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Sadomasochistic Sensations: A Phenomenological Analysis Of Black Ontology, Embodiment, And Transcendence

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SADOMASOCHISTIC SENSATIONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK ONTOLOGY, EMBODIMENT, AND TRANSCENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifteen years, feminists have challenged the notion that sexual sadomasochism perpetuates racial and gender-based violence, and instead claim that the practice can be a powerful site to control and subvert oppression. In this thesis, I contribute to this growing discourse and argue that sensations experienced during practices of Black sexual sadomasochism and attention to the feelings and affects that arise from them can be used to mediate Black being in a violently antiblack United States. Through applications of Black feminist thought, Black anti-humanism, and phenomenology, I claim that antiblack oppression denies Black people the experience of tactile sensation, which mediates the body's position as a perceiving subject. This denial of sensation, caused by colonial legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, commodification of the Black body, and by forced endurance of extreme violence, compromises Black ontology and ultimately denies access to the lived body and intersubjectivity. Close reading analysis of film pornography pieces *Connection First* (2023), and the written pornography piece "Reach" from the anthology *Kink: Stories,* demonstrates how attention to sensations experienced during Black sadomasochistic practice grants access to embodied subjectivity, and ultimately access to humanness. Additionally, recognition of Black sensation and embodied subjectivity breaks material, ontological, and epistemological histories that shape Black lives, allowing possibility for a fleeting existence outside of systems of antiblackness. Therefore, I argue that BDSM, a practice that is focused on sensation and evokes cultural memories of antiblack violence, may grant access to an ephemeral existence outside of these histories which dictate conditions of Black being. This movement, which I call transcendence, enables existence in a third-positionality between subject and object in which a person's existence is solely dictated by and for the self as opposed to being dictated amongst other subjects and objects. This shatters histories of antiblackness, and I suggest that this shattering makes BDSM a site which contains a kernel of liberatory power.

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INTRODUCTION

The aesthetics and dynamics explored in the erotic practice of bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) faced criticism from feminist and anti-racist scholars and activists because the practices mirror—and even reimplement —forms of extreme racial and gender-based oppression. The infamous work of Tom of Finland (Touko Valio Laaksonen) who drew homoerotic and pornographic art featuring hypermasculine men in leather has been criticized for being emblematic of Nazi imagery;[1] feminists, especially those of the radical feminist movement in the United States such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Adrianne Rich, criticize BDSM for its celebration and trivialization of female sexual violence and even suggest that it is a form of colonialism;[2] and Black feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Hortense Spillers criticize imagery in BDSM that evokes images of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the dehumanization of Black women, and the eroticization of racial oppression.[3] Paul H. Gebhard, an anthropologist and sexologist who wrote in the 1960s and 1970s—the time of the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States—suggests in the piece "Fetishism and Sadomasochism" that sadomasochism is popular *because* dominance and submission is the basis for our social functions, and that the desire to participate in sadomasochistic erotic practices is a reflection and recreation of oppressive social

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[1] Manuel Betancourt, "Tom of Finland's Art Still Resonates Because It Mixes Pride and Shame," Vice, April 24, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/qkq3q5/tom-of-finlands-art-still-resonates-because-it-mixes-pride-and-shame

[2] Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (London: Arrow, 1978), 169.

[3] Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 14-15.

functions.[4] Despite these criticisms, people who are committed to deconstructing systems of white supremacy and antiblackness willingly participate in BDSM erotic practices, despite the presence of violence and cultural memories of the Transatlantic Slave trade and racial oppression in the practice. Feminist and queer scholars have sought to explain why people of color participate—often joyously so—in an erotic practice that is so often racialized through aesthetic themes, language usage, physical actions, and the prompting of submissive mental spaces and suggest that BDSM is a way to engage with rhetorics and temporalities of oppression and generate historical consciousness and imaginings. My intervention investigates how sensations experienced in BDSM practice prompt embodied sensation, disrupting antiblack oppressive systems in the United States. Through applications of Black feminist thought, Black anti-humanism, and phenomenology, I claim that antiblack oppression denies Black people the experience of tactile sensation, which mediates the body's position as a perceiving subject, preventing intersubjectivity between Black and non-Black people. This denial of sensation, caused by colonial legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, commodification of the Black body, and Black people's forced endurance of extreme violence, compromises Black ontology and denies subject status. Close reading analysis of film pornography piece *Connection First* (2022) and written pornography from the anthology *Kink: Stories* demonstrates how attention to previously denied sensations experienced during Black sadomasochistic practice grants access to sensation which breaks histories of antiblack oppression, allowing for sadomasochism to be a site of anti-oppressive practice. I seek to insert this argument into existing feminist discourse on

[4] Ariane Cruz, "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 410.

practices of BDSM and BDSM pornography through the utilization of phenomenological analysis and close reading.

Feminist Viewpoints on Sadomasochism and the Elimination of Difference

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, during what is considered by some as "the golden age of pornography," an increase in production of sadomasochistic hard-core visual pornography the thrust sadomasochistic (S/M)[5] into the public eye. This increase in the production and distribution of sadomasochistic pornography and erotica alongside a growing participation in sadomasochistic counter cultures made sadomasochism a topic of discourse in feminist and queer spaces. Feminists who led these discussions expressed their concern with the role sadomasochism played in female and queer liberation. Although some groups of feminists believed that sadomasochism and sadomasochistic pornography created productive feminist questions and could be used in queer and feminist liberation movements, these voices typically sat in the margins.[6] Many feminist voices described sadomasochism, sadomasochistic pornography, and pornography in general as a representation of male violence. Scholars who dominated the literature in this discourse include white feminists Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Robing Morgan, and Susan Grifin and Black feminists including Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde. Black anti-pornography and anti-sadomasochistic feminists

[5] The term sadomasochism or S/M was used colloquially throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s. BDSM became a more popular term in the 2000s and 2010s. In my own analysis, I use the terms interchangeably but will only use the term "sadomasochism" when discussing the historiography of feminist viewpoints on the practice.

[6] Sam Forrey, "Discerning New Feminisms from Sadomasochistic Pornography in *On Our Backs," Frame* 36, no. 2 (2023): 100.

theorized that pornography perpetuated racial injustice and violence through depictions of Black female subordination and abused.

The concern of violence in pornography increased in the 1970s and 1980s through the alleged circulation of snuff films, or pornography films where the climax of the film was the death of the female performer—she was literally "snuffed out."[7] This genre was named after the 1976 film *Snuff* which was rumored to depict a legitimate assault, murder, and disembowelment of a South American woman. The film was released with the tagline: "the film that could only be made in South America… where Life is CHEAP!" The violence shown in *Snuff* is fictional, and although there is no sufficient evidence to suggest that real snuff films were produced and distributed in the 1970s and 1980s,[8] authors Ethne Johnson and Eric Schaefer note that the fictional film *Snuff* (1976) and the proverbial genre of snuff films changed how feminists conceptualized pornography and discussed it in activist spaces. They claim that prior to snuff entering the mind of the public sphere, "pornography had been viewed generally as a victimless vice."[9] The genre of snuff, however, created an increased anxiety about pornography as representative of a dangerous and sadistic male desire to exploit and harm women and children.[10] Snuff films, whether they existed materially or only in discourse, became the embodiment of the

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[7] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 1999), 190.

[8] "Snuff" videos have become more pervasive since the rise of the internet and the meaning of the word has changed. Snuff is now a genre that depicts someone experiencing real death on camera and is not only used to describe pornography. Most internet snuff is non-pornographic.

[9] Eithne Johnson and Eric Schaefer, "Soft Core/Hard Gore: *Snuff* as a Crisis in Meaning," *Journal of Film and Video* 45, no. 2/3 (1993): 40.

[10] Johnson and Schaefer, "Soft Core/Hard Gore," 40.

patriarchy's goal to literally snuff-out those in which it subordinates. This discourse conflated pornography and sadomasochism, as they both represented embodiments of male violence. Porn studies scholar and feminist Linda Williams notes that through this discourse, the sadist—representative of violent patriarchy—desires to eliminate all forms of difference.[11] Williams notes that this notion is further problematized by the willingness of the masochist to be eliminated. She uses the example of concentration camp pornography to illustrate the troubling implications the sadist and masochist bring to the predominant feminist argument that pornography is representative of male domination and harm:

> "The "concentration camp orgasm" is a troubling concept, certainly if we think of it as belonging to the sadist who destroys, but perhaps even more so if we take it to include the victim. The idea of this latter pleasure is what most troubles feminism, for it represents the possibility of an absolute loss of humanity and intersubjectivity in sexual relations, the total abandonment of the self to the will of the other.[12]

Although the "concentration camp orgasm" and other depictions of sexual violence in proverbial snuff films were pornographic tropes instead of acts of real violence, feminists saw these films as representative of the desires of sadistic and violent patriarchies. This viewpoint is most aptly demonstrated by radical feminist Robin Morgan's famous quote: "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice."[13] Linda Williams specifically notes that this fear is driven by the belief that sadism and masochism specifically enact an "absolute loss of humanity and intersubjectivity."[14] The sadist is the absolute subject which holds the power to withhold subject status to the

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[11]Williams, *Hard Core,* 227.

[12] Williams, *Hard Core*, 227.

[13] Robin Morgan, *Going too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 164-165.

[14] Williams, *Hard Core*, 227.

masochist through extreme objectification of the masochist. If pornography is the representation in which sexual violence is based off, it can be understood that sadomasochistic sexual practices are practices of real sexual violence as opposed to being a performance of fantasy. This further conflated pornography and sadomasochism

BDSM, particularly sadomasochism,[15] is a very fleshy, corporal experience for those who participate in the practice. At its most extreme levels, people leave sadomasochistic play scenes with markings on the body from tools like paddles, needles, knives, and whips understanding that there is a risk of markings remaining permanently. BDSM, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, often invokes imagery of extreme oppression. In the 1970s and 1980s, activists within the radical feminist movement heavily criticized sadomasochism and claimed embodied patriarchal violence and associated the practice with oppressive masculinities,[16] and the common colloquial understanding of BDSM as "chains and whips," can be interpreted as invoking the imagery of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, perhaps reinforcing the fleshiness of the sexual practice.[17] Audre Lorde described sadomasochism as an embodiment of the American viewpoint that one possesses "the right to dominate" learned through racist intolerance.[18] As I will discuss

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[15] Other forms of BDSM may be less concerned with the body: i.e. kink that focuses on psychological play.

[16] Forrey, "Discerning New Feminisms from Sadomasochistic Pornography in *On Our Backs,"* 100.

[17] Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 4.

[18] Audre Lorde and Susan Leigh Star, "Interview with Audre Lorde," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis,* ed. Linden, Robin, Darlene Pagano, Diana Russell, Susan Leigh Star, (East Palo Alto: Frog in the Well, 1982), 69.

in depth in Chapter Two of this thesis, Black feminists like Patrica Hill Collins wrote about their concerns with how race and the subordination of Black people is encoded into sadomasochistic practices and pornography.[19]

There is not a consensus within feminist and anti-racist scholarship on whether BDSM is a practice of embodied racism or a way for people who face violent racialization to engage with aspects of racialization constructively. Since the 2010s, feminist scholars who conduct cultural studies research have analyzed BDSM and pornography through a new lens which challenges previous feminist discourse on race and sadomasochism. These scholars suggest that the racialized nature of BDSM creates the opportunities to subvert existing racialized power structures. This thesis primarily engages with the work of Black feminist scholars Jennfier Nash, Ariane Cruz, and Amber Musser who examine various relationships between Blackness and sadomasochism.[20]

By utilizing a Foucauldian analysis of power, Jennifer Nash reimagines racialized themes in BDSM as "racialized iconography" in her book *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race,*

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[19] See: Stuart Hall: "Encoding/Decoding" *Culture, Media, Language.* Edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy, Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, (London: Hutchison, 1980), 128-138.

[20]Other scholars such as Juana María Rodríguez have also written on race and sadomasochism. In the article "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," Rodríguez suggests that sexual fantasies concerning domination and submission do not recreate the oppressive systems in which they are practicing, but instead have the potential for being generative sites of thought production that work to challenge, subvert, and even disrupt systems of racial power, thus, making BDSM a "gesture of critique and imagination that attempts to unravel both individual subjectivity and the existing social relations that surround us." She further claims that the desire to repress fantasies because of political correctness or due to their association with pain discourages thought production, thus becoming a form of epistemic violence, reaffirming the importance that racialized subjects engage in fantasy and play despite racialized connotations. See: Juana María Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011), 343.

Reading Pornography. Racialized iconography opposes Black feminist thought proposed primarily by Hortense Spillers, who suggests that Black women in the United States are treated as a "pornotrope,[21]" and Patricia Hill Collins who asserts that pornography is one of the many reiterations of Black female pain exploited to reassert white supremacy.[22] Although there is an undeniable presence of racialization in pornography, Nash proposes that racialized pornography can be a site of ecstasy for Black women, thus being sites of agency and liberation as opposed to only being a representation of racialized pain.[23] Nash utilizes close reading of feminist texts and film pornography to make her argument. Nash also suggests that BDSM and racialized pornography parody the systems in which they reside in, which allows for a reshaping and reimagining of white supremacy.[24] Similarly, author Ariane Cruz uses textual analysis, archival research, and interview in her manuscript *The Color of Kink* to explore how racialized violence in BDSM is not only a way to access pleasure, but a way to critique racist power systems.[25] Both Nash and Cruz explore the eroticism of racism which, according to them, allows for new understandings of how and where racialized bodies reside in the systems of antiblack racism and misogynoir. Nash and Cruz provide powerful insights into how the racialized rhetoric and

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[21] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Diacritics 17, no. 2 (1987), 67.

[22] Collins, Patricia H, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 81-84.

[23] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 30.

[24] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 3.

[25] Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography,* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 25-26.

imagery present in BDSM can be used as an analytical and negotiating tool for bodies racialized as Black.

In *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism,* Amber Jamilla Musser also interrogates how and where racialized bodies reside in an antiblack system and explores if this system, which withholds racialized bodies from agency and consent, prevents masochism from being a liberatory tool.[26] Musser's framing of this question differs from those of Nash and Cruz. Musser's archive, unlike Nash and Cruz, is not entirely pornographic material: she does look at sexualized images of Black women and BDSM practice, but also engages with art, literature, and performance. Synthesized from the theories of Hortense Spillers, suggests that Black people lost subjectivity, personhood, and embodiment through structures of captivity in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[27] Through the historical analysis of masochism, Musser asserts that masochism is an analytical method that can demonstrate how difference and power are embodied. Unlike the texts listed above, which emphasizes how language and imagery used in BDSM is used for liberatory consciousnesses, *Sensational Flesh* focuses on how sensation itself informs understandings of embodiment. To do so, she synthesizes theories from thinkers like Deleuze, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir to understand how sensation aids in consciousness building for those who are historically withheld from accessing personhood.

Sensation, the Body as an Object, and Being

Sensation plays a significant role in daily life and functions as an informant to our surroundings. However, how individuals engage with sensation and embodiment is debated

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[26] Amber Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 3.

[27] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 20.

among philosophers and literary critics. In the introduction of *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism,* Amber Musser explores the significance of sensation. She theorizes that although sensation is subjective because it can be understood by the individual, sensation's necessary externality provides a person with objective information which allows people to discern information about the world in which they reside. An example of this, although not provided by Musser, is that if someone touches an oven door and it is warm, the person may be able to discern that the oven is on. Although the discernment that the oven is on is not an objective thought process, as it is informed through someone's own lived experiences, the sensation of warmth on the skin itself has an external nature to it, suggesting there is an objectivity to sensation.[28] Sensation, thus, occupies a space between reality and consciousness because of its role as an informant.[29] Additionally, Musser asserts that sensation allows a person to become a "perceiving subject," which transforms the world and those who reside in it as an object that can be perceived.[30] Sensations and the subject and "subjectless" positionalities that arise from them, according to Musser, become the basis of experience in the world. Experience, however, is not shaped by, nor does it reify identity because it is objective—a sensation is objective and real to the person experiencing it even if the same sensation is perceived differently

[28] To describe this thought, Musser provides the example of seeing the color blue.

[29] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 2-3.

[30] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 1.

(if it is perceived at all) to a different person. Shared linguistic referents allow us to understand objective experiences, and this structural[31] reality grants sensation to be a point of analysis.

