

Reclaiming and Asserting Sexual Agency: Black Women in Sadomasochism

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Reclaiming and Asserting Sexual Agency: Black Women in Sadomasochism

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how racial and sexual identities intersect in sadomasochism in relation to historical understandings of Black women's sexual identities and social positions. My specific research question is: Can Black women reclaim their sexualⁱ agency from colonial history and assert that agency through sadomasochism? Because the research and analysis focus on the interactions of heterosexual Black women with White men, it is important to consider why and how Black women interact sexually with White men, to what extent sadomasochism informs the sexual interaction, and if and how race is a significant factor in the interracial sadomasochistic encounter. These considerations are important because they give insight into how Black women establish and assert their sexual agency—whether that is through choosing a particular partner, how they negotiate a scene, whether racial difference is influential, or some combination of these and/or other factors.

Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, among other texts, open the potential for this work as Black feminist scholarship. Africana theories in conjunction with discursive and historical analyses will provide historical and social context. Specifically, the autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs will establish historical constructions of Black women's sexual identity. An essential part of this work is the interview component. Four Black women who identified as sadomasochists who playⁱⁱ with White men volunteered to respond to a questionnaire and enter a conversation about their practices. Largely, the interviews will be the core primary sources. This work is an exploration of how the participants see themselves in relation to historical constructions of the sexualized Black woman and how they are currently producing their own understandings of Black

women's sexual agency. In addition to this, the current work will also engage psychological findings concerning sadomasochism; previous research on the subject has failed to include the experiences of Black people. As an Afrocentric study this work places Black women at the center of the discourse about Black women's sexuality and agency. This work is groundbreaking because it examines sadomasochism, which is often characterized as an alternative sexual practice or lifestyle. Moreover, it looks to Black women to express and articulate their sadomasochistic experiences. In my research there was no other literature that attempted to do this. The present work enhances the fields of both Africana Studies and sexuality, and opens the door for other work of this nature.

Methodology

In addition to reviewing literature, interviews were used to inform this work. Interviews are useful for relating experiences; they allow one to pursue in-depth information based on the respondent's subjective lived experience. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method used in this study. This type of interview enabled the participants to expand on a train of thought and allowed me, as the researcher, to pursue a line of questioning that was not explicitly outlined in the interview questions. The interviews, which were conducted via Skype, lasted about forty-five minutes to one hour. The four interviews provided invaluable information on Black women's perspectives and perceptions of their understanding, roles, and agency in sadomasochism.

In the book *Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods*, Margaret Anderson writes that "studies of race have often been distorted by having been centered in the perspectives and experiences of dominant group members" (39). The present work challenges this standard by privileging the voices and experiences of Black women, who are not typically considered a

dominant group. Moreover, this study contests the dominant group perspective by exploring sadomasochism, which is a marginalized sexual identity and practice.

Anderson states that relationships between research subjects and researchers are “never equal” (40) due to qualities such as race, class, and gender. Based on the demographic information collected, the interviewees and I are of the same race and gender. However, it is unclear if we are of the same class and educational background. Though I did not ask them directly, based on our conversations it did seem that the women who informed this study were both well-educated and gainfully employed. Additionally, all of the participants were over the age of eighteen; one woman indicated that she was thirty-two. The age difference between this particular woman and I may have placed our conversation in a certain power dynamic. She may have felt that she, the older, had a responsibility to not only share her experiences, but also teach me, the younger.

The fact that the participants and I are of the same race and gender seems to afford me a sort of familiarity with the women. Anderson notes that “minority scholars are also less likely to experience distrust, hostility, and exclusion within minority communities” (41). Because of our shared characteristics, it is possible that the interviewees were particularly comfortable speaking with me about a topic as sensitive as their sexuality.

Constructions of Black Women’s Sexuality

A crucial part of studying Black women’s sexuality is examining how that sexuality was first conceptualized. Studies on African women and sex in precolonial times are very limited. The literature that does exist seems to focus on women’s roles in political, religious, economic, and family life. This research often discusses specific gendered divisions, but not sex rolesⁱⁱⁱ. Typically, Western scholars present African women of colonial times using

Western understandings of sex roles. A large part of this understanding is how people originally approached Black women in a sexual manner—what the “approacher’s” intent was.

In her book *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*, Joane Nagel describes “ethnosexual frontiers”, which are intersectional sites where “ethnicity is sexualized, and sexuality is racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized” (14). These frontiers are patrolled and regulated by force. This force is either police intervention or social constructs that stigmatize the dominant group who interact with “the Other”. An example of such stigmatization is when the mixed couple is not accepted into the local community; this communal rejection could be based on race, national identity, religion, or even language (Nagel). Despite obstructions like retaliation, rejection, and stigmatization, ethnosexual frontiers are continually crossed.

Nagel details four types of people who infiltrate the ethnosexual frontiers. First, there are the “Ethnosexual settlers”, people—White men—who form lasting relationships by joining communities of or establishing families with “the Other”—Black women. “Ethnosexual sojourners”, the second category, are White men who have sexual contact with Black women for a limited amount of time, then return to their original communities. Third are the “Ethnosexual adventurers”, White men who transgress the ethnic boundaries for “recreational, casual, or ‘exotic’ sexual encounters, often more than once, but who return to their sexual home bases after each excursion” (14). Finally, “ethnosexual invaders” are White men who commit sexual offenses “across ethnic boundaries, inside alien ethnic territory, seducing, raping, and sexually enslaving [Black women] as a means of domination and colonization” (14). Each of these terms—“settlers”, “sojourners”, “adventurers”, and “invaders”—connotes access and control. Historically, White men have had access to each of the four categories; they

could enter and move freely through a space or community in ways that Black women could not. Even in their seemingly benign forms as settlers and sojourners, White men who cross ethnosexual frontiers have access and opportunity to infiltrate and influence the Black community.

Ethnosexual settlers and sojourners “make social, emotional, and sexual contact with local populations” (Nagel 15). Typically, the relationships that ethnosexual settlers and sojourners are a part of are public and permanent or long-term; they join the ethnic community (Nagel). Though it is not always seen this way, assimilation can be examined through sexuality; intermarriage is “the most institutionalized form of sustained ethnosexual contact” (Nagel 15). George Francis Dow’s *Slave Ships and Slaving* includes several first-hand accounts from slavers. An example of an ethnosexual encounter involving a White “settler” or “sojourner” is the story of the slaver Richard Drake. In *Revelations of a Slave Smuggler: being the Autobiography of Capt. Richard Drake, an African Trader for Fifty Years—from 1807 to 1857*, Drake relates his capture during a raid by the Yallaba on the Ashantee, two warring African groups. As a prisoner, Drake was taken by the Yallaba to Dahomey, which is present day Benin. There, Drake was treated well by the Yallaba king and his people because of Drake’s white skin. As time passed, Drake was viewed more favorably by the Yallabas. After about one year in captivity, Drake wrote:

One day King Mammee sent for me and after a long harangue said that I should become his son by marrying Soolah. He told me that his fetish and mine would become very powerful. My vanity was touched by this mark of royal favor and I was not averse to the princess who was the handsomest young negress I had ever seen and so I consented at once. (200)

In this instance, Drake, the White ethnosexual settler or sojourner, is socially and emotionally connected to the Yallaba through marriage. He understands and speaks their language, and he

is in a position to gain an important status in the community. Additionally, through his marriage to King Mammee's daughter, Drake will soon be sexually connected to the Yallaba. In this situation, there does not appear to be any force on Drake's part; in fact, he is attracted to Soolah and looks forward to their union. Soolah's voice in the matter of the marriage is silenced. We do not know if she was coerced or endorsed the arrangement. Moreover, Soolah was given away by her father, the king. This action by the king complicates the matter of ethnosexual frontier crossing. King Mammee's giving Soolah away indicates that the role of ethnosexual frontier crosser can be initiated by the White man, as well as placed upon him. There is no indication that Soolah consents to marrying Drake; it seems that her opinion and ability to choose are invalidated. This disregard for consent is very much present in Black women's encounters with White ethnosexual adventurers and invaders in the United States.

The words "adventurer" and "invader" do not inspire thoughts of friendly, or even consensual, encounters. Relating this to the above scenario, the Princess Soolah does not appear to have any influence in the marriage arrangement; it is not clear whether or not she consents to marrying Drake. Nagel states that "recreational sex with and sexual abuse of members of other ethnic groups are the specialties of ethnosexual adventurers and invaders" (17). Sexual transgressions such as rape, forced sexual servitude, and trafficking committed by White men ethnosexual adventurers and invaders happen as a result of "assertions of the impurity, inferiority, or hypersexuality of ethnic Others" (Nagel 19), specifically Black women. These sexual affronts were permitted by the dominant colonial society. It was not illegal to rape, or otherwise sexually abuse, an enslaved Black woman because she was considered property. Ideas such as these prompted people to conceive of Black women as sexual savages (hooks), as such "a non-human, an animal [could] not be raped" (hooks 52). If a

White owner was charged with such a crime, it was unlikely that he would be found guilty of any wrongdoing. Because of their “ease and casualness” (Nagel 18), as well as the very low chance that White men ethnosexual adventurers and invaders would suffer any negative consequences like stigmatization or penalization, the sexual assault of Black women by White men was a regular occurrence. These acts are a hallmark of White male privilege and institutional racism. Ethnosexual adventurers and invaders had ample opportunity to commit sexual affronts against continental and diasporic African women.

