Kink in Flux: BDSM theory and sexual praxis

Celeste Pietrusza

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KINK IN FLUX: BDSM THEORY AND SEXUAL PRAXIS

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Celeste Pietrusza

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KINK IN FLUX: BDSM THEORY AND SEXUAL PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT

KINK IN FLUX: BDSM THEORY AND SEXUAL PRAXIS

By

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April 2019

Dissertation supervised by Lori Koelsch, Ph.D.

The opening decades of the 21st century have seen a veritable explosion of representations of bondage, discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM) and kink practices in mainstream media and American culture. Along with this, empirical researchers working in sexuality studies continue to show, contrary to the history of stigmatizing accounts in the history of clinical psychology, no evidence of increased pathology and, in some studies, better outcomes on measures of mental health.

Given the legacy of psychoanalysis in foregrounding considerations of sadomasochism and sexuality for the human psyche, it seems particularly well positioned to approach the complexities of dynamic fantasies involved in BDSM and kink. Yet in the United States, many contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapists have distanced themselves from discussions of sexuality, considering it of little importance in contrast to normative or adaptive ends for
psychotherapy. Meanwhile, emerging narratives and anti-narratives from feminist and queer “kinksters” as well as those with histories of trauma are beginning to explore BDSM and kink as forms of self-transcendence as well as transformation.

In this dissertation, I consider the material and historical aspects of BDSM and move, with queer and feminist theories as my guide, into considerations of contemporary kink practices. I consider BDSM and kink through the notion of sexual praxis, in which theory and practice are intertwined in a consistent ethic. Through published accounts by BDSM practitioners I consider how, following Foucault, engagements in sexual praxis can constitute embodied forms of philosophical activity related to the production of knowledge and subjectivity. I explore, through psychoanalysis and later schizoanalysis, how individuals and groups may transform cultural trauma through redefinitions and enactments of fantasy. As much of philosophical and analytic thought as well as research has ignored the importance of the role of touch in history, fantasy and trauma, I conclude with a proposal for haptic inquiries into sexual praxis. Moving from literary accounts to contemporary blog posts, I take up Elizabeth Freeman’s (2006) call to theorize BDSM’s historicisms while also historicizing its theories.
DEDICATION

For Molly, who fought to transform what could not yet be spoken, and whose spirit moves, through the maelstrom, beyond despair.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This writing would not have been possible without the beautiful queers who have made my life—and especially my intellectual life—possible. From the first day we met at Duquesne, Jess Dunn has been an inspiration. Her persistent and daring willingness to speak her mind for what was right—even and perhaps especially when it was not popular—gave me the courage to detour from critiques of a mainstream in which I was no longer invested and instead write here and elsewhere about kink and BDSM. Our daily conversations about things from clinical work and philosophy to film and new media challenged me to push beyond the conventions of professionalism and respectability politics that had previously kept me bound in non-kinky and unhappy ways.

Jose Arroyo, too, was a daily source of humor, fun and care through graduate school and this project. His reminders to keep it real when I got too faux deep got me through to the end. Jose’s light and life showed me I could bring the passion I have for academic and clinical work into my personality in the classroom.

My friendship with Jessie Patella-Rey shows me, continually, that our work in philosophy and critical theory has the power to inspire beyond the “ivory tower.” I’m grateful to her for our conversations about psychoanalysis and sexuality, which reground me in the power of femme. Her community outreach and media presence teach me what it means in this day and age to be a committed public intellectual with a true commitment to social justice and feminism.

In addition to the aforementioned rainbow of folx, I am also grateful for the sunshine provided by others. Tallulah Elvis Poodle introduced me to Freud in high school and our friendship and discussions of multiple decades still have the power to surprise me with depth and humor. In addition to Tallulah, Kay Chai also kept me well-fed and accountable. My friendships with Julie Futrell and Cameron Boisen cleared the way for this particular future and the two of them showed me light through some dark nights of the psyche. Erica Freeman introduced me to the work of Robert Stoller and Alenka Zupancic and her commitment to philosophical psychology reminds me in an ongoing way of its importance.

I am grateful to my parents, Richard and Machaela Pietrusza, who did not go to college, but were committed to making education possible through the rigor and beauty of homegrown Pittsburgh union labor. Lisa Moondrop Pietrusza, provided health care and sister care along the way, and my brother, Travis Pietrusza, financial support and encouragement.

Over the years in the Duquesne University Psychology Department, the colleagues and mentors who have guided the way are too numerous to list. Amy Barackman and Niko Kikeras both provided generative feedback for this project. Conversations with Elizabeth Fein helped me stay true to the ethic of my work. Suzanne Barnard and Derek Hook read graciously. In my discussions with each of them over the years, I have always walked away with something new. Most of all, I am thankful to Lori Koelsch for her deep patience, wisdom and willingness to read not only this dissertation but many other versions prior to it…along with many long, convoluted emails I wrote trying to figure out what precisely I meant and where I was going. I am thankful that she took the chance and did not give up. I emerge from this process more grounded, clear and true to myself and those whose lives about which I write because of her guidance.

Finally, to my love, my dove, Evan Malater: Where I end here, we go on beginning, continuing to weave temporalities together.
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Introduction

This kinky moment

[B]y covering up “the sexual,” one always also—and perhaps primarily?—covers up something else, something that is not there and which tends to raise some deeply metaphysical issues and ambiguities.

Alenka Zupancic, What is sex?

Fantasy is never individual; it is group fantasy.

Sexual emancipation give[s] no privilege as long as sexuality remains confined within the framework of the ‘dirty little secret.’

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus

The opening decades of the twenty-first century have shown a veritable explosion of representations of bondage, discipline and sadomasochistic (BDSM) and “kink” practices in mainstream media and American culture. With the release of the immensely popular book and top-grossing film Fifty Shades of Grey (Taylor-Johnson, 2015) and its two sequels, depictions of and conversations about such sexual practices have entered American discourse in a major way. In the late twentieth century, artistic portrayals and enactments such as the punk performances of Throbbing Gristle in the 1970s, Lydia Lunch’s poetry, and films such as 9½ Weeks in the 1980s still retained the cultural power and ability to shock and remained far outside capitalist cultural discourse. Now these practices, formerly considered taboo, make casual appearances in pop music. Teen icon Justin Timberlake cagily sings “I’ll let you whip me if I misbehave” in his 2006 hit song SexyBack, while Rihanna made the top of the charts in 2011 with her song S&M, where she proclaims, “whips and chains excite me.” While in 1992, Madonna’s art photography book featuring BDSM imagery was kept swathed in silver packaging behind the counters of mass-market booksellers, a 2015 Wonderful Pistachio commercial aired featuring a latex-clad
dominatrix opening a pistachio with a whip while the voice-over suggestively says, “dominatrix do [sic] it on command.”

While these proliferations of representations have certainly piqued public curiosity about alternative sexual practices, many, if not most, caricature actual practices. Many focus on the material and consumerist elements of the glamour and aesthetic of pricey clothing and sadistic implements to the exclusion of the complex affects, language and discourses of individuals who consider their “kinks” integral and often evolving elements of their subjectivity. As such, while Foucault (1990; 1986), in the second and third volumes of The History of Sexuality, argued that S/M has a liberatory aspect to it, the appropriation of the kinky imaginary in and by capitalist discourse seems to operate more in line with his theory of the repressive hypothesis of sexuality: All this singing, writing, and talking about kinky sex is not the same as doing or enjoying it.

These operations of capitalist discourse extend, not surprisingly, to the psychotherapeutic sphere as well. Recent empirical research has shown better outcomes on measures of mental health for BDSM practitioners than controls from the general population (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Yet reports from some BDSM practitioners seeking therapy include descriptions of therapists believing they are being physically or sexually abused, acting out low self-esteem, or suffering from sex addiction (Wright, 2008; Hoff & Sprout, 2009). While the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-5 (American Psychological Association, 2013), has made some changes to their category of “paraphilic disorders” to include caveats around personal distress, consensual BDSM practitioners note that “the psychiatric understanding of paraphilias—a de facto endorsement of social stigma—[is] a partial source of [distress and] isolation” (Keenan, 2013, p. 15). Also in the sphere of clinical psychology and DSM-based diagnosis, Kolmes, Stock and Moser (2006) note that some clinicians may
mistakenly diagnose individuals involved in BDSM or “kink” practices with personality disorders due to the legacy of psychological discourses that attributed involvement in related practices to underlying personality issues or disturbances.

While the history of psychology has not, historically, viewed kinky or alternative sexual practices in a favorable light, the advent of psychoanalysis was thought to provide, perhaps, safer havens for explorations of sexuality, both lived and fantasied. Yet, in her recent book *What is Sex?* Lacanian psychoanalyst Alenka Zupancic (2017) cites a surprising study that investigated contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapists’ attitudes around sexuality. Overall, therapists in the study viewed sexuality as a defense against self-identity and did not draw clear lines between love relationships and sexuality. Citing, at length, Zamanian’s (2011) commentary on the study:

As an example, one therapist concluded that his patients “rarely talk about sexual issues” and that their discussion of romantic relationships “never [has] sexual connotations.” … Several therapists in the study experienced discussion of sexual matters as a “form of hostility directed at them” and even felt “abused by their patients.” … [O]ne therapist described one of her patients in the following manner: “It was as if he was thinking, this is therapy so I can talk about everything.” (p. 38)

This aversion to discussions of sexuality is often intensified when patients bring in fantasies or experiences involving practices outside the mainstream. These may, in some forms of psychoanalytic psychotherapy be considered as problematic or pathological examples of unconscious “acting out” rather than chosen forms of expression and play.

As such, these examples point to how despite what Foucault (1990/1978) describes in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* as a “veritable discursive explosion” (p. 17) and “steady proliferation of discourses” (p. 18) around sex over the last three centuries—and even more so, I
would argue, in recent decades—the real operations of sexuality remain occluded. Zupancic (2017) describes the more radical operations of sexuality as “a properly philosophical problem of psychoanalysis—with everything that resonates with this term, starting with ontology, logic, and the theory of the subject” (p. 1). Here, I have chosen to explore the issues contemporary BDSM practices pose for psychoanalysis and philosophy as well as look at what an intertwining of theory and practice might add to considerations for subjective becoming. Moving through the Marquis de Sade and Sacher-Masoch and into contemporary queer, feminist, dis/ability and critical race perspectives expands what Foucault, following Freud’s observations in the Three Essays on Sexuality, notes as the detachment of “sexual pleasure from genital specificity, from localization in or dependence on the genitals” (Halperin, 1995, p. 88). According to Halperin (1995) for Foucault:

…represents a re-mapping of the body’s erotic sites…even a re-eroticization of the male genitals as sites of vulnerability instead of as objects of venerations…S/M represents an en-counter between the modern subject of sexuality and the otherness of his or her [or their] body. Insofar as that encounter produces changes in the relations among subjectivity, sexuality, pleasure and the body, S/M qualifies as a potentially self-transformative practice[.] (p. 88-89)

This transformative potential—with the emphasis here on potential, as this is far from the only outcome for or reason to engage in such practices—arises from the ways in which BDSM is constituted not only by a set of behaviors, but an interweaving of haptic, affective, linguistic and fantasmatic elements. In the pages that follow, I will explore and describe this approach to BDSM as a sexual praxis, in which a theory or underlying ethic is realized through its engaged application. Much writing on BDSM studies divorces theory and practice, often privileging one
aspect to the detriment of the other. In so doing, these writings have neglected crucial operations and nodal points in and for BDSM subjectivities and descriptions of the more radical affective impacts of the praxis are lost.

**Kinks in flux**

For the purposes of this inquiry, I have chosen a methodological approach that I feel best suits the evolution and heterogeneity of the sexual praxes that fall under the umbrellas of BDSM and kink. I begin Chapter One with a historical inquiry that starts with the uptake of personal literary accounts into psychoanalytic discourse. In doing this, I foreground how sadism and masochism came into theoretical discourse, the European and, later, the American cultural imagination. As until the past few decades, accounts from the diversity of BDSM practitioners themselves were rare, I consider what may have been excluded or occluded in readings and fantasies of BDSM from a predominantly masculinist and colonialist imagination. I include feminist readings, sympathetic and resistant, to figures such as the Marquis de Sade to show how what exceeds these accounts can illuminate them. I also look at the implications for the intersections of queer theory and psychoanalysis on sexual praxis. In later chapters, I move into post-psychoanalytic readings of fantasy and sexuality through the work of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Bracha Ettinger.

The ethic undergirding this pan-theoretical methodology owes much to the collaboration between Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and, in particular, Guattari’s (1995) late work *Chaosmosis*. In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari critiques structuralist and post-structuralist approaches that “try to put everything connected with the psyche under the control of the linguistic signifier” (p.5). Together with Deleuze, he argues for reconsideration of the radicality of the Freudian unconscious. As such, in tracing flows and movements from psychoanalysis to schizoanalysis, I
do not consider the two theories incompatible with each other. In readings of psychoanalytic thinkers, I consider the ways in which sexuality may emerge from Oedipal dynamics while sexual praxis points to an-Oedipal or post-Oedipal possibilities. Though in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), Deleuze and Guattari reject connections between sexuality and family dynamics to instead view it as a creative production in action, I consider how sexual praxis may be *both and*. Through queer engagements with temporality and trauma in the final chapter, I look toward an engagement that honors each of these movements. I consider, following Althusser, how a non-human theoretical orientation coupled with a pragmatic humanism might account for an ethics of praxis.

In Chapter One, “Doing and Undong de Sade and Sacher-Masoch: From literary past to psychoanalytic (anti-)hermeneutic,” I contextualize theoretical issues in contemporary BDSM praxis from the literary and historical notions of sadism, masochism, beginning from de Sade and Sader-Masoch, as then picked up by early classificatory pathology of 19th century sexology. I next turn to Freud difference to look at how revolutions in psychoanalysis opened new ways of considering sexuality, sadism and masochism. While Freud and some post-Freudians provided openings productive for considering the operations of contemporary BDSM praxis, other, particularly American relational and ego psychological distanced themselves, avoiding the real of sexuality in favor of adaptive or normative ends. I consider in this chapter, after Freud, how the work of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche create new spaces for fantasy. I specifically address how Laplanche’s work seeks to address the signification of touch as that which “enigmatically” exceeds the linguistic signifier in ways relevant for considering fantasy and transformation in BDSM praxis. Then, lastly, I turn to the importance of the often-forgotten ethnographic work of American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller to BDSM studies.
Chapter Two, “A new beyond: Queer and feminist transformations,” explores how later 20th and 21st century theoretical writers push psychoanalytic notions further to investigate their impact on the effects of sexual praxis and social links, with implications for BDSM theory. I first look at the contributions of Michael Foucault’s social constructionist perspective on gay male S&M before moving into later queer radical psychoanalytic perspectives put forth by Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam. I then consider how many perspectives, until the 1990s, neglected a serious consideration of women’s, female and feminine voices in sexual praxis and BDSM. I present and critique Jessica Benjamin’s oft-cited neo-Hegelian perspective on sadomasochism and, as a counterpoint, consider what a rethinking of hysteria has to offer for psychoanalysis and sexual praxis.

