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Hybrid – Can That Be My Nickname?: Intersectionality, Afro-Nihilism, And The Otherly Existence Of Queer Black Women

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HYBRID – CAN THAT BE MY NICKNAME?: INTERSECTIONALITY, AFRO-NIHILISM,
AND THE OTHERLY EXISTENCE OF QUEER BLACK WOMEN

by

BRYANA DELOIS JONES

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

For Black women, recognizing, accessing, and exercising their ability to disrupt hegemonic categories of normativity is an important project. A combination of misogyny/sexism and racism relegates all Black women in America to an intersecting space of multiple marginalizations, and Black masculine lesbians ultimately occupy a space in the intersection of no less than four different oppressions: race, gender, sexuality, and gender nonconformity. This project examines, through narrative inquiry – primarily the poetic of storytelling – the ways that Black masculine lesbians, due to their particular positionality, experience an alternative, Otherly ontological existence. It also investigates the ways in which Black masculine women navigate, and ultimately transgress and subvert white heteropatriarchal standards of masculinity while concurrently creating an alternative space of performance within which they navigate/resist violence and access personal power.

INDEX WORDS: Black masculinities, Intersectionality, Afro-nihilism, Black feminist thought, Ontology, Queer black women

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BRYANA DELOIS JONES

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

Master of Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents, Ildiko Henni-Jones and George Dan Jones, for paving the path on which I walk and always guiding the way, and to my best friend, Sade' Collins, for holding my hand and walking it with me.

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This project is the outcome of a collaborative effort between myself and many others. I would like to acknowledge those people and offer my sincerest gratitude for their contributions that have allowed me to engage in this work, and helped make this chapter in my life revelatory:

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The Indigenous peoples of Georgia, and Atlanta particularly, upon whose land I have conducted this work. I acknowledge this project as the privileged indirect outcome of colonization, violence, and trauma against the original people of this land.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Power? I do have power. Power is choice. Power is free will, you know?...You can be whoever you want to be. That is the fact, and that is power.”

- Sara Cohen, personal interview

For Black women, the project of recognizing, accessing, and exercising their ability to disrupt prescribed social categories of normativity is an important one, particularly in the context of America’s white supremacist heteropatriarchy. An insidious combination of misogyny/sexism and racism, defined as misogynoir by Moya Bailey, relegates all Black women in America to an intersecting space of multiple marginalizations (Bailey 2010). Due to homophobia and heteronormativity, Black lesbian women are even further marginalized by these interlocking oppressions. Black masculine lesbians, sometimes referred to as studs, must also negotiate the gender binary and socially normal and normative constructs of gender expression. Black masculine lesbians ultimately occupy a space in the intersection of no less than four different oppressions – race, gender, sexuality, and gender nonconformity. As Blackness in white supremacy is negatively constructed to delimit the boundaries of whiteness, and by extension, humanness, studs’ Blackness positions them even deeper into the status of non-Being.

As form of Black existence, the stud is ungendered (Spillers 1987) and nonontological (Warren 2015). As queer, she is unfree (Stanley 2011, Warren 2015). As female, she is inherently once-removed from the normal humanity of manhood. As all three concurrently, her existence does not register on the scale of Western human grammars. Therefore, the nonontology of Blackness, and the social – and literal – annihilation of the Black female queer, intersect, and this intersection ultimately creates a unique space that begets two mutually reinforcing realities.

First, because of their unique position at the intersection of multiple oppressions, Black masculine lesbians subvert hierarchical binary classifications that are endemic to Western modes of conceptualizing knowledge. In other words, Black masculine lesbians, due to their particular positionality within a white supremacist heteropatriarchy, transgress and subvert Western binary classifications, and thus are placed outside the scope of what is socially “acceptable,” or even comprehensible. However, it is precisely this – existence outside of the prescribed categories of normativity and comprehension – that allows Black masculine lesbians to transgress those categories.

Because they are, at least ontologically, outside of the realm of what is read as human, human classifications of gender do not properly translate when performed by Black masculine lesbian bodies. Horton-Stallings (2015) argues that the grammars usually associated with the human can, because of the otherness of Blackness, be “overwritten by nonhuman grammars” (131). The Black, as other, is not, and in fact cannot be, bound by the delimitations of what Horton-Stallings refers to as Greco-Roman and Enlightenment, or white/Eurocentric, ideals. Spillers (1987) argues that the theft of Black bodies during chattel slavery – “a willful and violent...severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (67) – caused the loss of Black gender difference, as “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (67). She further argues that because of these willful and violent processes, “every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding the African-American person” (78), and “gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female in this historic instance” (79). If Black bodies are conceptualized, as Spillers asserts, as ungendered nonhumans that are

undifferentiated and nonspecific, then it is effectively impossible to conceptualize Black masculine lesbian “gender” performance within Western confines of gender roles, rules, and norms. Queer Black women are thus able to perform and exist outside of these human/ontological grammars. Effectively, the violence of ontological annihilation to which Black masculine lesbians are subjected begets a different lived experience and manner of existence. Such women cannot ostensibly be bound by limitations that were never meant to, and never will, apply to them, as society cannot limit or otherwise control what doesn’t – and perhaps never did – exist. Because they are incapable of attaining and performing hegemonically normative humanist scripts, Black masculine lesbians ultimately “[have] nothing to prove” (74) to respectable and proper gender and personhood.

In my project, I examine the ways that Black masculine lesbians, due to the particular intersection at which they exist, experience an alternative, otherly ontological existence. I also investigate the ways in which they navigate, and ultimately transgress and subvert white heteropatriarchal standards of masculinity while concurrently – and seemingly contradictorily – creating an alternative masculinized space of performance within which they navigate and resist violence and access personal power. Specifically, I investigate the interpersonal, sexual and romantic possibilities that exist for Black masculine lesbians outside of both “normal” and normative ways of being and recognized ontological structures. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks proposed by Black feminist scholars, masculinities studies scholars, Afro-pessimists, nihilists, and the stories of two Black masculine lesbian women in Atlanta, Georgia, this project investigates the myriad ways in which Black masculine lesbians are affected by hegemonic social constructions and systems of oppression.

Afro-nihilism constructs Blackness as a unique, nonontological object position that begets incomparable oppressions. Consequently, Afro-nihilism as a theoretical framework argues against intersectionality, suggesting that the omnipresent dereliction of Blackness negates other oppressive social power structures. This is an inherently problematic premise. People do not live single-issue lives, and it is therefore impractical, if not impossible, for us to contend solely with single-issue struggles. (Lorde 1984, 138). While a very useful framework for conceptualizing Blackness as nonontological and fungible, Afro-nihilism is unable to comprehensively flesh out the difference between the theoretical single-issue struggle of this dereliction, and the real, lived, multi-issue struggles of derelict Black people who are also non-straight and/or non-male. I therefore apply a Black feminist epistemology to use Afro-nihilism intersectionally in this project in hopes of better incorporating the theory with the lived reality.

In Chapter 1, I investigate, through familial lineage, the historical and present social nonontology of Blackness in white supremacy. I suggest that generations of trauma and the enaction/reception of physical, emotional, and epistemological violences create and are created by the social nonontology of Blackness. In Chapter 2, I propose a both/and framework for the unique positionality of queer Black women. I concede that Blackness is an inherent structural position of nonontology, while simultaneously using intersectionality to acknowledge heteropatriarchy and understand the ways in which the social nonontology of Blackness manifests in the lived experiences of Blacks who are also queered lesbian and sexed female. In Chapter 3, I investigate this unique intersection, and explore the potential internal, interpersonal, and social possibilities this intersection and positionality begets, and suggest that masculine-identified Black lesbians occupy a unique social space that is predicated on visibility rather than

ontology. I propose that Black masculine lesbians are placed outside of the categories of comprehensible sexuality and gender, and are thereby able to transgress them.

1.1 Research Questions

Given the societal hegemonic overvaluation of white heteropatriarchal masculinity that makes it impossible for Black masculine lesbians to perform it as a way of accessing humanity, this project pursues the following research questions:

1. How do Black masculine lesbians define masculinity?; How do they feel their masculinity relates or is compared to normative masculinity? How does hegemonic masculinity impose scripts of appropriate masculine performance/behavior? Do Black masculine lesbians feel like they successfully perform masculinity, and in what contexts?
2. In what ways, if any, do Black masculine lesbians' interlocking oppressions make them feel socially erased and/or invisible? Do they feel as though the particular intersections of their identity makes them particularly vulnerable to violence? If so, how do they respond to that reality?
3. What sexual/romantic, interpersonal, and internal possibilities do Black masculine lesbians create in response to their socio-epistemological nonontology (erasure)? Is it possible for these alternative ways of existing to be conceptualized as personal power and resistance?

2 THE THEORY

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white... White is what woman is; not-white... is what she'd better not be
- Lorraine O'Grady

Blackness is an exclusion that enables ontology... Blackness is unthinkable, innominate, and paradoxical. In essence, Blackness exists to not exist.
- Calvin Warren

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 “We Already Lost; We’re the Symbol of What Not to Be:” Afro-Nihilism and Black Female Nothingness

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers (1987) provides an analysis of Black people’s subordinated, marginalized, and disenfranchised position in modern America, situating their condition in the context of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery. Spillers argues that through the trauma of the middle passage, “a vast background without boundaries in time and space” (71), and the arrival into a white supremacy for the sole purposes of enslavement and colonization, Black people have been stripped of autonomous ontology, and have been relegated to an inherently captive object position, one in which the body is “reduce[d] to a thing, becoming *being* for the captor” (67). As dehumanized “things,” Black bodies are consequently ungendered, wherein “male” and “female” Black bodies are ultimately nonspecific and undifferentiated. Spillers argues that the theft of Black bodies – “a willful and violent...severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (67) – caused the loss of Black gender difference, as “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (67). Additionally,

“one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” (72). In other words, the transatlantic slave trade was a process of theft, dehumanization and captivation, through which Black bodies became ungendered, undifferentiated objects whose ontologies were heteronomous, created by and for their captors.

In his book *Red, White and Black*, Frank Wilderson (2010) uses Spillers’ theory of Black ungendering to propose a similar argument: that Black people have been, through the process of slavery, disembodied and dehumanized, deconstructed into mere “things” (298) of “flesh” (313) in relation to the construction of white people as “beings” (299) and “bodies” (313). Wilderson elaborates upon this concept by arguing that to be Black is to be inherently captive, to be dehumanized and made a “thing,” and to ultimately be rendered bodiless. He critiques both white feminist (Butler 1990) arguments about the performativity of gender, and the consequent tendency of some scholars to argue that the “performativity” of race and Black/white relations is analogous to the performativity of gender and male/female relations (314). Wilderson argues that “the typical white feminist gesture...assumes that all women (and men) have bodies, ergo all bodies contest gender’s drama of value” (314). The problem with this assumption, Wilderson asserts, is that because Black people do not have socially-recognized bodies, the Black is “neither female, nor male” (314), but “thing.”

The positionality of Blackness as un/nongendered, bodiless, and “thing” consequently produces and reproduces the object-thingness of Black (female) sexuality. According to Wilderson, to be woman is to be white, to be virgin, and to have a sexuality “so meaningful as to be inaccessible, forbidden” (306). Women’s sexuality – white and virginal – is illusorily hyper-valued. In other words, it is valued specifically because its ontology allows for it to be policed,

determined, and defined by white supremacist heteropatriarchal scripts of normativity; this valuation is illusory because it marginalizes (white) women's sexuality while purporting to value it. Conversely, to be Black (woman) is to be female, to be slave, and to "be so hyperbolically sexual" (306) as to have no coordinates, and therefore, no existence. Thus, Black female sexuality is unvalued because of its inability to be ontologically valued. Because one cannot contain what does not exist, white supremacist heteropatriarchy cannot properly control Black sexuality, and Black flesh is ultimately rendered sexually valueless.

The devaluation of Black female sexuality necessitates its construction as "deviant." This construction is, in part, an attempt to regain control of the "always already colonized Black female body [which] has so much sexual potential that it has none at all" (Hammonds 2004, 305). However, it is concurrently a means by which white women's (hetero)sexuality is delimited: "the female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white, or prototypically Black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of 'woman.' White is what woman is; not-white... is what she'd better not be" (O'Grady 1992, 14). Thus, Black female sexuality is contingent upon the normal, meaningful existence of White women's sexuality, while White women's sexuality is secured through the deviant, meaningless nonexistence of Black female (hyper)sexuality. This mutual relationship is also predicated on the normal (hetero)sexuality of whiteness and the deviant sexuality of Blackness, and on the humanity of queerness and the nonontology/nonhumanity of Blackness.

Collins similarly asserts that racism and homophobia both require the construction of sexual deviancy for meaning. For the former, “the point of deviance is created by a *normalized White heterosexuality* that depends on a *deviant Black heterosexuality* to give it meaning” (Collins 2004, 97) For the latter, “the point of deviance is created by this very same *normalized White heterosexuality* that now depends on a *deviant White homosexuality*” (97).

Heterosexuality is therefore contingent upon whiteness for normalcy; Blackness renders any sexuality abnormal. Heterosexuality is additionally contingent upon the existence of homosexuality, as the normality of the former is delimited by the deviance of the latter. However, homosexuality, and queerness generally, is raced white, and therefore, within the scope of ontology – deviant and abnormal – but human, nonetheless. Calvin Warren (2015) defines queerness as, “an experience of unfreedom” (6), wherein “unfreedom brings the subject to the limit of subjectivity, but it is a limit, nonetheless” (15). Thus, to be queer is to be marginalized and abused, and in many aspects, erased in discourse; it is the “site of a subjectivity pushed to its limit – pushed, but yet within the scope of humanity” (22).

Building upon Spillers’ and Wilderson’s concepts of Black ungendering, and Collins’ notion of white (homo)sexual deviance, Warren (2015) argues, that the “Black queer” is an ontological impossibility within America’s white supremacist heteropatriarchal society. Citing Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Warren asserts that the Black body is an inherently captive object position, “reduced to a ‘thing,’ a being for the captive” (21). Warren consequently argues that this captive object position of Blackness is a structural position of nonontology, which he defines as a negative axis of being/existence that secures the boundaries and delimits the coordinates of the human (6). Defined as “an exclusion that enables ontology,” Warren asserts that Blackness “is pure object delimiting the boundaries between the human subject and

its predicating verbs. As an object, it...lacks a coherent grammar of suffering” (9), because “suffering belongs to the human” (10), which the Black-as-object is not. In other words, “blackness *exists to not exist*” (7); human *is* what is *not* Black, and Black *is* what *is not* human.

Unlike Blackness, queerness is a subject position, and therefore, a position of existence; it is the liminal subject vis-à-vis the derelict object that is Blackness (17). Thus, queerness, as humanness, is predicated on the nonontology of Blackness. The Black queer, then, “does not, and cannot, exist” (6), as it is ontologically impossible to simultaneously *be* and *not be*. Of course, Warren’s assertion of Black queer nonontology is philosophical. In other words, there are, physically, Black people who identify as LGBTQ+; thus, Black queers do exist, literally and corporeally. Despite their corporeal existence, however, Black LGBTQ+ individuals do not exist, or rather, occupy a space of nonexistence, in America’s social and intellectual consciousnesses.

