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Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality

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ARIANE CRUZ

## Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality

I have been the meaning of rape  
I have been the problem everyone seeks to  
eliminate by forced  
penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/  
but let this be unmistakable in this poem  
is not consent I do not consent

—June Jordan, *Poem about My Rights*

### INTRODUCTION: THE EVIDENCE OF SLIME

Slavery, itself a kind of “slime,” remains an active marketplace for the production of Black female sexuality and its representations.<sup>1</sup> The impact of chattel slavery and the pervasive rape of Black female slaves on modern

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1. In using the term “Black women,” I am referring to African American women for whom the history of chattel slavery in the Americas has produced the socio-historical conditions that uniquely inform Black female subjectivity and sexual politics. My use of this term is not to essentialize Black American womanhood; rather, like Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, I use the term to gesture to a Black women’s standpoint influenced by the condition and experience of gendered and racialized abjection, a “common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent.” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1990), 22. In this essay, I focus on Black women who practice BDSM, a small but nonetheless heterogeneous group of women in the already-marginalized larger kink community.

constructions and representations of Black women has been well theorized, in particular by a number of Black feminist scholars who have worked to rupture what Darlene Clark Hine terms the “culture of dissemblance,” the politics of silence shrouding expressions of Black female sexuality.<sup>2</sup> While the antebellum legacy of sexual violence on Black women is substantive, what has not been effectively considered is how Black women deliberately employ the shadows of slavery in the deliverance and/or receiving of sexual pleasure. That is, how the “slime”—a staining sludge of pain and violence—becomes a type of lubricant to stimulate sexual fantasies, access sexual pleasure, and heighten sexual desire. In this paper, I explore how Black women facilitate a complex and contradictory negotiation of pain, pleasure, and power in their performances in the fetish realm of BDSM.<sup>3</sup>

Situating my analysis in the context of hardcore BDSM Internet pornography and the controversial praxis of race play, I argue that BDSM is a critical site from which to reimagine the formative links between Black female sexuality and violence. Race play is a BDSM practice that explicitly uses race to script power exchange and the dynamics of domination and submission. Most commonly an interracial erotic play, race play employs racism, often involving the exchange of racist language, role-playing, and the construction of racist scenes. Eroticizing not just racism, but the miscegenation taboo, racial difference, and (hyper)

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2. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–920. For more on Black female slave sexual assault and its aftermath, see Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ann duCille, “‘Othered’ Matters: Reconceptualizing Dominance and Difference in the History of Sexuality in America,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 1 (1990): 102–27; Elsa Barkley Brown, “Imaging Lynching: African American Women, Communities of Struggle, and Collective Memory,” in *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas*, ed. Geneva Smitherman (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 100–24; and Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness As Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–91.
  3. BDSM is an umbrella term that stands in for bondage/discipline (B/D), domination/submission (D/S), and sadism/masochism or sadomasochism (S/M). For the purposes of this paper I exchange S/M, S&M, and/or SM with the more contemporary label BDSM. For more about the terminology of BDSM, see Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

racialization itself, race play is deeply controversial and contradictory in BDSM communities and beyond. Here, I am interested in staging the unique theoretical and practical challenges hinged around the unspeakable pleasure aroused in racial submission and domination that BDSM presents to Black women. I read the practice of Black female/white male humiliation in mainstream Internet pornography, a BDSM performance that offers a transgressive role for the Black female performer, particularly in the context of Black/white interracial intimacy in porn. Finally, I examine race play as a particularly problematic yet powerful practice for Black women that illuminates the contradictory dynamics of racialized pleasure and power via the eroticization of racism and racial sexual alterity.<sup>4</sup>

Using textual analysis, archival research, and interviews, I reveal how violence becomes not just a vehicle of pleasure but also a mode of accessing and critiquing power.<sup>5</sup> BDSM is a fertile site from which to consider the complexity and diverseness of Black women's sexual practice and the mutability of Black female sexuality. This paper is invested in opening a dialogue about the diversity of Black women's sexuality. It resists the admonition "don't go there," which often shrouds dialogues of Black women's sexuality. I follow the unorthodox lead of my subjects and am analytically invested in what Hortense Spillers might call "the retrieval of mutilated bodies."<sup>6</sup>

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4. I devise the term "racial sexual alterity" to describe the perceived entangled racial and sexual otherness that characterizes the lived experience of Black womanhood. Historically, this alterity has been produced (pseudo)scientifically, theoretically, and aesthetically, and inscribed corporeally as well as psychically. Racial sexual alterity signifies the ways Black womanhood is constituted, *not* produced solely, via a dynamic invention of racial and sexual otherness. Hence it does not signify a fixed core. It expresses the importance of both race and sexuality as complex social constructions that are imposed on the Black female body. It designates a particular, not static nor essential, sociocultural experience of subjectivity; one where sexual categories of difference are always linked to systems of power and social hierarchies.
  5. This article borrows from a larger project on Black women's performance in race play and its representation in contemporary US pornography. Here, I draw from my own and others' interviews with Black women BDSM players and sex workers as well as from their own online testimonies.
  6. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 no. 2 (1987): 68.

It is helpful to begin by engaging the important feminist debates that Black women's performances in BDSM ignite. Pioneering voices in the dialogue of Black feminist sexual politics Audre Lorde and Tina Portillo effectively polarize the issue and stage the debate, spelling out the stakes for Black women. For Lorde, BDSM is not divorced from, but rather operates in tandem with and perpetuates social patterns of domination and submission:

Sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And, it *prepares* us to either accept subordination or dominance. *Even in play*, to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially and economically.<sup>7</sup>

Lorde's conceptualization of BDSM echoes US-American sexologist Paul H. Gebhard, who posits, "Sadomasochism is embedded in our culture since our culture operates on the basis of dominance-submission relationships and aggression is socially valued."<sup>8</sup> Lorde's identification as a Black woman amplifies her firm anti-BDSM position; she states, "As a minority woman, I know dominance and subordination are not bedroom issues. In the same way rape is not about sex, s/m is not about sex but about how we use power."<sup>9</sup> Lorde conveys the ways in which BDSM becomes an especially stigmatized sexual practice for Black women.

Expressing a contrary outlook, Black female BDSM practitioner and writer Tina Portillo celebrates her "sadomasochistic soul," an identity that she does not see as at odds with her claiming of Black womanhood.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Audre Lorde and Susan Leigh Star, "Interview with Audre Lorde," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1982), 68. (Italics in original.)
  8. Paul H. Gebhard, "Fetishism and Sadomasochism," in *Dynamics of Deviant Sexuality: Scientific Proceedings of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jules Masserman (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1969), 71. See also Thomas S. Weinberg, "Sadomasochism and the Sciences: A Review of the Sociological Literature," in *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, ed. Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (New York: Hawthorn Press, 2006), 17–40.
  9. Lorde and Star, "Interview with Audre Lorde," 70.
  10. Tina Portillo, "I Get Real: Celebrating my Sadomasochistic Soul," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Los Angeles: Daedalus, 1991), 49.

