn't so natural, but strategic, calculated, and intentionally curated, and the idea of challenging such a system with an alternative imagining becomes more tangible. In other words, by engaging with Black genderqueer people's performance of pleasure, perversity, and inhumanity, let's fuck with the dominating cultural apparatus by challenging the idea that respectability, citizenship, heteronormativity, and even humanity, are modes of being worth striving to occupy.

In order to stake a claim outside of the dominant, recursive understanding of an attainable future, this study takes on the project of helping to reframe the scripts of value and ethics. The accumulation of academic scholarship that explores the dangers that pleasure-seeking activities pose for Black and queer communities further prevents the conceptualization of Black queer

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[35]Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017, p. 324.

[36]Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezilis Mirrors Imagining Black Queer Genders*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 121.

[37]José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, NYU Press, 2009, p. 460.

pleasure as a site that may be mined for value. According to Rodríguez, "The sexual practices and psychic lives of racialized [queer] subjects, like those of people with disabilities, the imprisoned and enslaved, the foreign and the indigenous, [... and] other bodies labeled deviant, have never been construed as good, healthy, or whole."[38] Traditional epistemologies of humanism have excluded those existing at the intersection of Blackness and genderqueer and academic scholarship within Black Studies commonly theorizes queer pleasure as furthering the violence against Black queer bodies. Intrinsic to this systematic violence against Black queer people is an endeavor to strip us of our dreams of liberation and belonging. In order to challenge the dominant symbolic order that promulgates queer desires as pathological and abject, we must cultivate a more expansive cultural consciousness and work through hegemonic epistemes with liberatory scholarship.

Too often, research that examines Black queer people's engagement with "risky" pleasure producing activities relies on rhetoric that implies that Black queer people's experiences of pleasure are innately dangerous or deserving of scrutiny. Within Black Studies, this pattern of devaluation may manifest as the subliminal equation of Black queer pleasure and Black death, but is not limited to such. Similar relegation also materializes in popular mobilization attempts that erase a marginalized group's engagement in stigmatized and pleasurable activities.

In order to subsume marginalized people into a general public who boast "traditional family values," throughout human rights discourse there has been a discernible strategy of distancing vulnerable populations seeking protection from the state from the stigmatized and pleasurable activities with which they may engage.[39] In the 1970s, because of her visibility as a

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[38]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* New York; London: NYU Press, 2014, p. 13.
[39]Nswp, "Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries Found STAR House," Global Network of Sex Work Projects, July 12, 2017. https://www.nswp.org.

Black and trans sex worker and substance user, Marsha P. Johnson, a key vanguard of the

LGBTQ Rights movement, was considered a potential hindrance to the progression of the very

crusade she helped to conceive,[40] and until recently, has been largely neglected in most formal

accounts of LGBTQ history.[41] For many, Johnson's patterned homelessness in conjunction with

her public engagement in perverse pleasure like sex and drug use was considered to taint the

aims of gay rights leaders who wanted the general public to perceive gay people as upstanding

citizens whose family values warranted them worthy of assimilation into a white middle class.[42]

     Inextricable from phrases that boast a proximity to normativity is the idea that those

occupying normative identities do not deserve to be subject to violence or perceived as

threatening the status quo. Insidiously, by correlating respectability with a right to freedom and

safety, another statement is also made; one that implies that those excluded from or existing

outside of normative and respectable ways of life do not possess credentials that deem them

worthy of a citizen's right to protection and freedom. In this regard, Black trans and genderqueer

people whose oppressed identities, unintelligibility, and engagement with stigmatized pleasure

prevent them from being seen as espousing "traditional family values" may be considered

justifiably fearsome and threatening to the existence of a "general public" who do. At the very

least, recycling rhetoric that implies that "teachers," "mothers," "children," or other identities

that signify innocence and piousness, are indicative of the kinds of people who deserve safety,

erases those with more perverse identities from the moral grammar of rights discourse.[43] Those

whose identities signify modesty and ethics aren't the only people deserving of safety. Sex

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[40]Ibid.
[41]Cacho, "The Rights of Respectability" (pp. 190-206).
[42]Eric Marcus, "Marsha P. Johnson & Randy Wicker," Making Gay History, Making Gay History, May 25, 2018, https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-11.
[43]Cacho, "The Rights of Respectability" (pp. 190-206).

workers and drug users deserve freedom and protection and by emphasizing perverse pleasure as sites for the production of value, this study envisions a future where freedom for these groups is not only possible, but on its way.

The proposed research is predicated on such grounds. While the meaning making of Black genderqueer people hold important implications for Black Studies and an interrogation of Humanism's insidious relational hierarchies, there is a paucity of scholarship validating the existence of Black genderqueer people and an even scarcer amount of research validating the pleasure of Black genderqueer people as viable meaning making. Unlike normative theoretical approaches which dominantly demean Black queer perversity, by examining Black genderqueer people's engagement with Instagram, this study examines pleasure as making possible the production of value. This research is positioned in alignment with a Black and trans genealogy that pursues queer futurity while refusing to forget the past.

The strategy of attempting to expunge perverse pleasure from the imaginary of marginalized populations is not limited to the Gay Rights Movement, but can be seen in organizing processes throughout time. By depicting themselves as "good" and moral people with traditional family values, many marginalized populations will attempt to secure the same rights and protections as "mainstream" citizens. Ultimately, since sanitization for the purpose of integration may garner resources and lead to increased safety for vulnerable people groups, the utility of proliferating positive propaganda cannot be dismissed. At the same time, disseminating homogenized images of "goodness" and morality only serves to render invisible, as well as further condemn, stigmatize, and oppress Black queer people who cannot or do not wish to adhere to hegemonic standards for propriety. Given the ways in which those seen as perversely

deviant are erased from the moral grammar of rights discourse, emphasizing pleasure as a potential site for value production is an especially critical telos.

In contrast to the aforementioned patterns of action which, in an attempt to portray the lives of marginalized groups as valuable and ethical, distance oppressed people from the perverse pleasure with which they may engage, the present research will emphasize stigmatized and perverse pleasure as valuable sites for the production of expansive living. To support this claim, I turn to the rich varieties of Black genderqueer people on Instagram to consider how pleasure, precisely because it can help negotiate a more unfettered experience of self, may also help constitute ethics, new futures, and more free forms of belonging.[44] By centering pleasure, ecstasy, care and the erotic, this study seeks to affirm the tangibility of liberated and joyful futures for Black queer people. Using Black genderqueer self documentation as fodder for queer world building, I understand such labor to expound upon a trajectory for Black queer futurity.

1.2   "Hapticality, or Love"[45]: Intimate Interventions

This text seeks to touch, taste, probe, and feel its way through time to a queer horizon more capacious than our current moment. In many ways, in writing this text I move through the gradations of coping mechanisms I've employed since childhood and for this reason, it feels relevant to describe my personal stake in this research. Throughout these pages, I theorize engagements with a strategy that has helped me find some semblance of solace while being subject to spaces sedulous in their gender prescriptions and body regulation. As a Black genderqueer person, imagination has repeatedly been my respite in times when corporeal captivity has been too much to bear. As I've drudged through conservative classrooms,

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[44]JAKOBSEN, JANET R. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tole*. NEW YORK University, 2003, p. 18.
[45]Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten, :The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study," New York: Minor Compositions, 2013.

exploitative employment, and ascetic households, dissociating from the limits of my reality has allowed for me to venture into more malleable terrain.

During adulthood, I've had the privilege of actualizing many of my fantasies. As I've yearned so fervently for a space in which I could actualize the full gamut of my gender (or perhaps, lack thereof), I have also pushed myself to manifest the genders I one day hope to see proliferated around me. When I think of who I am now compared to who I imagined myself becoming, I am overwhelmed with emotion – even in my wildest fantasy, I never believed that a Black trans person could feel such love, freedom, and hope for the future. My reveries have always felt impossibly idealist; ephemeral moments with cloud-like consistencies that I treasured, in part, for their diaphony. But even as provisions rather than solutions, I feel fiercely that my imaginings have been soul saving. As I've navigated the vehicles of hegemony that sought to make me one of them, it was my fervent belief in a life beyond isolation and shame that kept me afloat. In this regard, I have realized that idealism, imagination, and fantasy not only have the potential to converse with a tenable future, but may also indemnify the present to help us get there.

Just as I was able to use my fantasies to find reprieve, on Instagram, Black genderqueer people use the documentation of their emotions, experiences, and bodies to imagine an existence beyond their present stultifying and necropolitical landscape. My work is greatly beholden to the texts of scholars like Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's and José Esteban Muñoz's postulations of queer imagining. In Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's critical text, *Ezili's Mirrors:Imagining Black Queer Genders*, Tinsley challenges pervasive understandings of art by recasting Black women who mush against gender mandates as cultural creatives who open up "a space from which

contemporary black queer [people] can imagine love and possibility."[46] Within her text, Tinsley

reminds readers of their capacity to "[conjure] a world where [they can] move from imagination

into flesh."[47] Drawing from the prose of the queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz, who contends

that the "present is provincial,"[48] similarly to the present study's centering of Black genderqueer

people – a marginalized community within a marginalized community – Tinsley's speculative

text, *Ezili's Mirrors,* "turns to the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny

of the [normative.]"[49]Building upon Tinsley and Muñoz, who encourage an ontological field of

"doing in futurity,"[50] the present research attends to a utopian impulse invoked by Muñoz's "call

for 'doing' that is a becoming the becoming of and for 'future generations.'"[51]

Throughout her work, Tinsley's creative and affirming retelling of Black temporalities help

guide readers toward a queer horizon. Similarly, the present research seeks to unpack the queer

ways of "doing" on social media that "contest the limits of normative realities."[52] Just as some

may use their fantasies to find reprieve from reality, on Instagram, Black genderqueer people use

the documentation of their emotions, experiences, and bodies to imagine an existence beyond

their present stultifying and necropolitical landscape. Building upon Muñoz's theorizing of queer

futurity and Tinsley's engagement with "imagining Black queer genders" as Black queer art and

a process of envisioning "[queerness as a horizon,]" the present examination of Black

genderqueer people's performance of pleasure will unpack the ways that Instagram is harnessed

to express "the mark of the utopian [as] the quotidian."[53] As the brave "cultural [creators]" of

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[46]Tinsley, *Ezilis Mirrors*, p. 10.
[47]Tinsley, *Ezilis Mirrors*, p. 170.
[48]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* p. 458.
[49]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 457.
[50]Ibid.
[51]Ibid. Tinsley, *Ezilis Mirrors,* p. 105.
[52]Tinsley, *Ezilis Mirrors,* p. 105.
[53]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 454.

queer genders and queer futures, Black genderqueer people participate in artistic production that deserves careful engagement.

My study will seek to explore the ways in which pleasure (including sex and drug use, as well as other pleasurable modes of living as conceived by pleasure theorist Adrienne Marie Brown) is invoked in the visualities of Black genderqueer people engaging with Instagram, and will ultimately investigate the ways in which the imbrication of these pleasures give way to the production of values. While some research within Black Studies explores the ways that Black people engage with the ideas of Black queer sexual longing and pleasure (Louis Chude-Sokei, Ariane Cruz, Amber Jamilla Musser, Jennifer C. Nash, L.H. Stallings & Kirin Wachter-Grene, 2016), there are significant holes in the trends of qualitative studies which center Black genderqueer people, especially within the context of social media. By Black people's practice of genderqueerness and their performance of pleasure on social media, this study will traverse new ground.

1.3   Theoretical Framework

When Black genderqueer people index pleasure on Instagram, they both perform and enable an engagement with values, attitudes, and practices. In this regard, queer of color theory, defined as an epistemological index that emphasizes the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality, was a particularly suitable theoretical paradigm for the present research.[54] Contrasting with methods of theorizing that assume a universality of oppression, queer of color theory looks at material and historical analysis, poststructuralist critique, Black feminism, and queer critique

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[54]Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 149.

to perform a methodological, political, and theoretical intervention.**[55]** Central to a queer of color critique is an investigation of "[w]hat [...] queer studies [has] to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism [and of what] [...] queer studies tell[s] us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights."[56] To construct this study, rather than approaching Black queer subjectivity through voyeurism or disconnected observation and analysis, a queer of color critique is apt because it orients its examination of processes for generating meaning making within queer communities of color.[57] Taking its name from Roderick Ferguson's synthesis of Black queer lives, which underscores the ways in which sexual pleasure and practices may inform sexual politics,[58] a queer of color critique is especially relevant to this study.

One of the fundamental assertions made by a queer of color critique, argues for making space for the informal or "illegitimate" narratives of Black queer people,[59] an endeavor centered by the prospective research which probed at manifestations of queer pleasure on Instagram. This research, informed by the concept of erotic proffered by Audre Lorde in conjunction with Adrienne Maree Brown's 2017 *Emergent Strategy,* encourages oppressed people to consider the cell-sized units of their lives as a conduit for liberation work. In conjunction with the idea that "it is as imperative for organizers to critically and fluidly *be* in the world[60] as it is for them to do in the world" the prospective study utilized a queer of color critique with the assumption that by

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[55]Brockenbrough E, (2016) "Queer of Color Critique," Rodriguez N., Martino W., Ingrey J., Brockenbrough E. (eds) In: *Critical Concepts in Queer Studies and Education*, Queer Studies and Education, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

[56]David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz asked in their introduction to Social Text 84-85 (2005), p.2.

[57]Queer of Color Agency in Educational Contexts: Analytic Frameworks From a Queer of Color Critique Edward Brockenbrough University of Rochester.

[58]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 22.

[59]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 15.

[60]SSDP, (Conversation Logan Ward), 2018.

homing intimacy and pleasure, interpersonal and intrapersonal transformative care can be just as important as addressing exploitative dynamics that pervade systemically.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines four aspects of the study: Genderqueer Offerings to Black Thought/Philosophy; Pleasure and Perversity; Legibility and Gesture; and Social Media and Performativity. Each section expounds upon the concepts of genderqueerness, humanity, and pleasure to establish how and why the performances depicted on Instagram may serve as important sites for analysis. Attending to these categories helps to highlight the continuity among the concepts I employ as well as their relationship to larger processes of socialization. In this regard, by assembling a genealogy of Black genderqueerness, pleasure, and Instagram, this literature review elucidates Black genderqueer people's connection to the idea of pleasure and the ways in which Instagram may be employed to exhibit critical queer perversity in the midst of hegemonic repression.

2.1 Genderqueer Offerings to Black Thought/Philosophy

My research examines Black genderqueer people's performance of pleasure on the platform of Instagram. For the purpose of this research, genderqueer can be defined as an individual with an expressed motive to challenge the establishment of hegemonic static gender binaries through self expression and identification. It is important to note, however, that this definition is ever amorphous; it is not absolute and contains no rigid boundaries, rather, it is simply a contrivance which helps to explain the parameters of this study. I center Black genderqueer people in my study because of the ways in which a stated alignment with genderqueerness attempts to push up against the project of gender. In this regard, the present

study orients itself within the legacy of Black feminist scholars and Black trans feminist scholars such as Kai Green, Marquis Bey, Sylvia Wynter, VèVè Clark, Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman.

At its base, this study is a treatise on possibility. It reaches to imagine Black people beyond the confines of cultural inscription and grounds itself in the fervent belief that Black people have "nothing to lose but our chains."[61] Centered in this discourse are self identified Black genderqueer people, who prompt us to partake in an "unchaining" that dismantles not only the spatial manifestations of carcerality, but repressive formulaic systems such as gender. Focalizing social media as a salient site for queer imagining, this study examines the ways in which Black genderqueer people who perform pleasure on Instagram converse with a queer utopia.[62] This study proceeds with the questions: In what ways might Black genderqueer Instagrammers unique intersectional identities shape their performances of pleasure? (2) How do these Black genderqueer people's Instagram posts offer pleasure as a potential site for value production?

To a similar end, in the roundtable discussion entitled, "Where Black Feminism Meets Trans* feminism" (2017), Black trans feminist scholars Marquis Bey and Kai Green interrogate Black gender and resilience in the face of state and social violence.[63] For Bey and Green, one of the biggest apertures in Black feminist study is the paucity of research investigating opportunities for subsistence outside of the categorization of "woman." Responding to Wynter's call to correct interpretations of ontology developed at a cursory glance, or to extricate "the map" from "the territory," Bey and Green call for a reading of femininity and masculinity that bucks

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[61]Shakur, Assata. *Assata: an Autobiography*. London: Zed Books, 2014.
[62]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009.
[63]Kai M. Green, and Marquis Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture & Society* 19, no. 4 (October 2017), p. 438.

against ossifying a moral grammar which essentializes erasure. A brief history of Wynter here becomes pertinent. Over the years, Wynter has consistently challenged those who conflate race and ontology, explaining race, instead, as a function of sociogeny, or a sociohistorical vector furthering hegemony. In this regard, the crux of Wynter's scholarship probes at the very notion of who and what we are, forcing us to question the tacit laws that govern our process of meaning making and encouraging us to rewrite knowledge. Specifically, much of Wynter's work reflects upon the role of Black Studies, a mantle both Bey and Green take up with loving intention, using "trans*" as a potential methodology for knowledge production.[64]

In their 2017 roundtable, Bey and Green suggest that Black feminists have the capacity to free themselves from entrapment within the word "woman," a notion entangled with limiting and oppressive ideas surrounding authenticity, to reimagine "the ways in which femininity and masculinity are moving in and across all kinds of bodies."[65] If, as Bey and Green contend, those who perform gender cohesion are considered real, then genderqueer people occupy a farther proximity from "authentic[ity.]" Here, the word "authentic" and its association with the concepts of "honesty" and "earnestly" reveal the ways in which hegemonic gender deploys value. By identifying themselves as genderqueer, Black genderqueer people characterize gender as an exclusionary institution unworthy of their assimilation.

Expounding upon the importance of moving away from the primacy of gender construction in social relation, sociologist Oyewumi Oyerunki names gender as a Western construction and a form of colonial imposition.[66] Taking my departure points from Oyerunki's

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[64]Wynter, "No Humans Involved,": 13-16; Wynter, Sylvia, 2006,"On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in the Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project," In The Companion to African-American Studies, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, 107–18. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

[65]Green, Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet," p. 442.

[66]Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 34.

understanding of gender as inextricable from cultural colonization, as well as Bey and Green's

conception of "trans" as methodology, this research understands genderqueerness as a critical

disruption in hegemonic social ordering. Specficically, the present study attempts a disruption of

hegemonic morality by looking to perverse pleasure as viable sources for value production – in

light of the ways in which Black genderqueer people illuminate the nexus between hegemonic

morality and hegemonic gender, centering this group feels particularly apt.

Similarly to Bey and Green, this research seeks to think "about gender nonconforming

bodies, bodies that do not fit and actively refute a binary legibility [...] not because these people

are necessarily more radical, but their existence often poses a critique to the gender-binaried-

order of the land."[67] Drawing from the legacy of Bey, Green, Wynter, and Oyerunki, my research

will proceed with the assumption that if the function of Black Studies is to rewrite knowledge,

research pursued by Black Studies scholars must first challenge and expand popular portrayals of

humanity. In this regard, as long as we cling to binary gender in an attempt to usher Black people

from the realm of thingified to human, we will always subtend the dehumanization of an abject

queer other.

