In Pursuit of Intimate Justice(s):
The Critical Implications of Rethinking Sexual Deservingness and Consent

Senior Thesis

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Prologue

About a year and half ago, December 2017, I finished the fall semester of my junior year here at Brandeis. Over the break, in between semesters, I had a newfound energy to read, which I can rarely do for pleasure during the chaos of the semester and the vacation was sufficient time to read something other than a requirement for a course. I picked up Junot Díaz’s *This Is How You Lose Her*. I came upon this book primarily because I knew Díaz’s novel, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, but also because I had heard the title bouncing around in other texts and wanted to give the book a try. To be succinct, reading *This Is How You Lose Her* broke my heart. This is a collection of short stories that are told from the perspective of the male narrators – Ramon, Rafa, and Yunior – and detail the various relationships patterns and experiences that shape the men’s lives. The title is an attestation to the myriad ways in which Yunior, as a result of growing up seeing Rafa and Ramon’s relationships with women as standards for such, is inevitably going to lose her, lose the woman he truly desires to be with. I read each story with an attention that I hardly give other texts, and upon finishing the novel, I picked it up once more and started again. There was something about the way Diaz writes – a very raw, unfiltered manner in which he conveys the sexual exploits of the male characters, something about the coarseness with which the novel touches readers. I was left speechless. I could not, and am still struggling to, find the words to describe precisely what it is about *This Is How You Lose Her* that was so disquieting. This thesis is an attempt to answer some of those questions through the theoretical lens of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality studies.
This thesis, animated by my experience of reading Díaz’s *This Is How You Lose Her,* aims to examine how an intimate justice framework can complicate and problematize conventional understandings of consent. In answering this question, this thesis relies on many different elements of feminist theory. That is to say, this project is in large part about the body. It is about how we conceptualize the body, how a plethora of feminist, and other, scholars have historically framed the body, and how we make sense of the body in sexual spaces and experiences. With this thesis project, I aim to deconstruct overrepresented binary conceptions of consent — conventional consent models of “yes means yes” or “no means no” — to attempt to understand boundary formation in sexual spaces in order to return power to experiences and to give language to sentiments that are often lost in the gray area.

This gray area is a concept to which I will refer several times throughout this thesis. Utilizing the “gray area” reflects the ways in which my own upbringing has influenced the construction of this thesis. Taught to understand consent as a “yes” or “no” in response to sexual activity, I came of age in a time where talking about sexual assault, specifically about campus sexual violence, was especially topical. During this time, there was a transition on many college and university campuses as the traditional model of “no means no” transformed into “yes means yes,” because many activists and academics posited that the “yes means yes” mode is a positive model of offering enthusiastic consent, as opposed to a negative model that is relative to an undesired sexual activity. There was never much more elaboration and it was always kept very simple. In many ways, consent still should be this simple, this uncomplicated, at least to understand. However, this is not frequently the reality. Consent takes a much more complicated form — authors have referred to sexual consent as a “nebulous” concept (Beres 94). Social
constructions and political institutions are implicated in the construction of consent, and that is what I refer to as the gray area — the very sociopolitical influences that affect consent in ways largely unknown, and the subtle ways in which racism and sexism may be internalized and manipulated to unrecognizable aims.

The impetus for this research came from Roxane Gay’s influential essay collection *Bad Feminist* in which she writes of her own experience of *This Is How You Lose Her*. I use Gay’s statements because Gay powerfully articulates these sentiments: “I have been conflicted about this book because I loved these stories, the richness of the details, the voice, the way the stories pulled the reader from beginning to end. These are stories with gravity. They hold the reader in place” (105). Gay’s reflection of a sense of conflict upon reading *This Is How You Lose Her* is an apt description of how it feels to read the work — the stories are written beautifully, but, as she continues, there is also “the sexism, which is at times virulent” (107). In Díaz’s work, Gay states, “women are their bodies and what they can offer men” (107). These women are “pulled apart for Yunior’s sexual amusement” (Gay 107). While Gay believes that there must be space within fiction writing for flawed characters such as Yunior, Gay also comes back to “the relative impunity with which the men in *This Is How You Lose Her* get to behave badly” (108). The license to behave poorly, without consequence, is largely implicated in conversations about consent, but this is often translated only into “no means no” or “yes means yes” models, which function along giving/receiving a “yes” or a “no” in respect to sexual activity. Both of these modes, but especially a “yes means yes” model, do not propose critical insight into the formulations of a such a response. From the host of texts that will be discussed in this essay, one can begin to observe how power structures and different modes of oppression are deeply implicated in the construction of sexuality, and even into the giving or receiving of a “yes” or a
“no” in response to sexual activity. The purpose of this thesis is to complicate consent in ways that bring already-existing theorizations, that seem to circulate among only academic and activist circles, to the forefront. That is to say, anti-oppressive ideologies of sexual consent, sexual agency, and sexuality in general, that re-theorize consent to give language to confounding sexual experiences are not necessarily new, but they are seldom heard. This thesis attempts to bring these texts together to focus more on the gray area of sexual consent.

In writing this thesis and reviewing the literature, it is hard to escape the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect and how gender functions primarily along the binary. While this thesis aims to deconstruct binary conceptions of consent, I find myself and this literature, for example, Catharine MacKinnon’s *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, not necessarily affording the same intentions to binary conceptions of gender. Furthermore, many of the texts utilize a language that places womanhood and vagina ownership as mutually inclusive categories. This is not to relieve the responsibility of critical reflection as there still exists value in many of these theorizations. However, this value exists so as it expands our understandings of womanhood and femininity. I find the significance of these texts not necessarily under a biological construction of womanhood, but under a more fluid interpretation of womanhood. While these texts may engender a stagnant womanhood of vagina ownership equaling femaleness, I believe value can be extracted from these texts if experiences that these authors offer — of womanhood, of femininity, of sexuality — can be mirrored by any person who may opt into any of these categories. Moreover, individuals who were socialized under the guise of womanhood can find aspects of their experiences reflected in the literature. Individuals who were not socialized as such, but now live within femininity and engender femininity may also find worth in the literature. Language continues to prove itself difficult and limited. Thus, I offer this
expansion as a recognition of language and theory’s boundaries, while not relieving any text of the responsibility to continually attempt to deconstruct binaries of gender.

Many authors and scholars have tackled the gray area of traditional constructions of consent, and one such author is Lili Loofbourow, a culture critic at *The Week*, who wrote an article regarding the allegations that were brought against Aziz Ansari, entitled “The female price of male pleasure.” Loofbourow alleges that women “are enculturated to be uncomfortable most of the time” and more importantly, “to ignore their discomfort” (“The female price of male pleasure”). Moreover, society teaches women to tolerate the bad behaviors that Gay and Díaz write about. In Gay’s description of “Otravida, Otravez,” a story in Díaz’s text, she argues that the story speaks “to the choices women make in love, to what they tolerate from men, to how closely they hold their hopes” (106). As Loofbourow writes, women are taught to permit, to endure, men’s poor behavior, at the expense of their own well-being. Furthermore, this thesis takes up the gray area of consent that is a direct result of the way women are socialized. This discussion is not such a simple one. As one uncovers the impacts of the social institutions that inform consent and sexual satisfaction, one comes to understand that a “yes means yes” or a “no means no” model of consent does not attend to all the ways in which women, all individuals who have experienced womanhood, have been taught to tolerate certain behavior.

I answer my research question largely through a review of feminist literature as it appears in sociological articles, psychological articles, and many other iterations, to provide a solid foundation for understanding how feminist theory has written about the body and sexual interactions. Feminist theory from authors such as Linda Martín Alcoff, Evelynn Hammonds, and Judith Butler will be employed to lay this groundwork. But my thesis begins primarily in an intimate justice framework, an analytical tool put forth by Sara McClelland, who “argues that
research on individuals’ evaluations of their lives — and specifically their levels of satisfaction, well-being, and happiness — should be assessed using measures and methods that always consider both potential group differences and the social conditions that may influence these appraisals” (“Intimate Justice” 1010). Moreover, the discussions we have about consent are often vague and fail to connect to real-life experiences — they are frequently not grounded in recognizing what Sara McClelland writes as the “potential group differences and the social conditions that may influence these appraisals” (“Intimate Justice” 1010). These models of consent focus on an individualized experience instead of representing larger patterns that occur across the spectrum of sexual experiences, directly related to social conditions.

Sara McClelland’s intimate justice framework is indubitably a derivative of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw published “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” the first iteration of her framework. She utilizes intersectionality as a tool to combat the “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis,” and more specifically, to give language to the “particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 140). Since the publication of this text, intersectionality has become one of the most cited theories in many antiracist and feminist imaginations; though critiqued for its misuses by some academics and practitioners, the importance of this concept cannot be understated. For this, a section of this text is dedicated to outlining Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality, because feminist analysis and other justice movements cannot prove to be truly liberatory without it.

Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality has had a direct influence on Sara McClelland’s intimate justice framework predicated upon theorizing “the impact of social conditions on
deservingness,” which refers to an individual’s sense of value, worth, even entitlement, as it is present in sexual spaces and experiences (“Intimate Justice” 1010). Moreover, McClelland argues that “individuals’ sexual expectations,” or sense of deservingness “may significantly vary from, for example, peers who face fewer limits on their sexual rights” (“Intimate Justice” 1010). McClelland calls on intersectionality when she too notes that traditional discussions of life satisfaction, as it is based upon “a self-imposed set of criteria,” does not “sufficiently address the degree to which sociocultural contexts affect individuals’ expectations for and evaluations of life satisfaction” (“Intimate Justice” 1011). In other words, intersectionality calls for attention to the various modes of oppression that intersect to specifically inform Black women’s experience of the world — intimate justice calls for attention to the various social constructs, in addition to the various modes of oppression, that inform one’s experience of their sexuality and satisfaction. An intimate justice framework in this thesis provides an understanding of how social contexts play a role in constituting a “good” sexual experience or a “bad” sexual experience, and in transforming discussions of consent.

This is how we all lose, Gay writes in Bad Feminist. When we talk about consent as a binary of yes or no, as if there is not a vast and deep gray area that exists between the two, we fail to recognize the numerous ways in which social contexts affect our understandings of what constitutes a “good” sexual experience and a “bad” sexual experience. This leaves the conversation around consent flat, ineffective. After discussing This Is How You Lose Her, after discussing “The female price of male pleasure” and McClelland’s intimate justice framework, Gay’s writing becomes even more pertinent to modern discussions of sexuality and consent.

Furthermore, Gay alleges that the “limited ways in which we talk, write, and think about gender,
these vacuums in which we hold cultural conversations, no matter how good our intentions, no matter how finely crafted our approach, I cannot help but think, this is how we all lose” (108).

This thesis begins with a discussion of feminist theories of the body, and from there, I will move to discuss the implications of the critiques of intersectionality. Without laying an intersectional framework grounded in recognizing the varied experiences of all people, feminist thought, in addition to this thesis project, is not genuinely liberatory. After discussing Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, I discuss feminist epistemologies and the various authors that have explicated on this concept and a new area of study called “embodiment studies,” which will work to connect our theorizations back to feminist discussions of the body. After this, I will be talking about scholars’ re-theorizations of sexual consent, and the myriad ways in which sexual consent can be viewed and explained in manners other than “no means no” and “yes means yes” models. From there, I will return back to a conversation about McClelland’s intimate justice framework, McClelland’s other work, in addition to other authors who have done the same, on the concepts of pleasure and danger. In this section, I will also explain the other modes of intimate justice that exist, from the point of view of other scholars who have done work on the subject. Finally, I will bring this thesis back to Díaz’s This Is How You Lose Her. I will bring in my rereading of the text, after the research and the work for this project.

