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BRINGING SEX TO THEORY: SENSATIONAL AFFINITY, PLEASURE AND SEXUAL
PEDAGOGY

by

ADREANNA NATTIEL

Under the Direction of Susan Talburt, PhD

ABSTRACT

This project is about theorizing black queer women's sexualities and experiences with sexual pleasure outside the lens of traditional identitarian frameworks. Drawing on queer pornography and pleasure-based sex education, I analyze how these various forms of sex education conceptualize and deploy sexual pedagogy. Further, my project maps the ways in which black queer women's sexual pleasure can be read through the lens of sensational affinity, which can serve as a form of queer world making.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist thought, Affect theory, Sexual pedagogy, Black queer women,
Pleasure, Sensational affinity

BRINGING SEX TO THEORY: SENSATIONAL AFFINITY, PLEASURE AND SEXUAL
PEDAGOGY

by

ADREANNA NATTIEL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

2018

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2018

BRINGING SEX TO THEORY: SENSATIONAL AFFINITY, PLEASURE AND SEXUAL
PEDAGOGY

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August 2018

DEDICATION

This thesis dedicated to Mad Dworschak, who has been my loyal proofreader, constant support, and number one fan throughout the ups and downs of graduate life. This thesis is also dedicated to my mother, Sheila Nattiel, who has also celebrated my independence, admired my strength, and lifted me up during the hard times. Finally, this thesis is also dedicated to black queer women, who are my community, my *raison d'être*, and constant inspiration.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
PIV	Penis-in-Vagina sexual intercourse

1 CHAPTER ONE: FOREPLAY

It is an embodied, queer methodological practice that questions the normative assumptions of the everyday and invites us to resignify our fleshy encasements on our own terms. (122)

—Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*

1.1 Introduction

In writing this thesis, I wanted to get past the idea that sex is what we do and identity is who we are. Rather, I argue that sensation is what we seek and in that seeking lies the possibility of becoming connected. Initially, my endeavor with this project was to move beyond identity, which I viewed (in an admittedly myopic way) as a stumbling block to more radical imaginings of black lesbian sexuality; however, this work became a way for me to explore the tensions that exist between essentialized identity and collective experience. Using pleasure as an analytic, I was able to understand the ways in which identity informs our experiences of pleasure and how those sensations help to form connections between bodies.

To facilitate this research, I observed a sex education workshop, interviewed a queer black sex educator, and explored two pornographic films created by and for black lesbians. My goal was to analyze the ways in which the erotic facilitates and informs the formation of both subjectivity and community. My proposition is informed by a recent development in black feminism and Black Sexuality Studies: a renewed focus on the potentiality of pleasure for black women. While black feminist theorists have written extensively on the black female body's legacy of pain, our pleasure has not been explored with the same voracity. I believe that political and sexual connections between black women have an unmatched potentiality for liberation and

I wanted to probe this fertile ground. Further, I attempt to theorize identity in a way that departs from individualization and focuses instead on collectivity of sensation, experience, and political affinity

My interest in this topic is three-fold. First, as a black lesbian, I remain committed to delving deeply into how our identities and subjectivities form, what they mean to us, and how they help us to relate to and forge bonds of solidarity with other black lesbian women. Second, the current state of queer politics has left me and other young lesbians feeling isolated, ostracized, and alienated. In queer theory, as well as in real-life queer spaces, there is a trend toward fetishizing fluidity, reactionary anti-normativity, and valorizing individualization. In my own social world, local organizations and social scenes that designate themselves as queer spaces, have increasingly focus on giving space and voice to those who identify as anything other than gay or lesbian. The way the term “queer” is used in these environments places primacy on multiple gender attraction while simultaneously relegating same-gender attraction to secondary importance. Within these particular queer spaces, to be queer is to be attracted to more than one gender. While lesbians, like myself, are certainly part of these organizations and attend these events, we often find that our desires for sex and relationships with other women are elided, considered ephemeral, or criticized as “boring” or “backward.” Most recently, the emergence of “femme” as a broad category, rather than terminology that describes a particular kind of gender-subverting lesbian experience, has lent itself to the erasure of lesbians. In particular, the emergence of the “black femme” in black feminist digital and academic spaces, elides black lesbian experience as its definition rests solely on presentation and does not mention sex acts. Rather than focus on what does not exist or what is lacking, I explore those communities that provide the space and solidarity that young lesbians are looking for. Last, I am

interested in the corporeality of sex and the theoretical and methodological possibilities it has the potential to create, sustain, and open. Because sex is an embodied experience that exists in almost innumerable formations, thinking about the externality of its associated sensations creates a generative space from which to begin re-thinking relationality and sociality. Through this research, I learned that the erotic creates both expansive and concrete possibilities that cannot be contained under hollow monikers like the recently reconceptualized “femme.”

One of the aims of my project is to bring black lesbian life and sociality to the forefront. Rather than — as Rodríguez cautions against — “wishing away our erotic attachments to race and gender (130),” I used this research to lean into those erotic attachments and explore the ways in which they can lead us to a better understanding of our subjectivity as black lesbians. Doing so allowed me to step away from seeing my sexuality, and that of others, purely in relation to white and heterosexual norms and ideals and focus on what is made possible through black women’s relationships with one another. Rather than thinking of a black lesbian identity that belongs to each of us individually, my project looks at black lesbianism as a communal space. Said another way, black lesbian subjectivity comes into being through the repeated coming together of black women physically, spiritually, sexually, and politically. Black lesbianism is an experience to which we attune and attach ourselves. It is a space where black women are united in and attuned to sensation in such a way that there is harmony, connection, and even discord, between bodies. An attunement to pleasure — where lesbian pleasure is the impetus for seeking out these relationships and sensations — makes this affective, communal experience possible.

Additionally, this project was an attempt to complicate identity. Barbara Smith and the other members of the Combahee River Collective are credited with coining the term “identity politics” in their now seminal Collective Statement (The Combahee River Collective Statement).

The Combahee River Collective's articulation of identity politics emerges from an understanding that the political goals of black women were unlikely to be reached through acceptance of broad based anti-racist or feminist politics. Rather, the members of the Collective spoke about their politics as emanating from the realization that material realities of their experiences as black women, and as black lesbians, could only be changed through dissolving the interlocking systems of domination that rendered them silenced and oppressed. In the portion of the Statement entitled "What We Believe," the Collective states their commitment to working toward their own liberation: "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (The Combahee River Collective Statement). The idea that politics should stem from one's own oppression has shortcomings — namely, the tendency to allow politics to become single-issue and devolve into a race to become the most oppressed. However, Smith's articulation of identity politics in the Collective Statement stems from the members of the Collective's call for "a healthy love for the self" that is the beginning of a radical politics, rather than the end of it. More specifically, the sense of collectivity that emerges from identity politics in the Collective Statement serves as a compliment to my own argument about the pursuit of pleasure as a precursor to community formation. In this project, I emphasize the importance of collectivity, and look at the ways in which sensation is both shared and personal. Amber Musser writes, "If we conceive of experience as the narrative that consciousness imposes on a collection of sensations, sensation provides a way for us to explore corporeality without reifying identity" (1). Using theories of affect creates the possibility of theorizing sexuality (and the communities that form around it) in a way that resists overdetermination. Rather than positing an essentialized

black lesbian identity, my project seeks to explore the ways in which black lesbian experience resonates with a number of sensations to which bodies are attuned. In my thesis, I explore the ways in which black lesbian subjectivity is achieved by the coalescence of sensation, affinity, and position with structures of racial and gender power.

Finally, I endeavored to expand notions of what theory can be. Rather than thinking of theory as purely textual, I explore the ways in which bodies can become a site of knowledge production. Using Lorde's concept of the Erotic and Musser's concept of sensational affinity, my goal is to analyze how black lesbians create new understandings of embodiment. What sorts of knowledge do bodies hold? How can we think of the erotic — both in Lorde's conception of it and the colloquial use of the term — as a site where theory is created? These are the questions I sought to answer with my work. I wanted to take the body seriously and treat it as an opportunity rather than a liability. In the literature review that follows, I explore the tensions and sites of common ground between the various approaches that black feminists have used to theorize black pleasure. The texts that I analyze interrogate the intersections of race and sexuality and, most importantly, trouble the connections between sexuality, race, and identity.

1.2 Literature Review

My Literature Review explores the fields of Queer of Color Critique, Black Sexuality Studies, and Affective Sexuality and Sociality Theory. I utilize this section to discuss the emergence of the turn toward pleasure in black feminism and its relevance to my larger project.

1.2.1 *Queer of Color Critique*

Queer of Color critique developed in response to the growing academic dominance of queer theory. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson characterizes Queer of Color critique as:

... an interrogat[ion] of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique. (149)

One of the primary points of contention with which Queer of Color critique grapples is the siloing of queer theory from other fields within gender studies, namely black feminist thought. Laura Alexandra Harris makes this critique in her 1996 article “Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle” and contends that a queer black feminism could serve to disrupt the silences that occur when feminism, queer studies, and black feminist thought are framed as mutually exclusive. The crux of such a feminist orientation would be to make the terrain of feminist politics a discussion about race (Harris). Harris contends that while contemporary gay, lesbian, queer, and feminist positions gesture toward race, their modes of doing so often disregard the nuanced ways in which black feminist theory has already engaged with difference. Harris illustrates this tension by reading Barbara Smith’s positing of a black feminist lesbian criticism in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* more than three years before Adrienne Rich’s much-lauded articulation of a lesbian continuum in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Both works analyze Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, reading it as a lesbian text. However, as Harris points out, Rich makes no mention of Smith’s work in her essay. Further, Smith’s black lesbian feminist approach makes explicit the link between racial and sexual politics, underscoring the white privilege evident in Rich’s decision to extricate lesbianism from sexuality (Harris).

Harris proceeds to contend that queer social theory is indebted to black feminist thought, as it often calls for an analysis of race and class (alongside sexuality) without actually producing it. This omission stems from the inextricable link that she identifies between Queer as it had been articulated up to that point and white masculinity:

Queer, as it is often claimed by academically powerful white masculinity, sometimes suggests and describes its political constituency as seductively fluid, unmarked, ambiguous, and chosen. This fluidity sounds dangerously like the status of white masculinity to me. (Harris 21)

The unmarkedness that white queer subjects can inhabit and even name as a central component of queerness is only possible if it is constituted in opposition to the markedness of the black sexual subject. It is this very position of privilege — to hold a position of supremacy and then demand that others critically engage with the systems that benefit you and claim that this constitutes analysis — that perpetuates the isolation of queer theory from black feminist thought. In “The Beached Whale,” Sharon P. Holland contends that the historical borders that queer theory constructs serve to deepen the disconnect between these fields — effectively segregating black feminist issues from the terrain of queer theory and positioning black feminism as something queer theory references to constitute itself (Holland 91). Further, she posits that it is in this historical contention that identity politics backfire, as white queer theorists “pay attention” to racial others in service of white hegemony, while believing themselves to be “experientially incapable” of actually engaging with the lived realities or theoretical contributions of black queer subjects.

According to Holland, this dynamic is a function of the very historical framework with which queer theory constitutes itself. Holland’s primary critique is leveled at the ways in which

Gayle Rubin's seminal work "Thinking Sex" constructs itself in opposition to the black female subject, even though she is totally absent from the essay's analysis. Holland cites Rubin's impulse (one that is shared by most of the forbearers of queer theory, might I add) to have "queer" history begin after the second World War, rendering the nearly 400 years of chattel slavery that preceded that century unworthy of queer history and theorization. Moreover, when black subjects are mentioned — in Rubin's work as well as other canonical works of queer theory — it is always in comparison to white subjectivity. Rubin mentions that a "rich, white male pervert" will be less affected by sexual oppression than a "poor, black female pervert" would be. In this framework, the black body "stands as the thing against which the survival of whiteness must pit itself or as the exemplar par excellence of social inequality" (Holland 93). Further, the future for the black female body in sexuality studies becomes unforeseeable, as it is repeatedly discursively positioned as both the exception and the rule.

Erica Edwards' "Sex after the Black Normal" is an attempt to trouble the relationship between queer theory and black feminism even further to elucidate issues inherent in the incorporation of minority difference into the institutions and imaginaries of contemporary global power. It serves as an indictment of sorts for what she calls our "habits of thought" in feminist studies — namely the belief that multicultural inclusion will produce a comprehensive feminist analysis. She analyzes the "queer force of survival" of black women in The Museum of African American History's Changing America exhibit, alongside Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*, as narratives that expose the limits of queer anti-normativity in contemporary queer and feminist theories. Edwards argues that black women are always-already nonnormative; therefore, reactionary anti-normativity neither applies to them nor has the potential to result in their liberation (Edwards). Further, she contends that black women's sexuality functions at once as a

lubricant for neoliberal governmentality and as a domain of “collective preservation within this order” (Edwards 151). In essence, black women’s bodies have been used to facilitate and maintain neoliberalism in the United States while simultaneously being instrumentalized to support collective alternatives which expose the weaknesses of the neoliberal order. In other words, she probes the ways in which black women’s bodies have been constructed as sites of both security and danger within neoliberal discourses and how these representations of black women’s sex and sexualities have served as the catalysts for the transformations in economy, military power, governance, and identity that are collectively referred to as “neoliberalism.” Given how black women’s sexuality serves as a resource for both premature death and surplus life, Edwards gives attention to its complex and contradictory figurations in order to elucidate how normativity functions as a complicated set of relations and movements — a system in which even that which is framed as nonnormative, other, or deviant serves to construct the norm.

