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TOUCHING RACE THROUGH PLAY:
SADOMASOCHISM, PHENOMENOLOGY,
AND THE INTERTWINING OF RACE
AND SEXUALITY

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Abstract

When scholars research and theorize about sadomasochism (SM) as a sexual practice, they usually focus exclusively on how gender and sexuality are played out in SM encounters, often neglecting other crucial identity categories such as race. In this paper, I undertake a phenomenology-inspired, interdisciplinary discussion of the controversial SM practice of “race play,” which involves re-enacting and staging oppressive racist relations in a sexual context. I argue that exploring “race play” is important because it can reveal the ways in which race is closely intertwined with the erotic, even when race is not overtly acknowledged. Importantly, I argue that SM race play brings forth the ways in which institutionalized relations of domination and submission are always already imbued with eroticism, and that the erotic elements of contemporary sadomasochistic relations are inextricably linked to historical oppressive relations. I claim that further critical engagement with SM can bring to appearance the transformative and subversive potential of these practices.

Keywords: Sadomasochism, phenomenology, sexuality, feminism, race play

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Introduction

This article seeks to examine whether and how race as a category that structures relations between people (and institutions) is manifested in sadomasochistic (SM) engagements. It is interesting to look at race in the context of SM because, as much recent empirical research reveals, self-identified SM participants generally perceive their SM relations as subversive, or as ‘rejecting social norms’ (Turley, King, and Butt, 2010). However, insofar as SM participants ignore or deny the existence and importance of race as a category that can be “played” with deliberately and as a structuring feature of sadomasochistic engagements—even when not intentionally brought into a ‘scene’ by the participants—SM relations risk perpetuating hegemonic, implicitly racist, neoliberal ideologies about sexuality and intimacy, even though SM relations can seemingly be subversive in certain aspects.

I focus specifically on a type of SM play known as “race play” because it is one of the few genres of SM interactions that explicitly calls up race as a source of and resource for arousal. I take up race play as an entry point into a broader discussion of the (often concealed) presence of racialized relations of inequality in SM practices. Similar to many other SM practitioners, race players can also be inclined to individualizing and privatizing their interactions—prominent neoliberal strategies of handling non-normative sexual practices—claiming them to be ‘just their personal kink/fetish’ and therefore unrelated to historical and contemporary structural manifestations of racism. Contrary to these widespread strategies, my central argument is that SM can have phenomenological relevance in the sense that it can help to reveal and deconstruct the ways in which our subjectivities are raced or racialized today, how these racializations are connected to historical power relations of inequality, and how these unequal power relations are tightly interwoven with sexuality—thus pointing to a lasting link between race and the erotic which persists today. I suggest that critical engagement with SM, whether conceptual or embodied or both, has the potential to alter how we relate to our own and other people’s bodies, offering opportunities for (co-) creating new meanings in regards to race and sex difference, as well as sexuality in general. The sort of critical engagement that I argue for in this paper entails keeping an open mind to the multiple and interconnected experiential dimensions that affect people’s lives, even if certain dimensions are not immediately salient in our own lives.

Setting the Scene: Background, Theory, and Methodology

First, I would like to further clarify the central concepts in my paper, sadomasochism and phenomenology, and touch on how the two may be connected and the importance of seeking out these connections in our research and theories. Invented by the Austrian sexologist and psychiatrist Karl Krafft-Ebing, appearing for the first time in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), “sadism” was first used to describe the tendency to experience sexual arousal by seeing and making one’s partner suffer, while “masochism” meant that one experiences arousal by suffering and/or being humiliated by a partner. Sigmund Freud took up “masochism” and “sadism” throughout his works (specifically in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, 1905, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” 1924, and “A Child is Being Beaten” 1919), and he is the one who first combined the two terms into “sadomasochism,” claiming that they are very closely connected, if not inseparable. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze tried to separate these terms, arguing for the distinctness and unique structure of each in itself (*Coldness and Cruelty* 1967), however “sadomasochism” remains to this day the preferred term, encompassing a wide range of activities, behaviours, desires, and fantasies. Another term used is BDSM and it is inclusive of sadomasochism (SM—the term I will use most often in this article), while also referring to bondage and discipline (BD) and dominance and submission (DS). Some other terms that BDSM practitioners use to describe themselves and their activities are “kinky,” “perverted,” and “freaky,” in addition to other terms that people may use. The range of activities that comprise SM is infinite, but what makes an activity distinctly SM is the manifestation of an eroticized power differential or exchange. A strong definition of SM that I work with here is of SM “as consensual sexualized encounters involving an orchestrated power exchange characterized by domination and subordination typically involving the infliction of pain” and humiliation (Deckha 2011, p. 130).

