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Ain't I a Woman, Too? Depictions of Toxic Femininity, Transmisogynoir, and Violence on *STAR*

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Ain't I A Woman, Too? Depictions of Toxic Femininity, Transmisogynoir, and Violence on

STAR

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Abstract

As the rate of the murder of Black trans women at the hands of Black cisgender men rises steadily every year (HRC, 2017), discourses regarding the detrimental impact of toxic masculinity within Black communities continue to increase within different branches of feminist literature. However, the role that Black cisgender women and toxic femininity play in the violent and systematic subjugation of Black trans women is largely ignored in feminist literature. In this thesis, I conduct a cultural analysis of the representations of the Black trans character Cotton Brown (from the Fox show *Star*) to examine how the show illustrates toxic femininity and complex intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Through a cultural analysis and review of current literature, I bridge the gap between the representation of cultural politics in *Star*, literature regarding the same cultural politics, and the realities of the lives of Black trans women in the United States. I argue that Black cisgender women and toxic femininity play significant roles in sociocultural understandings of sexuality and gender identity within Black American communities, as well as the facilitation of violent transphobia that specifically targets Black trans women.

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Transgender women remain one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations in the United States, with the average lifespan of trans women of color being only 35 years (Carcaño & Por La Saud, 2018). The Human Rights Campaign detailed that in 2017 alone, the homicides of at least 27 trans women were reported, which was an increase from at least 23 reports that were submitted in 2016. Between 2013 and 2017, reports of at least 102 murdered transgender women were submitted, and at least 75 of them (over 70%) were Black trans women (2017). Despite Black trans women being disproportionately targeted for violence, their experiences are largely ignored within and outside of Black communities. They are seldom given adequate media coverage, if any media coverage at all. Ava Le'Ray Barrin (17), Tonya Harvey (35), Celine Walker (36), Sherrell Faulkner (46) Derricka Banner (26), Chay Reed (28), and Alphonza Watson (38) are just a few of the many Black trans women whose recent murders sparked little to no outrage. In addition, Black trans women are often misgendered by news organizations, and the majority of homicide cases regarding Black trans women go unsolved (HRC, 2017).

Not only are Black trans women subject to anti-Black transmisogyny from patriarchal, white supremacist institutions, they also battle violent transmisogyny within Black communities (Stein, 2005). Violent transphobia is specifically directed at Black trans women (a process

known as transmisogynoir) because of sociocultural notions of their "intersecting race, sexuality, and gender identity statuses" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, 74). Transmisogyny describes the coupling of transphobia (intense prejudice against transgender people) and misogyny (intense prejudice against women). This is a layered form of gender oppression specifically faced by transgender women. Transmisogynoir further articulates distinctions in gender oppressions by describing the intersections of racism and misogyny, which Moya Bailey calls "misogynoir" (2013, p. 342), with transphobia. While transmisogyny is experienced by all trans women, transmisogynoir is the specific, multifaceted gender oppression faced by Black trans women. Ideas regarding gender expression and sexuality within Black communities have largely been influenced by colonialism, slavery, and eurocentric ideologies that inherently demonize Black LGBT+ people (Collins, 2013). Available literature regarding intersections of Blackness and transness analyze the ways in which Black trans communities continuously dispute white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy (Snorton, 2017), Black trans women organizing to challenge structural inequalities (Durban-Albrecht, 2017), how stigmas and intersecting institutions of oppression cultivate environments that specifically target Black trans people for violence (Couler, Mair, Miller, et. al., 2017), and many more composite topics that center Black trans identities. My research adds to these discourses by conceptualizing manifestations of toxic femininity and how cisgender women contribute to various forms of sociocultural and systematic violence faced by Black trans women, whereas mainstream feminist literature tends to focus on the impact of violence stemming from toxic masculinity alone. I define toxic masculinity as manifestations of dominant masculinity that uphold the harmful reinforcement of patriarchal scripts, which normalize violence and misogyny as integral components of masculinity. It is also

informed by cisheteronormativity, the sociocultural notion that being cisgender and heterosexual is normal, natural, and privileged. Scholars have not, however, articulated whether and how toxic embodiments of hegemonic femininity may function cohesively with toxic masculinity to reinforce transphobia and normalized gender policing.

In order to create productive discussions and praxis regarding the eradication of institutions of transphobia and transmisogyny within Black communities, I critically analyze the roles that toxic femininity and Black cisgender women play in the perpetuation of said institutions, as well as the specific forms of power Black trans women are subject to. I define toxic femininity as manifestations of dominant femininity that are shaped by white supremacist patriarchy and reify traditional cisheteronormative gender scripts, which act as a harmful tool of gender policing to dictate who is, and can be defined as, human and woman. In this study, I use a Black transfeminist lens to analyze how the 2016 Fox show *Star* represents and critiques instances of gender regulation as they intersect with structures of race, class, and sexuality in American culture. *Star* illustrates themes of toxic femininity, gender policing, and the consequences faced by Black trans women when they do not, or are unable to, abide by cisheteronormative gender scripts that seek to erase their transness. By developing the concept of toxic femininity through a critical analysis of *Star*, my research contributes to trans, Black, and feminist discourses to deepen our understanding of the complex intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

My positionality as a women's and gender studies scholar informs my research. Although I identify as a Black lesbian woman, I still benefit, to some degree, from the same cisnormative structures that I critique in this thesis. These structures privilege cisgender embodiments of

femininity over Black trans women's embodiments of femininity. Additionally, as a cisgender woman, I remain attentive to the dangers of speaking for Black trans women in the struggle against oppressive institutions. As a scholar and a cisgender person, I seek to use my privilege to prioritize the experiences of Black transgender women in my work and help to further uplift transgender communities. The goal of my research is not to further dichotomize notions of gender expression, but to interrogate the complex ways in which dominant notions of gender identity shape our behaviors, and how cis people, regardless of gender, perpetuate toxic femininity and toxic masculinity.

Background

Before situating *Star's* discourse surrounding intersections of Blackness, class, transness, and womanness, I will provide some background on the show. *Star* is a dance, musical drama about a group of three young women who join together to create a unique girl group. The show was created and executive produced by producer, writer, and director, Lee Daniels, who is also an openly gay/fluid Black man. Initially, the show is centered around one of the group members named Star, who, along with her younger sister and groupmate, Simone, born into poverty and violated by the foster care system. The third group member, Alex, comes from an upper class background, but deals with fame, her mother's alcoholism, and her father's compulsive infidelity. After uniting, the three young women are taken in and mentored by a woman named Carlotta Brown, who was the old friend and groupmate of Simone and Star's mother. In addition to having a background in the music industry, Carlotta Brown also owns a hair salon, which her daughter, Cotton, works out of. Cotton's character is particularly unique in the context of mainstream Black television because she is a Black trans woman, and played by Black trans

actress and model Amiyah Scott. Cotton is a major character on the show, which may come as a surprise considering the Fox corporation's position on sociocultural issues. Cotton's character is portrayed in a highly multifaceted manner, her storyline explores her experiences with racism, transmisogyny, gender policing, sex work, prison, love, family, religion, abuse, and motherhood. She is also frequently ridiculed by her family members and coworkers in the hair salon, who regularly ridicule and misgender her. However, over time and the course of life changing experiences, Cotton's family and coworkers come to recognize their transphobia and grow to be more accepting. My thesis critically analyzes the politics of representation in *Star*, focusing specifically on the character Cotton and the ways in which the show characterizes the intersections of her gender, race, class, and sexuality.

By analyzing the portrayals of Cotton, I explore how toxic femininity and gender policing shape her interactions, conceptions of identity, and navigation through both cis-normative queer settings and cisheteronormative settings. Additionally, these analyses lead to the interrogation of the implications of *Star* for Black queer and trans communities. The intent of my research is to not dichotomize ideas of masculinity and femininity, or to dictate "good" versus "bad" representations of femininity. Instead, I critically analyze how our inscribed and ascribed constructions of gender identity and expression are shaped by complex histories and institutions. These institutions encourage us to embody gender in ways that prioritize eurocentric gender binaries (Lugones, 2007). This often results in the dehumanization and destruction of those who deviate from such norms, particularly Black transgender women.