In this space of nonontology, Warren describes Black queerness as a catachresis, emphasizing the impossibility of “folding the Black queer into humanity” (11). This inability to read Black queers as human consequently cultivates a culture of violence that attempts to reconcile, and ultimately rectify, this impossibility by eliminating it. Because Black queers “do not exist,” this violence is contradictory, and ultimately rendered “incomprehensible and unthinkable – symbolically and ethically” (11), since human grammars that articulate and enact violence cannot be enacted against the nonexistent or nonhuman. Warren describes the incomprehensible impossibility of this violence as “onticide,” asserting that gratuitous violence enacted upon Black queers, particularly in the form of murder, “illustrates...the fatal collision between an irresolvable conflict (Blackness) and an experience of ‘unfreedom’ (Queerness)” (12). This collision is not fatal because death occurs, as expelled objects lacking subjectivity

experience onticide before any violence is enacted (12). Rather, this collision is fatal because of racism and homophobia's inability to reconcile subject with object, leading to both the excessive brutality, and the inability to comprehend such brutality, against a Black queer body, which ultimately causes society's inability to see, recognize, grieve, care about, or stop this violence.

Citing the brutal murder, dissection, and defacement of the remains of Steen Fenrich, Warren asserts that the violence to which Black queers are subjected "exceeds the logic of utility – [it is] a violence whose 'end' is simply to reproduce the panicked pleasure that constitutes it. Physical death...is not sufficient satiation; even after the biological functioning of the body ceases...the aggressor continues to mutilate the body, postmortem, as ending 'biological life' is not the real aim of this sadistic drive" (13). Rather, the real aim is to ensure that brutality continues past death and beyond utility and reason in an attempt to eliminate Black queerness (as nothingness) from subjective existence. Additionally, "one cannot rely on 'rational instruments' to resolve an irrational dilemma," and therefore "any 'solution' or 'corrective' to this problem [the incomprehensibility of Black queers] would also have to reside 'outside of the normative times of life and death' and outside of reason itself," (13). Overkill, eradicating the irreconcilable, becomes as the solution to the Black queer problem. Eric Stanley (2011) supports Warren's assertion regarding the ontology of white queerness, noting that "not all who might identify under the name *queer* experience the same relationship to violence. For sure, the overwhelming numbers of trans/queer people who are murdered in the United States are of color" (9). That white queers are often spared from the violence to which Black queers are subjected certainly supports Warren's (2015) assertions that white queers have a "'grammar of suffering' to register this violence as violence" (15), and consequently, white queers are recognized as human, no matter how close to the limits of subjectivity they might be. Black

queers do not have this grammar of suffering, and the irreconcilability of their identities subjects Black queers to an incomprehensible gratuitous violence that is not – and cannot be – conceived of as such.

Warren ultimately argues that Blackness is a unique object-positionality that begets oppressions that are unparalleled to those of sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, etc. Like Warren, I too maintain that Blackness is a derelict object position – one that is unique and incomparable to other systems and experiences of oppression. Nevertheless, I offer that the fungible dereliction of Blackness does *not* negate the existence and effects of other oppressive power structures on the lived realities of multiply-marginalized Black people. Calvin Warren argues against the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework, alleging that doing so conflates the particular ontological violence of Blackness with other, “lesser” forms of oppression. Warren is also a cisgender, gender-conforming, visually straight-passing Black male whose lived reality has never been, and will never be, that of a gender-nonconforming Black lesbian. It is imperative that we actively acknowledge the ways in which our own positionalities and identities shape our perspectives. Although Black folks of all anatomical sexes are socially ungendered, this ungendering is neither monolithic nor unaffected by hegemonic societal narratives about the inferiority of all women, poor people, disabled and queer people.

Black women, in academia and society generally, have been forced by binary oppositional logic to choose a loyalty to their race or their gender, and intersectionality as a theoretical frame developed as a direct consequence of Black women’s rejection of such a dangerous masculinist logic. I argue that any call, particularly by Black men, for Black women to eschew intersectionality, flattens and delegitimizes the realities of Black womanhood in a society

that is simultaneously white supremacist and misogynistic/patriarchal. I therefore suggest that we move away from an either/or framework rooted in the very binary oppositions that Black feminist academics should be endeavoring to subvert. Under an either/or binary framework, it becomes impossible to recognize and contend with the oppressions of sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism that shape the lives of Black masculine lesbians. This binary frame also inherently positions sexism/heterosexism as lesser, secondary and tertiary oppressions, a logic The Combahee River Collective, Crenshaw, Collins and others have labored for decades to dismantle. If we reject binary oppositional logic and allow for of a “both/and” reality, we can understand the violent nonontology of Blackness while simultaneously contending with the realities of sexism and heterosexism in queer Black women’s lives.

When the Black is queer, s/he is a catachresis proximal to a specific homophobic-racist violence: overkill. This acknowledgement of the different violences enacted upon Black straights and Black queers is in effect an acknowledgement of intersectionality. When the Black queer is female, overkill is underpinned by misogyny in addition to homophobic anti-Blackness. It is in this particular intersection that many Black masculine lesbians realize a particular social, epistemological, and ontological overkill, wherein the violence is enacted not only to maintain the nonontology of Blackness, but also to annihilate abnormal Black female queerness in its entirety. This is depicted in F. Gary Gray’s *Set It Off* through the character Cleo, portrayed by Queen Latifah. As much of the film’s Black masculinity was channeled into Cleo, she ultimately constructed as a “receptacle for the embattled, outlawed, and virulently ‘heterosexual’ articulations of ‘black masculinity’ that undergird ‘ghettocentrism’” (Keeling 2003, 37). Keeling argues that Cleo carries the “burden” of Black masculinity within the film in order for the other three female protagonists to be read as feminine, heterosexual women (37). Moreover, as

femininity and masculinity are mutually constructed and performed, Cleo's Black masculine identity constructs, and is constructed by, her partner Ursula's visible femininity. Cleo's Black masculinity is "consolidated and valorized" (40) vis-à-vis Ursula's femininity, and Ursula is identified as a femme lesbian solely through her relationship with "her butch, Cleo," (43) without whom, Ursula would ostensibly be read as a heterosexual woman. Thus, Ursula and Cleo's respective femininity and masculinity are contingent upon each other, as are their constructions as lesbians in a butch-femme relationship. However, "because Cleo's female masculinity resists recuperation into a heterosexual economy, her homosexuality poses a significant challenge to...organizations of social life that assume a strict correspondence between biological sex...and gender expression (38).

Furthermore, while Cleo's murder is, in the context of a Blaxploitation film, constructed as "heroic," her slow and highly dramatized death scene, in which she "dies in a barrage of bullets fired by police officers" (39) supports Warren's assertion: Black queer death is meant to be brutal beyond utility, reason, and biological death itself. This brutality is exacerbated when the Black queer is female and gender nonconforming, as misogynoir and heteronormativity further subvert the Black queer and relegate her to a position of social, epistemological, and philosophical incomprehensibility. As Keeling notes, "in order to extract value from the...viewers interactions with Cleo, *Set It Off* subjects that viewer to the spectacle of Cleo's violent, heroic death" (39). Cleo's role in the film was, effectively, to delimit the identities of the non-queer/straight-passing characters, and her value in the film was entirely predicated upon her being the victim of glorified, gratuitous overkill.

2.1.2 “The Protector, The Pimp...They Have Their Roles:” Black Masculinity and Lesbian Gender Performance

Black Masculinity studies scholars assert that Black cisgender men’s failed attempts to attain hegemonic, or straight, white, cisgender male masculinity, are fundamentally and inherently futile due to the exclusive nature of hegemony. Unable to perform this form of masculinity or attain its benefits, some Black cisgender men may attempt to perform a mimicry of straight, white, masculine male performance. Such an imitative performance of hegemonic masculinity is one form of protest-masculinity, defined as “a pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings, sometimes among ethnically marginalized men, which embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 847-48). Black men’s expressions of protest masculinity “seize upon opportunities for projecting male dominance, possibly functioning as a means to vent the extra frustrations that Black men experience in a racist society, while also shoring up a sense of identity in an uncertain world” (Elijah Ward 2005, 498-499). However, these failed attempts to perform hegemonic masculinity and attain its benefits often cause psychological and physiological damage to Black men and their communities. For example, hegemonic and protest masculinity’s expectation that men suppress their emotions often leaves Black men empty, conflicted, aggressive, alienated from themselves, and generally psychologically damaged (Mutua 2006, 15). Additionally, the expectation that men be dominant and exert power-over – physically, sexually, and financially – often leads men to engage in physical aggression/violence, sexual violence and misogyny, and work-related violence (Collins

2006, 86, 88, 90). Mutua similarly asserts that hegemonic and protest-hypermasculinities are predicated upon the domination, exploitation, and oppression of others (5).

Black men have undoubtedly suffered, and continue to suffer, under the constraints of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and the inevitable toxic hegemonic and hyper-masculinities that accompany them. Damaging scripts rigidly define and regulate Black male gender and sexual expression, restricting the ways in which Black men understand and relate to others and themselves. Nevertheless, under a white supremacist heteropatriarchal social system, hegemonic masculinity is rigid, regardless of the gender identity of its performer. In other words, masculine-identified people of all genders, are, in various ways, expected to adhere to patriarchy's rigid constructs of masculinity and conceptions of so-called appropriate masculine behavior. Rigid patriarchal constructs rely on seemingly-natural oppositional and hierarchical binaries that shape "our thinking in mutually exclusive categories so that masculinity, reason, and objectivity are defined by the absence of femininity, affect and subjectivity" (Peterson 1996, 18). It is important to emphasize that "masculinities do not first exist and then come into contact with femininities; they are produced together, in the process the constitutes a gender order," (Connell 1999, 7). Consequently, within this patriarchal, androcentric "gender order," masculinity and its associated attributes are privileged, while femininity and its corresponding traits are devalued. However, masculinity is privileged predominantly in the contexts of whiteness and gender conformity. That is, "masculine conduct with a female body is felt to be anomalous or transgressive, like feminine conduct with a male body" (5).

Thus, the oppressive constructs to which Black women are subjected that strictly define and enforce gender/sexual roles and norms are further complicated by a racist framework that

that masculinizes Black femalehood. Amber Musser (2014) reminds us that “female innocence was generally figured as belonging to white women. Owing to legacies of slavery and racism, black women were already read as separate from an economy of innocence and femininity...these discourses worked to masculinize her, thereby aligning her with the butch” (55). Of course, this does not mean that all Black women were, and are, innately masculine, lesbian, or stud-identified. Rather, it is to say that Black women are constructed by hegemonic white supremacist patriarchy as both inherently hypersexual and outside of femininity. Under this construction, the Black female body is inherently anomalous and transgressive, becoming, in certain contexts, a surface upon which to map non-normative forms of masculinity.

America’s societal overvaluation of masculinity reinforces rigid hegemonic and categorical prescriptions of gender normativity and appropriate masculine presentation/behavior for studs. Because Black protest-hypermasculinity utilizes intensified versions of white hegemonic masculine characteristics, including sexism, homophobia, and misogyny/misogynoir, Black masculine lesbians are concurrently subordinated by both white and Black male masculinity. However, because white supremacist hegemonic ideals are pervasive, perhaps even omnipresent, they are susceptible to internalizing, and attempting to adhere to, the very gendered, raced, and sexed messages that cause their subordination. Some may strongly feel the need to “correctly” perform their masculinity in order to minimize the negative effects of their gender transgression. However, I argue that, due to the nonontology of Blackness, and the consequent social annihilation of Black queer women through the relegation to incomprehensibility, prescribed categories of sexual and gender normativity do not – and in fact, cannot – apply to studs in the first place.

Black masculine female gender expression is – in the context of a heteronormative society that relies exclusively upon binary classifications to categorize individuals – multidimensional, complex, and inherently disruptive of the white supremacist heteropatriarchal hegemonic power structures that be. Studs’ simultaneous Blackness, homosexuality, femaleness, and masculinity is particularly subversive of Western hegemonic norms, as their lesbian masculinity is rooted in, and an active resistance of, America’s anti-Black, misogynistic history. According to Lane-Steele (2011), in order to understand studs’ masculinities, we must first outline “the historical roots of Black masculinities in the South” (482). She describes the various “continuous assaults [that] have been made on Black masculinities” (482) under slavery: “During slavery, Black men were tortured, humiliated, commodified, and persecuted...these unrelenting and brutal attempts to emasculate Black men have prevented Black masculinity from attaining what Kimmel, Connell, and other gender scholars call hegemonic masculinity” (482), which is described as “the exclusion of ‘others’ – women, nonwhite men, nonnative-born men, homosexual men” (483).

Lane-Steele further asserts that “even though only the most privileged of men can access hegemonic masculinity, it is normative and desired by all people who embody masculinity” (482-83). Consequently, the less-privileged “others” sometimes embody masculinities which are formed “under situations of cultural, historical, and economic oppression” (483). It is important to emphasize the plurality of masculinities, however; masculinities are not “homogenous states of being,” and “do not exist prior to social interaction, but come into existence as people act” (Connell 88). Masculinity, as a gender expression and performance, is situational, and contingent upon time, place, and the overall context of the circumstances. Because Black men have been

stripped of access to hegemonic masculinity, Lane-Steele argues that some have adopted protest masculinity as one of the alternatives to hegemonic masculinity.

While protest masculinity has been adopted in different ways by various marginalized groups, Lane-Steele argues that the protest masculinity Black men perform is specifically “categorized by hypermasculinity: taking certain characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (homophobia, misogyny, dominance, and the policing of gender) to more extreme levels” (483). Because of the gender subordination to which they are subjected by protest-hypermasculinity, studs’ protest masculinity fundamentally differs from that which is performed by Black men. Nevertheless, Lane-Steele argues that stud lesbians adopt parts of Black male protest-hypermasculinity, asserting that the adopted aspects “function in ways that give these women privilege and power despite their subordinated position as lesbian women in a heteronormative, patriarchal culture” (483). Thus, studs “unconsciously yet strategically piece together their masculinity by incorporating the parts of [Black male] protest-hypermasculinity that give them access to power and dominance while leaving the other parts [sexist oppression] behind” (484). Effectively, by performing protest masculinity, studs are able to avoid some of the homophobia, racism, and sexism that affect the Black community. However, Lane-Steele notes that many studs adhere to heteronormative protest-masculinity through their participation in homophobia and misogyny, and, not unlike their heterosexual Black male counterparts, refer to sexual and romantic partners with sexist, derogatory terms. Many also exhibit homophobic sentiments towards gay male and stud-stud lesbian relationships, which Lane-Steele describes as “homophobia towards homomascularity” (487).