SM is deeply rooted in a psychological tradition which has often conceived it as a mental disorder or pathology located and manifested in the individual psyche. The popular Western imagination today as well as some contemporary scholars and mental health professionals continue to conceptualize and treat SM and its practitioners according to the frame of pathology. Andrea Beckmann (2001), Emma Turley, Nigel King, and Trevor Butt (2010), as well as Margot Weiss (2008) reveal some evidence for the persistence of the pathologizing treatments of SM and its practitioners in the academy and mainstream culture. The authors themselves provide helpful theoretical and methodological alternatives to these pathologizing tendencies. Because of these tendencies, it is important to approach SM from disciplines other than psychology, or even better, to work with it from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Here, I propose that we engage with SM alongside phenomenology, as has been done by Darren Langdridge and Trevor Butt (2004), Turley, King and Butt (2010), Darieck Scott (2010), and Corie Hammers (2013) among others, though my thinking is also heavily influenced by literary, historical, and sociological research. By “phenomenology” I am referring to a set of philosophical approaches emerging from the Continental (European) philosophical tradition, founded by Edmund Husserl, and further elaborated and refined

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by Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Simone De Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. My work here is guided by Heidegger's explication of phenomenology as "the *method* of ontology" (Heidegger 1954, p. 20) rather than as something characterized by specific content, or the method for getting at and understanding being, notably, by delving into particular experiences. Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all have different positions on whether it is possible to get at "pure" experience (Stoller 2009, p. 709). Husserl elaborated *epoche* as a crucial initial step to getting at the essence of experience, which entails "bracketing" or putting "out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being" (Husserl 1983, p. 61). By "natural attitude" Husserl meant a relationship toward life which simply assumes that the world is just "there for us," without questioning or challenging what is there--thus taking things for granted and allowing them to fall to the background (Stoller 2009, p. 709).

SM and phenomenology are already similar in this crucial strategy of bracketing, for as much empirical and theoretical research on SM shows, participants experience and think of their interactions as "play" or "fantasy" which allows them to "bracket the scene from the everyday" (Weiss 2011, p. 151). I am critical of the tendency in some scholarship to conceptualize this bracketing in SM as "escape" from reality or the self, leading to a kind of abstraction, depoliticization, and individualization of fantasy. Roy Baumeister (1988) popularized the 'masochism as escape from self' thesis, which still has some following in scholarly and clinical approaches. I suggest that, like the phenomenological *epoche*, the essential component of bracketing in SM can in fact allow us to suspend the familiar in a way that can allow us to *sink deeper* into it, thus gaining insights which are nearly impossible to attain when we go about our lives 'as usual.'

My goal in this paper is not simply to apply the tools of phenomenology to explore SM, but to explore some ways in which SM can work phenomenally in terms of revealing about being. I theoretically delve into race play specifically not only because of the interesting reactions of silence, disgust, and condemnation that it brings forth in some scholars and SM practitioners (Scott 2010; Hernandez 2004) but because I perceive race play as a valuable nexus of sexuality, gender, race, and class that discloses the simultaneity of historical and contemporary systemic inequality, gathering both the oppressive *and* liberatory potential of our intersubjective encounters. First and foremost, I wish to contribute to intersectional and interdisciplinary feminist work on sexuality and race, by further elaborating an approach to SM that goes beyond traditional pro-sex/anti-sexism feminist approaches to sexuality (Chancer 2000; Collins 1992). My methodology in this paper is comprised of a dialogue between multiple psychological, philosophical, and sociological works on sexuality in general and SM in particular. My thinking is guided by a philosophical spirit that seeks to question and disclose the reversibility between race and (SM) play or the ever-present energy that oscillates between and connects the two. Admittedly, I do not apply a systematic phenomenological method in this paper,¹ nonetheless, my approach, my questioning, and my language are deeply affected by phenomenology.

