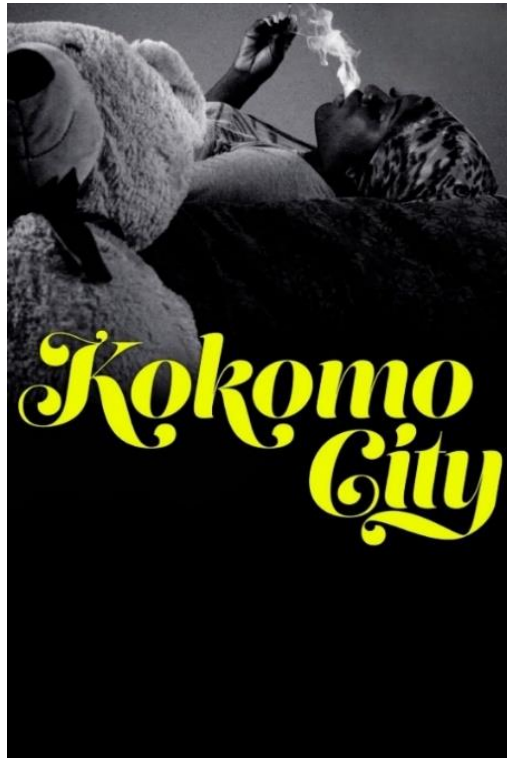# Ain't I Trans and Woman?

Representing the Everyday Black Trans Fugitive Navigating Belonging and Resistance

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to answer the question how Kokomo City as documentary discursively depict the everyday experiences of Black trans women, specifically those involved in sex work, and the emerging narratives of everyday negotiations of belonging within the Black community in the United States (US). An intersectional lens is applied to understand how gender, sexuality, race, and class intersect in shaping these processes. The often binary representations of Black trans women as either victims of violence, or successful and empowered in media, and oftentimes still in academia, gives rise to the significance of this research. I employed a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) through with I discovered that sex work through their desired Black trans feminine body is a secret, liminal, in-between space where the four Black trans women renegotiate their belonging in a broader context of transphobia within the Black community. Additionally, they navigate their belonging further through fugitive acts and fugitive thinking by claiming their Black trans feminine identity and through imagining another reality of them in the Black community. In this sense, fugitivity is part of belonging. In the end, these narratives of belonging are not just about marginalization based on the specific position of Black trans women, or just narratives of agency, reflecting their navigation of belonging. Both aspects are intertwined and form a unique multifaceted narrative of belonging in its situated specificity. Additionally, the filmmaker aims to transform this private sense of belonging into a public one through the documentary. Kokomo City is inherently fugitive and political in its pursuit of this goal. The filmmaker employs both realist and anti-realist strategies to create a pedagogical intervention by presenting the wider Black community with the stories of these Black trans women.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the representation of the everyday experiences of Black trans women in their narratives on how they navigate their position within the Black community in the United States (US). Attention to transness in media representation is not new. However, since 2014, we have entered a period known as the "transgender tipping point," characterized by increased public and scholarly attention to the legal protection and rights of transgender individuals (Steinmetz, 2014). Since this tipping point, there has been greater focus on transness in our society, including the experiences of Black trans women. Despite this increased visibility, this "transgender tipping point" does not necessarily translate into more nuanced representation and discourse around transness in media (Steinbock, 2018). Media attention often highlights either stories of success and empowerment through ultra-feminine performance, such as those of actress Laverne Cox, or extreme victimization and premature death due to transphobia (Ellison et al., 2017).

The concrete content of these binary representations is often underpinned by two main narratives depicted to Western audiences in film: transition narratives and oppression narratives, as Hoskin & Earl (2020) have found. First, transition narratives focus on the before and after of gender-affirming surgery, portraying the trans individual as successful through transnormativity[1] (Hoskin & Earl, 2020). As Steinbock (2018) discusses, the discourse on transition narratives is dominated by the ideology of cisgender as the norm, and the perception of transness as medical and pathological. Second, in oppression narratives, content creators depict trans individuals as victims of with little agency, unable to enjoy life (Hoskin & Earl, 2020). These oppression narratives often feature elements of prejudice, discrimination, and severe psychological and physical violence due to (at least) transphobia, as described by Koch-Rein et al. (2020). Specifically, there is an emphasis on how Black trans women are disproportionately victimized due to the intersectional forces of racism, sexism, and transphobia, as noted by Kacala (2020), and how they resort to sex work for economic survival (Glover, 2016). Such stereotypical portrayals contribute to the marginalization of Black trans women in media representation, as Abbott (2022) highlighted.

Also in research, scholars often still adhere to binary representations of transness. As Chu and Drager (2019) put it: *"In trans studies, it seems that we are telling a story of our victimhood*

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[1] Glover (2016) defines transnormativity as the inclusion of trans individuals based on their similarity to cisgender individuals and their assimilation to heteronormative norms and values (p.340).

(tragedy) or a story of our resistance (romance)" (Chu & Drager, 2019, p.104). However, academic work on trans individuals' experiences of transness, trans identity, and subjectivity is not novel. Already from the very beginning of trans studies, Sandy Stone (1987) highlighted and warned against inadequate trans representation. As Chu & Drager (2019) explain, the aforementioned binary is part of set of binary research focuses within the field of trans studies over the past thirty years (p.106). In line with this argument, Gill-Peterson (2020) state that trans individuals have experienced many forms of reductionism, where scholars in the field of trans studies created simplistic subjects (Aizura et al., 2020, p.130).

As Steinbock (2018) argues, some trans scholars are critical of the ongoing simplicity in representation since the "transgender tipping point" (p.174). Nonetheless, much more academic work is needed to address the binary trans representation of subjectivities that still circulate in academia, as Chu & Drager (2019) suggest. Thus, this research derives its academic significance from unearthing subjugated knowledge[2], and therefore diversifying academic literature even more on Black trans representation by exploring more complex and everyday portrayals of trans subjectivity, aiming to nuance extreme forms of representation that reduce trans individuals to simplistic images. In addition, this thesis seeks to pedagogically intervene in these binary representations in media, with the hope to contribute to dismantling dominant oppressive gender binary systems that uphold heteronormative and cisgender norms, as mentioned by McLaren et al. (2021).

Considering these points, the academic and societal relevance lies in focusing on the everyday experiences of Black trans women as an attempt to address this 'narrative problem' both within and outside academia. The importance of nuanced representations of trans subjectivity stems from the consequences associated with the lack of complex characterizations. As Hall (1992) explains, a lack of nuance in representation prevents us from meaningfully understanding individuals' experiences. Media and academia that perpetuate binary representations do not do justice to trans subjectivities when they enforce stereotypes shaped by sexist and racist structures (Vipond, 2015). As McLaren et al. (2021) argue, the lack of complex characterizations results in stereotypes becoming embedded in the public imagination, affecting our perception of normalcy. Abbott (2022) specifies that binary trans representation enforces a restrictive definition of acceptable trans identities, and thus, upholds oppressive gender binary systems. According to Hall (1997), these ways of representing

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[2] Subjugated knowledge is knowledge that is not included in dominant narratives (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p.3).

individuals clearly misses the point of representation. Representation plays a critical role in fostering novel forms of knowledge worldwide, exploring new subjectivities, and unveiling new dimensions of meaning that can contribute to the social transformation of values and norms.

In this thesis, I aim to highlight the representation of the everyday experiences of Black trans women through the medium of documentary. The choice to use a documentary is deliberate. Cultural artifacts such as documentaries help uncover the richness of Black trans experiences, which, in turn, can shape the field of (Black) trans studies, as Omni (2023) explains (p.20). Despite the lack of nuance in many representations of Black trans women, there is a growing archive of film documentaries -such as *Disclosure* (2020)- that question *who* can speak for trans individuals and *how* their lives should be represented, as signaled by Travers (2020) and Koch-Rein et al. (2020). I decided on a documentary produced by a Black trans woman for Black trans women based on the fact that non-trans individuals frequently determine the representation of trans individuals without considering the perspectives of trans individuals themselves (Rondot, 2019).

The selected documentary as focus of analysis in this thesis is Kokomo City (2023)[3]. This recently filmed politically-motivated documentary focuses on the everyday subjectivities of Black trans women, as reflected in their narratives. The documentary Filmmaker D. Smith- a Black trans woman herself- shot this documentary in the US. Kokomo City centers on the daily experiences of four Black trans women involved in sex work: Koko, Dominique, Liyah, and Daniella. In the documentary, they share their stories with the filmmaker in a one-on-one setting. The four Black trans women reflect on how they navigate their belonging[4] within the Black community. The documentary shows that the sense of belonging of these Black trans women is neither self-evident nor straightforward within the Black community. This desire to 'fit in' is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This is evident in the documentary, where the filmmaker directs attention to these women's efforts to change and challenge their existence within the Black community. I interpret these efforts as forms of resistance, as they create and shape their own understanding of who they are and what they do in relation to their position in the Black community, specifically as sex workers. Therefore,

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[3] Smith wanted a title that didn't directly reveal the documentary's content while still being original. She chose 'Kokomo City' after hearing the song 'Sissy Man Blues' by Kokomo Arnold from the 1930s. The lyric about longing for a 'sissy man' if God didn't bring a woman inspired the title (Rascoe, 2023).

[4] Belonging has many definitions, but a widely shared understanding is that it is tied to feelings of inclusion, acceptance, and being valued in relation to others within a particular—often historical and cultural—context (Lähdesmäki et al., 2014).

this thesis focuses on the representation of the Black trans women in Kokomo City and their narratives of everyday negotiations of belonging and resistance within the Black community in the US.