This thesis is an invitation to explore more closely how institutionalized constructions of sexual consent have largely missed and ignored the subtler ways in which sexual violence operates. The language of this project has been chosen very carefully because we must be intentional when we speak about sexual violence. There is very little use of the language of rape and of sexual assault. Rather, this thesis is about analyzing social power dynamics that facilitate
a world under such conditions where sexual violence could and can occur. For this reason, this thesis leans heavily on frameworks of intimate justice, and serves to argue that these frameworks, especially as they are in conversation with each other, offer a comprehensive account of the conditions that allow the “could” of sexual violence. These analytical tools must not only be in tandem, but also utilized with re-theorizations of sexual consent. Each part of this thesis builds one on top of each other, each part being a critical component of intimate justice in its own right. Intimate justice is but effective if not the sum of its parts.

_Feminist Theories of the Body_

This thesis begins and ends with the body. There is no writing about, thinking of, conceptualizing sexuality, or all that it encompasses, without the body. Feminist theories of the body are multiple and varied – these scholars write about race, about ethnicity, about culture, about physicality, as the body itself holds so many different meanings. Feminist thinkers have constructed a breadth of knowledge and have theorized about the body, from more biological perspectives, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s _The Second Sex_, to other, more abstract critiques, such as Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Without a doubt, there are gaps within these theorizations. Not all of the authors included, and certainly not all of the feminist scholars who have existed, have been attentive to matters of race, of class, to identities beyond gender. Nevertheless, this work has been included to lay a groundwork for what is to come later in this project, and to provide a sense of development and a defined trajectory for where this thesis project, and for where feminist thought must go. While this project will shift from discussions of intersectionality, to sexual consent and intimate justice, it must literally begin at the most basic
foundation — the body. How is one to begin to analyze the decision-making processes related to the body, if one does not first understand the body?

As noted in the beginning of this thesis, speaking about feminist theories of the body brings to the forefront a confrontation of recognizing the exclusive connection of vagina ownership with femininity and being a woman. This association proves to be one of the downsides and harms of this area of thought, especially in early feminist theory of the body. Many early thinkers have connected vagina ownership with being a woman, but in this paper, I utilize these texts under an understanding that they might be valuable to anyone whose body was, at one moment, classified as that of a woman’s body. The selections of theory were brought into this essay to offer a general and wide understanding of the myriad of feminist theory of the body. The authors that have been cited are not the only ones to do this work but have been chosen to offer a broad scope of this area of thought. Many of these texts centralize the linkage between the body and the self, with some of the earlier texts focusing solely on the gendered body and self, which we can now see as an impossible existence since no one lives single-issue lives, as Audre Lorde once claimed. The later texts begin to expand on the linkage between body and self, but one can now understand how the body arrives at a self that is contingent upon and simultaneously gendered, racialized, and classed. To begin this discussion of feminist theory of the body, it may be helpful to begin with a text that has long been canonical in many feminist imaginations.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is a 1949 book that links experiences of the body to experiences of the self (Lennon). In other words, Beauvoir argues that bodily formation is intimately intertwined with one’s experience of the world, though her original argument has since been expanded upon by other scholars who understand other categorizations of identity as
critical to one’s understanding of self, such as race. In her text, Beauvoir writes that “presence in the world vigorously implies the positing of a body that is both a thing of the world and a point of view on this world” (Beauvoir 39). The body, for Beauvoir, is of dual nature. It is both a physical entity and a theoretical identity. In addition, as per her analysis, men and women’s sense of self and experiences of the world can directly be attributed to varying bodily existences. While Beauvoir was certainly not the first one to do so, her work instills the importance of recognizing the relationship between the body and the self. In part, Beauvoir also contributed to understanding the socialization processes of womanhood. Beauvoir argued that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (330). This ideology of socialization, and the act of becoming, of processing, is critical to conceptualizing gender identity, or any social identity. For Beauvoir, in short, the body is “the instrument of our hold on the world” (66). The work of the scholars that follow in the section allows us to understand the implications of what Beauvoir intended when she wrote that the body is precisely the “instrument” that shapes and molds our experiences of the world.

As noted, Simone de Beauvoir was not the first to theorize and to name the relationship between the body and the self, nor was she the first to recognize the social process of “othering.” Many others came before Beauvoir, and Sojourner Truth, for example, also speaks of the relationship between body and self, but in a way that Beauvoir did not necessarily reference. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” spoken at the Women’s Convention in 1851, around 25 years after gaining freedom, attests to the rendering of self-identity based on bodily formation, especially as Truth experienced this linkage within the institution of slavery. Speaking from a body that was simultaneously racialized, gendered, and classed, Truth attested to an experience that was radically different, yet complementary, to that of Beauvoir. In her speech, Truth says,
“Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?” (“Ain’t I a Woman?”) Moreover, Truth begins the speech by demanding that audiences be attentive to the physicality of her body — Truth has accomplished, and is physically capable of, laborious tasks. While her physical being, on the one hand, is just as capable as a man’s body, she is relegated to inferior positions because she is a Black woman. She argues, “I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman?” (“Ain’t I a Woman?”) Her direct call to slavery punishments is utilized to further indicate her physical strength. Truth’s speech, that occurred almost 100 years before the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, serves to problematize and expand Beauvoir’s construction of self-body connection as well as the process of “othering,” which cannot be solely recognized due to gendered existence, but must also be recognized due to racialized existence. While Truth’s speech might not be theoretical in its language — its original language, too, being the subject of debate — Truth contributes to the changing understanding of what it means to live and experience the world in a body that is racialized and gendered. For Truth, and for many others, these ideas cannot be separated. Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” is a testament to the significance of visible identities, namely race and gender.

Linda Martín Alcoff, in her book Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self, too attests to the implications of an identity, of a plethora of identities, that is able to be seen. She describes characteristics such as race and sex as “most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status” (Alcoff 102). Her text can be seen as a more philosophical interpretation of the politics of visibility, arguing that ability to be seen is “both the means of
segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance” (Alcoff 7). The theories of the body that have already been illustrated, and the conceptualizations of sexual justice that will be shown, attend to this combination of simultaneous partition and connection. Visibility, Alcoff argues, is a “sign” and thusly, works to invite “interpretation to discern what is behind it, beyond it, or what it signifies”; it is, therefore, is a critical element of identity formation, as it breaks open the separation between self and society, inviting the latter to involve itself in the formation of the former (Alcoff 7). In this way, “social identities may be relational, then, as well as contextually variable, but they remain fundamental to one’s experience of the world and to the development of one’s capacities” (Alcoff 92). She summarizes how the “visible” as well as the “acknowledged” identity largely “affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience of subjectivity” (Alcoff 92). In this way, social identities — race and gender — are “fundamental in this way to one’s experiences...[and]...fundamental to the self” (Alcoff 92). Identities within the larger scope of society, as Alcoff and as readers will see, are critical to one’s perspective of the world and how one moves through it.

Alcoff moves the text subsequently to illustrating arguments about how a “public self may not match a lived self” (93). Alcoff also notes that the “problem with explaining the experience of a felt separation between how I am seen by others and how I see myself via a metaphysics of mind/body differentiation is that it allows one to say, ‘I am not really my body,’...” (93). As one can see, it would be almost impossible for one to separate their self from their body as “if one were actually housed elsewhere and only there [in their body] as a tenant” (Alcoff 93). One is not just a tenant of their body — one’s sense of self is very intimately connected to their body. Alcoff, more generally, in her text, is calling for a recognition of the
“diversity of identity constructions and processes of identity formation” (85). She notes that one cannot assume, for example, that “the process of construction of ‘whiteness’...which has involved strict border control, illusions of purity, and a binary opposition to nonwhiteness, is analogous to all other process of identity formation” (Alcoff 85). While it is critical to recognize that identities may all be formed differently, Alcoff also supports the argument that visibility remains at least one core aspect to identity formation.

While Truth and Alcoff speak about visible characteristics of the body, as well as Beauvoir, there are other scholars who have analyzed the more invisible, more internal parts of the body. For example, when talking about the physical form of the body in the sense of body processes related to body parts, anthropologist and feminist scholar Emily Martin, in a text published in 1991, explains how the physicality of bodies with vaginas, as they are so determined as women’s bodies, invites discrimination, in ways other than those that have been discussed so far. That is to say, Martin writes that the processes of the bodies with vaginas do not receive the same treatment and understanding as processes of bodies with penises. For example, Martin explains that “medical texts describe menstruation as the ‘debris’ of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis, or death of tissue” (486). Menstruation, the overtly natural and constantly recurring process of shedding the uterine lining, is described as a process of “death,” and thusly, is described negatively within these connotations. On the other hand, “male reproductive physiology is evaluated quite differently,” she argues (Martin 486). The ways in which processes related to the penis are written about often allude to the “remarkable cellular transformation” that is spermatid to mature sperm, and that spermatogenesis is an “amazing” process. Martin’s “The Egg and the Sperm” continues with these metaphors for many more pages, but the point has already been made within these primary metaphors. The body is tied to self even in the way that
its processes are conceptualized and spoken about. What does it mean to exist within a body whose natural, innate, unescapable processes are viewed in such negative metaphors and destructive materialities? How does that affect one’s existence in the world? These are the questions that Martin attempts to answer.

Returning back to Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?,” much like Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, this text is not the first, or the only, of its kind. Feminist theories have continued in Truth’s spirit to expand feminist theorizations of the body to include all social dimensions that contribute to understanding the relationship between body and self. When one speaks about how the body influences one’s experience of their self, the body is not only linked to gender constructions, but also constructions of race. Evelynn Hammonds, in her text “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” argues that the construction of racialized and gendered bodies is contingent: the construction of the white woman’s body is contingent upon the construction of the Black woman’s body because terms of identity such as “lesbian” or “femme” or even “sexuality” is “defined with white as the normative state of existence” (Hammonds 128). In one moment in her text, she asks, “how does the structure of what is visible, namely white female sexualities, shape those not-absent-though-not-present black female sexualities which...cannot be separated or understood in isolation from one another?” (Hammonds 131) Lorraine O’Grady, in “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” argues that these “two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West’s metaphoric construction of ‘woman’” (152). She asks, “how could they/we not be affected by that lingering structure of invisibility, enacted in the myriad codicils of daily life and still enforced by the images of both popular and high culture?” (O’Grady 153). In response, Hammonds claims that “white feminists must re-figure (white)
female sexualities so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality” (131). Furthermore, Hammonds is calling for a reconfiguration of these analyses of sexualities, which will be worked into the fibers of this thesis. These inquiries must encompass “a conception of the power relations between white and black women as expressed in the representations of sexuality” to manifest a more “complex, relational...conception of racialized sexualities” (Hammonds 131).

Hammonds continues to describe the multitude of ways that various scholars, including Toni Morrison and Hortense Spillers, have attempted to describe Black women’s sexuality. A common thread among the theorizations includes “metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a ‘void’ or empty space...” (Hammonds 132). The production and maintenance of these perceptions relies upon three core themes, one of which Hammonds describes as an “evolution of a ‘culture of dissemblance’ and a ‘politics of silence’” (132). The “politics of silence” were developed by Black women as a strategy to “counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality and their use as a justification for the rape, lynching, and other abuses of black women by whites” and first articulated by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Hammonds 132). In addition, it “emerged as a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman” (Hammonds 132). The “politics of silence” illustrated a “political” desire to assimilate to what was considered to be “proper” and “good.” Not only this, they were developed as a manner to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects” of their own lives (Hammonds 132). For this, Hammonds ultimately argues that one only knows “more about the elision of sexuality by black women than...about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire” (133). This dynamic is what Hammonds, and this project, makes effort to rectify.
In analyzing the culture of silence that exists around Black women’s sexuality, Hammonds calls upon the pleasure-danger debate, which will be explicated further on in this thesis, and explains that the aspects of danger, the “restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers,” while pleasure, “exploration, and agency,” do not receive the same treatment (Hammonds 134). Hammonds states a variety of reasons for this historical trend, arguing that “black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body” while also “doing the work of producing theory” (Hammonds 134). Instead of “offer[ing] a critique of every white feminist for her failure to articulate a conception of a racialized sexuality,” Hammonds analyzes these representations of Black, female, queer sexualities in a manner that emphasizes the necessity for a rearticulated politics of visibility (127). Hammonds’ work, moreover, is a search for Black women’s sexuality and a push for its visibility.