Although Musser introduces sensation as having an aspect of objectivity, Maurice Merleau-Ponty is critical of the notion of the "the objective body" and the externality of sensation. In the "Introduction to Part One" of his monograph *The Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty states obsession with the state of being prompts people to "treat [their] experience as an object" which people "deduce it form a relation among objects."[32] Therefore, people conceptualize the body as an object which exists in the world, therefore repressing the consciousness that Merleau-Ponty feels is inherent to the body.[33] He proposes that the body, although often reduced to an object that experiences other objects, does not fall into this category. Instead, the body is the very core of one's being and can be understood to be an affective object. He uses the example of pain in the foot provoked by stepping on a nail and the respective signifier "my foot hurts" to illustrate the body's affectivity and how we are able to conceptualize the body as a non-object but inherent to ourselves.[34] The phrase "my foot hurts," does not indicate that the foot is the cause of pain in the same sense that the nail stepped on is the cause of pain, nor does it mean that the foot is an external object where pain begins. Instead, it is understood that if someone feels that their foot hurts that the pain is experienced within one's

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[31] Musser uses structural meaning structural linguistics, not the social science or colloquial use of the term referring to an architecture of power.

[32] Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. (London: Routledge, 1962), 81.

[33] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 102.

[34] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 107.

body and not only informs one's thoughts, but is a *part* of one's thoughts since the body in this scenario cannot be understood as an external object.[35] Therefore, Merleau-Ponty understands sensations to possess the same type of subjectivity that other ways of thinking.

I bring up these two opposing viewpoints on sensation's role as an objective or subjective experience because both provide important frameworks for moving forward with my analysis, especially within the context of BDSM as performed by Black people within the United States. I am drawn to the work of Merleau-Ponty because it is critical of the Cartesian "mind-body" dualism that is so often prevalent in Western schools of philosophical thought. Although theories of mind-body dualisms are prevalent throughout the history of philosophy, beginning with theories proposed in ancient Greek thought, contemporary dualist theories are typically based off the work of Rene Descartes who proposes that the body is a permanent object consisted of matter which is incapable of thinking, whereas the mind is a non-physical entity which is distinct from the body on a fundamental level.[36] In his work, Descartes viewed these entities as so different to each other that he struggled to articulate how they interact with each other at all.[37] This proposition that there is an inherent difference between the mind and body has been criticized not only by Merleau-Ponty, who insists that we must work to understand how there in the *in-itself*

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[35] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 107.

[36] Gary Hatfield, "René Descartes", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2024 Edition),* Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (2024).

[37] Descartes, "Mediations on Fist Philosophy," in *Philosophical Works of Descartes,* trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 9.

there is a *for-us,*[38] but is heavily criticized within the feminist school of thought, particularly within schools of Black feminism. Both Audre Lorde and bell hooks argue that enforcing mind-body dualisms is an intentional act of often white,[39] heteropatriarchal powers that work to repress liberatory consciousness that occurs when people are able to escape mind-body dualisms.[40] Both of these authors assert that the conjoining of the body and the mind and the deep satisfaction that occurs when the two are able to meet in spite of patriarchal repression is an act of *eroticism,* a feeling that Lorde says can be summed up by the phrase "it feels right to me."[41]

Despite these criticisms of the objectivity of the body, Musser's assertion that sensation is a subjective experience is a response to theories of Being and ontology outlined by African anti-humanist theory, which is concerned with being and the ontological existence of Black bodies in the United States. In Black anti-humanist theory, the existence of Being is at minimum, fraught, and at most, non-existence. Musser explores this concept through masochism's ability to deem one "subjectless." For the sake of this paper, I find that theories of Black subjectivity is outlined most significantly in Calvin Warren's work *Ontological Terror,* which discusses the ontological nothingness that Black people in the United States assumes through violent racism and the

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[38] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 375.

[39] Lorde associates this intentional separation with those of the European-American male tradition (pg. 41). However, bell hooks notes that this same repression is also prevalent in Black spaces, particularly of the Black Academy. Hooks asserts that when patriarchy is present, the "mind/body split" is present.

[40] bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process," in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom,* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.

[41] Audre Lorde, "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider,* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 44.

mediation of [42] the In the first pages of *Ontological Terror,* Warren raises the "terrifying" question of whether Black people possess life in response to the phrase "Black Lives Matter" due to a systemic and global presence of antiblack brutality where "[B]lack torture, dismemberment, fatality, and fracturing are routinized and ritualized.[43]" Within this framework, it is understandable why Musser focuses on the externality and objectivity of sensation, as the ontological implications proposed within the field of Black anti-humanism. Since a Black being is fraught, Merleau-Ponty's theory on the self, which suggests that there is a "*being-for-itself"* or "*for-us"* cannot exist. Therefore, since sensation mediates being, both the experience of sensation and the state of being becomes difficult to discern when being is non-existent. I propose that this violent objectification of Black people prohibits access to occupation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of the "lived body."[44]

Black non-being in a system of antiblackness poses troubling implications for the existence of a Black lived body as proposed Merleau-Ponty. The existence of the lived body is not only contingent on the individual's ability to occupy the subject positionality, but also to occupy the status of human. Therefore, antiblackness in the United States which deems the status

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[42] Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.

[43] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 2.

[44] Throughout the writing of this thesis, I looked at both Donald Landes' and Colin Smith's translations of *The Phenomenology of Perception.* Although I primarily use Smith's translation, as I find its prose to be significantly more moving than the prose in Landes' translation, I use Landes' translation of "lived body" throughout the paper. Not only is the "lived body" used more often in existing scholarship referencing the work of Merleau-Ponty, but I find that the past tense use of the word evokes a more active conceptualization of the body than Smith's use of the phrase "living body."

of Blackness as non-human status makes the existence of the Black lived body difficult to discern. Although some could deem this as an oversight of the French continental school,[45] I believe the inability for Blackness to fit into Merleau-Ponty's framework further enforces the theories Black non-humanness and Black ontocide as proposed by Spillers and Warren, respectively. In Chapter One, I will outline how the experience of embodied sensation, a key actor in the mediation of the lived body and the body schema, is denied to Black people in the United States through systems of violent racism including the Transatlantic Slave trade and police brutality. Denial of sensation not only denies the taking up of the role of the subject, since subjectivity is partially created through the experience of sensation, but literally inhibits the mediation of the Black being and perhaps the Black body schema. This denial of access to the lived body is dictated by material, cultural, epistemological, and ontological histories of antiblackness. However, phenomenologists Simeone De Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who suggest we are all bound by histories dictated by means outside of our control and that we are able to transcend outside of these histories. This transcendence reveals a body that is for the self which does not need to be dictated by others, therefore removing one from both object and subject positionality. I call the occupation of this transcendent plane "third-positionality." Since the experience of what I call "embodied sensation"—or sensation that is attendant to subsequent feelings and affects that arise— is denied to Black people in the United States through histories of antiblackness. I propose that the taking up of projects that pay attention to Black sensation is a way of engaging with and breaking histories dictated by violent antiblackness in the United States. BDSM, a sexual practice that is focused recognition of sensation and the attendant

[45] It is reasonable to criticize the Sartre and Merleau-Ponty for not considering the ontological and epistemological status of those who do not occupy the French intelligentsia.

feelings and affects that arise from it, can then be a way for Black people to engage with denied embodied sensation making the practice a site of anti-oppressive practice. In Chapter Two, I close read two pieces of pornography that depicts practices of Black BDSM—the film *Connection First,* directed by Jamal Phoenix; and the short story "Kink" by Roxanne Gay—and apply the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter One to outline how subjects in the selected pornographic pieces interact with embodied sensation, subjecthood, transcendence, and third-positionality. Finally, in my conclusion, I illustrate how the presence of consent and risk awareness in BDSM makes it particularly attendant to sensations previously denied, making BDSM a performance of recognized sensation and thus a site of potential liberatory worldmaking.

Methodology

In *The Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty suggests that philosophers are typically only concerned with only the mind (he is particularly critical of Descartes and his well-known concern of truth of the mind which he solves through the phrase *cogito, ergo sum)* and philosophies that have no bearing on the material world as a pseudo-problems.[46] He instead prompts us to consider our bodies as lived bodies and to develop tools of analysis stemming from the facticity of the world and the understanding of how experience works as an embodiment tool that informs consciousness and ontological facticity.[47] Merleau-Ponty calls for first person analyses of lived phenomenon and experiences that we encounter and to prompt an understanding of embodied or experienced consciousness. Lived phenomena can include

[46] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 464.

[47] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* vii.

"perception, imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition, and action.[48]" He suggests that analysis of lived experience allows for the understanding of the body as a lived body that is both and neither subject nor object.[49] I will later propose that this experience, especially when done as an act of radical consciousness building in repressive systems of racism and colonialism that prohibits full embodiment, can be nearly transcendent and allows for the conceptualization of what I call an embodied third-positionality that uproots binary understandings of subject and object.[50] The existence of a third-positionality—a positionality that transcends the binary divide of subject and object, therefore freeing one's existence being mediated amongst other subjects and objects—and its subsequent implications on ontology makes the occupation of this plane a solution to worldmaking within systems of Black ontocide.

Although phenomenology began as a philosophical tradition, the framework is a theory and methodology within literary criticism. Although one cannot discern the actual first person experience of an author, scholars of literary studies and cultural studies utilize artwork as a "mediator between the consciousnesses of the author and the reader or as attempts to disclose

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[48] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition),* ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2018.

[49] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 83.

[50] Queer theorists have also discussed how the body's experiences also inform the mind. In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* Ahmed states that "knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble, all those feelings that are crucially felt on the bodily surface, the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world." Emotions are not immediate, according to Ahmed. Instead, emotions and feelings are a way to interpret politicized social experiences and to develop epistemic understandings of them (Ahmed 171).

aspects of the being of humans and their worlds."[51] My method of phenomenology includes both applications: I approach phenomenology as a school of thought in which I discern theories of Black being through the analysis of sensation and I conduct phenomenological analysis of BDSM pornography where the creator's lived experience is present in the work. I will use *Connection First* and "Reach: to demonstrate that attention to sensation empowers assumption of a third-positionality that escapes the limiting roles of subject and object and mediates humanness. Thus, BDSM, a site focused on the flesh, the body, and attendant sensations, is potentially a site of anti-oppressive worldmaking that interacts with and temporarily shatters histories of antiblackness.

[51] Paul B. Armstrong, "Phenomenology," in *Johns Hopkins Guide for Literary Theory and Criticism,"* ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), accessed online.

CHAPTER ONE

SENSATION AND THE MEDIATION OF RACE

Contextualizing Sensation

The Phenomenology of Perception outlines how the limits and boundaries of the human body are mediated by both sensation and by the affective reactions that arise in response to sensation to constitute a "lived body." The concept of the lived body not only functions as a challenge to dualisms between mind and body, enforced through systems of white patriarchal powers, but also enables access to an understanding of the body as a lived subject as opposed to an object amongst objects. Because sensation is vital in the mediation of a lived body, however, sensation can be systemically denied, preventing access to the lived body and thus, subjecthood and the category of human. This chapter will trace the relationship between sensation and being and how embodied sensation is denied through acts of brutal violence to justify Black dehumanization and oppression in the United States. Despite my claim that sensation is denied to prevent access to a lived Black body, I also propose that attention to embodied sensation in BDSM play subverts material, cultural, epistemological, and ontological histories of antiblack violence to break histories of Black oppression.

Sensation, in the context of this project, specifically refers to tactile sensation—sensation felt through stimuli; the lived body touching, colliding, rubbing with what it encounters in the world. It also, in some cases, refers to conscious lack of sensation. Trans philosopher Hil Malatino notes the importance of lack of sensation, specifically the lack of perceived stimuli one

may have learned to feel; Malatino calls this numbness and refers to this feeling in the context of emotional numbness.[1] Despite **incongruency in** use, I find Malatino's notation on the importance of a palpable lack of physical sensation that one is expecting is important in the phenomenological analysis of this project because it too, nearly functions as a sensation. Malatino uses numbness acquired from forgetting to wear gloves as an example—one knows that their hands are there and can sense that sensation is meant to be felt, but it cannot be.[2] For these reasonings, I include the conscious lack of tactile sensation in my understandings of sensation because of the "absences of what we expected to feel."[3] I conceptualize this absence of sensation to function nearly similarly to sensation.

This project focuses on tactile—or what I sometimes call *physical* or *external*—sensations as opposed to other sensations like taste, sound, or sight because of the physical relationship that occurs between the lived body and what surrounds it. Sensation, as perceived by the lived body, mediates, creates, and draws attention to the position of the lived body and therefore aids in forming the body schema, or how we see and conceptualize our body.[4] Tactile sensation is not something that can just be experienced, but can be immediately *felt* and noticed, and when it is not felt it remains noticeable. This noticing—the attention that is drawn through sensation, informs us that we are not an object that has subsequent thoughts based on interactions

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[1] Hil Malatino, "FUCK FEELINGS: On Numbness, Withdrawal, and Disorientation," *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 67.

[2] Malatino, "FUCK FEELINGS: On Numbness, Withdrawal, and Disorientation," 66-67.

[3] Malatino, "FUCK FEELINGS: On Numbness, Withdrawal, and Disorientation," 67.

[4] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 96.

with other objects, but that our body is lived and therefore generates feelings and affects in response to experiences, harboring embodied consciousness.

Recall how Merleau-Ponty uses the analogy of stepping on a nail to illustrate how we think of the body, and how he emphasizes that we say, "my foot hurts," not "my foot is causing my mind to feel pain." We think of the body like this because the body's schema is inseparable from the mind and thus, from the self. They are intrinsically tied to each other. To conceptualize how tactile sensation functions as a mediator between the lived body and the world in which it resides, I will use a similar metaphor: stubbing one's toe on an object like a door frame or a piece of furniture. This sensation is only sometimes painful but is often frustrating. The sensation of stubbing one's toe does not simply serve to inform a person that two objects that have collided the way that a sound of a tree branch scraping against a window indicates that the wind is colliding two objects with each other—the window and the tree exist and collide with each other, regardless of whether they are perceived or not. The stubbed toe and the door frame interact with each other in a fundamentally different way: first, the stubbed toe cannot exist without the perception of it being stubbed by the person in which perceives it. This alone differentiates the lived body from a mere object, for if it is not to be perceived then it is to not have happened, whereas the tree branch and the window are intrinsically objects based on their ability to exist without perception. Secondly, stubbing one's toe is something that can be felt that immediately triggers affect (and in the case that it is not through the limiting of sensation through a medical issue, one is aware that there is no sensation despite there being a collision of the toe and the doorframe). The tree and the window are unable to feel each other; the doorframe is also unable to feel the toe. This *feeling* acquired through tactile sensation is what differentiates us from

objects that we interact with in the world. However, as I will outline throughout this chapter, the denial of this feeling prohibits access to the status of subject, and the denial of feeling associated with sensation is a crucial component to the denial of the Black as human.

I must acknowledge that people experience many tactile sensations on the day to day that do not trigger feelings—sitting in the same office chair daily, placing one's arms on a table, washing one's hands. Through repeated tactile sensation, there is an expectation of feeling, making it only noticeable when the object we interact with does not provide the same sensation. I will use the example of sitting in the same office chair to further illustrate this point: for those of us who have freedom of movement, nearly every day we choose to sit down and only sometimes consciously notice our bodies meeting with the chair and only noticing this sensation when we are particularly exhausted. However, when we sit and the chair in which we expected to be there is not there, or perhaps is positioned lower or higher than our bodies remembered, we are made conscious of the previous times in which we have sat and the sensations we have come to expect through difference in or absence of sensation. In these moments, we are made aware of the feelings our bodies expect, and we experience an affective reaction triggered through absence. This affective awareness reinforces the boundaries of our body schema and mediates our awareness of where and how our bodies reside in the world. Black feminist Amber Musser also notes that sensation, specifically sensations experienced in masochism, as ways to analyze how racialization is constructed. To Musser, masochism, which is defined as a "the desire to abdicate control in exchange for sensation"[5] encodes histories of power and difference. Therefore, sensation and masochism, and their attendant affects come to represent systems of power and

[5] Musser, *Sensational Flesh,* 3.

difference literally embodied and felt. Therefore, sensation not only reinforces how and where our bodies materially reside in the world (for example, where you are sitting while reading this project) but also informs us where our bodies reside in the world in relationships to structures of power.[6]

Sensation's intimate relationship with personal affect and feelings reifies sensation's subjective role. Although from an outside perspective, stubbing one's toe may be understood to be an objective experience—someone hit their toe on the side of a doorframe—the sensation itself—how the collision with an object and the lived body feels (or, what does it feels like?) and the affects and feelings that arise from the sensation (or, how do I feel?) are subjective experiences. The objectivity of sensation and experience is shrouded from the individual experiencing the sensation and is completely inaccessible because we are unable to perceive the experience outside of our own subjective viewpoints informed by our lived body. Sensation cannot be understood without experiencing the sensation and the feeling that arises from it. Illustrated through the example of stubbing one's toe on the doorframe, we are incapable of witnessing the collision of stubbing our own toe from the third person. This understanding of sensation differs from that proposed by Musser in *Sensational Flesh.* Although Musser suggests the dual internal and external nature of sensation makes it an important analytical tool for understanding where and how the body resides in the world,[7] she asserts that sensation is an objective experience that allows the subject to become a perceiving subject.[8] I disagree with this

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[6] Musser, *Sensational Flesh,* 1.

