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**Reclaiming “Crazy:”
An Interview on Mental Health, Kink, and Lesbianism**

Lady Gya interviewing Rita Liavali Coquet

I met Rita Liavali Coquet at a workshop on domination she was giving in Berlin to women, lesbians, trans, and intersex. She was carrying a sjambok that surpassed her in height, and bemoaned not being able to explore it to its full potential in crowded play spaces because of its size. Instead, she used it to point at participants and fix sticky notes on the higher parts of the wall. What struck me about Rita, at first glance, was her dry, dark humor; she could bring the workshop participants to laughing tears in deadpan deliveries. Our subsequent correspondence proved her to be as brutally honest as she was sarcastic, never shying away from those dark and difficult places no matter how awkward or uncomfortable they may be. She articulated her politics with no adornments, jargon, or squeamishness, unflinching in her consideration, even when I drowned in anxious bouts punctuated by self-pity. From Rita I learned the power of long negotiations, the intimacy in being vulnerable, in laying oneself bare – a transnational encounter.

I expressed my desire to interview her and potentially publish our conversation in *Kohl*. "Why?" she asked, "just because I know something doesn't mean I am more worthy of anything, especially of being the one that takes that space away." So we discussed what an orthodox view of authenticity could not possibly achieve in transnational spaces, especially when authenticity is distinct from appropriation. Despite her initial reluctance, she consented to fill a gap when it comes to the conversation around mental health and its interlinkages with non-normative sexual practices, even if her experiences were rooted in different contexts. So on a warm afternoon, huddled on the couch of her Berlin flat, I squeaked through my questions, slightly choking over my cup of tea, the room filled with the terseness of her laughter.

Disclaimer: all the kinky practices discussed in this interview are consensual and carried out in accordance with previous negotiations between all the involved parties, who are aware of the risks and understand their share of responsibility in the process.

“I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.”
– Edgar Allan Poe, letter to George W. Eveleth, 1848.

Lady Gya: To contextualize the discussion, maybe you could talk about yourself a bit and how you prefer to be introduced.

Rita Liavali Coquet: I usually introduce myself as a crazy lady, because I like to take that name for myself before someone else gives it to me. And also because many in the scene¹ express their fear of talking about their mental health, as others can be quite prejudiced. People would tell each other that so and so has panic attacks or anxiety or depression, as if it was some horrifying truth about someone that would indicate they are not safe. And I find that quite disturbing. So, at the beginning of all my workshops, I start straight away with coming out about having PTSD, depression, and panic attacks, and stressing that it does not make me unsafe. I am crazy, and I can deal with my crazy, which is why I go to psychotherapy, why I take medication when I have to. I know what works for me and I can take care of myself; it is not your fucking job to take care of my mental health. It is not anyone’s fucking job to do that for me. I do it for myself.

LG: You know when I went to your workshop, I was initially confused when you referred to yourself as “crazy,” because, just like the word “queer” years before, it has been understood as stigmatizing in feminist circles. So it took me a while to figure out that it was a kind of self-definition, of reclaiming the word.

RLC: It is an act of reclaiming. I sometimes give workshops on how to play² when you have to contend with mental health problems as a top. I don’t know how you do it as a bottom because I don’t switch. I discuss the tricks that I use to deal with anxiety and panic attacks during play, and many have found them really helpful to return to play if they have been away or scared. And every time I give different workshops, whether on domination or caning or fear play, a third of the people will find me discreetly afterwards to tell me they also have mental health problems but haven’t told anyone. They all come to tell me that for some reason. It is really funny, why can’t we tell each other? Because of how others react to mental health and subsequently behave. Which I find really amazing. I mean, in this day and age, how are you going to stay away from people with depression? Seriously. Are you going to have no friends? I mean, have you seen the year we are having? This is not a time when you want to stick with people who are happy. Because then, you are just left with the right-wing racist assholes. That’s it!

LG: Do you see a binary between happiness and experiencing mental health issues?

RLC: No, but if you are completely oblivious to what is happening around you, or to life in general, then yes, you are happy, and privileged. I mean, happiness happens in instances. It is not an immutable state. “Happy” as a constant doesn’t exist. If you have that, then you should be worried.

¹ “The scene” here refers to the circles of queer women, lesbians, trans, and intersex who engage in BDSM.

² In a BDSM context, play indicates the kinky activities people choose to engage in.

LG: So the promise of constant happiness as deceitful, it does bring me back to mental health in some way. To be happy or content with how things work is being asked to be "sane" in a way that is standardized, to be sane for the system, in a way that would not challenge the status quo. So how can we deconstruct happiness?