What one must take from “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” furthermore, is an acute understanding of how race, gender, sexuality, and the politics of visibility are all intertwined. Gender and sexuality cannot be theorized without attention to racial constructions. In this essay, it is of utmost importance that there is no separation of sexuality, gender, body, and race — all of these aspects exist simultaneously and cannot be separated. Hammonds references Crenshaw: “in feminist contexts, sexuality represents a central site of the oppression of women; rape and the rape trial are its dominant narrative trope” and “in antiracist discourse, sexuality is also a central site upon which the repression of blacks has been premised…” (Hammonds 134). The gaps in theorizations that were left by early feminist theorists have been exposed by later feminist thinkers who underscored the centrality of liberatory thought that is attentive to all social categorizations of identity.
A re-articulation of sexuality must include an accurate representation of the power relations between white and Black women, and Hammonds relies on Butler to assert that “this model of power...must avoid setting up ‘racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations’” (Hammonds 131). Instead, one must recognize the ways in which these “vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation” (Hammonds 131). Hammonds draws from *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, where Butler argues that the body is a central dimension of theorizing sex, sexuality, and gender. In this book, Butler is attentive to matters of race. In “rejecting those models of power which would reduce racial differences to the derivative effects of sexual difference,” it is also imperative to re-conceptualize “the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are executed as well as contested” (Butler 18). As Butler indicates, sexual formation, or “sexing practices,” is a nexus of both gendered and racialized forms of oppression.

Butler’s work in *Bodies That Matter* is dedicated to describing processes of a body coming into being, a body formulated through specific “regulatory practices.” Butler argues,

The category of “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce — demarcate, circulate, differentiate — the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time (2).

Butler is effectively deconstructing what Beauvoir meant when she wrote that one “becomes” a woman, as Butler argues that sex, not only gender, is a social construct. Sex is a process that she presents as “regulatory,” in that it classifies and determines and administers rules and guidelines
for these bodies. However, the ways the body becomes material, the way the body becomes realized, is through power hierarchies. Butler adds that “what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect” (2). Ultimately, Butler is arguing that it is impossible to remove the body from the political because the body is, in its very nature, a political work.

Within the context of speaking about the body, we may speak about location, which in a theoretical sense, refers to the process of locating one’s body through the various characteristics it holds. Within one’s experiences of the world, but especially within discussions of the body and of feminist theory, it is critical to be attentive to the politics of one’s own location. In Adrienne Rich’s “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” Rich offers her own commentary on the idea of location, she writes, “begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closes in — the body” (“Notes Towards a Politics of Location” 212). Before anything else, one is located within their own body, and one’s location must be analyzed accordingly. Rich continues, that this it “not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman…” (“Notes Towards a Politics of Location” 213). This line of thinking is particularly important — to be constantly and consistently grounding one’s experiences of the world in their physical body is central to theory, but specifically to re-theorizations of sexual consent. Rich makes a critical addition to this ideology, stating that “perhaps we need a moratorium on saying ‘the body’” (“Notes Towards a Politics of Location” 215). She argues, “when I write ‘the body,’ I see nothing in particular,” but to “say ‘my body’ reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions” (“Notes Towards a Politics of Location” 215). While Rich’s work has continued to be critiqued.
for its lack of attention to matters of race, her arguments in “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” serves to emphasize even further what has already been clarified about the importance of thinking in the body thus far — theorizations of the body must also be grounded in one’s theorizations of their own body.

Furthermore, as noted before, feminist scholars and authors have constructed a breadth of diverse theories on the body — the body has been conceptualized by many different individuals in various times and contexts. Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” asks, “why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (47). Our bodies, in fact, do not end at the skin, not even remotely. As demonstrated by the work of the plethora of authors quoted, although the physicality of the body certainly is important, as so demonstrated by Martin, the implications of living within a racialized and a gendered body reaches far beyond that. While many of these texts that have been considered are seen as canonical, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex or even Emily Martin’s “The Egg and the Sperm,” present revision reveals the gaps in the findings these authors demonstrate. In both the contemporary moment and the past, feminist scholars of color have done the arduous work of exposing and remedying such failures. It is critical to keep this in mind because while feminist thought, and liberation projects in general, are constantly in motion, it cannot be forgotten where they began and where they have developed along the way. For this, I choose to close with the notes of Nigerian feminist scholar, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. She succinctly argues that “the body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded” (Oyèwùmí 4). As this thesis project continues to discuss intersectionality in its many different iterations, and as it ultimately continues to its apex, examining retheorizations of sexual consent and deservingness, the power of Oyèwùmí’s declaration cannot be dismissed.
The Centrality (and Critiques) of Intersectionality

In feminist work, it is critical to situate any research, any theory, or body of text within an intersectional framework that attends to matters of race, class, gender, and the many different embodiments of identity. Projects for justice that only pertain to a single axis of experience fail to include and uplift those who live within multiple axes of oppression. As Audre Lorde explained in “Learning from the 60’s,” there does not exist “such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Intersectionality is critical to justice projects as anything else, anything that does not attend to the multiple axes of experience, does not truthfully reflect the lived experiences of those whom these projects aim to uplift. In my particular experience in Women’s, Gender Studies, and Sexuality courses at Brandeis University and other feminist spaces on- and off-campus, intersectionality is indubitably one of the most frequently relied-upon theories. When I first learned about this concept, I could not imagine what I was doing with my own feminist analysis before I became aware of intersectionality, which is a core theoretical framework within modern feminisms, and its many uses and critiques will be discussed in this section.

Intersectionality was first coined as a term in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, when she published a landmark text entitled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Within this text, she describes intersectionality as tool to name the “particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” in response to “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis,” a pattern that is “dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics”
Since the publication of this text in 1989, intersectionality has become one of the most cited frameworks in many antiracist and feminist imaginations. Although intersectionality has also faced criticism, as will be explained later in this essay, the importance of this concept cannot be understated. For example, intersectionality, as it appears throughout feminist analyses, has been referred to by a diverse host of terms. Terminology such as “interlocking, multiple jeopardy, and discrimination-within-discrimination..., multiple consciousness..., multiplicity..., multiplex epistemologies..., translocational positionality..., multidimensionality..., inter-connectivities..., and synthesis...” has been employed in a variety of settings (Dhamoon 232). This array of work only serves to highlight that since its publication, intersectionality has been utilized, called upon, reformulated, and reiterated.

While Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality,” she was not the only scholar to have written about the concept — many other scholars have critically engaged with the framework. One such scholar is Angela Davis who, as an academic and an activist, utilizes intersectionality in her essay “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights” to focus on the harm done to women of color during the birth control and reproductive justice campaigns, in spite of these movements being highly revered within many feminist imaginations. Davis argues that the birth control movement was a racist form of mass birth control largely because of involuntary and unconsented sterilization for women of color. Eugenics had a massive influence on the birth control movement as Margaret Sanger, who is often heralded as a birth control hero, was a strong advocate of birth control to institute her racist ideologies, or “more children from the fit, less from the unfit” (Davis 360). The birth control movement leaned heavily upon arguments “invoking birth control as a means of preventing the proliferation of the ‘lower classes’ and as an antidote to race suicide” (Davis 358). Not only this, but it was also “assumed
that within birth control circles, Black and immigrant women had a moral obligation to restrict the size of their families” (Davis 358). Often, however, this was not an obligation a woman of color could choose to opt out of. The racist ideologies that the birth control movement championed proved to be powerful as they continued to influence policy throughout the medical industry, leading to the many forced sterilizations of Black women. Davis’s account of the racist history of the birth control movement is only one testament to the importance of utilizing an intersectional framework which brings to bear a historical perspective of race, sexuality, gender, and reproductive rights in the United States.

Crenshaw’s oeuvre of work within the development of intersectional thought is not limited to “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” In 1991, Crenshaw published “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” in which she focuses once more on what is at stake in a feminist analysis that does not attend to issues of race, or a racial discourse that does not attend to issues of gender. Crenshaw describes two different iterations of intersectionality: structural and political. She defines structural intersectionality as the “qualitatively different” experiences of women of color that are based on their position at the intersections of race and gender. Political intersectionality, on the other hand, she defines as how feminist and antiracist rhetoric, instead of uplifting women of color, have worked to silence the issue of violence perpetrated against women of color. In clarifying structural intersectionality, she writes of women of color who do not have the option to leave abusive relationships for the multiple axes of oppression they experience — economic, social, immigrant status, and more. For example, immigrant women who seek shelter from domestic abuse still have to face the existing societal structures that block “their ability to create alternatives to the…relationships that brought them to [the women’s] shelters in the first place”
due to their immigrant status (Crenshaw 9). Furthermore, Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins,” in addition to Angela Davis’s “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights,” works to set the foundation for intersectional thought within both feminist and antiracist movements by illustrating the importance of such an analysis. When the experiences of those who are marginalized in multiple ways are left out of critical analysis, serious damage is inflicted, and lives are at stake.

bell hooks in “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” is yet another scholar who offers intersectionality as central to movements for justice. She argues that one of the core rifts in modern feminism is the inability to decide upon a consensus to describe feminism. She offers her own definition of feminism as a movement that seeks to eradicate systems of domination, of which there are many. She notes that “a commitment to feminism so defined would demand that each individual participant acquire a critical political consciousness...” (hooks 26). To advocate for feminism, to utilize hooks’ language, is to have an awareness and understanding of social systems and their interconnectedness. Moreover, the political consciousness hooks writes of can be defined as intersectionality and can be defined as understanding how all systems of domination are intimately intertwined. Intersectionality is the “political consciousness” that forms, or at least should form, all feminisms and justice projects. A feminism that is understood as the eradication of systems and of domination recognizes that such systems are connected and recognizes the critical nature of intersectionality.

Although there are many scholars who have engaged with Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw still has encountered obstacles from those who do not quite understand her objectives. The first time that I became aware of the critiques of intersectionality was in Professor Wallace’s SOC 138A: Sociology of Race, Gender, and Class. In posing the
question, “In what ways has intersectionality lost its acute political power?” Professor Wallace comments on the many misuses of intersectionality. He notes five primary points in the depoliticization of intersectionality. Firstly, scholars and students may cite intersectionality as a passing phrase without grounding it in political work. Additionally, students and scholars may cite intersectionality as the brainchild of feminism and not specifically Black feminism, may think of intersectionality as “high theory” without direct implications to practice, may think of intersectionality as a loose identity exercise and not an involved systems critique, and finally, most importantly, fail to understand how intersectionality is implicated in linked liberation. In this case, each of these critiques is a comment on the misuses of intersectionality, each of which is valid in its own right, and each of which could merit an entirely separate essay. However, many critiques are also based in the concept itself. That is to say, some critics of intersectionality have offered comments on the manner in which intersectionality was established as an analytical framework.

Patricia Hill Collins is one such scholar who offers a critique of intersectionality based in the theory, not in its proponents. She writes,

"Intersectionality faces a particular definitional dilemma — it participates in the very power relations that it examines and, as a result, must pay special attention to the conditions that make its knowledge claims comprehensible. Because analyzing the relations between knowledge and power is the traditional bailiwick of the sociology of knowledge, this field provides important theoretical vocabulary for conceptualizing intersectionality as both reflecting and shaping the power relations that house it. A sociology of knowledge framework suggests that knowledge — including knowledge aimed at better understanding intersectionality — is socially constructed and transmitted, legitimated, and reproduced (3)."