From the moment that African people were first captured and forced onto slave ships, sexuality was used as a means to control their bodies. Several accounts from slavers detail the sexual aggressions that enslaved women faced. In “Description of North and South Guinea”, the slaver John Barbot wrote that Black women have a “natural hot and lewd temper [that] soon wastes their bodies” (7). African women were conceived as sexually uncontrollable. In his recordings entitled “The Ship Doctor’s Narrative”, Alexander Falconbridge, a slave ship doctor explains that “on board some ships the common sailors [were] allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they [could] procure...The officers [were] permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure and sometimes [were] guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature” (145). Here, slavers were permitted to have sex with African women who consented. “Consent” assumes that the women—captured and trapped on a slave ship—had the right or ability to refuse any sexual advances. If a woman did not accept the slaver’s sexual advances, she endured another physical attack—she was beaten. In a testimony to Parliament, the slaver James Arnold affirmed, “It was [the captain’s] general practice on the receipt of a woman slave—especially a young one—to send for her to come to his cabin so that he might lie with her. Sometimes they would refuse to comply with his desires

and would be severely beaten by him and sent below” (174). In one final example, the slaver Richard Drake wrote in his autobiography, “The younger women fared best at first as they were allowed to come on deck as companions for our crew...some scores of women were driven below as company for the males” (242). Again, enslaved women are used as “companions” for the ship’s crew. The sexual exploitation of Black women continued when they were on the actual slave plantation, reinforcing the images of Black people as sexual savages and sexual heathens (hooks).

In her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs uses the pseudonym Linda Brent to detail and protest the sexual harassment that slave women were confronted with. In chapter nine, “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders”, Jacobs explains that:

The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles inculcated...she may have a lover...or the profligate men who have power over her may be exceedingly odious to her. But resistance is hopeless. (79)

According to Jacobs, as soon as a young girl enters puberty, she is rendered vulnerable to the sexual proclivities of any and all of the White men that are present on the plantation. bell hooks writes that institutionalized sexism ‘legitimized sexual exploitation of black females’ (24). In the chapter “The Trials of Girlhood”, Jacobs continues to explain that a slave girl

Will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. (55)

Of her own experience, Jacobs writes, “I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear” (44) and “My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him” (46). Jacobs is able to keep her persistent master at a distance and devises a way to upset him. However, even her acts of resistance and agency are sexually based.

In chapter ten, “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life”, Jacobs, “with deliberate calculation” (83), engages in a sexual relationship with an unmarried White man who has taken an interest in her. Jacobs does not enter into this relationship on a whim. On the contrary, she explains that “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs 85). Additionally, Jacobs notes that should she have any children with this man, they would likely be supported and made free, since he is not her master. This anecdote from Jacobs’ autobiography is a clear enactment of her power to choose and influence her fate. Though she is both a woman and a slave, Jacobs makes informed decisions for herself; she considers what is in her own best interest and that of her potential children. As Hazel Carby writes, “in the slave narratives written by black women the authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects” (36). Because of how she navigated her sexuality by using consent and the ability to choose her partner, Jacobs could be considered one of the first public figures to address the importance and influence of Black women’s sexual agency. Jacobs’ active sexual role became racialized and gendered, a “symbol of deviant female sexuality” (Collins 83).

In her work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that the “jezebel”, a trope established during times of slavery, is a characteristic central to constructions of Black women’s sexuality. Because she is not passive like White women, the Black jezebel is understood to be inappropriate and have an insatiable sexual appetite. Stereotypes such as this one seemed to confirm intimately intertwined ideas about sex and race; the two identifiers reinforced one another. Collins writes that “controlling images such as jezebel are created to mask” (Collins 162) power differentials between Black women and White men, “[providing] the illusion of consent” (Collins 162). This explanation indicates that colonial representations of Black women as promiscuous and hypersexual served to justify the sexual exploitation of Black women by White men.

Some scholars have retrospectively attributed White men’s historical attraction to Black women as a “side effect” of The Cult of True Womanhood, also known as The Cult of White Womanhood. Barbara Welter, the creator of the term, explains:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and this spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. (225)

Two of the key virtues outlined above, piety and purity, demand sexual repression. As slaves, Black women were demonized as sexual, making them impure. In her autobiography, following her sexual involvement with the single, White man, Jacobs writes, “My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave. I had said, ‘Let the storm beat! I will brave it till I die.’ And now how humiliated I felt!” (87). It is clear from her lamentations that Jacobs was, at one time, “pure” by colonial standards. In earlier chapters Jacobs details how her grandmother pressed upon her the importance of Christian derived

values, such as being chaste. However, as a result of and in order to change her circumstances as an enslaved woman, Jacobs betrayed her self-prescribed purity and piety. Additionally, Black women were considered domestic workers. Though female slaves served both in the house and in the field, they were purely laborers. A “house” slave would not fit the Cult of True Womanhood’s idea of domesticity because she was still a laborer toiling away at house chores. Finally, female slaves would not be deemed submissive in terms of the Cult of True Womanhood. Black women struggled against their imposed slavery. This resistance was met with retaliation by the White owners; in this way, Black women were forced into submission. Their submission was not that of the supposedly docile plantation mistress. Moreover, Black women were considered property. Additionally, these characterizations served to masculinize the Black female (hooks). Black women were viewed as “‘surrogate’ men by white males slavers” (hooks 23). As Carby notes, understandings of true womanhood as deemed by White colonial society were bound by a shared social understanding that particular external physical characteristics were socially constructed as impure, corrupt, and overtly sexual, which, in turn, reflected the person’s morality. The enslaved Black women were offended by this masculinization and “bitterly resented that they were not considered ‘women’ by the dominant culture and therefore were not the recipients of the considerations and privileges given white women” (hooks 48). Taking all of this into account, one point of view suggests that, in the parameters of The Cult of True Womanhood, Black women were not recognized as women at all, but objects outside of womanhood.

Following this pattern of thought, White men were driven to Black women, who were not conceived as women, but objects, in order to satisfy their sexual needs. Citing Winthrop Jordan, D’Emilio and Freedman state that “white men desired sexual union with blacks, but

given their culture's aversion to racial mixing, they refused to acknowledge that desire...thus white men projected sexual desire onto black women, viewing them as lustful and available" (37); this speaks to the characterization of Black women as jezebels. Moreover, because of their supposed over sexuality, Black women were "held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress" (Carby 27). White men were not blamed for their active roles; in fact, they were seen as victims of Black women's sexual displays. Many Black women were enslaved and, consequently, largely at the mercy of their White owners and overseers. In some circumstances the women did challenge their White aggressors and resist being taken advantage of. However, when this happened, the women were often severely punished, as described earlier. Women were whipped or starved for refusing a White man (Carby). Considering these points, as well as the master-slave power differential, it is difficult to imagine that Black women willfully and purposefully ensnared White men using their sexual feminine wiles. This view is limited as it does not consider the will of White men and their purpose in using sexual violence against Black women.

In her book *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis criticizes this view, stating that characterizing White men's sexual interactions with Black women as a response to The Cult of True Womanhood is "far too simplistic of an explanation" (23). Many scholars have said that a range of relationships existed between Black women and White men during the times of slavery, from sexually coercive to consensual and loving. In their book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, D'Emilio and Freedman state:

It is important to recognize that these unions did not simply involve powerless black victims subject to the total domination of white masters...to characterize interracial sex purely in terms of the victimization of black women would be a distortion. Not only did black women resist sexual assault successfully, but in addition, sincerely affectionate unions sometimes formed. (101)

Though they do not acknowledge it, D'Emilio and Freedman contradict themselves by stating the following two points: 1) according to the law, slaves were considered property, not people; therefore, they could not be raped, and 2) "men expected to exercise sexual freedom with women slaves" (94) and "as a result, owners and overseers often approached slave women expecting or commanding sexual relations" (101). Following these points about the societal standards, it does not seem that all enslaved Black women had "affectionate unions" with White men. If they dared resist, women were threatened with being beaten or sold, or some other harsh punishment (Carby). Despite this, Black women did, as D'Emilio and Freedman note, exercise resistance.