RLC: I don't know what happiness looks like for others. Where I am concerned, I have PTSD and various mental health issues because of PTSD, like depression occasionally, and having to deal with panic and anxiety in my daily life, which affects my health in a chronic way. So there is all sorts of crap going on, I am exhausted half the time and feeling like I am just surviving. Then I get to a point where I feel I am actually living, and not just surviving. And I feel happy. It is being able to accept what is instead of worrying about what isn't. Being able to be at the present state, in the present. You have panic attacks and you try to pinch yourself to force your body into recognizing that what is potentially happening is what you can feel, on the surface of your body, through your own pinches, but not what is happening inside of you, which will be tachycardia. Then you'll be feeling out of breath. Then you'll get chills running up and down your spine. Your skin gets hot and tingly. You start sweating. You feel lightheaded. You feel like you are going to faint. Sometimes you feel like you are going to have a heart attack. You feel like you are going to die. Your system is flooded with adrenaline. That is a panic attack. A disconnect. My body tricking me into believing that I am in physical danger. When you are able to connect with the present, like pinching yourself, you realize that it is this pinching that I feel, and it is my feet on this floor, in this room, or it is this table in front of me that is this shape and this color, and you can break the cycle and start coming down. Being able to be in the present and not experiencing panic attacks, fear of future death, or reliving the past through flashbacks is a state of happiness to me.

LG: I don't like the combination of "mental health" with "issues;" it sounds as if there is an ideal state of non-issue, just as if there is an ideal state of continuous happiness. And in that sense, there is a lot of discussion about linking mental health with disability.

RLC: I do think that everybody is crazy. There is no such thing as a concept of sanity that some people have and others don't. People who are managing and coping with different kinds of mental health issues are often more able to deal with all sorts of things that come our way than people who have never had to, simply because they have never had to; that is the point. As for disability, I honestly don't care what people call it. If someone was to offer me to go back in time and not have a traumatic experience that leads to PTSD, I would refuse. I wouldn't push a button and wish myself away. The person that I am today, how things are for me, it might seem difficult, and it is, but at the same time it isn't. So, if someone wants to call that disability, fine. I don't know. I am sure there are various people with different abilities or disabilities who would not wish themselves away. So maybe it isn't disability, maybe it is just different people. Different abilities.

LG: And yet, there is still a lot of stigma around mental health, at least in Lebanon.

RLC: And Portugal has those too, yes.

LG: So in relation to the scene, people avoid playing with people who experience mental health issues, deeming them unable to consent. And here in Berlin, and I am saying this as a "sex tourist," I did feel that

this discourse was being challenged. But you talked about unpleasant experiences within the scene earlier, so is the stigma still there, even if not as overt?

RLC: Yes, definitely yes. That's it, I don't know what else to tell you, there is nothing else to say. It is quite significant that people would come to tell *me* about their mental health instead of actually telling their play partners.

LG: It is a double standard. If we look at societal views of people who have mental health issues or kinky people, both groups are perceived as "diseased," "deviant" bodies, and yet, there is stigma in the scene still.

RLC: Well, you get any group of people and they will find someone to hate. Don't look at me like that, it's the truth! This isn't a new thing that I am telling you. You get any group of people who have something in common and they will find someone else to exclude. It is not the same as women who come together in order to make spaces for themselves away from cis men. Reverse exclusion doesn't exist. I am talking about something else. When the feminist movement started, they excluded lesbians because they didn't want to be perceived as "sexual deviants." Later, lesbians became better because you are not "fraternizing" with the enemy. Then they excluded black women. Then there were lesbians and feminists who were against sex work, or porn, or kink because it is "recreating violence." You get any group of people, and you get exclusions. That is the nature of groups. They are disgusting.

LG: You look very evil as you say this.

RLC: And that is my trademark anyway, to joke that people are disgusting.

LG: How would you say that PTSD changes the way you play? To go back to your workshop, I remember you mentioned how upon informing someone that you cannot play on a particular day, they would go like "but I was looking forward to it!" as if you weren't.

