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Editorial: Leaving a Legacy

I am so grateful to be able to share with you this year’s edition of Sprinkle. As always, Sprinkle provides a platform for critical academic works as well as creative works done by undergraduates in the fields of Feminist and Queer Studies, both in North America and abroad. This year, the authors featured come from a wide range of perspectives, and we at Sprinkle remain ever grateful for their contributions.

This year was especially poignant, as it was the second year without Dr. Meyer at Cal Poly. However, the editorial board worked diligently, and their work has culminated in one of the most impressive volumes of Sprinkle to date. This volume is not only full of impressive scholarship, its existence as the tenth volume of an academic journal of feminist and queer theory is a testament to the need for spaces that celebrate undergraduate scholarship. My hope is that this volume will inspire future scholarship, both within these fields and beyond.

This publication includes works that are vastly different from each other and also strikingly similar. They vary from topics as far from each other as new interpretations of literary classics, to new uses of media, to intersectional examinations of intimate partner violence. What connects them all, though, is the authors’ continued commitment to feminist and queer scholarship, and their belief in its importance. I hope that within this volume you see that your voice has been heard, and that you have a place in feminist scholarship.

This publication would not exist without the hard work and dedication of many people. Thank you to our Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Lehr, for your guidance and support. Thank you to the entire editorial board, as this year could not have happened without you. I would also like to specifically thank Emma Sturm, Frank Gaspar, and Jennifer MacMartin as they returned this year and helped to create a truly exemplary publication. This journal would also not exist without the continued support of the Cal Poly Women’s and
Gender Studies Department, and their continued support of this publication is deeply appreciated. And finally, thank you to everyone who submitted to Sprinkle this year. Being able to take part in your scholarship was one of the highlights of my academic career.

Thank you.

Alex Castro
Associate Editor
Editorial: Celebrating *Sprinkle*

As the current chair of the Women’s & Gender Studies Department at Cal Poly and Editor-in-Chief of *Sprinkle*, I was delighted to present *Sprinkle* and its volunteer staff with the *2017 WGS Excellence in Leadership for Social Change at Cal Poly Award* (student category) earlier this month.

The *Excellence in Leadership for Social Change at Cal Poly Award* recognizes a student (or group of students) who have achieved excellence and impact as campus leaders in efforts to create a more just, equitable, and inclusive Cal Poly. Students who have directly collaborated with the Women’s & Gender Studies Department in these efforts are prioritized for this recognition. This award was established in 2015 and the awardee is selected annually by the Women’s & Gender Studies chair. Previous recipients of this award are Bailey Hamblin (2015) and Emma de la Rosa (2016).

There are many factors that led me to select the entire *Sprinkle* team as the recipients of this year’s award. *Sprinkle* has been published at Cal Poly since May 2013 and this is the fifth volume managed and edited by students at this university. I believe that these previous volumes – and the hard work, learning, and doing they represent – played a key role in helping Cal Poly imagine and understand itself as a university that does and supports queer studies.

How has this ability to imagine and understand Cal Poly as a university that does and supports queer studies been transformative? I am delighted to announce that Cal Poly will launch a new Queer Studies minor in Fall 2017. This minor is designed to provide students with opportunities to explore how sexuality is central to human societies and to promote intersectional, interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry, education and activism that emphasizes how constructions, experiences and expressions of sexuality (including the invention of homo/heterosexuality and ab/normality, intimacy, kinship networks and embodiment) change over time and are lived in relation to interlocking systems of race, ethnicity, religion, class, nation, age, dis/ability and gender.
Students completing the minor will develop the intellectual and practical skills necessary to contribute to scholarship, creative production and innovation in the interdisciplinary field of Queer Studies and to serve as leaders in the creation, enactment and evaluation of efforts to create a more inclusive, just and equitable world. **Thank you to Sprinkle staff past and present for your work to queer Cal Poly and the world. I can’t wait to see what you and we do next!**

As noted last year, it is an honor for Cal Poly to manage this journal and create this space for feminist and queer scholarship to flourish. Readers are invited to share this volume with others committed to this project so this content gets the large readership it deserves. *Sprinkle* is currently published once a year. Look for the next Call for Papers in January 2018. Finally, on behalf of *Sprinkle*, I want to thank the Cal Poly Instructionally-Related Activities (IRA) Program and the College of Liberal Arts for making it possible for us to continue to publish print copies of this year’s volume, and to thank the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy for hosting our online editions.

Thank you for being a part of the *Sprinkle* community and helping make space for the contributions of emerging scholars in this field.

Jane Lehr, Ph.D.
*Editor in Chief*
Beyond LGBTQ: Re-creating Queer Identities
Creative Submission: I Return to the Place I Ran From

By Ian Gillespie

I return to the place I ran from
Back to that blasted heath,
where the sky has lost its color
Where I see those few fallen friends
Still waiting for me
Their broken bodies
still bearing the weight
of the hatred placed on them.

I see my brother and my sister
Those imperfect allies
And love them and know them
And they know and love me.
They are not as holy
As our kith and kin.
They were not tempered in the same forge
And Mine was different from theirs.

I embrace my artificer
My opposition
Who loves only what he thinks he sees
But abhors who I truly am.
Like his father and his mother
All of them cool with holy water
Sanctified by ‘holy’ individuals.

They railed against me
and ridiculed me unknowingly
thinking that it was friendly fire
laying wastes to parts of me that are deep and sacred
And so
I ran
and I ran
and I ran.
And I became strong and I became beautiful
And I have returned here now, to reclaim this heath
To reestablish my place
And I shall renew this land
And I shall bring the light and the spectrum with it
And much will grow where once was death
And we shall be able to come out and that
That cavalcade of color and of wonder and of magic
And I shall call it home
And it shall be my PRIDE.
LGBTQ People of Color and Digital Spaces of Empowerment

By Eden Bonjo

ABSTRACT. In recent history, the internet has been considered a place where disembodied users can escape the limitations of their corporeal bodies. But in the contemporary moment, the digital and the physical worlds have become mutually constitutive. What happens when a politics of race, sexuality, and gender is centered in an analysis of digital activity? LGBTQ people of color use strategies to navigate marginalizing social dynamics of power both offline and online. This negotiation is important because of how integral the internet has become to everyday life. In the age of social media, cultural production has become the business of the masses. Digital democracy decentralizes the production of media that helps us to define ourselves. By participating in this process, LGBTQ people of color self-empower by promoting visibility among both themselves and other communities.

Introduction: Theoretical Groundwork
This essay is derived from the literature review of a community-based research project in which I worked with members of an LGBTQ support group located in a culturally Latinx nonprofit space. The young adults who participated in this study displayed engagement with social media throughout processes of identity development and community organization. This project intervenes in the digital humanities discourse which talks about digital interaction as though it is separable from corporeal bodies. Rather than perpetuating the tendency to pose politics of race, gender, and sexuality as inconsequential to the digital realm, I intend to center these structures in my analysis to
champion the navigational strategies employed by queer people of color in online sociality. Here, an analytical lens grounded in queer of color theorizing will guide an investigation of the internet as a space of empowerment for LGBTQ people of color. As will be explored later, “Latinx” is used here as a gender-inclusive term to refer to people of Latin American heritage (in place of “Latino” or “Latina”).

Queer of color critique will be the primary method of analysis here because it responds to social and national investments in normative subjects and exposes the harms that they inflict on marginalized groups. It historically launches from Black feminist thought to define a body of theoretical work that looks to cultural texts to expose the manifold embodiments of gender and sexuality that circulate within communities of color. These, in turn, reveal the limitations and restrictions of the normative subject. In an analysis of the writings of Cherrí Moraga and women of color feminist theorizing at large, Grace Hong (2006) defines culture as encompassing “a system of meaning-making, a system ordered by relations of power... as itself a material and social practice.” (p. xii). Thus, queer of color critique examines culture as a highly politicized arena, as the formational site of social power dynamics.

Roderick A. Ferguson, a foregrounding thinker in queer of color analysis, introduced the notion that the universalization of a white heteropatriarchal norm directly functions to produce the queer of color “other.” He articulates race as a project of national formation that forces the question “are you with us, or against us?” on those subjected to it. Put differently, the hegemonic norm allows sociopolitical institutions to selectively convey a sense of national belonging to people according to racial identity. Ferguson (2004) argues, “revolutionary and cultural nationalisms waxed empiricist as they measured the authenticity of subjects of color and defined the reality of minority cultures in terms of heteropatriarchy” (p. 140). Accordingly, I argue that white heteropatriarchy must be dismantled through strategies that work to uplift LGBTQ
people of color and give stage to their voices, actions, and experiences.

Of course, groundwork based in queer of color critique must begin with a discussion of the eternal paradox of identity politics. Specifically, there is a need for unifying identities which signal collective experiences of marginalization at the hands of the normative regime in order to launch resistance efforts (Crenshaw, 1991). Yet, at the same time, these categories often result in racial and sexual essentialisms which exclude certain people from belonging even as they share experiences of marginalization. Given this conundrum, what is the appropriate metric for inclusivity in categories of racial identity? Or is there a better way to frame the question of racial belonging?

The answer to these questions lies within the concept of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that an identity politics which positions sexism and racism as mutually exclusive experiences necessarily fails to account for the experiences of women of color. She therefore advocates for a levying of identity politics according to “the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction” (p. 1242). In other words, the language of race, class, gender, and sexuality should not aim to divide people up and parse out their experiences of oppression as isolated from each other; instead, the unique nature of identity-specific marginalizations must be implemented in the pursuit of collective social change. Indeed, the boundaries between identity-based discourses must be made permeable in order to open the field to the voicing of those experiences which occur where they overlap. A politics of resistance is useless if it does not account for these intersections and employ them in the work of displacing white heteronormative hegemony. It is following this line of thought that the project at hand deliberately analyzes the manifestations of queer of color identity in digital space and investigates how LGBTQ people of color are using the internet in revolutionary ways.
Latinidad: Complicating the Monolith of Racial Identity

This project specifically investigates the role of online interaction for a Latinx community. Therefore, given a general queer of color critique framework, it is important to establish the particular complexities of Latinx racial identity. In Queer Latinidad, Juana María Rodríguez (2003) discusses identity politics specifically in light of latinxidad, which she describes as something that serves “to define a particular geopolitical experience but it also contains within it the complexities and contradictions of immigration, (post)(neo)colonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, language, and the politics of location” (2003, p. 10). For Rodríguez, Latinx identity is the product of national and cultural foundations tied together by the shared experience of oppression under colonial projects. However, this commonality is threaded with the legacies of colonial oppression insofar as Latinx communities are parsed up according to how latinidad is recognized. Latin American communities are stratified along the lines of cultural, social, and economic factors in ways that are not all captured by “Latino” or “Latina” as catch-all panethnic identifiers. Therefore, shared racial and ethnic heritage alone is not sufficiently descriptive of the multidimensionality of embodied experience among individuals tied to latinidad.

Marginalization is interwoven with Latinx identity in the United States, but Rodríguez asserts that it cannot be taken for granted that those who identify with latinidad be regarded as simply powerless subjects molded by the circumstance of disenfranchisement; instead, LGBTQ Latinx subjects must be seen as engaging with their constructed realities in such a way as to cause rupture to the normative script. For example, a person of Latin American heritage may identify as Puerto Rican, Boricua, and Latino, and use these identifiers differentially according to social context. In Rodríguez’s words, “understanding the relationship between social context and social agents, socially constructed categories and lived realities, is crucial if we want to impact society and its (non)citizens” (2003, p. 21). Therefore, it is
crucial that normative social scripts of race and gender be continually interrogated by insisting on the plasticity of Latinx LGBTQ identity. It then becomes possible to investigate how LGBTQ Latinx people use digital space to navigate racial identity and the power structures woven therein.

**Disidentificatory Practice: Rethinking the Identity Crisis**

LGBTQ people of color engage in strategies of identity management that both resist and disidentify with power structures in the process of negotiating multiple marginalized identities. What is meant by disidentification? José Muñoz (1999) writes that it constitutes a social practice which uses “the code [of the majority] as raw material for representing a disempowered politics of positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (p. 4). Because society does not offer LGBTQ people of color any representational templates for a sanctioned way of being, it becomes necessary to read between the lines of the normative mainstream cultural narrative to infer a sense of self and assert a social presence.

Carlos Ulises Decena (2008) points to tacit subjectivity as a disidentificatory strategy practiced by minority groups to negotiate nonnormative identities. He discusses the way in which Latino men who have sex with men may not necessarily be explicitly ‘out’ with their families and frames it instead as what is often a tacit understanding which cannot be verbally breached because of the need to preserve community ties integral to survival. According to Decena, “individual self-realization through speech has been severed from collective social change. Today, one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a ‘normal’ gay subject” (p. 339). In this way, coming out is reframed not as liberating, but as a socially constructed trap. People of color experience the vision of a uniformly “out and proud” LGBTQ community as null and void because it fails to account for the complexities of racial oppression. For the subjects of Decena’s study, it does not make sense to explicitly self-
describe as homosexual, or bisexual, or as a member of the LGBTQ community. Instead, disidentificatory tactics are employed to reach an understanding. What are some other ways in which LGBTQ communities of color might disidentify with the normative model of sexual and gender identity?

The Revolution Will Not Be Digitized... Or Will It?
The digital medium is rife with the same social contradictions and constraints that characterize the offline world. What are the ways in which digital spaces can work to either reinforce hierarchies of representation, or provide a launching point for politics of resistance? It has been established that race, gender, and sexuality function to mediate the relationship between social subjects and their enfranchisement. In the contemporary post-industrial, tech-based U.S. economy, technology then comes to serve as the means by which enfranchisement is expressed and asserted. The digital world is a space of both social interaction and cultural representation. In Digital Dead End, Virginia Eubanks (2011) argues that “technology embodies human relationships, legislates behavior, and shapes citizenship” (p. 21). If race, gender, and sexuality configure types of social membership with associated capacities to access resources, then digital space is a location in which these citizenships can be enacted, contested, and mobilized. How does this understanding of contemporary digital spaces signal movement towards digital space as a site of identity formation and contestation?

Recent years in the digital age have witnessed a shift in online sociality, such that the online and offline worlds have become mutually constitutive. Lisa Nakamura (2008) accounts for the way in which the digital landscape is shaped by race, gender, and sexuality by asserting that “there has come into being a new emphasis on the Internet’s promise as a place of radical production or intervention rather than as merely a space of anonymous consumption” (p. 51). The web viewer is not a passive and invisible subject willingly erased from physical space, but rather an agent that actively
engages society through the production of media cultures. For example, a Facebook user might signal Latinx identity with the use of Spanish language in status updates. The internet functions as an arena in which to assert the presence of marginalized racial, sexual, and gender identities. It is a potentially empowering space for LGBTQ people of color to proliferate and disseminate myriad representations of identity embodiment.

How might online connectedness contribute to an upheaval of normative power dynamics? Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (2003) theorize the democratic potential of web-based media. They argue that the revolution will indeed be digitized; however, it has not (and will not) taken on a single recognizable form. Rather, “digital democracy will be decentralized, unevenly dispersed, even profoundly contradictory... [and is] likely to appear first... in cultural forms: a changed sense of community, for example, or in a citizenry less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (p. 2). They call for an understanding of new media on democratic processes that attends to both its potential for liberation as well as the socio-cultural and political-economic factors that influence its mobilization. The trajectory of digitized democracy depends on whether barriers of access for the full participation of all political subjects can be overcome. These barriers constrain LGBTQ users of color online, even while digital activity itself may be used for empowerment.

Ultimately, while Jenkins and Thorburn argue that the response to the question of whether the revolution will be digitized is undoubtedly “yes,” they caution against overambitious conceptualizations of web-based participatory politics as able to instantaneously topple the regimes of contemporary governmental and corporate institutions. Nevertheless, they note that “the Web's low barriers to entry ensure greater access than ever before to innovative, even revolutionary ideas” (p. 12). Ironically, Jenkins and Thorburn skirt around direct acknowledgement of race, gender, and sexuality as constructs that structure and
limit cultural representation for marginalized internet users. However, I point to their notion of participatory politics to argue that the digital world may provide a space for the demands of marginalized users to be voiced and prioritized through the decentralization of cultural production. The power to produce state-sanctioned knowledge is no longer a privilege afforded only to news corporations and media conglomerates.

The structures that define knowledge production are changing; the question of “whose knowledge” is less easy to define. What is lauded as legitimate cultural information about “who we are” is being taken back into the hands of the people in the circulation of narratives that tell society about itself. Jenkins (2010) writes, “A participatory culture is one where they are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement … the borders between reader and writer, consumer and producer, are starting to blur” (p. 48). Cultural production is no longer monopolized by the entertainment industry. Therefore, the proliferation of *cultural representation* is no longer limited to these institutions. Marginalized users are becoming empowered to circulate their narratives in the public sphere for purposes of not only public presence but also community connection and social support.

Vikki Fraser (2010) engages with the epistemology of the closet in the interaction of queer subjectivities within online arenas. In her assessment, “coming out” online doesn’t necessarily constitute a step towards realizing an “out” identity in the offline world; it may just as aptly be explored without necessarily being a means to an end. To overvalue the emergence of the queer subject from the closet limits us to an understanding of it as transitional, rather than as a space to be occupied and critically interrogated. According to Fraser, “by removing to a periphery space and acting within the stages and scripts set by that space, queer young people are able to use the online closet as both a separating and a unifying strategy” (p. 32). Truly, the compulsion to “come out,” to disclose a sexual identity, is omnipresent in both the
online and offline worlds. And yet the concept of disidentificatory practice encourages us to consider the ways in which tacit resistance may take an even greater stake in the subversion of marginality. For example, National Coming Out Day has become a Facebook “event” now regularly lauded with an onslaught of status updates declarative of personal truths of gender and sexuality. But it may be worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the implications of this proverbial bandwagon and who is permitted the access to ride. If nothing else, the question of how the internet mediates subjectivity (whether tacit or not) may be a useful stepping stone in thinking about possibilities for online collectivity among the LGBTQ of color community.

In Conclusion: The Possibility of Digital Community

Thus far, it has been established that the internet may serve as an arena for identity negotiation among LGBTQ of color individuals to disidentify with marginalizing structures of social power. A queer of color theoretical lens has been used to expose normative subjectivity as a hierarchical paradigm that depends on the disenfranchisement of LGBTQ people of color (Ferguson, 2004, p. 40). Identity politics has been investigated as a framework through which to understand social hierarchies and the violences of marginalization that they incur. While identity politics has been deemed necessary, it must also necessarily be continually interrogated; essentialist notions of identity may be counteracted with a metric of inclusivity based on shared experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). How might this knowledge of identity politics be applied to digital spaces? How do the strategies that LGBTQ young adults of color use to engage with the digital world translate into empowerment and visibility?

Digital space may play an important role in facilitating the embodiment of marginalized racial and/or sexual identities. The notion of participatory politics gestures to a shifting cultural terrain in which the business of cultural production is being delivered from the possession
of corporate entertainment oligarchs (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003, p. 4). While these entities indubitably still exist, widespread cultural production has been returned to the hands of the bloggers, webcammers, amateur filmmakers, Snapchatters, Facebookers, Instagramers, and all the other producers of the digital masses. The line between the digital and the physical worlds has been blurred such that they are mutually constitutive; the same goes for the line between producer and consumer. How, then, might web-mediated sociality also provide a tool for communicating and organizing among LGBTQ people of color? In the words of Silvio Torres-Saillant (2010), “when it comes to the race question... personal experience can adequately compete with other forms of knowledge in the power to lay out the issue under discussion” (p. 453). Personal experience is an important element in cultural representation which, in turn, can influence social power. If the production of cultural representation has truly undergone a shift toward digital democratization, LGBTQ people of color may be able to use online spaces as launching points for a politics of resistance against regimes of normative subjectivity. By documenting their own lives, asserting digital presences, and wielding the internet as a tool of social connectedness and community support, LGBTQ people of color become agents of digital cultural productions that destabilize and dismantle dynamics of power that structure marginality as a necessary condition of their identities.

References


Eden Bonjo is a recent graduate of Smith College (’16) where they received highest honors for their award-winning thesis research project entitled “We post to give inspiration to other people’: LGBTQ Young Adults of Color and Digital Spaces of Empowerment.” Eden is passionate about advocacy and organizing in the transgender community and particularly enjoys thinking about the ways in which cultural representation presents opportunities to analyze shifting dynamics of social power. They are currently considering graduate programs in Education and Psychology. In their spare time, Eden enjoys bike rides, art projects, and petting cats.
Bodies without Organs (BwO) and the Self: Reading Leo Bersani through Deleuze & Guattari

By Jing Hao Liong

ABSTRACT. Queer theory is often concerned with the production of multiplicities and the expansion of the possibilities of being, evidenced by the works of theorists such as Foucault, Butler, and Muñoz. However, rarely is the centrality of the self-examined as the normative (and potentially violent) good from which an emancipatory politics is to be enacted. In this paper, I use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the Bodies without Organs (BwO) to question how queer theory and queer politics might move away from its current productive tendencies towards an intentional destruction of the self. By reading Deleuze and Guattari alongside Leo Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” I argue that the BwO can be constructed in the gay man’s rectum through the “shattering” of the ego. It is this confrontation with the BwO that will compel us to refuse complacency in our theorizing and political activism.

Introduction
There is a wonderfully imaginative dimension to the thinking that occurs in queer theory that involves re-creation, re-interpretation, and re-construction. Such projects often entail imagining new possibilities of being and living that challenge and expand upon heteronormative imperatives of contemporary society. And yet these positive imaginings do not exhaust the demands and practices of queer theory. The construction of the self must not be thought of as the sole end of queer politics; its deconstruction must also be attended to both for its theoretical significance as well as for its political consequences. What does a queer politics look like when the
concern is not the making possible of multiple and various selves, but the radical deconstruction of the self itself? How is this already being enacted in the world, and to what effect?

In this essay, I want to consider what happens when the self is unraveled. I take as my starting point Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conception of the Body without Organs (BwO) as an intriguing theorization of the radical deconstruction of the self (1987). The BwO is both provocative and productive; provocative because it challenges us to surrender the illusory necessity of selfhood and subjectivity, and productive because it allows us to conceive of differential “embodiments” of the self. With the BwO in mind, I will explore how the centrality of the self is challenged in Leo Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987), a queer politics that questions the very possibility of fabricating new selves is already engaging with the question of unraveling pre-existing ones. We must now press further and consider why this might indeed be desirable.

The Self in Queer Theory
Before I begin to explore what it might mean to undo the self, it is important to identify how the self-figures in the history of queer theory. Such a venture must begin with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic model of sexual development wherein the formation of a proper (heterosexual) self is theorized. I will then briefly reflect on the writings of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and José Esteban Muñoz.