[7] Musser, *Sensational Flesh,* 23.

[8] Musser, *Sensational Flesh, 1.*

assertion as it does not address how the sensation, which is only felt in the body, is inseparable from the body and its subsequent feelings, thoughts, and affects. Sensation is not the experience itself, as sensation can only be understood through one's own bodily perception—without the initial feelings (or, what does it feels like?) caused by the sensation and its immediate affects and feelings (or, how do I feel?), sensation is non-existent to the perceiving subject.

Although I challenge Musser's assertion that experience and sensation are objective, I do agree with her notion that our ability to perceive makes us perceiving subjects, which in turn allows us to classify things in the world in which we interact with as either subjects or objects. Recognizing that we experience affective reactions and feelings to sensations we encounter, while the objects we interact with do not, reifies our status as subjects residing in a lived body and allows us to be perceiving subjects. This logic often carries through in how we interact with other lived bodies *only when* we interact with them as lived bodies. Merleau-Ponty proposes that this happens when "emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behavior and my 'psychic events.'"[9] Within the school of phenomenology, this is considered to be "intersubjectivity," or when you interact with another person as a subject through employment of empathy. That is, through the understanding that the other is experiencing the same or similar thoughts, feelings, or affects that are identified as and with "emotional expressions," we are able to understand that other people also inhabit lived bodies and are conscious.

If you are to accidentally collide with a stranger on the street, the other's humanness is mediated by the recognition of that person's experience of the sensation of being collided into

[9] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 410.

and its subsequent feelings and affects that arise from the collision. This recognition is often expressed through utterances like, “oh, I am so sorry!” or, “are you OK?” Through these speech acts,[10] we acknowledge the sensation that the other person may have felt, which mediates their existence as a lived body and a perceiving subject, as opposed to an object akin to a doorframe. Although there are times in which we interact with other people as lived bodies—as fellow perceiving subjects—there are many times in which we do not, where our recognition of shared sensation is absent. When there is an absence in recognition in the subjecthood of the other person we interact with, we reduce the other person to an object. Think again of the same example of running into someone on the street. There have been times, perhaps in a busy place like a concert, a sporting event, or even walking off the train at rush hour, that we collide with people in a similar manner. Rarely do we acknowledge that this person felt the same sensation that we did running into them—we view them as an object in the way, an inconvenience, a doorframe. Merleau-Ponty describes this denial of subjecthood: “The other transforms me into an object and denies me, I transform him into an object and deny him.”[11]

In these instances, it is normal to view the other as an object; at all points in humanity, people have viewed the other as an object, and some phenomenologists, such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir, claim that it is impossible to never view another person as an object.[12]

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[10] Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how hearing the Other speak allows us to find relatability to them as subjects but does not acknowledge how our speech acts also mediate the other’s subject’s positionality.

[11] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 420.

[12] See Jean Paul Sartre’s theories of phenomenology that views other people as objects through theories of “being-for-others” and “the look” in *Being and Consciousness* or Simone De Beauvoir’s theories of subject and object in *Pyrrhus and Cineas.*

However, I propose failure to recognize the sensations that another human experiences as real, as an experience they also experience as a lived body, on a chronic and systemic level poses dangerous effects on the status of others as lived bodies and subjects. Merleau-Ponty urges us to not view the social interactions between others and the social sphere as an object in which we interact with. He states:

> Our relationship to the social is, like our relationship to the world, deeper than any express perception or any judgement. It is as false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects, as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification.[13]

Additionally, Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception is a violent action that harms those in who are perceived.[14] By viewing the person as "an other person" violence is enacted. If a person is to be systemically rendered to the status of an object through perception dictated by hegemonic powers, it can be understood that a systemic act of violence is being committed against that person. Therefore, the othered person becomes not only a victim of violence from the perception itself, but additionally faces violence from their status of an object.

Systemic Denial of Sensation and the Status of Black as Human

Black studies scholars, particularly scholars who fall into the school of Black anti-humanist thought, explore how systems of white supremacy utilize violence to objectify, commodify, dehumanize, and animalize Black people. In the first chapter of *Ontological Terror,* the author, Calvin Warren, recounts his experience with being invited to participate in dialogue on the murder of Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old Black boy who was murdered by a police

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[13] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 421.

[14]Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 421.

officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. According to Warren, the term "Black Lives Matter" juxtaposed against the violence Michael Brown endured challenged his understanding of Black life.[15] Michael Brown experienced the brutal sensation that few of us will be able to imagine—the sensation of bullets hitting our skin, breaking our bones, ripping apart our inside or sensing the immediate end of our life. Black people who are victims of police violence and murder often express experiences of extremely painful sensations. Some of the last phrases uttered by George Floyd, whose murder on May 25, 2020 sparked massive protests and call for institutional change across the United States, demonstrate his attempt to mediate his own life: "Please, the knee in my neck, I can't breathe" and "my stomach hurts, my neck hurts, everything hurts." Despite both Brown and Floyd undoubtably experiencing and expressing sensations that mediated and terminated their position as lived bodies in this world, not only was this mediation of life unrecognized, but rather *taken away and denied.* Even when experiencing the most extreme sensations—violent bodily harm leading to one's death—and expressing the extreme agony that these sensations cause, their experience and their position as perceiving subjects remains largely unacknowledged in a violent antiblack dominant space, rendering them as objects that one simply interacts with, an inconvenience akin to a doorframe.

Warren brings up the story of Michael Brown's and the phrase "Black Lives Matter," which was coined in 2013 but popularized after Brown's murder, to question whether Black people are capable of possessing life in a violently antiblack world. Although Black Lives Matter assumes an ontological existence of Black being, Warren points out that beinghood and Black personhood is decidedly absent for Black individuals. According to Warren, this lack of being is

[15] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27

decided through the paradigm of the "free black."[16] Warren proposes that there are three functions of the being[17] of the "free black," or what he calls the Negro: first, the proposes that the Negro is an incarnation of nothing, therefore the world tries to eradicate it. Secondly, Black bodies are reduced to objects in which humanness is mediated against. Borrowing the term "available equipment" from Heidegger, Warren says that Black people are available equipment used to support "the existential journey of the human being.[18]" Through this process, Blackness is illegible ontologically. His last point asserts that this illegibility becomes an obsession of the United States post slavery "since the boundaries of ontology—between human and property and freedom and unfreedom—are thrown into crisis with the presence of the free black." I draw on Warren's framework of the ontological crisis created through antiblackness and that paradigm of the free Black, particularly focusing on the second point of his framework proposed in the first chapter of *Ontological Terror,* which claims that Black people are "available equipment" in which non-Black's ontological and existential being is mediated against, to conceptualize how Black bodies are reduced to objects through denial of sensation. Using some of the most tangibly violent examples, the murder of Black people through violence enacted by the state, as a macro-level starting point for conceptualizing how sensation, and therefore subjecthood, is denied, subsequently reinforcing Black people's status as an object in which whiteness is constructed against.

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[16] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27.

[17] Warren strikes through the word being when referring to Black Being to denotate its nonexistence.

[18] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 27.

This denial of sensation happens beyond the macro, beyond the grotesquely violent. Since Black non-being is used to mediate the being of non-Blacks, denial of sensation (and therefore, denial of status as a perceiving subject) is weaved into every physical and metaphysical structure in the United States. This encompasses gender, economic, kinship, and ontological, and epistemological structures at a minimum. Through the framework of Hortense Spillers, I conceptualize that this denial of sensation is created and enforced through what Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers calls "theft of the body." In the article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers proposes that systems of captivity under whiteness and the crossing of the Middle Passage robbed black people from access to their land and their own bodies. She outlines the troubling implication theft of the body has for Black gender, kinship systems, and Black humanness. Through this theft, "the captive body [is severed] from its motive will, its active desire."[19] Severing the body from its will and desire, according to Spillers, creates the loss of gender difference and female and male captive bodies become a location of cultural and political will of enslavers. This action reduces enslaved Africans to a thing—an object—therefore divorcing enslaved Africans from subject positions. This systemic enforcement of inaccessibility to a subject position creates a physical and biological understanding of "otherness."[20] Inability to access the body reinforces the notion that the Black body is a body that does not feel, and therefore functions as an object.

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[19] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

[20] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

Theories of the Flesh

Spillers asserts that through the crossing the Middle Passage, Black people's and specifically Black women's, systems of captivity and white supremacy transformed Black women's bodies from something human to something that is an amalgamation of flesh through structures of captivity, commodification, and white supremacy. This transformation through violent objectification, which strips the person from their personhood, is a significant and intentional process of captivity and white dominance: by stripping a being from their personhood and transforming them into an object of flesh, they are also able to be stripped from their gender and their agency while being scrutinized under a "hyper-visual, hyper-gendered"[21] lens and grammar. This new grammar, created from theft of body, emphasizes the sexuality of Black women which Spillers calls "pornotroping."[22] Additionally, by transforming Black bodies into flesh, white enslavers transformed Black flesh into a commodifiable object that could be bought, sold, bred, and mangled. Spillers pays specific attention to the role the Middle Passage played in unmaking Black being. While enduring the nearly unimaginable nothingness of the Middle Passage, Black people faced suspension in the "oceanic" (referencing the Freudian meaning of the word which means 'an undifferentiated identity'). Exacerbated through Black people's sudden separation from land, kin, gender, and the self, the suspension in the nothingness of the Middle Passage "unmade" captive Black people, making the flesh a site of absence. By being

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[21] Samantha Pinto, "Black Feminist Literacies: Ungendering, Flesh, and Post-Spillers Epistemologies of Embodied and Emotional Justice," *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 4, no. 1 (2017): 27

[22] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

transformed into flesh through theft of the body and a violent nothingness, systems of violent white supremacy enforced that Black people were not humans, but commodifiable objects.

The theory of the flesh, as proposed by Spillers, suggests that flesh is not only an object, but is a framework to understand how commodification of Black bodies through chattel slavery lingers in the "affective, legal, social, and market systems that define contemporary Black life."[23] To be commodified is to literally be objectified to the point where one is unable to access humanness and its attendant feelings and affects. The effects of commodification on Black people are outlined by Orlando Patterson, who proposes that Black people are perpetually commodified since they are unable to escape the legacies of slavery and the subsequent designation of flesh. Therefore, since humanness is inaccessible, Black people face ontological and social death.[24]

One's body is not only transformed into flesh through involuntary commodification but is also transformed through endurance of extreme violence.[25] Spillers describes the violence that Black people faced under the chattel slavery system in the United States: "eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives the canine patrol, the bullet."[26] She does not indulge in graphic descriptions of the violence enacted onto Black bodies; the words themselves carry the weight of the action done. Through these impactful statements, readers paradoxically imagine what it

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[23] Pinto, "Black Feminist Literacies," 27.

[24] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death a Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 35.

[25] Pinto, "Black Feminist Literacies," 28.

[26] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

would feel like to endure this type of pain but cannot access insight into what the sensation of being branded, to use one of Spiller's examples, would feel like. Similarly, many of us cannot begin to understand the violence of being shot in the hand, and then through the body, for allegedly stealing cigarettes as Michael Brown endured. Philosopher Elaine Scarry notes that when descriptions of pain, an experience that is sometimes felt in response to tactile sensation, are expressed, the experience of pain cannot be denied nor confirmed through paradoxical imaginings; however, if the body experiencing pain can be imagined to be a human body like similar to one's own, the pain can be imagined by the person who the pain is being described to.[27] Scarry uses this understanding of pain to theorize about how infliction of pain is used to deny and "unmake" groups of people. Using Scarry's understanding of pain as a crucial aspect of understanding the humanness of the other, I conclude that if the pain is completely unfathomable, it cannot be applied to the shared referent of the human body. Therefore, I propose that the sensations of violence that Black people must face in the United States is unimaginable *on purpose.* If someone who inhabits a subject positionality is able to truly imagine the sensations, the feelings, and affects that arise when facing these violent sensations, it would mediate subjecthood for the Black person. By keeping the sensations Black bodies endure in an unintelligible realm, the body of the Black person is unrecognized as a fellow body within systems of white supremacy, thus rendering the body to flesh. Additionally, to perpetrate such a level of violence onto a human, one must not recognize their humanness in the first place. The rendering of Black bodies to flesh not only mediates the humanness of non-Blacks but asserts it.

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[27] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 13.

Therefore, the denial of sensation and its attendant feelings and affects is a tool of white supremacist powers in the United States to deny access to a Black humanism.

Accessibility to the Body and Embodiment

Spillers notes that flesh is a state that exists prior to the body; the flesh is an object made by and is subject to extreme violence. Flesh differs from the body, as flesh is only considered being *for* the captor, whereas the body is a state of being which posseses desires, will, for the self. The body is embodied and lived, while the flesh is objectified and therefore faces ontological death. Denial of sensation further objectifies and dehumanizes Black people and long term and systemic objectification and dehumanization through violent racism and the denial of sensation withholds access to the body, and therefore access to being. Through understandings of the body as proposed by Merleau-Ponty, which denies mind-body dualisms, inability to access the body creates problematic implications for Black people who are subject to ontological death and who are rendered as flesh, as access to embodied knowledge and an embodied self are contingent on access to the body. These problems possibly suggest that Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the lived body is invalid or incomplete as these theories do not acknowledge the experience of those who have limited access to the body. This oversight is addressed by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who notes that Merleau-Ponty's description of the lived body is limiting as it is clearly the body of a white, European, male demonstrated through its privileging of visual phenomenon.[28] I do not reject Irigaray's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's lived body—it is undeniably shaped by Merleau-Ponty's experiences as a white and male

[28] This is translated summarized in a piece by Elizabeth Grosz: Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1, (1993): 37-59.

member of the European intelligentsia. However, I do not find that Merleau-Ponty's perspective inherently limits the accessibility of the lived body to women, queer people, colonized people, and those who face racialization. Instead, in understanding Merleau-Ponty's default conceptualization of the lived body as the body of a white, European male, scholars are able to more aptly explain the challenges of accessing epistemological, ontological, and material existence and embodiment, especially when people do not occupy the same lived body as Merleau-Ponty. However, it is, frankly, dehumanizing to assert that embodiment is completely inaccessible to someone because of their existence as someone who is racialized, gendered as non-male, queer, or exists under colonial power; Black feminism, for example, is largely concerned with how embodiment is, can, and must be fulfilled by Black women.

One of the most important accounts of embodiment in feminist canon is Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic proposed in the essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Lorde describes the erotic as the deep satisfaction one feels when engaged deeply with other women, and that the erotic is intentionally suppressed by patriarchal powers because of the danger a fully engaged mind and body poses onto patriarchal hegemony. The erotic, as proposed by Lorde, is defined as as full knowledge, a connection between the deepest part of the body and the mind. Lorde describes the feeling as an "electrical charge"—a physical affect that resembles an external sensation.[29] This sensation, and its subsequent power, is felt through sharing a pursuit with another person and engaging deeply with both the pursuit and the person and through experiencing joy without resignation.[30] She uses the examples of dancing, building a bookshelf,

[29] Lorde, "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 47.

