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**“Rope makes me fuzzy inside:”
Exploring the Sexual Freedom of African Queer Women and Gender
Non-Conforming Persons Through Bondage and Kink**

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Looking at the sexual landscape from within the African continent, you see it characterised by issues such as Female Genital Mutilation, HIV/AIDS, and child marriage. However, this facet is beginning to change, as pleasure and bodily autonomy and integrity are increasingly centralised, not only as topics of discussion, but as means by which we unpack sex. That re-centering of sex has become evident through the public platforms and individuals that deal with issues around women and their sexual agency. Platforms, such as *Adventures From the Bedrooms of African Women*¹ and *The Spread Podcast*,² instinctively and continuously centralise pleasure as a principle, whilst various other digital platforms seek to unpack notions of great sex and ownership of one's body. Far from being limited to the online space, art and activism got in on the game, as witnessed in works such as *Pussy Print*, produced by Lady Skollie, a feminist artist and activist from Cape Town, South Africa, and the Safe Sex and Pleasure (#PleaseHer) workshops by *HOLAAfrica!*.³ Both of these examples tackle an array of notions, such as what gets people off and what it means to control your body.

One other space where ideas of pleasure, sexual agency, and bodily autonomy are being unpacked is within that of kink, and some of the premier pioneers of this on the continent are queer black women. BDSM, which is a subset of kink, stands for Bondage, Discipline/Dominance, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism. Within this particular realm of sexual practices, there are a lot of myths, a lot of misunderstandings, and a lot of ideas, whips, chains, and pain. What needs to be noted about these spaces created by these women is that they are often feminist and queer friendly. These are spaces in which black queer women are carving out for themselves outside of more "conventional" kink spaces, which are often occupied by white heterosexual people, in particular heterosexual men. Within these spaces, black kinksters often feel out of place and uncomfortable, negatively fetishized (for example wanting to engage in role play purely because of one's race), or generally marginalized and excluded.

One can imagine that there are general problems of SWB (subbing whilst black). As black people, and more particularly black women, it is not a far stretch to imagine that in entering a BDSM play scene,⁴ you would instantly get flooded with images of everything from *Roots* to *12 Years a Slave*.⁵ This historical context, riddled with colonisation and slavery, is coupled with the current reality that is marred with misogynoir⁶ and the war on black women's body that is waged every day. From homophobic rape, to intimate partner violence, to skewed (hypersexualised) perceptions of black women and their sexuality,⁷ these violent acts are so widespread that they infiltrate social, political, and economic spaces, and are seemingly present in *all* private and public spheres, from offices, to traditional and

¹ *Adventures From The Bedrooms of African Women*, accessed 30 June 2017: <http://adventuresfrom.com/>

² *The Spread Podcast*, accessed 30 June 2017: <https://soundcloud.com/karenkazlucas/sets/the-spread-a-sex-positive>

³ www.holaafrica.org

⁴ Play scene: The term originated in the BDSM club and party communities, indicating the activities taking place within a scene

⁵ Movies based on the slave era within the United States.

⁶ Misogyny directed towards black women where race and gender both play roles in bias.

⁷ Ofiwe, Michelle. "The Power Of Being A Submissive Black Woman In Bed." *The Establishment*. 2016. Accessed 30 August 2017. Available at: <https://theestablishment.co/the-power-of-being-a-submissive-black-woman-in-bed-7fc7f1d44bab>

cultural spaces, to colleges, to political scandals, to the halls of Hollywood. Looking at the extent of sexual violence, the situation for black women can seem sexually and socially dire.

All of this would make one question why a black queer woman and/or a gender non-conforming person (GNC) would even *consider* BDSM, let alone find intimacy, joy, and pleasure in it. Despite this macabre history, more and more black women are becoming visible within the BDSM realm, one often seen as “some freaky white people shit”⁸ by many who harbor misconceptions about what the sexual practice entails. Being able to navigate this nexus of pain, pleasure, and protection is something that more and more black women have managed to do when engaging in the realms of sexual pleasure within kink, and more specifically, BDSM.



Photo credit: Siphumeze Khundayi. Published with the permission of all parties involved.