In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality Freud proposes a theory of infantile sexuality that attempts to chart how adult (hetero)sexuality is achieved. For Freud (1975/1905), the infant initially seeks pleasure through the stimulation of the “erotogenic zone” (p. 50), an auto-erotic stimulation that does not distinguish between the infant and the outside world. As the infant develops, it begins to replace “the projected sensation of stimulation in the erotogenic zone by an external stimulus which removes that sensation by producing a feeling of satisfaction” (Freud, 1975/1905, p. 50). An external stimulus is identified as that which fulfills
the desire of the infant; an external world *that is not the infant* emerges and demarcates the border between self and non-self, assigning the world of the non-self as the source of pleasure. The world of pure desire is abandoned, and the newly discerned self must be disciplined to attain normalcy according to the rules and expectations of a particular societal matrix. What is important for our purposes is the fact that a “pre-self” state exists in which an “external world” is not discerned.

This process of embodiment, of the departure from a “pre-self” state, is taken up as given by other theorists who then begin to question the possibility of multiplicities of embodiment and relations between selves. Foucault, for instance, suggests that we must “invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship... the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure” (Foucault, 1998, p. 136). Even though he challenges the teleological model of heterosexuality inherent to the Freudian model, Foucault does not abandon the assumed existence of selves, and the externality of pleasure. While he offers a reconfiguration of relations *between selves* that makes possible different forms and sources of pleasure, the self remains just that – a self-distinct from a non-self, external world and deriving pleasure from other selves.

Whereas Foucault is concerned with the *relations* between selves, Butler and Muñoz are both concerned with the process of subjectification. Butler (1993) defines performativity as “a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted” (p. 22). The subject is interpellated by discourses that precede the existence of the subject; indeed, one cannot help but to *become a subject*, and a queer politics lies in the potential of failed repetitions of conventions to disrupt the linguistic and discursive structures that produce heteronormative subjects. Echoing these sentiments, Muñoz (1999) describes disidentification as a survival strategy by which the non-normative self “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text... to account for, include, and empower minority
identities and identifications” (p. 31). It is thus a process of disrupting hegemonic discourses of subjectivity and opening up new possibilities of being by re-interpreting and re-fashioning what is available in the majoritarian public sphere.

This brief discussion serves to highlight the centrality of the self in the history of queer theory. Certainly the embodied self is highly unstable, and the performance of and relations between selves can be negotiated within the existing matrix of power. However, what remains constant is the distinct unit of the self that is differentiated from other bodies and persons. Queer politics can be productive insofar as it strives for the construction of various selves, but what happens when this project is abandoned for a radical rethinking of what the self is? Rather than strive for the preservation of the self, what happens when one strives to do the exact opposite, that is, to destroy the self and imagine a way of being otherwise?

**The Body without Organs (BwO)**

In order to think about how such an undoing of the self might be possible, I want to turn towards what Deleuze and Guattari understand to be the Body without Organs (BwO). At its core, the BwO is an attempt to undo the organization of the self (or what Deleuze and Guattari understand to be the “organism”) to attain a self-contained circulation of desire and intensities. The BwO is a project radically different from those of the theorists mentioned above, as it is “what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 151, emphasis mine). It is a process of removal and deconstruction, a process that refuses altogether identity and meaning; it is the total refusal of the social.

The BwO is, in many respects, an attempt to right the wrongs committed by psychoanalysis, a project that “royally butches the real, because it botches the BwO” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 151). However, if the BwO is an attempt to
undo the violence of psychoanalysis, then we can think of the BwO as analogous to the “pre-self” infant Freud describes that knows not of an external world and is concerned solely with its own desire. A quote by Deleuze and Guattari will be helpful here:

The BwO is the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 154)

As a “field” and a “plane” the BwO refuses an embodied configuration that produces the possibility of a demarcation between itself and the outside world. It is immanent, operating within itself and for itself according to (specific to) its own desire that is defined as independent of any “exterior agency.” The BwO does not need an external world to procure its source of pleasure, and in fact, pleasure might not even be the end goal.

All of this is reminiscent of the auto-erotic stimulation of the “pre-self” infant described by Freud: the body of the infant sufficiently satisfies its own desires without recourse to an external world. And if this infant knows not of an outside world, is not its body also an undifferentiated “plane”? The demarcation of self and non-self is thus what Deleuze and Guattari would understand as that which “botches the BwO.” Psychoanalysis, in demanding the creation and recognition of a self, destroys the BwO.

But what exactly does psychoanalytic theory do to the BwO that is so objectionable? What warrants the dismantling of the organism? For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), psychoanalysis is merely the “most recent figure of the priest” (p. 154) that destroys the BwO by wrenching desire from its field of immanence. In keeping with this theological vocabulary, the priest works on behalf of God whose judgment “uproots [the BwO] from its immanence and makes it an organism, a signification, a subject. It is the BwO that is stratified” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 159). The
priest – the psychoanalyst in its most recent manifestation – makes an organism out of the BwO; the psychoanalyst is always already working against what the BwO (the “pre-self” infant) wants to be: to remain as it is.

The organism is undesirable not only because it disrupts the field of immanence upon and through which desire and intensities circulate, but it also entails a coercive organization of the BwO that is violent. An “organic organization of the organs” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 158), the organism is “a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 159). The BwO becomes dependent and attached to an external other through which “useful labor” is extracted, but also an external other through which it must seek recourse to obtain pleasure – recall Foucault’s discussion of friendship and giving each other pleasure. The organism is in itself violent, and even the most gratuitous and earnest attempts to make possible a multiplicity of forms that the organism can take is insufficient. Thus the BwO is not friendship (Foucault), performativity (Butler), or disidentification (Muñoz) because each of these projects eventually imagine for itself the possibility of a becoming, an arrival at an identity that allows a self to say “I am this” or “I can be this” or “I can be this (or these things) in relation to that (or other things).”

This this is precisely the problem – the BwO resists becoming a “form,” and instead offers a counter-organizing project of “disarticulation,” “experimentation,” and “nomadism” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 159). One might argue that the ideas of performativity and disidentification function precisely to disarticulate and to experiment; this assertion would not be completely incorrect. However, the end goal of these practices is to open up new possibilities of being, or creating, for all intents and purposes, new organisms that might not have been imagined in the judgment of God. Nonetheless, they are organized, and they
are “forms” that constitute a new self – they are productive practices. The BwO, on the other hand, works to “dismantle” the organism by “invent[ing] self-destructions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 160, emphasis mine). The BwO is not merely a re-signification of the self (it abhors signification), it is not a re-imagining of the subject (it abhors subjectification), nor is it a strategic re-fashioning and re-purposing of existing organizations of the organism. The BwO is, ultimately, an intentional and constant destruction of the self.

**Constructing the BwO in the Rectum**

While Foucault, Butler, and Muñoz do not take up the project of creating the BwO, Leo Bersani certainly takes more seriously the need to “invent self-destructions” in his article “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Writing in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, Bersani (1987) calls into question the existing discourse on gay politics and what he sees as the pitfalls of the “redemptive reinvention of sex” (p. 215, emphasis in original) put forward by thinkers such as MacKinnon, Dworkin, Foucault, and Weeks. Bersani’s critiques are worth reflecting upon briefly.

The “redemptive sex project” (Bersani, 1987, p. 215) is described as an enterprise by various thinkers that argues for a re-imagination of sex and pleasure. In particular, it is undergirded by a “frequently hidden agreement about sexuality as being, in its essence, less disturbing, less socially abrasive, less violent, more respectful of ‘personhood’ than it has been in a male-dominated, phallocentric culture” (Bersani, 1987, p. 215). In this critique, Bersani suggests that the redemptive sex project posits, erroneously, the possibility for a way of doing sex that is, to put it simply, better than the violently sexist way that it is currently being practiced. It effectively sanitizes, dignifies, and obscures the discourse on gay sexual practices and politics (which are often hierarchical and nasty) to make palatable the existence and “lifestyles” of gay people to a heteronormative and homophobic mainstream public.
For our purposes, it is important to note Bersani’s skepticism with the redemptive sex project’s respect of personhood. We might think of personhood as what we have been calling the self – respect for its autonomy and dignity. Bersani’s concern with the self becomes blatantly clear following his reading of Freud: “the self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power... the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship... condemns sexuality to becoming a struggle for power” (Bersani, 1987, p. 218, emphasis in original). We can find in these claims Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “organism” and the judgment of God that imposes upon the BwO forms, functions, and hierarchies. The self, as an organism distinct from other organisms, thus enters into relations of domination and power that necessarily de-neutralizes sex as practiced between two different selves. Bersani (1987) extends Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary of organization and struggle into one of conflict: “[a]s soon as persons are posited, the war begins” (p. 218).

Bersani advocates for a gay politics that rejects the heteronormative imperative of monogamous, partnered sexual relations for one that embraces sex for its potential to “shatter” the ego, the self that constitutes the basis for power and domination. An “obsession” with gay sex is desirable insofar as it “never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice” (Bersani, 1987, p. 222). The “internalized phallic male” might be thought of as analogous to Deleuze and Guattari’s judgment of God in that it organizes and produces proper organisms that are legitimate in the world, the macho heterosexual male being the quintessential proper subject. As the judgment of God, the internalized phallic male thus makes us “an organism, a signification, [and] a subject” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 159): we must articulate a macho male body, we must signify manliness (and thus be interpreted as manly), and we must fulfill our role as male-sexed subjects in a gendered social order. In the act of sex, in
the shattering of our egos and therefore the shattering of the judgment of God, we construct our BwO.

If we are to address the title of Bersani’s article, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” we must simultaneously answer in the affirmative and in the negative. On the one hand, it is where the internalized phallic male is sacrificed, is destroyed, and is where the judgment of God no longer ceases to operate. But on the other hand, it is also where the organism is dismantled and the BwO can be constructed, where a new type of being, neither a “self” nor a “non-self,” emerges. As Bersani (1987) suggests, “it is in the gay man’s rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him” (p. 222). The gay man’s rectum becomes the site – the socially and historically situated site – where the judgment of God that condemns him to obliteration is dismantled, and where the gay man can construct his BwO unrestrained by the self.

For a queer politics then, this means that we must refuse to turn away from the power-laden act of fucking, to sanitize a queer discourse with the rhetoric of ‘lifestyle’ and ‘friendship,’ and to linger on the liberal value of diversity that celebrates multiplicities of selves and identities. What is needed is a direct confrontation with that which has the potential to shatter the self, that which can lead to the construction of the BwO. The very value of the self must be radically questioned and ultimately undermined as merely “a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical idea, it is a sanction for violence” (Bersani, 1987, p. 222). The self has become a normative value to be defended and cherished, but in this very affirmation dwells the permission for violence.

Conclusion
By serving as a powerful model for an alternative politics that is ultimately not only productive of new selves, the BwO might allow for a radical reconsideration of queer political action. Loosening the privilege we accord to “personhood” allows us to rethink the self beyond the confines of our
epidermal border, and insists on an unrelenting critique of all the judgments of God that seek to produce organisms, to produce the notion of a self. In this essay, I read into the work of Leo Bersani, the model of the BwO that Deleuze and Guattari offer us, and attempted to demonstrate how queer theory has historically already engaged in the project of dismantling the organism.

The need to do so is crucial. What the BwO reminds us to do is to constantly question the very sedimentation of forms that emerge out of our political struggles for the recognition and legitimation of difference. Rather than champion an undoing of the self back to some utopian originary state of infinite desire and intensities, the BwO is a mandate to constantly experiment, to refuse complacency in the victories already achieved, and to remain open to (and indeed welcome) hitherto unimaginable circuits and flows of desire and intensities.

References

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Standing Under a Sign to Which One Does Not Belong: Desire and (Dis)identification in Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait* Series

By Jenna June

**ABSTRACT.** This paper will take a closer look at Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait* series. Spanning a decade, from 1993 to 2004, each self-portrait is both reflective of an important time in Opie’s life, and are emblematic of a particular period in the LGBTQ movement. Traditional interpretations of these images have read them as independent of one another. When read together however, they present a subtle yet powerful statement on identity and desire. Using José Muñoz’ disidentification theory as a critical lens, I plan to unpack these images and offer new insights that will bring them in line with contemporary queer theory. While iconic on their own, when read together they create a dialogue that challenges the very concept of normal vs. abnormal and speaks to the validity an entire spectrum of individual identities.

**Introduction**

Catherine Opie is an American photographer that rose to prominence during the 1990’s with *Portraits*, a series depicting fellow members of the San Francisco and Los Angeles queer community set against lush, colorful backgrounds. Since then, Opie has gone on to produce a diverse body of work, photographing everything from American mini-malls to Elizabeth Taylor’s closet. Much like the artist herself, Opie’s work is hard to pin down. If there is one connecting thread, it is a desire to explore communities and how they shape and are shaped by the physical landscape and the individuals that inhabit them. Opie has
also, on several occasions, turned the camera on herself. Her three self-portraits, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, and *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, show the viewer that she is not only an observer, but often a part of the communities she photographs. Spanning a decade, from 1993 to 2004, each self-portrait is both reflective of an important time in Opie’s life, and are emblematic of a particular period in the LGBTQ movement. Over the course of her career Opie has moved up the art world food-chain. In 2008 the Guggenheim devoted four floors to her mid-career retrospective, she is a tenured professor at UCLA, sits on the board of several museums, and has had several of her early images feature in the opening credits of the popular lesbian drama, “The L Word.” I only mention this last part because a recent article in *The New Yorker* cited it as an example of the ways in which, over the past several decades, Opie’s images have “migrated towards the mainstream” (Levy, 2017).

While much of Opie’s content has to some extent been “normalized,” in part due to the images themselves, her three self-portraits have always retained a quiet subversiveness. Using José Muñoz’ disidentification theory as a critical framework, I plan on reading the works in relation to one another as a means of uncovering a new narrative that brings these images in line with contemporary queer theory. These self-portraits independently depict a particular desire (such as domestic bliss), a reclamation (of a derogatory label on one’s sexuality), or state of being (such as motherhood). When read together however, a dialogue emerges around identity, desire, and rigid ideologies.

**Theoretical framework: Disidentification Theory**

José Muñoz’ disidentification theory provides a useful tool for analyzing Opie’s three self-portraits. Of his theory, Muñoz (1999) writes “Disidentification is 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.” (p. 8). Pulling from a variety of
theoretical paradigms, Muñoz examines identity formation in queer “subjects” of color. Taking an intersectional approach, Muñoz looks at the ways in which varying fault lines of power converge in the lives of minority subjects to make identity formation especially fraught. However, according to Muñoz, rather than reject identification altogether, these subjects are able to disidentify with dominant culture and carve out a space for themselves.

Muñoz’ theory is best illuminated through French linguist Michel Pecheux’s three modes of subject formation. The first mode is “identification,” wherein “good subjects” choose a path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. The second mode, “counteridentification,” is where “bad subjects” attempt to rebel against dominant ideology and turn against the “symbolic system.” Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, and the one in which Muñoz’ theory does its work. Disidentification “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Disidentification becomes a particularly useful tool for resistance because it works from both “within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5). Rather than reaffirming rigid social structures and ideologies by choosing to either agree or disagree, to “identify” or “counteridentify,” disidentification works to dissolve these structures and pave the way for a multiplicity of identities. Opie’s Self-Portraits fit particularly well to this theory because the images themselves are flexible and lend themselves to a variety of different meanings and interpretations. Through the lens of Muñoz’ disidentification theory, Self-Portrait/Cutting, Self-Portrait/Pervert, and Self-Portrait/Nursing are able to be re-worked, re-coded, and re-signified while still remaining a site for change, resistance, and radical possibility even decades after they were first created.
Reimagining Context: A Site for Queer Resistance

If we extrapolate Muñoz’ theory to identity politics, more specifically LGBTQ identity politics, then “identification” could be likened to homonormativity and “counter-identification” to queer radicalism. While “good subjects” will choose to engage in respectability politics as a means of demonstrating that they are “just like everyone else,” radical queers, or “bad subjects,” fight the system by choosing not to engage, to stand outside of the social order. An example of “counter-identification” can be seen in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, a 2004 polemic in which he argues for a queer ethics that is against reproductive futurism, or the sociopolitical structure organized around “creating a better future for our children.” In this text, Edelman (2004) writes, “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (p. 75), or to put it more succinctly, “fuck the Child and the social order in whose names we are all collectively terrorized” (Edelman, 2004, p. 75). While much can be said about both the “normal” and the radical, both end up simply reinforcing the tired binary of good vs. bad subjects. That is why disidentification is so powerful; it seeks to dissolve these rigid social structures by giving people room to work both “on and against” the dominant social order. Muñoz (1999) writes of this “working on and against” as “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (p. 12).

While some of Opie’s work has been absorbed into mainstream discourse, it also provides what Foucault calls a “stumbling block.” Taken together, *Self-Portrait/Cutting, Self-Portrait/Pervert*, and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* open up a “point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 19), by presenting a view of desire and identity that resists binary structures and instead gives way
to an infinite possibility of varied and valid ways of being, having, wanting, and so on.

Before I go into the works in conversation with one another, I would like to examine how context itself, both formal and cultural in Opie’s self-portraits, may be reimagined as a site for queer resistance. One major facet of disidentification is the “recycling and recoding” of images in dominant culture as a means of finding space for oneself in a place not meant for them. Opie’s work often draws upon art history. In her self-portraits she is referencing the work of 16th century artist Hans Holbein the Younger. The rich tapestries draped in the background are meant to mirror those in Holbein’s portraits of noble men and women. She has even likened her Self-Portrait/Pervert to Holbein’s portrait of Henry VIII saying, “Pervert is my Henry VIII. It’s like I’m a warrior king, I’m going to carry on the cause of being a pervert, and I’m going to make it very elegant” (quoted in Getsy, 2016, p. 209). While this juxtaposition is a means for Opie to “soften the blow” of the confrontational content by couching it in formal aesthetics, it can also be viewed as Opie’s way of recycling and recoding the image with her queer body. Opie’s participation in the BDSM community pushes this one step further. While she was shunned from the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement for being too deviant, Opie uses Renaissance portraiture as a site for political power by proudly displaying her “perverted” desire in a space typically reserved for kings and noblemen.

**Self-Portrait/Cutting**

Inspired by the recent break down of Opie’s first long term relationship, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* is meant to depict the artist’s longing for domesticity at a time when it was both personally and politically unattainable. The drawing, which resembles a child’s drawing of two female figures holding hands in front of a house, was tentatively sketched on Opie’s back by an artist friend so that, much like the emotional trauma over the loss of her partner, the raw wound would eventually heal over. At a time when gay marriage is federally
legal (albeit not fully accepted), and the military has lifted its ban on transgender members, a children’s drawing of two women holding hands no longer seems that subversive. In fact, a longing for domestic bliss, such as in *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, could even be taken as a somewhat macabre way of promoting homonormativity. In a section of her memoir, *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson likens Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Cutting* to the Prop-8 signs scattered throughout her neighborhood. Nelson (2016) writes, “I don’t get it, who wants a version of the Prop-8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?” to which her partner, Harry Dodge, pointedly shrugs “Maybe Cathy does” (p. 11). Rather than view this work in terms of normative versus transgressive, one could view this image through Muñoz’ concept of “good” vs. “bad” subjects. Is Opie a “good” citizen for wanting to settle down and start a family? Is she a “bad” lesbian for reinforcing heteronormative ideals? Or is she neither? By choosing not to assimilate into the dominant cultural structure, while not strictly opposing it, Opie is working “on and against” domestic ideologies by refusing to choose a side between assimilationist and radical queer (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Rather, Opie is choosing to reflect on how she felt at a particular moment in time.

One could also interpret the impermanence of *Cutting* as a symbolic way of saying that people cannot be expected “to live a life that is all one thing” (Nelson, 2016, p. 74). While in that particular moment, the wound left by the loss of domesticity was both literally and figuratively fresh; over time it will come to heal and possibly even disappear completely. I think that what Nelson is getting at is the idea that people can, and should be, allowed to change their minds about what they want in life regardless of their sexual identity, gender, race, class, or any other construct foisted upon particular bodies.

**Self-Portrait/Pervert**  
*Self-Portrait/Pervert* was also inspired by a particular moment in the artist’s life. During the 1993 March on
Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, Opie and her San Francisco leather community (a queer BDSM community) were asked not to attend because they were considered too deviant. Out of anger at the then current LGBTQ movement and its focus on appearing “normal,” Opie decided to have “pervert” carved in her chest as both a painful reminder and a badge of honor. It is interesting to note that, while *Cutting* was intended to heal without a scar, *Pervert* was created precisely so that it would scar. Perhaps Opie did this as a means of reflecting and embodying her sexuality, something that is beautiful to her; but to society, she is literally and figuratively branded a pervert for life. Perhaps she did it as a way of saying that, while some desires are subject to change (such as a desire for domesticity born out of loss), others are here to stay.

**Self-Portrait/Nursing**

*Self-Portrait/Pervert* and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* presents us with a very interesting dichotomy and brings up something that is often overlooked in contemporary queer discussions, which is the intersection of the maternal body and queer identity. Taken together, the two images point to a traversing of roles. Just because Opie is or was a member of a sexually “deviant” group does not mean that she cannot have the desire to be a mother. And while her sexuality is a part of her, as indicated by the scar on her chest, it does not impede her from being a nurturing mother. In a recent interview, Nelson discusses pregnancy and queer identity. She writes, “Historically there’s been this upheld opposition between procreation and queers—think of the image of the queer, childless pervert and the panic about protecting children from queer sexuality. That’s all starting to shift now.” *Self-Portrait/Nursing* sits at the intersection of these ideas and could be taken as a literal depiction of this shift. Here we have pervert, procreator, queer sexuality, queer motherhood, and child all wrapped up in one image. While this shift is hopeful, notions of perversion, the queer body, and children also bring to mind current issues such as the debate around
gender identity and bathrooms and reminds us that, while these fears are starting to give way, there is still much work to be done.

While her participation in the BDSM community could liken her to a “radical queer,” and her depiction of motherhood and domesticity could paint her as an assimilationist, the narrative that emerges from Catherine Opie’s three self-portraits is much more complex. Rather than identifying or counteridentifying with any dominant cultural structure, Opie works within, on, and against structures that are both heteronormative and queer; and presents us with three very different aspects of her identity that are intertwined but not contingent upon one another. When read together, the narrative that emerges is one of transgression, and perhaps the notion that one can in fact live a life that is many different things.

Conclusion
Much like the process of disidentification, Opie’s work exists at the intersection between desire, identity, and ideology. Separately, each of Opie’s self-portraits depicts a particular desire (such as domestic bliss), reclamation (of ones sexual identity) or state of being (such as motherhood). Taken together they convey a subtle yet powerful message that one need not be imprisoned by any single aspect of their identity. Opie’s self-portraits can be seen as a challenge to binary thinking because she is working from within dual ideologies as a means to explode them and in doing so reveals the slippages between desire, identity, and ideology. It is within these slippages that Opie works to carve out a space for her own identities, and make way for the identity of others.

