

Is BDSM Possible After Black Lives Matter?

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Photo from <https://www.thehouseofenchantment.com/product/trick-handcuffs-jay-leslie-super-escape-cuff/>

I came of age mostly in the Southern California leather community. It was there I did most of my activism, nonprofit work, and I even became a titleholder that gained recognition outside of the leather world. It was never a secret that I was comfortable speaking out against racism, sexual inequality, and it was something that I did quite often. But I never thought that the very concept of the leather/BDSM world and its existence could be inherently racist.

I spent the weekend going over my website, and I wanted to post a photo of myself in leather formal as the main landing page. For the curious, leather formals are essentially the “suit and tie” of the leather community, where largely, in gay male communities, men usually often dress in tight leather versions of a police officer’s uniform. While I liked the way the photo looked, I had one question, “was this racist?” After everything I’ve posted about Black Lives Matter, and all the moralisms I had espoused (“be a better ally” blah, blah, blah), I thought it would be hypocritical if I wasn’t at least, somewhat reflective of what I was wearing at the current moment. After all, I thought to myself, “it’s not like I

wanted to be a police officer. It's not like I wanted to embody the authority of the State and how it could potentially be misused to harm innocent people." But then I realized, I had it next to text that said "Empower yourself." So somehow, on some subconscious level, I was thinking about the notion of embodying *power*.

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. That feeling was a sense of morality and that now, more than ever, I had to side with my friends and allies within Black communities. I couldn't morally live with myself to think about what that image meant to them. So I eventually changed the photo.

This is the position I have always inhabited when I think about being a leatherman. On one hand, it was a space for me to explore my sexuality. For all of the drama that happens in the leather world, it was a place where I got to be in touch with my sexuality. It was a place where I felt relatively safe to learn about who I was sexually, and meet people that could share my interests. I had teachers that could show me the ropes (in a manner of speaking). I had events I could go to where to some degree, my presence was tolerated and even accepted. I remember the closeness and intimacy that I had with other men, and no matter what I think about the leather world now, there is no substitute for that kind of intimacy for me. I had a place where I could express my version of masculinity and be comfortably smug that the way I did gender was a place that could push the most prim and proper of the queer community to revile what I stood for: a proud, sexual libertine. And indeed, I relished that. It's what made me happy and prideful in how I was shaping my sexuality, gender, and my overall persona.

But then I knew our community had major problems, and these were my experiences. It's largely a White-dominated community, and depending on which sexual community you're dealing with (since I'm a gay man, I've had the most experience with gay men communities) there's a twinge of racism that permeates the community. With the gay male communities, you have older White men that downplay the AIDS epidemic's effect on Black and Brown communities. You see them on Facebook all the time as they tone police every woman, person of color, and transperson when they talk about minority rights, and they throw around the words "divisive" and "political" like some used cum rag. You have whole organizations, like ONYX (a leathermen of color group which I worked with for a while), that exists on the very premise that men of color (particularly Black men) dealt with enough discrimination and formed their own leather club (not to mention the stupid cries of reverse racism every time a White man wanted full membership). Not all White leathermen are like this, and indeed we had the spectrum. You had men that aren't overtly as racist/discriminatory as the men I just mentioned, but they are subtly racist and indeed, keep their heads down on racial issues in the community but at least are somewhat smart enough to get a social justice warrior vocabulary down. It was funny because one of them tried to "school" me, a professional sociologist, on what "racism" is. Some of them know how bad racism in the community is but because they've made a reputation based off of

their privilege, they prefer to stay complicit and enjoy the leather world. And then finally, you'd have the real allies, only they actually didn't have any power to do anything substantial. They're wonderful for moral support but have little to no voice in our community politics.

On the other hand, based on my experiences, many people of color in the community struggle for what little power they get. Minority communities are very much tokenized, and like real world politics, those that go far in positions of leadership always work harder than their peers, somehow play a version of the "I'm not like those other ones" card, and/or say (do) things that overtly screw over minorities that actually care about inequality in the leather world. They speak privately about how horrible certain racial inequalities are in leather, but never challenge racist community politics. Others tend to stay silent on leather world abuse and simply try to stay out of view. There are also those that continue to stay because they want to make the community better. They work hard and question why they're never rewarded, because in the end, their work is not seen as a contribution, but rather, distraction. Hell, there are even minorities that weaponize race and other minority issues as a bullying tactic to maintain their positions within the community as a survival tactic (bullying in any community begets more bullying). These marginalized people know that the minute they challenge authority in a substantive way, everyone else will turn on them, and lose any shred of power. It's like Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* but with minorities in slings and harnesses instead of women in role-specific clothing.

Ultimately, I do think that the lack of solidarity and constant fear of losing power ultimately prevents us from achieving equality.

We cannot go forward after the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement and not address racism in all of its forms, whether it is the racism that we endure at the hands of others or the racism we impose on ourselves. I question leather itself just as I question forms of authority that have historically marginalized Black communities. For example, I think about whether or not I'm comfortable using terms like, "Master and Slave," or "Sir and Boy," especially considering what that means to other people. Also, I know there were several think pieces that look at something called "race play," where some fetishize the powerplay between a slave owner and a slave. So besides what we wear as gay men and some of the things we sexually do, our very communities are based on the ideas of dominance, hierarchy, and dare I say, inequality.

But the kicker is that without these hierarchies and without these terms, the premise of BDSM and leather of the very power play that I find so erotic can also be liberating. I sexualize the idea of control and power. I can lose myself in a scene that involves role play and active assertion of dominance. I desperately want to think about leather as a way to resist these forms of power, but I still come back to these questions.

So now I'm more or less trying to reconcile how I feel about things that I do in my own practice of leather, BDSM, and my sexuality. I'm thinking more about the broader picture and whether or not my sex life reinforces the emotional pain of other people. I really don't know how to feel given the history of what I know the community to be, what I know the real world is like, and the promise of what leather should be. Time will tell, but I still will think about who I am, what I want to embody, and question whether or not leather is possible after Black Lives Matter.