



CHAPTER 3

## Queer Like Me

*Black Girlhood Sexuality on the Playground,  
under the Covers, and in the Halls of Academia*

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I find that women—myself included—both in and out of academia, talk an awful lot about the dangers of female sexuality. In my search for a market of lesbian pornography made by lesbians, I wonder if this small effort will really distract me from my gut feeling that I am still supporting a larger industry that is based squarely on female exploitation. I have been privy to a number of college classroom discussions that debate the responsibility of sexual health teachers in the age of abstinence education. We are always left wondering, just how harmful is it to tell adolescent girls that the only way to avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases is to ignore their desire to have sexual relationships? I have battled with these tensions throughout my childhood and young adulthood. On the one side, there is familial and church community pressure to conform to a “proper,” middle-class conception of Black womanhood with its (hetero) sexual conservatism. On the competing end, there is my overwhelming urge to explore my sexual desires—desires that are made even more blasphemous by their queerness, youthfulness, and consciously-enacted na-

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ture. The first side, I am told, will guarantee my physical safety and social/moral respectability. The latter would only let me loose into a world of exploitation, crippling indulgence, and regrettable indecency.

The sexual dangers are real and should continue to receive our attention, but not at the expense of those lessons found in women's stories about sexual pleasure. As Carole S. Vance heeded in her introduction to the collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*:

To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experiences with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live. (1992: 1)

Growing up as a Black girl who loved other girls, I remember moments in my childhood and adolescence when my secret quests to satisfy my sexual desires forced me to problematize several aspects of my developing identity: if I did not comfortably fit in either of the mutually exclusive categories of Black womanhood, where did I belong? It is my hope that these stories and others like it open up a new research space in youth sexuality studies that would encourage young Black girls to no longer view their sexual development as something to be feared in silence, but rather as an opportunity to cultivate self-awareness, or subjectivity, and personal agency through the exploration of their sexual urges. This research space could contribute to the construction of an integrated Black feminist, queer, and pleasure-centered model of sexuality education that allows youth to freely ponder/discuss/theorize about race, class, gender, and age tensions as they relate to sexuality. Sexual health educators could work together with Black girls to develop modes of addressing these tensions in ways that respect the vast variety of individual feelings on sexual pleasure and danger. Such an intervention is essential at a time when youth pretty much only have access to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that fail to recognize sexual desire or oppressive interventions that seek to punish the erotic.

I adopt as my theoretical framework for this project Laura Alexandra Harris's (1996) queer black feminism, which she developed to disrupt the silences in feminist, Black feminist, and queer theories on issues of race, class, and sexuality. This theoretical site allows me to explore the significant—yet rarely discussed—intersection of sexual pleasure and the politics of race and class. As Harris argues:

Queer and black allow me to bring the personal and the political together without having one circumscribe the other. . . . In this critical personal narrative, the

queer modifies and is modified by the black which then doubly modifies the feminism. I contend that as these multiple modifiers illuminate contradictions and problems they produce an axis where pleasure and politics and feminist bodies can compile their histories. (1996: 4)

The stories from my childhood will illustrate a process of feminist identity development that, at its core, is different from that of the White, middle-class, heterosexual women that popular culture still largely identifies as leaders of the mainstream feminist movement. My identity is defined by a distinct racialized, classed, and heteronormative gender domination.

The fact that I have pursued a divergent sexual pleasure under these conditions means that I enter into feminist theory at an angle that opens up new discussions on young, queer Black girls' sexualities (Harris 1996). I seek to salvage a queer Black female body erased from the dominant White feminist agenda. I do not wish to disregard race, class, and sexual identities when researching Black girls' sexualities in order to maintain a fictitious single feminist identity (Collins 2000; Hammonds 1994). Neither do I choose to respond to the hypersexualization of Black women in the media and academic research with indignant silence. I research and publicly talk about Black girls' sexualities because Black women's silent resistance has not always proven to be an effective coping mechanism, nor has it curbed the abundance of racialized sexual stereotypes that permeate our culture (Collins 2004; Davis 1997; DiClemente, Harrington, and Davies 2007). Finally, I theorize from a position of pleasure in order to bring balance to the youth sexuality literature. The current research is narrowly focused on Black girls' sexual abuse and the dangerous consequences of their deviant behaviors (e.g., Johnson et al. 2005; Price 2004; Sparks, Peterson, and Tangenberg 2005). And as for the body of work that actually examines young Black female sexual pleasure, there is certainly room for deeper inquiry.

