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Sexing the Colorlines: Black Sexualities, Popular Culture, and Cultural Production

"I Don't Exist: Conflicting Communities and the Nature of (Un)Belonging"

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I am a first-generation American of African and Caribbean descent; I am a queer *cisgendered* woman; I am kinky; I am a feminist[1]. As I have mapped and named these facets of my being, I have found it difficult to share the entirety of myself with others without at least one of my identities, regardless of the context, making someone uncomfortable enough for me to *feel* their disapproval. After almost twenty years of occupying what has often felt like a faraway planet of one, I am on an exploratory mission.

My decision to locate myself at the center of this paper is not without precedent. The lineage of confessional literature includes writers from St. Augustine to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sylvia Plath to Lauren Slater. This genre exists within academia as well.

In *Longing to Tell*, her 2003 book on black female sexuality, Tricia Rose presents the first-person narratives of twenty women without any authorial interference. Of this deliberate primacy of oral histories over critical speculation, she says:

> These sexual stories, when allowed to unfold in the context of women's lives, call out to us to see that black women share important contemporary social, political, and cultural histories with one another and share other histories with women from diverse backgrounds. Their accounts are

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[1] *Cisgendered* means that one's gender identity matches the gender that one is assigned at birth. It was first used on an internet bulletin board by Dana Leland Defosse in 1994.

both compelling personal narratives and extraordinary, socially relevant, collective stories.[2]

Rose's "absence" from the bulk of her text is crucial to "[allowing] the stories to move relatively freely [and] link sexuality to everyday life."[3] By setting aside a disembodied "voice of authority," Rose allows her subjects' confessions to essay their desire to be mirrors for others and to "[make] an important contribution to the underdocumented story of black women's sexuality in America."[4] For Rose, these deeply personal stories reflect the realities of black womanhood — and all womanhood, really — in a way that her discarded critical text could not.

Additionally, Adale Sholock's 2007 article "Queer Theory in the First Person," also presents a template for utilizing the format of confession in academic writing. In this text, she examines the history of Queer Theorists using autobiography as a way to "[break] down categorical distinctions between the subject and object of academic study."[5] These critical personal narratives "[provide] a locus from which we can address the difference that sexual difference makes in the discursive production of academic knowledge."[6] In discussing her reading of Judith Halberstam's "Between Butches," Sholock reveals that her own interest in "academic autobiographies" is rooted in a highly personal search for "community and professional models," which she finds "difficult to locate in most academic spaces."[7] I would argue that these models — my models — are difficult to locate not just in academia, but also everywhere.

Despite this representational lack, and the resultant periods of isolation, for Sholock and other academics from underrepresented groups, making one's unbelonging public seems and feels divisive. Laura Harris, in her 1997

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[2] Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy*. New York: Picador, 2003: 8.

[3] Rose, 6.

[4] Rose, 15.

[5] Adale Sholock, "Queer Theory in the First Person: Academic Autobiography and the Authoritative Contingencies of Visibility." *Cultural Critique* 66 (2007): 127.

[6] Sholock, 130.

[7] Sholock, 129.

article "Queer Black Feminism," equates this act — one that she herself undertakes — with airing dirty laundry.[8] The intensely personal nature of the academic autobiography heightens the risks already associated with taking one's scholarly products public. By centering this work around myself — a decision made necessary by the paucity of models in the mainstream public sphere — I hope to extend my theorizing from myself to others. Furthermore, I endeavor to explore the interstices between "my" communities and my interactions with those communities. In 2008's *Power Lines*, Aimee Carrillo Rowe posits that "the meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection."[9] For Carrillo Rowe, individuals and communities make and remake each other with every interaction, and these relationships have wide-ranging implications for discussions about privilege and oppression:

> [...] how we insert ourselves in community produces a range of options not only for what kinds of experience become possible (experience), but also for how we come to understand those experiences (consciousness), and how we seek to transform, challenge, and resist the conditions which produce it (agency). A politics of relation, then, entails understanding agency, experience, and consciousness as collective and interrelated moments within a circuit.[10]

Using the personal as the position for a discussion on identity is an attempt to reflect on the relations that have influenced the ways that I identify and move within and outside of communities. "Our work is to turn ourselves inside out," Carrillo Rowe says, and that desire is at the heart of this essay.[11]

I write this paper not as an academic — not even as an academic-in-training — but as a nonfiction writer with an obvious and deep personal interest in my own narrative.