Portillo is aware of what she terms the “politically incorrect” nature of troubling historically racialized sexual subjectivities. For example, in her discussion of Black female bottoms playing with white tops, Portillo notes, “As for S/M being politically incorrect, especially for me as a *black woman* who plays with *white tops* (occasionally a white *male* top), people say that because of history I shouldn’t be enjoying this, let alone wanting it.”<sup>11</sup> For Portillo, the history of violence and imbalanced power relations between white and Black, specifically Black women’s sexual domination by white men, and her attainment of sexual pleasure via BDSM narratives that recite these same scripts present no antagonisms. In contrast to Lorde, Portillo names pleasure and desire in distinctly different terms. She states, “If someone desires a scenario such as plantation slave and master or cowboy and Indian, as long as it is mutual and done in a loving spirit that’s all that matters and all I care about.”<sup>12</sup> Mutually consensual pleasure in the moment, regardless of whether such rapture is linked to the internalization and/or perpetuation—conscious, unconscious, or subconscious—of oppressive white heteropatriarchal supremacist structures and values (past, present, and future), *is* what matters. As I will discuss, similar notions of pleasure resonate in debates about Black women’s involvement in BDSM, specifically race play.

Lorde and Portillo’s voices remain relevant to the philosophical and ethical concerns regarding Black women’s engagement with BDSM. They speak to broader critical discourses in the field, such as Black female sexual autonomy and agency; the policing (self and other) of Black female sexuality; the complicated dynamics of Black women’s pleasure, power, and violence; and the historically contentious relationship of Black feminism to nontraditional, nonconservative, and often nonheteronormative practices of Black female sexuality (BDSM, pornography, and various sexual labors).<sup>13</sup>

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11. Ibid., 50. (Italics in original.)

12. Ibid., 51.

13. Black feminism has historically produced a particular set of constraints for Black women’s pornography consumption and production. Revisiting this tension, Jennifer C. Nash explores the peculiar alliance between anti-pornography feminism and Black feminism, arguing that the relationship hinges around the “Hottentot Venus,” a problematic analytic tool of both scholarly political projects. See Jennifer C. Nash, “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism,” *Social Text* 26, no. 4 (2008): 51–76; and *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*

The larger feminist debates stemming from the so-called sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s also presented a lively engagement with BDSM and its recitation of historical violence and patriarchy. During this time there was an active debate concerning BDSM with groups such as Samois representing one side of what has been problematically framed as an entirely dichotomous argument.<sup>14</sup> Formed in the late 1970s, Samois, a small San Francisco-based collective of lesbian feminist BDSM practitioners, argued that BDSM was not antithetical to being a lesbian or a feminist. Rather, they argued for BDSM as a productive and pleasurable sexual expression that offers a critique of heteropatriarchy and its naturalization of gendered hierarchies of power with men as dominant, violent, and aggressive, and women as submissive, passive, and nonviolent.<sup>15</sup> Opponents of BDSM however, did not view it as way to theorize gendered and sexualized power outside of the rigid binary of male/female relationships. Instead, they claimed it recited and replicated patriarchal, heterosexist modes of oppression and sexuality. In particular, BDSM among lesbians stood as a testament to the decree of heterosexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Feminist women of color took offense to Samois proclaiming themselves as an “oppressed sexual minority.”<sup>17</sup> Such a claim, many felt, mocked the lived realities of minorities such as women of color. Alice Walker describes her horror at watching a Black/white interracial lesbian couple, mistress and slave, on a public television report on the

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(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). For more about the vexed relationship between Black feminist scholarship and pornography, see Ariane Cruz, “Pornography: A Black Feminist Woman Scholar’s Reconciliation,” in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Mireille Miller-Young (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 215–27.

14. This debate is far more complex than a binary of for/against BDSM. For the purposes of this paper, such polarity effectively animates the feminist exchange and demonstrates that BDSM occupied an always-already controversial space in the field of women’s sexual praxis.
15. See Samois, ed., *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1981); and Samois, *What Color Is Your Handkerchief? A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (San Francisco: Samois, 1979).
16. For more about the radical feminist opposition of BDSM during this time, see Linden et al., *Against Sadomasochism*.
17. Karen Sims and Rose Mason, with Darlene R. Pagano, “Racism and Sadomasochism: A Conversation with Two Black Lesbians,” in Linden et al., *Against Sadomasochism*, 101.

phenomenon of BDSM. In the clip, the Black female “slave” dons a chain around her neck for which her white mistress possesses the key. The image wreaked havoc on Walker personally and her pedagogical efforts, as a Black feminist scholar, to teach about the conditions of Black female enslavement:

All I had been teaching was subverted by that one image, and I was incensed to think of the hard struggle of my students to rid themselves of the stereotype, to combat prejudice, to put themselves into enslaved women’s skins, and then to see their struggle mocked, and the actual enslaved condition of literally millions of our mothers trivialized – because two ignorant young women insisted on their right to act out publically a “fantasy” that still strikes terror in Black women’s hearts.<sup>18</sup>

For Walker the image was a devastating symbolic reenactment of Black female sexual vulnerability during chattel slavery. Walker’s interpretation illustrates how, as Anne McClintock argues, the material appendages of fetish role-play carry the allegorical vestiges of chattel slavery, “the fetish slave-band, mimicking the metal collars worn by Black slaves in the homes of the imperial bourgeoisie, enacts the history of industrial capital as haunted by the traumatic and ineradicable memory of slave imperialism.”<sup>19</sup> The women’s voices I marshal here expose how the rich historical symbolic capital of the BDSM “slave” fantasy maintains not just a deeply erotic currency, but also the power to induce disgust.

Many practitioners claim the debate is misinformed — that it decontextualizes BDSM from its spheres of practice. Pat Califia, for example, states that “terms like ‘roles,’ ‘masochism,’ ‘bondage,’ ‘dominance,’ and ‘submission’ have become buzzwords. Their meanings in an often academic feminist context differ sharply from their significance to S/M people.”<sup>20</sup> This decontextualization is one, according to Califia, that moves BDSM, not from subculture to mainstream, but rather out of the

18. Alice Walker, “A Letter of the Times, Or Should this Sado-Masochism Be Saved?” in Linden et al., *Against Sadomasochism*, 207.

19. Anne McClintock, “Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 241.

20. Pat Califia, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” *Heresies* 3, no. 4 (1981), 30.



fantasy realm in which it is situated for many BDSM practitioners. Concordantly, as this essay argues, we need to listen to women articulate their own sexual practices, desires, motivations, and experiences. As I highlight later, there is a core of fantasy and play that epitomizes the practice and its representation. BDSM “players,” as some identify, believe themselves to be engaged in a volitional erotic relationship involving power exchange and the often-elaborate staging of “scenes”—consensual narratives scripted by each player.