The White owning class was determined to subdue Black women. The way they attempted to do this was through sexual affronts, specifically rape. White womanhood was idealized through concepts such as the Cult of True Womanhood, whereas Black women were sexually assaulted (hooks). Davis explains, "Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist" (23). This understanding clearly reasons that White men's sexual attraction to Black women was less of a desire or urge prompted by the chastity encouraged by The Cult of True Womanhood and more of a political ploy intended to defeat and debase Black women, discouraging them from realizing and utilizing their agency. The resistance and resilience that Black women demonstrated were used to imagine them outside of the Cult of True Womanhood. In support of this reading, Carby examines Black women's characters in the literature of the time. She asserts that "the black woman repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood because she survived her institutionalized rape, whereas the true heroine would rather die than be sexually abused...[this] encouraged readers to conclude that the slave woman must be less sensitive and

spiritually inferior” (34). In other words, as strong, non-submissive survivors, Black women were viewed as flawed and unwomanly, rather than pillars of perseverance. It is exactly this resistance that makes understandings of interracial sexual encounters during slavery complex.

Angela Davis notes that Black women experienced the same oppression and suffering as Black men, were considered equals in the slave community, and resisted slavery as fervently as any man. Of this resistance, Davis says:

It was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system, for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable...the groundwork was created not only for Black women to assert their equality through their social relations, but also to express it through their acts of resistance. (23)

In other words, because some Black women were subjected to the most extreme mistreatment in the same ways as their male counterparts, they were considered equals in their communities. This equality was a driving force in Black women’s resistance and agency. Accordingly, Black women experienced unique sufferings in the context of American slavery, which included, but were not limited to breeding—a slave woman’s “reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property, and directly to capital itself” (Carby 25)—and rape. Discourse asserting that there existed consensual interracial sexual interactions suggests that “what happened between [Black women and White men], therefore, was not sexual exploitation, but rather ‘miscegenation’”, which “hinges on the issue of paternalism” (Carby 25)—the White owners acknowledging some form of humanity in their slave property (Carby). This paternalistic understanding does not take into account that “white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies. It was as oppressors—or, in the case of non-slaveowners, as agents of domination—that white men approached Black women’s bodies” (Davis 26). In other words, there was no social or cultural space for White men to engage in loving or desirous relationships with Black women because

the White men were the constructors and owners of American society at the time. What the White men wanted, was theirs for the taking—Black women’s bodies included. In addition to breeding and rape, “sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity” (hooks 37). It is interesting to consider this hierarchical sociosexual dynamic in the context of Bondage, Discipline, and Sadomasochism, where some Black women consent to these sorts of replays of history.

Background on Sadomasochism

Black women’s sexuality and ideas of consent come together in the context of Bondage, Discipline, and Sadomasochism (BDSM), or, simply, sadomasochism (SM). Many BDSM interactions are constructed around dominant and submissive or master and slave relationships; these designations exemplify power differentials. Harriet Jacobs’ choice and consent to enter into a sexual relationship with a White man, initiating the collapse of the sociosexual hierarchy created during the colonial period, can be understood as one of the first instances where Black women’s sexuality and consent converged. In exploring the etymology of sadomasochism, the terms “sadism” and “masochism” are both derived from literary sources. French Comte Donatien-Alphonse-Francois, Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) and writer, practiced and wrote about sexual cruelty; “Sade” forms the root of the word “sadism” (Weinberg). Similarly, the word “masochism” was created using the name of Leopold Ritter von Sacher Masoch (1836-1905), an Austrian author who wrote about erotic pain, humiliation, and submission (Weinberg). Sadomasochism is understood as “the eroticization of dominance and submission” (Weinberg 20) and is an umbrella term that encompasses many forms of sexualized power differentials. Dominance and submission, or the giving and accepting of control of one person over another in a sexualized context, is a set of behaviors that are

typically an integral part of this power play. The pairing of bondage—the practice of physical restraint—and discipline—the practice of psychological restraint—is one type of sadomasochism.

In the course of this work, four volunteers contributed their time and experience by participating in interviews that greatly informed the study. Each person identified herself as a Black woman who participates in sadomasochism with White men. One of the first questions that each woman answered was, “What does sadomasochism mean to you?”. The definitions that the women provided are as follows:

It’s the pleasure received from being on both the giving and receiving end of sexual pain and its following release both emotionally and physically (K).

Giving and receiving of pain for pleasure (V).

Receiving pain as a part of pleasure (N).

For me, it’s the exchange of energy. Given and received. Some like to give pain and others like to receive it (F).

From these four individual definitions, it is clear that each includes the same basic principles—sexualization of dominance and submission. These definitions are also a slightly different from the general understanding of sadomasochism because they all include pain as part of the definition, providing nuanced understandings of the term sadomasochism, as well as its practice. Pain is not part of every BDSM scene; it is simply one way to establish the power differential. This subjectivity is exemplary of the difficulty that BDSM practitioners and scholars have with reaching a consensus on a definition of sadomasochism. Aside from its definition, another important part of sadomasochism is establishing one’s role. The respondents presented many ways to describe themselves. One woman shared, “I am completely submissive, however, on certain occasions, I do have pet and little girl streaks” (K). Another

identified herself as “Mistress because [she owns] a slave and dominant because that is [her] personality type” (F). The final two simply stated, “I am a submissive” (N), and “Dominant” (V).

Both historically and contemporarily, psychologists and medical doctors have pathologized sadomasochism. The medical pathology of sadomasochism has its roots in the works of historic figures like psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, both of whom characterized sadomasochism as a symptom of some underlying psychopathology (Weinberg). Often, because it is considered deviant, sadomasochism is linked to behaviors like rape; it is also seen as a symptom of sickness, maladjustment, and/or sexual disorders (Cross and Matheson). Not surprisingly, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) classifies sexual masochism and sexual sadism as “Sexual Dysfunction Not Otherwise Specified”^{iv}. Despite this established understanding, there is a move to de-pathologize sadomasochism.

Attempts at Non-Pathological Explanations

Returning briefly to the participant definitions of sadomasochism, one woman expresses SM as an “exchange of energy”. She does not see BDSM as a psychological disturbance or perversion, but as a transfer, perhaps, even, a way for her and her partner to communicate. It is expressions and understandings of sadomasochism such as this one that have led people to explore non-pathological explanations of BDSM. In trying to expand explanations of sadomasochism, a study aimed at discerning sadomasochists’ definition and understanding of their sexuality has identified eight common themes. The themes were: dissidence, pleasure, escapism, transcendence, learned behavior, intra-psychic, pathological, and inexplicable. As dissidence, sadomasochism was described as antithetical to patriarchal

heterosexuality and rooted in a feminist discourse; in this way it was a political act that parodied normative sexual behaviors. Additionally, sadomasochism as dissidence opposed “vanilla sex”^v and celebrated difference. Sadomasochism as dissidence could be related to critiques of conformity and normativity. All participants in the study described SM as fun and pleasurable. In terms of escapism, some of them described sadomasochism as escape of the “mundane, of the ordinariness or alienation of everyday life” (Taylor and Ussher 304), as therapeutic and other worldly—these expressions are similar to the “exchange of energy” mentioned previously. When describing sadomasochism as transcendence, respondents related it to a mystical framework with increased consciousness. Some respondents described their sexuality as a learned behavior where they linked sexual arousal to pain. Participants included spankings as punishment during childhood and the pain of masturbation as types of learned behavior. It is important to note that they did not cite child sex abuse as examples of the learned sexual behavior; this recognition distances sadomasochism from characterizations of the practice as perversion and pathological. Some of the informants discussed sadomasochism as intra-psychic, where they detached themselves from their real world problems. Others expressed the importance of control in their intra-psychic understandings. The people in this study did not talk about themselves in terms of pathology, but claimed to know sadomasochists who were pathological. They expressed concern that people they knew or had seen practicing BDSM were too harsh or aggressive. Finally, some participants described sadomasochism as inexplicable; they did not have the words or vocabulary to fully understand or express themselves and their sexual behaviors (Taylor and Ussher). Both the people who participate in sadomasochism and scholars of the lifestyle and sexuality are interested in non-pathological explanations.

Thinking about these eight identifications in relation to the Black women's responses, the women who informed the present work had varied understandings of their motivations to engage in BDSM. Of these motivations, they said the following:

Just the idea of being at someone else's control and whim...that feeling of helplessness. To engage in that sort of thing you have to trust your partner immensely and yet still during certain parts of a scene you may still feel just a hint of uncertainty and that fuels me a bit, as well. You can never really determine exactly what is going to be done (K).

[I am intrigued or excited by] the power exchange, the rough play, control (V).

I like the power exchange (N).

It's pretty abstract in a way. I like the power of taking from someone what they give. I like to see a person go past their limits and knowing I took him/her there is a charge for me (F).

As a submissive, one woman is intrigued and excited by the uncertainty of what is to come in the scene and the importance of trust. The remaining three participants are really driven by the exchange of power, but in varied ways.

