

Whalen Symposium Abstract – Award Consideration
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#GirlsLikeUs: The Development of Femme Identities in the (Auto)biographies of Janet Mock and Miss Major, Black Trans Women

Understanding the subjectivities of black transgender women lies at the intersection of multiple academic fields. Revolutionaries such as Judith Butler, bell hooks and Kate Bornstein have all contributed to discourse surrounding transgender women of color. To understand and humanize the subjectivities of these women, there must be an interaction of gender theory, queer theory, queer of color critique, and black feminism. Trans women of color are routinely in the margins of academic spaces because their lives are interactions of unique oppressed identities.

This presentation puts the (auto)biographical lives and works (a memoir and documentary, respectively) of two black trans women in context: Janet Mock, a young activist, author, and media maker, and Miss Major, an elderly activist whose life has spanned from Attica to Stonewall and beyond (Licon). It centers their stories through the black feminist concept of “a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective). Through these methods of black feminist love, we can observe the ways Mock and Major have developed black trans femme identities and how those identities are revolutionary.

Mock and Major both establish self-love through their modes of unique gender expression, the way they “become” women in the way that Simone de Beauvoir theorized through personal growth and gender expression. Their living of this theory allows the idea of womanhood, or femme-central identity, to be a “process, a *becoming*, a *constructing* that cannot be rightfully said to originate or end” (Butler). They both exist in a world that is dehumanizing of their gender, sexuality, sex and racial identities. Their choice to exist in their gender truth becomes an act of self-love and trans black feminist resistance.

The love of their “sisters” is established in the way both create familial relationships. Mock's memoir details her relationships with her blood siblings and her chosen sister, Wendi. Major has a network of trans women that she considers as sisters, daughters and granddaughters. Queer individuals, particularly trans women, struggle when born into heteronormative family structures. In loving a family of one's choosing, whether genetic, chosen or a mixture of both, both of these women establish radical sisterly/familial love. They also represent this love historically through the humanization and acknowledgement of historic trans women of color. Major in particular references Sylvia Rivera and organizations such as STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) (Stryker).

Community love for both women takes shape in the form of activist work and communal care. Mock expresses this love in chronicling the way she and other trans women of color cared for each other during times of sex work and in her out-of-memoir life, including her creation of the #GirlsLikeUs campaign to bring the lives of

trans women to light. Major's work includes her historic involvement in trans community building through her activism during the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco and her work for TGI Justice, a group that advocates for and communicates with trans, gender-variant and intersex folks in the prison industrial complex. Both women engage in creating intellectual or physical "third spaces," a term adapted by Licuna to mean a space that creates a "differential consciousness capable of engaging creative and coalitional forms of opposition" (Licuna).

Placing these narratives in conversation with each other and with theories of gender, queerness and black feminism creates a third space. Mock and Major show the ways that the process of "becoming" a gender is one that is diverse based on a multitude of personal subjectivities. Each is an individual and holds power in her humanity. It also expresses how, for trans women of color especially, coalition building through community and family is an act of love.

Love, when seen as "the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility" is a space that is both foundationally individualistic and inherently political, if not revolutionary, for black trans women (hooks). In viewing the ways Mock and Major practice these three prongs of love, we can view these women as individuals and put their active praxis of trans black feminism into action through establishing and supporting their ability to love.

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(Note: Not all works are used explicitly in the abstract, but all contributed intellectually to the interactional understanding of these women and their lives)