

**“Everything I know about being femme
I learned from *Sula*”**
or
Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism

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I came to Femme as defiance through a big booty that declined to be tucked under, bountiful breasts that refused to hide, insolent hair that can kink, and curl, and bead up, and lay straight all in one day, through my golden skin, against her caramel skin, against her chocolate skin, against her creamy skin. Through rainbows of sweaters, dresses, and shoes. Through my insubordinate body, defying subordination, incapable of assimilation, and tired, so tired of degradation. Through flesh and curves, and chafed thighs which learned from my grandma how Johnson’s Baby Powder can cure the chub rub. Through Toni Morrison, and Nella Larsen, and Audre Lorde, and Jewelle Gomez who, perhaps unwittingly, captured volumes of black femme lessons in their words. Through Billie Holiday who wore white gardenias while battling her inner darkness. Through my gay boyfriend who hummed show tunes and knew all the lyrics to “Baby Got Back,” which he sang to me with genuine admiration. Through shedding shame instead of shedding pounds, and learning that growing comfortable in my skin means finding comfort in her brownness.

-Sydney Lewis,
“I came to Femme through Fat and Black”

My paper opens with an excerpt of a piece that I submitted to a fat positive anthology. In my piece, I articulate the genesis of my queer black femme-ininity through my identities as a black and fat body. My femme development is shaped by the intersections of those identities as much as those identities shape my expression of femme. For me, Femme is both an unconscious approach and knight in glitter armor to oppressive regimes bearing down on and producing my racialized, gendered, large, queer body. Before I could

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pinpoint its name, Femme gave me strength and strategy to claim my decidedly non-heteronormative body. My particular articulation of femme resulted from my interactions with pop culture and the black femme images, which I found in the lithe frame of Josephine Baker, the climatic whispers of Donna Summer, the uncontrollable curls of Diana Ross, the rasp of Billie Holiday, and the poetics of Toni Morrison, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Though I didn't know at the time what I was looking for, I knew these images provided sustenance for my culturally malnourished queer of color spirit. As a proto-femme, there was a lingering something in these words, images, and sounds that shaped my later femme development. At the time, I had little language for this something; just quiet inklings. The key to deciphering this "something" was not to be found in mainstream feminist or queer theory; in fact, the black Femme remains largely invisible in both domains. I turn, then, to culture as a site from which to launch a black femme-inist critique. Like Laura Harris who, in her essay "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle," supplements critical theory with personal narrative in order to write herself "into history, by writing [herself] a history," throughout this paper I model a Black Femme-inist critical approach by weaving the personal and the theoretical (7). To be clear, I am not privileging one discourse as more authentic than the other, but using each to interrogate claims to authenticity.

In this paper, I look toward Toni Morrison's *Sula* as one such site where the complexities of black femme identity are articulated and delineated. First, I examine Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a black feminist criticism" and the controversy that its proto-queer reading of *Sula* ignited. I look to Smith's essay, not only as a starting point for black feminist literary criticism, but also, in the words of Roderick Ferguson, as a "resource for epistemological and political practices that could express alternatives to existing social movement" (126). Next, I expand Smith's reading of *Sula* by framing the novel as a literary black femme-inist prototype. Finally, as exemplified in my reading of *Sula*, I suggest that Black Femme-inism opens up rich new forms of queer and feminist inquiry and praxis while acknowledging its indebtedness to those methodologies. This double gesture of innovation and preservation prompts my definition of Black Femme-inism as a neo-critical theory.

Part 1

"She knows where she's going and never forgets where she came from: a single-mother-no-father-big-bang theory of creation."
– Elizabeth Ruth, "Quantum Femme"

Barbara Smith in "Toward a black feminist criticism" provides much more than just a title for me to riff off. Her essay is part of the inspiration and impetus for me to develop my Black Femme-inist Criticism. Admittedly, she does much of the legwork that enables me to read *Sula* as a femme text. Smith opens her 1977 essay with the recognition that she is

"attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous, merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all" (132). For Smith the necessity of black feminist criticism stems from the invisibility of black women's experiences in the annals of history. Her stakes are to make some connections between Black women's cultural productions and the politics of Black women's lives. When black women's cultural texts are examined at all, they are minoritized as subordinate to (white) women's literature and (male) African-American literature, which is always already subordinate to the (white male) canon. As Roderick Ferguson deduces, Smith sees black women's cultural productions as a form of political activism stemming from and extending black feminist movements. The main criterion of a black feminist criticism is that it has a "primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing" (Smith 137).

After establishing the necessity for a recognizable black feminist criticism, Smith introduces three tenets of the methodology. First, black feminist criticism must attend to the roles of sexual and racial politics in black women's writing; second it must acknowledge black women's writing as a distinguishable genre; third it must emerge from black women's own identities rather than the methodologies proposed by white/male literary critics. In this, black feminist criticism "would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use" (Smith 138). Modeling this black feminist methodology in her reading of *Sula*, Smith proposes that, despite the sexual relationships between men and women, Morrison's "consistently critical stance toward heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships and family [...] poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives" in a "form and language [which is] nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects" (138). In her comments on lesbian readings of *Sula*, Morrison explicitly denies the presence of homosexuality in the novel: "Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*." (qtd in Tate 118). Her denial of "homosexuality" points to the homophobic fear of eroticization of black women's love, while the clear homoeroticism of the text suggests the radical possibilities loving relationships between black women pose to systems of oppression. Morrison's denunciation, according to Smith, "only shows the way in which heterosexist assumptions can veil what may logically be expected to occur in a work" (141). Thus, reading the novel through Smith's Black feminist critical perspective enables radical meanings to emerge from the text, regardless of Morrison's proclaimed intentions.

In his use of Smith's "Toward a black feminist criticism" Roderick Ferguson understands Smith deployment of the term "lesbian" not as an

identity, and not even in terms of same gender loving sexual behavior, but as a set of social relations which point to the instability of heteropatriarchy. Ferguson explains how *Sula* “allegorized [...] the conditions of black women’s gender and sexual regulation [and] the desire to formulate identities and social practices that could withstand and provide alternatives to those limitations” (132). In effect he reads the novel as a response to black nationalist formations and liberal ideology, as represented by the Moynihan Report, both of which point to “the emasculating effects of black women and the need for black men to resume their role as patriarchs” in order to achieve black liberation (123). Ferguson goes on to situate *Sula* and Smith’s essay within a tradition of “women of color feminists [who] attempted to devise notions of culture and agency that would alienate heteropatriarchy and liberal ideology” (116). These texts are a “resource for epistemological and political practices that [can] express alternatives to existing social movement” (Ferguson 126). His conclusions are echoed in Kara Keeling’s description of the black femme who “offers a glimpse into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected” (Keeling 1). These social movements and existing organizations of life, at best, ignore the intersections of identity, or, at worst, pathologize difference (in this case gender/racial/sexual difference) as a deviation from and impediment to socio-political ‘progress.’ It is in this context that *Sula* proposes “something else to be” (Morrison 52). I argue that “something else” is a black femme that embraces the sexualized images of black women while eschewing the accompanying narratives of pathology. Therefore, in its critique of heteropatriarchy, *Sula* suggests an alternative to black women’s bodies as inherently deviant. Whether they are matriarchs or childless, involved in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, laboring outside or inside of the home, black women are trapped in a bind that has the potential to pathologize their actions and identities.