Historical Implications of Constructions of Gender and Sexuality Within Black Communities

Western ideologies have largely normalized negative and reductive stereotypes about Black sexuality and gender expression through the transatlantic slave trade, religious institutions, and colonialism. The transatlantic slave trade completely severed Black peoples' ties to their languages, cultures, and kinships (Roberts, 1997). This forced them to re/construct their identities within societies controlled by white supremacist patriarchy. Colonialism and white supremacy violently normalized eurocentric notions of gender and sexuality through what Christine Halse refers to as "virtue discourses" (2009). Virtue discourses are specific values, ideologies, and behaviors which shape constructions of being by declaring dominant behaviors and qualities to be absolute, necessary, and desirable (Halse, 2009, p. 47). In this context, eurocentric notions of cisgender identity and heterosexulity are viewed as natural, normal, and virtuous. Black bodies were not only reduced to laboring bodies for capital expropriation through slavery, systematic racism, and segregation, but also subjected to the inscriptions of cisheteronormativity and gender propriety (Roberts, 1997). Such dehumanizing ideologies institutionalized Black people as "docile bodies," which Michel Foucault describes as bodies who self-surveille and abide by dominant discourses through disciplinary acts (1984, p.17). These systems declared Black people, and Black LGBT+ people especially, to be inherently deviant, and encouraged Black people to internalize such ideologies (Roberts, 1997).

Over time, and through constant violent reinforcement from structures of colonialism (slavery, religion, law enforcement, segregation, etc.) Black people internalized eurocentric notions of gender and sexuality. This signified a deep and generational normalization of the idea

that Blackness, and therefore Black gender and sexuality, is inherently deviant. This framing subsequently led to Black peoples' adoption of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls "politics of respectability" (1992). These ideologies were adopted in order to combat stereotypes of Black sexuality and gender, and ensure safe movement through patriarchal white supremacist societies. However, Black peoples' adoption of "politics of respectability" later translated into the normalization of the idea that cisheteronormativity is inherent in Black communities, and that Black LGBT+ people are immoral and not authentically Black (Collins, 2013). In addition, traditional notions of gender and sexuality within Black communities rely on anti-trans, religious, and essentialist male-female dichotomies (Barnes, Battle & Battle, 2010). In Marcus A. Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson's book *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life*, they describe the politics of respectability as a phenomenon that has been effective in constructing acceptable pathways to civil rights, while simultaneously creating cisheterosexist boundaries around Blackness and Black history (2018, 67). Such ideas of Black sexuality and gender expression encourage the perpetuation of gender policing, on the one hand, and reproduce dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, on the other. Both processes serve and reify eurocentric, patriarchal sociocultural modes of thought and practice.

Dominant Femininity, Black Femininity, and Toxic Femininity

The relationship between hegemonic, or dominant, femininity, Black femininity, and toxic femininity is extremely complex and linked to histories of colonialism and patriarchy. Patriarchy, which derives from the word *patriarch,* describes a society or set of ideologies in which male domination is foundational (Rubin, 1975). Patriarchy categorizes women as "exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of

men with men" (Sedwick, 1985, p. 24-25). The performance of femininity, according to

patriarchy, must therefore abide by sex essentialism and normalized notions of male dominance.

Patriarchy is not only centered on sex essentialism and the idea that female = woman = feminine

and male = man = masculine, but the creation of specific gender scripts that reify these

categorizations (Butler, 1999). This leads to the classification of femininity as object, passive,

and subservient to men (and patriarchy as a whole), therefore, situating femininity and

masculinity as polar opposites, with femininity being deemed lesser (Butler, 1999;Sedwick,

1985).

Dominant notions of femininity, as a result of colonialism, are rooted in white

supremacist patriarchy, which categorizes femininity and "woman" in relation to the benefit of

white cishet men in particular. This concept is especially complex for Black women because the

transatlantic slave trade normalized Black women as sub-human, object, and subservient to white

men (and Black men) as a result of social views regarding their gender and their race.

Femininity, according to patriarchy, is white centered, once again marginalizing Black women

and cementing the notion that Black women are deviant, hypersexual, and incapable of

femininity (Roberts, 1997). Forceful integration into western colonial society through violence

and exploitation reconstructed Black people's notions of femininity to include anti-Black,

misogynoiristic rhetoric that is normalized by white supremacist patriarchy. This resulted in

Black women's adoption of dominant notions of femininity, despite these ideologies being racist,

sex essentialist, and exclusionary to Black women. Patriarchy, and therefore dominant

femininity, further severed Black women's ties to indigenous and decolonized ideas of

femininity by absorbing Black women into patriarchal structures, while simultaneously excluding them from said structures.

Toxic femininity is shaped by anti-Black, classist, and dichotomous sex essentialist notions of dominant femininity, which are overseen and reinforced by patriarchy. Like dominant femininity and patriarchy, toxic femininity also influences normalized notions of Black femininity within Black communities. Think of patriarchy as a very large electric company. In this context, hegemonic femininity is the electricity, and patriarchy both provides and controls the electricity. The electricity (hegemonic femininity) is pumped into different communities to empower and encourage detrimental forms of gender expression that abide by hegemonic femininity (toxic femininity). Similar to how household appliances intake electricity to expel it in a different form, toxic femininity is both powered by, and a derivative of, hegemonic femininity and patriarchy. If marginalized communities do not buy into or abide by these constructs, navigating patriarchal society becomes increasingly difficult and dangerous.

This is not to say that Black femininity is inherently toxic, or that *all* notions of dominant femininity are inherently toxic. Instead, I am acknowledging the multifaceted and violent histories that have forced the reshaping of feminine identities within Black communities to include oppressive and patriarchal ideologies. These ideologies can and do hurt all Black women, especially Black trans women.

Gender Policing, Toxic Masculinity, and Toxic Femininity (A Concealed Weapon)

Toxic masculinity (also commonly referred to as hegemonic masculinity) is a concept that was introduced by the work of sociologists and psychologists in the 1990s, which focused on the relationships between men and their fathers, war, and representations of masculinity (Haider,

2016). In Syed Haider's article, "The Shooting in Orlando, Terrorism or Toxic Masculinity (or Both?"), the author discusses the ways in which the regulation of American patriarchal cultures normalize violence as "constitutive of masculinity," power, and patriarchal order; thus breeding and institutionalizing toxic masculinity (2016). Furthermore, I borrow from Haider's description and define toxic masculinity as manifestations of dominant masculinity that uphold the harmful reinforcement of patriarchal scripts, which act as a tool of gender policing to normalize violence and misogyny as integral components of masculinity. Toxic masculinity is also informed by the naturalization of cisgendered heteronormativity in white supremacist societies.

Hegemonic patriarchy not only shapes normalized sociocultural constructions of masculinity, it is also foundational in constructions of femininity (Bartky, 1997). Similar to toxic masculinity, I define toxic femininity as manifestations of dominant femininity that are shaped by white supremacist patriarchy and reify traditional cisheteronormative gender scripts. Toxic femininity also functions as a layer of gender policing, operating as a concealed weapon under the blatant violence of toxic masculinity. Toxic femininity is indeed an integral weapon of transphobic institutions, as is toxic masculinity, because it normalizes traditional patriarchal notions of femininity that devalue, exclude, and police any person who does not fit binary standards of sexuality and gender, particularly Black trans women.

Gender policing is a phenomenon in which gender binaries are prioritized, and those who are not seemingly performing their gender "correctly" are demonized and/or subjected to discrimination, harassment, or worse. A particularly well known example of gender policing is the topic of bathrooms, which is a space where gender binaries are heavily enforced (Green, 2015). However, spaces beyond bathrooms, and even queer spaces, are subject to heavy gender

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policing in under interrogated ways—ways that ostracize transgender and non-conforming people. Gender policing is shaped by anti-Black, anti-queer, and anti-trans ideas of gender presentation that stem from hegemonic institutions grounded in patriarchal white supremacy. In the context of Black transgender women's lives specifically, toxic femininity shapes the practices of gender policing by transphobic institutions that define who is, or should be considered, human and a woman. This is further complicated by intersections of race, class, and sexuality, which are also informed by cisgender and heterosexual dominance (Collins, 2013). What makes dominant notions of femininity "toxic" is that the prioritization of cisgender and heterosexual bodies seeks to both exclude and eradicate those who subvert, or diverge from, gender binaries. This reinforcement of cisheteronormative dominance infringes upon Black trans women's human rights by denying their experiences, identities, and rights to exist free from the unjust interference of others. Dominant notions of femininity classify Black transgender women as "not real women" because of intersections of their Blackness, transness, and womanness (Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Snorton, 2018). This is particularly detrimental to Black trans women because they are routinely labeled as "deceivers" and subsequently murdered, often by Black cisgender and heterosexual men in the name of the preservation of toxic masculinity (Bettcher, 2007; HRC, 2017). This is an example of the complex ways in which toxic femininity and toxic masculinity function cohesively as tools of gender policing. Such tools ultimately result in the disenfranchisement of Black transgender women and the restriction of their life chances.