Echoing June Jordan’s poem quoted from in the epigraph, Lorde and Walker question whether black women can indeed consent to racialized sexual play. Black women BDSMers, however, suggest that it is precisely this consent that is not only possible but also pleasurable. Amplifying the complexity of sexual consent itself, race play demonstrates what Biman Basu calls the “crucial but constrained” nature of consent within BDSM sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Reading the vexed but vital relationship between violence and pain animating the slave and neoslave narrative and contemporary BDSM, Basu conveys how these “texts” evince “the ambiguity of consent and represent the nuances of (non)consensual desire. They remind us that consent everywhere is constrained in both libidinal and political economies.”<sup>22</sup> The dynamics of domination and submission, particularly when stratified by the processes of racialization, disrupt understandings and enactments of already complicated sexual consent.<sup>23</sup>

For example, in *Monstrous Intimacies*, Christina Sharpe is interested in the ways that desire and consent serve to encode the history of violent domination, or that which consent veils.<sup>24</sup> Sharpe’s stunning study of the enduring sexual horrors and pleasures of chattel slavery that continue to mold the post-slavery subject also illuminates the profound ambivalence of sexual consent.<sup>25</sup> While Sharpe, too, questions the

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21. Biman Basu, *The Commerce of Peoples: Sadomasochism and African American Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 136.

22. *Ibid.*, 137.

23. For Basu, “the matter of consent itself is thoroughly troubled in domination and submission.” *Ibid.*, 162.

24. Christina E. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

25. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 119. Sharpe is interested in how the legacy of African chattel slavery and its modern repetitions are complicated by

possibility of sexual consent for the enslaved — “as much as an enslaved person can be said to participate in nonconsensual sexual acts” — she confronts the fraught site of sexual consent for post-slavery subjects.<sup>26</sup> Sharpe engages with the probability of the enslaved subject’s sexual desire, arguing that indeed, “somasochistic desire might be a place from which to exercise power and to exorcise it through the repetition of particular power relations.”<sup>27</sup> She brilliantly illuminates this obfuscatory power of sexual consent, arguing that, in the murky realm of sexual ethics “the distinction between public good and private harm and the effects of violence in these supposedly distinct realms is maintained by erasing the ways that in be(com)ing a subject one is called on continually to consent to violence.”<sup>28</sup> Mirroring the complexity of the multitude of binaries that vivify BDSM, consent is rarely ever a simple yes/no binary.

The rhetoric of fantasy and play ought not to belie the seriousness of the practice of BDSM, which includes a wide range of physical and psychic “ritualized interactions,” each negotiating the importance of consent.<sup>29</sup> BDSM is not only a structured and trained practice but often a

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understandings of sexual consent and pleasure as unspeakable. She reveals the paradox of the quotidian nature of somasochism for the Black (queer) subject and its simultaneous disavowal as a kind of “black unspeakable.” (112).

26. Christina E. Sharpe, “Costs of Re-Membering: What’s at Stake in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry Elam Jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 321.

27. Sharpe, “The Costs of Re-Membering,” 327.

28. *Ibid.*, 141.

29. Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook II* (New York: Book Surge, 1983), 43. Numerous scholars have explored the ways consent operates as a principal feature of BDSM, for example, Staci Newmahr, *Playing on The Edge: Sodomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*; Kleinplatz and Moser, *Sodomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*; Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction* (San Francisco: Greenery Press, 1996); Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds, eds., “Introduction: Just a Simple Matter of Yes or No?” in their *Making Sense of Sexual Consent* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, eds., *Safe, Sane, Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sodomasochism* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2007); Darren Langdridge, “Voices from the Margins: SM and Sexual Citizenship,” *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 4 (2006): 373–89; Joseph W. Bean, *Leathersex* (San Francisco: Daedalus, 1994); Andrea Beckmann, “‘Sexual Rights’ and ‘Sexual Responsibilities’ within Consensual ‘S/M’ Practice,” in *Making Sense of Sexual Consent*; and

lifestyle. BDSM scholarship confirms the diversity of the practice, the salience of power exchange, and the engendering of sexual pleasure as key motivations for the practice.<sup>30</sup> Such scholarship takes on misconceptions of the “subculture” and detaches it from its roots in psychopathology, as studied by sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his seminal text, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), and later by Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, Paul Gebhard, and others.

Though condemnatory, the dialogue commenced by Lorde and Walker in the early 1980s is one that brought race into the foreground and begs to be revisited in the context of Black women’s modern day enactment of BDSM. Despite the growth in BDSM scholarship, Black women’s experience with the practice remains undertheorized.<sup>31</sup> Mobilizing Black women BDSMers’ diverse voices, as this essay argues, destabilizes monolithic articulations of Black female sexuality anchored in the tenacious realms of degradation, disempowerment, normativity, policing, and silence. This becomes an important step toward an urgent de-pathologization of Black female sexuality.

**CYBER BLACK AND BLUE: VANESSA BLUE,  
FEMDOMX.COM, AND WHITE MALE HUMILIATION**

Internet porn elucidates the convoluted dynamics of Black female aggression, power, and pleasure in BDSM. FemdomX.com is a BDSM website owned and operated by Vanessa Blue and was launched in 2004.<sup>32</sup> Blue is a highly accomplished veteran Black female porn performer whose

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Cheryl Hanna, “Sex Is Not a Sport: Consent and Violence in Criminal Law,” *Boston College Law Review* 42, issue 2, no. 2 (2001): 239–90.

30. Critiquing essentialist and reductionist studies rooted in the perceived pathology of BDSM, Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher, for example, undertake a phenomenologically guided approach to studying BDSM to generate a definition based on four factors: consensuality, an unequal balance of power, sexual arousal, and compatibility of definition. See Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher, “Making Sense of S & M: A Discourse Analytic Account,” *Sexualities* 4, no. 3 (2001): 293–314.
31. See Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge*; Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*; and Danielle Lindemann, *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
32. The website, “aimed at creating a destination for an audience appreciative of the sexually aggressive ethnic female,” loosely interprets the BDSM title focusing on “fetishism, domination and kink-related activities.” See “Vanessa Blue Inks Exclusive Deal with Hustler, Launches Fetish Website,” *Adult Video News*, November 16, 2004, <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/Vanessa-Blue-Inks-Exclusive-Deal-with-Hustler-Launches-Fetish-Web-Site-41181.html>.

websites feature primarily women of color. In addition to performing on her website, she also directs and films much of the material herself. As Black feminist historian Mireille Miller-Young notes, Blue's entrepreneurial role as a pornographer creates critical opportunities for self-authorship, "produc[ing] a space for black eroticism beyond the framework of stereotyped black sexuality in dominant porn."<sup>33</sup> Blue maintains a record of being candid and outspoken about racial discrimination in the industry, specifically the unique hardships Black women face. FemdomX.com illustrates a complex and contradictory negotiation of pain, pleasure, and power for the Black female performer. Blue and the performers on her website navigate a conflicted, violent terrain of gender, race, and sexuality—traversing antebellum legacies of Black women's sexual violence and the feminist (more largely lesbian-feminist-led) debates about BDSM stemming from the late 1970s/early 1980s in which, as I have demonstrated, women of color, though marginalized, played a significant part.

FemdomX.com features femdoms, a BDSM term for dominant women. FemdomX.com may be seen as a kind of progressive enterprise in terms of its expansion of roles for Black women in the industry.<sup>34</sup> Blue "will never shoot a scene where the girl is anything less than in a position of power. There is enough product like that already."<sup>35</sup> She maintains her femdom vision is about allowing "the girls to fuck back."<sup>36</sup> When speaking of her role as director/performer, Blue states, "I wanted to totally dig in on the girl power. I was able to take all of my ladies and empower them to fuck the way that they have been getting fucked in previous movies."<sup>37</sup> Enabling female performers to "fuck back" in ways they haven't experienced in the past, she seems to posit a self-empowering quality to BDSM performance and its fostering of sexual agency for Black

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33. Mireille Miller-Young, "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography," *Sexualities* 13, no. 2 (2010): 230.