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[8] Laura A. Harris, "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle." *Feminist Review* 54 (1996): 8.

[9] Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008: 25.

[10] Carrillo Rowe, 10-11.

[11] Carrillo Rowe, xix.

This essay will fall somewhere between the expressionistic exegeses of black female sexuality in *Longing to Tell* and Sholock's inquiry into queer representation in academia. In an attempt to make sense of myself, to find out where, exactly, I belong, I am merging my roles as subject and object to make practical what might remain, for me, in the realm of theory.

At various points in my life, I have found the black, feminist, queer, and BDSM communities varying degrees of inhospitable, both consciously and inadvertently. In an attempt to give people a refuge from the racism, sexism, heterosexism, and sex-negativity of dominant U.S. culture, these communities prescribe criteria for inclusion that sometimes exclude the very community members that they are ostensibly trying to serve.

In this paper, I will examine the tacit metrics for inclusion that I have encountered when trying to access these communities; I will attempt to unpack the feelings of belonging and unbelonging that have arisen during these interactions; and I will try to locate where and how other queer, kinky feminists of color are making communities that permit them to inhabit their identities without feeling the need to sacrifice one or more on the altar of belonging.

I begin with blackness because — outside of my femaleness — it is my only unambiguous and visible identity. While this identity is clear to those for whom I am an object, I have never felt like a member of *the* black community. Indeed, the very idea of a monolithic "black community" is a dangerous fiction. From an early age, I realized that the black people on television had little in common with my own family. In the early 1990s, the *Cosby Show,* the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Family Matters* gave me portrayals of African Americans that were only slightly more nuanced than those available to my parents in the 1970s. The representational realities of my relatives and of myself did not exist in the media.

I grew up ensconced in my mother's large, working and middle class extended family of West Indians. Concentrated in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, my mother's generation and their parents emigrated from St. Vincent — a 133 square mile, former British Colony in the Lesser Antilles — in the 1960s and 1970s. My father's family — Nigerians of the Igbo variety — were scattered all over the world, so most of my familial exemplars of blackness came from my maternal relatives, who were all connected to their West Indian-ness in a way that I never was. Everything that I was seemed

diametrically opposed to what they all were: I was painfully shy and very quiet, I did not dance, I did not like talking, I did not like Caribbean foods and music, and I did not believe in the Christian conception of God. Disconnecting from aspects of my heritage, I found that I could not connect to black American culture in the ways that my fellow U.S-born cousins found a connection with their heritage. Instead of emulating their devotion to Jodeci, I watched MTV waiting for "Constant Craving" to come on again. Eight-year-old Alea was fascinated by k.d. lang.

In rewatching the video for the purposes of this paper, I noticed that it occurs in a reality devoid of people of color. If I happened to notice that in 1992 — an observation I probably would not have made — I did not care. Lang intrigued me and my gaze was fixated on her face, hair, clothes, and persona. I could not tell if she was a man or a woman, but she was so freaking hot in her artfully disheveled men's clothes that I did not concern myself with figuring that out. This desire made sense to me because it felt completely natural. Despite that, I instinctively knew that this was something that I would never be able to discuss with my family members. Their interests and mine, even at that time, felt too disparate, and I knew that my fondness for k.d. lang did not belong within the group of things that eight-year-old black girls were supposed to like. In my feeling both kinship with and desire for k.d. lang, I felt excluded from my family's blackness.

Feeling unable to mimic this blackness, in fifth grade, I started looking for a mirror among other black students in my class. This search was a spectacular failure. Though I had spent the first few years of my elementary education in East Flatbush, which was heavily populated by other families from the Caribbean, I spent third and fourth grade on the north shore of Long Island, where my mother did her family practice residency and where I was the only black student in my classes. When I returned to Brooklyn for fifth grade, it was almost like the other students of color could detect the influence of the wrong *kind* of whiteness on me. For students in Canarsie, that meant that it was not Italian or Jewish, but WASPy. With the friends that I made in Stony Brook and Setauket — all of them white — I had a lot of firsts: I watched *Hairspray*, ate squash, and listened to the Gin Blossoms. I was able to adopt whatever aspects of white, middle class culture interested me and it was okay enough with some of my peers for me to do so comfortably. Racism, of course, was definitely a factor,

but, for the most part, my first experiences with predominantly white institutions were more positive than not. By virtue of being one of a small number of black people, there were no "better" examples than myself. In this sense, I learned from an early age that I had to be my own role model, and I had to create my own belonging. Though it was enough for me to get by, the process of living without external models, of "making shit up as I went along" was incredibly unsatisfying. With nowhere to ground my nascent identities, I often felt like I did not actually exist, or, if I did exist, that I was an abomination whom growing up would cure of the predilections that made her an outlier.