In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen identifies similar limits to a purely queer (read: sexuality-based) approach to politics. Namely, this single-issue approach precludes possibilities for political organizing because it fails to account for the ways in which systems of domination are co-constituting and how individuals may benefit from certain systems while being oppressed by others. Cohen asks, “how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women — women of color in particular — on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support?” (442). Cohen’s solution to the problem of single-issue politics is a commitment to a leftist analysis and approach. According to Cohen, a left framework acknowledges the “interdependency of multiple systems of domination” (435) and works against discursive and material forms of oppression with the same voracity as discrete forms of violence enacted by

state institutions. Given these leftist commitments, Cohen concludes that queers, lower-class folks, and people of color could form more effective collectivities by focusing on the ways in which these systems of domination oppress each group in different but related ways.

Theorists producing Queer of Color critique work to uncover the normativity of whiteness in queer theory and to disturb the easy boundary between normativity and antinormativity. These revelations have opened discursive space to explore the specificities of black sexuality, pleasure, and queerness. The resulting discourses have begun to coalesce into the burgeoning field of Black Sexuality Studies.

1.2.2 Black Sexuality Studies

In “Bringing Flesh to Theory,” Nikki Lane fleshes out the field of Black Sexuality Studies and talks about how ethnography is particularly well situated to help those within the field of Black Sexuality Studies to theorize with black sexual subjects and validate their experience of life at the intersections of racialized gender and sexuality. According to Lane, Black Sexuality Studies projects critique three key conventions: the heteronormativity which pervades the field of African American studies; the white normativity of queer theory; and the lack of attention to sexual pleasure within black feminist theory. Lane expands Hortense Spillers’ concept of “flesh” to refer at once to issues of embodiment and the way black bodies are engaged within both theory and practice. Lane highlights four ethnographies that fit into the field of Black Sexuality Studies to demonstrate how this medium leads to rich understandings of the lived experiences of black sexual subjects. Among these understandings is Jafari Allen’s concept of “erotic subjectivity,” which explains how those living on the margins of hegemonic society participate in acts of self-making that construct both an alternative sense of personhood and new kinds of publics based on “deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul” (635).

Erotic subjectivity attends to the presumed impasse between studies of sexuality, race, and gender, where the assumption is often that the study of one of these categories necessitates neglect of the others. Allen's conception is similar to another analytic tool that Edwards mentions, which is Mirielle Miller-Young's concept of "illicit eroticism," which allows her to address the ways in which black women in the porn industry mobilize acts of racialized sexuality to navigate and profit from the mainstream porn industry's racial fetishism.

Jennifer Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy* is a "loving critique" of the established canon of black feminist thought, which both "parts company with many of the questions that have driven black feminist scholarship on representation ... [and] hopes to bring renewed theoretical energies to these debates" (Nash 8). Nash employs two strategies to accomplish this end. First, in the opening chapter of *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Nash charts a critical genealogy of contemporary black feminist thought. Specifically, she contends that it was Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* that moved representation from the periphery to the center of black feminism. Second, Nash delves into pornography as a vehicle for the expression of black women's sexual pleasure, offering an alternative to negative conceptions of visibility and the visual field. Through her valorization of black women in pornography, Nash describes and argues for complex pleasures that take place within structures of domination. For Nash, the black subject is not bound by the dichotomy of either always trying to heal from a representational wound or critically eyeing, and thus attempting to subvert the racial constructions that contain her. Rather, she may find gratification in the complicated pleasure of being seen, whether or not that pleasure also contains pain. For Nash, if racial-sexual pleasures can be oppressive, they give us the power to create "powerful vocabularies for naming what we desire" within power structures that might titillate even as they

organize what we imagine to be possible (150). She names this nexus of racial and sexual pleasure “ecstasy,” and makes use of all the pleasure, pain, and messiness contained within its boundaries. By viewing black women’s participation in porn through the lens of ecstasy, pornography itself becomes a form of sex education that demonstrates the affective, sensational, and physical aspects of sex that black women experience and embody.

While Black Sexuality Studies engages in attempts to trouble the easy association between sexual imagery and racial trauma, it makes clear that the relationship between sex, racialization, and exploitation is not an uncomplicated one. In “Let’s Play: Exploring Cinematic Black Lesbian Fantasy, Pleasure, and Pain,” Jennifer DeClue takes on Juana María Rodríguez’s challenge to embrace the pleasure of “untamed erotics” and not shy away from exploring the materiality of sexuality and the pitfalls and potentiality of sex play and fantasy that incorporates play with power dynamics among racialized subjects. DeClue accomplishes this by analyzing three films that feature black lesbian fantasy, BDSM,¹ and sexual pleasure. She focuses on the tensions engendered by visualizing black lesbian sex acts, given the history of black women’s sexual exploitation, the politics of respectability, and the culture of dissemblance used to combat black women’s sexual degradation. The essay also examines the manner in which sexual fantasy and play work out traumas of racialized sexual violence while simultaneously leaving open the possibility that these cinematic representations of lesbian sexuality may re-traumatize both viewers and participants as they work to disentangle the politics of visibility and silence that always already haunt black women’s sexualities.

¹ BDSM is interpreted as a combination of the abbreviations B/D (Bondage and Discipline), D/s (Dominance and submission), and S/M (Sadism and Masochism). BDSM is now used as a catch-all phrase covering a wide range of activities, forms of interpersonal relationships, and distinct subcultures (Musafar)

Black Sexuality Studies explores that complex and evolving relationship between blackness and sexuality. Each of the theorists in this section argues for the complex ways in which black women navigate their relationships to sex, sexuality, and pleasure within the shifting matrix of domination that constructs their lives. To push this inquiry further, it becomes helpful to tease out not only what pleasure is, but also the ways in which pleasure is embodied, instructive, and productive of connections between beings.

1.2.3 Affective Sexuality and Sociality Theory

This section explores what I am calling affective sexuality and sociality theory. This group of theorists probes the embodiment of sensation, emotion, and sexuality and how these embodiments influence our interactions with one another. For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to present a small group of theorists that represent this expansive and varied field.

In her chapter titled “Queer Feelings,” Sara Ahmed elucidates the pre-existing forms created by heteronormativity and how the queer subject’s orientation to those forms creates new understandings of comfort, pleasure, and worlds. These new modes of being, seeing, and belonging can collectively be understood through the lens of externality. More specifically, they develop the ways in which sensation occurs outside the subject. According to Ahmed, comfort can either be approached as the complete integration of the self with an external object, or the seamless integration of a body with an exterior space. Ahmed thus approaches heteronormativity as a public comfort because it allows certain (heterosexual) bodies to extend into a space that has already assumed their shape; thus, they do not feel discomfort or a lack of belonging:

One feels better by the warmth of being faced by a world one has already taken in. One does not notice this as a world when one has been shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape. [...] Queer subjects, when faced by the “comforts” of heterosexuality

may feel uncomfortable (the body does not “sink into” a space that has already taken its shape). (Ahmed 148)

In addition to theorizing heteronormativity, Ahmed’s bodily approach to queerness creates theoretical space to talk about connections between queer bodies. Unable to assume the “fixed shapes” that heteronormativity creates, queer subjects are forced to find alternative ways to relate to the world and one another. Ahmed contends that it is the bonds between queer people that preclude queer bodies from sharing in the comfort that stems from fitting into the spaces carved out for heterosexuals. The resulting discomfort becomes a generative space from which queer lives form. Rather than thinking of queerness as fluid or resistant, Ahmed argues that queer subjects inhabit norms differently — creating new modes of relationality in the process (155).

Amber Musser uses *Sensational Flesh* to examine how power structures race, gender, and embodiment. Through this exploration, Musser creates new pathways to explore the ways in which sexual experience is both individual and collective. She posits “sensation” as an analytical tool for illustrating the subjectivity of gendered, racialized, and sexualized subjects. Sensation, Musser suggests, “undercuts the identitarian dimensions of experience” (1), allowing for the possibility of exploring the embodiment of experience without reifying identity. Musser argues for the analytical purchase of sensation with particular efficacy in her discussion of Lorde’s concept of the Erotic. Musser contends that Lorde uses the erotic, not to reinforce subjectivity but to theorize the creation of affective communities. “The erotic decenters the individual in order to produce an alternative kinship between women. The erotic also produces a space where women can learn to find joy and feeling in life” (148). Musser proposes that this parallel demonstrates the importance of feeling in creating community.

With *Funk the Erotic*, Stallings' project was to create an epistemology based on sensation. She lays bare her political motivations for this move early on, positioning it as a "rejection of the Western will to truth, or the quest to produce a truth about sexuality" in order to "demonstrate how some black cultural producers have strategized against the sexual con of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy outside of politics" (xii). This enables Stallings to conceptualize knowledge being produced through and with bodies, which creates a point of entry from which to rescript labor, pleasure, and black sexuality and trouble the binary between pleasure and knowledge. Her goal is to utilize funk to highlight the importance of the erotic and eroticism in Black cultural and political movements, delegitimizing "the truth of sex" and its histories. Mobilizing funk as a theoretical tool, Stallings argues that Western theories of the erotic fail to account for the nuance and materiality of the affective experiences of black subjects and are insufficient in discussions of black bodies, subjects, and culture. Through the book Stallings sets out to demonstrate the ways in which black artists have embraced and utilized the superfreak, sexual guerrilla, sexual magic, mama's porn, black trans narratives, and sex work in a post-human subject position (Stallings).

Stallings' methodology centers on a discursive strategy that Susan Stryker termed "transing." In the simplest terms, transing functions as a disciplinary tool in areas where stigma associated with loss of gender status threatens "social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination" (Stallings 11).² Stallings employs this strategy to trans black literary and sexuality studies in order to elucidate how black communities have deployed funk to create alternative sources of knowledge about the body, imagination, and sexuality. Doing so allows her to subvert the gendered and moral strictures that could potentially constrain work around Black

² Stryker's definition states that transing also serves as "an escape vector, a line of flight or pathway into liberation (4)" that can open up new modes of studying sexual labor, culture, and expression.

Sexuality Studies. In addition, the theoretical methodology she employs depends on her notion of funk as a philosophy that supplants the barrier between life and death, as she posits that it is sustained by “otherly human and nonhuman beliefs in the supernatural, afterlife, and reanimation” (Stallings 3).

Many of the preceding theorists are indebted to Audre Lorde’s theoretical exploration of affect and the embodiment of power in “Uses of the Erotic.” In her seminal essay, Audre Lorde lays out what she terms “the Erotic” — a deeply held source of feminine power that emanates from the most personal, mysterious parts of the self. According to Lorde, the Erotic is life-giving, spiritual, and transformative. However, she also emphatically states that the Erotic is the antithesis of the pornographic, which she claims “emphasizes sensation without feeling.” While this assertion made sense given the political climate at the time the paper was given — and the ongoing history of black women’s hypersexualization — it seems possible to honor Lorde’s work while troubling some of its assertions. Following Stallings’ inquiry, we must understand that the “disparate uses of eros and the sexual” are reflections of the ways in which hegemony has produced both concepts (Stallings). Surely the concepts cannot be entirely distinct if the same system of knowledge defined them both. In addition, it seems that Lorde was conceptualizing feeling as internal and sensation as external. However, if feeling only finds distinction in relation to other sensations (Shouse) and sensation has both individual and shared components (Musser), it stands to reason that these concepts can exist at once and in harmony with one another. In fact, it is the depiction of sensation that allows a circulation of feeling between the performers and the viewer. Sensation does not supersede feeling; rather, it augments and helps to transmit it.

Finally, my thesis explores Juana María Rodríguez's discussion of the ways in which playing with power dynamics during sex between racialized subjects can be a generative space through which to theorize sociality. Rodríguez focuses on the ways in which queer people of color play with repressive systems and begin to erode the boundaries between sex, play, and dance. She elucidates how dissolving these distinctions opens up the possibility of understanding how social forces shape understandings of bodies and how subjects play with those forces of power: "Both dance and sex create opportunities for new interpretations that are performed and received in each instance of their production, making each articulation simultaneously wholly iterative and wholly new" (Rodríguez 100). In thinking through embodiment this way, we can see sex as an act of self-making and queer world-building.

This set of literature explores the limits placed on the queer black sexual subject through a variety of conceptual frames. Framing the black sexual subject only in contrast to the white queer subject, through the lens of respectability and a culture of dissemblance, or purely in terms of representation renders black queer identity overdetermined and futureless. If we must continue to conceptualize identity as innate and singularly important, then the only possibility for a queer future is an endless list of increasingly individuated identity markers that preclude the creation of community. Understanding the nature of the connections that already exist among black queer women (and possibilities for other forms of attachment) requires methods that consider the affective and sensational aspects of those experiential modes of coming together.