RLC: I have worked out that one of the things that gives me anxiety is my expectations of myself, which can lead to panic when it becomes very stressful. So, self-expectations, as well as imagining what other people are expecting of me and that I am going to disappoint them, become a vicious cycle that makes me even more unwell. And if I realize that I am stuck in this cycle – it is not like I can work out what is happening all the time, then I deal with it accordingly. For instance I'll be looking forward to playing with someone. And then I'll be scared, I'll notice that I am scared of not being well and able to play. And that stresses me because I start worrying about how that person is going to react, about disappointing myself or disappointing them. And certainly, you would think that anyone would say, "of course, if you are not able you just tell your partner." But the funny thing is, people don't do that. Not for mental health. I don't play with people who don't accept my beginning negotiations, which are, I have PTSD, I have anxiety, I have all sorts of weird stuff that work very badly in my body, and so until the last minute, I never know if I am going to be able to play. And the crazy thing is, I have only cancelled play once or twice for problems that had nothing to do with mental health; I had a cold and a fever, both times. When some people realize that "oh, because of your PTSD and being a crazy person, you might not be okay to play one day," they get really taken aback. If that takes you aback, then just keep it and don't play with me. Anyone else is

liable, at any point in time, to miss a bus, not find the train they are supposed to be on, break a leg, get a cold, a stomach flu, food poisoning. Anyone is liable to get any of these a few hours before a play date, and any of those reasons would mean that your play is canceled. And you don't worry that "normal" life could fall on someone else's head and that they might have to cancel plans with you. You don't get upset or annoyed or scared, saying "oh my god, you are liable to have food poisoning, that's terrible! I am not sure I want to play with you when you eat food; that means you could unknowingly have food poisoning and not be able to play." No one says that! And yet, when it comes to mental health, they are like "oh, that's creepy, you could be crazy that day and not be able to play?" Yes! It is called being alive! And if that is not okay with you, then play with someone else. I am not interested, and I can't play with you, because you are crazier than I am. Seriously! Other people walk around thinking they are always going to be fine – of course, they are full of health. And people like me sometimes walk around knowing we don't. So we make plans with that in mind, which other people find weird only because they are not aware that they are the crazy ones. They think they can control how things are going to work out. And I know they can't, and that freaks them out. I only play with people who are completely "good crazy" people, and they immediately reply with, "of course, it's not a problem, don't worry." So I am relaxed because I know I can cancel until the last minute should I not be okay, and they are not going to be annoyed or upset or disappointed. It is just life, we can play another time; there is time. And that immediately takes away the stress, which is how I end up being able to play when I have intended to. On the other hand, I don't want to play with people who, instead of worrying about me being unwell, worry about what they are not getting from me.

LG: I have been meaning to ask you a question for quite a while, so now might be the time to do it.

RLC: A weird question, great!

LG: It's not weird.

RLC: Oh, that's a pity. You are the weird one then?

LG: We'll get to that later. I have been wondering, you define yourself as a lesbian, you don't use queer at all.

RLC: You know how old I am, right?

LG: Yes, and you also tend to think that people are younger than they actually are.

RLC: I think it is lovely to play with younger people who define as queer, and I appreciate them for that, but that doesn't mean I am going to erase what brought me to who I am today just so that it sounds better to your ears. Lesbian is still not an offensive word, so I definitely still label myself only as lesbian, never as queer. It has to do with how I grew up, where I grew up, and what the word lesbian came to mean to me. We didn't have the word queer back then. You can have a relationship with a word; beyond the label, it becomes a safe haven, a community, a way of understanding the world a bit better, of not being alone. And queer doesn't mean anything to me, in that way. It is not mine, and I am not going to take it on just because others around me do. Even in the playground as a kid in primary school, all the girls wanted to

play with each other and giggle about the boys. As a 7-year-old already, I was embarrassed to talk to the girls because they were pretty, and spent all my time running around with the boys instead. The word lesbian came to my vocabulary when I was about 7 or 8. We heard the word “homosexual” for the first time on TV; it was also the first time that “homosexual” was used on Portuguese TV. The newscaster was reporting on the AIDS epidemic in the U.S., calling it the “gay cancer.” So my sister and I asked about it at dinner, and my parents told us that “homosexual” was not a bad thing and there was no such thing as a “gay cancer” – we already knew the word cancer, our grandfather had it. They explained that homosexual was when a man likes another man and has special men friends, and a lesbian was when a woman likes another woman and has special women friends. At the time I said already, “oh, I must be a lesbian then, because I like girls better.” It made sense to me. Later when I worked out that “special friends” weren’t the people that I liked playing dolls with, it became different.

LG: But you still like playing dolls.³

RLC: Yes! I still like playing dolls. It is just a question of time. The word is just a question of time. People who are coming out now have the word queer as a big umbrella; it is part of their feeling of a community. Lesbian is my feeling of a community.