Lane-Steele asserts that studs define and express their masculine female identities through visible characteristics, such as masculine dress and hairstyles, as well as through non-visible characteristics, such as performing traditionally masculine gender roles and behaviors. However, Lane-Steele makes a crucial clarification: although studs present a masculine gender, this expression does not impact their gender identity. In other words, although they perform masculinity, they maintain a “woman” gender identity; they do not wish to be men, despite their masculinity. By “challeng[ing] the hegemonic idea that biological maleness is necessary for masculinity... female masculinity...proves that biological sex is not a determinant or a requirement of gender expression” (485). Thus, through their expressions of masculinity, and by embracing the socially-perceived inconsistency between their physical anatomy, gender identity, and gender expression, studs subvert the very system – white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy – that causes their marginalization. Nevertheless, studs’ masculinities are not stagnant, and their masculine privileges are frequently situational or circumstantial, as their subversion of normativity often begets violence – as evidenced by Cleo’s violent death in *Set It Off*.

In what ways, then, do Black queer women, and studs in particular, navigate their lived experience in such close proximity to the constant physical, emotional, and socio-political threat – and frequent reality – of gratuitous violence? As a no less than triply marginalized group, Black lesbians of all gender expressions are “exposed to pervasive and numerous instances of prejudice from close others [families, peers], society, and from the lesbian community” (Reed and Valenti 2012, 708). It is important to explore the various methods Black lesbians utilize to cope with homophobia/heterosexism that is intersected by racism and misogyny and often expressed through violence. Reed and Valenti analyzed information gathered through semi-structured, open-ended personal interviews with fourteen Black lesbians between the ages of

sixteen and twenty-four. Five of the study participants self-identified as studs, while five self-identified as femmes – feminine-presenting/femininity-performing lesbians; four self-identified as stemmes, lesbians whose gender expressions alternate or exist somewhere between femininity and masculinity. All of the participants described multiple experiences of sexual prejudice, such as “overt forms of homophobia from within their families or peer groups, at church or in the workplace, or by strangers within their community” (708). However, “only studs reported experiencing blatant homophobia such as job discrimination or physical assault” (708). While Blackness, according to Warren, is already inherently nonontological, we cannot ignore the reality that intersectional difference affects lived experience, and that multiply marginalized people experience oppression in multidimensional ways.

Reed and Valenti’s finding indicate that studs are more likely than stemmes and femmes to experience physical violence, and the disparity in homophobic experiences between studs and femmes/stemmes can ostensibly be attributed to studs’ quadruple oppression due to the addition of their gender nonconformity. Reed and Valenti also found a disparity between studs and femmes/stemmes regarding the mechanisms they implemented to cope with homophobia: “responses to sexual prejudice included cognitive reframing of heterosexist messages, passing [as heterosexual]...and fighting back (physically and verbally)” (703). However, “passing as heterosexual, or rather as females meeting normative expectations of femininity, was a strategy only used by femmes and stemmes” (710). Whereas femmes “found it easy to pass, as most people assumed they were heterosexual,” (710) and “stemmes could and would pass for instrumental purposes – to please their parents, to obtain a job, or to be able to go to church without receiving condemnation” (710), “studs were unwilling to dress or act more feminine for the sake of gaining access to heterosexual privilege or avoiding sexual prejudice” (710). Instead,

studs predominantly utilized cognitive reframing to resist or reject heterosexist/homophobic messages. Furthermore, they were willing to engage in physical and verbal fights to defend and validate their sexual and gender identities (708). This, too, suggests that studs experience a proximity to a violence that is specific to Black queer female masculinity.

Reed and Valenti determined that studs are often subjected to oppressions from without the Black lesbian community that are specific to their particular positionality and differ from the oppressions to which femmes and stemmes are subjected. However, studs are also subjected to discrimination that comes from within the Black lesbian community; these are discriminations that femmes and stemmes do not face. For example, Bianca Wilson (2009) utilized focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observation of Black lesbians in Chicago to answer the following research questions: what function, if any, does lesbian gender play in Black lesbian sexual life?; how is lesbian gender constructed and understood?; and what are the range of perspectives regarding lesbian gender in Black lesbian communities? (300). Through analyses of the data, Wilson determined that participants felt as though identifying with gendered labels, like stud and femme, was “part of an overarching sexual cultural norm of which all were aware,” and to which many felt external pressure to align/identify (303).

Many further felt as though this cultural script extended into partner choices, wherein studs were expected to partner with femmes, and vice versa. Wilson emphasized that this pressure was predominantly social/external, and that many of the women were uncomfortable with, or altogether rejected such gendered labels. Interestingly, although many participants rejected utilizing/identifying with labels overall, and recognized certain pressures as external, many of the participants who rejected labels expressed discontent with studs, not femmes (309).

Wilson notes that this “indicates that resistance against femme-stud lesbian gender expression is not an unqualified rejection of all Black lesbians who express themselves in gendered ways...instead, the resistance is centered on the rejection of masculine women, studs, who dare to transgress the mainstream cultural expectations for proper female expression” (310).

Though participant-observation fieldwork, focus groups, surveys, and semi-structured interviews, Mignon Moore (2006) examines the meanings behind different Black lesbian gender presentations. She investigates the reasons as to why individual lesbian-identified Black women express their gender in the ways in which they do, taking into account clothing choices, hairstyles, and behaviors and mannerisms. Furthermore, Moore examines the subjects’ perceptions and understandings of different gender labels – like femme, gender-blender (stemme), and transgressive (butch/stud) – in relation to themselves and their attractions to other women. Like Wilson, Moore found that some of the non-masculine participants rejected or resisted masculine identities or masculine-identified women. It is worth noting that this resistance was heavily classed.

Only formally educated and/or upper and middle-class subjects felt as though a non-femme gender display disrupted their image of respectability, and consequently constructed them as being aligned with negative stereotypes of Black female sexuality (such as being a bulldagger, dyke, etc.). Less formally-educated and working-class subjects were less critical of, and more likely to acknowledge, masculine lesbian identities and expressions. This suggests gender-conforming Black lesbian women’s internalization of Western gender binary constructs of gender and the mutually inclusive, rigid relationship between gender identity and “proper” gender expression. Moreover, Reed and Valenti’s, Wilson’s, and Moore’s findings suggest that

different intersecting identity markers create different lived experiences, reaffirming the vital importance of an intersectional framework.

2.2 Methodology

The nonontology of Blackness and therefore the Black queer, certainly helps explain the lack of research and general discourse about Black masculine lesbians. Thus, a Black queer feminist epistemology, combined with Afro-nihilist perspectives, is important for investigating the erasure caused by multiple systems. Black women and Black feminists have historically been cognizant of the ways in which their oppressions are multidimensional and intersecting. Moreover, Black women and feminists have historically used narrative inquiry, through the Lordean poetics of story-telling, oral histories, and casual/banal interpersonal conversations, as a fundamental Black feminist epistemology, methodology, and counter-narrative method to redefine and reaffirm Black female social positions that are made fungible and derelict.

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective issued a statement in which they described contemporary Black feminism as “the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters” (2); the recognition of the interwoven nature of oppressions was foundational to their movement specifically, and to Black feminist thought generally. The collective is particularly significant as the movement not only challenged the default standard of white maleness, but also interrogated homophobia, heteronormativity, heterosexism, and lesbo-misogynoir while simultaneously reject[ing] the stance and exclusivity of Lesbian separatism (6). Situating the development of the contemporary Black feminist movement in the second wave women’s liberation and civil rights movements, the collective asserts that “it was our experience and disillusionment with these liberation movements...that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-

sexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (2). Furthermore, Black feminist thought asserts that “sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race...[it is] difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously....there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual” (4). Rooted in a Black feminist thought, a Black feminist methodology thus recognizes the specific oppressions Black women, and other multiply-marginalized people, experience; it remains “actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” and attends to the reality that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (1).

In 1989, scholar Kimberle Crenshaw gave a name to the Black feminist concept that systems of oppression are interlocking, coining the term “intersectionality.” Much like the Combahee River Collective, Crenshaw developed the theory to critique the “single-axis analysis” of oppression, wherein oppressions are analyzed in isolation, arguing that such an analysis does not accurately acknowledge the way in which Black women are oppressed. In lieu of this “single-axis” model, Crenshaw argues for a multi-dimensional approach, intersectionality, when analyzing the many ways in which different oppressions manifest and impact various individuals. Crenshaw argues that Black women are “theoretically erased” due to society’s “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience,” (57). She elaborates upon this concept by arguing that “the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women’s and black men’s experiences” (59). In other words, “women” are considered white, and “Blacks” are considered men, which leaves Black women in the unique intersection of being too Black to be women, and not man enough to be Black. Within this single-axis framework, “Black women are protected only to the extent that

their experiences coincide with either of the two groups,” woman, or Black (59). Crenshaw points out that Black women cannot simply be filled into the parameters of existing structures, as the intersectional experience, and the experience with intersecting oppressions, is greater than the sum of the oppressions individually; thus, “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (58).

Intersectionality is crucial in understanding the specific way in which Black women – particularly those of whom are lesbian, and thus are triply marginalized by race, gender, and sexuality – are oppressed. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (2000) offers an analysis of heterosexism vis-à-vis Black women’s sexuality and the various intersecting oppressions Black women experience. Collins states that “in the United States, assumptions of heterosexuality operate as a hegemonic or taken-for-granted ideology – to be heterosexual is considered normal, to be anything else is to become suspect... Within assumptions of normalized heterosexuality, *homosexuality* emerges as a second important category of ‘deviant’ sexuality” (129). Establishing heterosexuality as the hegemonic “norm” in America, Collins asserts that “studying Black women’s sexualities reveals how sexuality constitutes one important site where heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender as systems of oppression converge. For Black women, ceding control over self-definitions of Black women’s sexualities upholds multiple oppressions” (128). This site of convergence of oppressions is particularly applicable to Black masculine lesbians because of their positionality in the intersection of at least four different oppressions. Collins further states that “when self-defined by Black women ourselves, Black women’s sexualities can become an important place of resistance” (128). By self-defining, validating, and embracing their non-normative and

hegemonically abnormal sexualities and gender expressions, Black masculine lesbians ultimately resist the systems that causes their oppressions.

Because my subjects are situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions, a staunch commitment to intersectionality is imperative for my research. In fact, any research on Black women would be incomprehensive, if not impossible, without the methodological framework produced by intersectionality and Black feminist thought. A Black intersectional feminist methodology, then, offers the most inclusive and comprehensive lens through which to analyze the positionality of Black masculine lesbians in America. Of course, no research is without limitations. Although applying a Black feminist epistemological framework to analyze Black women is both logical and appropriate, it is important that we recognize that there is no singular “stud experience,” just as there is not one singular Black or woman experience; we therefore must not universalize, or assume that the specific identities, perspectives, and beliefs of one individual within a larger group are applicable to the entire group. Thus, the collaborative and qualitative research of Black lesbian, queer and other scholars devoted to exploring the lives of Black lesbians is essential to this project’s methodology.

Also essential to this methodology is narrative inquiry through the method of interviews/storytelling. It is necessary to establish that although white supremacist hegemony constructs the Black “subject” position as inherently captive, it simultaneously perpetuates the false narrative of Black liberation – often by deflecting to exceptions to the rule, such as the successes of people like Barack Obama and Oprah. Of this narrative Michelle Rowley (2012) remains reasonably critical. She emphasizes the importance of understanding whose history is being told, by whom, and why, as doing so allows us to reject and consequently move beyond the limitations of a singular, and assumed to be universal, U.S./white-centric hegemonic mode of

thought (81). Additionally, it allows us to “challenge the idea of one narrative or mode by which we can tell...history” (81). Citing Ann Braithwaite, Rowley further argues for the necessity “to always ‘think about how we think about’ whatever term or concept is being used. (2004, 97)” (80). In other words, it is necessary to be conscious of how we think about what we think, learn, and instill in others; being critical and rejecting any information as universal or inherent allows us to better recognize the gaps in knowledge and become aware of what’s missing, what’s biased, what’s misinformed, or ultimately inaccurate.

Like Rowley, Barbara Christian (1988) argues that Western social structures and modes of thought production are monolithic, or single-axis, and are produced, dictated, and dominated by white (supremacist) hegemony. Thus, Christian defines theory in the singular as an exclusionary monolith that functions from, and is produced by, intersecting positions of power and privilege: Western whiteness, maleness, straightness, wealth, formal education, ability, and other such privileged variables. Monolithic social structures and modes of thought production are problematic not only because they function, form, and are produced by, a position of power and privilege. These monolithic social structures are also problematic because they, from this privileged position, allow for “ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism” (75) to masquerade as, and ultimately evolve into, theory, while dehumanizing, decomplexifying, and stereotyping individuals. While Christian defines theory in noun form as a deeply reductive and restrictive Euro-American construct, she understands theorizing, the active verb, as a practice far more complex than that which is only taught and learned in a Western academic setting. Christian argues that “people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we

create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language” (68). Theorizing, then, can be practiced, among other ways, through creative and/or historical narrative about a lived experience.

Due to the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal nature of Western society, many marginalized women, including Black lesbians, feel as if they are “speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to [their] needs and orientation” (68). Collins (2000) similarly asserts that “oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for the dominant group” (vii). Theorizing through story-telling and the first-hand accounts of interviewees allows the oppressed to frame ideas in their own language, and “highlights the diversity, richness, and power of Black women’s ideas as part of a long-standing African-American women’s intellectual community” (viii). This approach to theorizing helps “counteract the tendency of mainstream scholarship to canonize a few Black women as spokespersons for the entire group and then refuse to listen to any but these select few” (ibid), a few who are often exceptions to the rule and occupy relative elitist positions of power and privilege themselves. Such an approach also helps actively subvert the elitist belief that only canonized (white) academics are qualified to produce theory, and only they can interpret not only their own but everyone else’s experiences (vii). Theorizing and interpreting theory through the poetry of storytelling thus “illustrates how thought and action can work together in generating theory (viii). Much of Collins’ – and my own – formal academic training has been designed to show us that we must alienate ourselves from our communities, families, and ourselves in order to produce “credible intellectual work” (ibid). In other words, academia fundamentally operates under the masculinist logic of the superiority of

reason, rationality, and objectivity, relegating our “feminine” emotion, affect, and subjectivity to a status of invalidity and intellectual uselessness.