34. "FemDomX Launches Affiliate Program," *Adult Video News*, December 13, 2004, <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/FemDomX-Launches-Affiliate-Program-41433.html>.

35. "Vanessa Blue Unleashes Fem-Dom Vision on Hustler," *Adult Video News*, February 27, 2005, <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/Vanessa-Blue-Unleashes-Fem-Dom-Vision-on-Hustler-42323.html>.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid. Her use of the word "girl" instead of "woman" reflects not so much her own infantilization of the female body, but her adoption of adult entertainment industry lexicon grounded in the most profitable bedrock of eroticized female infantilization.

women. Although firmly located in the genre of Black porn, employing predominately Black women performers on her site, being vocal about the discrimination of Black women in the industry, and enunciating a seemingly quasi-feminist “pro pussy” philosophy, Blue maintains that she is not willing to “push any type of pro-Black feminine agendas.”<sup>38</sup> Her remark communicates an important ambivalence with regard to race—one that mirrors the industry’s equivocal gaze toward Black women as simultaneously desired and disavowed. It also reflects Blue’s careful, strategic negotiation of race within such an industry.

FemdomX.com features videos that range in severity from being invited to smoke a cigarette with partially clothed Blue as she reclines in bed, watching Cassandra get tickled, or Chyanne shower, to more elaborate violent scenes of domination, submission, bondage, fireplay, and, as I will discuss, white male humiliation.<sup>39</sup> Larry Townsend, author of the pioneer BDSM guidebook *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (1972), defines humiliation, a core element of BDSM, as “a conscious humbling of one partner by the other.”<sup>40</sup> Practices of humiliation include degraded tasks and debased physical acts as well as verbal indignity. On femdomX.com, however, race becomes a critical tool in the act of humiliation.

For example, in *Door 2 Door*, a seemingly inane video about a white insurance man, “Major,” is disconcerted by a scantily clad, dubious, horny woman (played by Blue) during a site visit. The story shifts quickly and dramatically to an incisive account of Black/white interracial anxiety, aggression, and desire, specifically the ambivalent desirability of the Black female body under the white heterosexual male gaze. In the video, Blue chastens her white male partner, physically and verbally—choking him with various body parts (breasts and buttocks in particular) and deriding him with remarks about the insufficient size and skill of his (white) penis. The Black female body becomes a key weapon employed in this cyber theater of BDSM as Blue’s character commands him to “choke between [her] big Black tits,” while she violently squeezes her breasts

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38. Vanessa Blue, email to author, December 3, 2010. Though irresolute, her “pro-pussy” philosophy is, at the very least, refreshing in a pro-dick, hetero-patriarchal industry. See also “Vanessa Blue Unleashes Fem-Dom Vision.”

39. Fireplay is a form of temperature play, where controlled flammable substances are used to create heat to stimulate the skin.

40. Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook II*, 43.

around his face. Here, Blackness, as Blue's character repeatedly says to Major, is "too much." The hyperembodiment and corporeal excess of the Black female body is evinced through visual effects as well as language. In addition to Blue repeatedly referring to her body parts as "big" and to her Blackness as "too much," the use of close-up camera angles allows Blue's body to fill the frame.

While Black female sexuality is configured as superabundance, imbued with the power to make one choke, white male sexuality, also largely somatically registered, is portrayed as lack. However, Black female sexuality emerges ambivalently as both deficiency and excess—the Black female body's lack of desirability under the white male gaze and its somatic and libidinal superfluity. In turn, the corporeal excess of Black female sexuality is displayed and foiled against white masculinity as utterly deficient. Blue continually badgers her white male sub. Major's genital inadequacy, while universally an undesirable characteristic in mainstream pornography, is especially problematic when confronted with the Black female body and Black female sexuality as cavernous and rapacious. In the elaborately scripted quasi-comical storyline of *Door 2 Door*, race emerges aggressively as the crux of the BDSM scene. Humiliation scenes such as in *Door 2 Door*, steeped in stereotype and racial hyperbole, illuminate the racialized dynamics of violence in mainstream interracial pornography and rest on a volatile substratum of racial sexual alterity.

Blue jokes that "punishing young white boys" is one of her favorite things to do. For Blue such punishment is not discriminatory; on the contrary, she jests, "It's not racist, it's about spreading the love." When asked if she considers her BDSM work as "trying to avenge hundreds of years of oppression," she responds, "Only when I am fucking them in the ass."<sup>41</sup> Blue's sardonic responses reveal her awareness of the racialized codings of sex acts and gesture to her recognition of BDSM's possibility for destabilizing conventional hierarchies of power (particularly within the context of mainstream US pornography)—that is, a Black female sodomizing a white male. Indicating the affective catharsis that such

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41. Chris Nieratko, "Vanessa Blue," *Bizarre Magazine*, August 2005, [http://www.bizarremag.com/fetish/interviews/2139/vanessa\\_blue.html?xc=1](http://www.bizarremag.com/fetish/interviews/2139/vanessa_blue.html?xc=1). See also Gene Ross, "Conversations with Vanessa Blue," *Adult FYI* (blog), August 25, 2007, <http://www.adultfyi.com/read.php?ID=27452>.

role-playing permits women of color specifically, Blue states, “As far as girls, I just try to shoot beautiful women of color. Most of us have a lot of pent up anger anyway. It’s just a matter of getting her to the point where she’s comfortable enough to release it.”<sup>42</sup> Pain delivered is conveyed as a release for pain carried in the flesh.<sup>43</sup> The essential and essentialized anger Blue bestows on women of color suggests, if not a keen awareness of the historical legacy of Black female sexual violence, then an intimate understanding of Black women’s ambivalent positionality in the US adult entertainment industry.

In *Door 2 Door*, race becomes essential in the BDSM scene of humiliation — one where racial difference is fundamentally established and eroticized. *Door 2 Door* illuminates the ways Internet pornography so vividly reaffirms how race operates in cyberspace. Cyberspace is not a utopian transcendent arena where we can elide the categories of race and gender as critical categories of power, but rather it demonstrates how they act in hyperreality. Internet pornography becomes an important place to interrogate how these categories and their respective power dynamics function in the virtual realm as critical markers of human difference. FemdomX.com reveals how virtual corporeality — specifically, representations of the body in cyber pornography — are deeply embedded in the sociopolitical historical material conditions of everyday life.<sup>44</sup> On femdomX.com, myths of Black female sexuality are reinvigorated at

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42. “Vanessa Blue Unleashes Fem-Dom Vision.”

43. Observing the flesh’s memory of pain, Hortense Spillers writes, “I think that the generations of slavery did carry pain in the flesh, that information was passed through the body in pain or through the torn flesh.” Hortense Spillers, interviewed by Tim Haslett for the Black Cultural Studies Website Collective in Ithaca, NY, February 4, 1998, [http://www.blackculturalstudies.org/spillers/spillers\\_intvw.html](http://www.blackculturalstudies.org/spillers/spillers_intvw.html).

