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Deconstructing and Decolonizing Identities of "Gender" and "Sex" When Viewed as Anti-Black: Black Narratives Outside of the Binary

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Deconstructing and Decolonizing Identities of "Gender" and "Sex" When Viewed as Anti-Black:

Black Narratives Outside of the Binary

by

Didier Salgado

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ABSTRACT

How is "Reality" experienced in the Black body? Is "Reality" an objective article which is

outside of the realm of personal experience? Assigned sex is often assumed an objective

biological phenomenon that exists everywhere and in all communities. Gender is often thought

about as a socially constructed form of identity which is expressed in various ways. In this thesis,

I critically examine the terror of "reality" on the Black body, looking at the ways that Black

people who've experienced discomfort with gender and sex categories experience the "world"

around them. Diving deeply into their own experiences and the meanings they make for the

"reality" around them. This thesis looks at gender and sex not as identities, but rather as tools of

white supremacy which were forced on Black bodies. I specifically engage in in-depth

conversations with participants who have communicated these discomforts with gender and sex

categories, to bridge the conversation into race/racial violence, and the "nature" of "reality".

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There have been many conversations within and outside of the academy, by scholars and outside media alike (such as podcasts, blogs, and social media outlets) that circulate around a violent "history" of sex and gender categorizing on the Black body (Curry 2017). Recent scholarship and research argues that sex and gender should be understood as historical tools of imperial dominance (Curry 2017; Warren 2018; Kitossa and Curry 2021). For Black folks who are descendants of slavery, the remnants of this violent "history" are ever present, continuously ongoing, trapped in what I call "the unending present-tense." Frank Wilderson described this idea well when writing, "For the slave, 'historical time' is not possible" (2010: 339). In the very language sex and gender is articulated in, it is revealed in the Black body, this ongoing, never-ending cycle of terror continues because it was not the original language spoken by or known to indigenous "Africans" prior to enslavement, it was a language imposed (O' Rourke 2005; Snorton 2017). It is important to reconsider how we think of sex, gender, and by extension, humanhood with respect to the narratives of western history of the transatlantic slave trade, which encompassed the violent imposing of identities on Black bodies (Matlack 1971; Hartman 1997; Snorton 2017). Humanhood is described in the Collins English Dictionary as "the state or character of being human" (2014). It intersects with identities of sex and gender in relation to race because historically, Black people were not considered actual "people" until 150 years ago. If we were to include the time it took for Jim Crow laws to be abolished, that would bring the timing of emancipation to just 57 years of actually being regarded as "human," though scholar Saidiya Hartman tells us we are "still living in slavery's afterlives" (20067: 6).

Humanhood is important to use in this context, because after a long violent "history" of not being regarded as human, Black people are suddenly assumed to have agency, either in activist spaces by organizers, by particular scholars in feminist schools of thought, or by those who believe that "slavery was a long time ago" and that it's now "time to get over it." Black "men" are assumed the capacity to benefit from patriarchy in gender and feminist studies, but Errol Miller has argued that "Patriarchy has historically marginalized 'men' not covered by the covenant of kinship. Throughout history such 'men' have been perceived as threats and treated as such. Patriarchy's treatment of such 'men' has always been more brutal and harsh than its treatment of women. This contradictory and inconsistent feature of patriarchy has been mostly ignored." (1991: 342). There is nothing "empirical" that backs up the narratives pushed in dominance feminism on the discussion of Black men and patriarchy, which create division within Black communities.

These detrimental theories neglect the long, ongoing "history" of violence on the Black body when it comes to the topic of being. More specifically the "not being," where the Black body was regarded as "nothing incarnate" by early western ontologists (Warren 2018: 111). If Black bodies "were" regarded as not human, and "nothing incarnate," then it becomes an anthropomorphic project, and continued violence assigning sex and gender to them, which are reserved positions for the human which is synonymous with the white body. Previous research has involved those who may identify as queer, non-binary, or gender-queer individuals who reject the gender-binary system. In "I want to be who I am," scholar Ana Balius found that "the ability to choose one's own name is an important part of rejecting binary gender" (2018: 15). Balius's project was informative, and though there was much to gain, the limitations in the ways in which race is situated with gender and sex categories were not addressed, with no discussion

on race. Having the "ability to choose" requires agency. In Maria Lugones' article, *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender system*, she argues that "colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing" (2007: 186-187). The "introduction of gender itself" as stated in Lugones' research is an important concept for this thesis, because at the same time that I am aiming to highlight Black narratives, I am simultaneously attempting to deconstruct, disrupt, and challenge this ontology, which was birthed and coupled with anti-Blackness. Indeed, anti-Blackness and Western ontology are "forever" inseparable.

This ontology sought to give reason to the "unknown," to explain the "nothing," and ultimately conquer its fear of this "nothing." Western thinkers, enslavers, political leaders, and jurists were "able" to do so by capturing the "African," and through the process of enslavement, they became the "Black/Negro" whose flesh, and "embodiment" was "nothing incarnate" (Warren 2018: 1-25). Black bodies were, and continue to be the subject of torture, oddities that allow for testing methods and developing theories because of the Black being "nothing, but a nothing that is something," meaning the Black body yields usefulness in its nothingness because it allows for the continued development of the "world" and "reality" (Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2015; Warren 2018; Woods 2019).

Building on the previous research, this project aims to contribute an understanding of sex and gender from the perspective of Black folks who either feel uncomfortable with or feel they fit outside of Western categories of sex and gender. It explores the ways in which they combat or

reject gender-sex systems and how they "make sense" of the "reality" around them. At the center of my inquiry, I aim to add a nuanced perspective that emphasizes the importance of race in relation to gender-sex categories, while simultaneously challenging gender and sex as Western imperial-colonial concepts that were inapplicable to Black bodies.