Specifically invoking VèVè Clark's theory of marasa consciousness; a concept probing

at, as Sylvia Wynter says, a globally hegemonic "Janus faced" biocentric humanity,[68] the present

study looks to Black genderqueer people as an example of subjectivity positioned outside of

bisection. By proffering marasa consciousness as an invitation to "imagine beyond the binary"

and by arguing that the tension between oppositional nodes may "lead to another norm of

creativity -- to interaction or deconstruction"[69] Clark invites Black Studies scholars to imagine

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[67]Green, Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet," p. 444.

[68]Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in the Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project."

[69]VèVè Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness," *Theatre Survey* 50 (2009): 9–18.

beyond a system of bounded distinction that requires the constant and violent materialization of sex. Clark's assertion that imagining "beyond binaries" can hold the potential for critical deconstruction conjures the Black genderqueer work of playing with taxonomy to highlight its irreverence. As Clark applies this notion to literary theory based on Vodun practice, she does so with an eye to broader applications, and in this regard, I take up her work and apply it to a Black Studies analysis of genderqueer pleasure. The present study centers Black genderqueer people with the belief that by partaking in marasa consciousness, Black genderqueer people are laying bare the deficiency of hegemonic classification schemes in ways that could help lead to "deconstruction."

Forecasting Clark's charge to widen our imaginative purview, is the work of Hortense Spillers. Highlighting Blackness and genderqueerness as innately entangled, her critical essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), suggests that Black people have the capacity to reclaim gender incoherence by thinking beyond the binary. Within her essay, Spillers engages with some of the most salient historical vectors confining the Black animus to a "scene of negation."[70] Seamlessly exposing the imbrications of race and gender, she challenges anthropologic analyses of racial gender that impose a singular experience upon complex historical interplay. Spillers reflects that just as the "symbolic paradigm" of gender can be understood as asserting a cohesion between whiteness and a biologically bisected femininity and masculinity, the Middle Passage and chattel slavery can be understood as underscoring the aporia of racial gender. Ultimately, by arguing that Black people exist outside of "American grammar," Spillers emboldens Black people to embrace alterity in order to challenge the imperialist patriarchy. According to Spillers, "It is the heritage of the mother that the African-

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[70]Spillers, "Mama's Baby," p. 69.

American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood - the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within,"[71] and for the African American woman to correspondingly claim "the monstrosity of a female with the potential to 'name.'"[72]

At the heart of Spiller's argument is the idea that in order to confront patriarchy, Black people might be "less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject."[73] As one of the most cited articles in African American Studies,[74] Spillers's proposition of a centrifugal movement with respect to "joining the ranks of [gender,]" presciently anticipates, or perhaps, informs Black people's current calculated identification with genderqueerness. By explicating gender as a set of criteria used to exhibit an intrinsic Black dysfunction, Spillers emboldens a new generation of Black people to imagine a future where gender is not used to determine one's humanity or value.

For Spillers, womanhood and manhood are overwritten by whiteness – and why ask for a seat at the table built upon white supremacy? As Black studies scholar Keguro Macharia suggests, "nothing is quite as futile as trying to occupy or reclaim a negating space."[75] This study concentrates on Black people who are genderqueer, because by refusing to cohere with a naturalized form of subsistence that deems Black people an inherent contradiction, Black genderqueer people help provide scaffolding to think in generative ways about the limits of our current reality and the exclusion and erasure endemic to systems of categorization. This scaffolding is especially pertinent to the present research's examination of the cataloguing of perverse pleasure on Instagram as performing a critique of the present's hegemony.

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[71]Ibid, 80.
[72]Ibid.
[73]Ibid.
[74]Jarrett, Gene Andrew, *A Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 414.
[75]Keguro Macharia, "On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of Complaint," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 186.

Black genderqueer people's positionality outside of universalities which biologize gender, invokes the Fanonian tradition of phenomenological reduction and anticolonial philosophy. Africana philosopher and Fanonian scholar, Lewis Gordon argues that Fanon's relationship to reason "required taking it off the pedestal so that it would not stand in reality's way with false truths of completeness or universality."[76] When Fanon encourages taking "reason off of a pedestal," he advocates for this skepticism based upon the assumption that colonizers present "reason," fact, and the natural laws that govern society in ways that suit their interests.[77] Similarly, Black people who adopt the identity genderqueer instead of confining themselves to a modernist and Western understanding of gender, subvert the biologization of social roles gendered during modernity, ultimately taking "reason" and the axiomatic construct of gender "off of a pedestal." Building upon this parallel understanding of Blackness and queerness, in conjunction with Spillers's assertion that Black people need not join the "ranks of [gender,]" my research centers Black genderqueer people because of the ways in which they expose "reason" as a constructed fiction, thereby illuminating the possibility for a diverging imagining.

Black Studies suffers when knowledge production is stratified. Just as Du Bois offers "The Veil" as a symbol for the metaphysical vision into the psyche of whiteness,[78] as endangered populations within the Black community, can one infer that as "seventh sons"[79] Black genderqueer people also possess the gift of clairvoyance? In addition to the racial double

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[76]F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1952), p. 141.

[77]While Fanon's theory of false universals is deeply pertinent to the practice of genderqueerness within the Black community, it is important to highlight Fanon as one of the Africana scholars who likely saw queer communities as a European(ized) phenomenon rather than as active members of Black communities. In Julien Isaac's *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon is cited as acknowledging the existence of "cross dressing" and genderqueerness in Martinique, but as responding to it by insisting, "I think they have sex the 'normal' way" (Isaac, 1996). Ultimately, although Fanon denounces false universals in his scholarship, he responds to queerness with "[normative]" theory, evincing himself as ideologically captured in his time. Even so, Fanon's work regarding taking "reason off of a pedestal," still serves as cogent analysis applicable to the prospective research.

[78]W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (First Yale University Press Edition, 2015), 5.

[79]Ibid.

consciousness Du Bois describes,[80] Black genderqueer people possess a compounded consciousness enabling them to see themselves through "the revelation of the [another] world"[81] who sees them as inherently wrong and "[another] world" who is dedicated to punishing those who fail or refuse to meet their standards of gender performance.[82] In this way, for the improvement of intellectual thought, it is necessary that Black genderqueer people narrativize their lives, not only to exemplify their connection to a larger legacy of Black thought, but also to elucidate the perpetuation of anti-Black oppression by those who attempt to impose hegemonic understandings of gender upon Black subsistence.

The present research exists as an attempt to address this need. Black genderqueer individuals comprise the focus of this study because by naming and embracing themselves as unwilling to conform to the present system of binary gender morphology, they also explicitly express interest in troubling the mandates of racial patriarchy and heteronormativity. Emphasizing social media as a space which lends itself to utopian hermeneutics, this study examines the ways in which Black genderqueer people who perform perverse pleasure on Instagram participate in a critical form of value production. As this study explores the ways in which Black genderqueer people's engagement in perverse pleasure can instruct a value system that challenges ascetic morality, this study's centering of Black genderqueer people relates directly to a desire to engage a group whose reimagining of ways to relate to themselves, their world, and their bodies urge a freer future.

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[80]Lewis R Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 37.
[81]Ibid.
[82]Lewis Gordon expounds upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performance on page 150 and provides further insight on specific sources exploring this concept on page 262 of *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*.

By reimagining gender dissidence as a form of critical subversion, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019) by Saidiya Hartman greatly informs the focus of the present research. *Wayward Lives* can be read as a kind of polemic against the astringent mandates of womanhood and an ode to Black women who will not, or can not, adhere to them. Throughout her work, Hartman harkens to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) as she reflects upon the aporia of racial gender for Black women in America and frequently insists, "It was obvious that gender as category was not elastic enough to encompass the radical differences in the lived experience of black and white women."[83] For wayward Black women queered by their distance from normative gender, Hartman argues that desire and pleasure, in addition to envisioning a tenable future, had the capacity to change the quality of the present.

Throughout history, Black women's desire, sexual proclivity, and insatiability, have been framed as not only individual moral failures, but as responsible for larger social impacts that range from enervating Black families to exhausting the nation's economy. In *Wayward Lives*, however, desire brings life rather than death to the Black women who wield it. As they navigate a cultural apparatus that frames Black death as a symptom of Black life, Hartman underscores Black women's insistent desire for "future bliss" as not only indemnifying the present but battling for a forthcoming "heaven on earth."[84] In this regard, Hartman's affirmation of Black women as "radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise,"[85] converses directly with the aim of my research. Similarly to Hartman, who reimagines Black women as radical actors who illustrate aspirational futures, the grounding premise of my research is that, while popular discourse argues that, for

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[83]Hartman, *Wayward Lives,* p. 184.
[84]Ibid, 183.
[85]Ibid, xv.

queer, racialized, and gendered bodies pleasure must be sacrificed in service of the family or the

nation,[86] pleasure and desire can all be harnessed by Black genderqueer people to organize

against oppression.

Traversing a cultural opprobrium that seeks to keep us moored upon its shores, this

research explores engagement with insurrectionary sources of recourse. At the heart of its

examination this study asks, what if, instead of using gender to antagonize the existence of

multiplicity, we used gender to welcome malleability and multivalency? How could leaning into

hapticality and hedonism be a valuable instructive for Black genderqueer people? What kind of

imaginings emerge from the conversations between our past, present, and future when pleasure

and queerness are used as tools to navigate oppression? How might Black genderqueer people

performing pleasure on Instagram provide discursive responses to such questions? We have an

incredible amount to learn from the ways in which Black trans and genderqueer people

(re)conceive of themselves and, in this regard, drive a reconceptualization of desirable futures.

While numerous studies explore the violent imposition of sex and gender upon Black

people, I could find no sources examining Black genderqueer people within the context of social

content platforms in general, and Instagram in specific. As Black genderqueer people

increasingly assemble intimate community through the platforms of social media, interplay

between Black queer people and virtual reality platforms like Instagram holds important

pedagogical implications. The present research is one small endeavor to address these apertures

in literature. Despite these holes, studies exploring Black genderqueerness provide strong

evidence of Black genderqueer people as making plain the construction of gender while

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[86]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 13.

simultaneously attending to queer futurity, and in this way, serve as foundational data for my proposed research.

Unlike both the seminal and germinal studies that examine Black genderqueerness, this study will specifically look at Black people's practice of genderqueerness and their performance of pleasure in the context of Instagram.

2.2   Pleasure and Perversity

Despite emerging contribution to a body of knowledge that centers Black genderqueer and transgender people, gaps remain in the literature regarding Black genderqueer people's relationship to pleasure within the context of social media. In a digital age where virtual reality comprises a large portion of sociality,[87] the former elision is especially salient. Examining Black genderqueer people's exhibition of perverse pleasure on Instagram to address this aperture, the prospective study will build upon a critique of work offered by Moya Bailey, and "the erotic" as conceived by Audre Lorde and developed into a praxis for pleasure activism by Adrienne Maree Brown.

Within her 2019 essay "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," Black feminist scholar, Moya Bailey, uses an intersectional Black feminist framework to reformulate the traditionally disaggregated theories of race, gender, and ability. According to Bailey, by virtue of eugenics, which connects race and ability through scientifically hegemonic theories, "[r]ace—and specifically Blackness—has been used to mark disability, while disability has inherently 'Blackened' those perceived as unfit. Black people were—and

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[87]Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang. "Academic Studies of Social Media." In *How the World Changed Social Media*, 9-24. London: UCL Press, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69z35.9.

continue to be—assumed intellectually disabled precisely because of race."[88] Here, Bailey

contends that within our current cultural apparatus whiteness becomes a metonym for mental

fortitude. Positioning this claim in apposition with an insistence that disability, the manner in

which a disability is acquired, and one's gender, class, and race all shape one's access to

employment,[89] Bailey highlights the desperate need for a Black feminist framework to

recalibrate concepts like "work" and "labor."

For Black people barred from a wide latitude of labor because of perceived intellectual

ineptitude, a theoretical polemic of "work" and "labor" is essential. Often, within a Black Nation

building imperative, Black people internalize the notion that weakness must be sacrificed for the

sake of rearing strong Black families.[90] Within her text, Bailey challenges this hierarchical

valuation by posing the questions: "What of disabled Black men who cannot work? [...] Are they

failed men because they do not meet the able-bodied expectations of liberation? Are they less

masculine if they are queer or are they queered by not having a valorized form of masculinity?

Care is feminized and thus devalued in our culture, and this ideology is still embedded in some

liberatory futures that are imagined in Black Studies."[91] Bailey's questions poke holes in the

valorization of the concept of "labor." By alluding to the ways in which Black men are kept

from entering the workforce, kept from providing for their families, and in this way, alienated

from the concept of normative masculinity and queered by the State, Bailey highlights the

glorification of labor, ableism, and heterosexism as historically imbricated. For Bailey, although

Black Studies has offered a critique of debilitating and unethical labor practices in the US, it can,

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[88]Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley, "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," Gender & Society 33, no. 1 (February 2019), p. 24.
[89]Ibid, 32.
[90]Ibid.
[91]Ibid, 26.

and must, take this radically further.[92] Black people deserve to be valued beyond their ability to

contribute to state production – instead of limiting a critique of work to "unethical" labor

impositions, Bailey suggests a critique of the notion of work itself.

At the heart of Bailey's text are two essential questions that germinate from Disability

Studies. The first is: how might we reimagine our organizing if we do not assume that everyone

should work to get their needs met? And second: how might we restructure society itself if we

could meet our needs without working jobs, however honorable and ethical they might

become?[93]

Within this context, pleasure activism becomes a helpful pedagogy for critiquing an

overarching dictate which moralizes Black productivity on behalf of the state. In a racist and

ableist social opprobrium where unemployed Black people face heightened criminalization[94]

pleasure activism intervenes to argue that centering Black pleasure, leisure, and care is a radical

gesture. Bailey's request for scholarship that provides a scaffolding for those confined to a

biopolitical-necropolitical continuum is the nexus between a critique of a Western work

imperative and pleasure activism's assertion that emotion, pleasure and erotic desire can all be

harnessed to organize against oppression.[95] This research's centering of pleasure responds to

Bailey's charge for "scholarship that can inform better direct [...] actions for those living daily

with and through social death."[96] Examining the ways in which Black genderqueer people on

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[92]Ibid, 34.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Susanna Delfino, Michele Gillespie, and Louis M. Kyriakoudes, *Chapter 1: A Vile, Immoral, and Profligate Course of Life: Poor Whites and the Enforcement of Vagrancy Laws in Antebellum Georgia*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011.

[95]Adrienne M. Brown, *Pleasure Activism : The Politics of Feeling Good*, AK Press, 2019.

[96]Moya Bailey, and Izetta Autumn Mobley. "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," Gender & Society 33, no. 1 (February 2019), p. 35.

Instagram perform perverse pleasure to create value and meaning, the present study is a response

to both a Black Feminist Disability framework and pleasure activism's call to arms.

Before delving into the specificities of pleasure activism, it is necessary to first map its

lineage. While exploring the utility of pleasure as performed by Black genderqueer people on

social media, this study will engage with an understanding of "the erotic" offered by Audre

Lorde in her seminal essay, "Uses of the Erotic" (1978), and later adapted into a concept of

pleasure activism by Adrienne Maree Brown. In Hortense J. Spillers's 1987 essay "Mama's

Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers coins the term "pornotrope" to

refer to a reductive transformation of a person into nothing more than a physical object, stripped

of subjectivity to gratify violent and erotic impulses.[97] Pushing up against a similar conception of

"porn" in 1978, Lorde describes the radical potentiality of an internal directive that is entrenched

in desire, joy, and transformative wholeness and demonstrates "the erotic" as a critical tool for

disruption.

In contrast to social trends which laud suffering as the mother of wisdom, Lorde presents

"the erotic" as an alternative source of power and abundance. In short, Lorde argues that the

erotic can make us "give up [...] being satisfied with suffering and self negation"[98] and prompt us

to choose strategies for survival that cultivate profound wellness. For this study, one of the most

pertinent components of Lorde's argument is her refusal to bifurcate critical junctures of cultural

politics from quotidian moments of delight and fulfillment where our desires manifest as

restorative action. Throughout her essay, Lorde obscures the borders between the personal and

the political, encouraging oppressed people to consider the fractal elements of their subsistence

as channels for freedom building and change. Centering mental, physical, and spiritual

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[97]Spillers, "Mama's Baby," (1987).
[98]Brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 19.

attunement in the pursuit of joy, Lorde affirms that for those who have been systematically alienated from the right to self love and care, the pursuit of pleasure is "not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."[99]

While "Uses of the Erotic" has been engaged with purely in terms of Lorde's theorizing of eroticism, the essay was specifically written in response to Second Wave Feminists' debate over whether pornography creates and maintains sexual oppression. Throughout her essay, Lorde posits the erotic as a source of power and information and juxtaposes it with the "pornographic" which she conceives as a suppression of true feeling and a direct denial of erotic power.[100] For Lorde, the erotic is jouissance – an enunciation of love in all of its valances. Within this context, the erotic can range from writing a good poem to tasting a lover's skin, but when one pursues "sensation without feeling" or bodily pleasure detached from a sense of internal affect, Lorde argues that they deny their erotic guides, live outside of themselves, and venture into a terrain that is pornographic and numbing.[101] Lorde's understanding of the erotic as a source of power and instruction heavily informs this study, as does the work of scholars such as Ariane Cruz, Amber Jamilla Musser, Jennifer C. Nash, L.H. Stallings, and Kirin Wachter-Grene, who hold space for Lorde's iconic engagement with the erotic while simultaneously providing critical critique on Lorde's understanding of the pornographic and perverse.

Audre Lorde's conception of erotic power has been instrumental to Black feminism's exploration of the erotic as both traversing and transcending sexual interplay. Since the 1970s, Black feminists have embraced Lorde's work and affirmed her understanding of internal knowledge while also pushing some of her original analysis beyond oppositional understandings

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[99]Sarah Mirk, Adrienne Brown, *Bitch Media*, "Audre Lorde Thought of Self-Care as an 'Act of Political Warfare,'" Accessed October 10, 2019.
[100]Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. London: Penguin Books, 2019, p. 89.
[101]Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 90.

of pornography and eroticism. In "Race, Pornography, and Desire: A TBS Roundtable," Black feminists Ariane Cruz, Amber Jamilla Musser, Jennifer C. Nash, L.H. Stallings, and Kirin Wachter-Grene do just this as they examine pleasure and power through devalued avenues for kinesthetics, such as pornography. For these contributing scholars, porn and other stigmatized engagements with pleasure, are fraught with both repression *and* freedom, and in this regard, give way to the potential for a radical reimagining of the future.

While validating Lorde's idea that there is danger in adopting pleasure as one's fundamental tool for liberation, contributors to the TBS Roundtable also acknowledge the ways in which pleasure can constructively lay bare social hierarchies and make naturalized hegemonies available for reimagining. Ariane Cruz notes, "rather than viewing [the] relationship [between pornography and black feminism] as inherently incompatible, we need to understand [them] as pushing, not policing, each other in productive directions that elucidate black female sexuality as 'simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency.'"[102] Here, Cruz expounds upon the fecundity of using the erotic as a meaning making process and mode of power.[103] For Cruz, while erotic iterations that pervade pornography, like racial excess and hypsersexuality, can be constricting, they can also allow for the promotion and affirmation of sexual imaginations; "by homing in on what it is to have a body and relate that body to others, the erotic allows for a theorizing of subjectivity, agency, and futurity."[104] Within the realm of somatics, one can apply a similar line of thinking to other perverse experiences of pleasure. While Lorde writes a polemic against "sensation without feeling," this study assumes that sensation alone is sometimes sufficient, especially when

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[102]Louis Chude-Sokei, Ariane Cruz, Amber Jamilla Musser, Jennifer C. Nash, L.H. Stallings & Kirin Wachter-Grene (2016) Race, Pornography, and Desire: A TBS Roundtable, The Black Scholar, p. 52.
[103]Ibid, 53.
[104]Ibid, 61.

harnessed by Black genderqueer people to lay bare power relations or to sense and imagine one's way to a more queer horizon.

