

SEEING POWER, SEEING COLOUR

A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Colorblindness Within Academic Understandings of BDSM

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BDSM: PLAYING WITH POWER

BDSM: bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism; is the eroticization of power. BDSM plays with power in that it takes otherwise oppressive systems and molds them into unique practices of pleasure.

For example, a Black woman being physically and emotionally dominated by a white man defines racial and patriarchal oppression in our social world, but these practices, when consented to as in BDSM, can evoke great pleasure and empowerment for all players (Cruz, 2016).

The idea of deriving pleasure from oppressive structures can be uncomfortable for those outside the practice of BDSM. It can be uncomfortable because the practice of BDSM does not fit into a Western, very binary, understanding of what is oppressive and what is not; what are appropriate gender, sexual, and racial scripts, and what are not. BDSM can be uncomfortable for outsiders because individuals are socialized to think being restrained, gagged, and whipped (BDSM expressions) *should*, and always will, be oppressive when in reality, BDSM uses these very practices to create pleasure.

BDSM and FEMINIST DISCOURSE

BDSM has been conceptualized differently within feminist thought. Two primary understandings of BDSM revolve around radical feminism and choice feminism.

- Radical feminism disavows BDSM based on the belief that eroticizing domination and subordination (as done in BDSM) further supports male domination and patriarchal oppression (Thompson, 2001).
- Choice feminism acknowledges the social influence of oppressive structural systems (such as patriarchy), but believes women hold the power to express their agency by *choosing* their actions, regardless if such actions seem to support larger structural systems; meaning BDSM is seen as a legitimate practice (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

As we see from feminist discussions surrounding BDSM, there are social power imbalances in our society, such as patriarchy. But we do not only live in a patriarchal society; race, as well as gender, is tied to structural systems of inequality based on an ongoing history of oppression and disadvantage.

So, to understand BDSM, which plays with present and historical systems of power imbalances, we must acknowledge race, as well as gender, as aspects of politicized identities BDSM plays with.

i.e. race cannot be taken out of the picture (Cruz, 2016)

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM and COLORBLIND INTERSECTIONALITY

Postcolonial feminists describe how gender and patriarchy are constructed in distinctly Western understandings of the world. By positioning a Western structure of gender as *the* gender structure, all other experiences of gender are effectively erased or at most seen as inferior (Oyewumi, 1997; Lugones, 2007).

In relation to sexuality, this translates to desire being painted in a distinctly Western expression; Western (white) desire becomes the place holder for *all* desire (i.e. ‘acceptable’ desire).

Colorblind intersectionality is the practice of selectively recognizing intersecting systems of oppression, for example, gender, sexuality, and SES, without articulating whiteness as a social position (Carbado, 2013). Within this practice, intersectionality becomes “colorblind” in that it ignores ‘white’ as a recognizable ‘color’ (race). With this, whiteness blends into the background as the normative identity standard. White is coded as neutral, while all other races require racial caveats. In this discrete way, colorblindness disguises its actions to uphold white racial dominance.

METHODOLOGY

A critical discourse analysis assesses the dynamic relationship between power and language; namely how language can discursively reproduce, or challenge, systems of power.

This research looked at peer reviewed academic journal articles from the database: Academic Search Complete.

A total of 34 articles fit sample criteria (centred on submissive and/or masochistic women in BDSM), and were thematically coded in line with postcolonial, intersectional, and Black feminist thought.

RESULTS

Total number of articles: **34**

- **30** empirical; **4** conceptual

From the **30** empirical articles:

- Number of articles that included racial demographics of their participants: **11**
- Number of articles that included demographics, but not racial demographics: **16**
- Number of articles that discussed race: **2**

DISCUSSION

A number of themes emerged from this research; themes that can all be tied back to colorblindness:

A DEMOGRAPHIC CHECKBOX: THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION

En masse, there was no *discussion* of race in this sample. If race was included, it was listed with the participants’ demographics or cast to a table; and not even all studies did that.