Of course, there are still questions that remain. Muñoz’ disidentification theory places heavy emphasis on the intersection of race and sexuality. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Muñoz (1999) writes that, “the lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race, which reaffirms the belief that it is necessary to talk about
race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and their text” (quoted in Muñoz, 1999, p. 10). How does Opie’s work deal with aspects of class, race, and sexual identity? What, if anything, has Opie done to address her racial privilege? Are her self-portraits helping or hurting queer visibility? All these questions make it difficult to bring her work and disidentification into perfect alignment. There is no doubt her work does not fully address the complex issues of white privilege, capitalism, classicism, and a whole host of other things that are present in today’s queer community. However, her self-portraits do present a subtle yet powerful statement on identity that challenges the very concept of normal vs. abnormal and speaks to the validity of not only an entire spectrum of individual identities but to the spectrum of possibilities within one’s own identity. And that, at least in my mind, is a step in the right direction.

References


Jenna June is a fourth year at the University of California San Diego who is working towards a B.A. in fine art with a minor in critical gender studies. She once had a professor tell her, “We cannot ever truly enact social change if we cannot first imagine it in our own heads.” Her work revolves around the concept of “radical imagination” as a precursor to social change. Her areas of research include gender and sexuality in the arts and she is interested in the power of self-representation and radical imagination as a both a site for resistance and tool for enacting social change.
Shame and the Struggle of Sexual Identity

By Brooke English

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the development and use of language in minority communities within the queer community from the beginning of the 20th century through today. The pre-Stonewall era is explored through two literary works, Quentin Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* (1997/1968) and Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1990/1928), and the post-Stonewall era looks at two 21st century groups, the undocuqueer movement and the group of queer people who use Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), otherwise known as Truvada Whores. Drawing on analysis of the modern groups found in Hinda Seif’s *Coming out of the Shadows* and undocuqueer and Tim Dean’s *Mediated Intimacies*, I attempt to explain both the ways that language are used in each era as well as the reason for the differences between the two eras.

Internalized Shame and its Language

Queer identity and shame have always been linked and the connection between the queer community and external shame has been extensively studied. However, the shaming of non-normative and other minority identities within the queer community is a topic that has received less attention. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, internalized shame in the queer community revolved primarily around the shaming of non-normative gender expression, as seen in literary works from that time period. However, through the development of a homonormative identity and the rise of neoliberalization, new axes of discrimination, such as undocumented status and PrEP usage, have appeared and become dominant. Furthermore, the language used within these discriminated subsets of the queer community has shifted from self-deprecating to empowering.
Quentin Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* (1997/1968) focuses on Crisp’s own experiences with rejection and shame for how he expresses his gender. The main source of Crisp’s shame stems from the homosexual community itself. Crisp goes against the gender norms of the homosexual community in his time, he must, “with every breath [he draws], with every step [he takes], demonstrate that [he is] feminine” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 21). The ‘normal’ members of the gay community frown upon Crisp’s expression because it conflicts with their idea of how gay people should act. Crisp’s presentation and public behavior “[spoil] it for the rest”, according to a gay American actor (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 80). Crisp dares to defy the pre-established definition of homosexuality despite the backlash that he receives from other members of the homosexual community. Traditionally, homosexual people of this time were secretive and frequently denied their sexuality, even when they were caught in participating in homosexual acts. Edward Saragin, writing under the pen name Donald Webster Cory, references a report of a U.S. sailor who let “a stranger,” whom he believed to be homosexual, perform oral sex on him (Cory, 1951, p. 188). However, the sailor himself does not identify as a homosexual, despite complying in the sexual act. Crisp challenges this secrecy and it is this non-compliant expression that draws criticism.

Crisp’s descriptions of the shame that he feels in response to the criticism parallel early descriptions of homosexual feelings and serve as a condemnation of the evolving homosexual community. Crisp sees homosexuals as worse than heterosexuals in terms of discrimination, going as far as to say that “all heterosexuals, however low, [are] superior to any homosexual, however noble” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 62). The campy feel of the novel shows its strengths in its descriptions of the self-described illness that plagues Crisp. Crisp highlights the irony of the other gay people treating him much like their predecessors were treated, drawing on metaphors related to sickness and questioning why they think that “consumptives who coughed
ruined for others all the fun of tuberculosis” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 80). Crisp reclaims the language of disease, historically used as a negative way to describe homosexuality, and uses it to describe his pain that results from the rejection and hypervisibility that he experiences as a result of his gender expression. By pulling from this discriminatory language, Crisp highlights the isolated feelings and internal struggle with how he lives his life, that which sets himself apart from the ‘normal’ homosexuals.

The shaming of varying gender performance is not limited to just the male homosexual community in this time period, however. Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* portrays Stephen Gordon, a woman who struggles with both being a woman and her sexual preferences. Throughout the novel, she is compared to her father, especially in regard to appearance. She prefers traditionally male clothing and activities and in her own words, “being a girl [spoils] everything” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 37). Her life is characterized by not a loneliness of identity but rather the loneliness of isolation caused by an inability to fit either in the invert community or ‘normal’ society. She shuns the invert community much like Crisp shuns the homosexual community. However, she cannot fully disassociate from the community and solemnly acknowledges that she will always be a part of it, as shown in Stephen’s first visit to Alec’s, a bar for inverts. Finding herself in the midst of everything that she hates and has tried to avoid, her initial response to the bar is one of disgust and repulsion. When she is approached by a youth who calls her “ma sœur,” she is angered at the fact that this person, who she sees as the lowest of the low, would call her one of his kind (Hall, 1990/1928 388). However, after she takes a second look at the boy, she recognizes the scars of a struggle that she herself faces and reluctantly accepts the label and calls him “mon frère” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 389). The key difference between Stephen and the boy in the bar is that while the boy has given up his efforts to remain a part of ‘normal’ society, Stephen keeps up the fight, a “hapless creature... hopelessly pursued” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 389).
Hall evokes the image of a persistently hunted animal to describe the kind of life that Stephen lives. Much like Crisp, Stephen lives a hypervisible life due to her dress and general manner. However, Stephen actively resists associating herself with the invert community and labeling herself as an invert whereas Crisp, although detesting the homosexual community, has embraced his identity, as much as he despises it. Stephen finds herself between two worlds, the invert community and society as a whole, but never completely in one or the other. The imagery and associated language of a constantly hunted animal captures the stress and isolation that Stephen feels, unable to rest or find solace in either of the spaces that she can occupy.

In the years since the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* and *The Naked Civil Servant*, the rise of a “new homonormativity” and neoliberal ideals have brought forth new non-normative identities for shaming (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). People in minority groups that do not fit into the golden standard of the ‘normal’ white, cis, middle-class, gay male, such as undocumented queer immigrants, are left by the wayside in almost all steps forward in progress for the queer community. Similarly, the neoliberal idea that what is sexual should be kept private has resulted in the shunning of new developments in preventative AIDS measures, such as the use of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), and those who use them. While language in the pre-Stonewall era was primarily used to describe pain and loneliness, minority communities within the queer community have begun to use language as a method of empowerment.

Born out of the intersection between the queer and undocumented immigrant communities, the undocuqueer movement challenges and complicates normative identities within both marginalized communities by adopting language from the queer community and the “coming out” narrative. Hinda Seif examines this particular usage of language in her paper “Coming out of the Shadows” and “undocuqueer”. In Seif’s paper, she interviews Julio, a member of the undocuqueer community, in which he shares why he
increasingly identifies with the term “queer.” In particular, Julio evokes the image of the so-called “mainstream” gay person, a “white, male, white picket fence ideal” that he does not see himself in (Seif, 2014, p. 90). Using the term “queer,” however, gives a way for Julio and other queer members of the undocumented immigrant community a freedom from imposed identities and an opportunity to embrace self-definition.

Their embracement not only of their undocumented status, which is shunned in the queer community, but their queer identity, which is shunned in the undocumented community, is only possible through this usage and adaptation of language. “Queer” is still a relatively new term in the Latino community, only coming into usage within the past decade, according to Julio (Seif, 2014, p. 90). However, as that term came into use, activist groups, primarily coming from the “1.5-generation” undocumented immigrants, began to form around their queerness and made moves towards strengthening the undocuqueer movement and the undocumented community in general. The first annual Coming out of the Shadows Day event took place on the steps of the Chicago Federal Building. Speaking about being undocumented in front of a federal building is a direct slap to the face of normative identity. This action is the undocuqueer community pushing for more visibility and recognition in the midst of a world that increasingly marginalizes them. Furthermore, it is actions like these that demonstrate the ability for minority communities to come together and define themselves using their own vocabulary rather than accept the labels placed on them.

A hotly debated and divisive topic in the queer community recently is the introduction and usage of PrEP, also known as Truvada, as a way to prevent the spread of AIDS. The stigma arises from what kinds of sex are acceptable in society. As Tim Dean explains in Mediated Intimacies, HIV-negative women who want to become pregnant but have HIV-positive male partners may choose to go on Truvada to avoid infection. This usage of Truvada is
acceptable because the end goal is “the noble task of heterosexual reproduction” (Dean, 2015, p. 232). However, if an HIV-negative gay man goes on Truvada, he is labeled a ‘Truvada Whore.’ As Rubin says in Thinking Sex, “sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent” (Rubin, 2011/1984, p. 150). The use of medication as a mediator in homosexual erotic enjoyment is unacceptable but the use of it is permissible and understandable in the case of procreative heterosexual intercourse. AIDS foundations in particular have lashed out against the usage of Truvada. Michael Weinstein, president of AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), refers to Truvada as a “party drug” and that widespread usage will result in “a public health disaster” (Merevick, 2014). Weinstein’s comments, and the subsequent media coverage of them, have effectively built a society that shuns people who ‘don’t need’ Truvada for taking it, despite the fact that in the end it creates a safer society for the LGBT community. The combined effects of the stigma surrounding sexual acts outside of the charmed circle and AHF’s disavowal of Truvada have created a society in which the only way someone can escape judgement is by not admitting that they take Truvada.

Even with the stigma that surrounds their usage of Truvada, members of the queer community who take it regularly have fought back against the discrimination through the reclaiming of language. The term ‘Truvada Whore’ has been reclaimed and now is sold on shirts with the profits going to fund AIDS research. The embracement of the derogatory phrase not only fights against the stigma of taking Truvada but also the stigma of bringing the act of sex for erotic pleasure into the public space. Through the Truvada Whore movement, information from people on Truvada is spreading and disproving some of the myths that surrounded Truvada when the FDA first approved the drug. This use of language empowers not only the group of gay men on Truvada but HIV-negative men who are not on Truvada, as they learn more about the drug from the movement.
Conclusion
Whereas in the pre-Stonewall era the language used in the minority communities within the queer community was primarily geared towards expressing their pain, language in minority communities today is used as a source of empowerment. Language, once used as an expression of isolation and loneliness, is now used as a rallying call, gathering people of like identity and furthering their collective cause.

References
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Conscious Consumption: Intersectional Media Studies
Creative Submission: For the Androgynous

By Elias Fulmer

Hail the androgynous
The coming of the heavens
In the duality and unity
The wisdom of two worlds
Bestowed unto one heart
To the pixie cuts and long shags
Drop “Who are you?” as a threat
And take the question as challenge
Wrap yourselves in the bright and pale
Cast your iron in no mold
Let their questions turn inwards

A prayer for the androgynous
For all light is divine and sacred
Let them not bade in darkness
For there a pitfall for a soul
Awaits with quagmires of self doubt
But in the raptures of confidence
The blades of truth will wave
In the triumphs of deep respect
But yield to the garden of life’s follies
For the bloom of one single rosebud
In everlasting rebirth of self love
Exploiting Non-Western Women in Media Representations

Gabrielle Miller

ABSTRACT. Media representations and advertisements serve as visual mediums through which cultural values are projected and reinforced. Western capitalism relies on Eurocentric media representations that exploit perceived differences of non-white and non-western cultures to sell western products. This paper analyzes recent advertisements from Kellogg’s and Suit Supply as examples of media representations that employ Eurocentric perspectives of non-western cultures to uphold white masculinist and colonial power structures. Therefore, I suggest that the non-western cultures in the Kellogg’s and Suit Supply advertisements exist within a western capitalist vacuum. This way of consuming and representing serves to reinforce western ways of knowing as superior and natural.

A feminist critique of Eurocentrism exposes the colonial power structures that serve to validate patriarchal and western ways of knowing. Eurocentrism applies western social and political systems and meaning to non-western cultures and communities. This disempowers preexisting cultural wisdom as well as social, political, and economic institutions of non-western countries. Through media representations and advertising, western capitalist corporations utilize Eurocentrism to normalize and reinforce cultural and imperialist authority over non-western cultures. These representations replicate colonial frameworks by exploiting perceived Otherness, a concept that serves to validate western ways of knowing as superior, and alienate nonwestern peoples and ideals from seemingly advanced western values.
Nowhere is the exploitation of Otherness more visible than in American advertising. American media representations exemplify the way capitalism exploits Otherness by sexualizing and exotifying perceived non-western women. These advertisements reinforce white masculinist and colonial systems of power through the objectification and commodification of non-western women and cultures exclusively for western consumer capitalism. Thus, such advertisements are contemporary manifestations of colonialism reproduced to maintain colonial histories of oppression.

This paper will analyze two advertisements from Kellogg’s and Suit Supply as prime examples of a much larger and pressing disclosure of the maintenance of white colonial and masculinist systems of power. Predominately targeted towards heterosexual westerners, Kellogg’s and Suit Supply exploit non-western women and cultures in order to project heteronormative gender roles and expectations as natural. Therefore, the non-western women and cultures depicted in the advertisements exist in what I define as a western capitalist vacuum. Western media employs this mechanism of consumption as a capitalist technique to ensure that westerners and western consumers operate within the white colonial and masculinist framework. This process relies on the reiteration and normalization of Eurocentrism as a way for American consumers to comprehend the non-western cultures portrayed in the advertisements. Within this context, Kellogg’s and Suit Supply emphasize racialized and colonial notions of female sexuality through the de-contextualization and commodification of non-western women to reinforce western ways of knowing as superior. Thus, Kellogg’s and Suit Supply’s representations of exotic and sexualized non-western women prove integral in preserving colonial power structures, and validating westerner’s sense of self and culture as legitimate, exceptional, and progressive. This way of consuming and representing functions to maintain global power structures in the domain of white western and patriarchal authority.
Commodifying Non-Western Cultures
In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, feminist author bell hooks further clarifies this racialized colonial framework that decontextualizes non-western cultures in mass media for the visual pleasure of western consumers. Hooks argues that, “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks, 1992). Western consumer culture exploits perceived cultural differences in order to enhance the monotonous nature of white media. In other words, whiteness lacks the mystery, diversity, and exoticism that the Other seemingly embodies. Viewing the non-western cultures within this context allows Western consumers to experience the Other from a distance without transgressing beyond Western values and ideals.

In Kellogg's Special K advertisement, an alleged non-western woman dons a red Sari that contrasts against a stark white background. The woman’s exposed abdomen displays her slender physique, compelling the consumer to assume that she achieved her slim figure by eating Special K cereal. However, her non-western attire allows Western consumers to immediately identify the woman’s exoticism and perceived Otherness. The advertisement lets consumers passively observe the woman without any information about the non-western culture depicted. The lack of cultural context reinforces the woman’s Otherness, reflecting the Eurocentric ideology that Western consumers do not need to understand the non-western culture depicted to grasp the Western product being marketed. Instead, the non-western woman is a capitalist landscape in which American ideals are reinforced through perceived Otherness.
Her Sari invigorates white media without transgressing or questioning the legitimacy of white colonial systems of power. In this way, the woman's Sari functions as a commodity, a costume to attract the attention of western consumers. Even though traditional Indian dress varies based on climate, region, and community, the woman's cultural difference serves as a captivating spectacle for western consumers.

Similarly, Suit Supply’s advertisement also capitalizes on representations of the exotic Other to promote their menswear product. The advertisement portrays a non-western black woman topless and wearing African jewelry. The woman’s near-naked body is striped with white paint, accentuating her dark skin and mimicking the pattern of Suit Supply’s collection of menswear being marketed in the advertisement. Her black body and tribal attire signify her Otherness as no further information is provided, or apparently needed, about the non-western culture depicted. The image, produced for Suit Supply’s “Like Skin” campaign, lacks cultural context because her tribal attire serves to exude exoticism for western consumer pleasure. Consumers

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1 Source: http://www.amsterdamadblog.com/2011/03/25/suit-supply-fits-like-skin/
can buy suits that fit like skin, or like the attire of the seemingly primitive nonwestern culture depicted, which seemingly has not yet advanced to the modern world of western material culture.

Depicting Kellogg’s Special K cereal as well as Suit Supply’s menswear alongside nonwestern women functions to attract western consumer attention because of their cultural differences. Author Julia Williamson in the article, “Woman is an Island,” highlights western consumer culture’s destructive obsession with utilizing non-western peoples for American capitalism. Williamson argues that, “Women and foreigners—who are so valuable in reflecting capitalism’s view of itself are robbed of their own meanings and speech, indeed are reduced to the function of commodities” (Williamson, 2006). The women, the Sari, and the African attire all serve as commodities meant for the western consumer gaze. As such, their non-western attire exists within a western capitalist vacuum, because their cultural significance is devoid of meaning within the western colonial and capitalist framework. Instead, the women in the advertisements function as a cultural playground within the western imaginary, a land of culture and meaning colonized by American values and customs.

Reinforcing Colonial, Racialized Notions of Female Sexuality
In the western imaginary, the female body is largely understood through a masculinist lens which relies on western gender dichotomies to justify notions of male/female, femininity/masculinity, and other gender differences as real and biological. Since femininity is believed to be the weaker embodiment, a woman’s body and identity are compared to and distinguished from seemingly superior masculine attributes. Therefore, colonial histories and power structures have delegated patriarchal meaning to both western and non-western women’s bodies. These androcentric interpretations associate bare female flesh with sexual allure or desire, especially women’s breasts, legs,
and abdomen. Catherine King argues that in western images women are often represented according to patriarchal notions of femininity and gender expectations (King, 1992).

Accordingly, Kellogg’s further abuses their representation of the Sari by sexualizing the non-western woman’s naturally exposed flesh, an inevitable byproduct from the design of her traditional attire. Kellogg’s patriarchal perspective capitalizes on the woman’s exposure by exploiting the Sari to reveal her cultivated flesh through western notions of desirable female sexuality. The woman is reduced to and defined through masculinist ideologies about the corporeal female body. Her body objectified and her culture commodified, the non-western woman exists solely for the superficial consumption of westerners. The cultural significance and non-sexual nature of the Sari within Indian cultural context is disregarded in favor of promoting and reinforcing western messages and expectations about femininity.

Within this patriarchal and colonial framework, non-white women’s sexuality signifies a distinctly different meaning. Non-white women are considered more erotic which often rationalizes their sexual exploitation within western media (Collins, 1990). Historically, magazines like National Geographic have offered western consumers nude images of non-white women that reinforce western stereotypes about non-white women’s sexuality. Feminist anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz suggests that such representations characterize non-white and non-western women as hypersexual and seemingly more embodied than white women. Lutz explains that National Geographic readers “vary in how they portray the personal or cultural meaning, or both, of this nakedness, some noting it was an aid to masturbation, others claiming it failed to have the erotic quality they expected” (Lutz, 1993). As such, Suit Supply displays the non-white woman’s exposed breasts alongside her cultural attire to gratify westerners’ often prurient infatuation with black bodies. This portrayal of the hypersexual black woman relies on white patriarchal
histories of oppression and stigmatization to manifest new forms of colonialism that seem invisible to westerners insofar as this racist framework and way of consuming prevails.

Kellogg’s and Suit Supply exploit the exposed flesh of the non-western women by applying western and masculinist meaning to their bodies based on racialized notions of female sexuality. Although uncovered flesh may not be associated with eroticism in the actual nonwestern cultures depicted, the Eurocentric lens through which they are consumed defines the westerner’s perspective. Moreover, the western capitalist vacuum absorbs pre-existing cultural meaning. It functions to objectify the non-western women according to stereotypes created by patriarchal and colonial frameworks which seemingly justify western ways of knowing as superior. Therefore, circulating representations of racialized female sexuality upholds white colonial and masculinist power structures as they serve to rationalize both western and nonwestern women’s subordination as natural.

**Heteronormativity in Media Representations**

In order to attract western consumers, both Kellogg’s and Suit Supply capitalize on heteronormative gender expectations—a western concept that relies on gender dichotomies to validate and privilege heterosexuality as essential to natural order. This notion also suggests that women need to highlight the qualities men find attractive to be considered desirable. Cultural historian John Berger asserts that women within the western colonial framework observe and critique themselves through a masculinist lens (Berger, 1972).

In the Kellogg’s advertisement, the non-western woman’s Sari is supposed to accentuate her physical body, suggesting that the exposed nature of her Sari functions to attract male attention. A man, located in the background of the advertisement, is seen gawking at her shapely figure which seemingly confirms and validates her success at
achieving a slim physique, or in other words, attaining masculinist ideals of female beauty. The woman’s accentuated makeup, slim physique, painted nails, and glowing hairless body reinforce western patriarchal notions of beauty and femininity as desirable, natural, and integral for male attention. The non-western woman’s newfound sexual desirability is further evident from the image’s text that proclaims Special K gave her “The look that makes him look again.” The advertisement’s text illustrates the normalization of heteronormative rhetoric as well as a reliance on the notion that women buy Kellogg’s cereal with the intent to attract male attention.

Thus, the woman in the Kellogg’s advertisement functions as a medium through which heteronormative representations of female sexuality are reiterated for western consumers. Her body serves as an economic opportunity to reaffirm western female beauty ideologies that keep heterosexual women buying their product. Orienting the consumer gaze to operate within the patriarchal and colonial framework normalizes and reinforces these beauty ideologies as inherent to womanhood. This mechanism of consumption projects American values onto non-western cultures in order to maintain dominant western social structures and sentiments about female sexuality.

Suit Supply also reinforces heteronormativity even though the advertisement predominately targets heterosexual men. Their company website labels Suit Supply as menswear and their clothing advertisements display men wearing the products, suggesting they predominately market to cisgender men. Therefore, Suit Supply depicts a topless woman because they presume the male consumer should and would want to gaze at the woman’s bare breasts. Her tribal attire, which rendered her topless, is not a form of cultural appreciation, but a way to highlight her naked body and exaggerate her perceived Otherness. Combined with western notions of black hypersexuality, the woman’s body exists for the visual pleasure of the assumed western male
gaze. Suit Supply assumes the heterosexuality of the western consumer and normalizes the objectification of the non-western black woman to preserve white patriarchal heteronormativity, illustrating the exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalism.

**Conclusion**

Feminism’s analytical lens discloses the exploitative relationship between western capitalism and non-western women as well as the contemporary manifestations of colonialism that exists within advertising. Through non-western women’s exploitation and commodification, Kellogg’s and Suit Supply serve as testaments as to how western media upholds masculinist and colonial frameworks of power. The western capitalist vacuum decontextualizes non-western cultures and instead projects the Other in a way that reaffirms western ways of knowing. The non-western cultures and traditional attire become meaningless costumes that function to emphasize western patriarchy and heteronormativity as intrinsic. The women’s perceived exoticism and physical bodies become colonized landscapes to invigorate white consumer culture and project values that maintain the authority of western ideologies and power structures. Thus, the alleged non-western women in the advertisements are both exotic and familiar as western capitalism exploits their cultural differences while simultaneously applying western masculinist meaning to their non-western bodies. These mechanisms of consumption can change, but not without challenging representations of non-western women within the white colonial and masculinist framework. Doing so would directly question the legitimacy and superiority of western ways of knowing as well as the authority of those it serves to keep in power.