The Reinforcement of Toxic Femininity in Black Queer Spaces

Although toxic femininity prioritizes cisgender and heterosexual ideologies and bodies, it is not exclusive to cishet (cisgender and heterosexual) communities. Toxic femininity and transmisogynoir (intersection of transphobia, racism, and misogyny) are also very pervasive within Black queer communities. As docile bodies, who have been forced to construct their sexuality and gender identities within the oppressive frameworks of institutionalized white supremacist patriarchy, Black queer people (and queer people in general) commonly internalize anti-queer and anti-trans ideologies. In Black queer spaces, "the fixed unimagined borders between sexual identity and gender identity are enlivened by the inability to recognize that trans people can also be lesbians and gay men" (Richardson, 2013, p. 372). This shaping of gender and sexual identity ostracizes Black trans people, even in spaces that are supposed to be safe for Black LGBT+ folks.

In Matt Richardson's article, "Lesbian Generations: Good and Messy Lesbian and Transgender Identities," Richardson described an instance where a Black trans woman was kicked out of an African Ancestral Lesbians for Social Change meeting in the early 90's. Despite her being a part of the community for a significant amount of time and making impactful contributions to the organization, she was labeled a "male infiltrator" and exiled from the community. Richardson also recalled the blatant transphobia and exclusion of trans people and bisexual people from lesbian and gay organizations that he was a part of (2013). Similar to their cishet counterparts, many Black cisgender lesbians and bisexual women often promote fear and suspicion of Black trans women, despite their immense impact on Black LGBTQIA culture and activism (Stein, 2005). This exclusion reiterates the fallacious sociocultural notion that Black trans women are not "real women" and are therefore incapable of being lesbians or bisexual. The

exclusion of trans women from Black queer spaces is an example of how toxic femininity

enforces gender policing, especially because such actions prioritize queer, cisgender, feminine

people, while foreclosing safe spaces for transgender and non-conforming people. Barring Black

trans women (and trans people in general) from queer safe spaces decreases the already minimal

amount of resources that queer and trans people are granted access to, as well as increasing their

vulnerability.

Violations of Trans Rights and Constructions of "Passing" - a By-product of Gender Policing

In addition to being expected by cishet communities to abide by dominant notions of sex

and gender, within their communities, transgender people are also held accountable to what

Austin H. Johnson refers to as "transnormativity standards" (2016, p.467). Living in a society

that hierarchizes cisgender and heterosexual norms of gender and sexuality also forces

transgender people to construct their identities within such frameworks. Transnormativity centers

the binary medical model and creates hierarchies of identity and experience based off of a trans

person's alignment with normative notions of sex and gender (Johnson, 2016). Sociocultural

norms conflate sex with gender, classifying male as masculine and female as feminine. These

normative notions of sex and gender are both informed by, and inform, medical industrial

complexes (Stewart, 2017; Butler, 2015). Johnson refers to state institutions, such as hospitals,

court systems, and the department of motor vehicles, as "gatekeeping institutions" who police

the validation of trans identities, experiences, and bodies (2016, p. 467).

Sex essentialism and dichotomous notions of gender are foundational to white

supremacist patriarchy, which frequently conflate sex and gender in order to reify sex binaries

(Bettcher, 2007). Sex has been historically cemented as biological and irrefutable, while gender

is viewed as culturally distinct (Oakley, 1972). Both notions have been generally accepted by mainstream feminism, which also illustrates a dangerous acceptance of biological binaries based mainly on genitalia that also inform notions of gender (Rubin, 2012;Bettcher, 2007). Sex and gender are theorized as having distinct and clear cut differences. Within such categories, the normal/pathological binary is used to further reify supposed concrete differences between sex and gender, as well as dichotomous sub-categories (man/woman, feminine/masculine, vagina/penis, cis/trans etc.). However, the relationship between the social constructs of sex and gender are far from clear cut, they are actually quite messy (Richardson, 2013;Rubin, 2012). By not recognizing both sex and gender as complex, messy, and ambiguous, we further erase communities that do not fit into these rigid categories, while also forcing them to assimilate into said sociocultural structures.

Passing is both a survival strategy and a hierarchical classification attributed to members of trans communities who appear in a way that they are assumed to be cisgender. Marlon M. Bailey describes passing as the strategy of "unmarking oneself" as trans through the performance of gender norm binaries—that is, appearing in a way in which one is assumed to be cisgender (2011, p. 367). According to Judith Butler, discrete gender norms "humanize" individuals and punish those who do not abide by them (1999, p.140). Stereotypical depictions of trans women often feature cis-presenting white women whose identities are associated with medicalized gender confirmation (Snorton, 2017, 144). This situates the concept of "passing" as not only a validation of transnormativity, but more importantly, a means of survival for trans people who would otherwise be punished for their gender identity (Bailey, 2011). Transnormativity and the

prioritization of passing are also reified through trans community media and trans public figures, who are often white and/or wealthy (Johnson, 2016).

The concepts of humanness and womanness are shaped by patriarchal, white supremacist state institutions (medicine, government, law), which subsequently figure Black trans women as sub-human subjects. This is a result of the intersections between their Blackness, womanness, and transness; all of which have been historically labeled as categories of deviance by said institutions. Black trans women are also categorized as not performing their gender correctly (Butler, 1999). This idea allows for institutional policing, dehumanization, and murder of Black trans women through lacking human rights, treatment by state institutions and facilities (courts/law enforcement, hospitals, schools, prisons), and treatment after death (misgendered, violence ignored). Black trans women are regularly placed in prisons for men, barred from using bathrooms for women, denied access to adequate healthcare, and often abused by law enforcement. Until recently, courts have allowed the use of "trans panic" as a defense for cishet men who claimed to murder trans women because they were "deceived" (Wodda & Panfil, 2015). This must be interrogated in addition to institutionalized transmisogynoir and gender policing.

Transmisogynoir and Gender Policing in Black Liberation Movements

Even in the face of violent transphobia and transmisogyny within and outside of Black communities, Black trans women have always remained at the forefront of liberation movements, such as the stonewall riots, working diligently as community activists and leaders (Stein, 2005). Despite Black trans women's monumental contributions to Black liberation movements, they are largely excluded from movements based around causes that they dedicate

their lives to. The BLACKLIVESMATTER movement was created by three queer Black women who sought to "affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum" (Garza, 2014). Although BLACKLIVESMATTER was originally created as an inclusive movement, some scholars and activists argue that it has morphed into an exclusionary medium that largely focuses on the police murders of cishet Black men, and occasionally cishet Black women. Similarly, Black feminist scholars have been critiqued for excluding Black trans people, and regurgitating anti-trans and anti-queer rhetoric (Bey, 2016)

In her book, *The Angela Davis Reader*, Black political activist, revolutionary, writer, and former member of the Black Panther Political Party, Angela Davis discusses how exclusion within Black liberation movements subsequently resulted in their destruction. Davis writes, "it was the inability to address questions of gender and sexuality that also led inevitably to the demise of many organizations" (Davis, 1998). The experiences and needs of Black LGBTQIA people are frequently viewed as "less severe" compared to systems of racism and sexism, despite the fact that systems of oppression work co-dependently in the United States (Combahee 1977; Russell & Fish, 2016). Lala Zannell, a Black trans woman activist who also serves as the lead organizer at the New York City Anti-Violence Project (AVP) recalled being misgendered and othered during a BLACKLIVESMATTER march. Instead of being welcomed by her Black cis counterparts, she was ridiculed by Black people who claimed that the march was "not a gay thing" (Zannell, 2018). This example highlights the politics of gender policing in minoritized communities. It also reflects the habitual conflation of gender with sexual identity, as well as the ways in which privileging a particular category (race) above another (gender identity) often

results in exclusionary effects, even in movements that aim to empower disenfranchised communities.