In this project, I elucidate an affective understanding of black lesbian identity and subjectivity. In order to accomplish this, I interviewed Marla Stewart, the queer, black creator of an Atlanta-based sexual education organization. Stewart was a natural interlocuter for this project because her sex education work foregrounds pleasure. After the interview, I attended

SexXAtla, a sex education event that Stewart facilitated. Armed with an understanding of Stewart's ethics and politics, I spent time observing a diverse group of people who were forming spontaneous bonds — or being repelled — as a result of the sensational affinity produced by their experiences. Originally, I planned to attend play parties and discuss the role that affinity and affect played in both my decision to have sex with other black women and my account of those experiences. Writing about my own sexual experiences would have been ideal because doing so would have allowed me to analyze the personal dimensions of touch and sensation, as well sensations' externality — the ways in which those sexual experiences are shared outside of and between feeling bodies. However, due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards concerning consent forms and potential risk of harm, I elected to watch pornographic films instead. I chose to watch Shine L. Houston's *Crash Pad* and *The Rec Room*; the latter film features performers Papí Coxxx and Stud Slayer produced by Queerly SF — a hosting site that features only independent, queer-produced queer porn. While viewing the films did not allow me to physically participate in the sex acts, I argue that the films I chose sought to interpellate me as a viewer.

1.3 Research Questions

For the research portion of my project, I elected to interview a queer, black community sex educator and attend a community sex education event that she facilitated. In addition, I watched two porn films created by and for queer black women. Through this research, I answered the following questions:

1. How does Marla Stewart define the importance of her work?
2. What does a focus on sex education pedagogy reveal about SexXAtl?
3. What relations and affinities can be identified among SexXAtl participants?

4. What relations and affinities can be identified in black lesbian pornographic films?

The preceding questions formed the basis of my inquiry in this project. Through exploring these questions, my analysis addresses the questions I raised in my literature review: What happens when we think about identity in terms of experience rather than an innate condition? How can we theorize black queer women's subjectivities outside of anti-normativity? What possibilities are opened by exploring the corporeality of sex? How can sex lead us to a black lesbian sociality?

1.4 Methodology

The purpose of my project was to reposition lesbianism as a space of liberation for black women and to bring black lesbian sexuality to the forefront. Because of our positionality as black lesbian subjects, I believe that sexual and political relationships between black women have liberatory potential that differs from that of relationships between other marginalized subjects. In my project, I wanted to capture, center, and learn from these relations. As such, it is important for me to position myself within this research and lay out my epistemological, ontological, and political commitments to black lesbian subjectivity.

As I have mentioned previously in this prospectus, I am a black lesbian. My understanding is the cultural hegemony of white supremacy creates norms of gender and sexuality that necessarily exclude black people. This process renders the black female subject undesirable and makes a queer black subject unimaginable. It is this very undesirability and unimaginability that give relations between black women their potential for liberation. Through

our desires for other black women, black lesbians can create sites of rupture that challenge the hegemony of both heterosexuality and white supremacist ideals of desire and sex.

One of my other commitments is to a subjectivity that is undeniably black and specifically lesbian. I use the term lesbian to describe myself (as well as the women I will be studying) because I believe it more than adequately describes the way of being in the world I am theorizing in this project. While the reclamation of queer was originally meant to signal unapologetic homosexuality that opposed straight norms, the term has an entirely different connotation in the online and physical LGBT spaces I participate in. In those spaces, calling yourself “queer” implies that you are not gay or lesbian, but rather that your sexuality is more fluid. Both my life and this thesis are about sexuality and womanhood that is exclusively for other women, and I think lesbian encompasses this commitment most effectively. While the women that I studied may not use the term lesbian to describe themselves, I believe that claiming spaces within lesbian identity for an array of women who may not typically be identified within its bounds is a way of troubling bounded and rigid identity categories. By expanding “lesbian” to include women who are seeking pleasure and community with other women, I could claim space for “lesbian” as a way of understanding a particular type of pleasure-seeking and see a greater wealth of connections between women than would have been possible otherwise.

I chose to focus on the pleasure-driven dimensions of sex education because sex provides an avenue to observe and experience sensual affinity. In addition to being embodied, sex is a phenomenological experience that we use to organize ourselves and our lives. The sexual sensations that we find ourselves oriented toward connect us to other bodies in ways that do not need to be connected to identity.

Throughout this chapter, I have intentionally allowed some slippage between the terms “identity” and “subjectivity.” Identity has many connotations and definitions, but in this postmodern, late capitalist historical moment, it has come to represent some essential fact or quality of an individual. This understanding of identity is incredibly limiting; if the self is all that can be said to truly exist and identities are prediscursive, then communities cannot be material nor is political change truly possible, because all of those identities are ossified. My aim was not to theorize or elucidate a black lesbian identity. Through this work, I attempted instead to open up a new understanding of subjectivity. Political subjectivity makes possible an understanding of the embeddedness of the subject in the intertwined systems of meaning and power. Rather than an aspect of the subject, political subjectivity is “the mode of being of the subject” (Rahimi 3). More specifically, subjectivity refers to ways in which we position ourselves relation to other bodies and ways of being in the world. Subjectivity refers to the ways that we ascribe meaning to those positions and participate in the discourses that create those meanings. These modes of being are the crux of my inquiry. I attempted to expand the limits of how black lesbians see and use our subjectivity. Instead, I found myself more oriented towards the black lesbian sensorium and the ways that the senses formed the basis of black lesbian experience.

1.5 Methods

First, I interviewed Marla Stewart, the founder of Velvet Lips, LLC. Velvet Lips is an Atlanta-based sexual education venue and organization. Its focus is empowered sexuality and sexual liberation through coaching, workshops, and events. I chose Velvet Lips for two important reasons. First, the founder, Marla Stewart, is a queer black woman who is passionate about breaking down the barriers to black women’s sexual pleasure. Second, I felt that organization’s focus on somatic sex education and “sexological body work” would produce

moments of sensational affinity that I could observe and theorize. Somatic sex education involves using hands-on teaching techniques to help individuals, couples and groups with discovering their sexual power, overcoming trauma with sexual healing and revealing their hidden pleasures (VelvetLipsLLC.com). Sexological bodywork combines breathing techniques, touching, erotic sensing and masturbation coaching to increase sexual awareness and tantric embodiment. During my interview with Stewart, I asked her questions about what inspired her to create Velvet Lips, her views on the politics of pleasure, and how she defines the impact of her work. I used a two-hour interview to delve into Stewart's subjectivities as a sex educator and queer, black woman and deduce how each of these subjectivities play into how she approaches her work and sexuality.³ Through this interview, I gained clarity about how Stewart conceptualizes her events and workshops and how she understands their impact on the community she serves. Interviewing also give me insight into her investment in and attachment to a pleasure-driven model of sex education.

Following my interview with Marla Stewart, I attended SexXAtl — a sex education event featuring “TEDx-style talks” about pleasure-focused sex which foregrounded pleasure in safe sex practices, sacred sexuality, and sex as form of healing. I attended the talks and recorded my observations. In my note-taking, I focused specifically on interesting language and the mood of the room before, during, and after the workshops. I concentrated on the words that both the speakers and the attendees used to describe the workshops; this involved analyzing the materials provided at the event (such as The Guiding Principles discussed in Chapter Two), and listening to the speaker's content and the audience's feedback. I paid special attention to the language used to describe pleasure, how pronouns are used (e.g., does the speaker use “I” or “we”

³ See Appendix A for a full list of the semi-structured interview questions.

statements when she describes sex acts), and how and when sexual orientation labels were used. Paying attention to those descriptive uses of language helped me to deduce how participants were interacting with SexXAtl.

I focused on trying to ascertain the “mood” of the workshops. To accomplish this, I took stock of the age, race, and gender demographics. As the workshops were facilitated, I turned my attention to questions — considering how many questions were asked, which participants (in terms of race, age, and gender) are asking the questions, and whether attendees asked questions as the presentations were taking place or waited until they are over. I also made note of how many questions the speaker took and whether she was generous with inquisitors or not. In addition, I concentrated on the methods that the facilitators used to engage the audience and how effectively those methods garnered the attention of participants. Finally, I took all of the aforementioned factors into account to determine the mood in the room. Was it a relaxed atmosphere? Were people laughing or smiling? Did the talk feel more like a conversation or a lecture? These questions gave me of how affinity, sensation, and affect are working at SexXAtl. I analyzed my observations there in the context of Audre Lorde’s concept of the Erotic — the feminine source of energy that lends itself to the creation of more engaged political livelihood and feeling through the vitality of living a deeply engaged and relational life. In addition, I thought about Amber Musser’s concept of sensational affinity, which concerns itself with the ways in which experience allows us to think about multiplicity and corporeality without reifying identity.

My observation of the conference helped me understand how sensational affinity could be either generated or foreclosed. I observed how the narration of vulnerability could both

disrupt dominant discourses about the sexualities of marginalized groups and spark the creation of community within the space of the conference.

The final research portion of my thesis project involved watching Shine L. Houston's *The Crash Pad* and *The Rec Room* with Papí Coxxx and Stud Slayer. I chose these films because both are made by and for queer women of color. *The Crash Pad* is a feature-length pornographic film that depicts the sexual and romantic conquests of a multi-racial group of lesbians in the titular community hub. Throughout the film, the viewer follows these women as they engage in sex that defies typical conceptions of gender and sexuality while foregrounding pleasure and connection in all its forms. As I watched these films, I analyzed how the performers communicate their connection to one another through touch, eye contact, and non-linguistic expression (e.g., facial expressions, moaning, etc.). I also listened to language and paid attention to the words they use to describe their own pleasure, each other's bodies, and the sex acts they are performing. In the final chapter, I describe the particular kinds of black lesbian sociality and relationality that the films depict.

My methods and analysis for the pornographic film viewing portion of my thesis are heavily influenced by Nash's *Black Body in Ecstasy* and Miller-Young's *A Taste for Brown Sugar*. Both writers perform what Judith Butler terms "aggressive counter-reading" (22) in order to rescript traditional concepts of black women in pornography. I perform the same kind of strategically selective reading practice as I analyze Houston's and Queerly SF's films searching for moments of pleasure, agency, and education within their scenes.

1.6 What I Learned

In doing this research, one of the most salient lessons I learned is that language itself can become a barrier. Working with themes of affect and sensation stretched the boundaries of both my imagination and my analytical mind. I realized that even though terms like “attunement” and “sensation” can be defined, the words still leave something to be desired. I occasionally found myself relying on shared experience as a way of trying to explain my work; it seemed that trying to find some sort of shared referent was often more effective than an academic explanation — even in conversation with other scholars.

I also found that there was a tension between my attempt to move beyond or complicate identity and my desire to do research about black lesbian subjects. I found that I could work within that tension by expanding the parameters of “lesbian,” for instance, but my initial belief that sensation could subvert identity was challenged repeatedly. Having completed this research, I now believe that identity and sensation are not completely separable.

Through this research, I learned that liberation can occur in spontaneous bursts — in moments of identification with the vulnerability of another person. My work with SexXAtl taught me that being open to sharing one’s vulnerabilities is a type of attunement that can be generative of rich connections. I learned that those spontaneous connections are a type of community that are often overlooked.

2 CHAPTER TWO: GETTING IT ON

I sought out Marla Stewart for a multitude of reasons. I was looking for someone whose work was compatible with my research in its methodology, target audience, and queer sexual pedagogy. As I began conceptualizing this project — in part through conversations with Marla — it became clear that studying Marla’s work would be a fruitful exploration into yet another method of understanding the ways in which black lesbianism comes into being through sensation. Marla’s business, Velvet Lips, is an Atlanta-based sexual education venue and organization. Its focus is empowered sexuality and sexual liberation through coaching, workshops, and events. Marla Stewart is a queer black woman who is passionate about breaking down barriers and centering black women’s sexual pleasure. Second, the organization’s focus on somatic sex education and “sexological body work” aligns well with my goal of understanding sensational affinity in queer black women. Somatic sex education involves using hands-on teaching techniques to help individuals, couples and groups with discovering their sexual power, overcoming trauma with sexual healing and revealing their hidden pleasures (VelvetLipsLLC.com). Sexological bodywork combines breathing techniques, touching, erotic sensing and masturbation coaching to increase sexual awareness and tantric embodiment. Both techniques make it possible for participants to discover the sensations that are pleasurable for them — a key component of sensational affinity.

During my interview with Stewart, I asked her questions about what inspired her to create Velvet Lips, her views on the politics of pleasure, and how she defines the impact of her work. Through this interview, I gained clarity about how Stewart conceptualizes her events and workshops and how she understands their impact on the community she serves. Interviewing Stewart also gave me insight into her investment in and attachment to a pleasure-driven model of

sex education. I used a two-hour interview to delve into Stewart's subjectivities as a sex educator and queer, black woman and deduce how the intersection each of these subjectivities play into how she approaches her work and sexuality.