Chapter Three, “Sexual plurality and 21st century BDSM praxis,” turns to recent accounts and scholarship in BDSM studies as a map for kink praxis, as it unfolds in the early decades of the 21st century. I consider the differences between the roles of professional dominatrices—many of whom are hired by heterosexual men to engage in BDSM—and self-identified “kinksters” (as BDSM practitioners often lovingly refer to themselves). I include in this chapter published accounts from kinksters who identify as queer, feminist, and dis/abled as well as kinksters of color. These accounts, along with those from kinksters engaging in more subcultural or non-human play, I believe, show how “kink” practices may involve elements of BDSM and yet also go beyond it. These modalities of kink thus may involve what Manning (2015) calls “modes of articulation” might “precede or exceed language” as “new modes of subjectivity…of existence…[that] open new encounters with experience” (p. 66). Kink, thus, may include elements elided or suppressed in mainstream BDSM cultures. I also include in this chapter
accounts of kinksters with and without trauma histories who find transformation and self-transcendence through their practices.

Chapter Four, “Philosophy outside the bedroom: toward haptic, fantasmatic ethnographies of sexual praxis,” moves my discussion from psychoanalysis to schizoanalysis. Here, I consider how investigations into BDSM praxis might consider the role of touch in trauma, fantasy, and transformation. I hold tension between the psychoanalytic concept of the subject and Deleuze and Guattari’s flat ontological notions of the “productions of subjectivity” to consider a non-linear approach to individual and group fantasmatic change. I introduce the work of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger, whose considerations of what she calls co-erotic-responsibility involve both the radical asymmetries of non-relational sexuality as well as the possibilities for what she calls wit(h)nessing and a poetics of touch. Through and with queer literary theory, I sketch a provisional proposal for a fantasmatic ethnography that neither reduces nor occludes the role of trauma and fantasy for over-determined and signified bodies involved in BDSM praxis.

Finally, in the conclusion, I consider what new voices in BDSM praxis can offer to current social-political movements and critiques. I consider, briefly, the work of Wilhelm Reich, and an anti-oppression approach to BDSM and kink theory. Moving forward into post-Oedipal logics, I ask: What cultural anxieties and possibilities might BDSM visibility express? How do new evolutions in kink disrupt previous theories? What anti-narratives are excluded from the social order and why? As such, I take up Elizabeth Freeman’s (2006) call to theorize BDSM’s historicisms while also, too, historicizing its theories.
Mapping sexual cultures: terminology and perspectives

As contemporary BDSM cultures involve specific terminology, I will define, here, some important terms for considering praxis and a broad overview of what Kathy Sisson (2013) calls the “sexual culture” of BDSM. The umbrella term BDSM is a contemporary acronym used to describe three distinct subcategories of praxis within its four-letter acronym: BD refers to bondage and discipline; D/s to dominance and submission; and SM, S&M or S/M to sadomasochism or sadism and masochism (Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984). BDSM relationships or encounters encompass a wide range of attitudes and behaviors which may include elements from any or all of the three categories, as well as other “kinks” or fetishes that go beyond these descriptions. Different role names are assigned to the various positions or identities individuals assume in BDSM play or scenes. Generally and traditionally, the “sadist,” “dominant,” “dom/domme,” “master,” or “top” is the person in power and/or providing stimulation; the “masochist,” “submissive,” “sub,” “slave,” or “bottom,” is the person on the receiving end of power, control or stimulation; a “switch” is a word used for anyone who takes on both positions, even in the course of one play experience (Langdridge & Barker, 2013). I’ve chosen to use the formal word “practitioners” for individuals involved in BDSM praxis in most instances throughout this work. However, some involved in the “lifestyle” or “scene” use terms such as “kinksters” or “ritualists.” Activities range from single or multiple instances of “play” meetings in which pre-negotiated “scenes” are enacted to more extended lifestyle relationships and even full-time “24/7” roles, though the latter comprise only a small minority of individuals involved with BDSM (Langdridge & Barker, 2013; Williams & Moser, 1984).

As BDSM was not developed as an acronym until the second-half of the 20th century, I will interchangeably use different acronyms and descriptions for its practices in line with the
historical moment or the particular or author or authors’ use of terms. There is still considerable
debate as to what is considered to fall under the category of “kink” versus so-called “vanilla”
practices, with one recent informal study of a general population showing that 72% of
respondents consider “anal sex” to be a “kink” or “kinky” (VICE staff, March 13, 2019). For the
purpose of this dissertation, I reserve the term “kink” for contemporary practices which, while
they may involve a power dynamic or elements of BDSM, differ from or go beyond these
practices in their engagements with fantasy and/or the non-human realm. As an example,
individuals who identify as “kinky” or “kinksters” may engage in BDSM practices while also
participating in other types of sexual or sexualized play involving power differentials that do not
fall under this acronym. Examples of this may include “age play” (play pretending to be an age
other than one’s lived age) or “pet play” (pretending to be non-human animals and/or owners or
trainers of these imaginary animals).

Mutually negotiated relationships play a major role in contemporary BDSM praxis
(Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). Contemporary practitioners can draw from modes and
forms of loosely codified consent practices described alternatively by acronyms such as SSC
(Safe, Sane and Consensual), RACK (Risk-Aware Consensual Kink) and the newest 4Cs
(Caring, Communication, Consent and Caution). Boundaries and limits are imposed using what
are called “safe words” or cues given to ease the intensity of a scene or stop play altogether
(Easton & Liszt, 2000). While BDSM praxis may appear violent in nature on its surface,
practitioners emphasize that aggressive anger has no place in scenes. Consensual
sadomasochism has nothing to do with violence, which, as Carol Truscott (1991) writes in
distinguishing it from BDSM, is “the epitome of nonconsensuality, an act perpetrated by a
predator on a victim” (p. 30).
While demographics of individuals participating in BDSM are still difficult to estimate, in one non-academic survey of 317,000 people in 41 countries, approximately 20% of respondents reported that they had used masks, blindfolds or other bondage equipment at least once and 5% reported activities specifically connected to BDSM (Durex, 2005). Prevalence studies in the United States and Europe show a range of individuals from different genders, races, sexual orientation and socioeconomic strata practicing BDSM with some suggesting higher prevalence for people with higher socioeconomic status. Emerging studies suggest no assumptions should be made between gender and roles in BDSM. Estimates of individuals actively participating outside the bedrooms or home in BDSM cultures range between 1-2%. Richter, et al (2008) found that people engaging in BDSM were more likely to have a wider range of other consensual sexual experiences, while not reporting more prevalence of being abused, raped, coerced or struggling with other sexual difficulties.

Despite long-standing narratives in clinical psychology around sadism and masochism as indicative (or potentially indicative) of pathology, a recent epidemiological study found that rather than exhibiting increased pathology (as had been hypothesized), practitioners tended to score better than controls on many measures of mental health. While the authors could not make claims to causality in their study, they hypothesized that people who engaged in BDSM-identified practices may have scored higher to their increased awareness of the importance of communication, including around difficult and personal topics such as sexuality. In addition, a literature review conducted by Kleinplatz and Moser in 2013 on empirical studies of BDSM found no evidence to demonstrate that involvement with BDSM causes personal distress or dysfunction in consenting individuals.
Both academics studying BDSM as well as practitioners have begun to write about healing potentials with regard to issues such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse; ageist, ableist or racial discrimination; and chronic pain or tension (Barker, Gupta & Iantaffi, 2013). In the documentary *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (Dick, 1997) the filmmakers show how the performance art practices of Bob Flanagan gave him access to experience his body, through and beyond his suffering from chronic pain and disabilities associated with cystic fibrosis, in a new and powerful manner. They demonstrated, as well, how it opened up avenues of connection with the bodies and affects of both other BDSM practitioners and audiences. The fictional portrayal in the film *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002), starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, also provides an example of this type of narrative, as an awkward and self-injurious secretary is shown discovering power through submission in a BDSM relationship.¹ Qualitative researchers have recently looked at how BDSM environments can serve to create safe spaces to explore issues and pursue goals more typically explored in the contexts of professional psychotherapy—joining memory and affect, increasing self-esteem and self-acceptance, and forwarding personal agency (Barker, Gupta & Iantaffi, 2007; Easton, 2007; Henkin, 2007). Other writers, thinking from clinical standpoints, consider how the interventions of others in repetitious fantasies can open new pathways for self-exploration and growth (Henkin, 2007). Some described BDSM play as a way to create new, positive experiences (Haines, 1999), to experiment with sexual activities and emotional intimacies that they felt were inhibited by previous experiences (Thomson, 2000), and to let go of shame and guilt around trauma or abuse

¹ In a personal conversation, one female friend described the film as “being so moving for me in that the characters don’t ‘work through’ their S&M tendencies in the sense of getting rid of them, but that they instead find this beautiful intersubjective way of enjoying them…they find each other—find the person that is the ‘S’ to the ‘M.’” (January 8, 2019).
in a way that can feel empowering and allow for a sense of trust and control over situations which previously felt uncontrollable (Haines, 1999). Chapter Three includes readings of published examples of these and other forms of 21st century kink praxes.

Along these lines, other researchers have found that individuals who explore different roles in BDSM play may develop these as identity-formations that extend beyond their experiences with BDSM. In research on queer BDSM communities, Bauer (2008) looked at how individuals who embody different gendered selves in BDSM praxis may begin to experiment with these identities in other public situations. For example, taking on a “masculine” role in a scene might provide the affective, embodied experience that extends this BDSM practitioner to experiment with their gender identity in another social context unrelated to BDSM. Bauer (2008) writes that queer BDSM praxis performs a kind of cultural transformation or therapeutic through “transformative acts…[that] create new meanings that might hold promising utopian or political potential or both, beyond the private or semipublic BDSM setting” (p. 236). BDSM praxis thus can be useful in developing what Bauer (2008; 2013) calls “subcultural skills” that are applicable in both the everyday and political lives of radical BDSM practitioners. These accounts attest to what some politically-oriented practitioners see as challenges to dominant social norms, sexual and otherwise (Bauer, 2010; Simula, 2012).

At the same time, while these non-pathologizing and politically progressive narratives resonate with some practitioners, others resist these, with the concern that the discourse of BDSM and kink as “positive” or “healing” merely recapitulates prior assumptions that individuals involved in BDSM are all physically ill, unbalanced, or marginal in some way. An expressed fear from some practitioners is that linking BDSM and kink to therapeutic narratives, whether individual or cultural, may serve to hierarchize individuals’ rationales for engagement
by setting up implicit notions of “good” healing practices versus “bad” pathological ones (Barker, Gupta & Iantaffi, 2013). There is also the potential for transformation narratives to potentially serve as disciplinary mechanisms that can work to neutralize and control the more radical aspects of interactions and practices. In this vein, Dymock (2012) argues that change in BDSM may not only occur necessarily through “successful” attempts towards self-actualization, but instead a type of “failure” or “self-shattering” that has no proper place in the social order.

From the violent critique of the State imagined and partly performed by the Marquis de Sade to the gender non-conformist, post-humanist resistances and productions of contemporary feminist and queer kinksters, certain sexual praxes have produced, over time, new configurations for subjectivity and politics. Yet, despite this, such acts—as opposed to the work of dreams or fantasy—have been stigmatized by mainstream psychology and in psychoanalysis, mostly left to the field of fantasy, with sexual praxis often mischaracterized as an unconscious form of “acting out.” I argue here that inquiry into contemporary BDSM and kink can offer a way to investigate what can be produced when groups of individuals embrace, enact, and discuss specifically taboo sexual fantasy. This type of freedom in sexual assembly offered by certain forms of praxes, I argue, can and may also be a form of social change. To use outdated forms of reading, informed by particular fantasies, on contemporary praxes can, I argue, unintentionally perform a reductive violence.

What I am emphatically not arguing is for BDSM praxis as a replacement of or substitute for psychoanalytic psychotherapy or a reading of BDSM through theory and philosophy. Instead, as Deleuze’s *Cinema* (1986; 1989) books describe not a philosophy of film, but film as philosophy, I suggest that the particular moments, movements, human and non-human couplings and becomings in BDSM praxis, give rise to philosophical concepts. For in this current moment,
sexuality perhaps has never been so visible and yet still so much in what Lacan calls the Imaginary: even BDSM is becoming inscribed into capitalist discourse and dominant ideology. At its most radical, I argue that BDSM praxis can offer a modality through which to explore neglected affects and unspoken structures of social life, the possibilities for subjective particularity within it, while offering, too, in its collectivity amid difference, the possibility for social witnessing.

Amid the theories and published accounts here, I interweave, too, my own experiences with kink and BDSM, through which I have discovered—and continue to discover—more about fantasies and bodily capacities in flux. These engagements and risks were ones that would or could not be possible alone. They were taken with others whose journeys intersected or paralleled, but never fully coincided, and as such, are never fully or only my own.
Chapter 1: Doing (and undoing) Sade and Sacher-Masoch: From literary past to psychoanalytic (anti-)hermeneutic

_A European fantasy of origin: Life and writings of the Marquis de Sade_

[W]hatever form [perversion] takes and whatever metamorphoses it has undergone, it still relates, as it always has done, to a sort of negative image of freedom: annihilation, dehumanization, hatred, destruction, domination, cruelty and jouissance.

Yet perversion also means creativity, self-transcendence and greatness…Perversion fascinates us precisely because it can sometimes be sublime, and sometimes abject.

 Elisabeth Roudinesco, _Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion_

Sadism is not a name given to a practice as old as Eros…it constitutes one of the greatest conversions of the Western imagination: unreason transformed into the delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite.

 Michel Foucault, _Madness and Civilization_

Accounts of the use of ritualistic pain, particularly flagellation, in the service of pleasure run throughout history, as far back as late third and early second millennia B.C. Mesopotamia, with cuneiform texts depicting the goddess Inana conducting rites that move from “punishment, moaning” to “the ecstatic, the transformed” (A hymn to Inana, 2001/n.d.). The earliest surviving Hindu text on erotic love, the _Kamasutra_, indicates bodily regions where inducing pain may produce pleasurable sensations—with the important cautionary note that only some enjoy these sensations.

In European or Western culture, though Roman poets and playwrights such as Juvenal and Petronius cited the use of bondage and flagellation for sexual arousal in the first through second century, B.C., few written or artistic accounts exist from then until the 18th century, when the medical-legal classificatory system began to include categories for and of sexual phenomena. It was between 1785 and 1797 when the Marquis de Sade—from whose name the words “sadism” and “sadist” were later derived—wrote his most famous novels: _The 120 Days of Sodom_,

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Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Juliette. These works—fictions famous for their long, detailed accounts of rich “libertine” members of the aristocratic classes inflicting sexual and physical cruelty on others, their dialogues interspersed with political treatises as well as discourses on the education of the sexes throughout—would become origins for much of the medico-sexological discourse, one hundred years later.