Black studies scholar Tryon P. Woods tells us, "Under slavery, the black family and 'blood' were functionally outlawed, an impossibility, rendering inapplicable identities and categories of scholarly inquiry customary in the Eurocentric convention— gender, sexuality, labor, family, marriage, generations, ancestors—or, at best, leaving these classifications 'indissociable from violence' (2019: 59).

This original inapplicability of gender and sex identities, and the time it has taken, debatably, to consider Black folks human, demands that we call into question the usefulness of Catharine A. MacKinnon's "dominance feminism" and Kimberle Crenshaw's model of intersectionality, which both fall into the trap of "relying on the normative codes of race-gender and sex…" and are widely accepted theories within and outside of the academy (Woods 2019: 27). It is for this reason, that this project seeks to highlight the different ways that Black folks combat these normative codes that reify these "historical" anti-Black colonial instruments of terror.

CHAPTER TWO: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A Violent "Trans-Historical" Background: Black Fungibility

During the transatlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were violently forced from various African countries into captivity. The horrors that took place during the enslavement of Africans who were considered "mere flesh" (Young 2005; 380) would eventually include the forcible designation of sex in a language foreign to and also violently imposed upon the Black body (O'Rourke 2005; Snorton 2017). Indigenous "Africans" had their own languages, expressions of identity, and ideas of being and spirituality that intertwined intricately with one another, but because of the violent conquest and kidnapping of African peoples for the advancement of white imperial power, much of this information was forcefully destroyed (Berlin 2005; O'Rourke 2005). Because of this violent stripping of indigenous identity, which includes the very enforcement of colonial language of which such categories of "sex" and "gender" are reified, gender and sex will always be situated in a way that constitutes harm on a Black body. Black Studies scholar Tryon P. Woods argues that although "queer and gender studies attempt to attack the reification of gender and sex categories…" such works are "counterproductive because they do not hold themselves accountable to the structures of antiblackness in which gender and sex arise through their coupling with violence" (2019: 56). The condition to being human was categorized by descent. Those of white european descent were able to classify themselves and others, based on a sense of superiority, which emerged from the "reports" of "savagery" they encountered in Africa and the Americas. Categorizing Black bodies did not create the violence being experienced "now." Violence is not what followed, but what must have already existed for

such a horrific scene to take place and continue to ripple throughout "time" (Woods 2019). It is imperative to address the violence that is historically coupled with sex-gender categories in any theoretical or academic conversation, otherwise it remains an injustice on the Black bodies who were forced to bear the burden of these imposed identities.

On Black "Reality", "Time", and the "World":

Afro-pessimism has offered many tools by which one can view the "world," in *Blackhood Against the Police Power*, author Tryon P. Woods tells us that, "Afro pessimism…is not an argument for or against black agency but rather views the modern world as founded on a priori violence against Black people that creates ontology as it's fact" (2019: 44). The "world" as we know it in this "current" moment of "time," has been constructed through grotesque violence on the Black body, who are the object/subject by which all ontologies are created (Warren 2018), likewise *Queer Feminist Science Studies,* discusses how science practices and conceptions of "time" emerged out of the violent legacy of colonialism and how we must think critically about how we "know" what we "know," and also "what" we "know." The authors call the reader to question objectivity and offer alternative ways to view the "world" outside of the normalcy produced by the colonial project (Cipolla et al. 2017).

Gender Trouble

Judith Butler first introduced their book *"Gender Trouble"* in 1990, where they skillfully theorized issues that emerge with identities. They specifically used "gender" as an example and extension of violence. In this work Butler drew from Foucault's *"History of Sexuality,"* where he used sex, sexuality, and gender to display how power dynamics work. Foucault (1978) did this by showing how sexual practices are discussed in politics, literature, and science. Butler in a similar manner added to the conversation by showing the "Gender Trouble" that emerges with identities and argued that these identities and the assumptions that come with them create "others." Butler discussed how these identities had an inseparable relationship with power and violence, while also introducing the "trap" held within these identities, which is "performativity," or how these identities are roles that are almost predestined that one cannot help but simply "perform" in like a character in theater.

The Pitfalls of Dominance Feminism

Catharine A. MacKinnon has been attributed with pioneering dominance feminism. (Mazingo 2014). In her book *Feminism Unmodified*, she argues that "gender is an inequality of power, a social status based on who is permitted to do what to whom" (1987: 8). However, she fails to 1) take accountability for the violent history of sex and gender in relation to Black bodies by completely dismissing the identities once held by indigenous "Africans" and 2) acknowledge the violent history of sexual abuse white women enacted upon Black men. MacKinnon argues that women must essentialize themselves to fight against the patriarchy and the control of "men." She also says that regardless of race women have always been subject to "man's structural capacity to rape, even the most privileged of women, white women, are degraded as sex objects"

(1996: 4). Dr. Curry offers a more nuanced explanation saying, "it was well known that white women pursued and coerced Black men into sexual relationships, but any insult to a white woman's advances, as well as any surrender to her demands, could be considered rape" (2017: 58). MacKinnon's understanding of gender and power lacks the capacity to take accountability for a violent history, which many would argue is ongoing, to address the ways in which white women have committed violence against Black bodies, especially considering "the sexual exploitation of enslaved men" which was "well known, though mostly unarticulated…" and the failure to recognize that "regardless of 'sex'" enslaved Black bodies were nothing but property in "the eyes of the law" (Hallam 2004: 1). The effects of the transatlantic slave trade are still witnessable and violently imprinted on Black bodies. The very language used by descendants of slavery is one foreign to us. Yet because of indigenous languages and identities being beat and tortured out of the Black body, we are forced to operate with a language that is situated violently against our experiences. We are forced to give testimony to an experience we have, in a language that was meant to negate and deny those experiences (Matlack 1971; Hartman 1997; O'Rourke 2005).