Fifth grade was the antithesis of my experience on Long Island and emblematic of the majority of my experiences since then. Dropped back into an ethnically and racially diverse environment, my interests in boys, books, television, and music; the way that I spoke; and the way that I dressed all caused many of my black American peers to view me as inauthentic in my personal expression of my black identity. The mercilessness with which my black peers taunted me led me to find friends outside of my ethnic group. My closest friends that year were Asian American and Latina because they were the only female students of color in my class who were not cruel to me. In retrospect, I cannot help but think that their status as first generation Americans played some part in the facilitation of our close relationships. For me, that identity trumped the bonds that I was supposed to form with black students to whom I was supposed to relate solely based on the mutuality of our races and ethnicities.

Consequently, in the sixteen years since then, the majority of my friends of color have been "non-standard" in some way that allows us to relate to each other through our experiences of racism *and* through the feelings of unbelonging that we feel within our ethnic and racial groups. Since I fit in neither with my family nor with my black American peers, I set out looking for another place to belong. In moving from Brooklyn to Orlando, I made a conscious decision to seek out those to whom I could relate based on *my* cultural and intellectual interests — interests that I dogmatically decided were definitively "not black."

The idea that feminism is only for white women is one that I did not consider until well after I had wrapped myself in the trappings of the Third Wave. I started identifying as a feminist in middle school in Orlando, but I didn't hear the words "womanist" and "mujerista" until

college. Black Feminism has existed for longer than I have been alive, but, in the adolescent search for community that I undertook after being, in my mind, rejected by black people, I reached for Third Wave feminist periodicals — *BUST, Sassy,* and *Jane* — instead of for Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks, all of whom I would not hear of until well into my undergraduate career and would not read until I became a graduate student. Despite rarely seeing girls who looked like me in these periodicals, I felt a kinship with the mostly white women that I found there due to their embodiment of the things that my peers had used to exclude me from blackness: alternative/indie, DIY culture. These women were imperfect mirrors, but they were the best that I had access to at the time. And, to some extent, white, third wave feminists continue to play a large role in the evolution of my ideas on gender and sex. I still own and refer to a tattered copy of *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, purchased illicitly with birthday money from a Virgin Megastore in 1999. With sections entitled "Feminists Fatale: BUST-ing the Beauty Myth," "Sex and the Thinking Girl," "Men are from Uranus," and "Growing Up Girl," the *Guide* modeled ways of being female that were verboten in my culturally conservative, religious family. I saw in the contributors to these texts more *free* versions of myself, literary big sisters who made me feel like *maybe*, at some point in a very distant-seeming future, the complexities of my identities would be honored instead of shunned.

I did not begin to see the flaws in the feminism that got me through my adolescence until after I graduated from college. My disagreements with feminists, however, have been more on the basis of sexuality than on the basis of race. While I do not want to diminish the at times exclusionary whiteness of the feminist movement, I will be focusing more on its sex-negativity, which highlights the ways in which my experience with feminism challenges common anticipations of cultural trends and identities. While it is nearly impossible to enter virtual feminist spaces without running into the inevitable RaceFail, being black does not automatically make my beef with feminism about race. I am definitely critical of feminism's racial exclusions, but, for me, sexual exclusion has been particularly salient.

Do not misunderstand me. I know that sex, for the majority of Third Wave feminists, has always been more than okay. In "Lusting for Freedom," Rebecca Walker — who coined the phrase "Third Wave" in 1992 and founded the Third Wave Foundation a few years later — recognizes

that "the way we experience, speak about and envision sex and sexuality can either kill us or help us to know and protect ourselves better."[12] The importance of giving girls frank, comprehensive sexual education is explored in her discussion of her own adolescent sexual experiences. Without the love of pleasure and freedom that came with her experimentation, she asks:

> [...] how else would I have learned to follow and cultivate my own desire? How else would I have learned to listen and develop the language of my own body? How else would I have learned to initiate, sustain and develop healthy intimacy, that most valuable of human essences?[13]

I do not question the commitment of Third Wave feminists to women's sexual freedom. In the creation of the idea of a Third Wave, Walker believes that "it was important to us (the founders) that Third Wave be, at its very core, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-issue, pan-sexual orientation, with people and issues from all socio-economic backgrounds represented."[14] I know that Third Wave feminists endeavored to address the flaws that they saw in the theories and practices of the Second Wave, but I posit that within this movement, despite its good intentions, there is sometimes a dogmatic conception of what sexual liberation should look like.