As Lähdesmäki et al. (2014) empathize, the feeling of belonging is structured by power dynamics. Intersectionality, a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989) is a valuable tool for critically analyzing and understanding power, particularly how it positions individuals hierarchically at the intersection of social categories, including race, gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). Including intersectionality in the analysis acknowledges the unique position of Black trans women. Consistent with this argument, Ellison et al. (2017) state that trans studies must address the racialized logics of sex/gender that have historically shaped the analytical focus on sex/gender. Therefore, this thesis aims to bring specific societal and academic attention to the represented experiences of Black trans women through an intersectional approach.

These considerations lead to the following research questions:

1. *How does the documentary Kokomo City discursively depict the everyday experiences of Black trans women, specifically those involved in sex work, and what narratives emerge regarding their resistance and everyday negotiations of belonging within the Black community?*
2. *How do gender, sexuality, race, and class intersect in shaping these processes?*

Reading guide

This introduction provided the reasons for and relevance of this research. In the next chapter, chapter two, I will present the theoretical framework for this thesis, including a general discussion on the concept of representation through the work of cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, the feminist ethics of trans representation (since I argue that Kokomo City is a political documentary), and I will discuss the concepts of intersectionality and fugitivity as broader theoretical lenses to interpret the narratives of belonging and fugitivity. In chapter three, I will focus on the methods of this research, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), detailing how I conducted the analysis and reflecting on my own motivations and position. Chapter four presents the first section of the results, where I will discuss Kokomo City as a political documentary and its potential effects related to the cinematic realist and non-realist techniques employed by the filmmaker, D. Smith. I will

explain in the theoretical framework why I regard this as important. Chapter five constitutes the second results section, focusing specifically on narratives of non-belonging, negotiating belonging through sex work and the trans body, and navigating belonging through fugitivity. The final chapter consists of the conclusion, where I provide a concise summary of the findings, interpret the results, and provide suggestions for further research. An important note is that my relation to the material is not discussed solely in the methodology but also throughout the theoretical framework where appropriate. It would be a missed opportunity to exclude transparent considerations on my positionality.

2. *Theoretical framework*

The concept of representation

This paragraph is central to understanding the general discussion on the meaning and function of representation. Representation is a key concept in this research, given the focus on the discursive depiction of Black trans women. Further elaboration on this concept will primarily be through the work of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, a leading scholar in media and cultural studies (Jhally, 2005). According to Hall, representation means *''using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people''* (Hall, 2013, p.1). Language is broadly understood as any organized structure that uses signs to communicate and represent (Hall, 2013). However, Hall (2013) also mentions that representation is much more complex than this definition suggests. It involves not only language but also a system of signs that contribute to meaning and, thus, to representation, including language, sound, (moving) images, paintings, and more (Hall, 2013).

Hall specifically proposes a constructivist theory of representation, which acknowledges the constructed nature of meaning-making in relation to how power operates. I choose to adopt Hall's constructionist approach in this research because it recognizes the subjectivity inherent in representation (Hall, 1997). This approach enables a critical analysis of the power dynamics and ideologies embedded in representation within a specific socio-historical context. Moreover, Hall's constructionist approach facilitates an understanding of how representations are used politically by marginalized communities and individuals, such as Black trans women, thereby offering greater potential for deeper analysis. The following elaboration on Hall's constructionist approach will clarify my choice.

The constructionist view posits that meaning is socially constructed and that things do not inherently have meaning (Hall, 2013). Representation assigns significance to depiction through meaning within a specific socio-historical and cultural context (Hall, 1997). Therefore, representation is not concerned with merely reflecting or distorting reality. Instead, representation plays a more creative and active role in shaping how individuals think about the world and their position within it (Hall, 2013). Concretely, Hall (1973) explains that constructing meaning involves the processes of encoding and decoding. Encoding is the process by which content creators/producers ascribe meaning to media representations, which

is done through choices in how a cultural product is presented to the audience using signs. Conversely, decoding is the process whereby the audience interprets and makes sense of the mediated cultural product (Hall, 1980). According to Hall, there is not a single, fixed meaning in media; content can be interpreted in various ways (Campbell, 2017, p.2). Our conceptual maps, such as classifications, help us create meaning, which occurs through signifying practices; practices involved in meaning-making. These signifying practices are shaped by our expectations of what is present and absent in representation (Hall, 1997).

The encoding/decoding model is more complex than the above description suggests. It involves an intricate process of interconnection between the creation of meaning through content, the content itself, and how it is perceived by the public, as I aim to explain in this and the next paragraph (Hall, 2013). First, the producer intends to create meaning through the encoding process within a specific context. The producer's position affects the encoding process, where powerful individuals often seeking to determine meaning in representation through difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, and more), motivated by their ideology. This means that what is considered 'different' or 'other' is not neutral. Those with the power to encode decide how to define and represent these differences. For example, stereotyping in documentaries can be an intentional effort to establish the meaning of the represented reality (Hall, 2013). Hall emphasizes that representation is always linked to the power struggle over who gets to represent what in the media and in which way (Hall, 1989; Hall, 1997). Popular culture and media matter because they are arenas where power is negotiated, based on political, social, and economic interests and beliefs (Gramsci, 1971). Serving these interests in representation is crucial, as representation shapes everyday perceptions of reality (Hall, 1989). For Hall, analyzing media representation is essential for uncovering the power dynamics at play in the dominant meanings present in representations that promote the interests of the powerful (Campbell, 2017).

Second, meaning is not self-evident to the receptive public in the decoding process. The specific intentions behind a representation are not necessarily how the audience decodes its meaning. The things represented in the media, such as people, events, or objects, do not have a fixed meaning and are constantly changing (Hall, 2013). Accordingly, representation is closely tied to the perspectives or positions from which we speak or articulate ourselves, and it is always situated within a specific context (Hall, 1989). For example, bell hooks was critical of the representation of women in Spike Lee's film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986).

Despite the filmmaker's intention to depict Black women as empowered, patriarchal ideologies persisted within the depiction, with the film centering on the male gaze that objectifies women. hooks noted how Black women were shown in stereotypical roles, shaped by the unique position of Black womanhood. Hence, the interpretation of difference in representation is contested. Nevertheless, Hall mentioned that we can understand difference through cultural work by examining how difference is constructed (Hall, 1997). In the next paragraph, I explain how filmmakers aim to produce an artifact with a specific political effect and for whom.

The feminist ethics of trans representation

How feminists (intend to) represent experiences of transness, the trans body, and trans subjectivity -and why they do so- raises an inherently feminist ethical issue, given the desire to create a politically motivated effect. I explore feminist perspectives on documentary film in relation to Kokomo City, a politically motivated documentary[5]. Feminist film theory has been dominated by key ethical questions: how to represent reality in media, and in the context of transness, for whom this representation is intended. This paragraph explores these considerations, as interpretations of reality in documentary filmmaking shape how depictions of trans subjectivity are encoded and decoded, impacting its potential effect on the public. This is of paramount importance since the research questions concentrates on how Kokomo City depicts Black trans women and their everyday narratives of negotiating belonging and resistance. First, I will clarify what a feminist political documentary might imply.

The filmmaker can have multiple intentions regarding the political aspect of feminist documentary, such as challenging hegemonic dominant discourses and understanding how power relations are ingrained in them. For example, this can be achieved by reflecting marginalized voices, comprehending the social realities of individuals and groups, fostering critical thinking, and mobilizing the public towards action (Trinh, 1990; Juhasz, 1999). Ultimately, documentaries can facilitate the (re)production of cultural values and norms related to various axes of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class, and race (Olivieri, 2018).

Moreover, among feminist scholars, there is a discussion about what constitutes a feminist political documentary in its form, and how its intended goal hinges on how reality is

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[5] As I will show in the analysis in chapter 4.

represented in documentaries, considering that these films are socially constructed. This is an important discussion specifically for documentary films since, as explained by Olivieri (2018), the documentary genre holds a privileged position in the representation of reality. Namely, documentaries are seen as having a less mediated connection with reality than other film genres (p. 211). The line between fact and fiction is blurred; a documentary, as a genre, aims to represent individuals in a non-fictional manner (Olivieri, 2018). As Steinbock (2018) explains, it is impossible to separate representations in documentaries from the real, daily narratives of trans individuals. Nonetheless, documentaries are still creative mediations with cinematographic techniques and continuous choices in, for example, the framing, editing, and selecting of narratives (Bonner, 2013; Riggs, 2016; Olivieri, 2018). Therefore, the constructed nature of documentaries implies an artifice with a specific intention behind producing the documentary, and reality is still questioned (Thrinh, 1990).

More specifically, there are different stances in the 'feminist realist debate'; anti-realism and realism (Olivieri, 2018, p. 215). The intended purpose and character of the feminist documentary determine which approach dominates in pursuing a political aim; it can either be challenging the truth established in dominant discourses through an anti-realist approach or being political in the realist sense, such as in a way that goes beyond naïve realism, as I will explain principles of both approaches.

An anti-realist approach dominated feminist film theory in the '70s. This approach argues that it is impossible to access reality outside of discourses, and representations are as far as we come in understanding reality (Kaplan, 1983). This entails that movies do not reflect reality or 'the objective truth,' and spectators should not passively accept depictions in cinema but instead, should suspect and challenge representation (Marcus, 2007; Olivieri, 2018). Thus, in anti-realism, the emphasis is on the constructedness of narratives, with particular attention to how reality is embedded in dominant, among others, patriarchal narratives (Johnston, 1973). Such a critical approach to reality raises the threshold for understanding documentaries, making them more accessible to mostly already literate and critical audiences (Olivieri, 2018, p. 216).