1 There can be variations of the phenomenological method or reduction, depending on which philosopher one is engaging with; see Mallin (1994) for a valuable and well-structured explanation of how to practice phenomenology.

The Invisibility of Race in SM Practice and Research

Even though SM practitioners generally pride themselves in transgressing social taboos around sexuality, there is one set of practices that is considered too controversial to be taken up by many practitioners: race play. Hernandez describes “race play” or “racial play” as “getting aroused by intentionally using racial epithets” or enacting “racist scenarios like a slave auction” or a Nazi interrogation scene (Hernandez 2004, p. 14). Some research indicates that simply talking about race play in SM communities is considered “too touchy” because many practitioners feel that ‘race does not matter’ (Bauer 2008, p. 245). Yet if race does not matter, then how come it’s so touchy?

Perhaps one answer lies in the fact that, as much recent sociological research on SM reveals, the majority of practitioners who are active in SM communities, in Western Europe and North America, are white (Sheff and Hammers 2011). In Elisabeth Sheff and Corie Hammers’ article (2011) on the importance of researching the role of race in SM relations, the authors argue that in addition to most SM research being done by and with white people, another contributing factor to the absence of the experiences of people of colour may be that, due to the added surveillance, stigma, and racism experienced by people of colour, people “might be more reluctant to assume a potentially disadvantageous identity than white or ethnic majority people” (p. 13). Moreover, it is possible that some people of colour refuse to engage with (white) researchers about their sexual activities for fear that the research findings might perpetuate stigma and racism about a particular group. This reluctance and the real possibility of the perpetuation of stigma are in themselves indicative of the interconnection between race and sexuality. Collins (1992) reveals in her article that African-Americans inhabit a society that requires them to censor themselves in regards to their sexual lives, which affects their intersubjective relations as well as relations with the self. This self-censorship, Collin explains, is an inherent characteristic of a hierarchical society, where “sexuality and power as domination become intertwined” (1992, p. 87). Moreover, the benefits that white people accrue from their whiteness--which can be as simple as never becoming aware of their own race--can be conceptualized in relation to the “universal” status that is attributed to whiteness, or the idea of “whiteness as nonracial” (Weiss 2011, p. 193). Simply turning our attention to terms such as “people of colour,” which is often used to mark racial identities other than white, reveals that whiteness is not considered a colour or a racial category (Ingram 2008; Fanon 1968).

The rhetoric of the insignificance of race and racial difference is relentlessly streamed into our everyday lives through a “liberal humanist position,” which, despite “being mostly shell-mouthed on the question of sex and eroticism anyway--habitually and insistently disavows the salience of racial difference and argues that any recognition of it taints the “purity” of “real love” or “real desire”” (Scott 2010, p. 342). In other words, the dominant ideological stance on the role of race in mediating our relationships is to deny its significance, by positing that love and desire are (ideally) immune to the influence of race or racism.

However, as I discuss further on, race and racial difference are always already present in all manifestations of sadomasochistic sexual practices, private and public. So long as white

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SM participants insist on keeping considerations of race at a distance, they will remain oblivious to their racial privilege--which not only dulls the transgressive and transformative potential of SM, but also contributes to contemporary relations of inequality. White participants certainly can and do engage with SM in ways that allow them to reclaim certain oppressed dimensions of their experience, such as gender and sexual orientation, however by not deliberately accounting for the intertwining between sexuality and race, these practices risk becoming co-opted by neoliberal ideologies and practices, which 'tolerate' the existence of non-normative sexuality as long as it remains private and able to be capitalized on by being marketed to particular groups of people--i.e. white, middle-upper class (Beckmann 2001; Weiss 2008; 2011).