I, like Collins, adamantly maintain that subjectivity, emotion, and affect are as valuable sources of potential knowledge production as their masculine counterparts. Christian’s conceptualization of theorizing – stories we create, riddles and proverbs, and the play with language – is a poetic that this project realizes specifically through the use of story-telling, and is therefore fundamental to the project’s methodology. Audre Lorde (1984) implores all women – but Black women especially – to understand that *poetry is not a luxury*, but a vital necessity of our existence (37). She is, of course, not referring to the “sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean,” (37) the written and verbal attempted to colonize, gentrify, and quantify feeling. Rather, Lorde speaking about poetry as the “*revelatory distillation of experience*,” (37). She is referring to Beyonce’s *Lemonade* (2016) and *Homecoming* (2019). She’s discussing Warsan Shire and Nayyirah Waheed. She is speaking to the dancers and the painters and writers among us, and in us. To the orators and storytellers. To the mothers. She is speaking to the poet – and poetry – in each of us. Poetry is not a luxury for the Black girls who have always been *too*: loud, big, bold, bossy, bitchy, much. Poetry is vital necessity for queer Black women whose value is defined by how well we fly by a society that has mutilated our wings and refuses to even acknowledge our blood on the floor.

Poetry is an inherent and fundamental expression of the erotic. It is, therefore, a way for Black queer women to access personal power. The erotic, a “deeply female and spiritual plane” (53), allows us to access “what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us” (56). It is through this access that we can achieve joy, empowerment, satisfaction, excellence, and invest in self-determination. Although it can be expressed through sexuality, the erotic, and its uses for

power, are not limited to the domain of the sexual. The erotic can be attained and expressed through the domain of various basic daily human actions and interactions, “whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual” (56), for the erotic as power is not merely the “doing” of an action with a goal of pleasurable physical gratification or sensation. Western conceptions of poetry, possibility, and power are rigid and limited. We often understand poetry as “sterile word play” instead of as a “revelatory distillation of experience” based on the belief that “living [is] a situation to be experienced and interacted with” (37). Nevertheless, the power of the erotic is realized by “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (54). This power does not come from what we do, but from how we feel in our intentions while doing, and doing can allow us, as Black queer women, to not only “touch our most profoundly creative source, but [to] do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (59). The methodology of theorizing through poetry, vis-à-vis storytelling and story-writing, is an active doing that provides us with “the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.” (59). To be Black and queer and woman is to be a witch the master’s tools could not burn, and poetry is our magic.

2.3 Methods

For this project, I conducted a series of first-person interviews with open-ended questions about various subjects with two self-identified Black masculine lesbian women. Because “race is a social construct, not a biological reality,” (Khanna 2010, 103) inclusion criteria included mono, bi, or multi-racial Black identities, and the definition of “Black” was restricted to self-identification (103). Similarly, my participants’ sexualities were restricted to self-definition as lesbian, and their gender identities as “women.” While both of my participants further identified as cisgender, both cisgender and transgender Black lesbians were invited to participate. One

interview subject participated with me in two interview series. The first was an oral history that was conducted over the course of four interviews pertaining to her personal and family background/history. The second series of interviews was focused on my research questions and conducted over the course of two interviews, wherein I asked her various open-ended questions pertaining to her intersectional identities, gender presentation/performance, experiences of violences or social erasure, potential possibilities, and general experiences with her gender identity, race, sexuality, and gender presentation. I additionally engaged in participant observation of this subject in public and private settings.

I conducted one interview with a second subject, asking the same research questions pertaining to her intersectional identities, gender presentation/performance, experiences of violences or social erasure, potential possibilities, and general experiences with her gender identity, race, sexuality, and gender presentation. I met and conducted an hour-long interview with this participant in a public setting, and she seemed transparent and eager to participate. Nevertheless, after completing the interview, I considered the information I had just obtained and contextualized it with the far more detailed, intimate, and extensive information I had gathered from my primary participant. While the information obtained from my second participant was valid, relevant, and useful information, I did not feel as though I would be able to narrate her story as thoroughly as with my first participant, and I feared that including supplementary information from my second participant's interview and experiences would relegate her story to footnotes and afterthoughts to my first participant's story. In other words, due to various limitations, I was unable to give my second participant's story the attention it warranted, and I ultimately decided to exclude any information I obtained from her, rather than relegate her story to a side-note.

I implemented these research methods because I maintain that lived experience is one of the most valid/valuable forms of knowledge production available to academia. As individuals, we are a collection of our stories and personal experiences; as such, our experiences are valid and important, and telling our stories serves as a significant and legitimate source of knowledge production. After all, the personal is political, and the personal is powerful. Collecting data through these aforementioned methods provides a degree of intimacy, and subsequently, a level of multidimensionality, that would not be attainable through impersonal or quantitative, “objective” research methods. Moreover, implementing such methods can provide a more autonomous voice to individuals who are so frequently marginalized, silenced, or erased.

It is imperative that I recognize the limitations of inclusivity, and I am cognizant of how limited this project is. Determining which subjects/voices to include and exclude in this project is already inevitably shaped by the researcher’s (my own) biases. This determination is also inherently informed by my racial, sexual, and gender identity, my social positionality, education, access to participants, regional background and current location, and time restrictions. Moreover, the information I was able to procure from my sole subject, particularly in the scope of a master’s thesis project, was limited due to many of the same constraints.

While I conducted interviews with two participants, I have chosen to only include the material I obtained from my first participant. I initially endeavored to engage in a project that analyzed more broadly the experiences of several Black masculine-identified lesbians. However, because the only constant in life is change, this project evolved into a comprehensive bio-ethnographical analysis of the history, experiences, and perspectives of one queer Black woman.

Leon Dash’s (2015) *Rosa Lee: A Generational Tale of Poverty and Survival in Urban America* follows one Black women’s story, and by association, those of her family and friends,

over the course of several years. Dash's long-term focus solely on Rosa Lee and her family, rather than on numerous women and their families over shorter periods of time and in different locations, demonstrates an exercise in depth over breadth. Dash gains information through his repeated, years-long interactions with his participants that he would almost-certainly have been unable to obtain had he chosen to study more people in that same time-frame. What he is ultimately able to produce is a deeply-comprehensive analysis of one woman's story that, in many ways, becomes a metaphor for the Black experience in America. Of course, the human experience is vastly different, and not every impoverished, urban Black American woman's story is like Rosa Lee's. However, I maintain that at the same time, the human experience is *vastly* similar, and many impoverished, urban Black American women have stories, or know women who have stories, like Rosa Lee's.

I would therefore be remiss not to also address the limitations specific to working with a single subject. The life experiences, beliefs, and statements of one queer Black woman in Atlanta, Georgia, are not the experiences, beliefs, and statements of every Black masculine lesbian in America. Her understandings of her identity, history, and the ways in which systems of oppression operate in this society are not universal, capital-T truths. This project, in fact, does not aim to investigate any such "universal" truths. Rather, this project aims to investigate the various individual, little-t truths of one person's story. Like Dash, I felt that an in-depth analysis of one woman's experience would be more beneficial than several more surface-level analyses with more women. Thus, while my subject's truths are not all Black masculine women's, I hope that the similarities in our experiences can allow her story to serve as one of validation, representation, relatability for queer Black girls who may feel invisible. Moreover, I hope that her story, and the method by which I obtained it, can serve as a template for alternative ways of

theorizing and producing knowledge that are rooted in the Black female truth that poetry is not a luxury. If we understand poetry not as sterile wordplay but as revelatory distillation of experience, then we can conceptualize all the interview and observation processes with my primary participant as an active method of creating poetry.

The interviews I conducted were informal, semi-structured, and open-ended. I invited my participant to share as much or as little as she was comfortable sharing, using whatever language she felt comfortable using, and encouraged her to think critically about her positionality in time and space. I endeavored to foster a dynamic in which transparency was a priority, and in which the sharing of experience, action, or opinion was not met with judgment or contention, but with validation and legitimization. The interview and observation processes involved active and collaborative engagement rather than passivity for both interviewer and interviewee, in speaking, listening and thinking. It required my Black queer female participant to reveal and share generously with me her time and experiences, and it required that I, a Black queer female interviewer, receive and distill her story in a revelatory and affirming manner. Thus, I offer that the entire interview and observation process, which spanned the time of three months, was, by Lorde's definition, a revelatory distillation of experience for my participant and for myself, and was therefore an exercise in poetry creation and performance.

Lastly, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations and possible ethical concerns of the elitism that, despite some of our best efforts, mine included, remains inherent to Black Feminist and Women's Studies scholarship, and to academia generally. Implementing a Black feminist epistemology to analyze the narratives of Black women who conceivably may not identify as feminist allows me to potentially superimpose a feminist consciousness on them. Such a superimposition, as well as the hierarchical power differential that is inherently exercised and

reinforced simply by my ability as the researcher to frame the discussion, is a problematic reality of this type of work. Thus, it is important that I as a researcher continue to recognize, and try to actively deconstruct, the hierarchical dichotomous construction of researcher/subject, as well as actively be aware not to speak for or over my subjects. By acknowledging and destabilizing this hierarchy, Black feminist thought and scholarship can work towards transcending the elitism of academia, consequently validating subjects' nonacademic perspectives and legitimizing their comprehensive identities. Ideally, doing so will demonstrate that all Black lived experience, even that which takes place outside of academia, is valuable and important. By analyzing the Black masculine lesbian experience in America, this project hopes to elucidate and validate the experiences of a rarely-acknowledged group of people who evince a way of navigating outside of and around normative scripts for recognizable, reconcilable, and respectable gender and personhood. Ultimately, I suggest that Black masculine lesbian offer a way to begin to reconceptualize alternate ways of being and meaning making in the world.

3 THE PRAXIS

This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me."

Survival is not an academic skill.

– Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

3.1 Chapter 1: "It's All We Fuckin' Know; That's All That Was Ever Done to People:"

Racism, Trauma, and the Anathema of Blackness

Dorothy is not in Kansas anymore. Ruby slippers traded in for dress shoes, skirt replaced by slacks, she is, in fact, not even Dorothy. Standing at six-foot-one, Sara Cohen is slender, androgynous, and normatively attractive, her white-passing complexion juxtaposed by her

Afrocentric nose, mouth, and curl pattern. Conventionally masculine and feminine features amalgamate on her face, and are accented by prominent cheek bones, a strong jawline, and a slightly cleft chin. Outwardly, Sara presents and performs as masculine, dressing in button ups and polos, sagging her jeans, and preferring men's cologne over women's perfume. In public, she is constantly misgendered, perceived as a heterosexual man rather than as a lesbian woman, a reality she finds more amusing – and confusing – than upsetting, considering how overtly Black-and-queer Atlanta is. Nevertheless, it is clear that she is grateful to be here, particularly considering the alternative. Not in Kansas anymore, Sara speaks of her hometown in a way which suggests that she believes Dorothy would have been better off staying in Oz.

Sara was born to Tamara Charles and Clint Cohen in Liberal, Kansas on May 12, 1998, the first of her mother's three children, and the third of her father's seven, or eight, depending on whom you ask. Sara's lack of relationship – physically, emotionally, and financially – to her paternal family is obvious, both in what she does, and doesn't, say.

“It sounds like you don't have connections, at least strong connections, to anyone on your father's side,” I muse after she concludes a disinterested description of her paternal grandmother and aunt.

“Yep, it is what it is. And that's what it is. My dad's side is weird.” She pauses. “Like they're fascinated by me, but they won't touch me.” Among her paternal relationships, that which she has with her father is the most comprehensive, and most complex. Her descriptions of him vacillate from anger or disgust to indifference and to entitlement. Clint was an emotionally absent figure in her life. When he was present, he was usually angry and abusive, and would often attempt to ease the effects of his violence with a respectable appearance and material gifts.

“He always had nice things and had this smell, and that was my dad,” Sara recalls. “It was nice things, and the smell. That’s all really that was there, you know? He was goofy, too. We had really funny conversations, but then after there was funny, there was always serious as fuck, and that was the end of it. There was really no cherishment or love. No, he was always busy – he was never around.”

“What did he do for work?” I ask, presuming his work was the cause of his absence.

“He’s a drug dealer,” she states as matter-of-factly as if she’s describing the weather.

“You said he *was* a drug dealer? Or he...present tense?” I say, trying to clarify.

“Presently...” Sara hesitates for a moment. “He’s a bar owner. He owns a bar.”

Prior to that, it was a carwash. In both cases, the legal businesses were – and are – money laundering operations for Clint’s drug dealing business. I question whether his occupation may have caused him to be less present in her life as she may have liked.

“He’s been around,” Sara asserts. “But there was no emotional attachment. There was no, like, ‘Oh, that’s my daddy, I love him.’ So, it wasn’t even just the absence. It was kinda more like you’d look him in the eyes and he’s there, but he’s not. It was weird like that.” She opens her hand around the pencil she’d been absentmindedly thumbing, and it falls on the laminate table with a clatter. “He’s still this guy that I don’t know. I mean, when you sit there and talk to the guy, he’ll get angry about nothin’. He finds a reason to get angry. Some people don’t know how to love.”

Spillers describes the false notions of Black fatherhood as “at best, a supreme cultural curtesy” (76), rooted in the conflicting intersection between patriarchy/androcentricity and white supremacy/anti-Blackness. In other words, Black fatherhood under white supremacy is simultaneously an impossibility – due to the derelict objectivity of Blackness – and a mimetic

expectation – due to the hegemony of anti-woman sexism and the understanding of Black males as being more proximal than Black females to manhood. As she continues to describe her father and their relationship, Sara’s general dislike of him becomes glaringly apparent, and her conceptualization of him as sperm donor, rather than a father, begins to make sense. I notice that Sara never refers to Clint as “dad,” an informal term of endearment used towards paternal parents, but rather as “father,” a term that does not inherently imply an intimate or genetic paternal-parental relation, perhaps unconsciously understanding Clint’s role in her life as a mimetic façade of the Father, rather than as a position of dadhood.

Sara recites her siblings chronologically, but hesitates after rattling off the seventh. “I think that’s it right now. That’s all I can count off the top of my brains...I got another sister out there too. Yeah, and my little sister. Oh yeah! Jayce. I don’t know about if I should claim him or not, but I am.”

I ask her what makes her question whether she should claim him.

Sara chuckles, “I was just joking. Well, I kinda was. But, my dad’s talking about ‘It’s not his,’ but it most likely is. He was just sayin’, you know, he didn’t wanna be fatherly to him ‘cause he’s better off, probably. ‘Cause he already has enough [children]. My dad just feels like he’s a type of fundraiser for people, some type of sponsor. He feels like he has to provide [financially] and that’s it.”

“Well, he does have all these children,” I point out.

“Yeah, so he kinda feels like he has to provide and that’s it. Not emotional. Like, children are happy [with gifts] but only for so long.”

It is evident that Sara believes her father tried to buy her love, an unsurprising reality from a man who “doesn’t know how to love.” The plentiful clothes, toys, and video games she

received growing up were unable to fill the painful void left by Clint's emotional detachment. In this pain – both Sara's and her father's – the real-life effects of America's virulent and institutional anti-Black racism become clear as glass. Wilderson notes "Spillers's parallel between the runaway slave advertisement and the FBI All Points Bulletin indexes two periods that are more than one hundred years apart but whose effects on Blacks and Whites evince 'a stunning mutuality'" (303). Sara's paternal grandfather, Clint the First, evinces this mutuality, as he was accused, and consequently incarcerated, of murdering a white man. Despite maintaining his innocence, he remained behind bars for decades. The result was a violent theft – and a void perhaps broader and deeper than that which Sara feels – of Clint, Sr. from his children and family. Ultimately acquitted and released, Sr. is now in his mid-sixties and confined to a wheelchair due to severe arthritis, and the damage, to everyone, has been done.

