

The Queen's Journal spoke with **Trinda Penniston, MSc (Psychology)**, on the topic of barriers that people of colour may face while exploring sex and sexuality. Trinda is currently working at the Sexuality and Gender (Sage) Lab at Queen's, researching diversifying and decolonizing research and clinical practices to include more QTBIPOC.

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Sexual liberation while racialized

Finding partners, navigating the orgasm gap, and watching porn can all get more complex as a person of colour

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Three students speak to their research and experiences with the sex lives of POC

This piece uses “Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (QTBIPOC)” to refer to the experiences of Queer racialized students. We acknowledge this term is not universal.

Sexual liberation has always been core to the feminist movement. In North America, for a long time, that has looked like sexual liberation for white women and white women only, which is a subject being increasingly explored as academics of colour are given overdue space in the field of sexology.

The Journal spoke with **Trinda Penniston, MSc (Psychology)**, on the topic of barriers that people of colour may face while exploring sex and sexuality. She's currently working at the Sexuality and Gender (Sage) Laboratory at Queen's researching diversifying and decolonizing research and clinical practices to include more QTBIPOC.

“There's not a lot of sex educators, researchers, or sexologists who are out there who look like me and I'm going to take every opportunity to try and find them,” Penniston said.

Penniston's work involves reporting on a highly under-researched field, which has important implications for the sex lives of racialized students in and outside of Queen's in terms of how their race impacts their ability to find sex partners, explore sex and kinks with these partners, and ultimately feel secure enough to enjoy sex to the fullest.

Race is always relevant

Lisa,* Sci '20, was in a committed relationship before coming to Queen's and experienced hookup culture later in her undergrad. She has had both men and women as sex partners. One of her consistent partners even helped introduce her to new aspects of her sexuality, including kinks.

She's generally happy with the partners she's had while at Queen's, but has experienced being fetishized for her race, both online and in-person.

"One of my sexual partners said they were mainly attracted to short, brown women. That's racist on its own."

She's also accustomed to seeing videos and photos which fetishize women of colour, particularly Asian women, on porn sites and her Instagram feed. For her, it's undoubtedly racist and difficult to understand why features associated with a certain race are more sexualized than others.

"Sexual liberation for POC in general means eliminating the racist aspect to it," Lisa said.

Penniston agreed: "[I]t's really difficult to find Black sexuality being represented in a way that's not hypersexualized, stereotypical, and not incredibly racist and degrading."

She added that, while fetishization can be damaging to women of colour, so can a lack of positive representation overall.

As with any other form of media, people deserve to see themselves and their race depicted in a variety of ways in sexual stimuli, or it may negatively impact their self-esteem.

Finn Huang, ArtSci '21, has had mostly white Queer partners, which has sometimes led to tokenization of his race during sex.

"As an Asian person, especially as an Asian [Assigned Female at Birth] person, it's very easy for people to assume what roles I fulfill in the bedroom, often more submissive."

Some of his partners have told Huang that he was the first Asian person they'd been with.

"That plays into how they're ignorant about racism and how it works and affects the way I've been conditioned to interact in sexual situations. I'm obviously being more submissive because there's a whole history there of Asian women being seen as submissive and serving."

"I want to be seen as equal in the bedroom [...] and if I want to bring up my race then that's on me, but I don't want to be fetishized for looking like an Asian woman of colour."

Lisa felt fortunate to have people in her life who she could talk to about her sexual experiences, and who had the appropriate educational background to talk about safe sex. But she also acknowledged how that can be a privilege for people of colour exploring their sexuality at Queen's.

She grew up in a family that was conservative about sex, believing it should only be had for the purposes of reproduction; sex education at home came in the sole form of her dad giving her a book about puberty. A lot of her racialized friends come from families who also treat sex as taboo.

“As a POC, it [sexual liberation] means having equal access to sexual education and safe-sex promotion.”

Digging into the research

“I don’t see myself being represented in a liberated way,” Penniston said.

Much of Penniston’s research, which focuses on examining Black women’s sexual responses, involves looking for sexual stimuli—being any materials created to spark sexual arousal—that depict Black folks in a positive way. She’s had a difficult time finding any materials that fit these criteria.

In her literature review so far, she has only found one relevant paper looking at Black women’s sexual responses. Other papers on non-Black women of colour’s sexuality exist, but still don’t necessarily constitute positive representation, depicting them in a degrading manner, often through hypersexualization.

When it comes to finding spaces to explore the sexuality of racialized folks, Penniston has gone out of her way to do so. In her view, women of colour in sexology are more visible now than they were in the past, but the burden is on individuals to go and find these spaces.

For Penniston, this has involved actively scouring Instagram and Twitter. Some of the BIPOC sexuality pages she follows include [@afrosexology \(link is external\)](#) and [@thefatsextherapist.\(link is external\)](#)

She also noted that it’s harder to do this within academia than in more informal contexts. Penniston said certain perspectives and ways of knowing are privileged over others, which often means those without a PhD who have important lived experiences aren’t given the credit or platforms they deserve.