There are four current academic views of sadomasochism: *medical/psychoanalytic perspectives*, *radical feminist view*, *escape-from-self*, and *SM-centered perspective*. In an effort to assess these views, Patricia Cross and Kim Matheson administered questionnaires to people who identified as sadomasochists and analyzed text from internet sources such as chat rooms or discussion boards. The medical/psychoanalytic perspective asserts that sadomasochism is a symptom of some underlying sickness or maladjustment. Empirical research on the medical/psychoanalytic perspective did not find that "masochists are guilt-ridden when it comes to sex or that sadists are id^{vi}-driven" (Cross and Matheson 144). Additionally, the results did not show that "sadists are antisocial or psychopathic and that masochists suffer from some sort of mental disorder" (Cross and Matheson 145). The radical feminist view claims that

sadomasochism is misogynistic. However, empirical research assessing this view did not find that sadomasochists have more anti-feminist or traditional gender role beliefs than people who did not identify as sadomasochists. The escape-from-self view explains sadomasochism as a “temporary and powerful escape from higher-level self-awareness” (Cross and Matheson 136). The results from empirically testing this hypothesis did not suggest that masochists “were more inclined to engage in escapist behaviors” (Cross and Matheson 147) than others.

Despite this finding, one of the Black women stated that sadomasochism fulfills her need to “give up control” (N). She explained, “I work a job where I make decisions all day... While I am at work I am asked for my opinion or what to do about a situation. While I am in a scene everything is planned before hand and the dom^{vii} just takes the preset limits and runs with them. There is no ‘How does this feel’ or ‘Do you like this?’” (N). For this Black woman who identifies as a submissive, it appears that sadomasochism is an escape from daily life. It is a context where she is not under the pressure of making executive decisions and can separate her work life from her sex life.

Finally, the SM-centered perspective understands sadomasochism as the “eroticized, consensual exchange of power” (Cross and Matheson 137). Each of the Black women who were interviewed for the present work would agree with this last perspective. After all, each of their self-developed definitions of BDSM incorporated an aspect of sexualized power exchange.

What BDSM Practitioners Have to Say

As evidenced above, empirical and psychoanalytical research does not sufficiently address the motivations of sadomasochists. In fact, many people who practice sadomasochism are well-educated and well-adjusted in society, falsifying the stereotype of sadomasochists as

deviant (Williams). The current work is contributing to the discourse by including participants whose interview responses are based on subjective experience and “the social side of sadomasochism”. The social side of BDSM is tied to learned and culturally produced meanings that are reinforced by participation in sadomasochism (Weinberg). The analysis is not limited by pathologized explanations and understandings of sadomasochism.

Integral parts of BDSM play and lifestyle are context, consent, and mutual meaning-making. Mutual meaning-making refers to SM practitioners’ ability and responsibility to establish the purpose and parameters of their scene by creating differential statuses (Cross and Matheson). One way to think about this difference is through pain and violence; they are often used to establish the dominant and/or submissive roles. Pain is definitely an important aspect in each of the Black women’s scenes, as they all cited “pain” when explaining their self-developed definitions of BDSM. However, pain and violence are not essential to SM; they are simply two of many techniques used to establish power dynamics. The Black women interviewed for this research spoke to the importance of consent in sadomasochism. They explain:

Consent really does [have a role in my BDSM play]. I have to trust him...therefore use of safe words and keeping one another informed throughout the scene of how we’re feeling and our headspace is important so things don’t become too out of control. As for collaboration, I enjoy not knowing what is going to happen and so I generally mention things I’ve found interesting and wish to try, he asks me a few questions regarding it, and then it isn’t mentioned again for a while, and then one night I’ll visit him and he has the scene he desires set up but with my mentioned interest as the main thing (K).

Before any scene, rules are established. What they like, what I prefer, how far to go, etc. I also use what I call the ‘stoplight’ as a safe word. ‘Red’ means completely stop the scene. ‘Yellow’ means ‘I like what you are doing but slow down’ or ‘I need a break and do something else’. ‘Green’ means ‘I like what you are doing, do more’ (V).

It is very important to talk to your partner if it is your first time playing together or to play with someone you trust (N).

I have very lengthy talks. I find out the likes, dislikes, limits, the hard and soft. I ask about medical conditions, a little about the person's past, are there any triggers that may create a negative reaction, I talk about food allergies if I plan on using food. What will or won't happen is agreed upon...Also without consent you are doing something against the other person's will and without permission. This can be viewed as abuse because there was no consent. Scenes are negotiated to the 'nth' degree (F).

As evidenced here, consent and mutual meaning-making, as well as understanding, are central to sadomasochism. Considering historical sexual abuses against Black women—which surely involved non-consensual violence and pain—it is interesting that the women who informed this study chose to rely on the use of pain to negotiate and enact their scenes.

Continental and Diasporic Africans in BDSM

Psychological research on BDSM that is informed by participant interviews usually focuses on gay White men or heterosexual White men and women; these are the people who typically make themselves and their play spaces open to researchers and/or interviewers. Because there are few people of color who participate in sadomasochism, it follows that they are underrepresented in scholarly works about BDSM sexuality and lifestyle. One possible reason that few people of color participate in sadomasochism is to maintain an accepted status in society and not be conceived of as deviant. Despite previous scholarship's shortcomings, Black people have, in fact, documented their history in sadomasochism through online sources and communities. Popular online resources and communities include Dark Connections (www.darkconnections.com), Black Funk (www.blackfunk.org), and The Perverted Negress (www.mollena.com). It is important to analyze the website names and consider their potential underlying meaning, for they could allude to interactions between BDSM and other parts of Black culture.

The website name “Dark Connections” seems to be a play on words—a double entendre for the word “dark”. On one hand, “dark” could refer to sadomasochism itself, a nonconformist or alternative sexual practice and lifestyle. On the other hand, “dark” could allude to the demographic of people that the website aims to attract: people of color or non-white (and therefore, dark) people. The website name “Black Funk” seems less ambiguous. The word “Black” could be a direct reference and call to Black people, the intended audience of the website. In a similar vein, “Funk” could be reminiscent of funk, or funky, music which is a music genre created by Black musicians in the 1960s. Perhaps by connecting BDSM, an alternative sexual practice, and funk, an alternative music genre, the website name is attempting to bridge unfamiliar, taboo cultural associations (sadomasochism) with more accepted and recognized ones (funky music). This potential cultural reference seems to designate the website as one for Black people. “Funk” can also be interpreted negatively. It could refer to something unpleasant or disgusting; sadomasochism is often considered deviant and, consequently, unpleasant. However, it is unlikely that Black Funk is associating itself with this negative connotation because it seems to be a sex-positive space for BDSM exploration.

Interestingly, the content warning page for Dark Connections says: “Black BDSM resources and personal ads for people of color” (Dark Connections). Though it uses the phrase “people of color”, this description seems to establish its primary intended audience as Black people. Also noteworthy, the content warning page for Black Funk states: “This web site is the online presence of Black Funk, the first sexual cultural center for people of color (POC)” (Black Funk). Although the website name seems to limit its primary intended audience, this description makes it clear that the site is intended for all people of color, not just Black people. Finally, Mollena Williams (Mo, for short), also known as “The Perverted Negress”, does not

have a content warning page for her website. Despite this, the name “The Perverted Negress” warrants an examination of its own. The words “perverted” and “Negress” are provocative in moral, political, and historical ways. “Perverted” has negative connotations that are associated with maladjustment and social outcasting. Similarly, “Negress” is considered offensive because of the racist history associated with it. It is important to note that Mollena considers herself a masochist, an emotional masochist, submissive, a slave, and a feminist. Considering these identifiers, it follows that Mollena would use reactionary and negatively charged words to describe herself and to create her nickname.

“The History of Black BDSM”, which can be found on Dark Connections, is known as the most comprehensive history of Black people in sadomasochism. “Scourge” and “coffee”, two members of Dark Connections who compiled the historical information, make several assertions about BDSM and its connectedness to African rituals. According to this website, Black people were not in BDSM publications until the 1970s. During this decade, bondage magazines became popular and women of color were often featured in these magazines. Although the images presented “largely objectified and over-sexualized Black women” (Dark Connections), the magazines were the first means of exposure to BDSM for many people of color. During this same decade, adult BDSM films featured “ethnic actors and actresses because of the added interracial taboo” (Dark Connections). Scourge and coffee connect BDSM to Black cinematography. Blaxploitation films, which first debuted in the 1970s, starred actresses with dominant personalities; many of the films also contained dominant and sexualized leading Black women^{viii}. In this same era, Black BDSM magazines and newsletters were being published. Popular ones included “Black Amazon Digest”, “Black Mistress Review”, “Obeah”, and “Black Leather In Color”. The authors of the website note that “most

of the early magazines were used primarily by White males searching for Black female mistresses” (Dark Connections). Although my search did not return substantial results on the history or circulation of any of these magazines, it did provide pieces of information—contemporary social media perpetuates these images. An Instagram picture entitled “Black Mistress Review, dedicated to the slavery and education of the White Male. 1975”, posted on October 24, 2012 (Instagram), exemplifies the magazine’s use of personal ads by Black women to attract White men. The magazine cover and one such advertisement are depicted in Figure 1 (Appendix A). The personal ad reads:

Can you imagine this face laughing at you while you jerk off before me? I can! Although I am only a phase 1, my potential is high, & I wield a mean strap. Oral sex is not automatic, but a reward to good little boys. Are you a good little boy? I hope so! Or else! Crossdressing my bag! You hurry now you hear?
(Instagram)

The words of the Black woman featured are stern and commanding, but as the ad ends with “You hurry now you hear”, the words are also inviting. The words portray a sexually available and sexually dominant Black woman in search of a male to dominate. These characterizations are reminiscent of colonial constructions of Black women’s sexuality, specifically stereotypes like the hypersexual, promiscuous jezebel. Both pictures on the magazine page appear stern and domineering; particularly, the one where the woman is dressed as a super heroine. Both the images and words pique the reader’s interest—he is curious about the mysteries of the Black woman who is literally laid out (in magazine form) before him.