**References**


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Enriching the Story: Asexuality and Aromanticism in Literature

By Adrienne Whisman

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the role of asexual and aromantic coding within Emily Brontë's novel Wuthering Heights and Virginia Woolf's novel To the Lighthouse. Both books utilize relationships and sexuality in order to portray arguments within the book. Brontë portrays Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship as transcending physicality, both as a way to portray them as soulmates but also to foreshadow events. Woolf utilizes Lily's disinterest in sex and marriage as a way to contrast her to other women in the novel. Both characterizations can be read as asexual, or in Lily's case also aromantic. This queer reading allows insight into the characters but it also creates a characterization rarely seen in popular media or literature. It challenges social assumptions about sexuality and romance as well as heteronormative readings of literature. It gives the asexual and aromantic community a literary presence but also shows that the lack of representation can be damaging to the understanding and acceptance of asexual and aromantic individuals.

Keywords: asexuality, aromanticism, queer reading, asexual representation, aromantic representation, literature

Much of literature is a dialogue between the reader's understanding and the author's portrayal of characters and events. This leads to various interpretations of text and many new ideas can be read into literature by virtue of a new perspective. One way to understand literature is through a queer reading. Queer theory informs the reader that it is okay and even encouraged to break away from heteronormative assumptions of sexuality and gender, "locating non-heteronormative practices and subjects as
crucial sites of resistance” (Green, 2007, p. 28). Beyond this, it also allows readers of all ages to find themselves fully within a text or a character. As children and adolescents read, they search for themselves. This is especially true with queer children and the slow emergence of canonical queer characters in media and books can only help individuals discover themselves and their identities. Despite this, the overwhelming lack of asexual and aromantic characters in popular media and literature leaves much to be desired. Most individuals cannot define asexuality or aromanticism, let alone point to an example in pop culture. For clarity's sake, asexuality encompasses the idea of an individual who feels little to no sexual attraction, it can mean anything: from being sex repulsed, to seeing sex as something not worth pursuing, or even someone who only rarely has sexual attraction for another (Decker, 2015). Aromanticism follows this same pattern for romantic attraction. The lack of overt and diverse characters who are aromantic or asexual within popular media creates a void of information. It limits what the average individual knows about asexuality and aromanticism. Media informs how people perceive the world and more importantly it informs how people perceive various forms of sexuality. By not including asexuality and aromanticism more openly in pop culture dialogues about individuals and humanity, asexuality and aromanticism become erased from what it means to be human.

Because of this, queer readings of literature can help validate and expand upon how we as individuals see the world and how asexuality and aromanticism can be valid interpretations. This overturns the assumed heterosexuality of characters and instead offers one that is asexual and aromantic. Asexuality and aromanticism in literature need to be a part of academic discourse as they “challenge many existing assumptions about gender and sexuality” (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010, p. 655). Because of this, my taking of two literary classics and applying an asexual and aromantic lens to them not only legitimizes the validity of a queer reading but it also makes readers reconsider
characterizations and deepens the literary dialogue. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (2003/1847) and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1981/1927), while different in many ways, share how certain characters can be read. Brontë’s portrayal of Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship can be read as asexual in nature while Woolf’s Lily Briscoe can be read in an asexual and aromantic light. Reading both under the lens of asexuality creates a new way of understanding each character. Although both novels vary in tone, narration, style, and genre, they both utilize coding that can be read as asexual. The unique relationship held between Catherine and Heathcliff is one that transcends physicality, embodying the Romantic ideal of their passions that continues beyond death. Lily Briscoe’s coding as asexual and aromantic helps highlight the differences between her and other women in the book. Reading both books with an understanding of asexuality helps foster greater understanding of the underlying emotions and motivations held by every character.

Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship in *Wuthering Heights* goes beyond the physical aspect. Although both are raised as adopted siblings, Catherine describes Heathcliff as her “soul” and Heathcliff returns the sentiment (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.125; p.130). Frequently throughout the novel, the relationship portrayed is one of soulmates, or one soul trapped in two bodies. Neither can truly live without the other. Catherine says to her housekeeper Nelly that she loves Heathcliff, “not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.63). Heathcliff expresses his need for Catherine by begging her to “haunt” him or “take any form” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.130). Both Heathcliff and Catherine are linked, as Catherine says, “If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.64). Similarly, Heathcliff laments to Catherine on her deathbed, “Oh, Cathy! Oh, my life!” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.123). This theme, of transcending the physical aspects of their dependency, is
asexual in nature. Not once do they lust after each other; their connection is more intrinsic and toxic than that. By creating a sexless relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, Brontë foreshadows their continued existence together beyond life and body. At the end, after Heathcliff dies, they are seen together on the moors, wandering as spirits. Neither of their heavens is the Christian Heaven, but each other out on the moors. Heathcliff, shortly before he dies, says “I tell you, I have nearly attained my heaven,” his heaven being Catherine (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.255). They are not truly themselves unless they are with each other. They find peace through haunting the moors together. Catherine tells Heathcliff she “won’t rest until” he is with her (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.99). The passions between Catherine and Heathcliff are not those of the body but those of the spirit. Continually, they reference their feelings for each other involving life, souls, and being. Catherine states that she is Heathcliff, “not as a pleasure, anymore that I am always a pleasure to myself – but, as my own being” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.63). Their relationship is one that revolves around them being the same intrinsically and therefore beyond the realm of the physical.

This idea of beyond physicality is exemplified when compared to Heathcliff’s relationship with his wife Isabella Linton and Catherine's relationship with her husband Edgar Linton. Both Heathcliff and Catherine use sexuality and physicality to manipulate their respective spouses. Catherine rewards Edgar for allowing her to go to Wuthering Heights with a “summer of sweetness and affection” making the house a “paradise” where Edgar profited much (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.79). For Catherine, her love for Edgar Linton is shallow compared to her deep passion for Heathcliff. As similar as she is to Heathcliff, she says that Linton’s soul is as “different as a moonbeam from lightning or frost from fire” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.63). She considers soul compatibility above physical attraction and uses that physical attraction to manipulate her husband, rewarding him and making him jealous in turn, saying, “I gave a few sentences of
commendation to Heathcliff, and [Edgar Linton], either for a headache or a pang of envy, began to cry” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.77). Even though Heathcliff is physically more attractive than Edgar, Catherine never uses it as a justification of her love for him, nor does she lend herself to commit adultery, having Heathcliff is enough.

Similarly, Heathcliff uses his attractiveness to lure in Isabella and manipulate her. This is mainly as a way to take revenge against her brother, Edgar, for marrying Catherine. Heathcliff uses physical affection to make Isabella fall deeper in love with him, “supposing himself unseen, the scoundrel had the impudence to embrace [Isabella]” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.87). He justifies himself by saying that Catherine does the same thing with Edgar so “only allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.88). It is amusing to them to manipulate people through sexual or physical acts. The way sexuality is portrayed and viewed by both Catherine and Heathcliff is shallow or not as worthy as their passions for each other. For Heathcliff and Catherine, sexuality comes second to their soulmate based love. They are indifferent to sex when it comes to their true desires, creating a coded asexuality within Wuthering Heights. This idea, that they love beyond their physical forms at once foreshadows their fate of haunting the moors and also creates an interesting example of a romantic asexual relationship full of sexless passion.

Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse uses a different form of coding to depict Lily Briscoe, a friend of the Ramsays who stays with them over the summer, as aromantic and asexual. Within the novel, Woolf shows a variety of women, from the older generation of housewives to the “New Woman” who was more liberated. Lily is a painter who “would always go on painting, because it interested her” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.72). She does not see herself as one to marry as “she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.50). For Lily, marriage is a “degradation” and actively dreads it in the first part of the novel, especially with Mrs. Ramsay’s emphasis on
matchmaking with her guests (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.102). Lily still sees the beauty in love but the kind of love that unifies humanity. Lily is forever looking for “unity” with others, an “intimacy” that could not “be written in any language known to men” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.51). She prefers intimacy without the entanglement of romance or marriage, and all that implies: “indeed, his friendship had been one of the pleasures of her life. She loved William Bankes” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.176). Throughout the book, Lily struggles with the paradox of love being the “stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions” and it also being “beautiful” and “exciting” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.102). By the end of the novel, Lily comes to the resolution that separates romantic love from all other kinds of love.

Every example Lily observes of love is in the form of romance: Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay or Paul and Minta. She sees how destructive it can be, as Mr. Ramsay “took” so much from Mrs. Ramsay that she died from giving (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.149). Lily also has a pessimistic view of relations between men and women, viewing them as “extremely insincere” due to the gendered roles they are forced into (Woolf/1927, 1981, p.92). Through Lily, Woolf portrays a new emerging thought that rejects gender and sexuality roles as well as female submissiveness. The fact that Woolf chose to portray Lily as completely uninterested in romance and marriage creates an ample argument for Lily’s aromantic asexuality. Through this portrayal of Lily, the validity and positivity of asexual aromanticism can be seen. Woolf did not turn Lily’s “old-maid” status into something to pity or something that is above all other relationships in the book, but she portrays it as a fact of life. Lily did not marry because she was not interested in any aspect of it.

From an asexual and aromantic perspective, Lily’s disinterest in sexual feeling or romance creates an interesting dichotomy to the rest of the women in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is in many ways the antithesis of Lily. Mrs. Ramsay views marriage and parenthood as the epitome of a woman’s life, wanting both her children and any young
woman she meets to find happiness through marriage. Throughout the book, Mrs. Ramsay can be seen playing matchmaker thinking that William Bankes and Lily “must marry” because they are walking together (Woolf, 1981/1927, p. 71). Mrs. Ramsay sees life fulfillment with marriage, something that Lily cannot understand, saying, “what was [Mrs. Ramsay’s] mania for marriage?” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.175). Not only does this create a beautiful contrast between generations, it also helps highlight exactly how much marriage disinterests and even scares Lily. For Lily, marriage is a trap and when she realizes that she “need never marry anybody,” Lily feels “an enormous exultation” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.176). Lily prefers friendship and her art over any possible romance as shown in her lasting friendship with William Bankes. This exalting of friendship over romance is a common theme of Lily’s and gives credence to her aromantic view of the world. When she learns that Paul and Minta “were ‘in love’ no longer” and that “he had taken up with another woman,” she felt vindicated (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.174). Paul and Minta worked out how to stay friends by no longer being in love, and “they’re happy like that; [Lily is] happy like this,” by staying single (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.175).

Through these three women and their relationships of various forms, Woolf shows the multiple ways a woman can become fulfilled in life. Mrs. Ramsay viewed marriage as fulfillment for her, and all women. Minta thought marriage was the answer but she found friendship was the better course with her husband Paul. Lily, through observing these two marriages, is able to come to terms with and accept her disinterest in that path in life. She discovers the fulfillment that comes with work and with friendship. The portrayal of Lily as asexual and aromantic helps highlight the different forms of love and how no form is better than the other. In the same vein, Lily’s characterization defines what it means to be a woman with the answer being that there is no right way, there is only who they are. By reading Lily as aromantic and asexual, a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the
various women can be found. Lily is not a curiosity, but a person in her portrayal. Not only does Lily embody the New Woman’s ideal of work before marriage but she also perfectly captures an asexual and aromantic indifference to sex and romance while elevating the status of friendship, both between men and women and between women.

The reading of Lily Briscoe and the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff through the lens of sexual indifference adds dimensions to the respective books. The use of asexual or aromantic ideas helps create a more nuanced portrayal of the emotions and thoughts of the various characters within the book. By reading Cathy and Heathcliff as asexual, not only does their relationship reflect more fully the reality they ultimately create, but it also shows how passion can be removed from physicality. Lily Briscoe’s disinterest in romance and marriage puts her at odds with the ideals of Mrs. Ramsay and creates an interesting dichotomy among the various women within To the Lighthouse. Woolf uses Lily as a way to look at the New Woman and the various forms of love as being equal to romance and old fashioned views. Reading Lily as an aromantic asexual adds a further facet to the character as well as the novel. Lily is content with her life as it is and her lifestyle is seen as just as valid as the other characters who do enter into a sexual or romantic relationship. Therefore, Lily isn’t just a representation of the New Woman, she is also a validation that to be asexual and aromantic is a valid identity. Though Wuthering Heights and To the Lighthouse are different genres and reading experiences, both authors utilize ideas that can be interpreted as asexual or aromantic in order to further the themes and ideas of their books and deepen the dialogue between reader and writer. It overturns heteronormative and flat assumptions about the various relationships depicted in the book.

These works of literature connect across genres and time periods through the use of a queer reading of asexuality and aromanticism, but these themes continue to pop up in modern society. The fact that asexuality and aromanticism
must be inferred from most texts and media is disheartening. Asexual and aromantic lived experiences, themes, and subtexts are not new concepts. They are valid themes within literature and their traits have been acknowledged and seen throughout history, though they have only recently been given a name. Today, by acknowledging them, we begin to understand the diverse sexualities in our own culture and time. Sexual orientation is not simply a “fad” one grows out of, it is a real, human experience. By understanding and reading into the lives of characters from literature as well as within other media, the audience can begin to empathize with those around them. For asexuals and aromantics, it gives validation of their own identity as well as representation within literature and media that expands beyond the community and into popular thought. For non-asexuals and non-aromantics, proper representation shows that individuals who have little to no sexual and or romantic attraction do exist, overturning the general assumptions that romance and sexual desire go hand in hand, and it connects them to diverse people, allowing them to understand and not invalidate the sexualities of others through simple ignorance. Queer readings using an asexual and aromantic light is a good first step into acknowledging the complex nature of romance and sexuality in society today. It challenges the notion of what it means to be queer as well as creating conversation about asexuality and aromanticism. More investigations into and representations of these identities would go a long way to validating them in mainstream society while simultaneously informing individuals who do not feel sexual or romantic attraction that they are not alone. Representation, both on an academic as well as a popular level, normalizes identities, ideas, and people. To do so with asexuality and aromanticism would foster a better understanding not only of the asexual and aromantic communities, but also a better understanding of what it means to be human. Since literature is an exploration of the human condition, to bring conversation about asexuality and
aromanticism can only enrich our understanding of the stories presented.

References
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La Negra Tiene Tumbao: Multimodal Resistance Strategies of Afro-Latinxs and Other Queer Constructions

By Kassandra Colón Cisneros

ABSTRACT. The importance of sound in Afro-diasporic communities hearkens back to the slave cry on the plantation field, a sound that showed there is social life within social death. These survival and resistance strategies still exist today, and are not limited to music; they can also be traced through aesthetics, as well as routes and history that connect Afro-Latinxs to the diaspora. The deployment of diasporic resistance through what Juan Flores calls “baggage,” show the possibility and radical potential for survival in white spaces. Recognizing the necessity to dismantle white heteronormative spaces, my research will analyze how Afro-Latinxs—especially those who identify with marginalized gender identities—survive using tools of resistance that can be traced back to the Afro-diaspora. I will contextualize this method beyond survival mechanisms to their influence of queer Afro-Latinx spaces. Through understanding Latinx communities in a diasporic context, I will reveal how an aural politic of resistance, which is tied to the sound and aesthetic of the diaspora, disrupts a legacy of antiblackness. My analysis will be framed through the genealogy of the Afro-diaspora and will explain how our understandings of Afro-diasporic communities transcend into current interpersonal relationships and black performance.

The importance of sound in Afro diasporic communities hearkens back to the slave cry on the plantation field, a sound that showed social life lived within social death. This sound was a rumbling of resistance, allowing a slave’s survival mechanism to transcend plantation fields. Creating new
communication and resistance models, slaves in Latin America formulated survival mechanisms predicated off sound and performance. The deployment of diasporic resistance through what Juan Flores calls “baggage,” shows the radical potential for survival in white spaces. By exploring the use of sound and its contributions to Afro diasporic communities, this paper will reveal how sound disrupts a legacy of antiblackness using tools of Afro Diasporic resistance. Contextualizing this method beyond survival mechanisms, this research will explain how Afro Diasporic communities not only influence Afro Latinx queer spaces, but how they become fundamental to interpersonal relationships.

Sound is a noise, a vibration that can travel across mediums; it does not exist in a vacuum. It’s a rupture, a genealogy, a communication strategy, a politic explaining routes and histories among Afro Latinxs connecting them to the African diaspora. “This noise becomes essential to speech” (Glissant, 1989). In this instance, the slave as the commodity discovers the only way to speak is through noise since speech itself was restricted (Glissant, 1989). “Slaves camouflaged the world under the intensity of their screams,” becoming the only articulation of life on the hacienda. Slaves used aural resistance in Latin America as an irrefutable connection to the body and its performance. By making the body a vessel by which resistance is deployed, black social life escaped and subverted the law existing within death of slavery and its correlation to colonial society (Sexton, 2011). Social death is the exclusion of the slave from civil society, accomplished through law and repetitive practices that denote unworthiness (Armstrong, 2002). Social life, on the other hand is a position that disrupts the cyclical nature of plantation ties. Social life within social death takes shape through sound, which becomes another name for freedom within a legacy of slavery. However, we cannot think of social life and social death as relational opposites, but rather two positions that exist within each other (Sexton, 2011).
Slavery as an institution is not simply the static existence of the slave, rather, it is the range of processes associated with maintaining an institution sustained by black fungibility, such as the Caribbean plantation (Patterson, 1982). To keep a functioning plantation, hacendados monitored slaves through watch towers to maintain an institutionalized plantation where the only autonomy of a slave was that of an object. Michel Foucault’s concept of the panopticon, a relational power structure of surveillance and intimidation (Foucault, 1975), explains regulation of property as it prevented another Haitian-style slave rebellion in Latin America. It is here where the colonized identity was formulated from control. As hacendados culminated in a surveillance state from watch towers, an act of power and surveillance that intimated slaves, reducing them to nothing more than a commodity due to lack of agency that derived from political control.

Living in fear after the Haitian revolution, hacendados embraced the panopticon as a tactic to restrain agency of colonized peoples through mechanisms of force and surveillance (Michelakos, 2009). The Caribbean plantation demonstrated not only how power restrained agency, but also how repression and trauma necessitated mechanisms of survival. It is through these acts of repression where sound becomes important, serving as a root of Africa that exceeded the plantation. Sound was a vehicle of resistance on the hacienda, where the commodity spoke into being, an experiential rupture of social life within social death (Moten, 2003). Like the single blade of grass that pokes out a cemented driveway, this critical rupture and creation of power allowed for sound to traverse the realm of social death, defying the horrors of hacienda life.

There is a shared root of Africa that explains our contributions to sound. It is the epitome of positionality, establishing a historical analysis predicated on whiteness and blackness that transcends life on the hacienda and throughout the colony. This African root does not determine the entirety of our positionality, but rather, explains our
embodied politic in relation to social life, social death, and survival in white heteronormative space. It does not make us all the slave, or the object, but is the link between African genealogy and civil society. The subject is inevitably the hacenda worker, who suppresses ruptures of social life through the upholding of antiblackness. Sound counteracts the antithetical root of the subject, gearing the body as a vessel by which resistance is deployed.

“Musical baggage” (Flores, 2004) is not just the historical context of diasporic sound, but is an embodiment of resistance that transcends the highest pillars of social death. It is a tool slaves and Afro queers call upon to exist within a legacy of antiblackness, creating “a language that can be the site and theme of historical action, the locus of contention over issues of identity and community that reach far beyond our preference for, or reliance on, this or that word or grammar” (Flores, 2000). Musical baggage makes sound a historical grammar that ruptures social death, engendering an embodied politic that embraces the object’s root of Africa. Flores (2004) explains:

The musical baggage borne by return diasporas, while rooted in the traditions and practices of the Caribbean cultures of origin, are forged in social locations having their own historical trajectories and stylistic environments, and are thus simultaneously internal and external to the presumed parameters of national and regional musical cultures (p. 292).

With a shared African Root, survival mechanisms began to formulate new codes of life, as sound and rhythm became the focal point for revolution, resistance and existence. Sound and its relationship to rupture does not only exist in the context of a song, or vibration; it is a cry, a stomp, a rattle, and murmur that formulates an utterance in which social death becomes material, making an incoherent scream, a rupture, by which objectivity begins to shift away but never exist in subject. What becomes at stake in this shift then is, “not what the commodity says but that the commodity says
or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, what must be made to say” (Moten, 2003).

Contextually speaking, musical baggage has connected the routes and histories of the Afro diaspora, becoming a language that understands colonial life in the Caribbean. Providing a cocktail of sound and religion, Vodou in the context of the Haitian rebellion is an example as it geared the overthrow of the French Monarch. A communicative collectivity that was predicated off dance, vibration, and worship allowed for slaves to experience the social life that existed within them, enacting the most successful slave revolt in history. The Haitian rebellion is a diasporic experience that is easy to reconcile within its relationship to sound, as it became a ruptured vector that “harbors a sense of process, freedom, agency and an alternative mode of position” (Flores, 2000).

Sound creates performative trenches such as dance that resist and formulate coded communication among those who are rendered unintelligible, inhuman, slave, Afro queer. It is a rupture that exists and generates survival practices. A “(kin)esthetic function irreducible to a commodity fetish, a function that prompts and re-articulates embodied forms of knowledge and desire that cannot be bought, sold, claimed or learned by proxy” (Sánchez González, 1999). Sound compounds on itself to become a fully encompassing strategy; it influences and embraces a unique performance that cannot be commodified. Since each performance is unique, its continuous reproduction pulls upon external structures, such as nature, communication and rhythm to give sounds it’s coherency in relation to interpersonal politics. Such performance cannot be commodified due to the originality and organic connection to the metaphysics of blackness. That is, each body articulates survival differently in an anti-black world. As a resistance strategy, sound exists beyond language, creating an activation of performance beyond musicality and irreducible vocalism. A dance floor is no longer a space by which whiteness may exist, but becomes a space that articulate black performance as an embodied
connection to the body and the resistance by which it deploys.

Sound created Tango, a dance form rooted in blackness during the nineteenth century among Afro Argentines. Tango as a resistance practice exists because it is the “dancing one did to the drums,” a reclamation of movement and decolonization (Chasteen, 2012). As slaves reclaimed a culture that was exclusionary to their blackness, tangos resisted humiliation within blackface as other Argentines “spoke African” mimicking slaves and their dancing. Rupturing Argentinean white flight, Tangos contributed to classification and grouping of slaves, creating a community based on belonging versus exclusion like that of ballroom culture in Afro queer space. As a ruptural performance giving Afro Argentines an artificial place within white colonial society, blackness and queerness became cemented in Tango’s ability to rupture white flight.

