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Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism. By Amber Jamilla Musser. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014, 254 pp., \$24 (paper).

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How do race and gender influence the experiential meanings of masochist acts? In *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, Amber Jamilla Musser employs masochism as an analytical tool through which she explores race, gender, power, and subjectivity. Through the hermeneutical method of “empathetic reading,” Musser critiques a litany of key theorists from the history of science, feminist theory, and queer theory for essentializing the multiplicity of meanings inherent to masochism by ignoring race.

Musser’s core thesis interrogates whether structural inequalities that problematize matters of agency and consent for black women negate the liberatory potential of masochism. Although black women are historically encoded as “wounded flesh,” Musser proposes a resignification of this woundedness, through the analytical lens of sensation, which “allows us to think about flesh, not as something static and essential, but as something that changes, something that is in motion” (p. 20). She centers the flesh, as opposed to embodiment more generally, in her counternarrative because flesh has historically factored as the material grounds for oppression. Musser suggests that the motility and irreducibility of masochism has the potential to counteract the atemporal “stickiness” that otherwise results from the lived experience of black objectivity.

In her first chapter, Musser outlines the politics of masochism within feminist theory and postcolonial theory, concluding that “masculinity and masochism are tied together in a complex drama marked by possessing, disavowing, and lacking the phallus” (p. 57). Next, Musser turns to the academic history of masochism, tracing the term’s coinage in Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* and its rise to fame through *The Story of O* and *Venus in Furs*. She highlights the complicit labor of black women in both texts, interrogating the meaning of their sadism as economically

dependent employees; she further critiques the rhetorical conflation of their labor with “love,” as rationalization for colonialism.

Musser expands upon this problematic conflation through the postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, within which he develops his concept of “becoming-black.” Musser reads “becoming-black” as synonymous with “becoming-biological,” asserting, “This particular mode of black objectification (or *enfleshment*) allows for an understanding of whiteness as an affective state that requires an other to project him- or herself against” (p. 89). Musser further constructs the pleasurable suffering of white liberal guilt as masochistic experiences that reinforce the status quo; masochism leads to the emergence of a new subject whereas becoming-black suspends the subject as atemporal and essentialized. In her final chapter about the masochistic potential of illness, Musser questions the limitations of Lorde’s advocacy for plural subjectivity, illustrating the “sticky” limitations of the black community’s ongoing identification with atemporal woundedness. To illustrate her point, Musser discusses the divergent viewer experiences of Kara Walker’s silhouette tableau of slavery, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*; just as these flattened images possess multiple meanings, Musser argues that the intersectional experience of black womanhood can become resignified as pleasurable woundedness.

Although Musser’s theoretical contributions are insightful, the structure of her book triggers experiences for the reader that she concurrently presumes to oppose. *Sensational Flesh* criticizes the academic exclusion of intersectional subjects from the discourse about masochism, even while Musser uses jargon and references that exclude all readers but those who identify with her particular theoretical intersection. Musser contests the academic marginalization of black women, while relegating discussions about their particularity to the end of each chapter; this approach structurally reproduces the marginalization of black women as subjects while diluting her stated focus. Finally, Musser essentializes black women by ignoring lived differences wrought by variables such as socioeconomic status, country of origin, and gender identity and by presenting the black female relationship with masochism through a predominantly lesbian lens; given the erotic subject matter, this last oversight is particularly problematic.

The most significant and novel points that emerge from this densely theoretical book are Musser’s construction of black women’s *enfleshed* experience as “sticky” and her advocacy for theorizing *enfleshment* instead of embodiment when skin color is central to the analysis. She

convincingly describes the theoretical and rhetorical constraints within which black women are stuck, and the liberatory potential of masochistic experimentation. Moving forward, Musser advocates for black women to reinscribe the meanings they attach to their atemporally wounded flesh, and to interrogate the possibilities of agentic submission in tandem with systematic and historical oppression. In a sex-positive era, Musser admirably defends black women's rights to experiment boundlessly with sensations and the erotics of power, free from the restraints of the collective memory of slavery.

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