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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/16184587>

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# MAMAS GOTTA HAVE A LIFE TOO: COUNTERNARRATIVE WORK TO THE SEX NEGATIVE BLACK MOTHER FIGURE

by

NIA BYRD

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

## SEX POSITIVE BLACK MOTHERS AND BLACK GIRLHOOD

Black girlhood is a beautiful experience despite the adversity many Black women face. In following the belief of the founder of Black girlhood studies Ruth Nicole Brown, "Black girlhood is a continuous life journey." While women throughout history have always struggled with respectability and sexual politics. Black women have had an even harder time being a woman, a sexual being, and a mother all in the sphere. We have experienced unique oppression due to both our race and gender that makes it vital that we tell our stories. Therefore, my thesis focuses on telling the narrative of Black mothers who practice an affirming sex-positive pedagogy and its influence on Black girlhood.

INDEX WORDS: Black Sexual Politics, Memory Work, Black Girlhood, Sex Positive, Poetry,  
Personal Narrative

"MAMAS GOTTA HAVE A LIFE TOO": COUNTERNARRATIVE WORK TO THE SEX  
NEGATIVE BLACK MOTHER FIGURE

by

NIA BYRD

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

Masters of Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

MAMAS GOTTA HAVE A LIFE TOO: COUNTERNARRATIVE WORK TO THE SEX  
NEGATIVE BLACK MOTHER FIGURE

by

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December 2019

## DEDICATION

To my mother, Marla, there are not enough words to convey what you mean to me. Thank you for sharing your stories and poetry in my work. Thank you for reminding me there are a thousand ways to skin a cat, and thank you most all for inspiring this entire thing. This entire thesis is my love letter to you and our village. Thank you, Aunt Mary, for being more than an aunt, but an extension of my mother, and I thank you for every editing session. Thank you, Dad, for telling me in 2015 to just take a chance on Atlanta leading me to two degrees and the best time of my life. Thank you to my cohorts, who made this the best experience of my academic life. To Black Squad (Kara/Bryana), thank you for your endless support, laughter, inappropriate everything, and, most of all, sisterhood. To London, my beyond a best friend, thank you for just dealing with me even while you were juggling law school, opening your home every time I needed to escape to Chicago, and for reminding me, I got this! To Paris, thank you for always showing up to make me beautiful and teaching us all it is never too late to choose you! Finally, to my partner, who has been on this journey with me for a decade, thank you for just being my friend above all things. You get me, you respect my work, and I am just so grateful to celebrate the end of this beautiful journey with you!

## **Acknowledgments**

To my committee Tiffany King, Chamara Kwakye, and Megan Sinnott, I appreciate your patience and feedback on this journey. Thank you for making me feel like my work had educational value and was a story worth being told.



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## INTRODUCTION

### “Queering-up the Script of Black Motherhood”

I always knew that my relationship with my mother was unique growing up. It was open in a way that I did not see with other mothers and daughters. Our relationship seemed especially unique because we are a Black mother/daughter duo, and our openness with each other I would learn later was abnormal. I did not realize my mother's performance of Black motherhood deviated from some unspoken script until a group of my girlfriends used the word "privileged" to describe our relationship. Upon hearing this, I found myself feeling sadden by this statement because I learned that many Black girls did not experience this kind of openness with their mothers. Unlike the saying that goes, "children should be seen not heard," my mother encouraged open dialogue. My mother was my best friend, in every sense of the word, and she was a "give it to you straight no chaser" kind of educator. My mother's openness was especially true when it came to the subject of sex and being comfortable with one's self. The idea of motherhood being separate from one being a sexual creature never existed in my household. My mother was a sexual person and a mother to me.

I often wondered, did other Black mothers offer to show their daughters how to put on a condom with their stash of dildos correctly? Did other Black mothers encourage their daughters to masturbate or as she would say "know yourself before you give yourself?" When the condom broke for many Black girls, did they have space and opportunity to tell their mothers they needed to go to Planned Parenthood to get Plan B (at one point you needed someone over 18 to have a doctor prescribe it)? My mother did not "put" me on birth control out of some fear of making her a grandmother too soon; instead, she discussed my reproductive rights with me.

Growing up with this privilege as my friends called it left me feeling alone in my Black girlhood experience. I recalled so many moments growing up where people recoiled from my mother and me. I remember experiencing this response to us when my mom took me to a Def Jam Poetry special in Chicago. I was twelve in an adult space listening to adult and often sexual content. What others perceived as inappropriate was my mother's way of nurturing my ability to express myself. In our home, when we could not find the words in moments of anguish, poetry became a part of our love language.

In the tradition of Audre Lorde, particularly her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," I understand poetry and writing to be not just a connection to Black motherhood, ancestral ties, but also to the erotic. The erotic is the very reason I find myself taking on this poetic project of writing between mothers and daughters to reveal an erotic bond and sex-positive pedagogy. I believe that Black mothers deserve to be spoken about in a new light that is not a sex-negative gatekeeper of Black girlhood sexuality. I know that I am not alone in this experience, that other Black girls have Black mothers that were not afraid to queer up the script. Also, some Black mothers have the desire to find a way to connect to their daughters in a sex-positive way but cannot find a blueprint.

I argue in this thesis that Black mother and daughter relationships can also be erotic, that it is necessary to the Black girlhood experience. In my work, I define and use queer to refer to acts and ways of being that are classified as nonnormative as well as attending to the way that queer references the erotic. I, like many, have found myself craving a depiction of my experience only to realize that these representations were limited. I could only find some affinity in shows like *Gilmore Girls*. *Gilmore Girls* is a show that displays a close friend like mother/daughter

duo, but their whiteness limited this affinity I felt. I struggled to find depictions of radically open and erotic relationships between Black mothers and their daughters.

The belief that mothers and sexuality should be separate has been a useful tool for feminists arguing for reproductive rights. However, as Stallings argues in her book, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, it is at the detriment of the woman inside the mother, "Simply put, because women know that reproduction is valued by the state, reproduction has become the forum from which arguments about rights and privilege are made. This is a pacifist approach, and it cannot bring the subject of mother in tune with that of woman" (61). Sexual pacifism hurts all women, but especially Black women who are left in this liberation limbo of being pulled for various political tools such as sexual/asexual, violent/ nonviolent, and racial/economic politics. Stallings clarifies this more the dangers of pacifism, "sexual pacifism remarks upon how black women's most heralded quests for liberation and freedom have consistently been stepped in epistemic nonviolence and asexual or desexualizing politics even when racial politics have alternated between strategies of violence and nonviolence" (61). Therefore, Stallings calls for Black girls and women to search for their mother's porn stash. Mama's porn is the key to understanding how Black mothers who seem to queer up the script are participating in an ancestral rebellion. For Stallings, "mama's porn, with its explicit representation of sexuality, is also good at getting mother's body to live beyond the everyday regimen of a political economy and work society in which such rewriting may be neither necessary nor desired. It makes it clear that there is indeed sexual rebellion (60)." Our mama's porn is the root of our liberation, and once we find it, then we can begin to tell our truths. Like Lorde, who reclaimed the erotic as something more than sex, Stallings does the same in redefining what *Mama's Porn* means. According to Stallings, "Mama's porn is not literally the



pornography of our mothers, but it is funky erotixx briefly mentioned in the preface, a maternal profane imaginary and lineage, that informs cultural objects of propaganda in black women's sexual rebellion (60)." Therefore, I am doing this research to understand how Black mothers and daughters express sexuality, desire, and identity in their relationships by studying one Black mother and two daughters for this project. For this research, my participants and I produced creative pieces that narrated this intimate/unique experience, as well as show variation and difference. My project expands the discussion of diverse ways of mothering and daughtering. I hope to create a desire for more conversations about Black motherhood, sexuality, and guiding Black girls through the challenges of Black girlhood. I hope that my research contributes to new representations of and for Black women and shatters myths about Black sexuality.

## 1.Literature Review

### Black Feminism and Pleasure

Black feminists have produced insightful work on the various intersections that shape Black women's identities and experiences. Still, as I started my project, I found myself wanting to contribute to a discussion that moves discussions about Black women from the space of trauma to a space of pleasure. I am not saying that trauma does not come up or does not affect how Black mothers will perform Black motherhood. I just want to help move the conversation beyond trauma, and my desire to do so has led me to scholars like Jennifer C. Nash. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Jennifer C. Nash creates a new space in black feminist theory that does not focus on the black woman's body as solely a site of trauma. Instead, Nash focuses on how racialized fictions in porn can create a space of agency as well as become a source of pleasure for black women. Using pornographic films from the 1970s and 80s, feminist, queer theory, and critical race theory, Nash moves the conversation beyond limited representations of black women. Works like Nash's led me to an understanding of why representations of Black women in erotic spaces are limited. She focuses on the importance of Black women regaining agency, and the radical experience it is to see a visual representation of women experiencing pleasure in a public/private sphere.

In addition to Nash's work, I discovered Adrienne Brown's book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, which helped me connect how accessing pleasure is a form of activism in self. I found Brown's work especially appealing because of its vignette style. The idea that there is a group of academics and creatives who use their work to advocate for the rights of

women to experience pleasure without shame is reassuring there is a space for my work. I have taken from Brown the importance of being transparent in pleasure activism because it creates an intimacy with your participants, Brown writes, "Most likely you don't know me, so whatever trust can exist between us will come from how well I can share and how much you can open yourself to what I share (31)." I also took from Brown's book that we cannot move to align ourselves with pleasure politics alone; it takes a diverse village to create new norms. "In the writing and gathering process, whenever I came to one of my edges or limitations, I reached out and gathered in a comrade who knows more than I do-about sex work, BDSM, burlesque, legalizing marijuana, pleasure during gender transition, recovering pleasure after childhood sexual abuse, pleasure while battling cancer, pleasure over age sixty, and parenting to generate pleasure-orientated children," (85). I am not naïve enough to not understand by participating in pleasure activism; I will be met with resistance, especially when sex positivity and the woman is still a developing subject, just developing its identity.