Spatially speaking, the emergence of ballroom culture posits queering as a rupture. Rooted in defiance and necessity, ballroom culture was an underground gathering among Afro diasporic communities that contributed to gender expression, sexuality and life. As a break and instance of black performance existing within white place and space, ballroom culture was a survival mechanism that imagined the possibility of a world inaccessible to the human. By creating a grammar that rearticulated the confines of civil society and its relationship to blackness, ballroom culture was an outlet by which unaltered queerness could be performed absent whiteness’ surveillance. This approach made Afro queer performance a unique rupture, connecting them to their root of Africa that rendered vibrations and dance as an incoherent escape from social death.

Ballroom culture is not merely just a rupture that displaced and subverted whiteness, but is an example of kinship’s technicality that corrected fractured displacement. As an affirmation, ballroom kinship formed communities of deracination, where bonds of belonging juncture blackness into existence within an insuperable world. This is where
ballroom houses and communities of displaced slaves are a juxtaposition, as blackness’ familial bond strengthened interpersonal relationships, combusting fissures of solidarity that breached white heteronormative institutions. The creation of houses and kinship within ballroom culture and displaced slave communities provided not only a support system for Afro queers, but is the politic of hope that aids social life to rupture social death.

What this research seeks to explore is not just the relationality between sound and object, but the contingency rupture has on performativity to disrupt white heteronormative space. Sound as a language not only explains a slave’s relationship to colonization, but provides a coherent communication strategy that explains a world predicated from antiblackness. This relationship between sound and performance combusts into a medium of movement and praxis as it exists on the plane of the inhuman. Moten (2003) explains this phenomenon:

To ask this is to think what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances (p. 12).

The question then becomes, how does white heteronormative space become a site where black (queer) resistance is thinkable? Black performance, in it of itself, is the answer, creating a subversion by which resistance is thinkable. It is a break revealing the importance of space and its connection to resistance, as “each break evidences the same substantive crisis—the compulsion to articulate a contradictory in others, rhythm, tone or lyrics” (Cooks and Eng-Wilmot, 2016). Here is where black performance becomes distinct as its performativity generates metaphysics of the unthought (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003). That is, the underbelly of performance designed to
view civil society through a lens of blackness versus just merely about blackness.

Sound as a medium does not only exist within a realm of slavery. When contextualized to queer space, sound generates revolutionary praxis as Afro queer performance ruptures white heteronormativity, an articulation of agency and disobedience. As a survival mechanism, sound within Afro queer space generates new knowledge based on lived experience and performativity. This becomes necessary, insofar, as the act of queerness itself is exclusionary, and is one of the biggest problems with LGBTQ+ and Queer Studies. Queer scholars are so quick to think about race, but never through race. Immediately positioning race as a byproduct of queerness, scholars coat over how queerness and resistance operate within different positionalities leaving their analysis colorblind. This paper does the exact opposite, situating a historical analysis of sound and its relationship to movement and performance among black and brown queers. It renders and ruptures the plane of the human, where current white LGBTQ+ studies lies, creating a theory that is not based in philosophical abstraction, but based in the materiality sound has as a medium.

Much too often, we beg the question of how queerness is performed, but never why queerness is performed the way it is. This is especially true in the context of black and brown queers and their performance; we cannot simply identify phenomena and theory without understanding implicated action. That is, if queer violence is the gun, blackness determines where it’s pointed. Palatable positionality and its contribution to white heteronormative space is dependent on black sound. Since blackness always exists on the register of the inhuman, it never subverts back into the subjectivity that is accessible to white queers. Jennicet Gutierrez’s and Cece McDonald’s inhuman cry and shriek for trans equality and resistance is the opposite of palatable. Their sound ruptured, displaced and repurposed, it fractured normative civil society and in result led to a false criminalization. Their object status is what makes rupture
unique, as black and brown queers create sound that transgresses a common theme of ancestry, like hacienda rebellions that are confrontational to white hegemony.

The diaspora carves our understanding of queerness, in that blackness is already and will always be queer. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) explains:

> The brown-skinned, fluid bodied experiences now called blackness and queerness surfaced in intercontinental, maritime contacts hundreds of years ago... the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic... captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these ships (p. 191-192).

Tinsley’s articulation of blackness explains the telos of resistance, as blackness’ fungibility and performance becomes situated as queerness. Resistance and survival as a framework analyzes the connection between blackness and queerness, making any discussion of blackness—regardless of its context—a discussion of queerness. A register of indifference is what formulates the intertwined relationship between the two, situating “queerness” as the crux to blackness because of the beautiful abnormality existing on slave ships, paving the commodity’s existence and resistance. The act of blackness as queer explains the relationality of slave’s resistance in Latin America, as ruptures derived from their blackness, or more specifically, queerness.

Sound as an affirmation and rupture exists within an Afro queer context because of its relationship to blackness and the diaspora. Generating an aural politic of resistance, sound weaves and melds together the incoherence of a world controlled by whiteness and heteronormativity. It challenges a dominant narrative that assists with the disruption of sameness. Since sound is not vacuous, it does not just exist in vibrations, but is an embodied performance for resistance to surface on a plane of the inhuman. Sound is the banging of
drums, it’s a dance, a shriek, the speaking commodity, it is the ballroom culture that exists within slavery and outside. It is a medium that generates the queer routes of Africa to exist beyond the plantation, existing within a realm of social death. But more importantly, it’s a survival politic among Afro queers to gather around a common theme of displacement through black performance.

References


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Misrepresentation of Women of Color in Western Media

Nicole C. Schutte

ABSTRACT. This paper delves into the misrepresentation of women of color in western media. From the perspective of bell hooks (1992), the commodification of the Other serves sinister societal “needs” in order to uphold the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Judith Williamson (1986) interpret this as keeping the western racial hierarchy, gender dichotomy, and capitalist markets intact. A vast majority of people believe that any form of representation in the media is a sense of inclusion when in fact misrepresentation is counterproductive and problematic. Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins (1993) would agree that inaccurate portrayals of people of color, specifically women of color, regress years and countless movements that resulted in social progress. The intersectionality of this issue is pertinent in explaining its origin, motives, results, and consequences. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1997) conveys exactly how false depictions enable current systems of oppression and how endangering it can be to the physical and/or social fate of the Other. In order to bring an end to the social catastrophe of misrepresentation, people must acknowledge the systems that allow it to occur in the first place. Accordingly, this article will show how cultural appropriation, the misrepresentation of women of color, and the desire for Otherness—products of a white supremacist patriarchy—are central to today’s society.

Introduction

There is an overwhelming amount of misrepresentation within western media that aids the normalization of the exploitation of women of color. Such normalization means
that white supremacist patriarchal domination of women of color becomes accepted and even celebrated by many. This fuels the western capitalist market, as women of color are used to sell goods and products. Misrepresentations of women of color are Eurocentric, making racial and ethnic differences more acceptable in a hostile society. Eurocentrism is the belief that American and Western European customs, styles, political structures, ways of knowing, and modes of production are superior to non-Western countries. As a system of meaning, Eurocentrism relies on hierarchy and dichotomy. When mainstream media representations of women of color are read critically, we can see that Eurocentrism is an underlying feature of the exploitative images.

Consequently, most mainstream media representations of women of color are skewed. In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) accounts for the problems with hierarchical and dichotomous systems of meaning. She writes,

> Binary thinking shapes understandings of human difference. In such thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its “other.” Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts—they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites... Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference (p. 70).

Advertisements utilize binary thinking by attempting to project an image that is so different from the consumer. This results in the want to know more, to purchase an item, to see a movie, attend a concert, and so on. Here, I will show how the contemporary misrepresentation of women of color is produced by Eurocentric systems of meaning. It is my belief that Eurocentric misrepresentation is a form of violence enacted through commodification and appropriation, a desire for Otherness, and misconstrued cultural values. More simply, advertisements depicting women of color that cater
predominantly to a white audience harm women of color by framing their racial or ethnic difference as exotic, a framing which creates a more hostile society for women of color. Accordingly, when we consider the misrepresentation of women of color, we see how Eurocentrism erases and discards the richness and depth of numerous cultures and people, especially of women.

**Portrayals and Appropriation of Women of Color**

In “Woman is an Island,” Judith Williamson (1986) describes how women of color are depicted in a safe way to allure white audiences. For Williamson, portraying a person of color in a white washed lens shapes an inaccurate perspective of the commodified person's culture, people, and nation. She writes, “In showing an actual (albeit very ‘white’-looking) South Seas woman the control of difference is more complete, and we are placed not between worlds, but in control of both” (p. 315). Representation matters. By showing one to be lying on the beach all day wearing next to nothing, it is likely that the entire culture may be viewed in such a way: lazy, sexually available, care free, and only pleasure oriented. A white audience easily accepts advertisements constructed from a white gaze because it harnesses a sense of diverse inclusion. But, in reality, such false representation depletes an entire culture of its worth, history, and current circumstance.

Fortunately, Williamson’s insights can help us understand even more contemporary images. In 2013, Club Sun Color Studios, based in Mobile, Alabama, released a controversial advertisement consisting of one white “pilgrim” and one “Native American” woman. The advertisement reads, “The Indians brought more than just ‘corn’ to the first Thanksgiving... they brought Sexy ‘Color’!” In this advertisement, sexualized racial difference is being sold to serve societal needs: to uphold the gender hierarchy, capitalist market, and oppression of women of color in the west. The depiction of sexualized non-white women are used to entice white consumers. However, in using such
depictions of non-white women white supremacist meanings of women of color and non-western cultures are sustained. False stereotypes of women of color in commodified images can give the idea that non-white women have an uncontrollable sexual appetite, are primitive in nature, and possess less societal value in comparison to white women. Commodification for the sake of profit is dangerous as it may later interfere with white individuals’ ability to notice cultural appropriation. Excess media misrepresentation leads whites to believe that racism and other social tensions are dead.

It’s important to note that the “Native American” woman in the advertisement is actually a white woman with an altered appearance to play the part. White people control how Native American culture is projected and internalized. This is a form of cultural appropriation. Defined by Peter Kulchyski (1997), “Appropriation involves the practice on the part of dominant social groups of deploying cultural texts produced by dominated social groups for their own (elite) interests... somehow intervening to reverse their meaning-effect so that the signs indicate an opposing meaning or an opposite direction” (p. 3). For example, the cowhide dress, feathers, and colorful beads have specific functions and meanings in Native American culture. Here in the advertisement they are used as everyday fashion accessories, thus changing meaning and negating the original symbolic meaning. These harmful images and messages diminish one’s cultural values as well as their own ethnic identity. Violence against women of color isn’t a new issue, however false representations such as advertisements involving misrepresentation and/or cultural appropriation aid permission to such behavior.
This ad utilizes “the Other,” a term used to refer to a person, or more commonly a “character,” of color used by the white supremacist patriarchal capitalist system. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks (1992) provides a clear explanation of why the Other is used. She writes, “... there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (p. 21). The use of the Other in the west is a paradox because
economically capitalism relies on non-western images while politically we attempt to undermine non-white rights, opinions, and needs. Visually, the purpose of the Other is to entice consumers through ethnic “spice,” i.e. racial or ethnic difference. In today’s generation, diversity is encouraged, but not often exercised societally. Marketers use this contradictory idea to seemingly give various ethnicities a chance to be embraced by the media. They overlook and carryout the erasure of an entire history of white imperialistic colonial past, allowing escape from white guilt.

Another major issue with misrepresentation is the portrayal of the Other, which is entirely in the hands of white people, allowing opportunity for cultural appropriation. Until the Other has a say and part in their representation, images are not inclusive but are instead harmful and exploitative. For instance, the Club Sun advertisement displays a white woman impersonating a women of color. Such impersonation proves the paradox of ethnic inclusion within western mass media: non-white women are included only to spice up products, but are not actually included in the representation on their own terms. In the tanning advertisement, the “Native American” is strategically placed next to a conservatively dressed white “pilgrim,” sending a clear message of supposed ethnic difference. Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins (1993) claim white women are, “…variously praised for their ‘fragility’, ‘great softness’, ‘grace’, ‘languorous’ qualities, and eagerness ‘to please’” they have historically been a symbol of sexual purity (p. 319). The “pilgrim,” perhaps a virgin, is well covered, civilized, sexually tame, and wearing a friendly smile. She’s playing into Collin’s and Lutz’s given stereotype of non-women of color being the embodiment of innocence.

Meanwhile, the “Native American” woman wears next to nothing, is seemingly comfortable with her overt sexuality, and has a tempting grin. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1997) conveys the consequences of this issue,

Whatever the relationship between imagery and action is, it seems clear that these images do function to create
counter narratives to the experiences of women of color that discredit our claims and render the violence that we experience unimportant. These images not only represent devaluation of women of color, they may also reproduce it by providing viewers with both conscious and unconscious cues for interpreting the experiences of ‘others’ (p. 253).

Crenshaw facilitates how false portrayals directly result in both gender and race based violence. Images that result in intersectional oppression are not worth any amount of monetary gain when it clearly condones violence against marginalized groups. The advertisement exploits marginalized individuals, including Native American women, who endure(d) severe oppression and violence. The actual sexual exploitation of Native American women is represented quite explicitly in the Club Sun advertisement, as the “Native American” woman’s body is exposed.

Here we see cleavage, inner thigh, full neck, (uncovered) hair, and her tantalizing eyes. She is an inviting, scandalous, and alluring specimen in the eyes of white men, thus the image perpetuates not only the hypersexualization of women of color in a white supremacist world, but also invites the sexual exploitation of Native American women. For this reason, Club Sun’s advertisement is not anomalous, but is part of a history of sexual violence against non-white women.

**Desire for the Other**

Central to not only the featured advertisements but also to other forms of exploitation of the Other is desire. Lusting after “the Other” in whatever context, without true understanding and acceptance of them, is prejudiced. Desire based purely on racial difference does nothing to challenge white masculinist or colonial systems of meaning. Instead, such desire enforces these violent systems of meaning. Current systems such as the patriarchal system or binary gender system affirm and correlate to the Eurocentric colonial past. hooks (1992) describes the desire for Otherness as, “When race and ethnicity become commodified
as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (p. 23). The misrepresentation of women of color affirms the belief that the Other is simply a pleasure outlet in which any member of a higher social class can partake in. This sexual conquest within the white male population reinforces gender, racial, and ethnic hierarchies.

hooks (1992) notes that sexual experimentation with the Other is believed to open one’s mind and perspective. She writes,

...non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different... sexual encounters with non-white females, was considered a ritual of transcendence, a movement into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage” (p. 24).

For hooks, the rite of passage is white men’s sexual conquest of dark others, and thus represents white male privilege and entitlement. This paradoxical ideology of longing for interracial intimacy equating to complete acceptance of diversity not only upholds the white supremacist patriarchy, but is also understood by white men as a progressive step forward. Deeming anyone to be readily available for taking in any context is a supremacist belief. Until true value and care is emphasized in interracial relationships of all kinds, acts such as those mentioned are racist.
In consonance to desiring the Other, this advertisement for a Suzanne De Lyon fragrance resonates with lust. It was constructed specifically for men to feel the longing of closeness to the Other that bell hooks discusses. Collins (2000) reveals the typical role of the black Other. As she writes, “Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammys, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S Black women’s oppression” (p. 69). The woman in the perfume ad is meeting the social
expectations of black women by looking assertive, unprofessional, seemingly sexually “on the prowl,” and embodying the “hot momma” persona quite well. Although some people might believe that any representation is a form of inclusion, in actuality misrepresentation is counterproductive and deeply problematic. If this image were a genuine attempt at inclusion, the woman would not be depicted through such a specific lens in order to maintain today’s societal norms and systems. This perspective is from a white supremacist patriarchal observation. She is being displayed as a wild animal, quite literally, complete with a mane, tiger stripes, is nude, has animalistic make up, and the look of a (sexual) predator.

Let us not forget how only a few of generations ago, darker skinned people of African descent were commonly known as “primitive” and were compared to various animals. Today, members of the dominant culture still exercise the highly offensive stereotype. Collins (2000) supports this argument noting that, “black studies scholarship and postcolonial theory both suggest that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more “natural” denies African and Asian people’s subjectivity and supports the political economy of domination that characterized slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism” (p. 71). Needless to say, the photo is not only insulting but also eliminates generations of change and progression. Dehumanizing a group of people aids the justification of oppression. Slavery-era rationalization and the excuse that people of color were “less than human” still have relevance in modern western society. The way in which various races, religious followers, or other groups of people are depicted in the media matter. False images are dangerous, as the media has a large influence in each of our lives and realities.

Furthermore, images such as these encourage (white) men to continue to view women of color as meat for their personal consumption, while egging on the expression “fucking the Other.” hooks (1992) describes white predatory men, “They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism. To
them the most potent indication of that change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others” (p. 24). This behavior implies that having sex with someone is the ultimate favor of acceptance. This is a perfect example of white privilege and entitlement, and proves that patriarchal thoughts are oppressive. Desire based on race in any context is in fact racist, especially in the case of sexual possession. hooks (2000) writes,

While teaching at Yale, I walked... behind a group of very blond, very white, jock type boys... these young men talked about their plans to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups as they could ‘catch’ before graduation... Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into one category), deemed easier to entice, were considered ‘prime targets’... (p. 23).

Nowhere does it mention a mutual longing of intimacy. Putting one's rights and wants over another is a paradigm of white supremacy. The context of some phrases, including 'catch' and 'prime targets' is truly disgusting. They are speaking about these women as if they're ten point bucks waiting to be mounted over the fireplace, or their winning bass at a fishing tournament. An act of dehumanization makes “hunting,” raping, manipulating, or simply taking advantage of much easier.

In continuation, hooks (2000) explains one reason why this desire for the Other occurs: “Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger” (p. 26). Just as the white college boys thought interracial relations opens one's perspective, this belief must be sparked from western culture's infatuation with danger. Throughout time, people of color have unfairly been thought to be more aggressive and sexually charged. Kathleen M. Blee's (1991) article “The First Ku Klux Klan” featured in An Introduction to Women's Studies: Gender in a Transitional World brings forth this disgusting truth: “Klan
propaganda steadfastly portrayed women as passive sexual acquisitions of men and insisted that black men used physical coercion to wrest sexual favors from white female victims” (p. 235). Dominant social group’s values, perspectives, and theories heavily influence society as a whole, regardless of certitude. Though unfortunate, this was once reality and still has weight in today’s world. Earlier, hooks described interracial intimacy being less taboo than it historically has been in America. Therefore, lust for the Other is at an all-time high. However, Carolyn J. Field, Sitawa R. Kimuna, and Murray A. Straus (2013) describe interracial marriage statistics in “Attitudes Toward Interracial Relationships Among College Students: Race, Class, Gender, and Perceptions of Parental Views” saying,

... until the 1967 Supreme Court ruling in the Loving vs. Commonwealth of Virginia which overturned miscegenation laws that barred sex or marriage between Blacks and Whites... Whites marry Blacks less often than they marry any other racial or ethnic group... Black/White marriages still remain remarkably uncommon with less that 1% of the total (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012) (p. 743).

This pertains to marriage, not intimacy. While hooks’ previously mentioned claim that more college aged white men are “experimenting” in sexual acts with women of color, this excerpt proves that the ultimate goal of marriage is unlikely. Marriage is a milestone in western society. Given that black and white marriage is uncommon proves that the desire for the Other is purely sexual and most white men have no intention on developing a true or even lifelong connection to dark Others. Ideas relating to possession, rite of passage, and white entitlement are dangerous to society and especially the safety of non-white women.

Resolution
While many white western people believe that any contact with someone from a different race or culture proves a complete acceptance of diversity, this is not the case. Instead
of commodifying various people as a sense of “inclusion,” portrayals of people of color must not be in the hands of the dominant culture. Simply gazing upon, laughing at, or desiring the Other is not a form of acceptance and is in fact problematic. Representation in mass media matters because the way in which one is depicted influences how others may interpret them. Commodification for the sake of profit is dangerous because it may later interfere with white individuals’ ability to notice cultural appropriation. Using a person of color solely for monetary benefit is in no way a fair representation and it is not a step towards acceptance. Instead, misrepresentation helps white people turn the cheek to their imperialistic past and believe racism as well as other social tensions are nonexistent simply because they do not experience the harm it enacts. Throughout history, the west has experienced some social progress in the ways different people coexist. However, we’ve only just taken our marks at the starting line and still have a marathon to go.

References


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Intersectionality in Action
Creative Submission: Freedom?

By Ian Gillespie

It had been many years since she had tasted freedom, true freedom, and for her three children, it was the first time.

He had been vanquished, banished, at least physically. He would never be seen again, she hoped, that demon, that creature in human flesh that had possessed her, that had possessed her children. She looked at the old place. Foreclosed upon, retaken by the bankers who truly owned it. She watched as the gate shut, the green grass fluttering in the breeze. She gathered her children into the car that contained everything that they owned and left.

At night, when the children were asleep, she would feel his presence still. There was a spirit in the room that would not let her bide. She remembered. She remembered how he had once been of noble sort, at least, she hoped he had. How he had taken her in after she had been abandoned, her and her children destitute, living in a shabby old house in a dying town, her three children in her arms.

She remembered how kind he was to her, how nice, how his voice seemed strong and reassuring. How everything that he did convinced her that he was safe, that he could provide, that we could protect and heal the wounds that she and her babies had suffered. She became more and more convinced that he was the one. That he was the only one.

When they had been married, it was fine. It was natural. It felt right. It was okay. It was okay when he had her beat the children. It was okay he threw her eldest into his room, locking him in solitude. When he twisted her second-born into something like him, and scarred the young person. When he would lock himself in her daughter's room alone with her. When he would ignore her protests when they were alone.
His threats to leave her were always more harrowing than his presence. Whenever he threatened to throw her back out into the wilds she would acquiesce herself to whatever he wanted. She had to be told that it wasn’t normal. She had to be told that it wasn’t right. She didn’t believe it, at first, and had pushed away the one friend that had noticed.

She didn’t believe it when he called her ‘cunt.’ She didn’t believe it when he threw plates and chairs and overturned tables. She didn’t believe it until she saw her eldest child try to stand up for himself, and get knocked down. Until, after everything else, her motherly instinct kicked in, and silently, in the night, she took her three children away from that terrible man. She got a restraining order, a legal shield, and returned to that house to collect their things. He had taken everything that was his and much that was hers and her children’s. Very little was left.

She packed everything in a car, and took once last look at the gated old house, with the green grass fluttering in the breeze, and then left. At night, when the children were asleep, she would feel his presence still.
Ambiguous Identities: Gesturing Towards an Intersectional Conception of Freedom

By Shaun Soman

ABSTRACT. Writing in The Ethics of Ambiguity (1948), existential philosopher and feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir declared that each individual’s freedom depends upon that of others. This claim was meant to motivate others to not remain complicit in the oppression of others; however, when considering the xenophobic rhetoric within Western feminists’ rhetoric about “liberating” Muslim women, one realizes that this demand warrants further scrutiny. In this paper, I apply Alia Al-Saji’s work on Western feminists’ approaches to liberating “other” women to de Beauvoir’s “we” in order to strengthen this latter concept. Overall, my aim with this work is to demonstrate that an intersectional understanding of “we” is necessary for collective resistance efforts to avoid perpetuating other forms of oppression.