Another online source entitled “Summer Kinky Reading” by Liz Highleyman describes the periodical “Black Leather in Color”. Highleyman writes:

Subtitled ‘leather on the cutting edge for people of color and their friends’, Black Leather in Color is the only magazine I know targeted to people of color. Issue #5 includes a feature on bloodsports, an interview with 1993 International Mr. Drummer Graylin Thornton, a pictorial on ‘Mistress Lisette and Her Dogs,’

and a feature on gay artist Mark Durham. Dr. DeSade's informative medical column focuses on diabetes, hypertension, and epilepsy. The magazine includes a feature on "Leather on a Shoestring," and sells for the very reasonable price of \$4.95. Black Leather in Color is published in New York City and includes a Los Angeles scene report. The content is pansexual and African-American focused rather than pan-ethnic; this is not an ethnicity-fetish rag. (Black Rose)

According to DarkConnections, "Black Leather in Color" was the first fetish magazine produced by and for people of color.

Africanisms in BDSM

In an effort to support their claim that sadomasochism has its roots in African rites and rituals, Scourge and coffee address the West African Malinke's worship of the spirit Mama Dyumbo as an example of dominance and submission in African history: "Whenever women acted disobedient, the husbands would mimic the deity by donning makeup, masks and elaborate headpieces and then drive the women out of their homes for a communal whipping" (Dark Connections). The compilers also cite the Tuareg of Northern Africa, stating that "women enjoyed freedom of choice in sexual involvement and often entertained male visitors when their husbands were absent. The tents and furnishings were the personal property of the women alone, and they were in charge of all finances" (Dark Connections). It is not completely clear how Scourge and coffee contextualize these practices as characteristic of sadomasochism. Though they are trying to create a bridge between Africanisms and BDSM, I do not believe that there is a connection between the African "rites" that they describe and sadomasochism. It may be more accurate to examine these examples in an "African cultural framework to identify African cultural resources that can be creatively incorporated into BDSM practice" (Black Funk), as suggested by Herukhuti.

Aih Djehuti Herukhuti Khepera Ra Temu Seti Amen, or Hameed Sharif Williams, is the founder of Black Funk. On its homepage, Black Funk is described as "a sexual cultural

center focused on Indigenous/Pan African Disaporic/Native/Global South approaches to sexuality...a portal and community space for people who are interested in learning more about sexuality from an Indigenous, decolonizing, culturally-affirming perspective". With this website Herukhuti is clearly attempting to establish a non-White space. It is especially important to create this space in the context of sadomasochism because people of color, continually constructed as deviant, may not feel comfortable exploring the non-normative sexuality and practice of BDSM.

Accordingly, Herukhuti presents himself as a BDSM practitioner and Afrocentric scholar, who promotes an "Afrocentric perspective to BDSM". An Afrocentric perspective to BDSM is one that incorporates African culture and agency into BDSM practices (Black Funk). Herukhuti identifies three areas of African culture where BDSM can be integrated: families and clans, ritual, and spirituality. Herukhuti explains that collectives—organized into families and clans—help facilitate the development of Black BDSM practitioners, both inside and outside of their sadomasochistic encounters and experiences. In other words, the connections that people in BDSM communities establish do not have to be limited to sexual settings; they can—and do—exist as friend groups, social networks, and support systems outside of sexual practices and lifestyles. Herukhuti explains that families should be organized in the following way:

Families are households headed by an elder or elders. Elders should be initiated members of the community who demonstrate wisdom, good judgment, and the ability to mentor others. They should be women/men committed to the development of community and family...elders and their sons, daughters, goddaughters, godsons, boys, and girls should be at the core of family affinity. Oracles/divinations can be used to make decisions about who should be invited to join a family. Astrological readings can also be used to understand how a potential family member's energy will affect and be affected by the family's overall energy. (Black Funk)

Importantly, the families are not necessarily biological; they rely on fictive kinships, which were integral to the survival of both Black individuals and families during colonial times. Herukhuti goes on to define clans as “peer groups that BDSM practitioners can form that will supplement and complement the resources of Black BDSM families” (Black Funk). The role of the clan leader is to “[ensure] that skills are taught and knowledge is transferred throughout the clan” (Black Funk). Herukhuti suggests that clans form based on skill sets and hierarchies. In addition to fictive kinships, clans seem to be responsible for the proliferation of knowledge produced within the community. This dissemination of knowledge can be likened to the ways in which diasporic Africans transferred information from one generation to the next through the griot, the keeper of oral histories. One participant shared how she entered sadomasochism and the role of families and clans in her experience.

When asked how she entered BDSM, the interviewee explained that her sergeant in the Noncommissioned Officers Academy (NCO) first introduced her to a “private party”...She noted that the sergeant was “the Head Master of the Tribe” and emphasized, “He was BLACK by the way” (F). This emphasis is especially important in the context of this work because it is an example of Black people not only in BDSM communities, but also in positions of power and influence in the monochromatic, White dominated SM culture. When discussing her own rank and position in Leather, the respondent said, “I am a leader in the community...I was the ONLY female that earned my House of 5 men and they all out-ranked me” (F). Leather society, a branch of the wider BDSM community, is not inherently rooted in African cultural traditions. However, based on his assertions, it can be interpreted as having Afrocentric influences.

Herukhuti next discusses ritual and spirituality. He states that some BDSM practices can be restrictive and limiting, “[lacking] the soul that is common among Black folks around the world”. Citing Malidoma Some and his work *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Herukhuti explains that:

We have control during the preparations leading up to a ritual. Once ritual begins we are subjects of the magic and unpredictability of ritual. If we can predict and designate everything that happens in a ritual, then no magic/power was present and it was merely ceremony...From an Afrocentric perspective, a BDSM scene/experience is a ritual...there should be space for Spirit to enter. (Black Funk)

Herukhuti does not neglect to mention the importance of clear intentions and purpose, as well as careful preparation, for a scene. Segueing into spirituality, Herukhuti claims that “At the heart of African culture is our connection to Spirit. It is in everything; our music, language, art, and therefore it should be in our sex” (Black Funk). The scholar explains that one way to recognize the history of slavery in a BDSM context and honor ancestors is to pour libations before a scene and “(ask) that this voluntary practice of the ritual of BDSM serve as a healing for those ancestors who were enslaved or colonized” (Black Funk). It seems that Herukhuti is urging Black BDSM practitioners to recognize that BDSM is a space of privilege for them. This urging alludes to the fact that Black people did not always have to ability to consent to sadomasochistic scenes—they lived them through the hardships of slavery. Whether they do or do not connect to this history in their own practices, this point forces Black people to acknowledge the power behind their ability to choose and to consent. Certainly, this ability is one way that people of color in general are able to reclaim and assert their sexual agency.

Herukhuti continues that, when under the right conditions, spirit possessions can occur in the ritual space of BDSM. None of the women who participated in the interview process described this spiritual, almost religious, experience. However, two informants did say that

their experiences with sadomasochism do fulfill some need that is more than just sexual pleasure or release. One participant said:

It primarily feeds emotional and mental needs for me really; the physical is just a reeeaaally fun bonus. I use sadomasochism because when I was younger in other relationships, I often felt a sense of emptiness and discontent without it, and then upon realizing this need, it gives me confidence as to my place, what to expect and also makes me feel much more connected to him than I would the average partner because of that need of trust and the ability to relinquish control (K).