Opening the door to a more capacious definition of lesbian, one that does not solely rely on woman to women sex is not without notable stakes. The risk is taking the queer sex out of queer theory—sanitizing it for heteronormative consumption. Michael Warner in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, contends that the mainstream gay movement “has increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex” (25). Likewise, according to Judith “Jack” Halberstam the sanitization of gay sex inhibits “radical thought about sex” and contributes to queer theories “increasing distance from queer cultures” (257). Halberstam locates these queer cultures in “zines and community newspapers, in nightclubs and bars” where “queer communities look immensely more diverse than the theoretical work allows” (261). Halberstam continues “specifying sexual acts and their histories allows us to break with identity discourses that have the tendency to render some minority sexual practices completely unintelligible and to conflate still others with criminality” (261). Being somewhat of a theory pervert myself, I agree with Warner and Halberstam’s argument that queer sexuality needs to be in the forefront of queer theory. In fact, as I begin to delineate the terms of a

Black Femme-inist theory, I contend that sex must be at the center of the project. My response to Warner and Halberstam is not so much a departure as a cul-de-sac – we get to the same point but by different roads. Warner’s point that mainstream gay movements have restricted their issues to those having least to do with sex is indeed a valid one. However, my split with both theorists is best explained by looking that Halberstam’s use of the word minority in her configuration of “minority sexual practices.” Halberstam’s “minority” refers mostly to sexual proclivities – such as BDSM, intergenerational-sex, fetishism, and other queer sexual practices that don’t fit in with the ‘we are just like you’ homonormative model. However, something else happens if we read minority as racialized. Sexuality and sex is never separate from racialization. In other words, sexual practices of people of color are always minoritized. Whether it is the predatory black man, the hypersexual black woman, the submissive Asian woman, the asexual Asian man, or the Latino continually reproducing “anchor babies,” racial ‘minorities’ are repeatedly conflated with minority sexual practices. As for Smith’s proto-queer reading of *Sula* that designates the novel as Lesbian not because of same-sex practices but because of its critique of heteropatriarchy, I argue that the critique of heteropatriarchy is embedded in the queer sex implicit in the novel. The black women’s bodies are already queered by racist discourse, which the townspeople (especially the women) in the novel fight against in vain. *Sula* by embracing her hypersexuality is queered by both white and black notions of respectability. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Smith’s reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel as proto-queer because, though it was before the official inauguration of queer theory, the queerness of her reading is there in everything but the word. Meeting Halberstam and Warner at the close of my metaphorical cal-de-sac, Halberstam contends that the project of queer theory is “to judge the meaning of sex in any given historical [and I would add racial] location and to trace the development of notions of identity and sexual selves from within discourses of acts and pleasure” (265). Foregrounding discourses of acts and pleasures is what Femme-inist theory, and particularly my articulation of a specifically Black Femme-inist theory accomplishes, thereby putting the sex back into queer and feminist theory which has increasingly become more normative in its politics.

Part 2

“We, Black Femmes, can often be masculin(ized) – automatically viewed, treated, and cruised as butches. And even if we are seen as Femmes, we can still be devalued or just plain not perceived as Femme(inine) in any sense but the sexual”

– T.J. Bryan, “It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin”

In their introduction to *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, Harris and Crocker point to three reasons why femme voices need to be acknowledged in feminist, lesbian, and queer theoretical models. First, they contend that femme voices have been overlooked in each of these critical

paradigms. Second, they assert that “mainstream feminism has not analyzed femme as a model of critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality” which would be a useful model “not only for lesbians [but] for many women” (1). Third, femme identity, when discussed, is put in relation to butch-identity, eliding Femme as existing in and of itself. Extending Harris and Crocker, I insist that for black femmes the exigency of theorizing Femme identity is compounded by their erasure from most queer, queer of color, and black feminist texts.

For black femmes the erasure of femininity and/or the usurping of it for sexual objectification are ever-present threats. When femininity is attributed to black femmes, it is an instrument for white sexual pleasure. T.J. Bryan suggests that finding a Femme tradition “enough to dwarf everything they think they already know ‘bout me and mine,’ is one strategy for addressing the erasure of the black femme and the commandeering of black femme agency. Another? Being “an instigator, A shit disturber” who uses her “dark-skinned and conscious presence” to challenge “queer circles where white wimmin’s Femme(ininity) often passes for the epitome of female beauty” (Bryan 158). If black women have been ungendered, that is “out of the traditional symbolics of female gender,” this erasure provides an unintentional space for rescripting black femininity (Spillers 85). Hortense J. Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” points to the “insurgent” potential of the “female with the potential to name” (85). Or, as Spillers contends “‘Sapphire’ might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment” (85). I propose that this rewriting can occur in Femme. Sometimes “Sapphire,” sometimes “Jezebel,” often a “Bitch,” Femme calls for “claiming the monstrosity” of self-defined black femininity (85).

Among those who explore Femme there is a consensus that the interruption of white heteropatriarchal dominance and its regulation of femininity is a defining factor of femme identity.¹ Thus Femme, rather than striving to fit within heteropatriarchal paradigms, endeavors to interrupt those paradigms as much as possible. Femme’s intervention into heteropatriarchy has a history of being misread as yielding to heteropatriarchy’s fantasy of femininity, but that is part of Femme’s mystical glamour, its trickery. Femme takes heteropatriarchal femininity and queers it – fucks with it (sometimes literally), turning it into a threatening parody of

¹ A variety of definitions of Femme, but all with a similar emphasis on the interruption of heteropatriarchal femininity can be found in Joan Nestle *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader* (Alyson, 1992), Lesléa Newman’s *The Femme Mystique* (Alyson, 1995), Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker (eds) *Femme: Feminist Lesbians and Bad Girls* (Routledge, 1997), Sally Munt (ed) *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (Cassell, 1998) and Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri (eds) *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002) to name just a few.

itself. While femininity is “the demand placed on female bodies,” Femme is “the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine” (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 13). However, Femme is not homogenous. Femme identity can only be defined as indefinite – a swagger of beauty, pleasure, and unruliness that struts across time and place. For Brushwood Rose and Camilleri, Femme’s “wildness is mercurial, encompassing the earthly and metaphysical” (12). It is “inherently ‘queer’ – in the broadest application of the word – as bent, unfixed, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated [...] femininity gone wrong” – bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy” (12-13). Albrecht-Samarasinha attests that, for women of color, Femme in its “brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious[ness] [...] goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass [sic] feminine propriety” (“On Being Bisexual” 142). In order to realize its parodic threat, Femme must be a trickster -- constantly shifting, glamouring, dancing – the magician *and* her lovely assistant.

