

From Plantation to Performativity: Queering Gender Labor, and Kinship in Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary feminist criticism has significantly expanded the understanding of race, gender, and power in Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*; however, its engagement with the novel has largely remained within the framework of binary gender identities. This paper examines *Queen Sugar* through a gender-queer perspective to argue that the novel not only critiques patriarchal structures but also destabilizes the very binaries through which gender is socially produced and understood. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity alongside Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Black feminism, Marxist feminism, and ecofeminism, this paper reflects how labor, land, kinship, and community function as interconnected sites where race, gender, class, and ecology continuously reshape identity.

Through a critical reading of Charley Bordelon, Remy Broussard, and the Bordelon family's relationship with the plantation, the paper argues that the novel reconfigures authority, care, and belonging as relational practices rather than gender-specific attributes. Rather than presenting empowerment solely through women's access to traditionally masculine spaces, *Queen Sugar* imagines identities that exceed

rigid distinctions between masculinity and femininity. By discussing how *Queen Sugar* engages with the notion of belonging, this paper argues that Baszile's novel belongs to postmodern feminist discourse in its willingness to destabilize binaries and envision gender and power relations in a different fluid light.

Keywords: Gender beyond the binary, Gender performativity, Queer theory, Postmodern feminism, Intersectionality, Natalie Baszile, *Queen Sugar*

Paper:

Every harvest promises renewal; however, every field carries the memory of what has already been planted. On the Louisiana sugarcane plantation of Natalie Baszile's "Queen Sugar", the inherited land is an archive as much as it is a property; here race, gender, labor and memory are both cultivated and called into question. The soil has the memory of slavery, the crops are a matter of economic survival, and the people tending the land put forward identities that do not fit neatly into the social categories assigned to them. Plantation is not a mere backdrop. It is a living space where notions of family, belonging, and various forms of masculinity and femininity are created and remade.

One could be tempted to read the novel in conventional feminist terms and hail Charley Bordelon as an empowered Black woman standing up to patriarchy. There is merit in such an approach, but it tends to keep the binary of male and female intact even as it critiques it. This paper takes an alternate view, arguing that Baszile destabilizes the gender binary altogether. In *Queen Sugar*, the author orients about how identity is grown through the daily business of resistance, care and labor, and who exactly is on the land. For example, there is the ethical authority of Violet, Ralph Angel's vulnerable form of fatherhood, and the way the Bordelons have reconfigured kinship. These are not things that can be accounted for by any essentialist notion of what it means to be a man or a woman. The study employs a gender-queer approach inspired by the works of Judith Butler and her performativity, Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality, José Esteban Muñoz's queer futurity, as well as the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed and Jack Halberstam to understand gender in a coherent way.

The argument here is that the novel does more than tell the story of Black feminist resilience; it queers the very structures of gender. Motherhood is something other than a reproductive function; kinship is built on care and not biology; and masculinity is found in vulnerability rather than in the exercise of authority. Thus, Baszile makes the plantation a place where new kinds of belonging are possible and old binaries are left in doubt, putting the novel in step with a postmodern feminist project that rejects the fixed definitions of gender. There is a basic flaw in much of the feminist scholarship that has been applied to Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*: an unyielding dependence on gender as if it were a fixed category for analysis. In most critical appraisals, Charley Bordelon is lauded as a Black woman of rare fortitude, who has made her way through the patriarchal order of the male-run sugarcane business. These readings credit the work with its feminist politics, yet they tend to take for granted that femininity is a given identity and

that resistance is a product of it. In doing so, gender is reduced to an innate quality rather than being viewed as a cultural process.

This essentialist view misses the more radical point of Baszile's novel. She is not content to show a woman making inroads into masculine territory; rather, she puts the whole notion of the divide between the sexes to the test, a divide on which patriarchy is predicated. The true import of *Queen Sugar* is found in how it lays bare gender as a social performance that is never stable and always in flux, not just in the simple fact of female empowerment. To grasp this, one must put aside conventional identity politics and turn to Judith Butler's performativity, in which gender is something an individual does through culturally sanctioned acts, not something she has. Butler changed the way feminists think about identity by discarding the idea that biology dictates behavior. Under her formulation, gender is a cultural fiction upheld by repetition and not an ontological fact. This upends the preconceived binary logic of masculinity and femininity as natural counterpoints and shows them to be products of history and social control. It is a framework well suited to *Sugar*, where one sees identities formed by the rigors of labor, leadership, and political resistance, not by any biological determinism. In Baszile's telling, gender is put in place by social practice in the manner of the sugarcane itself, which demands constant tending; thus, the plantation becomes a performative ground on which identity is made anew each time.