In August of 2009, a pair of blog posts on the website for *Bitch* magazine sparked a minor flamewar among a group of feminists who are mostly white, educated, and in their 20s and 30s. Entitled "I Blame Porn" and "I (Still) Blame Porn," these brief editorials about the effects of pornography on teenagers highlight the limitations that those at the center of the movement still place on expressions of sexuality. "Good" feminists cluck their tongues at "bad" feminists who are cast as brainwashed

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[12]Rebecca Walker, "Lusting for Freedom." In *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation*, Barbara Findlen, Emeryville: Seal Press, 1995: 19.

[13]Walker, 22.

[14]Sangamithra Iyer, "Riding the Third Wave, The *Satya* Interview with Rebecca Walker," *Satya Magazine*, January 2005, http://www.rebeccawalker.com/v1/article_2005_riding-the-third-wave.htm.

victims of the patriarchal oppressiveness of mainstream pornography. In her first post, Becky Sharper writes

> [...] I'm not going to tell anyone that their kinks are wrong. To each her own. If you want to watch porn, fine. If you like having dudes come on your face or you like being completely hairless, that's your perogative [sic]. But let's not deceive ourselves, these behaviors are strictly porn-inspired.[15]

Condescending, ahistorical, hyperbolic retreads of Andrea Dworkin's anti-pornography feminism appear frequently on sites like *Bitch* and *Jezebel*, two monoliths in contemporary Third Wave feminism. While these internet watering holes can be truly excellent at calling bullshit on sexism in pop culture, for me, they often have a blind spot where sexuality is concerned. For a certain subsection of American feminists, any sex that is not vanilla is, at best, barely tolerated and, at worst, used to label non-compliant women as dangerous tools of the patriarchy, a tactic that is, by its very nature, divisive and kyriarchal. By repressing the varieties of female sexual desire, feminism simply reproduces the paternalism that it attempts to combat by its very existence.

I believe that no feminist should be forced to choose between her feminist ideals and genuine, empowered sexual fulfillment. I cannot and will not separate my sexual identity from my feminist identity. Those at the center of movement, however, often ask for just that. In a book review for a 19 November 2009 issue of the *New Yorker*, Ariel Levy lobbies for a unification of feminists through the abandonment of what she derisively calls a "politics of identity."[16] She first says:

> [...] if feminism becomes a politics of identity, it can be safely drained of ideology. Identity politics isn't much concerned with abstract ideals, like justice. It's a version of the old spoils system: align yourself with other members of a group — Irish,

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[15]Becky Sharper, "I Blame Porn," *Bitch Magazine*, August 2009, http://bitchmagazine.org/post/i-blame-porn-1.

[16]Ariel Levy, "Lift and Separate." *The New Yorker*, 19 November 2009: 78.

> Italian, women, whatever — and try to get a bigger slice of the resources that are being allocated.[17]

Later in the article, she switches tactics and frames identity politics not as something from which to defend feminism, but as a constructive tool that enabled the movement to "[enjoy] real victories." Despite that, she says, "a preoccupation with representation suggests that feminism has lost its larger ambitions."[18] Levy vacillates between thinking of identity politics as dangerous and as helpful, but, either way, for her, they are, or should be, a thing of the past. Though the focus of her article is traditional, conservative women who reap the benefits of feminism while completely disowning its place in bettering their lives, I cannot help but feel like Levy's article also disenfranchises women who have never been fully accepted by mainstream feminism. I am entirely preoccupied with representation, but not because my feminism has lost its larger ambitions. I am obsessed with representation because finding mirrors within Feminism-with-a-capital-F is still nearly impossible. Even finding compassion and understanding is fraught with complications and disappointments.

Though I have managed to craft my own identity by jury-rigging pieces of identities found in the public sphere, I am still looking for public representations of each of those pieces within the same subject. Representation is not a frivolous desire. The lack of an affirming public representation of oneself can be incredibly damaging; thus, seeing a reflection of one's identifications can be a lifeline. Feminism has been part of that lifeline for me, but it also misrecognizes and attempts to invalidate other parts of my subjectivity. I wish to expand Laura Harris' mission from "[making] the terrain of feminist sexual politics a discourse on race" to making it a discourse on all identities that are important to women.[19] Because I still want and need feminism's conversations to affirm my beliefs, I believe that it needs to acknowledge *all* of me in a way that is meaningful.