In an American study conducted by Sheff (2005), one research participant explains that many African Americans "are much less likely to go into a BDSM setting" and feel like they belong, and "identify with the label" of BDSM (study cited in Sheff and Hammers 2011, p. 15). The participant interestingly states that BDSM "is similar to feminism, in that many African American women have feminist principles and take feminist action and even participate in what some would consider feminist activism, but" refuse to identify as feminists (Sheff and Hammers 2011, p. 15). This research participant explains that because of the majority of SM practitioners are white and readily identify with each other on this basis, "race does not stand out to them, so kink can become their organizing identity" (Ibid). The research participant's comparison between SM and feminism is quite compelling for me as a feminist researcher because it points to the ever-present invisibility of race in feminist scholarship, which is not so much a symptom of the inherent, incorrigible whiteness of feminism, but more of an indicator and an outcome of the researchers' own subject positions and how these affect research interests and agendas.

The Touchiness of Race (in) Play

In Hernandez's (2004) article, an American black woman, Chupoo, comments that she engages in SM with her partner, but rejects racial play because "[i]t's too close to home for American black people" (p. 16). Chupoo explains that she "can accept other people are able to rise above their sexism," but "[t]he race thing is really a lot deeper." Chupoo's statement that racial play is "too close to home for American black people" is perhaps referencing the not so distant past of black slavery in the United States, as well as the continuation of anti-black racism in the country. Like Chupoo, some people may strongly feel that sadomasochistic race play is unacceptable because racism is a very real, if not a tangible phenomenon that significantly impacts and harms the well-being of people racialized as non-white. However, sexism is very much a real phenomenon as well, and I think we are allowing our critical lenses to get fogged up if we really believe that "sexism"--or unequal gendered relations of power--however different from racism, is any less harmful and that people are "able to rise above" it. Moreover, if a woman engages in an SM scene where overtly sexist practices are being enacted, these practices are always already tinged with racial ideologies, but they will have different meanings depending on the participants and the context.

Sadomasochistic encounters, even when not explicitly taking up race, evoke a racialized history of what are now sexualized dynamics of domination/submission in SM communities, such as the “master/slave” relation. One way in which SM practitioners enact this dynamic is by wearing collars to establish the role of the slave. Interestingly, and not coincidentally, young Black boys who “played as exotic ornaments for wealthy white women in the 1500s to the early 1800s” were made to wear “fancy collars with padlocks” (Tuan discussed in Collins 1992, p. 103). These collars undoubtedly served to symbolically and materially mark the collar-wearer’s submission and belonging to an owner. Race play is significant because, by deploying racist slurs and practices in a sexual context, it brings forth the intertwining between race, sex, and sexuality, and it “intensifies [the] reference to the historical context from which the words [and practices] emerge” (Scott 2010, p. 236). Moreover, the political nature of these practices can also start to appear by taking into account that it is through these sexualized, violent, dehumanizing practices that citizenship was and still is established. Scott (2010) elaborates that a certain “knowledge” that is “obtained through the acts of the body and the catalysis provided by words,” whether it is experienced as a pleasurable “high” or as orgasm, “is the material and psychic trace of *a shift in discursive activity* that comes from working in the present with the legacies of slavery” (p. 238, italics added). This shift in discursive activity which can emerge from expressing our bodily existence through sadomasochistic sexual practices can serve as a powerful path through which we can resignify the body and open up opportunities for more egalitarian sexual relations. However, the transformative potential of SM can only be garnered if we always keep in mind the intertwining of race difference, sex difference, and sexuality.

I turn to McClintock’s (1995) insightful historical study of SM to underscore the point that SM is inherently founded on racializing practices and ideologies—a foundation that is called up by a multitude of props, toys, roles, and terms with which SM players engage. Ever since the inception of the terms “masochism” and sadism” and the emergence of SM as a “historical subculture” in Europe, the sexual and the erotic acquired their meaning from and informed people’s understandings of gender and race (McClintock 1995, p. 142). McClintock writes that it is not by accident that SM as a subculture “emerged in Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century with the emergence of imperialism in its modern industrial form” (Ibid). She explains that just “when the industrial economy was being transformed from a slave market to a wage market,” objects which were previously markers of slavery, such as slave-bands and chain-collars, started being taken up and utilized as paraphernalia for ‘kinky’ sexual and erotic relations (McClintock 1995, p. 155). This is a fascinating analysis because, at first sight, we can interpret this paraphernalia and other markers of BDSM (such as enacting roles of slave and master) as simply a displacement of imperialist slavery to the erotic realm—as trying to hold on to colonialist slave practices and ideologies just when they are disappearing from public view. On second thought, we can also interpret the emergence of SM as a subculture and the ways in which it becomes manifested as a refusal to allow the history of slave labour fade into the past—a refusal to forget! McClintock puts it more eloquently, “The slave-band thus stages the history of industrial capital as haunted by the traumatic and ineradicable memory of imperial slavery” (Ibid).

