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Queering BDSM, Losing the Labels: A Circular Methodology

Lady Gya

- 1- *Make me stand in the center of the room and order me to spread my legs.*
- 2- *Blindfold me and cuff my hands behind my back with the leather handcuffs.*
- 3- *Describe what you are about to do to me and tell me I can shout as much as I want but I am not allowed to move.*
- 4- *Call me a slut and slap my face every time I moan.*
- 5- *Flog me on the boobs, ass, and thighs. Aim for my pussy a couple of times.*
- 6- *Touch my pussy and tell me how dirty and wet I am.*
- 7- *Tell me I need permission to come.*
- 8- *Touch me until I'm about to come, then stop.*
- 9- *Repeat 5 and 8 three times.*
- 10- *Place six clothespins on each of my boobs and one on each nipple. Take the time to brush your fingers against them.*
- 11- *With a riding crop, aim at every clothespin until they all fall off.*
- 12- *Lick my pussy and finger me simultaneously on the bed until I beg you to let me come.*
- 13- *Make me come in your mouth.*

Safe word is "Hogwarts" in case you need it.

The clothespins squirmed, resisted, then gave in and cascaded on the floor, one after the other. A particularly vicious one snapped and hammered its iron spring into the flesh of my boob. Suddenly, my hands were free; I could see again, and the dim candlelight was blinding. I looked at the deep bloody cut on my chest. "Why did you stop?" I asked. My partner's face was in the shadow, but I could sense that the gaping wound on my breast was flirting with a hard limit.

"Hogwarts."

It spread in the air like electricity. We cleaned the gash together and kept the pieces of shattered wood.

I loved pain. Or better said, I loved pain when it was consensual. It propelled me into a blissful state of mind where pleasure tore into lightless lightness. I never recoiled from painful sensations; for a long time, they had been the center of my day-to-day. I had dreaded them before I could tame them. I had played them, with them, around them, shutting them off or letting them gush into my body in tides of despair. Finally, pain that was neither violence nor abuse. Pain that I could control and stop at will. Pain that pleased rather than harmed. I was free to reclaim it or let it go. It was political.

The first time I watched porn, it was on slothful dial-up internet connection. By "watch," I mean loading movie previews second by second and scrolling through endless galleries of pictures. There was something indescribably disturbing about heterosexual pornography designed for a heteronormative male audience. I found gangbangs especially unsettling. I was unsure whether my discomfort was due to the men's postures and grunts or to the facial expression of the (only) woman in the scene. Upon exploring categories on the sites' menus, in alphabetical order, I was even more appalled by tags such as "Arab" and "Asian," or even

“cumshots” and “deepthroat.” Then I found it, a capital “S” followed by a capital “M,” the two letters separated by an ampersand. I had no idea what it meant, but when the first pixelated clip loaded on my screen, I was enthralled. Picture after picture of bondage, humiliation, caning, flogging, whipping, wax play, and nipple torture. At thirteen, BDSM was my first love, and I was smitten before I could even begin to articulate my attraction to women.

I was introduced to a queer women community space in the summer of my twentieth birthday. I showed up, nervous, repressing the urge to chew on my perfectly manicured nails and clutching a feathery handbag under my arm. With a quick glance, I checked my attire. I had decked myself out in what I thought was attractive clothing: a turquoise blouse with an embedded necklace of opaque beads complemented with high heels sandals. Putting aside the countless sniggers and jokes on whether I knew what the space was about, “femme” was the first word I learned I was. With it came the tedious expectation that I should always be wooed, like a good hetero-passing queer woman, and let the “butcher” lesbians do the job. But I dated promiscuously and abundantly, and short-lived adventures earned me a reputation and months of slut-shaming. Somehow, because of my assigned gender identity, I was not considered “queer” enough to break the normative taboos of the seduction game. I was desperate to fit in, so I learned to bottom as a survival mechanism, because femme and bottom seemed to go hand in hand. And I was terrible at it.

As a bottom-performing, passive-fucking, femme-looking, hetero-passing queer woman, I did not know how to negotiate my boundaries. I had sex that I regretted, sex that felt bad, sex that was bad, sex that felt like rape because I stayed silent when I wanted to say no – I rectify, sex that was rape. There is nothing wrong or violent about being a bottom-performing, passive-fucking, femme-looking, hetero-passing queer woman, all together or separately. But the very process of being forced into an expression and performance that were based on my physical appearance alone was violence. Internalizing this process and reproducing myself as a bottom-performing, passive-fucking, femme-looking, hetero-passing queer woman was self-inflicted violence. Being coerced into presenting myself in normative female clothing and adornments was violence. The bullying, silencing, and slut-shaming coming from a queer women “safe” space was violence that damaged me beyond any other. And engaging in sex that I neither enjoyed nor wanted was simply self-harm.