Thinking about the interruptive and liberatory possibilities for femmes of color, I turn to Roderick Ferguson’s black drag queen prostitute who appears in the introduction of *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Ferguson describes this prostitute:

She has decked herself in a faux leather bomber and a white tiger-striped dress that stops just below her knees. Her face is heavy with foundation as she ponders into the distance. She holds a cigarette between fingers studded with cheap-press on nails, dragging on it with lips painted red [...] in the pleasure of her existence lies a critique of the commonplace interpretations of her life [...] Conceding to the meanness of her life, probably for her, is a far cry from assuming that her gender and sexual difference are the reasons for her poverty and that who she is attests to the absence of agency (1).

This woman isn’t just fierce, she’s ferocious! Her red lips, clingy animal-print dress, and femininity-gone-wrong give her a style which some of us can only aspire to achieve. Her entire body possesses a wild wrongness. Ferguson suggests that her body manifests the estrangements of African-Americans from dominant narratives of American citizenship: “The country of her birth will call out to ‘the American people’ and never mean her or others like her” (1). Although there are “those who wish to present or make African American culture the embodiment of all that she is not – respectability, domesticity, heterosexuality, normativity, nationality, universality, and progress” in her hint of pleasure and ‘alrightness’ amid her estrangement lies a critique of those who would condemn or pathologize her body and condition” (2). Ferguson introduces the black drag-queen prostitute as an embodied critique of narratives of heteronormativity and universalization within liberal ideology. Ferguson’s accomplished project is not my own. However, I am invested in thinking about non-normative sexual and gendered formations that challenge normative regimes, especially those that are non-normative even under the rubric of queer. For me, the black femme,

much like the black drag-queen prostitute, inhabits and challenges those normative sexual and gendered formations through her racialized, non-heteronormative, not-quite-right gendered body. Kara Keeling offers a similar interpretation of the black femme who:

offers a glimpse into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected [...] she challenges each of the primary categories that have been constructed in response to racism, sexism, and homophobia ('black,' 'woman,' and 'lesbian,' respectively) to contend with what is excluded from that category in order for it to cohere as such (1-2).

In short, an alternate title for this paper might be “black femmes fuck things up” through the alternative and contradictory possibilities she poses to regulatory identity categories.

Part 3

WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER, RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE EACH OTHERS' WEALTH. HOS BEFORE BROS, ALWAYS! FEMME SOLIDARITY AND LOVE FOR EACH OTHER IS A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE.

— Leak Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “Femme Shark Manifesto!”

Published in 1973, *Sula* is Toni Morrison’s second novel. The novel takes place in the mostly black community, the Bottom and chronicles the relationship between childhood friends Sula and Nel from 1919 to the epilogue in 1965. Though in many ways opposite in their upbringing, Nel having a conservative home, while Sula’s home is a swinging door of unconventionality, to say the least, the girls form an almost instant bond. After high school, Nel chooses to settle down and get married while Sula leaves the Bottom and gallivants through multiple affairs. Upon Sula’s return to the Bottom she is made a pariah due to her promiscuity and disregard for social conventions. Initially Sula and Nel reunite, but their friendship ends after Sula has an affair with Nel’s husband, Jude. After Sula’s death, Nel remembers the friendship they had and mourns for the loss of Sula.

Anchoring my reading of *Sula* as offering a black femme-inist criticism is an early scene in which Morrison describes the meeting between Nel and Sula:

They felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be [...] they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for (52).

The homo-social bond between Nel and Sula, tinged with sensuality, is a result of their awareness that neither is a normative white male body. This recognition leads to the realization that *they* can create who and what they want to be. As Morrison relays, Nel and Sula "had seen the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits" (120). Since neither Nel nor Sula have to, in the words of Frantz Fanon "meet the white man's eyes" in each other neither "have to be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon 110). Although Fanon describes that black man as "want[ing] to be like the white man," this presumes a degree of privilege that comes with masculinity. The only difference (thought we must remember it is an important difference in the eyes of whiteness) between white and black men is skin color. Black women, however, experience the alienation from whiteness two-fold. Fanon describes "the Negress" as suffering from an inferiority complex, which causes her to "aspire to win admittance into the white world" (60). However, he can only account for this desire through the black woman's relationship with white men. In *Sula*, the white male is taken out of the picture. In other words, the debilitating relationship Fanon describes as occurring between black and white men becomes a mutually formative relationship between two young black women. Through her relationship with Nel, Sula accesses "the closest thing to both an other and a self" (Morrison 118-120). In essence, the girls resist the subjection of their 'queer' (non-white, non-male) bodies through a libatory 'queer' identification "found in each other's eyes."

Histories of sexual, gender, and racial oppression hold up distorted mirrors through which we black women often view ourselves. Karla Holloway encourages black women to shatter the "mirrored reflection of a prejudicial gaze" through "reflexive, self-mediated vision of our bodies" (qtd in Collins 180). In a tone suggesting both warning and exaltation, Patricia Hill Collins notes that "Black women learning to provide mirrors for each other [...] come face to face with the possible eroticization of such love" (180). She cautions that, due to black women's already-assailed femininity and racial and gendered othering, black women's erotically shaded mirroring "can be highly threatening to heterosexual African-American women's already assaulted sense of self" (181). However, loving relationships among black women also "pose a tremendous threat to systems of intersecting oppressions" which situate "Black women as a collectivity as so unlovable and unvalued" (181).