Collins is bringing attention to how intersectionality is not always accessible to the very people it aims to uplift, by virtue of its participation in power/knowledge politics. For this, Collins draws on racial formation theory to describe how intersectionality can be structured and interpreted in
ways that are more conducive to both teachers and students of intersectionality. Within racial
formation theory, proposed by scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant, knowledge is at the
heart of racial projects. Racial formation theory “conflates neither discourses about race (e.g.,
racial meanings, representations, and social identities) nor the power relations in which racial
meanings are situated. Both are held separate yet interconnected” (Collins 4). Furthermore,
Collins is contributing a response to her critique of intersectionality and remedying the ways that
theories can opt out of epistemological disparities, such as racial formation theory.

Other texts may also focus on how intersectionality was written as a theory. Kathy Davis’
“Intersectionality as buzzword: a sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist
theory successful” focuses on how intersectionality can be successful despite its vague character.
Her argument is that precisely because the theory of intersectionality is left open-ended and quite
vague, intersectionality finds its success. Davis notes, “theories thrive on ambiguity and
incompleteness” (Davis 69). Intersectionality persists and continues to be present in modern
feminisms because students and teachers continue to grapple with its implications and
significances. Moreover, Davis states that “successful theories are successful precisely because
they do not settle matters once and for all; they open them up for further discussion and inquiry”
(Davis 77). For example, the author notes that some “suggest that intersectionality is a theory,
others regard it as a concept or heuristic device, and still others see it as a reading strategy for
doing feminist analysis” (Davis 68). However, Davis also consistently recognizes the many
positive qualities of intersectionality and speaks about the tensions that are present in modern
movement-building and intersectionality’s role in projects for justice. She notes that “it is not at
all clear whether intersectionality should be limited to understanding individual experiences, to
theorizing identity, or whether it should be taken as a property of social structures and cultural
discourses.” This question is also present in building movements for justice, as many have and continue to think about whether the most effective manner of movement-building is one that establishes links via shared identity or shared experiences. There exists often an incorrect assumption that similar identities yield similar experiences when this might not always be the case.

In addition, Davis states that intersectionality is critical to feminist discourse as “learning the ropes of feminist scholarship means attending to multiple identities and experiences of subordination” (Davis 68). Intersectionality is implicated in understanding the experiences of systems of domination, if we take bell hooks’ definition of feminism(s) as a movement to end systems of domination. Davis continues, “however tarnished the ideal of inclusivity has become, feminist theory still needs a theoretical and normative platform if it is not to disappear altogether” (Davis 71). Here, Davis is also calling on bell hooks, who argued that feminism requires a specific political consciousness, which would be embodied in intersectionality.

Davis’s text also fits quite aptly with Patricia Hill Collins’ “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas” because both authors recognize the role that knowledge plays in intersectionality. However, the two authors take different stances regarding the role of knowledge. For Davis, intersectionality represents “a commitment to the situatedness of all knowledge…,” and embodies a commitment to deconstructing traditional principles of epistemology (Davis 71). Moreover, Davis argues that intersectionality may “be employed by any (feminist) scholar willing to use her own social location, whatever it may be, as an analytic resource rather than just an identity marker” (Davis 72). With that said, intersectionality makes a promise “to enhance the theorist’s reflexivity by allowing her to incorporate her own intersectional location in the production of self-critical and accountable feminist theory” (Davis 71).
Rita Kaur Dhamoon, in a third text, “Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality,” mostly shares Davis’ ideas, in that intersectionality gives validity to marginalized knowledge. Dhamoon, much like the others, also states that intersectionality as a “research paradigm raises questions about power and knowledge” (240). She continues, “while the primary focus of existing intersectional-type research has been on including and pluralizing marginalized voices and experiences, this paradigm also reveals knowledge about what (and not just who) is taken as given or normalized” (240). For example, “…antiracist feminists such as bell hooks...have long deployed oral traditions, narratives, storytelling, biography, and personal testimony…” Such methods “face criticism because they are not seen as positivist, rigorous, theoretical, or scholarly enough. Yet methods considered antipositivist are traditional tools of existing intersectionality-type work because they center situated and experiential knowledge” (Dhamoon 240). Epistemology has been a recurring theme in feminist texts as many analyses that lean on experiences based in feelings often are not viewed as academic or valid enough. However, personal narratives are central to feminist imaginations as feminisms are so intimately connected to one’s own experiences. Dhamoon, in other words, is proposing arguments similar to those of Kathy Davis — intersectionality, among many of its benefits when employed as a theoretical framework, centers marginalized experiences and methods of knowing to offer truth and perspective to feminist and antiracist discourses.

Finally, a fourth text serves to offer broad overviews of the different critiques of intersectionality. “Critical Engagements with Intersectionality” differentiates between eight different critiques of intersectionality and is the only text that groups critiques of intersectionality in this manner; while a bit excessive, it proves to be helpful in considering all the critiques that may exist. The “Scalar” critique holds intersectionality as “too microscopic—or too
macroscopic—and/or cannot account for all levels of social totality or the relationships among them.” The “Infinite Regress” critique argues that intersectionality “could never account for the infinite differences that constitute social identities.” The “Mutual Exclusion” critique declares that intersectionality “assumes a unitary model of identity or oppression…” The “Reinscription” critique alleges that intersectionality “reinscribes the epistemological and political problems it identifies; rather than overcoming them, it reifies them.” The Marxist critique contends that intersectionality “lacks an explanatory theory of power, a problem that results from intersectionality’s insistence on the irreducibility of racial, gender, and other oppressions to class exploitation…” The New Materialist critique asserts that intersectionality “is a form of representationalism, which stages an ontological dualism between (active) representation and (passive) represented and advances a defeatist theory of victimization…” The Assemblage critique claims that intersectionality “presupposes the primacy of the (oppressed) subject and its investment or self-understanding in identitarian politics…” Finally, the Post-Intersectional Critique, which expresses that intersectionality “is too simplistic a theory or too crude a metaphor to account for the complex phenomenon of subordination…” These critiques, unlike the many other commentaries on the concept of intersectionality, are referring to the body of the theory itself, and not its uses. In understanding the breadth and reach of Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, it proves to be of the utmost importance to strike a balance between critiques of its formation and assessments of its utilization.

The section has laid out the reasons why it is critical to situate any research, any theory, or body of text within an intersectional framework. Although intersectionality has been critiqued for its misuses, the importance of this concept cannot be reduced. Intersectionality is called upon in many different aspects of feminist thought, and liberatory thought in general. As already
illustrated, what is at stake when an intersectional framework is not utilized is high. In less theoretical terms, policy additions or public programs, when not grounded in an intersectional framework, fail to fully understand the complexity of individuals’ lives and choices and therefore, decline to truly offer assistance in their structural interventions. In more theoretical terms, individuals may not see themselves reflected in a unidimensional analysis, and for this, critical theory cannot enrich their understandings of their own lives as theory so sets out to do. Furthermore, as this thesis has to do with the body and sexuality, these areas of thought need to continually and constantly be reconnected to the source — they need to reflect all dimensions of one’s existence, including race and class and gender and sexual orientation. Models of sexual consent cannot and do not function if they are not attentive to matters of race and gender because they are leaving by the wayside important aspects that shape one’s experience of the world. It is precisely for these reasons that this thesis draws on aspects of a diverse range of theory. This thesis draws on Black feminism, queer theory, racial formation theory, reproductive justice, among many others. It is crucial to take up multiple different perspectives, even more so because it is often through sexuality that multiple methods of oppression are played out and seen through, as Kimberlé Crenshaw signaled. It is critical to lay an intersectional groundwork that has roots in various modes of theorizing because all of these areas have at one moment theorized about sexual consent and contribute to this growing field.

*Embodiment Studies and Feminist Epistemologies*

Before we move to the central problematic of this thesis, we must turn to a new field of study that can be referred to as embodiment studies. Embodiment studies works to validate forms of knowledge that come from the body, or that may come from other forms of feeling. These
discussions of the body, of consent, of intimate justice must be grounded in recognizing and validating the “alternative” forms of knowledge from which they arise. I utilize alternative with quotation marks throughout this section because, within feminism and within other justice movements, it is obvious that these knowledges are anything but “alternative” — they are critical. Therefore, to validate the breadth of knowledge that exists on these subjects, and to much of the pushback these ideologies have received due to their complexity and theoretical nature, centering the notion of feminist epistemology is critical.

Epistemology, as it can be generally described, is the theorization of knowledge — it is the analysis, the interrogation, of how and why we know what we know. Feminist epistemology, moreover, is the connection of the interrogation of the processes of knowledge to gendered and racialized existences. Just as the feminist scholars have written, just as the body affects the understanding of self, the body functions similarly with acquisition and development of knowledge. Feminist epistemology is the study of the ways in which “gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification” (Anderson). In addition, feminist epistemologies identify “ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups…” (Anderson). This is to say, while epistemology as a field only focuses generally on the production and attainment of knowledge, feminist epistemology centers the effects that gender and race and other identification categories has on these knowledge-making processes. Feminist epistemology differs from intersectionality in that intersectionality focuses on uncovering the interlocking systems of oppression as they appear through the multiple and varied experiences of individuals’ lives. Feminist epistemology focuses instead on the specific ways in which these interlocking systems have influenced the
acquisition and legitimation of certain types of knowledges. What is more is that feminist epistemology and embodiment studies, as will be argued, center specifically on the knowledge processes based on the body, which is key to the re-theorizations of sexual consent.

The need for a feminist epistemology derives from the argument that dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women, especially when compounded by race and class, in a variety of ways. Traditional modes of epistemology harm women and individuals belonging to marginalized communities by excluding them from inquiry, denying them epistemic authority, denigrating their ‘feminine’ cognitive styles and modes of knowledge, producing theories of women that represent them as inferior, deviant, or significant only in the ways they serve male interests, producing theories of social phenomena that render women’s activities and interests, or gendered power relations, invisible, and producing knowledge (science and technology) that is not useful for people in subordinate positions, or that reinforces gender and other social hierarchies (Anderson).

Furthermore, feminist epistemology aims to center these “alternative” modes of knowing and of understanding and how these knowledges, while considered secondary or alternative (hence the use of quotation marks), still constitute valid and legitimate knowledge. Recognizing feminist epistemology becomes critical because all too often, when speaking about bodily experiences, or any experience that is based on a feeling, quickly becomes invalidated as feeling is not seen a legitimate path to knowing by many, and neither are feelings in one’s own body. “Right” or “correct” knowledge is seen as having to be based on data, numbers, statistics. But where does the knowledge fit in that is based on feeling, based on other dimensions of existence, based on something that cannot be captured by measures of something such as statistical analysis?

One exemplary text speaking about feminist epistemology is Audre Lorde’s “Use of the Erotic.” In this text, she describes the tensions between feeling and knowing. Lorde draws upon the notion of feminist epistemologies in describing the erotic as a “considered source of power
and information within [women’s] lives” (Lorde 53). She claims that there exists the false belief that “only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be strong” (Lorde 53). By stating this, by describing the erotic in this way, she is highlighting the societal notion that real and true knowledge does not necessarily come from within. She continues, “as women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde 53). This only serves to further the idea of “right” knowledge. The erotic, she argues, has “been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation...[and for this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information” (Lorde 54). The words that Lorde utilizes, the “confused” or even “trivial,” is often what other individuals use to describe what they might consider to be inferior forms of knowledge. She continues to include that “the considered phrase, ‘It feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge...” (Lorde 56). The notion of feeling as a matter of knowing is central to the erotic, as well as central to the devaluation of “alternative” modes of knowledge. For Lorde, the erotic is “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (Lorde 56).

Lorde continues to connect the erotic as not only a source of knowledge, but how it is also connected to the body — the erotic, she says, is a “measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (Lorde 54). The erotic is, as Lorde asserts, what “we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives...” (55). The erotic, and thus more largely, feminist epistemology, is also a manner of being fully engaged in knowledge projects. She explains that “the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 54). More than this, Lorde argues that “when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of
the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon
the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense” (58).
Furthermore, recognizing the erotic as a source of knowledge and as a source of power is a
demonstration of accountability to oneself and one’s body. Finally, Lorde begins to close her text
in saying, “in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other
supplied states of being which are not native to me” (Lorde 58). There could not be a more
perfect way to validate what has been considered as “alternative” or “less-than” knowledges.
These knowledges, moreover, as Lorde explains, are not and cannot be less-than, for being in
touch with these modes of knowledges is in and of itself a form of empowerment.