McClintock’s analysis of the emergence and development of SM in this period highlights the potential of sadomasochism to work phenomenologically or its ability to reveal

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and expose historical and contemporary systems of inequality and discrimination, such as the exploitation and enslavement of poor, white women and women and men racialized as non-white. McClintock writes that by borrowing the paraphernalia of “state power,” such as “boots, whips, chains, and uniforms,” “S/M plays social power backward, visibly and outrageously staging hierarchy, difference and power, the irrational, ecstasy, or alienation of the body, placing these ideas at the center of Western reason” (McClintock 1995, p. 143). We can consider SM as playing social power backward by virtue of being an engagement that is actively sought out, in which all of the partners involved know exactly what their roles are, rather than embracing a liberal ethos that (falsely) declares equality amongst individuals to be the existing state of affairs. McClintock adds that “with its exaggerated emphasis on costumery, script and scene, S/M reveals that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented (Ibid). The usage of props and costumes, as well as the types of titles and labels that SM partners use to refer to, humiliate, and pleasure one another can be phenomenologically relevant because they can be methods for highlighting the processes through which current unequal social relations become legitimated-- fundamentally, these relations are not “natural” but require props and labels to acquire their force. But how is it that these racializing props become (tied to the) erotic and what are the political implications of this intertwining?

The Intertwining and Potential of the Erotic with/ in Unequal Relations of Power

In his fascinating exploration of racialized and sexualized power dynamics in literary works by African American authors, Darieck Scott (2010) points out how racial difference is materialized in interracial pornographic representations, noting that “more commercial and mainstream” black-white porn usually engage “racial hyperbole” in “more muted” ways (p. 214). In other words, although mainstream porn still takes up markers of racial difference, by displaying particular bodies engaging in particular activities, it usually minimizes reference to past and present systemic relations of inequality. Scott highlights that “BDSM-themed porn stories” represent racial hyperbole in more overt ways since (especially) “a black-white pairing in domination/submission fantasies cannot avoid the historical underpinning of such scenes” (Ibid). The historical underpinning that Scott is referring to is not only “the fact that a history of enslavement makes the pairing possible and legible,” but that “it is the very history that is the source of erotic fantasy.” This is a compelling claim indeed: the history of racism and enslavement is precisely what makes sadomasochistic race play erotic and sexually titillating. Could there be a mistake here? I think Scott’s claim is absolutely correct. But rather than rushing to the conclusion that people of colour who fantasize about race play are self-hating, uneducated, or uncritical, let us re-examine our own critical lenses and rethink SM beyond the frame of individual pathology. Rather than understanding SM practitioners as individuals who “fetishize” and “eroticize” damaging relations of social inequality, let’s remind ourselves of the phenomenological potential of sadomasochism. The arousal derived from fantasizing about and enacting relations of domination/submission is not something that “perverts” superimpose--rather, hierarchical relations of power are *always already imbued with the erotic!*