Self-harm was not the DIY tools and home goods that I used as sex toys in my teenage years. Self-harm was not the clothespins and paraffin candles I stole from the laundry bucket and the electricity-cut-emergency-kit drawer respectively. It was not me locking myself up in the bathroom for as long as I dared to, spread-eagled on the bathroom rug, burning candle in one hand and clothespins biting on my flesh. Self-harm was not the orgasm-inducing bruises I left on my body and nipples that I would feel for days under my clothes.

The most tired argument I have heard from many queer feminists about BDSM is that it maintains the status quo of patriarchal violence perpetuated on women’s bodies. This recurrent soliloquy is heavy with judgement and riddled with double standards. First, it is complicit with the many ways some queers perform acts of invisible violence by bullying, silencing, and categorizing other queers, putting them in normative boxes of femme/butch, bottom/top, or “real” vs. “not so real” queer. Second, it polices consensual desire and sex acts the same way hetero and homonormative systems do. And most importantly, most hideously, it refuses to go

beyond the mainstream assumption that compulsively equates pain with violence, and violence with oppression.

Violence is what we experience as violent. We are assailed with images and stories of other brown bodies interrogated, confined, tortured, raped, displaced, mutilated, killed, buried in mass graves. Our collective memory is infused with traumatic narratives of war-torn geographies, the not-so-distant whizz of missiles, the systemic commodification and forced submission of female-looking bodies. So what does it mean for brown queers to engage in BDSM? What does it mean to unlearn the pain-violence-oppression conundrum without glorification or bashing?

Reminiscing about my I-want-to-fit-in days, I can still picture the countless times I lied down, head resting on a pillow, looking for cracks in the ceiling while a woman was pathetically puffing and panting around my dry pussy, only managing to give me a sore clit. I would repress a sigh and my guilt. This was homonormativity: queers telling other queers that we cannot love or be loved outside of the politics of respectability, so we are to love and be loved respectably, and we are supposed to enjoy it in the process, even if that starts with coercing us into certain forms of sexual expression. When I was finally able to surpass my “passive bottom” label, I became a hardened masochist. In the context of negotiated, consensual BDSM – or simply, BDSM – , my pain was free-floating pleasure and release. I stopped differentiating between a finger, a dildo, a whip, or a clamp except in terms of sensation and intensity. I was choked, spat on, bitten, spanked, bruised, peed on, disciplined, and not once did I feel violated. Not once were my boundaries stepped on, and I finally learned to talk about the sex I wanted to have, first via writing down my fantasies, and eventually in brutally honest conversations, no matter how awkward. Not once did my pussy remain piteously dry.

I had a longstanding joke with a friend/lover of mine about “disorganized BDSM.” I had coined the term to describe those sporadic slaps, spanks, and bites that could be pleasurable on the spur of the moment but that do not lead to any actual build-up. (One such slap unwittingly landed on my temple and left me temporarily dizzy, blind, and deaf in one ear.) After years of indecisiveness, my friend/lover finally decided to experiment with BDSM. I gave her her first real spanking. I was expecting a light spanking session; at best, we could figure out whether she wanted to push her boundaries a bit further. At worst, I thought, we could joke about her failed BDSM attempt. When I sought her consent to carry on midway through the spanking, she asked: “can you hit me harder?” The palm of my hand was already almost blistering, but I complied. She came the moment I touched her. I had never spanked anyone that hard. “The build-up,” she said, “it’s all in the build-up,” channeled through the palm of my hand.

I loved pain. I still do, sometimes. But the build-up is an intellectual process. It is political. Another newbie with whom I had a tumultuous affair at the time asked me to initiate her to kinky sex. My fingers explored her body, scratching her skin, squeezing and pulling her nipples increasingly hard. I could feel her breath deepening under her blindfold. The build-up was inside me, flowing from my guts, to the tips of my fingers, to her body. The power she willingly relinquished elated me. A month later, I was flogging her boobs while fucking her hard, and her cries drowned in bursts of intense pleasure. She described her orgasm as “pain orgasm.” The sadist in me reared its head.

Sadist fantasies with a hint of dominance dawned on me, gripping, obsessive, destabilizing. They chased me and hovered over my most mundane activities. I tried to dismiss the imminent identity crisis that was brewing in the back of my mind because I thought I had eradicated “identity” and “crisis” from any of my frameworks and articulations of self. I reveled in my newfound misery until she seduced me quietly, awkwardly, her eyelids heavy, and I seduced her with intent stares and almost unintentional touches. We did indulge in mutual physical pain, but lustful despair thrust into every parcel of skin grinding against skin, and it hurt. She opened up with shy abandon, and it did not matter what or who I was at that moment. Our bodies touched and liquefied all labels and roles, and I breathed with her breath, my heart pounding like torrential rain. Her pleasure was my pleasure, and her whispers died on my lips, breathing life into my lungs. I came full circle. That night she was pleasure and pain and queer resistance that reverberated like soundwaves in my body for weeks.

Hogwarts.

It spread in the air like electricity. I gathered shattered pieces of me and kept them close.

I let her go. It was political.