A second interviewee stated simply, “It’s not all about the sex. I think also for me it’s the feeling of letting go [of] the BS and being who I am on a very baseline level. It’s like going to the gym to work out. You get a high from it” (F). Both women seem to have metaphysical experiences that are intimately tied to their BDSM play. This abstract experience—in that is not physical, as the participants do make concrete and substantial connections to the non-sexual need that sadomasochism fulfills—that both women describe seems to credit and/or validate Herukhuti’s discussion of spirituality, even though neither of the informants describe their experiences in a religious or spiritual way. As with the cultural associations on *Dark Connections*, it does not seem that the practices described by *Black Funk* are inherently Afrocentric. Rather, Herukhuti is trying to infuse African spirituality into sadomasochism. He attempts this by selecting parts of African culture that can be incorporated into BDSM.

Both Herukhuti and the compilers of the history of Black BDSM on *Dark Connections* discuss BDSM in the context of American slavery. Like *Dark Connections*, *Black Funk* notes that many people of color did not know about BDSM at its inception; however, this does not mean that Black people were unfamiliar with sadomasochistic experiences. The difference between people of color and White people in the context of BDSM is that many sadomasochistic experiences for Black people have historically been non-consensual, such as

slavery and rape, among other acts—connections can be drawn between Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography, as well as the descriptions of the atrocities against slave women detailed in various slavers’ journals. The Dark Connections website acknowledges that it may seem “strange” that Black people willingly participate in sadomasochism. The authors note that many practitioners do not make a connection between race and America’s slaveocratic past.

Race Play

Race play is not limited to Black and White dichotomies. It can be acted out by people of any race or people of the same race in any type of racialized context; the act could involve both real and assumed racial identities (Colorlines). In her article “Playing with Race”, Daisy Hernandez asserts that race play, or being aroused by intentionally using racial slurs or racist scenarios, “is considered on the edge of edgy sex” (Colorlines). One woman in the present study defined race play as, “playing up to stereotypes in an over the top manner” (F). Some people who informed Hernandez’s article stressed that race play is not about hatred and that they keep politics outside of their BDSM scenes. It is difficult to conceive of a racialized scenario as apolitical because, both historically and contemporarily, race is tied to political power and influence. Additionally, race is strongly connected to how people are perceived. Playing with race is contestable because it seems to trivialize peoples’ historical and lived experiences with race. It suggests that race can be switched on or off, or even “tried on” during a BDSM scene.

Two interviewees in Hernandez’s article were Chupoo and Mollena Williams^{ix} (mentioned earlier as Mo, or the Perverted Negress), both Black women who engage in sadomasochism. The two women had different views on the role of race in their lives; specifically, “Chupoo sees race as central to her life; Mollena, not as much or not in the same

way...For Mollena, [race is] most often the other person's problem" (Colorlines). Agreeing with my participant's definition, Williams defines race play as "any type of play that openly embraces and explores the (either 'real' or assumed) racial identity of the players within the context of a BDSM scene" (Colorlines). Williams explains that "the prime motive in a 'Race Play' scene is to underscore and investigate the challenges of racial or cultural differences" (Racialicious). Emotional and physical care are important after any BDSM scene, however Williams stresses how critical they, as well as psychological care, are after race play (Racialicious).

In Hernandez's article, Chupoo identifies with the history of institutionalized racism. She says, "I can't do race play because I have people in my family who had to submit to that, where they had no choices. It's too close to home for American black people" (Colorlines). Race play makes Chupoo "think about her grandmother who had to sleep with her employer, a doctor, so that her children could have healthcare" (Colorlines). As stated, Chupoo does practice BDSM and is, in fact, part of a master-slave relationship with a Black man. Despite this Chupoo asserts, "The race thing is really a lot deeper...I cannot imagine feeling that [partnership and respect] with someone around race play" (Colorlines). Additionally, Chupoo sees that racism exists in the BDSM community. She states, "I get more White sub^x men hitting on me than anything else" (Colorlines). The men hope Chupoo will be "a big, black dominant woman" (Colorlines). She continues, "It's their thing. It's their racist fantasies of what black people are" (Colorlines). Here, Chupoo is referring to the stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman"^{xi}. Based on these varied understandings of and encounters with race play, it seems that the practice is subjective and contestable.

Hernandez notes that “a curious thing about race play is that it is pursued by people of color but often consumed by whites. The BDSM community is largely white, so those watching a public scene are more often white people” (Colorlines). This observation is particularly interesting in the context of the present work. It forces us to question who is consuming and who is being consumed? Who is the subject and who is the object? As White people make up a large part of the BDSM community and are less inclined to engage in race play, then it is Black people (and other people of color) who are consumed and objectified. Even in the context of consent and meaning-making which are essential to BDSM, Black people, particularly the Black women who informed Hernandez’s work, still seem to be objectified. This interaction between consent/choice and consumption/objectification speaks to the difficulty of some people understanding why others participate in race play.

When talking with Andrea Plaid, the sex correspondent for Racialicious, Williams explains why she participates in both BDSM in general and race play in particular. She says, “I do it because it fascinates me...The idea that someone might hate you PURELY because of your identity is horrific. [I]t dehumanizes you, and it makes you ‘less than’. So, in the context of BDSM, it is fair game for that type of play” (Racialicious). Williams elaborates by explaining that a race play scene is one where she can “pretend”. She states, “I have never lived in the South on a plantation and felt the terror of my life every moment at the hands and whims of an owner or of another slave with an agenda. However, I can pretend. And, in a very real emotional sense, I have tasted what that is like...I experience it” (Racialicious). Plaid presses her by asking the question that many have, “But *why* would you want to do that?” Williams further explains herself stating that she lives “viscerally” and through race play better understands that she is “at heart, obedient” to authority (Racialicious). This explanation seems

to reveal that through race play, Williams understands herself better. Though Williams describes race play as a positive experience, the Black women who informed the present work felt differently.

None of the women who volunteered to participate had engaged in race play, although some of them were propositioned to do so. One participant said, “I do not care for race play....that makes me uncomfortable...I try to stay away from [a focus on race or race play] because it’s simply a part of me, not a big deal but certainly nothing to fetishize over either” (K). This woman’s refusal to engage her racialized self in BDSM is in itself a form of reclaiming and asserting both sexual and political agency. She chooses not to let her race be a factor in her play and, consequently, attempts to disable and disempower the history and stereotypes associated with that racialization. However, the fact that encountering race at all makes her uncomfortable suggests that race cannot be avoided. This participant must work to ignore her racialized self. It is not an aspect of her identity that can be easily disconnected from her sexualized self.

Another respondent had a more nuanced relationship with race play. She explained, “I have had request for race play which is something I am not into... I don’t get into race play. I find it hard to take. I WILL NOT put myself in the position to be degraded like a slave during the times of slavery” (F). Though she was adamant about not being degraded, this second woman presented an aspect of race play that she might consider. She said, “Now if asked to play the Black woman slave that took a stand and lead a revolution and kicked ass... I’m all in. I’d consider that role play more than race play” (F). Though she makes this distinction between what she would consider race play and role play, the informant would still not want to engage in this sort of scene for an extended period of time. She asserts:

Those that do [engage in race play]... live it for the most part. I would never be put in the position of being a nigger woman, high yella girl in the kitchen and in massa's bed. Not my personality type. I think a lot has to do with integrating a school in '68. Also I was big with Black Power. I read the history of the plight of Black folks and I know what it's like to deal with racism when it wasn't a choice. I am not going there for sport (F).

This interviewee's decision not to engage in race play seems to be tied to her previous political activism. She recognizes the struggle and negative effects associated with the United States' bitter and more blatant racist past. Being acutely aware of this, she does not want to sexualize and, perhaps in her view, make light of that history. Like the previous participant, this woman reclaims and asserts her sexual and political agency. Though she can develop a race play scene that might interest her, ultimately, she chooses not to engage with this racialized identity. However, her choice is not meant to disable that racialization, but rather to limit its ability and stigmatization by not surrendering any greater power to it by engaging in such a scene.

Intersectionality and BDSM

Theorists question the "role of SM in reinforcing, perpetuating and exonerating real-life inequalities, oppression and violence" (Taylor and Ussher 312). In the context of Black women in BDSM, this consideration is intimately tied to colonial constructions of their sexuality, which was characterized by inequality, oppression, and violence. It follows that, because these constructions were based on real disenfranchisement and marginalization, BDSM could be continuing stereotypes and subjugation of Black women, or even pardoning those same stereotypes and subjugations.

In her article "Unleashing Gender: Dependency, Subjectivity and Recognition in Dominant/Submissive Relationships", Sarah Smith writes that differences are established using identifiers like gender, race, and class, playing into institutional "inequality and

discrimination” (184). In this same article, Smith asserts that “such differences may be psychologically necessary” (184), meaning that in order to establish power differentials in sadomasochism, the differences and inequalities must be socially real. In a somewhat contradictory manner, Cross and Matheson explain that the exchange of power in BDSM is “essentially illusory” (157). However, if sadomasochism is tied to real, culturally produced meanings, then the exchange of power must, on some level, be more real than illusory—grounded in historical, social, and cultural understandings. In support of my point, Patricia Hill Collins explains that “sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather, it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in American social inequalities” (6). “Intersectionality” is the keyword here; it encompasses ideas and social practices that are mapped onto, in this context, Black women’s sexualized bodies.