In this chapter, I argue that a politics of sensation opens political possibilities that are foreclosed by identitarian philosophies. Specifically, I explore the sexual education pedagogy of Marla Stewart and SexXAtl in order to identify and analyze the ways in which participants in these events experience sexuality and organize themselves politically around sensation. I analyze SexXAtl's privileging of experiential knowledge over formal training and credentials and how this validation of the phenomenological aspects of sex creates an alternative epistemology of sexual knowledge. I attend briefly to the role of the "non-expert" as both a tool for decolonizing sexual education and a potential liability that can result in the circulation of pseudoscientific language that can undermine the accessibility that the use of non-experts attempts to cultivate. Finally I discuss materiality versus "energy," a common descriptor used for sex.

The primary site of connection between Marla's work and mine is that of sensational affinity. Sensational affinity is a term coined by Amber Musser to describe an effect of what she calls "empathetic reading." The process of empathetic reading "seeks to make the flesh more visible within the process of knowledge production" (Musser 21). In other words, empathetic reading calls the reader's attention to the nonidentarian aspects of knowledge production by unpacking the historical structures in which writers are embedded. Musser expounds further upon the concept of sensational affinity using Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of masochism in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the excerpt she chooses, Deleuze and Guattari praise masochism as a space of freedom because of its potential to stabilize the subjectivity of Man as the stable, privileged knower. Masochism in this context is conceptualized in terms of creating new

assemblages that require mobility of thought and malleability of feeling. According to Musser, it is that freedom from fixed subjectivity that allows Deleuze to connect his own embodiments to the embodiments he ascribes to masochism. Deleuze posits that the sensations he experiences through various stimuli (e.g., homosexuality, drugs, etc.) are not exclusive to particular groups but rather that they can “always be produced by other means” (Deleuze 11). Deleuze’s prioritization of sensation and affect speaks to experience but the experience he describes is not legible as an identity (Musser). Deleuze’s understanding of experience as contingent on the historical and cultural moments in which they are situated makes it possible to understand how experience and its attendant sensations can be experienced collectively and resist categorization. Because these sensational experiences necessitate connection to other bodies or objects, they can be read through a lens of collectivity.

Musser’s engagement with Deleuze is important to my thesis research because I want to see what possibilities are opened up by thinking about queer black women’s sexualities as sites of sensational affinity. Deleuze’s argument about his own affective experiences serves as a theoretical precedent for my own inquiry into the black lesbian sensorium. Analyzing black lesbian sexuality through the lens of sensational affinity means that it is possible to develop a more comprehensive understanding of black lesbianism than is offered by viewing black lesbianism as inherent or identitarian. Sensational affinity moves beyond discourses of black lesbianism as identity or practice, to theorize the ways in which black lesbianism can be read as method of black women relating to and experiencing the sensations produced by other black women’s bodies, rather than simply a “doing” of particular sex acts. Consequently, sensational affinity enables the theorization of a black lesbian sensorium. A sensorium not only functions as a collection of sensations, experiences, and affects; it is also the tool through which these

sensations are experienced. Through the sensorium, it becomes possible to see a proliferation of black lesbian experiences that are otherwise obscured.

While Musser articulates sensational affinity as a strategy to expand written theory, this methodology can have productive applications for understanding the flow of sensation at events like SexXAtl. During SexXAtl one experience in particular demonstrated the promise as well as the challenges of sensational affinity. The final presenters were a heterosexual black couple who filmed and produced their own pornographic films. They each communicated their motivations for beginning that particular creative endeavor: he had done sex work for a number of years and was interested in branching out into new areas of the industry while she had grown tired of having her personhood reduced to her role as a mother of two young children. After a brief discussion — during which they showed clips from several of their films — the pair announced that they would be facilitating a spanking demonstration. Their subject was one of the SexXAtl participants. The demonstration covered proper impact play technique, including instructions about stance and equipment. The spanking demonstration represented a facet of SexXAtl that was a bit unnerving. My initial, and frankly ungenerous, interpretation of the demonstration was that it represented the pervasiveness of heterosexuality even in a queer space. That initial reading was the result of a couple observations. First, while the demonstration involved two black women (the volunteer and one of the demonstrators), the demonstration still felt explicitly heterosexual. It becomes difficult to parse out why the spanking demo seemed to privilege heterosexual relations; however, I can offer a few observations. First, the male facilitator gave the majority of the verbal instructions. While the female facilitator would occasionally offer an aside or commentary of some sort, her contributions seemed to hold secondary importance. Second, the entire demonstration was framed in a way that portrayed women as recipients of the

act of spanking and men as the purveyors. Instructions about receiving the spanking and communicating one's comfort level were directed at women while instructions about technique were directed at men. Through that particular workshop, it became clear that women were being primed to be the submissive party in the act of spanking and while men were being primed to be dominant. Though the act of spanking can provide pleasure for both parties, presumption that spanking would necessarily be happening in heterosexual pairings and that women would necessarily choose to be the recipient of said spanking seems unimaginative at best. Given the fact that Velvet Lips is a queer organization hosting a queer conference, there is an expectation that activities will retain a queer (or at least gender-neutral) focus. Additionally, given that the act of spanking itself does not rely on gendered anatomy, making that particular demonstration "align" with queer sexuality would have required little effort.

However, in revisiting my notes from that workshop and thinking with Deleuze and Musser's work on affinity through sensation, I came to a more interesting interpretation of those events. In thinking about the spanking demonstration — and SexXAtl as a whole — as an avenue through which participants could experience collective sensation, one can read the act of watching a spanking demonstration as productive of shared affective experience. In chapter 3, I will argue that the medium of pornographic film interpellates the viewer into an erotic experience. Watching a live demonstration has a similar impact on a group of people. Being in the room where an erotic act is taking place is itself a type of participation. Even if participants chose not to look — like one participant I noticed who averted their eyes — that does not disrupt their involvement. In addition, the act of watching produces a type of sensational experience. While audience members could not actually feel the spanking as it happened, they could derive a number of sensations (including pleasure) from watching. The pleasure — as well as the

discomfort and uneasiness — that the audience derived from watching the spanking demonstration can serve as an interesting heuristic tool through which to understand sensational affinity. That demonstration, though it involves a man and two women, does not map easily onto identitarian models of sexual behavior. Thinking with Musser’s interpretation of Deleuze’s sensational affinity, the spanking demonstration becomes a richly generative avenue through which to experience the collective and individual facets of sensation.

2.1 Bodies Without Organs, Conversations Without Taboos

SexXAtl was an all-day event consisting of sex education workshops led by a variety of facilitators. The workshops were all of equal length, were held in the same room, and focused on pleasure based sex education. Though each facilitator left time for questions at the end of their presentation, they also encouraged audience participation and open sharing throughout their workshops. Topics included dealing with sexual dysfunction, introducing sex positivity into sex-negative institutions, and “energygasms,” which I’ll explore later in this chapter. While all of the workshops provided insight into the politics and practices of pleasure-focused sex education communities, I want to focus on three workshops in particular. The first, “Pushing Pleasure: Stripping Ableism & Embracing Cripsex,” explored pleasure for disabled abled bodies. The second is “Rediscovering sex in Recovery,” during which the facilitator described his experience of using BDSM to recover from sex addiction. And finally, I will discuss “Spank Bank: Earning Your Pain & Pleasure,” the workshop that included the spanking demonstration I discussed previously. These three workshops work particularly well to demonstrate the conditions that are productive to sensational affinity and which conditions shut them down.

2.1.1 Open Access

“Pushing Pleasure” opened with a brief explanation of the facilitator’s interest in centering disabled bodies in sex education. She spoke about her journey to discover her own sexuality as a woman living with a congenital disability. She presented both her personal and professional experiences of advocating for the sexual autonomy of disabled people with practical advice for the participants to incorporate into their own sex lives and activism, regardless of their own physical ability. In addition to information about advocating for accessible work and social spaces and ableist legislation on the political horizon, the facilitator’s speech was peppered with jokes and quips. Rather than relying on self-deprecation — a strategy many facilitators use to disarm audiences, she made light of the discomfort that allies often mask with hyper-vigilance about their behavior. She created a sense of comfort by allowing participants to laugh at themselves, while also learning concrete ways to make an impact in the lives of their community members.

“Rediscovering Sex in Recovery” utilized a similar approach. The facilitator spoke candidly about his own life — describing both his sex addiction and subsequent recovery in explicit detail. His engagement with his own life experience both explored the possibility of reclaiming kink as a sex addict and challenged “the addict” as a label and subject position. Both presentations were characterized by open and effusive audience participation. During both workshops, participants volunteered their own experiences, creating a type of spontaneous, if ephemeral community within the space of the workshop. Through the narration of vulnerability, the facilitators of “Pushing Desire” and “Rediscovering Sex” centered personal experience in way that undid the primacy of expert opinion and made sensational affinity possible.

In order to articulate the relations between facilitators and participants, it becomes necessary to articulate the manner in which I am engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body Without Organs (BwO). Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of the BwO represents an attempt to denaturalize the human body and place it relation to other bodies and entities. Deleuze and Guattari speak of the BwO as a surface of intensities before it is stratified, organized, hierarchized (Grosz). They conceptualize it as a conduit for a flow of intensities: "it produces and distributes them in a spatium that is itself intensive, lacking extension... It is non-stratified, unformed, intense matter" (Deleuze and Guattari 153). During, the aforementioned workshops, both facilitators explained their own experiences which allowed people to decide how they wanted to be connected - to the facilitator and to the experiences they described, as well as the other participants. The presenters made themselves vulnerable to the audience, opening up a Body without Organs to which other members could connect.

In addition, both facilitators talked about their own experiences with subjects that are still considered taboo- sex addiction and disabled sex. Both of these sexual subjectivities are often shrouded in secrecy and silence; the very existence of sex addiction is contested and disabled people are infantilized and desexualized as a result. Affirming the existence of sex addiction and disabled sexuality through the facilitators' personal experiences challenges the silence that hegemony perpetuates regarding those marginalized sexual modes of being. Further, the narration of the facilitator's vulnerability inspired participants to be vulnerable, share their experiences even if they did not directly relate. This narration creates community by disrupting dominant narratives and, even in that limited capacity, creates a new discourse about sex addiction and disabled sexualities.

The openness and ease of the speakers, combined with the novelty of the conversations taking place became an emotionally generative space. In many ways, “Pushing Desire” and “Rediscovering Sex” represented new territory for the facilitators and audience members alike and all parties seemed to lean in to that newness rather than resisting it. Even the design of the room seemed to reflect ease and relaxation. Audience members sat scattered across the small auditorium — some participants sat next to each other in the rows of chairs near the front of the room; others sat at tables on the sides of the room; and still others occupied the couches at the very back. As the workshops were being held, attendees would address the facilitator or other participants from their seats. This informal design allowed people to participate to their comfort level.

2.1.2 Affective Control

For the penultimate workshop, “Earning Your Pleasure,” there was a stark shift in affect that can accurately be described as sensory overload. The natural light had faded and the lights in the room were turned off, casting the participants into darkness. While the other facilitators had used PowerPoint presentations, the slideshows were visually pleasing and served as an aide to the facilitator’s presence rather than a focal point. In “Earning Your Pleasure,” the presenters played their amateur porn on the screen. The darkness of the room combined with the brightness of the screen (and its constantly flashing) forced the audience to focus on the images being projected. The podium was replaced with a long wooden table that was subsequently covered in their equipment and merchandise. For the spanking demonstration, chairs were moved so that the demonstration could take place in the middle of the aisle, mere feet from where the closest attendees sat. All of these elements combined to galvanize the audience. Suddenly, it became impossible to tell what sensations audience members were experiencing. This set up forced all

the participants to shift their gaze and attention in cooperation with the presenters and keep it there. The male facilitator barked out instructions in authoritative tone. There was not a single question asked by any of the audience members during the entirety of the demonstration.

Where the previous workshops had opened up sensational channels and allowed for a number of different experiences, this workshop foreclosed on all potential reactions except for total attention to their demonstration. Sensational affinity depends on the possibility of a diversity of sensational experiences — on the free flow of sensation with which participants can identify and connect. The sensory overload utilized by the facilitators of the final workshop forced participants to interact in a prescribed way — to look directly at the facilitators, to focus on a screen, to hear and see the demonstration at close range — which renders sensational affinity impossible.

2.2 The Political Work of Sex

Though it was not articulated in precisely the manner in which I previously described, the possibility of sensational affinity seems to be a central goal of Velvet Lips. By interviewing its creator, Marla Stewart, I got a glimpse into how her particular orientation as a black feminist sex educator shaped Velvet Lips into an organization that privileges sensational experience over clinical instruction, thereby allowing sex education to center fluidity, change, and sensation. I opened the interview by asking Marla about the impetus for starting Velvet Lips. This question seemed vital because of her organization's uniqueness on several different levels. In Atlanta, Velvet Lips is the only black queer-led sex education organization and the only sex education organization that focuses on pleasure as opposed to sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention or testing. When Marla starts to speak about starting Velvet Lips, she states clearly that the lack of similar programs was the motivation for beginning the organization. "So I

decided to start this business, because well, number one is that there isn't anything really like it." Stewart's understanding of her work does not rest solely on its uniqueness, however. Throughout our conversation, she explains that she finds value in her ability to give her clients the tools to seek and find pleasure, personal power, and ultimately, sexual liberation. In short, Stewart believes that the work that she does impacts her clients' lives in ways that extend beyond their sexual practices; becoming empowered to improve their sexual lives is essentially a gateway to demanding more of their social, emotional, and political worlds as well.