In his 2017 song, "The Story of O.J.," Shawn Carter, known professionally as Jay-Z, highlights the reality that racism continues to negatively affect Black individuals and communities in America through various processes of marginalization. The song is accompanied by an illustrated music video featuring caricatures of racist Black archetypes, including mummies, sambos, a Hottentot Venus, and pickaninnies; all are illustrated with accentuated noses and excessively-large lips. One of the sambo-like caricatures is of Carter himself, who narrates the lyrical story, as he and the other caricatures are subjected to racist stereotypes and racial oppressions throughout the video. The caricatures, particularly Carter, are depicted sitting in the "colored" section of a bus, hanging by the neck from a noose, alighting from a slave ship and standing on an auction block in chains, and being surrounded by hooded Klansmen beside a burning cross. The chorus – "Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga; Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga; Still nigga, still nigga" – is recited as these images are

displayed on the screen. By including an illustrated depiction of himself in the music video, Carter demonstrates that not even wealth completely protects Black bodies from being “still nigga.” Furthermore, by using the lyrics “house nigga” and “field nigga,” Carter utilizes slave imagery to suggest that slavery has not truly ended for Black people.

Spillers similarly suggests that the atrocious legacy of chattel slavery continues to create a dual fatherhood, comprised of the African father’s *banished* name and body and the captor’s mocking presence (80), as Black people, and men especially, stand in the intersection between hegemonic patriarchal understandings about the Law of the Father and hegemonic understandings about the nonhumanity of Blackness. She further argues that “the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated – the law of the Mother – only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law” (80). The theft of Clint, Sr., and presumably the violent thefts of numerous prior generations of Cohen men, marked one moment in the centuries-long and continuing legacy of the severing, literally and ideologically, of Black people from each other *and* from themselves. When we understand Clint, Jr. as a man who “has never had that father figure, so he doesn’t know how to be a father as well, due to racism,” we begin to understand Clint’s anger, and Sara’s pain.

Sara continues to describe an emotionally hurt man whose experiences of violence normalized trauma and pain, both receiving and giving. “My mom says that he was abused as a kid,” she recollects. “I mean, I don’t really know what he’s been through, personally. My mother’s told me that he was beaten on as a child, so that’s kind of like, you know some people, that’s all they know. I think my dad definitely didn’t have any type of stable love in his life as a

child, and I think that he used some of those tendencies against us – the abusive tendencies that he grew up on. ‘Cause, uh, he whooped my brother for putting on a shirt that he bought with his back wet from the shower – he just got out the shower and his back was wet, puts on his shirt, ‘Why would you ruin the shirt, Tyrell?’ So he got a whoopin’.”

She describes her seven-year-old brother being beaten by her father with a confused tone that almost borders bemusement, before suddenly stating, in the same bemused tone, “I just think something’s deeply wrong with my father. Instead of talking to someone, he just knows to do other things. I also think he was mad at the time, so he took his anger out on my brother. So that’s just another evil-ass, sadistic thing to do.”

“What kinds of other things?” I wonder.

“I remember my dad, like, pinching me one time,” she replied after a moment’s thought. “Like on my arm, really fucking hard, to where you wanted to cry out. If we were in public, and he thought I was acting out, instead of telling me to stop, he pinches me in fucking silence. He’s just so evil, you feel me? That’s so evil.”

Sara’s negative perspective toward her father mirrors her overall perceptions of her birth-town, where her father continues to live today. “There’s a horrible smell over the whole town of Liberal. When you first enter the town you’ll smell it. Just smells horrible. It’s cows’ burning blood, basically, is what it is. I don’t like it honestly. It’s just so small. There’s a lot of incest goin’ on in the town as well. People look different there, ‘cause of the water systems and everything. But the town is called Liberal for reasons. I mean, it’s ironic in every single way.”

Blood, violence, and decay – permeating from the slaughterhouse that provides most of the working-class jobs in Liberal, and being perpetrated by the community itself – suffuse the town of 20,000. Sara’s relationship with her father and his family are figuratively and literally

suffused with the same. Liberal becomes a bleak metaphor for her relationship with a man who has lived his entire life in a place she laments is “all meaningless. There’s nothing there.”

One of Sara’s earliest memories is of her father beating her mother while she and her brother watched. It was a memory that repeated itself several times before Tamara ultimately became “fed up,” and relocated with Sara and Tyrell, first to Wichita, and then to Georgia.

“That’s the reason our mother left there – didn’t wanna be in Liberal anymore. Didn’t wanna live around my father,” Sara asserts. At twenty-two, Tamara left Clint and entered single motherhood with two children both younger than two.

“My dad was a major support, ‘cause he was good off,” she recognizes. “My mom kinda felt like she had the obligation to stay with him so that we’d be better off, but she made the better decision for herself to be apart from him and try her hardest to take care of us, so I commend her.” It was a decision that was neither painless nor easy, and it’s apparent Sara’s experiences with violence did not begin or end with her father and Liberal. She remained for years on the receiving end of her mother’s anger, anger that manifested in Sara “getting whoopin’s every day.” At least, she claims, “that’s what I was told.”

“Oh, you don’t remember?” I ask.

“Nuh-uh. They whooped the memory out of my ass. I don’t remember shit.”

She does, however, recall one incident involving child protective services, wherein Tamara beat Tyrell with a belt to the point of bruising, and acknowledges with no hesitation that both of her parents engaged in the same style of discipline, asserting that the style had been learned by both of them through their parents. “Yep, same degree. Same shit,” she conceded. “They’re definitely like the same type of – my mom didn’t really do that on her own without the influence of my grandfather. She felt like ‘oh I was treated this way, I can treat ya’ll this way.’”

And the violence was not solely physical. “My mom used to emotionally abuse us a lot,” Sara tells me.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What kinds of things?”

“Telling us we wouldn’t be shit, stuff like that.” She breaks in to a wide smile before continuing, “I knew she had it in her, you feel me? It’s like, this woman’s not bad, she just is in a bad place.”

Despite experiencing similar emotional and physical violence from both parents, Sara’s emotional connection to her mother is as strong, bolstered by Tamara’s willingness to create an emotional relationship with her firstborn, as well as by Sara’s compassionate, empathetic understanding of her Tamara’s pain and struggles. This sympathy is not extended to Clint, against whom she holds clear resentment for the violence he had enacted against all of them.

We sit on her back porch together one evening after having completed an interview, the sky painted with cool greys and purples. “My grandpa made that,” she nods toward one of the two chairs pulled up beside a pollen-coated glass table.

“The chair?” I raise my eyebrows.

“The cupholder,” she replies, pointing to an attachment secured to the chair’s arm. She settles down into the opposite seat, pulls a wood-tip wine Black n’ Mild from behind her ear, and fishes a lighter from her pocket.

The lighter clicks. “You know my mom used to be a stripper,” Sara tells me. “So [my father] would talk bad about that. All that shit he did, but he wasn’t supporting us. I’d get it if he talked bad about her and sent her \$500 a month, but he wasn’t sendin’ nothin’. Maybe like \$200 every other month, if that. But yeah, my dad talking bad about her, I look down him about it. He

kinda feels like he can do no wrong, like he does everything right and everybody else is wrong,” she continues from behind a cloud of smoke.

“How did you feel about it?” I ask.

“About what?” Thick, sweet-smelling smoke billows in my face. “My bad,” she quickly mutters.

“Your mom’s occupation” I answer, fanning the smoke.

“I actually encouraged her to do it, but I didn’t know she had a drinking problem,” she admits. “So she’d come home, drunk as fuck, yellin’, angry. We had to go through that as kids, you know? It sucked.” Now a single mother of three, Tamara invariably struggled to make ends meet, and relied on sex work as her primary source of income. While successful at her new job at first, Tamara quickly began self-medicating with drugs and alcohol.

“It was a beautiful life until my mom started, you know, comin’ back home drunk as shit after work, not bein’ able to take care of herself tryna take care of us. It was really sad.” Sara’s tone changes, and I hear sadness in her voice.

“Did she work as a stripper for a long time?” I ask.

“About like...” Sara thinks for a moment. “She said two years.”

“Wow.” We sit in the silence briefly.

“Yeah, it started off as not that bad, but it got worse,” she tells me.

“What do you think that was about?”

“Just the alcohol, and just being able to survive in the club for so long. Having to deal with men groping on you or just, you know, being sexual, moving sexual all the time, nonstop. Standing in these heels, not wanting to feel your feet, even. You know, just trying to be something you’re usually not. Definitely gotta be something else.”

We lock eyes, and I see the sadness in her voice reflected in her pupils. “Sorry you – ” I begin.

“Had to go through that?” she tries to finish for me.

“ – had to see her hurting.”

“Yeah, and then she, um, was hospitalized. We were...we were staying in a fuckin’ Extended Stay. She was still stripping.”

I hesitate for a moment. “You mean you were like, living there?”

“Yeah, we were stayin’ there, we had all our shit there. Shit was bad.”

On the verge of homelessness, Tamara had no option but to live with her three children in a residential hotel while supporting them on her single income. Shortly after, she was hospitalized for alcohol-related appendicitis and had complications during recovery. Sara’s earlier words echo in my mind: “this woman’s not bad, she just is in a bad place.”

“How would you describe your relationship with your mom today?” I asked her.

“I think it’s A1. I feel like if I were to leave today, she would be scared about tomorrow. Seriously, she loves me,” she replies with a chuckle.

The feeling is, seriously, mutual. Few topics cause Sara to speak with sincerity. She describes brutal acts of physical violence as if they were mundane happenstances, and cavalierly recounts experiences of sexual molestation and emotional trauma. And despite Sara experiencing similar and frequent violences from both parents, with respect to her mother, Sara is fiercely protective, occasionally defensive, and almost always serious.

“Your parents are really mysterious to you until become older. You kinda just see them as this lord and savior person that provides and gives you whatever you need and want in life, you know?” she says. “They’re kinda preparing you to get on your own, but you just expect them

to be around and love you forever, you know? It wasn't that with [my dad]. It was never that. I kinda had that emotional attachment with my mom. I mean, did you look at your parents like that?"

I tell her that I did. "If they told me something I believed it really as gospel. I didn't question them in a lot of ways."

"Right," she exclaims, before continuing, "and as a child, you just don't understand the total power that they possess. And they don't either. And that's the problem, you know? I guess my dad wasn't that being. I guess the mother's really just powerful as fuck. I've always had this infinite bond with my mother. It's like this intangible – nobody else measures to it.

I think about Spiller's "law of the Mother," the "powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated" (80). Spillers further argues that "the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community" (ibid) The atrocities of slavery render Black motherhood a social and genealogical impossibility; concurrently, prevailing social narratives, both positive and negative, depict a Black matriarchy that assigns a mimetic, and ultimately impossible, power to Black women/motherhood, a "power" that has developed "only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male...as a partner in the prevailing fiction of the Father's name" (ibid). A result for Sara, at least in part, is a rejection of her father that is both caused by and causes her adoration of her mother.

It is not possible to disentangle Sara's understanding and performance of masculinity from her understanding of her parents, her gender, and her race. In many ways, she connects Black male-performed masculinity with violence, trauma and pain. The Black men in her life been particularly proximal to racial violence, ideologically and – in the case of her paternal

grandfather – literally eliminated from communities and society overall. Simultaneously, Black men and male-performed masculinity have consistently enacted violence upon her, physically, sexually and emotionally. Nevertheless, Sara still understands masculinity as fluid and transgressive of gender. She asserts that Tamara – a woman inherently socially constructed as masculine due to her race – was a tomboy before she had Sara, and assigns Tamara a masculine role, describing her mother as her “lord and savior,” someone “powerful as fuck.” Masculinity, when performed by Blackness, is not necessarily gender-specific to Sara, but it is enmeshed with experiences of violence, theft, and pain, inter- and intra- racially.

“I guess my dad never held that power, that weight on his shoulders growing up, you know?” She concludes, putting out her Black n’ Mild on the arm of the chair. “I kinda knew he was faulty because my mom left him, you feel me?”

I shrug in affirmation as Sara stands up, opens the sliding glass door for me, and nods her head toward the house. I stand up, pushing my chair in, and cross the threshold. Sara follows, and I hear the door slide shut behind me.

3.2 Chapter 2: “Are You Fuckin’ Hybrid?”: The Otherly (Non)Existence of Masculine Black Womanhood

It’s an early Wednesday afternoon as we sit at the kitchen table in Sara’s home. Tamara is at work, and despite the lateness of the hour, Desiree, Sara’s little sister, is fast asleep in her bedroom. The screen door to the back patio and front porch are both open, and a cool cross-breeze occasionally sweeps through the warm room. Sara and I sit in adjacent chairs that match the color of the pink, laminate table, me clutching my phone, she, a pack of Game Leaf cigars. There’s a small stand on my right that holds a bowl of cowry shells, a bundle of sage in an abalone shell, and incense. On the baker’s rack opposite me are two wooden figurines of a nude

African man and woman, identical in height, size, shape, and even hairstyle, differentiated only by the defined vulva and breasts on the female and penis on the male. On the mantle rests a vase of flowers and several candles. The indigenous American and African energy in the space is tangible.

Sara rips the top off the Game package and pulls out a cigar. Dropping the pack, she pulls the crystal ashtray on the table closer and begins unraveling the tobacco leaf, letting the shredded tobacco filling drop into the tray.

I set my phone beside the ashtray. “Ready?” She nods. I switch on the recorder and ask her a question about her identity: “In what ways do you feel socially nonexistent or erased by mainstream society, specifically because of your identity as a Black masculine gay woman?”

“Why would I feel erased?” she retorts, to my surprise. “I mean, I’m here,” she continues nonchalantly. “I don’t know who else thinks I’m not. I don’t really care if they don’t – if they think I’m not here. I don’t really understand that question because I’ve always taken pride in who I am, and I don’t really...I think everyone notices me, if anything, because – I hope this is not... this is kinda sad, me sayin’ this, because I’m mixed, though. I’m lightskin, and people don’t really know what I am, and I think I’m more seen than not, also because they don’t know if I’m a fuckin’ woman or a man, so I don’t really feel erased at all.”

I think back to the experience she had previously shared with me about an encounter she’d had in the woman’s restroom in the mall. “Okay, one of my worst –” she had begun. “One of my first ever problems was this pregnant woman. I went in the bathroom, this pregnant woman was like, she’s like freakin’ out n’ shit. She’s like, ‘You’re not supposed to be in here.’ I’m like, ‘Yes I am.’ It was just weird as fuck. I’m like, how is this woman tellin’ me where I’m

supposed to be, you know what I'm sayin'? I don't give a fuck if you're pregnant. Like, does your baby know what gender I am or somethin'? No! I don't know, it was really weird. I don't really remember the instance, but it made me very uncomfortable. It was one of my – one of the first times. She ran out of the bathroom and was like...I think she said she was gonna call security – I don't remember. But yeah, she just looked like she was mad she was wrong," Sara had assuredly concluded. "That's the real idea. People are just upset that they were wrong."