As Scott (2010) highlights, the very fact these scenarios are titillating to participants and observers can serve to “call to, as a *part* of the excitement, the historical processes of *the production of racial difference* through humiliation and domination” (p. 221). In other words, race play brings to appearance the ways in which racial difference is historically produced through humiliation and domination, which is already *latently* erotic, but it can also become overtly erotic for all of the parties involved. This does not mean that oppressed people, past or present, enjoy or get off on being humiliated and dominated; rather, when people belonging to oppressed groups take up race play as an enactment of their erotic fantasies, “like all erotic fantasies,” Scott states, their play “involve[s] an identification with both the perpetrator and victim” (p. 222). Bauer (2008, p. 247) writes that “[t]he fact that most members of [the dyke/trans BDSM] community have racial privileges seems to prevent them from experimenting with and transforming race and race relations” in their play. It appears then that, in their aversion to race play, many white SM practitioners can only identify with the perpetrator. This reveals that many SM practitioners take up and seek to transform only those roles that oppress them or that they feel restricted by; in a way then, these practitioners are not taking into account how they hurt others or how they are benefiting at the expense of others due to their racial privilege. However, race play can open up opportunities for revealing and challenging current oppressive power relations since, sadomasochism as a sexual practice, like sexuality in general, can be “a mode of dramatizing and investigating a concrete historical situation” (Butler 1989, p. 85).²

To try to understand what Butler (1989) means when she writes that sexuality can dramatize a concrete historical situation, let us turn to Patricia Hill Collins’ (1992) explication of sexuality as an energy or a stream of life which is kept bounded within a particular “sex/gender system” (1992, p. 87). This sex/gender system is “multilevel,” Collins explains, because it affects our interactions with social structures, other people, and with our self. Although this sex/gender system comes out of so-called biological sex differences between females and males as well as socially constructed gender differences between the feminine and the masculine, this system “reflects the needs of a given historical moment such that social constructions of sexuality change in tandem with changing social conditions” (Ibid). The ways in which we express our sexuality is therefore not simply a personal choice or preference, but has implications that are tied with present and historical social relations.

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s theorizations on sexuality in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Butler (1989) explains that “[s]exuality is not a choice inasmuch as it is a necessary expression of bodily existence and the necessary *medium* of ‘choice’” (p. 89, italics added). Here Butler is elaborating on the idea that sexuality is not necessarily manifested in

2 There is of course a diversity of participants who take up race play, and some of them self-identify as racist. Scott (2010) also takes up this occurrence, pointing to the possibility that for some SM participants racialized as non-white, race play can be especially titillating if they know their play mate to be ‘genuinely’ racist. Questions emerge whether this particular occurrence can still be subversive or even safe for the racialized participant. Like all SM engagements, trust and communication between the participants is a crucial part of race play and the way to establish mutual pleasure and safety. I suggest that such an encounter can still be phenomenologically relevant since it reveals, even more starkly, the deep and complicated interconnection between race and sexuality--i.e. a mutually satisfying sexual encounter can take place even when the participants are cognisant of a racial hierarchy existing or imposed on the relation.

any particular form, nor is it attached to any specific part of the body, even though sexuality is an expression of the fact that we exist as bodies. Sexuality is the medium through which choosing becomes possible, not a choice itself or something which ‘represents’ “existential choices which are themselves pre- or non-sexual” (Butler 1989, p. 89). Even though Merleau-Ponty writes that “the sexual life is a sector of our life bearing a special relation to the existence of sex” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 159), the ways in which we carry out our sexual lives are not necessarily directly or explicitly linked to sex.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) does not explicate further what he means by “sex,” but we can gather from his explanation and Butler’s interpretation that sex is a “current of life”—that “[l]ife is particularized into separate currents” (p. 159); however, there are no specifically sexual or non-sexual phenomena, for sexuality “has no necessary forms, but presents itself as having-to-be-formed” (Butler 1989, p. 89). Making choices or expressing our bodily existence through sexuality implies intentionality or will, which engage both consciousness and the body, but, as Merleau-Ponty explains, “[w]ill presupposes a field of possibilities among which I choose” (1962, p. 161). Even though the body is “a specifically corporeal agency” the types of choices we make and the ways in which we exercise choice is based the field of possibilities in which we find ourselves. This field of possibilities or horizon is partially shared with other people in our culture, in the sense that we typically engage in the sexual practices and behaviours that we are exposed to or that are available to us. Depending on the types of bodies we are or how our bodies are received in the shared horizon, we will be expected to express our sexual bodily existence differently and we will only have access to certain sexualities. Race and sex difference are both categories of being which circumscribe what sexual practices are authorized and sanctioned as belonging to particular individuals and groups of people.