Morrison underscores the radical potential of Nel and Sula's eros. As young women, their relationship provides a "safe harbor" which enables them to "abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (Morrison 55). Nel casts off her devotion to racist and gendered beauty assaults when she refuses to pull her nose straight and ceases to aspire to the "smooth hair" of the hot comb (Morrison 55). Sula's repudiation of racist assaults against black women is even more pronounced. Nel is described as "stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes" (Morrison 54). Yet, Sula holds a grudge for weeks when it comes to

defending Nel from the racist and sexual attack of four white boys. They accost Nel and, upon seeing Sula pull out a knife, the raised violent stakes of the confrontation excite the boys who imagine “this is going to be better than they thought [...] Maybe they could get an arm around one of their waists, or tear...” The ellipses interrupt their rape fantasy as Sula slashes off the tip of her finger with a knife and in quiet defiance threatens “If I can do that to myself, what do you suppose I’ll do to you” (Morrison 54-55). This self-injury is not an unconscious desire for the destruction of blackness as proposed by Fanon, but in direct contrast, an act of black female love. Fanon cannot even imagine a loving relationship between two black women, after all, according to Fanon, there is no “homosexuality in Martinique” (180). Sula’s very real threat of castration is augmented by the symbolic threat the young women’s loving relationship poses to the white male phallus and all that it represents, an act of self-love as opposed to self-hate.

As an older woman, Nel forgets the “safe harbor” of Sula’s company in her acquiescence to her supporting role as Jude’s wife. Jude marries in an attempt to fortify his manhood in the face of racist assaults. After repeatedly being denied construction work while countless white men are hired, Jude is filled with a “rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow;” this rage makes “him press Nel about settling down” (82). To him, Nel is “someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up [...] Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around the kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude” (83). When she “discover[s] his pain” Nel is more than happy to play the role of the soothing and healing wife in whom Jude “could see himself taking shape” (83). In contrast to Jude’s need to consume Nel for his own self-affirmation, Sula’s relationship with Nel (before the affair) is a relation based on complement and reciprocity. Sula encourages “free reign” of Nel’s “sparkle and sputter.” She “seem[s] always to want Nel to shine” and a “compliment to one was a compliment to another” (83-84). While heterosexist femininity encourages women to compete for the ‘shiny’, Femme shares it, dousing all in glitter. Elizabeth Ruth in “Quantum Femme” contends that the femme “can make you comfortable in your skin even when you shouldn’t be” (16). “She is a body housing infinite possibilities for women, some of them [like Nel’s] snuffed out at a tender age” (Ruth 18).

Femme sexuality isn’t relegated only to same sex relationships, but evident also in ostensibly heterosexual relationships. The ’queerness’ of Femme stems from a desire that exceeds the assumed passive sexuality of normative femininity. The novel’s reflections on sex, desire, and power are key contributions to its black femme-inist critique. According to Sula, no man is “worth more than me” (144). For the folks of the Bottom the primary difference between Sula’s mother – who also slept with married men – is that “Hannah was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands,” whereas “Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow” (115). For Sula, sex is a means to access

self-defined sexuality and not primarily a vehicle for male pleasure and pride. It is a complex matrix of vulnerability and power, but always accompanied by a self-awareness and discovery. She recognizes the “utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power” (Morrison 123). Through sex with men, Sula accesses “what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (Morrison 123). This sorrow is not connected to shame but a deep understanding of herself -- a “postcoital私ateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (Morrison 123). Albrect-Samarasinha echoes Sula’s sentiment describing her own femme sexuality as “a particular femme strength of sexual openness, vulnerability, and need [...] feel[ing] the touching burn through the layers of numbness [...] a vulnerability that can be both incredibly powerful and incredibly terrifying” (“On Being Bisexual 143). Sula and Albrect-Samarasinha’s access of an internal consciousness through sex dovetails nicely with Patricia Hill Collins contention that the “hidden space of Black women’s consciousness [...] allows Black women to cope with and, in most cases, transcend the confines of race, class, and gender oppression” (Collins 108). That is, for women of color these moments of sexual catharsis become key moments of private introspection and self-care often denied to racialize women’s bodies.

The pivotal act which nails Sula to the Jezebel cross (to mix biblical metaphors) is sex with Nel’s husband. For her, sex with Jude isn’t about love, vengefulness or even lust, but another vehicle to access her inner self: “There was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That’s all. He just filled up the space.” Jude is merely a penis that fills the space inside her body and mind – the space that Nel evacuated when she married. In this, the novel suggests that in Sula’s mind, sex with Jude is also a means to regain her girlhood closeness with Nel who “was the closest thing to both an other and a self.” It doesn’t occur to Sula that sleeping with Jude would hurt Nel since “they had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line her used with one and then the other. But, now Nel “belong[s] to the town and all its ways” (119-120). Morrison’s language that Nel belonged *to* the town as opposed to merely *in* the town indexes how the town has subsumed Nel’s individuality. She is not an individual resident in the Bottom but has been seized and consumed by the town.

Privately, even Nel struggles with the expectation that she condemn Sula. In her attempts to mourn for Jude, Nel collapses in the bathroom “wait[ing] for something to happen.” She thinks about the shrill, vociferous cries of the women at Chicken Little’s funeral and recognized them as “a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead” (107). The mourning is more about “good taste” than debilitating grief and the women’s cries an expected habit rather than a real rush of emotion (107). Nel, struggling to mourn for Jude as the women would, as she believes *she* should, lies in the bathroom “trying to feel [...] but it [doesn’t] come.” Instead her mind continually returns to Sula – things that Sula said, what Sula

would do, and the pain of losing Jude and not having Sula as a confidant. The loss of Sula and the loss of Jude overlap as she struggles to mourn her husband but returns to her perceived loss of Sula. The ambiguous grammar Morrison employs to frame Nel's struggle suggests that both the loss of her husband and her female 'other half' involve sexual loss. Directly after Nel bemoans her separation from Sula "because it was Sula that [Jude] had left her for," Morrison writes, "Now her thighs were really empty"(110). And later "For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart [...]" (110-111). If *now* Nel's thighs are *really* empty then what were they before she started thinking about her separation from Sula? If Sula is the one who "had taken the life from them," is it because she has "taken" Jude or because Sula is the one who had originally put life in them? Emphasizing the sexual ambiguity of Nel's loss, Morrison closes the paragraph with her lament "both of them [had] left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (110-111).

Part 4

Whores, like queers, are a society's dirty joke [...] Whores and women who look like whores became the enemy, or at best, misguided oppressed women who needed our help

– Laura Harris and Liz Crocker, "Bad Girls: Sex, Class, and Feminist Agency"

The ambiguous space between homo and heterosexuality framed by Nel and Sula's relationship is echoed in Sula's appointment as the town Jezebel. Patricia Hill Collins reasons that, due to her excessive sexuality, the jezebel exists within a liminal space between homo and heterosexuality. Since

heterosexuality is juxtaposed to homosexuality as its oppositional, different, and inferior 'other.' Within this wider difference jezebel becomes the freak on the border. Her insatiable sexual desires help define the boundaries of normal sexuality. Just across the border stand lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women who are deemed deviant in large part because of their choices of sexual partners. As a sexual freak, jezebel has one foot over the line (92).