I also found a deeper understating of why Black women and sex-positivity seems so elusive in Hortense Spillers' work. A literary critic and author of the 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers argues that the middle passage creates ethnicity as a freezing effect and ungenders Black people. "Ethnicity," in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look, and the effects of the Eternal. We could say, then, that in its powerful stillness, 'ethnicity' (66)," the Black woman has often been displaced and othered. The Black enslaved female does not have the same access to womanhood, motherhood, family, the domestic sphere, and, therefore, white women and femininity. Black women cannot replicate 'femininity' and are denied access to the gender "woman." As Spiller argues, "This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh-of female flesh 'ungendered'—

offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (68). In following Spillers' theory, it is no wonder that as I began my journey looking for representations of sex-positive Black Mothers, my well began to run dry. How can I find information on a subject (being the Black Mother), that according to Spiller, does not exist?

According to Spillers, figures like the Black mother are unintelligible. In their intelligibility, Black women who mother change the performance of motherhood. The way that society regulates gender performance can create anxiety in those who fear they deviate from the standard. Cathy Cohen, in her work "Punk, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," discusses how queerness and queer politics could be extended to understanding how nonnormative/marginalized groups, the basis for transformative politics are. In order for queer politics to be transformative, it must acknowledge how power structures and policies identity formations (i.e., race, class, and gender). According to Cohen, anything that is outside heteronormativity, not just homosexuality, is under scrutiny by society. Cohen writes, "Recognizing the limits of current conceptions of queer identities and queer politics; I am interested in examining the concept of "queer" in order to think about how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality (441)." Cohen's use of the welfare queen/mother is a clear example of how Black women inherently take part in queer theory, especially when you add intersecting identities like poor and receiving state assistance. "Anything done under the umbrella of poverty and Blackness is often scrutinized as a queer performance because of the impossibility of it being performed normatively even if the individual identifies as heterosexual. Cohen reiterates,

“Again, I raise this point to remind us of the numerous ways that sexuality and sexual deviance from a prescribed norm have been used to demonize and to oppress various segments of the population, even some classified under the label “heterosexual (457).” The sex-positive Black mother figure, like the welfare queen, straddles this space between heteronormative privilege and queer subjectivity. Cathy Cohen's work helped me to connect how Black mothers, who choose to embrace a sex-positive pedagogy, are enacting a queer performance. Cohen's notion of queer informs and shapes how I will use queer to define nonnormative behavior that goes beyond just sexual orientation.

### **Memory, Writing, and Queer Black Performance**

My grandmother was a part of the first generation to be introduced to the pill in my family. The pill would be approved in 1960, but it would not be until 1966 that my grandmother started using it. She was introduced to it by a white woman whose house she cleaned. My grandmother's body and memory have provided me with knowledge about a vital moment in Black sexual history. Understanding the value of memory did not take root until I took on this project. Memory is remarkable because it ties me to women who have transitioned in my life as well as the living. I wish there were a way to have recorded those who have transitioned, but I feel it is vital to record those who are still with us.

The usefulness of memory is that when someone recalls an experience, they are also creating a story, and this story creates generational tales. Imagine if, in a few decades, when another researcher is looking for a representation of sex-positive Black women, the stories written in this piece will exist simply because I asked them to write down their memories. Memory enabled me to understand that my ability to create poetry/stories is rooted in memory,

which is why I am having my participants enact the use of memory by recalling specific moments in their life that were defining when it came to an understanding themselves as sexual beings. This even includes unpacking memories that are not pretty like sexual trauma. Something that I find can up when discussing Black women's journey to understanding themselves as sexual beings. However, unpacking in this piece does not mean focusing on it but rather understanding how you can still become sex positive despite trauma. To understand the uses of memory, Frigga Haug's book, *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*, is incredibly useful. The following group of German feminists coedited this book and socialist: Haug, Sunne Andresen, Anke Bunz-Elfferding, Korneila Hauser, Ursel Lang, Marion Laudan, Magret Ludemann, Ute Meir, Barbara Nemitz, Erika Niehoff, Renate Prinz, Nora Rathzel, Martina Scheu, and Christine Thomas. This book became one of the most publicized works centered around memory work in the 1980s. In the book, Haug writes, "The way our culture represents the reproductive role of women—for example, in literature or folktales—turns them into mere objects. It is for this reason that women, in particular women of color, have only fragments from which to piece together their own memories (48)." Haug then goes on to explain why this has a stifling effect on women's history, especially sexual history. Haug says that "The fact of not being included in history as an active participant encourages women ultimately to accept themselves as 'pieces of nature'—which puts them at the mercy of the dominant culture (49)." Since much of women's experiences, histories, and what one might categorize as nonnormative and salacious aspects of women's lives—like sexual pleasure—are suppressed and excised from official histories; women have to engage in other kinds of knowledge production like memory work.

Memory work is counternarrative work for women who desire to tell their own accounts of historical events or moments in time. Memory work provides a creative way for women to fill

in pieces of history where they have felt silenced and creates a vision for the full potential of women in the future. Haugh writes, "Only through their own historicization can they retrieve from the dominant culture elements of a new image of themselves, on the basis of which they may possibly be able to construct alternatives for the future" (49). Women's work to historicize their own lives blurs the line between subject and object, allowing the researcher to become both. "Indeed, memory work is only possible if the subject and object of research are one and the same person" (35, *Female Sexualization*). Memory work is defined and used theoretically by Haugh as, "explicitly presented as a bridge to span the gap between "theory" and "experience," the collective's work will be assessed in relation to theories currently dominant on the Left and within feminism conceived to explain the process whereby women, as subjects within culture, are "made" (14). In more straightforward language, memory work is the willful act of retrieving and analyzing past events. Memory work is essential according to Haugh because it has become a survival guide for women, "Women gained practical experience through consciousness raising groups of retrieving from everyday life itself the means of transcending the everyday. It clearly boosted self-confidence to know that we were not alone in any of our various modes of experience (39)."

L.H. Stallings, in her books, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, extends the use of Funk to discuss how understanding funk connects to how sexuality is a sight of memory. Stallings states that "When memory, or a site of memory, is afforded the same value as history, then we might gain a better sense of what has been wagered" (150). What is so crucial about validating memory is that it can disrupt history that is usually reliant on written events. Stallings uses theorist Pierre Nora's who says, "memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events (22)" (151). Disrupting the way, we rely on events to

define history, would disrupt the history of sexuality. Incorporating memory redefines sexual culture, and the body can become a sight of memory and, therefore, a sight of history. Stallings writes, "I like to believe that they come to me because my body serves as a site of memory for them and because we have a shared understanding about how to approach this world's manufacturing of the publics of sex—that it should not be the primary mediator of our sexuality" (149). Stallings's ability to see her body as an archival guide allows us to theorize a history that is not reliant on events alone. This new framework moves the body and the flesh to being defined beyond the influence of the public sphere. Women must be provided new ways to theorize their sexuality that moves beyond the public sphere. Women of Color are especially stifled by this reliance on the public sphere to shape identity.

Stallings writes, "alternately, if we the black public sphere remains the only way that black women can theorize identity, culture, and movement, then all is lost (150)." The problem with relying on the public sphere is that the "public" is always changing, and depending on who the moral conductor is will decide what is acceptable. Memory work allows us to push back at the written history of sex in the public sphere, which then opens a space to redefine sexual practices and taboos. It also has room to reinterpret acts like public orgies as a site of memory that can connect us even more to our ancestral past, but this also comes with heavy responsibility. Stallings talks about this very point by acknowledging the challenges of memory work. Stallings states, "however, because of the immediate memory of relatives who have transitioned in my lifetime, as well as ancestral presence that I only have blood memory of, I am motivated to be mindful of what they ask of me, when might they ask it, and how they ask, especially when it might conflict with known black feminist thought and its sexual politics"



(152). As someone whose research centers around the memory work method, I have to acknowledge how my memories and ancestral memories are guiding my work.

Using Stallings's belief in memory as a way of messing up this division between reality and fiction, I would like to extend the use of memory to support my use of poetry/storytelling. Stallings argues that it is important that we view sexuality as an object of imagination since it will advance us beyond objective knowledge as the source of power. What is even more compelling is Stallings's use of Toni Morrison's essay, "The Site of Memory" in the book, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* edited by William Zinsser, which Morrison argues for the validation of memory and fiction as one. Of Morrison, Stallings states the following, "reducing the power of history, even more, Morrison would later claim that fiction could be a site of memory for attempting to reconstruct the lives of black people: "Because no matter how 'fictional' the account of these writers, or how much of it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory" (151).

What I love about Toni Morrison's point is that it echoes the sentiments of Audre Lorde. An example of why memory is essential to this project is how memory changed my perception of my grandmother's body and experience. My grandmother's body moved beyond being a matriarchal figure to a source of unspoken history. Her body became a source of history that I did not even know I was missing, and this is because despite the many papers I have written on the history of the birth control pill; I had not realized until talking to my mother that our shared experience of being introduced to the pill through choice was a legacy of my grandmother.

## Creativity + The Erotic

Audre Lorde's essay, "Poetry is not a Luxury," argues that poetry is the spirit of the human and vital to the survival of women. Lorde argues that poetry is a necessity more than something you do in leisure. Lorde believes that poetry is what connects us to our past lives and ancestors. It is the blueprint to our existence as well as the core of our womanhood. Therefore, poetry should be respected as such. Lorde's writing combines artistic expression through writing in order to create her theory. She created a new space to theorize the elitism does not taint that those academic institutions impose on theory. Barbara Christian's essay, "The Race for Theory," refers to Lorde's work as an example of how theory should not be limited to academic institutions and instead theorizing should be accessible to all. Christian uses Lorde's "Poetry is not a Luxury" to emphasize that theory can be poetry. Theory like poetry is rooted in Black ancestry, "For people of color have always theorized-but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic" (68). Poetry pays homage to our ancestors, who created poetry before concerns of academic acceptance was a consideration. It gives this validation to experiences of the past, and it gives a voice to those who felt silenced. "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless, so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (Lorde, nine).