One crucial connection between race difference and sex difference is that they are both salient in how we carry out our sexual lives in the sense that race is sexualized and sex is racialized; however this connection is carefully disguised in Western societies. Sadomasochistic sexuality, particularly race play, can be one way in which the connection between race and sex are brought to light and reworked. The repertoire of practices which makes up our sexual life, be it SM, “vanilla,” or a combination of the two, is constantly being formed. The fact that we perceive and conceptualize some sexual practices as being ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ is less a result of their being rooted in ‘human nature’—although nature is never completely detached from our bodily existence—rather, the persistence of particular ways of expressing our sexual being is a result of the systematic and ever-renewing relations of inequality.

Being Accountable for Our “Kink”

There is something erotic about unequal relations—so what? Does this mean that we should advocate for them? My answer is no—unequal power relations which are institutionalized and based on imperialistic, patriarchal ideologies of inferiority and superiority are undoubtedly harmful, and it is our task as antiracist feminists to work to uproot them. However, sadomasochistic engagements, whether fantasized or enacted, depict an exaggerated

and excessive version of these widespread patriarchal ideologies and practices, and thus can be useful in our political work since contemporary systemic relations of power work in evermore invisible and stealthy ways. I cannot stress enough that in order for the phenomenology of SM to be politically useful we have to get rid of the easy neoliberal strategies of individualizing and privatizing our desires, and be more alert to the reversibility or the ever-present oscillation between race and sexuality that emerges in SM. This alertness can come from the simple act of speaking deliberately about our own and other people's (e.g. our research participants, if we happen to be researchers) practices and identities, rather than unthinkingly taking up the terms that are there. When we identify ourselves or others as "kinky," are we explicitly calling up race or inviting a discussion about it? No? Then we ought to do precisely that.

It is fascinating that the third set of definitions for *kink* (n.1) offered by the Oxford English Dictionary Online are of three American slang usages for the word: the first is derogatory reference to "A black person," currently obsolete but reported to have been used in the middle of the 19th century; the second meaning is "A criminal"; and the third usage refers to "A sexually abnormal person; one who practices sexual perversions"--this being the most common meaning of *kink* today. We would be naive to think that it's just a coincidence that the term *kink* today has almost completely converted from being a derogatory term for criminals and Black people which calls up curly hair as a sensible (visual) manifestation of racial difference and therefore deviance to its modern usage which refers to sexual perversion or deviance from 'normal' sexuality. The fact that the racial implications of *kink* are seemingly obsolete is a linguistic manifestation of the apparent de-racialization of contemporary sexual practices.³ The de-racialization of sexuality is not only propagated by the "liberal humanist position" discussed by Scott (2010), but it is also evident in the manifestation of sadomasochistic sexuality, particularly among white practitioners, as Bauer's (2008) research reveals. Nevertheless, sexuality, sex difference, and race are inextricably connected.

Sadomasochistic race play can serve to bring to appearance the connection between race and sex because in these encounters it becomes clear that the racist usage of certain terms and practices is precisely what makes them arousing and pleasurable. For example, Scott (2010) explains that the word "nigger" "is *erotic*, and this eroticism has political meaning" (p. 229). To say that this word is erotic implies that there is some sort of desire or passion that underlies its usage, and to say that this eroticism is political means that the term is part of a repertoire of symbolic and concrete practices which work to delineate a person's or group's position relative to the state and to other people, as well as to distribute citizenship rights. Racial slurs which are taken up in certain SM encounters are arousing *because* they are slurs, Scott explains, and they provide "an expression" of a particular "domination/submission dynamic" (2010, p. 225).

Scott (2010) touches upon something quite crucial about the usage of racial slurs: the power and affect of the term does not only lay in its ability to reify racial difference; the

3 Interestingly, the most common term for non-normative sexuality used by people of colour, particularly Black people, is "freak" or "freaky" instead of "kink" or "kinky" (Stewart 2013, p.1).