Although the current research does not center an exploration of pornography, the aforementioned engagements with perverse somatics significantly inform this study's understanding of pleasure's potentiality. In accordance with Cruz's analysis of what it is to have a body, I seek to investigate the potential for Black genderqueer people's bodily desires (such as sexual perversity, drug use, and other queer and devalued kinesthetics) to act as an erotic guide towards a more queer horizon. Within this context, Audre Lorde's capacious conception of the erotic is also instructive. Instead of limiting her understanding of pleasure and the erotic to the explicitly sexual, Lorde conceived of the erotic as reaching beyond the bedroom. As the current study will explore the benefits of sexual performance, similarly to Lorde, it will also postulate pleasure in terms of care, comfort, tranquility, joy and a utopian hermeneutic of social change. In this regard, the current research will build upon diverging pedagogies of pleasure such as Cruz's and Lorde's by examining Black genderqueer people's performance of pleasure on social media and their practice of genderqueerness. Such engagement with the potentiality of pleasure and imaging, while assiduously invoked within the pantheon of Black feminist and Queer studies by scholars such as Lorde and Cruz, deserves a continued engagement within the context of social media.

While popular discourse argues that, for queer, racialized, and gendered bodies "pleasure must be sacrificed in service of the family or the nation,"[105] within *Pleasure Activism* Brown contends that emotion, pleasure, and erotic desire can all be harnessed to organize against oppression. According to Brown, what feels good can be a radical driving force that makes it

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[105] Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* 2014, p. 13.

possible to be more deeply present in our bodies, in our communities, our environment, and our worlds. The present study's recognition of pleasure as a constitutive source of value is predicated on such a premise. Looking to Black genderqueer people's performance of perverse pleasure on Instagram, this research understands that, as Brown argues, indexing pleasure can be a form of transformative justice, "a way we can begin to believe that the harm that has come to us won't keep happening, that we can uproot it, and that we can seed some new ways of being with each other."[106] Throughout *Pleasure Activism* Brown, similarly to queer theorist, Sara Ahmed, situates the need for pleasure activism within the contours of consumerism, global capitalism, and an imperative to fill the emptiness in one's life with products designed to militate against a need for interdependence and connectivity.[107]

Imbricated in global capitalism's promotion of an insatiable desire for commodified goods is the positioning of pleasure as a dangerous distraction that may turn the person experiencing it away from more important formal duties.[108] Within this context, pleasure becomes acceptable only as a reward for work and productivity – the "right" kind of work becomes that which yields production or reproduction. Elaborating upon pleasure's ascetic subtext, Ahmed elaborates: "The orientation of the pleasure economy is bound up with heterosexuality: women and men 'should' experience a surplus of pleasure, but only when exploring each other's bodies under the phallic sign of difference (pleasure as the enjoyment of sexual difference)."[109] Connecting this conception of pleasure and heterosexuality to productivity, Ahmed later explains, "pleasure within the West [...] remains tied in some way to the fantasy of being reproductive: one can

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[106]Brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 8.
[107]Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 163.
[108]Ibid.
[109]Ibid.

enjoy sex with a body that it is imagined one could be reproductive."[110] Here, Ahmed highlights

productivity and reproduction as appositional to the concept of pleasure under global capitalism.

Within an imperialist heteropatriarchy, pleasure is only affirmed either as recourse to a subject

conforming to capitalist injunctions or as a part of a heterosexual (re)productive imperative.

Challenging this symbolic order, the activism of pleasure theory resides in its encouraged use of

erotic bonds to resist commodification and to reclaim humanity. If queer people have been

forcefully alienated from pleasure under heterosexism, the telos of pleasure activism is that

connecting with those and that which we have been forcefully isolated may also bring us

different, freeing ways of living with others.[111]

Building upon the analysis of the erotic offered by Audre Lorde, Brown does not limit her

idea of pleasure to the sexual, but describes a list of pleasures that range from forging alternative

kinship models to using drugs to open oneself up to experiencing the world in different ways.[112]

Because queer sex isn't the only pleasure queer people are alienated from under capitalism,

forging an erotic, or deeply personal, connection cannot be limited to sexual connections, but

encompasses cultivating intimacy with one's community, environment, and oneself. In her self

help text *Emergent Strategy*, Brown urges her readers to "'transform yourself to transform the

world.'"[113] For Brown, this exigency doesn't mean getting lost in the self, but rather "to see our

own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice,

liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet."[114]

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[110]Ibid.
[111]Ibid, 165.
[112] Brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 2019**.**
[113]Adrienne M. Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing World*s, Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017, p. 53.
[114]Ibid.

Integral to this research's centering of pleasure is a politic that challenges survival as the locus of living, and instead argues that, pleasure can comprise "the daily labor of making our lives livable."[115] Corresponding with Lorde's assertion that the erotic "is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely we can feel in the doing."[116] In this way, the impetus of pleasure activism lies in challenging the hierarchical scripts of a heteropatriarchal and white supremacist superstructure that places more value on material production than on happiness, healing, and pleasure. Using pleasure activism as a pedagogy, the present research seeks to contravene this hierarchical value regime. As the TBS roundtable scholars maintain, "the erotic allows us to think critically about what it is to center care and pleasure in a world where these things are often deemed frivolous or against a project of uplift […] it maintains a sense of futurity that compels many to resist unilateral and linear thinking about black life that may be dominated by death, suffering, trauma, and pain."[117] Analogously, for the prospective research, the popular framing of Instagram as an indulgent, narcissistic, and frivolous virtual experience[118] makes it a pertinent vehicle for examining pleasure's radical potentiality. Incorporating Lorde's understanding of eroticism and Brown's theory of pleasure as generative somatics, the present research applies a paradigm of transformative pleasure work to the analysis of Black genderqueer expression on Instagram.

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[115]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 27.
[116]Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* p. 88.
[117]Chude-Sokei, "Race, Pornography," p. 61.
[118]Emma Bedor Hiland, "'Fluff,' Affect, and the Circulation of Feeling," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 2018): 138.

2.3   Legibility and Gesture

By emphasizing the role of visuality in the depiction of Black genderqueerness on social media, much of the prospective research will hone in on Black genderqueer social media users' physical expression of self and documentation of embodiment. In order to effectively engage with this exploration, a contextualized interrogation of embodiment, humanism, and hegemony is pivotal. Throughout my work examining the Instagram posts of Black genderqueer people to prepare for this study, I noticed that most of the posts I came across depicted bodies. Within this section of my research, by aggregating the concepts of legibility, gesture, and embodiment, I am not equating the body with self expression, but rather, attempting to highlight the dominant ways the body gets apprehended as a mode of gesture and meaning transmission. In this regard, an understanding of the ways that notions of bodily normativity underlay an understanding of "the human" will help explain the prospective research's purposeful centering of visuals which privilege Black genderqueer people's navigation of embodiment. Texts that ground the proposed research's analysis of gendered, racialized, and queer embodiment include *Black on Both Sides* (2017) by C. Riley Snorton and *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings (Sexual Cultures)* (2017), by Juana María Rodríguez, Kendall Thomas's "Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" (2005), Jasbir Puar's "Bodies with New Organs" (2015), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), and " Sylvia Wynter's "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project" (2006).

In his critical composition, *Black on Both Sides* (2017), C. Riley Snorton explores the nexus between humanism and the historically profitable atomizing of Black flesh. Snorton,

similar to queer theorists such as Kendall Thomas in "Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" (2005) and Jasbir Puar in "Bodies with New Organs" (2015), positions himself within the lineage of Sylvia Wynter who argues that phenotypic and behavioral disjuncture from a "normative" expression of self relegate one's perceived humanity. Deconstructing the ways in which whiteness is valorized through the anatomizing of Blackness, Snorton examines the archives of Dr. Sims, "Father of Gynecology," who uses Black women's flesh as a symbol and sign system to inform Black as other.[119] Currently, we can understand Sims's tendentious probing and manipulation of Black flesh as subtending Blackness's "disarticulation of human form";[120] a microcosmic glance at what Marie Jenkins Schwartz refers to as "'a medical plantation' model for medical knowledge in which life and death were 'to be managed according to the wishes of slaveholders.'"[121] Within this model, white and proper bodies underlie conceptions of the human through distinctions from the Black and inhuman other.

On a larger scale, this plantation model where the "slaveholder," or any other metonym for hegemony, is tasked with assigning a hierarchy to forms of embodiment, isn't limited to institutions of medicine, but, as evinced by Thomas in "Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?", permeates systemically to inform the ways in which humanity is conceptualized through the recursive dehumanization of a deviant subject. In his essay, Thomas references the murder trial of Gwen Araujo, a Latina transgender woman killed by two men in October of 1992,[122] to expound upon the ways that trans people must struggle with a legal regime of "infrahumanity."[123] Throughout the trial, Araujo's perpetrators invoke "transpanic" as they

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[119]Riley, C. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides : A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 19.
[120]Ibid, 18
[121]Ibid, 23.
[122]Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter. "Afterword: Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 317.
[123]Ibid, 312.

reproduce the abstraction of a "[revolting]" trans phantasm for the court, and with their verbal reenactment of transphobic violence against Araujo, the oppressive vectors constituting the category "human" are laid bare, as is, in the words of Thomas, the "inhumanitarianism" of the human.[124]

   While Araujo's case is credited with bringing the transpanic defense into national attention in 2006,[125] we see a similar successful demonstration of this defense in the murder trial of Chanell Picket nearly ten years earlier in 1997. Chanell Picket, a Black trans woman described by her twin sister as *"full of life… high-spirited… with many goals,"*[126] was egregiously killed by her date, William Palmer, whom she had met in a bar.[127] Palmer, who claimed to attack Picket only after realizing that she was transgender, was convicted solely for battery, not for murder. Reflecting upon the case, transgender activist Nancy Nangeroni comments, "It really speaks to the fact that being transsexual means being less of a person .... Rich, white boy kills poor black transsexual girl, and the white boy gets a slap on the wrist."[128] Here, by arguing that a poor Black girl becomes even "less of a person" when she is trans, Nangeroni highlights the ways in which, for poor Black transwomen, class, race, and gender fatally overlap to further a bio-necro-political expedient. Relatedly, throughout both Picket and Araujo's cases, the trials' overtures imply that those who kill to protect state sanctioned notions of normativity and legibility comprise the kinds of "humans" the state actively invests in shielding from censure.

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[124]Ibid, 318-319.

[125]MOYA LLOYD, "'Heteronormativity And/as Violence: The "Sexing' of Gwen Araujo," *Hypatia* 28, no. 4 (2013): 819.

[126]"Chanelle Pickett Story," MassTPC.org, December 10, 2012.

[127]Morgan Tilleman, "(TRANS)FORMING THE PROVOCATION DEFENSE," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1973-)*100, no. 4 (2010): 659-688. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25766132, pg. 671.

[128]Ibid.

Essentially, the mere existence of those written outside of America's grammar book,[129] or those who belong to a culturally illegible aesthetic, threaten the legibility of those whose humanity depends upon a system of exclusion, erasure, and denial. Queer theorist and performance artist Sandy Stone remarks upon this interstitial plane of existence, reframing the "inhumanity" ascribed to trans and racialized bodies as a "contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type, [and] a tactile politics of reproduction constituted through textual violence."[130] Within these sites of "dys-being"[131] and "textual violence," the rigid and unyielding cult of racial gender buttressing the deployment of "human" is made palpable, and the idea of the "inhuman," in juxtaposition with the violence of humanity, may appear malleable, capacious, and even inviting. By proffering inhumanity as an alternative to human embodiment, Thomas interrogates pervasive understandings of the body and its relationship to "the human" while underlining a potential political trajectory where the idea of inhumanity is exploited rather than shunned.

Building upon Thomas's exploration of inhumanity as potentially constructive to an understanding of queer selfhood, the prospective research will explore the ways that Black genderqueer people on social media embrace behavior that can be understood as supplanting their interpellation as inhuman. Considering the ways that Black genderqueer people have been systematically alienated from public forms of self expression in addition to the experience of pleasure,[132] the proposed research's exploration of perversity will contribute to a crucial body of knowledge that challenges the proliferation of such policing. Furthermore, the proposed research

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[129]Spillers, "Mama's Baby."

[130]Finn Enke, "Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History," *TSQ* 1 February 2018; 5 (1), pg. 24.

[131]Wynter, "No Humans Involved," Place of publication not identified: Moors Head Press, 2016.

[132]Heath Fogg Davis, "Sex-Classification Policies as Transgender Discrimination: An Intersectional Critique," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 1 (2014): 45-60.

seeks to complicate ideas around representation, legibility, and humanity by expounding upon a corollary that analyzes queer of color embodiment.

Critical texts such as Snorton's and Thomas's, as well as Jasbir Puar's, ultimately provide fertile ground for the exploration of not only "human" as a conceptual category, but of embodiment as a mode of existence. As evinced by Snorton's historical examination of Black flesh as a terrain of unending maneuver and distortion,[133] as well as Thomas's analysis of Araujo's murder trial, the concept of "human" traffics in the dominant visual economy of a naturalized embodiment. In "Bodies with New Organs," Puar respectively anticipates and invokes Thomas and Snorton's engagement with ideas of humanity and embodiment by problematizing the purported connection between the two concepts. Exploring the ways in which, for trans people, the imperative to inhabit a culturally legible gender may compel hormone treatments and surgeries, Puar contends that as human embodiment comes to signify a cis and able bodied existence, transness and disability come to represent a site of flesh endlessly available for hormonal and surgical manipulation.[134] Here, similarly to Snorton's analysis of Black bodies as distortion, Puar explores trans bodies as defective. By interrogating the kinds of humanoid embodiments that are read as object versus human, Puar implicitly explores the ways that non-naturalized gender, sexuality, and ability come to stand in for the body itself. Within this context, Puar probes at our understanding of embodiment by subtly juxtaposing naturalized and human modes of existence with the experience of those barred from legible taxonomy who are interpellated as fleshy excess.

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[133]Riley, C. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides : A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 19.

[134]Jasbir K. Puar, "Bodies with New Organs," *Social Text* 33, no. 3124 (September 2015), p. 52.

The political implications of such a critique are first, that embodiment "makes public the imprint of our past,"[135] and second, that a body politic alone cannot secure one's freedom. While the body can be used as imaginative fodder for ways of being, if our identities are limited to the phenotypical and physical, what happens to Black bodies that, as Spillers and Snorton reflect, exist as commodities? What happens to trans bodies that are perceived and treated as an endless site of experimentation? While Black and trans subjects are certainly able to maneuver and carve out space for themselves within such figurations, in addition to working within this apparatus of cultural construction, we must also look to transgress a symbolic order where embodiment and the body become the summation of identity. But this is not to say that an exploration of embodiment is not crucial to liberation work. Embodiment, gestures, and cultivated aesthetic all act as a cultural archive as well as a force that carries with it the potential for a radical reimagining of the future.[136] As we navigate embodiment and the ways that our bodies reveal the "inscription of social and cultural laws" as well as our relationship to power, we should also be cognizant of the ways that our individual movements and corporeality carry political potential.[137] By exploring embodiment as both political experience and expression, the prospective research will proceed with the understanding that self exploration and expression are salient aspects of effective activism.

2.4   Social Media and Performativity

The social media platform of Instagram constitutes the setting of the present study. This research looks to Instagram because of the ways that it helps to facilitate an expression of Black genderqueer subjectivity and imagining. For the purpose of this research, social media can be

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[135]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 5.
[136]Ibid, 26.
[137]Ibid, 5.

defined as a place where people connect, imagine, and feel together, as well as a space used to express and construct a subject-based sense of identity. Within the context of social media, online platforms include websites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and can be understood as internet locations used as tools to deliver media to an audience, whilst sometimes allowing for discussion and sharing. Before delving more into what Instagram does, I will first provide a context for what Instagram is.

In the 18th century, the undergirding philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment precipitated journalism, a culture of public engagement, and an "expanding information society."[138] Specifically, within this period, "enlightenment rationalism," or the idea that "truth is not the domain of specific institutions or traditions (such as Christian churches or beliefs), but can be determined through active participation in reason and debate," incited a gathering and reflecting upon issues of public concern, culture, and politics through journals and newspapers as well as in common spaces like salons or coffeehouses. This process had the effect of blurring an imagined separation between knowledge production, the public sphere, the private sphere, and the sphere of government.[139] Similarly, the vagaries of private and public dialogue can be illuminated by the emergence of the internet.[140]

With the development of the internet and its various subsets, for much of the population, interpersonal communication became more publicly available – in other words, "the initial development of social networking sites was, in effect, a scaling-down of public broadcasting to become individuals posting to groups.[141] As the preponderance of social media continues, the

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[138]Peter John Chen, "Social Media," In *Australian Politics in a Digital Age*, 69-112, ANU Press, 2013, p. 71.
[139]Ibid.
[140]Ibid, 69.
[141]Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang, "What Is Social Media?" In *How the World Changed Social Media*, 1-8. London: UCL Press, 2016, p. 2.

visual – and therefore the concept of social visibility – becomes even more fundamental to the way we communicate.[142] While initially, the internet was largely considered a virtual world separate from reality, we have increasingly depended upon the internet to meet our everyday needs, and in this way, virtual reality has become just as real as offline.[143] Expounding upon this sentiment, social media scholar, Daniel Miller reflects,

> Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. In the same way no one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from 'real life'. [...] Our research provides considerable evidence that social media should be regarded rather as a place where many of us spend part of our lives.[144]

As "a pace where many of us spend part of our lives" social media platforms constitute settings worthy of careful observation.

While social media platforms such as Instagram have been proven to be a major component of everyday self expression and communication,[145] oppressed people who depend upon these platforms as a primary form of sociality are often berated. Within white supremacist patriarchy, those who are white, cis, heterosexual, and male occupy positions of privilege. Specifically, within social dynamics, white men are less likely to be chastised for behaviors such as sharing their opinions, expressing themselves, and living unapologetically.[146] Conversely, because those repressed by the state are systematically alienated from these liberties, many members of marginalized groups have used social media as a tool for making themselves heard and seen. In this regard, it is unsurprising that social media gets debased – If oppressed populations are systematically silenced, scattered, and alienated from

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[142]Jolynna Sinanan, "Conclusion: Social Media through Ethnography," In *Social Media in Trinidad: Values and Visibility*, 199-208. London: UCL Press, 2017.

[143]Ibid.

[144]Miller, "What Is Social Media?" p.7.

[145]Ibid.

[146]Kay Inckle, "Debilitating Times: Compulsory Ablebodiedness and White Privilege in Theory and Practice," *Feminist Review*, no. 111 (2015): 42-58.

agency, trivializing the ways in which they amplify their voice and connect with one another works to subtend their stratification. Positioning itself against this repressive order, the present research examines Instagram as a devalued scaffold for meaning making and a potential tool for a generative project of valuation.