[30] Lorde, "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 44.

and writing a poem, all of which are mediated and informed by tactile sensations and attendant affects—the sensation of your feet moving across the ground, the differing textures of the wood and the metal, the sensation of the pen you chose scratching across the notebook or your fingertips on the keyboard. The sensations experienced in the erotic serve to remind the person that they are capable of feeling;[31] this reifies the existence of a feeling that is denied through violent antiblackness. These erotic moments indicate that Blackness does not relegate one to the realm of non-existence nor does it make the body completely inaccessible. Thus, the erotic and the power in which it holds becomes a liberatory way to escape the material, epistemological, and ontological troubles that is imposed onto Black people by denial of sensation dictated through antiblack racism and subsequent denial of humanism.

Transcendence, Third-Positionality, and Liberation

Despite cultural and historical conditions in the United States working to deny humanness to Black people in the United States causing tangible material, epistemic, and ontological harm, Black people do occupy lived bodies and engage with embodied selves. In the pamphlet *Pyrrhus and Cineas,* feminist philosopher and phenomenologist Simone De Beauvoir notes that although people are free to make choices, their choices are limited by the existent in which they reside. One may choose to carry out certain actions, but their reasoning and ability to do so are dictated by circumstances in the past and present that are out of one's control. This dictation of our actions means that our material, epistemic, and ontological conditions are structured through means beyond our control. I deduce that these conditions and histories are also dictated by acts of violent racialization. Beauvoir uses the example of gardening in her

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[31] Lorde, "Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 44.

narrative to illustrate how histories outside of our control dictate our existence. Although one may choose to begin gardening, their access to land, to the knowledge on when to plant certain crops and how to take care of them, and even the ability to farm cultivated seeds is enabled by a variety of histories that are synthesized into a singular moment that allows you to choose to begin gardening.[32] Similarly, conditions of Blackness in the United States are dictated and bound by legacies of slavery and antiblack violence that denies sensation and the status of Black as human. However, despite being bound by time, material, and ontological conditions, Beauvoir notes that people are able to engage with "projects," or engagements with the world and ourselves— including our thoughts and feelings—which exist outside of the conditions we are constrained by. Although hegemonic structures in the United States deny Black people from subjecthood through the denial of sensation, Lorde's theory of the erotic and theories of embodiment proposed by other Black feminists like bell hooks and those in the Combahee River Collective, who propose theories of embodiment that directly challenge structures of white patriarchy, demonstrate that Black people access a lived Black body despite residing in a reality dictated by a series of histories that denies Black humanness through the denial of sensation and the infliction of extreme violence.[33] Beauvoir describes existence outside of historical, cultural, and personal conditions—therefore, existence for the self—as transcendence:

> What is mine is first the accomplishment of my project; a victory is mine if I fought for it... It is because my subjectivity is not inertia, folding in upon itself, separation, but, on the contrary, movement toward the other that the difference between me and the other is

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[32] Simone De Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* in *Philosophical Writings,* ed. by Margaret A. Simmons, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 95.

[33]See: bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process," in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom,* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

> abolished, and I can call the other mine. Only I can create the tie that unites me to the other. I create it from the fact that I am not a thing, but a project of self toward the other, a transcendence.[34]

For Beauvoir, transcendence exists beyond the other and toward the self and removes the barriers between the subject, the object, and the self. Although Beauvoir's understanding of transcendence is focused on "movement toward the other" which is unhelpful for those who face violent, systemic othering (as movement toward the other is impossible since they already reside in the space of the other), her understanding of transcendence suggests that transcendence aids in "breaking our histories."[35] I propose then, that transcendence contains a kernel of liberatory power. If histories deny humanness, dictate ontological and social death and subject people to extreme forms of physical violence, transcending from these histories offers an existence outside of these conditions.

Merleau-Ponty's definition of transcendence is similar to Beauvoir's. Merleau-Ponty proposes that transcendence is movement inward and away from the positions of subject and object. This movement erodes the barriers between the subject and object, specifically deconstructing ideas of mind/body dualisms. He describes transcendence as existing beyond the need of perception—a pure existence for the self. This theory of transcendence exists outside of the body's positionality as a subject or as an object and is the purest form of self since the self exists outside of mediation against objects. According to Merleau-Ponty, "being in the world" cannot be understood as a sum of reflexes (a dualist understanding of the body), and cannot be understood as a series of spontaneous thoughts (a dualist understanding of the mind) but instead,

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[34] Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* in *Philosophical Writings*, 92.

[35] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 102.

can only be distinguished from third person processes and from first person forms of knowledge. Thus, "being in the world" exists at the "junction of the physical and physiological,"[36] as a prior form. Philosopher William Wilkerson describes this access to this prior form as "discover[y] beneath subject and object, and beneath mind and body, a primordial level of living experience that provides the fund from which we derive objectivity as a pole opposite the subjective interiority of our consciousness."[37] Transcendence, then, can be understood as a phenomenological ontology that exists both beyond and prior to being in the world. Not only, then, does transcendence break history, but it also reveals a state of being that is before being and innate to the self. Transcendence can also be understood as an equilibrium of the lived body both before and beyond subject and object positionality.[38] One of the earliest definitions of transcendence as proposed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* is presented in the chapter "The Body as a Sexed Object" with one of the earliest frameworks of transcendence in the book:

> Indeed, the natural world presents itself as existing in itself over and above its existence for me; the act of transcendence whereby the subject is thrown open to the world runs away with itself and we find ourselves in the presence of a nature which has no need to be perceived in order to exist. If then we want to bring to light the birth of being for us, we must finally look at that area of *our experience which clearly has significance and reality only for us* [emphasis mine], and that is our affective life.[39]

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[36] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 82.

[37] William Wilkerson Merleau-Ponty the Metaphysician: The Living Body as a Plurality of Forces." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2013): 299.

[38] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 178.

[39] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 178.

As conveyed in the quote above, transcendence is engaging with the body outside of its existence as a perceived object, allowing for the body to become fully realized as a lived body. This transcendence is also described as an equilibrium; it is full embodiment while simultaneously transcending from the self. Transcendence, to according to both Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, is always temporary. Since our bodies are constantly being mediated amongst objects and as an object, moments in which the body can reach transcendence are fleeting and short lived.

Theories of transcendence proposed by Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty reveal that there is a liberatory nature to transcendence—not only does transcendence allow existence in all its forms (ontological, epistemological, material, etc.) to break from its histories, but transcendence erodes the subject/object dualisms while reifying the existence of the lived body *for itself*. I propose that when histories are broken and the body exists for the self, not only are subject/object positionalities eroded, but a third-positionality between subject and object is achieved. Transcendence is a move toward a third-positionality. Existence within a third-positionality allows for recognition of a self that is not dictated by and amongst objects and subjects, therefore existence in a third-positionality is a true existence for the self and both moves toward a prior self and a self that exists beyond the self. It is a brief escape from an existence mediated as an object amongst objects. Because a third-positionality is a window to mediate the self without the histories that constrain the self (including material, cultural, ontological, and epistemological histories), third-positionality is a liberatory positionality. Not only does it transcend history, but it serves as a way to escape and transcend ontological and epistemic conditions in which we reside. Through transcendence and inhabitance of a third-positionality, or an existence not mediated by

the other's perception and perception of the other, one is able to exist outside of systems of violence. This brief existence outside of a violent system allows for one to imagine worlds outside of these violent systems and where people are not withheld by the conditions in which they reside. To reach transcendence and move toward a third-positionality, one must take up projects that challenge and subvert material, cultural, ontological, and epistemological histories.

As I have outlined, histories of Blackness in the United States are shaped by histories of violent racism enabled by denial of embodied sensation and, ultimately, humanness. Therefore, a breaking of histories required for Black transcendence requires the subverting, challenging, and shattering of racist histories. This includes cultural memories of racism like memories of the transatlantic slave trade, police brutality, and everyday acts of racism along with systems of white domination that deny embodied sensation, relegating Black as a non-human category. Queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman proposes in her article, "Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History," that sadomasochistic sex and role play are a way to interact with historical notions of oppression because the actions "relentlessly physicalizes the encounter with history."[40] Through close reading of Issac Julien's short film *The Attendant,* which showcases a Black museum guard's fantasies about sadomasochism and domination brought about by looking at a painting illustrating the slave trade, Freeman outlines how sadomasochism is a way to engage with history embodied. This engagement with sadomasochistic sex practices, or what is more commonly referred to as BDSM in the present day, can therefore be understood as a way for people to experience embodied engagements with history.

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[40] Elizabeth Freeman, "Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History." *Differences* 19, no. 1, (2008): 41.

Embodied engagements with history, however, are not enough to shatter them. Although some authors like Elizabeth Freeman, Ariane Cruz, and Jennifer Nash conceptualize BDSM as a site where cultural memories and histories of violent racialization can be engaged with, challenged, and subverted, this analysis does allow for a breaking of histories because they do not acknowledge how systemic denial of Black embodied sensation dehumanizes and objectifies Black people in the United States. This dehumanization not only dictates material and cultural histories, but because it relegates Black people into the category of non-human and other, it also dictates metaphysical and epistemological histories. Therefore, BDSM practice not only allows for people to engage with the temporality of racism but can enable the breaking of cultural memories and histories of racial oppression through engagement with and recognition of embodied sensation. Not only does attention to these concurrent experiences allow for recognition of humanness in a system that denies humanness to Black people within the United States, but also brings forth access to an embodied self where the body and mind as one being as opposed to extensions of or separate from each other. Recall how Audre Lorde calls access to embodied self the erotic: full engagement of the body and the mind outside of and in spite of repressive and oppressive systems that limit female freedom and embodiment.

Thus, transcendence must be partially mediated by sensation. Sensation, unlike the visual, can only happen to and be understood by the individual, as it only happens and can be observed by the self: even if someone is to experience the sensation from the same external object at the same time as another person, how sensation is perceived and then interpreted can only be done by the individual. In part one of *The Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a house to explain how it can be witnessed from many different angles.

Despite this, it is still the same house regardless of how it is percived, and two people can understand that they are looking at the same house despite the house being seen at different angles by different perceiving subjects.[41] Through the perception of sight and through shared linguistic referents, we are able to understand that the existence of the house is a constant (until it isn't, where, then, its non-existence is understood to be in result of some type of physical disruption of the house's existence). Tactile sensation does not function in the same way, as sensation's existence can only be understood by the individual. If two people are to experience the same event that resulted in a sensation at the same time, sensation is only existent to the person who experiences it. Through intersubjectivity, empathy, and through shared linguistic referents, we are able to understand that sensations felt by individuals may be similar, but we can never discern that it is the same sensation because sensation cannot be observed from the third person, whereas the house can be. Additionally, sensation is mediated by one's feelings and affects, which also mediate our positionality as lived bodies and subjects. Lorde's notation that violent objectification denies sensation without feeling; this denial, as established in this paper, creates historical, material, ontological, and epistemological conditions that inhibit subject positionality. Transcending these conditions, then, requires that sensation and feeling must not be denied. Therefore, transcendence and inhabitance of a third-positionality—a liberatory positionality—requires projects that undertake eroticism differently but not separate from its relational connotation to enable full engagement of the body and the mind, for only then is the full subjectivity of a person recognized while transcending past the conditions that oppress people, especially Black people.

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[41] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 78.

The taking up of projects for the self that triggers sensation, and embracing the attendant affects and theories, such as BDSM, attempts at mediating and negotiating the positionality in which one resides. In Chapter Two of this project, I will utilize close reading of the written and filmed pornography pieces “Reach” and *Connection First* to examine how Black practitioners of BDSM utilize sensation as a tool for transcending beyond the material, epistemological, and ontological histories enforced by systemic denial of sensation without feeling. For some, this practice not only asserts a lived Black body, but asserts a lived body for that exists for itself and within a liberatory third-positionality.

CHAPTER TWO

NEGOTIATING BLACK BEING IN BDSM PORNOGRPAHY

Through analysis of BDSM pornography which is encoded with cultural memories of slavery and violence towards Black people, I demonstrate how attention to previously sensation in BDSM mediates Black subjectivity and empowers transcendence and the inhabitance of a third-positionality. To further contextualize my arguments and my readings of pornography, I situate my understanding of the racialization present in pornography and sadomasochism within existing Black feminist thought. I am particularly attendant to the theories proposed in the 1980s and 1990s by Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, and other notable authors like Alice Walker. I also trace how contemporary Black feminist thought on sadomasochism and pornography outlined by Ariane Cruz and Jennifer Nash interact with and build upon these theories. Outlining these arguments enables me to demonstrate how cultural memories of racism is encoded in BDSM and pornography which preface my own readings of the pornographic pieces and "Reach," by Roxanne Gay, and *Connection First,* directed by Jamal Phoenix. My analysis demonstrates how cultural memories of racism, and the transatlantic slave trade are encoded in these pieces and in BDSM practice, and how subjects within the pieces analyzed engage with these memories through the recognition of sensation. Analysis of "Reach" and *Connection First* also demonstrates attempts at transcendence through engagement with and breaking histories in which subjects of the art pieces are dictated by.

Sadomasochism and Black Feminist Thought: Contextualizing Representation

At the latter half of the second wave feminist movement, feminists became increasingly concerned with the violence they witnessed in pornography and sadomasochism. Black feminists also contributed to discourses critical of pornography and sadomasochism by specifically pointing to aspects of racialization present in pornography. Black feminists writing in the 1980s and 1990s suggest that pornography contributes to the commodification and dehumanization of Black women. In the canonical book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins claims that the exploitative nature of pornography is rooted in the oppression of Black women, regardless of the race of the woman depicted in the pornography. Collins asserts that although white women are harmed by pornography, the thought that justified pornography—collective ideas of domination, objectification, and control of women—was constructed around the ownership of Black female bodies during the Antebellum United States and the longstanding misogynoir that followed.[1] She describes how the effects of slavery permeated into ideas of pornography, and therefore oppressive forms of sexuality, by stating that "the political economy of pornography meshes with this overarching value system that objectifies, commodifies, and markets products, ideas, images, and actual people."[2] The joint force of this value system and political economy creates what Patricia Hill Collins deemed "icons" or "representations" of qualities that are associated with the group of people depicted.[3] Therefore, through Collin's framework, one can conceptualize that all pornography is a representation of cultural understandings of bodies, even

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[1] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 176.

[2] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 180.

[3] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 176.

if the pornography is trying to subvert the hegemonic understandings of bodies because they are informed by and in conversation with those structures—this is agreed upon even amongst porn studies scholars who do not argue that pornography is inherently oppressive like Jennifer Nash, Linda Williams, and Ariane Cruz. However, Patricia Hill Collins and other Black feminists writing in the 1980s and 1990s focuses on documenting the deeply oppressive rhetoric encapsulated in these representations and emphasizes that this oppressive rhetoric is rooted in Black women's sexual exploitation. Collins' work particularly focuses on Black women's sexual exploitation and how the system of transatlantic slavery in the United States "objectified [enslaved African women] as less than human"[4] and that contemporary pornography encapsulates this idea by portraying women as sexual animals that must be tamed.[5] Collins also draws attention to the extreme forms of violence that Black women endured at the hands of their enslavers during the slave trade—especially rape—and alludes to the instances of violence that present in pornography that mirrors the oppressions of slavery.[6] Therefore, Collins sees pornography as not only grounded in racism and sexism, but as a cultural memory of Black commodification and abuse.[7]

Collins introduces this analysis of representations of Black female bodies in pornography to criticize the institution of contemporary pornography and to assert that Black women's bodies

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[4] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 175.

[5] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 176.

[6] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 175.

[7] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 176.

are "treated pornographically" by the transatlantic Slave Trade and its legacy.[8] Through this assertion, Collin's critique of pornography is expanded. Instead of pornography existing only as an oppressive system informed by institutions of racism and sexism, Black feminists understood pornography to be institution that treats Black women pornographically, therefore perpetually enacting tangible harm and violence onto Black women. The notion that Black women are treated pornographically is also mirrored by Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Baby" where she introduces the concept of pornotroping. According to Spillers, through "theft of the body," as described in the first chapter of this thesis, and through casting Black female bodies as an inhuman other, White supremacist and patriarchal powers are able to transform Black female bodies into pornographic objects that are subject to the imposition of violent gendered and racialized oppression.[9] These interventions as proposed by Collins and Spillers draw attention to the violent sexual oppression that Black women face as a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. For these Black feminist authors, pornography is not a singular form of oppression. Instead, pornography represents centuries of violence that affects the ontological status of Black women. Because the effects of sexual and racialized violence tangibly harmed Black women, Black feminists expressed their concern when sexual practices that seemed to celebrate the violent legacies and cultural memories of sexual violence, slavery, and pornotroping was thrust into the public eye through pornography and through practice of sadomasochism.