On the surface, the Marquis’s writing is dull, the characters flat and, most times, merely mouthpieces for his philosophy, much of it enacted through sexual norm-breaking and spectacles of cruelty and wickedness. Yet his dark imagination and bleak portrayals, written contemporaneously, as Lacan (2006) articulates in his essay “Kant with Sade,” with the moral and rational writings of Immanuel Kant, revealed operations of a newly modern society in its extreme commitments to the dictates of pleasure, at times beyond reason or rationality, and the Law of jouissance. Sade’s world is one of the inversion of values, the transgression of decency and the derivation of a perverse pleasure. He denies optimism and any romantic notion of a state of nature in favor of vice and an insistence on the danger of naïve conceptualizations of “the good” in culture as well as sexuality.

Given that Sade’s novels are each fairly lengthy, a brief description of some plot summaries is called for to give a sense of their formal and stylistic qualities. In 120 Days of Sodom, four male libertines isolate themselves in a castle where they increasingly engage in sexual torture and eventually slaughter their victims, while older female prostitutes write the tale. Sade alternately lauds and derides his so-called protagonists—two aristocratic brothers, a banker and a judge who previously took pleasure in convicting the innocent. Gruesome accounts of murder

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2 Lacan uses this word throughout his work to speak of a surplus enjoyment beyond the conscious realm. The word is left untranslated in English editions to differentiate it from conscious enjoyment or pleasure.
and rape are portrayed throughout. Here, Sade echoes Hobbes and Machiavelli in a critique of any idyllic state of nature, as, say, forwarded by Rousseau.

After this unfinished novel, two “companion novels” illustrate Sade’s dichotomous portrayals of women and ones, later, that 20th century feminist writers will return to and take up in their work. In *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, the eponymous 12-year-old orphan protagonist, is, in her quest to find refuge, subjected to torture from those she tries to assist and her stay at a monastery ends with a brutal rape. In contrast, in *Juliette*, Justine’s 13-year-old sister takes a different route from her situation. She allies with an older woman who critiques morality and religion to ally with rich, depraved men. Juliette, thus, becomes an active accomplice in Sade’s classic incest, rape and murder plots, “busy[ing] herself,” as Jamieson Webster (2016) writes, “with a systematic work of sacrilege…attacking civilization with its own weapons” (p. 5), enjoying herself without care for others, in the least. In more contemporary form, these versions of Sadean women, as Angela Carter (1979) calls them, might be seen in the film heroines of Lars von Trier or the female protagonists of Ayn Rand, respectively.

Finally, for this discussion, in *Philosophy of the Bedroom*, Sade most explicitly and succinctly combines his moral and political views with his graphic descriptions of sexual cruelty. In the guise of what Sade (2007) calls an erotic education, complete with an introduction addressing “voluptuaries of all ages and every sex” (p. 1), Sade depicts the protagonist, Eugenie’s, ambivalent relationship to her mother, the moralistic Madame de Mistival. Eugenie is invited to the equivalent of an orgiastic weekend of torture in which the bisexual male character Dolmance, at the request of Eugenie’s father, lectures to her on courage, liberty and atheism. When Madame de Mistival arrives to rescue Eugenie, she is raped by her own daughter, who sews her genital orifice shut with a deadly virus.
Given these descriptions of non-consensual, violent and repetitive acts, it is no surprise how, when translated to medico-legal discourse, the “sadism” that would later form the S of BDSM would be read, de facto, as pathological. The life of the Marquis de Sade, with its blurry lines between it and fiction, may have something to do with this. Prostitutes of both sexes complained of Sade’s treatment of them; he was found guilty of abusing a maid he hired for his family, and he and an accomplice were sentenced to death for sodomy and poisoning. These crimes resulted in multiple imprisonments, from which he escaped. During periods of freedom, he participated, despite being lambasted as a member of the aristocracy, in radical leftist Parisian politics of the time. He was arrested in 1801 by Napoleon for writing Justine and Juliette and spent the remainder of his life institutionalized, first in a prison, then, more famously, in the Charenton Asylum (Perrottet, 2015). As many of his extant works were in the hands of doctors and medical facilities, their fascination with the envisioned world of the Marquis fueled, I argue, sexologists’ own fantasies.

While in no way advocating for practicing S&M or BDSM as described by Sade, 20th century queer and feminist writers read, philosophically, in his work, critiques of culture that provide the possibility of some difference. Writing existentially and phenomenologically on Sade, Simone de Beauvoir, in Must we burn Sade? (1952)—written as an introduction to Justine—cautiously argues that Sade’s life and work offer an important, albeit failed, critique of a patriarchal political machine. By baring the operations of cruelty at their most extreme limit, Sade forces his characters to assume responsibility for their choices as a necessary condition of existential freedom and provides a critique of hypocrisy. He does so in a mode radical for his time: Sade’s women as much as men are capable of pleasure in cruelty. De Beauvoir argues, however, that this exclusive focus on the material body and rationality, without consideration for affect or the
emotional, severs intersubjective bonds and instead provides Sade with the opportunity to justify suffering and cruelty: a danger, I would argue, also possible in strictly heterosexist, patriarchal or capitalist uptakes of kink practices still today.

In her work, *The Sadean Woman*, novelist Angela Carter (1979) offers a feminist reading of the Marquis de Sade through his novels described above. While critiquing the images Sade offers in *Justine* and *Juliette* of the virgin and the whore, Carter also demonstrates how Sade’s demystification and deromanticization of sex lays bare these assumptions in modes elided by other writers. While Carter’s study is not philosophical but polemical, investigating the ideology of pornography, she echoes de Beauvoir in showing how Sade provided fantasmatic images of women who could come to sexual climax, be interested in sex without procreation, have interests outside motherhood as well as separate from their own mothers, and divest from religious and other ideologies that aligned women solely with the metaphysical “good.” In the realm of queer theory, likewise, writers like Lee Edelman (2004) see Sade as providing an alternative ethics of the death drive in contrast to solely futuristic notions of “the Good” as situated in the figure of the Child.

As with de Beauvoir, Carter’s opinion is that Sade cannot envision reciprocal experience. The triumph of one individual necessitates the annihilation of another. Thus, the Sadean subject remains stuck in an autistic trance. Sade is still, she writes, “in complicity with the authority which he hates” (p. 136), due to his loveless portrayals of the flesh, the masculinist divorcing of affect from sexuality. Carter reads Sade as entirely “without transcendence,” yet argues that if, in *Philosophy of the Bedroom*, he could have allowed his most abused and wretched character, the moral Madame de Mistival, to “experience pleasure, then the terms of his vision would have been disrupted. Transcendence would have crept in. He might even have to make room for
hope” (p. 18). Lacanian feminists such as Juliet Flower MacCannell (2000) have posited, following this, that perversion, as described by de Sade, opens a “precarious freedom” a “prisoner’s dream” (p. 26) for women’s enjoyment. I will return to this notion of transcendence and its particular importance for contemporary BDSM practitioners in Chapter Three, in a discussion of radical, feminist BDSM praxis beyond the limits of the Law.

As such, though Sade’s work has little in common with BDSM praxis today, perhaps more starkly than any writer, he portrays the image of European aristocratic culture of the Enlightenment as founded upon rape, both literal and figurative. By pushing descriptions of the enactment of cruelty to the most extreme, Sade provides a brutal sexual phenomenology of the power dynamics of his time that still continue to undergird sexualized subjugation of bodies and subjects based upon notions or race, class and gender that are still in operation today. Thus, Sade’s novels are not a guide for sexual praxis or political action, but a beginning point of laying bare the cultural mechanics and power dynamics that, only later, could begin to be taken up in different creative forms and modes of resistance in European and American cultures.

**Masochism and difference: The legacy of Venus in Furs**

Whereas today, the terms sadomasochism, S&M and BDSM combine “sadism” and “masochism” into one concept, the terminology for these was not always connected. While Krafft-Ebing (1965) derived “sadism” from the legacy of the Marquis de Sade, he took his concept of “masochism” from the name and writing of Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, who, in 1870, published the short novella *Venus in Furs*. The novella’s protagonist, Severin, is infatuated with an aristocratic woman, Wanda, who dons furs. Severin encourages Wanda to treat him in progressively demeaning ways, insisting that she remain distant from him while he lauds her with praise. Wanda, initially flummoxed by the request, moves from
humoring him to taking increasing pleasure in her domination of him. As she feels more contempt for Severin, he experiences a kind of pleasure he names “suprasensuality.” Severin submits to Wanda until the end of the novel, when she takes a new lover to whom she in turn submits.

In his 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing took this plot description from *Venus in Furs* to introduce masochism to the psychiatric community as a pathological disorder of sexual desire, in its feminization of what was considered, at the time, a man’s societal role. Masochism, thus, was linked not only with an experience of physical pain, but also submission to the other gender. Krafft-Ebing saw men exemplifying powerlessness as pathological. In women, in contrast, Krafft-Ebing connected masochism to physiological determinants, a linking of sexual and personality characteristics to the biological that Sade, for one, would have rejected. Women, in Krafft-Ebing’s conceptualization, could only be masochistically pathological if they adopted the fantasy of a male slave. Already, in this early conception of pathological masochism, however, Musser (2014) notes that its radical determinants are evident: Masochism was that which undermined the social order. This situation of masochism as “exceptional” thus has the power to expose the potency of subversion through fantasy as well as, historically, “assumptions and silences about bodies, race, and gender” (Musser, 2014, p. 4).

In a philosophical vein, upturning the notion of masochism as a powerlessness, Deleuze, in his 1967 essay “Coldness and Cruelty,” shows how in Sacher-Masoch’s account of masochism, Severin schemes for his own pleasure, with the figure of Wanda carrying out his wishes in the role of Ideal Mistress. Deleuze ultimately concludes that rather than submitting to a human other, what the masochist does is render reality absurd through absolute submission to a contract. For Deleuze, the masochist displays a desire to be rid of the paternal law and the pernicious
workings of modernity. Masochism, for Deleuze, provided a philosophical counterpoint to the Kantian imperative of de Sade of the will to jouissance. It also pointed to the non-human in sexuality with vacillations between poles of dominance and submission. The character Severin, thus, sought to be “reborn” as a new man without need of a woman: “The new sexless man” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 33). As such, this provided something akin to the entry point for a democratization of pleasure, one that Deleuze later will write formed part of the thinking for his work with Felix Guattari in Anti-Oedipus (1983), which I’ll turn to in later chapters. He argued that his work on masochism and the fluctuations involved between sadism and masochism “contradicted psychoanalysis but could be reconciled with it” (Musser, 2014, p. 79).

This said, these radical re-readings of masochism came much later than Krafft-Ebing’s conceptualization, which remained dominant in clinical psychology through much of the 19th and 20th centuries. Like sexual sadism, the enjoyment of physical masochism became a scientific category based on behavior, one made accessible to the large European and later American publics independent of its original historical, literary and social context. Sexual behavior preferences were, for the first time, treated as indicative of underlying psychological problems pertaining to morality and the degeneration of man. Of masochism, Krafft-Ebing writes in Psychopathia Sexualis:

Psychologically speaking, the facts of sexual bondage are of greater criminal importance. If sensuality is predominant—that is, if a man is held in fetishistic servitude and his moral power of resistance is weak—he may be goaded into the very worst crimes by an avaricious or vindictive woman, into whose bondage his passion has led him. (as cited in Lin, 2014, p. 452)
In other words, one major argument for Krafft-Ebing in pathologizing masochism was the possible social consequences of female dominance, an espoused fear of unearthing or revealing the underlying criminality of women rather than the masochistic desires themselves!

The diagnosis was laden with the charge of degeneracy and deviation and, along with homosexuality and many other forms of non-normative sexuality, this legacy of Krafft-Ebing remained through the 1970s in the DSM as a sexual deviation or paraphilia. Sexual deviation, in DSM-II (APA, 1968) was defined in individuals:

whose sexual interests are directed primarily toward objects other than people of the opposite sex, toward sexual acts not usually associated with coitus, or toward coitus performed under bizarre circumstances as in necrophilia, pedophilia, sexual sadism and fetishism. Even though many find their practices distasteful, they remain unable to substitute normal sexual behavior for them. (p. 44)

In addition, in DSM-III, sexual sadism and sexual masochism were specifically defined as diagnoses. It was not until DSM-IV-TR that individuals who consensually engage in BDSM or kink activities were excluded from de facto pathologization as having a specific mental disorder.

As such, descriptions of BDSM praxis were relegated, in psychology and sexology, to nosological descriptions of pathological behavior. Only Freudian and post-Freudian thought, to which I now turn, continued to consider the dynamic and fantasmatic elements of sexuality.
**The psychoanalytic revolution: Freud and sadomasochism**

What endeavor other than psychoanalysis, what treatment, what study of humans, has at its core unending curiosity and skepticism, the absolute demand that the individual find his truth — cut loose from magic, from secrets, and from the erotization of victimhood? Analysis, with astonishing speed, went from revolution to respectability, to outdated mythology. I do not think that a free society can easily bear the loss.

Robert Stoller (as quoted in Roudinesco, 2007, p. 158)

Freud, in his 1905 work *Three Essays on Sexuality*, proposes a model for sexuality far afield from the classifications of Krafft-Ebing and his insistence on perversity as pathology. Freud, here, I believe is at his most radical, especially with regard to sexuality. Rather than seeing perversions as deviations from the norm, he posits a polymorphously perverse infantile subject of drive-based sexuality, engaging in a continual interplay with objects and others, at the foundation of human sexuality. The human animal is thus, from infancy, given to investing objects and a multiplicity of parts of sexed others with libidinal intensities. Perversions, for Freud, are related to fixations in infantile development, with the “normal” development of heterosexuality framed as an “achievement,” one possibility amongst many and not a necessary one. His original subject is psychically bisexual, and, returning to this conceptualization along with the productive elements of polymorphous perversity, will open ways of considering fantasy beyond normative heterosexual forms of BDSM praxis.

In *The Three Essays on Sexuality*, written in 1905, Freud (2000) draws from Krafft-Ebing and other sexologists’ accounts to theorize sexual instincts, separating sexual object from sexual aim. He immediately separates the notion of romantic love (“the popular view of the sexual instinct” (p. 3)) from sexual activity and soon questions whether the sexological notion of “‘degeneracy’ is of any value or adds anything to our knowledge.” (p. 4). He also separates himself from theories that involve explicit linking of physiology to sexuality and muses that many otherwise
well-adjusted and fully developed people are “abnormal in their sex life” (p. 15). In terms of what he calls “derivations in respect of the sexual aim,” he identifies activities that involve anything other than vaginal intercourse—including calling kissing, touching and looking, and slow lingering on any body part other than heterosexual genital to genital aim into question—thus, in a way, making all human sexuality in some form or another, “strange.” This “strangeness” opens the door to question as well as make sense of practices not only involving interactions with other humans and their various body parts but also non-human object sexuality and the fetishes or kinks involving shoes, furs, or other eroticized objects invested with libidinal energy and historical meaning for the subject in and of fantasy.

