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## Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism, Amber Jamilla Musser (2014)

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***SENSATIONAL FLESH: RACE, POWER AND MASOCHISM*, AMBER JAMILLA MUSSER (2014).**

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*Reviewed by Octavio R. González, Wellesley College*

This is the book I wish I'd written. It engages contemporary debates in queer studies, critical race theory, feminism, and affect studies.

Musser's key concept is of 'flesh' as a dimension of embodiment that undergoes sensations. These sensations—such as distance, coldness, or sympathy—are interpersonally shared in the encounter of reader and text and writer. Musser calls her hermeneutic practice '*empathetic reading*' (19, 21–25, *passim*) after Gilles Deleuze's 'intensive reading' (1995, 8–9) and, implicitly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'reparative reading' (2003, 123–51). She cites other queer reading practices such as Carolyn Dinshaw's 'touching the past' (1999, 1, *passim*) and Elizabeth Freeman's 'erotohistoriography' (2010, 95, *passim*) to focus on the sensations of embodiment, particularly racialized and gendered embodiment.

First, but not foremost, Musser displaces a fairly Eurocentric queer theoretical tradition—beginning with Bersani and Foucault, ending with Deleuze and Guattari—that thinks of masochism as, in Musser's words, 'exceptional' (6). She wrests it from a white male queer theoretical tradition and turns masochism into a mode of thinking difference and sexuality simultaneously. And so, Musser challenges the unitary lens of canonical theory by thinking of masochism as an 'analytical space in which difference is revealed,' rather than a mode of eroticism that effaces differences—particularities—of race, gender, or ability (19).

Musser focuses her investigation into 'sensations' of the 'flesh' through the lens of masochism because masochism reveals forces of biopolitics and desire, as well as carnal differences such as race and gender that it eroticizes. Masochism also has a long history as a site of thinking through its 'political potential' due to its 'plasticity' (19)—its reversibility and adaptability to varying configurations of subjects and situations. Masochism allows us to ask questions about the possibility of exercising agency within scenes of subjection. The book works through what Musser calls 'local histories of masochism,' to explore the sensations that animate narratives of masochism, which transform bodies into—suffering, pleasuring—flesh (27). Musser travels from Alice Walker and Audre Lorde and the U.S. feminist sex wars surrounding S&M, to Fanon and Beauvoir and the Antilles and midcentury France, to Bob Flanagan's illness and masochism as differential modes of engaging with agency, subjectivity, and embodiment.

Musser focuses on flesh because of her interest in what María Lugones calls the 'modern/colonial gender system,' which invented modern notions of sexuality through loaded categories of race and gender (2008, 1, *passim*). Musser's *Sensational Flesh* is framed by this long history of racialization, which 'dismember[ed] bodies into flesh' during the transatlantic slave trade (20). More specifically, Musser wants to address the historical 'equation of blackness' to 'wounded' flesh, an equation that remains intact, Musser argues, through the 'perpetual wound of slavery' (159). Musser stresses that 'flesh' 'connotes objectification, woundedness, and a lack of agency,' but that 'dismissing it is also problematic,' as 'flesh occupies a fraught position within studies of difference. It oscillates between being a symptom of abjection and a territory ripe for reclamation' (20). The legacy of this history contributes to a

racist cultural imaginary, which persists in equating bare embodiment, or ‘the flesh,’ with blackness, and ‘blackness with depersonalization and nonsubjectivity’ (20). Thus, Musser argues, black women’s bodies became ‘wounded and flatten[ed]’ through the horrors of slavery and its legacy, which sustains the ‘connection between black femininity and the flesh ... through the historical frames’ that continue to inform this cultural equation. Some of these historical frames are the topic of Musser’s individual chapters (158, 156).

Ironically, Musser adds, this ‘flattening out’ of black female subjectivity in the realm of representation occurs even in accounts that seek to redress this very effect. This speaks to the ‘double bind’ of progressive accounts in which scholars ‘attempt to avoid these flattening processes but end up with a different set of constrained behavioral choices,’ such as the nearly universal condemnation of black female masochism as an unaffordable ‘luxury’ or false consciousness (160, 172). This historical legacy persists, as even critics continue to theorize ‘structural and historical violence [as] interchangeable with the specter of female bodies of color’: the notion of black female masochism sinks under the heavy ‘baggage that the term has when applied to black bodies,’ Musser concedes (158, 170).

For, even as masochism correlates with sensations and situations of ‘becoming-flesh’ or ‘becoming-animal,’ as in the example of Deleuze’s masochist in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987, 143–46), these ‘becomings’ are not all the same. In the conclusion, Musser writes, the ‘black woman’s equation with the flesh is distinct from other forms of becoming-flesh’ (159). In a summary of the book’s contents, Musser adds: ‘this form of objectification is different from the becoming-flesh that Beauvoir discusses because the terms do not veer into narcissism’ as they do in Beauvoir’s example of white French femininity. She goes on: ‘It is also different from the becoming-flesh that Fanon describes because this formulation of becoming-flesh is linked to the particular historical moment of slavery rather than the sticky temporality and becoming-biological’ of Fanon’s male-embodied subject. She continues: ‘Nor is this mode of flesh equivalent to the pain produced by illness’ in Bob Flanagan’s white masculine ‘supermasochist.’

No, Musser concludes: ‘This is flesh that has been caught in the perpetual wound of slavery, so that agency cannot even be illusory: it has already been foreclosed’ (159). Again, to press against that foreclosure is Musser’s end goal. She insists that the only way to do so is to lend credence to the radical idea of ‘a mode of inhabiting an oppressive history with hints of pleasure’ (173). Masochism and its variants—such as BDSM—are a privileged mode of ‘inhabiting oppressive history.’ Musser writes that, in their ‘refusal to allow for individual agency, Walker’s and Lorde’s criticisms of S&M speak to the way that sexuality has been foreclosed as a space for black women’ (172). Musser argues against this flattening out of black female engagements with oppressive history, since to do so is to return black women ‘discursively outside sexuality and individuality’ (172).

And this is precisely why Musser chooses to end with images of black women engaging in masochism: to carve out a space for black women’s pleasurable ‘inhabiting [of] oppressive history’ is Musser’s first and final aim. In this, she echoes Sharon Holland and Hortense Spillers, who also critique the under-theorization of black female subjectivity (158). In so doing, *Sensational Flesh* does something I did not think possible: it makes masochism neither a magical practice nor a form of complicity with hegemony. In fact, perhaps my favorite concept from the book is the notion of ‘complicity as a modern response to power’ (60). To view complicity as a form of resistance is to resist the simple binaries of opposition/cooptation that we inherit from the twentieth century. Musser has another vision—one where the ‘woman of color’s body’ is no longer just ‘a reminder of historical wrongs’ but is also ‘assimilated into a political future’ (158).

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