With Charley coming into the Bordelon sugarcane farm, the novel registers its first significant break from normative gender performance. In the past, agricultural work was a prime example of hegemonic masculinity in all its cultural visibility, a means of displaying male identity through land ownership, economic clout and physical prowess. Baszile has Charley put in her place in this old order of things but will not have it that she is merely aping masculine ways. Her authority is won by decision-making, the running of an economy, political leadership and a sense of communal duty; through such

negotiations the idea that these are men's provinces is slowly undone. Her unease can be seen in getting to Louisiana; that experience is what makes her a leader, not some inborn trait, as clearly mentioned in the following statement "The only crop she had ever harvested were the Meyer lemons... hanging off the trees by the fence in the backyard. However, she was not a country girl. Not even a little" (Baszile 7). It is not so much a sign of wanting as it is an indication that identity is contingent and incomplete. There is no true feminine nature for Charley to unmask under her urban exterior; she fashions a subjectivity of her own by way of the labor at hand. She bears Butler's view that one does not find one's identity; one performs it, and there is no essential masculinization in the way Charley puts an air of authority.

One might expect a conventional feminist reading to laud a woman for taking on masculine traits to get ahead, thus reinforcing the old dichotomy of male power and female frailty. Baszile had none of these. For Charley to make a go of it as a farmer does not require her to put aside her maternal duties or stifle her emotional vulnerability; she simply will not have it. She occupies, all at once, roles that are culturally at odds with one another: entrepreneur and caregiver, mother and political activist, agricultural leader, and daughter in mourning. In doing so, her identity is not confined to the binary of masculine authority on the one hand and feminine domesticity on the other. Jack Halberstam's notion of female masculinity shows how masculinity is a social practice and to be enacted in various gendered settings, not something the male body monopolizes. Charley's authority does stem from the appropriation of the masculine by a woman but rather from the sign of the historical instability of masculinity and its susceptibility to being redefined. The novel in this way puts a different spin on the matter, eschewing the question of whether women are capable of masculine roles to ask more pointedly why they were deemed the exclusive preserve of men in the first place.

The prevailing critique of *Queen Sugar* tends to laud Charley Bordelon as the picture of Black feminist fortitude. However, for all the praise heaped on her, these accounts tend to accept the binary view of gender at face value. In casting Charley's work in the fields as an act of female empowerment in a man's world, they end up underwriting the notion that economic leadership and authority in farming are inherently masculine pursuits. This reading misses the more radical point that Baszile makes. The writer has little interest in merely proving a woman can hold her own in a masculine domain; rather, the aim is to show how tenuous the lines between "masculine" and "feminine" really are. If Butler's concept of performativity applied to Charley's place in the sugarcane economy, it becomes apparent that gender is less an essential quality than something produced by the repetition of social acts. Any natural link between the sexes and one's social role does not give her authority; it is a matter of negotiation, labor and political resistance, and being answerable to the community. Therefore, the novel has gender as a function of performance instead of the body, putting forward the idea that identity is something put in place by practice, not biology.

Black feminist critics are right to emphasize of the novel's probing of race and the oppression of patriarchy, but in their analyses, representation tends to be prioritized over ontology. They will ask how women are admitted to masculine spaces without inquiring into what makes those spaces gendered. Butler would have it otherwise: masculinity and femininity are not natural categories but performative effects. Applying this to Baszile's account of agricultural work in *Queen Sugar*, the work is revealed as a critique of binary gender as much as a feminist story. There is an explanation for the constitution of gender in the repeated acts Butler speaks of, but Sedgwick's take on binary epistemology shows why such acts are only making sense in systems of cultural opposition. Then there is Ahmed, who would add that orientations matter too; the way bodies are directed

toward certain spaces or relationships. All of these come together in *Queen Sugar*. Charley's departure from corporate Los Angeles for the country in Louisiana is no mere change of venue; it is a reorientation of gender. In going where men have been, she does not cede to patriarchal convention; her presence alters the meaning of leadership, land, and labor.