⁸ Elder, Sajae. “What It’s Like to Be a Black Woman Into Kink.” *Vice*. 2016. Accessed 25 July 2017. Available at: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3b4qkn/what-its-like-to-be-a-black-woman-into-kink

Power and Consent: An Age-Old Battle

In her *The Establishment* piece “The Power Of Being A Submissive Black Woman In Bed,”⁹ Michelle Ofiwe links the perception of strength around black women with vulnerability: when it comes to vulnerability and pain, one finds themselves wary of who to show their “soft underbelly” to. The ability to show sexual vulnerability or strength is something that many women grapple with and, considering the history outlined above, black women may have even more of a tough time with this. Within BDSM, the notion of power – who has it, who to give it to, and when to hold it – is one that is central to the act; it is a core element of why queer women, who were approached by myself for the purposes of this paper, engaged in the practice. These were women who personally and through online engagement with *HOLAA!* had shown us that kink was not something foreign, Caucasian, and dominated by older men, but something through which queer women explored their sexuality and autonomy. Through their events, twitter feeds, and private conversations our interest was sparked and a door opened to different possibilities of engaging with sex. The beauty of the online space resides in us managing to find these women in all sorts of nooks and crannies, in various cities from Cape Town to Nairobi, and the diaspora. The conversations we had with these women brought us some nuggets of wisdom that shaped our thinking and engagement with the world of kink, informing everything from our safe sex and pleasure manual *PleaseHer*, to our various photo shoots.

What is most striking thing about these women and their exploration of kink is the notion of being “unbound” in a sense. There is an erotic freedom in exploring new ways of sex and pleasure, a queering of interactions that subverts and explores notions that are taken for granted within more “vanilla” notions of sex. Muthoni, a queer activist¹⁰ from Kenya, unpacked the role of BDSM in helping her heal scars that were caused by societal sexual violence. She says, “It heals the history around the woman’s place in sex as a recipient, therefore the sole purpose of a man’s pleasure. BDSM gives the woman the agency to clearly define and negotiate their power.”

Muthoni also stated that “it’s liberating to up notions of power in a trusting space.” She went on to explain that it is the ability to negotiate the sex that you wanted in that time and space that was both empowering and liberating. When one looks at being a queer woman from East Africa, the notion of bodily autonomy and safety is one that is a constant negotiation, threat, and compromise, and kink is a way, to those such as Muthoni, to subvert this danger and existence within their private spaces. Thus, engaging in BDSM allows for a challenge to this societal threat. Going further, she says, “BDSM demands that sex and power is mutual and shared willingly and honestly.”

Kgothatso, another woman whom *HOLAA!* has worked with in the past, is a queer woman based in Southern Africa. Her engagement in kink had grown over the years, leading her to host kink spaces within Cape Town under the brand *Blaqueer Kinksters*. She also had conversations online about being a black queer woman engaging in kink. When asking her about *why* she had chosen this particular sexual path, she spoke of the pleasure it gave her: “rope reminds me of the liberation I find in BDSM. It reminds me that there is much freedom in being able to relinquish all control.” She went on to explain

⁹ Note 7.

¹⁰ Artivism is a portmanteau word combining art and activism.

that it is both in being able to be in control whilst relinquishing control that these women can explore their ability to negotiate power. Power is a central component to this engagement, namely, that between sexual partners; as Muthoni explains, “the acknowledgement of the presence of power in sexual engagements” allows for the ability to genuinely engage in how this power plays out in terms of notions such as pleasure, and more importantly, consent. This ability to negotiate your sex subverts ideas that are entrenched by rape culture,¹¹ and this is a core part of BDSM practices. What people do not often understand is that consent lies at the heart of the practice.

Sexual assault often has very little to do with sex and more to do with exerting power over someone physically, and this can happen on varying degrees. The issues of exerting control over someone not only comes in the physical, but also in verbal coercion and the inability to say no to a sexual encounter or a sexual act. Within the kink space, these possible imbalances are intimately unpacked and explored. Although many think that the kink scene is awash with instances of forced violent instances and imposed pain, one scholarly paper describes these occurrences as not the rule, but rather “the unwanted exception” (Fulkerson 1).¹² In the works, consent is defined as “informed agreement between persons to act in an activity which is mutually beneficial for everybody involved” (as cited in Fulkerson, vii).¹³ The “grey areas” that legally and socially come together to attempt to define consent (within the notions of verbal or nonverbal communication for example) are ones that kinksters¹⁴ often find themselves swimming in and having to meticulously deal with.