Freud (2000) does discuss the specific cases of sadism and masochism in The Three Essays, naming them as “[t]he most common and the most significant of all the perversions—the desire to inflict pain upon the sexual object, and its reverse” (p. 23). By pain, Freud refers not only to physical pain, but, following Krafft-Ebing, the psychological or emotional pain of humiliation as well. Freud describes sadism and masochism as outgrowths of what he reads as the aggressive nature of sexuality and, in fact, calls sadism pathological only when it involves violence as opposed to aggression or rigid fixity to the exclusion of all other forms of enjoyment. Thus, for Freud, sadism was a kind of gift that made suffering bearable, revenge, a defense against masochism. His unique fascination and attribution of meaning to sadism and masochism for sex, lie in their core relation to human social and emotional life, in that their operations are directed at objects from the very beginning. He writes:

Sadism and masochism occupy a special position among the perversions, since the contrast between activity and passivity which lies behind them is among the universal characteristics of sexual life. (p. 26)
Connecting this with his theories of psychic bisexuality, Freud expresses a delightful surprise in the discovery that sadism and masochism are not always separate entities, but “habitually found to occur in the same individual” (p. 25). In 1924, Freud added a concluding clause to this section on sadism and masochism by noting that rather than describing characteristics as “masculine” or “feminine,” this dichotomy “often has to be replaced in psycho-analysis by that between activity and passivity” (p. 26). This simple statement thus, prior to queer and feminist writings of the later 20th century, marks a decoupling of energetic attributes from both biological determinism as well as, more radically, gendered language.

Freud (2000) also marvels at the specific potency and power of the sexual instinct and its ability to “overrid[e] the resistances of shame, disgust, horror or pain” (p. 27). He describes, even, at its most extreme, the corophilia (eating of excrement) of Sade as not necessarily pathological, writing that “even in such cases we should not be too ready to assume that people who act in this way will necessarily turn out to be insane or subject to grave abnormalities of other kinds.” Thus, while seeing sexuality as underlying human behavior, it is not, in Freud’s estimation, predictive. It stands in relation to other forms of life and ways of being, yet does not completely dictate it. In contrast, Freud suggests, at least for those with hysterical or conversion symptoms, it was precisely the non-expression of and aversion to sexual instincts and desires that lead to miseries, maladies and illnesses. In yet another radical turn, Freud suggests that the physiological perception of gender and labeling of sexuality as “masculine” or “feminine” may occlude these underlying operations as the operations of sexual repression, writing that it is:

*apparent* when a hysteric—a male patient it may be—falls ill as a result of some trivial emotion, some conflict which does not centre around any sexual interest. In such cases psychoanalysis is regularly able to show that the illness has been made possible by the
sexual component of the conflict, which has prevented the mental process from reaching a normal issue. (p. 32)

In this manner, I believe, Freud opens the way for the expression both of women’s, men’s and, later, gender-non-conforming individuals non-normative, social unsanctioned desires, such as those produced in, through and with fantasies of BDSM.

In his 1919 essay, “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud begins to explore the theoretical problem of masochism through a childhood beating fantasy, which, he notes, can often arouse sexual desire. Masochistic enactments, he notes, are enactments of fantasies that can serve as models for clinical investigation. In the essay, he traces the fantasy through its mutations and displacements between fantasied staged characters as well as differences in the ways genders are positioned within the structures of the fantasy. The fantasy goes through multiple shifts in the Oedipal schema: In the first version, the fantasy is a memory or desire from childhood, in which the child images a father-figure beating a rival or sibling. In the second version, the fantasy shifts to the subject herself being beaten by the father, pain and pleasure linked in the satisfaction of attaining the father’s incestuous attention and love. In the final phase, the subject, in a Deleuzian vein, imagines any number of children—ostensibly substitutes for the subject herself—being beaten by an authority figure such as a teacher, sadism and masochism moving together into one. As such, sadomasochism is a consequence of moving through Oedipus.3 Notably and importantly for later discussions, in this essay Freud describes masochism as a feminine position and he interprets a male patient’s recollection of a beating by his mother as a

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3 This theoretical note, it seems, can explain, thus, the increased visibility and presence of sadomasochism in an increasingly post-Oedipal society, a consideration I will return to in Chapter Four and the conclusion.
repressed homosexual desire for the father. Here, as in much of Freud, the mother’s role in fantasy is minimized.

In his 1920 work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces his notion of the death drive. While he had previously hypothesized that a drive for mastery was one of roots of sadism, here, in his famous example of the *fort/da* game, he describes a child attempting to overcome the pain of separation by controlling an object (the mother) through a fantasy enacted in play. The child, in this formulation, masters or overcomes trauma through changing passivity into activity. He also introduces clarifies his theories of temporality in trauma first introduced clinically in *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, naming this psychoanalytic concept, *Nachtraglichkeit* (“afterwardness” or “deferred action”). Freud describes *Nachtraglichkeit* as the retroactive attribution of a sexual or traumatic layer to earlier events inaccessible to consciousness. These memories, he believes, were made in a time that is not recoverable, represented by recollection and an an-archical trace that has become origin-less, not fully made into memory. The impulse to play, thus, for Freud is here a form of self-mastery not explicable by the model of pleasure-seeking alone.

Freud’s later 1924 essay, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” marks this even further. Freud views masochism as further removed from sexuality that sadism and instead connected to a complexity of factors, including guilt, pain, disgust, shame and other things “stand[ing] in opposition and resistance to the libido” (p. 25). Here, he describes three forms of masochism: erotogenic, feminine, and moral. Feminine masochism, he defines, without much further comment, as pleasure in pain. Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) have noted that in this context Freud describes “femininity” as an element of bisexuality. Moral masochism, Freud associates with the harshness of superego criticism and the repetitious nature of self-injurious guilt. In
erotogenic masochism, he describes men’s sexual acts as the carrying out of psychic phantasies through play, “being gagged, bound, painfully beaten, whipped, in some way maltreated, forced into unconditional obedience, dirtied and debased.” The masochist, he writes, “wants to be treated like a small and helpless child, but, particularly a naughty child.” Yet, in the analytic elaboration of these fantasies, Freud reports that individuals desire to take on a feminine form, to give birth to a baby. In this way, masochistic practices show a desire, perhaps, to move with and through sexual difference in fantasy, through and beyond the actual body. In 1976, Lacan will take up these observations on masochism in his Seminar XXIII on Joyce where he reads the author as creating what he calls a sinthome through the embodied, masochistic act of writing through the body. Masochism, in a different but related vein from Deleuze, thus provides an escape from the lived father and, for Lacan’s Joyce, a way to, instead, create a multiplicity of possibilities of Names-of-the-Father. Thus, while, masochism, did pose a problem for psychoanalysis—one Freud would later tarry with in his writings on the death drive—it also, I argue, pointed a way toward its development and beyond.
**F is for phantasy: Klein and Lacan**

Freud situates an element—a veritable transformer—that never has its source in the nervous system and remains radically foreign to it: the *fantasy* (*Phantasie*). Sexuality thus names a regime of eventuality that is situated at the intersection of an energetic circuit and a theatrical scene.[1]

Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*

SM is not fantasy, but the enactment of fantasy. For many, it is the transformation of fantasy into reality—or the closest approximation of it in which they are interested, or that they are willing to achieve.

Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*

What is meant by “fantasy” in psychoanalytic discourse can be, depending on the analytic tradition or theory cited, a great number of things. In the context of psychoanalytic theory, here, given the extensive literature on this topic, my reflections will be relatively short as rather than providing a backwards review of the aetiology of fantasy or a hermeneutic, I am more interested, for this project, at how fantasy (and phantasy) operate in the psyche of the subject and, furthermore, how they might transform and be transformed through sexual praxis. Freud, when first writing about fantasies, identified them at work in the conversion disorder symptoms he saw in the clinic and described in his early work *Studies on Hysteria*. While he later abandoned some of these early theories of fantasy, what remained consistent in his work is that he observed psychological symptoms and fantasies as connected to one another. Important to note is that Freud does not, as Dylan Evans (1996) describes it, “imply a rejection of the veracity of all memories of sexual abuse, but the discovery of the fundamentally discursive and imaginative nature of memory; memory of past events are continually being reshaped in accordance with unconscious desires…in a complex dialectic in which fantasy plays a vital role” (p. 61). The expression of fantasy in language, in some instances, could even be thought to be the outcome of
analysis, such as the expression of a fantasy of prostitution emerging from descriptions of symptoms of agoraphobia.

In their close reading of Freud’s work on fantasy, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (1967) map the different movements in Freud’s work on fantasy. They connect, in Freud’s case studies, the way fantasy arises from “unconscious combination[s] of things experienced and heard” in early childhood experience, including intergenerational legacies as well as those experienced directly by the subject herself. They write of Freud’s post World War I conceptualization of fantasy:

The original fantasy is first and foremost fantasy: it lies beyond the history of the subject but nevertheless in history: a kind of language and a symbolic sequence but loaded with elements of imagination; a structure but activated by contingent elements. As such it is characterised by certain traits which make it difficult to assimilated to a purely transcendental schema, even if it provides the possibility of experience. (p. 324)

Conscious fantasies, thus, are, in Laplane and Pontalis’s reading of Freud’s various iterations of fantasy content—primal scenes, castration, seduction, etc.—always fantasies of origins, specifically of sexual difference. There is always some element, in conscious fantasy, as Lacan will underscore in Freud’s work, that conscious fantasy is marked by a detail of nonreality.

This said, Freud also considered how fantasy involved “psychical reality,” which, while not equivalent to material reality and separate from the operations of reality testing, is of equal if not, at times, great importance for the subject. Though Freud used the same word in German (“Phantasie”) to designate two operations of fantasy, Freud’s translator later would go on to use the spelling “phantasy” to distinguish between the conscious elements of fantasy—the manifest
content of a daydream or conscious sexual fantasy—and “unconscious phantasy,” which was of a
deeper level. In his work introducing the death drive, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud will
write of phantasy as being equivalent to a psychic event, active in the so-called “navel” of the
dream (Malabou & Johnson, 2013, p. 96).

After Freud, Melanie Klein, in her analyses of children’s play, saw the work of adult
unconscious phantasies and symptom development in a material form, through children’s
manipulations of objects and toys. Klein saw anxieties around conflicting impulses as producing
phantasies which, in turn, motivated perceptions and for, in her view, children to seek
confirmation of “goodness” or “badness,” with the mother’s breast as the original object for this
expression. Klein saw phantasies as motivating and underlying children’s everyday play,
including expressions of helping gratitude and aggressive destruction, with the oscillation
between what she called the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions continuing and being
modified throughout life. Phantasy, as such, for Klein, was rhythmic, prior to and also
motivating conscious thought or actions, in joining or destroying ways. In Kleinian analysis,
change can only happen with the slow work of libido strengthening in the transference, allowing
for the trust with the diminishing of guilt and fear. Yet, this victory over the destructive drives
will always only be partial.

Angela Carter’s reading of Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* is a sexual example as close to
a phenomenology of Kleinian phantasy as any that one might hope to find described in the
psychoanalytic literature. Carter describes Eugenie and her mother Madame de Mistival, in their
final scene, caught in a “rich psychotic trance” in which the daughter copulates with her mother
and then murders her, the father nowhere around. This, Carter reads as a fantasmatic and
“exemplary vengeance upon” the Kleinian “good breast” and one, she says, had Sade carried it
further and allowed for Madame de Mistival’s pleasure to assert itself over pain, could have shown a lifting of repression and taboo around women’s sexual pleasure and reproductive agency. Without this, according to Carter, Sade remains stuck in a void, without the possibility of subjective or societal change.

In a different mode, after Klein, Lacan too will write of the specific and particular structural function of a type of unconscious phantasy that he believes the subject must traverse in analysis, one he calls the “fundamental fantasy.” This fantasy is linked to the later scripts, which do not dominate or repress it. This type of fantasy, which, other than in Lacanian psychoanalysis, was largely abandoned by post-Kleinains, is seen as shaping, forming and patterning later relationships in life. Lacan reads Sade as bringing the Kantian imperative to its most formal form, where, in the words of Zizek, “‘following one’s desire’ overlaps with ‘doing one’s duty.’” Phantasy, for Lacan, is unique and essential to subjective constitution. As Zizek (1991) articulates this ethical position:

What confers on the other the dignity of a ‘person’ is not any universal-symbolic feature but precisely what is ‘absolutely particular’ about him, his fantasy, that part of him that we can be sure we can never share. To use Kant’s terms: we do not respect the other on account of the universal moral law inhabiting every one of us, but on account of his utmost ‘pathological,’ on account of the absolutely particular way every one of us ‘dreams his world,’ organizes his enjoyment…For this reason, we can acquire a sense of the dignity of another’s fantasy only by assuming a kind of distance towards our own[…]

(p. 156)

While fantasy, for the structural Lacan, outside the “fundamental fantasy,” operates, vis a vis his articulation of the clinical categories of neurosis and perversion, as a “relatively stable mode of
defense” against castration (Evans, 1996), these still express, through symptomatic behaviors, each subject’s specific relation to pleasure or jouissance, albeit in a “distorted” way that maintains the subject’s desire."

The implications here for BDSM praxis lie in the singularity of each practitioner’s relationship to the enactment of fantasy. While couples and groups engage together in scenes, how the scene functions in each person’s psychic economy varies. A scene that impacts one player at the level of what Lacan would call the Real and effects subjective change may not have nearly the same effect on another. Yet, nonetheless, despite this radical asymmetry, practitioners may nonetheless co-experience powerful impacts that cannot be assimilated into any parallel experience. As such, the kinds of negotiations and discussions that occur prior to and particularly during “aftercare” provide a glimpse at fantasy operations that may be at work and stake for different players. Ethical BDSM praxis, particularly in instances of group witnessing, requires a radical respect for the particularities of fantasy, a multitude of subjective positions, and also, too, the at times non-verbal space of phantasy.