Keywords: “we” as legion, Western feminist rhetoric, initial hesitation

In this paper, I critically evaluate Simone de Beauvoir’s theories regarding freedom and oppression in light of Alia Al-Saji’s analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the United States’ war on terrorism; although de Beauvoir’s work provides a useful basis for both understanding and responding to systemic oppression, I argue that her theories prove insufficient when taken alone. First, I relate de Beauvoir’s understanding of community and interdependent freedom in order to outline the divide de Beauvoir makes between men and women; as I stress throughout this work, this preliminary divide does not fully capture the intersectional nature of identity. Second, I offer de Beauvoir’s claim that
one’s own freedom may only be guaranteed by actively working towards the freedom of others in beginning to interrogate which women speak—and which are silenced—within resistance movements; here, I introduce ‘intersectionality’ as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Third, in drawing upon Al-Saji’s examination of American rhetoric concerning the liberation of “other” women, I demonstrate the shortcomings of de Beauvoir’s generalized “we” insofar as it motivates and reinforces Western imperialism in practice. Given this, while I do not reject this “we” outright, I argue that it is insufficient for collective resistance efforts when taken in isolation from practices of listening. Fourth, by considering the myriad perspectives which feminists maintain in relation to multicultural concerns, I scrutinize what constitutes freedom and how we can attain such freedom. Fifth, I apply de Beauvoir’s own claim that “women... are best suited to elucidate the situation of women” to critique attempts to project Western feminists’ conception of freedom to non-Western contexts (2011, p. 15). Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to both acknowledge the strengths of de Beauvoir’s work and address several drawbacks in order to amend—thereby strengthening—collective, intersectional resistance.

Two overarching concerns motivate my analysis: a) how do we define “community?” and b) how does this definition guide our actions? Initially, one might understand human communities as intersubjective. In contemplating this point, de Beauvoir (1976/1948) crucially stated, “[W]e’ is legion and not an individual; each one depends upon others, and what happens to me by means of others depends upon me as regards its meaning...It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful” (p. 82). Evidently, each individual—by virtue of existing within society—is subject to the will of others. Given this dependence upon others, one’s freedom is not self-determined, but rather depends upon whether other subjects “open the future” to this individual or transform said individual into an object by closing this future (de Beauvoir,
1976/1948, p. 82). In the latter case, one encounters oppression, which—as de Beauvoir (1976/1948) argued in the context of gender—“divides the world into two clans” (p. 83): men and women. At this point, one discerns two weaknesses with de Beauvoir’s gender division. First, it is crucial to note that this dichotomy problematically overlooks non-binary individuals who may also face gendered oppression within Western contexts. A second concern that resonates more closely with the particular aims of this paper is that de Beauvoir defines “women” within a Western European framework; thus, it is imperative that we critique de Beauvoir’s subsequent conception of what “genuine” freedom entails for all women, regardless of culture. Before one may question this freedom, one must consider how oppression affects groups rather than individuals, and how this united “we” may perpetuate oppression of others if it does not recognize the intersectional nature of identity.

Detailing the socialization process which conditions female-bodied individuals to adhere to traditional constructs of femininity, de Beauvoir (2011/1949) claimed, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 283). For de Beauvoir, this Woman is unequivocally defined as “Other” in relation to Man (2011/1949, p. 6); moreover, Woman’s status as Other is present “[i]n all civilizations,” a claim which demands—and will receive—further analysis in light of Al-Saji’s work (de Beauvoir, 2011/1949, p. 167). It is this generalized (and, as I stress, oversimplified) division into men and women that de Beauvoir understands oppression. In order to begin combating this oppression, de Beauvoir was primarily concerned with consciousness raising within the female community; just as the Marxist would attempt to unite the proletariat against class-based oppression, so would the de Beauvoirian hope to unite women under a collective “we [women]” in order to resist gendered oppression (de Beauvoir, 2011/1949, p. 8). Recalling that this “we” acknowledges the interconnectivity of individuals, one may understand how oppression functions. Stated simply, systematic oppression operates at a group—rather than an
individual—level; if one is oppressed on the basis of gender, for example, it follows that others who share this gendered identity may also experience a similar form of oppression. Given this, one ought to work towards the freedom of others in order to ensure one’s own freedom, for the latter is impossible without the former. While this movement towards the liberation of others is perhaps admirable, one must not disregard the issue of which women speak, and which are silenced, within resistance efforts.

When considering which groups—which “we’s”—experience oppression, either as oppressor or oppressed, it is overly simplistic to claim that only men oppress and only women are oppressed. As has been thoroughly discussed by feminist thinkers, each individual’s experiences are informed by the various elements of which one’s identity is composed; that is to say, our identities are intersectional. Though not yet explicitly defined at the time, intersectionality’s foundation can be traced back to “the political movement of Black women, Chicana and Latina women, and other women of color” throughout the early 1980s (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) explicitly labeled this concept to demonstrate how prevailing conceptions of discrimination tended to erase “black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Crenshaw (1991) further defined three aspects of intersectionality. First, “structural intersectionality” examines “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes [their] actual experience of...[oppression] different from that of white women” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1245). Second, “political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Third, “representational intersectionality” includes “both the ways in which...images [of women of color] are produced through a confluence of prevalent...
narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color” (Crenshaw, 1991; p. 1283). Of these aspects, representational intersectionality and its approach to culturally constructed images are most useful for my examination of how non-Western women of color are represented in both media and feminist discourse.

To illustrate the necessity of an intersectional approach to understanding the contemporary feminist rhetoric surrounding the liberation of “other” Muslim women, one may turn towards Alia Al-Saji. As Al-Saji (2009) lucidly argued, Muslim women are depicted within Western rhetoric as “passive victims...of their religion or culture from which they require liberation” (p. 65); moreover, this purportedly oppressed status is uncritically understood as essential to Islam. Stated differently, Islam and (Western) feminism are constructed as mutually exclusive entities. Al-Saji (2009) critiqued this Western feminist discourse, which both, “assumes rather than deconstructs the dichotomy of Islam and the West” and takes “the latter to be the only appropriate and perfectible ground for feminist subjectivity” (p. 66). Here, one notes that Western feminists are susceptible to reinforcing xenophobia and racism through their projected conceptions of oppression; by pointing towards the relative freedom experienced by women in Western countries to criticize the veil (in its myriad forms specific to various groups within Islam) worn by Muslim women, the uncritical Western feminist reinforces the narrative which holds Muslim nations as “backwards” or “uncivilized.” Such claims present a blatant problem for the de Beauvoirian; although de Beauvoir (1976/1948) described freedom as genuinely willing itself “only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others,” it seems as though “liberating” Muslim women from the veil would actually reinforce their oppression by Western imperialism (p. 90).

In order to potentially resolve this issue, one may, somewhat ironically, refer back to de Beauvoir’s own work.
Recalling the claim that women are particularly suited to describe the situation of women, it would perhaps behoove one to remain somewhat skeptical of the likelihood that non-Western women find themselves “best” suited to describe the situation of non-Western women. To paraphrase de Beauvoir, it seems to be the case that Muslim women “know the [Muslim] world more intimately than [non-Muslim women] do because [the former’s] roots are in it” (1976/1948, p. 15). At this point, a number of potentially problematic counterpoints might be offered. Firstly, one could – rightly, to some degree – point out that women in Middle Eastern countries are, as a general rule, not afforded the same educational opportunities as Western women; given this, the Western feminist might take it upon themselves to “educate” non-Western women about their oppression. Despite the benevolent intentions of such an action, one must remain wary of perpetuating imperialist narratives which holds non-Western countries as “uncivilized” due to disparities in educational opportunities; moreover, such actions would overlook the privileged position occupied by individuals who do find themselves in a position to pursue higher educational opportunities. Secondly, the Western feminist might raise the concern that if they were to do nothing, non-Western women—and, for the de Beauvoirian, all individuals—would remain unfree. In an attempt to assuage this latter concern, I consider how Western feminists can simultaneously work towards the liberation of non-Western women while remaining mindful of not reinforcing white, Western imperialism through listening before acting.

Presaging the xenophobic rhetoric which has partially defined contemporary feminism in the West, de Beauvoir (1976/1948) claimed that the “Koran treats [women] with the most absolute contempt” (p. 89). While one might understand de Beauvoir’s statement as being made in an attempt to generally unite all women—regardless of cultural origin—under the “we,” one must acknowledge how such broadly sweeping claims reinforce xenophobia.
Given this, how might one address and adequately respond to the oppression of Muslim women without effectively perpetuating Western imperialism? The answer is, as I turn to detail, deceptively simple: one ought to first listen before acting. As Al-Saji (2009) claimed, what is needed is a move to bracket “the framework of freedom and oppression that prefigures the representation of Muslim women” (p. 79). This bracketing, which leads to critical reflection, incites hesitation (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 79). Responding to the aforementioned concern that doing nothing is unacceptable, one must note that this hesitation does not lead to or amount to inaction, but merely dissuades uncritical and potentially problematic action by causing us to *listen* to the perspectives of Muslim women. Ultimately, this means that feminists who seek to “liberate” Muslim women ought to listen to these women prior to working with them rather than simply deciding what is “best” for them. By listening, one may develop a more nuanced understanding of Islam; rather than be inherently oppressive, and thus inferior to Western society, one may understand “how what is so often presented as progressive and liberating for Muslim women in fact partakes of a colonial and paternalistic logic of oppression” (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 80).

To demonstrate the advantage of Al-Saji’s approach and to further emphasize the need for intersectional approaches to oppression, consider the broader anti-Muslim rhetoric following the September 11 attacks. Puar and Rai (2002) related how much of the black humor describing the appropriate punishment for Osama bin Laden focused on making him “have a sex change operation and live in Afghanistan as a woman,” which simultaneously revealed “racist, sexist, and homophobic suggestions” (p. 126). By failing to critically examine “how the dominant media are using the figure of the *burkha*-ed woman in what are often racist and certainly chauvinistic representations of the Middle East,” Western feminists risk silencing and erasing the voices of Muslim women (Puar & Rai, 2002, p. 127). Although Western feminists might view Muslim women’s
experience as oppressive and may certainly be inclined towards liberating these women, action motivated by uncritical acceptance of these dominant images effectively impedes their efforts by perpetuating racist narratives. This is not to suggest that Western feminists should unconcern themselves with the experience of Muslim women, but rather to emphasize the need to amplify this latter group’s collective voice. Of course, simply listening will not defeat oppression; action is necessary to undermine oppressive systems. The primary benefit of listening is that we can more adequately understand the needs of Muslim women as they themselves articulate such needs. In this way, we might move away from political action motivated by inaccurate and supremely problematic media depictions of Muslim women to informed by actual experiences. Beyond aiding Muslim women in liberating themselves, a nuanced critique of anti-Muslim rhetoric allows for a greater understanding of the oppression of LGBTQ persons both at home and abroad (Puar & Rai, 2002).

The aforementioned move towards listening rather than acting first is heavily indebted to Al-Saji’s “initial hesitation...[which] aims to destabilize representational frameworks that close down the imagination and limit the possibilities for feminist solidarity” (2009, p. 79–80). Rather than responding to oppression with indecision, as was the de Beauvoirian’s concern above, feminists who adopt Al-Saji’s framework may find themselves better suited to combat not only gendered oppression, but also systemic oppression deriving from colonialism. As Al-Saji (2009) stated, the initial hesitation, when coupled with bracketing—or, the suspension of judgment of—“the framework of freedom and oppression that prefigures the representation and knowledge of Muslim women...[may] dispel certain seemingly paralyzing dilemmas...that confront feminists when it comes to Muslim women” (p. 79–80). Oddly enough, such an adoption seems to resonate with de Beauvoir’s theories regarding the ambiguity of ethical decisions more than feminist responses which uncritically apply “ready-
made binaries” such as freedom-oppression, modernity-religion, and West-Islam” (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 79). By committing to first listen, to truly listen and understand others’ perspectives, and then to shape our actions around those voices, we allow ourselves the opportunity to develop a more well-rounded conception of freedom. If de Beauvoirian is genuinely concerned with maintaining an open-future for individuals, then it seems outright hypocritical to reject certain possibilities as some Western feminists do in regards to Muslim women.

Admittedly, criticisms which may be raised against de Beauvoir benefit in part from hindsight and subsequent theoretical developments in the realms of philosophy and feminism. Although de Beauvoirian and Western feminists have been the subjects of my criticism within this paper, I do not mean to imply that such positions must be utterly abandoned; quite the contrary, it seems as though placing various theories into “conversation” with one another—which has only been hinted at in this particular analysis—would prove conducive to the development and flourishing of coalitions which would ideally work together to end oppression in all its forms. Certainly, de Beauvoir’s contributions to feminist philosophy can neither be understated nor simply ignored; however, it falls upon each of us to engage in an ongoing, ever-reflective critique of our actions and the various factors which motivate them. Beyond this critique, one effectively adapts or “updates” de Beauvoir’s work in referring to Al-Saji’s work. In compelling each of us to undertake “the difficult work of concrete communication, self-critical reflection, and attention to historical and contextual specificity being carried out,” Al-Saji (2009) outlined the means for us to disrupt commonly accepted binaries whose unexamined application impedes our efforts towards achieving feminist solidarity (p. 80). Ultimately, such ambitions hold de Beauvoirian accountable to consider multicultural perspectives and concerns; as de Beauvoir (2011/1949) herself declared upon concluding The Second Sex, “Let us beware lest our lack of imagination
“impoverish the future” (p. 765). In the case of feminist discourse, we must conceive of a world in which Western notions are not uncritically accepted as inherently free to the detriment of non-Western cultures.

References


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A Pre-Medical Student’s Reconciliation of Feminist Narratives Regarding Women’s Health: A Consideration of Perspectives on Childbirth in the U.S.

By Laura Clayton

ABSTRACT. Many feminists argue that one major negative aspect of reproductive healthcare in the U.S. is the common over-medicalization of women during childbirth, including potentially unnecessary procedures such as cesarean-section and episiotomy. As a solution, they advocate for increased involvement of midwives in childbirth practices, as midwives allow women to give birth at home with minimal medical intervention. This paper analyzes the benefits of midwifery as well as the current increased risk associated with homebirth in the U.S. Additionally, it questions the damaging stigma associated with assumptions of cesarean-section as a suboptimal outcome. A false dichotomy has developed in our culture between natural and unnatural childbirth that silences the voices of women who benefit from obstetric medical interventions. Furthermore, not all women have the economic privilege of choice in how they deliver their baby. Herein, I explore the ways in which midwifery and traditional obstetrics could be combined to provide the greatest amount of safety and choice to women as they bring their children into this world. This is done alongside a reconciliation of my feminist perspective with my aspiration to be an obstetrician/gynecologist.

Since I first watched a physician guide a newborn baby into the world, I’ve wanted to become an obstetrician/gynecologist (OB/GYN). As a scientist and a feminist with education in Women’s and Gender Studies, I’ve taken the time to analyze what impact I could have with a career as a physician. I want my life’s work to help women, rather than hinder them. Many feminists before me have
noted that all of science is infused with cultural subjectivity. Even something as simple as the mechanism of egg fertilization by a sperm usually has descriptions infused with cultural norms of masculinity and femininity, in my experience. Sperm are often described as bravely trekking towards a docile egg, even though this process is much more complicated. Medical providers, like all people, fall victim to cultural assumptions and normative ways of thinking. For women specifically, these biases can lead to alienation from their bodies and healthcare choices, especially those involving reproductive care and childbirth.

Delivering a baby is a particularly vulnerable time in women’s reproductive healthcare, as many new moms are in physical pain and are anxious for the huge change to come in their lives. Trauma surrounding childbirth can be extremely scarring and it is worth examining ways to avoid harmful experiences. There is little discussion of childbirth within the academic field of Women’s and Gender Studies. Within grassroots movements, many feminists argue that negative experiences during childbirth are more common in the U.S. than Europe and other developed countries because of American healthcare’s propensity for over-medicalization. In search of clarity regarding my own professional goals, I have analyzed feminist and medical narratives surrounding childbirth. I argue that though feminist voices have created productive debate around women’s health by advocating for integration of midwives in obstetrics, a dichotomous distinction between natural and more interventionist healthcare should be avoided, as it does not always serve to liberate women.

As an aside, I’d like to note that what constitutes womanhood is not easily defined, and that the category “women” includes many more individuals than just those who can bear children. Though this analysis of the over-medicalization of women focuses on childbirth, as it is an experience many women go through, I understand that there are many other aspects of over-medicalization which I do not
discuss here that have the potential to affect those who identify as women.

**Over-medicalization**
The United States has many challenges to overcome if it is to increase the quality of medical care its citizens receive. From difficulty in obtaining a primary care doctor to confusion about one’s treatment, many people feel alienated and helpless when they encounter the healthcare system (Torrey, 2016). Reproductive healthcare can be especially intimidating, and the necessity for intervention is sometimes questionable. Unfortunately, the burden of reproductive healthcare falls almost exclusively on women. Though many men receive a vasectomy or treatment for erectile dysfunction in their lifetime, women are more likely to come into contact with medical professionals for a longer period of time, as many seek out physicians for birth control, pregnancy termination, childbirth oversight, and general gynecological care. Some feminist theorists argue that this extensive medical oversight can lead to unnecessary intervention, such as a procedure or placement on medication, that can be detrimental to the overall care that women receive. Over-medicalization—where a medical condition is identified, pathologized and medically treated without clear benefits—can leave anyone in worse condition than they began and may be disproportionately affecting women. For example, Carol Downer famously said, “why should a woman have to go to a gynecologist every time she has a vaginal itch?” in reference to the ease of self treating yeast infections (Fortune, 2009, p. 26). During pregnancy especially, women spend much more time under the care of a physician than they would normally. In the case of pregnancy and childbirth, while sometimes necessary, obstetrician intervention may also interfere with the natural course of delivery.

Women throughout history have endured childbirth without the intervention of obstetricians, epidurals, and cesarean-sections (C-sections). Feminists who wish to
change common obstetric practices in the U.S. describe obstetricians as interventionists who sometimes perform C-sections for their own convenience, rather than for the mother and baby’s safety. This is a startling sentiment and wrongfully demonizes physicians. However, there are unfortunately many incentives to medicalize a natural childbirth that may unconsciously sway physicians’ decisions. Obstetricians’ education is based on ways to intervene should complications arise, and they often do not witness a routine vaginal delivery during their training (Pilkington, 2010). Limiting their exposure to only complicated deliveries could encourage over-medicalization. Also, all physicians live in fear of litigation (Cyr, 2006). They are less likely to be sued for an outcome involving maternal morbidity, such as years of urinary incontinence (inability to control one’s bladder), than for fetal mortality, and will therefore be conservative in their decision making. Some hospitals also rely on income from C-sections and Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICU) to make up for other costs; thus the “payment system rewards providers for intervention” (Block, 2009, para. 32).

Many women argue that extensive medical interventions serve to pathologize a normal and beautiful experience (Pilkington, 2010). The feminist authors of Our Bodies, Ourselves are well known for their critique of obstetricians from the 1970’s. They paint doctors as “condescending, paternalistic, judgmental, and uninformative” (Norsigian et. al, 1999, para. 3). They describe how many women are subjected to unnecessary treatments. Standard obstetric care in the U.S. “routinely induces and speeds up labor, immobilizes women and has them push in disadvantageous positions, cuts episiotomies,” and employs vacuum extractors (Block, 2009, para 8). These descriptions of the over-medicalization of childbirth inform many other articles, both in mainstream media—which represents public opinion—and in academia.

To support arguments that typical American obstetric practices require reform, feminists commonly cite
that the U.S. has one of the highest fetal/maternal mortality rates in the industrialized world (MacDorman, Declercq, Cabral, & Morton, 2016) despite spending more per capita than any other developed nation on maternity care (Blustain, 2009). The proportion of poor outcomes in the U.S. is staggering, and the incidence of medical intervention is even more so.

Overall, one would hope that obstetricians are adequately balancing factors of safety, cost, and the mother’s wishes based on their judgment of what is best for their patient. However, as these authors point out, there are many systematic challenges in the healthcare system that predispose physicians, and specifically obstetricians, to lean towards interventionist methods that are not always necessary and not always beneficial to the patient. There are other options that could help balance the medicalized approach of obstetrics.

**Midwifery as an Alternative**
For feminists who see traditional American obstetric practices as the source of poor healthcare during childbirth, removing obstetricians from cases where they are not medically necessary is a logical solution. However, a completely unattended birth could prove fatal. Therefore, some feminists have advocated for an increase in the use of midwives for delivering babies in the U.S. There are different types of midwives and there is variability in their scope of practice. Certified Nurse-Midwives have nursing degrees and therefore sometimes practice in hospitals in addition to overseeing home births. Direct-Entry midwives are certified by outside organizations, such as the American College of Nurse-Midwives. Some midwives choose not to become certified by any official organization (“Midwives Alliance of North America,” 2016). In general, midwives often perform deliveries in women’s homes with some rudimentary medical equipment, but much less than would be used in a hospital environment.
The proposed increased integration of midwives into childbirth practices aligns well with feminists' goals for women's healthcare in a larger sense, as it increases the number of delivery options available to women. Mainstream feminists almost always argue for increased choice when it comes to women's reproductive healthcare. The introduction of midwifery as a more common practice for delivering babies could potentially solve many of the problems American women face. Women who deliver with a midwife instead of an obstetrician are “less likely to have a medical intervention, less likely to have a cesarean section, and less likely to have an epidural for pain management. Their hospital stays were also likely to be shorter” (Lincoff, 2013, para 5). Feminists often invoke a comparison between the U.S. and other European countries when discussing midwives, as “in much of Europe, midwives play the lead role in assisting most low-risk and healthy women to give birth, handing over to a specialist doctor or surgeon only when conditions demand” (Pilkington, 2010, para 10). Low-risk women who use a midwife are less likely to undergo C-section, their babies are less likely to go to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), and they are more likely to breastfeed successfully than women on a typical obstetric ward (Block, 2009). Most importantly, many women cherish memories of their deliveries at home because it enables them to go through a natural, challenging, and rewarding rite of passage without the interference of a medical professional or a sterile hospital environment. Midwifery could potentially provide a beautiful birthing experience to women without eliminating medical care altogether.

When evaluating the benefits of midwifery, safety should be regarded above all other considerations. Many articles regarding alternative birthing practices claim that delivering with a midwife is “just as safe” (Lincoff, 2013, para. 1). Indeed, a large study recently conducted found that low risk home births were associated with fewer medical interventions, but similar intrapartum and neonatal mortality rates as low risk hospital births (Johnson, 2005).
However, contradicting data exists. In Oregon, a law was passed in 2011 that required reports regarding “planned place of birth and birth attendant” as well as birth outcomes, including death, by location and attendant type (“Oregon Health Authority,” 2012, p. 1). Subsequent data indicated that maternal and infant mortality was six to eight times more likely for homebirths. Based on these studies, and others, there does not appear to be clear consensus on the safety of using a midwife. Still, one can imagine that should a delivery necessitate it, the time it takes to travel from home to the hospital could mean the difference between life and death for the baby or its mother. In the U.S. currently, an expecting mother must decide whether the increased risk of a poor outcome is worth the benefit of delivering at home.