As highlighted, social media is often devalued as a form of communication and as a subset of reality. In her essay "'Fluff,' Affect, and the Circulation of Feeling," Emma Bedor Hiland contends that even though social media is increasingly used as primary sources for newsgathering, journalism and media experts often express contempt for news outlets willing to publish "fluff" alongside "hard" news.[147] Expounding upon the meaning of fluff in regards to social media, Hiland characterizes it as a type of engagement "'typically seen on low-quality publications looking to get some cheap content,' [...] or to put it even more bluntly, [real] journalism's opposite."[148] Here, words "low-quality" and "cheap" converse with limiting and oppressive ideas surrounding authenticity, overlapping with a symbolic order where value gets mapped onto concepts based upon past histories of contact and their proximity to power.[149]

Drawing from the work of Sarah Ahmed, who explains that "emotions do things" and force us "to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective,"[150] Hiland suggests "a reconceptualization of fluff that positions sharing content [on social media] as a form of digital labor that perpetuates affective states."[151] Similarly, within this study, I understand Black genderqueer people's expressive production on Instagram to be "'digital labor' that

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[147]Emma Bedor Hiland, "'Fluff,' Affect, and the Circulation of Feeling," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 2018): 138.
[148]Hiland, "'Fluff,' Affect, and the Circulation of Feeling," p. 139.
[149]Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.12.
[150]Ahmed, "Affective Economies," p. 119.
[151]Hiland, "'Fluff,'" p. 139.

perpetuates affective states." In a study which foregrounds the importance of pleasure, the affective circulation potentiated by social media is especially significant.

Additionally, the present study looks to Black genderqueer people's engagement with Instagram specifically because of the ways that this participation gets trafficked as superficial and frivolous. Within the context of a Black feminist disability framework, this indulgence in frivolity, or refusal to adhere to the mandates of racial capitalism, performs a necessary critique on the valorization of "productivity" and "labor." Using the ways in which Black genderqueer people on Instagram enagage in perverse pleasure to challenge the dominant value system which correlates Black queer perversity with inhumanity, my research interrogates what it could mean to flaunt the frivolous and pleasure as a radical gesture. I look to social media to find the subjects of my study because of the informality and accessibility of content sharing platforms. Presently, the internet is more accessible than ever[152] and in the United States, most people (from older children to elderly adults) have handheld devices connecting them to virtual reality within seconds.[153] Because of their convenience and accessibility, social media platforms such as Instagram see a wider latitude of Black participation in comparison to more formal, distinguished, and exclusionary institutions for exhibition.[154]

Hegemonic engagements with art invest in maintaining a distinction between the venerated forms of civilized expression and primitivistic styles of articulation,[155] and while social media may subtend this order, it may also be employed for exhibition which obscures this traditional bifurcation. Within systems of hegemony, privileged classes who express themselves

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[152] Again, there are nuances to this, especially as it pertains to incarcerated people.
[153] Miller, "Academic Studies of Social Media."
[154]Makeba Lavan, "THE NEGRO TWEETS HIS PRESENCE: BLACK TWITTER AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL WATCHDOG," *Modern Language Studies* 45, no. 1 (2015): 56-65.
[155]Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 433-50.

politically and artistically are often affirmed for their inventiveness, while acts of self expression proffered by the masses are trivialized and demeaned as lowbrow.[156] While a lawyer who bikes to work may be affirmed for her willingness to express environmental politics through physical performance, she who bikes to work because she cannot purchase a car is considered largely unremarkable. Through the purposive dichotomization of art from the quotidian, the apparatus of cultural construction cordons off worth and ethics from the subsistence of "lay-people" and ascribes these traits to the populations considered most desirable and valuable.[157]

Contemporarily, social media has, in some ways, altered the circulation and consumption of artistic expression; as a platform and stage, social media has become a space akin to historical conceptions of theater, dance recitals, music studios, and galleries. In fact, visual art, acting, dance, and song have all been proliferated by and through public engagement with virtual realities. By allowing classical and informal artists to cohabitate with those who casually narrativize their experiences through video, prose, and picture, social media may be used to helps "stitch together"[158] and problematize the conventional separations among the latter.

Within the context of social media, this study will specifically look at the posts, pictures, videos, and captions that Black genderqueer people circulate on Instagram. This research proceeds with the belief that, as articulated by Black cultural theorist and art historian, Raél Jero Salley, visual media of this kind can not only "[provide] culturally readable visual performances as alternatives to current conceptions of identity,"[159] but when used as a tool by oppressed

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[156]Raymond Williams, *An Open Letter to WEA Tutors; and Culture Is Ordinary*, London: Workers Educational Association, 1990.
[157]Ibid.
[158]Erin Durban-Albrecht; Postcolonial Disablement and/as Transition: Trans* Haitian Narratives of Breaking Open and Stitching Together, *TSQ* 1 May 2017; 4 (2): 203.
[159]Raél Jero Salley, "The face I love: Zanele Muholi's 'Faces and Phases,'" *Queer African Reader* (2013): 109, accessed February 20, 2019.

people, may also serve as "an attempt to reposition guaranteed centers of knowledge [and the] certainties of realism."[160]

In Salley's 2013 essay, "The face I love: Zanele Muholi's 'Faces and Phases,'" Salley participates in dialogue with the portraiture of South African artivist Zanele Muholi, who uses visual art to examine the lives of Black lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex South Africans. According to Salley, "[Muholi's] pictures exhibit an interest in making the private public, and suggest a family album, a community and a struggle with which the viewer is invited to empathize." Salley proceeds to highlight "Faces and Phases" "[as] actively reveal[ing] how the phenomenon of 'black [queer]' [is] currently capable of becoming visible in ways that enable (and/or force) a re-vision[ing] of existing dominant conceptions of the world."[161]

Conversing with Muholi's value for making the private public, undergirding my study is a critique on a globalized understanding of liberal democracy where some are allowed to live their lives freely in both the public and private spheres while others are allocated a privatized freedom.[162] My study will operate with the understanding that restricting difference to the private sphere only extends cultural dominance and a pattern in which those who deviate from a prescribed imperialist normalcy are minoritized.[163] As I employ social media to look at the function of Black genderqueer people's exhibition, I build upon Salley's analysis to display the ways in which Black genderqueer subjectivity "re-tool[s] visual mechanisms"[164] to interrogate intramural methods for producing value.

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[160]Ibid.
[161]Ibid.
[162]Jakobsen, *Love the Sin,* p117.
[163]Jakobsen, *Love the Sin*, p106.
[164]Raél Jero Salley, "The face I love: Zanele Muholi's 'Faces and Phases,'" *Queer African Reader* (2013): 117, accessed February 20, 2019, doi:10.1162/AFAR_a_00028.

A salient component of this study's use of visual media is the performativity which constitutes the act of indexing pleasure on Instagram. On a public platform such as Instagram, when one shares a snapshot of a feeling or experience, these experiences no longer take place behind closed doors or internally, but exist as a conversation with an audience of spectators; they become a performance. Instagram's characterization as a social content *platform*, or stage, reveals the underlying performativity inextricable from the act of uploading. Within this context, an analysis of performativity helps to illuminate the ways in which Black genderqueer people's cataloguing of pleasure can converse with a freer future.

In Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies* (2002),[165] Schechner argues that performance traverses and transcends the formal theater and is enmeshed with the diurnal rhythms of social interactions, cultural practices, and public advocacies.[166] For Schechner, performance manifests in everyday activities from casual conversation to conventional acting in a manner that "mark[s] identities, bend[s] time, reshape[s] and adorn[s] the body, and tell[s] stories."[167] Within the context of the present research, as a form of "[story telling,]" Black genderqueer people's documentation of their identity along with their participation in pleasure on Instagram can be seen as a practice with the potential to "bend time" and "reshape" one's ideas of possible futures.

The radical potential of Black genderqueer people's performance of pleasure on Instagram is perhaps best realized in the context of Judith Butler's analysis of performativity and gender.[168] Implicitly conversing with Schechner's analysis, is Butler's notion of performativity. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler explains that performance occurs as a result of one's

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[165]Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3. ed. London: Routledge, 2013.
[166]Ibid, 31.
[167]Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance*, Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008, p. 16.
[168]Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* New York: Routledge, 1993.

"matriculation [through a society] governed by regulatory norms."[169] Within our current

repressive regime, one can see "regulatory norms" instantiated through the (as previously

described) moralization of labor, standards for nuclear kinship, and normative gender. While

Butler explains performativity as coercively reproducing these behavioral norms, she also argues

that performance holds a radical potential for reimagining the future.

According to Butler, performativity has the potential to "establish a kind of political

contestation [by] forging a future from resources inevitably impure."[170] Here, Butler contends

that although gender, sexuality, sex, and race may be "impure" formations conceived through

hegemony, they also carry the potential to resignify "abject" forms of subsistence. In the context

of Black genderqueer people's performance of their stigmatized identity and "perverse" pleasure

on Instagram, Butler can be seen as arguing that "the public assertion of 'queerness' enacts

performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of [queerness] into

defiance and legitimacy."[171] In this regard, given the ways in which biopower disciplines the

body, regulates populations, and imposes social sanctions, quotidian performances of Black

genderqueerness and pleasure on Instagram have the potential to revivify "abject" identities and

to intervene against a purportedly inexorable cultural law.

Social media provides an informal space in which Black genderqueer people can perform

a disruption of the norm. Formal institutions may privilege exclusive narratives, but in some

ways, social media provides a stage on which "illegitimate" others may partake in storytelling.[172]

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[169]Linda A. Krikos and Cindy Ingold, *Women's Studies: a Recommended Bibliography*, Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004, p. 29.

[170]Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 21.

[171]Ibid.

[172]Using social media as an instrument to explore queer world building has its limitations. Because corporations have marketed self expression on social platforms, social media has the capacity to sublimate Black gender nonconforming people's expression of self by assimilating it into the mainstream so that it no longer functions as a resistance to normative culture. In this way, in order to respond to post industrial capitalism's demand for workers who are able to adapt to the complexities of commodity exchange, Black gender nonconformity expressed on social

In the words of Black feminist scholar, Joy Ann James, "[p]romoting unorthodox and heretical states of consciousness that further radical politics has always been a suspect state endeavor [...] [u]nofficial narratives, though, continue to be the persistent companions of official texts."[173] Ultimately, James argues, in order to avoid a liberal approach to ethics leading to politically conservative consequences, one must use unofficial narratives which offer an alternative vision of ourselves and society.[174] The present study's centering of social media grounds itself in this notion; it is in this unofficial narration that oppressed people may portray themselves with agency and subjectivity and are also able to wield "a pervasive influence [and participate in] social transformation."[175]

Undoing Gender (2004) by Judith Butler, Butler elaborates upon James's analysis and insists that fantasy exists in the realm of the informal and illegitimate. Emphasizing the importance of imagining, Butler states,

> the critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingentlimits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.[176]

Existing contemporaneously, the availability of social media to disparate demographics in many ways challenges the historically siloed academy of art. The implications of this problematization are especially laden when one considers the traditional role of art in widening one's idea of the

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media may be less a reflection of radical queerness and more an attempt to capitalize on the commodification of Blackness and gender-flexibility. In order to produce a nuanced account of the ways in which Black gender nonconforming people perform meaning making and world building, it is important to factor in the potential for Black gender nonconformity expressed as a response to commodity exchange. Nevertheless, just because self expression on social media may be manipulated and exploited, this does not negate its importance as an informal tool for radical reimagining. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that Naomi's instagram does not participate in any formal branding or advertising, although participation on Instagram may afford them a different sort social capital. While social media may have its limits, in its critical and accessible engagement with fantasy, social media can be used to grab onto important manifestations of queer, creative, and self authored existences.

[173]Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (Palgrave 1999), 177.
[174]Ibid.
[175]Ibid.
[176]Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29.

possible.[177] While social media users must often garner recognition from systems of

commodification before they receive mainstream success, the spectacle of their self exhibition

still grips and stimulates the small-scaled milieus they traverse. In this way, Black genderqueer

people who utilize social media to publicly participate in queer imagining play an important role

in interacting with and galvanizing a community of eager viewers.

Throughout history, art and self expression have always both imagined and examined ideas

of identity, reality, and social order. As Black genderqueer people perform pleasure and identity

on the subset of social media, Instagram, their work similarly reflects upon "what it is to *be"*[178]

in the present, while interrogating what it means to "[do] in futurity."[179]

3 METHODOLOGY

This study investigates Black genderqueer social media users' engagement with Instagram

as a means for value production and imagining worlds estranged from systems of

repression. Examining a demographic marginally studied and understood, this research centers

Black genderqueer people as critical figures within cultural economies, ethics production, and

queer world building projects, toward the progression of future manifestations of identity, value,

and queer utopias.[180] This study examines the extremities of cultural construction which

reproduce the auto-naturalizing temporality known as "straight time,"[181] and by shedding light

on the behavior of Black genderqueer people, which labors to disrupt this chrononormative

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[177]Tourmaline, *Trap Door.*
[178]Tourmaline, *Trap Door*, p. xx.
[179]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 457.
[180]Much of the methodological praxis I will use is derived from Beza Fekade's qualitative research involving second generation East African Women and the construction of homeplace (2019) as well as Ololade S. Hassan's qualitative research on Black women's engagement in social media hashtags as an affirmation Black beauty.
[181]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 454.

continuum,[182] the present study lends itself to the eradication of necropolitical and binary conceptions of value. As a qualitative study, this research interprets the culture sharing group of three Black genderqueer young adults[183] on Instagram.

This chapter will contain the research methods of the study, specifically the design, its appropriateness, the demographic that is studied, sampling, data collection procedures, and the methodology's reliability and limitations.

3.1 Approach

This research conducted a qualitative analysis in accordance with Kelly Guyotte's and Joshua D. Atkinson's synthesis of qualitative approaches to visual inquiry.[184] In *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches*, Atkinson states that qualitative research is most apt for the exploration of how a cultural group works to interrogate issues such as power, resistance, and dominance. As a study which examines pleasure as a potential tool for Black genderqueer people surviving necropolitics, a qualitative method was most suitable for this research because it is not predicated on the quantifiable usage of Instagram but rather the way it's used to address power.

In "Confronting the Visual in Qualitative Inquiry," Guyotte expounds upon Atkinson's analysis, affirming the subversive potential for qualitative visual engagement. For Guyotte, qualitative research methods which center aesthetic production may help to provide insight into the processes involved in the co-constructions of value, lived experiences, and potential futures,

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[182]Green, "Tranifest," p. 220.

[183]This study localizes the ages of the participants within the age bracket of 18-33 years old because, as a qualitative study, it looks for a group of culture sharing subjects. If this study were to center a more intergenerational age bracket, the culture of the participants would be more likely to diverge. Additionally, drawing from Sadaiya Hartman's explanation for why she centered young Black wayward girls in 2019 *Wayward Lives*, this project finds that young people are seen as less respectable, less wise, and therefore less instructive or worthy of study, and in accordance with the aims of this study, the present research centers young people to push against an ageist hierarchical valuation.

[184]Joshua D. Atkinson, "Qualitative Methods," In *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches*, 65-98, NEW YORK: Fordham University Press, 2017, Accessed February 17, 2020.

while also working to critically destabilize a reliance upon text and language.[185] Drawing from

this analysis, the present study engages the visual-verbal environment of Instagram to contravene

academic paradigms of knowledge production and ownership which privilege written text as the

"proper" and "authentic" mode for knowledge transmission.[186] Summarily put, a qualitative

Aanalysis of visual data was an approach most apt for the present study, first, because this

project incorporated a visual, audio, and textual analysis of Instagram usage which required in-

depth analysis and interpretation to unveil themes of identity, value production, and utopianism,

and second, because a qualitative visual analysis of Instagram may be used to interrupt the

epistemic hegemony of academic knowledge production and thus converges with the antinomian

animus of this study.

    As a fundamentally queer endeavor, this study strives to blur the boundaries of

traditionally demarcated qualitative approaches. In accordance with its value for moving against

a politic of purity or fundamentalism, this project employs a trans* qualitative methodology

informed by the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, ''Postposttranssexual: Key

Concepts for a TwentyFirst-Century Transgender Studies,'' and more specifically, queer theorist

Sandy Stone's synthesis of trans* methodological approaches to shifting digital

epistemologies.[187] In "Postposttransexual," Stone contends that as a commercial concept,

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[185]Atkinson, "Qualitative Methods," p. 65., R. Barthes & Heath, S. (1977). Image, music, text. New York: Hill and Wang.

[186]Here, I remark upon the primacy of text to explain my reasoning for engaging with the technology of Instagram. This is not to say that by centering Instagram as my sphere for analysis the present text avoids epistemic violence. In fact, as Gayatri Spivak highlights in "Can the Subaltern Speak," research cannot evade coloniality. By defining an "over there" and an "other," turning this group into an object of study, drawing out information, and mediating it within the system of academic hegemony, Spivak challenges the capacity for conducting formal research without cooperating with a project of colonialism. While I belong to the group of people centered within the present text, because this research circulates the academic institution from which I benefit, the knowledge offered functions as an exported commodity. In other words, by using text to give words to the visual, I reify the very system of propriety I seek to disrupt, and as my writing is oriented in a tradition of hegemonic intellectualism, it cannot be considered a transparent medium. In order to account for this, throughout this text I have made a consistent attempt to provide autobiographical turning points that invite my reader outside of such hierarchical formalities.

[187]Green, "Tranifest," p. 246.

transmedia methods are "hybrids that cross and connect multiple media narrative threads, genres, and forms" to "offer points of social contact and expressive meaning making rather than static representations and theories."[188] In accordance with the queer work of trans* methodology, the present research purposively problematizes binary distinction by stitching together textual and visual analysis, interweaving Instagram posts and convening both the symbolic and material representations they contain, working to hold space for not only the disdain the selected Instagram posts may exhibit toward a dominant moral order, but also potential attachments they may demonstrate, and by striving to interrupt normative informatic production by centering depictions of perversity as sites for value production.

3.2   Setting

This study is navigated with trans* qualitative methods that use self-imaging practices as hermeneutical resources.[189] Instagram enables this process of interpretation by circulating a user's photographs and found objects, thereby granting spectators negative space so that we may construct the narrative ourselves. As interlocutors in a process of production and consumption, the visual media shared on Instagram allows for an "imaging practice" where the content producer's body, imagination, ideas, and desires may exist as both objects and subjects at the same time. In this regard, "imaging practice[s]" of Black genderqueer Instagram users pokes at the stereotypical role of image production that is controlled by a white supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist, and patriarchal state. While the state has varying degrees of control over Instagram, as

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[188]Green, "Tranifest," p. 245-246.