_Elaboration of ‘the sexual’: Laplanche on fantasy_

While much of Freudian and psychoanalytic theory addresses issues of gender, sex and the category of the sexual, the differences and interactions between these categories are nowhere as well defined as in the works of Jean Laplanche. His works, which offer what Dominique Scarfone (2015) calls a “‘critical approach’ to Freudian thinking” (p. vii), have considerable to offer to contemporary scholars interested in feminist and/or queer psychoanalytic theory.⁴

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⁴ Judith Butler’s writings on sex and gender in _Gender Trouble_ and _Bodies That Matter_, for instance, were influenced by Laplanche’s work and he cites her, in his work in the 1990s and beyond, in his discussions of these topics as well.
Laplanche close reads Freud’s work on psychosexuality and radically rejects, in his work, the dichotomy between body and psyche or soul, arguing that “the dividing line actually runs between self-preservation and the sexual sphere, each of which includes both somatic and psychic components” (p. 8). Gender, according to Laplanche, is not double or binary in nature, “often plural, as in the history of languages and in social evolution” (p. 159). Sex (or what Lacan would call “sexual difference”), in contrast, for Laplanche is dual “by virtue of sexual reproduction and its human symbolizations, which sets and freezes dualities.” Finally, the sexual, following Freud in the *Three Essays*, is, for him, “the object of psychoanalysis,” “multiple, polymorphous,” and “based upon repression, the unconscious and fantasy.” Furthermore, he makes the compelling proposition that the sexual is “the unconscious residue of the symbolization-repression of gender by sex,” or, more succinctly, the multiplicity of genders as expressed in and through operations of duality. As such, Laplanche diverges further from previous psychoanalysts, except perhaps Lacan, in separating “the sexual” from the vital order and biology and the opposition between drive and instinct as fundamental. He writes that “sexuality draws away from its natural object, finds itself delivered over to fantasy and in this very process is constituted qua sexuality” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967, p. 46)

For Laplanche, sexuality can be seen in the example of auto-erotism, which always already involves a prior object; there is, for Laplanche no endogenous fantasy. As in Lacan, the Other is primary in the formation of the subject and “the unconscious sexual comes from the other” (Scarfone, 2013, p. 26). The “elusive but elective relationship which Freud established between fantasy and sexuality dissolves. Laplanche argues that in the psychical reality of fantasy “the reality of unconscious wishes take their ‘truest shape’” and ought to be considered with dignity and not merely material to be analyzed, considered as a defense or taken to be regression. He
refers to this as ““the reality of the message’…a third category of reality in which psychoanalysis is interested” (Scarfone, 2013, p. 11). His work is opposed to the initial stage-based sexuality considered by Freud. He also critiques the desexualization of sexual fantasy in “A Child is Being Beaten,” stating that it leaves out the explicitly sexual and material connections and the nature of physical impact. Arousal in the realm of the sensory-visual, Laplanche argues, also affects erogenous mappings of the body and arousal through the fantasmatic body. In his formulation, even conscious fantasy—sexual or otherwise—may become repressed and become pathogenic. The excess or surplus between two partners—similar to Lacan’s notion of “no sexual relationship”—exists no matter the level of attunement. As Scarfone (2013) describes is, “Such asymmetry has to do with the sexual for which there is no code of translation or adaptation available to the infans” (p. 21). Laplanche attests to the importance of touch in fantasy and the way the communicative action of content is written into the body. As such, his work has particular power and import for considering pleasure, trauma and excess in BDSM praxis.

Rather than following Freud on Eros and Thanatos being part of the same drive, Laplanche prefers to speak of sexual life drives (binding forces) and sexual death drives (drive-related sexual) to specify their different operations of binding and unbinding respectively. Rather than considering attachment as key in the formation of sexuality, as many psychoanalysts after Freud and contemporary psychologists do as well, Laplanche considered the role of (or lack of) tenderness. This, I argue is key to understanding, when they occur, the healing factors of BDSM praxes and temporary binding practices (e.g, as in practitioners who play ethically with multiple partners at a time or different times without negative attachment reactions) involved. Analysis, according to Laplanche, “consists in a revival and reopening of the ‘fundamental anthropological
situation’ which…is the lot of every human baby born into a world where he or she is necessarily exposed to the enigmatic and ‘compromised’ messages of the adult other” (Scarfone, 2013, p. 11). The sexual, for Laplanche, in its forceful and basic traumatic impact does not assume, like Kleinian phantasy, any pathological form, but rather instantiates processes of psychic differentiation. The excess the adult transmits is cultural and also at least partially unconscious to the adult herself. Laplanche challenges, like Lacan, relational and ego psychological notions of adaptation, while also pushing up against the notion that the ends of analysis involve assuming castration. As such, Laplanche, with his focus on embodied co-emergence and attentiveness to the operations of the non-gender-specific maternal, is more in line with feminist and queer psychoanalysts whom I will discuss further in Chapters Two and Four. Notably, Laplanche foregrounds notions of the operations of the material in fantasy, even through metonymic displacement, through the specific example of milk. Even a child who has been bottle-fed, for instance, may develop fantasies about breasts, as this connection may be active in the parents’ psyches. Laplanche’s theories thus provide a powerful way to begin to consider how the active, haptic and tactile activities of BDSM praxis might work on change at the level of phantasy, through the more-than-linguistic signification that occurs through touch and translation.
Psychoanalysts take to discussing morals and ethics like drunkards to drink. I do not wish to serve as one more grand master of sexual behaviour, to judge if sexual freedom damages or enriches society, or to pronounce what laws should be created and how enforced to reflect our morality.

Robert Stoller, *Perversion: The erotic form of hatred*

A Brahmin turns green watching us eat hamburger: Whose stomach secretes the truth? When the actors know the rules and can trust their partners, there is less damage done than in many ordinary human relations, erotic or otherwise. The imitation of humiliation is carefully constructed never to produce true humiliation. The imitation of trauma, such as when being humiliated is enacted, is not traumatic. Constant, high attention to one's partner's experience is more caring and safer than the blundering, ignorant, noncommunicating obtuseness that governs so many "normal" people's erotic motions.

Robert Stoller, *Pain and Passion: A psychoanalyst explores the world of S&M*

In contrast to Europe, where discussion of fantasy and the sexual remained, if not central to psychoanalysis, at least of key importance, the American development of ego psychology in the wake of Anna Freud and relational psychoanalysis shifted focus to defense mechanisms and relational enactments that all but banished sexuality entirely. One exception to this could be found in the work of psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, who wrote most prolifically in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. Stoller stridently advocated for alternative theories of gender identity development as well as the depathologization of sexual behavior. Perhaps less well known, but important for the history of psychoanalysis, was Stoller’s belief that psychoanalysis could be better used as an empirical research tool vis a vis the publication of analytic notes and transcripts of interviews. His approach was one that brought together ethnography and psychoanalytic inquiry, such as that used in the final book published before his death in 1991, *Pain and Passion: A psychoanalyst explores the world of S&M*. While linking what formerly went by the name of perversions to not only pathology but human creativity, Stoller, unlike Wilhelm Reich, did not reduce or limit his inquiries to the erotic or the orgasm. Putting aside here his theories of sex and
gender—which I, following Laplanche, find incoherent, and are not discussed in this particular book—it is to this work on S&M I now turn.

In this ethnography, Stoller puts aside psychoanalytic concepts and language, which he argues illuminate as much as obfuscate, to look at how “there is no sadomasochist perversion,” as different schools of psychoanalysis might have argued, but rather “many sadomasochistic perversions” (p. 8). He visits S&M clubs in the Los Angeles area and speaks to individuals there about the scenes in which they engage, pushing away as he does so Freudian concepts of activity and passivity:

[O]ne cannot judge power relationships simply on the basis of ‘top-bottom’ or ‘sadist-masochist’ … Passive and active would seem fine descriptive words for sadomasochistic activities, but when we enter the participants' minds, we find that-just as is the case everywhere-passivity can be a (covert) way of controlling, and activity can be a (covert) way of indulging in passivity. Likewise with the terms dominant and submissive. (p. 15)

Stoller goes beyond empirical accounts such as those of mid-century empirical sexologists such as Robert Kinsey as well as psychoanalytic accounts that remain distant from practice. Stoller, without calling it such, may be the first to properly investigate BDSM praxis as I describe it here, and does so with lightness and even humor. Stoller normalizes S&M in many ways by cross-comparing its practitioners with individuals he sees in his consulting rooms—a fighter pilot who gets erections while flying; a woman who is aroused by the image of crucified Christ on the cross—and asserts that the individuals in his study are no less healthy than his friends or, at times, the mildly depressed neurotics in his practice.

In the opening chapter of his ethnography, Stoller looks at various impetuses for S&M: sexual and/or sensual pleasure, but also relaxation and dramatization. Stoller notes that play
oscillates between different “polarities” and “possibilities”: pleasure and unpleasure, relief and trauma, success and failure, danger and safety. What, in my opinion, is most remarkable about Stoller’s observations and inquiries is that he does not pathologize the affective aspects of the sexual. He stridently writes against sublimation, desexualization and the moralist notion that perversion is a less developed or creative of an approach to the world or ultimately unsatisfying.5 His work, in its detail and nuance into the histories, dynamics and affective and material aspects of S&M, neither reduces the testimony of lived erotic experiences nor the impact of psychoanalysis: On the contrary, it reinvigorates both through foregrounding fantasy. He writes:

Remember that when we use the terms mastery, humiliation, childhood trauma, conflict, separation, merging, mother, father, self, defense, ambivalence, excitement, sublimation, feeling, meaning, wish, rage, harm, joy, love, friendship, anxiety, and other words that stand for experienced subjective states, we are referring to either fantasies (e.g., beliefs, expectations, and memories) or psychic events that are made up of and, simultaneously, are responses (e.g., desires and affects) to fantasies. (p. 42)

In the extensive book-length study, Stoller includes transcripts from ethnographic interviews with male masochists, female dominants, and dungeon owners. He notes, etiologically, that the

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5 One can see this attitude reflected explicitly in the relational work of Emmanuel Ghent (1990), in his essay “Masochism, Submission, Surrender—Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender,” in which only surrender is seen as a term that “convey[s] the quality of liberation and expansion of the self as a corollary to the letting down of defensive barriers.” Ghent reads masochism and submission as possible stages on the way to surrender. While he notes that submission and surrender may occur together, he ultimately privileges surrender as a term and telos. Likewise, he notes that in the realm of the sexual, “it is not primarily the sex that is longed for except as the vehicle for the glimpse of surrendered bliss that we are speaking of.” While this may be the case for some forms of sexual praxis, again, here, the entire collapsing of the relational into the sexual may, perhaps, speak more to the kind of male authorial fantasies of quiescent union as articulated by Angela Carter in her discussion of Sade. Following this, it seems to me that the conflation of the sexual and relational does violence to the realm of the sexual. Ghent’s invocation of Masud Khan’s (1973) writing that “all perversions accrue from a symbiotic complicity between two persons, which is both unconscious and empathic” ignores what can be the radical asymmetry of sexual fantasy.
four who were most into physical S&M had intensely painful diseases in childhood for whom medical interventions were required and that all four, without specifically being prompted, described how as children they:

had to be confined, severely and for long periods, without the chance to unload their frustration, despair, and rage openly and appropriately…[and] consciously forced themselves to master what at first, in infancy and childhood, was uncontrollable physical agony and terror by taking the pain and working with it in their heads, eventually via daydreams, altered states of consciousness, or genital masturbation, until it was converted into pain-that-is-pleasure: voluptuous pain. The conscious, desperately, successfully taught themselves to erotize suffering. (p. 25)

As such, in an unorthodox way throughout Stoller describes the diversion of different types of pain into the pleasures of erotic thoughts. He diverts from Freud in refusing to create a teleology of sexuality. Conscious, ruminative guilt, Stoller argues, is more of a defense against the affective, emotional state of guilt than transformation of guilt into erotic or sexualized pleasure.

While it could, perhaps, be tempting to read S&M practitioners as acting out certain pre-established scripts, Stoller sees the operations of fantasy as key and central to the unscripted, unrehearsed nature of the interactions. He includes depictions of negotiations as well as conversations from after scenes or aftercare discussions. Stoller uses these and other conversations to illustrate how, while he does not idealize his informants as “paragons of enlightened behavior,” he does believe that their practices have much to offer even to more so-called normative discussions of sexuality.

In keeping with some current narratives of BDSM, Stoller also cites professional clients’ linkages of their practices with healing, growth and transformation. One masochistic client,
whom the professional dominant noted was involved with the Manhattan Project in the World War II told his dominant that they are “the best psychiatrist he’s ever seen. He’s been seeing psychiatrists for fifteen years, not doing him any good.” The dominant continues, “The main difference between us and the other establishments: we’re concerned about the individual.” In speaking of his desires for the future of BDSM, this club owner said that licensing would provide “proper acceptance of it in a controlled environment and a useful tool to psychologists and psychiatrists, which I feel would be a tremendous benefit.”

This linking with psychologists and psychiatrists, however, was not shared by all of Stoller’s participants, some of whom insisted that its creativity and play outside a mainstream or capitalist economy was important to challenge and undo harmful forms of power.

Perversion that has to do with the mockery of social rituals—is definitely subversion.

That’s why church and state conspire to crush it. Docs, cops and padres don’t like it, and I can sure understand why. You go to a Janus party, what costumes do we see?

Uniforms; people playing doctor; religious themes. (pp. 46-47)

Stoller also, at the end of the work, looks at the business of S&M pornography and differentiates it from the practices of those in S&M relationships, who frequent clubs, or who visit dominatrices. He also carefully explores the differences between professional versus underground or informal economies, a qualitative distinction I’ll explore in considerations of 21st century BDSM praxis in Chapter Three as well as the Conclusion, with their concomitant social implications.

At the conclusion of his work, a decade of interviews, Stoller ends with a thoughtful reflection of BDSM praxis as a process in the realm of repeating, remembering and working through, “the bottom-line mastery of trauma” (p. 293). He reads it as a serious and embodied
form of play that touches upon important questions for the subject and the study of subjectivity. While he does not believe he “gets” at the not-all that sadomasochism is, he shows how its connection to and approach of the loss of identity and nonexistence touches upon profoundly philosophical questions such as that of Freud’s death instinct. Finally, from the perspective of a psychoanalyst without any expressed personal interest in the overtly physical aspects of sadomasochism, yet, who nonetheless received pleasure, over the long-term, from listening to his informants and seeing them through life events, he reads his work as a transformation of his own naïve, preconceived notion of sexuality from the perspective of a master. He writes that:

Because I am no longer a covert enemy of my patients and informants, I can let them open themselves up to the search for an understanding of the origins and dynamics of their erotic practices. And with that flood of new information, I can enjoy giving up previous positions and no longer bum with the fevers of righteousness. This relaxation has led to the observations that, as stated at the beginning of this essay, erotically aberrant people are as different from each other as everyone is from everyone else, and that we analysts should no longer even covertly support the cruel positions, claimed to be scientific, vis-a.-vis aberrant people (i.e., minorities) that poison human relations and that victimize de jure and de facto the people who make us uneasy. (p. 48)

If ever there was a case for including descriptions of sexual praxis into clinical practice, without denying, within them, the multiplicities of fantasy, Stoller makes it here. The extensions of queer and feminist theory, writing with and through psychoanalysis, bring the importance of these, for the subject and their social links, even more so into focus.
Chapter 2: A new beyond: Queer and feminist transformations

First, Foucault

We have to invent with our bodies—with their elements, their surfaces, their masses, their volumes—a non-disciplinary eroticism: an eroticism of the body in its volatile and diffuse potentialities, its chance encounters and uncalculated pleasures…

Michel Foucault, *Sade, Sergeant of Sex* (as cited in Bersani, 1995).