Furthermore, the anti-realist approach is highly critical of realism/the realist approach. Realists opted for realist cinematographic strategies for political aims to facilitate identification and to be accessible to a wider audience (Olivieri, 2018, p. 216). These strategies consist of providing the impression of uncontrolled, spontaneous, and unavoidable content to make it appear as objective and factual as possible (Capdevila, 2015). Realism, in

this regard, implies a relation to accuracy, reliability, or authenticity (Moon, 2018, p. 44). However, anti-realism and realism are not mutually exclusive, as I argue through the work of Trinh (1990) and Juhasz (1999).

Juhasz (1999) critiqued traditional realism that proposes the existence of an objective truth, and goes beyond naïve realism. She acknowledges and advocates for the use of realist techniques such as documenting stories, since realism can be a mode to connect with broader audiences by facilitating identification with the represented individuals. Such identification can convince and evoke emotions; empathy and a deeper understanding of other realities, which in turn, can foster critical thinking and collective action. Juhasz (1999) emphasizes that realist techniques can be used in a very critical and complex way, challenging the idea that realism equals complicity with dominant, hegemonic narratives.

Similarly, Trinh (1990) recognizes the capacity of realist techniques in documentary as a tool for comprehending the social realities of individuals and groups, and the concurrent power relations that shape these realities. Meanwhile, both Juhasz (1999) and Trinh (1990) point out the necessity of deconstructing realist strategies by being transparent and reflecting on the mediation of creative elements in representation, showing their critical stance towards realism, and their intention to reflect on dominant narratives. As Trinh (1990) argues, exposing the constructed nature of the documentary is essential for it to be politically effective, without denying that such representation engages with the reality of the represented. In this way, we can overcome the realist/anti-realist discussion by understanding how they can be part of documentaries in their own way. Also in this thesis, understanding the discursive depiction of Black trans women also necessarily consist of reflecting on the creative meditations of the documentary in decoding meaning.

While the discussion of the political aspects of documentary in realism and anti-realism primarily focuses on how to represent reality and why, as well as how the audience relates to the documentary and reality, other feminist authors focus on the interaction of trans and media studies consider the intended audience in the particular context of trans representation. For example, Steinbock (2018) refers to Cáel Keegan's (2016) concept of the trans media object, which implies an intention to create space to cultivate trans consciousness for trans individuals specifically, in order to explore diverse non-normative gender identities and presentations: *''transformative engagement with media images can aid transgender subjects in exploring the shape of our subjectivities, which exceed the dominant narratives imposed on us''* (Keegan, 2016, p.27). Steinbock (2018) argues that instead of intending to educate the

audience on transness as a political goal, based on differences between cis individuals and trans individuals (instructional/pedagogical trans figures), trans representation should invite trans audiences themselves to be involved in an exploration and reflection on non-traditional and binary gender norms (aesthetic experiences). As Keegan (2022) explains, such an approach prevents transness from being represented in a way that confirms cisnormative expectations. The trans media object can function as a liberating space for trans individuals since they can more authentically express themselves without considering cisnormative expectations. The following paragraph introduces a theoretical lense in this research; intersectionality, that helps to uncover the interplay of various factors in shaping the experiences of trans individuals.

Theoretical lens: intersectionality

The reason to pay specific attention to the unique social position is based on the idea that interlocking systems of oppression inherently tie to exclusion and, concurrently, experienced marginalization grounded in exclusion. I regard the focus on intersectionality as specifically needed in this research for two reasons. Firstly, because of the focus on belonging and thus, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in power dynamics. Intersectionality offers a critical lens for analyzing power dynamics. Secondly, there is a need to consider racialized logics in trans studies (Ellison et al., 2017). Therefore, I argue that intersectionality provides a more layered understanding of these narratives of belonging and the counteractions of Black trans women, as reflected in the depicted narratives of resistance.

Many Black feminist scholars wrote from an intersectional perspective before the term intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1989). For example, Sojourner Truth, a woman who escaped slavery, considered the interconnected oppressions of women and Black individuals in her speech *"Ain't I a Woman?"* (1851). Additionally, in the '70s and '80s, Black women were active in the women's, civil rights, Black nationalist, and Black Panther movements but faced exclusion based on their intersectional identities. They often felt marginalized by racism within the women's movement and by sexism within the Black and civil rights movements. Consequently, this resulted in the need to establish a movement that recognized the multiple layers of oppression -racism and sexism- and their interconnectedness, as seen in the Combahee River Collective (1977). Around this time, other Black feminist scholars, such as Audre Lorde, wrote about the different but related forms of oppression she experienced based on her sexual orientation and color as a Black lesbian

woman in her works *Zami* (1982) and *Sister Outsider* (1984). Lorde and the Black feminist scholar bell hooks also addressed the lack of solidarity and recognition among feminists concerning intersectional issues, such as the oppression of Black women (hooks, 1982; Lorde, 1984).

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, coined the concept of intersectionality, referring to the unique realms of social life experienced by Black women as they interact with social and legal-political institutions. These institutions are embedded in culture and thus shaped by social norms with inherent power dynamics. I use intersectionality as the starting point in interpreting narratives of belonging and resistance, based on the depicted experiences, since intersectionality pays attention to the unique social position of the subjects by considering interlocking systems of oppression, such as sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1989). This unique position implies that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identity axes do not operate independently from each other but are experienced and lived simultaneously. This means that intersectionality is not additive; rather, the experiences of Black trans women are shaped not just by being trans, Black, and female, but by Black trans womanhood (Nicols & Stahl, 2019). Concretely, in the analysis, it is paramount to explore how Blackness shapes and gives significance to trans identity and sexuality.

Furthermore, many scholars have further developed the concept of intersectionality from different perspectives. Nevertheless, the main point remains that power structures related to gender and race cannot be studied in isolation (Smiet, 2017; Nicols & Stahl, 2019). The deliberate choice to use Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualization is for a specific reason. Crenshaw (1989) acknowledges that experiences within the category of womanhood can differ, partly because of other intersections. Crenshaw addresses the erasure of experiences and proposes alternative ways of experiencing gender while recognizing the womanhood of the subjects regardless. McShane et al. (2021) builds on this line of argumentation by suggesting that Crenshaw advocated for a denaturalization of imperialist notions of gender by focusing specifically on Black womanhood. In this sense, Crenshaw challenges the notion of a natural manifestation of womanhood as White. Crenshaw's intervention inspires me to use intersectionality in this research to remain open to how (Black) womanhood can be experienced in non-normative ways and to expand the notion of womanhood further, simply because Crenshaw resists dominant rigid gender constructs. This non-essentialist approach to conceptualizing intersectional positions supports the interpretation of trans subjectivities, which is central to the analysis of their depicted narratives. It encourages me, as a non-trans

researcher, to actively reflect on what is missing or flawed in my thinking patterns concerning Black trans womanhood and to critically examine categories that I might have internalized as well. More precisely, intersectionality provides a framework for critically decoding meaning through interpretation in a manner that acknowledges the construction of gender and how a unique social position shapes narratives of belonging and resistance.

Theoretical lens: fugitivity

A specific form of resistance is fugitivity. There are three explicit reasons why the concept of fugitivity is valuable for this research. First, the concept of fugitivity can help in understanding the phenomena of resistance among Black trans women, a central part of the overarching research question. As Bey (2019) argues, fugitivity inherently encompasses resistance, with specific attention to the racial dynamics (Blackness) of resistance. Thus, I consider fugitivity a more precise conceptualization of resistance for this research, given the focus on Black trans women. Second, multiple scholars, such as Hartman (1997), Harney & Moten (2013), and Santana (2019), explain fugitivity in relation to belonging. In my analysis, this element of fugitivity allows for an interpretation of narratives of resistance alongside narratives of belonging within the Black community. Third, Harney & Moten's (2013) conceptualization of fugitivity highlights how it relates to my role as a master's student conducting research within an institutional context, emphasizing the importance of how I listen to the voices of individuals in marginalized positions. This makes fugitivity an ethical consideration in my research practice as well.

The concept of fugitivity is rooted in the history of Black enslavement, particularly in Black American slave narratives (Hartman, 1997). The term fugitivity historically refers to a slave who fled or attempted to escape to pursue freedom and another form of existence, as Jacobs (1861) described as a fugitive slave herself. Du Bois (1835) also refers to fugitivity in his book *Black Reconstruction* during the post-slavery period when political systems in the U.S. failed to protect the civil rights of African Americans due to the foreclosure of governmental institutions, the exclusion of historical narratives of slavery, and racial stereotypes (Hesse, 2014).

Moreover, a thorough conceptualization of Black fugitivity in the literature is provided by Black scholar Saidiya Hartman (1997), which I will use and complement with the work of

Black trans scholar Dora Silva Santana (2019), given that she specifically focuses on Black trans fugitivity and various intersecting identities. In addition, I reflect on my position and motivation for this research in the methods, drawing from the work of Stefano Harney & Fred Moten (2013), since these authors reflect on fugitivity in the institutional context, providing tools for reflection on my role as someone conducting research on fugitivity within an institutional context.

The core meaning of fugitivity is the pursuit of agency and self-definition in the face of oppressive and dehumanizing conditions (Hartman, 1997). Hartman conceptualizes fugitivity as twofold within the specific historical and cultural context of Black slavery: first, as a constant state of escape and flight, and second, as resistance against the dehumanizing conditions imposed by the slave system. Central to Hartman's description is the communal aspect of fugitivity, wherein shared experiences of oppression, embodied in 'a pained body,' lead to a collective yearning for liberation and the fulfillment of basic human needs and desires (Hartman, 1997, p.59). Hartman interprets fugitivity in both physical and psychological terms. In her work, it involves literal physical acts of flight and escape, as well as psychological strategies of resistance, such as the refusal to accept subhuman conditions and the creation of alternative self-understandings outside the objectifying labels imposed by the oppressor. Additionally, Hartman centers her approach on how enslaved individuals made themselves visible within oppressive systems through acts of refusal, asserting their presence and humanity in defiance of dehumanization.