LG: I wouldn’t say that I use queer as an umbrella term. My introduction to feminist activism was through queer feminist activism, and it had to do with politics of gender, fluidity, but also the political intersections, how you position yourself.

RLC: Not an umbrella term in that sense, but in the sense of encompassing a lot more than just sexuality. But for me, lesbian *is* that word that takes on a lot more than just sexuality. It also has to do with my position and worldview; it is like you see the world as forever putting in your face certain images of heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality. That, to me, feels like home. Lesbian. Not queer.

LG: And how do you see the intersections of lesbian and kinky?

RLC: I don’t understand the question.

LG: You said that lesbian is a worldview for you, but there are also other labels that you give yourself, like kinky, crazy, etc. Do you feel that they all fit under lesbian for you?

RLC: No. I am a crazy kinky lesbian.

LG: Anything else?

RLC: Dominant, crazy, lesbian, bitch. No, I think that’s it.

LG: That is a lot.

³ In reference to dollification as a type of kinky play.

RLC: I would say dominant more than kinky. I tend to think of myself as dominant instead of kinky.

LG: So to get to the weird stuff, what do you like as a dominant?

RLC: What do I like?

LG: As a dominant.

RLC: Whatever people don't like is usually my favorite thing. I like to find the things that are really difficult for the person I am playing with. I like to get to know them. I like to play with people who are attracted to what they don't like or particularly enjoy, strange things, but push themselves in order to feed their feeling of submission. But they enjoy it because it is part of them going deeply into their own submission, and disappearing into what I decide and want. And I like that.

LG: It is different levels of enjoyment.

RLC: Yes. Very much so. In general terms, that is mostly what I like. But I also enjoy just having fun with some pain play where I can hurt someone and have a laugh, it is also great fun. I like too many things. Oh, and I am also a slut where labels are concerned.

LG: How so?

RLC: I am a dominant slut, in the sense that if someone enjoys something, and I enjoy playing with that person, I can see the enjoyment of what they like, and that will call to me. I never had a big interest in gags for instance, then I started playing with someone who loves gags. And their mere reaction to them really turned gags into a fetish for me, so it called to me to try different ones, and different things.

LG: That is an unconventional explanation of slut.

RLC: Oh yes, did you expect the "I sleep around a lot?"

LG: I mean, that would be the normative way.

RLC: I know, but I use slut mostly because I have a very wide variety of tastes.

LG: I would want to go further into different types of play if you are fine with that, because I do feel that even in the kink scene, you are part of the people who do not play in a conventional way.

RLC: Well, it depends on what people think is conventional.

LG: Exactly, we had that discussion; I was talking about edge play and you said something about...

RLC: What is edge play?⁴

LG: Yes.

RLC: I mean, that is like saying that you like to play with boundaries. Boundaries aren't set in stone for every single person in the same way. Edge play to some people is what others enjoy doing every day. If we take the example of knife play, for some, even seeing a knife during a play scene is edgy because it is a trigger for them, which would already take the scene into fear play. Of course I am not talking about triggers of the bad kind here, in which case there would be no knives at all, but about those who enjoy playing around "good" triggers with people they trust. Then, there are others who are like, "I can't come if there isn't a knife in the room." It is very arbitrary to decide what edge play is for everyone. So, I would like to know which edge play God decided what edge play is and isn't. Because I didn't go to a funeral, and I didn't vote. And if I didn't go to a funeral and if I didn't get to vote, there is no edge play decision. Edge play is completely personal; each person has their own edges. That is just silly; deciding that one thing is edge play means that if it is edge play *for you*, then it must be for everybody. Oh, knives are edge play! What the fuck does that mean? If that is how the world works, then I am telling you right now, everybody is a lesbian. And those who aren't are just disgusting and playing with things that are very dangerous, and they shouldn't be doing that. Heterosexual sex is dangerous and could get you killed. Edgy. Only what I do is normal. Everybody is a lesbian now, that's it, we're done. It's ridiculous! No one can decide what is edgy, normal, or "safe" on behalf of others.

LG: Tell me more about headfucking.

RLC: Headfucking.

LG: Yes, give me all your secrets.

RLC: I don't know how to give you my secrets because it is very specific to each person. Headfucking is really fun, as some people like to just let themselves go into the lies that someone else weaves in a play, and believe they are in real danger, or that something is real. Of course, they have to allow that to happen, too. They have to let go of the pragmatic, the rational, to allow for the fantasy to take over. So it works with two people: one who allows the fantasy to happen, and one who guides it basically. And it is not something you can do with everyone. You have to really get to know the person you are playing with, know what would work, what would not, what the no-goes are. When you hear mindfucks, people think of the regular tricks, like convincing someone that there is a knife on their body, when you are basically touching them with a toothpick, or with the edge of a credit card, making them believe that you are cutting them.