According to Black feminist writer and activist Audre Lorde, "there can be no hierarchy of the oppressed" as all systems of oppression are conceived from the same source of the belief in inherent superiority (1985). Black liberation movements must be inclusive because Black peoples' fight for liberation "cannot exist on a single register - racism, sexism, capitalism, transphobia, homophobia, and ableism manifest as mutually constituted forms of dehumanization and marginalization" (Lindsey, 2017, p. 322). Black communities, especially Black women who advocate for the liberation of Black women, have a responsibility to challenge systems that target, abuse, and murder our Black trans sisters. Black feminist discourse and Black liberation movements must also be centered on the experiences of Black LGBT+ (Dotson, 2016), particularly Black trans women.

The Importance of *Star*

Following behind famous Black queer productions like *Paris is Burning* (1990), *Pariah* (2011), and *Moonlight* (2017), *Star* ventures into uncharted terrain as a television drama series with a Black trans main character, played by actresses who identify as transgender women. *Star* is by no means a "perfect" depiction of the lived experiences of Black trans women, as the nuances of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality make such generalizations fruitless. However, *Star* does illustrate many complexities of such intersections, while simultaneously interrogating our preconceived notions and assumptions about the lives of trans women of color. In addition, it is significant that the creators of *Star* chose to cast a Black trans actress as a Black trans character because Black trans women are seldom represented in mainstream film and

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cisgender men and women are usually cast to play trans characters. The show provides much needed representation in the world of Hollywood, which usually portrays trans people as white and "passing" (Snorton, 2017).

By situating *Star* in relation to its historical and cultural context in the contemporary United States, I analyze how *Star* foregrounds and critiques toxic femininity, gender policing, and violence against Black trans women. Drawing on Black feminist theory, transfeminist theory, and cultural studies, I reveal the ways in which *Star* raises important questions regarding gender policing, toxic femininity, and the normalization of harm against Black trans women.

Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, I describe the theoretical frameworks that I employ to situate *Star* in the historical and cultural context of the contemporary United States, as well as to analyze the show itself. Through the combination of several theoretical frameworks, I interrogate the multidimensional nature of *Star,* as well as relevant issues and discourses.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist thought is a framework that centers the experiences of Black LGBT+ and Black women by foregrounding intersecting categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Green & Bey, 2018). According to Kristie Dotson, Black feminist thought promotes "activism, advocacy, research and/or theory that might change the current plight of Black people, specifically cis and trans* Black women, girls, and gender-nonconforming people" (2016, p. 49). The utilization of Black feminist thought in research regarding Black trans women is imperative

because it defies linear definitions of social categories and oppressions through multidimensional discourse and activism (Dotson, 2016). Black feminist theory is also useful because it interrogates the historical implications of racialized social constructions of gender and sexuality, which shape the experiences of Black people specifically (Collins, 1990).

Transfeminist Theory

Due to the fact that my research centers representations of the experiences of Black trans women, it is imperative that I incorporate a framework centered on the liberation of trans women. Emi Koyama describes transfeminism as a movement "by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond" (2001, p. 245). The principles of transfeminist theory are grounded in trans rights, activism, and the subversion of traditional notions of femininity (Koyama, 2001). According to Kai Green, the application of transfeminist knowledge also challenges "what is thought of as knowledge" and "how knowledge is produced" (2015).

Cultural Studies

In order to analyze the ways in which culture and media shape ideas regarding of race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as the lives of Black trans women, I use a cultural studies framework in my research. Lawrence Grossberg describes cultural studies as a framework that examines how "people's everyday lives are articulated by and with culture," and how people are "powered and disempowered" by dominant cultural structures (2010, p. 8). Cultural studies, as Stuart Hall explains, foregrounds culture as a site of struggle where power and resistance shape people's everyday realities (Hall, 1980). By incorporating a cultural studies analysis, I analyze

the ways in which dominant notions of gender and sexuality are both shaped by, and inform, cultural politics, especially in the context of Black LGBT+ people.

Methodology

By focusing on the politics of representation in *Star*, I analyze the ways in which the complex intersections between race, gender, class, and sexuality are portrayed in relation to the only main character who is a Black trans women on the show. Additionally, I examine representations of gender policing and toxic femininity, as well as how they align with relevant discourses on these matters. In order to analyze how *Star* represents and critiques instances of gender regulation as they intersect with constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, I use the tools of a visual and textual cultural analysis, focusing on the representation of Cotton Brown on *Star*. I chose to use this visual and textual cultural analysis because it allows me to merge the principles of Black feminist and transfeminist frameworks. In this section I discuss the definition of a cultural analysis and why it is fundamental to my research.

Irene Kacandes describes the examination of a person or group's relation to the culture in which they were produced, as well as the culture in which they are being examined, is essential to cultural studies (1997). A cultural studies methodology interrogates the ways in which cultural politics inform people's' lives, and how culture both empowers and disenfranchises specific groups (Grossberg, 2010; Hall, 1983). The utilization of cultural studies in the analysis of representations of cultural politics in film bridges the gap between representations of cultural politics and literature regarding cultural politics. These qualities make a visual cultural analysis particularly beneficial in the examination of how cultural politics inform complex sociocultural relations presented within the *Star*. I use a cultural analysis to examine how the show portrays

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Cotton Brown's identity formation, and interactions with gender policing, toxic femininity, and violence.

   In the next chapter, I analyze three particular scenes from three different episodes in the series that emphasize the themes of gender policing, toxic femininity, and violence. Furthermore, I examine how the representations of these themes speak more broadly to the experiences of Black trans women.

CHAPTER II. PORTRAYALS OF TOXIC FEMININITY IN *STAR*

The first episode of the Fox series, *Star,* aired in December 2016, trailing behind other predominantly Black shows like *Empire, Queen Sugar*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Power*. These shows share the commonality of having, at one point or throughout the series, a Black LGBT+ character whose queerness is illustrated during their development on the show, whether short term (a specific scene, season, or episode) or during majority of the character's lifetime on the show. *Empire*, a musical series like *Star*, features a queer character named Jamal Lyon, a talented songwriter who identifies as a Black gay man and struggles with his sexuality, the cisheteronormative music industry, and acceptance from his family. *Queen Sugar*, a drama series about a Black family who inherit a widely desired sugarcane farm from their deceased father, features a main character named Nova, who is an activist, herbal healer, journalist, and an openly queer/bi-sexual woman. The HBO drama series *Power* at one point featured a character named Jukebox, who was a crooked cop and identified as a Black lesbian woman. *Orange is the New Black*, a Netflix drama series about the lives of multiple women in a prison facility, features

several queer characters, including a Black trans main character named Sophia, who is played by actress and LGBT+ advocate Laverne Cox.

All of these shows, in some fashion, exhibit a Black queer character who deviates from certain standards of cisheteronormativity that are not only present in predominantly Black television series, but in television as a whole. Cotton Brown, like Jamal, Nova, Jukebox, and Sophia, proves to be another representation of the multifaceted experiences of Black LGBT+ people that we seldom witness in mainstream television. Despite their queerness, Black queer characters in general are typically portrayed in a manner that is palatable to cisheteronormative mainstream television. Cotton Brown is depicted as a character who is trans but is still somewhat "acceptable" to mainstream television because she visually fits conventional beauty standards and often successfully "passes." However, this does not lessen the importance of representations of the experiences and existence of characters like Cotton, as well as the ongoing struggle to represent Black queer characters in mainstream television shows more broadly.

I chose to situate my definition of toxic femininity in relation to Cotton Brown because the show not only illustrates the character's experiences with sex work, drug abuse, gender confirmation surgery, mental health, suicide, and more, but it specifically exemplifies the detrimental impacts of Black cis people, specifically Black cis women, in the perpetuation of violent transphobia. In this section, I analyze three specific scenes from the first two seasons of *Star* in order to conceptualize toxic femininity, in addition to the complex and messy nature of dominant notions of gender identity and presentation. Lastly, I use a cultural analysis to draw connections between *Star's* representation of Cotton's experiences and real life examples of toxic femininity and transmisogynoir. In this section, I focus on the character's tone and body

language in each of the three scenes, as well as the body language of relevant characters in order to illustrate the physical, emotional, and mental impact that transmisogynoir has on Cotton.

