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# Caretaking in So Many Ways: A Conversation with Mistress Velvet

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INTERVIEW BY KIRIN WACHTER-GRENE

**Mistress Velvet (MV):** MA, ICDVP (pronouns: she/they) has been a sex worker and human rights/social justice activist for 10 years. Her work has spanned reproductive justice, gender-based violence, permanent supportive housing, and LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health and relationship education for youth and adults. Mistress Velvet holds a Master of Arts in Women's & Gender Studies (with a focus on African Diaspora Studies) from the University of North Carolina Greensboro and a Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. She is currently based in Chicago.

**Kirin Wachter-Grene (KWG):** Mistress Velvet, why don't we begin with you introducing yourself to *TBS* readers?

**MV:** I'm a queer immigrant from Ghana. I'm non-monogamous. I'm a sex worker and also a social worker. I'm intersex. I live My life every day thinking about My ancestors. My great-to-whatever power maternal grandmother was our Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa. She, among other things, led the war against our British colonizers in 1900, and was eventually exiled to Seychelles. Our president Kwame Nkrumah brought us to independence from the UK in 1957. He was a Marxist Leninist and Pan-Africanist; a huge figure in

our country not just because he's an icon, but because of his politics surrounding global African unity. These two people are a part of the foundation of My identity. I use their struggle, politics and motivations to inform almost everything I do in My life now. I'm very intentional because I've realized, in order for Me to get things done in My life it has to be with all of My heart, or nothing.

**KWG:** Let's talk about intentionality. As a grad student you focused on Women and Gender and African Diaspora studies. You are known for requiring your white, cisgender male clients to read and process and even write about Black feminist theory as part of your BDSM practice. I think of you as a teacher. Can you talk a bit about how teaching informs many parts of your life in both the civilian world and in sex work, as well as a bit about your pedagogy?

**MV:** I'm about to contradict Myself because I said I'm very intentional, and I am, but: the fact that the work I do as both a social worker and BDSM practitioner is focused on teaching was accidental. It took Me a couple years to realize that I actually wanted to be an educator, and I ended up moving out of the medical field and into teaching. I was a sex educator during grad school and for a while after. I was fired from and asked to resign from two agencies when they found out I was a sex worker. It was difficult for Me at the time, but now I just laugh at the irony.

I will also say, being a sex educator was challenging because traditional sex-ed is not comprehensive. There is such an obsession with abstinence-only models, and if we did talk about sex, the focus on penile-vaginal

intercourse and heterosexual relationships left a lot of queer young people erased. Institutions don't value standpoint epistemology and the knowledge we derive from our communities and lived-experiences. But I've always emphasized that learners should be a part of the framing of pedagogy. Let's talk about our experiences and supplement them with best practices.

**KWG:** Right, so as a sex educator you were tapping into peoples' lived experience and then using those to fill in the gaps of what's missing and then saying "let's talk about best practices" from that vantage point.

**MV:** Right. Because I find myself wondering, "where, and on whose back, is knowledge produced?" It's produced in many spaces outside of academia. So, standpoint epistemology is a method through which I shape and practice education.

**KWG:** So then thinking about your white, cis male clients reading Black feminist theory (which is asking them to approach that work from a radically different standpoint), can you talk about how you're invoking education there? In other words, one approach you take is asking people to learn by beginning with their own experiences or standpoint, whereas here you are asking people to identify with someone or something radically opposite their own standpoint. Can you speak to these different approaches?

**MV:** Even though it is not standpoint methodology [to require white, cis male clients to read Black feminist theory], I see the foundational approach to be the same—legitimizing

alternative sites of knowledge production, validating subjective knowledge, and transforming our perspectives. My clients will admit to Me that they do not often come in contact with Black women in their work or personal life. By making them read Black feminist theory, I'm providing them with a truth that they can then apply to their experiences of privilege and understandings of Black and Brown oppression.

I want to add, as much as I give into the trope and stereotypes of what a Dominatrix is (one dimensional and one directional power dynamic), My relationship with clients is much more of an exchange. What gets lost in the understanding of BDSM practice is the complexity of what we do. Sometimes I wonder what it even means to be a provider.