Poetry is a performance and storytelling; it speaks for the dead and the living. Poetry truly is a transformative way to reclaim a history that people of color often have little control in producing. *Patient.* by Bettina Judd is a collection of poems that explore the complex medical industry and its relationship to the black female body. Bettina Judd's main point is to provide a space to narrate recovery of the subjectivity, combining past and present experiences of black

women that came before her. As she says at the beginning of the poem, *Initiation/ Memory*, "Gynecology was built on the backs of Black women, anyway" (10), a reminder that Black women's bodies have never belonged to themselves. Due to slavery, Black women could not control their subjectivity, especially our sexuality. To give this human quality to poetry, this sense of vital importance is a beautiful space Lorde created. In doing my research, I find myself looking for theorists who complement the work of Lorde, Morrison, and Stallings.

I find Jose Munoz's focus on performance by queer of color subjects to be a complementary work. In the book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, performance, and politics are one and the same. Politics can often serve as a flame of inspiration to a performance piece. It is this very relationship that Munoz explores but takes it a step further by looking at disidentification in relation to the performance of politics. Munoz's goal was to contribute to the growing field that is a queer performance-studies lens. Munoz states, "The chapters that make up this study attempt to chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of impossibility that dominant culture generates" (6). One of the critical points that Munoz makes is the importance of performance to theory. Munoz also makes it clear that performance art is political. Munoz states, "performance art changes one's perception of the world (13)." Another critical point in this book is how desire and disidentification go hand in hand for queer folks of color who must work against the desire for white acceptance. Munoz defines disidentification as something, "meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (8). Disidentification, in this case, is when a woman who is labeled loose

or a slucker embraces this performance rather than reject it. Performing slucker removes shame for choosing to blur these lines and creates a new performance of mothering.

Under the white ideal, a mother is supposed to be "the angel of the house," she is nurturing but not overtly sexual. She is the gatekeeper of her daughter's sexuality and must protect her daughter's virtue. The Black mothers that I observed have chosen to embrace their sexuality and motherhood as one. One of the first slang words my mother introduced me to was the term "Slucker," a cross between a slut and hooker. It was a term that I remember my mother and sisters laughing over as she dressed in her leather corset in preparation for date night. I was ten and thirsty for new knowledge, so I asked her what the word slucker meant. My mom, not one to shy away from a teaching moment, told me it was a word she embraced during college while bartending to describe her risqué persona. Slucker was not just a word she informed me, but it stood for the philosophy of her old girlfriends at the time. She said, "We were a group of young women in college who enjoyed their freedom, we partied, we had one-night stands, and we loved ourselves still."

Early on, my mother chose to include me in the many facets of her erotic life, and it made her the mother I have come to admire. While the performance of motherhood is not a solo show, it is still a performance that is under scrutiny by society. The mothers and daughters I choose to focus on deviate from the dominant narrative and expectations that come with being a mom/woman. Instead, they have chosen to create their standard of "normal" and acceptable behavior. They have also creatively found ways to pass on these lessons. For my mother, it is poetry, and for me, it is storytelling. These mothers' erotic work and creativity will be an essential part of my research. Stallings helped me understand how, from the moment a Black

woman begins to produce work that is considered erotic, it becomes a new form of sex labor and art.

Stallings (2017), discusses how producing arousing material can be a form of labor. The issue that can arise is when that material is used to produce propaganda aimed to control sexuality in our society. An author that Stallings focuses on happens to be an extremely popular writer of urban erotica who goes by the pen name Zane. By using Zane, Stallings argues that Zane's book blurs private and public spheres for black sexuality. Stallings is the first to admit that Zane's books and urban erotica are hard for some literary critics to find value in, "Criticism about whether sex acts should be written about, and thus how they should be written about as either formulaic or non-formulaic, has made it difficult for literary critics to engage the writing of Zane or others who for within the tradition of urban erotica or urban fiction" (82). Zane's work as Stallings points is a hybrid of intersectionality, "Zane's fiction bridges the gap between public and private spaces by erecting a new leisure industry built around digitization, technology, media, intimacy, and erotic literacy" (86). This point is vital because Stallings argues that writers like Zane are reshaping sex labor that goes beyond traditional ideas of sex work. "As form of sex-based work that does not have to take place in the streets, black text-based erotica on the white space of paper and the cyberspace of the web during the 1990s creates transitory spaces and sites for the black body, literally and symbolically, displaced by many city ordinance and zoning of sexual commerce and leisure" (84). I would never claim to have experience in sex work or to dismiss the hard work of sex workers. However, I admire the fact that Stallings acknowledges that when women create erotic or arousing material, we are crossing a new labor line. Poetry has always been a space to explore the erotic, which is why, at one point in history, it was exclusively for men. Longing, passion, and the reflection of memorable experiences with a

lover is the backbone of poetry. The earliest poetry I wrote was erotic even though I had no real experience with passion; my notebook still caught the flame of desire. It would have been empowering to understand that I was participating in a form of resistance, and while not a sex worker, I was still laboring in sexual literature.

### **Black Motherhood /Black Girlhood Studies**

In Ruth Nicole Brown's book, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, she argues for a vision where there is space for almost all Black women to practice Black girlhood. This space she refers to is "Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths," also known as SOLHOT throughout the book, Ruth Brown defines this space as, "SOLHOT is a space to envision Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls, who, it seems to me, are often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable, in collective work and social movements that they could very well lead and organize"(1). Ruth Nicole Brown's work also connects to my use of Audre Lorde as well because Brown points out, "makes the case for a performative and creative methodology of visionary Black girlhood practice" (3). Brown uses Audre Lorde's ability to make art into theory as a reference point for the core values of SOLHOT. "Audre Lorde (1984b) insisted is made possible when silence is transformed into language and action" (2). Brown also advocates for the use of "homegirl memories," "in homegirl memories, work is doubly referenced as the practices attributed to making space of Black girlhood through time, as well as the work that memory performs in relationship to the sacred (51)." Brown defines "homegirl" memories as "engaging Black girls in the name of Black girlhood as sacred work implicates time. Sacred work acknowledges the ways spirits move one to act, often beyond the material conditions of one's immediate circumstances (15)". Brown encourages her readers to create their own work if they feel like something is missing, "Write the story yourself. Writing

the story is not as risky, I suppose as doing so within current academic confines, which you ultimately have to disrupt or transgress" (8). This call to narrate is the groundwork of my research because I am interested in infusing new ways to narrate Black girlhood experiences (i.e., poetry/ storytelling). Black girl memories are critical for understanding pleasure, sexuality, and the self.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

1. What can studying Black mothers who deviate from the “respectability” politics of asexual motherhood offer to the study of Black sexual politics?
2. What does Black motherhood guided by a sex-positive pedagogy look like creatively, and can we honor them through creative works like poetry?

### **Methodology**

If the point of the qualitative method is to understand the social realities of the individual, group, and cultural influences, then I would argue that memory work, storytelling, and poetry provide a creative way to do this. The memory work method would redefine sexual culture, and the physical body would become a site of memory, therefore, a site of history. Confirming that memory or the site of memory is a valid source to base theory from would revolutionize Black sexual politics because it would link us to our ancestral ties. Memory or the sites of memory remove the division between public/private, nature/culture, mother/sexual subject, human/nonhuman, and fiction/ nonfiction. Redefining sexual culture as a site of memory would redefine how Black women can theorize identity, culture, and movement beyond the Black public sphere. My research relies heavily on theorist L. H. Stallings's work because I believe the use of Funk creates a space where Black sexual culture is revolutionary and evolving. My premise that memory or the site of memory is vital to the evolution of Black sexual culture and Black feminist thought also coincides with why the qualitative methodology appealed to me. Using a qualitative data method would allow me to collect personal data from Black mothers who are a participant in queering up the performance of motherhood. Using a qualitative data method would allow me to collect personal data from Black mothers whom I interview and write



poetry with during this project. Qualitative research methods in feminist work can be useful when you are conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews with participants on personal subjects like sex. The method allows for my participants to feel included rather than feeling like a mere subject. Memory work encourages the blurring of the subject and the researcher. It blurs the line between subject and object, allowing the researcher to become both, "Indeed memory work is only possible if the subject and object of research are one and the same person" (35, *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*).

What memory work provides for my methodology is that it does not ask the researcher to be "objective," it encourages you to acknowledge your personal feelings. "In memory work the researcher's emotions, instead of being carefully eliminated from the research process, offer significant insight into the social and emotional worlds of those being studied" ( 444, 'Remember When Memory Work as an Interpretive Methodology for Sport Management'). It also forces us to acknowledge that our gaze has been colonized and that how we approach formulating questions is inherently biased. Memory work then tells us to integrate all these things, not just individually but as a group. While numerous women, regardless of race and social class, will find similarities in their experience with motherhood, girlhood, and sexuality, I will primarily be focusing on understanding the shared experience of Black mothers who practice a sex-positive pedagogy. Through storytelling, poetry, and memory, my research provides a new way to understand how having sex-positive Black mothers influences Black girlhood. Finally, my research adds to the conversation on how Black mothers who queer up the script to motherhood find ways to navigate hegemonic influences in Western society.

## **Method**

I worked with three participants to do memory work; they include my mother, a daughter who took on being a mother figure to her younger sister, and myself. We exchanged five letters discussing our experience with a Black mother whose pedagogy is sex-positive. I gave my participants the option to submit poetry and or short stories. Memory work will allow participants to feel as if this is a group effort, which is the point of producing collective work. Despite having different memories, each participant has their own experience with the prompts and questions I asked. During the process, I could not expect my group to be open about their experiences without sharing mine, especially with subject matters like sex and motherhood. The group chose a specific topic like "the birds and the bees talk," and then the group journaled about their experience. Once the journaling was completed, the group would begin to analyze the differences and similarities that they experienced dealing with lust.

- We wrote five journal entries during September.
- We shared our journals via email at the end of the designated month of September.
- We used memory in a poetic and storytelling form to write letters.