The Pitfalls of Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw, who has been accredited with coining "intersectionality," aligns herself with MacKinnon's notions of dominance feminism (Crenshaw 2010). Now it is important to understand the history of Crenshaw's coined term. Intersectionality was a word given to an experience to illustrate and define the experiences of

oppression and exclusion in relation to African American women. This "experience made manifest" in language was brought forth by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, who skillfully

displayed the issues in law excluding Black women, as well as the somewhat compromised position that the African American woman was subject to by being Black and a Woman, simultaneously.

Intersectionality has come to mean much more and includes various intersecting identities. In fact, Crenshaw clarified that "the point of the intersectional metaphor was to draw attention to the multiple ways that patterns of power can converge..." (2010). There is no discrediting intersectionality's achievements in activist, academic, and various other spaces. There is, however, admittedly skepticism on this very important clarification and the timing of it. Crenshaw first introduced the concept of intersectionality in the late 80's yet waited 21 years to clarify what she was saying while others were weaponizing her early concept. Herein lies the true pitfall of intersectionality, it regurgitates Western categories/identities, which reifies them over and over again. Intersectionality recognizes multiple identities, but it does so by drawing off of Western categories, so any "identity" that exists is still subject to the confines of a western binary. These "intersecting identities" are a synthesis trapped, like "inter-sex" individuals, whose assumed identity still legitimizes "sex," trapping them into legitimizing these categories, inter-sectionality, not outer-sectionality. How can Black people truly emancipate themselves, free themselves internally and externally, while still operating with violent colonial weapons of oppression? As Audre Lorde (1984) cautioned, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." It is impossible to use anti-Black instruments to combat anti-Blackness. The pitfall of intersectionality is that it reifies gender and sex, legitimizing these "identities," "giving them a life outside of racial violence" (Woods 2019: 55). This thesis aims to reveal the discomfort caused by sex and gender that is experienced by Black folks of any "expression of self" (see notes page), and how they experience "reality." Previous interview-based research has

contributed by seeking the ways in which "LGBTQ+ people reject binary gender" (Balius 2018).

What I'm interested in doing, is continuing the conversation of gender and sex as imperial tools

of dominance, and not giving them a life outside of the racial violence (Woods 2019:55-60).

Why Address Intersectionality and Dominance Feminism:

      I came into higher education after years of being an "on the field" activist. During my

time working as an activist, it became apparent to me that "intersectionality" was often

weaponized and coupled with notions of patriarchy from Catharine MacKinnon's theories on

dominance feminism. Some of the things I witnessed involved Black women telling Black men

or assigned males to "hush" or "shut-up" about their experiences as victims of oppression, and

the many angles of violence like sexual assault, fetishization, police brutality, misdiagnosis,

medical malpractice and so on that they have experienced, because they "still benefitted from

patriarchy." I also witnessed Black queer people, alongside Black women, open up a space for

the purpose of "dialogue" in which white queer people degraded Black men (who many of the

Black queer folks were). There were some who of course didn't agree with this and found it to be

problematic, but I was shocked to witness the number of organizers who thought this was okay

and tried to back up why it was okay, loosely using "intersectionality" and dominance feminism

as justifications. I am not sure why these theories still hold so much weight in many activist

spaces, being that they've been critiqued in literature, so I'm led to question if perhaps the

critiques on these dated theories are possibly inaccessible to those outside of the academy.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

I conducted 7 in-depth interviews where I asked Black-Indigenous[1] folks of various

identities about their experiences with sex and gender discomfort and how those discomforts

interplay with their race. I gained access to these participants by being involved in Black social

and activist spaces. Specifically, I have had the opportunity to network with these participants in

Black social and activist spaces in person via clubs, bars, kickbacks, or protests prior to this

research project. The interviews for this thesis were conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams

and recorded for transcription. Online interviews were decided to be the best option in terms of

accessibility. Having online interviews allowed participants the freedom to decide when and

where they would be interviewed. It also relieved the need for additional travel or preparing for

and deciding upon a shared meeting place.

The dynamic between being an acquaintance and a researcher created a complex network

of interactions involving the way in which the participants viewed me and responded. For

example, when I would ask participants questions, they would respond with the assumption that I

knew what they were talking about, not going into detail or referring to brief prior conversations

from the past before the recorded interview. The lines were somewhat blurred between

researcher and friend. This led to difficulty in drawing out detailed responses from the

participants, even when priming, much like the experience described by researcher Bertha

Ochieng (2010) when interviewing Black families. Using this previous research, among others as

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[1] Black-indigenous is a term I use to describe ALL Black descendants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade
regardless of "nationality" or "ethnicity"

a guide, I had to insist to the participants that, for the sake of the interview, imagine they were speaking to a stranger, and go into as much detail in their responses as possible. Given previous research, I speculated that this would be a limitation prior to conducting the research. To be clear, the experience was not off guard, but it was still challenging even if it was somewhat anticipated.

Participants were provided with Institutional Review Board-approved recruitment texts prior to the interviews. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 31. All participants identified as Black, one identified as "ethnically Hispanic," and one identified as a "mixed Black" person. Three participants identified as male, two as women, and two as sexually queer and gender nonconforming, all having experienced some form of discomfort with gender and sex categories. Participants' education level ranged from having high school diplomas to first-year masters' students. All participants lived in the state of Florida during the time interviews were conducted, though all interviews were held virtually on Teams. The eligibility requirements for this project were as follows: participants had to be adults who were 18+ years and able to understand English because the interview questions were in English. Additionally, participants were expected to have been Black since this research project was specifically about Black people who have experienced some form of discomfort with "sex" and "gender" categories (Balsam et al. 2011; Nadal et al. 2015).