Santana (2019) approaches fugitivity from the contemporary status quo of trans oppression, with a focus on the psychological strategies of resistance from both the individual and the collective: *"What are the strategies of resistance and care for ourselves and our communities in the face of the haunting and material presence of death? How do we imagine possibilities of livable lives, of freedom, well-being, and transformative change, as we resist death?"* (Santana, 2019, pp. 210-211). Her definition of fugitivity relies on fugitivity as refusal (p. 214), a refusal characterized by living life to the fullest possible -*Mais viva!* (p. 215)- while being aware of the oppressive structures Black trans individuals navigate. Santana advocates for creating a liminal space between violent experiences and finding enjoyment in life, both individually and communally. She emphasizes a critical and urgent way of being more alive and a refusal to lose oneself by developing one's own identity. Therefore, fugitivity involves developing new meanings of oneself, distinct from dominant narratives of bodies. Santana

refers to Sandy Stone's *Posttransexual Manifesto* (1993), which advocates for constructing gender notions beyond existing binary discourses (pp. 11-12). Santana precisely aims to use fugitivity in doing so, with specific attention to the intersection of Blackness and transness. She extends this argument to the question of which genealogies we develop in the field of Black trans feminism (Santana, 2019, p. 212).

Santana (2019) poses a critical and ethical question, particularly for researchers in the field of (Black) trans studies. This question, as I interpret it, closely relates to the focus of Harney & Moten (2013) in their book *The Undercommons*, where they call for a space where marginalized groups -although not specifically Black trans individuals- can rethink and reshape alternative knowledge, and where these 'undercommons' can challenge academic institutionalized knowledge. From this, I take that academics need to use terms that sufficiently cover the contemporary meaning of the concept in a specific situation (p. 105), such as Black trans subjectivity. In this research, I aim to bring nuance to academic debates on trans subjectivity, with the work of Santana (2019) and Harney & Moten (2013) providing critical reflection tools on how to do so. Thus, fugitivity is not only about the acts of Black trans women but also about the responsibility of academics to challenge the expectations of academia by listening to voices in creative spaces, as Harney & Moten (2013) argue, and, in my case, studying fugitivity itself. I regard the documentary as a creative space.

In the analysis, these considerations imply that I stay close to the discursive expressions of the four Black trans women, fully immersing myself in listening, observing, and questioning: "What do I see and hear?" This approach involves being sensitive to nuance and letting the observations sink in before contemplating what fugitivity means to these Black trans women. After these observations, I broadly consider the definitions and elements of fugitivity as proposed by Hartman (1997) and Santana (2019), asking questions such as: "What do resistance strategies mean to them in their everyday practice, and how does this relate to normative expectations?" "How do they navigate spaces physically and psychologically?" and "How is fugitivity used to claim belonging, or potentially, how is it a form of belonging itself?" The next chapter, on the methodology, will continue this reflection on my own position and motivation regarding the thesis topic.

3. Methods

In this research, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the visual and linguistic aspects of the documentary, with the main emphasis on linguistics. Foucault (1980) first introduced the concept of discourse to analyze how individuals develop self-understanding within their cultural contexts and produce knowledge about shared meanings and human experiences. According to Hall (2013), discourse involves producing knowledge through language[6], thereby constructing meanings (p. 29). Discourse closely relates to representation; Hall (2013) defines it as a system of representation. CDA, specifically, *''focuses on (group) relations of power, dominance, and inequality and how these are produced or resisted by social group members through text and talk''* (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 18).

There is the broad consensus that CDA includes two main elements; a political concern how power is organized in society, and how language shapes, sustains and unveils these power dynamics (Breeze, 2011, p.495). Given the focus of the research on the topic of belonging and resistance from an intersectional perspective, I deem an analysis of power structures as necessary. This explicitly means that I examine power dynamics within emerging themes. I adopt a constructionist approach to representation in the analysis of the representation of Black trans women's belonging and resistance through meaning-making. This approach posits that meaning is forged through connections between people, events, and experiences, thereby shaping our conceptual world and mental constructs (Hall, 2013). I opted for this approach because I want to give the recognition that discourse does not develop in a social vacuum. Nonetheless, I also consider that the documentary mediates this representation of discourse (Olivieri, 2018). The research focuses on narrative as a form of discourse, thus it does not emphasize 'absolute truth' or assumed reality. Moreover This CDA is based on the represented narratives of four Black trans women in the US and its goal is not to generalize the analysis to Black trans women in the US in general, or even the Black community in general (Gill, 2000).

The scope of Critical Discourse Analysis

I apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with a focus on the linguistic aspects within the documentary, giving subordinate attention to the visual aspects. Therefore, I cannot refer to this research as multimodal (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The visual elements of the documentary

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[6] As mentioned before, Hall (2013) broadly interprets language as any organized system that utilized signs. Thus, it is not just about words, buy also other symbols that convey meaning.

are primarily described for the contextualization of scenes. In Chapter 4, there is some consideration of the visual aspects through realist and non-realist techniques in relation to the political goal of Kokomo City. This selective focus affects the richness of the research, as integrating discursive and visual elements would provide a more holistic examination of meaning, thereby enhancing the depth of understanding (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Ultimately, visuals play a significant role in meaning-making (Marks, 2000). Discursive and visual elements collaborate in crafting meaning, with visual elements, such as the filmmaker's role, camera visibility, color schemes, art and text, film settings, filming angles, lighting, re-enactments, and level of detail, playing a strategic role (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Olivieri, 2018). By prioritizing the linguistics solely, the scope of this research is limited. Practical (time) constrains led to this decision.

Analysis: material selection and coding process

The first step in this analysis involved attentively watching the documentary to generate an understanding of its general themes and main messages. I took notes focusing on cinematic representation, particularly noting visual elements and auditory choices for provides concrete contextualization for the linguistic aspects, and to deconstruct the cinematographic representation in relation to the political goal of Kokomo City. The second step entailed verbatim transcription of the documentary, capturing spoken words and the physical depiction of Black trans women. Following this factual description, I developed memos to record my interpretations and impressions after close reading of the verbatim transcription. The third step was selecting which scenes to analyze, ensuring inclusion of all four Black trans women while excluding scenes where other members of the Black community discussed Black trans women. This decision was made to prioritize the voices and experiences of the women themselves in this research, rather than their reception. The fourth step encompassed the actual coding process: using an a priori coding scheme with thematic codes aligned to the overarching research question and sub-questions, such as 'narratives of resistance', and 'narratives of belonging'. The analysis heavily relied on close reading, followed by open coding of selected scenes using Atlas.ti. Subsequently, pattern coding followed, involving the identification of similarities and differences among all open codes and categorizing them in themes[7].This process of pattern coding included reflecting on how these open codes and themes interrelated, and how they related to the broader context wherein the documentary is

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[7] These themes were foundational in structuring chapter four and five, the analysis.

situated. From this analysis, several themes emerged in the narratives of belonging, narratives of non-belonging, renegotiating belonging (sex work/trans body), and navigating belonging: fugitivity. Additionally, in narratives on fugitivity, themes such as owning a Black trans feminine identity and re-imagining a different existence were prominent.

Throughout the coding process, I maintained memos to document analytical, methodological, and theoretical insights (Sandaña, 2021), which aided in both the (social) analysis and the subsequent writing process. The analytical approach draws inspiration from the models of Fairclough (1992) and Hall (1989), advocating for a social analysis of discursive and some visual elements. This approach situates the analysis within the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the documentary operates. Furthermore, following Fairclough's argument (1992), attention is given to how the documentary serves political ends through discursive practices, influencing knowledge of a broad public and social relations in society.

Such a social analysis is closely tied to an intersectional analysis. There is not one appropriate method for an intersectional analysis. Rather, intersectionality as a concept is criticized for its complexity to apply in the analysis. For example, the concept itself does not explain how to apply it (McCall, 2005). My starting point to apply intersectionality is asking myself questions, a method that I read in the work od Matsuda (1991, p.1189), such as: 'How does racism influence the position of these women?' 'Where do I see the racism in this narrative?' 'How is class relevant in their narratives?' 'How and why is hetero- and cisnormativity normative in their narratives?' With these questions in mind, I read the analysis multiple times, and I think of what these intersections mean in their narratives (Matsuda, 1991).

Reflexivity
Critiques highlight the lack of trans scholars engaged in trans studies (Travers, 2020). As a non-trans scholar, my interest in the representation of trans women arose from consuming feminist documentaries. Watching Kokomo City, I was intrigued by how these women were portrayed with directness and assumed authenticity, boldly sharing their stories and occupying space with their voices and bodies. There is a strength that radiates from them. Choosing this topic raised doubts due to my non-trans identity and the socio-cultural differences. I questioned whether my motivation stemmed from fetishization or 'othering'. However, I realized that this curiosity could help deconstruct my assumptions and stereotypes, inspired by Hall (1997). Instead of fearing fetishization, I aimed to explore the unexpected aspects of their daily experiences and narratives while confronting my own stereotypical thinking patterns

about trans women. For example, as an outsider, it is easy to disregard the affective component of sex work, an aspect that I will discuss in the analysis (chapter 5).

Additionally, the work of Harney and Moten (2013) showed me that fugitivity is not (necessarily) a responsibility of the oppressed. Academics and students within universities should develop sensitivity through fugitive listening, creating space for 'the undercommons' and allowing them to speak with their own voices, in my interpretation of the work of Harney & Moten (2013). Researching the representation of Black trans women is not just for those who define themselves like them but also for ourselves, as these hegemonic structures are detrimental to us all (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 10). Through this realization, a sense of responsibility emerged; while I consume many feminist documentaries, it is easy to overlook their multiple layers of meaning and reduce such documentary to mere entertainment. This thesis provides me the opportunity to reflect on and investigate these meanings, enhancing my ability to critically engage with such documentaries and do justice to the diverse realities they represent.

