

Beyond the Binary

AN EXPLORATION INTO BLACK QUEER IMAGINATION

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Queer:

- (noun)
 - Strange, odd.
 - Denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.
- (verb)
 - To spoil or ruin.¹

To be Black is to be queer.

Blackness and Black peoples are inherently queer within the context of our current post-colonial neoliberal world. Black peoples have been forced to perform heteronormativity within the rigid boundaries of the gender binary, set by European colonizers, and maintained by systems of capitalism and white supremacy.² Within this exploration, I put forth that any ideas of a collective Black healing must include a reimagining of gender expression; constant efforts to force the ‘square peg’ of Blackness into the ‘round hole’ of the gender binary wear away at the body, mind, and spirit, and don’t allow us to experience the fullness of life to be found in love.

Blackness and the Black body have been queer since the early days of European contact. Our strangeness has been ascribed to the ways that we related to each other, the oddness of our birthing practices and social hierarchies, the way families were structured, and societies built have caused uproar in more “polite”³ settings since time immemorial. The shape and appearance of our bodies were shockingly vulgar when juxtaposed against the beauty standards and ideals of colonizing nations. The very existence of these bodies and relationships queered the notions of gender and sexuality for Europeans, creating a

¹ Definition from Merriam-Webster dictionary

² Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

³ Read here: white.

cognitive dissonance. As accounts of contact with Black Africans began to circulate and the system of chattel slavery began, Europeans and early Americans struggled with the conflicting ideas of Blackness as exotic and illicit, titillating and terrorizing.

“Writers who articulated religious and moral justifications for the slave trade simultaneously grappled with the character of a contradictory female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available, and untouchable, productive, and reproductive, beautiful, and black. By the time an eighteenth-century Carolina slaveowner could look at an African woman with the detached gaze of an investor, travelers and philosophers had already subjected her to a host of taxonomic calculations. The meanings attached to the female African body were inscribed well before the establishment of England’s colonial American plantations, and the intellectual work necessary to naturalize African enslavement—that is, the development of racist discourse—was deeply implicated by gendered notions of difference and human hierarchy.”⁴(Morgan 18)

To quiet the uneasiness this created, Europe had to create a reason. Blackness was different, dangerous, and devious, and to control this inherent criminality and protect the sensibilities of white people, they must establish a system of subjugation and supremacy through which black bodies must perform the norms.

“Differences in gender and sexual expression were used to justify the subjugation of black bodies, along with imperialist expansion. As travelers and men of letters thought

⁴ Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*

through the thorny entanglements of skin color, complexion, features, and hair texture, they constructed weighty notions of civility, nationhood, citizenship, and manliness on the foundation of the amalgam of nature and culture. Given the ways in which appearance became a trope for civility and morality, it is no surprise to find gender located at the heart of Europeans' encounter with and musings over the connection between bodies and Atlantic economies." (Morgan 13)⁵

Performance of gender compliance and heteronormative behaviors became protection. As racism and discrimination became codified into law, racial and sexual minorities began to rely on the performance of cis-heterosexual white norms to protect themselves from the threat of injury and targeted harassment.

As movements for Black freedom and healing continue to gain traction, I believe it is crucial to address issues concerning sexual discrimination and Black queer freedom. As we begin to imagine large-scale divestment from the carceral state, as we engage in discourse around multigenerational households and the importance of community-based models of childrearing, and as we approach discussion concerning anti-capitalist praxis, a reimagining of queer identity and movement away from gender binaries must also be on the table. A freedom from violence against the Black body must include a freedom of identity and space for the exploration of self.

⁵ Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*

A key tenet of second-wave feminism holds that the personal is political⁶, and I also put forward that the person is political. The Black body is political. The body is the physical and political embodiment of personhood; its recognition is dependent upon acceptance.⁷ The reliance on performance of gender norms as a means of gaining acceptance of the Black body has led to a disregard of the flesh; the carnal, the erotic, the unbound, the free.

As Audre Lorde writes,

“This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.”⁸

The refusal to explore the erotic and the politics of desire forces the Black body to remain stagnant, locked in the struggle for acceptance into a system never meant to embrace it. The fluidity of the Black body is inherent, its queerness is evident in the way we have been Othered, categorized, cataloged, queried and studied. We are not meant to live by rules established under duress; what would it mean to find the freedom of imagination? How do we begin the process?

⁶ Hanisch, Carol. *The Personal is Political*.

⁷ Spillers, Hortense. *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*.

⁸ Lorde, Audre. *Uses of the Erotic*.

“I have seen, over and over, the connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our system and being able to access personal, relational and communal power. Conversely, I have seen how denying our fool, complex cells — denying our aliveness in our knees as living, sensual beings— increases the chance that we will be at odds with ourselves, our loved ones, our co-workers, and our neighbors on this planet.”(Brown 3)⁹

Divorcing ourselves from the rigidity of the gender binary opens us up to a multitude of possibilities, many of which have yet to be imagined. It is this radical imagination that becomes the vehicle for decolonization and freedom from the systems of white supremacy. The creation of racially gendered categories was built on racist and capitalist European standards, meant to subjugate and Other Black bodies (and other people of color). Performances of masculine or feminine, man or woman, have long been judged as authentic or inauthentic by its likeness to whiteness. Diverting from that allows for a richness in diversity and a embracing of the wholeness of the flesh. When we allow pleasure and fulfillment to be the driving force of our personal politic, we open ourselves up to the idea that we have the right and the responsibility to shape our lived realities.

“This world begs of us to be, to move out of scarcity, move out of fear, move out of crisis, and not imagine anything abundant or transformed, not to move out of desiring one another and being desired as powerful, fully living beings.”(Brown 7) ¹⁰

Any ideas of Black freedom, imagined or realized, must incorporate the fullness of the flesh, the possibilities of desire, the creation of community, and the divestment from the dregs of

⁹ Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Pleasure Activism: Reading Records*.

¹⁰ Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Pleasure Activism: Reading Records*.

racialized gender binaries to be able to fully encompass Blackness and begin the work of healing.

Works Referenced

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Presentation Reflection:

I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to present my paper to the class. Reading my words aloud allowed me to process my thoughts more clearly and outline my argument clearly. I have taken some of the feedback given to me and made note to add to my research, as I begin to build my portfolio and gather ideas around my capstone. As shared in class, I had questions around gender “roles” and gendered performance within Black queer communities that I wasn’t able to dive into. I wondered where these “archetypes” come from. When I hear “butch”, femme, queen, top, or bottom, there’s an image that comes to mind. Where did that come from, and why have we remained so committed to it? I also started to think about pornography, in Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic*, she pits pornography against eroticism and sexual pleasure. I wondered in places where that came from and what it would look like to incorporate pornography as a legitimate area of pleasure, as opposed to illicit or vulgarity. I wish I had more time to have a discussion with the class, as I’m sure this would have opened up a world of discovery for me.