Within the area of feminist epistemologies, there exists feminist standpoint theory.
Feminist standpoint theory is a theory that “claims an epistemic privilege over the character of
gender relations, and of social and psychological phenomena in which gender is implicated, on
behalf of the standpoint of women” (Anderson). This varies only slightly from the general
understanding of feminist epistemologies because standpoint theory notes that to speak about the
“social and psychological phenomena in which gender is implicated,” a woman, or any
individual who experiences oppression due to gender identity, is the best individual to speak
about such issues (Anderson). On the other hand, feminist epistemologies in general simply
describes how one’s gender affects one’s way of knowing. Standpoint theory, furthermore, is
also a core tenet of Black feminism, and was first introduced in this iteration by Patricia Hill
Collins in her text, Black Feminist Thought. In this book, Collins outlines standpoint theory to
recognize the standpoint of Black women, while also recognizing the differences that exist
among Black women. Moreover, the shared experiences among Black women lead to the
development of their unique standpoint. Throughout the many texts that Collins has written
utilizing standpoint theory, she describes this specific theory as “stressing the interconnectedness of group experiences and collective knowledge” to further emphasize “the significance of Black women’s experiences for generating new questions, issues, and interpretations…” (43).

Just as intersectionality has often been described as a tool to liberate all individuals, following the sentiment of uplifting the most marginalized lifts up all, Collins presents standpoint theory as a manner of achieving the same goal. For Collins, standpoint theory provides not only insight into what she describes as “the African American experience,” but also “on the basic concepts used to describe that experience” (43). In other words, standpoint theory “not only reveals new knowledge just about Black women’s lives but enriches our theoretical understanding of the meaning of the political” (Collins 44). The “political,” in other words, cannot solely be composed of white women’s experiences or white men’s experiences, but must include a variety of different experiences and knowledges to truly understand what precisely is the “political.” In fact, Collins, throughout, connects intersectionality as a core tenet leading to the development of standpoint theory — these prove to be the two dimensions of standpoint epistemology (the “potential utility of centering on Black women’s experiences” and the “significance of using paradigms of intersectionality in interpreting social phenomena). She writes that within standpoint epistemology, there appears “the significance of using paradigms of intersectionality in interpreting social phenomenon” (Collins 44). She argues that “centering on Black women’s experiences produces not only new knowledge but new ways of thinking about such knowledge…” (44). Utilizing intersectional frameworks via standpoint epistemology, ultimately, is critical in “explaining not just Black women’s experiences but the overall organization of social structure and culture itself” (Collins 44).
In addition to feminist epistemologies, embodiment studies may work hand-in-hand to construct a more solid grounding of how knowledge and theorizations of sexual consent are produced. Embodiment studies, a relatively new term to describe different modes of epistemology, seeks to “understand human life as the life of the body in a physical universe and...to restore bodily experiences as an essential subject of knowledge and ways of knowing” (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). Core concepts of embodiment studies include, but are not limited to, embodied epistemology, ecological bodies, and social bodies. The notion of embodied epistemology describes the attempts to “locate, critique and seek to mend dichotomies, binaries and dualisms – such as, mind/body, knowledge/belief, self/other, spirit/matter, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, and science/art…” (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). The notion of ecological bodies seeks to “investigate relationships to land and place and to other nonhuman bodies, and gain an understanding of the rootedness of emotions, ethics and cognition in the more-than-human world” (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). Finally, the notion of social bodies moves to gain “an understanding of intersecting social identities and the ways that these identities shape bodily experience and knowledge” (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). In addition, this final notion explores the “intersection of embodiment, justice, privilege, power and activism” (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). Each of these three principles serves to highlight the aim of embodiment studies to underscore legitimacy and gravity of the body-based knowledges.

As noted, embodiment studies seek to ground knowledge in bodily experiences. Knowledge is intimately connected to one’s body, and one’s experience of their body and experiences because of their body. While feminist epistemologies, a concept among them being standpoint theory, is connected to how social identities affect knowledge, embodiment studies,
on the other hand, attempts to connect these bodily experiences to knowledge — bodily experiences that may derive from gendered experiences or racialized experiences. Embodiment studies seeks to more generally expand upon the notion of embodied knowledge, which essentially posits that bodies know how to act on their own. Embodiment studies and feminist epistemologies are critical to the changing understanding of sexual consent. Embodiment studies as it points to “restoring bodily experiences as an essential subject of knowledge and ways of knowing,” proves to be a foundation upon which one may then begin to theorize and conceptualize sexual consent (“Embodiment Studies Concentration”). Sexual consent, after all, is tied to the body. We ask, how can we talk about these liberation movements without talking about the body when the body has been the primary site of oppression that has spurred these liberation movements?

Retheorizing Sexual Consent

There have been many academics who have written about sexual consent, and much literature has been produced on the subject. The iterations of consent that are more common in the public imagination include “yes means yes” models and “no means no” models. However, within the past decades, feminist scholars have done much work to develop models of sexual consent that reach beyond such stagnant frameworks. Models of consent cannot simply follow a “yes means yes” or a “no means no” without any complication because the reality of giving and receiving consent is much more involved than that. Much like the dictations of intersectionality, modes of consent must be more complex than that because the giving and receiving of consent does not inherently reflect that. One of my first introductions to a more comprehensive consent model was a talk given by a member of Black and Pink, a queer liberation and prison abolition
project. In explaining sexual violence that occurs within prison systems, and the representations and diversities of sexuality within the system, they argued that an incarcerated individual cannot consent to any sexual act within the prison system, such as to a guard or an officer, because the power dynamics between them are simply too great. This situation is only one example of how discussions of sexual consent cannot follow unidirectional models and must consider societal factors and political implications. Just as the moderator explained a circumstance between incarcerated individual and prison official, there are many other manners in which similar power dynamics permeate other sexual encounters.

One work that has been instrumental in my understandings of the radical potentials of a more complicated consent model is Robin Bauer’s *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*. This text, published in 2014, follows Bauer’s extensive research within queer BDSM-practicing communities, and illustrates how the “transgressive nature of BDSM allows [these individuals] to push their own and social boundaries, engaging with social difference and power dynamics, appropriating them for their own pleasures” (13). The book focuses intimately on the lives and experiences of those who identify both as queer and as BDSM-practicing, but the significance of the book reaches far beyond these communities. This text, by and large, focuses on more than just the “critical consent-making processes,” but on the interpersonal, interrelational factors that affect these consent-making processes. Bauer aptly argues that “all relationships involve power issues and the potential for the abuse of positions of power” (76). With this said, we must pay attention to those power dynamics and those potentials.

One of the most critical ideas that Bauer brings to the forefront is the phenomenon of sexual interaction being “increasingly constructed as occurring between egalitarian partners whose intimate bodily interactions are devoid of power dynamics and anything that may be
thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame, or discomfort” (3). He continues to refer to this ideal as “harmonic sex,” which, Bauer argues, “serves to obscure the fact that the sexual, constructed as the most intimate and private sphere of interaction, is not distinct from socio-political contexts, but is infused with power dynamics just like every other area of life” (3). In other words, it is the “depoliticized, privatized and sanitized ideal of the pure relationship” (Bauer 3). As one can observe, this is simply not true — the realm of sexuality is indubitably just as affected by power relations as any other sphere of one’s life. Bauer, moreover, is attempting to recognize the “complications of consent” that arise “through individuals and social hierarchies…” (75).

In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” author Gayle S. Rubin too argues for a sociopolitical understanding of sexuality. Rubin argues that the “realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression” (143). She continues, “as with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity” (Rubin 143). As such, sexuality is “imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental” (Rubin 143). In this sense, Rubin argues, “sex is always political” (143). For Rubin, and for Bauer, sexuality cannot be separated from all other sociopolitical constructions, such a formulation is what Rubin refers to as “sexual essentialism,” and is similar to Bauer’s notion of “harmonic sex” in that Rubin defines it as “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions” (149). Sexual essentialism, moreover, considers “sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical” (Rubin 149). This is far from the truth. Sexuality is constantly changing, constantly developing, and increasingly vulnerable to social hierarchies and other modes of oppression.
One social hierarchy that Bauer writes of is the power relations of gender, and more specifically, gender-based oppression. He explains, for example, that “some lesbian feminists ...[point]...out that women specially have been socialized into consenting to male dominance in a patriarchal culture” (Bauer 76). Moreover, this school of thought argues “even if a woman consents to dominance, this does not mean she does so of her own free will” (Bauer 76). While dimensions of this argument pertain specifically to those who practice BDSM, this argument more generally still holds. Even outside of the realm of BDSM, “in this line of reasoning, the giving of consent only proves how effective the internalization of oppression is” (Bauer 76).

Catharine MacKinnon, a noted radical feminist, argues that “it is not possible for women to give consent to men due to the current power relations between men and women” (Beres 98).

MacKinnon, in her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, published in 1989, puts forth the argument that sexuality is, more specifically than what has already been noted, a locus of male dominance. MacKinnon asserts that “male dominance is sexual” (127). This means that “men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize hierarchy...” and gender is one such hierarchy (MacKinnon 127). Furthermore, she argues that “a theory of sexuality becomes feminist...to the extent it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power; defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive of male power” (MacKinnon 128).

The radical feminist approach to sexual consent, as characterized by MacKinnon, is exactly as it is so named: radical. MacKinnon, in her work, alleges “that women are categorised according to a dichotomous ‘Madonna/Whore’ model of female sexuality” (Moore and Reynolds 31). She argues that “virtuous and virginal girls do not consent, while wives, prostitutes and unvirtuous women do nothing but consent” (Moore and Reynolds 31). Even “in a situation where an explicit verbal consent has been given, it takes place within a context of unequal power
relations between men and women and, therefore, the quality of that consent is flawed…” (Moore and Reynolds 31). This is where MacKinnon’s argument lays — consent under male patriarchy actually cannot be given or received because women will always feel obligated to consent and cannot do so out of their own free will. However, many authors have since criticized this point of view. Radical feminism’s take on sexual consent is not necessarily one which describes the experiences of all women, or all individuals. In the text, “Feminist Approaches to Sexual Consent: Radical Feminism versus Post-Feminism,” authors Allison Moore and Paul Reynolds argue that “as soon as heterosexual sex is seen as more complex, or involving pleasure for women, the radical position becomes far more fragile” (32). The authors allege that “the claim that consent is meaningless under hetero-patriarchy is epistemologically flawed” because it implies that all women feel the same degree of oppression by all of the men who are equally oppressing them (32). This is to say that “the problem [radical feminists] face is in defending the idea that gender is significant and important in shaping, if not determining, women’s experience of consenting to sex, without usurping or disparaging women’s subjective experiences of sexual consent and sexual pleasure, which are to some degree diverse, contradictory and contingent” (39). Moreover, the issue that is presented to those who undertake this position is that there do exist realities in which women who engage in heterosexual sex are doing so in ways that are pleasurable, and in ways that are equal. We must complicate consent to a higher degree in understanding that gender is a significant determinant of women’s experience of consent but does not prove to be an obstacle so that they may never consent.