A related important ethical consideration to the aforementioned reflection is that the coding process, as well as writing the results and conclusion, relies heavily on my interpretation. As a non-trans researcher who is not deeply familiar with Black trans experiences, my perspective might not fully align with the issues of the four Black trans women involved. This disconnection could impact the accuracy and relevance of the analysis (Breeze, 2011, p. 520). I attempted to mitigate this by including direct quotes from these Black trans women in the documentary and by contextualizing when and where they were presented.

Analysis

4. The political dimension of Kokomo City

In the introduction, I argued that Kokomo City is a politically motivated documentary. In this section, I elaborate on the political aim, and through what (realist/non-realist[8]) techniques the documentary maker, D.Smith this pursued. The underlying reason to elaborate on this is the idea that deconstructing the mediation of the creative artifact leads to a better understanding of the aimed representation and it's political goal, which I regard as needed when researching (if Kokomo City is a more) nuanced representation of narratives that goes beyond the extremes. Eventually, Juhansz (1999) and Trinh (1990) both clarify that critically reflecting on hegemonic narratives also entails the deconstruction of documentaries. Instead of solely interpreting the intended goal based on the content of the documentary, I also include the perspective of the documentary maker on the aim of Kokomo City that I read or heard in interviews with her as a foundation for the argument I make. I reflect on the intended goal (why this documentary and for whom), and the connected realist/non-realist strategies in pursuing this aim.

4.1 The intended goals

In multiple interviews, filmmaker Smith, narrates three main intentions with the documentary. First, she wanted to give Black trans women[9] the opportunity to unapologetically be themselves, such as overcoming taboos on how trans bodies look and how this is natural to these women, for example by discussing topics like passing and not-passing. She let them speak without directing them, in Smith's own words (D'Souza, 2023). Through such representation, she aimed to show the humanness of Black trans women, and to give dignity to their story 'without softening the edges and without taking away the realness of Blackness' (Bobak, 2023). In the documentary, I interpret this rawness in its representation through how these women talk about topics such as acceptance and rejection in their own social environment, and how (the history of) Blackness plays a role in this, for example, how slavery still works through in how Black trans individuals are perceived (Smith, 2023, 53:17). In the visual sense, Smith does not soften the edges by including re-enactments of what these

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[8] I do not say anti-realist strategies, because in the realistic approach, non-realist strategies can be used without aligning with the principles of anti-realism, as I will explain in this paragraph as well.

[9] In the analysis, I also refer to 'these women', meaning 'Black trans women'. Not just for enhancing readability, but also because I want to refer to them as they perceive themselves; as women. In Chapter 5, this will be more clear.

women tell, with explicit content, such as violence, sex, and through filming sexualized body parts of the women. In some instances, Smith included corresponding sound effects.

Second, Smith aimed to provide an alternative, more relatable, and authentic narrative to the public, differing from repetitive narratives concerning trans deaths and the glamorousness of transness. To achieve this, she asked the women not to dress differently for the camera than they would in their daily lives (Bobak, 2023). This second aim is also notable in the main topic of the documentary; it is about how these women are positioned in the Black community, including their direct social environment, where violence is one of the sub topics that is part of the broader narratives of belonging, but does not receive main attention (Bobak 2023; D'Souza, 2023).

The first and second aim contribute to the third aim of this documentary; Smith desires to open the conversation in the Black community, aiming for the mitigation of transphobia in the Black community (Haynes, 2013). Showing their humanness and authenticity are means to do so, in my interpretation. Opening up the conversation can be interpreted something after watching the documentary, however, I observed already in the documentary itself how these women are taking the first steps in opening the conversation through the documentary; they speak to the Black community, for example, Daniella, who looks in the camera, points her finger, while speaking directly to Black trans women (Smith, 2023, 1:06:25, image 1). In the next paragraphs, I explain how these political aims in Kokomo City relate to the meaning of specific realist and non-realistic strategies.

Image 1

4.2 Realism

Smith presents the documentary as a portrayal of real, authentic stories. Her approach to realism began with the selection of Black trans women who are not well-known or famous, to depict more average, everyday experiences (Bobak, 2023). She also emphasizes that the documentary is uncontrolled in how these women discuss various topics; they were encouraged to speak freely and to present themselves authentically in their appearance, according to Smith. Interestingly, Smith uses an anti-realist filming technique -shooting in black and white- with the intention of conveying the message more authentically. This choice avoids the "in-your-face" glitter and glamour, instead presenting the raw reality of these women through toned-down visuals (Renata, 2023).

To enhance the sense of objectivity, Smith adopts a "fly-on-the-wall" perspective. This approach, which seeks authenticity through spontaneous and unfiltered content, is a key characteristic of realism (Capdevilla, 2015; Moon, 2018, p. 44). Smith further strengthens this impression of realism by filming the women in their real, everyday environments; their homes (bathroom, bedroom, living room, kitchen) and the public spaces they move in. Her filming technique is adapted to these settings; she positions the camera so that parts of a door or other furniture are visible when the women are sitting on a bed or couch, giving the audience a sense of peeking into their lives (Smith, 2023, 01:15, image 2). Through this, Smith aims to show a slice of their everyday life that is not fabricated for the documentary, as Renov (1993, p.7) explains

Image 2

As I draw this interpretation from the work of Juhansz (1999), Smith employs these realist techniques to foster human identification with Black trans women and to evoke empathy from a cisgender audience, while advocating for the acceptance of Black trans women as women.

Her goal is to minimize the perceived differences between the cisgender public and these women while bringing forth the Black trans subjectivity of these women. The distinction between Black cisgender women and Black trans women is central to the narratives of Black trans women in the Black community, as portrayed in Kokomo City. In this way, Smith seeks to challenge and resist these hegemonic narratives.

4.3 Non-realism

While realism is Smith's guiding principle in the documentary, she also incorporates non-realistic strategies to captivate the cisgender audience, and to bring over the realism of the lives of these Black trans women. In her words, entertainment is a tool to achieve this (D'Souza, 2023). These anti-realist techniques support the delivery of realist narratives: the use of re-enactments, sound effects, fitting music, bright yellow overlaid text, on-screen drawings, and non-linear editing, where Smith shifts between the stories of the four women, are all examples. In my view, these techniques not only enhance the documentary's flow by strategically using anti-realist elements to maintain the audience's attention but also add deeper meaning to the women's words through symbolism and evoke emotional responses to their real stories.

For instance, when Daniella discusses a conversation with her mother, processing her conflicting emotions, and explaining what she sees as the core issue in the non-acceptance of Black trans women and how overcoming this would allow her to reach her full potential, flowers begin to bloom on the screen. I interpret this as symbolic of the beginning of a dialogue and the potential for the beautiful aspect when belonging of Black trans women occurs or when such difficult conversations are opening, as represented by the blooming flowers (Smith, 2023, 1:02:50, image 3)

Image 3

In the end, Smith utilizes both realist and non-realist strategies within the documentary; the non-realist techniques, creative mediations are employed to enhance the audience's engagement with what is intended to be perceived as a realistic portrayal. Additionally, these creative mediations add depth to the conveyed meaning and evoke emotions by engaging the senses more intensely, in my interpretation. As Trinh (1990) explains, intertwining multiple realist and non-realist strategies is not problematic when the artifice and its political purpose are made explicit. She emphasizes that engaging with reality through fictional elements in a documentary is possible, but it requires careful reflection.

4.4 Trans media object?

Finally, the question of 'for whom' this documentary was primarily made is clear: it is for Black women themselves, to allow them to be unapologetically themselves, and specifically for the Black community, to open up a conversation about transness within that community. In this sense, I would interpret Kokomo City as a pedagogical intervention (Juhansz, 1999). Thus, interpreting Kokomo City as a trans media object might seems like a stretch[10]. In Kokomo City, the focus is less on exploring their own identities and presentations and more on affirming who they are. However, the performances of the women in the documentary do not rule out the possibility that they further explored their subjectivities while speaking, as they reflect on what being trans means to them and on the importance of being true to themselves, regardless of others' opinions.

Also, as a viewer, it is unclear to what extent these women considered their non-trans audience in their expressions, as a trans media object is typically aimed exclusively at a trans audience. Moreover, if these women did have the opportunity to explore their transness within the documentary, it occurred not through the medium of the documentary itself, but through the process of telling their stories and reflecting on their experiences in a one-on-one setting with the Black trans filmmaker as she filmed. Therefore, I would hesitate to categorize Kokomo City as a trans media object in the conventional sense. At most, it could be considered a by-product of a more flexible interpretation of what constitutes a trans media object in specific film contexts like Kokomo City, which is an intriguing concept to explore further.

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[10] In case the definition of Keegan is needed again: a trans media object, as defined by Keegan (2016, p.27), is a space where trans consciousness is cultivated, specifically for trans individuals, to explore diverse non-normative gender identities and presentations.

5. Everyday negotiations of belonging

In this chapter, I explore how four Black trans women discuss their negotiations of belonging in everyday contexts within the Black community. A recurring theme in their narratives is the simultaneous experience of belonging and non-belonging. The boundaries between belonging and non-belonging can shift suddenly, creating a blurred distinction; their belonging is not easily demarcated. This dynamic of belonging and non-belonging concretely manifest in two ways: on the one hand, a non-belonging expressed via 1) ignorance and 2) violence, and on the other hand, through their negotiation of everyday belonging via 1) the Black trans body and 2) the corresponding unique services in sex work, both desired by Black men. Specifically their bodies and services create a longing for their sexual presence. Consequently, the belonging of these Black trans women often occurs in a secret, liminal, in-between space within the broader context of non-belonging. The following section highlights how the everyday negotiations of belonging reveal the intertwined dualities of belonging and non-belonging in the narratives of Liyah, Dominique, Koko and Daniella, and how intersecting forms of oppression shape these experiences.