Collins acknowledges that "sexual practices and groups who diverge from [the white heteropatriarchal] norm" are labeled as deviant and threatening" (165). But also asserts, "Because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary 'hoochies' represent a deviant Black sexuality" (89). This suggests that deviance poses a threat to the oppressive norm in that it disturbs attempts to control black women's sexuality. Whereas Nel admonishes Sula for "act[ing] like a man" "walking around all independent like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't," Sula reasons that "being a woman and colored [is] the same thing as being a

man" (142). Since white heteropatriarchy denies Sula, and other black women, the femininity it grants to white women (for better or for worse), being a black woman masculinizes Sula. However, rather than submit to politics of respectability as a futile defense mechanism Sula reclaims the stereotype of aggressive sexuality associated with black masculinity as well as the jezebel image. Her aggressive sexuality "masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does" (Collins 91). Given Spiller's contention that slavery ungendered blackness, and since "the gendered female exists for the male" the "ungendered female" encases "an amazing stroke of pansexual potential" (Spillers 79). In other words, Sula grasps that her race and gender have ungendered, and therefore "queered" her, and she uses sex as a libratory strategy from both restricting respectability and its connection to white racist misogyny.

In a world which "taught her there was no other that you could count on" and "there was no self to count on either," Sula focuses on her own desire with "no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). Like many femmes whose "self-definition, insofar as it includes the conscious giving over of sexual control to ultimate desirability" is "a major component of their power," Sula's power stems from her desire and her desirability (Kennedy 25). This erotic power, according to Audre Lorde must be stifled by oppression, which, in order to perpetuate itself "must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (53). The distorted and pathologized Jezebel exposes heteropatriarchy's anxious attempts to reframe black female sexual agency in order to undermine the threat that erotic power poses to racist and sexist regimes.

Cast as the jezebel and the town pariah, Sula consolidates the heteronormativity of the townsfolk who begin "to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-118). Her sexual desires delineate the bounds of 'normal' sexuality. As opposed to Sula, who embraces an "experimental life", the folks in the Bottom, and the women in particular, are more fearful of the consequences of straying from normativity than they are of the stultifying norm itself (118). They are "more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below" and "if they were touched by the snake's breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role" (Morrison 120). Citing essays by M. Jacqui Alexander and Evelyn Hammonds, Collins argues that black women, in a misdirected effort to protect themselves from racist and sexist oppression, may inadvertently sustain that oppression by denouncing black female erotic autonomy. Within a historical legacy in which "certain expressions of Black female sexuality [are] rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the group" self-imposed sexual silence "makes it acceptable for some heterosexual Black women to cast both openly sensual heterosexual Black women and Black lesbians as 'traitors' to the race" (Collins 183). While Morrison implicates white heteropatriarchy in the construction of black

female deviance, she more pointedly suggests how the black townspeople of the Bottom have adopted white heteropatriarchal discourses thereby implementing their own terms of regulation. Sula becomes the pariah of the Bottom because the misfortunes of the Bottom are displaced onto Sula and framed as “disgust for the easy way she lay with men” (122). Her sexual promiscuity, Sula’s powerful connection to her vulnerability, should be her disgrace. Instead, it enables Sula’s “full surrender to the downward flight” that the other folks fear (120). Sula is, to use Elizabeth Ruth’s words, a “Quantum Femme”, “a ball-busting bitch from the planet of no apologies, her molecular structure defying gravity” (15).

Part 5

The act of moving deliberately between society's prescribed roles, in opposition to the gender categories, even if only in wardrobe, remains a profound political statement. The blurring is not just of the lines between what we wear but ultimately implies a toppling of the barriers to what we can do as women
—Jewelle Gomez, “Femme Erotic Independence”

Despite Harris and Crocker’s caution that “femme identity is not simply a role playing in which certain sets of clothes or behaviors are on a daily basis easily assumed or discarded,” I cannot in good femme consciousness talk about Femme without exploring fashion (5). Harris and Crocker acknowledge that in the face of various power regimes that mark bodies, femme can be a way to “mark your own body, as well as a way to strategically pass across, translate between, connect, and complicate various boundaries of identity” (5). Precisely because of the historical difficulty for women of color to mark their own bodies and their already-lack of proper femininity, I particularly want to address the ways in which femmes of color utilize a disruptive hyperfemininity in order to insert themselves into a feminine identity that has been denied to them. Through claiming and naming their own femininity, femmes of color defy patriarchal structures that define femininity as a lack of power and racist structures which define women of color as lacking acceptable femininity (without gaining any power in exchange for their lack). For femmes of color, fashion provides a critical strategy for marking their own complex terrain of identities.

Published in 1973 and situated in the first half of the 20th century,² Morrison’s novel attends closely to the significance of dress and its relation to feminist politics of proper womanhood. The first chapter of *Sula* is titled “1919.” While 1919 marks the federal granting of women’s voting rights, it is also an era in which the leaders of the black women’s club movement rallied for racial and sexual justice. A key to the club women’s social uplift strategy was to counter racist attacks on black women’s sexuality through a politics of respectability. Noliwe M. Rooks in *Ladies Pages: African American Women’s*

² To be specific, the novel is set in 1919 – 1941 with an epilogue set in 1965.

Magazines and the Culture that Made Them quotes an article by black clubwoman, Mary Church Terrell, who advocates that it is important for every black woman to “look as well as her means will permit” but cautions that black women should always be demure and mindful to avoid “the excruciating discord between the color of the trimmings and the complexion of the wearers” (50). Similarly, an article in the black women’s magazine *Ringwood’s Journal* advises “Women who eschew the garish and gaudy in dress may demand more consideration and respect than those who violate this principle” (qtd in Rook 52). As Rooks explains, the policing of fashion underscores the conjecture that “how [black] women appear in public bears not just upon her, but upon her family, her friends, and indeed, the entire African American race” and that fashion provided the “means to make an African American woman into a lady whose appearance was capable of refuting charges of immorality” (50).

A slightly more contemporary example of the black women policing the respectability of other black women’s bodies can be seen in Coreen Simpson’s photograph *Club Savage*. In this 1980s photograph, a slender black woman clothed in bourgeois respectability looks askance at a voluptuous black woman adorned in a form fitting short sweater dress and large jewelry. This photograph, which I encountered in a collection edited by Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, is accompanied by their commentary that the piece “explicitly refers to the censorship within the black community, especially regarding bodies that are consistent with stereotype many regard as derogatory” (71). The juxtaposition of the slender conservatively dressed black woman with the body of the voluptuous and showy black woman, also suggests that her ‘inappropriate’ dress instigates the condemning glance.