As I introduce arguments against sexual sadomasochism as proposed by other Black feminists writing in the 1980s and 1990s, it is important to remember Patricia Hill Collins'

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[8] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 178.

[9] Spillers, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe," 67.

assertion that all sexual oppression and exploitation is constructed from violent sexual exploitation of Black women.[10] Therefore, it is typically understood within the conversations I highlight that acts of sexual sadomasochism that do not involve Black women are still informed by the oppression of Black women. Additionally, these conversations happened alongside and among conversations within the radical feminist movement during the Feminist Sex Wars, which largely viewed pornography and sadomasochism as who viewed pornography and sexual sadomasochism as representative of oppressive male desire.[11] To illustrate this thought process, I, again, highlight the anti-pornography argument proposed by the Radical feminist Robin Morgan in 1978 that asserts that pornography is a framework in which sexual violence against women is normalized through the often cited quote: "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice."[12] The feminist paradigm in which these authors wrote in is one that views pornography and sadomasochism as causing and perpetuating harm against women, and that these practices are especially harmful to Black women.[13]

In 1982, radical feminists Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E. H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star edited and published the anthology *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis.* This book, written at the height of the feminist Sex Wars, serves as a summary of anti-sadomasochism and anti-pornography feminist discourse in the 1980s and

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[10] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 176.

[11] Musser, *Sensational Flesh,* 33.

[12] Robin Morgan, *Going too Far,* 164-165.

[13] There are also arguments happening concurrently that discuss the abject violence and exploitation that many porn actresses face in the filming of pornography, but this is not the main topic explored by these authors.

1990s by both Black and white feminist authors. The book includes pieces from significant feminist thinkers including Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Robin Morgan, and Susan Griffin, and Judy (Judith) Butler. Increasingly concerned with the increased popularity in sadomasochistic sexual practice and pornography throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these authors came together to address the dire state of sadomasochism. Black feminists who wrote chapters for the book, including Karen Sims, Rose Mason, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker focused on the racialized imagery and language used in sadomasochism and the implications of eroticizing systems of dominance. In the article "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians" Karen Sims and Rose Mason discuss alongside Darlene Pagano, a white feminist, their concerns with sadomasochism. The practice of sadomasochism is a diverse practice where many different dynamics are explored. Not all sadomasochism includes role playing of sexual slavery.[14] However, when talking about sadomasochistic practices, Sims, Mason, and Pagano are largely concerned with rhetorics of slavery and the images that are provoked through use of the terms "slave" and "master." Sims, reflecting on the system of African chattel slavery emphasizes that Black women had no choice in their enslavement and rape. The lack of consent in the transatlantic slave trade makes the appropriation of the term master/slave in S/M spaces insulting, according to Sims, as it heavily implies that enslaved Black women chose to endure

[14] In BDSM, master/slave relationships are a type of relationship constructed around the structures of dominance and submission. Master/slave relationships, however, engage specifically with submission in relationship to ownership and play with (and possibly subvert) notions of consent. The practice varies from relationship to relationship: for some, one may only be a slave when engaging in specific sexual role play scenarios, while others may fulfill the role of slave-full time in the relationship with the master. Although slavery in BDSM often includes sexual acts, not all slaves are inherently sex slaves.

racialized and antiblack violence.[15] Alice Walker repeats a similar sentiment in her piece "A Letter of the Times, or Should this Sado-masochism be Saved?" and states that that "we must resist the notion that Black women were 'content' and that they somehow 'chose' their servitude, that they did not resist."[16] To these feminists, the racialized imagery present in sadomasochism tangibly challenged newly established historiographies of slavery that emphasized the extreme abuse that enslaved women went through, stripping both women enslaved during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and modern Black women of their agency. Alice Walker goes so far as to suggest that sadomasochism is an attempt to lead Black women back into captivity, stating that "television [depictions of sadomasochism are] a lot more subtle than slave ships."[17] Patrica Hill Collins also expressed her concern that pornography and sadomasochism evoked images of slavery and justified the subordination of Black women. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins cites multiple feminist sociological studies about Black women in pornography to provide evidence to her argument, and notes that in pornography, Black women are more likely to be subject to forms of violence in pornography, are more likely to be on their knees performing fellatio, are more likely to initially resist the sexual encounter and then submit to their dominant, and are more

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[15] Karen Sims, Rose Mason, and Darlene Pagano. "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis,* ed. Linden, Robin, Darlene Pagano, Diana Russell, Susan Leigh Star, (East Palo Alto: Frog in the Well, 1982), 104.

[16] Alice Walker, "A Letter of the Times, or Should this Sado-masochism be Saved?," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis,* ed. Linden, Robin, Darlene Pagano, Diana Russell, Susan Leigh Star, (East Palo Alto: Frog in the Well, 1982), (East Palo Alto: Frog in the Well Publishing, 1983), 206.

[17] Walker, "A Letter of the Times, or Should this Sado-masochism be Saved?" 208.

likely to express their love of rape, especially when white men committed the rape.[18] Collins also claims that the most consistent imagery in pornography that features Black women is imagery of them "breaking from chains" and says the settings and imagery of Black women in pornography is representative of slavery.[19]

Black feminists of the 1980s and 1990s were not only concerned with icons and images of slavery evoked through sadomasochism but were also concerned with the eroticization of power difference and oppression, or what Linda Willaims would later refer to as the sadist's desire to eliminate difference and the masochists' willingness to be eliminated.[20] In a conversation between Susan Leigh Star and Audre Lorde, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," Lorde suggests a psychoanalytic approach to analyzing sadomasochism and suggests that the root of desire to participate in sadomasochism comes from a deep, ingrained sense of superiority and inferiority compared to others and the "learned intolerance of differences."[21] Lorde notes that because the erotic permeates into all aspects of our lives, the oppression seen in sadomasochism will not only be relegated bedroom and will inevitably seep into how individuals carry out their life. According to Lorde, seepage of intolerance and the "right to dominate" is inevitable through the pervasiveness of the erotic, directly threatening efforts to deconstruct systems of dominance and oppression.[22] In "Racism and Sadomasochism," Sims recounts her

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[18] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 178.

[19] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 178.

[20] Williams, *Hard Core*, 227.

[21] Lorde and Star, "Interview with Audre Lorde," 69.

[22] Lorde and Star, "Interview with Audre Lorde," 69.

observations of BDSM and claims that the practice is particularly upsetting because it seemed to disregard her experiences of pain and trauma from racialization:

> Some of the things that I had seen and heard about succumbing to the power of someone else are devastating to me as a Black woman, having grown up in Black culture and being subjected to someone else's power, and having to live with that all my life.[23]

For Black many Black feminists like Lorde and Sims, sadomasochism felt like a celebration of the violent systems of racism, pornography, and pornotroping that they endured as Black women.

In "Racism and Sadomasochism," Darlene Pagano notes in the interview between her and Sims and Mason that Samois, a lesbian-feminist S/M club from the Bay Area, had Black women as members. Despite the facticity of this statement, Rose Mason quickly shuts it down. Mason states that she never saw third-world-women involved in sadomasochism and implies that any involvement would be non-consensual because it would be a way to control someone of a different race and class.[24] Despite Mason's claim that third-world-women, including Black women, did not participate in sadomasochism, Black people happily participated in sadomasochistic practice before *On Sadomasochism* was published and continue to do so in the present day. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as sadomasochism became more present in the public eye, Black people carved a place for themselves in the scene. The lesbian-feminist pornography magazine *On Our Backs,* which was published from the 1980s through the early 2000s, regularly featured articles, auto-bibliographic stories, and photos, of Black women

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[23] Sims, Mason, and Pagano, "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians," 102.

[24] Sims, Mason, and Pagano, "Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians," 104.

joyously participating in BDSM. In the 1990s, the organizations Brothers in Leather and ONYX were formed to serve as social clubs for men of color in the leather and S/M scene.[25] In 1998, a sister organization of the ONYX was formed named ONYX Pearls, serving as a social club for women of color interested in S/M and leather.[26] Contemporary interest in Black BDSM practice continues to grow and clubs, publications, blogs, and support groups foster safe spaces for Black people to participate in the practice.

For authors Jennifer Nash and Ariane Cruz, practices of Black BDSM are of particular scholarly interest. As noted above, it is accepted into the Black Feminist canon that BDSM practice contains memories of racialized violence. However, their research questions inquire on how heavily racialized sex acts—whether implicitly or explicitly racialized through use of imagery that may be reminiscent of chattel slavery or through race play, respectively—are pleasurable for Black women. Ariane Cruz conceptualizes her book *The Color of Kink* as a Black feminist intervention that "demonstrate[s] the power, agency, and pleasure," BDSM, pornography, and racialized sex acts can "engender for Black women."[27] Cruz analyses BDSM performances as text and pays specific attention to visual representations of race through close readings. Her close readings demonstrate the presence of racialization through descriptions of subtle details, like the color of rope in the self-portrait series, *Building Me a Home* by crystal

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[25] "Brothers in Leather," Leather Archives and Museum, accessed June 20, 2024, https://leatherarchives.org/ca/index.php/Detail/entities/10170.

[26] "Onyx," Leather Archives and Museum, accessed June 20, 2024, https://leatherarchives.org/ca/index.php/Detail/entities/3151.

[27] Cruz, *The Color of Kink*, 20

nelson, which she argues represents whiteness;[28] and through descriptions of explicit race play scenes as seen in the film *Get My Belt,* where the porn actress and actor play the roles of antebellum slave and master.[29] Cruz's book explores many themes of racialization including depictions of racial revenge and subversion in race play scenes;[30] the role of technology in pornography, kink, and race; and the pornography industry's interest in playing with race. I am, however, most interested in the argument made by Cruz in the first chapter of *The Color of Kink.* Cruz analyzes the complex entanglement between race and systems of violence and suggests that BDSM allows Black women to deliberately engage with cultural memories of slavery to engage with sexual pleasure.[31] Cruz's analysis does not discard the arguments proposed by Black feminist thinkers like Collins, Spillers, Lorde, and others, but instead bases her intervention from these canonical arguments. Cruz does not deny that pornography is explicitly racialized—she utilizes the presence of racialization in film to analyze how racialization can be a site of pleasure.

Although Jennifer Nash does not explicitly explore BDSM practices and their relationships to a larger culture or a community, many of the pornographic films she analyzes in her book, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* contain the same racialized tropes seen in BDSM

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[28] Cruz, *The Color of Kink,* 6.
[29] Cruz, *The Color of Kink,* 84-95.

[30] Race play (sometimes written as raceplay or race-play) is the literal "playing with race" in sexual roleplay. Race play scenes explicitly engage with racialized and racist dynamics. This could include dynamics that Cruz mentions in *The Color of Kink* including play that alludes to the Antebellum period in the United States, or arousal from the idea of being dominated by a Black woman as a white man. Race play consciously plays with racial dynamics: it is different than racialized representations in pornography or sexuality which is sometimes understood to be latent or encoded into pornography.

[31] Cruz, *The Color of Kink,* 32.

pornography including "rape-play" scenes,[32] bondage, extreme degradation of the person in the submissive role, and even faux incest. Like BDSM, the tropes seen in the pornography Nash analyzes are reminiscent of cultural memories of slavery including rape play and bondage scenes evoking images the rape of Black women during enslavement. Nash defines these descriptions as "racial iconographies" and suggests that they can be sites of Black ecstasy that engage with racialization despite the violence typically associated with these icons. Ecstasy, according to Nash, can be understood as "pleasures in looking, pleasures in being looked at, pleasures in performing racial fictions, pleasures in upending racial fictions."[33] She is particularly interested in exploring how race functions as the basis of identity and community, and how this presence of race in pornography can be a pleasurable site of staging these identities and communities.[34] Additionally, Nash attempts to subvert existing Black feminist critiques of pornography on pleasure and pain while acknowledging the historical context in which these texts reside.[35]

Reading Race in BDSM and Pornography

Like Cruz and Nash, I do not wish to discard the contributions made by Black feminist thinkers—doing so would be negligent at best and an act of material violence at worst. Although I do not come to the same conclusion as Black feminists of the 1980s and 1990s on the nature of sadomasochism and pornography, nor do I agree that these institutions are conscious attempts of white patriarchies to perpetuate and even reimplement specific systems of racism, Black

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[32] Rape-play is a form of BDSM practice that emulates rape or other types of non-consensual sex in a consensual space.

[33] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 3.

[34] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 3.

[35] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 24.

feminists' attention to racialization in pornography and sadomasochism are essential to the analyses I conduct in this project. Their critiques of BDSM are, in fact, what led me to this project. Like Cruz and Nash, I found myself interested in how, despite the presence of violence, misogynistic tropes, and the memories of colonization and chattel slavery in BDSM, people joyfully and enthusiastically participate in the practice. In fact, at the beginning of my scholarly inquiry into BDSM and pornography, I was motivated to undertake study of this topic because of my concern with the presence of violence and racist, misogynistic, and sometimes queer and transphobic tropes and how these may normalize and contribute to oppression. However, throughout my research, I find that these tropes are not inherently oppressive and that they seem to hold a kernel of liberatory power. Within BDSM communities, engaging in a kinky encounter with another person is often referred to as "play." I believe use of the term play is significant, especially when thinking of BDSM as a site of anti-oppressive practice because it literally gives people the opportunity to play with—therefore change, contort, reshape, and reimagine, and even break—oppressive histories.

Despite BDSM having the potential of being a site for playing with and breaking histories, the claims about the racialized nature of pornography and sadomasochism and their material harms made by Black feminists are not unfounded. Even amongst those who do not find the exploration of power and race in BDSM settings to be actively or inherently oppressive, they do note that the existence of racial and gender dynamics cannot cease to exist when play begins. When discussing the eroticism of race play with journalist Andrea Plaid, sex performer, actress, author, and BDSM educator Mollena Williams notes that people read racial dynamics in BDSM

and pornography even if they are not a dynamic being explicitly explored in a scene.[36] She recounts a time that she was approached by a woman who said that one of the first times she had seen a race play scene was during an exhibitionist scene in which Williams, a Black woman, was the submissive. In the interview, Williams clarifies that the scene did not explore race play, and that the white dominant she engaged with specifically did not engage in race play scenes. Despite this, because Williams acted as a Black female submissive for a white dominant and because she submitted to being bound and whipped by a white man, this bystander read the scene as a race play scene.[37] Ariane Cruz calls the rhetoric and memory of chattel slavery and rape paired with contemporary representations of Black female sexuality as "slime—a staining sludge of pain and violence."[38]

Williams' anecdote illustrates the presence of this slime and how race is encoded in all cultural productions, including pornography, performance, and sex. Critical analysis of pornography and sex reveals cultural understandings about race and racialized bodies. However, Nash and Cruz demonstrate that analysis of pornography and sex can bring light to attempts at subversion and acts of pleasure existing in spite of and even because of the presence of racialization. It, thus, becomes the responsibility of the person conducting analyses of pornography and sadomasochism to navigate around the racialized slime present in representations of Black female sexuality. This task requires great care and nuance, especially as

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[36] A scene in BDSM is when two or more people engage in BDSM practice in constrained time and place. Scenes typically have a start and end point, and differentiate the practice of kink from the everyday interactions.

[37] Mollena Williams and Andrea Plaid, "Race Play Interview – Part IV (Conclusion)." Mollena, April 9, 2009. http://www.mollena.com/2009/04/race-play-interview-part-iv/.

[38] Cruz, *The Color of Kink*, 32.

a white researcher. As I conduct analyses of pornographic films and written erotica and navigate around the cultural memories of racialized violence, I also recall Saddiya Hartman's critique of focusing on the "terrible spectacle" of violence described in discussions of enslavement and racism in her book *Scenes of Subjection.* Revisiting the account of Fredrick Douglass' introduction to slavery where he witnessed the beating of his aunt, Hartman is critical of the constant recounting of brutal violence. She expresses fear that the constant remembering and reiteration of brutality creates a spectacle of suffering and provokes a sense of indifference from the reader.