Fostering Inclusivity

Though there are many flaws in the way obstetrics is practiced in the U.S., some arguments in the typical feminist narrative of over-medicalization do not help make childbirth a better experience for all women. Feminist narratives advocate for increased choice concerning childbirth, but they also inadvertently scold women who choose more medicalized birthing options. False narratives of binaries, with terms such as natural vaginal vs unnatural cesarean births, assume that natural is superior. Assertions that C-section birth is a suboptimal outcome ignore valid reasons for obtaining one and minimize those birthing experiences. Though use of midwives could provide more choice in method of childbirth, it should not create a space for women to police other women about the correct way to bring their child into the world. Instead, feminist narratives should be inclusive of women's varied experiences. Additionally, goals of decreasing C-section rates do not help providers make good decisions regarding individual patients' care, as “no case should ever be decided with one eye on the statistics of the hospital” (Cyr, 2006, p. 933). Each patient will have unique risk factors and wishes, and nothing other than her
and her child’s well-being should influence the quality of an expecting mother’s care.

Besides being uninformative, statistics regarding C-section rates are not accurate measurements of healthcare quality. Some physicians pride themselves on getting a woman through her vaginal delivery and avoiding C-section (Cyr, 2006, p. 933), but at what cost? One should not assume that because a C-section is unnatural, it’s worse for the mother or child. Women who deliver vaginally are more likely to later experience urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse. These conditions are not life threatening, but prevent those affected from living normal lives and can require surgical repair. Some of these women may not be able to run, laugh, or sneeze without urination or pain (Butler, 2017). Placing value on naturalness privileges women who are able or willing to endure these common side effects after vaginal delivery. Should she require further surgery, a woman may have been better served by having a C-section, a single surgery, in the first place. Not all women will need C-sections to avoid these complications, but to best serve women and their children, metrics other than avoidance of C-section should be used to quantify successful delivery.

The Issue of Cost
For some women, avoidance of the complications associated with vaginal delivery are a matter of comfort and general quality of life, which is important. Unfortunately, for many women who are underprivileged and have low socioeconomic status the side effects after birth may prove more devastating economically. Women who are single mothers, whose children depend on her salary alone, likely cannot afford to take any extra time off work due to hindrance from pelvic organ prolapse or incontinence, for example. For women from a low socioeconomic class, their last worry is the naturalness of the birth, but rather how they will pay and whether they will be mistreated by medical staff (Lazarus, 1994). Not all women have the privilege of ignoring
cost when making decisions regarding their birthing experience. Additionally, assumptions that natural births are healthier and more desirable privilege women who can afford to accept the higher chance of a poor outcome that is associated with a natural, vaginal delivery because they can pay for care during recovery. Perhaps the possibility of a quicker recovery time is enough for women who are economically disadvantaged to choose C-section.

Though C-sections may get women back to work more quickly and may be medically necessary for many women, they unfortunately dramatically increase the upfront cost associated with childbirth. The U.S. government spends more on childbirth than any other condition, likely partly because approximately half of births in the U.S. are from women who qualify for Medicaid (Block, 2009). Many physicians, especially high-quality private practice OB/GYNs, do not accept this form of insurance. Those on Medicaid are left without easy access to the healthcare they might need. High costs and profit driven healthcare likely contribute at least in part to disparity in outcomes due to race (Block, 2009), as people of color are more likely to qualify for Medicaid (“Kaiser Commission”, 2013). Separate from economics, differences in treatment and outcomes because of race are seen throughout medicine (Roberts, 2011), including obstetrics. When imagining a mother who wants a natural birth, one might not immediately picture a woman of color. The movement for naturalness is associated with whiteness. However, women of color deserve to choose what they believe is best for their children as well. The benefits of an expanded obstetric system in the U.S. and discussions about how to implement it should not exclude women of color.

It is upsetting that class and race are considerations in patients’ medical decision making in the U.S., but that is the current reality. Until that is not the case, it is worth working within the system as it stands to improve outcomes for underserved populations. One of the biggest potential benefits of increased use of midwives, both for the nation and
for individuals, could be a decrease in the cost of childbirth, bringing greater accessibility. If midwives could be integrated into systems of traditional reproductive medicine and made safer, these measures could make affordable childbirth more accessible to underserved populations. This would decrease environmental racism and healthcare inequalities more generally.

My Reconciliation
There is not one best way to bring a child into this world. Because every woman has different wishes and different limitations, the best way to serve women is to increase the number of options they have when choosing how they would like to deliver and then protect access to those options. Unfortunately, there are still systemic challenges to this. The healthcare system in the U.S. has not integrated midwifery, and thus affordable home birth is currently much more dangerous than delivering in a hospital. However, there are possible solutions to increase the safety of midwifery. If birthing centers with midwives were attached to hospitals, normal childbirth could be treated like an outpatient procedure while allowing quick transport to an obstetrician if necessary. In Canada, more women use midwives as a part of traditional reproductive care and there is no disparity between in and out of hospital birth outcomes (Hutton et. al, 2015). In the U.S., more OB/GYNs could integrate midwives into their practices, as they have integrated nurse practitioners and physician assistants for low risk gynecological patients. Feminists should continue to fight for the inclusion of midwifery in obstetric care. However, feminists should also remember not to create a dichotomy where some birth plans are privileged as being superior to others.

The benefits of midwifery do not need to exclude physicians from patient care, and discussions of ways to prevent over-medicalization do not need to demonize women who choose medical intervention. Trauma
associated with negative birthing experiences is devastating. The medical community and feminists alike should therefore strive to eliminate potential over-medicalization, stigma, excess cost, and increase the number of options available to women. Balance can be reached with all of these factors in mind to help achieve the greatest outcomes possible on the day women bring their children into the world. I still aspire to one day be an OB/GYN. I do not believe that this will prevent me from working to further women's and feminists' cause, as I can be a part of the movement to integrate choice and greater education into the field of obstetrics and gynecology.

References


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Revolutionizing Space: A Case Study on Accessibility and Comfort

By Jennifer MacMartin

ABSTRACT. Influenced by a dynamic and revolutionary crip theory, this piece seeks to operationalize the combination of crip theory/disability studies and intersectional feminist praxis. Dis/ability is consistently disregarded as a central social identity, as the world has been literally built and maintained by (temporarily) able-bodied people with the intent to accommodate able-bodied people’s needs and comfort. DeafSpace, a revolutionary project prioritizing deaf people’s needs and comfort, serves as a case study for potential revolutionary architectural projects that focus on dis/ability accommodation, accessibility, and comfort. However, in seeking additional solutions to this issue, we must be conscious of tokenizing the experiences of individuals with disabilities, and rather, seek to revolutionize architecture and engineering developments as a whole.

Keywords: crip theory, dis/ability, feminism, intersectionality, architecture

Navigating the spatial world is not something that able-bodied individuals have to consider on a daily basis: this world was literally built for us. Classrooms, public transportation, shopping centers, skyscrapers, and entire cities were historically built by and for able-bodied people; people with disabilities are often an afterthought for architects and developers. Nation-wide standards for building developments in the United States did not exist until 1961, when the first national design standard—the American National Standards Institute—was created (National Institute of Building Sciences, 2016). Only recently, in 2014, were standards published for outdoor recreational
areas, such as walking trails, campsites, and beaches (National Institute of Building Sciences, 2016).

Contemporary intersectional feminism makes an intentional effort to call attention to various social identities and the interlocking oppressions people experience based on these complex identities. Dis/ability is one of the identities that is often considered the least by able-bodied people; their ability to navigate the world around them is not altered by their physical or mental capacity. As contemporary intersectional feminism is an all-encompassing movement aiming to end all oppressions and recognizing the multiplicity of the human experience, dis/ability activism is on the forefront of feminist and queer scholarship. Intersectional feminism, as utilized in contemporary feminist discourse today, focuses intentionally on these various intersecting identities. Additionally, queer theory and crip theory have developed often in tandem with one another, as queer people are often pathologized and viewed as somehow “disabled” historically, while people with disabilities are often viewed as decidedly queer (McRuer, 2006). Both feminist theory and queer theory can (and must) inform our understandings of crip theory, and vice versa.

A popular volume of scholarly articles regarding the complex intersection of feminism and dis/ability activism, Feminist Disability Studies edited by Kim Q. Hall (2011), introduces the inherent, but complicated, link as follows:

Feminist disability studies, like the gendered or disabled body, is more than a sum of its parts. Just as disability studies shows how disability is irreducible to bodily impairment, feminist theory shows how gender is irreducible to biological sex. However, understanding feminist disability studies as simply a combination of feminism and disability studies dulls its critical edge and lessens its potential to intervene in theoretical and social transformation (Hall, 2011).

The key component of this definition iterates the “potential to intervene in theoretical and social transformation” (Hall, 2011); thus, this is not solely unapplied academic work, but
rather a contribution to a wider goal of movement-building, change-making, and revolution. Within this framework, I seek to deconstruct the ways in which our physical space has been constructed and analyze the resulting oppression and marginalization that individuals with disabilities face within these physical spaces. As a part of this analysis, I will explore the potential for revolutionary reconceptualization of our physical space with DeafSpace as a case study, making accessibility, inclusivity, and comfort the forefront of design.

Rooted in a feminist epistemology, this work and research is partially based on standpoint theory: the idea that research is best conducted by and for the marginalized, studying from the “bottom up” as opposed to traditional “top down.” Personal experience is deeply rooted in all research, whether acknowledged or not. While I, myself, am temporarily physically able-bodied, my mother is physically disabled and thus I have navigated much of the world alongside her experiences. My research and call to action are both influenced by these experiences; I have considered physical spaces, and movement within them, far more often as a result of her disability and physical limitations.

The goal within this reach is to acknowledge our inaccessible, uncomfortable physical spaces, and advocate for more inclusive architecture and design. Airplanes, concerts, shopping malls, even polling places (National Council on Disability, 2013)—all commonly accessible in able-bodied people’s lives—become nearly impossible to navigate from the neglect of architects and engineers. By revolutionizing our conception of our physical space, we can make our society more accommodating and comfortable for people with various disabilities who comprise approximately 12.6% of the United States (Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2016).

DeafSpace, a revolutionary design technique catering to deaf folks’ needs in navigating buildings, is a potential case study for laying the groundwork of this intentional developmental design. There are five main tenets of DeafSpace’s design (Gallaudet University, 2016):
I. **Sensory Reach:** Restructuring spacial orientation, allowing for full 360-degree “wayfinding.” This may include semi-transparent walls or doors, as deaf folks are generally more sensitive to background visuals and movement. This can help cue them to entering persons, ongoing conversations, a busy conference room, or expressions/gestures of others.

II. **Space and Proximity:** Allowing optimal space for sign language and gesturing. As signers necessitate more room to gesture, especially as participants in conversation grow, this tenet calls for ample room sizing, furniture positioning, and avoiding limiting protrusions.

III. **Mobility and Proximity:** Allowing for signers to walk and talk at the same time, with ample space for movement and hazard prevention. This may manifest in wider hallways, broader staircases, and rounded wall corners.

IV. **Light and Color:** As visual communication is essential for deaf folks, poor lighting or contrast makes signing especially exhausting. By avoiding glares, limiting shadow patterns, eliminating backlight, and diffusing harsh sunlight, softer lighting and coloring can be utilized to make visual communication easier.

V. **Acoustics:** Not all deaf people are completely lacking all hearing capabilities; therefore, background reverberations or acoustics may be incredibly distracting for those with some hearing or cochlear implants. By improving the acoustics (through materials and surface-building), individuals with some hearing can be made more comfortable.

DeafSpace stands as a radical, revolutionary example of potential for change within architectural and engineering spaces. Within these designs, accessibility and comfort are intentionally prioritized; in a world where the privileged are often invisible, cloaked in normalized assumptions, this distinct shift in design-making brings inclusivity to the forefront.

Makerspaces—innovative physical spaces where individuals can gather to spread ideas, build, tinker, and network—are becoming popular in the engineering culture today and there is a movement to consciously build these makerspaces with intentionality for people with disabilities. Makerspaces can, and should, be restructured with open
pathways, adjustable desks and whiteboards, braille labels for tools and equipment, easily moveable furniture, large-print signs, assistive technology, etcetera (Burgstahler, Cakmak, Steele, & Blaser, 2015). As makerspaces are a place for community, inspiration, and development, all community members should be equally welcomed into these spaces to participate. “Making a Makerspace? Guidelines for Accessibility and Universal Design” outlines dozens of questions developers should ask themselves before creating one of these spaces. However, should these questions be limited to makerspaces and specialized buildings alone, or be more readily applied in common building developments?

There is absolutely a clear difference between apathetic, regulated accessibility and sympathetic, intentional comfort. Ramps outside of buildings, for example, are often *accessible*, but *uncomfortable*, placed at the back of buildings, forcing individuals with mobility disabilities to maneuver at the demand of able-bodied individuals. Able-bodied architects perhaps concern themselves more with the aesthetics of the building, as opposed to inclusivity. Inclusion of people with disabilities is often an afterthought; a regulation to abide by. Thus, wheelchair spaces are segregated and ramps are hidden behind the facade of buildings. We must transform our thinking to view these design techniques as inspiring, rather than limiting; liberatory, rather than regulatory.

Integrating this into all architecture would be truly revolutionary; creating a checklist for accessibility and comfort for every physical space would literally result in a new physical world. DeafSpace is a radical idea, but these basic alternative development strategies can be created for every building, not only highly specialized ones.

Direct solutions regarding this issue are clear, albeit incomplete. Representation of people with disabilities in engineering is incredibly low: “in 2008, students with disabilities received 1% to 3% of the doctorates in most science and engineering fields” (Sevo, 2012), compared to the aforementioned 12.6% of people with disabilities in the
United States (Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2016). Additionally, it has been shown that marginalized communities can often produce better, and more intentionally inclusive work, than privileged communities; their “funds of knowledge” that stray from the norm benefit their capacity for innovation and progressive development (Smith & Lucena, 2015). Increased representation can transform our physical spaces, empowering people with disabilities to revolutionize our world and how we navigate it.

However, this should not serve as the beginning and end of our endeavors: “the idea that marginalized citizens are somehow naturally interested in the technical problems of their own communities is problematic” (Slaton, 2010). We must not simply recruit individuals with disabilities into architecture and engineering fields with expectations for them to solve “their own” problems. Rather, we must revolutionize architecture and engineering as a whole, and bring able-bodied architects and engineers into this conversation as well. We must utilize inclusive checklists as developed by Sheryl Burgstahler: identifying the space, defining the universe, involving consumers and stakeholders, and then adopting guidelines or standards, rather than the reverse order (Burgstahler, 2012). These developers have a role to serve their community, and develop spaces that are accessible and comfortable for everyone, regardless of their capabilities.

Inclusive development and revolutionizing the physical space around us can, and must, be included in our vision of a feminist utopia. If the feminist mission is to eradicate all oppressions that women face, each intersecting identity must be considered and explicitly accommodated and quite literally, built into our feminisms.
References


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The Historical Roots of Stereotypes of Black Women Established by the Old South

By Cristina Tenreiro

ABSTRACT. During slavery, conditions existed under which white masters would rape their black females slaves. These conditions are part of the larger narrative existing after the abolition of slavery. Throughout American history, these women have never given consent for the life of slavery that was forced upon them or for the rapes that occurred. Thanks to popular constructions in media and conversations about feminism, the ideology that black women are overly sexual still endures into the 21st century. The roots of rape culture in slavery have ultimately resulted in a creation of stereotypes for black women that are untrue.

Introduction
In the Old South, during a dark period of American history, there existed a system of slavery. Many of the secrets of this system would go undisclosed (Clinton, 2013/1982). The conditions that existed during slavery, where white masters would rape their black female slaves, are part of a larger narrative after the abolition of the slave trade. This cycle of abuse from masters to their enslaved women may be thought of as a contributing factor to shaping black women’s sexuality and motherhood in the public eye from slavery to the present. This well-known “secret” in plantation life later translates to current stereotypes that black women are generally overly sexual and poor mothers. During slavery, black enslaved women had no control over their bodies and were in compromised living arrangements as mothers. Their bodies were commodities and they were objectified by their
masters. Therefore, the argument stands that due to a history of masters raping their female slaves, black women's sexuality and motherhood are judged negatively because of the trends established by the assaults. Furthermore, the over-sexualization of enslaved black females stemmed from slave wives thought of as “cheating” on their slave husbands. The lack of their own control over their bodies led to the belief that they were sexually available. It was easy for slave masters to gain access to these women despite their lack of or ability to provide consent. The result of these sexual assaults, which often led to childbirth, is the historical perception of black women as being poor mothers because they “abandoned” or neglected their children and they beat their children on top of being single mothers.

**Historical Context**

The belief that black women are overly sexual and bad mothers can be seen as a result of the abolition of the slave trade in 19th century America. The slave population steadily began to skyrocket at this time, despite no more slaves coming into America. In 1830 the number of slaves was around 2 million and in 1860 that number increased to 4 million (Roark, 2009). Slave women having children was imperative to the success of the institution of slavery and the wealth of white plantation families. The increase in slaves could have been the result of many different factors, however, the trend of masters raping their slaves and having mulatto children by them is one of the contributing reasons. As Block noted, while some of these children were born to both slave parents, “Even if only a small percentage of the master-slave sexual relationships resulted in master-fathered enslaved children, the number of American mixed-race children born into slavery suggest that such relations were far more common than surviving documents reveal” (Block 2006). In other words, the occurrence of slave women having children by their masters was extremely common—masters just denied that it happened.
Sexual Exploitation
The time period in the South, after the disbandment of the slave trade but before the Civil War, was marked by white male patriarchy as well as dependency. For the slave master and his white family, home and work were closely knit together, and everyone depended on the patriarch for survival. This was exceedingly true for black slave women as they often worked in the homes of their masters and were in close quarters with their master’s family. The male patriarch of the South maintained a high level of control over his slaves and over his family, leaving him with an extraordinary amount of power to extort. As a result masters would use their power on their female slaves in ways other than for house or fieldwork. A master used his enslaved women as sexual objects whom he believed that because they worked in such close quarters to his home that, “the duties of servants and slaves also implied that dependent women would naturally desire to sexually serve [him]” (Block, 2006).

Due to the nature of master-slave relationships, black women were naturally dependent upon their masters for their livelihood. The sense of dependency in plantation life created a position where enslaved women were thought of as vulnerable and technically sexually available, allowing for masters to believe that the abuse was acceptable.

Instances of rape were so common that even a former slave thought of it as, “the strongest reason why southerners stick with such tenacity to their ‘peculiar institution,’ ...because licentious white men could not carry out their wicked purposes among the defenseless colored population, as they do now, without being exposed and punished by law if slavery was abolished” (Yarbrough, 2005). The actions of the masters led to the promotion of black female bodies being sexually available because they used them in that way, not because the female slaves were inviting of these interactions.

Former slave Harriet Jacobs recounts her life during slavery when she was forced to make a difficult decision about her sexuality. She tells the story of her slave master, Dr. Flint, who would whisper foul words in her ear and make it
explicitly clear that he planned to make a shed apart from his home for which he could use Harriet as he pleased. Although Dr. Flint never committed rape she describes the difficult turmoil in her decision to avoid his advances. She explains how, “under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me” (Jacobs, 1861). She made the decision to pursue relations with a white neighbor next door and became pregnant on purpose. Stories such as this one can take on a twisted meaning for society to believe that Harriet Jacobs was overly sexual in creating her own pregnancy, but it was a difficult decision that was made to avoid being raped by her slave master. Simply because she was avoiding rape in this way does not mean her choice did not come without a stigma from other black enslaved women at the time. In recalling her feelings, Jacobs saw the circumstance as bringing shame to her grandmother, “who had tried so hard to shield me from harm. I knew that I was the greatest comfort in her old age, and that it was a source of pride to her that I had not degraded myself, like most of the slaves. I wanted to confess to her that I was no longer worthy of her love” (Jacobs, 1861). She claimed her sexuality for herself by choosing the white neighbor rather than allowing the master to rape her but the shame she felt inside herself and the mention of her grandmother being proud that she had not “degraded herself,” displays how black females over-sexualization was felt by the black enslaved women themselves. This decision made by Jacobs did not come without extreme difficulty. She refers to slavery as a monster that was too strong for her. Yet, her story and her internal struggle allude to the opinion that these were women who were overly sexual.

While black women may be seen as overtly sexual this is not directly correlated with how most slave women felt about sex. Historian Brenda Stevenson (2014) writes,

 Slave women usually frowned on blatant female sexual exhibition or promiscuity. This is not to say that they were
ashamed of their sexuality. Nor were they shy about the promise of sexual pleasure and human procreation that they as women embodied. There were rules however, which guided their sexual expression, rules which many of them respected and tried to incorporate in their social lives.

It was not that female slaves were overly sexual, but instead that the circumstances of rape culture under slavery created situations in which it could be portrayed that they acted in this way. They had no control over their bodies during this time. For example, slave men and women sometimes engaged in marital unions, however it was, “impossible for some slave women to submit to their husband’s desire for sexual exclusivity” (Stevenson, 2014). This was a direct result of masters raping their slaves, even with the knowledge that they were married to another slave, masters created a situation in which wives would have “cheated” on their “husbands.” Having a slave husband did not stop masters’ advances. The enslaved woman did not consent to sex with her master, yet was still seen as cheating on her husband, who legally was not her husband because marriages were illegal for slaves.

Slave marriages made rape culture all the more strenuous for slave women as it reconfigured the definition and boundaries of consent, providing that there was none when it came to slaves and their white masters. Former slave, J.W. Lindsay, describes a situation in which a female slave, “had a husband...but that made no difference; [the master] used her whenever he saw fit. He generally carried a white oak cane...and if the women did not submit, he would make nothing of knocking them right down” (1863). In masters’ minds, then, “slaves could not only be forced to consent, but this force was also refigured as consent” (Block, 2006). This understanding of consent is extremely important because it alone implies that black slave women were welcoming these sexual encounters when in fact their lack of compliance and lack of ownership over their bodies negated the possibility of consent. The sex seemed welcomed to masters because they acquiesced, but ultimately it was forced.
Further contributing to the notion of excessive sexual behavior was the belief that, “because enslaved women could not legally marry and have legitimate sexual relations, all of their sexual behavior appeared illicit” (Block, 2006). It created a double edged sword, where black enslaved women who were “faithful” to their slave husbands, in that they were not raped, were still seen in a bad light because their marriages were not legal and their behavior was characterized as immoral. Which makes Harriet Jacobs life all the more complex: she felt shame in her behavior by choosing to have a child by the white neighbor in an effort to avoid being raped by her master. In any case Jacobs’ sexuality would be seen as illicit according to her and her grandmother, and had she been raped by Dr. Flint it would have also infringed on her virtue. There was no circumstance for these women to express any kind of sexuality without judgment. Jacobs’ recalls her mistress speaking to a fellow female slave when she asked to marry a colored man. Mrs. Flint answered with, “‘do you suppose that I will have you tending my children with the children of that nigger?’ The girl to whom she said this had a mulatto child...not acknowledge by its father. The poor black man who loved her would have been proud to acknowledge his helpless offspring” (Jacobs, 1861). These family ties and relations with genuine life partners were illicit even if borne of love, yet masters were still able to contribute to the stereotype that black women were overly sexual because they tainted the very marriages they deemed illegal.