Both the aforementioned early 20th century and late 20th century examples point to black women policing other black women’s fashion; however, the role of whiteness in the policing of black women’s bodies should not be neglected. Fashion police of the early and late 20th century agreed on one thing: dress determines who does and does not count as a woman. The theme of respectable dress as a questionable attempt to circumvent histories of black women’s sexual objectification is still relevant in late 20th century cultural politics.

In *Sula*, clothing is a signifier of the struggle between respectable and dangerous sexuality. When Sula returns to town in 1937 she “is dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foxtails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye” (90). Suggestive of Sula’s black femme lineage, the color yellow and the flower and bird imagery are used earlier in the novel to describe Helene’s mother, Rochelle, who is first referred to as “the woman in the yellow dress” (Morrison 25). Rochelle’s dress differs markedly from Helene’s upright “heavy but elegant dress with velvet collar and pockets” made of “deep-brown wool and three-fourths of a yard of matching velvet” (19). Helene takes pains to distinguish herself from

her mother, a “creole whore,” and is warned by her grandmother “to be constantly on guard for any sign of [Rochelle’s] wild blood” (17). Although Helene is dressed as an emblem of respectable femininity, that doesn’t keep her from being banished to the Jim Crow car. In other words, despite the pressures put on women to dress respectfully as a means of achieving racial and gender liberation, Helene is still stripped of her womanhood. She is belittled through being called “gal” and subsequently haunted by “the old fears of being somehow flawed” (20). In the eyes of the train conductor, and the heteronormative whiteness he represents, Helene, despite her respectable dress is no different from her “creole whore” mother (17).

In contrast Sula’s dress, and entrance accompanied by plague imagery, marks her as menacing to discourses of respectability and, simultaneously, a threat to the white heteropatriarchal ‘natural’ order. Whereas Helene is obsequious even in the face of insult by smiling “dazzlingly and coquettishly” at the conductor, Sula is an unapologetic and even defiant woman. Upon her return, Sula is associated with phenomena that upset the ‘natural’ order of things. Her return to Medallion is accompanied “by a plague of robins [...] yam-breasted shuddering birds” “flying and dying all around...” (89-90). It is notable that she uses her shoes, impractical pumps, “edged in bird shit to push dead robins into the grass” (91). Her pumps are covered in the ultimate abject - shit - yet she uses them defiantly push away that which covers her path. That her return isn’t marked by ominous vultures, or destructive crows, or a raven’s portentous “Nevermore,” but red-breasted robins -- the same “rockin” little creatures that go “tweet, tweet, tweet” is precisely the point. The conjunction of these small creatures and their appetizing breasts with plague, death, and shit is jarring and figures the black femme threat emanating from her dangerously stylish body.

Part 6

WE REMEMBER OUR DEAD – SAKIA GUNN, GWEN ARAUJO, AND MANY OTHER QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOUR WHO DIED BECAUSE OF RACIST, HOMO/TRANSPHOBIC VIOLENCE. NOT AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT, BUT AS WOMEN WE LOVED IN REAL LIFE, WOMEN WHO COULD’VE BEEN US OR OUR LOVES.

– Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “FEMME SHARK MANIFESTO!”

On her deathbed Sula tell Nel that, despite everything that the townspeople *think* she has done, they will learn to love her:

After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jail-birds and after all

the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers' trim; when Lindberg sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norman Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there'll be a little love left over for me (145-146).

She prophesizes that once every Body who does not have normative desires succumbs to their latent 'deviancy' then they will love her, for she was the one to expose normative regimes that regulated their desires and actions. Sula's presence exposes the black community's 'dirty little secrets.' They had no desire to destroy Sula, "the presence of evil was something to first be recognized, the dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118). However, in death, Sula (im)morality is what triumphs: "mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against [...] Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity" (153-154). As Ferguson points out, Sula reveals "the contradictions of 'normativity,' between the presumed universal nature of normativity and the actual discrepant fact of nonnormativity" (Ferguson 128). For Keeling, the appearance of the black femme serves a similar function: "when [the black femme] becomes visible, her appearance stops us, offers us time in which we can work to perceive something different, or differently" (2). Like Morrison's description of Sula, the black femme offers "something else to be" (Morrison 52). Sula is not the pathologized hypersexualized black subject of pseudoscientific discourses and national mythologies,³ but a black subject for whom the never-attainment of white normative heterosexuality enables a degree of agency. Sula, as a black woman, is a body with pleasures that have already been subject to white heteronormative regulation and abjection. In her acceptance of her failure to achieve heteronormativity, Sula finds the freedom to follow her own desires and pleasures.

Both Sula and Nel's final thoughts are of each other. Sula's death brings the peaceful self-awareness that she could only achieve through sex. The novel narrates Sula's death in language that is indicative of both a rebirth and a sexual climax. Suggesting birth, dying allows Sula to "draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls (Morrison 149)." Pointing to sexual climax, as Sula waits in "weary anticipation [...] a crease of fear

³ For examples of some of these pathologizing pseudoscientific discourses see Margaret Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted;" August Forel "The Sexual Question;" Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero "The Female Offender" and C.G Seligmann "Sexual Inversion Among the Primitive Races" reprinted in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

touch[es] her breast.” She expects a “violent explosion in her brain” but realizes “that there was not going to be any pain.” Like a young woman anxious to share the details of losing her virginity, Sula’s post-mortem thoughts are “Well, I’ll be damned [...] it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149). Nel’s final thoughts of Sula close the novel. Her struggle between mourning Jude or mourning Sula ends as Nel realizes “All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” The loss of Sula “press[es] down of her chest and came up into her throat as she wails “We were girls together [...] Oh Lord, Sula [...] girl, girl, girlgirlgirl [sic].” The cry that she couldn’t reach while mourning Jude finally erupts for Sula “loud and long” with “circles and circles of sorrow” (174).

Part 7

There is nothing tidy or peaceful here [...] Here, and outside of these pages, we are dangerous and pleasure-seeking, we are volatile matter. We find danger in our search for pleasure, on our own terms. We give good danger, we warn, we warn of danger, of dangerous times. WE are harbingers, harlots, heroes. We are troubled and troubling. Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of femininity. Here, we indelibly mark ourselves femme.

-Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, “Introduction: A Brazen Posture”

To be sure, Sula is not an infallible heroine. She can be read as selfish, vain, heartless and treacherous. She is not a character that facilitates an easy connection; she interrupts all that is good and proper: she’s an ungrateful daughter, a selfish lover, and patently refuses to be a mother or a wife. But there is something about her that is intriguing, charming, even seductive. Sula is complex – both “troubled and troubling” – a quintessential femme. What Morrison describes as Sula’s “elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior” holds a subtle secret: “Her poker face delivers a heavy hand – in femme’s look away, she appears” (Morrison 127; Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 12). Sula/Femme - “is the blade – fatally sharp; a mirror reflecting back fatal illusions” (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 12).