"So, I hear what you're saying." I choose my words deliberately, sincerely trying not to invalidate her reality.

"Go ahead," she encourages, sensing my hesitation.

I exhale loudly. "I wonder, though, if...like specifically, are there ways in which you know for a fact that your race, your gender, your gender presentation, *and* your sexuality are causing this situation to be happening? Like, 'It's not *just* 'cause I'm Black, and it's not *just* 'cause I'm gay. It's because I'm dressed like this, in this body right now, and that's why this is happening.' You know how we've talked about before how society doesn't perceive Black people to be – 'society' being like, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy and all of that stuff – doesn't perceive Black people to be human. Are there ways that you've had these experiences with the larger society that have made you feel nonhuman to the point that you're not even recognized as even being there in any kind of valid way?"

"Uhm, I'ma say this." Sara pauses. "Uhm, I feel like, awkward around certain people, and I can tell that white people, white privilege carries a part because they feel comfortable in all and every situation." Without a word, she stands up and walks down the hall and into her bedroom, returning with a small scale and a 3.5 in a knotted sandwich bag.

“Like, they could be anywhere,” she continues, slowly working the knot. “They’re like, I don’t know, white people talk differently than Black people, and I think it’s because of the uncomfortability, like, white privilege. They have it, wherever they go they have white privilege, you know what I’m sayin’? And them growin’ up in a lifestyle like that, they’re able, they’re just comfortable with talking to people of any race, you know? But I find myself not knowin’ the words to say to people of noncolor.”

“Just in in conversations or...?”

“Just in conversations because – I don’t know, I just feel so uncomfortable. That’s one thing, if I’m in a room with all white people, I do feel like the oddball out, even though I am light-skinned, but that’s because I’m not white,” she concludes, shaking a few small buds loose from the bag and placing them on the scale.

Through both his lyrics and imagery, Carter argues that Black Americans, regardless of their skin tone, wealth/class status, and personality, are considered by American society – one that is undoubtedly white supremacist and racist – to still be relegated to the status of “nigger.” Sara epitomizes this reality. Ancestrally, she is not fully Black, as Tamara is Black-white Biracial, and despite not being *full* nigga, she is nevertheless *still* nigga.

Sara tells me that at a young age, she understood “it was a privilege to be white, and...it was a problem to be Black.”

“Of course, being Black is invisible,” she acknowledges, “but I told you, I’m lightkin. I got it a little easier. Little bit. It’s sad. There’s light-skin privilege. We know about that shit.”

Through her daily lived experience, Sara recognizes the simultaneous realities of the non-existent positionality of Blackness, and the certain privileges within that space of non-existence

due to her proximity to whiteness, both phenotypically and ancestrally. My eyes make their way back to the wooden couple on the baker's rack.

The music video for Carter's "The Story of O.J." visually depicts Spiller's assertions about the ungendering of Black people in this "new world." Although certain caricatures throughout the music video – like the Hottentot Venus exotic dancer – are gendered to more clearly perpetuate anti-Black stereotypes, other caricatures, like the slaves, are androgynous. The female slaves are illustrated with inconspicuous breasts and very short hair, whereas the male slaves have neither breasts nor hair. Except for these two differences, the female and male adult slaves are indistinguishable. They are illustrated with the same skin tones, facial structures/features and body types, and are dressed identically: topless and in underwear. By illustrating each slave nearly-identically and choosing not to distinguish between genders, Carter maintains that because Black bodies of all genders and ages were enslaved, the status identity of "still nigga" is one that is ungendered, undifferentiated, objectified, and quantitative.

Similarly, LaMonda Horton-Stallings uses Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* to situate Blackness as an inherently contradictory space, wherein multiple seemingly-oppositional realities operate concurrently. Stallings uses *Fledgling*'s protagonist, Shori, as her cite of analysis, constructing her as "someone who undoes expectations of the human" (Shante Paradigm Smalls 2017, n.p). Shori is a "fifty-three-year-old Black female vampire with the appearance of a ten-year-old girl" (ibid), and is the cite of concurrent oppositions in myriad ways. She is Black and white, Ina (vampire/nonhuman) and human, adult and child, genderqueer and gender-normative. She is more-than-human, Otherly-human, and nonhuman, simultaneously. Shori's entire existence is constructed by/upon oppositional binaries, a series of concurrent both/ands and neither/nors. Shori's dichotomous positionality is, in many ways, parallel to that of

Sara's, insofar as both occupy a space of ontological nonexistence and epistemological erasure, and both disrupt oppositional binaries and hegemonic social constructions. Because Sara is neither straight nor male, feminine nor white, she is multidimensionally disenfranchised and theoretically rendered Other. Sara and queer Black women like her transgress, like the figure Shori, conceptions of normativity, ultimately disrupting what is socially constructed and received as human, nonhuman, and Otherly-human.

The pregnant woman in the mall restroom, who was racially of European descent and ethnically Latinx, had told Sara, "You're not supposed to be in here." Sara was not ungendered in this interaction. The woman, herself a gender and ethnic "Other," clearly received Sara in a gendered way. However, I regard this interaction as a form of mis – or perhaps otherly – gendering. Because Sara is – at least ontologically – outside of the realm of what is read as human, human classifications of gender do not properly translate when read on/performed by her body. Stallings argues that the grammars usually associated with the human can, because of the otherness of Blackness, be "overwritten by nonhuman grammars" (131). The Black-as-other is not, and in fact cannot be, bound by the delimitations of what Stallings refers to as Greco-Roman and Enlightenment – white/Eurocentric – ideals. If Black bodies are conceptualized as "ungendered flesh" that is undifferentiated and nonspecific, then it is effectively impossible to conceptualize Black masculine female "gender" performance within Western confines of gender roles, rules, and norms. In other words, Western notions of gender/gender performance are articulated through human grammars. Black masculine lesbians are therefore concurrently received, and able to perform and exist, outside of these categories, due to the inability of human or ontological grammars to script nonhuman or nonontological beings.

I break my gaze from the wooden figurines and watch Sara roll up for a moment in silence. “Uhm, well, okay. I have a question,” I eventually ask. She nods her head to say, “go ahead.”

“When you sent me that screenshot with the guy who said ‘what are you, a hybrid?’ like to me, I took that as not being seen. I framed that as a way in which you are looking at me in this body, and you do not see me, and you’re posing this question, ‘am I a hybrid?’ I’m not even a human, am I a hybrid?” Sara had recently received a message from a Tinder match, a conventionally attractive light-skinned man of African descent, that read “I hope I don’t offend you. Are you a woman? Like you look hybrid.

I continue, “And so to me, I took that immediately as like, ‘you just erased me.’ But you didn’t take it that way.”

“I thought it was actually kinda flattering?” she replies,.

“Really?” I fail to hide my surprise.

“I’ve never had someone ask me like that, you know? Are you fuckin’ hybrid? Like I think of myself as some fuckin’ alien human that’s like, the perfect being of not a male and not a female but just human, just a being, you feel me?”

“But do you personally identify as a woman, regardless of all that?”

“Yeah,” she says, raising an eyebrow.

“Just for the record,” I explain.

“Oh. Yeah.” She flips open the top of her Zippo and runs the seam of the blunt back and forth along the flame. “But if I did identify with anything, it’d be human. And it’s probably what it should be, until they’re like, sixteen, and they’re like ‘yeah, I wanna be this [gender].’”

It is apparent that in the context of gender, Sara is frequently perceived and received in a way that is gendered, but mis-or-otherly so, as even those who correctly receive her gender as “woman” understand that identity as being performed in an alternate, and often incorrect, way. Even Sara’s maternal siblings, both of whom are accepting and supportive of her queerness, regard her gender as being in an alternative space outside of Western constructs. Once, in a clothing store, in an attempt to emphasize the pressures that come with performing femininity, Desiree told Sara she was lucky that she doesn’t want to be a girl.

“What the fuck do you mean? I am a girl,” Sara retorted.

“You know what I mean, like girly. You don’t have to worry about stuff girls have to worry about,” Desiree explained.

On another occasion, Sara was in the kitchen, playfully bickering back and forth with Tyrell on Facetime, as I sat in the living room. I heard Tyrell pause and suck his teeth before exclaiming, “Bitch! I mean nigga!” Sara walked into the living room, shaking her head at him. Turning to me, she says “He just called me a bitch nigga.” Like his little sister, Tyrell’s deliberate use and self-correction of gendered language is indicative of his conceptualization of his big sister’s gender performance as being in an Other space that is outside of Eurocentric gender grammars.

It is apparent that Sara conceives of and perceives herself in this same alternative positionality, although she – and I – struggle with the constraints of the lack of accessible human/Western grammars to describe this particular space, positionality, and performance. Several months ago, Sara was booked as an extra in a cocktail brunch scene for a Fox Network television program. For the scene, she was dressed in a fuchsia cocktail dress, blush pumps, and faux-diamond jewelry. That evening I had asked how it had gone.

“It was good. It was fun,” she said. “I got to dress up like a girl.”

“You are a girl.”

“You’re right,” she had laughed. “I meant like a ‘girly’ girl. ‘Cause ya know, I’m uh...pretty masculine.”

Zippo in hand, Sara stands up again, this time walking around the table to the stand on my right. She lights an incense, and then the blunt, disappearing again for a moment behind a cloud of smoke.

“How do you define masculinity?” I ask her as she returns to her seat.

“Uhm, masculinity is defined by people differently. I think of masculinity as the aggressive type of person, or the person that likes to take initiative. But uh, I think anybody can wear masculinity. Doesn’t matter, race, age, gender does not matter.”

I smile. “Anyone can wear masculinity? I like that, actually – that language. That’s cool.”

“Yep, it’s hard to really define it, because everybody thinks of it differently, so I’m just gonna say, whatever you think a man is ‘supposed’ to be is ‘masculine.’ Even though that’s not true, but yeah.”

“I hear what you’re sayin’. What about for yourself? For Sara personally?” I wonder.

“My masculinity is my clothes,” she explains. “That’s about it. Really not the masculine type, if you know what I’m sayin’.”

“So, is what you like about men’s clothing just like the physical comfort of it, or –” I begin.

“Definitely the physical comfort. And just how I’m treated. I think men treat women like pawns in a chess game, kinda like. And when I’m wearing men’s clothes, I’m more respected,”

she asserts, further stating that men's clothes often spare her from the inherent objectification of womanhood. I ask her why she predominantly defines her masculinity as physical presentation.

She ponders the question for a moment before responding, "Uhm, the way I move is a little different than the average woman. So yeah, maybe the way I move and what I wear. Really about it. Way I move is not like a woman's 'supposed to' move."

I ask her what she means, but it's clear to me that she has some sense that she's failing at "properly" doing gender.

"Uh, I don't know. Like modelling has kind of shown me that."

"I bet!" I nod. "Talk to me about that. That's interesting, for sure."

"Uhm, I don't know. Feelin' like – wearin' heels is really uncomfortable, but feelin' like 'you walk like a guy in some heels' is definitely, uh, noticed by a lot of people, even though you feel like you may be doin' it like a woman, you know? And then posing, women move more fluently, and men kinda have more of a structure to their body, where they kinda keep their angles the same. They don't really do S's with their body, like push their hip out, push their shoulder out one way. You don't really see men doin' that. So yeah, and kinda just, women are more fluent, like I said. Like they move – they can move however they want to. Men can't do that masculinely – in a masculine type of way, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"I notice that you are saying 'women' and 'men,' and not 'we' and 'men,'" I tell her. "You're saying, 'women this-and-that,' but you're a woman. I think it's interesting that instead of 'we are supposed to...' you say 'women are supposed to...'. Because to me, it kinda seems like you're positioning yourself outside of 'woman,' then. Is that accurate? At least in this context?"

“Uh...” Sara pauses. “Yeah,” she agrees after a moment’s thought. “Yeah.” She hands me the blunt. I look at it for a moment, then take it.

Sara and I both understand Blackness as an identity inherently proximal to violence in a plethora of manifestations. In a prior conversation, Sara had stated that Black people are treated “unhuman,” lamenting that we are “being treated like savages...targeted as some type of beast or, you know, a slave. Like, just that symbol for everybody to know. It’s kinda like that example for everyone, if you really think about it.”

“Of what not to be?” I ask.

“Exactly!” she exclaims. “It’s sad. That’s scary. And that’s probably why Black people are like, ‘We already lost, ‘cause we’re the symbol, you know? Of what not to be.’”

I wonder whether her gender identity and expression increases this proximity. “Since I am Black,” she notes, “I am ‘aggressive.’ Since I am lesbian, I am ‘aggressive.’ Since I am a Black female lesbian butch, I am ‘aggressive’ in some type of way.”

“In what ways do you feel like you experience violence by mainstream society specifically because of your identity as Black and woman and gay and masculine-identified?” I ask her. “Pass me that ashtray, please.”

“In what sense?” she asks me, sliding the crystal bowl over and watching me gently tap the excess ash off the cherry.

“However.” I reply. “Emotionally, mentally, sexually, physically. However you wanna answer or think about that question. Could be theoretical, could be literal.”

“I have had men tryna have sex with me at a very young age, so, [I’m] very uncomfortable with men, so I’ve had a lot of violent – if you wanna say ‘violent’ – pretty violent then. And then I grew out of that...’bout nine.”

I pass her back the blunt. “Is that something you feel comfortable talking about?”

“Yeah, we can talk about it,” she tells me. It sizzles between her lips.

“So, wherever you feel comfortable starting, whatever you feel comfortable talking about, I’m happy to just listen,” I tell her.

“Okay, I was molested at the age of four by somebody outside of my family, which is actually pretty surprising. Uhm, he was a guy that lived in me and my grandma’s basement, which is so sketch. He worked for [her] limo company, and his name was Marty. I mean, that’s...it was really horrible, now that you look back at it. I actually have certain triggers. Like certain odors, and just the area of like a basement, or like a garage. Things like that just give me a feeling, like flashbacks, or just, remind me of the smells. Also with a cousin of mine. Uhm, livin’ in [Aunt] Paula’s house, ‘cause I grew up a lot of my life there. And her son, his name is Tavius, he would uh, he would just touch me in inappropriate ways and shit, and then one day, his sister catches him, and she’s like, stunned by it and she starts crying, and then after that it never happened again, thank god. So yeah, that’s that. I’ve just been molested all my life, basically, all my childhood life. Ain’t never had no regular childhood, you know what I’m sayin’?” She exhales and passes me the blunt.

Initially, Sara is cavalier, recounting the abuse with a degree of emotional detachment, almost as if she’s trying to mitigate the severity of her experiences through her speech patterns. As she continues, however, her tone shifts from indifference to sheer disgust as she begins to discuss her father’s second son, Bint.