> I… call attention to the ease with which [violent] scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body… What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of world-destroying capacities of pain…? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of Black sentience or the inhumanity of the "peculiar institution"?... At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible.[39]

Recalling this section of *Scenes of Subjection* grounds my own analyses of race and implores me to not only focus on sensationalized suffering and pain. Although attention to suffering may seem like a way to recognize denied sensation, which I establish is a necessary tool in enforcing violent antiblackness, Hartman's critique demonstrates that the casual retelling of material suffering and violation often becomes an act of dehumanization and voyeurism as opposed to an intersubjective act. Therefore, it is unproductive and harmful to only focus on suffering when

[39] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

reading texts that are racialized.[40] In Chapter One, I claim that sensations of Black suffering exist in an unintelligible realm to enforce the status of the Black person as an other and to prevent intersubjectivity, which can only be fostered through empathy and the sharing of like experiences. Therefore, casual recounting of tales of unimaginable Black suffering does not aid in the conceptualization of the Black as a subject. Instead, it further objectifies Black people and perpetuates their object status while making a spectacle of the violence they endure. Therefore, my analysis of BDSM must not only focus on images, memory, and rhetoric of Black suffering that may be present in the practice, especially when scholars like Cruz and Nash demonstrate the presence of racialized pleasure nestled amongst them.

However, as previously mentioned, it is frankly irresponsible to not acknowledge the presence of race in pornography when scholars like Collins and Spillers aptly trace how Black women are treated pornographically and pornotroped.[41] [42] To ignore aspects of racialization in pornography and to and disregard the canonical understandings of sexual oppression rooted in the exploitation of Black female sexuality—or what Cruz refers to as the presence of slime—does not erase its undeniable presence. Acknowledgement of oppression rooted in Black female sexuality is not only an ethical necessity as a white scholar reading in Black studies but is

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[40] In *Senes of Subjection*, Hartman does not focus on pleasure in lieu of sensationalized suffering, instead she focuses on suffering that occurs when it is less obvious. Since my methodologies and theoretical frameworks recall and are drawn from authors like Hartman, Warren, and Spillers who are not concerned with pleasure, I do not find it appropriate to conflate lack of suffering as pleasure and I believe doing so creates a problematic binary opposition. Although Cruz and Nash talk about pleasure as (Nash coins the term "race-pleasures"), and certainly some of the acts I analyze are pleasurable experiences, my analysis is not focused on pleasurable sensations.

[41] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 178.

[42] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

essential to understanding the issue of transcendence. Within colloquial discussions on concerns violence and racist imagery within BDSM spaces, they are often dismissed and not brought into further discussion under the guise that the practice takes place between two consenting adults, therefore is acceptable. In the 1970s and 1980s, people used the argument of consent when discussing BDSM practice to protect the practice of BDSM from censorship and criminalization. [43] Consent of course, is an important aspect of the practice and is one of the reasons people find it empowering and enticing. However, reducing aspects of racialization and violence in BDSM to an issue of consent to prevents further questioning about the presence of violence and racialized imagery and dynamics. This prevention of questioning not only inhibits analysis of harm but prevents understandings of how experiencing these phenomena subvert and shape agency, pleasures, and ontologies. These discussions cannot exist without acknowledgement of the historical, material, and social contexts in which these phenomena reside in. My intervention, which seeks to understand how Black BDSM practice can be utilized to transcend material, social, ontological, and epistemological histories which deny Black sensation, ontology, and subjectivity and functions as an anti-oppressive practice, is incomplete without the acknowledgement of the works of Black feminist authors like Spillers, Collins, and Lorde. These authors rightly outline the historical conditions of material, social, ontological, and epistemological oppression of Black people encoded in BDSM practice. Refusing to engage with these important works because they are apparently oppositional to the practice of BDSM prevents full exploration of BDSM as a site of reclamation, negotiation, and anti-oppressive

[43] In the 1970s and 1980s, the American right and the American left encouraged the censorship of BDSM. Additionally, people have been arrested for participating in BDSM practice in the United States and the presence of consent has never held up as a valid defense. For more information, see: Vera Bergelson, “Consent to Harm,” *Pace Law Review* (no. 21 vol. 1 2008).

practice. As I move into analysis of pornography, I am mindful of how Black feminists demonstrate that race is encoded into pornography while keeping in mind the theories posed by contemporary Black feminists who have reshaped ideas of representations of race in pornography and BDSM.

Reading Black Sensation in Pornography

To demonstrate the theories I proposed in Chapter One and to put my intervention in dialogue with existing scholarship on Black practices of BDSM, I look at two pieces of erotic art: the short story "Reach," by Roxanne Gay in the anthology *Kink: Stories* and the film *Connection First* (2022), directed by Jamal Phoenix. Through phenomenological analysis and close reading, I showcase how subjects in the stories attempt to mediate Black being through attention to previously denied sensation through the practice of BDSM. BDSM, a sexual practice uniquely concerned with sensation, is a tool used to conduct these attempts. These stories are artistic renditions of queer, Black sexuality and sensation. I focus on erotic films and literature as opposed to other methods of analysis, such as ethnographic studies or interviews, because I conceptualize these artistic pieces to be artistic retellings and renegotiations of one's own experience of lived phenomena. I view literature and film, especially literature and film where the creator's positionality is explicitly present in the work, as a carefully created recounting of ones experienced in a lived body. These modes of creation are also more apt for analyses of how bodies are represented in dominant culture and imbued with ideologies which both reinforce and subvert hegemonic understandings of race, gender, sexuality, and sensation. Ariane Cruz notes that "representations of the body in [pornography] are deeply embedded in the sociopolitical,

historical, and material conditions of everyday life,"[44] [45] therefore, pornography acts as a representation of cultural understandings of the Black body. Additionally, *Connection First* and "Reach" are heavily informed by the creator's own experience. *Connection First,* for example, is directed by and stars the actor Jamal Phoenix, a Black transgender man. His voice and own understandings of his experiences of lived phenomena are present in the film, as is Roxanne Gay's positionality in the story "Reach" despite the story not being autobiographical. The creator's own experience as a lived body runs through these works and demonstrates how Black people experience embodied sensation in a white supremacist system that denies Black experience of sensation.

The recognition of a subject's voice, feelings, and affects in pornography complicates the rhetoric proposed by feminists who criticize pornography. It directly, and perhaps most notably to this project, challenges Audre Lorde's theory of pornography as proposed in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In the essay, Lorde states that the erotic is intentionally conflated with the pornographic to isolate women from power gained through engagement with the erotic. She states that "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling."[46] Although this proposition by Lorde may seem to initially challenge my propositions and analysis, I find that Lorde's assertion reinforces my overall thesis. Lorde's statement that pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling suggests that the oppressive aspect of pornography is a lack of

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[44] Cruz, *The Color of Kink,* 86.

[45] Cruz is specifically discussing cyberpornography, but I believe this is attendant to all pornography and cultural productions of the body and sexuality.

[46] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 42.

recognition of a lived body—an embodied whole self. This fully embodied, engaged self—accessed through the recognition of feelings, affects, and sensation—is a crucial aspect to Lorde's theory of the erotic. It is also crucial in understanding phenomenological accounts of the lived body. Recall my emphasis that recognition of feeling and affect is crucial to understanding the other as a lived subject and to understanding sensation's subjective role in Chapter One. Therefore, emphasis on sensation without feeling is an incomplete understanding of an experience. This prevents access to embodied subjectivity. Pornography that does not attempt to recognize embodied subjectivity, or the failure to recognize the other depicted in the pornography as a lived body, may prevent access to the erotic. However, some pornography pays special attention to the relationship between sensation and feeling, allowing the subjects of the piece to direct their own subjecthood and their own positionality throughout the piece. I chose the pieces *Connection First* and "Reach" because I find them to be particularly attendant to sensations and subsequent feelings that arise from them.

Analysis of erotic film and literature, or what is often deemed as pornography, makes my analysis fit more neatly into the analyses of authors like Patrica Hill Collins, Hortense Spillers, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde amongst others who are primarily concerned with the harm visual and rhetorical representations of Black female subordination can enact. Even Karen Sims and Rose Mason, who spoke about their problems with the lesbian sadomasochistic social club Samois, primarily drew their conclusions about the group from written, visual, and spoken representations of the club presented at feminist anti-pornography meetings.[47] Additionally, I focus on literature and film that can be understood as pornographic media because of the

[47] Williams, *Hard Core*, 28.

feminist movement's long conflation of sadomasochistic sexual practices with pornography. For many American feminists, especially American feminists associated with radical and second wave thought, both pornography and sadomasochism are heavily associated with violent male desire and the sexual subordination of women.

Analysis of written and filmed representations of Black people's engagement with sensation through sadomasochistic play, while engaging with larger societal understandings of race, gender, and being, suggests that BDSM play can function as an attempt at mediating subjecthood and Black being. As established in the beginning of this chapter, BDSM's cannot be unaffiliated with its racialized imagery, dynamics, and the history of Black women facing particularly gruesome sexual violence in the United States since the transatlantic slave trade. However, I understand BDSM to also be what Simone De Beauvoir calls a "project," or engagement with the world, which is especially concerned with sensation and the attendant affects and theories associated with these sensations. Sensation's role in BDSM both empowers Black BDSM practitioners to navigate the self as a lived body and embodied subject—positions which are denied through antiblack racism in the United States—while paradoxically engaging with and outside of the violence associated with antiblackness in the United States. Black practitioners of BDSM can and do utilize BDSM practices as projects that attempt to break these histories and mediate subjectivity. Of course, these attempts are not always successful, but still function as attempts at anti-oppressive praxis that challenge Black onticide.

Roxanne Gay explores BDSM as a tool for self-discovery while engaging with the histories of antiblack racism in her short story "Reach," featured in the anthology *Kink: Stories.* The story describes the relationship between the narrator, who is briefly introduced as Annie, and

her wife, Sasha. For the couple, BDSM is a game that enables them to play with their own and each other's histories.[48] The story, which describes the day to day lives of the couple with explicit descriptions the sex the couple has. In these sexual encounters, Annie is the dominant and Sasha is the submissive. Although the two clearly love each other, there is a great bit of tension between Sasha and Annie. The story traces this tension while describing exciting encounters of sadomasochistic sex where, in first person, the Annie describes her experiences and sensations she experiences while fucking Sasha and inflicting pain.

The use of first-person narration, as opposed to third person narration, achieves two interventions. Although we learn at the beginning of the story that the narrator is named Annie, this name is only mentioned once, making it possible for the readers to distance themselves from Annie. First-person narration allows for the reader to insert themselves into the story and to imagine themselves as the dominant who receives a variety of sensations and who asserts their control over Sasha. The presence of the reader in the story is partially a mechanic of function and enjoyment. Narration in the first-person can allow for the reader to escape the role of the voyeur who simply observes people performing sexual acts, therefore allowing them to become an active participant in the story. When the narrator recounts pressing her lips against her partner's skin or describes how it feels when her partner plays with her clitoris, the use of first-person narration allows for the reader to visualize how this sensation may feel on their own body. If the story is written as a tool for bringing about arousal or to inspire masturbation, then the first-person narration seen in "Reach" and many other stories in *Kink: Stories* allows for the reader to immerse themselves more deeply in fantasy. Through fantastical immersion, the reader shares

[48] Roxanne Gay, "Reach," in K*ink: Stories*, ed. Kwon, R. O., and Garth Greenwell, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 136.

sensation with the narrator, transforming the reader into a subject who becomes present in the story. If the story was told in the third-person, the voyeuristic gaze of the reader could objectify both characters in the story. Therefore, escape from the voyeuristic gaze creates a potential for intersubjectivity between the reader and the narrator. However, by sharing intersubjectivity with the narrator, the narrator then subsumes the standpoint of the reader. This complicates the narrator's role as she explains her attempts to dominate her wife while building an understanding of how her and Sasha's histories, meet, hide and intertwine with each other. If the narrator subsumes the positionality of the reader, the narrator risks perpetuating loss of intersubjectivity and the denial of sensation.

Use of first-person narration also allows for presence of the author's voice and positionality within the text. Annie is not some unknown, distant narrator in whom we have a rare privilege of accessing her thoughts: instead, the narrator's position can be informed by the experiences and positionality the reader and of the author, Roxanne Gay, who is a Black lesbian. Although the story is not autobiographical, indicated by the narrator's name briefly being mentioned as "Annie," (as opposed to being unnamed or even being named "Roxanne") Gay's voice, experiences, and subjectivity are clearly present in the text by the distance from the narrator. Although all writing is informed by the authors' lived experience, the use of personal pronouns and the distance from the narrator also makes Gay's standpoint salient in the text. The subjectivity of the narrator, whether it is informed by the reader's positionality or by the positionality of the author, dictates how instances of intersubjectivity and recognition of sensation can be read between the narrator and her wife, Sasha. There are times when sensations felt by Sasha are intentionally disregarded. This denial can be seen toward the end of the story

when the narrator performs oral sex on Sasha despite her indignant dislike of the sensation. According to Sasha, oral sex a is boring and pointless action.[49] However, the narrator notes that receiving oral sex makes Sasha extremely angry to the point that she will not speak to the narrator for days. Despite this, the narrator still performs this act because Sasha does not use a safe word.[50] A pessimistic reading of this story may interpret this detail of denied sensation as a reification of Sasha's experience of denied sensation as a Black woman in an antiblack world. However, denying sensation may also function to subvert and renegotiate the systemic denial of sensation experienced in an antiblack world because there is a recognition of Sasha's feelings, even if they are discontent. The narrator makes it clear that sensation, whether it is denied or acknowledged, is used to "break" Sasha and to gain a better understanding of her concealed and difficult to parse history.

Upon being proposed to, Sasha tells the narrator that she will marry her because she believes that Annie possesses the capacity and ability to hurt her in the way she feels is needed for her to pursue a permanent partnership. Although the two maintain this partnership, there is clear distance between the narrator and her wife. Sometimes the distance is material, physical distance: the narrator recounts the times that Sasha curls away from her when she reaches to share intimate touch and trace Sasha's back.[51] Other times, the distance is relational. Sasha disappears after work nearly every day, and Annie asks no questions nor does Sasha indulge

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[49] Gay, "Reach,"136.

[50] A safe word is a word or phrase used to indicate to a sexual partner that a person is withdrawing their consent.

[51] Gay, "Reach,"136.

information about her absence.[52] This distance, kept up through secrets and the withholding of information, manufactures a game is played with the histories of the two women.[53] An understanding of Sasha's history is intentionally withheld from the narrator's lived experience. This is initially presented as a pleasurable game to enhance dynamics of their kinky relationship: this game, and the walls that Sasha puts up, allows for Annie to attempt to actually "break" Sasha. This intensifies their kinky relationship: the roles of dominant and submissive are not temporary, pretend roles that the two slip in and out of. Instead, the goal is for Annie to actually dominate Sasha and break her down to the point that the true, concealed Sasha is revealed. Despite this desire, the narrator clearly outlines uncomfortable tension created by her inability to access Sasha's histories— at one point the narrator describes this tension as the two having "cross purposes" and implies that breaking Sasha would surely be devastating to the relationship.[54] Sasha herself is even unable to articulate where these histories lie, and instead describes what she is seeking as a "place she has no vocabulary for—a place neither [Sasha nor the narrator have] been."[55] I interpret this unknowable, unnamable place that is clearly intertwined with the histories of Sasha as a metaphysical location inaccessible to her as a Black woman, or being, subjecthood, and liberation in antiblack world. Both Sasha's and the narrator's inability to name this place further compels me to interpret this location as Black being. Although histories are played with, they are not broken—Annie is never able to "break" Sasha,

[52] Gay, "Reach,"137.

[53] Gay, "Reach,"136.

[54] Gay, "Reach,"139.

[55] Gay, "Reach,"137.

and Black being cannot come to fruition. However, Annie expresses at the end of the story as she carries Sasha into bed, that she hopes she had "inched closer to that place."[56] Despite these metaphysical barriers to reaching the location of transcendence, the two attempt at doing so.

Although the desire to break Sasha may seem violent and oppressive, this action is rooted in the narrator's love for her wife. Sasha is described as someone who constructs tight walls around herself that are nearly unmovable, even to Anna whom she loves and trusts. This distance is clearly informed by her experiences as a Black woman with allusions Sasha's experiences of racial trauma and violence throughout the story. Most notably, the narrator describes thick, knotted scarring wrapping along Sasha's upper back.[57] I interpret the description of these scars—their thickness, their position on her along her upper back—and the unspeakable pain they hold to alludes to the scars enslaved Black people received from violent bodily abuse by whipping and torture endured during the Antebellum period of the United States, therefore serving as a metaphor for experiences of racialized pain and trauma. When the narrator traces a razor blade along her partner's back to leave her own scar, she attempts to recreate the sensations endured through this racialized trauma so the narrator can recognize Sasha's feeling. By having the feelings and affects she experienced during sensations caused by racialized violence recognized, Sasha can experience the embodied subjectivity from which she was previously withheld.