44. Scholars such as Lisa Nakamura and Cameron Bailey have long imploded the myths of postcorporeal and postracial cyber subjectivity that once charged conceptualizations of virtual corporeality, revealing the myriad of ways race *matters* in cyberspace. See Lisa Nakamura, “After/Images of Identity: Gender, Technology, and Identity Politics,” in *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, ed. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 321–31; Lisa Nakamura, Beth E. Kolko, and Gilbert Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Cameron Bailey, “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace,” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 29–49.



the same time they are challenged and their utter performativity and construction made hyaline. In humiliation scenes such as in *Door 2 Door*, while power is not ultimately redefined, it may be reclaimed for the Black female, who possesses the power to humiliate and to vocalize an acerbic critique of both Black female sexual alterity and ambivalence; the binary of lust/disgust that characterizes Black female sexuality, especially under the heteronormative white male gaze. Such dynamics of reinvigoration and challenge, reproduction and subversion, represent a vibrant leitmotif within Black women's BDSM performance.

#### IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES: RACE PLAY AND BLACK WOMEN

While not explicitly advertised as such on her website, Blue's humiliation scenes can be categorized as a type of race play, a form of BDSM that "openly embraces and explores the (either 'real' or 'assumed') racial identity of the players," often employing racism as primary mode of titillation.<sup>45</sup> Race play typically employs racist epithets, role-playing, scenes, tools, and props. Scott Daddy, columnist of *Leather Bound* for *Edge Magazine* defines race play as "erotic play that explores power exchange within the dynamics of cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, religious and/or racial differences."<sup>46</sup> Like other BDSM practices, race play relies on the simultaneous observance and violation of conventional sociocultural interdictions. Here it is not just racism that is eroticized, but a vibrantly imagined racial difference in which the color line between Black and white is itself played with—constantly smudged, redelineated, and traversed. Performances of racial sexual alterity become essential in race play. BDSM educator and writer Mollena Williams, also known as the "Perverted Negress," believes that "the prime motive in a 'Race Play' scene is to underscore and investigate the challenges of racial or cultural differences."<sup>47</sup>

Race play reveals how narratives of racialized sexual violence hinged on historical wrongdoing and racial transgressions script performances

45. Andrea Plaid, "Interview with the Perverted Negress," *Racialicious* (blog), July 10, 2009, <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/07/10/interview-with-the-perverted-negress>.

46. Scott Daddy, "Race Play," *Edge Magazine*, April 5, 2010, [http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=columnists&sc=scott\\_daddy&sc3=&id=104189&pf=1](http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=columnists&sc=scott_daddy&sc3=&id=104189&pf=1).

47. Plaid, "Interview."



of Black/white interracial intimacy in BDSM.<sup>48</sup> This discussion exposes, but does not resolve, the paradoxes immanent in race play—its performance, theorization, representation, and spectatorship. Offering a complicated reading and not a drawn-out conclusion, this section illuminates the multitude of contradictions operating within race play and its encircling discourse. Drawing from the diverse lived experiences of Black women BDSMers, specifically femdoms, I unveil the ambivalence that underlines the practice.<sup>49</sup> Race play means different things and feels differently to those who enact it at different times and trajectories, indeed moments, in their lives. It is my hope that these voices facilitate a resistance to the pathologization of both BDSM and Black female sexuality in theories about race play.

Still considered “on the edge of edgy sex” by many in the BDSM community, race play is a popular topic on BDSM social networking websites and is becoming increasingly more prevalent in hardcore pornography.<sup>50</sup> Discussion groups in online BDSM communities are filled with evidence of an interest in the controversial fetish practice. One popular online fetish community, fetlife.com, houses groups called “Black Women Who Love to be Called Names During Race Play” and “Black Cum Whores For White Masters,” each of which have over a thousand members. Like other arenas of BDSM, race play is a consensual and trained practice recommended only for “advanced” players by many established BDSM trainers such as Midori, whose race play pedagogy includes reconstructing scenes of antebellum plantation auction blocks where she plays the white mistress inspecting the Black male slave prior to

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48. Race play is not relegated to Black and white. Online race play discussion groups such as “Racial Name Calling, And Racist Fantasies” at fetlife.com attest to the inclusive spirit of fetish racial play, cheekily advertising, “This group is for all of the Honkies, Niggers, Spics, Gooks, Chinks, Dago Wops, Bogs, Canucks, Flips, Heebies, Hymies, Japs, Krauts, and Polaks, and any other derogatory named group, who have racist sexual fantasies.”

49. I focus on professional Black femdoms because of their visibility and access. Unlike Black female subs, many of these women maintain websites offering various services. Many Black femdoms express a desire and a history of playing submissive roles in their nonprofessional sexual relationships and/or self-identify as *switch* (someone who identifies as both dominant and submissive), speaking to both the fluidity and interchange of BDSM roles and the personal/professional divide.

50. Daisy Hernandez, “Playing with Race,” *Colorlines*, December 21, 2004, [http://colorlines.com/archives/2004/12/playing\\_with\\_race.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2004/12/playing_with_race.html).

purchasing his body.<sup>51</sup> A well-known Japanese American sexuality educator, Midori's enactment of a US chattel slavery scene speaks to the complex racial landscape of doms, submissives, and trainers, as well as the erotic power of the Black/white binary itself—what Sharon Holland calls the “primal scene of racist practice.”<sup>52</sup> In *playing* race, Midori uses as “her setting the greatest of American interracial sex factories, the antebellum plantation.”<sup>53</sup> Race play prompts us to “rethink the black/white binary and its hold upon [not just] exemplary epistemologies,” but our erotic imaginaries.<sup>54</sup>

This is a common sentiment expressed by those who practice race play—that it demands a certain level of experience and training with BDSM and is not recommended for dilettantes. One professional Black dom states that race play is not as commonly requested as other BDSM acts and is often a practice built up to. She states, “Most guys prefer garden variety humiliation and they don't dip their toe into racial humiliation until they can tell me a little bit.”<sup>55</sup> While all serious practitioners of BDSM recommend the importance of training, technical skill, and discipline, setting race play apart from other “garden variety humiliation” reveals the currency that race brings into already interdicted BDSM performances.

At least three fascinating entangled elements emerge in the context of the discussion of race play in BDSM circles, both kink and scholarly. First is the concept of fantasy; a dialectic exists between the fantasy world of BDSM contrasted against the “real” world arena.<sup>56</sup> For some

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51. Ibid.

52. Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 26.

53. Adrienne D. Davis, “Bad Girls of Art and Law: Abjection, Power, and Sexuality Exceptionalism in (Kara Walker's) Art and (Janet Halley's) Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* (June 2011): 102.

54. Holland, *The Erotic Life*, 29.

55. Black Fuhrer, Interview with author, June 19, 2012. Mollena Williams confirms the difficulty of race play even within the spectrum of BDSM edge play: “Doing race play is HARD. It isn't some walk in the fucking park. And finding people I trust enough to do it with is almost impossible because it is hard, and they are at risk.” See Plaid, “Interview.”