While many have criticized the theorizations of sexual consent put forth by radical feminists, especially by MacKinnon, some of MacKinnon’s ideas still hold value. Primarily, her argument that “there is no ungendered reality or ungendered perspective,” is particularly
poignant in these discussions of sexual consent and can indubitably be extended to include the fact that there too is no unracialized reality or unracialized perspective (MacKinnon 636). Just as MacKinnon argues that in a world in which patriarchy is pervasive, racism is ubiquitous, and so any discussion of sexual consent regarding gender hierarchies must also include racial hierarchies. Additionally, MacKinnon is accurate in asserting that sexuality “is a pervasive dimension of social life, one that permeates the whole, a dimension along which gender occurs and through which gender is socially constituted…” (Toward a Feminist Theory of the State 130). This argument is especially powerful when she adds, “it is a dimension along with other social divisions, like race and class…play themselves out” (MacKinnon 130). Many of her ideas cannot be applied to all women, such as her argument that “the deeper problem is that women are socialized to passive receptivity; may have or perceive no alternative to acquiescence; may prefer it to the escalated risk of injury and the humiliation of a lost fight; submit to survive” (MacKinnon 177). However, many of MacKinnon’s arguments still are relevant in complicating the discussion of consent.

There have been attempts to institutionalize other models of consent, such as the Antioch College Code. This consent model was one pursuit to expand and complicate discussions of sexual consents. After two instances of sexual assault on the campus, the college adopted a sexual consent policy modeling ongoing verbal affirmation. Within this framework of sexual consent, consent must be “(a) verbal, (b) mutual, and (c) reiterated for every new level of sexual behavior” (“College Students’ Perceptions of Women’s Verbal and Nonverbal Consent for Sexual Intercourse”). Antioch College was one of the first schools to adopt a code such as this, and soon became the subject of much backlash. Bauer theorizes that “the resistance to the Antioch College Code...was largely caused by its implicit attack on heteronormative ideas about
sexuality, namely, that sex is natural and not something that is learned…” (87). Additionally, Bauer argues that the Antioch College Code disrupted the idea that “the male in heterosexual encounters orchestrates the encounter, which is geared toward his desires and a heteronormative script” (87). In Bauer’s understanding, the Antioch College Code normalized an alternative mode of sexuality, a communicative sexuality, that was consequently seen as threatening “heteronormative ideas about sexuality” (87). The reactions to the Antioch College Code serve to cement the presence of ideologies of sex as “natural” and direct communication as antithetical to sexual encounters.

Bauer, in his book, integrates other past studies into his analysis of queer BDSM-practicing consent-making processes that build upon the ways in which the reactions to the Antioch College Code took place. One such study was done by Terry Humphreys and is entitled, “Understanding Sexual Consent: An Empirical Investigation of the Normative Script for Young Heterosexual Adults.” In this study, Humphreys finds “that most heterosexuals tend to think that sex is supposed to function naturally, to be spontaneous and unplanned, without any communication, and the partners should be consumed by passion” (Bauer 87). In fact, Humphreys finds that “heterosexual men actually interpreted communication during sex as a sign of failure” (Bauer 87). This is not a new idea of any sorts. Many individuals, and as Humphrey points out, many cisgender heterosexual men, opt into the ideology of sex as something that is “spontaneous and unplanned,” and communication as something that opposes the natural direction of sexual activity. This proves to be one reason why responses to the Antioch College Code were so strong — communication is understood by many as the antithesis to sex. Bauer responds to this argument, noting that “…consent usually means agreeing on a frame of actions,” but does not mean actually mean agreeing “on every detail or a precise script” (81). Instead,
consenting “creates flexible boundaries around a theme” and thusly, “negotiations do not eliminate the spontaneity of a session” (Bauer 81-2). In this moment, Bauer is offering a counterargument to problematize how many understand communication and sexual encounters as the former meaning the latter has been unsuccessful.

One other study that was done on young people’s understandings of consent was published in 1999 and focused on how “young women and men communicate sexual consent in heterosexual situations” (Hickman and Muehlenhard). The authors of this study also came to conclusions that echo those provided by the reactions to the Antioch College Code. These authors found “that indirect communication in sexual situations is favored because it enables one to gain sexual access while avoiding explicit rejection and the social awkwardness that goes with it…” (Bauer 80). Bauer offers that “this problem might be solved in part by a sex-positive approach that accepts sexual rejection as integral to the negotiation process…” (80). Bauer finds a solution to individuals’ dislike for communication, arguing that if a reason for not communicating is fear of rejection, then we should simply normalize rejection. While Bauer’s statement is critical to keep in mind when conceptualizing consent, the authors of the 1999 study are arguing more generally that “definitions of consent need to allow for the possibility that people use a variety of verbal and nonverbal behaviors to communicate consent” (Hickman and Muehlenhard 259). That is to say, while nonverbal methods of communication should not be recognized solely as it is weaponized as a method of avoiding rejection and uncomfortableness, the authors of the 1999 study argue that nonverbal methods of communication, as they exist positively within sexuality, are still important to conceptualizing consent. Finally, these authors state, as has been noted before, that “when conceptualizing consent, it is important to consider the context in which consent occurs” (Hickman and Muehlenhard 259). That is to say, an
individual “may be unable to give or withhold consent freely as a result of alcohol or drugs, threat of harm, economic coercion, or compulsory heterosexuality” (Hickman and Muehlenhard 259).

Compulsory heterosexuality is a term popularized by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 text “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” In this essay, Rich puts forth the argument that heterosexuality is not intrinsic to all individuals, but rather heterosexuality is imposed upon many individuals. Compulsory heterosexuality is an aspect of male, patriarchal power, which includes such other elements as “men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce...to use them as objects in male transactions...or to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments” (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 639). While Rich goes on to describe how any woman can opt to be a lesbian, which one may agree or disagree with, the arguments taken from her publication include recognizing the power of an institutionalized heterosexuality. The authors of this literature on sexual consent, in adopting and utilizing Rich’s conceptualization of compulsory heterosexuality, are echoing the sentiment that sociopolitical constructions indubitably affect how or why someone consents.

In 2008, feminist authors Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti published a collection of essays called Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape, combining the writings of many different authors and scholars. In one of the essays entitled “Reclaiming Touch: Rape Culture, Explicit Verbal Consent, and Body Sovereignty,” author Hazel/Cedar Troost prompts readers to rethink the politics of touch. Ze writes that practically “any oppression you care to name works at least in part by controlling or claiming ownership of the bodies of those oppressed” (171). For this reason, the author implores readers to reformulate
previously-held conceptions of touch. The author includes an exercise to begin this path, asking “to those of you who no longer negotiate, or never have negotiated, consent with your partner(s): Try it. You might be surprised at how much touch you don’t want but accept—or do want and don’t ask for” (173). Hir argument about unconsciously accepting touch, and not realizing that it is not a desired touch, is indubitably reminiscent of arguments like that of MacKinnon. There are many pervasive ways in which modes of oppression affect one’s life and undertaking mindful consent may highlight these courses.

In this essay, Troost also utilizes the metaphor of a map, arguing that “assumptive touch always involves some kind of map” (175). This map of consent establishes a pyramid of consent, implying that “consent to one form of touch implies consent to all forms at its level or below (i.e., if groping is fine, hugging will be, too)” (175). While the author points out many problems with this top-down model of consent, arguing that these maps “erase hir power and agency as an ongoing self-determiner and co-creator of touch,” the author additionally notes that “culturally speaking, who is drawing the map for whom also matters” (175). Ze writes, for example, “A map drawn by white Christians won’t account for the experiences of a black person who is sensitive to white people wanting to touch hir hair, nor a traditional Buddhist who assigns ritual significance to the head and feet…” (175). Even more, a “map drawn by cis people fails utterly to predict what kinds of gendered touch (which is all touch, sexual or not) a trans person will want or accept” (175). Under these measures, models of sexual consent must consider varying identities and experiences, in ways that reflect the multidimensional aspects of sexuality.

Sexual consent, as has been illustrated, is meant to define a variety of boundaries. It might be used to distinguish “pleasurable sex from unpleasurable sex” or “morally unproblematic sex from morally problematic sex,” or even “good” sex from “bad” sex (Beres
Beres, author of "'Spontaneous' Sexual Consent," argues that "the boundaries created by these arbitrary definitions confuse the understanding of consent" (95). That is to say, if "these distinctions represent the boundary created by consent, then we should be able to distinguish consensual from non-consensual sex by examining the resulting sexual activity," to observe if the resulting sexual activity falls under being pleasurable, being good, being morally unproblematic, or any of the other categories listed. Just as Troost had prompted readers to think about the touch one does not want, but accepts, Beres too argues, "there are likely many people who have participated in sex that was not pleasurable, although they would argue it was consensual, nonviolent, and non-coercive" (95). In addition, "although consensual sex may be good... not every instance of consensual sex is by default 'good'..." (Beres 95). Moreover, if "we are to use consent as the boundary between good and bad sex, we also need to define what we mean by 'good' and 'bad' sex" (Beres 95). In the section that follows, the categorizations of positive and negative sexual experiences are explored through intimate justice frameworks.

In these conceptualizations of sexual consent, it is also essential to talk about the other side of discussions of consent, specifically when there have not been able to be discussions of consent. That is to say, in the historical construction of women of color as hypersexual, especially of Black women as hypersexual, there exists another dimension of understanding sexual consent. When women are constructed in this way, as hypersexual, they too are constructed as not being able to consent due to such characteristics, as if their perceived hypersexuality speaks for their sexual desires. This is not a social trend that affects just Black women but is implicated within other marginalized groups of women – indigeneity or tribal heritage functions similarly. In the white patriarchal gaze, or in the patriarchal gaze in general, women who embody these characteristics are often viewed as “unable to be raped” because their
bodies are constantly consenting. Additionally, if the argument is that these women are unable to be raped, then they that signifies that they too are unable to consent. However, we know this not to be true. No person inherently is without sexual agency, without bodily agency, but these are characteristics that have instead been stripped from a person by another. No person is innately “unrapeable,” but it is someone, something else, that constructs them as such. When talking about sexual consent, and in delving into the theoretical aspects of sexual consent, it is critical to hold the realities of sexual consent closely. It can be easy to become enveloped in theoretical discussions, but these conversations must continue to make sure they reflect the realities of those to whom they speak.

As illustrated, there have been many authors of sexual consent contributing to this ever-developing field of thought. Their ideas have assisted in breaking down commonly-held iterations of consent that are limited to “yes means yes” and “no means no” models. Additionally, through their work, one comes to understand precisely how and why models of consent cannot adopt a unidirectional model of “yes means yes” or a “no means no.” The realities of giving consent is much more complicated than what these frameworks so often propose. In *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, Bauer concludes his findings of how consent and consent-making processes exist within queer BDSM communities when he writes,

*I propose an understanding of the foundation of dyke and queer BDSM practices as negotiated consent or working consent to stress that consent is not to be taken for granted, but has to be actively and critically established, and even then will always remain relative in a culture of social hierarchies and given its affective character...I understand the concept of consent as critical in two regards. First it is negotiated in a power sensitive way. Second, because of the inherent limits to rational control over social interactions consent is always critical in the sense that it remains precarious and provisional. Understanding consent-making processes as ongoing is, therefore, crucial (99).*

His findings of the forms that consent takes in queer BDSM-practicing spaces can be reflected in the general conclusions of the multitude of other consent literature. He argues that consent is not
meant to be assumed and consent needs to be constantly and consistently manifested. Ultimately, because consent is implicated in power relations, consent must primarily be understood as a process and a secondarily, as a process that is conditional and ever-changing.

It is Bauer’s conclusion that will lead us into the subsequent section regarding intimate justice. While he asserts a few closing statements, the whole of the text follows Bauer’s primary argument that “no one truth will emerge in this book, but instead we will see non-dissolvable contradictions” (12). This declaration proves to be true throughout the review of sexual consent literature – each author takes a different stance, presents a contrasting argument, complex and through in its own right. Even Beres, in “‘Spontaneous’ sexual consent,” moves to point out that “within the literature on sexual consent there is no consensus on what it is, how it should be defined or how it is communicated” (94). While this is a statement that is found to be true, it is also legitimate that sexual consent exists in this way. Sexual consent, and sexuality more broadly, is complicated and attempts to describe how it might be acquired or given under the construction of society is more complex still. Even if there is no consensus for what a more radical, more accurate model of consent can look like, as Beres argues, at least it may be seen that models of consent cannot follow simple “no means no” or “yes means yes” models. An intimate justice framework, moreover, helps us to re-center theorizations of sexual consent and sexual satisfaction.