In her desire for the same recognition, Harris proposes that we redraw the boundaries of the feminist movement; she writes:

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Harris, 11.

> I *always* thought I was a feminist but the more education I manage to acquire the more inclined I am to believe that I must have been lingering in a pre-feminist purgatory all those years [...] What then does it mean for a person to identify as a feminist when she does not possess an erudite knowledge of the feminist 'canon' of history, practice, and theory? [...] Rather than interpret my history as one devoid of feminism it seems more productive to ask what brand of feminism was at work in my experience?[20]

Through her critique of her fellow second-wave Feminists, Harris proposes that it is okay for my feminism to include k.d. lang, Jane Pratt, Claire Huxtable, Buffy Summers, Madison Young, and my mom. I do not actually need de Beauvoir, Steinem, and Davis to be a feminist in my own right. I can, and did, create my own pantheon of feminist exemplars based on the cultural material that was available to me when I needed it most.

Despite my problematization of the feminism of my past, I remain grateful for my time as a middle school feminist. Though it feels limiting now, the materials that I consumed in my adolescence gave me a larger understanding of gender and sexuality than the traditional views that I received from my family and peers at the time.

I first came out on the internet when I was in middle school. As soon as my family got AOL in 1995, I was in chat rooms having NC-17 conversations with people who were probably much older than my eleven years. The anonymity of the internet allowed me to lie about my age, but it also gave me the freedom to be truthful with these strangers — and, thus, myself — about what turned me on. It was truly the first “place” where I was able to explore my desire honestly and identify in ways that felt authentic. I was not familiar with the term "queer,” but, even then, the word with which I was familiar — "bisexual" — was ill fitting. It felt cutesy and slightly embarrassing, with a whiff of faddishness. It felt as black and white as, well, black and white did, which are two racial concepts that I knew were anything but monolithic. Luckily for me, however, after my AOL days and after I came out to my best friend — who said "Uh, duh!" — I no longer had to use the term.

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[20]Harris, 9-10.

I lived in a linguistic no-person's-land through high school and college. Because flirting with girls involved more social adroitness than I had at the time, I had very few romantic encounters with other women in college. This prevented me from having to come up with some kind of working terminology for myself, but I also felt like I was hiding. Shedding the androgynous, skater aesthetic that I had cultivated in middle and high school, in college, I adopted the super performative, high femme appearance that I still present today. Because of this consciously created hyper-femininity, most people assume that I am straight-ish. The "concealability" of my sexual identity meant that other queers did not reach out to me, but my own social limitations prevented me from seeking them out, so I have always felt like I cannot fault anyone but myself for my lack of visibility. If my outward packaging had obviously coded me as queer, however, my interactions with my alma mater's queer community probably would have been very different. Harris points to the "issues of dark-skinned black lesbian fems' continued exclusion from conceptions of womanhood by an always present misreading of the black lesbian body as automatically butch."[21] I argue that queer black femmes are erased by black people for whom queerness is a white thing; queers for whom queer blackness is definitively butch; and feminists for whom feminism is straight, white and heteronormative. Adding colorism into the discussion further complicates the discussion of the expectation of where black women, according to their skin tone, fall on the spectrum of gender presentation.

I began identifying as queer almost three years ago. A brief note about my usage of the term, my preference for the word "queer" is rooted in the same place as my preference for the word "brown," which I have not been using in this essay for the sake of specificity. These two modifiers fit the reality of my identities better. I own plenty of black clothing and none of it matches the color of my skin. I believe that sex and gender exist not as binaries, but on spectra, and my partners inhabit multiple loci on those spectra. Additionally, living as a queer brown woman gives me a greater sense of commonality with people of color of different ethnicities and with queers, genderqueers, and transgendered people whose expressions of gender and sexuality do not mirror mine. These labels have given me a sense of solidarity with others

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[21]Harris, 6.

who might also find they are living in communities of one. In the absence of having a mirror in the public sphere, this terminology has given me some semblance of belonging and community. Language, however, can never completely resolve social issues, so, as much as I find "queer" and "brown" to be empowering, community-building ways of describing my identities, they are merely frames for the continuing unbelonging that I feel in a racist, heterosexist society that erases, stereotypes, and demonizes me for my identities.[22]