56. Many BDSM scholars have revealed how “fantasy is critical to sadomasochistic interactions.” According to Thomas S. Weinberg, fantasy serves to both draft the particular BDSM scenarios and serve as a scapegoat for the guilt participants may feel enjoying the enactment of taboo sexual fantasies. See

there is the perception that what one does while she is *playing* is somehow removed from her everyday existence and quotidian reality. In race play the rhetoric of play belies the sociohistorical gravity of racism itself and its contemporary utterances. Much more than play, race play requires a unique physical and psychic labor on behalf of its participants, illuminating just how much sexual desire and pleasure are products of both mind and body, socially constructed via a myriad of social exchanges. Rejecting claims that people who participate in race play are/ must be racist, Black dominatrix “Black Fuhrer” illuminates this tension between fantasy and reality, inside and outside:

I mean if we are going to try to make parallels between the world outside of fetish and inside of fetish and claiming that people who engage in racial type play are racists, then we are going to have to bring in domestic violence, assault and battery, verbal abuse, gay bashing, civil liberties. So we let some of this stuff go because no one will bat an eye to a guy getting caned, or nipple clamps, or labia clamps being put on someone, yet you know the use of certain words in a racial context gets people up in arms. So you know, you have to be consistent, if race play is off limits then so is impact play, breath play, forced bi or any other sorts of things that aren't kosher outside of fetish.<sup>57</sup>

Inside the realm of fetish, what would be outside the boundaries of conventional social mores and political correctness is not merely sanctioned, but eroticized. As conceptualized by the Black Fuhrer, racism and domestic violence thus transmogrify into something else when practiced within the seemingly insular chimerical domain of BDSM. As the Black Fuhrer elucidates, BDSM itself, not just race play, centers on an illicit eroticization of violence and power. She cautions us not to forget the foundations of BDSM as always-already an enactment of taboo sexual fantasies: “You kind of have to understand that you know whatever is being said is probably being played out as somebody's fantasy. It's

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Thomas S. Weinberg, “Sadomasochism and the Social Sciences: A Review of the Sociological and Social Psychological Literature,” in *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, ed. Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 33.

57. Black Fuhrer, “White on Black Race Play—My Views,” YouTube, October 26, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4W8f-xmCEE>.

somebody's fetish. You can't take it literally."<sup>58</sup> Though this is an important reminder about the practice — she advises “you know, emphasis on the word *play*” — paralleling race play to other BDSM role-playing such as “daddy baby girl dynamic[s]” (which she contrasts to pedophilia “outside of fetish”) risks eliding race as a critical tool of human difference and power.<sup>59</sup> Such elision her name contravenes, evoking not just the domination that she performs as a black femdom, but an analogous sexual political discourse regarding BDSM's (and pornography's) controversial eroticization of Nazism and fascism. Such debates, largely in the arena of feminist sexual ethics, reflect similar questions surrounding the historical legacies of violence (and pleasure) in our intimate lives.<sup>60</sup>

While many scripts underwriting BDSM narratives, such as parent/child, teacher/student, doctor/patient, and warden/prisoner, rely on an eroticized transgression of societal hierarchies (class, gender, race, class, sexuality, body, age, etc.), lumping these taboos together veils the historical specificity of such hierarchies. Race play evinces how historically loaded Black/interracial sex remains, or, as historian Kevin Mumford rightly notes, the ways in which interracial sex is always “more than just sex.”<sup>61</sup> It is precisely this sexual racism that is mined and eroticized in

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58. Black Fuhrer, interview with author, June 19, 2012.

59. Ibid.

60. The scholarship on BDSM's appropriation of Nazism and fascism is vast and diverse; for a sampling, see Irene Reti, “Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadoomasochism in a Post Nazi Holocaust World,” in *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadoomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, ed. Irene Reti (Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks, 1993), 79–99; Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in her *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 73–105; Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1981); Linda Wayne, “S/M Symbols, Fascist Icons, and Systems of Empowerment,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, ed. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles, Alyson Publications, 1996); Susan Leigh Star, “Swastikas: The Street and the University,” in *Against Sadoomasochism*, 131–36; Arnie Kantrowitz, “Swastika Toys,” in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Los Angeles: Daedalus, 1991), 193–209; and Lawrence D. Mass, “Nazis and Gay Men II: An Exchange with Arnie Kantrowitz,” in his *Homosexuality and Sexuality: Dialogues of the Sexual Revolution*, vol. 1 (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1990), 200–12.

61. Mumford writes, “In our culture when a Black person has sexual relations with a white person, the act is often controversial and always extraordinary.

race play. Importing “real” world racism and racial scripts into the “fantasy” world of fetish reveals just how permeable, nonetheless vital, the line between fantasy and reality is here. If, as Mumford argues, Black/white interracial sex is always “more than just sex,” then BDSM practiced between Black/white interracial partners, is always a kind of race play. Mollena Williams’s statement, “I do race play whether or not I want to,” is resonant here.<sup>62</sup> It testifies to the always-alreadyness of race play for Black women—the fact that we may be involved in race play whether or not we want to be—while critically expanding the scope and stage of race play. Williams’s statement cues the resonance of race play to the theory and praxis of Black female sexuality, beyond BDSM.

Central to the concept of fantasy is that of play itself. Somewhat of a misnomer, play in BDSM contexts is already complex, demanding emotional and physical labor, requiring training, and education. Race further complicates the dynamics of play and the transgression, pleasure, and power exchange that play facilitates.<sup>63</sup> Staci Newmahr defines

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Because of the history—slavery, racism, gender relations, sexual repression, power politics—sex across the color line always represents more than just sex.” Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press 1997), xi.

62. Williams recounts a time when a white woman spectator witnessed her playing with a white man and automatically assumed she was engaged in a race play scene. In response to the woman’s expression of revulsion at the sight of “a white man beating and torturing a Black woman,” Williams said, “You know what’s funny? That wasn’t a race-play scene. That man didn’t do race play. What you saw was the man to whom I was in service playing with me. What you perceived was a race play scene. I can’t warn you about your own perceptions.” This incident gestures to important questions about the witnessing of the spectacle of race play and the complicated dynamics of empathy and complicity well synthesized in Saidiya Hartman’s profound question: “Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of Black sentience only by feeling for himself?” Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19. See also Williams, “BDSM and Playing with Race,” 70.
63. Recognizing the labor and play components of sexuality itself, Margot Weiss conceptualizes BDSM as “working at play” a kind of fluid movement “between the registers of work (productive labor) and play (as creative recombination).” This understanding of BDSM is especially relevant when considering BDSM in the context of pornography websites and professional domination, where the Black female body is commodified and BDSM

"SM play [a]s the joint boundary transgression of personal boundaries between people of hegemonic social and ethical boundaries, and often physiological boundaries."<sup>64</sup> In race play, boundaries of race and racial ethics are transgressed. Yet, I would like to consider that these women are not only playing with race, but demonstrating the *play* of race — how we *play* race and even how race *plays* us. That is, race play allows for the eroticized transgression of racial boundaries, enables a dramatization of race that irradiates the performativity of race itself and speaks to the ways race, to borrow from Black vernacular, plays us. An African American urban colloquialism, play is often used as both a synonym for sexual action and to describe a kind of exploitation, deceit, or delusion. I elicit this sense of play here to signal the multiple complex and contradictory ways race, despite its function as a primary disciplining principle of humankind, is riddled with paradoxes.