“I don’t talk to him like that because he did some very strange things between us,” she begins. “He would do sexual activities with me before I was the age of nine. By the time this

happened, sexual activity for me was normalized because I was molested [by Marty] at the age of like, three or four, you know?”

I ask her how she feels the experiences of sexual violence have affected her.

“For me, it was...it was a kind of a catastrophe in my own setting. Felt like I grew up in...you can actually have someone grow up in human trafficking, and that’s how I kinda felt like I grew up in.” She sighs. “Like, not knowing that sex was not a child’s thing, because at a young age I was consciously giving myself to this man, [not knowing] it was wrong, because he was hiding it behind closed doors.”

“You think you were doing it willingly?”

Yeah, because it was something I was unknowingly doing wrong, and nobody knew about it till I was around nine. So, that’s a thought for heaven.”

“I am really sorry to hear that that is something that you experienced. Are you still in contact with those family members?” I ask her, hoping she’ll tell me she’s not.

“They’re there. I don’t really talk to them like that. I feel like there’s a weird disconnect, of course. Like, I wanna stab ya, but I’m not the person to do that. Yeah, I’m not the one to do that. I kinda, like...I do wanna put you behind some type of bars or something, or tattoo ‘I am a molester’ or ‘I am some type of sadistic pig’ on top of your forehead so everybody can know my fuckin’ truth, but I can’t do that, you know?” She fixes her eyes on the smoke swirling around my fingers.

“Uh...yeah,” she continues quietly, “it was a – it was a weird experience...and I don’t know whom to blame, but I know it’s not me. And it went all the way to my hometown, the sexual abuse, which is even sadder, because you would think that’s where you would be safe.

And once I told my father, I felt safe almost, until a few days after when he put his hands on me, so now I know I can't trust any man. Or anybody. It's kinda sad."

"You say he put his hands on you. That was the Fourth of July situation?"

"It was around Fourth of July, I believe, yeah."

When Sara was seventeen, she returned to Liberal from Atlanta for the summer. On July third, she had gone to the movies with Tyrell and a mutual female friend, the latter of whose hand she was holding when her stepmother arrived to pick them up. Sara thought nothing of it. The following day, growing increasingly inebriated during a Fourth of July cookout, Clint pulled Sara to the side, insisting they needed to talk. Sara followed her father into the house, where he confronted her about her holding hands with a girl.

"He already doesn't like the fact that I'm, like, boyish," she recalled. "I'm like, I was holding hands with a girl. What does it mean? Doesn't mean nothin'." Angered by her initial indifference and eventual indignation, Clint grabbed his daughter by the throat and struck her in the face. The following morning, she packed her bags and left for Aunt Paula's house.

"So what did you tell him?" I question, handing Sara what's become a roach.

She carefully grabs it from between my fingertips. "I just told him that his son...one of his sons – which is my half-brother – molested me when I was young, when I was growin' up. Like kissin' me. And he was like 'I can't believe that, why didn't you tell me?' And I was like 'Cause I grew up not knowing.' He was like 'It's not your fault, you know that.' I was like 'I wish I woulda known.' He was like, 'Do you want me to put him in jail?' And I was like, 'No, it's so late now.' You know? It's like I wish I could've put him in jail back then. But I do want him to be away from children, you know? And then he gave me a hug afterward... My brother."

“The one who did it?” My stomach churns at the understanding that Sara is continually re-traumatized by her relationships with her paternal family.

“Yeah, and I don’t really like him, still. It’s like, I just don’t give a fuck about ya’ll, you know? It’s like I’m just gon’ leave you where you are.”

“Has he ever apologized?” I frown.

“He has apologized. He did apologize when he hugged me. How do I feel about it? I don’t give a fuck. He was old enough to know. I wasn’t. You know? So I was just taken advantage.”

“Yep,” I sigh. “I’m glad you know that.”

For the first time in our conversation, her voice cracks. “Yeah...so why do I feel comfortable in these clothes?” She presses the tip of the roach into the side of the ashtray. “I’m not sure...” Her voice breaks as she hides her face in her elbow and bursts into tears.

3.3 Chapter 3: “There is No ‘American Dream’ Built for Us...and There’s So Many More Options”: Black “Masculine-Feminine” Women’s Possibilities for Personal Power, Resistance, and Erotic Potential

One of the primary things I notice about Sara is her lack of desire to conform to certain hegemonic scripts of gender, sexual and racial normativity. She is entirely comfortable taking up physical space in public, which may seem obvious considering her height and limb-length, but becomes more complex when we consider the frequent socialization of women to occupy as little space as possible, particularly outside of the home. The “minimal” positionality of womanhood is not merely limited to the physical, either. Society expects us to be soft-spoken, silent when being spoken to, likeable, demure, and generally deferential and submissive to men and

maleness. When we fail to be these things, whether consciously or unconsciously, we are scripted as bossy, bitchy, nagging, nosy, and generally “nasty.” The concept of quietness is not in Sara’s consciousness. She talks loudly in private and public, unashamed to laugh boisterously and be lively in any setting – even when regarded socially as inappropriate.

Black women of all gender expressions are held to hegemonic standards of womanhood, despite their inherent preclusion, due to the standards’ whiteness, from achieving them, and despite the truth that many Black women do not aspire to these standards to begin with. It is apparent that Sara has many reasons for her transgressing hegemonic womanhood, as well as many methods for doing so. In many instances, her refusal to perform womanhood “correctly” is active and deliberate, physically – in appearance and actions – and sexually/romantically. In others, her transgressions are more subtle, inherent, or unconscious. But all instances, I cannot help but see her movement outside of the space of “womanhood” as firmly rooted in, and a direct effect of, her positionality so significantly removed from the boundaries of that “womanhood.”

We sit together on the patio of apartment my building late on a humid Sunday morning, lounging on sofas around the stone-filled gas fire pit. Despite the minimal cloud coverage and humid warmth of the air, Sara leans forward to ignites the fire, flames erupting between the stones with a click of the knob. A woman is stretched out on a beach chair beside the pool across the patio, but otherwise, we are alone. We had begun discussing the ways in which Black masculine lesbians’ sexual and romantic relationships might operate or exist differently than relationships amongst people who don’t have those identities. Our conversation had turned to ways in which heteronormativity affects lesbian relationships, and I had asked her whether she felt pressured to adhere to particular rules in her romantic relationships.

“Like I may need to be fucking with...with my strap-on? Gotta have a strap-on,” she laughs. “S’posed to have a strap-on with the...what else? Yeah that’s really it. That’s all I need. An uh,” she thinks for a moment, “you know, I may like both. I may like giving and receiving, but I mostly like giving. In the stance of the stud/male giving figure or whatever.”

I give her a sly smile. “See, but is that a male figure, though? ‘Cause niggas don’t like to give like that, in my experience. Niggas can be greedy.”

“Well that’s what’s different about female relationships. ‘Cause men will bust a nut and they’ll be like ‘Oh...sorry. Maybe next time. Next time? Next time! Okay, next time,’ you know what I’m sayin’? Women, they are prideful and, you know, in knowing what a woman wants and likes and shit, you know? They’ll be like ‘Are you good? I could do it some more, you know what I’m sayin’? I could keep goin’. I go, baby, I go.’ Men just bust a nut, you know, it’s over with. So, I mean...some men like to give. Some people don’t.”

Sara’s statements remind me of Laura Lane-Steele’s findings through her study of studs in the Southeast: “there are ways in which...studs do not follow traditional male scripts in their sexual relationships...In general, during sex, the femme’s sexual pleasure is prioritized over the stud’s...This does not follow the heterosexual script that places men’s sexual desires ahead of their female partners, and in fact, it is the exact opposite” (486).

“I uh, I date studs. Like I’m one of those studs that date all women no matter what they wear, so it’s different,” Sara says suddenly, startling me out of my thoughts and bringing me back to the patio, my gaze refocusing on the fire pit.

I nod, acknowledging I heard her, keeping my eyes on the dancing flames. It’s not the first time Sara has told me this; she has always been transparent about her attraction to other studs, despite the attraction being highly taboo within the homonormative Black lesbian

community. In fact, Sara's revelation is the exact opposite of Lane-Steele's findings, as the latter's participants unanimously regarded stud-stud relationships as disdainful, disgusting, and "just gay!" (489). Sara's attraction to numerous gender identities and performances therefore demonstrates the way in which seemingly-natural classifications of attraction, even within otherwise nonnormative social spaces, like the lesbian community, are easily collapsible. That Sara describes her attraction to studs as "different" demonstrates that she understands the attraction as a subversion, and perhaps perversion, of various scripts of normativity. Her transparency about, and security in, her attraction indicates that she does not care what anyone within or without the LGBTQ+ community thinks, and that she will not allow herself to be restricted to the confines of whichever scripts of normalcy and normativity she believes herself to be transgressing.

"Do you feel unlimited?" I squint over at her.

"Uh, Metro PCS? What do you mean? 4G or LTE?"

I roll my eyes at her. "What do you mean?" she repeats.

"I don't know, like you got a..." I trail off, struggling to think of an example. "Alright, something else I think about," I begin again after few seconds' thought. "Straight couples, there's [often] this expectation. You gotta get married and have this baby and this house and this picket fence. Do you feel like your relationships, or your perception of relationships, are limited in terms of what they can be for you?"

"Uhm, honestly, no, because I am a masculine-feminine woman and there is no American Dream built for us. We have to totally make our own. And there's so many more options, you know what I'm sayin'?"

I'm struck by the use of that particular self-descriptor: "masculine-feminine woman." Over the course of our professional relationship, Sara has evinced a fluidity in her self-perception and the language she uses to describe herself. She often positions herself as both an outsider within and insider without normative conceptions of womanhood, referring to herself as a stud in some moments and asserting in others that the term is restrictive and not one with which she truly identifies. She admits to ideologically perceiving herself outside of the category of woman while adamantly asserting her womanhood to people – like the woman in the mall restroom, and even her own sister – who try to invalidate her. She offers flexible and relational definitions of masculinity, asserting that "masculinity really doesn't change. It really just changes in situations and forms, maybe with another gender, for it to play out." Her perspective of the relativity of gender, and her understanding of herself in an alternative, Other space suggests that Sara actively assumes an Otherly existence founded on a both/and framework. It is this existence that consequently allows her to describe herself as a "masculine-feminine woman," and to perceive those descriptors as complimentary, rather than antithetical.

"So yeah," she continues "We probably can think about the traditional way of a white man and white woman havin' 'bout three children – two boys, one girl, you know –"

"A whole dog," I interject out loud.

"Yeah, a whole dog. One girl, one boy, a dog, you know I'm sayin'? That type of relationship...No, I think we have more of an imagination because there is nothing made for us. I think when a white man and white woman gets together, or just two Black, a hetero couple gets together, then they're automatically thinkin' the white picket fence, because that's all that was ever made, you know what I'm sayin'? I'm still thinkin' about if I wanna wear a tux or a dress to my wedding, so..." Despite her joking tone, I can tell that she means it, too.

“Like you said, man, Billy Porter that bitch. Do both.” I chuckle softly, thinking back to a previous conversation in which Sara had excitedly exclaimed, “To my wedding I would wear what that motherfuckin’...Billy Porter was wearin’. That shit was fly. That shit was dope,” referring to the tuxedo/ballgown fusion piece the actor had worn to the 2019 Oscars.

“Yeah. For real,” she replies. “So I got options. I think that’s what scares people. I know I’m smart!” she playfully snaps at me, noticing my facial expression. “Keep going, let’s go.”

I shake my head and sigh, pulling the sheet with my interview questions out of my bag. I modify the question, recognizing Sara’s adamancy that her positionality does not cause her to be socially or ontologically nonexistent, or regarded as ungendered or racially sub/nonhuman.

Modifying my original question, I ask her, “How does being socially extra-visible allow you to develop an understanding of yourself and your identity that differs from those people who aren’t Black masculine lesbians?” I ask her. I give her an example as she thinks.

“I think about that in terms of being bi —” I begin, “sexual, racial, lingual, national. For me, my whole identity is being rooted in like, the middle of two things, and the way I perceive myself is through my understanding of me being in the middle of two things all the time. How, if at all, does your perception of yourself allow you to develop an understanding of who you are in a different way?” I frown at the sheet, realizing how vague the question sounds out loud. “You said you’re an alien?”

“Yeah, I’m definitely an alien,” she nods, eyes widening. “Uhm, I am mixed-race, female, big feet – can’t miss that – tall as shit, uh, lightskinned, masculine, *lightskinned*, okay?” She emphasizes the significance her complexion through both repetition and inflection. *Not full nigga*, I think to myself, *but still nigga*.

“So I knew I was in the middle of things. I knew I was in the middle of things,” she continues. “Now, I was raised with all boys. I would play football with my brother and his friends like almost every day. We were tackling each other, just something I wanted to do. I didn’t wanna play uh, one hand touch or whatever the fuck we called it. Uhm, but yeah, I found out, you know, all my friends that were girls wore very tight pants and didn’t wanna play football, didn’t wanna get dirty. So I automatically knew that I wasn’t a girl. I wasn’t girly, you know? I was gonna be me, you know? And I feel more comfortable around lightskin people, okay? ‘Cause I am in the middle of everything.”

“As opposed to white people or darker-skinned Black people?” I clarify, fascinated and validated that she too recognizes herself as being in a similar both/and, in-between space.

“Both”

“Oh,” I raise my eyebrows.

She continues, “Yeah, I’d rather be around some lightskin people than Black people and some white people. Honestly, I like Black people and stuff. They cool. We cool. We *are* good. But I like them as much as I like the white people. If I’m – honestly, if I’m around a bunch of white people in a room, I feel very, *very* uncomfortable. If I’m around Black people, I feel just a little uncomfortable, but I know they accept me, so it’s a little bit different.”

“You just feel like your Blackness is *kind of* in question?”

“Yeah, just a little bit,” Sara agrees. “Especially when we start talkin’ about it, and when I start sayin’ ‘nigga.’ Like I know nobody’s gonna ask me with my hat off, but, you know...”

“I know the feeling,” I assure her, glancing at her afro. It is one of discomfort, of invalidation, of othering, and at least for me, of being rendered nonexistent by one of the few communities to whom I should be most visible.

“Yeah, I know you get it all the time. It’s actually a problem for you,” Sara recognizes.

“People try to make it a problem.” I say with some defensiveness in my tone.

“Yeah, you’re like ‘Hell nah. *Skeet skeet.*” Sara vocalizes.

Damn right, I think to myself. Out loud, I ask, “How do you feel – if you do feel – that that perception you’re talking about, just being in between, in the middle, having more options, like what possibilities do you see for yourself because of your identity?”

“Honestly, I feel like I could be whoever I’d like to be, and I’ve always felt that way,” she answers almost immediately.