Although the sadomasochistic relationship between Sasha and Annie empowers Sasha to experience embodied subjectivity, Sasha does not transcend into a third-positionality. For the narrator to truly "break" Sasha, Sasha would need to exist outside of racialized traumas and her

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[56] Gay, "Reach,"143.

[57] Gay, "Reach,"138.

historical, material, epistemic, and ontological conditions as a Black woman. To break Sasha, then, is to reveal the core of Sasha's being outside of her material, epistemic, and ontological histories that deny her personhood. This core, inaccessible through the narrator's standpoint, is described by Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir as transcendence—existence for the self as the self, outside of histories that deny Sasha's humanness. Although Sasha takes up subjecthood through her submission to her dominant, her subjecthood is mediated by other subjects. If Sasha can access transcendence move toward a third-positionality, she not only moves away from her position as an object in an antiblack world, but her subjectivity is not dictated by other subjects. Sasha's transcendence is partially denied through the use of the first-person narration, as a non-Black reader may always be unable to foster intersubjectivity between themselves and Sasha because of Sasha's racialized pain being banished to an unintelligible realm, therefore perpetuating the denial of Black sensation.[58] Although attempts at transcendence are made, which would subsequently allow for Sasha to reside in a third-positionality, Sasha is not able to access this space because she her existence is always mediated as an other, even if she is granted subjectivity. Her mediation as an other is revealed through narration. Since the story is narrated in the first-person, readers are never given the opportunity to foster intersubjectivity with Sasha because she is never presented as the subject existing for herself: her point of view is never revealed, and she remains mediated as an other in a world of others. This conclusion is not to suggest that the play that takes place between Annie and Sasha are acts of oppression: despite being unsuccessful in their project described in the story, there is a desire and attempt to make

[58] This is not to say that intersubjectivity is impossible in interracial relationships, nor does it suggest that interracial relationships are necessarily oppressive. Instead, it is to outline how systemic antiblackness makes Black intersubjectivity difficult to discern.

BDSM a site of negotiation of Sasha's subjecthood and therefore, an attempt at liberation from antiblack systems. Instead, this analysis illustrates how transcendence is rare and fleeting because existence is not only mediated by ourselves, but by others' perceptions of us as objects amongst objects.

Other erotic art pieces by and depicting Black BDSM practitioners not only depict attempts at BDSM as a site of liberation against antiblack oppression but reveal that in what I conceptualize as transcendence is possible. I argue that transcendence is seen in the striking film *Connection First* (2022) which is directed by and stars Jamal Phoenix. In the film, Jamal Phoenix, a Black transgender man, is suspended by his dominant, Sir Malice. This film, functioning as both an erotic piece and an auto-bibliographical documentary, depicts Phoenix's first time suspended by rope bondage. Suspension bondage is a practice conducted in some BDSM play settings, and the person is literally suspended from overhead points. People are suspended a variety of ways including by chains, rope, certain types of gear, or in some cases by hooks inserted into skin. Suspension is considered a riskier form of BDSM play, as unsafe suspension can result in severe injury from falling, nerve and joint problems, and in extreme cases, death. Phoenix's willingness to engage in this play with Malice, a man who he never played with before, suggests that in this encounter, Phoenix is trusting Malice with his submission. The film's description confirms this point, stating that "You never know how the world will feel when you release control."[59] Not only does this quote suggest that Phoenix is

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[59] Jamal Phoenix, "Connection First," Letterboxd, 2022, https://letterboxd.com/film/connection-first/

assuming a submissive role in this encounter, but that this submission allows for Phoenix to experience the world outside of his typical bodily and affective milieu.

The opening scene of the *Connection First* shows a bright room where two Black men kneel, facing each other. One is kneeling on the edge of the bamboo mat, next to bundles of rope, while the other presses his knees into the clean floor. The wordless exchange is complimented by the calm, ambient music in the background. This is a dungeon; indicated by the bamboo covered padded mats on the wooden floor, a whipping bench tucked into the back corner, and the suspension rig hanging from the ceiling, held up by rope twisted and tied into shibari knots.[60] However, this dungeon visually differs from the dark, dingy rooms associated with the word and often seen in pornographic films which pay homage to the pre-modern associations of the word that indicate cruelty and punishment. The dungeon in *Connection First,* instead, is an open room with clean, warm toned wood flooring and crisp white walls. The room is illuminated by bright sunlight which casts an optimistic tone over the walls and the actors. The room is pleasant and bright, subverting the oppressive nature of the dungeon. The bright, quiet, and optimistic nature of the room illudes to new discoveries of the self and the future in the space.

Remaining on his knees, Sir Malice joins Jamal Phoenix on the mat. He kneels behind him and pulls Phoenix's bare back close to his bare chest and the two embrace tightly, reassuringly. The sensation of the embrace, heat from skin touching other skin, pressure from arms wrapped around the other, establishes that even in play, the other is a lived body. Queer touch, shared between two Black men, expresses an intersubjectivity that is often denied through antiblack systems that insist on denying Black humanness. Through their body positioning, the

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[60] Shibari is a type of Japanese rope bondage.

two are indicated to be equals. Although Phoenix plays the role of the submissive in this scene, the kneeling position of the two men creates a tension in the nature of the dynamic. Sir Malice maintains his dominance over Phoenix throughout the film: there is never a power struggle between Phoenix and Malice, only Phoenix's complete trust in and submission to his dominant. Malice also maintains his dominant presence by wearing a leather garrison, a motif of the United States military.[61] However, Sir Malice's submissive position in the beginning of the film suggests that he is equal with his submissive, and that he that he, too, is bound within structures of submission.

The acknowledgement of this structure is reinforced in the scene directly following the men's embrace. The camera cuts to Malice and Phoenix kneeling together on the mat, with Malice unraveling a bundle of jute rope, a rope made of natural fibers and is commonly used in shibari scenes. While the two continue kneeling, the camera looks down on them from a high angle, suggesting that the viewer maintains power over the two Black men despite Malice's display of dominance in the scene. This immediate assertion of dominance from the viewer objectifies the bodies of the men, despite them recognizing the other's subjectivity. This gaze asserts that a structure of power over the Black body which denies sensation and subjectivity remains in place and complicates the roles of dominant and submissive that are being played by Malice and Phoenix, respectively. After Malice prepares the first bundle of rope, Phoenix outstretches his arms, still kneeling, with his inner arms and hands pressed together. The camera returns to the angle the film opened with, a long shot of the two kneeling on the mat with the bright light from the windows bouncing off their skin. Malice wraps the fibrous rope tightly

[61] Sir Malice is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps.

around the wrists of his submissive, invoking cultural depictions of chattel slavery: a Black man bound by his wrists on his knees. However, Malice quickly presses Phoenix's bound arms to his chest, allowing his free hands to cup his chin, offering rest, reprise, and self-soothing to Phoenix. Touching his arms to his chest, and his hands to his bearded chin, Phoenix's sensations of his own body pressed against himself reifies his subjecthood, expressed by concentration and relief shown in Phoenix's face.

Malice continues to circle around Phoenix, wrapping his body in the tan colored jute rope. Up close shots show the intricacy of the knots as they weave around Phoenix, encasing him in a cross-legged position with his arms pressed to his chest. The bright light from the windows highlights the sweat accumulated on Sir Malice's body as he prepares rope to suspend Phoenix in the air. The camera cuts to a full body shot of Jamal Phoenix curled up, resting on the side of his left leg. His right leg and upper body are suspended in the air, hung by rope from the thick bar hanging overhead. As Malice adjusts the rope, Phoenix's body gives in to the manipulations of Malice's force, and he shifts and swings along to the tugs. In this moment, Phoenix is at the whim of his dominant as he has no way to access an escape without aid from Malice: the feeling of his body's movement and the pressure of the rope reminds him of this. Finally, Malice pulls a rope hard, raising Phoenix's legs far above his head, suspending his body diagonally and upside down. Phoenix's head barely touches the mat while Malice secures the ties.

Malice, donned in leather shorts and a leather vest, kneels behind his submissive who hangs suspended and vulnerable to him. Wordlessly, Sir Malice lightly smacks the behind of Phoenix, who grins at the contact. The touch, although light, swings Phoenix's body forward, only for him to be tenderly caught by his dominant. Malice holds Phoenix's head in his large

hands and caresses his submissive's hair while steadying his bottom. In some dynamics explored in BDSM, extreme objectification and dehumanization is the goal of the play scene. In these play settings, the dominant is purposely indifferent to the sensations endured by the submissive, denying intersubjectivity, to performatively dehumanize their submissive. This denial does not occur in *Connection First.* Sir Malice displays careful attention to the sensations his suspended submissive experiences through his gentle and comforting touches. In paying attention to the feeling Phoenix is facing—the rope pressing into his skin, his body weight moving his body forward and back, his head lightly grazing the bamboo mat—he shares these sensations, extending his subjectivity to Phoenix. He caringly adjusts Phoenix's bondage before the camera cuts close on Phoenix's face and upper body, showing his eyes squeezed shut with a pensive frown on his face. This shot not only shows Phoenix's reaction to the sensation he endures but demonstrates that this adjustment in ties is for Phoenix.

Malice adjusts Phoenix's ties once more and returns to kneel behind his submissive. He, again, presses his hand into Phoenix's ass, propelling him forward. With his body tied, folded, and twisted, Phoenix can feel his own body weight at odds with the jute rope as the two press against and into each other. Through the pressure and friction between Phoenix's body and the rope, and the sensation of his body swinging in the air, Phoenix's position as a perceiving subject is upheld: the rope functions as a contrasting object. During the final moments of suspension, Sir Malice leans away from Phoenix and removes his hands from Phoenix's body. In the moments that follow, Phoenix gently rocks his hips, propelling himself forward and backward while tears silently stream from his face. He is unable to see his dominant: Malice sits behind Phoenix.

Instead, Phoenix is suspended himself, embracing the intensity of gravity pressing down on the body, skin bulging through the rope, his body swinging.

Fully suspended, Malice steps behind Phoenix and holds his head and bottom in his hands. Then, for a moment, Malice briefly steps away from Phoenix, allowing him to swing freely from the thick bar that hangs above him. As Malice steps away, Phoenix is no longer able to feel or see his dominant. Although only residing in this moment briefly, Phoenix exists only for himself, literally suspended in time, which is described in the film's description as a moment where "weight, becomes weightless and pain gives way to pleasure."[62] This suspension in time frees and Phoenix from pain to welcome ecstatic pleasure, and Phoenix is briefly suspended from the historical, material, and cultural binds of antiblackness. Not only does he control and subvert Black submission through consensual BDSM play, but Phoenix transcends beyond the constraints of antiblackness. Phoenix's transcendence is also demonstrated in the closing scenes of the film. After Phoenix's suspension is finished, he is released: his head softly hits the bamboo mat followed by the light thud of his body. His facial expression suggests a sense of relief and peace. Following his suspension, Sir Malice begins to unwrap Phoenix's binds, revealing indents left on his skin from the pressure of his body weight against the rope. As Malice unwraps the binds from his submission, the camera shifts to an eagle-eye shot of the two men who sit together on the rope. Up until the end of the film, the camera typically stays at eye level and is relatively still. However, after Phoenix is unbound, the camera moves to an eagle-eye perspective, which demonstrates a literal move to transcendence and a shift in normal subjectivity. This shot, concretizes that Phoenix's suspension and the sensations felt aided in his transcendence. Not only

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[62] Jamal Phoenix, "Connection First," Letterboxd, 2022, https://letterboxd.com/film/connection-first/

does the eagle-eye camera angle literally suggest a transcendence through evocation of spiritual viewpoint, or being-for-itself, but the disruption of camera angles that are at eye level suggest the two settle into a space beyond the subject and object. This transcendent move away from the other into the third-positionality is ultimately freeing for Phoenix and Malice: in contrast to the beginning of the film, where both men sat kneeling on the bamboo mat, the film ends with the two sitting relaxed on the mat, smiling and exchanging words with each other as Malice continues to unbind Phoenix. This move from kneeling, which suggests that both occupy a submissive role, despite Sir Malice playing the role of the dominant in the scene, to both sitting relaxed, joyfully on the ground suggests that the transcendence in the scene and the occupation of a third positionality liberated both Phoenix and Malice from submission in an antiblack world through attention to sensation. Thus, this important detail reveals that both men exist beyond historical, material, and ontological histories of antiblackness and the denial of Black subjectivity in the United States.

In “Reach” and *Connection First,* the dominants shown are particularly concerned with the feelings their submissive may experience in response to sensation, even if those feelings initially seem denied. This denial is a performance where attention to feeling and affect is absolute. In practices of BDSM that are informed through philosophies of risk-awareness that emphasize consent, sensation is typically negotiated prior to the beginning of play in “scene negotiations.” In scene negotiations, people engage in discussion about what they may be looking to get out of a scene, what their limits for a scene are, and how they would like to fulfill certain roles amongst other things. These negotiations take place in order for feelings and affects can be attended to throughout play, preserving the subject status of those participating. This

attention and feeling, as demonstrated in “Reach” and *Connection First,* grants access to not only embodied subjectivity, but lays out opportunities for Black transcendence. Therefore, BDSM practices but can be a location to negotiate Black subjectivity and Black being.

CONCLUSION

FOSTERING BLACK LIBERATION IN BDSM PRACTICES

Putting "Reach" and *Connection First* in conversation with my theoretical framework of sensation, ontology, and transcendence demonstrates the role that embodied sensation plays in both BDSM and a main informant of subject/object relations. BDSM, when performed when both parties are aware of the risks associated with the practice,[1] is especially aware of the feelings and affects that a person is experiencing in response to sensation. Recall how I presented the example of colliding with another person on the street to illustrate how a person's humanness is determined in Chapter One. If you acknowledge the feelings and affects of the person who experienced the sensation of running into another body, you are also acknowledging their existence as a lived body. By disregarding a person after running into them, you demonstrate that you do not recognize the person's attendant feelings and affects, denying their subjectivity. This denial of experience literally objectifies the person since sensation cannot be experienced by objects. Within in BDSM, the recognition of these sensations remains present even when they may appear to be ignored. In "Reach," the narrator subjects Sasha to the sensation of oral sex despite her dislike of the sensation. In fact, the recognition that Sasha dislikes the sensation of

[1] This is often referred to as Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK): all sexual partners are aware of the risks possible in the scenario and consent to it; consent can be freely removed by the use of a communication system like a safe word, tapping, etc. I use this the framework of RACK as an informant to my analysis as opposed to other philosophical frameworks present in kink communities like "safe, sane, consensual" because many practices that are not considered safe that (such as asphyxiation or, in some instances, suspension) that are important to people's personal practices of BDSM. Use of the word "risk aware" as opposed to "safe" emphasizes the responsibility of participants to understand the risks involved with the practice. The awareness of risk additionally adds a layer of consent to the practice.

being eaten out is part of the reason the narrator finds the action desirable as a dominant and a sadist: the narrator recognizes Sasha's suffering and consensually carries on in spite of it, asserting Sasha's submission to her. The denial of sensation is simply a performance while there is an absolute attention paid to Sasha and her experiences. This attention to embodied sensation—or the sensation and its attendant affects and feelings—is an attempt at mediating the humanness of Sasha. The same attention to feeling can be seen in *Connection First* through the gentle, thoughtful touches Sir Malice presents to Jamal Phoenix. These attention to feelings, alongside the presence of consent, awareness of risk, and other practices that ensure the safety of the participants differentiates BDSM play from dehumanizing violence.