The feelings of unbelonging created by both communities of color and the white queer community have led many to create intentional communities of brown queers, safe spaces to share the joys and difficulties of being at the margins of multiple communities. This undertaking, however, is not without its own pitfalls. In "browngirlworld," her essay for 2002's *Colonize This!*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha unpacks her attempt to create a community that bypasses what she feels is the alienating, overpowering whiteness of the feminist and queer communities. She says:

> When I moved to Toronto for queer-women-of-color-only community in the mid-nineties, along with many others, I thought, *I don't want to waste any more time on white folks*. Or on white queers, or on white girls breaking down weeping in women's studies classes. No more Queer Nation, those whips and chains are a white thing. How could I have wasted all this time on fuckin' Susie Bright when my people are in the real shackles of the International Monetary Fund [...][23]

Using Susie Bright and "whips and chains" as markers of the white, sex-positive communities with which she is disillusioned, Piepzna-Samarasinha's seeks out a sort of queer brown girl utopia, but that turns out to be just as fraught with tensions as the white communities she had fled. By the end of her essay, through a critical reading of the complications of "queer-women-of-color-only community," her disdain for things deemed "white" fades

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[22]Joane Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 123.

[23]Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "browngirlworld." In *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman, New York: Seal Press, 2002: 5.

and she is able to re-embrace BDSM and sex-positivity as facets of her sexuality to which she has a *right*. She describes one vision of her ideal family as follows:

> See this queer, mostly dark family that is part of the changing of the world, living in houses with wrist restraints and Saul Williams on the minisystem, organic mangoes in bulk from the co-op, my fam that lets each other disappear down the paths that are what they need, and lets them come back, that flows in and out, not promising perfection, valuing each other enough not to implode.[24]

In the same way that she is able to recognize the imperfections within queer women of color only community without dismissing it as too impracticable, Piepzna-Samarasinha is also able to reclaim her desires without sacrificing her politics. BDSM is no longer "a white thing," but an integral part of her subjectivity that does not have to take away from her status as an anti-racist activist and a queer woman of color.

Before I thought about blackness and girlness and queerness as identities that I modified and was modified by, there was sex wrapped up in kink. I do not know how it got there and I did not have a name for it at the time, but it made me feel like a freak and I always hoped that it would go away. I was convinced that grown-ups did not think about *those things*, at least, not as much as I did. When I was in first grade, one of the first items in a long line of spank bank material — and this is actually pretty embarrassing — was professional wrestling. Looking at it now, I realize that it was the closest that I could get to gay male porn. Wrestling — the physicalization of what I now know as "power exchange" — is still one of my kinks; I also still like gay porn. The interests that I had as a very young child, instead of disappearing as I had hoped, flourished and formed the foundation of my sexual identity.

"Sexuality," as Tricia Rose says in her introduction to *Longing to Tell*, "is considered a private matter; yet it has a powerful and volatile public social life."[25] Erotica — in the form of media *and* people, if one understands both as texts — is everywhere from advertisements for deodorant to the Disney Channel. And yet, for many girls — myself included

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[24]Piepzna-Samarsinha, 16.

[25]Rose, 8.

— childhood sexuality is ignored or stigmatized in ways that "subvert girls' access to freeing and empowering sex."[26] I was warned against being "too fast" — women in my mother's family lived at home until marriage — but no one ever taught me that sex was instinctive and quotidian, utilitarian and decadent, profound and sublime. For much too long, the varieties of the human sexual experience were so unknown to me that I could not even recognize my own sexuality as "normal" until I was in my early twenties.

Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism: good girls do not *like* BDSM and, if anything, I tried very, *very* hard to be a good girl, a good feminist, a good black person, a good queer. As Harris asserts,

> I can be an academic feminist; I can be a black feminist; I can be a dyke feminist. But I can't be any of them really without first 'passing' the boundaries set up in each, without confronting the assumptions of each, without recombining the advantages and disadvantages of each, and without being a queer in each.[27]

While BDSM has become a larger part of mainstream culture over course of my lifetime, it has always been billed to me as a white thing, a misogynist thing, and a hetero thing, and it continues to queer my experiences with every other community of which I am ostensibly a member. It has never been something that I could access that would not, for some people, invalidate the "authenticity" of my other identities. This, obviously, is incredibly problematic. By keeping feminism, blackness, and queerness vanilla, the possibilities for these communities to fully encompass their members, to expand the notions of what these identities mean, and to provide greater opportunities for intersectionality are greatly limited.[28]

In her discussion of feminist "sexuality [that is] usually either heterosexually defined or politically defined and therefore narrowly defined by all camps in the feminist debate," Harris proposes that we "create a politics that

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[26]Walker, 19.