As our conversation progresses, I began to probe Stewart's political leanings and commitments. Specifically, I was looking for her to indicate whether she considers her work as a sex educator to be political. "Yes I consider [my work] political!" she answers emphatically. "As a raging, feminist, black feminist, womanist...I [believe] of course, that the personal is always political." While the use of that now hackneyed feminist phrase might seem to indicate a lack of thought and intention, for Marla, the opposite seems true. In labeling herself a black feminist, she highlights the ability of her work to create space for black women's coming together, a space through which I argue black lesbian subjectivity comes into being. Stewart proceeds to talk about how she intentionally connects her work to the social and political moment in which we live. She mentions that she often takes time to speak about how legislation that attempts to curb sex work through the regulation of safer sex products (i.e., condoms) threatens the sex education work that she does as well. "I'll throw things in there like that so they can see that the work is bigger than just them," she explains. While Stewart's largest goal is, perhaps, helping her clients achieve sexual pleasure, she places equal importance on explaining that the ability to reach that pleasure is connected to the political landscape in which we live.

The conversation about politics leads directly into a discussion about how Marla defines sexual liberation, which she considers to be a core aspect of both her work and her personhood. When I ask Stewart about her views on sexual liberation, I preface my question by stating that many feminists — including some black feminists — decry the importance of sexual liberation in achieving liberation from white supremacy and patriarchy. Stewart counters that assertion firmly and with conviction. She explains that a person's ability to achieve sexual freedom can lend itself to other forms of freedom:

Once we feel sexually liberated within our bodies and knowing our desires. Once we know those about ourselves, we can place them in the world. We can say, these are my desires when it comes to work. Do I wanna work 9-5? Does that feel good to me? Does that bring me pleasure? Does working for someone else who controls my paycheck, does that feel good to me? Does that bring me pleasure? I think understanding our pleasure bleeds into sectors of society and into your world...I think just feeling empowered and knowing that you have the power to control your destiny when it comes to your body and your sexuality can also translate to the other realms.

For Stewart, sexual pleasure is the gateway to achieving other forms of power and resisting the naturalized forms of oppressive power that structure our everyday lives. This guiding principle of Stewart's work overlaps in many ways with Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde posits that women can uncover the power to resist oppression and create political change by accessing their deeply held source of feminine power. While Lorde contends that women's erotic power has been forcibly confined and regulated to the realm of the sexual, Stewart seeks draw out the ways in which women's power and enjoyment are stifled even within

sexual practice. Stewart defines the importance of her work as a space in which women can access their power and allow that acquisition to transform their own lives and the lives of those around them.

Lorde equates the erotic with recognizing one's self as a coherent subject. The project of becoming a self is one of personal transformation. What Stewart articulates in the previous paragraph is a commitment to cultivating that transformation, which is itself a radical act. The space Stewart cultivates through Velvet Lips events like SexXAtl resist mere individualization. While Lorde emphasizes the importance of individual selfhood — through designating the erotic as source of power that exists within the individual — Lorde's version of the erotic is not purely about the individual, but rather about a space where community comes into being. Lorde's emphasis on cultivating individual power to foster community thematically links the erotic to Deleuze's articulation of affinity through sensation. In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde emphasizes the importance of individual empowerment for the advancement of the larger community: "the aim of each thing we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible" (Lorde 54). Stewart's philosophy reflects this same sentiment. She speaks about sexual empowerment as a precursor to experiencing emotional, social, and political empowerment. In linking her ideological commitments both the personal and political elements of sexual pleasure, Stewart's work creates new avenues through which participants can experience collective liberation.

2.3 SeXEducation Pedagogy

SexXAtl's sex education foregrounds pleasure and desire. This focus on pleasure allows for the production of community, connection, and agency. In stark contrast, clinical sex ed, which often focuses on preventing the spread of STIs and unintended pregnancy, often fails to

account for pleasure within its discourses. *The Politics of Pleasure in Sexuality Education: Pleasure Bound* attempts to make sense of this tension. The editors present the book as a site where diverse critical views of pleasure's possibilities and challenges, in and outside school, encounter and converse. *The Politics of Pleasure's* editors endeavor to "put pleasure under pressure," to interrogate its possibilities and drawbacks within sexuality education. This collection opens with an article by Michel Fine and Sarah McClelland in which the authors revisit their earlier work on school-based sex education. Sex education within schools epitomizes the clinic sex education that I contrast with community-based sex education like SexXAtl's. Where community-based approaches center the messy and personal aspects of sexuality, the telos of clinical sex education is to create rational sexual subjects who are divorced from the social and systemic factors that often influence sexual decision making. McClelland and Fine identify the role of neoliberal ideology — in concert with Christian morality — in shaping the sex education policy and pedagogy aimed at adolescents, which seeks to transform these adolescents into sexual rational actors. Further, they posit, in contrast to their previous assertions, that desire is "no longer missing but vilified" (14), and as a result, young bodies, particularly those who are designated female, queer and of color, are framed as "at risk" and "excessive" and are subjected to increased scrutiny and surveillance. The clinical model of sex education in schools favors individualization through disconnection from the social, cultural, and political factors that shape sexuality. Sensational affinity, like desire, is not only missing in the clinical model, it is an impossibility.

While none of the contributors directly interrogate community-based, pleasure-centric models of sex education, porn (as a site of pleasure education) arises frequently. Though the authors do not speak antagonistically of porn, there seems to be a reticence to acknowledge its

merits in providing a method of prioritizing pleasure. For example, Louisa Allen discusses internet pornography as “a legitimate source of information” about bodies and pleasures (174), but eventually, albeit thoughtfully, concludes that porn “is unlikely to be helpful in enabling young people to experience sexual activity in mutually negotiated and pleasurable ways” (174). While porn and pleasure-centered sex education approaches differ in many ways, both provide a focus on the aspects of sexuality that promote sensation and connectivity rather than strictly focusing on logical and decontextualized notions of avoiding danger and disease. Experiential, pleasure-based sex ed, like porn, can generate sensational affinity because it allows for an exploration of the dimensions of pleasure that integrate social, cultural, non-rational aspects of sexuality.

Sex education pedagogy refers to the methods and practices used to teach sex and sexuality. Sex education pedagogy seeks not only to convey sexual information but also, consciously or otherwise, to produce a certain type of sexual individual. In the case of SexXAtl (which I will discuss in this chapter) and *The Crash Pad* and *The Rec Room* (which I analyze in chapter 3), the sexual education pedagogies enacted help to produce a sexual individual guided by sensation and focused on connection. The sexual education at SexXAtl centered pleasure. As previously mentioned, Stewart’s organization focuses on instructing clients about the aspects of sexuality that promote pleasure, rather than prevent disease. Even the giveaways demonstrated this commitment to pleasure: of the nearly 20 items in the totebags, only five were barrier methods. The other products — massage oil, water-based lubricants, and small sex toys — were meant to be used purely to increase pleasure and provide alternative sensations. Every workshop held during the conference facilitated a discussion about pleasure. While some of the speakers focused on finding ways to create new forms of sensation in sexual behaviors that may have

previously been considered boring by the sexually adventurous set, other workshop facilitators spoke about the importance of providing pleasure for trans and disabled bodies.

2.4 Centering the Experiential

In order to better understand SexXAtl's sex education pedagogy, it is fruitful to speak specifically about Marla's investment in experiential knowledge and how that shaped the pedagogical choices at the conference. Experiential knowledge is that which is gained through experience, perception, and sensation. Experiential knowledge is valuable to a conference like SexXAtl because participants can share their knowledge through the narration of their life experience, which validates the experience of both facilitators and participants. Because experiential knowledge relies on perception, it has interesting possibilities for conversations about sex, which is a fundamentally phenomenological experience. During our interview, Stewart expressed her belief that focusing pleasure allows clients and educators alike to express desire in ways that lead to a greater sense of belonging that fosters increased openness about sex:

When we're able to think about ourselves, and speak up about what we like and vocalize that, other people can speak up and it can be like, "Oh, I thought I was the only one who was into that. You like that, too?" Ok, I'm not weird. I'm not different. A lot of times we all wanna feel just normal. We wanna feel like we belong in some way, shape, or another.

In Stewart's interpretation, the sharing of desire demystifies sex and can foster the creation of communities based on sensational affinity. Focusing on experiential knowledge at SexXATL seems to have had a similar impact on the participants. Throughout the conference, participants raised their hands to volunteer seemingly personal information about their sexual lives and desires in response to their facilitators' open discussion of their own experiences. For

instance, one facilitator spoke in depth about the ways in which participating in BDSM helped him to overcome his sex addiction. While none of the participants spoke about their sex addiction in particular, several attendees shared how participating in kink and fetish communities had been a part of their own paths to gaining greater self-confidence, feeling more connected with their bodies, and becoming more vocal about their needs in other areas of their lives. These acts of sharing were made possible through a focus on experiential knowledge.

In accordance with its commitment to experiential knowledge, SexXAtl's sex education pedagogy privileges a blend of experts and non-experts in its selection of speakers. While many of the workshop leaders held advanced degrees in sexuality studies, sociology, and social work, just as many were simply sex enthusiasts or "sex geeks," as one facilitator called himself. This pedagogical choice to include facilitators of a variety of backgrounds is not without merit. The inclusion of non-experts validates experiential knowledge of sex in a way that many sex education programs do not. The inclusion of the non-expert celebrates the importance of allowing personal and embodied sexual experience to take precedence. Valuing experiential knowledge allows for understanding the body as a site of knowledge creation. The installation of experts via the prescriptive power of white supremacist and colonial categorizations coalesces with the normativities of dominant white sexuality to create this objective distancing that characterizes appropriate sex and therefore, sex education. In privileging the non-expert, these normativities are subverted. The inclusion of the non-expert at SexXAtl sparked the creation of a pleasure-based epistemology. Rather than being beholden to notions of the body as gendered, racialized, and dis/abled, participants and facilitators alike were able to discuss the ways in which their pleasure defied those classifications. For instance, the facilitator of the workshop on sex and disability spoke about how the sex she has come to prefer decenters genital stimulation.

The heterosexual paradigm of sexual activity casts penis-in-vagina (PIV) penetration as the defining component of sexual intercourse. This paradigm delegitimizes other ways of having sex. By finding pleasure in non-genital sexual stimulation and affirming it as a valid form of sex, this facilitator resists the notion that her body is inferior due to her inability to conform to dominant modes of intercourse. When a facilitator described themselves as “not an expert” or spoke directly from their own experience — as many of the facilitators did — they no longer assumed the responsibility of providing universal or strictly factual information. However, it is also impossible for someone giving a presentation to completely abdicate the responsibility of operating from a space of reason. The role of the non-expert at SexXAtl was to share experiences that participants could potentially identify with or at the very least, have some interest in hearing. Being liberated from the responsibility to state facts meant that facilitators could incorporate a greater diversity of topics, even if that meant sacrificing depth and substance.

However, the inclusion of non-experts also meant that pseudoscientific language was often used. For instance, facilitators and participants alike often referred to sex in terms of “energy.” In this discourse, intercourse becomes an “energetic exchange” and bad sex is caused by an “imbalance in energy” rather than a lack of a communication or simple incompatibility. This understanding of sex as being primarily energetic is certainly generative. It resonated with the participants to the extent that most of the people that I spoke with or listened to described sex in terms of its energetic qualities. It also creates space to talk about the affective and prediscursive aspects of sex and sexuality in a way that does not have to be tethered to identity. For example, it was common to hear participants talk about “vibing” with the sexual energy of potential sex partners. These discussions of sex sidestepped essentializing notions of gender and sexuality to focus on what seem to be indescribable and instantaneous points of connection

between bodies. The discourse on sex as energy also opened up a space of queer world making through what can only be described as magical thinking. One of the black female facilitators taught a workshop on “energetic orgasms.” During the workshop, she described ways that women could reach orgasm through thought — without external stimulation. According to this facilitator, channeling one’s own sexual energy could allow women to direct the flow of that energy to any place on their bodies that they found pleasurable. The facilitator claimed that this practice could empower women to regain control of their bodies — granting them better orgasms on their own and with their partners. Most fascinatingly, she told the participants that through careful cultivation of this practice, she was now able to experience the sensation of having a penis energetically. I am less interested in whether this claim is “true” than I am in understanding what possibilities are opened up through this particular expression of black queer female sexuality. What this facilitator is describing is a type of Body Without Organs that allows her to resist the limitations of anatomy and connect to her own body and those of others in a manner that subverts heteronormativity. If we view the body as wholly individual, finite, and self-contained, then sensation has to end where the body ends— thus, precluding the possibility of orgasms that originate outside the physical body. However, if we think in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the body as a discontinuous, non-totalized series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances, and incorporeal events, intensities, and durations, we can reject the notion that the mind and body are disparate (Grosz). A sensation that is thought is equally real as one that is felt. Further, because the BwO is a “way of understanding how the human body is linked to other bodies, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects,” the “energygasm” could be a site of such linkage.