That is something that Tshogofatso, a sex positive blogger, feels strongly about: “Kink is all about consent. Within the kink world I have felt I have the power to consent more than I have in every other aspect.” For her, consent is one of the most important and central parts to the sexual growth and knowledge offered within the world of kink. She explains that in her experiences of kink, she was lucky to be exposed to kinksters who were able to conceptualize consent in a way that made her feel safe and able to explore her desires. She explains: “When comparing that [engagement with consent] to non-kinksters, I have been able to find a lot more control and a lot more able to experiment with things that previously had been uncomfortable with as I know in the kink world I am constantly learning.” Consent is often something that goes widely undiscussed in “vanilla relationships,” with the idea that everyone has already come to the party. Unlike kink spaces, ideas of what sex people would like, how they would like it, how hard and fast, slow and sensual, or even if it should involve fruit or whipped cream are rarely expressly and explicitly discussed. Speaking to women who engage in kink, one realises how silent many are about their sex and how much engagement relies on the (very precarious) notions of body language, innuendo, and implied acquiescence.

¹¹ A sociological concept used to describe a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality.

¹² Fulkerson, Anita. *Bound by Consent: Concepts of Consent Within the Leather and Bondage, Domination, Sadoomasochism (BDSM) Communities*. 2010. Wichita State U, MA dissertation. Accessed 30 August 2017. Available at:

https://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/3717/t10088_Fulkerson.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

¹³ Note 12.

¹⁴ A person who enjoys “kinky” sexual activities, or activities that are considered to fall outside the norm.

When one considers that the notions of consent, openness, transparency, trust, and safe words are at the core of BDSM, one can see why this realm would be rife with the reclaiming of sexual desire and autonomy, as well as a (revised) rise of exploring sexuality and healthy sexual practices.

Sexual Exploration: Pinpointing Pleasure

The sexual experiences of women need to be increasingly centered on pleasure, and a great part of the power dynamics within a sexual interaction emerges from being able to negotiate pleasure. This is compounded by the fact that typical gender roles and ideas of sexuality do not apply to BDSM. As these queer women and gender non-conforming persons negotiate the power dynamics around their sex, pleasure and what they can draw from the experience become a core part.

Exploring your sex is not always easy; there is a great fear of alienating your partner or finding someone who is not keen on something that gets you off, thus risking that awkward moment during sex. The stunted way of speaking about sex beforehand means that often people do not verbalise what they want in bed, either because they do not know how, or are ashamed to. One South African lesbian woman and financier, Thabile, muses on being able to try new and exciting things and explains that “kink simply allows me to be without judgement.” For her, the ability to engage in kink allowed her to explore what feels good to her and take it as far as she wants to. Pleasure, for her, is not an idea that is burdened by sexual expectations of women, because kink breaks down a large number of these boundaries, gender roles, and other hard and fast identities. The notion of being able to conceptualize and express your pleasure – and thus experience – is explored by Muthoni, who explained how it solidifies the idea of a woman being entitled to pleasure. As for Kgothatso, she describes the pleasure she gets from rope play: “Rope is that hug or cuddle I can wear under my clothes while I do my chores or go about my day. The tell-tale signs on my skin are pleasant reminders of last night’s affairs.”

Kink is a space in which unpacking your pleasure is allowed in a way that is sometimes denied in more vanilla settings, as it breaks the unspoken rules of “don’t discuss what you want in the bedroom, just let it flow.” Thabile explains that for her, kink “is a safe space of exploration and just being. A space where expectations are clear and worked towards, not just by yourself but with other people that care to learn you and work on keeping you safe.” She explains that “there are a lot of dynamics in life that one cannot control.” The ability to actively lay one’s pleasure is one of the core parts of kink in that it is what feeds notions of consent, down to the minutest actions. It means that your partner not only knows you want pleasure, but *how* you want pleasure, because it is explicitly spoken about. Thus, there are no nasty (in all senses of the word) surprises. Furthermore, according to Thabile, “the stripping of control also means the limiting of how one expresses themselves; so my involvement in kink is me trying to learn about myself in an environment that enables authenticity and the ability to just be damn right honest.”

Sexual accountability provides a space in which one can delve into what makes them feel good, what gets them off, what sexually excites them, and what they consider good and safe sexual engagements according to their individual standards within a healthy, cognitive, and communicative framework. Through their exploration of BDSM, African queer women are subverting dominant narratives of who

owns pleasure, who can dictate what happens to another's body, and what good sex looks like, allowing the rest of us to rethink how we engage in our own sex. Through acts of submission and domination, they are reclaiming their bodily autonomy as well as their right to sex that is not only negotiated and empowering, but also pleasurable. With notions of consent, active exploration of power dynamics that are often silenced, and the space to regain and claim bodily autonomy, queer women are using BDSM as a means of reclaiming not only their power within sex and the right to their bodies, but they are also carving out a space to dictate what sort of interactions they want.

Note: *Thank you to the queer women who aided in the compilation of the ideas and quotes for this paper. You stay magic.*