**Motherhood**

Circumstances of black female slaves being raped often led to illegitimate children, making them single mothers and creating possibilities where they could be seen as bad mothers. Despite having no control over their own bodies or the lives of their children, the actions that followed their rape led to this assumption. In cases where slave masters impregnated their female slaves and denied these “mulatto” children as their own, slave mothers were unable to properly
care for their children. Historian Nell Painter (2002) argued, “Slave children, particularly whose mothers worked in the fields, were also very likely to suffer physical and emotional neglect, because their mothers were rarely allowed much time off the job to spend with their children,” which means slave children suffered from neglect by their mothers, under a situation that the mother had no control over. These mothers also faced unique circumstances in child rearing. In many cases, similar to masters, slave mothers beat their children to condition them for a life of slavery to become good obedient slaves (Painter, 2002). While this was done to make their children’s lives easier and make them emotionally stronger for the challenges life would bring them, it set up a stigma in which the mothers were seen as abusive.

When a slave mother had a child by her master she would inevitably become a single mother. For example, a slave woman who had a child by her master while she was married to her slave husband, a man named Jacob, who had, “helped rear this child and built a family with Jane for six years,” still exemplified single motherhood when she, “and her child were sold away at the request of their master’s new wife” (Yarbrough, 2005). This shows how enslaved mothers were typically single mothers because masters denied that these half white children belonged to them and did not support marital unions and let a black stepfather take their place. Alternatively, if the white mistresses became aware that their husband had fathered a slave, often she would have the child and mother sent away to prevent further “temptation”. The slave mother was then left alone with the burden of child rearing and working in the fields, which would lead to patterns of neglect and abuse. Through no fault of their own, black women are continuously blamed for these same trends in motherhood that has been shaped by slavery.

**Conclusion**

The conditions of slavery for enslaved women, specifically when masters raped their female slaves, are contributing factors framing black women as overly sexual and poor
mothers. “A slave woman’s sexuality and her reproductive organs were key to her identity as a woman,” writes historian Brenda Stevenson (2002). These women were seen as overly sexual because their marriages to other slaves were not legal, making relations with their husbands impure. Rape by masters contributed to their sense of over-sexualization by taking the opportunity away from these women to be faithful, and sent the message that their bodies were objects owned by white men. Even in situations such as Harriet Jacobs’ where she avoided rape by becoming pregnant with a more caring white neighbor, in a sense she compromised her sexuality and purity because she sought out this relationship while avoiding rape. Many of these instances of rape by masters led to slave women having children by them and it created a disadvantageous situation for them as mothers. As forced single mothers, they had to make difficult decisions when raising their children and often they were not able to be proper mothers to their children because they were forced to work in the fields. Furthermore, they lived in a society where their children could be sold at any given moment, taken away from them, ruining their ability to be mothers even more or protect their young from the harsh realities of slave life. The over-sexualization of female slaves by masters through sex without consent and the resulting effects these women had to face as mothers created a condition where negative stereotypes were formed. Created while black women were enslaved, this narrative carries over into 20th and 21st century stereotypes in America that now define black women and frame how society looks at them because strong connections that were made during slavery frame their sexuality and shaped view on their motherhood.

Connections to 20th and 21st Century America
With the background narrative for black women created by slavery, one can see how 20th and 21st century discussions of black women are inevitably framed by the past. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the “welfare queen” identity given to black mothers in the 1980s. During this
time, "the welfare queen image implied that black women not only cheated the system but also lived extravagantly on the proceeds. Integrally tied to reproduction, the welfare queen’s trump card lay in her alleged disregard for birth control and propensity for having more children than she could afford...racist ideology maintained that, while white slave masters no longer profited from black women’s offspring, black women now claimed public tax dollars for their profligacy" (Springer, 2008).

This argument by Kimberly Springer directly highlights the lasting consequences of slave women who were raped and had mulatto children by their slave masters. As Springer points out, this thought that black women were profiting off of American tax dollars is the result of white men no longer profiting from these children as property to sell and or use for labor. Therefore, in the 1980s this terminology was coined and reflected that black women were overly sexual and cheating the welfare system when during slavery this narrative was largely the same, only reversed. White men were cheating the slavery system once the slave trade ended to create more profit. They raped their slaves to produce another generation of free labor for their own economic gain. In both cases the only people getting hurt are black women, who both in slavery and 20th century America were thought of as overly sexual because of their connection to reproduction.

Thanks to popular constructions in media and conversations about feminism, this ideology that black women are overly sexual endures in the 21st century. Ebony Magazine writes, “the way young Black girls are sexualized without their consent,” is one of feminists’ most prominent challenges (Lemieux, 2014). This is directly related to their sexuality that was established by slavery. Throughout American history these women have never given consent, not to the life of slavery that was forced upon them nor to the rapes that occurred under slavery. Young black girls are being sexualized without their consent because they have always been sexualized without their consent.
References


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The Complex Intersections of Being a Latina Immigrant Survivor: How Multiple Systems of Oppression Enable Intimate Partner Violence

By Zulema Aleman

**ABSTRACT.** The realm of intimate partner violence education, prevention and awareness is one that is currently growing. Even though there are improvements happening, there are communities being left out of both the movement and body of research. This paper aims at connecting the stories of undocumented Latinas who are survivors of intimate partner violence in the central coast of California with the current body of research on immigrant survivors. In doing so, it seeks to explore the areas where the body of research matches the stories of these women in the central coast of California and where there is a lack of knowledge from both the efforts in this field and the body of research. The stories of immigrant survivors shared in this report were collected by RISE on January 2015 to March 2015. RISE serves as a non-profit organization and resource for survivors and their families of sexual assault and intimate partner violence in San Luis Obispo County in California. RISE provided services to these women in one of their three locations in the San Luis Obispo County and who had experienced abuse as closely as a month prior to the January 2015 survey to five years.

**Introduction**

According to a recent national survey, 37% of Latina women have been in an abusive relationship during their lifetime (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). This statistic might not seem high, but as Hanzen and Soriano (2007) highlight in their study, “our understanding of intimate partner violence in the
Latino population as whole is relatively limited.” Hanzen and Soriano also mention that this limited knowledge becomes a bigger issue with specific subgroups within the Latinx community, such as those with an undocumented status and those who are migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. Similarly, a study of Latina immigrant survivors make the point that even with studies focusing on the Latinx community, it is still mixed together as if everyone who is Latinx and were in an abusive relationship had the same experience (Reina, Lohman, & Maldonado, 2014). Reina and colleagues highlight how specific subgroups, such as those defined by “national origin, citizenship status, language proficiency, and length of residence in the US” are routinely ignored by researchers and findings are generalized to all Latinxs. This generalization is toxic, as it reinforces a perceived homogeneity across Latin America, which stretches over two continents. All of these different identities play a part in how someone experiences abuse from a partner and the access to resources they might have based on it. For example, if there is a language barrier and the agency is not equipped to serve that person, it leaves someone without resources, even when they are actively seeking help.

An example of lack of cultural sensitivity in this field can be seen through a survey done by Medina & Vasquez (2004), which showed that out of 92 IPV related agencies they surveyed, 25% of them had no bilingual resources in the form of staff members even though 50% of the agencies reported that many of their clients did not speak, read or understand English. With limited knowledge due to the lack of studies and focus on Latinx immigrants of various backgrounds, it can be seen how advocacy in the field is falling behind with lack of resources that are not only Latinx-focused, but focused on many more communities who go through similar situations but in different contexts and by different factors.

It is important to note though, that when working with participants that come from a different culture, the researcher must not focus solely on culture as a factor. As
perfectly put by Reina et al., “Research on domestic violence within minority groups must not solely focus on victims, perpetrators, communities or cultures, but rather must be viewed within the political, historical, and economic context in which domestic violence take place.” Even though culture definitely has an impact and these concepts are interconnected, by focusing on the outside factors, the whole picture can be seen. Silvia-Martinez (2015) suggests in her research that there is an internal struggle Latina immigrants go through with emotions like, “fear, shame, uncertainty and desperation” but it occurs due to external factors that restrict and marginalize ethnic minorities. Examples of this can be seen with policies in the United States. Even though policies like the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 exist and create pathways towards citizenship to facilitate protection for undocumented survivors, there are several restrictions and hoops for survivors to jump through before being safe. Additionally, those policies can be overturned or changed, so there is no reassurance that these laws and policies will remain in place or be improved upon.

**Method:**
**Background**
The data used for this paper was independently obtained by RISE in partnership with the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter via a grant awarded by the Blue Shield of California Foundation to these two advocacy groups. The Blue Shield of California Foundation is a foundation that financially assists programs across the United States focused on solving local issues surrounding domestic violence. It was agreed by both organizations that there was a need to build a knowledge base for the medical providers about intimate partner violence when it came to screening, mandated reporting and treating clients. The organizations decided to create a survey that would serve as a comprehensive assessment of past and current survivors’ experiences with the healthcare system
and medical providers in regards to being in a violent partnership and to inform future advocacy (Appendix A).
It is important to note that this survey was formed as a needs assessment and the development of the research of this paper came after the survey design, data collection and implementation of the grant program. Therefore, the survey used is not focused on immigrant Latinas (the focus of this paper) but does contain comprehensive information of immigrant Latina survivors for the San Luis Obispo County, which has not been studied or compared to the body of research as a whole.

Sample
The selection of participants was done in a very informal way; there were no criteria to meet for this survey besides being a survivor of intimate partner violence that occurred within San Luis Obispo County. Initially, the survey was spread internally to current clients. There was a realization that this would only gather information from a small fraction of the community. This method would only collect data on those who had used either organization as a resource very recently and therefore, exclude survivors from the past. The organizations then decided to advertise the survey in the broader community through paid advertisements and partnerships with other organizations related to the work done by RISE and the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter.

Procedure
RISE and the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter had the goal of receiving data for about 200 survivors in order to form a robust analysis of the way healthcare was being provided and utilized in the San Luis Obispo County. In order to achieve this goal, the survey was provided in two formats and two languages. One was in a Google Forms to be taken online in either English or Spanish and the other one was offered in paper form in either English or Spanish. The paper form was only available in the office. Both the Spanish and English surveys submitted through hard copies were input
into a Microsoft Excel Sheet by a RISE intern. The option of being entered into a raffle to win a $100 gift card was used as an incentive.

**Measures**
This survey collected data from over 400 survivors and the survey focused on medical health care access and quality. Even though this is the case, some of the information (and data) will not be utilized for the purpose of this paper, but the content will be reviewed as a whole during this section. Additionally, it is important to note that this questionnaire was designed by a team from both the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter and RISE with the focus of their grant in mind. A more detailed version of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

**Demographic and background information.**
Information on gender identity, ethnicity, primary language, sexual orientation, dis/ability, income range and citizenship status were gathered from the participants. When asked about dis/ability, the options given for this question where “None,” “Physical” and “Mental” and participants were able to chose multiple answers. When asked about their total annual income, participants had a few ranges to choose from:

- $0
- $1,000 - $5,000
- $5,001 – $12,000
- $12,001 – $24,000
- $24,001 - $40,000
- $40,000 – $55,000
- $55,001 – $70,000
- $70,001 or more

The option to leave answers blank or refuse to answer was available for all questions and to all participants. Only the data from Latinas are analyzed.
**Intimate partner violence information.**

Information on the form of intimate partner violence that survivors had experienced was collected through identification of various options. The options offered were (a) physical abuse; (b) sexual abuse; (c) emotional and psychological abuse; (d) financial abuse; (e) reproductive coercion; and (f) spiritual abuse. Reproductive coercion is a term used to describe violence aimed at reproductive health and the ability to make decisions about one’s reproductive health. Spiritual abuse is a two-fold term including the use of religion as a tactic to keep the survivor in the abusive relationship, but it can also mean not allowing someone to practice their religion as a form of abuse and power. Participants were also asked how recent was the latest abuse and their age when it occurred, if they sought medical assistance, and if they did not, the participants were asked why they had not.

**Medical health care accessibility related information.**

Since this survey was originally designed to assess the resources and knowledge of medical health care access in the San Luis Obispo County, information about the survivors’ health insurance was collected, as well as information and ratings regarding their experience with medical providers, if any.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this survey was guided by the Reina et al. (2013) qualitative study on Latina immigrants, such that the data was examined multiple times in search of themes. This was done for multiple reasons, one of them being the flexibility given to the participants in their answers. Even though participants were given a set of options to choose from, some opted to write in portions of their narrative, which provided qualitative data.

When it came to looking at the causal factors of intimate partner violence and being a Latina immigrant, the strategy used in the Reina et al. study of reading and
rereading the set of data given and coding themes was used (Table 2).

**Results:**

**Demographics**
The survey had 419 responses but as mentioned previously, this study will be focusing on the individuals who identify as both immigrant and Latinx (See Table 1). Out of those 419 participants, 78 identified in the survey as immigrants, both undocumented and authorized immigrants.

Seventeen of the 78 immigrant participants selfidentified as a “legal immigrant” and the rest selfidentified as “undocumented immigrants” when asked. All 78 immigrant participants identified as Latinx, which was unsurprising since the survey was only offered in either Spanish or English and the majority (89.7%) of the immigrant participants selected Spanish as their “first (native) language” on the survey.

The data from the Google Forms and Google Sheets accounted for 75% of the total number of surveys in Spanish. Including all classifications of citizenship, the majority of the surveys were completed in English (84%). Out of the survey from immigrants 85% of the survivors felt more comfortable answering it in Spanish. When it came to sexual orientation, 71% of participants selected “straight,” 6% selected “bisexual,” and 23% did not reply to this question.

When it came to dis/ability, 67% of participants answered as to not having any disability. Twenty-nine percent said to have a mental disability and 19% said to have a physical disability. Eighty-six percent of the participants fell between the $0-24,000 annual income options, with 23% of the total number of participants reporting making an annual income of $0. Only 2.6% of the immigrant population in this group made over $40,000 but none made over $55,001. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median annual income for San Luis Obispo in 2015 was $60,691.
Intimate Partner Violence
As mentioned in the Methods section, participants were asked to define the type of abuse they had experienced. It can be seen in Table 2 that emotional and psychological abuse was the most common type of abuse experienced in this group (94.9%), followed by physical abuse (75.6%) and sexual abuse (56.4%). Additionally, participants were asked if they had sought help during the time they were in the abusive relationship and 93.6% said they had not. Only 5 of the survivors were able to disclose to medical providers about what they were going through. When looking at some of the reasons why survivors did not disclose, they gave a variety of answers but following ones were the most common: lack of knowledge of resources, lack of money, embarrassment, depression, fear of deportation, and fear of partner.

Fear of their partner (97.4%) and lack of knowledge of resources (96.1%) were the most common across all groups, regardless of their primary language, income, and legal status. Sixty participants (76.9%) listed fear of deportation as a reason why they did not disclose.

Discussion
The data that RISE and the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter provided accurately reflected what the existing body of research thus far has defined as barriers. For example, if the statistic of “Fear of Deportation” as a reason why a survivor did not disclose to a medical provider is closely examined with the general demographics, it can be seen that 61 of the 78 participants listed themselves as undocumented, thus, it can be said that 98.4% of the undocumented survivors feared deportation.

This result from the survey can be seen applied in the current general political climate where in Denver, Colorado, four cases of domestic violence filed by undocumented survivors have been dropped due to the fear of deportation, and they are not the only ones (Glenn, 2017). A similar situation happened in Texas, while a woman was seeking a
restraining order from her abusive husband in a courthouse, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) took her into custody (Gonzales, 2017). Thus, it can be safely assumed that this fear influenced why they did not report the abuse, and knowing this information is essential when trying to make resources more inclusive in including this community and accommodating to their specific and unique experiences and barriers.

Even though the influence of religion was not examined as a reason why some survivors might not disclose, spiritual abuse was reported by almost 18% of the participants as a form of abuse they have experienced. In a review of the literature done by Choi, Elkins, & Disney (2016), the intersection of immigration status, gender, religion and culture create the experience of each immigrant who is in an abusive relationship but the focus was given to how religion can be used to sustain abuse. “Religious beliefs are often used by abusers, family, friends, and the faith community to: (a) justify [intimate partner violence], (b) blame abuse women, and (c) encourage abused women to continue to be patient, forgive their abusers, and keep the family together,” and this is something that can happen in the Latinx community, since a lot of Latinxs are Catholic and Catholicism does not recognize divorce (Choi et al., 2016, page 3).

In this literature review, Choi et al. also mention that because religion does play a significant supportive role in the lives of immigrants, often abused women seek refuge within the religious institution and religious leaders. Choi et al. point out that this is especially so because it is a place where there is no fear of deportation. This is something that can, again, be seen happening, especially with the current political climate. In Colorado, a woman who was due to check in with ICE went to her church instead to seek refuge and according to the NPR author, this is not a rare occurrence. Additionally, “Across the country, dozens of churches and other faith communities say they’re preparing to offer
sanctuary to immigrants who are in the country illegally” (Rose, 2017).

Another connection that the data reflected with the body of research was the idea of shame. In this survey, shame was not strictly defined but it is commonly known that bringing shame to the family and feeling embarrassment about abuse falls on the woman since she is blamed for her abuse is common in Latinx families. Both Silva-Martinez (2016) and Choi et al. (2016) explore the concept of shame for not being a perfect wife. As mentioned previously, the responsibility is put on women for their abuse and they are expected to uphold patriarchal norms to keep the family together. Participants in Silvia-Martinez’ qualitative study explained this concept and how they are expected to keep those private matters in the bedroom and within the family, in keeping with Choi and colleagues. In her study, Silvia-Martinez takes it one step further by affirming that, “Silence as a result of shame not only allowed the violence to continue but also prevented [survivors] from seeking help from formal and informal sources of support,” which is clearly, very dangerous.

Lastly, exploring the factor of “lack of money” as a reason to not disclose or seek medical attention when it was needed with the reported annual income of the participants is very important. Over 80% of the participants in this study made less than $24,001 and 23% of this sample group reported making no annual income at all. It can be safely assumed that this creates a very dangerous situation for survivors. Survivors might have to become dependent of their partner to care for the family financially, and therefore create a situation where they are not able to leave or they can fall frequently into poverty and homelessness when they are trying to leave an abusive partner (Moe, 2007). Several other studies show the intersection of getting out of an abusive relationship with homelessness and poverty (Baker, Cook, and Norris, 2003; Browne and Bassuk 1997; Zorza, 1991).
Considerations
Looking at the experiences of this group of Latina survivors, there are a lot of intersections that can create barriers due to the lack of cultural competency when it comes to accessing resources when in an abusive relationship. The data collected by RISE and the San Luis Obispo Women’s Shelter gives an initial look at the immigrant community in terms of domestic violence. Since this survey was not made specifically to look at the Latinx immigrant community in San Luis Obispo County and their experience with an abusive relationship, there are several holes and places where the research can be taken a bit deeper to be able to provide the best possible services to this community.

As reflected in the recent events of deportations of survivors in Texas and survivors dropping their domestic violence cases in Colorado, policy changes are happening that place this community even more at risk and less likely to pursue their domestic violence cases due to the fear of retaliation. Providing resources that are culturally sensitive is essential. For example, it would be beneficial for local intimate partner violence resource centers to create and foster relationships with the local religious institutions. As demonstrated by Choi et al., religion and religious institutions play a significant role in the way immigrants live their lives and it would also be extremely beneficial if religious leaders were trained to serve as advocates within their religious institution.

Looking into the experiences of Latina immigrants allows for a deeper understanding of intimate partner violence within marginalized communities. With this, advocacy is able to expand as well. For example, knowing how different groups interact with resources and how they get them demonstrates that networking needs to happen with religious institutions and trained advocates are necessary in those places. Additionally, knowing what works for Latina immigrant survivors and what does not is also important. During this political climate, many undocumented survivors might decide to not file a domestic
violence case, but still could benefit from other resources such as a shelter, a food pantry, a place for their children to be looked after while they are at work are ways that a survivor can get away from an abusive partner and begin building their own life. Expanding the subjects of our research is essential as it allows for translation into advocacy for more effective and culturally sensitive organizations.

References


Appendix A
Survey
1. What is your gender identity?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your primary (native) language?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. Do you have a disability or impairment? If so, please indicate.
6. What type(s) of domestic abuse (intimate partner violence) have you experienced?
7. When was your most recent incident of abuse?
8. What was your age at the time of your most recent abuse?
9. Please indicate which of the following agencies you may have received assistance from in the past.
10. What was your yearly income (from all sources) at the time of your most recent abuse?
11. Please indicate your U.S. residency status at the time of your most recent abuse.
12. What was your health insurance status at the time of your most recent abuse?
13. Please indicate your U.S. residency status at the time of your most recent abuse.
14. What was your health insurance status at the time of your most recent abuse?
15. During your abuse, did you seek out medical assistance?
16. Please mark the reasons you did not seek out medical assistance.
17. Of all the reasons listed above, which was the PRIMARY reason why you did not seek out medical assistance?
18. Please indicate what type of medical services you sought.
19. Did the medical staff ask you about domestic violence?
20. Please rate the SENSITIVITY of the medical staff when they asked you. (i.e. how the question was phrased, the tone of how it was asked, etc.)

21. Please rate how ATTENTIVE the medical staff was when they asked you. (i.e. the posture and body language of the medical staff, how available the medical staff was to hear your answer, etc.)

22. Did you disclose to the medical professional about your abuse?

23. What was the reason(s) you did not disclose?

24. How would you rate the overall QUALITY of the medical assistance you received?

25. What were the outcomes of the medical assistance you received?

26. Please share any additional comments or feedback you have regarding your healthcare experience. (Optional)
### Table 1

#### Demographics (N=78)

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Table 2

Intimate Partner Violence Demographics

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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional &amp; Psychological</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Abuse</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive Coercion</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sought Medical Help</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reason For Not Disclosing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack Of Knowledge of Local Resources</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack Of Money</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame/Embarrassment</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Deportation</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Partner</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>97.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Participants had the ability to choose more than one option.
Zulema Aleman is a Psychology major and Women's and Gender Studies minor at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. She is currently the president of the Women's & Gender Studies Honor Society and works for the department as well. She also works for Safer, her campus' confidential resource for sexual assault, domestic violence and stalking. She works with undocumented survivors there and this paper came from the experiences so far in her advocacy work. Through that, it was learning and being able to share a story that is close and personal to her family, but it so common for this community.
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