The connection produced here allows the energy of pleasure to circulate, highlighting the ways in which bodies can connect to bodies in ways that are not bound by anatomy.

Though this language at least appeared to resonate with the participants, it also obscured some of the material realities of sexual experience. Specifically, the focus on sex as energetic in nature makes it difficult to discuss how systems of domination inform both sexual practice and sexual desire. In particular, speaking about sexual attraction as connection (or lack thereof) precludes the possibility of discussing how white supremacy shapes the politics of desirability. Energetic understandings of sex rely on the idea of attraction as inherent and instantaneous rather than as a result of social construction and conditioning.

The pedagogical choices I previously discussed reveal what I believe to be the most important takeaway from SexXAtl. Its facilitators and participants value connection above all else. The focus on pleasure reveals the necessity of using sensation to connect to one's sexual partners. Where communication fails, according to SexXAtl participants, physical touch can succeed. In learning to create the types of sensations that produce pleasure for themselves and their sex partners, these participants were able to connect with themselves and their fellow participants. This sense of connection also sheds light on the ways in which the speakers and the language they used were important pedagogical choices for SexXAtl. While some of the terms that were deployed were unclear, speaking about sex in terms of energy interpellated those attendants and facilitators in the production of their of sexual subjectivity: one that privileges attention to sensation over clinical sexual information.

2.5 Rules and Relationality

Though SexXAtl brings together a diverse group of people, there are particular sources of affinity and relationality that connect the participants. I analyzed this particular aspect of

SexXAtl through the lens of Musser's sensational affinity, a concept that privileges the sensations experienced by the participants rather than their particular identities. Specifically, I seek to group and understand the relations between SexXAtl participants on the basis of the sensations that they seek and experience and the ways that those sensations lead them to share in the collectivity of the SexXAtl experience.

Upon entry participants are given a set of agreements (as opposed to "rules") that they must consent to uphold. This set of agreements unites participants in a common investment in non-hierarchical space and reproduces them as upholders of those agreements. This sense of community through responsibility is echoed in the participants conscious requests to touch one another (one of the agreements) and the almost ubiquitous mention of amplifying silenced voices during the workshop presentation (another rule). Rather than a "safe space," SexXAtl is designed to be experienced by its participants as a space of agreement and commitment to a politics of non-power based relationships that allow for safe exploration of power exchange during both sexual and non-sexual activities. For instance, during the demonstration on spanking, there was a near constant reiteration of the idea of that the recipient of the "impact play" is in control of the situation. While spanking involves a great deal of submission, the participants of SexXAtl validate this form of sexual play because of their shared understanding of the politics of consent that results from the explicit commitment to consent in the guiding principles. The guiding principles explicitly state that a verbal confirmation of consent should precede any physical contact. Further, the principles affirm that participants "have the right to set [their] own boundaries and say no to any unwanted touch, interaction, or attention."

SexXAtl's community politics produces a sense of familiarity that lends itself to openness. During the workshops, participants sit close to one another despite the fact that there is

more than enough space to leave empty chairs between attendees. Breaks are spent making introductions, having conversations about the workshops, and making plans to meet after the day ends. Though this is not atypical behavior for a conference, at SexXAtl, this comraderie seems to signal shared interests and closeness rather than the need to network. Coming together for the purpose of learning and sharing about alternative sex practices seems to produce this closeness. Several attendees spoke openly about having few outlets to discuss their interest in BDSM, nudity, and queer sex practices — all of which were topics discussed in workshops at SexXAtl.

2.6 Centering People of Color

SexXAtl's commitment to centering people of color is similarly enshrined in its guiding principles. The first rule states that “the voices, feelings, and experiences of people of color should be prioritized.” The rule goes on to explain that do to the historical marginalization of people of color and their subsequent erasure from sex education discussions and research necessitates a radical approach to shifting those dynamics. As a result, participants in SexXAtl events are required to state their commitment to the inclusion and prioritization of people of color. Stewart articulated this commitment during the interview when we spoke about her work with black women. She began by explain that, while her focus on black women's pleasure is in some ways reflective of her own subjectivity as a black woman, that focus is also informed by her knowledge of black feminism and black women's history. In particular, she spoke about how the history of black women's bodies being used for the sexual gratification and scientific advances of those in power had inspired her to create events where black women's sexual pleasure would be centered. Stewart expressly stated that her understanding of the historical silencing and erasure of black women as sexual beings prompted her to focus on pleasure as a method of finding an alternative way for black women to relate to their sexual selves. In the

same vein, Stewart talks about the necessity of black women refusing to allow a focus on oppression to impede the search for pleasure. Stewart's politics of pleasure brought the conversation and my inquiries back to "Uses of the Erotic," as Lorde expresses how the erotic and its politics of affirmation and solidarity are vital to the formation and maintenance of black women's communities. For Lorde, the erotic is a space for women to create connections with one another that can begin to repair the damage done by patriarchy and racism and create pathways to move beyond those systems. Much of Stewart's work involves that very goal.

2.7 SexXAdreanna

Truthfully, I did not enjoy SexXAtl at all. While I appreciated the focus on pleasure-based sex education and enjoyed watching the other participants enjoy themselves, that was the extent of my identification with the people and events of that afternoon.

My biggest point of contention is one that is more indicative of living in patriarchal society than anything particular to SexXAtl. I felt very uncomfortable with the ways in which men were constantly pushing sexual boundaries — both in their presentations and in their interactions with me. One of the facilitators gave a workshop about bringing sex-positive politics to non-sex-positive workplaces. Many of the tips were standard (e.g., display a rainbow flag to generate a conversation about your sexuality); however, he also advised attendees to break down taboos around sex by introducing it into non-sexual conversations. He proceeded to tell the audience that during a class that he was teaching at community college, one of the students expressed discomfort with the idea of circumcision. Rather than shifting the conversation to a discussion about where his student's discomfort with the procedure stemmed from, the facilitator claimed that he asked the student whether he was circumcised or not. He then blamed the students' discomfort with that question on "sex negativity." Later that day, during a break, I was

having a casual conversation with one of the other male facilitators when he asked me if I was “sending him sexual energy.” The line between sexual openness and sexual harassment seemed to be blurry at best.

During the final session, which was facilitated by Stewart, I finally found material with which I connected. Stewart’s workshop was about learning your seduction style and involved a multiple-choice quiz to help determine which description fit. Stewart then described each of the seduction styles and asked audience members to share examples of the kinds of sensations that participants liked based on their style. When my style was mentioned, I raised my hand and volunteered that I like when someone I’m interested in goes out of their way to touch to me as they pass me in public. Stewart began nodding her head as I spoke, but before she could respond verbally, the male spanking demonstrator interjected and said what I described was “harassment.” Stewart tried to explain that as long as touch is consensual, it doesn’t fit the definition of harassment. After that interruption, I did not feel motivated to try to connect any further. SexXAtl felt too male-dominated for me to experience connection.

2.8 Conclusion

My interview with Marla Stewart concluded with her sharing her vision for sexual liberation. She spent nearly two minutes describing what sexual liberation meant in the context of her own politics and goals and for her work with Velvet Lips. Stewart contends that fostering her own sexual liberation empowers her to fight for the sexual liberation of others. Additionally, her conceptualization of sexual liberation incorporates a black feminist politics of intersecting oppression. Specifically, she believes that the guilt and shame black women experience in their sexual lives is a direct outgrowth of racist patriarchy. The spirit of explicit and open discussion

and unapologetic search for pleasure is Stewart's response to this oppressive reality and this sentiment is reflected in all of her work, especially SexXAtl.

SexXAtl offers a glimpse into what it looks like for a community to orient itself around sensation rather than identity. The prioritization of pleasure allows for a greater diversity of sexual practices to be explored and desires to be fulfilled. Subverting the label of "safe space," SexXAtl participants created non-hierarchical space with a commitment to constant reevaluation of the terms and conditions of consent. Though my experience with Marla Stewart and SexXAtl did not solely involve black women, Stewart's commitment to black women's pleasure offered tremendous insight into the political possibilities offered by focusing on pleasure.

In this chapter, I have attempted to articulate the conditions under which sensational affinity becomes possible. Sensational affinity depends on the possibility of a diversity of experiences and relations to the sensations transmitted by a particular event. Facilitators made it possible to connect to their experiences by narrating their vulnerabilities; this narration not only destabilized hegemonic discourses, but also allowed for emotional connection and sensation with participants. The sharing of experiences reveals that, even in the absence of identity categories, it is possible to observe shared affinity.

3 CHAPTER THREE: PILLOW TALK

Chapter three contains my analysis of *The Rec Room* and *The Crash Pad*. I use these films to develop my idea of a black lesbian sensorium.

3.1 Creating Visual Space

In the black feminist tradition, the function of visibility has been hotly contested. In most of the canon, the visual field functions primarily as a site of injury for the black female body. One of the fundamental themes of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* framed representation as a major site of racial and sexual inequity while simultaneously constructing dominant images of black women as "singular instruments of violence that produce and reproduce notions of black female sexual alterity" (Nash 35). However, scholars such as Jennifer Nash have sought to reclaim visibility as a site of creative possibility and untapped scholarship. The unthinkable of the black sexual subject in general makes it particularly well situated to find voice and liberation in the realm of visual possibility. In particular, the black lesbian subject, having been simultaneously erased and oppressed, can use the visual field to uncover new ways of experiencing pleasure and making her existence known. *Being*, a photo essay by South African photographer Zanele Muholi, claims space for the black lesbian in the visual archive. Shot mostly in black and white, these portraits show moments of tenderness, eroticism, and contented domesticity between black lesbian couples. By photographing black lesbians of various skin tones, gender expressions, and sizes, Muholi resists notions of black lesbian undesirability and essentialism and creates a visibility that resists marginality by presenting black lesbians as spiritually, socially, and sexually whole. Through *Being*, Muholi speaks back to

criticisms that paint the visual as a trap or site of injury, and creates a black lesbian archive that reveals the possibilities for black lesbian existence, pleasure, and resilience.

Just as Muholi's visual archive creates space within the feminist archive to begin imagining alternatives to black lesbian pain, pornography produced by queer black women can open new pathways of understanding black lesbian sex and the particular sensations and socialities that it produces. In this chapter, I analyze two porn films created by and for black lesbians. The first film is one of queer director T-Wood's most dynamic films which depicts an exchange between performers Papí Coxxx and Stud Slayer titled *The Rec Room*. In the film, we see the two performers — genderqueer Coxxx and stud-identified Slayer— engage in a series of sex acts that incorporates elements of BDSM, oral sex, and penetration using both hands and dildos. In this chapter, I argue that the scene intentionally reconfigures masculinity through the use of strap-ons to create moments of individual and shared pleasure, resignify black queer female masculinity, and produce moments of rupture where traditional masculinity itself gets undone. In the second film, *The Crash Pad*, director Shine L. Houston bucks the conventions of mainstream porn by creating a film that celebrates pleasure, desire, and above all, sex between women that mirrors the actual erotic practices of lesbians. I argue that both films contain affective performances that allow for an expansive conception of black lesbian sex, sociality, and connection.

3.2 Heterosexual Design vs. Same-sex Desire

In *Visualizing the Body*, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí elucidates how power operates through sight. Vision, she posits, can be a colonial tool that allows the user to notice difference in ways that are conducive to the creation of hierarchy. She argues that assumptions made through the lens of the Western gaze are framed as not only true, but universal. Moreover, the distance that

is integral to the act of looking serves to flatten and erode nuance — effectively blinding the viewer from alternate methods of interpreting reality. Specifically, she examines how the Western gender binary leads Western scholars to attempt to impose gendered readings of traditional Yoruba society, which did not have gendered hierarchy, because of the belief that gender hierarchy is a fundamental organizing structure in all societies.

This preoccupation with the visual is the very conceptual trap that led feminists like Adrienne Rich to rail against “male-identified” aspects of sexuality, like S&M and butchness. In the rhetorical shift from conceptualizing feminism as a movement for the liberation of women to an explicitly non-heterosexual discourse, lesbianism became defined as a way to resist the expressly male phenomenon of domination. This rhetorical shift emerged as one of the features of the rift between anti-pornography and pro-sex feminists during the Sex Wars of the late 70s and early 80s.

3.2.1 The Sex Wars

In the late 70s, feminist discourse began to shift toward the topic of sexuality. While several facets of sexuality — including heterosexuality, butch/femme dynamics, and sex work — were part of this burgeoning strain of discussion, pornography became one of the most polarizing topics. As an anti-pornography stance emerged from lesbian feminists like Andrea Dworkin, the often-termed “pro-sex” feminist movement rose to counteract it. This philosophical schism is often known as the Feminist Sex Wars. While it is tempting to reduce these debates to two opposing sides (anti-pornography vs. pro-sex), a more nuanced examination reveals that the interlocutors of the Feminist Sex Wars wrestled with complex ideas about the nature of social power, the importance of historicity, and sexual difference that remain relevant in contemporary feminist politics (Ferguson).