**KWG:** Speaking of providing, let's talk about the labor of being a Pro-Domme. Let's also talk about caretaking in relation to being a sex worker and practicing BDSM.

**MV:** I think of labor and caretaking [in this context] as equivalent. Clients (especially My straight, cis-gendered submissives) reach out to Me because they often do not have a safe or viable space in their lives to express the spectrum of their gender identity and sexual interests. Erotic labor is heavily criminalized, and individuals that seek our services are heavily shamed and even ostracized. And yet, My clients take these risks to come see Me secretly, lying to their friends, families, and partners so that they can experience sexual dynamics that are dissociated from gender norms. Patriarchy limits their personhood in certain ways as well.

**KWG:** Can you say more about how you see this work with these specific clients to be a form of caretaking?

**MV:** We have to find outlets to be ourselves within a patriarchal system. To be frank, My clients are white dudes that, for example, want to wear panties but can't because it's not considered masculine. That makes Me sad, and it is something I can relate to as a queer non-binary femme. It's not the same kind of oppressive gender norms, but I can empathize.

**KWG:** So, if I'm hearing you right, this BDSM dynamic is a type of caretaking because it allows for a certain type of freedom in a specific space?

**MV:** Yes. It is caretaking in so many ways. They have to trust Me. It is a massive decision under patriarchy to decide to bend gender norms. My clients have to trust that I am going to provide a space for them to be able to do that.

**KWG:** How do you build that trust, and how is that a form of labor?

**MV:** There's a show that has recently come out on a popular streaming platform about being a Dominatrix. Boundary negation and discussions about consent have been left out, which is completely inaccurate because I would not have any clients without trust!

**KWG:** "Safe, sane, consensual," the BDSM code.

**MV:** I say "Risk-Aware Consensual Kink." Trust-building begins at the very moment they fill out the reservation form on My website. It states: "the reason I'm asking for all this identifying

information is for our *mutual* safety." I have no desire to ruin My reputation by blackmailing you (unless that's your kink—then we can talk about it). And I want to be sure that I'm with a person that's safe. I think we focus on that a lot, as we should, because sex workers experience a lot of violence, but I also want to take some time to name the importance of building safety for our clients. There's a lot they could lose if someone finds out they have certain sexual interests, that they're procuring erotic services, etc. From a business standpoint, I want to make sure they feel good about the services I provide and will come back for more.

The level of care I give to My clients is comparable to the level of care I give My family, My friends, and My community. It's a bit more complex than that because I do feel myriad ways about My clients. Sometimes I hate them, but sometimes I cherish the fact that they get to spaces with Me that they haven't gotten to—and probably won't get to—with anyone else. It's an honor I don't take for granted, and I would say it is at the core of My experience as a sex worker.

Also, civilians don't realize how much work it takes to be a provider. The amount of personal development I need to continue My practice sustainably and ethically is often underestimated. As a social worker, I stay up-to-date with best practices, trauma-informed care, harm reduction frameworks, risk management, etc. I do all of this in sex work as well. Whether it's the instruments I use or the best ways to engage in aftercare, sex work is not a stagnant profession. It's as dynamic as the other [legal] work I do. I don't want to have to validate sex work by comparing it to institutionalized work. But I do want people to see the connections so they can see it as work. That's why I get so

frustrated with the ways we're represented [i.e. Dommies as cold and uncaring]. We literally wouldn't be able to do our work without care!

**KWG:** And empathy. We know, in our civilian lives, how much time and labor it takes to develop empathy and trust with anyone we're in a relationship with. Is there anything else you want to add about the labor of being a Pro-Domme that people don't even think about or see that you think is important for people to know, especially given pervasive and damaging pop cultural misrepresentations?

**MV:** I stopped taking My labor for granted, or perhaps began understanding it better when I compared it to legalized, decriminalized, institutionalized labor. Again, I now understand My work as a sex worker through the lens of a social worker because they're so parallel. I am My clients' therapist, and bring My skills around trauma-informed care and best practices and harm reduction that I use in My social work into My sex work. Not because it makes Me feel cool, but because it's *required* in sex work. I learned it there first and later developed the language for it in My civilian life.