[27]Harris, 13.

[28]"Vanilla" is a term used within the BDSM community for those who do not have any kind of kinky sex.

allows for a claiming of one's own pleasure."[29] I did not think of my personal activism within this framework before reading Harris, but writing this essay, I recognize that it is through my attempts to create a politics of pleasure that I have begun to encounter mirrors. Within the BDSM community, I have begun to find queer feminists of color and feminist white allies who do not leave their politics at the dungeon door. Paradoxically, it is through embracing the sexuality that I have fought to repress, that I am able to love — in Aimee Carrillo Rowe's sense of the word — my black, feminist, and queer femme identities.[30]

Additionally, and crucially, it is through my interactions with this community that I have learned to examine the cissexism that colored my search for representation. For Carrillo Rowe — who theorizes a "politics of relation" — "the range of options available to the subject — for experience, interpretation, and agency — arise out of the collectivities into which we insert ourselves or are inserted."[31] Through "[cultivating] intimate ties" with transgendered and genderqueer people of color, I have been able to gain "experiential access" to a type of privilege that I had left unexamined.[32] Over the past three years, in addition to cisgendered women, transgendered women, transgendered men, and genderqueers assigned female at birth have all been mirrors for me. Seeing these exemplars happy and healthy, living their kinks, and

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[29]Harris, 26-27.

[30]"My argument is that whom we love is who we are becoming, that the duo power/knowledge must also account for the politics of love. [...] I mean 'love' not necessarily in the narrow sense of lovers, or even friends, although I mean those relations too — I mean 'love' in the more expansive sense of whose lives matter to us. Whose well-being is essential to our own? And whose survival must we overlook in order to connect to power in the ways that we do? Because questions of whom we love are inseparable from the politics of subject formation, belonging is political. The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming. The meaning of 'self' is never individual, but is forged across a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection." Carrillo Rowe, 3.

[31]Carrillo Rowe, 10.

[32]Ibid.

forming chosen families has been incredibly powerful. However, while some of these people are well known within the subculture of those who play and attend conferences on a national level, they exist on the margins of a hegemonic power structure that privileges puritanical sex-negativity over frank exploration. Still, it is important to note that queers of color are creating spaces for themselves within the BDSM and sex-positive communities.

In looking for a BDSM event to attend during a recent trip to New York, I discovered Switch, a play party within a play party advertised on FetLife, a social networking site for the kink set. Though it is not specific to people of color, it is an excellent model of the way in which space is being carved out within the larger fetish community. The Eulenspeigel Society, the oldest and largest BDSM support and education group in the United States, hosts a monthly gathering and provides Switch with a separate, private space for people who identify as "women, trans, genderqueer, multi-gender, gender non-conforming, gender variant, gender fluid, et cetera."[33] In her FetLife profile, the anonymous founder of the party stresses the importance of holding the event in spaces where "we can go and define ourselves and they take our word for it."[34] She also says "i wish we had more places to meet and, i don't know, do things like wrestle and fight and fuck, and not get kicked out for it."[35] While she highlights the dearth of spaces available solely to kinky queers who do not identify as cisgendered men, she has taken the step of creating a place where members of her community can feel comfortable.

Ignacio Rivera — who prefers gender-neutral second person plural pronouns — self-identifies as a "Queer, gender-shifting, TransEntity, Black Boricua performance artist, lecturer, activist, and self-proclaimed sex educator and sex worker."[36] One of the founding board members of Queers for Economic Justice, through their company, Poly

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[33]switchofthemonth, "Switch," FetLife, http://fetlife.com/events/7633.

[34]switchofthemonth, "switchofthemonth," FetLife, http://fetlife.com/users/92308.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ignacio Rivera, Poly Patao Productions. http://www.polypataoproductions.com/about.php.