The most notable effort in this regard is Deborah L. Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (2005). In her intimate interviews with girls aged fifteen to eighteen-years-old, she heard young women sheepishly deny any desire, choice, agency, and responsibility in their sexual relationships. These girls alleged that sexual intercourse was something that happened to them, often much to their surprise. Upon identifying contradictions in several of the girls' interviews, Tolman speculated that these reports were "cover stories" that her interviewees concocted with the hope of avoiding social stigma, restrictive moral obligations, and psychological torment. These girls live in a world where adults are invested

in limiting young female sexual subjectivity. Sexual health educators warn girls to “just say no” to sexually charged boyfriends, lest they ruin their lives with unwanted pregnancies. Media outlets, including teen magazines, sitcoms, and movies, chastise girls who have sex “too young” and “too frequently” by labeling them as “whores and sluts.” Tolman’s findings on these contradictions and tensions undoubtedly bolster our theories of young female sexuality. However, the limited demographic diversity in her respondent sample raises questions about differences across and within racial, socioeconomic, and sexuality groups. In addition to an underrepresentation of social class diversity among ethnic minority girls, her sample of thirty young females included only three queer girls (two bisexuals, one lesbian). Thus, this narrative of a “frigid” or “guilty” young Black female heterosexuality overshadows the stories of queer Black girls who have presumably questioned the heteronormative cultural messages thrust on them and gathered the courage to claim a “deviant” sexual identity in a sexist, homophobic, and racist society.

I am in search of sites where young Black female sexuality is joyfully expressed, and I have found one such site to be Black lesbianism (Hammonds 1994). I take up Audre Lordé’s argument that the erotic—that is, the intense, spiritual, sensual “internal sense of satisfaction” (2007: 54)—“empowers [women], becomes the lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (2007: 57). In other words, the erotic may be so powerful as to actually compel us to examine such critical issues as racial, feminist, and queer identity politics as part of the struggle for more harmonious and fulfilling human relations. The stories from my childhood and adolescence show that the process of developing an erotic power can begin much earlier in life than many would imagine.

. . . *Flies are in the meadow*  
*The bees are in the park*  
*Miss Suzie and her boyfriend are kissing in the*  
*D-A-R-K, D-A-R-K, dark, dark*

*Dark is like the closet into which I followed Andre. I did not tell him that I was afraid of the dark because my curiosity was much more powerful than my fear. I wanted to know what it would be like to be Miss Suzie from the hand-clapping game rhyme that all us Black girls sang on the playground. As I shut the door, I kept an eye on the thin line of light seeping under the door. Without*

*a word or hesitation, Andre kissed my lips, neck, and chest. I stood perfectly still and remained focused on the light.*

*I do not know where my mother was during all of this, except that lunch was ready by the time we stumbled out of the closet. And I do not remember us doing much more than kissing, although when it was all done my white cotton underwear and undershirt were not on the same way as when I went into the closet. My mother did not spank me when she saw this, but this is my first memory of my mother's disapproving pursed lips and squinted eyes. I am not sure whether my mother was disappointed that I had let Andre do this to me without protest, or if she was saddened that I had learned the lesson of limited female sexual agency at the young age of five years old.*

The prominent models of homosexual identity development generally agree that the first stage of identity awareness for queer youth involves a feeling of being different than one's peers (Beaty 1999; Cass 1979; Zera 1992). Indeed, I felt strange during my childhood because I could imagine a life without boys, so very unlike my female friends. The encounter in the closet with Andre was boring and a bit frightening. When my friend Cheryl told me one day that we were to ignore the boys in our classroom for as long as possible, I was relieved that someone else had finally concluded that these secret games were obviously more fun for the boys than for us. I was disappointed when I realized that this was merely a ploy to appear coy, drive the boys crazy, and ultimately gain *more* attention from them—a strictly heterosexual game of chase so common among elementary school children (Best 1983; Blaise 2005).

I spent my childhood and adolescence trying to hide and, at times, deny my desires to chase girls on the playground and pull them into closets. Although, it may be more appropriate to say that I spent this time negotiating my desires. That is, in one moment I would trade in my desire to be like all the other boy-crazy Black girls in order to enjoy pleasures under the covers with my boldly curious best friend, Graciela. In another instance, I reaffirmed my commitment to obtaining the fruits of heaven by piously turning away from the photos of nude women that I liked to view on the internet after the household went to sleep. While the models of homosexual identity development acknowledge identity ambivalence as a reasonable result of the general homophobia that permeates our society, these models do not actually consider the distinct consequences “outness” would produce for a young, Black girl like me.