## **3 Conception**

### **3.1. "The Roots and Everything Erotic"**

"When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of the creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives ( 341, Lorde, Use of the Erotic)

#### The Village and the Stage:

The three women whose letters you are reading are each unique in their own way and offer various perspectives on their experience with the assigned prompts. I chose to use a letter format because letters create a timeless intimacy. I wanted my participants to be able to reflect in their own words their stories. My participants also wrote poetry and short stories that spoke to the themes of the discussion prompts. One participant is Ms. Francis is a mother in her fifties, who refers to herself as a "rejected flower child" and spends her time serving her Georgia community in career counseling. Participant two, Ms. Pink and Green is a daughter in her late twenties who served as a mother figure for her younger sister and works in DC advocating for family wellness. Finally, participant three is Ms. Byrd, who is a graduating grad student in her late twenties, who hopes that this work will inspire many more participants to share their stories.

We will be addressing our letters to each other, starting with "Dear Nasty Women," since each woman in this group has dared to challenge the established norm. The group name is Nasty Women, so I wanted to make sure that the letters were penned to each other and not just me.

**Prompt One:** After reading "Use of the Erotic" by Audre Lorde, what is something you found useful about the article? Can the relationship between Black mothers and daughters be erotic?

Date: 9/1/2019

**Nasty Woman One Ms. Byrd:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter one),

I have read Audre Lorde's piece, "Use of the Erotic," over a thousand times, and still, I find myself questioning do I even know what the erotic is? I like to believe that is the point she is trying to make, that the erotic is everything opposite of what you have been led to believe. Hence, why you will continuously find new meaning, especially if you are a Black woman, because the Black woman in following Spillers' belief is still finding its meaning of what being a woman is rather than what it is not. So, I had to ask myself, what does defining what the erotic is due to my ideas of building a sex-positive Black family? How will my definition of the erotic contribute to my ideas of motherhood and my Black girlhood experience?

The answer I found is not always tangible, meaning I found the erotic in the lessons my mother taught me spoken or not. I credit the erotic blueprint of womanhood taught to me by mother that led me to discover my road to feminism and sex-positivity. My mother, to this day, has never called herself a feminist, and neither did my grandmother. Hell, I did not even start calling myself a feminist until my early twenties, and I can genuinely chop this up to access with no name. Meaning feminism was always around me as I later reflect, but no one named it that. Maybe it is because my grandmother lived during a time where feminism was extraordinarily white and did not address her needs at the time.

When Black feminist voices like Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks began to rise in volume, my mother was a budding adult who just was about to graduate high school in 1984. To my mom, feminism was synonymous with independence, a lesson my grandmother hammered into her daughters. My mother took this lesson, added her spin, and created her philosophy that she passed to me, "As long as you can look yourself in the mirror the next day, then that is all that matters!" The lessons she instilled in me is why I contribute my path to feminism through the unspoken erotic, the unspoken feminism it was rooted in Paula Austin in the article, "*Femmes-inism: Lessons of My Mother*," would be introduced to feminist activism through the teachings of her mother who was a sex worker she later discovered. A woman who did not identify herself as a feminist but taught her daughter the power of the "feminine armor." "*Her sexy gait was evidence of her prowess, and both she and I were proud. She unknowingly modeling for me*" (160).

So, for me, the erotic is the life lesson the women in my village have taught rather spoken or not. It was the blueprint to my road to feminism; rather, the village claimed feminism or not. It was important to me to start this chapter talking about the erotic because it is the roots of our Black womanhood. This is why I made it my mission to include other women in this project who answered my prompts regarding the trials and tribulations of this journey to sex positivity as a mother or daughter. So, what does the Erotic mean to them?

Sincerely,

"Ms. Byrd"

### **Nasty Woman Two Ms. Francis:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter one),

The relationship of a woman to the world is erotic. The world would not exist without erotic, and I am not talking about the pornographic notion, I am talking about EROS. I believe that the relationship between mother and daughter is erotic. The mother has been protecting and providing everything that a daughter needs to survive in this world since the womb. The mother has been influencing her daughter by her emotions, health, wealth, and knowledge since conception. She has shown her daughter love by deciding to carry her to term. The commitment a mother makes is loving and sacrificial. She has elected to take on whatever, joys, and pains that come with carrying a child to full term. Many mothers will willingly speak of the changes her body went through while carrying a child, which forever altered their physical and mental health. Carrying a child is an experience that no man will ever understand, which gives a woman God-like powers.

A mother serves as a role model for her daughter from birth. She starts to teach her as soon as she latches upon her nipple. It still amazes me that society wants to paint breastfeeding as a sexual act to be covered up and forbidden in public. There is power in the nectar that comes from a mother's breast that allows her child to grow strong and healthy. The connection between a mother and a daughter is erotic because it is in all that we do for love.

We learn how to walk, talk, and navigate the world from our mothers. Mothers are women and not men! Mothers are your female aunts, teachers, and friends. Women have a phenomenal impact on the world through the use of their erotic. She puts love into everything she does, from child-rearing to company operations. She encourages excellence in her children and her staff. She teaches her daughter how to operate in a male-dominated world. She teaches her powerful

negotiation and persuasion skills when she often interacts with the father figure. Mothers understand that they are seen as a sexual being, which serves to undercut their true power.

If the mother is only viewed as an incubator, then she serves only one purpose. Society could never put a proper price tag on the position of motherhood. Motherhood is priceless and indescribable because it varies so much across the world. When a woman discovers and understands how much power she has in her, she becomes a force to be reckoned with in the world. The dialogue between a mother and daughter has to be open and honest. It has to breakdown stereotypes and replace them with endless possibilities. One of my favorite poems is "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou because it gives a glimpse into the power of the erotic in a woman like you and me. I included the poem so you can remember that we are all that and more. We are erotic in all that we do because we put love and passion in it. The one thing that kept coming to me as I read Audre Lorde's work was how erotic and love were synonyms. This also brought me to the conclusion that women and power are synonyms as well.

Best,

Francis

### **Nasty Woman Three Ms. Pink and Green:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter one),

From reading *Use of the Erotic*, it was truly helpful to understand that erotic is not synonymous with pornographic and that pornographic is the opposite of erotic because it is sensation without feeling. The erotic is a deeply emotional experience that can take place within multiple areas outside of just sex. Recently, I have been on a journey of celibacy and learning why it was important for me to have relinquished porn and masturbation. For me personally, they

were a sense of emotionless sensations. No intimacy, no relationship building, no work, no depth. As I am getting older, my body is changing, and as my womanhood is evolving, I realize that emotional depth and connection are the roots of every good thing. When emotional depth and connection are deprived, whatever the thing existing on the other end can become cancerous. Sex and sensation without emotion and connection, family relationships without emotion or connection, and work without connection or emotion can ALL be cancerous.

From reading this, I deeply believe that mothers and daughters should have an erotic relationship with one another. Non-sexual, of course, but a relationship that travels the depths of emotions together, love one another and does not hold back good feelings. Often, the relationship between a black mother and daughter can be the most strained relationship in the family nucleus. Black mothers are quick to share intimacy and love with their sons; however, with black daughters, there is only harsh, tough love. Furthermore, as I said earlier, anything without the erotic (deep emotional connection), can be cancerous. Therefore, a black mother's tough love and discipline can tear down her daughter without her even knowing.

The relationship between a black mother and daughter should be erotic—a deep love experience. A black girl learns how to love herself and other women through her relationship with her mother. Imagine how loving, non-judgmental, and uplifting we would be of ourselves and other women if that is the type of love we received from our mothers?

Best,

Ms. Pink and Green



## 4 Lessons

### 4.1. The Talk and Other Awkward Things

#### *Trigger Warning Intro*

When I started this project, I had this ambitious idea that I did not want to talk about trauma. Only because it often seems that the Black woman is often only discussed in that way. I worried that the moment it was brought up, the trauma would subsume the entire project. I can honestly say in my intimate group of friends; I am the only one who experienced sexual abuse. There I said it, while this is not a secret to my mother and a few close friends; this is not something I have put on paper. It is not even something I talk about because I spent most of my adolescence negotiating if I wanted the deeds of another to imprint on me. However, at twenty-six, I realized doing this work that it is not about them; it is about showing other Black girls and mothers that we can heal from trauma. Many of us, when talking about our first times and sex talks, are still figuring out what counts for us. We are negotiating what parts of our stories are necessary to tell, and so I will not avoid talking about it. My intention, though, is not to focus on it or dissect it as this subject rightfully deserves, of course, but I am not fully equipped to give it justice in this piece.

Sexual abuse, especially interfamily abuse, does not have to continue to be normalized as experience among Black girls, and it should not be weaponized to explain our sexual freedom. We can enjoy sex without the justification of our past, and we can be badass sex-positive women

despite it. That is what this next section focuses on our introduction to the age-old 'birds and the bees' talk and sometimes shits complicated, but it does not make it any less beautiful where it led us. To the Black mothers who wanted to protect their daughters only to realize evil still found them, I am here to say it is not your fault, and we still grew into bomb ass women with stories that will end the cycle.

### **The Bird and the Bees:**

**Prompt Two:** Tell me about your conversation giving and receiving the age-old "birds and the bees talk." What age were you when you were taught or learned about sex? What was missing in your lesson that you wished you would have been taught but learned along the way? Do you believe there is a way to have the sex talk that is sex-positive and informative, especially to both genders? How do you address the gender atonalities in your sex talk?

Date: 9/2/2019

Nia "Ms. Byrd":

Dear Nasty Women,

The following short stories were inspired by the previous poem mentioned "Who Knows this Body Better Than Me" and the poem "Morning Loving" by MFB. Rather than write a letter, I wanted this section to feature short stories that reflected the lessons I took away from my mother. Francis also submitted poems that inspired these short stories. The short stories are a mix of fiction and truth, so I hope you enjoy them.

### **Morning Lovin**

This mornings' loving was off the chain  
with just the right amount of pleasure and pain  
we had nothing to lose and plenty to gain.

I rode you long and hard  
with an assurance and quickness  
you were hard and stiff like still needing that first morning piss.

The juices were flowing  
streaming down my legs  
showering the freshly changed bed.

Releasing all the built-up stress and pain  
you were stroking me and driving me insane.

I washed you clean and put away  
wanting to stay and play for the rest of the day.

-By Ms. Francis

### **Who Knows Better Than Me**

From a baby in diapers  
To a divorcee in sexual crisis  
Who knows this body better?