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Results

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Toxic Femininity: Season 1, Episode 1 - Pilot

   The theme of toxic femininity emerges in the very first episode of the series *Star*. *Star* begins by immediately introducing Cotton Brown as a multifaceted Black trans character by showing that she engages in sex work, works at a strip club, and also works at her mother's hair salon. In this episode, Cotton takes Star (another main character and member of an aspiring girl group) to the strip club in order to connect with a producer who can help catapult the girl group into fame. After meeting the producer, Star finds Cotton outside, bruised and bloody, with a john who assaults her for "tricking him" and engaging in sex work with him. Star assaults the john and both she and Cotton retreat gleefully back to the salon. The following day, Cotton is working at her mother's (Carlotta) salon and Cotton's face is very noticeably bruised from her violent encounter with the john. Carlotta questions Cotton about the large bruise on the side of her face, immediately assumes it to be a result of an encounter that Cotton had while engaging in sex work, and scolds her for continuing to work at the strip club.

   Carlotta: *I know where you took Star last night.*

   Cotton: *We just went out dancing at the club*

   Carlotta: *What happened to your eye?*

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Cotton: Nothin'. Mama, we was just at the club dancing. That's it.

Carlotta: You better not be doing what I think you're doing.

Cotton: Mama, we was just at the club.

Carlotta: Stop lying, boy.

Cotton: Girl, Mama.

Simone: (whispers to Bruce) Wait, Cotton's a boy?

Bruce: Girl, Miss Simone, if you don't wake up. That ain't hard to figure out.

Cotton: Stop hatin', Miss Bruce.

Bruce: Girl, I-girl. I'm not.

Cotton: 'Cause I can pass, unlike your ugly ass.

Bruce: (stammers) If you could pass sweetie, you turtle-headed-looking bitch. You're a delusional gentleman.

Cotton: I'll staple that-

*Carlotta: -Stop all that cussing in my house! Look, you want to be a woman, a'ight.
I ain't got no problem with it. But I know what goes on in that club. I ain't new to the game.*

When engaging with Carlotta in this scene, Cotton's demeanor illustrates confusion, hurt, and the desire for acceptance. Despite the aggression and blatant transmisogynoir embodied by Carlotta when she intentionally misgenders Cotton, she responds softly, eyebrows raised in confusion, and in clearly hurt tone in her voice, even when she corrects her mother. The scene makes it very clear that Cotton deeply desires acceptance from her mother. In contrast, Cotton's reaction to Bruce's transmisogynoiristic remarks is very aggressive, and at one point she gets up

and stands face to face with Bruce as they are arguing. When Carlotta breaks up the fight, without addressing her, Bruce, or Simone's transmisogynoir, Cotton's demeanor exudes anger and hurt as Carlotta says "if you want to be a woman, fine…".

As discussed previously, I define toxic femininity as manifestations of dominant femininity that are shaped by white supremacist patriarchy and reify traditional cisheteronormative gender scripts, functioning as a mechanism of gender policing. In this scene, Carlotta, Bruce, and Simone all embody toxic femininity in quite different ways that are rooted in the same dominant notions of gender. First, Carlotta openly misgenders Cotton in front of everyone, fails to defend her own daughter after she is misgendered by Bruce and Simone, and dishonestly claims to not care if Cotton "wants to be a woman" despite clearly engaging in transmisogynoir with her remarks. This is an example of toxic femininity for several reasons. First, Carlotta intentionally misgenders Cotton and humiliates her because she doesn't view her as a "biological" woman. Second, Carlotta also fails to defend Cotton against Bruce and Simone's remarks because her notions of gender identity and expression also align with the cisheteronormativity and transmisogynoir exhibited in said remarks. Similarly, Bruce embodies toxic femininity by aggressively misgendering Cotton and calling her a "delusional gentleman," which all stem from him not viewing Cotton as a woman. Bruce also mentions the concept of passing by saying "if you could pass sweetie, you wouldn't be sitting there with a Black eye," purporting an ideology that is commonly used to justify the murder of Black trans women by romantic partners, otherwise referred to as trans panic (Bettcher, 2007).

Bruce not only misgenders Cotton, but further humiliates her by blaming her abuse on her transness and "not passing" enough—this is toxic femininity. Bruce's response is particularly

interesting because he is a feminine gay man, and the same societal ideologies that label Cotton as deviant and invalidate transness and womanness, also label Bruce as deviant and less of a "real" man (a topic also addressed later in the series through his own experiences). The same social concepts that seek to invalidate Black trans women for falling outside of the margins of dominant femininity also contribute to the historical idea that Black women in general, including cis Black women like Carlotta, lie outside of the margins of dominant femininity. These ideologies, including toxic femininity, are rooted in anti-Black cisheteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia. However, Carlotta's feminine cis identity, despite being a Black woman, and Bruce's cis identity, despite being a fem, gay Black man, empower both characters to demonize Cotton for her transness, which illustrates how toxic femininity can become naturalized in racial and ethnic minority communities. This also illustrates how anyone, regardless of their gender, can embody or enforce toxic femininity. Neither femininity nor masculinity are exclusive to specific genders, although cishet men and cishet women tend to benefit from toxic masculinity and toxic femininity more than LGBT+ people, respectively, because these ideologies prioritize those with cisgender and heterosexual identities. Simone misgendering Cotton is brief and portrayed as less aggressive; however, it is still an illustration of blatant transmisogynoir.

What makes the actions in this scene examples of toxic femininity are not only the blatant dehumanization and invalidation of Cotton's being and gender identity, but also the impact that these interactions have on Cotton, all of which are driven by standards that align with dominant femininity. In each aspect of the scene, Cotton is humiliated, saddened and angry, showing that the dialogue garners a visible negative emotional and physical impact on Cotton. These

interactions are consistent with my definition of toxic femininity because they are rooted in the prioritization of cisgender identities. Cotton is demonized by Carlotta for her queerness and transness, while Bruce, as a gay cisgender man who is feminine, is not demonized by Carlotta. This is consistent with the general tolerance of queer cis identities over queer trans identities (Barnes, Battle & Battle, 2010). Additionally, the notion that trans women are not "real women" and must be reminded through gender policing (transmisogynoir, misgendering, etc.) is consistent with traditional cisheteronormativity.

At the end of the argument, Cotton sits in silence with a saddened expression, returning to her work and forced to continue working throughout with the day with the same people who just humiliated her. Forced to navigate cisheteronormative societies that constantly devalue their identities and deny their humanity, Black trans women's myriad forms of discrimination has serious consequences for the physical, mental, and emotional health of Black trans women. Remarks such as those made in this specific scene reify cisheteronormativity and ostracize trans people, regardless of the intentionality of the character or person.

Gender Policing: Season 1, episode 8 - Mama's Boy

The theme of gender policing is evident across *Star*, but perhaps most especially in episode 8 of season 1. This episode features a scene that is quite violent, but pivotal in the re-development of Cotton's relationship with her mother, Carlotta, and in their interactions throughout the remainder of the season. During the first season, Carlotta rekindles her relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Pastor Bobby Harris, a cishet man and pastor at Carlotta's church. In previous episodes, Carlotta clearly struggles with her religion, relationship with Pastor Bobby Harris, and having a trans daughter. When the pastor visits Carlotta at the salon, she

routinely assigns duties to Cotton so that she is not in sight when the pastor enters the salon, and Cotton is very aware of this. In a preceding scene, a conversation is shown between Carlotta and the pastor in which she tells him "Cotton is a man, that's my baby boy." Carlotta later asks the pastor to come over to the salon (which is also the house in which Carlotta, Cotton, and the girl group lives), say a prayer over her and Cotton to mend their relationship, and bring them closer to god. However, this gesture translates into a scene that exemplifies the centrality of gender policing to both toxic femininity and toxic masculinity.

In the beginning of the scene, all three characters (Carlotta, Cotton, and the pastor) are sitting at the dinner table. The pastor begins the conversation by telling Cotton that he used to be a "sinner" but through prayer, he found his way back to the church and rekindled a connection with god.

> **Cotton:** *I'm doing this for my mother (softly grabs Carlotta's hand and looks at her for approval)*
>
> **Carlotta:** *(leaves dinner table to retrieve her personal bible and watch the prayer from an adjacent hallway)*
>
> **Pastor BH:** *Dear lord, forgive us for our failures, guide this mother and child relationship the way that it ought to be*
>
> **Carlotta:** *(whispers to self) Yes*
>
> **Pastor BH:** *I call on you, Lord, as I pray. This young soul has been lost for so long. Please, God, bring Arnold back to his mother.*
>
> **Cotton:** *(opens her eyes, which are already full of tears, and turns to Carlotta with a look of sadness, confusion, and distress)*

Carlotta: (has a look of shock, and stands frozen in the adjacent hallway while Cotton glares at her)

Pastor BH: Let Arnold renounce this gender confusion and purge him of sin. As Deuteronomy 22:5 says: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, "nor a man wear women's clothing, "for the Lord, your God, detest anyone who does this." Please, Father God refute the demons inside this child (camera turns to Cotton, who is visibly afraid and crying). Open your heart. Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your savior?