I want to highlight most of all the amount of emotional labor it takes to maintain and sustain relationships in this way. And I don't have a place to go process My experiences after because there are not a lot of sex worker competent services in our society.

**KWG:** That's so important to mention. Something that stood out to me in one of your other interviews is when you mentioned leaving the space of the dungeon, or whatever space you're in, and you go back out onto the street, just to walk to the train, and you get harassed.

**MV:** It's such a juxtaposition.

**KWG:** Right. The stuff you're working through in a consensual manner, through play, and then what you're dealing with on the street ...

**MV:** Especially because some of the most beautiful, safest spaces I encounter are in My BDSM practice. Some of the most beautiful relationships I have are with My clients. I enter a bubble for an hour or two with my clients. We have mutual trust, respect, and are defining our boundaries together. Then I put on My street clothes, leave the dungeon, and enter the harsh world.

**KWG:** That leads into my next question. We've talked about Black feminist theory, and how informative it's been and how foundational it has been to both of us. I'm wondering if, through your work, you have come to your own theory of interracial power dynamics?

**MV:** I think this is a really good question, because it took Me a while to realize that most of what I'm doing is race play.

**KWG:** Right, and I think of Black feminists such as Ariane Cruz, who is developing this "politics of perversion" theory or Jennifer Nash or Mireille Miller-Young or Mollena Williams-Haas who are thinking through and working with interracial power dynamics in ways *additional* to centuries of oppression and racism. These women are trying to find (and are finding!) space in that archive for pleasure, power, and desire on the part of Black women within asymmetrical power dynamics. What are your observations about this power dynamic?

**MV:** I love this question.

**KWG:** It's a hard question.

**MV:** It is a hard question! I think the space that I create with My clients is otherworldly. And, on one hand, as an anti-capitalist, I can assess that what I'm doing is on an individual, interpersonal level and not contributing to global systemic change (you know I'm always fantasizing about a global redistribution of wealth). But just because My work doesn't spark systemic change does not mean it's insignificant. Black Femme Domination is not insignificant.

I want to use the word "perversion" to describe the work that we do as Black Domes. We are literally perverting specific racial and gendered dynamics. Black women are oppressed. We don't have global power. But we are inverting this within BDSM. We are prototypes.

**KWG:** I want to think still with Ariane Cruz's "politics of perversion" to consider how Black women are taking power and pleasure in these dynamics that have for so long been thought of solely as oppressive. What's your take on this whole school of Black feminist thinkers such as Cruz, Miller-Young, Nash, and Amber Musser who are daring to go with Black feminism where it has not gone before for so many decades prior? These scholars are specifically discussing Black women

involved in BDSM and pornography. Why do you think this work is going there, now?

**MV:** While writing My master's thesis, I noticed an interesting coupling between older Black feminist texts and contemporary Black feminist literature. I would like to think of Myself as a contemporary Black feminist scholar, but I wouldn't have the foundations and understandings I possess without My ancestors and folks in the past that have done the work that they have done. It is so important to Me to honor them. I always first recognize the Audre Lordes and Patricia Hill Collinses before I get to Jennifer Nash or Ariane Cruz, even though the latter have been and continue to be incredibly influential in my life, practice, and pedagogy.

But at the same time, times have changed. And there are a lot of ways that I don't relate to the experiences of Black women from decades ago. There isn't anything wrong with that, but what we, as contemporary thinkers, are now doing is adapting the spirit of past work to changing circumstances. That's when I fall to the perspectives and expertise of Nash and Cruz to ask "how have you added to this monumental body of work?" There is an unbroken line of struggle, resistance, and wisdom across generations of Black women. And I can't wait for future Black feminists to build upon the work we are doing today.

**Kirin Wachter-Grene** is Assistant Professor of Liberal Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a PhD in English and a focus on African American literature and gender and sexuality studies. Dr. Wachter-Grene was the 2017-18 Visiting Scholar at the Leather Archives and Museum where she researched Black women's historical involvement with leather, kink, and fetish. Her work is published in *African American Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Callaloo*, and *Sixty Inches from Center* and is forthcoming in *Feminist Formations* and *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*.