*My grandmother caught me in the bathtub, pushing my Barbie dolls on top of each other so their little plastic limbs were intertwined, and they were lost in each other's painted eyes. She let out a wild cry and pulled me out of the bathtub. My grandmother actually sat me down in front of the Bible—buck naked—while she flipped to Leviticus.*

*“See,” she said. “It’s written here. A man sleeping with another man is as nasty as a man sleeping with a pig! Do you understand that?”*

*“Well . . . OK,” I thought. “But what does that have to do with my Barbies kissing?”*

In the intermittent periods that I secretly acknowledged, accepted, and acted on my queer desires, I felt alienated from the Black church community. And since churches were the heart of Black social and political organizing in my community, I also felt as though I was losing a grip on my racial identity. Our Pentecostal church, along with the dozens of other storefront churches in my neighborhood, preached “Rehabilitation or hell for homosexuals!” on Sundays and spent the rest of the week gathering school supplies for children, delivering food and spiritual healing to the shut-ins, and holding political meetings to scrutinize city council members’ commitment to their Black constituencies. What did it mean that I loved other females more than what was considered “normal” and I deeply appreciated these Black initiatives? I worried that if I continued my games of sexual exploration with Graciela, I could never get involved in a neighborhood service project without fellow residents questioning my curious lack of interest in “the men who are actually doing good in our community.” Perhaps God might not infuse my hands with healing powers like He did in those of the elders in my congregation, and I would not obtain all the other privileges I looked forward to inheriting in my Black adulthood.

Also during the times in which I explored my queer identity, I feared that I would not be socialized into the Black woman that my family and community felt they needed me to be. Since my mother had given birth to me when she was just sixteen years old, many feared that I would grow up to be a “sexual deviant” as well. My grandmother was very serious about grooming me into a respectable, educated, and sexually pure young woman. This was a difficult task given that the Black women I watched on television and saw in magazine ads were mostly insatiable harlots, manishly aggressive single mothers, and other racialized sexual stereotypes

that were created by a male power to denigrate and disempower the Black female population (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 2007). My grandmother, mother, and aunt instilled in me their expectations of heterosexual marriage in the hopes that a man would save me from the hard labor reserved for Black women like them with minimal education and I could gain some air of respectability in the eyes of the “smug” middle-class. The amount of self-sacrificing that was required of me in this mission to “uplift the race” seemed daunting and unfair.

*Whenever her mother dropped her off on our doorstep, I quickly took Graciela by her wrist and shuttled her to my bedroom. No time could be wasted, for I never knew if my mother was going to be babysitting her for just a few hours or over the next several days. Graciela was my best friend because she shared the latest handclapping games from her school and, moreover, I loved her beauty. She defused any hostile jealousy that could have arisen inside me over her hair length and texture by allowing me to run my fingers through the long, black hair that rippled down her back.*

*On the nights that Graciela stayed with us, my mother placed an extra pillow on my twin bed. Graciela and I would peek and giggle at the body parts that our mothers had told us to always keep covered. We touched the places our other friends said were nasty. And it felt, simply, freeing and good.*

My childhood memories reveal an intertwined course of queer, Black, and feminist consciousness-raising that emerged from my exploration of personal pleasure. It became quite clear early on that girls would be the only ones to unleash the euphoric erotic within me. How could a feeling that came so naturally be inherently sinful? I also came to realize that I was only allowed to dream of becoming one of two types of a Black woman: a sexual deviant who brings shame on the Black race, or a prudent wife whose humble life with her husband garners respect from the Black community. Would it be possible for me to create a hybrid identity? One, perhaps, that allowed my tremendous amount of service to the community to overshadow my secret relationships with women?

Managing my queer desires was becoming an impossible task by early adulthood, as my feelings of lust and love for other females would not subside. With my desires so obviously demarcated, I was forced to ask myself, “What makes you think you don’t deserve to be physically and emotionally fulfilled?” I now feel obligated to share my lesbian relationship with

my family and break the silence surrounding female pleasure—both queer and heterosexual—so as to steer the youngest generations of girls from settling into pleasureless, loveless, and unequal sexual relationships like those our matriarchs whisper about when they think we are not listening. Also, as an academic, I call for interdisciplinary analyses of youth's critical engagement with sexuality issues. This research, when taken into consideration by parents, sexual health educators, and other adults who work with young Black girls, can make for more dynamic and relevant curricula that do not punish sexual desire.

*I am a queer Black feminist who is constantly reflecting on my subjectivity and personal agency. While I am grateful for the personal progress that I have made thus far, and look forward to the lessons yet learned, this critical self-examination has occasionally made for a difficult career in academia. When I question the absence of race (other than White), class (other than privileged), gender (other than male), and sexuality (other than heterosexual) considerations from social theories—essentially, the blatant rejection of my existence in this world—some well-meaning academics inform me that a “professional” social scientist does not allow her political agenda to adulterate her scholarly critiques. Furthermore, I assert my personal agency by supplementing my formal education in the academy by consuming essays/poetry/art produced by feminist scholars, attending queer activist rallies, and participating in family conversations about politics/religion/everyday survival held over the kitchen table. Erotic power has given me strength, courage, and insight in many more aspects of my life than I could have ever imagined.*

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## Note

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