Cotton: (crying) I-I-I don't kn-...yes, I want to

Pastor BH: (stands and aggressively puts hand on Cotton's head) Do you accept the Lord as your savior? Say it right now. Say it!

Cotton: (crying) Yes, yes. I accept god.

Pastor BH: Your name is Arnold. You were born a man. "I am a man". Say it. Say it! "I am a man. My name is Arnold". Say it with conviction. Believe it from your heart. Say it! - (gasping) - "I am a man."

Cotton: (crying) I'm not a-...

Pastor BH: "I am a man". Say it!

Cotton: (crying) I'm not a man... (turns to Carlotta) Momma...am I a man?

Carlotta: (crying and shaking her head)

(scene cuts to a musical number about women's empowerment, self-truth, and acceptance sung by Carlotta and Bruce. When the show cuts back to the scene in the dining room, Cotton is curled up on the kitchen floor and crying)

Cotton: (moves away when the pastor tries to help her up from the floor, then turns to Carlotta) You set me up! (runs upstairs)

Pastor BH: I was just trying to help.

Carlotta: Get out! Get out!

Pastor BH: You asked for my help! You did! Both of y'all are confused. (aggressively pushes fixtures off of a nearby table before loudly exiting the salon)

Cotton: (upstairs scene: puts gun to her head and stares at herself in the mirror, crying, before Star finds her upstairs and convinces her to put the gun down)

In comparison to the previous scene in the first episode of this season, this scene is far more physically violent and garners a more apparent physical and emotional reaction from all of the characters in the scene. However, in a fashion similar to the scene in episode one, this long interaction displays how toxic femininity, especially in the form of complacency, functions cohesively with toxic masculinity. Pastor Bobby Harris perpetuates toxic masculinity in three key ways; labeling Cotton's transness as sin/deviance, deadnaming and misgendering Cotton, and trying to force Cotton to call herself a man. In this scene, the series very clearly situates the pastor's anti-trans beliefs as rooted in his Christian faith. This is consistent with the historical use of religion to demonize Black gender and sexuality, categorizing gender as a "god-given male-female dichotomy" (Barnes, Battle & Battle, 2010). Labeling Cotton's transness as sin/deviance, deadnaming and misgendering her, and trying to force her to call herself a man are all depictions of toxic masculinity because the pastor's beliefs about dominant femininity (gender and sex dichotomies) are rooted in white supremacist patriarchy (christianity via colonialism). Pastor

Bobby Harris also violently attempts to reify traditional cisheteronormative gender scripts by

deadnaming and misgendering Cotton, as well as trying to force her to call herself a man.

Pastor Bobby Harris' physical placement during the scene, and his violent exit from the

salon, are consistent with notions of toxic masculinity because he uses his masculine cisgender

identity to position himself as a major authority figure, especially in the context of Cotton's

gender identity. As the scene progresses, the pastor moves from a sitting position to standing

over Cotton with his hand firmly gripping the top of her head, as he repeatedly yells at her.

Despite seeing Cotton's distressed reaction to a clearly traumatic experience, the pastor does not

hold himself accountable for any wrongdoing and violently storms out of the salon when Carlotta

tells him to leave. Here we see Pastor Bobby Harris willingly upholding the harmful

reinforcement of patriarchal scripts that empower him to label Cotton as a "lost soul" and deviant

because he is doing his gender "correctly" while, according to cisheteronormative notions of

gender, Cotton is not, and must therefore be corrected. The pastor shows no remorse for the

trauma that he has caused both Cotton and her mother.

In the analysis of this scene, I am not situating toxic femininity and toxic masculinity as

polar opposites, on the contrary, I encourage the viewer to view these two concepts as complex

and "messy", sharing both various similarities and distinct difference. The distinct difference

between toxic femininity and toxic masculinity lie in how, or what, our society labels

manifestations of femininity or masculinity. Dominant ideologies regarding gender acknowledge

femininity as qualities of being docile, soft, timid, and submissive. Whereas dominant ideologies

regarding gender acknowledge masculinity as qualities of being stern, physically aggressive,

dominant, and emotionless. Therefore, the ways in which toxic masculinity and toxic femininity

manifest themselves, though sharing many similarities, can differ because they are dependent on what we are taught to view as dominant/normal femininity and masculinity. This complex intersection, however, is neatly illustrated in how the pastor perpetuates ideologies consistent with toxic femininity, while also displaying toxic masculinity through patriarchal scripts, physical aggression and showing no remorse for the damage that he has caused.

Carlotta, though visibly traumatized from the interaction as well, embodies toxic femininity by remaining complacent in the pastor's treatment of Cotton. Not only did Carlotta validate transmisogynoir by deadnaming and misgendering Cotton in previous conversations with the pastor, she also set the meeting up and did not tell the pastor to leave until after he completely traumatized Cotton. Carlotta's placement in this scene, from her complacency to her standing and watching from the hallway as the pastor traumatized Cotton, is consistent with many cisgender women's complacency with clear displays of transmisogynoir from cishet Black men. As cisgender women, most of us have been Carlotta in the face of transphobia at some point in time, especially transmisogynoir. In July 2017, the breakfast club (a famous urban radio show) interviewed a comedian named Lil Duval (a Black cishet man) and asked him inherently transphobic questions regarding how he would react if he discovered that a woman he was going to engage in sex with was trans. Lil Duval answered accordingly, using anti-trans slurs, misgendering a hypothetical trans woman, and openly saying "this might sound messed up but she dyin'. You manipulated me to believe in this thing." All of the hosts, including Angela Yee (a mixed race cishet woman, and the only woman host) happily engaged in transmisogynoir, even laughing at some of Lil Duval's violent remarks. Angela Yee, like Carlotta, a cisgender woman, remained complacent in a transmisogynoiristic environment because of acceptance of

her cisgender identity, showing no real care or solidarity for trans women, especially Black trans women. It is not until this extremely traumatic experience that Carlotta makes a true effort to mend her relationship with Cotton and validate her identity as a woman.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of this specific scene is the intense physical and emotional response from Cotton. As a result of being in that toxic and traumatic environment, Cotton runs upstairs and comes very close to ending her life. This is a very common consequence that results from normalized transmisogynoir, toxic femininity, and toxic masculinity. The toxicity of dominant notions of gender leads Cotton to desire to not live anymore. This is an outcome that we see frequently amongst Black transgender individuals, compared to their cisgender counterparts. According to a study conducted by the National Black Justice Association, National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 49% of Black trans respondents reported attempting suicide (2015). The respondents also attributed their feelings of isolation and violent experiences to racism, poverty, transphobia, patriarchy and other modes of oppression (Herman, Rankin, Keisling, et. al., 2016). Transmisogynoir, toxic femininity, and toxic masculinity are not just ideologies that shape our concepts of cisheteronormativity and perpetuate the systematic exploitation and disenfranchisement of trans communities—they quite literally drive trans people to not want to exist anymore. This specific scene both acknowledges and illustrates how dominant notions of gender have a violently negative impact on the physical, emotional, and mental health of trans people.

Transmisogynoir: Season 2, Episode 16 - Take It or Leave It

As the previous discussion suggests, the theme of transmisogynoir is also evident throughout *Star*, but one of its most complex and nuanced depictions appears in Episode 16 of Season 2. In the second season of the series, it is revealed that Carletta sent Cotton to live with her grandmother when she was a young adult, so that she could learn "how to be a man." During this time period, Cotton felt pressured into having a sexual relationship with a girl from the neighborhood. This character is introduced as Nakisha, who Cotton discovers is the mother of her son, Jayden. Upon meeting Cotton through an unannounced visit to the shop, Nakisha repeatedly deadnames her and is in shock when Cotton tells her that she is indeed the person that Nakisha is looking for. The two later agree to form a co-parenting relationship, however, the series makes it clear that neither parent knows how to explain Cotton's transness, and identity as one of Jayden's parents, to Jayden. In one of Jayden's visits to the salon, he begins to have seizures and is admitted to the hospital, where doctors reveal that he will need blood transfusions.