Based on previous research, I designed the questions participants were asked about their personal experiences in an effort for them to be able to create their own narratives and meanings behind the discomforts they experience with sex and gender categories. This does not mean that personal narratives should not be considered a reliable source of data. Research shows that narrative construction offers in-depth insight into the way participants experience and internalize

"outside" experiences (Mizock et al. 2011; Lyons et al. 2012). This research project aimed to document Black people's experiences with sex and gender categories and how they make meaning out of those experiences, including where they believe those experiences come from.

Marginalized "knowledge" is often left out of or gains an insufficient amount of attention in academic scholarship, and although research on marginalized communities has somewhat "always" been present, the dissemination of their specific forms of "knowledge" by those specific communities has been in deficit in comparison to white voices (Ocholla 2007: 3). It is for this reason that the data collected through the expressions of participants' experiences was based on their own narratives and the way they interpret "reality" around them. In this way, we as researchers who aim to deconstruct and "decolonize" academic writing, "legitimize" nonwhite voices by enlarging the territory through the use of this marginalized "knowledge" as research data (Lincoln, Gonzalez, Gonzalez 2008; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021).

Analytical Methods

After the 7 interview transcriptions were complete, I played the recordings of each interview again while reading over the recorded data (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021). While simultaneously reading and listening, I would pause the audio when something was said that felt familiar. I opened a new document titled "Findings Unorganized" and began to compile a list of quotes from participants' interviews that featured similarities. After doing this, I allowed the data to tell me what themes were emerging. The coding process involved taking quotes with similarities and putting them in their own section. Once I read through the section, I gave each section a name based either on the feelings being conveyed or a general quote from a participant that summed up what the other participants were communicating. Themes that emerged were,

"Not just Policing Self, but Protecting Self," "Reality is Structured: Meta Narratives" and "The Violence is the Same, Regardless of Sex or Gender." While each theme may contain a unique body of data that specifically conveys a "single" axis point of information, each theme contained subcategories, which tied into the other themes found (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021).

In other words, the themes were like tiles in a mosaic art piece, each one containing a world of its own, but intricately connecting to a larger picture. The interview questions served more as a fluid frame of reference rather than a set of fixed questions, meaning the participants were guiding the questions and flow of conversations rather than the researcher. It was an active engagement, rather than a fixed run through, which was my own "attempt" at undoing the neocolonial power dynamics that exist in research (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021).

Framework

During this research project, I took on a predominantly Afro-pessimist approach, in the hopes of somewhat "disrupting" the "current" flow of thought in sociology I have experienced, and further establishing and contributing to Black Studies, which emerged out of the Black Power era (Woods 2019: 18). Afro-pessimism is "a meta-theory: a critical thought project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their properties and assumptive logic, such as their foundations, methods, form, and utility; and, it does so, again, on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the theories it interrogates" (Wilderson 2020: 14). Afro-pessimism allows for the critical engagement and challenging of the ways in which knowledge is produced, and simultaneously allows us to question "knowledge" itself because of its anti-Black coding when "knowledge"

"was" being established through performing experiments and subjecting violence on the Black body (Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2020).

The Researcher

As a Black-Indigenous person who has struggled with sex and gender discomforts throughout life, my experiences have been the fuel guiding me toward this research project. I have experienced many angles of anti-Blackness, and though each angle was "unique," I could not help but essentialize these experiences, seeing each and every one of them as stemming from the same source of violence. Growing up in Polk County, which still has one of the largest openly active KKK memberships to this day (Moore 2020; White 2022), it's no shock that my experience wasn't a "unique" one. I have heard many others share their experiences and have witnessed violence firsthand, but it became more evident to me that these experiences were happening everywhere when I began to network and meet others outside of Polk County through active engagement in Black spaces like clubs, bars, or protests in surrounding cities. I was able to see myself in the experiences expressed by the participants and make meanings for myself about the "reality" I experience moment to moment, around and within me.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Not Just Policing Self, but Protecting Self, Reality is Structured: "Meta"/Spiritual Narratives, and *The Violence is the Same, Regardless of "sex" or "gender"* appeared to emerge throughout the entirety of the research project, and though these themes may not have been present in every interview, they do capture the essence of Black narratives and meaning-making. Black narratives and meaning-making in simple terms describe Black stories by Black voices on the topic of Black "reality," which is the violent absurdity constantly experienced by Black people, who the "World" absolutely despise, but also need to exist in order to operate in its proper function (Warren 2018), or as Saidiya Hartman explains, "The value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves" (1997: 7). It was through the safety and network I had already previously developed with participants that allowed such an open, trusting, and intimate conversation to take place. Of course, there has been plentiful scholarship in which authors state something along the lines of being a good researcher means either not getting close to participants, establishing boundaries, or being careful to not "go native," (Valli 2000) but I think it's important to engage critically in what it means to "create boundaries" in practice, like borders that were cut out of Indigenous land by colonizers and given names. We must ask ourselves, why there's such an issue with going "native" in research. Being "native" to this community offered more than "access," it allowed understanding.

Not Just Policing Self, but Protecting Self

Throughout each interview, participants shared their experiences and thoughts on Black people who police their behavior, or what a lot of people would call "code-switching." In simple terms, code-switching can be thought of as changing the way you present yourself, whether in speech, appearance, or mannerisms, in an adjacent way to the dominant ruling group in order to navigate through a certain social space more comfortably. Code-switching as described by Italo M. Brown in emergency medicine "is when an individual adjusts speech, behavior, appearance, or expression to optimize the comfort of others" (2021). It was of huge importance; however, that participants established not to think of it so much as policing oneself but protecting oneself from very real imminent danger. Some participants discussed policing in general, while others discussed examples from the way they were socialized in school.