The contentious relationship between feminism and pornography remains one of the most focal and complex aspects of the Sex Wars. Andrea Dworkin, who is perhaps the most well-known anti-pornography feminist, described pornography as a form of male dominance and enactment of male power in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. In *Pornography*, Dworkin claims that pornography “is the essential sexuality of male power: of hate, of ownership, of hierarchy; of sadism, of dominance” (Dworkin, *Pornography* 10). While Dworkin’s claim is certainly incisive, her argument cannot be reduced to a “demonization of male sexuality” (McBride), nor is it sufficient to summarize the diverse theoretical and political work of anti-pornography feminism. At the risk being reductive, anti-pornography feminism was an attempt to disrupt sexual violence against women. Dworkin’s claim that “in a sex-polarized society men also learn about women and sex from pornography” (Dworkin, “Warzone” 197) is difficult to totally dismiss. In fact, it is not unrelated to the argument I make about porn as sexual pedagogy. However, while anti-pornography feminism historicizes all pornography as indicative of essentialized and eternal male domination, there is an argument to be made about the contingency of the function of sexuality and its representation in pornography.

So-called “Pro-sex feminism” is no less complex than its anti-pornography counterpart. While the movement emerged as a response to the anti-pornography feminist strain, its proponents focused on the role of institutions in enforcing sexual norms, which they believed to be a key component of the perpetuation of social control (Ferguson). “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin’s, seminal essay, elucidates the ways social and ideological forces that valorize normative sexuality while demonizing those practices and persons that fall outside of hegemonic standards (Rubin).

While it's neither possible nor advantageous to identify a "central" conflict in the Sex Wars, differing theories of social power appear to have played a key role in this debate. Anti-pornography feminists conceptualized sexuality as a tool of male domination that operates through sexual domination (Ferguson). Sexual domination is then reproduced through the gender and sexual roles within the family structure. Pro-sex feminists located social power within the ability of institutions, interactions, and discourses to separate acceptable sexuality from unacceptable sexuality — thereby validating the former, denigrating the latter, and institutionalizing sexual repression (Ferguson). Both ideologies describe social power in terms that are too simple and too static.

3.2.2 Sex and the Subversive Phallus

In radical feminist discourses, butch women's masculinity became the embodied symbol of patriarchal compliance; their "rejection" of femininity represented an acquiescence to patriarchy and the potential to oppress women. This perceived oppressive power was only compounded by the presence of a phallus. Musser writes, "in her most feared specter as masculine and dominating, the butch wields a dildo" (Musser 41). In this framework, the non-anatomical phallus becomes a penis and therefore, a stand-in for heteropatriarchy. In thinking of the dildo as "just" a phallus, radical feminists missed its potential for undoing. While there were other political and ontological questions at play, the interpretation of the phallus exclusively within the visual senses turned the dildo into a tool that could only penetrate and evacuated it of other possible meanings.

In a revolutionary intervention, Butler assigns new meaning to the dildo with the concept of the lesbian phallus⁴. Rejecting the link between femininity and feminism, Butler re-scripts the dildo as a form of “subversive citationality” that calls attention the phallus’ lack (of meaning in and of itself) rather than interpreting its use as a way of imitating patriarchy (Musser 42). During the Sex Wars in particular, feminists read the phallus as “a violation of lesbian modes of sexual intercourse,” coding it as desire for the masculine, and thereby, a violation of the lesbian feminist protection of femininity and female space. Additionally, it is seen as acquiescing to the heteronormative idea that heterosexual penis-in-vagina (PIV) intercourse is the quintessential sex act, even in relationships between women. Butler turns to psychoanalysis to argue that the phallus does not have to be linked with masculinity; rather, it can be read as an open signifier containing multiple meanings. The lesbian phallus can function as a sort of sexual Rorschach test, having multiple meanings that remain unstable and fluid:

Consider that “having” the phallus can be symbolized by an arm, a tongue, a hand (or two), a knee, a thigh, a pelvic bone, an array of purposefully instrumentalized body-like things. And that this “having” exists in relation to a “being the phallus” which is both part of its own signifying effect (the phallic lesbian is potentially castrating) and that which it encounters in the woman who is desired (as the one, who offering or withdrawing the specular guarantee, wields the power to castrate).” (Butler)

The Rec Room centers around breaking one of the last taboos in porn: showing two masculine-identified black women having sex. Despite this, the scene intentionally subverts the exploitation that characterizes mainstream porn by refusing to turn their encounter into a

⁴ See “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” chapter 2 of Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, for a more in-depth discussion of this reinscription.

spectacle. Rather, the scene intentionally subverts masculinity through the use of strap-ons to create moments of individual and shared pleasure, resignify black queer female masculinity, and produce moments of rupture where gender itself gets undone. In *The Rec Room*, language itself becomes a kind of phallus. There is daddy play⁵ through the scene, where words like “daddy” and “boi” become open signifiers that contain greater meaning than the words themselves denote. When Stud Slayer asks Papí Coxxx if they “like daddy’s dick,” this is not an invocation of incest or even Dom/sub play. Instead, this provocative language provides another way to stroke the sweet spots that result in mutual arousal through a play on power dynamics. In her chapter, “Queer Sociality and Other Fantasies,” Juana María Rodríguez highlights the ways in which sex between queers can be enhanced through an embrace of politically incorrect sexual fantasies. Rodríguez contends that “‘daddy play’ does not condone, engender, or map easily onto actual accounts of coercive incestuous relations,” and that sexual play that addresses real-life power differentials has the potential to serve as expressions of utopian longings (Rodríguez 342). Within these politically incorrect acts of sexual play power dynamics are malleable and participants consent to the roles they embody. The use of fantasy gives queer black and brown bodies the opportunity to imagine a world where power dynamics are mutable rather than static and repressive. Between Slayer and Coxxx, the phallic nature of language creates a new pathway to experience eroticism together.

⁵ Refers to a BDSM practice in which the dominant partner is called “daddy.” It’s considered softer and more lenient than traditionally master-slave dynamics and is also more mainstream.



Figure 3.1 Papí Coxxx performs oral sex on Stud Slayer.

In a particularly memorable scene that occurs around the 15-minute mark, Papí Coxxx once again fellates Stud Slayer’s strap-on (figure 3.1). The act is one of mutual and enthusiastically expressed pleasure as Coxxx can be heard moaning and making eager slurping sounds while Slayer responds to the oral sex as if she can truly feel it. The act culminates in an intense, highly physical orgasm from Slayer — she arches her back and lets out a guttural moan and simulates cumming into Coxxx’s mouth. Though faking orgasms rests firmly within the sexual repertoires of many women, this exchange goes far beyond mere pretending. The phallus becomes an extension of her body, creating a brand new formation and a new terrain upon which to experience pleasure. Thinking of the *Butch Wielding A Dildo* as a type of *Body Without Organs* (BwO) lends itself to a more complex understanding of the function of the dildo in this scene. Viewing the body as wholly individual, finite, and self-contained necessitates that sensation ends where the body ends. In this framework, Stud Slayer could have no “true” connection to the acts performed on the dildo and any sense of sensation would exist purely in her mind. However, thinking in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the body as a

discontinuous, non-totalized series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances, and incorporeal events, intensities, and durations (Grosz), can begin to erode the mind-body dichotomy. A sensation that is thought is equally real as one that is felt. Further, because the BwO is a “way of understanding how the human body is linked to other bodies, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects,” the dildo becomes a site of such linkage (Grosz 171). The connection produced here allows the energy of pleasure to circulate Stud Slayer’s body, culminating in orgasm, which also brings Papí Coxx pleasure, highlighting the ways in which bodies can connect to bodies in ways that are not bound by anatomy.

In *The Rec Room*, connection between bodies serves to multiply pleasure exponentially. One sex act in particular depicts how this connection can allow us to see multiple types of pleasure at once. At the ten minute mark, Papí Coxx straddles Stud Slayer as they have sex (figure 3.2). What unfolds is a rhizomatic depiction of pleasure that occurs at multiple plateaus. The rhizome, as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, represents a resistance to chronological models of history and philosophy. Unlike a linear (or “tree”) model, the rhizome “connects each point to any other point” (Deleuze & Guattari 21). The rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, because a “rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze & Guattari 25). The concept of the rhizome has interesting implications for understanding the way sensation is transmitted. Namely, if we read the actors in this scene as bodies without organs, we can interpret what follows as a rhizomatic depiction of pleasure. In this scene from *The Rec Room*, the act of fucking creates a form of mutual pleasure amplified by acts of individual pleasure. Stud Slayer receives pleasure from her connection to the phallus,

while Papí Coxxx pleasures themselves by stimulating their own anus. In this act of creating multiplicitous and shared pleasure, Papí Coxxx and Stud Slayer resist normative arrangements of power relations. First, through the claiming of pleasure for their queer, black, female coded bodies, they resist the notion that black women's bodies can only be sites of pain. They subvert the idea that masculinity must be unfeeling and selfishly dominating as they verbalize a moment of mutual submission and pleasure. Juana María Rodríguez posits that this type of sexual social bond can begin to recognize and engage interlocking sources of power: "What is sex if not sociality of the most intense order — a place where bodies not only touch but are pushed and pulled into one another, a coming undone predicated on a coming together?" (Rodríguez 339) In this undoing, pleasure creates not only enjoyment but a basis on which to begin the creation of a new sexual politics where the giving and receiving of pleasure need not remain confined to particular formations of gender expression. Moreover, this scene explodes notions of what a stud "should" be and creates new pathways for black women to embody masculinity.



Figure 3.2 Papi Coxx straddles Stud Slayer.

In a recent interview with *Black Lesbian Love Lab*, Stud Slayer spoke candidly about the formation of her identity as a stud as well as her preference for dating other stud-identified women. In particular, she discussed the ways in which prescriptive expectations of her gender performance led her to experiment with relationships outside of the typical stud-femme formation:

All too often the femmes I dated were forcing gender roles on me. I was always the one who had to take out the trash, lift heavy items, do all the work in the bedroom while I got nothing. If I mentioned I wanted to receive sexual pleasure from my femme, I was shamed and teased and told “studs don’t do that” or “studs are not supposed to want to be touched.” WHAT?? After too many encounters like that, I decided I was going to date bois full time AND be open and proud about it! (Black Lesbian Love Lab)

The taboo around so-called stud-for-stud relationships stems from the conceptualization of the stud as part of a binary. Traditionally, studs represent the mutually constitutive counterpart to the femme physically, sexually, and emotionally. While it can certainly be argued that stud-femme relationships inherently resist heteronormativity, the performance of stud identity can at times be

expected to imitate hegemonic masculinity, rendering those who do not conform to these gender expectations illegible to their communities. This unintelligibility stems from the lack of a recognizably coherent gender performance. Judith Butler speaks to the origin of this unintelligibility in *Gender Trouble*, where she contends that gender is a process rather than a fact. Butler does not conceptualize gender as ontological; on the contrary, she contends that repeated actions produce gender as coherent: “gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler 25). Butler thus defines gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 33). For stud-identified black lesbians, acts of transgression — such as dating other studs — disrupt the status quo. However, this disruption opens space for the formation of new types of black lesbian sociality. Namely, these relations resist the notion that masculinity necessitates the denial of pleasure by emphatically claiming sexual and sensual pleasure for studs. These acts of reclamation resist heteronormative constructions of black masculine-of-center lesbians, thereby creating avenues through which to express a multiplicity of black lesbian desires.

In *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Jennifer Nash speaks to the possibility of reading racial fictions as a site of potential agency for black women. She fleshes out the term “ecstasy,” which she defines as “both the possibilities of female pleasure within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy” (Nash 2). Finding these moments becomes almost effortless when the subject is Shine L. Houston’s work. Houston’s films expose and obliterate false dichotomies that exist between

black feminist thought and pornography as she explores the symbols, myths, and representations that were skirted by earlier black lesbian filmmaking, such as black butch and transgender and sexual expressions. Houston situates herself firmly in the tradition of lesbian and feminist porn, claiming to create “adult entertainment that exposes the complexities of queer sexual desire.” Unlike mainstream lesbian porn, her films are not about showing straight men in the Midwest what it looks like for black women to have sex with women; they are emphatically about showing what it feels like for black women to love and have sex with each other and other women. In *The Crash Pad*, Houston makes use of the affective attachments that lesbian viewers have to non-heteronormative sex acts. This affective attachment is the precursor to developing intensity which can be transmitted to the viewer through the depiction of these sexual experiences. One of Houston’s primary modes of generating the flow of sensation from performer to viewer is depicting lesbian penetrative sex as an act of “interior possession rather than a spectacularized event that ends in orgasm” (Stallings 166). In Houston’s porn, rather than fetishizing penetration or framing it as the quintessential sex act, penetration is placed alongside a myriad of lesbian sex acts, all of which are given equal weight. Further, the performers’ gaze, facial expressions, and sounds communicate a sharing of pleasure with the other performers as well as the audience. Said differently, in Houston’s porn, the viewer does not simply see women reach climax; those moments of pleasure are *felt* by all involved.