My thinking of how race *plays* us and the dynamic paradoxes of racialization is indebted to Robert Bernasconi's recent work on race as a "border concept."<sup>65</sup> Revealing the myriad of contradictions and volatile landscape of racial borders, Bernasconi exposes how sexual transgression is historically constitutive of race and its conceptualization. Arguing that the racial borders are the places where we best assess political and culturally evolving racialization processes, Bernasconi unveils race as a profoundly "relational concept"; a border concept "whose core lies not at the center but at its edges" while simultaneously enacting the paradox of the sexual border traverse, that "to map the racial borders, the borders must be crossed."<sup>66</sup> In race play, racial boundaries are therefore delineated only to be (inter)crossed. Like the line between fantasy and reality, the racial border is marked by its "selective permeability."<sup>67</sup> Race

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performed as actual labor for profit. See Margot Weiss, "Working at Play: BDSM Sexuality in the San Francisco Bay Area," *Anthropologica* 48, no. 2 (2006): 230.

64. Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge*, 163.

65. Robert Bernasconi, "Crossed Lines in the Racialization Process: Race as a Border Concept," *Research in Phenomenology* 42, no. 2 (2012): 206–28.

66. *Ibid.*, 227, 216.

67. Abdul JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality,'" in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Donna Stanton, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 99.

play elucidates how race, as a technique of human differentiation replete with contradictions and incongruities, *plays* us in multiple ways.

Race postures itself as a stable, sovereign truth, when in fact, it is a dynamic and fluid site of demarcation — legible as a (conceptual) category of perceived purity historically engendered only as a result of profound mixing. It embodies what Holland calls the “lie of difference,” masquerading as a fundamental marker of difference and separation; while actually an emblem of relation and intimacy, its borders, as race play evinces, marked by an erotically charged crossing.<sup>68</sup> If race is a practice of “the drawing and redrawing of the racial boundaries,” then race play heightens such sketching — setting, pushing, and retracting the physical and psychic borders of the “play territory.”<sup>69</sup> In race play, racial boundaries collide with psychosexual and somatic boundaries in an unresolved melodrama animated by racism, eroticism, racial sexual alterity, power, pleasure, pain. Further, it unsettles the dichotomies of transgression/compliance, subversion/reproduction, mind/body, fantasy/reality, and Black/white.

Second, a conception of the body/mind divide undergirds race play. This soma/psyche split is perhaps best exemplified by Williams’s statement, “My vagina isn’t really interested in uplifting the race. What pussy wants is fucked up stuff, really dark scenarios to test the boundaries and cut with an exhilarating level of danger.”<sup>70</sup> Race play is conceived of as a somatic act, and it is the body that Black women BDSMers believe to be aroused by racist fantasies rather than the mind. Such disassociation, articulated by many Black women who express an interest in race play, is fascinating because it allows for an important reconciliation of race play — a kind of acknowledgment that it’s not necessarily “cool” to like to be called a “nigger cunt,” “nigger slave slut,” “tar monkey nigger cunt” while one has sex and/or to scream such abasements at one’s partner, but

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68. Holland employs the “lie of difference and non-relation” to signal our profound refusal of the interconnections between Black and white. Such a paradox is aptly embodied in a term Holland invents, “blood strangers,” an appellation signaling the myth of human, specifically Black and white, separation. See Holland, *The Erotic Life*, 2, 88.

69. Bernasconi, “Crossed Lines,” 222; Joseph W. Bean, *Leathersex* (San Francisco: Daedalus, 1994), 131.

70. Plaid, “Interview.”



a) it's only fantasy, only play, and b) it's not my mind that is stimulated by this, in fact my mind knows better, it is my body that is aroused.<sup>71</sup>

Other Black women express not just an intense pleasure, but also an empowerment and a kind of therapeutic and restorative quality in race play. For renowned black female “Leather Mother,” Viola Johnson, race play is empowering.<sup>72</sup> Reconciling her own fraught practice of race play in an article, “Playing With Racial Stereotypes The Love That Dare Not Speak its Name,” written a decade before Mollena Williams (the now poster child of race play) and others began speaking and writing publicly about the controversial practice, Johnson asks, “Why is it that we, as Leathermen and women of color, can’t accept the possibility that to some of us, Nigger may be empowering?”<sup>73</sup> Considering the racial dynamics of BDSM’s therapeutic potentiality, Danielle Lindemann identifies race play “as a mechanism through which clients could negotiate their anxiety by reproducing traumatic experiences on their own terms.”<sup>74</sup> Focused on race play’s interpretation from a pro-domme standpoint, such a theory differs from Margot Weiss’s argument that race play functions as a kind of “interven[tion] into the ways that people in the scene see their own stakes in and production of racialized social belonging, disrupting white American fantasies of universal citizenship.”<sup>75</sup> While Weiss argues for race play’s potential to challenge the whiteness of the BDSM community, Lindemann argues that in race play clients either reproduce or subvert broader racial hierarchies.<sup>76</sup> Although this either/or posture flattens out the distinctions between these two moments — reproduction and subversion — obfuscating a spectrum of possibilities, it is through

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71. The racial epithets I recite here are examples derived from interviews with Black women who practice race play, both professionally and nonprofessionally.

72. Viola M. Johnson, *To Love, To Obey, To Serve: Diary of an Old Guard Slave* (Fairfield, CT: Mystic Rose Books: 1999), 276.

73. Viola Johnson has been an active figure in the BDSM community since the mid-1970s. Her article, “Playing With Racial Stereotypes The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name,” *Black Leather in Color* (1994), is reproduced on the weblog *Leatherweb*, accessed April 5, 2012, <http://www.leatherweb.com/raceplayh.htm>.

74. Lindemann, “BDSM as Therapy?,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 2 (2011): 59.

75. Weiss, *Techniques*, 211.

76. *Ibid.*, 210–211; Lindemann, “BDSM as Therapy?,” 161.



this manipulation that racial hierarchies themselves are as revealed as performative and unnatural.

Hence, the therapeutic potentiality of race play may lie in not just the choice to be subjugated, a kind of exercising one's own conscious volition of racialized oppression and aggression (as Williams says, "I like my violence consensual"), but also in recognizing one's role as actor in the making and performance of racial hierarchies.<sup>77</sup> Yet the antidotal capacity and analeptic potential of shame and humiliation are fundamentally complicated by race. Lindemann finds that shaming is restorative in revealing the ephemerality of abjection because it "confirms that which the client is *not*—that is 'You are no longer a pig or a dog or whatever'"; however, Blackness, as a state that one typically cannot effortlessly slip in and out of, problematizes such apperception.<sup>78</sup> Can one no longer be a nigger, in the same way she is no longer a pig, a slave, or a whore? The endurance of Black abjection, the *fact* of Blackness, to borrow from Fanon, is such that outside of the dungeon, bedroom, or stage, one may not only still be race playing, but also one may very well remain a nigger. Williams's statement "[I] can go into the Big Ass Ice Cream Parlor of Racism and have a sample spoon, and leave. I'm not trapped there being force fed the Rocky Road Ice Cream of Oppression until I am sick" reiterates this sense of an ongoing experience of black abjection despite its temporary suspension via race play, further compromising the possibilities of and for the subversion of racial hierarchies.<sup>79</sup> It also highlights the importance of agency, self-determination, will, and mutual consent in performing the violent, erotic play of race. Williams is able, through the personification of her pussy (for example, "What pussy wants is fucked up stuff") to realize a Cartesian-like disassociation that allows her to enjoy race play. However, some Black women BDSMers I've spoken to are unable to do this.