As previously mentioned, Taylor and Ussher wrote about the “intra-psychic” theme, which revealed “SM as a compensation, continuation, re-enactment or reversed re-enactment of past or current power imbalances” (307). In other words, sadomasochism could be a way for people to “‘negotiate’ the very real effects of social power” (Smith 185), a means to subvert their intersectional identities. When considering these concepts, the identifiers of gender and race come to mind, as they are two very important intersectional societal identifiers. In the present work, participants had different ideas about the role of race in their sadomasochistic experiences. One interviewee said:

I just happened to fall into a sadomasochistic relationship with a white partner, but we don’t let our race enter into the dynamic (K).

For this woman, her color is inconsequential in the context of her SM relationship. As discussed earlier, the ability for a Black woman to construct her own sexuality outside of the confines of race is a form of reclaiming and asserting sexual agency. This woman does not find

herself questioning her racialized identity; she disempowers it by, seemingly, existing outside of it.

When asked, “Does your race have a role in your experiences with sadomasochism?” another participant explained:

Yes, I often find that I am the only black woman at a play party^{xii}. So, it can be a little off putting. I try not to think of race at that point and just try to enjoy myself. No one is rude or anything, but I am keenly aware that I am the only black woman in the room...I do think that some men maybe secretly get off on the fact that they are [dominating] a ‘strong black woman’ (N).

For this woman, her Blackness is a signifier of difference; even a form of discomfort in sadomasochism’s Whiteness. Despite this discomfort, this woman attempts to reclaim and assert her sexual agency. First, she does not let the discomfort of being the only Black woman deter her from exploring her sexuality. Secondly, she does not feel that she must represent all Black women when engaging with the BDSM community, as many people feel the need to do when they are the only “representative” of their race in other situations. Though she tries to move past her discomfort, this interviewee cannot separate her racialized self from her sexualized self.

Yet another participant discussed the interaction of race and gender in her BDSM experiences:

I am usually the only Black person at events. I am a leader in the community. I have found that a lot of people, male and female have fantasies of being dominated by a Black woman. There once was a time...back in the late 70’s and early 80’s it was difficult for the BDSM world to accept ANY woman in a [dominant] role. My negative experiences were not based on my color but by the fact [that] I was a woman acting ‘like a man’ (F).

This respondent seemed to have a very different experience when compared to that of the others. This woman’s experience was characterized more by gender biases than racial ones.

This interviewee rejected the provisions established by the Cult of True Womanhood that made

Black women less than women, less than people, less than autonomous agents. By presenting herself as both a woman and Black, this participant did, in fact, reclaim and assert her sexual and political agency. Clearly, each woman has a different understanding of and experience with her Blackness in terms of her sexuality in the context of BDSM.

Reclaiming and Asserting Sexual Agency

Returning to the primary question of this study, Black women can reclaim their sexuality from established colonial representations, as well as assert their sexual agency in many ways through sadomasochism. Black women accomplish this by establishing their own identities, challenging stereotypes, and enacting consent. Earlier, a description was provided of how each woman identified herself in terms of her role in the context of sadomasochism. By choosing their own role, Black women are not limited by imposed characterizations or categories. They choose how to classify themselves and what terminology to use. Each woman is open to have as few or as many roles as she chooses.

As described, there exists an array of stereotypes associated with Black women's sexuality. These include stereotypes like the "jezebel" and the "Strong Black Woman", both of which are often characterized as hypersexual, insatiable, or domineering. Each participant had different understandings of and experiences with these stereotypes. When asked, "Do you believe that stereotypes about Black women's sexuality play into your experiences with sadomasochism?", the women replied in various ways. One woman said that she was unfamiliar with any such stereotypes:

I've really never heard about stereotypes of Black women's sexuality...However as a Black woman, when I was younger it did confuse and slightly bother me that I enjoyed such things because 'It wasn't right' and the history of slavery. But as I got older I rather shrugged it off because it was ultimately my choice to consent, my partners were respectful, we had rules and there was nothing more than that (K).

Because she is unfamiliar with stereotypes about Black women's sexuality, this participant is not personally affected by them. She was more concerned about engaging in BDSM because of its relation to America's slaveocratic past. Eventually, she came to terms with this discomfort by recognizing that she could willfully consent to sadomasochism without feeling guilty about the history associated with it.

Another participant questioned, "Do you mean the one about Black women being more into sex than White women? Personally, I don't always have sex with my submissives, but I like the power exchange" (V). Though she was aware of a stereotype that characterizes Black women as hypersexual, this respondent was not defined by or confined to that portrayal. She went on to say, "I like being sexually dominant and love having sex, but I can get my release in other ways" (V). In other words, this respondent's satisfaction and fulfillment in BDSM were not dependent on whether or not she engaged in sexual intercourse. This woman's actions, or lack thereof, stand in direct contrast to existing stereotypes of Black women as overly sexual and insatiable.

A third participant had a similar view:

I don't find [stereotypes] to be true. You have to realize... that's the beauty of what we do. There is acceptance that 'normal' society won't accept or admit. I don't see [stereotypes] as a factor at all. I don't see or hear of those in the community. The stereotypes are put to the side, UNLESS there is race play (F).

According to this informant, stereotypes about Black women are not typically present in the BDSM community. The stereotypes are reserved for race play scenes, where they are purposely explored and exploited. Yet another participant stated, "I think [stereotypes do have a role]. Some men expect you not to be a good sub or they think that you have more of a sexual appetite than other women" (N). Of the four respondents, this last one seems to be the most

aware of the existence and role of stereotypes about Black women's sexuality in sadomasochism. In saying that people do not expect her to be a "good sub", she is referencing the stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman". In terms of the "sexual appetite", she is citing the stereotype that some Black women are sexually insatiable. Despite some conflicting responses, overall, it seems that Black women in sadomasochism are not limited to stereotypical representations of Black women's sexuality. By contradicting long held stereotypes, the women are able to reclaim their sexuality.

As previously described, consent is an integral part of any sadomasochistic experience. This consent is particularly significant in the context of play where one partner has been socially and historically dominant, and the other has been submissive. One *domme*^{xiii} noted that she often takes cues from how the submissive responds to her actions. Though the *domme* and sub in this pairing have a type of BDSM contract, established during their discussion of rules and limitations, it is ultimately up to the *domme*, in this case a Black woman, to decide what to do to her sub and when. Though the sub can interject with the "stoplight" system, described earlier, the *domme* is largely in control of how to direct the scene. In this situation, unlike historical contexts, the Black woman is in the position of power and control. She is an agent of her own sexuality and even has influence over her partner.

Even as a sub, the Black woman is in a position of power. As one participant explained, "The Dom is the person that appears to be in charge and the sub appears to be controlled by them" (N). She went on to detail the underlying power exchange that exists in this pairing. The respondent stated, "The sub is really the person that is in charge. They can end [the scene] whenever they wish...The sub is the person that is really in control. You set up your limits before any play starts. The dom is telling you what to do when to do it but it is never something

that you would not do” (N). In this pairing, the Black woman identifies as submissive.

However, this identification does not negate her agency. On the contrary, this sub is as agentic as the domme in the previous example. Although this participant acknowledges that she and her dom have established consent and rules, she firmly states that as a sub she does not engage in any acts that she is uncomfortable with or unwilling to submit to. In this way the Black woman has influence over the outcome of a BDSM scene. Unlike historical situations where Black women were often subjected to sexual abuses, this Black woman sub is an agent of her own sexuality; she has the power to either accept or reject scenes at will.

Yet another participant explained that she has “never been quite good at Domming from the Bottom even if [she] slightly cared to” (K). In other words, unlike the previous interviewee, this woman does not attempt to manipulate the scene from her position as a sub. She adds, “I enjoy serving too much and if I’m not getting my way I understand that he comes first as we originally agreed upon entering our relationship...if I still feel I have a need...I ask for permission to speak my mind freely and we discuss until we reach a happy conclusion” (K). Unlike the previous two respondents who assert themselves as powerful and in control, this participant presents herself as generally accepting of what her dom decides. Unlike historical sexual situations, this woman is not forced to accept what a dominant White man decides; she chooses to both accept and submit. The power to willfully submit requires agency; therefore, her decision to accept her role as submissive and her partner’s role as dominant is agentic. Moreover, if she feels unsatisfied, she ensures that her needs are eventually met, taking her own interests into account; her sole purpose is not to service her White male partner. This Black woman’s acceptance of her submissive role and her commitment to meeting her own needs are how she reclaims and asserts her sexual agency. Overall, consenting to BDSM is

acknowledging that this sexual exploration and practice is a place of privilege because, historically, Black women did not always have the choice of whether or not to engage.