The work of Michel Foucault in his late 1970s work *The History of Sexuality* marked a turning point in the twentieth century study of sexuality, including S&M sexuality. Foucault saw certain psychoanalytic work as reinscribing disciplinary norms as much as traditional psychology, with dominant discourses and ideologies of perversion introducing and establishing conditions that, as Beckmann (2011) writes, “directly or indirectly produced individual and social harm.” What were once sexual behaviors now became indicative of a species or “type” of person: the construction of the “sadist” and “masochist” as species of “perverts” paralleled the labeling of the “homosexual” as “deviant” or an “invert.” By putting aside the notion of polymorphous perversity and instead following Freud’s theories on oral, anal and genital stages in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, even more “liberal” or “open” approaches to psychoanalysis continued in the United States to construe alternative sexual practices as substitutions en route to a “normal, mature, genital sexuality” (Beckman, 2001). Instead, Foucault was interested in how gay S&M in particular, with its radical act of disrupting identities, could be seem as what Bataille called “limit experiences” that pushed at and revealed the limits of rationality.

While a full consideration of Foucault’s work is outside the scope of this dissertation, I open this chapter with a look at his work and its contribution to the continued proliferation of alternative and queer voices writing about sexuality and BDSM in particular. Foucault’s work came at a point, when, in European and American culture, alternative sexualities were becoming
more visible through cultural touchpoints as well as critical resistance to dominant heterosexual ideology. Ten years prior to the publication of the translation of *The History of Sexuality*, the Stonewall riots marked a visible moment of what in the United States would now be called queer resistance, as drag queens, transgender folx, butch lesbians and sex workers amongst others took to the streets of New York City in solidarity against police raids and civil rights violations.

Second-wave feminists launched critiques of mainstream representations of women as well as those found in pornography. While S&M remained underground, avant-garde artists were making sadomasochistic practices more visible in public performances that embodied violence, vulnerability and risk. Yoko Ono, in her 1960s work *Cut Piece*, sat alone on stage while audience members used scissors to cut away her clothing; Chris Burden, his 1971 piece *Shoot*, was shot with a rifle in a gallery by his friend. In the United Kingdom, BDSM would be most visible in music in the industrial and punk scenes, with bands such as Throbbing Gristle and acts like the female led band X-Ray Spex singing about or even performing bondage on stage. Gay and lesbian S&M still remained far underground in its practices. It was through gay men’s S&M practices, which involved, rather than the agit prop of performance art, subversive self-formation and alternative community creation, where Foucault would situate radical resistance to norms.

In Foucault’s argument, individual pleasure is dangerous to society because it causes harm and social destruction. He advocates for a resistance to norms through pleasure that moves through shame and disgust. S&M, in his conceptualization, is a subversive “technology of the self.” The liberatory aspects of S&M for Foucault lie in adopting creative capacities of the body; these capacities go beyond classificatory and identity-based categories and toward new forms of becoming, emergence and delight. These “alternate forms of relationality” (Musser, 2014, p. 18)
lead Foucault to consider what he sees as new possibilities for community formation, particularly, in his analyses, in gay male homosexuality and homosociality.

Foucault’s notion of pleasure-based social bonds and the “subjugated knowledges” of gay male S&M practitioners is an important one. What Foucault argues is that alternative sexual communities such as gay male S&M can show the operations of sex on the margins or outside of mainstream discourses that obscure it. He cites, in his discussion of repressive discourses, the way power writes over women’s bodies, children’s sexuality, non-reproductive sexual behaviors, and the politicization of marriage coupling. All of these codify and instantiate the way people speak about sexuality, while, through these norms, excluding and pathologizing others. Naming and inclusivity, thus, always creates an outsider, even, I would argue, within the discursive proliferations of today’s LGBTQIAP(GSM)⁶ “alphabet soup” obscuring, inscribing and limiting the stakes of sex and the sexual. Later queer theorists and also Lacanian structuralist theorists sought, however, to go beyond Foucault, outside of discourse and social construction, to look at how the operations of sexuality move to a more radical politics of sexual difference. Under the umbrella of what goes by the name of “queer theory,” these considerations take into account structural differences in constitution at the level of the psyche as well as morphological differences of bodies-in-relation. In other words, who writes, speaks and acts with whom and how matters.

⁶ This is currently considered one of the more inclusive acronyms used, on college campuses and elsewhere, to describe “lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, allies, pansexuals, and gender and sexual minorities.”
The politics of antisocial sexual praxis: Queer psychoanalytic theory and the death drive

We must love one another or die. W. H. Auden, September 1, 1939 (original)
We must love one another and die. W.H. Auden, September 1, 1939 (revised)

Though Foucault marked the beginning of queer theorization of S&M, his communitarian and, at times, almost utopian promises for it, were not echoed by all gay men. Despite refuting naïve optimisms, Foucault’s writing still reinforced the possibility of a cultivation of a certain “’style’ of freedom through vice” and a sociality based on refutation of the naïve “good.” As such, Foucault was horrified by and condemned gay Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini’s now infamous film version of Salo, or, 120 Days of Sodom (1977), which portrayed, in an uncaring and formalist way, the sadistic acts of Sade’s text. Pasolini, Foucault’s contemporary, painted a portrait of Sade that was starkly brutal, whereas Foucault emphasized, in addition to sexuality, “affection, tenderness, friendship, faithfulness, comradeship, companionship” (Halperin, 1995) through the enduring relational play of ironic forms of gay S&M. Post-Foucault, queer male psychoanalytic theorists would consider the role of the death drive and the power of the disjunctive, anonymous and negative in gay male sexual praxis, which writers such as Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman read as a radical resistance to heteronormativity. In this section, I consider the lineage, in queer theory, of the productive work of the sexual negative and how the disruptive counter-social breaking of bonds can be considered in some of the operations of BDSM praxis.

Bersani opens his 1987 article “Is the Rectrum a Grave?” with a provocative claim about the disruptive potential of sex: “There is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it.” Drawing
from theoretical elaborations in his book *The Freudian Body*, Bersani (1986) reads gay male anal sex as a transcendent form of self-shattering and self-annihilation. Pushing against Foucault, “buggering” Freud (as Deleuze would call it), and drawing in-depth from Laplanche, Bersani argues that the otherwise repressed and polymorphous nature of human sexuality irrupts from moments of excess. In Bersani’s conceptualization, sexuality *is* masochism; it is “socially dysfunctional”; it is also, at the same time, a “primary hygienic practice of nonviolence” (p. 222). Yet in order to serve this purpose and act against authoritarianism, it must return, he believes, to the rhythms of sadism and masochism. These rhythms must be stripped of their eroticization of social power dynamics of master/slave and instead focus on sensations of pain (Bersani, 1995a). It is here that Bersani reads what he sees as the most radical turn in S&M praxis: “that for the sake of that stimulation human beings may be willing to give up even a minimal control over their environment” (p. 21). Bersani’s vision of S&M is thus a more embodied and less language-based or visual one than that of Foucault, as it emphasizes the radicality of a return to sensation. This relinquishing of mastery he describes as a “nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject” (Bersani, 1995b), subjectivity without identity. He posits that inherit in gay S&M is a notion of difference not as trauma but a “nonthreatening approach to sameness” through an obliteration of the ego. Bersani positions these practices as creating the possibility for new anti-identitarian relational modes different from the uncritical forms of dominance and submission inherent in heterosexual monogamy.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman considers the radicality of homosexuality through its resistance to discourses about the future and the exalted figure of the Child. For Edelman (2004), the queer disruption of normativity is “inextricable from the death drive, temporal suspension, and masochism” (p. 17). Edelman develops a conception of a negation that cannot be negated: This,
he calls, following Lacan via a French-English neologism, sinthomosexuality. Sinthomosexuality combines a negative conceptualization of “homosexuality” with Lacan’s (1976) notion of the *sinthome* as described in his *Seminar XIII*. Briefly, the *sinthome*, for Lacan, can be described as the subject’s irreducible particularity, one that resists attempts at meaning-making through a continual “writing” of itself. Edelman reads the *sinthome* as a subject of an enjoyment beyond prohibition, one that operates through a “looseness” similar to a knot that is continually slipping, constantly at the verge of coming undone. The sinthomosexual thus operates beyond transgression and any productive notion of the future, in a radical ethics of the present. The clearing and devastation provided by the sinthomosexual thus might be thought to go beyond the Sadean hero in that they have the potential to break repetitive structural and social bonds in a non-teleological way. Edelman, as such, eschews notions of the queer derived from LGBTQ+ identities and instead insists, in contrast to the politicized future of the Child or homonormative structures of the family this: “the future stops here.”

Notable in both Bersani’s and Edelman’s work along with early influential works in queer theory are their avoidance of women’s or lesbian S&M practices. While Bersani (1987), notably, in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” links homophobia to a horror about the fantasy of feminine sexuality, in many ways, he continues the double closeting of women’s and lesbians’ sexuality by refusing their practices places in his theorizing. Butch women, stone lesbians, and others described by Pat Califia are considered by Bersani to show almost nothing transformative and he too quickly, I argue, writes them off as re-inscribing normative structures of masculinity and patriarchy. This is, arguably, due to Califia’s reliance, descriptively, on descriptions of the *images* of lesbian S&M rather than sensations. Yet, historically, given the emergence of even nascent descriptions by those assigned female at birth of their bodies and sexualities, this
moment, I believe, was necessary, and these hasty dismissals part of the ongoing and implicit desire to segregate “good” S&M practices from “bad” ones, even within marginalized subcultures.

Coming from different perspectives, Halberstam (2011) and Freeman (2011) each take up questions of trauma and femininity in ways relevant for BDSM praxis. In The Queer Art of Failure, despite not specifically writing about BDSM, Halberstam considers the radical notion of what might constitute an antisocial femininity. Citing Freud’s descriptions of the hysteric as “one who suffers from reminiscences” (p. 97), Halberstam envisions what a “radical forgetting, a total forgetting, a willful forgetting” (p. 97) might entail in terms of queer praxis. Halberstam writes of queerness as involving active forgetting, the choice not to remain attached, and yet to continue nonetheless. Halberstam (2008), in earlier work, reads this form of queerness through author Jamaica Kincaid’s colonial rage, Valarie Solanas’s (perhaps most famous for shooting Andy Warhol) SCUM manifesto, and the performance artist Marina Abramovic’s radical passivity. Halberstam takes seriously anti-narratives and “undisciplined” forms of production that eschew mastery or heroic narratives and instead, like masochism, operate through failure, the naïve, temporary and illegible. In Halberstam’s conceptualization, noisy and transgressive forms of femininity can play with new forms of temporality. As in the figure of Dory in Finding Nemo, temporal movement can occur and change can happen in praxis without the fantasy of full understanding, reconstruction or knowledge.

In her book, Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories, Elizabeth Freeman (2010), like Bersani, argues for the specific primacy of the body in S&M and, like Halberstam, considers the power of non-linear and incomplete narratives. Freeman, however, mobilizes queer theory to argue against an antisocial praxis and reads the body in S&M as having the power to
transform historiography. She foregrounds, here, the temporality of trauma, and writes that S&M provides “a means of invoking history—personal pasts, collective sufferings, and quotidian forms of injustice—in an idiom of pleasure. This is its scandal and its promise” (p. 139). For Freeman, the body speaks a complex erotohistoriography, which she maps through Freud’s invocation of nachträglichkeit, an always “after-the-factness,” the implications of which I will return to more fully in Chapter Four. S&M, for Freeman, provides the space for trauma to emerge and thus be rewritten and transformed through individuals’ bodies. Freeman critiques what she reads historically as the “Sadean acceleration in history,” progress occurring through a fast, repetitive fucking, both individual and cultural. Queering S&M, she argues, holds the power to problematize this acceleration through strategic disruptions.

In writing of the failures of queer theory to engage with specifically sexed differences, Jose Estaban Munoz writes that that wholly “antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking and investments in differing” (as cited in Musser, 2014, p. 18). Taking seriously Freeman’s notion of the “Sadean acceleration in history,” I read this as happening, too, within psychoanalysis, queer theory, sexuality studies and culture, all of which, in the course of a few short decades, glided over, in their discourses, the specific consideration of those assigned female at birth’s sexual fantasies and pleasure, to which I now turn.

The problem of O: Feminism, masochism and sacrifice

By the late 1970s, BDSM’s increased visibility beyond gay and lesbian subcultures became an issue and topic for feminists as well. Second-wave anti-pornography feminists in the United States such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon critiqued imagery that was likely to predominantly feature women in positions of servitude or bondage. Of the queer theorists,
Bersani (1987) in particular expressed that such strident opposition to this imagery spoke to the power of sex:

Their indictment of sex — their refusal to prettify it, to romanticize it, to maintain that fucking has anything to do with community or love — has had the immensely desirable effect of publicizing, of lucidly laying out for us, the inestimable value of sex as — at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects — anticommmunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving. (p. 215)

Yet what if masochism were in fact to not only underlie sexuality (as it does for Bersani), but also notions of “love” or “romance” as well? In her essay “The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination” Jessica Benjamin (1990) tarries with the difficulties for feminist politics of sadomasochistic imagery and the erotic appeal of sexual submission. While being conscientious not to condemn consensual BDSM practices, Benjamin grapples with the dialectic of dominance and submission in Pauline Reage’s novel *The Story of O*. Why, Benjamin wonders, would the main character in the novel, continue to engage—consent beyond consent—to masochism, pain and rejection in her search for transcendence?

Benjamin’s choice of *Story of O* is notable in that it is perhaps one of the first works of sadomasochism known to authored by a woman.7 *Story of O* opens with a fashion photographer and her romantic interest, Rene, taking a walk. The story quickly escalates into Rene whisking the main character, rendered nameless save for the letter O, off to a castle where she agrees to submissively serve other men. As part of O’s Sadean erotic education, Rene leaves O to his

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7 Anne Desclos, a bisexual French woman writing under the pen name Pauline Reage, would disclose her identity 40 years after the book’s publication. She noted that she had written the novel as a series of letters to her lover, Jean Paulhan—a well-known writer, literary critic and publisher who wrote the introduction to *Story of O*. Paulhan admired the Marquis de Sade, and Desclos said that she wished to embody and inhabit a character in Sade’s world.
step-brother, Sir Stephen. In a gradual and progressive stripping of sexual subjectivity, O is made to be constantly available for the service of men and eventually tasked to recruit other women for the castle. One model is horrified when she sees O’s chains; O, instead, claims pride in her sexual slavery. The novel has various endings: In one, O is naked save for an owl mask and she is given to a large party of guests as an object to enjoy; in another, she is abandoned in the epilogue by Sir Stephen and left waiting, indefinitely, loving him. Though structurally *Story of O* shares some qualities with its contemporary *50 Shades of Grey*—both fictions involve young, professional women entering into sadomasochistic relationships with mysterious men who fascinate them—O’s erotic trajectory is a sexualized one. In contrast to that of Anastasia Steele, it ends neither with any form of social redemption nor romantic consummation.