The heavy metal door to the patio creaks open, and two more residents walk out, towels and a case of beer in hand, and settle at the bar counter that runs perpendicular to the pool. “And how can these possibilities be understood as forms of power, personally, interpersonally, and erotically?” I continue once the door slams shut.

“Okay, well I – I’m blessed. Let’s just make it clear, I’m blessed, alright. I know that there’s women out there that look better dressed up as men than they do as women. There are some women like that. There are some. There are some women that look better dressed up as women than they do men. And for me, I’m okay. I’m fair, I’m even, I’m good. So my possibilities are actually infinite. Yeah. Can be with whomever, whenever, okay?”

Sara clearly regards the intersection of her phenotypical androgyny and racial ambiguity as a blessing that begets infinite personal possibilities. I inquire whether she understands those possibilities as power, “personally, or in [her] relationships with other people.”

“Power?” she looks away from the group at the bar and back to me. “I do have power. Power is choice. Power is free will, you know? Uhm, everybody has it, but as a masculine women, people try to put you in a box. But as yourself and knowing who you are and what you

know, how are you gonna let someone say ‘Oh, you’re masculine, so you have to be this way, you have to be this way. You have to do that and do that.’ And then in your mind you’re like ‘But I wanna do this.’ So what are you gonna do? Are you gonna let them take your power away?”

“I hope not. Better not!”

“Yeah. So personally, I feel like I could be bi, I could be straight, I could be lesbian. I am fuckin’ human. I can be whatever the fuck I want...That is the fact, and that is power. Okay?”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” I smile at her, admiring her concurrent refusal and inability to be contained.

She smiles back. “Yeah, I don’t feel like anything restricts me by being who I am and who I want to be...But I know a lot of people struggle with those facts and I’m just blessed to know that I look good, you know, no matter what. Some people are very insecure, and that’s what stops that power, so, there you go. Insecurities will render your power.”

“And how is this power a form of personal resistance against white supremacy, heteronormativity, and patriarchy?” I read off the final question on my sheet before leaning over and switching off the fire. “It’s too hot,” I mutter.

“Mmm,” she sighs, pondering the question briefly. “Well it’s against white supremacy because there’s rules to this shit, and I broke a lot of ‘em,” she begins. “Uhm, you know, white supremacy wants Black women to be with Black men and reproduce Black children. I am already a mixed child. I already broke rules. So uhm, patriarchy – men want me to wear women’s clothes. I’m breaking the rules. They’re mad at me. ‘Put on some fuckin’ thongs and lingerie. Put it on already. You’re not a man. Don’t hide that pussy. Don’t do it.’ Uh, what was the third one? Second?”

“Heteronormativity,” I remind her.

“Heteronormativity. Oh...yeah...uh, they don’t want me to be gay.”

“But, is that resistance? Like obviously your identities break these things, break these rules. How is that – do you see that as resistant?” I ask. “Do you see your existence as resistance?” I ask her this question in an effort to parse out any potential difference between passive, identity-based resistance (i.e. being born Black in a white supremacist society or identifying as woman in a patriarchy) and active resistance (being comprehensively and actively anti-racist, feminist, pro-LGBTQ+ rights, etc.).

Sara considers my question. “Uhm, yeah, in a way. To those people, I see it as resistant...Like, in general, no. But to those people – when those motherfuckin’ couples that are a woman and man holdin’ their hands lookin’ at me holdin’ my bitch’s hand, they’re like, ‘No,’ I do feel like there’s a little bit of restraint, or what is it?”

“Resistance,” I tell her, unconvinced that she truly perceives her identity as such. She has consistently maintained a positionality of difference, often actively so, but not necessarily a positionality that always intentionally seeks to disrupt or transgress spaces/situations.

“Resistant,” she corrects herself. “Yeah, I feel a little bit of resistance there. You know, there’s just so many different things out here, just like races. And uh, we’re kinda like the Jews to the Nazis, you know? Some type of thing, type of thing like that. You know, just different, like outspoken, weird-lookin’, strange.”

“The Other,” I sigh.

“Yes, the Other, there ya go. The Outsider. Basically what it is. But at least I ain’t trans.”

I brace myself for what she might say. “Just fuckin’ witcha, she quickly adds, looking at my furrowed brow. “See, ‘cause trans people have it harder.”

I breath a sigh of relief and nod in silent agreement. “Wanna go in?” I switch off the recorder and nod my head toward the pool. Without a word, she stands up and takes off her tee-shirt to reveal a silver sports bra that almost matches her red and white swim trunks.

“C’mon,” she exclaims as she begins walking toward the pool’s edge. I watch her slender, six-foot-one frame shrink with the distance, her almost-white complexion juxtaposed against a head of curls that are as defiant against gravity as their owner is against societal conceptions of “normal.” As I pull my sundress up over my head, I hear a splash, and I slip out of it in time to see Sara’s head reappear from beneath the ripples.

“Coming!” I call out before kicking off my sandals and following her into the water.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Laura Lane-Steele argues that although there has been a “vast amount of research done on lesbians of all races, academic literature on Black lesbian masculinity is lacking. There have been a number of studies about female masculinity...but few that specifically situate female masculinity within black communities” (481). Bettina Love (2017) makes a similar assertion regarding the (in)visibility of Black and Brown masculine queer women, particularly in the context of academia/education. While plenty of research has been conducted about lesbians and female masculinity, the particular intersection of Blackness, lesbianism, and masculinity has been understudied. As such, I assert that this research project is a significant endeavor both academically and socially. In the context of a heteronormative society that relies exclusively upon binary classifications to categorize individuals, a Black masculine female gender expression is one that is multidimensional, complex, and inherently transgressive of the white supremacist heteropatriarchal hegemonic power structures that relegate her to an ontologically otherly or nonexistence.

Both the pain and resilient strength and power of Blackness are abundantly evident in Sara's life. Nobody in the Cohen-Charles family has had it easy. In fact, it seems as though everybody, across generations, genders, and states, has had it downright hard. The violences of racism, sexism, and poverty are omnipresent, and violences in all manifestations plague inter- and-intrapersonal relationships amongst parents and children. There should be no contention that the Black experience in America has been marked by continual trauma, violence, and pain in all of its physical, spiritual, sexual, and emotional manifestations, often cyclically reinforcing and being reinforced by social constructs around the inferiority of Blackness.

Nevertheless, belief does not inherently create reality. The white supremacist declaration, "Black lives don't matter!" does not render Black lives valueless. Black girls don't cease to be magic simply because racism and sexism can't believe in what they can't see. To be Black and queer and woman is to be a witch that master, despite all his tools, could not burn. Resistance comes in screams and in whispers, and resistance in conditions of unfreedom or unbeing is resistance, nonetheless. Hammonds (2004) argues that "discussions of Black female sexuality often turn to the issue of the devastating effects of rape, incest, and sexual abuse" (308). While these are, of course, imperative subjects which we must reconcile and work to rectify, they are not the only ones of value in the discussion regarding Black queer female sexuality. Rather, "Black queer female sexualities should be seen as one of the sites where Black female desire is expressed" (308), and this desire can ultimately be conceptualized as a form personal power that relies on the power of the erotic. Much of the Black experience exists beyond Black pain, and yet we so often fetishize, romanticize, glorify, or reduce the Black experience to its relationship to trauma. This inherently limits the scope of possibilities for self-actualization and consequently,

personal power, that we can investigate, and ultimately relate to. It is in this same space of violence that exists space for limitless possibilities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we conceptualize this trauma as relative and relational, simultaneously created by and creating the myriad of possibilities for alternative ways of (non)being for queer Black women. For Sara specifically, her positionality is further complicated by her multi-racial background and racially ambiguous presentation. While she is ancestrally only white through her maternal grandmother, she actively identifies as mixed-race, and expresses being socially perceived as such; therefore, she is situated by race in a contradictory intersection of the humanity of whiteness and non-humanity of Blackness. Previously noted, Wilderson (2010) argues that the positionality of Blackness as un/nongendered, bodiless, and “thing” consequently produces and reproduces the object-thingness of Black (female) sexuality.

This becomes complicated, however, when the Black female thing is simultaneously – at least partially – also white human woman. Sara repeatedly described being mixed-race as being “in the middle of things.” Similarly, Wilderson states the mulatto/a is a “middle term” or “middle ground” between the subjugated and the dominating (301). This is not dissimilar to Warren’s (2015) description of Black queerness as a catachresis based on the impossibility of folding the (nonhuman) Black-queer into humanity (11). In effect, Sara also must additionally negotiate the impossibility of folding the (nonhuman) Black-white into her understanding of her humanity.

I have come to two primary conclusions through my series of interviews and conversations with Sara, both on and off the record. First, it is clear that Sara understands her identity in the specific intersections of race, gender identity, gender presentation, and sexuality as positioning her outside of realms of normativity. This is not in and of itself surprising – Blackness, gender nonconformity, and homosexuality all exist outside of hegemonic conceptions

of “normal.” What is surprising is the way in Sara, through behaviors, presentation, and speech, assertively claims a space that is not ungendered, like Spillers and Wilderson suggest, but Otherly-gendered. Perhaps the distinction here is in internal versus external identification, wherein Sara understands her gender in an Other realm, despite society’s attempts to strip her of her gender incomprehensible. Perhaps the distinction is in Sara laughs and goes along with it when she’s called “Sir,” rather than becoming angry, offended, or feeling insecure. Perhaps it is in her use and embracing of descriptors such as “alien” and “hybrid,” terms that don’t inherently describe her as non-being, but instead, as Otherly-being. Perhaps it’s in her feeling “blessed,” not oppressed, by her androgyny and ability to “be both and look exactly like both.” It’s her indignance when people question that ability.

Second, Sara strongly feels as though her intersectional identity puts her in a space of hyper-, rather than in-, visibility. When I asked her to elaborate on the ways in which her identities made her feel socially erased, she immediately retorted, “Why would I feel erased? I mean, I’m here. I don’t know who else thinks I’m not.” She continued to assert her that she did not care if anyone failed to see her, but also contended that it was more often the case that her complexion and androgyny caused her to be “more seen than not.”

“I don’t really feel erased at all,” she had assertively concluded. “That’s the only thing I’m able to call myself, you know what I’m sayin’? So why not take that and empower that?” Calvin Warren argues that Blackness is a position of social non-ontology that secures the boundaries of whiteness, also known as humanness. Nevertheless, it is evident that Sara finds herself being hyper-visible because of her physical presentation/identities. Surely, she does not feel invisible, nonexistent or erased; even her concession, “of course, being Black is invisible,” was subsequently qualified with “I’m light-skin. I got it a little easier.” I argue that the additional

intersections of Sara's identity, beyond race, create a positionality more complex than the understanding of Blackness as simply, solely, and always non-being. I suggest that Sara's positionality is not one of non-being, but one whose, because of her proximity to whiteness, combined with her gender incomprehensibility, is ultimately positioned within a state of being, Otherly-so, that is predicated on visibility instead of humanness. In other words, Sara, because of her identity, is so far removed from socially "normal" understandings about what is "ontological," that she is in fact thrust back into a position of visibility – one that is hybrid, alien, "people don't really know what I am," Other, *still* incomprehensible to white supremacist heteropatriarchy, yet visible – scarily and fascinatingly so – nonetheless. Afro-nihilism and pessimism presently understands Blackness as a position of nonontology, a nothingness superimposed with social non/invisibility. Sara's narrative suggests a unique social positionality for light skinned Black masculine lesbians, and this positionality creates space for further investigation and the potential to theorize Black queer women's stories and reconceptualize Afro-nihilism outside of binary, masculinist, and single-axis frameworks.

Ultimately, Sara evinces a way of being in this world that seeks to, for lack of a better term, live beyond the limitations that Afro-nihilism imposes. Through our interviews, Sara articulated the numerous ways in which she feels largely unrestrained by the bounds of hegemonic normativity, and through my interactions and observations of her, she not only verbalizes, but performs and actualizes this self-truth. Afro-nihilism argues that Blackness is so deeply "nothing," that other systems of domination are secondary, tertiary, and ultimately inapplicable, to Black people. Through my interviews with Sara, I attempted to reconcile theoretical and socio-epistemological nonontology with lived queer (Black) female experience, marked in Sara's case by a particular form of hypervisibility.

I previously suggested that Black masculine lesbians are subjected to, and consequently beget, a different lived experience and manner of existence, as they cannot be bound by limitations that were never created to apply to them. I further offered that because they are incapable of attaining and performing hegemonically normative humanist scripts, Black masculine lesbians ultimately “[have] nothing to prove” (Spillers 1987, 74) to respectable and proper gender and personhood. Sara encapsulates this argument. Not only does she move through her world as if social norms don’t exist (at least for her), in many ways she feels liberated by having nothing to prove to anyone respecting her gender, racial, and sexual identities and performances, describing her possibilities because of her positionality as “infinite.” Sara firmly perceives herself in a both/and “middle of things’ positionality, in which her unhuman blackness is complimentary, not contradictory, to her queerness and womanhood. In many ways, the violences of Sara’s positionality (racism, sexism, misogynoir, homophobia) that render her Otherly are the very ones that intersect in specific ways and allow her to be infinite. Effectively, Sara reaffirms the Black feminist declaration that it is difficult, if not theoretically and practically impossible, “to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (Combahee 4).

Sara’s existence in America is defiance. To be a queer Black woman in America is to be born knowing that your only value is as an example of what not to be, providing an Other Black pedestal for Proper whiteness, and by extension, for rightness. It is to be by and for everyone but yourself. It is to understand that your womanhood is defined by your usefulness to patriarchy, and the degree to which masculinity can use and consume you. It is to recognize that your sex, both in act and identity, only exist for male gratification and depletion. It is to hear the message that you are not valid. Frequently, it is to believe it.

Through the power and poetry of storytelling, Black women are able to acknowledge and honor their truths, which for Black queer women almost always means disturbing what society perceives to be “normal.” Often unconsciously, this disruption means using poetry, frequently performed and created through storytelling, to “pursue our magic” and (re)name that which has been – frequently through force – rendered nameless. As queer Black women, we understand that “the woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface. It is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (37). We understand this power within us as a space for transformation, one in which America’s denials, preventions, and rejections can be – and are – transformed into “new possibilities and strengths” (39). Poetry is a vital necessity for our existence. When our white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am, we heard the Black mother within each of us – the poet – whisper, in our ears and in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. (38). When our white masters try to convince us that because we are Black, and queer, and woman, we do not exist, we hear our Black mother issue her gentle reminder: “just because they do not see you does not mean you are not there.”

By analyzing Sara’s experience, this project adds to a growing body of scholarship on Black masculine lesbians, and hopefully will help affirm and validate the experiences of similar Black masculine women who feel non-or-Otherly-existent. I also hope that this project helps elucidate the ways in which Black masculine women, and Black queer women generally, access and express their personal power despite and because of their positionality in the alternative and incomprehensible. We may not be able to use the master’s tools to dismantle his house. But through poetry, and our stories, we will make our own tools, and we will burn his shit to the ground. Sara’s already got the Zippo.

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