> *Nakisha: I told you, I don't want you donating blood for Jayden. I don't know where you've been, who you've been with, or what you're walking around with. You will not put your blood in my son.*
>
> *Cotton: You came looking for me.*
>
> *Nakisha: I was looking for Arnold.*
>
> *Cotton: Nakisha, you're a hoe. You is the biggest hoe I know. You practically raped me, and I haven't even been - with a woman since.*
>
> *Nakisha: Hold up, ain't nobody rape you.*
>
> *Jahil (Cotton's father): (Steps in between them) Okay, ladies, stop, stop it. All right?*

You're both talking crazy 'cause you're scared. Jayden needs both his parents on the

same page.

Nakisha: He has one parent, and I can make a choice - on who donates blood.

Jahil: Well, actually, they want the whole family to donate if they can. All right? Just in

case Jayden needs surgery.

Nakisha: (turns to Jahil) You can donate. But I don't feel comfortable with Arnold or

Cotton or whatever you call yourself.

Cotton's body language in this scene, similar to the scene from episode one of the first

season, is very aggressive and defensive. She is visibly outraged by Nakisha's remarks and

refusal to allow her to donate blood to her own son because she is trans. During the argument

that ensues between Cotton and Nakisha, both women are very confrontational, and eventually

come face to face while arguing. Not only does Nakisha pathologize Cotton's trans identity like

Pastor Bobby Harris did in the first season, she also weaponizes cisheteronormative parental

rights, and repeatedly deadnames Cotton. These interactions are all various illustrations of the

centrality of transmisogynoir to toxic femininity.

Similar to the ways in which Pastor Bobby Harris viewed Cotton in season one, Nakisha

embodies toxic femininity by equating Cotton's transness to disease and deviance. This

viewpoint derives from the transmisogynoiristic notion that Black trans women are deviant

because they do not abide by white cisheteronormative standards of femininity. Nakisha's

rhetoric is consistent with normalized societal notions that view Black trans women as "unclean"

and sexually deviant. These ideologies are deeply rooted in anti-transness, colonialism, slavery,

and white supremacy, which inscribed labels of deviance, sin, and hypersexuality onto Black

women's bodies in order to justify their abuse and sever Black peoples' ties with indigenous gender and sexual norms (Roberts, 1997; Higginbotham, 1992). Nakisha internalizes these ideologies and regurgitates them in order to justify her transmisogynoir and refusal to support Cotton donating blood to their son. This also shows that, in that moment, Nakisha would rather risk her son's life instead of relinquishing internalized transmisogynoir and cosigning Cotton donating blood to their son.

Following this strike at Cotton's humanity as a trans woman, Nakisha continues by weaponizing medical parental rights that she knows prioritizes cisgender and heterosexual parents. *Star* is based in Atlanta, and Georgia, like many other states, has parental rights laws that are strictly cisheteronormative in both language and application. Georgia code 19-7-25 explains the determination of parental rights as lying solely with the mother, *"Only the mother of a child born out of wedlock is entitled to custody of the child, unless the father legitimates the child as provided in code section 19-7-21.1 or 19-7-22. Otherwise, the mother may exercise all parental power over the child."* (Official Code of Georgia Annotated, 2010). Georgia laws also use the term "biological mother" and "biological father." Although Star is a fictional show, the law, in reality, would more than likely side with Nakisha's weaponization of her parental rights. Through the use of transphobic rhetoric that wrongly deems trans parents unfit and a danger to the emotional and mental well-being of their child, courts frequently limit, or complete erase, the parental rights of trans parents (Carter, 2006). This would prevent Cotton from having any serious parental rights because she is trans, and the child was born out of wedlock without Cotton's knowledge, granting Nakisha total parental rights. In the state of Georgia, Cotton would be able to fight to "legitimize" her parental rights, however, this would likely prove to be an

extremely difficult battle because Cotton is a trans woman. This scene illustrates an occurrence

particularly experienced by members of the LGBT+ community, especially transgender

individuals, who commonly lose, or are barred from, parental and spousal rights because of their

gender and/or sexual identity. In *Cisek v. Cisek (1982),* an Ohio court denied visitation rights to a

father, who was underwent gender confirmation surgery and identified as a trans woman after

getting a divorce. In a similar case, *Daly v. Daly (1986),* a father lost their parental rights after

undergoing confirmation surgery and identifying as a trans woman. In both cases, the court

supported false "scientific" rhetoric that views transgender parents as "unfit" and a danger to

children, subsequently resulting in the court favoring the cisgender parent (Carter, 2006). In

Cotton's case, this battle would be even more complicated by her Blackness, class, and criminal

background (from when she committed fraud on the show to fund her gender confirmation

surgery). Nakisha's weaponization of her cishet identity and parental rights is indeed an example

of toxic femininity because she is using her privilege as a cisgender, heterosexual woman to deny

Cotton's gender identity and her rights as Jayden's parent. Here, we see that cisheteronormative

privilege clearly informs Nakisha's perceptions as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, which

proves to be harmful to the rights of Black LGBT+ women (Collins, 2013).

Once Jahil, Cotton's father, stops the argument between the two women, Nakisha expels

one last blow by agreeing to have Jahil donate blood but reiterating that she still refuses to allow

Cotton or "whatever she calls herself" to donate. In this last statement, she once again

deadnames Cotton. The toxic feminine nature of Nakisha's statement lies in the fact that she is

intentionally deadnaming Cotton in order to further dehumanize Cotton and situate her as "other"

because she is a trans woman. Intentional misgendering and deadnaming are two acts frequently

experienced by transgender communities, who are especially misgendered by news outlets and state forces (courts, law enforcement, etc.) (Wirtz, Poteat, Malik & Glass, 2018). This normalization of transphobic language has very real consequences for Black trans women like Cotton. Such language facilitates the harm and demise of Black trans women, and trans communities in general, by declaring them nonhuman for not conforming to cisheteronormative standards of gender, and attempting to justify their abuse. In this scene, the series shows that these transphobic ideologies clearly evoke a negative emotional and physical response from Cotton, situating this interaction as harmful, or toxic, to Cotton's well-being as a Black trans woman.

Discussion

Each of these three scenes, though demonstrating completely different scenarios, all conceptualize the complex intersections of Cotton's identities as a Black trans woman and the ubiquitous nature of toxic femininity, gender policing, and transmisogynoir. Toxic femininity is never explicitly stated (as a term) in any of the episodes throughout the series, however, the series continues to illustrate this concept in relation to Cotton both visually and narratively. The series also openly connects the toxic femininity and normalized transmisogynoir exhibited on the show with religion and its historical links to colonialist institutions.

What each of these scenes has in common is that they exemplify the emotional and physical toll that violent transmisogynoir, gender policing, and toxic femininity have on Black trans women like Cotton, regardless of whether it is verbal and/or physical. These scenes also illustrate the normalization of transmisogynoir, gender policing, and toxic femininity in Black people's sociocultural views of gender and sex. Through Cotton's experiences and interpersonal

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relationships, the viewer realizes the very nuanced ways in which violent and negative

sociocultural notions of transness impacts Cotton's safety and livelihood. The viewer quickly

learns that transmisogynoir is not simply an "opinion" that everyone is supposedly entitled to,

but a set of ideologies that systematically disenfranchises and endangers the lives of Black trans

women like Cotton. Additionally, the series shows the viewer that not only are these ideologies

extremely common, and heavily internalized by other marginalized groups, but that toxic

femininity does indeed exist, and can manifest in different ways from different people, regardless

of gender.

Conclusion

The relationship between hegemonic (dominant) femininity, Black femininity, and toxic

femininity is composite and deeply rooted in the systematic by-products of colonialism and

white supremacist patriarchy, both of which have historically shaped sociocultural notions of

gender identity and expression in the United States. This is not to say that femininity, or Black

femininity specifically, is inherently toxic. On the contrary, this thesis both queries and tarries

with the transmiogynoiristic notions of femininity that Black communities have been forced and

coerced to internalize and ascribe to. Instead of viewing transness, or queerness more generally,

as anti-Black and/or deviant, cisheteronormativity must be recognized as historically anti-Black

and anti-trans. Cisheteronormativity is not an undeniable truth or natural reality, but a set of

ideologies that fundamentally pathologizes Black gender and sexuality in all forms, particularly

and perhaps most forcefully Black trans women. Black communities have been taught that

eurocentric notions of femininity and masculinity reify Black identity, when, as illustrated in

Star, we see that these constructs normalize multilayered violence against Black LGBT+ people,

especially Black trans women. These constructions of gender identity and expression not only center the disenfranchisement and dispossession of Black trans women, but also all Black people because Blackness continues to be viewed by dominant groups as sexually deviant, subordinate, and inferior. Toxic femininity (and masculinity), transmisogynoir, gender policing, and cisheternormativity prevent all Black people, regardless of sexual and gender identity, from embodying gender in any way we see fit. Gender self-determination is a cornerstone of transgender studies and trans rights politics (Stryker 2008). For this reason, the centrality of race to the intelligibility of trans identities and presentations necessitates continued critical analysis.