[189]This project revolved around the styles of self making employed by the Black gender dissidents, Naomi, who uses text and visual media to perform and index moments of queer perversity. Essentially, my procedures relied upon user generated content as data. This data was collected by looking at Naomi's page, taking notes which detailed a description of the behavior performed on their page, and then performing a graphical media analysis. When observing the selected Instagram posts, I made note of the photo tags, media tone, photo content, captions, patterns and themes displayed across posts, and specific picture components in need of extended analysis.

it does all of its publics, Black genderqueer people have still been able to negotiate a certain level of liberty within this sphere. As the primary social networking realm for disseminating art and self expression, Instagram is thus the more suitable platform to examine how users engage with performance and "imaging" or "imagining" within these milieus. When harnessed by Black genderqueer Instagram users, Instagram's capacity for variegated positionality presents an opportunity to "challenge [...] the conceived social order of image production and consumption in our general visual culture."[190]

In order to best conceptualize the profiles of these users, first, a brief description of the Instagram layout is necessary. Instagram is a video and photo-sharing social network which displays circulated content in a square shape and in rows of three pictures. As one scrolls through an Instagram profile, the amount of posts in a given column extend. In other words, if one were to scroll through a given Instagram profile, they would do so until running out of content; there is no static number of columns. After signing up, an Instagram user creates a profile picture and a brief 150 character summary or "bio."[191] When you open an Instagram user's profile, their profile picture rests in the top left hand corner directly above their chosen bio. By clicking on a post, one is able to read a picture's or video's caption, read the comments left by the picture's other viewers, and locate any people listed or "tagged" within the post.

Within this study, I localize my archival work to Instagram because its amorphous proclivity feels deeply imbricated with queer mutability. Instagram is an online, mobile, picture, text, sound, and video sharing social network which enables its users to interact with others by engaging in these varied mediums.[192] It is a platform which constantly increases the capacity for

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[190]Gretchen, "Hair, Blood and the Nipple."
[191]https://help.instagram.com/424737657584573
[192]Gretchen, "Hair, Blood and the Nipple."

its users to self express. Most recently, Instagram has implemented speech-synthesizing features

which render the human voice robotic, and in 2016, Instagram began offering filters and image

editing capacities that overlay the subject portrayed in a given post to imagine them beyond

human subjectivity.[193] These updates are specifically fertile for an examination of queer

inhumanity, and for this reason, the present study understands Instagram as presenting a wider

latitude for creative self authorship when compared with its primary competitors, Facebook and

Twitter, neither of which provide features which directly participate in posthumanist imaging

processes.[194] As the primary social networking realm for visual media and performance[195] and as

a social technology offering features which enable posthumanist image production, Instagram is

an especially apt platform for examining Black genderqueer "[mobilization]" around a vision of

the inhuman.[196]

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[193]bid. On Instagram, filter features provide users an opportunity to use animated special effects in order to morph their faces with extraterrestrial beings, animals, as well as folklore figures such as elves. By using the app, Instagrammers are also able to transpose the image of themselves, in addition to any object captured by their camera, into a different setting or background. By employing the Instagram app, one may browse the special effects and filters offered by Instagram specifically as well as browsing filters imported to Instagram, effects that Instagram users have added themselves.

[194]Tim Jordan,\ "Social Media Networks," In *Information Politics: Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society*, 120-40. London: Pluto Press, 2015.

[195]Ibid.

[196]Thomas,"Afterword: Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" 312.

Using social media as an instrument to explore queer subversion has its limitations. Because corporations have marketed self expression on social platforms, social media has the capacity to sublimate Black gender nonconforming people's expression of self by assimilating it into the mainstream so that it no longer functions as a resistance to normative culture. In this way, in order to respond to post industrial capitalism's demand for workers who are able to adapt to the complexities of commodity exchange, Black gender nonconformity expressed on social media may be less a reflection of radical queerness and more an attempt to capitalize on the commodification of Blackness and gender-flexibility. In order to produce a nuanced account of the ways in which Black gender nonconforming people perform meaning making and world building, it is important to factor in the potential for Black gender nonconformity expressed as a response to commodity exchange. Nevertheless, just because self expression on social media may be manipulated and exploited, this does not negate its importance as an informal tool for radical reimagining. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that Naomi's Instagram does not participate in any formal branding or advertising, although participation on Instagram may afford them a different sort of social capital. While social media may have its limits, in its critical and accessible engagement with queer imagining, social media can be used to grab onto important manifestations of queer, creative, and self authored existences.

Instagram provides a fertile environment for examining social and material practices within the digital sphere.[197] On Instagram, each user is a content creator which enables limitless cultural creation.[198] Marwick argues that the majority of studies on Instagram to date have been quantitative, despite the fact that a qualitative method may be better utilized to understand the subjects engaging with the platform.[199] When researchers concentrate singularly on quantitative study, they overlook significant data, such as why people engage with this platform and what a (performance of self through) utilization of this platform can do. It feels important to note, however, that this research project is not a study of Instagram as a platform, but rather, a study of what people post and communicate through this platform, of why they might post, and the consequences of those postings.[200]

In part, Instagram was chosen as a field of study for the present research because its rapid transformability lends itself to a queer aesthetic. Relatedly, Erin Durban-Albrecht's engagement with the idea of stitching in her essay "Postcolonial Disablement and/as Transition: Trans* Haitian Narratives of Breaking Open and Stitching Together" informs this research's concept of Instagram as a manifestation of queer suturing. Situating her conception of stitching within "the stitch" as articulated by Jafari S. Allen in 2015, Albrecht argues for a necessarily transgenerational Black queer diaspora.[201] Allen's original conception of "the stitch" builds upon the famed New York City queen Kevin Aviance's proclamation, "Stitching, Darling!" at the closing of the Palladium nightclub in the 1980s.[202] According to Albrecht, within Allen's text,

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[197]B. Stewart, (2017) *Twitter as Method: Using Twitter as a Tool to Conduct Research. In The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, Ed. By Sloan, L., and Quan-Haase, A. London: SAGE, 251-265.
[198]Miller,"Academic Studies of Social Media."
[199]A. Marwick, (2013) *Ethnographic and Qualitative Research on Twitter*, In Twitter and Society. Ed. By. Weller, K., Puschmann, C., Burgess, J., and Mahrt, M. New York: Peter Lang, 109-122.
[200]Miller, "What Is Social Media?" p.1.
[201]Durban-Albrecht, "Stitching Together," p. 203.
[202]Ibid.

"'Stitching, Darling!' inspires [his] mobile methods of black queer diaspora: suturing (with a flourish) the past, present, and future as well as scenes 'here and there' in disparate geographic locations."[203] Within Albrecht's analysis of trans women like the subject of her study, Kelly, who must stitch together a home, family, and future for herself after the earthquake in Haiti, this concept of suture indicates an attempt at fostering disparate relationships "here and there"[204] with people who seek to envision Black queer and trans futures. As Kelly attempts to rework intimacy in the midst of her recovery from the earthquake, bodily transformation, and new disability, social media facilitates and empowers her stitching together of transnational companionships.[205]

Similarly, my research will engage the ways in which social media may enable a contemporary sewing together of distinct modes of self documentation, performativities, and art to attend to an imagining of Black queer and trans futures. Just as Albrecht argues through "stitching" for a necessarily transgenerational Black queer diaspora, the current research will also suture the present, "what it is to be," and the future, "what it is to do in futurity," to attend to a utopian impulse. Queer subjects find their history in-between the lines. By circulating photographs and found objects, the Instagram profiles of Black genderqueer people provide their viewers the conceptual space for subjective narrative production and diverging interpretations of gender and value. In this regard, similarly to Albrecht's synthesis, the idea of "stitching" as employed by Black genderqueer people who perform pleasure on Instagram is looked to as a tool for assembling a field of "utopian possibility."[206]

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[203]Ibid.
[204]Durban-Albrecht, "Stitching Together," p. 204.
[205]Ibid.
[206]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 453.

3.3 Sample

For the sample of the present study, three Black American genderqueer people from the ages of 18-27 were selected for analysis. I used a sample size of three subjects because the purpose of my qualitative study is not to display a sample that is representative of all Black genderqueer people on Instagram, but, rather, to highlight the "'here and now'" of "enhancing a vision for dignity and value through the exploration of a specific social practice" among three Black genderqueer people.[207] This research utilized criterion sampling, defined by Creswell as selecting and studying specific individuals based on an established criterion. I selected the present study's sample of three Black genderqueer Instagram users based upon the suggestions generated by the Instagram algorithm. On an Instagram account where I "followed" approximately 500 queer people whose Instagram pages demonstrated a pattern of posting crude humor, aesthetic excess, an engagement in sexual activity, sex work, drugs use, and other activities that could be characterized as perverse pleasure, the Instagram algorithm recommended me pages based upon my habitual engagement with these queerly perverse Instagram users.

Looking at the recommended results, I began a process of vetting which Instagram pages I would select for analysis. To ensure some level of range in the Black genderqueer voices selected for the study, I chose the first three Instagram accounts of Black genderqueer people who not only ranged from the ages 18-27, but also varied, to some extent, in body type, skin hue, and stated physical and or mental ability.[208] If the Instagram algorithm first recommended a thin,

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[207]S. Kemmis & R. McTaggart, "Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere," In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 559-603.

[208]These three characteristics were selected to help ensure some level of variety in this study's subjects, because they are aspects of identity either immediately recognizable or habitually explicitly stated within a Black genderqueer Instagrammer's bio. It would have been harder to ensure something like class diversity among subjects because explicitly stating one's class affiliation isn't presently as widespread as identifying oneself as a member of a disabled community or a "plus size" community. The various Black genderqueer Instagram user's profiles, skin hue

lighter skinned, and able bodied Black genderqueer person and the subsequent suggestion was someone occupying a similar axis of identities, I would continue along the search suggestion list until finding a Black genderqueer person who identified differently.

I chose this method of sample selection because it was a method for utilizing criterion sampling already built into Instagram. Additionally, to look for Black genderqueer Instagram users based upon word of mouth would run the risk of constricting my sample population to more localized friend networks or to a Black genderqueer "scene" unique to one or two specific cities. Because this study was not meant to be an analysis of Black genderqueer Instagram users of a specific spatial location, kinship group, etc., it was necessary to choose a system that provided some level of separation among subjects. Although it is not a perfect method, the Instagram algorithm generates suggestions based on an Instagram user's search data and most recently liked photos,[209] and for the purpose of this study, the search history of the account used was one which connoted Blackness, perversity, queerness, and young adulthood. While, in the process of generating suggested accounts to follow, the Instagram algorithm also considers your account's linked Facebook friends, location, and the accounts that have commented on your photos,[210] these variables were all controlled for – the Instagram account used for this study did not share its location, nor did it provide Facebook information, or have any followers or posts.

To ensure that this study did not expose the "perverse" Instagram accounts that were selected to undesirable scrutiny or attention, this research used pseudonyms for the Instagram pages detailed. This study was less about the names of the Black genderqueer people who

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and body type were readily discernable, and an affiliation with disability politics was an idenity component commonly stated in an Instagram user's bio.

[209]Lev. Manovich, "Cultural Analytics, Social Computing and Digital Humanities," In *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data*, edited by Schäfer Mirko Tobias and Van Es Karin, 55-68. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

[210]Manovich, "Cultural Analytics, Social Computing and Digital Humanities," p. 55-68.

document their engagement with pleasure on Instagram, and more about the implications of this interface.

3.4   Measures

This study measured the relationship of identity, pleasure, and value production within the context of Instagram-use by young adult Black genderqueer people from the ages 18-27. This study provides a graphical analysis on the Instagram profiles of Black genderqueer people to discover how this community is navigating Instagram to reappropriate value and reconceptualize aspirational futures. The content subjected to analysis within this study were selected photographs, captions, and videos as well as a variety of other media uploaded to the profiles of three Black genderqueer Instagrammers. Additionally, the layout of the page formatted by the Black genderqueer Instagrammers was also subject to analysis. This research looked at the three Black genderqueer Instagrammers' entire timeline of posts, sifted through these posts for the most relevant content, and ultimately put various uploaded posts in conversation with one another. Within this context, all Instagram posts transmitted by the three Instagrammers were potential artifacts and field data for research analysis.

In measuring the performance of pleasure, this study drew from Jafari S. Allen's notion of "erotic subjectivity," or a demonstration of a "marginalized subject's desire and the lengths to which they go to negotiate with hegemonic forces in order to experience those desires."[211] While observing the three Black genderqueer Instagram users' posts, I looked for instantiations of erotic subjectivity to address the way performing pleasure on Instagram "constructs [...] new kinds of publics based on deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul."[212] Each

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[211]Nikki Lane,"Bringing Flesh to Theory: Ethnography, Black Queer Theory, and Studying Black Sexualities," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): p. 635.
[212]Lane, "Bringing Flesh to Theory," p. 635.

section of this project treats a different aspect of erotic subjectivity as it manifests within the posts of the three chosen Instagram users. In particular, I am concerned with how these posts enact erotic subjectivity within the conterminous contexts of Black American digital reality, Black American resistance, trans* feminism,[213] and African American culture and politics.

Much of the present study was influenced by Nikki Lane's analysis of qualitative study and its many valances. According to Jim Thomas, as invoked by Nikki Lane in "Bringing Flesh to Theory: Ethnography, Black Queer Theory, and Studying Black Sexualities," qualitative researchers "describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain."[214] In this regard, this research centers Black genderqueer erotic subjectivity to critique "cultural formations and social practices that restrain the freedom or prevent the full participation in social and political life of those who occupy marginalized identities."[215] In each section of this study, I show that, as marginalized subjects on Instagram work out their position within the shadow of slavery, fungibility,[216] and the nostalgic family values covenant of contemporary American politics, they construct "their racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities according to deep longings."[217]

Through engagement with the Instagram algorithm, pleasure was highlighted as a major theme indexed by the three selected Black genderqueer Instagrammers. Following this process of coding, pleasure and perversity were motifs used to analyze Black genderqueer people's Instagram through a graphical analysis. As I examined three Black genderqueer individuals' Instagram-use, the relationship and relationality of value, pleasure, and identity provided insight

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[213]Green, Bey, "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet," p 438-454.
[214]Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography* (London: Sage, 1993), p. 2–3.
[215]Lane, "Bringing Flesh to Theory," p. 636.
[216]Saidiya Hartman, "The Dead Book Revisited," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): p. 208-15.
[217]Lane, "Bringing Flesh to Theory," p. 636.

on how Instagram is manipulated by Black genderqueer people in ways that are critical,

beneficial, and transformative.

3.5   Procedures

This study collected data through the careful observation of three Black genderqueer

Instagram profiles. Once the Instagram suggestion algorithm provided three varied Black

genderqueer Instagram profiles demonstrating a patterned performance of pleasure, I ended my

search for primary sources.

Public Instagram pages have the benefit of being generally accessible and generated in

real time. Because these profiles exist as public archives and because these Instagrammers will

be referred to with pseudonyms,[218] I refrained from making contact with the Instagrammers

behind the selected Instagram pages. Additionally, because the purpose of this study was to

observe the Instagrammers' performance without potentially provoking these individuals to alter

their behavior in order to cater to my observation, I decided to choose against notifying these

Instagrammers of my more formal spectatorship. Additionally, while this research focuses on

representations of Black genderqueer people, this study is less about engaging with these specific

Black genderqueer people and more about analyzing the content that they have produced. In this

regard, this project is not concerned with human subjects themselves, but the way that these

human subjects are positioned in the posts on their Instagram page.

The present study performs an in-depth description of the diurnal posts of three Black

genderqueer Instagram profiles. Using the anthropological explanatory method known as "thick

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[218]The pseudonym Instagram handles listed are not the actual Instagram handles of the Instagrammers invoked throughout this study. The Instagram handle pseudonyms used in this research are comprised of self referential phrases used by the Instagrammers themselves. For example, one Instagrammer has a post captioned, "I see your girl all the time, I can't tell whether she's yours or mine. Call me Mr. Take Yo Girl." When conceiving a pseudonym Instagram handle for this user, I considered the name "mr.takeyogirl."

description,"[219] this study explains not only the behavior or display in question, but also the

context in which it appears to occur and the qualitative researcher's interpretations of it.

Expounding upon the process of knowledge production incited by image dissemination, In

Practices of Looking (2001) Marita Sturken stresses, "meaning does not reside within images,

but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulate among viewers."[220] In

other words, viewers and audiences make meaning of visual images, and at this interface "visual

analysis may be employed to interrogate elements of discourse, institutional power, and

categorization."[221] Because this study was intentional about refraining from making contact with

human subjects, using a "thick description" procedural method, I took note of indexed gestures

which could help me to contextualize data based on a historical, political, and cultural

understanding of the subject, in conjunction with my own political orientation and interests as a

viewer.[222]

Ultimately, this project revolved around the styles of queer exhibition among Black

gender dissidents who use text and/or visual media to perform and index what appear to be

moments of pleasure, and in this way, its procedures relied upon user generated content, which

documented moments of pleasure, as data. This data was collected by looking at Black

genderqueer Instagram users' pages, taking notes which detailed a description of the perversity

performed on their page, and then performing a graphical media analysis. When observing the

selected Instagram posts, I made note of the photo tags, media tone, photo content, captions,

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[219]Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 87.
[220]Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, New York: Oxford University Threat, p. 7.
[221]Sturken, *Practices of Looking,* p. 7.
[222]Katie Nelson, "Selected Perspectives: an Open Introduction to Cultural Anthropology," Chapter 2 – Doing Fieldwork: Methods in Cultural Anthropology | Selected Perspectives: an Open Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. Accessed October 10, 2019. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-esc-culturalanthropology/chapter/fieldwork/.

patterns and themes displayed across posts, and specific picture components in need of extended analysis. Besides the larger theme of pleasure, themes such as queer imagining and queer utopianism were also coded for.

After gathering this data, I drew from the qualitative visual analysis of performance scholar and queer theorist, Juana María Rodríguez, to inform my process for content examination. Contextualizing her visual analysis of queer exhibition and latina gesture, Rodríguez asserts,

> Gesture emphasizes how a cascade of everyday actions is capable of altering political life. [...] Gesture—like law, and indeed like gender and race—is regulatory, citational, and iterative, always dependent on previous codes of signification in order to generate and discipline meaning [...] To gesture, then, is to embody one's intention, and may entail assuming a certain open-ended responsibility for what one carries.[223]

It is the "open-ended[ness]" that Black genderqueer Instagrammer's indices carry that the present research concerns itself with. As I interpreted the various gestures contained in the selected Instagram posts, I did so with the understanding that the exhibition of Black genderqueer people engaging in pleasure on Instagram, harbor, recalibrate, and generate cultural meaning.

3.6   Data Analysis

Because much of my research interrogates the values that inform Black genderqueer people's conception of pleasure and performance of pleasure on Instagram, data was analyzed using Value Coding. On page 89, Saldana defines Value Coding as "an application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspective or worldview."[224] Specifically, Saldana defines value as "the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, thing, or idea," and attitude as "the way we think and feel about oneself, another person, thing, or idea," and a belief as "part of a system that includes our values

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[223]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 4, 5, 7.
[224]Saldana, "The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers," p. 119.

and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world."[225]

The questions driving an engagement with the selected Instagram pages center the thematic elements of pleasure and utopian hermeneutics. By homing in on pleasure, I underscore Black genderqueer people's performance on Instagram as an entry point into a "site of knowledge production and energy, which is alternative to regimes of state and received culture."[226] The Instagram pages in this study were selected because they displayed a patterned documentation of pleasure, and therefore, coding these posts for their interpretive perceptions of the social world allows for the exploration of how pleasure has been indexed by these Instagrammers to connote value.