From a teen going thru puberty  
To a young woman sexually free  
Until society applied double standards to me

From “She’s Gotta Have It”  
To my pleasure is all about me  
Who knows this body better?

I’ve explored this body for years  
All the valleys, mountains and hills  
Entered every cave, longing to be filled

Watched in the mirror above my bed  
Spread oils all over with purposeful motions  
Who knows this body better?

My mind creating orgasmic orgies  
Where gender is a mind bender  
For hands and mouths are gender free

By: Ms. Francis

### **“Who Knows This Body Better Than Me”: The Faded Green Door**

*Written by: Ms. Byrd “Nia”*

*OPEN!* Flashed the red neon sign in front me, I stared at it for the thousandth time watching the N barely light up against the brown brick wall. *Move dammit. Go in or Go Home!* Still, my feet would not move to the fading green door; it was the same door that has taunted me since I became aware of its hidden treasures. This very door was unspoken about in our town, everyone knew about it, but of course, no one would dare go in. Yet it has remained in business for decades. I was fourteen with three months, two days, and 10 hours until my fifteenth birthday when I finally asked about the green door. It was after Jimmy Mitchel spread this rumor that my mother was the owner of the green door, and that is why my Daddy left us when I was young.

Of course, that is not why Daddy left; he got a better job in Michigan, and the marriage was already holding on by a thread. Still, Jimmy Mitchel's choice of insult had me questioning my mother on our way home, "*Mama did Daddy leave for his new job or really because you own the green door?*" My mother has always been a straight shooter; she says she never did baby talk with me because she did not want to insult my intelligence. It is this very reason why when she

pulled the car over in our local park and parked under our usual "serious talk" shade tree, and I already had my answer. I was wrong, though rather than being met by admission, I was met with a burst of deep soul laughter. *"Well, you tell Jimmy Mitchel had I owned the green door I would have saved on a few therapy sessions."* She laughed harder at this but then sobered quickly before asking, *"Girl, what you know about the green door really?"* I know they say black people cannot blush, but we all know that just means they ain't met enough black folks. Cause my cheeks heated up red, to tell her what I knew about the green door. It would mean admitting that I had googled about the hidden gem.

My obvious discomfort only made her more amused, but she did not want me to shut down in embarrassment. Instead, she reached across and pulled me into a hug, *"Honey, we have always been able to communicate about the changes in the body and sexual exploration. You are going to be fifteen soon--"* she seems to shudder as this realization hit her but continues, *"I am not surprised that you have looked into our towns little business."* I felt this sudden relief at her easy acceptance, *"I only googled today, and it did not say much besides it being an adult novelty store. I am assuming it sales adult books like the ones Auntie Kim, and you call each other about, you know the ones you say I can't read till I am a little older."* My mother had shelves of books; the top two shelves were books she felt required adult permission before reading.

Usually, the covers were of brawny men surrounded by fire with a beautiful heroine in their arms, and, if she was reading my mind, *"Remember when you were ten and snuck one of my books to read. You were concerned about the sensations it created in you. I explained to you about arousal and intercourse"*, I nodded my cheeks becoming red again because I recalled how enthralled I was by this particular novel. The female protagonist had a petition for domination,

something that is for a later tale; the scenes warmed me from the inside out, creating a fire that I was not aware I could create.

My mother interrupting this trip down memory lane, "*You see it is time now for us to discuss the importance of self-exploration, my mother once told me, and I am telling you the same, 'know thyself before thou give thy self,'*" she emphasizes the last part in a her best impersonation of a southern preacher reading scripture. I groaned, knowing where this was going, "*MOOOOM, we are not doing this, we are not about to talk about—*," I lower my voice to a whisper as if someone would overhear us, "*masturbation.*" She looks around then leans closer to my face and whispering with laughter clouding her words, "*Why yes, yes, we are going to talk about masturbation because you need to know that what is behind the green door is nothing to be ashamed of. What is behind that green door is a space to figure out what works for you and sometimes what works with you and a partner. More importantly, behind that door is a space of healing and exploration of yourself.*" To understand my mother is to understand that she is what she likes to call herself, "a flower reject," I will admit I was raised in space that is more Sweden than Victorian.

Hence, the confusion that is hitting me as I stare at the small brick building with the *OPEN* sign where the N that barely lights with the fading green door that has haunted me since I knew its' hidden treasures. I am thirty- one now no longer that little girl who mother must guide her through womanhood; I am now a woman with a woman's experience. I have felt the pleasures of the flesh, I have brought myself to ecstasy with others repeatedly during the dark coverings of the night. I have gained a lover and lost some lovers. Yet my feet will not lead me to the green door, what will this declare about me? What will entering this door tell the world that I am afraid of them seeing? The answer I realized it is not the door that is holding me back

but the shame that at thirty-one, I did not take my mother's advice. Instead, I relied on others to fulfill a desire that I had not mastered within myself.

I, for years, had allowed others to define and guide my pleasure, to imprint themselves upon my flesh before I had explored my relationship to the flesh that housed my spirit. What would these experiences have looked like had I not been afraid just to go in there sooner? It is not till I hear this tap at my window and am met by familiar kind eyes that always seem to shine with a level of self-love that I desired to achieve, "*You coming in or what?*" I nodded, then began to head towards the door. We approached the door in silence, no questions about why my car has been sitting here in front of her establishment for so long. Instead, she turns to me as I enter and with the spirit that reminded me of my own straight shooter, "*Your mother sat there for three hours the first time before she came in. I promised her I would not let you do the same if you ever stopped by, now if you have any questions or need recommendations you know where to find me.*"

I must admit the thing that I feared came true behind that green door, I discovered I did not know myself, but I also discovered it is never too late to find out. As they say, *Who Knows This Body Better than Me*. Enter If You Dare.

***Fin.***



**Seeing Dr. Manipulator: The Discovery of the Vibrator by Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville**

*Written by: Ms. Byrd "Nia"*

December 6, 1869

Dear Diary,

I have a secret to tell, and you must swear to guard this secret with your life. Of course, I know this is illogical, but it is going on day 127, so the line of sanity has begun to blur. I did not enter this place insane despite what they may say, and I was simply a victim like all women who display too much color in this world. Forced to be confined in 4x4 white padded wall till the color becomes as dull as the food they force us to eat. The only color they allow in this place comes in the small pills they give me, the pills they say will "fix me?" FIX ME! Wouldn't I have to be broken to be fixed and trust me Diary I do not feel broken. My only crime is that I am a woman, not just any kind of a woman, a woman who does not shy away from pleasure; in fact, I crave it. My mother did warn me on my wedding day, "Viola men gotta feel wanted, their egos cannot take a woman being the head, you gotta learn to run it but never let him know you running it!" I did not listen. I was never good at "faking it," and after the umptieth night of feeling this heavy weight on me with no regard for my pleasure, I had had enough. When I finally heard the heavy snore of my husband, I reached below our covers and, Diary, I must admit I found my freedom. I accessed this freedom night after night, learning what I should have been able to discover in my wedding bed. Sadly, this freedom was short-lived, my secret would be discovered months later when my husband found himself rolling over one night meeting a face he had never seen before. A face that must have frightened him enough because here I am confined off the strength of his diagnosis. I should not have been surprised; men have been

enslaving women from the beginning of time under to disguise of "protection." So here I am patient #526, they have deemed me in here a "nymphomaniac" with a touch of hysterics, it is laughable Dairy. What is more laughable is they have found a cure they say, invented by a man, of course, a man with more degrees than I could ever be allowed to achieve. He has created a hand-held machine that is intended to induce "paroxysm" in a shorter period. Honestly, Dairy, the man, has found a way to induce orgasm. Orgasms! The very thing that has led me to this captivity, the very thing I looked for but was punished for seeking. I would laugh at the irony if it were not so damn sad, how many women like myself have been forced into institutions like this for seeking the very thing he will profit from. Pleasure can only exist if it will benefit men, right? Which may be smart on their end because during those nights as I explored my new-found freedom. I found myself questioning my status in life, am I to live my life with my needs being second to that of my husbands? Am I to be confined to the home, an angel in the house with the devil's desires? My husband says that they will release me soon, that as far as everyone knows I went to help a sick Aunt, my dirty little secret could just be buried away. Buried away as he has tried to do to me and Dairy, I am not sure if I can exchange one cell for another. I am not sure if I can lay there night after night being denied a freedom; he so freely takes for himself. I guess one could call me ungrateful. My husband never raises his hands or voice like other husbands. His only vice is wine, which he says is in the Bible, therefore not a sin. Had I known that there was so little expected of a husband, I would have paused before chaining myself to one. Now Dairy, back to this secret that I shall only share with you, my husband's name has finally benefited me I must admit. I shall be one of the lucky few who shall take part in the home trials of Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville's new machine. His "cure" will be the key to my freedom, and

no one will be the wiser. My husband will inquire if I have taken my medicine and diary let me confess, and I will never miss a dose. I mean it is doctor's orders, right?

Yours,

Viola

*Fin.*

**Ms. Francis:**

My Dearest Nia/ Fellow Nasty Women (letter 2),

It took me a moment to respond to your question. I was reflecting back and recalled that I always had a curious nature as a young girl. I am not sure where the Birds and the Bees came from or what they have to do with sex, but I do know they have been around for a long time. I have always loved talking about sex and sharing what I know about sex with whoever wanted to listen and add to my knowledge. I was the youngest of eight children with a fourteen-year gap between the oldest and myself. Puberty and sex were always humming somewhere in the house, and I was listening.

I had four older sisters and asked a lot of questions and listen until I was kicked out of the room. My mother had the stranger danger conversation early around 5yrs or 6yrs of age. My official conversation about the Birds and Bees came in school. We saw a film that talks about reproductive organs. I was so excited about my newfound knowledge that I had to run home and

share this information with my old sister because she did not know anything. This was the start of many conversations and questions for my mother and sisters.