For example, Keshawn said:

> When you're not at home or around friends and stuff I do think that there is a system you could say set up for black people to just act the part. You're not supposed to do certain things. It's just like we're always in an interview. I feel like you have to do it I think, to make sure you get to where you need to be in life or to make sure you're safe. At school they would tell you, you can't say so and so or certain things because that's not how you should be speaking. I think that's how they programmed us. In public like official places, you know like libraries let's say or the courthouse and whatnot and stuff they assume that you should speak a certain type of way, but I do feel like that's a normal thing for black people to do. I feel like me personally I've experienced it myself

Keshawn describes many examples of policing, from speaking, to appearance and behavior, and how the feeling of constantly being under observation like you're "always in an interview" is existent in society for Black people. Keshawn discusses how this is "programmed" as an expectation of society and how normal it is for Black people to do this on a regular day to day basis. Programmed in the way that Keshawn describes it here is very similar to Butler's

notions on performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Keshawn describes the "policing/protection

of self" as something that "you have to do" in order to "make sure you're safe."

Similar to Keshawn's experience, Luis, who identifies as a Queer Black Hispanic male,

describes policing as something that is "programmed" throughout society, while also discussing

the automatic reflex of it that occurs in Black bodies[2] as a means to protect oneself. Luis brings

the automatic component of policing into the conversation.

Luis says:

> I think that it becomes an automatic nature, like an automatic self-protection mode
> we all go into to police ourselves to make sure that we're not making anyone
> uncomfortable you know? In regard to work, I'm a little more to myself versus
> anybody who knows me outside of my work life knows that I'm a very outgoing
> expressive person. At work I tend to tone myself down um to make sure that I'm
> not making anyone uncomfortable.

More on Luis's point, he acknowledges his queer identity, while also addressing a

difference in how he is perceived and how his Black identity is more visible than his queer

identity when it comes to violence, he says:

> Subconsciously I'm reacting without even knowing that I'm creating this little
> cocoon to feel safe. So being a black gay man, but being a black man in general
> there's these kinds of pressures that we kind of already have to think about and be
> conscious of regardless of our sexuality because you know, like police violence.
> Before a cop knows anything about us being gay or queer or anything they're going
> off of what they see, a black person. Any interaction with a police officer or white
> people in general automatically triggers the switch. Walking into places like a store
> you have to look over your shoulders and make sure you're not being followed
> around or accused of stealing you know? Or a simple traffic stop you know, fearing
> for your life. It's these little, tiny parts of our life that white people don't have to
> really think about when they go outside. To think like hey I might walk out the door
> today and I might not walk back in. That's not a pressure that a white person would
> ever have to experience whereas black people we have to be mindful of everything
> we do as far as how we're acting, where we're acting, and when we're acting
> because even if we're in the right, we're automatically perceived as the aggressors.

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[2] When I say body, I am also including the mind

Gabrielle, who identifies as a cis Black woman, adds her experiences as a student in a predominantly white postgraduate program. She discusses her thoughts on policing, while also furthering the conversation on the automatic nature of it by saying:

> Black people whether male or female police themselves and how they behave because of their race. You're talking to somebody in a postgrad program at a PWI. Every day I go to school it's crazy to even think about because it's not even really a conscious thing I do. It's kinda like this muscle memory thing. Like as soon as I walk into the school, my brain knows 'okay switch on okay switch off'.

Gabrielle expressing how her body knows what to do, and it not being a conscious thing she does once again parallels to Butler's idea of performativity. For Keshawn, Luis, Gabrielle, and so many others, policing as a means of protecting one's very own safety is a vital aspect of life, and from it emerges an arguably strange aspect of reality that is important to address. The strangeness emerges from the body's "ability"[3] to self-preserve with automatic unconscious coping strategies, almost as if hundreds of years of anti-Blackness has led to the Black body's "ability" to automatically turn this "switch" on and off for safety as described by the participants. The Black body is produced through constant unending terror, and the inhabitants of that body suffer the "reality" of it.

For scientists who study epigenetics and trauma, that is exactly the case (Clemmons 2020). Trauma lives in the body and can be passed down for generations according to studies done by Dr. Joy DeGruy, a clinical psychologist who specifically addressed the effects of chattel slavery in their book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring & Healing* (Clemmons 2020). Chattel slavery and the grotesque experiments the Black body was forced to endure to develop "science" and "medical practice" still affect and shape the way that Black

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[3] Ability is in quotation marks to denote skepticism and to think about the traumatic violence a body has to undergo for generations to adapt or self-regulate. Could be thought of as a "disability"

bodies are perceived in "reality." In the medical field, Black people are still assumed to "feel less pain than white people," "have thicker skin," and should be given less medication than their white counterparts (Filippou 2022). Epigenetics is how "certain genes in the genome can be turned either on or off due to the environment a person is in" (Filippou 2022). On the cellular level, traumatic experiences are literally "manifesting epigenetic changes" in the Black body, and those "changes can be passed down to multiple generations" (Filippou 2022).

Each of the 7 participants expressed in some form an automatic function in the body where "policing" takes place to ensure safety. I have also experienced countless moments where my body has switched into this automatic function that protects me from the life-threatening danger of anti-Blackness, and I believe this function comes from the "history" we have experienced, "the trauma from those experiences is embedded in our DNA. On a cellular level, we still recall the negative outcomes" (Clemmons 2020). Epigenetics shows us that the effects of chattel slavery is not only manifesting itself in emotional and spiritual trauma, but literally in the way the physical body governs itself in the environment around and within it (Degruy 2022).

Dr. Degruy (2022) uses the example of a Black mother at a schoolhouse sitting next to a white mother. The Black mother compliments the white mother's child saying that the child is excelling and doing a great job. The white mother goes on and on about how proud she is of her child, and then acknowledges that the Black mother's child is actually doing a phenomenal job too and is surpassing her son. The Black mother begins to say things like, "well he's a handful" and doesn't acknowledge him in the same way that the white mother does. Degruy then asks us to think back 300 years to a Black mother in the fields with her son. The slave master coming along says to her, "he's doing a good job," and the mother says, "no he's not, he's stupid." She does this to ensure the safety of her son, so that he's not separated from her and sold off. This is

what Dr. Degruy calls, "survival adaptation" (Degruy 2022). The Black body is home to a simultaneous contradiction, where we automatically embody the blessing and curse of policing ourselves for our safety.