Though I take issue with Benjamin’s intersubjective critique of *Story of O*, in which she views the sadomasochistic fantasy as enacting a form of “false differentiation,” she does provide, some important points that can viewed in the other-than-explicitly sexualized elements of S/M practices, particularly long-term D/s relationships, in which one partner (of any gender) assumes the role of “Dominant” and the other the “s-type” or “submissive.” Following Bataille, Benjamin (1990) notes that there can be “pleasure, for both partners…in [one person’s] mastery. Were both partners to give up self, give up control, the disorganization of self would be total” (p. 162). As such, rather than looking at the asymmetry in the sexual relationship, Benjamin describes the “non-reciprocity in all dyads.” She reads, through the movements of Hegelian dialectics, in consensual BDSM practices, the possibility for practitioners to find “release from inauthentic selves” and connect with others who are “unlike me.” Where she offers her critique is in the non-recognition and unconscious enactment of sadomasochism at the level of the political or “rational” as well as through non-consensual violence. In particular, Benjamin
foregrounds how women have been historically (though not exclusively) placed in the unquestioned role of masochist, whether in images of religious transcendence or pornography.

As a cis-gender female raised in a predominantly heterosexual society, I find compelling Benjamin’s note that the dialectics of sadomasochism unquestioning undergird many “romantic” though not explicitly sexual romance stories.\(^8\) One can think here to the original version of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. In this version, unlike the Disney adaptation, the potion for which the mermaid trades her voice to the sea witch, the elixir that transforms her mermaid tail into human legs, causes her great pain: She feels as if she is walking on sharp knives and her feet bleed continuously. She is also tasked, in this version, with a dark commandment: She will obtain an immortal human soul only if the prince she loves marries her. Despite the ordeals she humbly endures for the prince, a case of mistaken identity has him marry a princess from a neighboring village. The little mermaid’s sisters, eager to save her, exchange their long hair for a knife from the sea witch, which, if used to kill the prince, will return her to her original form. The little mermaid, unable to kill the man she loves in exchange for her freedom, watches over the married couple until she, in front of her family, turns into sea foam.

In a Lacanian register, Jamieson Webster (2011) in her book *The Life and Death of Psychoanalysis*, reads *The Little Mermaid* as a story of a hysteric seeking her desire, in which

\(^8\) This uncomfortable closeness and yet important difference between the structure of sexual and romantic fantasy can be seen through a cultural lens in Universal Studio’s lawsuit against the Smash Pictures production company’s attempt to produce a pornographic parody of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While pornographic parody films are quite common (e.g. *Edward Penishands*, *The Erotic Witch Project*, *Muffy the Vampire Layer*, *A Wet Dream on Elm Street*, *Whorrey Potter and the Sorcerer’s Balls*, etc.) and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* source material was originally fan fiction taken, without copyright, from the *Twilight* series, the lawsuit argued nonetheless that “a quickly and cheaply produced pornographic work […] is likely to cause the Plaintiffs irreparable harm by poisoning public perception of the *Fifty Shades Trilogy* and the forthcoming Universal films.” Marlon Wayans’ parody film *Fifty Shades of Black* did not face such legal challenges.
“sexuality and death move hand in hand,” with mourning and renunciation as necessary movements. The Little Mermaid’s fate is the excess of the masochistic contract she makes with the sea witch. For Webster and other Lacanian feminists, this is the more disruptive and transformative work of *jouissance* in difference.

**The hysteric’s sexuality: Always already queer?**

[T]he personal is political—for a long time feminism has insisted that what goes on in private is a political matter that concerns us all…[P]sychic life in itself will not be relegated to the private, it will not stay in its proper place. It shows up on the side of the historical reality to which it is often opposed.

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Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*

A woman who dives into the relationship between Eros and Thanatos is not typically regarded as someone making a transgressive, probing move, but as a self-abasing traitor…Likewise, a woman who explores the depths of her despair or depression isn’t typically valorized as a hero on a fearless quest to render any ‘darkness visible,’ but instead is perceived as a redundant example of female vulnerability, fragility, or self-destructiveness. A woman who lives, as did Artaud, like a mad animal at the farthest reaches of her sanity, isn’t a shamanistic voyager to the dark side, but a “madwoman in the attic,” an abject spectacle.

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Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*

In contrast to Jessica Benjamin’s account of *Story of O*, which reads O’s story as a failure, Amber Jamilla Musser (2014), in her book-length study on masochism, takes an alternate approach: Without mentioning “hysteria” by name, she argues that, as a women’s fashion photographer by trade, O is always already consciously playing with the male gaze. Musser reads O as, through her sexual fantasy, also choosing a creative erotic endeavor. To equate a creative femininity—and in this case, a sexual one—merely with women’s oppression is to, I argue, following this, too quickly overlook dimensions of pleasure. Benjamin’s account is the *Shades of Grey* narrative: The man, Christian Grey, teaches his submissive, Anastasia Steele, about sex, while he, in turn, learns from her how to overcome his trauma. This ignores the
complexity of fantasies that might undergird or co-occur along with this master narrative of what Genevieve Morel (2016) calls “a vibrant tribute to a successful hysteria” (p. 67).

The figure of the “hysteric” was not one invented by psychoanalysis, but goes back, instead, to Greek philosophy and culture. Prior to Freud and the invention of psychotherapy, earlier “treatments” for symptoms that were clustered under the term involved aromatherapies, vaginal stimulations and exorcisms. Late 19th century treatments involved, in contrast, hypnosis, which Freud studied and quickly renounced. Freud began his inquiries into sex with its connection to the curious “conversion” symptoms he, as a physician, began to see in the clinic: Loss of speech or loss of sensation in parts of the body without any seeming organic origin. He observed, amongst others, his predecessor, Josef Breuer’s, treatment of the now inaugural “Anna O.” In her introduction to the edited volume Hysteria Today, Anouchka Grose (2016) details what she calls Josef Breuer’s, Freud’s predecessor’s, “love story” involving Anna O. and his horrified renunciation of her treatment when she begins to develop and describe her sexual fantasies to him. Grose also describes accounts of Breuer’s wife’s depression and malaise during the time of his treatment of Anna O. Grose cites Ernest Jones’ biography and the termination of the treatment as such:

It was a long time before Breuer, with his thoughts elsewhere, divined the meaning of [his wife’s] state of mind. It provoked a violent reaction in him, perhaps compounded of love and guilt, and he decided to bring the treatment to an end” (Jones, 1953, p. 203). Anna was so shocked by his abrupt departure that she immediately relapsed, going into an alarming phantom labour. She spent the next few years in and out of the hospital, with Breuer wishing her dead. (p. xxii)
As such, it was no far stretch for Freud, in his early case studies, perhaps, to attend to the weight of the sexual material and connection to symptoms. Freud’s innovation, in the words of Grose (2016) was “to try and be more precise about what those connections [between love and sex] might be how and how they might work, and also to treat his patients using words, rather than physical interventions, which were basically replacements for the sexual act” (p. xxv). As such, Grose argues that perhaps Freud made “hysteria less sexy” (p. xxv). To consider the woman as sexual but not only a sexual object for men’s fantasies, thus, was revolutionary, though Freud and his contemporaries could not have spoken of it this way. Yet what if what Freud felt was “repressed from consciousness” was only that which the doctor had to repress so as to not act upon? What would it mean for a female patient, in contrast, not only to recognize, but to create sexuality beyond the consulting room or prison house of masculinist sexual prohibition?

How did history get here, produce this, in European thought? Certainly, this had not been the case for all cultures and civilizations with respect to female sexuality. While a detailed consideration of cultural differences in female sexuality is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a lay reader can quickly consider representations of women’s sexuality in Hindu temples, portrayals women in African art, or the goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology. Juliet Flower McCannell (2000), in The Hysteric’s Guide to the Future Female Subject, looks back to the figure with whom I began my narrative and inquiries and from whom, I argue, theory and philosophy of BDSM and kink sexualities still must escape: the Marquis de Sade. McCannell neither valorizes nor demonizes Sade. She reads how his pornographic descriptions exposed other societal operations in play in European culture. For women, philosophy and thus the social, could only take place in the “confines of the perverse scenario” (p. 264), a literal as well as psychological boudoir or bedroom. She compellingly traces a number of pathways for what
she reads as the trajectory of “the girl after Sade” (p. 25), through the figure of the hysteric and her fantasied relationship with the figure of “the sadist who comes to ‘liberate’ [her]” (p. 271). McCannell’s account emphasizes, as I do, the role of fantasy and, for her, specifically, the hysteric’s privileged mode of fantasy in its relationship to truth.

In her opening chapter, “The Soul of Woman under Sadism,” McCannell (2000) explores how still, even in the late 20th century, it might be said that we do not have much knowledge of the figure of the girl’s, much less the woman’s, unconscious or id. McCannell believes that through the relations between the pervert—embodied in a character such as Sade’s Dolmance from *Philosophy in the Bedroom*—and the female hysteric, it is possible to trace a direction and development for this knowledge and discovery. The hysteric, McCannell writes “loves the sadist. He brings a *jouissance* to her, a secret knowledge about the nihilism of human life, its petty morality, its fenced in restrictions—her ‘normal’ life—so flat in comparison with her secret *jouissance* within her” (p. 17). The Sadean pervert, following Lacan’s formulation, denies, in his privileging of anality and treating of each and every body as equal, the radical division of sexual difference. He is thus “interested in a fulfillment, a specific *jouissance* beyond gender, beyond even the pleasure principle, beyond the difference of sex that makes ‘relation’ impossible. He thus carries a particular appeal for the hysteric, who does not know if her sex is hers or not” (p. 20). This profound “not knowing” through a kind of entrapment in male structures of power and exchange can be seen in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*: It is the young Eugenie’s father who sends her away for her “erotic education” and, finally, at the end, is, behind the scenes, also commanding that she sew her own moralistic mother shut. McCannell argues that for the ethical to emerge, the hysteric passes through this relation with the pervert, through excess, to go beyond Sade’s very limiting “absolute freedom within reason.”
Fantasy, in McCannell’s account, emerges between the hysteric’s speech and the pervert’s act. The “dream of perversion” or fantasy of it for the hysteric is what sustains her desire. By making herself the object of another’s will, the hysteric, in these instances, experiences, even if disruptively, some previously restricted excess or jouissance. It is here that the possibility emerges of the girl’s going beyond the neurotic Oedipus complex of the patriarchal, into a new societal Symbolic emerges. Grose writes that Lacan puts a radical turn on Freud’s hysteric to consider her on the side of science, one who uses dissatisfaction to “keep desire spinning, acting against atrophy and ossification” (p. xxx). Yet, McCannell is no idealist: As Sadean discourse relegates women’s bodies to “nature” and disavows a possibility of entry into the symbolic through what de Beauvoir or Carter would call transcendence, the pervert “sometimes wins” and the hysteric misses her chance to leave the Sadean bedroom or boudoir. Instead, her ethical call is to attend to the fantasy, the excess between speech and act, the space of radical particularity and subjectivity, especially for herself, from “girl” to “woman.” Later, in Chapter Four, I will read the schizoanalytic works after psychoanalysis as providing space for feminine creative potentials and becoming. Of note here is a short passage in A Thousand Plateaus in which Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write that it is “necessary to conceive of a molecular women’s politics that slips into molar confrontations, and passes under or through them” (p. 276), as might hysteric’s interventions into sadistic practices.

McCannell (2000) reads Freud, in his studies of hysteria and consideration of the silences of women, as providing a space, albeit a limited one in what I would consider the “boudoirs of psychoanalysis,” for women’s truth. This truth, for Freud’s hysteric, was not always revealed directly, but indirectly through pieces of memory, past images, and reminiscences. McCannell reads the social contract as failing women in its tyranny of sameness. Psychoanalytic free
association thus provided what Jill Gentile (2016), in her book, *Feminine Law: Freud, Free Speech and the Voice of Desire* reads as a radical feminine future of the democratic notion of free speech. By taking hysteria seriously, Freudian free association began to offer an ethics of difference beyond sacrifice, biology, nature and foreclosure that, due to systems of social oppression, had come to be women’s lot. McCannell and Gentile both provide important places for women’s voices in the social and Symbolic. However, still, they only gesture towards the possibility of a place for sexuality. Psychoanalytic thinking problematizes the Sadean pervert’s fantasy of unbridled enjoyment and opens a space for the ethical in the hysteric’s fantasy. Yet, it has little to say about what occurs after this turn.

Given hysteria’s relationship to the body and truth, it seems that conscious engagement in sexual fantasy could potentially produce sexual associations beyond the pitfalls of perversion and barred entry to the Symbolic. Gentile (2016) writes that “[t]o attain free association, we must reclaim our forbidden desires in relationships with others. These others who were familiar now become defamiliarized and erotically reconceived” (p. 223). She notes that as the specificity of the psychoanalytic situation is to open up this place for desire, this specific possibility, in treatment, is explicitly barred so that it can find a space through speech. She does, at the end of her book, however, postulate a third space between that involves erotics and attachment for a feminine freedom of association that opens beyond freedom of assembly. What might this look like? What might this be? The clinic of neurosis gives space for fantasies in language, yet where might a hysteric go for their creation, especially given how, presently as well as historically, sexual praxis is too often pathologized as an “acting out,” a way of not speaking?
Here, we move into less charted territory, even within the world of BDSM studies. Though Halperin writes that for Foucault, gay S&M could be seen as a kind of “low-level philosophizing,” such was not the case for female subjects’ experiences. Even through the 1980s, S&M was “assumed to contaminate the world of lesbianism” (Musser, 2014, p. 31), which placed a greater emphasis on women’s nurturance and relationality. Few accounts considered bi- or heterosexual women’s accounts of their own sexualities. In her article “Beyond Queer?” analyst Anne Worthington (2016) suggests that the term “queer”:

- takes up hysteria’s response to the difficulties of being human, of being a man or a woman, of what to do about sex, and where to position oneself in relation to others and the Other—in the context of its genesis in today’s post-psychoanalytic world. (p. 46)

As such, these elided narratives of hysterics—women, male hysterics, and today’s trans* and non-binary or non-gender-conforming folx—I argue, return to Freud’s earliest consideration of psychic bisexuality and polymorphous perversity in *The Three Essays on Sexuality*. In doing so, they open, I believe, new fantastmatic forms of erotic becoming. Though I began this section specifically with the elided narratives of women, in “Hysteria, a hystory,” Colette Soler (2016) reminds readers that in French:

[Hysteria] is a feminine noun, it tells us nothing about the hysterics’ sex—they may be male or female. Neither can hysteria be defined solely on the basis of one type of symptom; the so-called mechanism of conversion, from psyche into soma, as they used to say (p. 92).

From psyche to soma, or soul to body: This, is, thus, the nature of “conversion” or change in hysteria. How, then, might fantasy move not only through the body, but, as in sexual praxis, in and through other bodies as well? What might what David-Menard (1995) calls “a meta-
psychology of movement” look like and how does this happen? David-Menard argues that “the materiality of the hysteric’s body raises different questions” (p. 20) around the historicity of the body and its signification.