We had the full-blown Birds and Bees conversation at 13yrs of age, at the onset of my period, or as my mom said back then when I started to menstruate. I do not know if it was because of the changes, she started to see in my attitude or that fact that now I was able to get pregnant. We were in the kitchen, where we had most of our conversations when she just started to talk about "feelings." I soon found out that "feelings" meant desires. My mother was what I considered to be old school back then. She came from the generation that required you to wear slips and griddles so that your body parts could not wiggle or be seen. She never taught abstinence even with her strong religious background. She talked about me growing up and become a woman and how that might cause me to have "feelings." She said that if my "feelings got so strong that I felt that I needed to act upon them that I needed to protect myself from getting pregnant or something. She said that if I felt like I could not come to her, that I should go to one of my sisters to get guidance about what to do. I did not ask her any questions because I was afraid she might ask me some back. I was a late bloomer in comparison to my friends but was very knowledgeable about the facts of life. However, when I did decide to go on the pill, I went to my mother because Planned Parenthood had a nominal fee that had to be paid because I was not sneaking to get my pills. I did not realize at the time that this was sex-positive teaching. I did know that it was not the conversation that was being had in some of my friend's households because they came to me.

I always wondered what made her decide that it was time to have that conversation. She did not accuse me of having sex or try to scare me into not having sex. Since she did most of my laundry, I wondered if it was my underwear that told my secret. I think mothers that are in tune

with their daughters have a clue or see signs. I am glad we had that conversation and many others in the kitchen. My conversations with my mother helped me when it came to you. I wish that I could have had more conversations about orgasms and masturbation. The subject of orgasms really did not come up when I was growing up. I discovered some things out on my own, both literally and figuratively. I am talking about these things with my youngest daughter because I thought it was important for her to understand some things about herself and her body before venturing out into the world of sex. I encouraged her to touch herself and see what felt good to her and aroused her nature. I believed that a woman should know what she likes so that she can express her desires to her partner. I got push back from family members because they thought that she was too young to have these kinds of conversations. If I had birthed a son into the world, I would have talked to him about his body and the female body. He would have had information overload pleasure and pleasing. We have to teach our children the same information and pray that they have a positive impact on the world and its double standards.

Best,

Francis

**Ms. Pink and Green:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter 2),

I remember like it was yesterday. We had just moved to Peoria from Maryland. I was about three, almost four years old, and my mother and I were watching the stories in their bed. I asked her where babies came from, and she described it to be in a very biological way what sex was.

She said when a man's penis enters a woman's vagina, and they have sexual intercourse, a baby can be made. She did not necessarily say they had to be married or even in love. Therefore, from an early age in my mind, it was VERY clear that a child could be created from sex with or without love, and that idea, honestly, guided my safe sex habits, even when I was young having sex. I did not want to have a child with someone who wasn't my husband. Most people would think telling a child that biologically you can have a child by anyone you have sex with, would encourage them to do so. However, for me, it helped me to understand the reality that my body is not biologically waiting on the one I love to create a baby.

Throughout my childhood, my mother constantly talked to my siblings and me about our sexual anatomy. We knew what good touches and bad touches were. We knew to feel comfortable with saying the true words, vagina, and penis, without shame. I was always in tune with my vagina, how to clean it, and pay attention to if there were any issues. My mother was also very comfortable in her naked body. She was often naked around us, which gave me great confidence in my own naked body.

I think my mother did a great job explaining the biology of sex to us. In my early childhood, my mother only discussed sex in the context of biology and making children. However, as I got older, she celebrated it between married couples. When I started to have sex, she began to discuss with me the importance of a woman knowing her body and what she wants because sex should be enjoyable for me as a woman just as much as it is for a man. She explained to me that enjoying sex as a woman runs in my family. Her mother, my grandmother, loved sex with my grandfather, and they had it frequently. My great grandmother also detailed how much she enjoyed sex with her husband and discussed multiple tips and tricks with my mother about

feminine hygiene that she has passed on to me. Sex is always an open topic amongst my family on my mother's side; it is a topic that we bond over; it is an expression of womanhood for us. My mother knew the emotional traumas that can sometimes come with sex, but that is an area that my mother did not know how to communicate well with me. I believe that family members molested my mother, and I also was at an early age. Sexual trauma was something she buried and did not truly speak about. That is where I wished that she would have guided me more. It was not until recently that she and I have discussed me being sexually assaulted in college and my feelings about the sexual trauma I experienced throughout my childhood. The way my mother introduced me to sex was from love, understanding, and science. The way others introduced me was completely unhealthy. Because my mother did not know how to deal with sexual trauma, those were topics, we rarely discussed. I would have loved for my mother to have helped me combat those unhealthy sexual ideas. As a child, those ideas were dueling in my mind, and it would have been great to hear my mom's perspective to tell me how those ideals were wrong. To her, they were a part of life, but as I get older, trauma, in that manner, does not have to be.

Sex positivity is important because sex is beautiful in its' proper context. Whatever the context that is set by an individual, self-love, emotional connection, and consent should be present, and trauma should not.

Best,

Ms. Pink and Green

The following poem another by Ms. Francis as a reminder that our bodies are ours to reclaim and define!

### **I Proclaim My Pussy To Be A Sanctuary**

A man cannot defile the sanctuary of my pussy

because it is special, even sacred

oh yes, there have been a few

they violated this inviolable place

robbing it of its sweet nectar

I didn't realize how special

my pussy truly is

I saw it as a pawn

in a complicated chess game

My introduction to its worth

came at a young age

at the hands of a child molester

he cared less about its sacredness

Given the opportunity to play

he had his filthy way

begging me to play his game

causing me a life full of pain



As I heal, I steal back  
all the sweetness and value  
and understand that I was not at fault  
nor am I the woman who must still pay the cost

I proclaim the sanctuary of my pussy  
announcing for the world to hear  
that this sweet nectar is not for sale  
for the highest bidder, the best licker  
the big dipper, the long dong, my woman is wrong or any of those other sad played out songs

I proclaim the sanctuary of my pussy  
for the sisters lost and found  
the brothers dead and gone  
the babies born and dying  
the mothers and fathers crying

I proclaim, to end my personal pain  
beginning a long journey  
of self-healing and no shame  
my pussy is special and scared

What God giveth  
 let no man taketh away  
 -By Francis

## 5 Peaks and Valleys

### 5.1. Eat, Pray, and Orgasms?

#### Religion Got Me Messed Up:

**Prompt Three:** In what ways has religion influenced your journey to understanding yourself as a sexual being? What have you had to negotiate throughout your life, being a Black woman with a sex-positive pedagogy and religion? I just want you to reflect on religion and sex while being a Black woman.

**DATE: 9/2/2019**

#### Ms. Francis:

Dear Nasty Women (letter three),

I have struggled with the notion of a woman being referred to as "Nasty" because of the way others perceive her. I faced this in the church, small-town community, and in private circles that should have been safe havens. I was raised by a conservative, Southern Baptist, divorced

woman. I am sure that the person I am today has something to do with irony found in my description of my mother. She mainly shared the things that she was taught and learned as a young, who lost her mother at a young age. My mother often said that a mother knows what each of her children needs, and their needs are different. I was very different, and she found a way to love and nature me just the way I needed without suffocating my spirit or sexuality. Your Grandmother was more progressive in her rearing than I even realized while being brought up in the church. We would attend church from Sunup to Sundown and all during the week if there was a rival going on at the church. The church teachings were the old brimstone and fire kind that punished you for your sinful actions and thoughts. This type of teaching left little room for attitudes and behaviors that exist outside of the prescribed accepted norms. The normal way of thinking was that there was no sex outside of marriage; no children outside of wedlock, wives obey your husbands, and masturbation is a sin.

I struggled with the standard way of thinking, and my mother struggled to keep me in line with these norms. She decided with me that it was best to provide me with information that would allow me to make safe decisions. She spoke candidly about what she called "feelings," which was really her way of talking about sexual desire. She was progressive in her rearing because she knew that these "feelings" were not going to be only explored in the acceptable confines of marriage like the church preached. She instructed me to protect myself from pregnancy by seeking contraception when I started having "feelings."

I found the teachings of my church to be judgmental and restrictive. I also realized that my actions were a report card regarding the child-rearing skills of my mother in the eyes of the church folks. The simple act of me not wearing a slip under a transparent dress was deemed as me being considered "fast" another way of saying a "Nasty" woman. The church folks will never

know the many conversations that were had between my mother and me regarding proper church attire and the under gear that a young lady should wear to make sure she is not revealing too much. I found these items to be as restrictive as the teachings of the church. A young lady should not be considered a sexual being with independent thoughts and actions outside of that of her husband unless she wants to be deemed as a "Nasty" woman. Well, I learned to navigate this arena by following the rules that were deemed as the norm, so not to bring shame and scorn to my mother while escaping to the arenas that allowed me to be sexually free as a "Nasty" woman just like a young man was allowed.

Your Grandmother allowed me to explore without the restrictions of the church, while still instilling the beliefs she knew to be the right way to raise a child. She allowed me to join organizations outside of the church that would broaden my world perspective. The way I reared you has a lot to do with the freedom that was granted me as a young lady growing up in a conservative arena. I believe that your Grandmother was a "Nasty" woman.

Best,

Ms. Francis

**Ms. Pink and Green:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter three),

I grew up attending church often as a child and early teen. In the church, I was learning that sex was wrong, and you should wait until marriage. At home, I was learning that sex is a beautiful thing that should be waited for until you are ready. My mother celebrated marital sex, specifically, with her and my father. I knew I could have sex outside of marriage, but I longed

for sex within a committed, caring relationship like I saw growing up. I began to have sex at a very, very young age. Unfortunately, I was extremely oversexualized by men in my community. At first, I despised it, but as I got a little older, I used it as my power. I was tired of feeling disgusted and covering myself, so I decided I would give my body to who I wanted when I wanted and make some rules for myself. I decided to choose a young man who was four almost five years older than me at the time. From that moment on, I felt an immense power from my sexuality and began to define myself by that.