Through Cotton's experiences and interpersonal relationships, *Star* repeatedly confronts the pervasiveness of transmisogynoir within Black communities, as well as complex manifestations of toxic femininity, and the hypocrisy of Black cis women facilitating the marginalization of Black trans women. Violence against Black trans women is typically framed in relation to toxic masculinity and cishet men. While the normalization of toxic masculinity is foundational to violence against Black trans people, the role that toxic femininity and Black cisgender women play in the facilitation of said violence should not be overlooked. *Star* uses the medium of fiction complicate this story by illustrating the various ways in which Black cisgender women, and Black people in general, perpetuate transmisogynoir and gender policing through toxic femininity. Shows like *Star* are not only important because they offer vital representations of Black trans lives, but also because they encourage viewers to deconstruct what we've been taught to view as socioculturally normal versus abnormal. Additionally, it is crucial that Cotton is a Black trans woman being played by a Black trans actress, Amiyah Scott. This is more than noteworthy in a social climate where trans characters, let alone Black trans and queer characters,

are rarely portrayed in a way that centers their experiences and skills as actors, producers, directors, and creators. In mainstream media, we are accustomed to seeing whitewashed and stereotypical illustration of transness, if the character is even played by a trans actor. However, *Star* makes a foothold in increasing Black LGBT+ representation by including a Black trans main character whose experiences are portrayed as multifaceted and complex. While it is difficult to say whether *Star* provides a "good" representation of Black trans women, my analysis has shown that the series certainly does exemplify the complexity and nuances of Black trans women's experiences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the show calls out and calls into question transphobic cisgender people by illustrating various ways in which cisgender people's violence toward transgender people is naturalized and normalized

      Star does an excellent job of situating Cotton as a multidimensional character and not allowing other key aspects of the story to overshadow the depth and importance of Cotton's experiences. However, like any show, *Star's* progressiveness and contributions to Black trans representation do not absolve the show of its perpetuation of harmful rhetoric. For example, the ways in which Simone and Cotton's drug addictions and mental health issues are addressed are quite problematic and ableist. Simone is both jokingly and seriously labeled as "crazy" and "unstable" throughout the show for her mental health issues, which stem from repeated childhood sexual assault. Though it is very probable that the portrayal of this rhetoric was intentional, in order to illustrate the frequency and hypocrisy of ableist statements. Cotton's experiences on the show may also be viewed as stereotypical and generalizations of trans experiences. Additionally, Cotton's attempted suicide is quickly glossed over after Star intervenes, however, the build-up to the point and the high rate of suicide amongst Black trans

women is not unpacked afterwards. The situation transpires, and the show moves on, dissolving the occurrence into the storyline to almost never be mentioned again.

In addition, although Cotton's existence on the show is powerful and extremely important, the portrayal of Cotton throughout the series is still a very palatable depiction of Black transness. Outside of Cotton's transness, she is very much so viewed as "passing" and visibly embodies dominant notions of femininity through her appearance. As the show progresses, particularly after the first and second season, Cotton's transness is seldom situated as a major part of the storyline. This is what Austin H. Johnson refers to as "transnormativity", in which transgender individuals are fundamentally held accountable for, and pressured into, the successful embodiment of cissexist gender norms (2016). Over time, Cotton's transness is rarely discussed because she is visibly portrayed as being successfully integrated into cisheteronormative social structures as a result of her passing. While the character development in the main characters making active efforts to unlearn transmisogynoir and accept Cotton is very important, seldom mentioning Cotton's experiences in the third season is consistent with portraying her as successfully integrated into dominant gender scripts, or transnormative. This representation of Cotton's transness prioritizes the experiences of Black trans people who "pass" and not trans people who do not conform to normalized constructions of gender identity and expression like Cotton.

Though *Star* is a step in the direction of more complex and intersectional representations of Black trans women, there are also some limitations of using the show to analyze and critique toxic femininity. First, the show is fictional, although it clearly mirrors the lives and experiences of many Black people in the United States. Cotton's persona, interpersonal relationships, and

reactions to her experiences on the show are delicately mapped out by show writers and producers. Although Cotton's experiences indeed align with the everyday experiences of Black trans women in the United States, her experiences are still, at the end of the day, written and directed at the discretion of the show's writers, producers, and directors.

A key limitation of my analysis stems from my methodology of visual and cultural analysis. I chose to analyze scenes that aligned with my definition of toxic femininity. In addition, because I used visual and cultural analysis to analyze only three scenes from 3 out of 39 episodes, this made my qualitative data pool much smaller compared to the total number of scenes and episodes in the series. Nonetheless, my research opens up important questions regarding cisheteronormative notions of gender identity and the complex ways in which masculinity and femininity can become toxic while masquerading as "normal" and "natural," particularly for Black trans women. The experiences of Black trans women are seldom centered in mainstream feminist literature despite Black trans women facing disproportionate levels of violence, abuse, and marginalization compared to other members of the Black LGBT+ people. Even when centering the experiences of Black trans women, cisgender scholars and activists tend to focus on the problem of toxic masculinity and violence solely perpetuated by cishet men. Countering this trend, my research suggests that we not only acknowledge the presence and damage of toxic masculinity, but also the nuanced ways in which cis women can, and often do, perpetuate toxic femininity while aiding and abetting an oppressive structure that overwhelmingly and systematically benefits cishet men.

Although I identify as a Black lesbian woman, I also identify as cisgender. My identity as a cisgender woman provides me with a shield of protection and privilege that is not afforded to

Black trans women, simply because my embodiments of femininity are privileged over the femininity of trans people. Black lesbians face disproportionately high rates of violence, however, trans women are routinely erased in research regarding Black lesbians. As a women's and gender studies scholar, I also recognize that the voices and experiences of Black trans women are rarely presented in mainstream feminist literature. This is quite alarming considering the pervasiveness of violence and abuse faced by Black trans women. The continuous erasure of Black trans women in research and everyday life, coupled with my awareness of the seldom acknowledged violence that cisgender women perpetuate towards trans women, motivated my desire to pursue this research. Unpacking how violence against trans women garners negative emotional, mental, and physiological responses that subsequently lead to high rates of suicide and mental health issues among Black trans women, shaped my analysis of Cotton's responses to the violence she faced. Future researchers might use ethnography to discover Black trans women's experiences, including their experiences with toxic femininity.

My research not only interrogates the roots of cisheteronormativity in Black communities, but also acknowledges the multifaceted nature of embodiments of gender and the messiness of sex/gender and cis/trans binaries as fundamentally racialized formations. The term toxic femininity, especially in the context of Black cisgender women, may make some uncomfortable. However, this uncomfortableness is another reason why toxic femininity should be discussed and acknowledged. If we do not recognize the ways in which cisgender women embody toxic and anti-trans notions of femininity, in addition to toxic masculinity, how are we to truly create environments that center and encourage Black trans women's survival, resilience, and vitality? In casual discourse, through interpersonal dialogue and social media, I have already

been told that toxic femininity does not actually exist. In response to this statement, I ask: what do we call radio host Angela Yee sitting complacently as everyone in the room jokes about murdering a hypothetical Black trans woman (The Breakfast Club, 2017)? What do we call Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie erasing the transness of women who have not visibly transitioned and insinuating that they are afforded the same privileges as cisgender men (Channel 4 News, 2017)? What do we call the actions of the two cisgender women in North Carolina who recently sexually assaulted a trans woman for using the bathroom (Carson, 2019)? What do we call the actions of cisgender women who routinely out men in romantic relationships with trans women to shame them (Fairchild, 2018; Mock, 2013)? What do we call the actions of cisgender Black women like Tami Roman, who defended Lil Duval's violent transphobia as "his truth" (Juice TV, 2017)? In order to decolonize ideas of gender and sexuality, scholars and activists must grapple with the toxicity of our embodiments and internalizations of dominant notions of gender and how it creates a particularly dangerous environment for Black trans women. By doing so, we can use our research and privilege to support Black trans communities

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