By employing Value Coding, I was able to excavate a specific "perspective" offered by the Instagram pages of three Black Genderqueer people. As Saldana contends, values, beliefs, and perspectives have been impacted by social and cultural networks and have had an influence on an individual's behaviors, gestures, and decisions. Hence, one's beliefs, values, and attitudes have a significant influence on the moments one chooses to document and post onto Instagram. Drawing from Saldana's analysis, coding for value allowed me to examine the ways in which the selected Instagram posts comment upon or critique a worldview. According to Saldana, second cycle coding allows for the "categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes,"[227] so for my second cycle coding method, I chose pattern coding to illuminate broader trends, themes, and concepts.[228]

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[225]Ibid.
[226]Lane, "Bringing Flesh to Theory," p. 635.
[227]Saldana, "The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers," p. 149.
[228] Ibid.

3.7   Reliability and Validity

In order to increase validity, a person who was not involved in the study observed the original posts collected, and the results found, and judged whether the interpretations were reasonable. This was also accomplished to identify any missing gaps that could be addressed.[229]

3.8   Limitations

While this research aimed for reliability, a qualitative analysis of social media, especially without explicit conversation with the human subjects involved, is an inherently messy endeavor. There is no objective perspective. Reflexivity is a fundamental component of contemporary qualitative research,[230] and as argued by Saldana, each researcher brings to their research a specific positionality that is based upon complex cultural and historical interplay. Within my observation practice, my identity and positionality undoubtedly influenced what I noticed, overlooked, or deemed worthy of analysis. Even so, I believe this "limitation" has instructive potential.

While acknowledging that researchers who superimpose their beliefs upon their subjects act in accordance with patriarchal domination, "Bringing Flesh to Theory: Ethnography, Black Queer Theory, and Studying Black Sexualities (2019)" by Nikki Lane, and *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba* (2011) by Jafari S. Allen, make the case that researchers who integrate their project with their personal ideology are not inherently problematic, and that leaning into subjectivity as a qualitative researcher can be a valuable research method. While conventionally the qualitative researcher "is thought to hold it as her principal duty to position informants as experts and herself the novice, careful not to presuppose a particular set of shared

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[229]This approach was derived from: Hassan, Ololade S., "#Melanin: How Have Dark-skinned Black Women Engaged In Social Media Hashtags To Affirm, Validate and Celebrate Their Beauty?." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2018.
[230]Lane, "Bringing Flesh to Theory," p. 638.

understandings about the way things are or, potentially, how she believes things should be,"[231] within Allen's work, his beliefs, experiences, and what is familiar to him as well as what is familiar in other parts of the African Diaspora are offered in conversation with the data he collects. On page 638 Lane reflects,

> From these moments we are able to witness Allen's individual subjective experience rubbing up against the various scenes of erotic self-making in Cuba: these moments themselves taking place within the larger context of African Diasporic experience. What some would argue is a limitation in his application of [qualitative research]— his reliance on his own subjective experience — lends the application of the method greater strength for the study of Black sexuality. In not only giving voice to those moments of recognition, moments where his Black American middle-class male body recognized something familiar, he foregrounds the ways that his own flesh experienced the erotic subjectivities of others.[232]

In a similar vein, when I looked to the posts of Black genderqueer Instagram users, as a Black genderqueer person who has indexed pleasure on Instagram, I considered my subjective experiences, perspectives, and attitudes, as contiguous to the ones I observed. Rather than strive for rigid objectivity – an expectation inextricably tied to hierarchical standards for knowledge production – I apply this method to make space for messy convergence and rupture. I believe my integration of, and reliance upon, my subjective experiences as a Black genderqueer person who is studying Black genderqueer people, as Lane suggests, lend the application of these methods greater strength for the study of value production and emphasize a wider scope of Black genderqueer subjectivity. While there is a possibility that this positionality could color the content I observe, and while some may argue that, for this reason, such a telos should be avoided, this project understands this possibility and chooses such a method to prioritize foregrounding Black genderqueer people as critical interlocutors in the production of alternative ethics.

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[231]Ibid.
[232]Ibid.

4   ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

4.1   Textual Analysis: Naomi

To begin our exploration of Instagram as a tool for revelation and reimagining, this study will center Black genderqueer barista and self proclaimed "butch bottom" renamed here as "Naomi"[233] (they/them). On their Instagram page, Naomi's body is absent in their profile picture, their avatar contains no specific subject of exhibition; it is blank and white. Describing the content on their profile is the bio, "my favorite things." Below their avatar, the posts comprising Naomi's page starkly contrast the emptiness of their profile picture. Their bio is Naomi's profile is crammed with color. The posts immediately observable on their profile display, not only their own face and body, but most often, the bodily comportment of family and friends. these posts contain short captions or no captions at all.

Naomi's Instagram is a litany of seemingly discordant visuals. In one post, Naomi showcases a friend, "nude4[satan's,]" text to them, which ponders: "is eating ass keto?" In another, Naomi is featured sitting on a bed with their father next to them; he is holding their foot in the way a mother might cradle her newborn baby. In his hands are a pair of tweezers and the picture is captioned, "my father getting a splinter out my foot." Throughout Naomi's Instagram, images like this one are typical. In the midst of photos that exhibit Naomi in drunken debauchery, food gorging, and partial nudity is a consistent documentation of familial genealogy – biological and otherwise. In one picture, their father poses behind a birthday cake, his face beaming, in others, Naomi and their aunt sit sipping wine, and in another, Naomi poses in between both parents with the caption "I'm their little bull dyke."

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[233]Pseudonym Instagram handle: @diasspora

On Naomi's page, there is no bifurcating the sexually somatic and platonically sentimental. Perverse and erotic imagery continually ensconce their pictures of familial intimacy. In one photo, Naomi is shown licking the tongue of a partner, their neck chained to her's as they kiss. More pictures depict Naomi gripping a partner's genitals, grabbing her ass, and choking her sensually. Along this timeline a wide spectrum of Naomi's androgyny is displayed as they occasionally oscillate from hard butch to soft stud in lip gloss or a bikini.

One cannot fully surmise how Naomi's nuclear family feels about their performances of self, but intermittent picture captions remind their followers that most of the family members showcased are blocked from viewing their Instagram, implicating some level of disjuncture. Throughout their Instagram, visual media also periodically sheds light on Naomi's familial difficulties. One such post is a screenshot from a conversation between Naomi and their mother. In a grey bubble, Naomi's mother texts, "Wowww, I am absolutely amazed at your lifestyle." Responding to the screenshot, a follower of Naomi comments "omg, your mom is so sweet, I'm jealous!" and Naomi responds to their follower by clarifying, "don't be jealous, she's saying this with the utmost disrespect [sad emoji face.]" In these cases, Naomi makes it clear that their family is "amazed" at their life choices… And not in a good way. Even so, in the midst of conversation with their family like these, Naomi has remained intractable in their depiction of a lifestyle outside the bounds of a respectable subsistence. As a visibly trans Black person who must, on some level, converse with the visual economies of sexual inversion and abjection, Naomi's subjectivity as depicted on Instagram toys with the "perversity" ascribed to those who do not fit into chaste humanity.[234]

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[234]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 323.

When situated within the contours of the current LGBTQ movement lead by homonormative interests that push for recuperating the perverse perception of queer people, Naomi's Instagram is subversively prurient. In *Queer Gestures, Sexual Futures, and other Latina Longings (Sexual Cultures),* Juana Maria Rodriguez expounds upon a necessity for such insurgency as she recounts the ways in which the state attempts to violently cordon off queer perversity from "the family." Describing an instance at Queer Pride where the parading "queer perverts" were barred from entering a playground reserved only for queer families with children, Rodriguez reminds us that "[t]oday the political Right deploys a rhetoric of perverse sexuality to silence, censure, and criminalize sexualized and racialized subjects, and the mainstream gay and lesbian movement responds by disavowing these same subjects and projecting an image of hypernormative domesticity worthy of political respect, validation, and humanity."

Here, Rodriguez harkens to mainstream LGBTQ media campaigns that sought to sanitize queerness in order to present an image of normative "[human]" citizen subjects deserving of same-sex marriage rights.[235] While same sex marriage is now legal across America, in a Trumpian political regime where progressive policies are continuously contested, the political machinations Rodriguez describes still ring true. In this context, the intermingling of cosmopolitan homonormative families and scantily clad and flamboyant queers can be understood as threatening the legibility of neoliberal queer people who strive to be read as normative human citizen subjects worthy of rights afforded to some (and not all) queer people.[236]

Naomi's rendering of their life experiences challenges the construct of "normalcy" and even "the human" as categories worth entering. If their androgyny and brazen lewdness come off

[235]Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures,* p. 9.
[236]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* p. 453.

as tautological to the hypersexuality and abjection already ascribed to queerness and Blackness, Naomi basks in this possibility by flaunting such clichés like precious jewels. Here, I do not valorize Naomi's "impropriety" and ambiguity at the expense of their Black and queer counterparts who wish to make themselves intelligible. Queer and trans people are continuously subject to violence and death for either refusing or being unable to perform a naturalized and "respectable" projection of gender; it is understandable that so often queer and trans people must announce their humanity in the form of legibility in order to be treated as human. Still, we can hold space for an impetus to move from thingified to humanized, even as we support the less legible ways that Black genderqueer people like Naomi articulate themselves.

On Naomi's Instagram, far from seeking admission to an exclusive club of righteous and heterosexual humans, they wear a chain around their neck which fetters them to an act of queer carnality. If we look closely at Naomi's neck, we can see small scrapes and welts raised around the tight metal dog collar, but rather than shy away from this gore, Naomi flaunts their wounding, ontological desire. Depicting themself in a dog chain and licking the face of their partner in apposition to pictures of their family members (some of them children), announces Naomi's sexual performance as family friendly queer interplay.

Wearing a chain akin to a dog's leash in a photo that sits in between pictures of unperturbed parental figures, Naomi embraces their implicit exclusion from a naturalized corporeality and turns an exhibition of perverse inhumanity into an unremarkable and quotidian gesture of pleasure. Here, queer sexual precocity and familial kinship, rather than bifurcate, overlap in referentiality; both allude to a future where the full complexity of queer Black people is smiled upon. What is more, the brash Black "butch bottom" who wraps their fingers around the throat of their partner as she grins for the camera is shown as the same "little bull dyke" who

needs their father's strong and gentle fingers to remove a small prick from their foot. On their

profile, Naomi converses with a future replete with familial acceptance and care that is

inextricable from sexual and somatic freedom. Even if they must presently block their family

members from engaging with their images, Naomi imagines another world where their nuclear

family stand as beaming spectators.

In Naomi's utopia, they never have to reign themselves in; their body, gender, sexuality,

and excess are beautifully fleshy and exorbitant. In imagining a future that is not yet here, where

they are allowed to flaunt their full complexity in the safe embrace of family, friends, and the

public, Naomi helps to illuminate the limitations of our present.

In "Queerness as Horizon," José Esteban Muñoz argues that "the field of utopian

possibility is one in which multiple forms of belongings in difference adhere to a belonging in

collectivity."[237] Although they may not explicitly acknowledge it on their Instagram, centuries

of displacement, slavery, and systemic violence commune with Naomi's consciousness and insist

that Black people have no future outside of the here and now. This auto-naturalizing temporality

referred to by Muñoz as "straight time," insists that Blackness and queerness are merely

consequences of modernity. Straight time would have us believe that the relegation of Blackness

to a labor imperative or ideas of danger, abjection, and perversity are permanently recursive.[238]

Refusing to adhere to an oppressive present, within their virtual reality, Naomi shifts the

modalities of time to manifest a future that has not yet arrived.[239] Muñoz argues that "[t]o see

queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal

stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of." [240] Stepping out of

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[237]Ibid.
[238]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 454.
[239]Ibid.
[240]Ibid, p. 461.

Black genderqueer people's current scape, Naomi's Instagram demonstrates the potential of

queerness to facilitate a "belonging in collectivity" and a unity that doesn't require coherence,

binaries, strict self regulation, or shame. Using Instagram as a staircase up and out from the

private sphere to which alterity has usually been confined[241] and parading their perverse

pleasures with their parents' blessing, Naomi's utopia speaks to a queer dynamism that is not

quite here,[242] but could be.

4.2 Textual Analysis: Cotton Roach

In their essay, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of

Docile Patriots" (2002), Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai highlight the nexus between the symbolic

representation of "the monster" and the political imaginary of the queer of color. Invoking

Foucault's assertion that with the development of modernity, the racial and sexual monster

"bring together the monstrous individual and the sexual deviant,"[243] Puar and Rai probe at the

ways in which the visual construction of the American citizen employs "the older technologies of

heteronormativity, white supremacy and nationalism."[244] This subchapter takes its departure

point from the aforementioned synthesis, and in this regard, understands Black queer

corporeality as coextensive with humanity, linear temporality, and morality. In other words, the

concepts of humanity, progressive time, and morality are all constituted through an exposure to

the figure of the Black queer which signals their negation.[245] Within this context, on the

Instagram profile of the Black transfeminine and genderqueer DJ, Cotton Roach (they/them),

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[241]JAKOBSEN, *Love the Sin,* p. 33.
[242]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 454.
[243]Michel Foucault, Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni, and Arnold I. Davidson. 2004, *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. New York: Picador, p. 60.
[244]Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117.
[245]Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," e-flux journal #79, Feb. 2017.

who publicly exhibits a "perverse" expression of queer behavior, I find an implicit, yet trenchant critique of this notion of sexual abnormality through a revivification of inhumanity.

In his canonical lecture, "Society Must Be Defended," Foucault argues that the formation of the nation is achieved through biopower, a project where human value is made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, and state-sanctioned protection and exclusion.[246] In their essay, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag," Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S Rai build upon this analysis by naming "sexually active gay men being banned from donating blood" as a prominent factor that currently constitutes the heteronormative character of American nationalism.[247] According to Puar and Rai, this exclusion is made possible through the regulatory construct of "monstrosity," a biopolitical technology that "imbricates not only sexuality, but also questions of culture and race."[248] Within this process of exclusion, the pervasive mode of trying to psychologize racial and sexual "monsters" or "abnormals" is by "positing a kind of failed heterosexuality" and sexual perversity.[249] In other words, the "monsters [of society] who must be quarantined" are those "whose psyches offend the norms of the properly feminine and masculine" and who exist outside of the nostalgic family values covenant of contemporary American politics.[250] The ban on gay men from blood donation – which Puar and Rai neglect to mention often extends to transfeminine people[251] – is situated within these contours. Through the notion of blood

[246]Foucault, Michel, Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni, and Arnold I. Davidson, 2004. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College De France: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. New York: Picador, p. 253.
[247]Puar, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag," p. 125.
[248]Ibid, p. 119.
[249]Ibid, p. 117.
[250]Ibid. p. 135.
[251]Nico Lang, "FDA's Blood Donation Rules Out Trans People," *The Daily Beast*, (2017).
The FDA's official policy bans men who have had sex with other men (within the span of 12 months) from donating blood. This policy also prohibit sex workers from blood donation. The FDA doesn't explicitly state that transfeminine people cannot donate blood, they defer this authority to blood establishments which are often reported as treating transfeminine people as MSMs.

contamination, the perversity of the queer subject is biologized, and the "sexual monster" can be justifiably excluded and "quarantined" from the upright American citizen.

Throughout the Instagram profile of Cotton Roach, who openly documents an engagement with stigmatized pleasures, I observe a pattern of posting which retools this visual economy to find life in the midst of social death. I find that many of the posts produced by Cotton Roach emphasize an understanding of Black queerness and inhumanity as thoroughly imbricated, and rather than subtend it, these posts work to critique the dominant repressive order. Homing in on Cotton Roach's Instagram profile, I argue that by calling upon the dominant visual economy of perverse queerness, Cotton Roach's posts can be used to highlight the potential for reappropriating "monstrosity" to contravene the dominant repressive regime.[252] Presently, I turn to Instagram as a salient site for analysis specifically because it exists as a public platform where Black queer people may exhibit acts of "failed heterosexuality" and "perversity" which have historically been confined to the private.

Knowing the system of stratification on which a system is predicated is vital; it is essential to make visible, and thus available for reimagining, the normally invisible construction of monstrosity.[253] In this way, Foucault's analysis of the sexual monster in his 1975 lecture at College de France, "Abnormal," is especially pertinent to this research's engagement with queer perversity and social death. According to Foucault, within society, there exists the monster, the individual to be corrected, and the masturbating child – all of which cohere in the nineteenth century to give rise to the domain of abnormality.[254] Throughout his analysis of these three

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[252]Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 383.

[253]It is worth noting here that while the construction of monstrosity is largely invisible, the symbol of the monster may be understood as hypervisible.

[254]Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 55.

figures, Foucault describes "the monster" as a "fundamental figure around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized"[255] – it is the baseline for "the transgression of natural limits."[256] Here, normalizing technologies depend upon the image repertoire of the monster as a standard for "abnormality" and excess. In other words, the individual to be corrected, or the citizen subject to processes of normalization which inscribe any "transgression" to a system of correction, depends upon the visual economy of the monster to determine the "irregularity" in need of fixing.

Historically, one figure of "the monster" has taken the form of Black flesh. Highlighting the notion of the sexual monster as undergirded by Blackness in, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000), Siobhan Somerville maps the shift in medical modalities of sexual deviance from a notion of gender inversion and sexual inversion, explained as a reversal of one's gender and sex role, to a model of homosexuality, defined as "deviant sexual object choice."[257] According to Somerville, "these categories and their transformations reflected concurrent shifts in the cultural organization of sex and gender roles and participated in prescribing acceptable behavior, especially within a context of white middle-class gender ideologies."[258] Here, it is important to note that the emergence of these categories and the deployment of "white middle-class" ideals of normalcy occur within the writings of physicians, sexologists, and psychiatrists, who use comparative anatomy to locate race as an "explicit, though ambiguous, structural element" of inversion.[259] Somerville specifically notes that attempts to establish gender inversion and sexual inversion "rested to no little extent on the

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[255]Ibid. p. 56.
[256] Ibid.

[257]Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 16.

[258]Ibid.
[259]Ibid.

sexual difference of the black."[260] In this regard, expert literature conceptualized both normalcy,

gender, and sexuality through a deployment of Black as pathology, and in this way, Black-as-

invert undergirds Foucault's description of the sexual monster.

Somerville implicitly builds upon Foucault's analysis to emphasize the queer deviance

ascribed to the Black body as biologized. Within our present biopolitical-necropolitical

continuum, the imputation of racialized queerness as an inescapable condition of hierarchical

difference or "[inversion]" is the precondition for necropolitics. Elaborating upon this premise,

Foucault, reflects,

> In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable.
> [...] When I say "killing" I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every
> form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of
> death for some people, or, quite simply put, political death, expulsion, rejection and so
> on. [...] Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the
> murderous function of the State.[261]

By highlighting the ways in which race, or biologized difference, becomes instructive for

determining who gets deemed worthy of state protection and who gets systematically neglected,

Foucault argues that categorization and racialization make legible to the state specific

communities to "[expose] to death." In other words, Foucault makes the case that racism justifies

the "death function," and in this regard, the figure of the monster becomes inextricable from the

specter of social death.

To highlight the capacity for finding life in social death, this study centers the Instagram

profile of the Black tranfemme and genderqueer DJ, Cotton Roach (they/them). Cotton Roach is

a prominent figure in New York City's queer underground rave scene. On their Instagram

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[260]Ibid, 25.