Overall, according to Penniston, it’s up to women of colour—particularly Black women—to make spaces for themselves within sexology¹. Collectively, non-Black folks have to start placing more value on their voices, regardless of where and how they’re researching and educating. That can mean ensuring their inclusion in academic spaces, particularly in public-facing events, as well as prioritizing their work and experiences when it’s time to educate ourselves on sexual liberation.¹

The orgasm gap

“I’ve personally never been able to come with any partner, whether it’s a man or a woman,” Lisa said. “I think that it’s something that happens in my head, physically. My body is just not designed for someone to be able to guess what I need in that particular moment in that orgasm.”

“Sometimes my clit wants to be moved up and down and sometimes it wants to be rubbed in a circle.”

She’s not alone in this experience. [The orgasm gap\(link is external\)](#) describes the lack of equality between men and women when it comes to orgasming during sexual encounters. Simply put, men are much more likely to orgasm with a partner than women.

Little research has been done into how the gap is impacted by race, and how sexual pleasure in general is impacted by race. Huang is also cognizant of the role that sexuality may play in expectations surrounding orgasms.

“A lesbian stereotype is that lesbians orgasm a lot more because they’re with people who know what their bodies are like. For me, because I’ve not always had very traditional partners, I haven’t experienced exactly that.”

Huang, who has been with lesbian women (cis and trans) as well as men, has always felt his partners have prioritized his pleasure, but this hasn’t always translated to orgasms.

“I’ve had orgasms given to me without my own hands, although it doesn’t always happen. I also have to really focus for it to happen.”

It can be difficult to tell your partner exactly what you need in order to orgasm which, Penniston believes, might be harder for women of colour. Penniston said that [medical racism\(link is external\)](#) might also make it difficult for women of colour to seek support and advice when it comes to both their sexual health and pleasure.

Lisa added that, while sexual pleasure for both men and women is often synonymous with orgasms, this isn’t an accurate indicator.

“I’ll definitely give my partner a go at trying to make me come but, if they’re unable to, I do my best to communicate that I’m perfectly fine if I don’t orgasm during sex. It’s not something I feel I need. There’s other ways that I take pleasure.”

In terms of enjoying sex with a partner to the fullest—whether or not that means achieving an orgasm—both Huang and Lisa said prioritizing communication on what feels best and trying new things when you’re comfortable, like toys or mutual masturbation, is important.

Making space in the movement for sexual liberation

Sexual liberation in mainstream feminism must include the needs and voices of women of colour, whether that be in formal spaces like academia or in private conversations between sexual partners.

“I am seeing a lot more Black women represented in positive ways, but that’s because we’re creating those spaces for ourselves.” Penniston said. “We really have to go out of our way to create the representation that we want to see because other people aren’t doing that.”

Penniston wants to see the voices of women of colour amplified in sexology. For her, that starts with validating their experiences. That means listening to women in your personal life and recognizing the difficulty attached with sharing their sexual experiences. It also means inviting BIPOC into academic spaces.

“White people, if they’re doing any kinds of talks or workshops or anything about these kinds of topics, they need to invite BIPOC voices. Without those voices, without those experiences, you’re only getting half the story.”

Lisa would like to see better access to sex education for people of colour, recognizing that many of them come from backgrounds that stigmatize sex to a greater extent than white people.

“When you finally leave home and come to Queen’s for the first time without parental supervision, I think that learning what you enjoy and what you take pleasure in takes time, and it’s not something that everyone has had the pleasure to learn and come across before they come to university.”

She doesn’t see topics like kinks, polygamy, and the fetishization of women of colour making it into Ontario sex education curricula anytime soon, but it’s personally important for her to further the idea that

sex should be desirable and that everyone should have equal freedom to explore their own sexuality—including the absence of desire to have sex.

She also noted that residence might be a good starting point to educate students of colour.

Huang wants to be able to talk about sex more with other people of colour. He doesn't interact with many Queer people of colour at Queen's and feels like he's missing out on the benefits of relating to one other when it comes to sex, sexuality, and finding sex partners.

"I can only imagine that if I was with another person, who was also a trans guy and also Asian, then he'd be more likely to understand the struggles I have with a lot of things."

**Name changed for anonymity due to safety reasons.*

¹ Psychology Footnote: *In the article, the author wrote "Overall, according to Penniston, it's up to women of colour—particularly Black women—to make spaces for themselves within sexology. Collectively, non-Black folks have to start placing more value on their voices, regardless of where and how they're researching and educating. That can mean ensuring their inclusion in academic spaces, particularly in public-facing events, as well as prioritizing their work and experiences when it's time to educate ourselves on sexual liberation."*

Trinda adds: I want to clarify this part because it reads as though I am placing the responsibility on Black women and other women of colour to make spaces for ourselves and make our voices heard. It's up to us to make spaces for ourselves not because it is our responsibility, but rather because it is our burden. When others are not making space for us, calling us in, passing the mic, or amplifying our voices, we are forced to do this for ourselves and for each other if we want to be recognized and represented in a positive way.

Go to the original Queen's Journal article (<https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2021-01-21/features/sexual-liberation-while-racialized/>)