Through my spiritual journey with God as an adult, I have been able to realize that my sexuality and sexual desires did not define me. Once again, as I said before, sex without connection and emotion can be cancerous. I had begun to go on a dangerous journey where I used sex like a superpower and thought that in return, I would finally be loved and experience the committed, loving relationship that I saw growing up as a child. I had always received an immense level of attention for my appearance, and what men thought my body could do for them sexually, so I thought playing into that would bring me all the love I desired. Unfortunately, it didn't. It brought me to more self-doubt, self-consciousness and low self-esteem. Instead of displaying how smart I was, how ambitious I was, how much I wanted to help people, and how loving of a heart I had, I was displaying my sexual abilities.

My relationship with God allowed me to redefine myself. It allowed me to experience a deep emotional intimacy that I have never experienced before—an intimacy that satisfied my unhealthy need for love and validation. When I became celibate, I found the best parts of me. I found my ability to connect with people and see them where they are, my ability to love deeply, my ability to trust people, my ability to lead, my ability to provide great counsel, my ability to experience love and acceptance without downplaying myself and my ability to succeed in things

I never imagined. More than religion, my relationship with God and his word, allowed me to be me freely. Now I have a much healthier understanding of sex and its' purpose in my own life.

Sex for me cannot exist without a deep visceral connection and the ultimate commitment.

Best,

Ms. Pink and Green

**Ms. Byrd:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter three),

Organized religion always grated my nerves and left a bad taste in my mouth. As I sat in the pews of my Baptist church as a young girl, I just knew this space would never be my haven. The people were too judgmental, and there was little room to question the teachings of the church. I am grateful that my mother allowed religion to be my own personal journey. I think that is why today I have no issue saying I believe in God, but my God is nothing like the one I was taught about.

As a young girl experiencing pieces of her soul being rearranged by the cruelty of others. I often found myself questioning God, "Am I broken inside, and is that reason I am experiencing this trauma? If you exist, then why do you let the cruelest lead in your word?" The most ironic thing is that religion, despite the tension I had also helped me. I remember I had finally told my mom the truth, and she had enrolled me in therapy. I was randomly convinced to go to family day by Aunt who lived in the church, and as I sat in the pews, I had always detested I felt this pull when the Preacher asked for baptisms volunteers. At the age of 12, I was baptized by choice, and no, it did not make me desire to be in church more. However, as my mind was being

cleansed, I would say it felt right getting my spirit cleansed as well. This allowed me to reconnect with my body in a new way, and I do not think I have been back since.

For me, I knew the God I got to know did not exist in those four aging walls that held our church together. God, to me, was the reminder that something greater had to exist in order to give me a mother who spent her last coin during a recession to pay for my therapy. God did not create sex just to procreate or weaponize; it was created to be consensually enjoyed with whoever brings you joy. My mother taught me that faith and sex should not be separate spheres. That its okay to challenge beliefs that attempt to control or erase your identity.

I am so grateful that I had a nontraditional meets traditional journey with faith. The God I created and knew would have hated those four aging walls as well.

Best,

Ms. Byrd

## **6 Judgment**

### **6.1. “Once Upon Not Long Ago I was a Hoe” -Mariah Lynn**

#### **Sluckers and the People Who Love to Hate Them**

**Prompt Four:** Slut-shaming, it happens even to the most conservative woman because we live in a society that polices women's bodies. What has been your experience with dealing with the recoil of society for actions you have taken part in? What lessons did you learn about people and yourself when you came to deal with slut-shaming?

Date: 9/3/2019

**Ms. Pink and Green:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter four),

I was honestly, never really slut-shamed by men. First, because my mother brought me up in a way that I never discussed with a man what I had previously done, only what I would do with him. I also never publicly broadcasted my sexuality via social media or anything like that.

Therefore, most people from the outside looking in would never have known the extent of my sexual rendezvous. I am glad my mother taught me to keep close because as I am growing into a woman, I can share my own life's choices in the manner I choose, not from someone else's lips, who does not know the real me.

So, throughout my teens and young adulthood, I was slut-shamed by mostly women for being in tune with my sexuality. They saw the attraction men had to me and the confidence I had in my abilities at a young age and thought it had to be because I was a "hoe." The shaming came well before I was having sex and were mostly based on totally false rumors. The crazy thing is that often, privately, many of those same women would eventually come to me asking questions about orgasms, the female anatomy, toys, etc. There is almost like a secret society of women who want to know more about sex, but publicly shame it because they are afraid of the depths that they may travel to seek pleasure. I must say, Pandora's box being opened can be kind of crazy, but that is why honesty and boundaries are essential.

I cannot lie, once I became celibate and would see women wifed up who had not done things in a conventional "waiting for marriage" way, I became slightly judgmental for a short period. I took my own journey with sex and finally reaching a place of liberation and projected that onto other



women. Not realizing that I was becoming one of those women who severely judged me. The bottom line is that no matter if a woman is waiting or having sex with multiple men or women, people are attracted to those who are genuinely and authentically themselves. Everyone has their own life journey, and shaming someone for where they are is not ok. Everything for me is all about heart posture. If a woman wants to have sex with 50 different men because she experienced sexual trauma as a child and has not taken the time to address her issues and heal is different from a woman who does sex work and feels empowered using her body to make a living. Sex-shaming throws everyone in the same bucket. However, once again, as I stated before, sex with 50 men from unaddressed trauma can be cancerous, a deep connection with the work that you do can be erotic and liberating. What I have learned is, unless you are someone's therapist, you will not know where the root of their decision lies. Therefore, it is not your business! Each person has to come to their own decisions about life and what healthy sex looks like to them.

I have been slut-shamed, and unfortunately, I have slut-shamed others in my mind also. The great thing about life for me is that everyone can define boundaries for themselves. When we define our boundaries authentically, we attract others who resonate similarly as a mate. When we are confident in our own decisions about our sexuality, we can allow others the freedom to decide theirs.

Sincerely,

Nasty HotGyal Pink and Green

**Ms.Francis:**

Dear Ms. Francis (letter four),

### **Slucker Club Members Only**

Woman empowerment verse Slut-Shaming has always been somewhere in my world. I have always been a woman who believes that if it is okay for a man, then it is okay for a woman. I fought against the double standards of society when it comes to sexual freedom and lost.

Growing up in a small town left little room to explore your sexual freedom without being labeled. I figured if a man can have more than one partner, why could I not. It seems simple, but the catch is only if you are willing to accept the label of a slut. There are many unflattering labels that men and women give to a woman who chooses to own her right to be sexually free. It has always fascinated me how cruel women can be to other women simply out of fear.

Fear that being associated with a woman who is sleeping with more than one man could be seen as an indicator that she is also. Another fear is that a woman who sleeps around might sleep with another woman's man. I cannot say that these fears are unfounded because they were true of the Slucker Club. The Slucker Club was a group of young women in their early 20's who owned their sexual freedom and supported and covered for one another. This group of women came before Sex in The City. They were women who were figuring out what they liked and how they liked it. They found that it was a lot easier to have conversations about sex and life with women who thought and acted alike.

I was one of the founding members of the Slucker Club. Slucker was a play on words, which was a mash-up of Slut and Hooker. Calling ourselves "Sluckers" was a way of taking all of the venom out of everything others could negatively say about us. We owned it and our sexuality. We knew we were sleeping around and were not ashamed. We had created a safe place where there was no judgment about our actions. We had a place to sound off about our sexual exploits and get a high five. It was empowering to encourage one another to go for it. We all had dealt

with shaming outside of our club, so it was beautiful to have an arena where you felt safe and loved. Haters are going to hate, and Lovers are going to love.

It was easy to combat men when it came to slut-shaming because we quickly pointed out their double standards and explained that we were not the women for them. However, it was always a different story when it came to the shunning from other women, because it cut deeper for some reason. We are all in the world struggling against the double standards on so many levels, so to have another woman go against you because you choose to own your body and sexual freedom just hurt a little more, and we did not have but one come back, "Members Only Club." The lessons learned were that you have to surround yourself with likeminded people and stay true to your beliefs.

Best,

Ms. Francis Queen Slucker

**Ms. Byrd:**

Dear Nasty Women (letter four),

My mom always told me, "*whatever you do, just be sure you can look yourself in the mirror the next day,*" and she always reminded me that life is full of double standards. I learned in middle school; you can get a reputation just from knowing too much and trying to correct the wrong information.

Like pulling out works and wearing two condoms is better than one, wrong information like this that was running through my school. I have always struggled with wanting to help others, even at the determinant of my reputation. Still, about the time I entered high school, I had developed a Sue Johanson persona that I owned with pride.

Despite this pride, the first time I was truly slut-shamed was the summer of 2010, going into my senior year, and it was by a guy who was my long-time middle school crush plus first real kiss. We will call him Jim for this piece. We never really dated just always were in each other orbit, and I had finally become single after experiencing the first real cut of first loves. I had spent most of the summer reclaiming my time without apology because I had spent half of high school trying to belong to someone without even knowing who I was. Ew. The point is Jim had heard about my reclaiming of time and despite not asking for clarification, which in hindsight, he did not even deserve that. He chose to believe rumors and tell a close friend of mine; he would never date a "hoe." The same man who made it his mission to only fuck virgins at this time, including me, when I turned 16 during a breakup with my boyfriend at the time. He dared to throw his judgment in the ring and devalue me despite our history.

I remember this clashing sensation of shame and anger. Shame that by being labeled this word, I knew others had spoken it about it me, and knowing the power the word had to make my life difficult. See, despite having a reputation in knowing too much, many had chalked it up to me being a future "freak." Another word, I detest just as much as slut/hoe. But, at 17, being called a freak held a mysterious honor rather than being called a hoe. Freaks were fun, but that did not mean they slept around with everyone. Then anger that I gave a flying fuck what others thought about me, especially when I owed no one the truth. I owed no one the right to my body, and if they could claim to have experienced, they were blessed if you ask me!

The most crushing point of this experience is that I got to see the way internalized misogyny affects women. Girls who I thought would defend me sided with Jim choosing to distance themselves as if *hoe* is contagious. Rather than cower from this moment, I thank the backbone my mother gave me, and I owned it. See, I realized young most people will judge you out of fear or jealousy. Jealous that they do not have the balls to challenge the status quo and instead have endured pleasureless experiences. Alternatively, fearful of what it means to encounter a woman who refused to bend even then.