On the Significance of an Intimate Justice Framework

In the introduction to this thesis, a few key sources were mentioned as providing the foundation, the inspiration, for this project. One of those texts was Lili Loofbourow’s “The female price of male pleasure.” As described, this article was written in response to the
allegations that were brought against Aziz Ansari and alleges that women “are enculturated to be uncomfortable most of the time” and more importantly, “to ignore their discomfort” (“The female price of male pleasure”). An interesting point to which Loofbourow devotes much of her article is how research published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* shows that “30 percent of women report pain during vaginal sex, 72 percent report pain during anal sex, and ‘large proportions’ don’t tell their partners when sex hurts” (“The female price of male pleasure”). Not only was pain a relatively common experience among women, but also it was seldom discussed between partners when it occurred. Loofbourow continues to illustrate how modern discussions of consent fail to include how the discussion of what constitutes “bad sex” is implicated in the maintenance of rape culture. Loofbourow integrates selections from McClelland’s “Intimate Justice: Sexual Satisfaction in young adults,” in which researchers found that men and women had vastly different criteria for categorizing “bad sex.” Researchers found that “while women imagined the low end to include the potential for extremely negative feelings and the potential for pain, men imagined the low end to represent the potential for less satisfying sexual outcomes, but they never imagined harmful or damaging outcomes for themselves” (“The female price of male pleasure”). McClelland’s framework of intimate justice extends to link “experiences of inequity in the sociopolitical domain with how individuals imagine and evaluate the quality of their sexual and relational experiences” (“Intimate Justice” 1010). In other words, intimate justice “encourages researchers to question how social conditions, such as racial and gender-based stereotypes...and sexual stigma...impact what individuals feel they deserve in their intimate lives” (“Intimate Justice” 1010).

This notion is not unlike what scholars of sexuality and of sexual consent have argued — sexuality is just as affected by sociopolitical constructions as any other aspect of one’s life.
While intimate justice as a framework is largely tied to other critical debates about life satisfaction, intimate justice within the confines of this thesis serves to expand upon the arguments already put forth by feminist scholars and scholars of sexual consent. Moreover, critical to McClelland’s framework of intimate justice is investigating “the role that expectation plays when a person decides if they are in fact fulfilled” (“Intimate Justice: A Critical Analysis” 663). She writes, “studies have been able to determine that individuals expect varying outcomes from their intimate and sexual relationships…” (“Intimate Justice: A Critical Analysis” 664). In other words, the discrepancies in what constitutes a negative sexual experience leads McClelland to argue that the expectations, therefore, are varying. Within the framework of intimate justice, McClelland posits that certain individuals exhibit more of a sense of entitlement to a positive sexual experience and expect the experience to go as such. Intimate justice centralizes the pathways to the “development of entitlement to justice in the intimate domain – including both freedom from harm and coercion, as well as experiences of pleasure and satisfaction” (“Intimate Justice: A Critical Analysis” 672).

It is critical to note that McClelland’s framework of intimate justice is less focused on the notion of sexual consent – the word “consent” is not mentioned a single time in her title work – and are more centered upon sexual satisfaction. This broadening functions two ways. In one way, it works similarly to the transition between the traditional model of “no means no” into “yes means yes” as a positive model of offering enthusiastic consent because the concept of “sexual satisfaction,” as compared to “sexual consent,” focuses on the right of all people to enjoy sex and their sexuality free from coercion and violence. Secondly, this broadening acknowledges in a more precise manner the complexities of sexual consent. Intimate justice, as will be demonstrated, not only describes McClelland’s work, but the work of other scholars who have
put forward their own interpretation of intimate justice to recognize all the circumstances that facilitate the “could” of sexual violence.

To demonstrate further this second point, implicated in the development of an intimate justice framework is the understanding that many feminist scholars and scholars of sexuality have come to — the coexistence of pleasure with danger. McClelland, the author of the intimate justice framework, is also the author of two texts entitled “Sexuality, Pleasure, Power, and Danger: Points of Tension, Contradiction, and Conflict,” and “Working at the crossroads of pleasure and danger,” in which she, along with the other authors, speaks to the coexistence of pleasure and danger. This conjunction leads them to develop the possibilities of a critical sexuality field, a field that connects the two sentiments. They argue that critical sexuality studies would “invite a more serious consideration of the sorts of unresolved tensions that exist for women’s sexuality, particularly the ongoing tensions between pleasure and danger” (“Sexuality, Pleasure, Power, and Danger” 234). Pleasure and danger, furthermore, are two feelings that have always existed very closely together. The authors argue that “sex simultaneously operates as a potential locus for violence/trauma and a potential site of pleasure” (“Working at the crossroads” 4). The authors posit, “what does it mean for women to experience both pleasure and danger, perhaps simultaneously or perhaps at different stages of their lives, as part of their sexualities?” (“Working at the crossroads” 2). In addition, they ask, “what does it mean, for example, that women sometimes experience their sexuality as infused with anxieties about pornography, sexual violence, and insidious silences about their bodies and desires?” (“Working at the crossroads” 2). The authors describe the linkage both as “pleasure combined with danger, but also pleasure experienced as danger…” (“Working at the crossroads” 2). What does it mean, then, for
sexuality to be contingent upon danger? How is one meant to interpret and interrogate their sexuality if it has historically been so tied to danger?

This linkage is also presented by Deborah L. Tolman, in her article, “Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls’ Struggles for/with Sexuality.” The guiding question of this article is, “how do girls enter their sexual lives and learn to negotiate or respond to their sexuality?” (Tolman 375). This question proves to be especially significant because of the coexistence of pleasure and danger. Tolman writes that for these young girls, “their experiences of sexual desire are strong and pleasurable, yet they speak very often not of the power of desire but of how their desire may get them into trouble” (383). While Tolman is inevitably focusing on the forms of danger that are affecting younger women specifically, they are forms of danger nonetheless. She writes, “larger societal forces of social control in the form of compulsory heterosexuality, the policing of girls’ bodies through school codes, and medical images play a clear part in forcing this silence and dissociation” (Tolman 384). Not only this, but Tolman can observe in the participants in her study the role of “specific relational dynamics, such as concern about reputation that can easily be besmirched by other girls and by boys, fear of male violence in intimate relationships, and fear of violent repercussion of violating norms of heterosexuality” (Tolman 384). What is very present throughout these discussions of pleasure and danger is its nature of duality. Tolman, throughout her text, is recognizing the “duality of their sexuality…” while also championing young people’s ability “to have safe contexts in which they can explore both danger and desire” (384).

Besides McClelland’s work on intimate justice, there is another intimate justice at work. Intimate justice has been a phrase utilized by many different scholars in many different contexts. Unlike other well-established concepts such as intersectionality or the politics of silence,
intimate justice varies in its significances among texts. For example, one text focusing on intimate justice, entitled “Intimate justice: confronting issues of accountability, respect, and freedom in treatment for abuse and violence,” is set within a marital and family therapy context. The authors of this text describe intimate justice theory, as they so call it, as a set of three interrelated concepts “that describe the ethical dimensions of equality, fairness, and care in ongoing partnerships” (Jory 399). The authors describe these three concepts as the three dimensions of justice. The first dimension, equality, is centered on “establishing equal rights and responsibilities...and incorporates concepts of mutual respect, freedom to make choices and seek self-fulfillment, and accountability for one’s behavior, including responsibility for self-examination of one’s internalized beliefs” (Jory 401). The second dimension, fairness, “focuses on fairness in negotiation processes of the partnership...and incorporates concepts of reciprocity and equitable exchange, non-deceptive communication, mutuality in working towards shared goals and outcomes, and appropriate accommodation of differences and imperfections in one another” (Jory 401). The final dimension, care, centers on “the ethical dimensions of intimacy: empathy, nurturance, and attachment” (Jory 401). The authors assert that intimate justice, as a theoretical framework, “conceptualizes care as a form of power because whom and what one cares about are significant forces in bringing structure and meaning to one’s life and because
choosing to care is a decision to accept responsibility…” (Jory 401). The authors of this text include a diagram of the dimensions and concepts of intimate justice theory.

The extended conceptualization of intimate justice theory includes these nine concepts, with the three core concepts already defined. There includes in the dimensions of intimate justice theory such concepts as freedom to make choices and seek self-fulfillment, respect for gender, race, and social heritage, accountability for considering social rules and authority, among many others. As one can see, the extended concepts are still based on a core understanding of equality, fairness, and care.

While all of these nine concepts are critical in conjunction with discussions of sexual consent, one aspect is particularly poignant. The concept of accountability is often lost within discussions of sexual consent and intimate justice. The authors argue that “in any partnership,
mutual accountability serves to structure equal rights and responsibilities and to mark how equal the partners are; equal partners demand similar levels of accountability…” (Jory 407). The division of responsibilities is often lost. This connects to the discussion of feminist theories of the body and what it means to live in a gendered, racialized, and classed body. How can responsibilities be shared between two or more individuals when different bodies require different responsibilities? For example, there are many ways that sex affects people with vaginas different than they do people with penises. The CDC published a fact sheet describing ten distinct ways that STIs may affect vaginas differently than they do penises. For example, the biology of the vagina is one core factor for this discrepancy. The CDC notes that “the lining of the vagina is thinner and more delicate than the skin on a penis, so it’s easier for bacteria and viruses” to grow and flourish (“CDC Fact Sheet”). Additionally, because of the anatomy of the vagina and the physicality of the quotidian processes, people with vaginas may be more likely to confuse or to mistake symptoms of an STI. That is to say, because vaginas are often in process of discharge and shedding, symptoms of an STI may appear normal. While the CDC continues to list other ways in which STIs differently impact vaginas, they emphasize that those with vaginas “disproportionately bear the long-term consequences” of STIs (“CDC Fact Sheet”). Furthermore, in these discussions of intimate justice, and in all that it embodies, being attentive to the biology of bodies is critical in maintaining respect and accountability. For people with vaginas who chose to have sex with people with penises, there already exists an inherent disjuncture between the responsibilities of their bodies. To attain true accountability, partners must remain attentive to the different needs of their bodies and the ways that specific individuals may “disproportionately bear the long-term consequences” of STIs.
In many ways, this CDC report presents concrete examples for ways in which concepts of intimate justice, namely accountability, may play themselves out. Other aspects of intimate justice, such as mutuality and collaborative decision-making, are present in dimensions of other frameworks, such as reproductive justice. Through reproductive justice, one comes to understand how women and men interact with sexual decision making, such as condom use, especially as it serves as an HIV prevention tool. Reproductive justice is a term coined by the Atlanta-based women of color collective, SisterSong and is defined as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children one has in safe and sustainable communities” (“Reproductive Justice”). Embedded within a framework of reproductive justice is the right for one to practice their sexuality free from danger and harm. In many structural interventions to HIV prevention and care, academics and activists are beginning to reconceptualize condom usage as a tool within this system. Presenting condom usage as an egalitarian intention is erroneous because in doing so, individuals are failing to recognize “the cultural construction and social organization of gender and sexuality in many societies [that] disempowers women and girls, making them particularly vulnerable to HIV infection” (Auerbach 1658).

Lisa Bowleg et. al, in “Gender Roles, Power Strategies, and Precautionary Sexual Self-Efficacy: Implications for Black and Latina Women’s HIV/AIDS Protective Behaviors,” expands upon the notion of how gendered and racialized power dynamics are implicated in sexual encounters, and particularly as it is related to HIV prevention and decision-making. The authors explain that in “the context of HIV/AIDS, gender-related dynamics are relevant to whether women will take an active or passive role in sexual situations including, but not limited to, initiating discussions with a sexual partner about safer sex practices, deciding whether and
when safer sex practices will occur, using strategies to negotiate or assert power to protect their own health, or refusing to engage in risky sexual practices (614).” Bowleg is arguing that gender dynamics are critical to understanding how sexual encounters will unfold, and therefore are critical to HIV/AIDS care and prevention. For example, as Hortensia Amaro explains in “Love, Sex, and Power: Considering Women’s Realities in HIV Prevention,” the primary “prevention method available today to reduce sexual transmission of HIV is a traditional condom, which requires male cooperation and, thus, places women at a disadvantage for determining their exposure to risky sexual behaviors” (437). In other words, prevention methods that focus on “just using a condom,” as noted, are often tone-deaf in that these models do not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which power dynamics play their role in sexual encounters, decision-making, and thusly, sexual disempowerment.