Part 8

...as a Black woman, I have to do everything I can to assert my femininity because every single day, I hear the phrase, “Blacks and women,” as though they are mutually exclusive. My identity exists in the forgotten space between the two

– Kpoene’ Kofi-Bruce, “Femme Queening – An Identity in Several Acts”

It’s always scary, especially in academia, to claim that you are doing something completely new. Undoubtedly, there are haters who hastily discredit those who claim to be innovative. So I respectfully concede that I’m not inventing a new kind of critical approach. Instead, I see this essay as positing a neo-critical paradigm. I am indebted to Barbara Smith in my

imagining of a Black Femme-inist Criticism – a neo entry point into black women’s cultural productions – that engages the past for sustenance, guidance, and finally, flight. Like Smith, I look toward *Sula* to plot the contours of Black Femme-inist Criticism. These features are not meant to be prescriptive or essentialist. Rather, I think of them as starting points which can be built upon and changed (after all, we femmes can be rather capricious). First and foremost, a Black Femme-inist Criticism should investigate the ways that black women’s cultural productions critique white heteropatriarchal construction of black women’s race, gender, and sexuality; they delve into the “open space” between “Blacks and women.” As Kofi-Bruce explains, Black women have always had to struggle to maintain control of the way our bodies are perceived: “the polarities of mammy and prostitute constantly dog my steps” (54). Thus, the policing of femininity and black women’s sexual agency, by and in necessary response to white heteropatriarchy, should be a locus of Black Femme-inist critique.

Mirroring the dangerous elusiveness of Femme, a Black Femme-inist critical approach avoids the trappings of essentialism. It does not seek to pin-down textual meaning, rather it probes the promiscuity of black women’s cultural productions, looking toward that openness as an entrance into a critique of white heteropatriarchy. If, as Smith contends, Morrison’s repudiation of lesbianism in *Sula* points to the mechanisms through which heterosexist assumptions mask far-reaching textual possibilities, then a Black Femme-inist reading lays bare a viable framework for critiquing white heteropatriarchy as well as heterosexist sexual essentialism. Alex Holding, in “This Femme’s Users Guide” admonishes the white queer community for their “history of classism and racism” that is “responsible for the ignoring and invisibilizing of images and histories of femme that have come out of the working class and communities of color for decades” (48). Black Femme-inist criticism makes visible the sexualities of these women while avoiding the pathologization of the ‘closet’ embedded in gay liberation thinking. This discourse of the closet is so pervasive that it has also been adopted by otherwise radical black feminists. For example, Cheryl Clark, who on one hand explains the propensity of black people to adopt white heteronormative oppressive ideologies, espouses homonormative principles in “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance.” Clark accuses black women of “hid[ing] in the closet of heterosexual presumption” if they only refer to themselves as lesbians to “certain communities” yet otherwise “pass as heterosexuals” (243). Within a homo- and heteronormative context where femmes are assumed straight and “femininity means less queer” and a racist context in which black femmes are marginalized to say the least, Clark’s remarks can be read as “heterosexist (straight until proven otherwise), sexist (femininity cannot possibly have the agency to define itself)” and I would add, decidedly, homo-normative (gay liberation demands that femmes come out) (Kennedy 16). I do not intend to be overly harsh in my critique of Clark; I understand that the stakes of her argument are to promote lesbian visibility within a context where the black lesbian is rendered masculinized and black femme non-existent, rather, my point here is to tease out the pervasive discourse of the closet. This rhetoric

can contribute to an oppressive essentialism that is inflicted upon femmes, and in particular, femmes of color by heteropatriarchal and homo-normative discourses, white and black. As Jewelle Gomez protests, Femme's "have to deal with the social issue of having to come out practically all the time" (Findley and Gomez 146). Black Femme-inist Criticism eschews the confines of sexual essentialism, instead engaging the openness of Femme as a possible space intervening in normative sexual regimes.

Femme critiques the "rigid dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual" which is present in heteronormative sexual paradigms as well as "embedded in gay liberation thinking" (Kennedy 16). Judith "Jack" Halberstam critiques this polarity maintaining that it "clamps[s] down on sexual excess and insists on clear sexual distinctions between perverse and normal sexual behavior and between male and female sexualities" (266). By denouncing the unyielding polarity of heterosexual and homosexual and accounting for the role of other identity categories in desire, Black Femme-inist criticism can facilitate a discussion of the multifaceted sexuality of women who may have spent a considerable part of their lives in ostensibly heterosexual relationships and/or have children. Rather than pathologizing these women as closeted, fence-sitters, or greedily wanting both worlds, Black Femme-inist criticism centers pleasures and desires in sexuality allowing for changeability and fluidity as opposed to strict categories.

Secondly, riffing on Smith's call that Black Feminist criticism "embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers," I draw from Smith's use of the word "embodies." As such, Black Femme-inist Criticism looks toward the black female-identified body ⁴ as a prime site where the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality are regulated and subverted (134). By turning to the body I take seriously Robert Reid-Pharr's assertion that "If there is one thing that marks us as queer, a category that is somehow different, if not altogether distinct, from the heterosexual, then it is undoubtedly our relationships to the body" (Reid-Pharr 85). Reading Reid-Pharr's passage with the "us" as black people - black men, black women, black fags, queens, dykes, femmes, transpeople, straights and gays - suggests that he is making a claim that by the nature of "our" bodies, black sexuality is, in itself, inherently queer. This fits well with Spillers claim of the "pansexual potential" of the ungendered female body (79). This potential marks the black body as a site of regulatory abjection but also as a place of possible subversion of racist heteronormativity.

⁴ Language is difficult when describing the complexity of identity. I use female-bodied here to suggest that Black Femme-inist criticism can encompass cisgendered as well as transgendered women, genderqueers, "sissy fags," queens and anyone who engages rogue femininities.

To exemplify the dual experience of racist and heteronormative regulation and subversion, and also to write myself into theory, I have an anecdote. I was driving to a drag king show and looked Fab-U-Lous. I won't go into full sartorial detail but part of my outfit included elaborately applied bright fuchsia eyeshadow (this will become relevant in a second). I was stopped at a light when the driver in the left turn lane decided that he no longer wanted to turn and started backing up at an angle. When he was mere inches from my car I honked my horn, at which point he rolled down his window and demanded that I "Chill the fuck out." There were three people in the car, the white male driver, the white female in the front seat, and a white male in the back seat. I asserted "you almost hit my car" as the driver kept cussing and the male passenger in the back attempted to subdue me with a drunken "ignore him baby, ignore him sweetie, he's sorry baby, look at me, look at me..." "You almost hit my car" I repeated, as the driver retorted "You mean I almost hit your makeup." His plainly dressed female companion laughed at his "cleverness." His retort was sophomoric and inane, but it set me off. Cuss at me if you want, but don't insult my makeup. I went off, throwing out tidal waves of profanities that I didn't even know existed. As he pulled away, the driver yelled out the window "Go back to Mexicali, bitch." To which I screamed, "I'm not Mexican, I'm black you racist idiot!" He was gone. I hyperventilated -- waves of nausea flooded by body and my heart raced – the panic attack set in. I pulled over, forced my body and brain to slow down and recentered. Then, I went to the show, shaken but still fabulous.