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term *establishes* a hierarchy which enforces a position of inferiority and submission on the target(s) of the term. In other word, racial slurs, particularly the controversial and problematic ‘n word,’ are laden with and reverberate a relationship of ownership or submission between the speaker and the addressee--a relationship which presupposes and demands that the addressee is to be used by the speaker as she or he sees fit. This relationship of ownership simultaneously denies and affirms the subjectivity of the addressee: on one hand the subject is inferiorized and objectified, but on the other hand, the addressee’s subjection is so valuable and titillating because he or she *is* a human subject just like the speaker--the main difference being the addressee’s presupposed (and/or enforced) submissiveness. Needless to say, the erotic is always present in such a relationship by virtue of the endless possibilities in regards to what we can do to/and with another body.

Another angle for explaining how racialized dynamics of domination and submission become sexualized is that sexuality is one crucial site through which racial difference has historically been and continues to be enforced. In a fictional account that reveals the racist underpinnings of modern pornography, Alice Walker (1981) discusses the “almost always pornographic treatment of black women who, from the moment they entered slavery... were subjected to rape as the ‘logical’ convergence of sex and violence” (in Collins 1992, p. 90). The systemic rape of Black women during American slavery is not simply indicative of white men’s ‘insatiable’ sexual urges; the sexuality of Black women (and men) was specifically targeted because “sexuality and the erotic” are key domains “of exploration, pleasure, and human agency” (Collins 1992, p. 88). Therefore, to channel or stifle the sexual current of another person’s or group’s life is an incredibly effective means through which racial domination is achieved. Although during American slavery intense levels of physical violence as well as blatantly racist legal measures were administered on Black people as methods of control, the *ideological* justifications for such violence are still in play today. Collins (1992) explains that the legacy of the discourse that frames Black women as promiscuous prostitutes who need to and deserve to be raped is still manifested today in the victim-blaming legal and social responses to instances of sexual violence experienced by Black women (p. 101).

The racial significations of popular contemporary terms such as “kink” are practically absent from people’s engagements with the term as a marker of (non-normative) sexuality; while certain other words, such as the ‘n word,’ remain highly charged precisely because of the racialization that they invoke, leaving its erotic affect quite concealed. A race play scene which deploys racial slurs, however, can significantly bring to appearance these disguised affects--if we are attune to them. This being attuned begins with distancing ourselves from neoliberal strategies of individualization and privatization, and acknowledging our inextricability from a network of relations that has power and meaning beyond our personal intentions. Becoming accountable for the language we use and the practices we partake in does not automatically mean suppressing our non-normative desires and practices--quite the opposite, accountability can allow us to enact our desires *more* deliberately, since it can bring to presence the multiple disguised affects of our activities, without taking for granted our imbrication in unequal relations of power in which we are both oppressors and oppressed.

Concluding Thoughts: Garnering the Phenomenological Potential of SM

I have argued that SM can have phenomenological importance because it can make apparent historical and current systems of oppression. That is, when SM is thought about and enacted critically “it cannot occlude the history’s framing presence but instead evokes it--and demands, or reveals, that this history become for the participants sexually and erotically pleasurable” (Scott 2010, p. 217). For those bystanders, onlookers, or third parties who don’t understand how unequal power relations, however excessive and hyperbolic, can be erotically stimulating, they ought to investigate the value in their “responses of shock, offense, and anger or squamishness” (p. 220). Stopping at these reactions without taking them further “shields against uncomfortable experience and the knowledge--the recognitions--that might accrue from the examination of this discomfort” (Ibid). What can these reactions tell us about ourselves and the context in which they arise?

Sadomasochism today is practiced by people who exist in a larger society and who are undoubtedly affected by its racist, sexist, and classist ideologies. We always have to ask who is consuming these images and representations and who is performing them. How are these images taken up by liberal and capitalist enterprises? Performing SM does not automatically put one in a better position to be critical of systemic relations of power, nor do these performances magically ignite in its practitioners a desire to think about their fantasies and act on them politically. SM practices have a significant advantage in comparison to hegemonic organizations of sexuality (i.e. the monogamous heterosexual couple) in that they are often manifested in public settings such as “play parties,” which can be valuable venues for thoughtful discussion and reflection. Undoubtedly, community discussions unfold regularly in SM-centered encounters which means that it is very much possible for powerful, non-oppressive, liberatory energies to be cultivated through play if we become more accountable for and attuned to the ambivalent energy of our sexualities.

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