These prevention models, as Amaro alleges, are “based on the assumption that sexual behaviors and encounters are controlled totally by the individual and that these encounters are always initiated under the individual’s control” (440). There are a variety of other contextual factors that may describe how an individual interacts in a sexual encounter. Other academics and activists writing within HIV prevention and care reiterate Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality in noting that “identities and statuses based on race, sexual orientation, class, gender, and other categories serve as organizing principles and help to determine how power is distributed, (im)balanced, maintained, and challenged” in sexual encounters (Watkins-Hayes 434). Furthermore, it is critical that race always be part of these dynamics. As Amaro explains, “psychologists know that knowledge about HIV or even skill in using condoms do not sufficiently describe the contextual factors that affect women's ability to engage in safer sex” (439). As these authors have all stated, HIV prevention interventions that simply rely upon
messages of using a condom fail to recognize how these discussions are not situated with an egalitarian context. Using an external condom, in its core nature, as Amaro signals, is disproportionately dependent upon the mutual effort of the partner who will be utilizing the external condom. Not only this, but as it is dependent upon other social categories of identity, condom usage may not always be able to be negotiated as a result of outstanding power dynamics between sexual partners. Ultimately, intimate justice as it describes mutuality as a key dynamic between sexual, and other, partnerships, demands collaborative decision-making related to condom usage and commitment to shared outcomes, such as HIV prevention.

There is one final iteration of intimate justice. Intimate justice is also used as the title of a work by Shatema Threadcraft, the entire title being Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic. Intimate Justice is a book that recounts the histories of struggles for freedom and equality “for the embodied black female subject, the struggle to use the powers and capacities of the black female body freely and equally” (Intimate Justice). Intimate Justice tells stories that have “been marked by infanticides, widespread and systematic sexual violence as a weapon of racial terror, coerced sterilizations, and other racially targeted techniques of population control, as well as racially biased child removal policies” (Intimate Justice). Ultimately, it asks what “what conceptions of freedom and corrective justice are necessary for the embodied black feminine subject” (Intimate Justice). Intimate Justice, furthermore, reminds us once more of the importance of linked liberation. We can see so clearly how, in this case, when we talk about intimate justice, we cannot separate the three bodies of work, the three different yet connected modes of liberation. Both racial and gender dynamics, as well as class and age dynamics, are present in these sexual encounters and indubitably affect one’s experience of these interactions.
Intimate justice frameworks, the plural, build upon the re-theorizations of sexual consent presented in the previous chapter. But these frameworks differ from these re-theorizations in that they divide components of critical analysis not solely among consent, but also among issues of accountability, of sexual satisfaction, of biology, of linked liberation. Through the frameworks of intimate justice, one is able to access a deeper, more profound understanding of the possibilities of sexual satisfaction and of sexual consent. Through the work presented not only on intimate justice as a category of analysis, but also on debates of pleasure and danger, of accountability, intimate justice denotes a more complex ideology than we could have imagined. Although sexual consent literature often does not come to a singular conclusion, which only mirrors the nature of sexual consent, the intimate justice frameworks offer a different way of conceptualizing sexual consent and sexual satisfaction in ways that build upon each other, not in ways that are constantly contradicting themselves. For this, while it is clear that intimate justice’s main concentration is not sexual consent, based on the lack of discussion of sexual consent in both McClelland’s work and Jory’s work, this is not to say that the work on sexual consent is not central – it is, in fact, of the utmost importance. Sexual consent must be a part of intimate justice, but as written, intimate justice engenders a variety of other aspects of sexuality and sexual encounters to fully envision a world where sexual fulfillment and pleasure are the standard, not the exception.

This Is How You Lose Her, This Is How We All Lose

As has been explained in the beginning of this thesis, the impetus for this research was formed in my reading of Junot Díaz’s This Is How You Lose Her. I desperately wanted to figure out why do these stories hurt so much, and what it was precisely that broke my heart just so.
While *This Is How You Lose Her* is a collection of stories about men — about Yunior, his brother Rafa, and his father Ramon — when I read the collection, I could not help but hurt for the women in each story. While some of the stories are named after the women, “Miss Lora” or “Nilda,” for example, the stories are not about them. The women do not receive the same attention as do the men in these narratives. *This Is How You Lose Her* is without a doubt a complex tale — the significances of the stories are still uncovering themselves. After all the research I have done, coming back to *This Is How You Lose Her* is now infinitely more complicated than it seemed at first. In some ways, I understand more clearly how reading this book brings forth the still-open wounds of sexualized violence. The intricacies of sexual consent are clearer to me more than ever, but it is not obvious that is describes precisely what is occurring in *This Is How You Lose Her*.

In the penultimate story in the collection, “Miss Lora,” Yunior pursues the title character, Miss Lora, a high school teacher. In this moment in the text, Yunior is going after her while he is also in a relationship with a classmate, Paloma. The second time that Yunior and Miss Lora see each other, Yunior writes, “this time you don’t even ask about the condom. You just come inside her. You are surprised at how pissed you are. But she kisses your face over and over and it moves you. No one has ever done that. The girls you boned, they were always ashamed afterward...Here there is none of that” (“Miss Lora”). It is in this scene that one can see how there is complexity to this story, and there is also so much heartbreak to it. We can see softness to Yunior as he describes how Miss Lora would kiss his face “over and over,” something so desired after not receiving the same treatment in previous encounters. Many reviews and critiques of “Miss Lora” speak about the age difference between Yunior and Miss Lora as an important aspect that shapes their relationship. It is here that one might argue how the
relationship was not consensual for Yunior because Miss Lora was of an older stature. However, one response to this reading of “Miss Lora” comes from Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” In this article, Rubin notes that “the primary mechanism for ensuring the separation of sexual generations is age of consent laws” but that “these laws make no distinction between the most brutal rape and the most gentle romance” (Rubin 159). In spite of these laws, minors “are permitted access to ‘adult’ sexuality in other forms” (Rubin 159). While they “are forbidden to see books, movies, or television in which sexuality is ‘too’ graphically portrayed,” it is also “legal for young people to see hideous depictions of violence, but not to see explicit pictures of genitalia” (Rubin 159). The ways in which Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” problematizes critics’ reactions to “Miss Lora” are present in how utilizing age as the sole demarcation for consenting should not be discarded, but fully fails to recognize other, more pervasive power dynamics that impact sexual encounters.

In the way that This Is How You Lose Her is written, and how the stories as a whole are written, one can observe how the text focuses primarily on the pleasure on Yunior. Of his relationship with Miss Lora, Yunior discloses,

You try to be reasonable. You try to control yourself, to be smooth. But you’re at her apartment every fucking day. The one time you try to skip, you recant and end up slipping out of your apartment at three in the morning and knocking furtively on her door until she lets you in. You know I work, right? I know, you say, but I dreamed that something happened to you. That’s sweet of you to lie, she sighs and even though she is falling asleep she lets you bone her straight in the ass. Fucking amazing, you keep saying for all four seconds it takes you to come. You have to pull my hair while you do it, she confides. That makes me shoot like a rocket (“Miss Lora”).

Apart from the fact that parts of the story are literally written from Yunior’s point of view, and other sections from the point of view of Rafa or Ramon, always a masculine perspective, the words continue to emphasize Yunior’s pleasure from and perspectives of his sexual encounters. On the other hand, one cannot clearly observe Miss Lora’s experience of their interactions. The
majority of descriptions that are centered on Miss Lora are dedicated to her physical attributes, to
“how large her eyes were in her thin face, how long her lashes were, how one iris had more
bronze in it than the other” (“Miss Lora”). What little one can see of her own sentiments is
present is the limited explanations of why Miss Lora might come to tolerate what she does. Of
Miss Lora, Yunior notes that her father was “always threatening to kill himself, and at least once
a day she’d had to beg him not to, and that had messed her up but good” (“Miss Lora”). He adds
that “in her youth, she’d been a gymnast, and there was even talk of making the Olympic team,
but then the coach stole the money and the D.R. had to cancel for that year” (“Miss Lora”).
These disappointments she had a child molded her relationship with other people, and
specifically could have shaped the way she interacts with men and other sexual partners.

However, in describing my reaction to Diaz’s work, there too is the fact that these many
of these women are living racialized narratives that I may not be able attend to. While I may see
parts of myself reflected in some of the stories, in some of the women, there are also ways that
they exist that I do not know of. It would be erroneous to mindlessly declare that I am exactly as
they are, that I have experienced the exact same things as these women. But it is in these
moments that one can see the impact of utilizing an intimate justice framework. One can see how
Miss Lora has had various negative experiences that could have colored her conceptualizations
of deservingness. One can also see how Yunior’s experiences and place in the world has
informed a sense of entitlement. To explain, Díaz, in an interview with NPR, explained that he
grew up in a world where he “wasn’t really encouraged to imagine women as fully human” (Gay
107). He notes, “I was in fact pretty much—by the larger culture, by the local culture, by people
around me, by people on TV—encouraged to imagine women as something slightly inferior to
men” (Gay 107). Gay argues that “the influence of that world is plainly apparent throughout This
Is How You Lose Her” in myriad ways (107). There is the way it is plainly reflected in Diaz’s construction of characters. For example, at one point in the text Yunior reflects,

Both your father and your brother were sucios. Shit, your father used to take you on his pussy runs, leave you in the car while he ran up into cribs to bone his girlfriends. Your brother was no better, boning girls in the bed next to yours. Sucios of the worst kind and now it’s official: you are one, too. You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were kidding yourself (“Miss Lora”).

There is also the manner in which this upbringing is mirrored in how Yunior is “a misogynist of the highest order,” and that he is merely “a product of a culture that routinely reduces women, that he is unable to remain faithful to his women, that none of the men in this book are very good to women” (Gay 107). While Gay attempts to remedy this tension by virtue of the text being fiction, Gay urges readers to consider that “we have all been influenced by a culture where women are considered inferior to men,” and therefore, it is legitimate to desire to “see what a writer of Diaz’s caliber might do if he allowed his character to step out of the vacuum he grew up in and that we all still live in” (107). While there is validity to Diaz’s process of writing, Gay’s commentary still returns readers to the power of a language that arises from deeply-embedded cultures of sexism and racism.

In bringing this thesis back to This Is How You Lose Her, this is to say that this thesis is not about This Is How You Lose Her — this thesis, instead, is about the body, it is about sex and sexuality, it is about sexual consent, sexual satisfaction, and intimate justice. This Is How You Lose Her was only the starting point of what became a discussion about sexuality, how one makes the decisions that they do, and what a radical future of sexual pleasure and equality might look like. What this thesis project turned into was an acute look into the diverse ways that sexual consent is conceptualized and manifested, taken and given. More than this, these re-conceptualizations were put into conversation with frameworks of intimate justice, to illustrate
how the latter, when contrasted with the former, presents a full picture of how equality can be acquired and maintained within sexual encounters and partnerships. For one last time, may we come back to Gay’s words in *Bad Feminist*. When she writes that this is how *we all* lose, there is intention in stating that it is *all* of us who lose within such limited conversations of social dynamics. Intimate justice frameworks point to critical concepts of accountability and mutuality, deservingness and entitlement, to truly illustrate how it is not just one of us, but *all* of us who can benefit from re-theorizations and re-conceptualizations of gender and racial dynamics as they play themselves out through our own sexualities.
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