Reality is Structured: "Meta"/Spiritual Narratives

The various ways in which the participants described their experiences and "reality" itself began to take on a meta or somewhat spiritual component, and while they may have shared openly with me how they perceived "reality," the participants also expressed a worry about seeming or feeling like they were "crazy." Spiritual or non-conventional and non-normative perspectives of "reality" are often not seen as reliable "objective" measurements of the "world" around us, and are often met with invalidation, skepticism, or the diagnosis of a mental illness. For Black people, misdiagnosis has been, and continues to be a huge problem in the community. Misdiagnosis coupled with not wanting to receive a diagnosis because of the alarming and racist history that psychology has, which includes the countless Black people that were diagnosed with schizophrenia just for asking for equal rights (Metzl 2010), leaves the Black body in a state of despair.

One of the participants felt as if there was a very purposeful plan created by colonizers, where they almost "knew" that the outcome of this plan would lead to an unending vicious cycle of violence. Gabrielle uses words like "always" to describe how the legacy of colonialism continues today, and is orchestrated in the Black life, by the white hands that always have a "plan."

Gabrielle says:

This is the society that they created, and they didn't create it on accident. I truly believe that to this day all of these steps have been made according to plan and that's just it. They'll always have a hand in what we're experiencing as you know second class citizens, the elites they're gonna make sure.

Gabrielle saying "they'll always have a hand in what we're experiencing" is so closely paralleled to what Du Bois was saying in *Dusk of Dawn*. He says, "I lived in an environment which I came to call the white world. I was not an American; I was not a man; I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. All this made me limited in physical movement and provincial in thought and dream" (1968: 135-136). Similar to Gabrielle's point, Keshawn emphasizes a "constant" battle that is happening not just around, but within the Black body as well. Keshawn discusses the body as a home for the ancestors that created us, and with that, the violent legacy of sexual abuse that lives inside the same body, on a cellular spiritual level.

Keshawn says:

Our ancestors were raped. So sometimes I wonder like is it the white insanity in our brain that makes us think a certain way sometimes. I like to think that our ancestors are still alive inside of us and are in a constant battle. Like souls kind of arguing with each other because of how they came to be. It's like outside of time still happening in a spiritual way

In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois (1903) similarly discusses the habitation of more than one soul in the body saying, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

These conversations involving spiritual or meta lenses that the participants viewed their experiences and "reality" through, offered immense insight and presented a revitalizing way to make meaning. There are many other scholars who use spirituality as a lens to describe the violence that exists in the Black community. Anthony Pinn describes the correlation between Black terror and the spiritual history and meaning-making that exists within the Black community in his book, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion, 20th Anniversary Edition.* He discusses how Christianity played a huge role in the language used by Black folks, and its encompassing nature (Pinn 2022: 1-24). In a similar manner Joseph, who identifies as a Black feminine gay male, discusses his thoughts on Christianity and the spiritual piece of violence that he perceives is happening all around us in Black people's lives.

He says:

> I think about how Christianity was a huge part of slavery, and the spiritual aspect of what we as Black people experience, even in our dreams. There's terror everywhere, in everything for us, no matter if you're a man, a woman, gay, trans. We're dealing with something almost out of this world.

For Joseph, and so many others, Black terror takes hold of dreams. To not be able to escape from a violence so encapsulating that it seeps into one's dreams is almost unimaginable. David Marriot asks, "How then can we hope to dream a reprieve from the real when that real is already a part of our dreaming?" (2000: viii). Joseph also reflects on the violence that plagues Black people regardless of assigned, assumed, or self-expressed identities by saying that "no matter" which of those identities one is, "we're dealing with something almost out of this world." Curtis who describes himself as a 25-year-old, straight Black man pauses for a moment while reflecting this feeling of life not feeling "real". He describes the discomforts experienced

by Black people in this world as something like a "movie," a violent spectacle that leaves him questioning sanity.

Curtis says:

> As a Black man I've experienced a lot of discomfort in the world. Life sometimes doesn't feel real, like I'm in a movie or something. You know the world turns on you, you know this sort of space is not, was not created for me and so I feel that all the time, like am I crazy or something? Like I've dealt with many situations as far as you know having confrontation with the police or you know just having a interracial relationship where I was seen as more as a trophy than a person, like I was property still. This don't seem real to me.

Curtis thoughtfully addressed the pressures he has experienced dating white women who viewed him as "property" and sexually fetishized him. He experienced the "transference of white fantasy to black experience" (Marriot 2000: ix). This transference "continues to haunt the black imaginary" leading him to question his sanity (Marriot 2000: ix). He asked a very common question that many of us have experienced, Curtis asked, "am I crazy or something" while discussing the strangeness that emerges from reflecting on the "world" or "space that was not created" for Black people.

In *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease*, Jonathan Metzl demonstrates how so many Black people were being diagnosed with schizophrenia during the 1960s just for advocating for civil rights. Schizophrenia was categorized by the "inability to perceive reality" in the DSM and outlines hallucinations, derealization, and delusions as criteria for diagnosis (Hurley 2022). If "reality" is considered a world where Black people are subject to endless violence, and to oppose that violence warrants the label "schizophrenic" or out of touch with "reality," then I have no desire to exist in that "reality." Rather I embrace feeling like I'm "crazy," or "schizophrenic." Reality is structured. By that I mean, that for many of us,

"reality" is the product of an intentional ongoing continuous plan of terror, whether that feels like being in a "movie" to some, or a simulation to others.