Although she does not get many requests for it, professional femdom Goddess Sonya does not do race play because she does not enjoy it.<sup>80</sup> Comfortable and skilled in diverse acts of play from golden show-

77. Williams, "BDSM and Playing with Race," 71.

78. Lindemann, "BDSM as Therapy?," 162.

79. Plaid, "Interview."

80. Goddess Sonya, interview with author, November 2, 2011. Goddess Sonya has been working as a professional dominatrix for over ten years and maintains her own website, [www.goddesssonya.com](http://www.goddesssonya.com), specializing in "ethnic kink" featuring primarily Black women.

ers to corporal punishment, Sonya expresses that her own fantasies and pleasure are tantamount to her domination; hence she does not engage in race play. Furthermore as a Black femdom with primarily white submissive male clients, requests for “nigger play” are not common. Her statement “there is nothing really racially charged in calling a white man a honky” attests to race play’s grounding in a white heteropatriarchal foundation of racism in the United States and its reliance on a specific (and very familiar) hierarchy of race.<sup>81</sup> It prompts us to consider how race play’s erotic current ebbs and flows with the shifting racial and gender dynamics of racial abjection performed. There are different tensions nuanced between the involvement of dominants and submissives in race play. While it is tempting to think that power differentials are strongest when applied to Black women doms rather than subs, I would encourage a thinking of race play that challenges this notion, as the practice elucidates the experience of a kind of affective agency in (Black) abjection. Sonya’s sentiment also suggests the limits of subversion via race play that I previously discussed in the context of race playing us. If, as expressed by Sonya and others, calling a white man a honky lacks the same “charge” as calling a Black woman a nigger, race play’s potentiality for racial subversion is limited, circumscribed by race and gender, and disciplined by white heteropatriarchy, seemingly a powerful and stable force both inside and outside the world of fetish.

Third, and linked to this body/mind chasm, is the contradictory undercurrent of political correctness that informs race play. For example, certain scenarios such as Black dom/white slave are often deemed more “palatable” and “less racist” than Black slave/white master. Such protocol reflects a common but flawed understanding of power and racism as top down, rather than a more fluid exchange dependent on relationality, resistance, and (power) exchange between master/slave, oppressor/oppressed, and dom/sub. Many Black women BDSMers question this logic, expressing not just their desire to play sub to a white dom, but their belief that this type of partnership is an acceptable and immensely pleasurable one. Williams challenges this idea that it is “OK if the Black person is dominant, but not ‘UPLIFTING THE RACE!!!’ if she’s submissive,” by joking, “Yes. Payback you see. We aren’t getting reparations, so

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81. Ibid.

go beat up some White [person] and get yours.”<sup>82</sup> Williams vocalizes the double standards that energize ethical charges against race play.<sup>83</sup> Her statement accentuates race play’s intense ambivalence. There is on one hand a shifting erotic capital and on the other a series of slippages in its reception and policing. These slippages are further complicated by the racial and gender dynamics of racial abjection performed and the veering positions of domination and submission. I advocate reading these women’s commentary not so much as defense or refusal of race play, but as a critical testament of sexual autonomy—a kind of claiming agency in and of one’s own sexual pleasure on one’s own terms—and as a poignant exegesis illuminating the stakes of Black female sexual politics.

In a 1982 interview, Michel Foucault, a theorist and practitioner of BDSM, states, “The idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well that what those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body.”<sup>84</sup> Reflecting the mind/body split, Foucault recognizes the productive somatic potential of BDSM in “inventing new possibilities of pleasure;” however, he rejects the kind of psycho-somatic historical register of BDSM—the premise that it is linked to an “uncovering of S&M tendencies deep within our unconscious.”<sup>85</sup> Following in this Foucauldian stream of thought, we might consider BDSM a practice uninformed by the Black female’s psychic and bodily memory of trauma and the constitutive links between Black female sexuality and violence. And BDSM cannot be about working out and through a Black female (un)consciousness haunted by a history of sexual violence, because it is not about violence or history at all,

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82. Plaid, “Interview.”

83. Black people within the BDSM community have labeled Williams a “self hating Black-woman,” a ‘traitor to the race,’ ‘deeply disturbed and in need of serious counseling,’ and ‘unfit to be in the community.’” See Williams, “BDSM and Playing with Race,” 71.

84. Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), 165.

85. Ibid. One such example of BDSM’s somatic possibilities is the de-genitalization of pleasure. Via a process of “corporeal intensification,” nongenital erotogenic and libidinal zones of the body are realized. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 199.

but rather about innovating fresh modes of accessing pleasure. In other words, Foucault suggests that BDSM is about the future of bodily pleasures that are *not* the un/subconscious past of historical trauma and/or memory. However, marshaling the voices of Black women BDSMers (or what Black women BDSMers tell us), I am arguing that it can be both. It is evident from attending to the voices of Black women who practice BDSM and race play that their pleasure, highly conflicted, *is* informed by the history of racism, interracial sexual violence, and racialized exchanges of power. If BDSM might not heal a historical wound and/or allow for some kind of redress, actual or symbolic, for Black women, it might serve as a stage or, better yet, a ring to *replay* and to reimagine scenes of Black/white sexual intimacy and the imbrications of pleasure, power, race, and sex. Perhaps such narratives of Black/white interracial sexual aggression in BDSM speak not about the physic past but the present tense of felt (in the now) Blackness — the sentience of the Black body itself.

This essay reveals how Black women's performances in BDSM are charged by the socio-political and cultural histories engaging Black women, sexuality, and violence. Harnessing the voices of black women BDSMers, I have argued that BDSM is a critical site from which to rethink the enmeshment of Black female sexuality and violence. Violence becomes not just a vehicle of desire and pleasure but also a mode of accessing and contesting power. Reconciled by the erection of fragile yet formidable boundaries between the constructs of fantasy/reality, inside/outside, mind/body, and Black/white, Black women BDSMers engage in an elaborate *play* of race in the pursuit of not only sexual pleasure but also sentience. BDSM is a productive space from which to consider more than the multiplicity of Black women's sexual practice and the multiteity of Black female sexuality. It brings into relief acute plateaus in the larger landscape of sexual politics, generating powerful resonances for women's sexuality — concurrently an arena of pleasure, power, danger, and agency.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, it is my hope that this essay, in addition to challenging androcentric and narrow conceptualizations of sexual violence and

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86. Such an understanding of the complexity of women's sexuality attentive to the critical tension between sexual pleasure and violence owes much to the trailblazing work of Carol Vance. See Carol Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in her *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1984), 1–27.

pleasure, moves us toward an exigent unsilencing and destigmatization of Black women's sexual lives.