Through a Black Femme-inist lens, multiple points can be taken from this vignette. First, the driver's initial line of attack was to insult/assault my body, specifically my feminine body. Of all the possible invectives he could have doled out, he turned to my makeup, which suggests that he not only noticed it, but it upset him. There was something dissonant and unsettling to him about a woman (and a brown woman no less) embracing a femininity that wasn't for him or his drunken Casanova friend in the back seat. There was no way he would know that I was going to a drag king show, nevertheless he read my body as not-right, queerly feminine. In this, a Black femme-inist theoretical model necessitates looking at the body as a site implicated in the naming and regulation of desire. My makeup intentionally named my femme-ininity and his reading of me as queerly feminine prompted the driver's attempts at derisive regulation.

As inane and laughable as his comment is in retrospect, in the moment I felt it as an attack on my embodied femininity and responded in kind. Neither sex, nor gender is the locus of black femme-inist criticism rather femininity and masculinity are the points of departure. I've been calling the driver's attack (hetero)sexist and misogynist, but his actions weren't solely based on his disdain for my sexuality or gender but my display of femininity. Third, when his heterosexist assault didn't thwart me, he added an extra shot of racism to his punch, demanding that I return to whatever foreign land produced me – in his mind "Mexicali." Throughout this anecdote, it has been

difficult to distinguish the driver's (hetero)sexism, from his disdain for femininity, from his racism (with a xenophobic kick). Was my makeup offensive because it was 'queer,' because I was brown, or because fuchsia doesn't work for me?⁵ Did I look like I was from "Mexicali" because of the way I was styled that day, because I can be read as ambiguously brown, or because geography was never his strong suit? Black femme-inist criticism demands that identities be acknowledged as shifting and intersecting and oppression as an imbricated strategy of subjugation. Heterosexism was at work even though there is no rainbow sticker on my car, disdain for femininity was evident in the words of the male driver and the laughter of his female companion, and all of these are inflected with racism and xenophobia. While acknowledging the body as a site of regulatory regimes, Black Femme-inism also looks toward the body as a site to subvert or dodge subjugation. The driver's nefarious aim, to tear me down and put me in my place, was both successful and unsuccessful. Sadly, I did break down. His assault on my gendered and racialized body prompted a momentarily debilitating physical response, a panic attack. As far as putting me in my place, I did not return to Mexicali as he desired, but took my place at the drag show, makeup still intact.

Finally, drawing from Smith's mandate that black feminist criticism draw from the personal lives and experiences of black women and Halberstam's fear of the "division of labor" in which in terms of sex "literature is the practice and queer the theory," I insist that Black Femme-inist criticism must be sexy (Halberstam 261). I acknowledge that promoting 'sexy theory' is a hazardous terrain for black women who are multiply-subjected to the racist and sexist demands of white-male dominated theory. Anxiety about my academic present and my professional future threatens to arrest my typing fingers. In a context where femininity is derided, black women suppressed, and erotophobia reigns it is understandable that for many women of color "the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fad" which are endemic (perhaps a pandemic) in white-dominated academia (Anzaldúa 167). Nevertheless, I extend this fraught proposition for sexiness by locating it within Gloria Anzaldúa's call to "unlearn the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing" in order to write with "intimacy and immediacy" (165). Given the array of black women's experiences and myriad

⁵ I slip between black and brown in my self-description due to my 'light but not white' appearance coupled with my black identity. I see this slippage as indicative of the slippage between women of color and black feminisms. In the same vein of the legacy of women of color feminisms that are indebted to black feminisms and vice-versa, I hope that Black Femme-inism can hold these struggles between blackness and brownness. In other words, I'm suggesting that Black-Femme-inism is pliable enough to acknowledge the historical and contemporary specificity of black femininities while also, as I indicated earlier, be a starting point for other theories about femininity.

of ways in which our experiences are inflected with other identities (and non-identities) it follows that sexiness cannot be precisely defined or policed. When I call for sexy criticism, I'm challenging critical regimes which demand separation of mind and body for intellectual rigor. Given the ways in which presumptions of rational disembodied subjects perpetuate the invisible domination of white knowledge production and erase the voices of subordinated subjects always-already defined by their bodies, I insist that the sensory body – resilient against its pressing hailings – be the heart and tongue of Black Femme-inist Criticism. Sexiness entails pleasure and sensory stimulation, thus Black Femme-inist criticism needs to draw from senses in its presentation. I want to hear our various patois and see, touch, smell and perhaps even taste black bodies. I want criticism that reflects our sadness, anger, jubilation, and, of course, pleasure. It is important to designate approaches that are rife with sensuality as theory in order to interrupt the racist and sexist misconception that black women represent while white men theorize. Barbara Christian observes that “people of color have always theorized” though sometimes “more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is more sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative” (281). Black women writing ourselves is a radical act. Marking (both textually and physically) black female bodies can be seen as acts of self-definition in the face of racist and sexist regimes which mark black female bodies as a form of subjugation. Thus, despite the dangers, or perhaps because of them, Black Femme-inist criticism needs to be both intellectually and sensory provocative.

Just as Smith suggests that a critical examination of black lesbian writing can open the door to thinking about all black women's oppression, a Black Femme-inist Criticism is not just applicable to black femmes, black lesbians, or even solely black women, but could be foundational tool for examining and intervening in regimes which subordinate femininity and the multi-faceted and intersecting tactics (racism, (hetero)sexism, misogyny, classism, transphobia) through which that subordination occurs. Black Femme-inist criticism examines how black bodies defy, embrace, and negotiate femininities which have been circumscribed by variously intersecting racist and sexist regimes. These regimes cast black bodies as improperly or unfeminine. Black femme-inist critique embraces feminine agency including sexual agency as a strategy for negotiating racist and gendered oppressions. As a strategy, Black Femme-inism engages with culture in order to supplement and contest traditional theory. Finally, Black Femme-inist criticism, as a neo-critical theory, looks toward the past – theory, history, culture, and bodies – as sites which shape the present and can point to new trajectories in the future.

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