The Violence is the Same, Regardless of "sex" or "gender"

The participants spoke of various angles that violence manifests itself on Black bodies regardless of "gender" or assigned "sex." Using examples that display the reality Black people face day to day, whether it be in a store, or your own neighborhood, the participants highlighted how although the "assumptions" about various Black bodies in a space may be different, the violence behind those assumptions are the same.

Gabrielle says:

> If a Black woman walks into a store she's gonna be assumed to be a thief somebody who's stealing and you gotta keep an eye on her and if a Black male walks in, it's like what the hell is about to go down in this place, but it's equally violent. It's literally the same violence, the same assumptions made about Black people. Like flavors of ice cream, it's all ice cream but it just tastes a little bit different that's not a good example but you know what I mean it's all still ice cream we're convinced it's a different flavor but it's all still ice cream affecting the pallet the same way

Gabrielle begins her point by showing that there are different stereotypes that exist for "different" bodies. A Black woman would be assumed a thief, while a Black male would be looked at in a store with the fear of what he would "do" at any moment. But she establishes understanding that "it's literally the same violence" and "the same assumptions about Black people" comparing these experiences to flavors of ice cream. She says that the "flavors might be a little bit different," but that it's "all still ice cream affecting the pallet the same way."

Joseph describes violence in a similar manner by discussing the expectations of what a "man" and a "woman" should be. Joseph highlights the racialized violence in these notions by acknowledging how these identities are "categories" that were not made by Black people,

furthering his point, that because white people came up with those identities, they get to negotiate them when they want to, saying "they get to say what a man is and what a woman is and who gets to be one when."

He says:

> What should a woman do for a man what should a man do for a woman you know all of these were historical things that were already set in place prior to us even being thought of you know? But this is stuff they did to us so we would fight with each other, We are victims of systems that predate us, systems not put in place by Black people. We don't get to live how we want ever because we live in a world made by them. They get to say what a man is and what a woman is and who gets to be one when.

Joseph discussing the constant negotiation of the Black body's sexed/gendered[4] position by white people is reminiscent of Sarah Haley's article, *Like I Was a Man: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,* where she discussed how imprisoned Black women were forced to work alongside imprisoned men, while white imprisoned women were protected from such labor. She discussed how Black women were excluded from the categories of "female" and woman" and how this negotiation of the body reinforced white supremacy (2013). Luis addresses the issues that emerge within the Black community and offers his insights and advice toward Black unity. Luis begins by acknowledging the tension within the community, saying that it seems like there is always a battle happening between Black people of varying identities whether it be "Black men vs. Black women," or "Black trans and queer" people vs. Black straight" people. Luis doesn't argue that these different issues do not exist within varying Black identities, but that no one struggle is more important than the other.

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[4] I'm conflating sex and gender here to reinforce both as socially constructed tools and not objective "scientifical" facts

Luis says:

We're always fighting amongst ourselves like it's always like oh Black men or Black women or Black trans and Black queers or Black straights and like it's always like a battle of identity even though there are things like we all know and experience and have an understanding of. If everyone stopped and listened no fight is greater than the next person fight, you know. For example, a black woman struggle's not more important than a Black man struggle and vice versa Black man struggle is not more important than a Black trans woman struggle and if everyone sat down and was able to listen everybody fighting for the same thing

Each of the participants' comments on the violence being experienced from the same source regardless of "sex" and "gender" categories is reminiscent of Sebastian Weier's reflection on *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,* in their article, *Consider Afro-Pessimism*. The author specifically reflects on Dr. Hortense Spillers' examination of the Black body as mere flesh.

Spillers says:

This 'theft of the body' this 'zero degree of social conceptualization' of the 'flesh' as Spillers contends, has neither gender nor history; it is a mere commodity that is subject to society's whim and will, but has no part in it. Those who were reduced to flesh were severed from their culture and history and scattered across the globe in the process. They were historically cut off from lineage, as black flesh was constantly open to legal rape, and openness that turned birth into the mere reproduction of property that may be sold at any time and put the notion of family under permanent threat (Weier 2014: 423).

I would argue that the way that Black violence; which is often publicized as a grotesque spectacle, is gendered is very strategic and works specifically as a tactic which divides the Black community. Black "men" or assigned "males" are the ones usually discussed in media as victims of police violence, while Black "women" or assigned "females" are discussed in media as victims of sexual assault/rape, and medical malpractice, though we know within the community, outside of media and scholarship, that it is all too familiar for all Black people to bear witness to the atrocities that exist in this strange reality.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION A DISCUSSION ON BLACK COLLECTIVITY

Looking "onward," assuming we are to think of time linearly (Cipolla et al. 2017), we must engage in conversations that are uncomfortable, morbid, sad, angry, dreadful, and terrifying. For a long time, history granted us some sense of "comfort" because it offered us very important and critical information; and it did so by creating the illusion of progress by displaying a hopeful story which included a linear sequence of events where we could see that things were really bad at first (the transatlantic slave trade), then they got somewhat better (slavery was "abolished"), then things took time and were rocky (the civil rights era), but eventually it all got "better" ("modern" day so called progress). So where do we go from here and what are we to do when we've witnessed countless violent spectacles enacted upon the Black body, regardless of "gender" or "sex" categories since the so called "abolishment" of slavery?

For the participants, Black collectivity is going to have to come from within the community and will have to come from a point of understanding in seeing that although our experiences may be angled differently based on various identities, the violence is still the same.

Luis says:

> we all have trauma and your trauma is no more important than mine it's not more traumatizing than someone else's in Black collectively we all want the same thing we all want to be treated as a human being we all want to be able to feel safe when we walk out in the morning we all want to be able to not have to worry about if we're gonna come home to our kids and our families and at the end of the day we all want the same rights we all want to be treated equally.