I first start with deepening out their represented narratives on non-belonging by describing how these women experience it, and following, how a non-belonging based on transness is related to experienced oppression in the Black community. This does not only give a more layered explanatory social analysis, as Hall (2013) advocates for, but is also an intersectional analysis, specifically on the intersection of Blackness and transness in oppression. After this, I elaborate on the represented narratives of how belonging is negotiated through sex work. In this section, I also apply an intersectional analysis of gender, sexuality, and class. Last, I explore how these women instrumentalize fugitive acts and thinking is navigating and claiming their belonging.

5.1 The narrative of non-belonging

One manifestation of non-belonging in the Black community as depicted in the documentary is through transphobic violence. The documentary begins with Liyah, lying on her bed, recounting how she anticipated the possibility of violence when she saw a 'big-ass motherfucking pistol' next to her client. She grabs the gun because 'it is his life or mine' and

pulls the trigger three times. The gun did not go off. She and the client started wrestling and fighting over the gun until he jumped in his car and sped off. Afterwards, the client and Liyah resolved the conflict via text message and decided to have a sex nonetheless (Smith, 2023, 00:09). Additionally, Dominique narrates another story of violence. While standing in her house in a doorway, she tells how she went home with a Black man after partying, and how she got slapped in the face after the man, who had just had an orgasm through oral sex, found out she had male genitals (Smith, 2023, 15:25).

The visibility of violence against trans individuals is omnipresent in the media, as Chu & Drager (2019) state. Kokomo City does not exclude this aspect of trans subjectivity. Trauma, violence, and stigmatization are integral parts of the documentary, reflecting their daily experiences and showing how this violence both stems from and manifests non-belonging. Including these narratives adds urgency to the documentary in light of its political goal. The violence depicted in the documentary is not merely to portray victimhood since these women tell their stories compellingly.

Another manifestation of their non-belonging and the transphobia within the Black community is the ignorance of their existence in various social relationships; family, romantic relationships, and the community at large. The women experience this as rejection. As Daniella says, while sitting on a public bench along the river in Brooklyn in her sports clothes, the Black community knows and sees the existence of Black trans women. However, Black cis heterosexual women, whose gender and sexual identities are perceived as normal within the Black community, refuse to acknowledge Black trans women. This is one specific way of how Daniella experiences transphobia, which she also generalizes to other Black trans women (Smith, 2023, 1:02:45). In addition, Koko explicates an example of family rejection. While sitting on her couch in her work clothes, she describes how parents of Black trans children deny and reject their existence and identity, pushing their own children out onto the streets. Moreover, Dominique expands this claim of non-existence to romantic relationships. While lying on her bed in a white dress, smoking a cigarette, she says: *''I wish that at least half of the guys that I've dated, been with, slept with, celebrities, would, you know, say that they have been with me. I mean any normal guy would not be ashamed to say that they've slept with me''* (Smith, 2023, 31:39).

5.2 The meaning of Black transness in the Black community

In these narratives of the women, the characterization of non-belonging stems from the denial of trans-attraction, embedded in dominant notions of masculinity in the Black community. The Black trans women underscore that this denial is part of a broader culture of non-acceptance of non-normative genders and sexualities within the Black community. Parents raise their children with the attitude to dislike trans individuals: *"You gonna hate who the people that love you tell you to hate"* (Smith, 2023, 53:14). Consequently, belittlement of trans attraction occurs (Smith, 2023, 52:19).

Daniella explains that the origin of this non-acceptance narrative is a verbalized desire to meet the White community's specific standards in order to be seen as equal (Smith, 2023, 53:18). Historically, as Collins (2003) notes, White people ridiculed and looked down on Black people for their assumed sexual behavior (hypersexuality, asexuality). Black sexuality has always been regarded in relation to White sexuality, initially by White individuals, and later by Black people themselves through internalization. As a result, their sexuality has been constrained by this perception (Collins, 2003), as Daniella validates. This history of oppression of Black sexuality continues to contribute to the perception of trans attraction as a threat to masculinity, leading to a degradation of status both within and outside the Black community.

This historical relationship between Blackness, sexuality, and status affects Black cis women's social expectations of Black men. They are expected to maintain the family, improve the family's social position, and ensure procreation. Black men are also expected to take on the role of 'freedom fighters' by conforming to a heteronormative and cisgender system (Smith, 2023, 1:04:24). Thus, there remains a survival mindset in which trans-intolerant members of the Black community associate being trans or trans-attracted with vulnerability, a trait seen as incompatible with survival. This mindset enforces assimilation into a heterosexual, cisgender norm to be considered a 'proper' Black citizen, as confirmed by Black trans scholar Bey (2017, p. 277). This assimilation serves as a strategy for coping with the ongoing perception of Black individuals as second-class citizens. Ultimately, there is a longing to be seen as successful and enough, and the common approach is to succeed within normative systems (Smith, 2023, 25:50). Consequently, boundaries are drawn within the Black community, determining who belongs and who does not, based on being trans and/or trans-attracted.

So far, it appears that these boundaries are rigid, what sociologist Epstein (1992) refers to as social boundaries. As Daniella narrates, *''We all scream the narrative that we are oppressed, that we all are bound by the white man, but we're the first motherfuckers to turn our nose up to the next person who wanna stand out and be different''* (raises voice) (Smith, 2023, 54:37). However, these boundaries of non-belonging can be bridged, crossed, and blurred, as explained by sociologists Lamont & Molnár (2002, p. 186). In the following paragraph, I will explain how non-belonging is nuanced and replaced by a specific form of belonging within the secret spheres of sex work.

5.3 Renegotiating belonging: sex work as desire

Even though the narratives of non-belonging are a substantial part of the documentary, I argue that it is clear that there is a blurred line between belonging and non-belonging. The threat of violence can suddenly shift to the human needs of (sexual) desire, and vice versa. To illustrate, in the same scene where Liyah saw the gun, she also depicted a desire for their bodies and sexual services; the attraction of trans bodies for Black men, which eventually led to a consensual sex after the violence occurred (Smith, 2023, 03:38). Similarly, for Dominique, right after giving oral sex, the Black man was suddenly violent to her (Smith, 2023, 16:20). These two situations reflect what Koko said while sitting on her couch: *"Trade[11] wants you but trade will also kill you"* (Smith, 2023, 33:50).

In this section, I reinforce the argument of fluid and blurred boundaries of belonging by unfolding the narratives of belonging, alongside the previous narratives of non-belonging. The interpretation of the title of this section, 'sex work as desire,' is twofold. First, it reflects the secret desire of Black men for the Black trans bodies[12] of these women. Second, it represents the Black trans women's desire for belonging, which they seek through recognition and appreciation of their passing bodies in the context of sex work. In the following paragraphs, I focus on these two interpretations in two distinct narratives. Finally, I reflect on how belonging is connected to class, noting that this research provides a different perspective on class compared to the conventional understanding tied to Black trans women involved in sex work, as explained in the introduction.

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[11] According to Koko, trade is the average straight man (Smith, 2023, 33:45).
[12] Specifically the body that passes as woman.

The first narrative of 'sex work as desire' is a narrative of belonging through secret sexual desire for the trans body that passed as a women, and their services. In the next two paragraphs, I show how the elements of secrecy and desire support my argument for the existence of the first narrative. To begin with, secrecy is characterized by how Koko and Liyah refer to their sex clients as hypermasculine in appearance and in performance in the Black community: 'real though, rugged trade' (Koko) and 'the most thuggish hood types' (Liyah) (Smith, 2023, 09:27&34:05). Liyah explains that someone would never expect these men to be trans-attracted, and she discusses the variety of Black men who seek her sexual services (Smith, 2023, 09:23). I want to empathize 'in appearance', because Koko breaks with this hypermasculine perception of these Black men by explaining that their sexual preferences are to be the bottom and to be dominated (Smith, 2023, 26:36). This stands in opposition to their hypermasculine performance in the Black community, which centers around domination, strength, physical and sexual aggressiveness, competition, heterosexuality, and cisgender identity (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Benson, 2001). By referring to such masculine performances of their clients and the unexpectedness of trans-attraction among these men, the masking and secrecy of trans-attraction are highlighted.

Furthermore, the element of desire is centered around the depiction of the seductive, sexy, feminine trans body, and the specific performance of these Black trans women as sex workers. Primarily, the objectification of trans bodies is visible throughout the documentary. For example, scenes focus/zoom in on their breasts and buttocks, and how these women themselves look in the mirror (Smith, 2023, 32:45&36:02). By sexualizing their bodies and literally looking in the mirror, there is the gaze from us, as viewers, objectifying their bodies, enforcing this narrative of desire. Also, these women verbalize that Black men feel attracted to their Black trans feminine body with *"titties and a big dick,"* in Koko's words, that pass as an object of desire, which is needed in sex work (Smith, 2023, 21:59). Another aspect of desire is through their services they provide as sex workers. As Liyah and Koko explain, they know how to fulfill specific sexual desires, such as men that want to bottom and be submissive (Smith, 2023, 21:44). This allows these men to express their sexual desires authentically without having to maintain a hypermasculine front. They connect their sexual desires to the opportunity to be themselves around women, free from the need to perform hypermasculinity (Smith, 2023, 18:55).