[261] Foucault, Michel, Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni, and Arnold I. Davidson. 2004. *Society Must be
Defended: Lectures at the College De France: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. New York: Picador,
256.

profile, Cotton Roach describes themself as a New York City interdisciplinary performance artist who seeks to embody themes of Black power, "queerness, transience, and fluidity."[262] By positioning their exhibition of self within the themes of Black power, "queerness, transience, and fluidity," Cotton Roach renders their depiction of self political.

The stage name and Instagram handle, Cotton Roach, feels pregnant with meaning. Chosen by an artist who is Black American and genderqueer, the name "Cotton" feels conversant with chattel slavery, and "Roach," with imagery interpolating queer desire as a dangerous contagion within the context of the AIDs epidemic.[263] Additionally, in its abstracted form, the term "roach" finds contemporary use as a slur against darker skinned Black people and has also been used to label Black people navigating abject urban poverty,[264] phenomenons which shed light upon the imbrication of Blackness, pathology, and inhumanity. As a stage name evocative of such profound histories, "Cotton Roach" feels worthy of careful consideration.

Cotton Roach takes the latter part of their name from one of the world's most notoriously hated insects. Traditionally, roaches are most infamous for being almost impossible to kill – they are known for their endurance – and for harboring disease due to eating almost anything, including human excrement such as blood.[265] Because of their reputation as infectious, for the health of humanity, killing roaches is often propagated as a necessary evil.[266] As a Black transfeminine person who dons the label "Roach," Cotton Roach exemplifies the rhetoric used to caution against contaminated vermin as imbricated with the sign system of the racial and sexual "monster" predisposed for necropolitics. In a similar vein, when Puar and Amit name "sexually

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[262]As of December 3rd, 2019, https://atlantacontemporary.org/people/cotton-roach.
[263]Sebastian Haus, "Risky Sex – Risky Language. HIV/AIDS in the 1980s," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 41, no. 1 (155) (2016): 111-34.
[264]John Nickel, "Racial Degeneration and 'The Hairy Ape,'" p. 33-40.
[265]Melvin H. Goodwin, "Cockroaches as Vectors," *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 73, no. 11 (1958): 997.
[266] Ibid.

active gay men being banned from donating blood" as an act of American nationalism, they also allude to American nationalism as participating in a project of biopolitics where the Cotton "[Roaches]" of society are deployed as contaminated and predisposed for death. By embracing the name "Roach," however, Cotton Roach performs a critical intervention, highlighting the positive potential of imposed inhumanity. While they may label themself after an insect culturally deployed as harboring the "preconditions which make killing acceptable," by specifically choosing to invoke the visual economy of the "roach," they also call upon an image repertoire where loathsome inhumanity converges with an idea of resilience.

The Instagram handle and stage name Cotton Roach feels deeply conversant with the musings of transtheorist, Kendall Thomas, who asks in his Afterword, "Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" (2006), "what might it mean for trans activists and their allies to mobilize around a vision of transgender, or better, "transhuman" [...] that affirmatively align itself with, rather than against, the idea of the *in*human?"[267] Invoking Foucault's assertion that the sexual deviant gets trafficked as a "monster" and conscripted to social death,[268] Thomas's essay highlights the nexus between transgender existence, which crosses over socially demarcated gender boundaries in ways that probe at the constructed barriers of human ontology and the potential for harnessing the idea of the inhuman as a positive force.[269] Similarly, by using a name which invokes both an image of inhumanity as well as tenacity, "Cotton Roach" alludes to the inhuman as harboring aspirational qualities. Here, Cotton Roach can be understood as demonstrating the capacity for Black genderqueer people to generatively align themselves with the inhuman, rather than shun it. Where Somerville names whiteness as a dominant social code

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[267]Thomas, "Afterword: Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" p. 312-313.
[268] Foucault, *Abnormal,* p. 60.
[269]Thomas, "Are Transgender Rights *In*human Rights?" p.319, p. 314.

which territorializes normative human gender, exhibited in Cotton Roach's Instagram posts, we also see a Black and queer reappropriation of inhumanity that pushes up against this social ordering to highlight Black and genderqueer map making. This map making turns to inhumanity specifically because of the ways in which black queerness is conscripted to contamination and monstrosity.

Cotton Roach's profile picture is comprised of a close snapshot of two dark brown eyes and below, their bio advertises their DJ booking website. Their profile page is neatly divided between pictures of themself, pictures of themself surrounded by friends, and pictures chronicling queer parties. As of 2019, the bulk of Cotton Roach's Instagram profile is comprised of posts which document and advertise perverse queer parties. Throughout Cotton Roach's profile are a steady stream of flyers advertising salacious "underground queer rave[s]" with names like "Orifice," "Otherworld" and "Simulation Crash." One NYC warehouse party dubbed, "the Blood Rave," is advertised on a flyer in the shape of a hospital blood bag. On the flyer, underneath the stage name for the party's DJ, "Cotton Roach," is the caption "I'm tagging the location for this as The Museum of Sex, not cuz it's there, but so yall know whatsup :P ". In the three posts with pictures taken at the Blood Rave,[270] are a series of pictures exhibiting Cotton Roach and a group of queer friends[271] passing each other blunts, drinking, kissing, laughing, licking each other's sweaty faces, biting each other's lips and necks, and straddling each other playfully on the floor of a large red venue. Under two of these photo series read the captions: "look at these angels" and "once you go Black you never go back."

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[270]These pictures were presumably taken at the Blood Rave because they were uploaded the day after the listed even date and tagged "Blood Rave."

[271]I came to understand Cotton Roach's friends as queer because Cotton Roach tagged the profiles of the friends depicted within these photo series. In their friends' bios they state identification with the label "queer."

Cotton Roach's pictures from the Blood Rave celebrate a night of perversity by revehicalizing the cultural demarcations of queer blood. The queer party's name, "Blood Rave," coupled with Cotton Roach's posts which exhibit saliva swapping, drug sharing, and imply sex – "I'm tagging the location for this as The Museum of Sex, not cuz it's there, but so yall know whatsup" – delight in the tabboo status of queer desire whilst also invoking the semiotic arrangements of queer Black flesh. The flyer image of a deep carmine blood bag, along with Cotton Roach's posts depicting Black queer youth drunkenly straddling, biting, and licking one another, are deeply evocative of 1990s poster campaigns from the AIDS epidemic, which displayed slogans like, "Don't let Death Begin Its Countdown!", in apposition to cartoonized bags for blood transfusions, and warned against the potential dangers of blood transfers, unprotected queer sex, and people with alcohol or drug dependency as more likely than the general population to contract HIV.[272] I list such campaigns, not to disparage studies which seek to promote HIV intervention in vulnerable communities, but to highlight the popular correlation and seeming causality between queerness, pleasure, and calamity. In campaigns such as these, which publicize the dangers of contaminated blood transfers and unprotected queer sex, the queer body doubles as the potential corpse.

Pushing against the dominant symbolic order where Black queerness gets deployed as fatal, by documenting the festivities of the Blood Rave, Cotton Roach's posts rework the dominant understanding of queer perversity and contaminated blood to connote a form of celebration. Within their posts which document the Blood Rave, queer perversity appears to give life rather than subtract it. While engaging in the swapping of fluids, sharing drugs, and gestures

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[272]Sebastian Haus, "Risky Sex – Risky Language. HIV/AIDS in the 1980s," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 41, no. 1 (155) (2016): 111-34.

of prurience, Cotton Roach's Instagram pictures portray themself, along with the queer party

goers they exhibit, as beaming at the camera in a gesture of contentment.

The "Blood Rave," the stage name "Cotton Roach," and the queer debauchery Cotton

Roach depicts as constituting the party, are all haunted by the specter of monstrosity. In their

depiction of Black genderqueer people who revel in perversity, Cotton Roach's Instagram posts

specifically invoke images of the AIDS epidemic, its proliferation of death in queer

communities, and even now, the higher rates of HIV contraction among Black people.[273]

Because Cotton Roach's posts depict the Blood Rave as a predominantly Black party, the name

of the gathering is also embedded within the larger economies of racial "blood purity," chattel

slavery, and the "one-drop rule," a historically social and legal principle of racial classification

relegating anyone with even one drop of "tainted" African blood to the racial category of

"Black." [274]

This idea of racial impurity and inhumanity is critical to Foucault's description of racism

as "the precondition that makes killing acceptable." Specifically connecting a notion of "blood

purity" to race, Foucault describes a rhetoric of contamination as constituting the Nazis'

demands for racial "purity."[275] Within the context of the Holocaust, Foucault highlights the

scientizing of oppression through biological distinction as coextensive with an idea that society

needed protection from the biologized subalternality, or the "contaminated" blood, of the Jewish

"race." Here, it is important to note that within such logics of blood purity, genocide against

Jewish people wasn't sufficient to prevent against the potential contamination of the ideal and

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[273] "HIV and African Americans," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 12 Nov. 2019.
[274] Christine B Hickman, "The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census," *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (1997): 1161-265.
[275]Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, p. 254.

Aryan citizen; the Nazis may have sequestered Jewish people, but they also had to target homosexuals, disabled people, and other groups marked as deviating from Aryan idealism. In this regard, the quest for purification always gets increasingly more narrow; it is a continual process of aggregating deviants for the protection of society,[276] and thus, even within the context described by Foucault, the proliferation of life for those with "pure blood" becomes dependent, in some part, upon a biologized infrahumanity signaled by Blackness and queerness.

Cotton Roach's exhibition of queer desire within the context of blood purity invokes this function of the category "abnormal" to secure the right to life for a small subsection of the world's population.[277] In accordance with the process of purification Foucault describes in "Society Must be Defended," within the United States, the "right-to-life" movement, or the anti-abortion movement, has been constituted by what Somerville labels, "white middle-class gender ideologies," or by an organized attempt to protect the sanctity of "the traditional family."[278] In "Tracking the Vampire" (1997), Sue Ellen Case also ties the right to life discourse to a notion of blood purity, reflecting, "[the] right to life was formulated through a legal, literary, and scientistic discourse on blood, which stabilized privilege by affirming the right to life for those who could claim blood and further, pure blood, and the consequent death sentence, either metaphorically or literally for those who could not."[279] In this regard, as Black people who embrace queerness and prurience publicly, and are thus estranged from "the traditional family" imbricated with American nationalism, as well as a hegemonic understanding of "pure blood,"

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[276]Feminism and Foucault, (Class discussion), Georgia State University, Julia Kubala, 2019.

[277] Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 383

[278]Mary Jo Neitz, "Family, State, and God: Ideologies of the Right-to-Life Movement." *Sociological Analysis* 42, no. 3 (1981): 265-76.

[279]Case, "Tracking the Vampire", 385. Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire", *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 383.

Cotton Roach and their friends embrace a social positioning outside of normal "life" and humanity.

Communing with the dominant archives for Black and queer perversity, Cotton Roach's posts act as salient contrastive positions in a "war of representation." Rather than shy away from the specter of death haunting queer perversity, Cotton Roach's posts contravene a narrative of condemnation, and use the unnatural and taboo status of queer desire as a generative "life/death break."[280] Not only do the visuals ensconcing the Blood Rave reappropriate the sign system of Black and queer as fatally tainted, but they also illuminate the racialized heterosexism undergirding temporality. By depicting their community as enjoying life while simultaneously enagaging in queer perversity "destined to bring death," Cotton Roach's posts blur the fast line between the temporal categories of "living" and "dead."[281] In "Tracking the Vampire" (1991) Sue Ellen Case expounds upon queer desire as toying with ontology, arguing that,

> Life/death becomes the binary of the "natural" limits of Being: the organic is the natural. [...] The articulation of queer desire [...] breaks with the discourse that claims mimetically to represent that "natural" world, by subverting its tropes. Employing the subversive power of the unnatural to unseat the Platonic world view, the queer [...] revels in the discourse of the loathsome [and] the outcast.[282]

In their posts, Cotton Roach's exhibition retools imagery which has traditionally been used to dehumanize Black queer people. In this regard, "revel[ing] in the discourse of the loathsome [and] the outcast" who gets conscripted to death because of their unnatural perversity, Cotton Roach's posts work to contravene the "'natural' limits of Being."

By reappropriating in the imagery of "loathsome" contamination, Cotton Roach's posts from the Blood Rave attempt to retool the monstrosity ascribed to perverse queerness. If Cotton

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[280] Ibid., 388.
[281] Ibid., 388.
[282] Ibid, 382

Roach's perversity has conscripted them to "death," they are determined to create an even queerer afterlife. Defying the racialized and heterosexist notion of a "life/death" binary in their depiction of the Blood Rave, Cotton Roach's posts find life in death, dent time and space, and emphasize the potential for another world at the end of the world.

4.3   Textual Analysis: BadPutaFlaka

The present research, analyzing the profile of the Black genderqueer femme Instagrammer, BadPutaFlaka, can be read productively with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's theoretical exploration, "'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics." Throughout her essay, Jackson attends to Black feminist quantum metaphoricity in order to approach the "representational quagmire" and "sublimity" of "the black *mater*(nal)."[283] In order to contextualize her interrogation of the Black maternal, Jackson examines the theoretical interventions of Black feminists, like Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, whose work probes at the ontologizing function of the Black maternal. So as to illuminate the material significance of Spillers's and Wynter's intellectual intercession, Jackson critically engages Edmund Burke's and Immanuel Kant's racialized and gendered philosophical approaches to the sublime. Within her essay, Jackson engages Spillers, Burke, Kant, and Wynter to exemplify the ways that Blackness underlies our modern systems of meaning making. In this regard, before delving into an examination of BadPutaFlaka's Instagram, it is first necessary to briefly recapitulate Jackson's engagement with the racial(ized) analyses of these figures.

To establish the Black maternal as undergirding affectivity, relationality, and modern ordering, Jackson invokes Hortense Spillers's, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," which maintains that through slavery, the "profitable atomizing" of the captive

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[283]Ibid, 383.

body causes Blackness to lose a "relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features."[284] According to Spillers, "[t]he captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless."[285] Here, because the slave looses its "relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features" within slavery and its afterlives, womanhood and manhood become inaccessible to the Black body. In other words, Spillers contends that New World slavery establishes a lexical gap between Black flesh and the binary registers of Humanism.

Spillers's essay precipitates a view of gender as beholden to the scopic and political function of racial slavery, specifically, the image and function of the captive body. Underlying her work is the question: if the captive body elides classificatory schema, then what is it? For Spillers, because of slavery, the Black body is just this, an "it"; a thing, a site of "flesh,"[286] and a point of passage that moves through and outside of categorization. Jackson hones in on the concept of "the Black maternal" to explain the nexus between this idea of indeterminacy and the Black condition. Critically engaging the work of the Western philosopher Edmund Burke, who interprets the figure of the "negro woman" as an "opaque and irresolvable" symbol of "inverted sex-gender,"[287] Jackson argues that the Black maternal "regulates and confounds the organization of desire for orderly racial and gender difference as well as grounds, even as it unsettles the [...] aesthetic system's heteronormative teleology."[288] To put it another way, the

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[284]Spillers, "Mama's Baby," p. 60.
[285]Ibid.
[286]Ibid.
[287]Ibid, 53.
[288]Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 624.

Black maternal emblematizes the "captive body," "flesh," or a mode of relating based on the transmission of porousness and dispossession.

Throughout the Instagram profile of BadPutaFlaka, a Black genderqueer person who openly documents an engagement with "indeterminacy" and "[fleshiness,]" I see a pattern of perverse posting which highlights the condition of the Black maternal while simultaneously pointing to its generative capacity. Homing in on this expression of "errantry," I argue that by gesturing towards a surfeit of queer desire, BadPutaFlaka's posts can be used to highlight the fugitive potential of excess. Here, "errantry," or the state of wandering, can be understood in conjunction with Moten's theorizing of fugitivity. In "Stolen Life," Moten contends that fugitivity is "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument."[289] Moten's analysis of errantry is particularly apt for considering the generative potentiality of the Black maternal condition, which I argue, imbricates with BadPutaFlaka's exhibition of sexual precocity, substance use, and "unsettled [gender.]"

As a symbol of disordered gender, Jackson explains "the Black maternal" as a "superposition" or, "the state of occupying two distinct and seemingly contradictory genders simultaneously—a predicament that underwrites the separation of both 'masculine' and 'feminine' in Western ontological discourse and exposes the impossibility of consistently keeping them apart."[290] Here, Jackson engages with Spillers's conception of Blackness as a metaphor for that which troubles "distinction." In this regard, Jackson's assertion that Blackness

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[289]Fred Moten, *Stolen Life,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 131.

[290]Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 635.

troubles gender may be read in conjunction with Joan Scott's formulation of gender in *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, where, according to Scott, gender names "not the assignment of roles to physically different bodies, but the attribution of meaning to something that always eludes definition."[291] Throughout her text, Jackson engages gender and sexuality, not as categories which precede the Black maternal, but as biopolitical modes for social ordering and regulation which are predicated on Blackness's incompatibility with binary order. Here, rather than exclusively signaling a social identity, the Black maternal refers to the force which troubles the process of attributing "meaning to something that always eludes definition." In short, the Black maternal exceeds its connection with womanhood. It not only functions as a site in which the normative categories constituting humanity and subjectivity (i.e. "womanhood" or gender, sexuality, etc.,)[292] loose coherence, but more generally, destabilizes categorization itself.

If Blackness is a "symbol" of "inverted" and "incoherent" sex and gender, then, following Scott, Blackness is also a general metaphor for failure and incohesion which proper and stable categories depend upon for meaning. Affirming this notion, Jackson contends, "the negation of blackness is the foundation of ethics and politics, even of modern sociality itself; this negation overdetermines black practices as criminal, queer, nationally polluting, and pathological."[293] In other words, since racialization, the logic sustaining slavery has extended diachronically, undercoding modern politics of representation and meaning making, and the pathologization of Blackness, a state of being which symbolizes indeterminacy, can be considered inextricable from the valorization of legibility and order.

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[291]Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Durham and London: Duke Univresity Press, 2011, p. 06.
[292]Spillers, "Mama's Baby," p. 68.
[293] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson; Waking Nightmares—on David Marriott. *GLQ* 1 June 2011; 17 (2-3): 361..

Engaging this interpellation of Blackness alongside the philosophical text, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* by Immanuel Kant, Jackson explains that the inside of a black hole may serve as a metaphor for the Black maternal's opacity and illegibility.[294] Throughout his text, Kant argues that "the negro" is incapable of reflective judgement and has no capacity for "nobility" or "any feeling that rises above the trifling."[295] Problematizing Kant's attempt to ascertain the force of Blackness, Jackson explains that, like a black hole, the Black maternal "gesture[s] toward that which withdraws from direct empirical observation."[296] For Jackson, similarly to the Black maternal, "the existence of a black hole is not seen optically but [...] is inferred from its ability to distort."[297] Elaborating on this metaphor, Jackson quotes the Black feminist scholar, Evelynn Hammonds who writes:

> The observer outside of the [black] hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space.[298]

With Hammonds, Jackson determines that, if the Black maternal can be considered in terms of this "perceived void [...] dense and full in place in space," then there exists a need to further cultivate critical intervention to attend to that which "resists and exceeds representation."[299] The present study takes its departure point from such a charge. Shedding light on the perverse gestures exhibited by the Black genderqueer Instagrammer, BadPutaFlaka,[300] I labor to push against the modern representational violence predicated on the Black maternal.