Patao Productions, Ignacio travels around the country facilitating play parties and workshops for queer women, transgendered people, and genderqueers, with the option of making these events for people of color. Ignacio is also currently working on a documentary called *Shades of Kink*, which they describe as "a series of educational/documentary style films around inserting racial/class/sexuality and gender analysis into the Kink world."[37] They believe that it is important for queer people of color to create images of self-identity because what few images exist are not accurate portrayals of our varied existences. Ignacio says, "We need to start expressing ourselves and our realities and our experiences so that this idea of 'who we are' is broadened."[38]

Mollena Williams, Ms. San Francisco Leather 2009 and Ms. International Leather 2010, is a bisexual black woman who teaches workshops on the leather lifestyle. She is also considered the authority — if a decentralized community like this one can have "authorities" — on race play, a type of edge play that sexualizes racial dynamics. One of her sponsors for Ms. SF Leather was Pink and White Productions, which is also based in the Bay Area. Led by Shine Louise Houston, Pink and White creates queer porn that, while not always obviously kinky, consistently features women, genderqueers, and transgendered people of color. Houston, a queer woman of color, has hewed a niche within the queer community, specifically the activist queer porn community based mostly in San Francisco. Of her work as a pornographer, Houston says, "there is power in creating images, and for a woman and queer of color to take that power, I don't find it exploitative; I think it's necessary."[39]

Ignacio, Mollena, Shine, and the creator of Switch are just some of the exemplars that I have come across in the past three years of expanding my involvement in the sex-positive and kink communities. While I do not think that the BDSM community is without the same oppressive whiteness that problematizes feminism, for me, it has,

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Ignacio Rivera, interview by Alea Adigweme, November 17, 2009.

[39]Shine Louise Houston, "About the Crash Pad Series." Pink & White Productions. http://crashpadseries.com/wordpress/about.

unexpectedly, played an invaluable part in the location of a kinky, queer women of color community.

So, *I do exist*, but I am incredibly hard to find. The small handful of accurate representations that I have found for myself does not exist in the mainstream public sphere, which is exactly where I think they should exist. I see this essay as a way to share a narrative that is both true *and* representational, one that challenges people to rethink their notions of who is black, who is feminist, who is queer, and who is kinky. My feminism is a sex-positive one that leaves room for kink and sex work as political statements and forms of activism. I concur with Laura Harris when she says that she wants her feminism to "take up sexuality in ways that make it simultaneously about race, class, and gender — in ways that politicize pleasure — not just personalize it as a politics of being."[40] I think it is important for people to hear stories from those on the margins whose intersecting identities are often ignored. I placed myself at the center of this autoethnographic work not only because I lack models, but because I also want to offer myself as a model of subjectivity that has been missing from the public sphere. To quote Barbara Christian, "I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*."[41] I want to inspire belonging in others as much as I want to critique the boundaries of communities. I believe that it is important, however, to remember that the process of challenging one's own narrative is a never-ending one. If we are complacent about our own inclusion, we are probably resting on someone else's exclusion.

In creating their borders, communities can never fully account for everyone. I think it is possible, however, to keep from rendering people like me invisible. Besides queer, kinky women of color creating spaces and continuing to be lighthouses for each other, I do not really know the solution.[42] It is not enough, as Harris says, to

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[40]Harris, 28.

[41]Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory." *In Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, Laura S. Kauffman, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 21.

[42]I use the word "women" because it is convenient, but I would like to reiterate that the exemplars I have found do not necessarily identify as such.

add token voices from the margins to these communities; we must "[allow] them to disrupt the systems in ways that *reconstitute* [those systems]."[43] I want to see images of women like myself created by those women and placed within the mainstream public sphere. I want the black, feminist, queer, and BDSM communities to understand identity *intersectionally* and on anti-racist, sex-positive, feminist, and queer terms. Harris rightfully demands "a cultural analysis and reclamation of queer black female sexualities: sexualities that have had a long history of being denied pleasure."[44] I want pleasure to be a way to think about social justice instead of it being a tool for existing movements to alienate members. Like Harris, Rivera, and Houston, I believe that it is important for those with complicated, intersecting identities to speak up about the fact that they exist at all. The confessional nature of this text is a continuation and mirroring of the candor and vulnerability of their works. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe writes, "When theory and experience connect, the collision creates sparks to light a path that casts new shadows. These reflections warm the spaces within theory: theory is a creation of the body, of experience, and of belonging."[45] This merging of theory and practice is at the forefront of my desire to combat a reality that Barbara Christian addressed in 1985 — "If Black women don't say who they are, other people will and say it badly for them."[46] I am taking this first step in saying who *I* am to avoid that fate for myself and to help forestall that fate for others.

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[43]Harris, 25. Emphasis mine.

[44]Harris, 28.

[45]Carrillo Rowe, 14.

[46]Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives of Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985: xii.

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