The second, but complementary narrative of 'sex work as desire' reflects the Black trans women's longing for belonging, which they pursue through the recognition and appreciation of their passing trans bodies within the context of sex work. In the next two paragraphs, I discuss how I interpret how sex work can serve as a means to fulfill the desire for belonging, while also noting that this form of belonging is not endlessly satisfying. The first point to consider is that the desire to belong of Black trans women through sex work is an acknowledgment of their existence and importance as (trans) women. To illustrate, Koko says that there is a big market for *"pretty-ass girls with a big dick and titties"* (Smith, 2023, 21:59). They pass as girls, and the fact that they have non-conforming genitals is not a criterion for passing, which validates their womanhood. Dominique even mentions that she embraces her transsexuality through sex work (Smith, 2023, 23:45). Moreover, as Daniella tells, men do not even notice her transness during sexual encounters, making her pass as a woman: *"Your man didn't even know I was transgender and came ready to climb my hole, giving me all my Black womanness"* (Smith, 2023, 1:06:39). As Vipond (2015) and Glover (2016) highlight, there is a tendency for trans individuals to assimilate in order to be included based on similarity. Notably, these women do not want to care whether they pass or are seen as similar to other women or not, as Liyah explains: *"I don't like the concept of passability because I feel like... I feel like fuck passability. Everybody should just be them, you know?"* (Smith, 2023, 36:23). This verbal expression can be seen as a sign of expressing their desire for authenticity and self-identification while navigating their belonging based on desire. However, this documentary shows that they are not indifferent about being desired, included, and therefore, passing.

In essence, sex work serves as a validation of passing as women and recognition of womanhood, which is a longing for these Black trans women within a community that stigmatizes them. Sex work can function as a way to pass -first and foremost, as women- and thereby be deemed worthy of affection as humans, highlighting the affective satisfaction derived from objectification. However, this objectification can also be perceived as a temporary and superficial form of belonging. When recognition is based on objectification, performance of femininity, and sex work alone, it can lead to feelings of 'losing oneself,' as Daniella described while sitting in her bathtub (Smith, 2023, 44:04). Therefore, belonging based on desire is not endlessly satisfying or comforting. I propose two possible explanations for this feeling. First, these women discuss recognition based solely on bodily objectification, which can feel superficial since their worth extends beyond just their physical appearance.

Second, the constant pursuit of acceptance by adhering to dominant norms and values of femininity (transnormativity) can be exhausting. This transnormativity, particularly as reinforced by Black men in the specific context of Black trans sex work, might limit other expressions of identity, as Glover (2016) explains. This restriction could contribute to the feeling of 'losing oneself'.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, the media and scholars frame sex work oftentimes in relation to limited options and economic necessity due to class. it is important to go beyond this one-sided narrative of economic survival (Glover, 2016). Indeed, the lack of belonging within the Black community contributes to the engagement in sex work, when young trans individuals are rejected by family, as Koko and Daniella mention (Smith, 2023, 34:56&40:45). Besides this obvious argument of economic survival, which is also present in Kokomo City, sex work has a more profound meaning, as can be understood from the former interpretation on belonging. Sex work also fulfills the desire for belonging by enabling individuals to 'pass' as women. It supports this cycle of 'passing' by providing the financial means to afford surgeries that enhance feminine appearance, as Dominique notes (Smith, 2023, 7:00). This aligns with the concept of transnormativity (Glover, 2016).

5.4 Navigating belonging through fugitivity

Renegotiating belonging through sex work in a context of non-belonging within the Black community is what I have discussed so far. Another way these women navigate belonging is through fugitivity. Fugitive navigation involves resistance as a meaning-making practice (Santana, 2019). The resistance of these women aims for acceptance and, thus, visible, public belonging. Their resistance represents a form of practicing liberation within the constraining contexts of heterosexism, transphobia, and racism. These women challenge the status quo of their exclusion through fugitivity. As I will show throughout the following section, fugitive acts and fugitive thinking are ways of living that maintain the meaning and dignity of their lives. A key argument in the work of Santana (2019) as well. Fugitivity relates to the political aim of Kokomo City to combat trans hostility in their community and beyond, as addressed in chapter 4. Specifically, I argue that Kokomo City presents two narratives of fugitivity: first, owning a Black trans feminine identity, and second, re-imagining a different existence. I will discuss these narratives in separate paragraph, but before this, it is important to contextualize these narratives through a quote that reflects the racialized aspect of fugitivity that is related to the above-mentioned two narratives of fugitivity, because in the end, fugitivity is a racialized

form of agency that is impacted by a history of oppression. I contextualize the racialized aspect this through a quote of Daniella:

"The Black experience has always been limited to the way in which a white person told us we could live, okay? And we threaten that as Black trans people because what we're saying to Black people who had been conditioned in that mindset that a Black man should be this way and a Black woman should be that way. We're saying, 'Fuck all that'" (Smith, 2023, 53:18). Daniella clarifies that Black trans individuals break with the slavery mindset by living beyond the rules of a White mindset and being who they want to be. She refers to the historical systemic oppression of Black individuals in a racialized and gendered way, leading to the internalization of specific gendered behavior. Powerfully rejecting the constraints of racial oppression through redefining Blackness and their identity is a manifestation of deviating from the norm. This is how these women challenge contemporary forms of oppression rooted in history and rigid notions of womanhood, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

Owning a Black trans feminine identity

The first narrative consists of owning and embracing an identity as Black trans woman serves as an intervention of resistance, stretching normative notions of womanhood. As I have distilled from the analysis, these Black trans women in Kokomo City affirm their identity in four distinct, but connected ways:

- Showing indifference to dominant social norms;
- validating their gender through sex work;
- presenting their similarity to cis women;
- and being explicitly visible in public.

First, showing indifference to social norms is a fugitive act, but can also be interpreted as precondition to act in a fugitive way. That is why I firstly delve into this way of 'doing fugitivity'. The women in Kokomo City express indifference towards others' judgments as a way to own their identity. This allows them to be themselves and do what they want as Black trans women. It is a strategy to challenge cisnormative and heteronormative beliefs about sexuality and gender. Accordingly, their indifference is not about apathy but rather a deliberate and strategic stance to reject community judgments and reclaim their identity within a community where they aim to redefine their sense of belonging. Dominique's statement illustrates this vividly: *"Like, if they wanna put their dick in a girl, in the wife, and*

they're trans, like that's their dick. That is who they wanna fuck. Why does everybody else care about who wants to fuck who?" (Smith, 2023, 32:10). She stresses individual autonomy and the normalization of transness by being indifferent to others' opinions. Similarly, Liyah verbally rejects normative gender expectations from others and emphasizes living fully when considering passing*: "Personally, I do not care about passing because I feel like it stops you from living life the way you wanna live life, and I feel that we should not live by rules"* (Smith, 2023, 37:28).

Second, manifesting a specific sexuality through sex work also helps in claiming their Black trans womanhood. Sex serves as a way to gain validation, strengthening them to express themselves as Black trans women. Notably, this validation of their womanhood through sex with men also includes affirmation of transness, as Dominique verbalizes (Smith, 2023, 23:45). However, this perception of Black transness of Black men is different from dominant social norms. Daniella explains that specifically Black ciswomen cannot accept trans women as women, stating that men see ciswomen and trans women as equal: *"Because when your husband encountered me, he saw me as a Black woman"* (Smith, 2023, 35:11).

The third way of owning their Black womanhood is related to this above quote of Daniella, namely, Daniella and Dominique minimize differences, and present their similarity to cis women. As Dominique narrates: *"A lot of us are way more woman than a lot of cis women. The only thing is, we have male parts"* (Smith, 2023, 17:10). In this sentence, she self-identifies as a woman based on the performance of gendered behavior. Dominique enforces the idea that gender is not natural behavior tied to sex. This mentality provides the space to own her womanhood.

Fourth, Daniella owns her Black trans womanhood by being explicitly visible in public spaces. Unlike many others, she does not move around inconspicuously but intentionally makes herself visible in places such as parks and stores. For example, she walks with her hand in the air, walks down the streets as if on a catwalk, and raises her voice (Smith, 2023, 17:59). She takes up space to gain recognition of her existence, as she experiences ignorance: *"What we usually do as trannies, we be broken down, but we need to stand out (laughs). Okay, broken the fuck down and needed all of that sound, all of that attention"* (Smith, 2023, 17:18). This is a fitting example of living with more liveliness instead of merely existing, as Santana (2019) states. Daniella clearly shows how she fights for self-definition and self-expression of her Black transness through her visible presence. With her visibility, Daniella desires the

community, specifically Black cis women, to reflect on their own judgments by positioning her perceived non-conforming Black trans womanhood as a mirror for others to examine their belief systems. I interpret this from how she speaks to her target audience: *"And what makes my shit so different? Because I am not carrying it out the way you want me to? And now ask yourself, who are you and who are you really when God is gonna be the one to judge you?"* (Smith, 2023, 1:06:20). Daniella advocates for embracing an authentic Black trans identity, free from the constraints of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and racism. When she expresses herself, flowers are popping open and blooming, which, in my perception, symbolizes fugitivity as a form of human joy. This aligns with Santana's (2019) work; resistance to losing oneself is a joyful fugitive act where Black trans women can live fully, already experiencing freedom through their fugitive acts. This complements re-imagining a different existence, the second fugitive narrative.

Re-imagining a different existence

A second narrative of resistance involves imagining alternative ways of living and existing, which is also central in the work of Hartman (1997) and Santana (2019)[13]. The Black trans women in Kokomo City visualize different ways of existing. On one hand, they imagine a more individualistic existence, seeking other work besides sex work to escape exposure to transphobic violence. On the other hand, they envision a community-oriented existence of acceptance and belonging to diminish the impact of oppressive systems. I will delve deeper into how these imaginations manifest in the narratives of the Black trans women.