My close readings of "Reach" and *Connection First* also note the presence of cultural memories of racialized violence and slavery: the binding of Phoenix's hands while he kneels and the thick, mangled scars on Sasha's upper back. However, these images are presented alongside a sense of care from the dominant. Both dominants demonstrate a level of intersubjectivity with the other by recognizing feelings prior and during the inflicting of sensation.[2] Although BDSM provokes cultural memories of slavery, the practice differs greatly from forms of antiblack violence in the United States inflicted onto Black people since the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The presence of joy, consent, and intersubjectivity creates a strong disconnect between the image and practice. Systems of white patriarchal powers not only deny the feelings and affects that arise from sensation, or what I refer to as embodied sensation, but also deny the experience sensation all together. Denial of Black sensation is described in Riley Snorton's manuscript *Black on Both Sides* when he recounts the experiments conducted by J. Marion Sims on enslaved Black women.

[2] Within BDSM practice, the sharing of subjectivity before the beginning of a scene to better recognize the others' feelings and limits is often referred to as scene negotiation.

Sims conducted horrific acts of racist, sexual violence that would later be considered the founding experiments and studies of modern gynecology. Snorton's analysis demonstrates the ways in which Sims' experiments transformed Black women into ungendered flesh through the inclusion of syntheses and quotes from Sims' journals. In one passage, Snorton discusses the sexual violence a Black woman underwent, and notes that Sims' descriptions objectify the woman victimized through the use of pornotropic language:

> …Sims describes [early gynecological procedures] in pornotropic detail 'the shreds of mucous membrane (some an inch long) hanging from each orifice on the under and lateral surfaces of the catheter' while making oblique references to the impact on the 'patient,' writing, 'The injury done to the part, and the pain inflicted on the patient, may very well be imagined.'[3]

In this account, Sims not only sexualizes the Black female body while simultaneously ungendering the body but claims that the pain experienced by the woman he tortured was simply an imagined experience. This is a complete denial of Black sensation, and in turn, Black humanness and Black subjectivity. Therefore, not only does Sims dehumanize the Black female body by reducing it to ungendered flesh, but further denies Black humanity by denying the lived body which can experience embodied tactile sensation.

The legacy of Sims and other white doctors' assertions that Black people are less likely to experience pain remains relevant in the present day. A 2016 study conducted out of the University of Virgina suggests that over half of medical students and residents in the United States do not believe that Black people experience the same level or type of pain as white

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[3] Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 34.

people.[4] The study by Kelly Hoffman et. all, "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks and Whites," suggests that the misconception is rooted in eugenicist and racist biological practices embraced by "scientists, physicians, and slave owners alike to justify slavery and the inhumane treatment of Black men and women in medical scholarship."[5] This proposition suggests that this white Europeans and Americans created racist science out of the necessity to justify the violent subordination of Black people in the United States. However, a white dominant society did not need scientific justification to own Black people and systemically deny their rights as people, as violent subordination of Black people in the United States and Europe acceptable long before this false set of sciences became accepted into the public lexicon. Carl Linnaeus, who created the system binominal nomenclature, was one of the first European scientists to suggest that there was a scientific truth to racial difference in humans.[6] In 1740, over two hundred years into the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Linnaeus published the tenth addition of *Systema Naturae*, which listed four distinct human varieties: the European white, the American Reddish, the Asian tawny, and the African black.[7] Sims primarily conducted his cruel experiments on enslaved Black women in the United States in the 1830's through the 1850's, just a few decades before the

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[4] Hoffman, Kelly, Sophie Trawalter, Jordan Axt, and M. Norman Oliver. "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks and Whites," *PNAs* 113, no. 6, (2016): 4297.

[5] Hoffman et. all, "Racial bias in pain assessment," 4297.

[6] Isabelle Charmantier, "Linnaeus and Race," The Linnean Society, 3 September 2020, https://www.linnean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race

[7] Isabelle Charmantier, "Linnaeus and Race."

abolishment of slavery in the United States.[8] Clearly, biology and medicine did not need to justify the subordination and dehumanization of Black people when violence inflicted by white people itself was enough to deny subjectivity and reduce Black people to non-human objects that could be commodities; instead, racist science is the result of a white, patriarchal hegemony that systemically denies Black humanity and subjecthood through the denial of embodied sensation while keeping the boundaries of violence in an unimaginable realm so intersubjectivity between non-Black people and Black people cannot be fostered.

I bring up Snorton's analysis and cultural memories of sexual violence against Black woman in historical accounts of medical literature to contrast illusions to these memories in BDSM practice. This is not to minimize the horrors of these memories, but to show that there is a distinct difference in the recognition of subjectivity in BDSM practice versus racialized sexual violence despite the presence of similar imagery. In BDSM practice that is especially attendant to the subjecthood of the individuals engaging in play, even if people encounter intense levels of pain through actions like cutting, whipping, body modification and mutilation, and genital torture that may evoke images of enslavement or antiblack violence, submissives experience these sensations and maintain their humanness and intersubjectivity with their dominant. Certainly, performances of dehumanization and objecthood are not aspects of BDSM—they are indeed well defined and relatively common fetishes and practices —but when people engage in these fetishes safely and consensually, the humanness of the other stays intact, even if it is performed in a way that temporarily conceals it. The maintenance of humanness and intersubjectivity throughout well-practiced BDSM and the heavy emphasis on tactile sensation allows for the practice to

[8] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* 17-19.

become a place to subvert, challenge, reclaim, and literally play with subject/object positionalities and systems of violent oppression like antiblackness through the radical recognition of tactile sensation and its attendant feelings.

Not only does BDSM allow for Black people to play with and challenge how sensation is (not) experienced in conditions of antiblackness, but BDSM literally allows for people to directly engage with racialized tropes and aesthetics present in BDSM rooted from cultural memories of slavery. Discussion of these racialized tropes and aesthetics maintained its presence in Black feminist thought on BDSM from the 1980s through the present. Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker, Jennifer Nash, and Ariane Cruz all focus their analyses on critique and synthesis of visual cultures that encode images and icons of Black oppression. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states that:

> Contemporary pornography consists of a series of icons or representations that focus the viewers' attention on the relationship between the portrayed individual and the general qualities ascribed to that class of individuals. Pornographic images are iconographic in that they represent realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers and by their relationship to their own time and to the history of the conventions they employ.[9]

Although Collins does not specifically discuss BDSM and BDSM pornography in this quote, the passage in which the quote is pulled from is discusses pornography's tendency to depict violent and racialized sex acts like rape, bondage, and the "breaking of chains," and because feminists writing during the Feminist Sex Wars heavily conflated sadomasochism and pornography, I also understand this quote to include acts of BDSM. Audre Lorde expressed a similar sentiment on her interview on BDSM in *Against Sadomasochism* through a psychoanalytic approach, stating that the desire to participate in BDSM comes from deep within the psyche to uphold existing

[9] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 136.

systems of dominance and submission.[10] Contemporary scholars do not deny the reification of racialized tropes in contemporary pornography and BDSM practice, but instead view BDSM practice as a space to find the joy in these iconographies and renegotiate memories of racialized violence by engaging with images that evoke these memories.[11]

Exploration, subversion, and play with systems of racialization allows for people to break away from racialized memories and histories of violence that denies humanness. The ability to break the memories and histories which confine ontological status is, according to Simone De Beauvoir, an act of transcendence.[12] Transcendence, although often associated with religion and spiritualism, does not refer to a spiritual move outside of material reality, but is instead understood in the phenomenological tradition as a movement inward; a literal being for the self or *being for us* (us, referring to embodied individual).[13] *Being for us* allows for a person to access a pure form of the self that exists prior to histories and memories. We are shrouded from this version of ourselves because our existence is constantly being mediated by and against other objects, making it difficult to know the true nature of the self outside of influence from objects and historical, material, and epistemological realities that shape our every day. Transcendence—being for us—then exists as a third-positionality between object and subject. For Black people in the United States whose bodies are constantly mediated as objects, occupation of a third-positionality allows for movement away from category of the object or other, and, I argue, can be

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[10] Lorde and Star, "A Conversation with Audre Lorde, 69.

[11] Nash, *Black Body in Ecstasy,* 23.

[12] Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas,* 86.

[13] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 178.

achieved through the breaking of cultural memories and histories of racial oppression through engagement with and recognition of embodied sensation. Not only does attention to these concurrent experiences allow for recognition of humanness in a system that denies humanness to Black people within the United States, but also brings forth access to an embodied consciousness that views the body and mind as one being as opposed to extensions of or separate from each other.

Movement toward a third-positionality, as opposed to inhabitance of the subject position, achieves at least two things: first, inhabitance of subjecthood requires that the subject be situated against an objectified other. Again, I recall my example of stubbing one's toe against a doorframe—our subjecthood is reified through encountering a fundamentally different object than ourselves and the generation of thoughts and affects from this encounter. Although one may be able to inhabit a subject positionality, their existence is still being mediated against other objects and people; this reinforces oppressive subject/object dualisms and does not empower one to exist for the self. Third-positionality, however, is existence between and away from the binary categories of subject/object and within this category, there is no obstruction of objects to dictate being; existence is truly for the self.

Attempts at transcendence, embodiment, and access to a third-positionality is present in both "Reach" and *Connection First.* Subjects of these works both attempt to break the histories

which bind them, creating recognition of a self outside of history.[14] This is most notably present in *Connection First* where both Sir Malice and Jamal Phoenix, two Black Americans, leave the submissive role they both started the film in, indicated by beginning the film kneeling, indicating subordination, and ending the film sitting on the floor, relaxed next to each other. Throughout the film, Jamal Phoenix experiences sensation while and having his feelings and bodily affects that arise during the scene acknowledged. This attention works to shatter a history of denied sensation and subsequent non-humanness enforced by antiblack racism and violence in the United States. The recognition of embodied sensation, then, paired with the engagement with imagery reminiscent of slavery like hands being bound by rope while kneeling, creates a space to engage with racial histories. Elizabeth Freeman suggests that sadomasochistic sex practice is a way to engage directly with history because the practice's undeniable evocation of historical time—she states the sadomasochism is a way to literally "feel historical."[15] I propose that engaging with racial histories and paying attention to the sensation historically denied in this temporal space enables histories to be challenged, subverted, reconstructed, and shattered. From this shattering, Phoenix achieves transcendence and inhabits a third positionality between subject and object, suggested by the disruption of still, eye level camera angles to a moving overhead shot of Phoenix and Malice sitting with each other. This suggests a literal movement into a

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[14] Even in non-academic discussions of BDSM, shifts in the self are acknowledged and are often an important or desired aspect of play. The term "subspace," which is used in some BDSM settings, is an altered state of mind that is achieved during submission. An article from the kink-centered dating app Feeld defines subspace as "entering a blissed out dreamstate" or a "trance" with feelings of "floaty, foggy, euphoric," or "out-of-body."[14] The article additionally notes that when in subspaces, some people may lose a sense of time and a difficulty articulating language.[14] I am not arguing that subspace is an example of transcendence, but instead noting that there are existing acknowledgements of changes in self that discuss an existence outside of the self.

[15] Freeman, "Turn the Beat Around," 40.

transcendent space. In the film, Phoenix moves toward the self, outside of structures of othering, objectification, and antiblack oppression. Although I ultimately determine that the characters of the short story "Reach" are unable to access a transcendent state, similarly to *Connection First,* "Reach" explores an attempt at breaking histories while engaging directly with imagery that evokes cultural memories of enslavement like rape-play, whipping, and scars on Sasha's upper back. Although neither appear to enter a transcendent state, the play the narrator and Sasha engage in allows for the two to reimagine and renegotiate memories of racialization while recognizing the other as a lived body.

In this thesis, I argue that transcendence's ability to disrupt and break histories of racialized violence suggests that BDSM practice can function as a site of ontological mediation for Black people who are subject to the denial of humanism through antiblack violence. Contemporary scholars on Black BDSM, like Nash and Cruz and even Musser, suggests that BDSM can be a practice that forges renegotiation and liberation. Musser's book, *Sensational Flesh*, analyses sensation to demonstrate the feeling and affects of domination within systems of antiblackness and patriarchy. In the conclusion, Musser discusses how Mollena Williams, who I wrote about in Chapter One, uses race play to explore temporalities, disidentification, and embodiment and to make visible the "invisible construction of racialized belonging" so it can be reimagined.[16] My argument of transcendence, however, ultimately differs from the propositions of BDSM as a site of anti-oppressive practice proposed by Nash, Cruz, Freeman and Musser. I conceptualize BDSM as a liberatory and anti-oppressive space not only because it subverts rhetorical, historical, and material conditions of violent antiblackness in the United States, but

[16] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 173.

also because it contains the possibility of granting access to a metaphysical and ontological state often denied to Black people. Recall Calvin Warren's strong statement that "Black life does not exist" because violent antiblackness denies Black humanism, creating ontological and social death for Black individuals in the United States.[17] As demonstrated through my analyses of *Connection First* and "Reach," BDSM can be a site where intersubjectivity is both present and necessary for safe play—therefore mediating the humanness of the individuals participating—and a site where access to transcendental states of being beyond subject/object positionalities which are utilized to enforce Black non-humanism. This transcendental ontological space is similar to Fred Moten's theory of Black Mysticism, which suggests that focus on the Black spirit can allow Blackness to exist outside of traditional understandings of being.[18] This theory acknowledges the denial of Black humanness and being the lens of Black anti-humanist thought while suggesting solutions to Black liberation within this system. Like Fred Moten, who offers the theory of Black Mysticism and suggests that focus on the Black spirit can allow Blackness to exist outside of traditional understandings of being, I conceptualize transcendence as a temporal space to envision an existence of Blackness outside of antiblack structures that deny humanness. Moten's theory acknowledges the denial of Black humanness and being the lens of Black anti-humanist thought while suggesting solutions to Black liberation within this system.

BDSM not only provides access to a transcendent location which restructures understandings of Black ontology, as previously mentioned, but is attentive to and creates space for the participants to experience and recognize their own and others' affective and bodily

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[17] Warren, *Ontological Terror,* 27.

[18] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh). *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 747.

reactions. In iterations of the sexual practice that ensure both parties are aware of the risk involved and values consent, recognition of the lived body—an embodied and whole body and mind that are inseparable from each other—is a core tenet and philosophy. In her piece "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde suggests that the erotic is a fully engaged body and mind that can be literally felt as a sense of deep, feminine satisfaction.[19] She suggests that the erotic holds a great deal of power because it allows for people to envision their capacity for joy and freedom withheld by oppressive systems, and asserts that the erotic is intentionally suppressed and feared because of the power it holds:

> 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.[20]

Therefore, engaging in activities that empower people to engage fully with an embodied body and mind become activities of resistance against a hegemony that encourages separation of the body and mind. Since embodiment is also contingent on humanness, Black practices of embodiment also assert denied Black humanness, resisting antiblack systems of mind/body dualisms and anti-humanist systems.

This intervention does not serve to suggest that all BDSM practice is liberatory—in fact, I am willing to admit that BDSM practice can promote and perpetuate harm if practiced unsafely and without attention to the harmful dynamics present in the sexual practice as outlined by Black feminists. Instead, my intervention attempts to outline a theory on the relationship between

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[19] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 41.

[20] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 45.

sensation and conditions of Blackness created through theft of the Black Body experienced during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the continuation of violent antiblackness in the United States. My argument, which asserts that white hegemonic powers deny Black people's experience of embodied tactile sensation to estrange and alienate Black people from being and humanness, suggests that the recognition of embodied sensation through intersubjectivity mediates Black being because this recognition challenges hegemonic assertions of black non-humanness. Additionally, I use phenomenological theory to conceptualize modes of existence outside of hegemonic powers, even if the modes of existence are fleeting. I put this theoretical framework in conversation with existing discourse on Black practices of BDSM and BDSM filmed and written film pornography to examine how BDSM can be used to mediate and recognize humanness through attention to embodied sensation. Of course, BDSM is not the only place in which this humanness can be mediated. My interest in the relationship between conditions of Blackness and BDSM arose specifically because of the heavy presence of racialization and cultural memories of slavery in BDSM tropes and images including dominance and submission, enslavement, and physical and sexual violence. I recognized that liberatory potential lies in this practice, demonstrated by Black people's joyful and enthusiastic participation, despite the presence of these memories. Through the works of Black sex workers, authors, feminists, scholars, and theorists, I articulate and demonstrate how Black queer people transform a racialized practice into a site of accessing liberatory thought and power. Occupation of a third-positionality and transcending from histories that deny Black humanness grants access to existence outside of antiblackness, creating a kernel of liberatory power. From the enabling of an embodied existence outside of structures of antiblackness, Black people are empowered to

envision and create worlds that recognize the Black lived body and challenge antiblack thought and practice.

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