Beyond establishing their own identities, challenging stereotypes, and enacting consent, Black women in BDSM create a space for sexual, social, and political meaning-(re)making. The first way that this is accomplished is through attempting to explore sexuality outside of the confines of race. Recall the woman who said that her race is “simply a part of [her]” (K). As explained earlier, by not allowing her race to have a role in her BDSM encounters, she is not individually bound by the expectations and historical constructions of Black women’s sexuality. Secondly, the politics of power are questioned and re-envisioned. They are complicated by dynamics where the sociosexual hierarchy is inverted, specifically where the Black woman is the *domme* of a White man. In the dominant position, the Black woman is figured as strong and the White man is characterized as weak. This particular exchange of power in BDSM is exponentially more empowering for Black women because the identifiers of gender and race are strictly socially defined and limited outside of BDSM. Finally, in the context of BDSM, constructions of Black women’s sexuality can no longer be characterized as deviant or pathological. Because BDSM as whole is considered non-conformist, Black women who engage in it are accepted—their sexuality is not constructed as divergent or abnormal. This acceptance is equalizing and, therefore, accepting of intersectional identities and disrupting to intersectional hierarchies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to explore and understand Black women’s experiences in the context of BDSM, specifically if and how Black women can reclaim their sexuality from the legacy of colonial constructions and assert their agency through sadomasochism. Based on

my research and analyses, Black women can reclaim and assert their sexual agency. However, I would argue that they cannot fully separate their racial selves from their sexual selves. These two identities are intricately intertwined and are not mutually exclusive. Even the women who conceive of their racial selves as separate from their sexual selves have trouble severing the connection between the two identities.

This subject is important to consider in explorations of Black women's sexuality for various reasons. Specifically, sadomasochism is quickly becoming more popular both as a lifestyle/practice and as an area of study. As previously mentioned, BDSM research usually only includes interviews and accounts of White people, particularly gay men. Including Black women's experiences and accounts will not only broaden understandings of sadomasochism as a lifestyle/practice, but also its role in Black women's lives and the role of race in sadomasochism. Studies that include Black women's experiences will further clarify the reasons that they engage in BDSM. Additionally, such studies will elucidate the meanings that BDSM has to Black women, whether they be social, political, or sexual, a combination of the three, or something entirely different. Though this work has uncovered some key points concerning Black women's agency in the context of BDSM, it did have some limitations.

The primary limitation of this work was that there were only four interviewees. Although the respondents provided rich, invaluable information about their experiences as Black women sadomasochists, the study would have been better informed if more women volunteered to participate. In addition to this, some of the questions that participants responded to may have been a little short-sighted—because of the timeline that the project approval process required, the questions had to be created before much of the research was conducted. In order to address these limitations, future research should recruit more interviewees, as well

as develop more dynamic questions, both of which may lead to new insights. Moreover, future studies should research Black women's BDSM relationships with Black men. This relationship would be interesting to explore considering colonial constructions of both Black women's and Black men's sexuality. Additionally, future research should examine both Black women's queer relationships and other interracial relationships in BDSM.

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Appendix



A. Figure 1

B. Interview Items

Below is the list of questions that guided each of the four participant interviews.

1. What does “sodomasochism” mean to you?
2. What about sodomasochism intrigues or excites you?
3. In terms of BDSM roles, what do you characterize yourself as (dominant, submissive, mistress, slave, etc.)?
4. In a sodomasochistic encounter, how are these roles defined and maintained? How do you *know* who is dominant or submissive?
5. Is your sexual role similar to your personal or individual role in society?
6. What kinds of sodomasochistic acts do you engage in?
7. What is the role of power in your sodomasochistic experiences? What about violence?
8. What is the role of consent and collaboration in your sodomasochistic experiences?
9. Is sodomasochism simply about sexual pleasure and release for you? Or, does it fulfill some other need? *For example, to be in control, to be controlled, etc.*

Some people could argue that sodomasochistic play between Black and White people is problematic because of the United States’ history of White people enslaving Black people. Since sodomasochism often draws on master/slave dynamics, I’d like to ask for your perspective as a Black woman on sodomasochistic play with White men.

10. In your experience, are there many Black women who engage in sodomasochism? What about Black or White men?
11. In your experiences with sodomasochism, what does it mean to be a Black woman in

the BDSM community?

12. Do you believe that stereotypes about Black women's sexuality play into your experiences with sadomasochism? *Examples of stereotypes: hypersexuality, eroticization, exoticization, sexually advanced/experienced*
13. What does it mean to be a Black "sub" or Black "dom"? In these roles, is anything specific expected of you?
14. In your sadomasochistic experiences, do you find that you seek out Black men or White men, or that they look for you as a Black woman?
15. Have you had a sadomasochistic experience where your race was prized? What about one where your race was an issue?
16. When Black or White men engage in sadomasochistic acts with you, how do you think they see you first? As a woman, as Black, as a Black woman, or something else?
17. Have you had sadomasochistic experiences in which you were uncomfortable? What is an example of one? How did you react in this situation?
18. In your experiences with sadomasochism, have you ever felt that your body was wrongfully or uncomfortably used or abused? What is an example of such a situation?
19. Does your race have a role in your experiences with sadomasochism? Why or why not?
20. Have you ever felt that your role as a "dom" was a way of getting back at White men in reaction to their privileged status in society? Why or why not?
21. Have you ever felt that you could use your role as a sub to manipulate White men into meeting your needs or demands? If yes, do these needs go beyond sexual satisfaction?

22. My ultimate goal in this research study is to understand the dynamics at play when Black women engage in sadomasochistic play with White men. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences that could help me understand this more?"
23. Is there anything else in general that you'd like to share?
24. Finally, "Do you have any questions for me?"

ⁱ In the context of this paper, the terms "sexual" and "sexuality" will be used somewhat interchangeably, both meaning: pertaining to sexual matters. "Sexuality" will not refer to preferences like heterosexuality versus homosexuality.

ⁱⁱ "Play" is a word often used to describe a scene is sadomasochism. It can refer to any kind of interaction, which does not necessarily involve sexual intercourse. This term speaks to the importance of context and mutual meaning-making, in sadomasochism—both will be discussed later in the text.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on the role of African women in pre-colonial times, consult "Perspectives on Cross-Gender Relations in a Traditional Society: A Study of the Idioma of Central Nigeria" by Okpeh O. Okpeh in *Humanities Review Journal* 5 (2005): 53-61; "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation" by Oseni Taiwo Afisi in *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3.6 (2010): 229-238; and "Women, Power and Society in Pre-colonial Africa" by Onaiwu W. Ogbomo in *Lagos Historical Review* 5 (2005) 49-74.

^{iv} Sexual Dysfunction Not Otherwise Specified is a category for sexual dysfunctions that do not meet the criteria for any established sexual dysfunction.

^v "Vanilla sex" is standard or conventional sexual behavior.

^{vi} Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality consists of the id, ego, and superego. The "id" drives basic human instincts; it follows the "pleasure principle" and constantly seeks pleasure and avoids discomfort. The ego follows the "reality principle" and attempts to please the id in realistic and socially acceptable ways. Finally, the superego, comprised of internalized ideals, aims subdue the id and make the ego behave morally.

^{vii} "Dom" is short for "dominant".

^{viii} Blaxploitation, or Black Exploitation, was initially a subgenre of low-budget films produced by and for Black urban audiences. In her book *Baad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*, Stephanie Dunn examines portrayals of the Black actress Pam Grier in her roles in the films "Foxy Brown" and "Coffy". Dunn writes that Grier's characters are "inscribed with a hypervisible black female sexuality" (111). Specifically, Grier's breasts and buttocks are bared and/or accentuated by using revealing and tight-fitting clothing. This image of sexual availability is associated with the colonial construction of the Black jezebel. In this way, Blaxploitation representations of Black women further inscribe and perpetuate stereotypes of Black female sexuality.

^{ix} Williams is a prolific figure in the practice and study of race play.

^x "Sub" is short for "submissive".

^{xi} The myth of the "Strong Black Woman" came from the work of Charlene Young. In her article "Psychodynamics of Coping and Survival of the African-American Female in a Changing World", Young wrote, "The strong woman confronts all trials and tribulations on behalf of those she loves, perseveres with no attention to her needs as an individual or woman, and provides unlimited support and encouragement necessary for her husband/lover" (210). This construction of encouragement, self-assurance, independence, and self-reliance is a role model for Black women (Harris-Perry) that epitomizes individual strength, determination, and dominance. The sexualization of this image subverts its original empowering intention by limiting Black women to a sexual realm. As a sexual entity, the strong Black woman is domineering and controlling.

^{xii} A play party is a BDSM gathering where practitioners meet to explore their sexuality. This exploration can range from introducing one's self to new people to experimenting with BDSM techniques and toys. Typically, the rules of play parties prohibit sexual intercourse.

^{xiii} "Domme" is short for "dominatrix", which is the feminization of the dominant role.