In *Queen Sugar*, the politics of land are not to be found in simple matters of economic survival or who owns the farm; they form a terrain of contention where one's identity is shaped by the coming together of race, gender, labor and ecological memory in ways that defy any essentialist label. Feminist critics have usually seen Charley Bordelon's takeover of the sugarcane plantation as an exercise in female empowerment in a man's world. While these interpretations credit women's agency, they do not test the plantation as a space that is both racialized and gendered. With a gender-queer approach one can move past representation to examine the making of identity, seeing the field as a performative landscape where social identities are worked out during physical labor. Then there is the matter of intersectionality as put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which is necessary for this analysis since Charley is more than her gender, her identity being also a product of class, the region she has been displaced from, economic privilege, race, and the aftereffects of slavery. In Louisiana, a Black woman in charge of agricultural property meets institutional resistance from capitalist owners and patriarchal authority as much as racial prejudice. The struggle Charley faces shows that power is exerted through overlapping structures, and identity is not a fixed thing. She does not fit the mold of the emancipated heroine or the victim, but in the process of negotiating an identity that is beyond binary definitions, makes plain that gender is historically made, contingent, and relational.

This reconfiguration of labor is indivisible from the ecological consciousness that permeates *Queen Sugar*. Unlike industrial

capitalism, which imagines land chiefly as a commodity for extraction and profit, Baszile repeatedly represents the plantation as a living archive carrying the memories of enslavement, hereditary survival, and common resilience. This perspective resonates with ecofeminist thought, which critiques the interconnected domination of women, marginalized communities, and the normal environment under patriarchal capitalism. However, Baszile's ecologic imagination extends beyond formal ecofeminism by refusing to feminize nature or essentialize women's relationship to the environment, arguing that the relationships between bodies and land remain dynamic, reciprocal, and historically mediated. The cultivation of sugarcane becomes a metaphor for the cultivation of identity itself, suggesting that neither ecology nor gender exists separately from continuous interpersonal and existent interaction. Charley's authority develops through continual acts of negotiation, cultivation, political resistance, and community leadership that destabilize formal assumptions associating somatic labor, land ownership, and economical decision-making with mannish identity. Remy's commitment to sustainable farming practices, Charley's resistance to environmentally destructive development projects, and the family's emotive attachment to the plantation collectively challenge the capitalist logic that separates human identity from ecologic existence. Therefore, the land functions not merely as inherited property but as an existent participant in the formation of alternative interpersonal relations that exceed multiple distinctions between culture and nature, masculinity and femininity, ownership and belonging.

Ultimately, Baszile transforms the plantation into a radical political space where race, labor, ecology, and gender intersect to challenge prescriptive structures of identity. Through the intertwined experiences of Charley, Ralph Angel, Violet, and the wider Bordelon community, *Queen Sugar* demonstrates that identities emerge through

collective practices of care, cultivation, resistance, and existent memory than through steady biological or interpersonal categories. The sugarcane field ceases to be only an economical landscape and alternatively becomes a site where the inherited binaries of race, gender, labor, and nature are persistently unsettled. Here, Baszile not only critiques the intersecting structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and racial oppression but also imagines new forms of subjectivity grounded in relationality, ecological responsibility, and performative belonging, thereby advancing a postmodern feminist vision of gender beyond the binary.

By drawing on intersectionality, Black feminist epistemology, Marxist feminism, ecofeminism, and Butler's theory of performativity, the novel shows how control over land is directly tied to the construction of identity. Although such feminist readings have been invaluable in broadening critical accounts of the novel's complications to structures of oppression, they tend to continue a binary or oppositional model by which Charley Bordelon's accomplishments are presented and sometimes applauded as proof of women's agency within patriarchal institutions. These readings, no doubt, clarify the feminist politics of the novel but they also hold the danger of missing its more radicalizing intervention. Reading through a gender-queer approach by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Black feminism, *Queen Sugar* does not merely tell a story of women fighting for their place in a male-dominated society. Instead, the novel problematizes the very foundations of such a system, presenting a perspective where women do not simply overcome patriarchy but rather expose its mechanisms that construct gender binaries in the first place. Thus, Baszile's narrative challenges not only the ability of women to succeed in male-dominated structures but the very nature of these structures to define gender roles altogether.

Throughout the novel, the author separates gender from biology and emphasizes its

social and material aspect. Charley's inheritance of the Bordelon plantation does not make her only the possessor of the male role model. The fact that she continues to work on the land, lead people, protest the state, and care for her family demonstrates that power is not given by gender but is performed repeatedly, regardless of the body of the actor. This aspect of gender presentation is extremely closely related to Judith Butler's phrase about gender performativity. Baszile does not attribute specific characteristics to male or female characters, making them appear more masculine or feminine. The traits of leadership, responsibility, compassion, and vulnerability are distributed among characters of different genders. For this reason, it can be said that gender is not essential in the characters' actions; it is only a social performance that changes constantly. In the novel, through the representation of female characters' empowerment, the author exposes patriarchy by proving that land ownership, labor, and leadership are not the privileges of men and have nothing to do with gender in general.