So, I guess what I took away from this experience is that no matter what you do, people are going to talk. Do not waste your time trying to escape labels designed by men to control women. Sympathize with women who uphold their patriarchy but do not invite them to your table without accountability. Remember that just because you enjoy giving and receiving pleasure, there is no shame in that. Making sure every encounter you engage in is safe, sane, and consensual is all that matters. But, most of all, what I learned is that hoes rarely die regretting the orgasms they should of had!

Best,

Ms. Byrd

## **7 The Village**

## 7.1. “When Your Good to Mama...”

### “Mama Knows Best: Letters to “Maternal Figures and their Daughters”:

**Prompt Five:** What is advice that has been given to you about motherhood rather you are a mother or not? What have you learned from the village of women in your life, good or bad? Has your sex-positive pedagogy come under fire because you are a mother or was raised by maternal figures who were sex-positive? If you were to write a letter to your daughter or a maternal figure, what advice would you pass on? Or what advice would you tell them not to take? Date: 9/4/2019

### Ms. Byrd:

Dear Nasty Women (letter five),

My mother never really groomed me into thinking about motherhood, meaning she never put pressure on this idea that I would someday be a mother. You know how sometimes you hear, "well when you're a mother," I still have never heard a phrase like this from my mother. She never prepared me to be someone's mother or wife; instead, she prepared me to be a member of a village. My mother was big on the saying, "it takes a village to raise a child," so my childhood was surrounded by mother figures, many who happened to be my aunts. In fact, when I was middle school shortly after my parents split my Dad moving to Iowa, then Georgia to pursue his career. My Aunt Mary (who I seriously think is my real mother I am still waiting on the Jerry Springer results) stepped up in my life in a fantastic way so much so that my old classmates thought my mother was in a relationship with her until they realized they were sisters.

The point is that is the greatest lesson I have learned about motherhood is that no one should do it alone. Surround yourself with people who are an extension of you, but that doesn't mean they

have to be a mirror image of you. I learned from my Aunt Mary how to walk into a room and command respect with the tilt of a chin/shoulders back. I learned from Aunt Mable how to convey "I ain't with this shit" energy with just a look and eye contact. My mother's sisters, who have passed, still speak to me despite leaving us too soon. My late Aunt Margert taught me about kindness and the importance of creating a welcoming home is. My Late Aunt Bobbie, who was the definition of a woman with fire, a fire so bright that at her funeral, all her boyfriends attended proudly to have experienced her flame. Because of this village, I was raised in space where womanhood was celebrated without apology.

From the Arbon Mist fueled weekly budget meetings, they would gather at the table, and I would soak up their pedagogy. When it came to sex, they were a spectrum from conservative to liberal, but at the sister table, it was a safe space to talk about it all. I wouldn't say they were sex-positive in the way that I think about it now, but I would say they were sex open in a way that many weren't. In my Aunt Bobbies' closet, I discovered in her *porn stash* literal porn tapes, and unlike Lorde, I believe in pornography. I love pornography but can also recognize it is an imperfect space. Still, I fondly look back at the memories of waiting for my Aunt to leave and rushing to the VCR to gaze upon women who, to me, were otherworldly. Then having a mother who removed the taboo of masturbation made my experience with porn an enlightening exploration. The point is if I am someday blessed to be a mother or a mother figure, I want my daughter to know that it takes a village. I am going to encourage my daughter to explore her village closet and unpack their porn stash. In those stashes, I hope she finds inspiration, support, and all the many lessons my village has taught me.

Best,

Ms. Byrd

**Ms. Francis:**

Dear Daughters (The one I birthed and the others that I have nurtured),

I write this letter to say that I do not know it all, nor do I want to know it all. If I knew it all, it would not allow me room to grow or to keep an open mind about things. Many of the things that I confess to knowing have come from the women in my life. I had several mother figures in my life. The most influential one was my mother, Vertie B Peterson. I consider my mother to be old school, with an edge. She raised her daughters to be independent of a man because of the challenges she faced in her life. She was a teenage unwed mother back in 1952. She decided to raise her new son without the help or assistance of his father because it would have meant giving him up to be raised by his grandparents. She struggled through the challenges of raising her son and her younger siblings after the loss of her mother a number of years earlier. There was a lot that she had to figure out on her own because men didn't talk to their daughters about life, or anything related to the sexes. Her Aunts weren't any better expect to say "keep your dress tail down and don't make any more babies or no man will want you." Due to her lack of information and desire to be loved, she conceived a second son out of wedlock. She was determined to prove her Aunts wrong, so she married the first man that asked for her hand. She went on to have six additional children with her husband. Her marriage to this older man had its challenges. After years of struggles, she took the advice of her neighbors and move up North to join her siblings, who were doing well for themselves. She has limited education but a strong will to make a better life for her eight children. Her struggles and challenges lead to her raising daughters, who were independent. She taught them to educate themselves and to work hard to be



able to provide for themselves. She ensured that she had conversations about life and sex so that her daughters were knowledgeable and could make informed decisions.

Many of the talks that she had were sex-positive, especially with me. I was the youngest of her eight children. She had figured out a few things and didn't mind sharing. I have several things that always come to mind when I think about things that my mother shared with me that I have shared with my daughters and female friends. She spoke of women always having their "Mad Money" She believed that women should always have a stash of money in case they needed to make a dash. I'm sure that this advice came from her desire to leave her marriage but feeling financially strapped. I have mixed emotions about this advice because, on the one hand, it can be seen as financial infidelity, but on the other, it could be the stash of cash that could save a woman's life in an abusive marriage. Another jewel of advice was related to the double standards in society when it comes to women and men. She would often say that "Women and Men can do the same things, but they will never ever be viewed the same." Through my trials and tribulations, I learned that this advice was valid. When it comes to sexual freedom, women are held to a different standard than men. A woman can have the same number of sexual partners as a man; however, they are seen as conquests, and hers are seen as surrenders. The woman is viewed as being a hoe or slut, and a man is viewed as a player or stud in society's double standards. I took my mother's advice and added one additional piece, "Whatever you decide to do is okay as long as you can look at yourself the next day in the mirror and be okay with you and what you did."

My desire to not put restrictions on my daughter's sexual freedom has come under fire by friends and family members. The only time that I got a pass was when "Oprah Winfrey and her doctors said that it was okay. I have found myself thinking and laughing about some of the crazy advice

that my mother gave me about oral sex. She said things like, "Don't let a man go down on you because he might suck all of the morals out of you." Another one related to oral sex was, "Don't give oral sex to a man because you might have to have your stomach pump like Rod Stewart." It was evident to me that this was not something that she wanted me to experience. I appreciate her just being willing to talk about sex. I often spoke candidly about sex with the children. I must confess that I left most of the conversations about sex with my son up to my husband unless he came to me for advice.

Best,

Ms. Francis

### **A Poem to My Village:**

If I die today, tell my village I heard their cries of pain.

I will ask God to let me wipe every tear dropped in my name before I take my final place.

Do not mourn for me too long; there is so much life left to live!

Dance my sisters, celebrate what you have done and what you have given me.

I got to live my truth, experience pleasure without guilt, and share my erotic with open minds.

My sisters carry on my pedagogy, create more unapologetic killjoys, and teach them the *walk*.

Do not mourn for me too long, our village was built so long ago, and it will carry on.

Share every lesson, recipe, and song that is in your stash with the young ones.

For if I die today, tell my village I am not far, I am just a memory away.

-Nia Byrd

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

When I went into this project, I selfishly wanted to find my community of superfreaks who conducted their mothers were. Sex positivity is more than a catchy word I am tossing around for academic recognition; it is my warrior cry to all Black mothers and daughters who want to change the status quo. I believe that normalizing a sex-positive relationship between Black mothers and daughters is a matter of life and death. I will always remember when a friend of mine in high school miscarried in her bathroom and was unable to tell her mother due to fearing her reaction. Rather than being able to seek proper medical care, for a week, she silently carried this burden, until my mother stepped and created a space for her to communicate her loss. My mother also suggested that she seek proper medical care to avoid infection. This is just one of the many stories I have when it comes to the dangers of girls not being able to talk to their mothers and village in times of need or curiosity.

While certain people in society have tried to cast their judgment on mothers who proudly declare they are sexual beings and extend the same right to their daughters, I am here to say to those people the cycle ends here. In every story, letter, and poem in this thesis is a little glimmer of hope that there is a community of Black women who are actively resisting repression and sex-negativity. I am so grateful to have created this space for Black women to reflect and write their memories in letter form. I hope that some curious Black girl will stumble upon this work and feel welcomed to explore our *porn stash*.

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## 9 APPENDICES

### Appendix: Prompts for Interviewees

First Prompt Use of the Erotic:

After reading "Use of the Erotic" by Audre Lorde what is something you found useful about the article? Can the relationship between Black mothers and daughters be erotic?

Second Prompt Religion Got Me Messed Up:

In what ways has religion influenced your journey to understanding yourself as a sexual being? What have you had to negotiate throughout your life being a Black woman with a sex positive pedagogy and religion? I just want you reflect the good and bad about religion and sex while being a Black woman.

Prompt Three: “Mama Knows Best: Letters to “Maternal Figures and their Daughters”

What is advice that has been given to you about motherhood rather you are a mother or not? What have you learned from the village of women in your life good or bad? Has your sex positive pedagogy come under fire because you are a mother or was raised by maternal figures who were sex positive? If you were to write a letter to your daughter or maternal figure what advice would you pass on? Or what advice would you tell them not to take?

Prompt Four: Birds and the Bees

Tell me about your conversation giving and receiving the age old “birds and the bees talk”. What age were you when you were taught or learned about sex? What was missing in your lesson that you wished you would have been taught but learned along the way? Do you believe there is a way to have the sex talk that is sex positive and informative especially to both genders? How do you address the gender atonalities in your sex talk?

Prompt Five: Slickers and the People Who Love to Hate Them

Slut shaming it happens even to the most conservative woman because we live in a society that polices womens bodies. What has been your experience with dealing with the recoil of society

for actions you have taken part in? What lessons did you learn about people and yourself when came to deal with slut shaming?