3.3 Porn as Black Queer Pedagogy

My aim in this project is not to recuperate porn or present it as uncomplicated, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which queer black pornographies serve as a form of sexual pedagogy. Houston’s work serves as an incredible case study of the possibilities engendered by viewing porn as an instructive, affective tool. Houston frequently and explicitly states her goal of

representing queer sexuality in general and black queer sexuality in particular on screen (Stallings). Though her company's slogan is "porn for pussies," her company's mission statement reveals a more complex set of goals:

Pink & White Productions creates adult entertainment that exposes the complexities of queer sexual desire. Taking inspiration from many different sources, Pink & White is dedicated to producing sexy and exciting images that reflect today's blurred gender lines and fluid sexualities. ("About Pink & White Productions")

Through her exploration of modes of sexual engagement that are often rendered invisible, as well as her deliberate creation of sexual imagery to which black queer bodies find themselves attuned, Houston's work serves as a form of black queer pedagogy. *The Crash Pad* in particular fulfills this function in part because of its focus on queer world-making. The universe of *The Crash Pad* is one in which queer women are able to inhabit forms of sexual liberation which we have often been denied. Another facet of this world-building project lies in its transmission of affect and sensation.

Houston's use of affect makes it possible to view the black lesbian sexuality she presents through a lens of sensational affinity. As discussed in Chapter Two, sensational affinity moves beyond discourses of black lesbianism as identity or practice, to theorize the ways in which black lesbianism can be read as method of black women relating to and experiencing the sensations produced by other black women's bodies, rather than simply a "doing" of particular sex acts. *The Crash Pad* allows us to observe these affective exchanges between performers, creating sensation that circulates and interpellates the viewer. Consequently, sensational affinity enables the theorization of a black lesbian sensorium. A sensorium not only functions as a collection of sensations, experiences, and affects; it is also the tool through which these sensations are

experienced. Through the sensorium, it becomes possible to see a proliferation of black lesbian experiences that are otherwise obscured. *The Crash Pad* highlights these unconventional experiences of connection.

3.3.1 Oozing Affects

The opening scene of *The Crash Pad* sets the affective tone for the rest of the film. We see two lovers — a black butch top and a white femme bottom — fucking with a strap-on. The scene shifts from color to black and white back to color, followed by five full minutes of the performers kissing and fucking. The sex occurs in various positions, alternating between oral and phallic stimulation. This oscillation not only adds to the erotic tension of the scene, but presents both forms of penetration as equally relevant, pleasurable, and sensorially significant. In a parodic nod to more traditional porn, the scene becomes a threesome as two other lovers stumble in. The Asian butch joins in as her white femme partner watches — visually centering the female gaze. As the three women engage in acts of oral sex, double penetration, masturbation, and fucking, the fourth woman looks on, and the camera angles and movement within the scene show that her gaze adds to their arousal. As Sara Ahmed instructs, “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed 29). In this scene, affect not only sticks, it drips, oozes, and gushes out. For lesbians, affects like pleasure and desire stick to acts stimulating a nipple with a tongue or being penetrated by a lover’s fingers. When these acts are performed in *The Crash Pad*, the performers experience pleasure and that intensity circulates through the scene and is shared by the viewer. This is what it means for black queer women to feel each other: to be united in and attuned to sensation in such a way that there is the possibility for harmony and connection, as well as discord, between bodies. An

attunement to pleasure — where lesbian pleasure is the impetus for performing in such a film or seeking it out — makes this shared queer affective experience possible.

However, unlike the other scenes, the final scene is solo. Initially, Jo masturbates with a dildo. Similar to the previous performances, she conveys a pleasure that begins inside her and radiates out to be registered by the viewer. Jo's solitude and vulnerability mirrors the viewer's, which serves to amplify the circulation of intensity. The affect is noticeably different in this scene. In the partnered performances, individual acts of pleasure become mutual as bodies interact and sensation and affect circulate. In Jo's solo scene, there's no fragmentation. As she sets the dildo aside and begins using her hands to masturbate, her body becomes its own closed circuit of pleasure and desire. Jo's performance reflects Mirielle Miller-Young's theory about how porn made by black women often "attempts to expand black women's sexual representations, performances, and labor beyond the current limits of the mainstream porn industry and the confines of pervasive stereotypes" (Miller-Young 264). In Houston's shots of Jo, Jo is not shown in snapshots of sexualized parts or fulfilling some stereotype of blackness, womanhood, or queerness. Nor is Jo attempting to subvert or resist those racial and sexual meanings. Rather, she is focused on herself and her pleasure. She's embodying wholeness. As the scene concludes, she brings herself to orgasm. She then looks at the camera and laughs, once more drawing the viewer into her affective orbit — allowing us to become whole, too.

3.4 Sex as Black Lesbian Sociality

The Rec Room provides a context through which to begin rethinking perceptions of the nature of submission. During the multiple strap-on blow jobs that Papí Coxxx performs, it becomes clear that giving fellatio is an act that allows them to give as well as receive pleasure. Throughout each act of fellatio, the viewer can see the pleasure on Papí's face. Their smiles, eye

contact, and moaning signify passion and enjoyment. Rather than “giving to,” it becomes an act of “giving with.” Papi’s method of performing oral sex causes the viewer to rethink what it means to be submissive. Sexual positions in which pleasure is derived from meeting the sexual needs of another need not be equated with acquiescence to patriarchal notions of social sacrifices (Rodríguez). In “Queer Sociality and Other Sexuality Fantasies”, Rodríguez uses a semantic breakdown of the Spanish word for service to describe new ways of thinking about submission. In Spanish, “servicial” is not a dismissal of the recipient as weak, but rather “a compliment that recognizes that person’s willingness to acknowledge and respond to the needs of others” (Rodríguez 338). In this context, submission becomes a way of expressing sexual agency that deploys gendered notions of service as a way of experiencing sexual gratification.

Mainstream pornography positions rhythmic moaning and graphic depictions of male orgasm (i.e., “money shots”) as the singular way to understand pleasure in the context of a sex act. Watched with sound, these scenes hardly look pleasurable — bodies are strangely contorted and women’s faces are frozen into the most attractive facial expression they can make while moaning. This artifice is part of the construction of a sexual fantasy wherein women are the passive recipients of sexual advances to which they will necessarily respond with pleasure. Conversely, the scene between Papi Coxxx and Stud Slayer features plenty of uncontrolled, unstaged, and sometimes unattractive orgasm faces (figures 3.3 and 3.4). The viewer can see that these are expressions of genuine pleasure. Far from searching for the most aesthetically pleasing expression, their faces telegraph that they are in a moment of such intense gratification that the last thing they’re thinking about is the way they look. The difference here lies in the function of indie porn. In scenes like these, the sex acts are intended to arouse the participants foremost, thereby creating pleasure for the audience through the authenticity of the experience. Mainstream

porn on the other hand, prioritizes the reaction of the intended audience, which results in sex acts that (in the case of lesbian sex) often appear forced and unrealistic.



Figure 3.3 Papí Coxxx pleasures Stud Slayer.

Figure 3.4 Stud Slayer dominates Papí Coxxx.

This distinction becomes very apparent in the final sex act of the scene. Stud Slayer fucks Papí Coxxx with her hands, resulting in three orgasms. It's implied that Papí Coxxx squirts during the final orgasm; however, this cannot be seen on camera. Rather than zooming in for this "money shot," the camera remains still, allowing the pleasure on Papí's face and in their voice to frame the scene. This focus on facial expression represents a significant departure from mainstream porn in which the vagina in general and squirting in particular are fetishized (Kerr and Hines). The use of camera angles to depict the sex acts in their totality rather than as fragmented pieces of spunk bank material is an aesthetic strategy that is deployed through the scene. At times, the viewer can't help but long for a better "view"; however, it is clear that this interaction is not about an outside gaze. Rather it is about exploding boundaries, creating new territory, and having really, really pleasurable sex.

The scene between Papí Coxxx and Stud Slayer concludes with an interview. Fully clothed, they recount the moments they found most enjoyable in the shooting of the scene. Once again, individual pleasure becomes mutual as they each share their favorite moments and find that some of them overlap. A particularly well-executed pornographic scene cannot completely dismantle systems of oppression or alter the subject position of black masculine of center queer women, but this sexual encounter offers a generative space for pleasure and healing for both the performers and the audience. In this way, sex can become a site of radical praxis. Fucking outside of the lines drawn by heteronormativity can help us begin to dream about life outside those constraints. Juana María Rodríguez expresses this hope most eloquently in “Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies”:

Yet through our real and imagined sexual encounters, queers enact the possibility of disentangling bodies and acts from preassigned meanings, of creating meaning and pleasure anew from the recycled scraps of dominant cultures. (Rodríguez 338)

4 CONCLUSIONS

Viewing *The Crash Pad* and *The Rec Room* through the lens of sensational affinity offers an entry point to understand how sensational can circulate even when bodies are not physically present in the same space. Beyond the mere representation of desire, these films use sensations and their attendant affects to generate modes of experiencing sensation that disrupt the binary between viewer and performer. Rather than conceptualizing pleasure as a problem or a secondary aspect of sex that needs to be conceded to prevention, sensational affinity grants an opportunity to see pleasure as central. Similarly, the pleasure-centered sex education offered by Velvet Lips rejects the notion of the proper sexual subject. Where clinical sex education seeks to create subjects devoid of social, cultural, and political attachments to sex, pleasure-centered sex education attempts to integrate the subject through an interrogation of the dimensions of pleasure that defy rationality. Queer pornography and pleasure centered sex education each provide an alternative sexual pedagogy that promotes connection — allowing sensation to flow and create sensational affinity.

Sensational affinity helps us understand sexual desire without relegating it to the realm of identity. In other words, the experiences of both the participants at SexXAtl and the viewers and performers Houston's and T-Wood's films can be read through a lens of collectivity and are not necessarily legible as identitarian experiences. The sensation of narrating taboo desires or watching Papí Coxxx fellate Stud Slayer's strap-on produce connection because they allow for connection with other bodies. The desire to experience such sensations then allows *Bodies Without Organs* to emerge. Unlike the imposition of identity, sensational affinity generates the

opportunity to theorize experience without having to attach those experiences to particular social categories.

Participation in these new modes of sexual experience do not map easily onto notions of resistance. The black queer women attending SexXAtl or participating in queer pornography do so not to subvert dominant narratives, but as a method of building other worlds and exploring other possibilities for sexual experience. These methods form the crux of my articulation of the black lesbian sensorium. In my concept of the black lesbian sensorium, black lesbianism becomes a way of reading the ways in which black women relate to and experience the sensations produced by other black women's bodies as well as their own. The sensorium reveals black lesbian experiences that would be elided otherwise. For instance, an identitarian view of black lesbianism would not necessarily include a black women experiencing pleasure or discomfort as a participant in the "Earning Your Pleasure" workshop I discussed in Chapter 2. While I argue that the facilitator's methods undermined sensational affinity, the possibility that some of the black women participants felt a connection to that demonstration cannot be totally dismissed. Interpreting this experience through the lesbian sensorium allows us to understand those kinds of experiences as a result of black women experiencing connection to other black women's bodies, even if those connections are complex and contingent.

I chose to focus on sex because it is an embodied act that helps us organize our lives. Departing from heteronormative modes of sexual practice and identification, the subjects I studied helped me see how sex can help us understand power and connection. In the queer porn films, sex became an avenue through which to reframe submission as well as masculinity. Through this exploration of black lesbian sex, I have attempted to argue that sex can help us understand how black lesbians relate to one another, sexually and otherwise. Using sensational

affinity, we can look at the sensations that produce connection between black lesbians and theorize black lesbian sociality. This leaves room for other registers of sensation, like smell and the haptic. What would it look like, for instance, to theorize a black lesbian haptic sense? In conclusion, while it is not possible to identify a single black lesbian sensation, we can use sensational affinity to multiply its possibilities exponentially.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What was the impetus behind your decision to create Velvet Lips?
2. Do you consider your work political? In what way? What about this political and historical moment makes your work significant?
3. Our ideas about the act of sex are influenced by power (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy, classism). In what ways do those definitions influence the work that you do? Do you think it is possible to subvert those power structures through sex? Is that important to you?
4. Looking at your work — from things like the sexy selfie workshop to SexXATL — pleasure takes precedence. Why is this? How does focusing on pleasure make your work different from other kinds of sexual education?
5. Thinking more about pleasure — How do you see black women's relation to pleasure? How and why do you center black women's pleasure in your work?
6. Your work is inclusive of all genders, but women's sexuality is front and center. When I look at the titles of your events and their descriptions, you are definitely catering to a female audience. Is this intentional? If so, why?
7. In what ways do you think black lesbians in particular benefit from your work? How does their experience and engagement differ from that of other participants?
8. In your experience, what role does affinity play in people's engagement with sexual communities?

9. How do you see people's conceptions of their own identities relate to their sexual exploration?
10. How do you define sexual liberation? Do you think sexual liberation should be the goal of black feminists?
11. How do you define community? How are communities built around sexual liberation different from other communities?
12. Can you describe the range of reactions or responses that you get from people who participate in your events?
13. How do you figure out what people are getting from your workshops? What are your goals?
14. How do you know if an event has been successful?