The novel also queers the institution of kinship by destabilizing accepted values and beliefs about families, relations, motherhood, and care. Baszile rejects the heteronormative idea of the nuclear family as the preferred and the only way to go. He presents the creation of a network of belonging that is based on love and responsibility rather than blood ties. The way Charley relates to Micah, Ralph Angel, Blue, Aunt Violet, Remy, and the rest of the Bordelon pack demonstrates that the bond can be achieved through nurturing rather than biology. Such a perspective aligns with a lot of research on queer studies, which insists that the family is an institution that should be reimagined. It should be seen as a social relation that goes beyond blood ties and needs to become more than a patriarchal concept. The narrative that Baszile writes deconstructs the heteronormative aspect of the family and lets the reader see that care is indeed a political act. It allows the author to experiment with

gender, parent-child relationships, and the idea of the domestic sphere in general.

Equally interesting was the way in which the book demonstrated the intersectionality of the experience of labor and land as a production factor in the context of genders and races, ecology, and capitalism. Indeed, the sugarcane plantation in the novel is not only a product of economic development but also a living fossil of slavery, exploitation of race, nature, and hard work. From the perspective of intersectionality theory developed by Crenshaw and applied to capital labor and feminism, plantations give people identity through the intersection of several factors such as race, gender, class, and labor to which individuals belong. At the same time, the critical perspective of Baszile's ecology is intertwined with his attitude towards women. The author does not romanticize the relationship between men and nature because land is exploited as hard as women. Thus, in Baszile's understanding, ecology is part of people's identity because it connects individuals with their past, which in turn shapes their present and future. Accordingly, the work on the land, regardless of gender, race, and culture, is a way of deconstructing the binaries that are imposed on individuals.

Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity questions the belief that traits like authority, leadership, and physical work are inherently masculine. Charley's role in managing the Bordelon plantation illustrates that these qualities are social construct rather than expressions of male identity. Consequently, her authority is neither a mimicry of masculinity nor a rejection of femininity; rather, it highlights the fluidity of gender categories. Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation illuminates Charley's return to Louisiana as a movement through unfamiliar social and cultural spaces. Although she inherits the plantation, she remains alien in the environment because neither the black farming community nor the white landlords fully recognize her as a legitimately belonging member of any community. Her belonging is a process that she negotiates

with herself, her body being the ultimate marker of orientation. This novel thus demonstrates that belonging is a negotiated position in society. Sedgwick's concept of the binaries of the Western epistemology can be applied to *Queen Sugar* to show how Baszile engages with the problematic process of defining people according to their gender roles. She does so by subverting the supposed naturalization of the relationships between women and men, mothers and children, and leaders and subordinates, asking if any of these relationships hold true. Her characters are not defined strictly within binary oppositions of gender, and the roles they take are fluid throughout the story. While many contemporary scholars of gender have engaged with the question of race and power in *Queen Sugar*, there has been little analysis of the ways in which Baszile examines the binary nature of gender identity itself in her work.

The present concludes that *Queen Sugar* must be located within the discourse of postmodern feminism that problematizes the very notion of essentiality. By questioning the ontological status of patriarchal foundations, Baszile does not adhere to the logic of women's emancipation through their entry into established hierarchies. Instead, the author problematizes the categories of gender, authority, family, labor, and belonging, presenting them as contingent phenomena produced through history, corporeality, and social relations. Thus, it follows the tradition of postmodern feminism that challenges teleological understandings of women's history. However, by centering the discussion on Black female servants and their labor, it goes beyond the framework of queer theory that privileges sexual orientation as the primary locus of contention. It focuses on the material conditions of race, ecology, and agricultural labor. Therefore, it comprehends that *Queen Sugar* rejects both patriarchal and liberal categories of oppression.

Queen Sugar should be viewed not only as a major contribution to black feminist literature but also as a groundbreaking work

within contemporary gender-queer writings. The major focus of this novel is more than just the celebration of female empowerment. It seeks to deconstruct the binary nature between genders, as well as the binary division of labor, authority, and familial relationships. By queering the perceptions of hard work, land, families and belonging, Baszile suggests that each person's identity is a continuous negotiation of historical power relations and socio-cultural contexts. *Queen Sugar* presents a postmodern take on feminist politics by attempting to dismantle the binary foundations of gendered relationships. Therefore, the novel offers a major revision to contemporary understandings of feminism and gender fluidity. By conceptualizing the possibility of continuous negotiation of one's gendered being, *Queen Sugar* promotes a progressive insight into the debate about the binary nature of gender.

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