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[294]Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 626-267.
[295]Ibid, p. 626.
[296]Ibid, p. p. 633.
[297]Ibid.
[298]Ibid.
[299]Ibid.
[300]This user's Instagram name has been included because it has since been updated. Searching for this user name will not bring up any material connected to this user's current or previous profile. See "Methods."

When the valorization of order and legibility depends upon the pathologization of Black illegibility, there need to be more attempts at interrogating the generative potential of the Black maternal. To conduct our examination of the Black maternal condition, this study centers the profile of the Instagrammer BadPutaFlaka, a Black, Latinx, and genderqueer Bronx native nicknamed here as "Puta" (they/them). By engaging the Instagram profile of BadPutaFlaka, I examine the extremities of cultural construction which reproduce this auto-naturalizing temporality.[301] Within this study, the errant expressions on the Instagram page of Puta evoke the ontological errantry central to Jackson's figuration of the Black maternal.

Before even looking at their profile, the Instagram handle "BadPutaFlaka," or, "Bad Skinny Slut," hints at the nature of their showcased content. Puta's profile picture displays them looking up at the camera and biting the tip of their thumb. Their bio reads, "feeling lucky? [followed by the emoji of a bright red kiss mark]." Puta's profile largely consists of self depiction comparable to this. Throughout their page, Puta catalogues a performance of partial nudity, partying, sexual lascivity, and substance use. In one hazy picture, Puta poses in a black thong leotard with pulled down pants. Below the image is the caption, "kiss my ass… AND my anus," casting added emphasis on the focal point of the image; their hairy posterior. Whereas some Instagrammers favor choreographed portraiture, blurry pictures like this one saturate Puta's profile. Another unfocused photo captioned: "I am the demon you see in the corner of ur room during sleep paralysis," shows Puta bending over a banister pole in a tight orange dress which precariously covers their bottom cleavage. In a similarly structured photo, Puta squats in a school girl skirt that doesn't quite cover their crotch. In another, a woman's tongue traces the hair from Puta's groin to their belly button.

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[301]Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 454.

Puta's page is an amalgamation of unruly comportment; when they aren't posing in the nude, then they're engaged in some other form of obscenity – petting the naked body of a friend, sucking the finger of an unnamed figure, and every now and then, bending over to flash their butt for the camera. It is impossible to scroll through Puta's profile without encountering gestures of vulgarity. Their post captioned, "pussy wetta than a seaquarium," where nudity, bodily comportment, and caption assemble a constellation of sublimity, concisely indicates Puta's customary content. Within this post, Puta is shown on a beach, posing topless on all fours, butt in the air, and fuzzy legs spread for the camera. Their mane is dark, thick, and curly – as is the hair that paints their legs, chest, armpits, and bottom. Notably, rather than depicting themself demurely, Puta indexes themself in a state of salacious motion.

I find that Puta's patterned performance of sexual desire evokes the superficiality ascribed to Black maternity while simultaneously calling attention to the question of legitimacy. Regarding the former, Kant's depiction of the negro as "an effect of discursivity,"[302] estranged from reason, judgement, and introspection, arises out of the concept of black femininity,[303] thereby expounding upon the Black maternal as occupying space occluded from the regnant modes of meaning making. Invoking Wynter, Jackson elaborates upon the figure of the Black maternal as taking up "foreclosed modes of being, feeling, and knowing," or in Wynter's words, as taking up "demonic grounds."[304] Explaining the significance of Wynter's phrase, Jackson notes, "within the logic of an antiblack imaginary, blackness functions [...] as a signifier of 'Ultimate Chaos' against which Man has been able to vertically institute and hegemonically

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[302]Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 627.
[303]Ultimately, Jackson argues that Kant's "Negro" is "a concept that arises out of the process of relating concepts to other concepts," which she connects to the positionality of the Black maternal (627).
[304] Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 619.

figure itself under the heroic sign of Order with attendant associations of Progress, Reason, and Beauty, concealing this sense of order's dependence on the abject figures constitutive to it and the systemic historical conditions of its emergence and renewal."[305]

Puta's performance refuses to disaggregate the negro from "foreclosed modes of being, feeling [and] knowing." Instead of performing gestures of "nobility," Puta's blurry picture shows them bending over in a bright orange dress, flashing their fuzzy legs at the camera and teasing a glimpse of their barely covered bottom. Additionally, Puta's captions make no attempt to connect their sexual proclivity to "noble" affect or positionality; Puta refuses to explain themself. Instead of trying to justify their behavior, Puta's picture caption, "I am the demon you see in the corner of ur room during sleep paralysis," shifts attention to the common sense of the normative gaze. In other words, Puta's post calls attention to the power dynamics at work in the act of seeing and being seen.[306] In their caption, which establishes that they are seen as a "demon," Puta renders the gaze which apprehends them as imbricated with the sententious "logic" of "the antiblack imaginary."

To take up hypersexuality, genderqueerness, and blurriness, even in a picture, is to take up "demonic grounds," or to converse with a fantasy of Blackness. While spectators may think that Puta's picture serves as a window into Puta's internal state, in actuality, they are looking at a projection or a blurry "[dream.]" In short, Puta's posts double as a transmutation of their spectators' perception. Instead of exposing what exists beyond the surface of their picture, Puta engages the lens through which they are viewed. While one may be tempted to characterize Puta's performance of perversity as vacuous, or, in the words of Kant, a failure "to rise above the trifling," Puta's posts simultaneously engage in sublime reflection. In posts like these, Puta not

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[305]Ibid. p. 618.
[306]This phrasing emerged from a conversation with Dr. Jade Petermon 2/25/2020.

only performs hypersexuality, but their captions shrewdly name the visual economy trafficked by their Blackness, sexual excess, and gender non conformity. Positioning their Black genderqueer body and sexual precocity in dialogue with "the demon," Puta invokes the words of Sylvia Wynter and emphasizes the Black maternal as taking up "foreclosed modes of being, feeling, and knowing."

In addition to reflecting upon the condition of the Black maternal, I find that Puta's profile performs a form of strategic excess and superficiality. The posts on Puta's page span from the year 2015 – half of a decade – and throughout this wide stretch of time, Puta is almost always chronicled in a state of intractable perversity. In this respect, Puta's self portrayal seems restricted to the surface, evading what one may be tempted to label a "true" or multifaceted expression of interiority. Puta's excessive vulgarity evokes a sense of exaggeration and superficiality – a lack of depth. While the word "superficial" is typically ascribed to signal vacuousness, by ascribing such a signifier to Puta's profile, I am attempting to trouble the oppositional positionality of superficiality and interiority. Rather than negate Puta's interiority, I interpret Puta's depiction of a static affective dimension to probe at the possibility that their self portrayal is strategically confined to the surface.

In "Surface Becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and Brown Jouissance," Amber Jamilla Musser writes about the problem of the modern surface as an issue of distinguishing what is "surplus" from what is "proper" to a thing.[307] Engaging the shiny surface of a large-format Polaroid photo, Musser argues that

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[307]Amber Jamilla Musser, "Surface-Becoming: Lyle Ashton Harris and Brown Jouissance," *Women & Performance* 28, no. 1 (March 2018): 34–45, p. 35.

surface offers the possibility of doubleness, troubling transparency and the idea of authenticity. In this way, surface complicates categorization because it confounds ideas of what knowledge is, where it lies, and how we can apprehend it.[308]

When scrolling through Puta's profile, one may feel moved to ask: what is this person *really* like? In this regard, Puta's excessive exhibition "offers the possibility of doubleness" that calls into question the credibility of immediate observation. Puta's engagement with "the surface," underscores its connection with transparency, troubling the Kantian association between Blackness and that which is immediately apprehensible. Within a normalizing order where violence is embedded in representation,[309] Puta's performance of duplicity can be taken as critically fugitive for the ways in which it, in the words of Jackson, "[gestures] towards that which withdraws from direct empirical observation."

In addition to nudity, substance use is a central theme of Puta's profile. In between pictures of Puta posing in jockstraps and see-through shirts, are photos which chronicle them guzzling bottles of beer, smoking unidentified substances, and partying with their friends. In one video, which casts them in alien green strobe light, Puta dances topless to electronic music, fist pumping on a crammed and sweaty dance floor. Another post with similarly unearthly light contains three pictures displaying Puta's body cast in a deep indigo aura. In the frame of the photos, impenetrable blackness encroaches upon the deep blue that permeates Puta's body.

The first photo of this sequence shows a blue colored Puta leaning towards an unseen light source with tightly closed eyes. In the last two pictures, with eyes still shut, the blue colored Puta gently strokes the skin of their cheek with the tips of their fingers. Puta's face looks serene. The ethereal brightness which engulfs them, their closed eyes and drifting hand, are all elements

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[308]Ibid.
[309]Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, ix.

that imply Puta is in a world intangible to their audience. Elaborating upon Puta's mental state, the photo series is captioned with the Kanye West song lyric, "I done died and lived again on DMT."[310] This caption, which references the use of the hallucinogenic tryptamine drug, DMT,[311] is not the first time Puta's profile invokes hallucinogenic drug use. In another post, Puta poses in the mirror, wearing a shirt that reads, "It's not Ketayours/ It's Ketamine," above the picture caption, "let go of your ego." While not explicitly referencing drug use, stylistically blurred pictures frequently pepper Puta's page, giving the visual scape of their profile a dream-like quality redolent of a Ketamine or DMT trip.

Puta's posts alluding to using Ketamine and DMT gesture towards the generative capacity of the Black maternal as well as the productive potential of perversity. On Instagram, the posts on Puta's profile are relational, and in this regard, Puta's allusion to drug use takes shape within a larger affective economy where hallucinogens are known to impel a state of sensory excess. That is to say, Puta's caption describing "[dying and living] again on DMT," as well as their pictures portraying an unearthly blue scene of serenity, can be situated within the geometries of "tripping" on DMT and Ketamine, where stable concepts of time, body, and self, are rendered incoherent.

Specifically, psychedelic drugs like Ketamine and DMT are understood to incite perceptual changes ranging from "increased brightness of colours," "heightened awareness," "depersonalisation," "disorganization of thought," and "poverty of speech."[312] Notably, one of the most frequently reported effects of Ketamine also includes a "warped" perception of time due

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[310]"Yikes," Lyrics, Rap Genius, Kanye West, 2018, https://genius.com/Kanye-west-yikes-lyrics
[311]E. Pomarol-Clotet, Honey, G. D., Murray, G. K., Corlett, P. R., Absalom, A. R., Lee, M., McKenna, P. J., Bullmore, E. T., & Fletcher, P. C. (2006), "Psychological effects of ketamine in healthy volunteers," Phenomenological study," *The British journal of psychiatry : the journal of mental science*, *189*, 173–179.
[312]Phenomenological study," *The British journal of psychiatry : the journal of mental science*, *189*, 173–179.

to acute NMDA blockage.[313] DMT offers a comparable experience. In numerous studies on the effects of the drug, DMT users report that tripping on DMT made them feel "detached from [their] body [and] sense of self" and that after a DMT trip, they "struggle to put into words exactly what [they] experienced."[314] Similarly, another DMT user discloses that when they tripped on DMT, "[they] no longer had any authority over words,"[315] and that "everything was rotating and swirling and spiraling [...] it didn't seem like there were normal space-time proportions going on."[316]

Responding to these trip interpretations, Robin Carhart-Harris, a designer for one of the leading psychedelic research groups, argues that DMT can be considered as "a drug model for the limbo state [between life and death.]" Similarly, Chris Timmermann, a psychologist and neuroscientist examining the effects of psychedelic drugs, speculates that during a DMT or Ketamine trip, one's "system is reaching such a high level of disorder that the psychological [effect is the perception of] dying." Echoing these sentiments, another DMT user reflects, "I felt a sense that perhaps death isn't the end – not that I'm religious."

Puta's posts referencing Ketamine and DMT feel deeply conversant with these accounts of tripping. Not only does the hazy blue of Puta's picture series evoke liminality, but their captions suggest that DMT has caused them to "[die]" and "live again," a sentiment strikingly similar to Carhart-Harris's description of DMT as "a drug model for the limbo state" between life and death.[317] Additionally, considering the depersonalization induced by Ketamine, where users reference feeling "detached from [their] body [and] sense of self," Puta's post referencing

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[313]Ibid.

[314] Ben Bryant, "A DMT Trip 'Feels like Dying' and Scientists Now Agree," *BBC,* September 14, 2018.

[315]Armando Veve, "How Does a Writer Put a Drug Trip Into Words," *New York Times* December, 24, 2018.

[316]Bryant "A DMT Trip 'Feels like Dying'" *BBC.*

[317]Bryant "A DMT Trip 'Feels like Dying'" *BBC.*

Ketamine with the caption "let go of your ego," seems to be gesturing toward the generative potential of this unsettled subject position. In a similar fashion, their caption "I done died and lived again on DMT," points towards the interstitiality and "disorder" impelled by DTM as giving life rather than permanently ending it.

By homing in on a depiction of "unsettled[ness]" or a refusal to arrive,[318] the invocations of drug use chronicled in Puta's profile labor to illuminate the condition of the Black maternal while also offering generative modes for offsetting the primacy of legibility. Throughout her essay, Jackson characterizes the Black maternal as a point of, "excess, "a lack of intelligibility" and ""a collecting pool for all that is imagined as excessive to the ideology of [...] aesthetic."[319] In this regard "indeterminacy" is a corollary to the condition of the "black maternal" and the significance of stable categories which undergird our dominant cultural logic depend upon the "unfencible excess" and "indeterminacy" of the blackened female.[320] Because of this, Puta's gestures towards this sense of incoherence, illegibility, and unsettledness can be understood to adduce the "unfencible excess" and "indeterminacy" of the Black maternal.

Puta's posts referencing Ketamine and DMT use invoke subjective instability, aesthetic excess, and suggest incompatibility with "normal" space and time, where language ceases to impute meaning. In this regard, Puta's posts disclosing "I done died and lived again on DMT" and urging "let go of your ego," prompt an examination of what it could mean to let normative subjectivity dissolve. In a world where the valorization of legibility is inextricable from the pathologization of Blackness, is it possible that the indescribable excess of DMT is what causes

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[318]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
[319] "Errantry," here, is derived from Moten's description of paraontology as errant movement (previously cited). Originally, "errantry" is Edouard Glissant's concept (see *Poetics of Relation*). Kara Keeling also deploys it in "Queer Times, Black Futures."
[320] Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void,'" p. 625.

Puta to die and live again? What could it mean to exist beyond the reach of language? By aligning the "unfencible excess" of a drug trip with new life, Puta not only calls into question what constitutes the "normal space time proportions" that drug use skews, but also questions the desirability of this normality. In other words, perhaps it is in this "break," this indeterminacy and opacity offered by the Black maternal, where one may find respite from the colonial violences of representation and order.

Pervading modernity is the relational structure of order established by New World slavery, where the Black maternal functions as "that without form." In "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers explains the extension of antebellum slave logic into the present when she suggests that Black femininity underwrites our modern "grammar" and symbolic order. According to Spillers, within slavery and its afterlives, "the captivating party does not only 'earn' the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and 'name' it." In other words, the anti-black violence of cultural construction can be seen, not only in the captivating party's right to "dispose of Black [bodies]," but in the system of language, ordering, and "[naming,]" which renders the Black slave body disposable. Describing this process of signification, post colonialist theorist, Julietta Sign, contends that within modernity, man's relation to the natural world is established through lexical dominion which operates through the capitalist cultural logic: "because I've named you I can consume you."[321] With this in mind, the lexical incommensurability mobilized by the Black maternal can be considered a potentially productive mode for fugitivity, as can the portrayals of drug use exhibited on Puta's Instagram page.

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[321]Julietta Singh, *Unthinking mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 12.

Centering the exhibition of drug use, deviant sexuality, and gender nonconformity on Puta's profile, I argue that Puta's posts highlight an excessive form of exhibition critically antithetical to the textual violence of representation. In this regard, Puta's posts may be examined as a form of knowledge production estranged from normative epistemologies of meaning making. Roderick Ferguson argues that "epistemology is an economy of information privileged and information excluded [under which] national formations rarely disclose what they have rejected."[322] Here, invoking Jackson's analysis on the homology of value and binary distinction under Humanism, Ferguson's engagement with the concept of epistemology emphasizes that boundaries function as repressive forms of imposed value.[323] Considering the brutality required for the scission between "privileged" and "rejected" forms of wisdom, it is urgent we look beyond the dismembering rubrics of dominant informatics. I say this, not to suggest that it is possible to circumvent dominance, but to highlight epistemological possibilities even in the midst of relational hierarchies. As critical prison scholar Stephen Dillon writes, "something takes flight and escapes even as capture is always imminent."[324] In accordance with this notion, I argue that Puta's profile may work not only as a site of queer perversity, but as a possible entry point into the political ontology of escape.

5   CONCLUSION

In this study, the profiles of three Black genderqueer Instagrammers made it possible to interrogate the various vectors which attempt to stifle queer desire. Examining the gestures circulated by these profiles, this research labored to illuminate perversity's productive potential.

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[322]Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, ix.
[323]See Best, Stephen Michael. 2018. *None like us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life*.
[324] Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State*, Duke University Press, 2018, p. 19.

By exploring this performance in the context of Instagram, this research emphasized emerging social technologies as infiltrating processes for Black genderqueer knowledge production. In this regard, the present study strove to emphasize the capacity for digital platforms like Instagram to expand the possibilities for reimagining Black social life. Ultimately the selected Instagrammers' posts not only challenged the cultural conventions which devalue Black queer desire, but by circulating on Instagram, a platform for affective exchange, they also invited viewers to imagine a life separate from such conventions.

Engaging the profiles of Black genderqueer people who performed perversity outlined the possibility for quotidian pleasure to converse with temporalities more hospitable than the present. While dominant epistemologies often predetermine queer pleasure as pathological, by employing Instagram to exhibit perversity, Black genderqueer Instagrammers demonstrated the potential for alternative signification. Performing on Instagram in ways that contest the dominant "danger" narrative shrouding pleasure, the profiles of Black genderqueer people labor to expand what we consider to be pleasure's capacity. Notably, while the gestures indexed on Instagram worked to reconfigure queer pleasure they also introduced alternative knowledge systems specifically aligned with Blackness and genderqueerness. In this regard, the profiles of the Instagrammers analyzed not only foregrounded pleasure as potentially generative modality, but also the positionality of Black genderqueerness.

Although the Instagram pages I examined engaged with similar forms of perversity (i.e. performing nudity, substance use, and sexual precocity for their viewers), each page offered a different portrayal of perverse engagement, thus enabling variegated reading practices. Naomi's profile assembled a symbiotic association between queer perversity and kinship, and by rendering these concepts complementary, their page called attention to civil society as dependent

upon their bisection. That is to say, their profile illuminated the scission inextricable from normative subjectivity while also imagining modes of subsistence free from segregation or restraint. Toward a similar end, the perversity depicted on the profile of Cotton Roach critiqued racialized heterosexism while also highlighting queer desire as making possible a generative departure from humanity. Finally, throughout Puta's profile, by gesturing towards the fugitivity made possible by perverse excess, their posts illuminated the generative capacity of the Black maternal. Within a battle of representation, where the health of society depends upon pathologizing Black queer desire, these interventions carry the weight of war. Pushing up against the dominant and hegemonic image repertoire for queer perversity, this study acts as an interlocuter between Black genderqueer production on Instagram and their critical gestures of fugitivity, disruption, and the transgression of normative ideals.

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