Luis says, "we all want to be treated as a human being". The violence that continues to plague Black people so powerfully speaks to the seemingly reserved position

of "human," so I too, as a researcher am left to ask where do we begin to even imagine what to do "next?" I believe as we continue to have conversations where Black voices are at the forefront and heading these uncomfortable dialogues, we can begin to start piecing together more effective strategies that aid in Black collectivity. There is more than one way to provide reparations, but it should be noted for members outside of this community that there may be a sense of distrust (rightfully so) for those who wish to help. More than half the participants believed that Black collectivity would be something that would have to come from other Black people.

> unfortunately, as bad as it sounds the responsibility falls onto us because we're the ones that want the change right. The white people are content you know? Why they gotta do the fighting? They got what they wanted. If they fought for us they'd end up losing everything that makes them better than us. -Luis

This project aimed to accomplish a few things, the first, was to critically approach "sex" and "gender" categories from a historical racialized point of view. I wanted to first discuss gender and sex categories as entities that were "inseparable from racial violence" (Woods 2019), while simultaneously taking on the task of honoring Black-Indigenous people, in every way that they identified. My contest was with the division that these identities cause within Black communities, and to refocus the "spotlight" on these identities as entities that were forced upon us, just like language, and because they were forced upon us, they are inherently violent. I'm not arguing that experiences are across the board when it comes to Black people (though it's possible that they could be from a structural position), but that the essence of those violent experiences are all rooted in the same source. Looking "ahead," I plan to continue to foster conversations and projects that aim to shift the way we think about identities, colonial languages, science, and even race,

in the hopes of piecing together some "sense" of the issues we presently/continuously face as Black-Indigenous people.

What does fostering conversations and projects look like? What I have in mind for the "future" is starting a project that first and foremost begins with addressing the transatlantic slave trade as the "beginning of time/reality." I believe that for those of us who are here, Black-Indigenous bodies, occupying a strange land and at the same time having nowhere else to go or call home, we have to begin there. In this project, I want to show the various ways that European colonizers would "identify" us, and simultaneously display the violent acts that were happening on the 'Black-Indigenous' body regardless of those identifiers during that time, this project will serve as a way to continue the project of Black Collectivity. I want to create a visual "timeline" that is shaped like a ring or circle, displaying each "year" since the first "Africans" were trafficked, and use examples leading all the way up to the current year which would be where the ring/circle meets itself again to show how there has been no rest, no justice, just violence.

"If you stick a knife in my back 9 inches and pull it out 6 inches, that's not progress. If you pull it all the way out, that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. They haven't pulled the knife out; they won't even admit that it's there."
-Malcolm X 1964

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Interview Guide
After verbal consent is given, begin recording**

I would first off like to thank you for volunteering for this voluntary research project and agreeing to be part of it. Again, anything you say is protected and anonymous, and at any point in the interview if you no longer wish to continue, all of your information will be disposed of and none of your information will be used for this research project. Your comfort and safety is what is most important. Just to remind you though, this study is low risk, and you will not be exposed to any situations and circumstances you wouldn't experience in your day to day life.

Would you like to provide a pseudo-name for this interview? If not that's totally okay, you'll just be assigned a participant number to record findings.
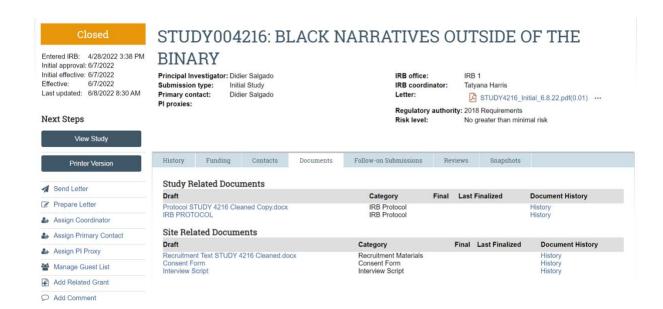
Pseudo-name or participant number:

Begin.

I. Background Information on Self and Identity
- What are some of the ways you describe and express yourself and your identity? Feel free to use any language or terminology you want to use, this is about you and your freedom of expression
- Can you talk about a time you felt out of place or uncomfortable with gender and/or sex labels like "man" or "woman", "Male" or "Female"?
- What is your discomfort with gender and sex categories, and for you, where do you think it comes from ?
- At any point in time have you ever felt any pressure to police the ways you express yourself because of your race? If so could you tell me about it, and if not do you think it happens to other Black folks and why?
- In what ways do you feel comfortable expressing yourself?
- Do you think it's easier for white people to come out, or express themselves in ways different from the "norm"?
- Considering how you identify, do you feel one identity is more meaningful than another, or that one "sticks out" more than another? Why?
- Is your Race important to you?
- Do you see yourself as Black before anything else? If so could you tell me why?
- How does your race relate to how you express yourself when it comes to gender or sex categories?

II.Rejecting or Disrupting Normative Sex and Gender Categories
- How do you celebrate yourself? What are some things that you do and/or ways that you express yourself that would be considered different than what is considered "normal" forms of how gender is expressed?
- If you're comfortable with sharing, why do you do those things?
- Is it important for you to do those things or do you see it as part of who you are?
- What do you think about Black collectivity?
- How do you think Black collectivity is achieved?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share or say about your experience in life as a Black person?

Dear Mr. Didier Salgado:

On 6/7/2022, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY004216
Review Type:	Exempt (2)
Title:	DECONSTRUCTING AND DECOLONIZING WESTERN IDENTITIES OF "GENDER" AND "SEX" WHEN VIEWED AS ANTI-BLACK: BLACK NARRATIVES OUTSIDE OF THE BINARY.
Funding:	None
Protocol:	• IRB PROTOCOL ;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

Approved study documents can be found under the 'Documents' tab in the main study workspace.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,

Tatyana Harris
IRB Research Compliance Administrator