First, the individualistic-oriented narrative focuses on transitioning from sex work to another job to reduce the risk of transphobic violence. As Liyah narrates: *"I want out…I need something else to do because I don't realistically know or see how long I can see myself doing this. And it's like, in this game, bitch, either you get out of it or you end up dead"* (Smith, 2023, 58:40). Koko also recognizes her potential to do different jobs and wishes to apply her abilities elsewhere (Smith, 2023, 1:00:45). This suggests that her validation as a Black trans woman does not need to come through sex work but through other means. However, Koko also underscores the difficulty in switching jobs due to transphobia in the labor market and society at large (Smith, 2023, 1:00:44). She realizes that transphobic structures confine her dreams. Again, freedom -or the freedom to dream- and containment coexist, as Hartman (1997) and Santana (2019) stress.

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[13] "Imagining possibilities of livable lives, of freedom" (Santana, 2019, p.211).

Second, Koko also envisions a community-oriented change. She wants to spread a different message than those aligned with dominant trans narratives, speaking for girls who cannot speak for themselves. She is tired of people looking down on trans individuals: *"But just being, just being something that you were born to be. Like how could people look down on you and say things to make it not, people... I cannot believe how the world makes you think that you've done something wrong"* (Smith, 2023, 1:02:13). Her wish is to shift dominant transphobic narratives through music to create more acceptance for trans individuals. This is a form of resistance to opposed labels (Hartman, 1997), and simultaneously, a care for the well-being of the trans community, another manifestation of fugitivity (Santana, 2019).

Third, Daniella narrates change as a communal fight against oppressive systems, aiming not only for the liberation of Black trans women but also for the liberation of the Black community in general. She talks about 'we' (all Black people) in a communal fight. Trans liberation is the starting point of her reasoning, but she realizes that Black trans oppression occurs because the Black community itself is not liberated from a slavery mindset, as discussed in the former section through the quote of Daniella. Instead of prescribing actions, she uses the opportunity in the documentary to encourage individuals to reflect on their own contributions to existing racist and transphobic systems of oppression, by directly speaking to them and unfolding the issues concerning trans acceptance.

In short, these visualizations of the future and dreams all represent different ways of fulfilling basic human needs and desires: living, and living more alive in full recognition of their bodies and subjectivities in a community and society that includes trans individuals in all these aspects. This corresponds with Hartman's (1997) notion of the fundamental nature of liberation.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I aimed to explore how Black trans women's narratives of everyday negotiations of belonging and resistance within the Black community are represented in the politically motivated documentary Kokomo City, through an intersectional lens.

The significance of this thesis lies in its intervention against binary representations of transness, trans identity, and trans subjectivity in media and academia. From the onset of this attention to the present, binary representations of transness have predominantly prevailed in both areas, such as narratives on either deadly victimization or famous success/empowerment (Chu & Drager, 2019). Such representations reduce trans individuals to simplistic subjects, reinforcing stereotypes that become embedded in public perception and upholding an oppressive binary gender system characterized by cisnormative and heteronormative structures. Through this research, I sought to explore a more complex subjectivity of transness by examining represented narratives of belonging and resistance in everyday settings through the artifice of documentary.

I departed from a theoretical framework wherein I discussed how media depictions are ascribed meaning through decoding and encoding, and how this relates to feminist ethics of representation within the broader realist/anti-realist debate. I emphasized the importance of deconstructing politically motivated documentaries and their creative cinematographic mediations to better grasp how such mediations contribute to the /aim of representation. In this deconstruction and further analysis of emerging narratives on everyday negotiations and resistance, I employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), using intersectionality and fugitivity as guiding lenses, with a primary focus on the linguistic aspects of these narratives.

In the analysis, it became clear that the filmmaker of Kokomo City primarily has a pedagogical intention, aiming to dismantle cisnormative and heteronormative structures by contributing to a sense of belonging for Black trans women within the Black community. This pedagogical intention is pursued through realist strategies designed to evoke emotions and identification, as well as through the intensification of this goal using non-realist strategies, as analyzed through the work of Juhansz (1999) and Trinh (1990). Interestingly, non-realist strategies are instrumentalized to support the realist impression of the documentary. Furthermore, although Kokomo City could be a trans media object, it is a potential by-effect rather the overall aim of the documentary, as I argue in chapter 4.

The pedagogical intention of the documentary aligns with the intention to transform the secret belonging of Black trans women more public belonging. As I argued, the narratives of negotiating belonging in a context of transphobia[14] and cis- and heteronormativity is through sex work that is a in-between liminal space. The driving forces are sex work as desire, from both the Black men as sex client who desires the Black trans feminine body and their unique services, and the Black trans women desiring the aspect of belonging that comes with sex work, based on their desired body. Hence, sex work as mode of survival is a stereotypical - incomplete and simplistic- image, and we have to move beyond this narrative by including the affective element in sex work; 'sex work as desire for belonging'. A similar argument on sex work employed by Black trans women is made by Glover (2021), who refers to the affect-driven customer service (p.566).

These Black trans women do not solely renegotiate their belonging through sex work in an in-between space between public belonging and non-belonging. I also argue that they claim[15] their belonging through fugitive acts and fugitive re-imagining. This relates to the experience of their belonging as not deeply satisfying, possibly due to its temporariness, the objectifying nature of belonging, and the limited scope (primarily Black men who are clients). These women employ fugitive strategies in two ways. First, by owning their Black trans feminine identity as part of a broader notion of womanhood. They assert this identity by showing indifference to dominant cis- and heteronormative norms, which creates room for claiming their womanhood through sex work, breaking rigid gender norms and categories, and presenting their similarity to cis women. Daniella, in addition to these psychological modes of fugitivity, physically embodies this by being explicitly visible in public, refusing to conform, and showing her way of being fully alive, a manifestation of what Santana (2019) describes as *'Mais Viva!'* (p.215). Second, these women re-imagine a different existence for themselves, in a different work sector, and for the collective. By telling their stories, they aim to contribute to changing oppressive social structures. This effort is not only for themselves but also for the Black community, as trans oppression is intertwined with oppression within the Black community. This communal undertaking of fugitivity involves a refusal of labels imposed by oppressive structures (Hartman, 1997), and aligns with Hartman's (1997) concept of liberation, which includes freedom from interlocking oppressive systems.

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[14] Manifested through violence and ignorance, as I argued in chapter 5 (p.27).

[15] With claiming I mean that there is no negotiation on how they do or think in fugitive ways, in opposition to renegotiating belonging with Black men as sex clients, where interaction -also based on the sexual desires of Black men- creates this liminal, secret space.

This is where the concept of intersectionality is of importance, providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the formerly summarized different narratives on belonging. The intersectional analysis reveals that the marginalization of Blackness persists in the contemporary lives of Black individuals, manifesting psychologically as a desire to live up to a successful standard. This marginalized position creates a situation within the Black community where non-normative interpretations of womanhood and sexuality are perceived as a threat to potential success. Black individuals are often not seen as equal citizens when associated with non-normative genders and sexualities (Bey, 2017). In contrast, masculinity is associated with success, as it relates to providing for a family. This dynamic is likely reinforced by class issues, as scholars have documented economic and social exclusion in the Black community (Kendi, 2016). Daniella explains that a survival mindset, as a legacy of slavery, is still prevalent. This mindset reflects the oppression these Black trans women face from both society at large and their own community, due to internalized cisnormative and heteronormative standards.

However, it would be too simplistic to interpret the narratives of belonging solely as narratives of marginalization based on how race, gender, sexuality, and class shape these processes given their agency to renegotiate and claim belonging. Notably, while Black transness can lead to exclusion tied to racial societal structures, Black feminine transness simultaneously fosters inclusion in a secret, desired liminal space. Although cisnormativity and heteronormativity still prevail to some extent in this space -since these women argue that their bodies need to 'pass' in accordance with transnormativity, such as having 'big titties' and a generally feminine appearance- these norms are less visible in this secret space where the trans body is desired and accepted. I specifically argue that interpreting the results of this research solely in terms of marginalization, based on an intersectional analysis, should be avoided. Rigid intersectional thinking can lead to binary representations, which would not do justice to trans subjectivity.

Intersectionality is often associated with systems of oppression, but this does not preclude belonging in all social relations for these Black trans women. By fixing the meaning of specific categories as oppression, rigid, binary understandings of marginalized individuals can arise. In this thesis, the position of Black trans women varies across different contexts, and based on this, I interpret their everyday belonging in a multifaceted way, as Kokomo City goes beyond a mere narrative of violence or a selective narrative of desire. It represents how these narratives of oppression and desire, in seemingly different contexts (public and

private/secret), are intertwined. It is not simply an either/or narrative or two complementary narratives to be included for nuance. Instead, these stories are deeply related, creating a unique position and narrative of belonging in this situated specificity, which can shift in an instant.

Shortcomings and further research

This research has multiple shortcomings and areas for further consideration, for which I provide suggestions for future research. I will discuss the two most important ones.

First, I attempted to listen to the creative voices in the 'undercommons' through the artifice of documentary (Hartney & Moten, 2013). However, I acknowledge my blind spots. This challenge of unlearning is an ongoing process, as I continuously gained additional insights and 'aha' moments throughout the analysis, and this will likely continue even after submitting this thesis. This is probably also related to my position as a non-trans scholar. Therefore, my first suggestion for future research is to engage closely with trans individuals when conducting research on transness, trans identity, and subjectivity. This includes involving the research subjects and (Black) trans scholars to do justice to their stories and prevent reductionist portrayals of trans subjectivity (Aizura et al., 2020).

A second shortcoming relates to the scope of this research. Much of the research on transness is US-centered, while there is much more to explore outside the US, particularly because trans subjectivity is shaped by geographical location and axes of difference that are less prevalent in Western contexts, such as caste. Predominantly Western research can lead to dominant Western narratives of transnormativity (Steinbock, 2018, p. 176). Therefore, conducting research on transness outside the US, and even outside the West, is another suggestion for future research.

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