LG: That is a physical headfuck.

⁴ Edge play has traditionally been defined as a set of kinky practices considered "dangerous," such as knife play, blood play, and breath play. However, many feminists challenge the notions of "safe" vs. "risky" through the understanding that no practice is safe, shifting the focus to consent, knowledge, and shared responsibility instead.

RLC: Yes, it is physical, and it is amusing because it does make something more dangerous than it actually is. Getting off on thinking you might have a knife on your genitals or the back of your neck or your face. That feeling of danger is all for the purpose of sexual stimulation. And then you have headfucks that have more to do with convincing people of something that didn't happen or that isn't happening, or that they are wrong about something. That is where it gets more complicated; we are talking gaslighting headfuck style here. And every person has different buttons you can press if they are interested in that kind of play. I remember playing with someone who liked to be pushed into a feeling of desperation, believing they fucked up and did something wrong, then being absolved and forgiven for it. So I convinced them that they had broken or crossed my limits, done wrong by me, the dominant, in the play, and they were extremely upset about it. It was great. Of course, even when someone is allowing this to happen, they know that everything is going to be okay, that I'll put them back together. I always check in and ask for colors⁵ throughout to make sure that they are giving me the green light, that they are still feeling confident and trusting of me.

LG: And you negotiate for a really long time.

RLC: We do negotiate for a very long time. And I get a sense of the person and what they are into, but they also know what they are coming for, to maybe get confused and lost in a play, but then in the end everything will be okay and back together. And that is why they want to play with that, and still trust me throughout. I like doing that.

LG: Would you like to talk a bit more about non-monogamy?

RLC: What about it? It is not monogamy, here you go! It's done.

LG: I mean you obviously play with different people, so how do you manage that?

RLC: I manage it the way I can, which is, I am very happy to play with various people whose company I enjoy, but I am not able to have more than one romantic sexual relationship at the same time. And I say romantic and sexual because it is not about being in love. It is not a question of value either; it has more to do with maintaining a level of intensity. If I try to have that kind of connection with more than one person, it just wipes me out. I don't have the health or the mental capacity for that. So, as far as I understand it, I have a primary relationship. I joined a poly group on Facebook that described themselves as encompassing different relationships that are not heteronormative. I put a caveat upon joining, explaining that I think of myself as non-monogamous, not polyamorous. But then this heterosexual guy – and it is always some fucking guy, isn't it – started explaining to me that any kind of hierarchal relationship system is not ethical, treats people as “unworthy” of a relationship, and gives a bad name to polyamory. And I thought, this is hilarious. I now have a heterosexual dipshit telling a crazy kinky lesbian how she can or cannot be in a relationship. That is brilliant because, you know, I don't have enough of that anywhere else. I am glad I came to this special group just so *you* could tell me how to do polyamory.

⁵ The colors system is a system of safewording adopted by many in the scene. Green would mean all is well, yellow, something is off, we need to talk, and red, the play needs to stop immediately. People can safeword at any time, and check-ins are an additional layer of ensuring consent is still given.

Thank God you are here, you fucking white man. I mean, how does it affect any kind of ethics when I know what I can and cannot do, when I know my capacity when it comes to relationships? This is how I can manage and what I can manage. I don't have the fucking health to be with two different women like you are. If I told two people I could be with them at the same time, I would be lying to them. And that would be unethical.

LG: It is important for us, as feminists, to recognize the different kinds of intimacies we experience with different people, and respect the set boundaries in our interactions.

RLC: And be attentive to what they need. I like having one on one time with people to catch up, be in touch. And it is already difficult as it is when I am sick so often and I don't have the energy. So, on top of that, I don't want a partner who doesn't understand what I can or cannot manage, or whom I cannot trust. Historically speaking, women have been unable to trust their partners. They were treated as trade, or land, or dowry, and were afforded no respect in their relationships. So to continue treating your partners like exchangeable pieces of meat is seriously unfeminist. Politically speaking, it is also quite indefensible. I really think that the personal is political, so you can't go around sprouting politics of ethical behavior to other human beings when you are unable to afford that to your own partners. I know that I am quite black and white on some things, but as kinky feminists, we base everything on negotiations, trust, and consent, and I wouldn't want it otherwise in my personal relationships.