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2015

Review of Amber Jamilla Musser's
Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and
Masochism

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/mdweiss/20/>

Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism. Amber Jamilla Musser. New York: New York University Press, 2014. xii + 255 pages. \$79.00 cloth; \$24.00 paper.

Amber Jamilla Musser's *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* takes up masochism not as a sexual practice, nor a psychological or philosophical concept, but as a set of relationships between sensation and power. Beginning with turn-of-the-century sexology and ending with contemporary African American art, with a lengthy sojourn in mid-century French existential philosophy, *Sensational Flesh* gathers together an extraordinary range of theoretical texts to demonstrate that while "masochism is a mobile entity whose meanings shift depending on context" (167), it always serves as a pivot point between subjectivity, sexuality, and agency. The book is a rich intellectual history of the constellations of power organized as masochism in psychoanalytic, philosophical, feminist, postcolonial, and critical theory.

Musser begins with a challenge to the dominant theorists of masochism—Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Leo Bersani, and (somewhat surprisingly) Lee Edelman—arguing that each, in different ways, sees masochism as a subversion, critique, or exception to prevailing social-sexual norms. For Musser, this emphasizes masochism as a "distinct lens for theorizing the ways that difference is embodied" (6) or "what it feels like to be enmeshed in various regimes of power" (2). Employing an additive, correlative method, the four central chapters of the book assemble different "structures of sensation" and map the dynamic relations between their conceptual parts.

Chapter Two takes up masochism as "a manifestation of patriarchal and colonial power" (31). Musser places the radical feminist critique of lesbian sadomasochism and butch masculinity alongside Frantz Fanon's analysis of masochism as

the pathology of racism/colonialism (in *Black Skins, White Masks* [1952]), and offers “distance” as a key metric of objectification. Chapter Three explores masochism as complicity, focusing on the aesthetics of self-objectification and coldness as feminized modes of compromised agency. Musser reads the chapter’s central texts—Pauline Réage’s *The Story of O* (1954) and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870)—through Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of female masochism (in *The Second Sex* [1949]) and Gilles Deleuze’s 1991 analysis of “coldness and cruelty.” Chapter Four moves from Fanon to Glenn Ligon’s text-painting *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (1990) to explore the temporality of masochism, in particular “becoming-black” as an atemporal primitivism—stagnant and stuck. Finally, Chapter Five explores masochism as an assemblage of pain, illness, and autonomy; Musser draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “Body without Organs” to read the performance art of Bob Flanagan against and alongside Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980).

In Musser’s reading, masochism sometimes serves to mask power and shore up racist, colonial, and patriarchal domination; at other times, masochism is a Foucauldian “technology of the self” that creates possibilities for agency and control. For example, in Chapter Two, the juxtaposition of Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” fantasy (1919) with Fanon’s “A Negro is Raping Me” fantasy, from *Black Skins, White Masks*, reveals masochism as the inversion of (white, colonial, racist) guilt. This structure returns in Chapter Four when Musser takes up Fanon’s analysis of the black body as an object of suffering that mobilizes (even as it masks) the masochism-as-domination of white, liberal subjects through the pleasures of empathetic comparison. In contrast, Chapter Three explores masochism as an agential technology of the self; O’s aesthetic practices and sensory coldness (in *The Story of O*) offer her “pockets of agency” in a patriarchal world (82). Musser describes both possibilities in Chapter Five. On the one hand, Flanagan, whose work took up links between desire, masochism, and the pain of cystic fibrosis, performs a “spectacle of suffering” that reinforces “his masculinity, domination, and whiteness” (123). On the other hand, chronic pain might decenter the (white) subject and instead “privilege a reorganization of corporality so as to highlight new forms of affinity” (148). This reorganization is carried through to Musser’s reading of Ligon as enabling a rethinking of race as movement, against the visual registers of stuck, suffering black bodies (113). There is no resolution of this duality: masochism in these divergent readings sometimes re-entrenches and sometimes resists modes of domination.

Musser confronts this duality in the conclusion, which might serve as an alternative opening to the book itself. Focusing her attention on the figural black woman who haunted the earlier chapters—the threatening black butch in lesbian feminism or the minor black female characters in *The Story of O* and *Venus in Furs*—Musser asks, “Can the possibilities of masochism as sexual exceptionalism/subversion

extend to black women?" (154). While one may disagree about the redemptive potential of masochism as agency, Musser's question foregrounds the need to examine its politics. She explores the flattening of black women into fleshly difference by taking up Kara Walker's panorama *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995). Pointing to black female sexuality as a site of impossibility, Musser challenges Lorde's and Alice Walker's well-known critiques of sadomasochism: "[I]n their refusal to allow for individual agency . . . [Walker and Lorde] enact [Hortense] Spiller's argument that black women are discursively outside sexuality and individuality," thus "forgetting that masochism, as we have seen through the book—despite the forms it takes—is elected" (172). Yet this celebration of (liberal) choice and agency is troubled anew in the book's final pages, when Musser suggests that the relations between subjectivity, sexuality, and agency that are essential to masochism are dependent on a racialized biopolitics (179-80). In this way, *Sensational Flesh's* conceptual history of masochism turns, finally, toward a history of the modern science of sexuality and its objectified/opaque Others.

The array of texts in *Sensational Flesh* demonstrates that masochism is a vibrant and mobile concept through which to explore modern modes of power and domination, perhaps most pressingly race, gender, and agency. Given the book's historical and cultural breadth and the enormous theoretical ground each chapter covers, it is not surprising that there are some overly compressed summaries; at times one wishes for a more sustained engagement with any one aspect of masochism—a slowing down that might have given more room for Musser's own argument and voice. Yet the power of *Sensational Flesh* comes in Musser's insistence on reading race at the center of masochism: Lorde and Fanon play as central a role as Deleuze, Foucault, and Freud in theorizing masochism, and she seeks to reorient an analysis of masochism toward a Lordian-Deleuzian "multiplicity of the erotic" (181) crosscut by race and gender. That this is a distinctive intervention in the literature illustrates the central challenge *Sensational Flesh* poses. Musser shows us that our understanding of sexuality, agency, and subject/object relations—our modern science of power—must grapple with the history of masochism as inextricably bound up with racialization.

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