If one were to perform a keyword search for ‘whiteness’ in this sample, it would only appear in five of the 34 articles. But if one were to keyword search for white, it would appear in 18 articles. White is used to state a demographic. Whiteness is used to discuss race and its social meaning.

This creates a great illusion, a sleight of hand in which it *appears* race is included in research (it has been stated), when in reality we have gotten away with neglecting to speak of race in any meaningful way at all.

This is colorblindness in action. As Lipsitz (2019) explains, “Colorblindness pretends that racial recognition rather than racist rule is the problem to be solved” (p. 24).

CREATING FOR THE VOYEUR: THE ACADEMY

The research I looked at was homogeneous: overwhelmingly white (while not seeing its own whiteness). Perhaps it is because ‘we’ are, consciously or unconsciously, creating for the voyeur: the dominant (white) social narrative of our academic institution.

Even in BDSM scholarship, an area where to be ‘non conventional’ is ‘conventional,’ scholarship still has not broken from old patterns. As academics - those wielding the power of language and research - ‘we’ may be part of the problem(s) we are outlining.

For example, in not seeing one’s whiteness and how it informs research regarding BDSM, ‘we’ play into a system of covert white racial dominance. Recognizing this, that ‘we’ are - or are at least part of - the problem, is uncomfortable. But it should be uncomfortable, and this does not mean it is to be avoided. Drawing from a practice of BDSM, ‘we’ as academics must learn to find our discomfort, question it, sit in it, and see what possibilities it unlocks.

In this sample, from the 34 articles, only two articles spoke of the positionality of their researchers and how their racial background influenced their work (both individually and structurally). Positionality is not required, or even a common practice to include in social science research, but what does this practice of ‘leaving the researcher out’ ultimately support? In terms of race and this sample, this only supports the assumption of whiteness

WHITE STUDYING WHITE, PRESENTED AS HUMANS STUDYING HUMANS

Though all but a few of the articles with human participants had samples with 80% or more of participants being white, research findings were generalized to *all* women – when in reality researchers more aptly meant mostly *white* women.

One may argue these articles did not discuss race because they *could not* discuss race; their samples did not contain adequate information from racialized participants. This is the very point I am making: the colorblindness of academia, and our greater world. White is not seen as a race, so race is not discussed because it is not seen as relevant in this space. But white is a color - and one that comes with immense social implications: privilege. And these studies, with their primarily white samples, had the opportunity to discuss just that.

White studying white, but presented as humans studying humans. This turns scholarship into a weapon which harms through naturalizing whiteness as humanness, and thus non-whiteness as *non* humanness.

Whiteness is not largely discussed, even when participants all hold this identity, because it is not seen as a ‘race.’ The logic holds that whiteness is the baseline, the root number which can no longer be divided - it is seen as the ‘pure’ form of humanity (and in relation to sexuality: desire), because the ‘we’ in the West who forcefully ‘decided’ this were just that: white. It is from here ‘we’ compare that which is not white - blackness and brownness. These are the ‘races.’ So even when research includes non white bodies, race, if it is included, is simply stated as the marker of difference; a way to distinguish the ‘other.’ It is to signify these people are not white, they defer from the category of ‘us’ - which is a category ‘we’ have determined.

CONCLUSION

Even in a practice that makes power structures explicit (BDSM), ‘we’ still cannot see one of the largest power structures at play: white dominance enacted through the assumption of white (i.e. non/lesser politicized) bodies. In reading the scholarship that made up this sample, colorblindness was the common thread that tied all, save for a few, of these works together.

Colorblindness: the unacknowledged kinship. A kinship we as scholars have the power to bring to light and question.

POSITIONALITY

As a white scholar, when I first approached the topic of BDSM, race and racial politics did not occur to me. Race did not occur to me because it did not *have* to occur to me. As someone who is white in North America, my privilege affords me this luxury. I do not have to think of race because *my* race is not seen as *a* race. Which is the very reason we should be taking a closer look at how colorblindness masks whiteness.

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