Colette Soler (2016) reads social links as specially occurring through the specifically sexual symptom, which, she writes:

invisibly holds two bodies together in spite of the absence of the sexual relationship, one body becomes an event for another[.] (p. 95)

As such, there is, in the sexual symptom, still an excess, which Soler says hysterical “inter-symptomatology” draws together. Soler writes that the hysteric must recognize her own sexual symptom and then ask: What is the other body’s symptom? There is thus not a mutuality or sameness implied, nor merely a recognition and integration, but rather a continued dialectic of wondering: How does and can another’s symptom correspond to my own? I particularly appreciate Soler’s account because it provides a space for the conscious and unconscious of the sexual fantasy. In addition, it does not place woman’s or the hysteric’s sexual desire outside the realm of the articulable. What Soler calls “the fundamental symptom” holds bodies together “where any relationship between their jouissance lacks” (p. 93). This, she believes, does not call for analysis as it “acts a solution to the absence of a rapport” (p. 93). It thus provides a way out of a repetitive obsessional or Sadean perverse sexuality. “[H]ysteria’s sexual symptom,” Soler writes, “takes on its value of constantly aiming at symptomatic singularity” (p. 96), in other words, difference, as opposed to sameness, as well as new forms of kinship outside marriage. Against neoliberalism and beyond the freedoms of Foucault’s S&M, hysteria moves toward this: sexual plurality.
Chapter 3: Sexual plurality and 21st century kink praxes

Out of the dungeon: From theory to praxis

In the opening decades of the 21st century, subcultural spaces now show a more vibrant and diverse landscape of sexualities than literary or theoretical accounts. In the United States, spaces for alternative sexualities are no longer confined to private “dungeons” in major metropolitan areas, but can be found in smaller cities and towns as well. The social media website FetLife.com, with now over 8 million members, opened in 2008 with the options for users to identify with over 60 built-in “role” choices. Edgy online magazines such as Vice routinely run articles on practices from cuckolding to “balloon sex.” Practices considered risky or dangerous “edge play” may appear in popular media, with Rolling Stone this year featuring an article on the use of waterboarding in kink “interrogation play” (Dickson, 2019). In more mainstream news media, in 2016, Newsweek ran an article on the health benefits of BDSM. These journalistic accounts include both interviews with practitioners as well as summaries of research findings.

In line with Stoller’s earlier psychoanalytic observations, Beckmann (2011) has argued that once BDSM began to be subject to research, the academic and theoretical discourses that previously pathologized the practices no longer held. Ethnographic researchers such as Margot Weiss (2011) have argued that any claims to “understand” BDSM de facto involve pathologization. Given this, is or can there be any theory or theories that, instead, might map the movements and evolutions in sexual praxis from practitioners’ accounts? In this chapter, I give an overview of some of the changes in early 21st century sexual praxis, from BDSM to newer forms of “kink.” While “kink,” in this description, may involve some of the power dynamics of BDSM practices, I use this term to describe other practices that may not neatly fall under this umbrella. Kink praxes, in particular, as I will articulate more in the next chapter, often disrupt
and challenge Oedipal as well as even some anti-human logics articulated by psychoanalysis. In place of power dynamics involving a human Dominant and submissive dyad, in any of its configurations (e.g., cop-robber, football player-cheerleader, teacher-student), kink praxes may involve more complex concatenations of animals “packs,” fictional characters, or alien creatures. Some kink community members even identify as asexual and participate in play that involves eroticsms of power as in hypnosis or confession play. Others may identify with “object sexuality,” attachments to objects that can exceed notions of the “fetish” and involve more complex affects and fantasies (Lorca, 2015).

Here, I take seriously Halperin’s (1995) claim that contemporary sexual praxis is itself a kind of collective philosophical activity. The previous chapters serve as a way to trace some structures of fantasy as expressed with and through BDSM praxes. Moving forward, I consider how kink praxes may push past them on the level of collective fantasy. In line with its Victorian beginnings, psychoanalytic discourse has historically privileged speech over action (and certainly sexual acts). I argue that contemporary kink praxes—from negotiations through scenes and into aftercare—involve a psychoanalytic and schizoanalytic ethic, in which ongoing speech moves with and through fantasmatic bodies. An exploration of contemporary sexual praxis takes it out of the walls of the clinic as well as the images of capitalist representation and into the social. To focus only on individual descriptions of BDSM and kink practices is not enough. Following Foucault, the result is too often a re-inscription of these praxes in repressive discourses, a mere twist on a post-Sadean catalogue. The consideration of psychoanalytic (and post-psychoanalytic) fantasy along with rich psychological anthropological description provides a way towards what I will propose in Chapter Four as a haptic, fantasmatic ethnography. In this chapter, I draw from published research and accounts of BDSM praxis as well as my own
experiences as a cis-gender female, pansexually-identified switch to draw a dynamic map of kink in flux.

**Kinky spaces, kinky faces: Where we do what we do with whom we do it**

In the late 20th century, anthropologists, sociologists and psychoanalysts who wanted to research BDSM would go to specific clubs, dungeons or parties in major cities. Today’s kinky spaces, in the online age, however, are more diffuse and diversified. Colloquially, many BDSM practitioners will refer to “the kink community,” which can speak to any number of large or small clusters of players. Dungeons, clubs, and “houses” or “chateaus,” are formal locations often partially or exclusively dedicated to BDSM play. Other “play parties” might be held at restaurants, bars or private establishments. Both those with experience and new to “the scene” may meet at informal, non-sexual gatherings called “munches.” Festivals and conventions held in hotels, resorts or campgrounds combine education, “play,” and relaxation. Each of these spaces may be dedicated to one specific group of practitioners or any number of types of play and players. While until very recently, much of academic research on BDSM has focused on codified spaces for mainly white, upper-middle class practitioners, practitioners of color have formed alternate spaces and communities across the United States, such as the black-focused summer event Weekend Retreat or specific “munches” for kinksters of color or queer kinksters. The diversity of players and praxes goes a long way from the imagination of Sade, Sacher-Masoch, Reage and novels.

In this section, I’ll discuss some of the dynamics and practices that can fall under the umbrella of what occurs in and through “The Scene” or “Community,” while keeping in mind that some kink practitioners even challenge these terms to describe their practices. Here, I consider these,
like even the acronym “BDSM.” as what Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983/1972) would call “territorializations,” or formations that involve processes such as centering, totalization and some hierarchization. In contrast, other kink practices may involve more of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call “deterritorializations,” which loosen containments and create suppleness through fragmentation, detachments, breaks and flows. As such, one territorialized acronym that is sometimes used to refer to the broadest possible swath of practices currently in circulation is WIITWD, which stands for “what it is that we do.” This acronym points to how active identity production most often occurs through engagements with material practices, couplings, groupings and encounters with others rather than static or individual descriptions.

In keeping with this, in studies of BDSM communities Margot Weiss (2006) found that her interviewees described their subjective positions and identifications in flux. She writes:

[They] identified themselves in very specific and relational ways: pervert, master, masochist, bottom, pain slut, switch, dom(me), voyeur, slave, submissive, pony, butch bottom, poly perverse, pain fetishist, leatherman, mistress and daddy. For those who identified themselves as tops, there were just plain tops, but also service tops, femme tops, switches with top leanings and dominant tops. Furthermore, these SM orientations are typically modified with sexual orientation (for example, het, dyke, gay, hetero-flexible, bi, genderqueer), relationship style or dynamics (for example poly[amorous], master/slave, TPE [total power exchange], married and interests (for example, flogging, Japanese rope bondage, canes, pony play). (p. 231-232)

Weiss notes that these types of descriptions privilege sexual fantasy or desire, emphasizing the way people practice power relationships rather than gender or sexual orientations exclusively. As such, BDSM practitioners often occupy more than one “role” or position, in a single
monogamous relationship or multiple non-monogamous or polyamorous relationships. While the most prototypical image of a BDSM relationship involves one dominant and one submissive partner, there are a wide variety of BDSM relationship configurations. Two “switches” in a relationship may, for instance, change between roles depending on the scene or context. Non-monogamy is common within BDSM praxis and one dominant partner may have multiple submissive partners or two dominant or two submissive partners may have other individuals in their lives with whom they “play.” Other BDSM practitioners identify as polyamorous and live and play in various configurations. Examples include: “V” relationships in which two partners share the same partner; “triad” relationships in which all three individuals are in relationships with each other; four-person “quad” relationships; “constellations” of individuals with different roles and connections; and “houses” in which a polyamorous group is often run or lead by an individual or a couple. “House” can also be used to refer to a professional or “pay-to-play” dungeon as well.

As such, rather than being restricted to what Deleuze and Guattari (1984/1972) call “molar” territorializations such as those of the “couple” or “family,” many kink practices move toward what they describe as the “molecular.” Molecular becomings, they see as promoting investigations of nomadic and polyvocal movements they call “lines of escape” or “lines of flight.” Writing on queer BDSM and non-monogamy, Bauer (2010) states that:

BDSM culture also provides ample opportunity to play in groups…Some group play remains strictly couple-focused, creating an erotic atmosphere among friends, a setting inspired specifically by BDSM fantasy worlds. For one couple comprised of two tops, co-topping a third enables them to experience BDSM together, thus stabilizing their primary relationship. Some interview partners are part of circles of friends who often
play in groups together, enjoying the synergy and sharing beyond dyadic structures. The development of such circles of friends…emerge when individuals form relationships with more than one partner, is an important part of community building. (p. 147)

BDSM practitioners thus often form very specific types of intimacies and relationships with different play partners. Some of these are neither romantic nor even sexual in a traditional sense, with some individuals identifying with labels such as “brother” and “sister” to indicate protector roles within the community. These asexual bonds can nevertheless remain committed and intimate over many years (Bauer, 2010, p. 149).

The engagements between fantasies and their enactment varies amongst and between kinksters. Many find in their play roles that can diverge greatly from their social worlds, while others prefer to use these kink spaces to play with aspects of their otherwise non-explicitly-sexualized identities. Weiss (2006) importantly notes that BDSM play, while of a different order than non-sexualized life, either explicitly or implicitly involves elements of the cultural, national or social. Some practitioners play with elements of their intersectional identities; others with deeply personal trauma; others, gender or cultural traumas. Others will create fantasy persona that they feel are as different as possible from their identities or “roles” they play outside of “the lifestyle.” This said, even more seemingly radical derivations from personal identity—in the context of practitioners who choose to “play” as animals or as a different age as a “little” or
“middle”—still involve social and cultural constructs.\textsuperscript{10} Though some of these BDSM praxes ignore or may replicate existing social and cultural mores, others, in contrast, quite literally “fuck” with them and, thus, may operate at the level of an act that can instantiate forms of change at different levels of fantasy.

\textit{Playing seriously, seriously playing}

The key word to understanding S/M is fantasy.

\begin{quote}
Pat Califia, \textit{Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality}
\end{quote}

I wouldn’t consider myself a sex worker. I consider myself a psycho-erotic worker…There’s a lot of healing in people being accepted for their taboo.

Anonymous pro-domme, San Francisco (Lindemann, 2011)

To me when you are actually playing, it’s too real for it to be theater. At least for when I play. What you feel is too intense for anything to be dramatic.

Anonymous male submissive, New York City (Lindemann, 2011)

To enter the world of BDSM, is to step into a world of vivid psychosexual fantasy.

Professional dungeons or play spaces can match the intricacies of amusement parks dedicated to the opulence of BDSM. Other, less extravagant spaces also bring fantasies to light through costumes, decorations, music and other sensory engagements. In one East Coast dungeon, when a new client walks in, the master there says to them, simply, “I see you have BDSM deep inside you.” This provides, in many ways, an open affective and material space for the realization of fantasies, enactments that begin, first, with talk and communication, in the form of negotiation of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[9] “Little” and “middle” refer to age-based personae adopted by BDSM practitioners who play at being younger characters or versions of themselves in a mode called “age play.” “Middles” are pre-teen or teenaged aged characters; “littles” are playful versions of younger children. Much of “age play” is not explicitly sexual and involves enactments of fantasies of childhood activities; the term “dark age play” is more often used for role play involving sexual fantasy.
\item[10] In a study of professional dominatrices by Lindemann (2011), practitioners reported playing out fantasies such as Revolutionary War scenes, being asked to wear a Hillary Clinton mask, and re-enacting Rumplestiltskin.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
fantasies, desires, erotic hopes and dreams. Thus, the dynamics of speech, sensation and temporality are intertwined.

As such, the discussion and work of conscious fantasy in BDSM and kink begins even before any “scene,” with the process of negotiation. Practitioners note that BDSM scenes are unscripted and unrehearsed. While professional dominatrices may have clients bring in a precise script, few experienced practitioners will execute it by rote or demand. Instead, the dominatrix (or domme) will adapt this according to her own skill and desire to maintain the power and fantasy of control along with the element of surprise. Negotiations involve a discussion of “safewords,” or what a bottom will do if they want to end the scene. In addition, players discuss who will do what, along with themes, specific activities desired, “soft” and “hard” limits. Also included in negotiations is what the bottom desires for “aftercare,” their time after the scene to rest and emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually reconnect to the world. Ethical players tend to make sure partners’ needs are met and individuals involved come away as happy as possible. In longer-term or established dynamics, there may be occasions in which consent is not discussed prior to each scene. Other exceptions to this are called “edge play,” in which experienced practitioners push past the limits of safety and/or consent. I will discuss these and their implications for praxes later in this chapter. Otherwise, players tend to adopt verbal or non-verbal cues that establish ongoing consent and the ability to withdraw consent at any point during the scene. Much of BDSM fiction or pornography, which does not depict consent or else, as in Venus in Furs or 50 Shades of Grey, involves a written contract only, tends to be fantasy and “the kinds of relationships depicted are perhaps not desirable or even possible. Many who love these fantasies know they would hate it in reality” (Easton, 2007, p. 190). Instead, fantasies and relationships in BDSM often build, develop and change over time.
BDSM practitioners and kinksters note that these relationships often involve “darker” aspects of themselves that they do not or cannot express in other contexts. Dossie Easton (2007), a therapist and author of The Ethical Slut, describes BDSM as putting the unconscious into play. What she might mean by this simple statement, however, is a complex question. I cite here empirical research that brings to light the difference, described in Chapter One, between conscious fantasy and unconscious phantasy. As a basic example, BDSM practitioners engaging in what seem like similar behaviors on the surface may, in fact, be pursuing entirely different fantasy experiences. A spanking scene, for one kinkster, may be a ritual atonement, where, as for another, the set-up for a victorious triumph. Other times, one may begin a scene with one expectation and end up discovering a new part of oneself, unknown or unconscious before (Easton, 2007). This awareness might emerge intrapersonally, or, as Yost (2007) writes, through a “co-consciousness in play,” in which another player becomes, through their body, aware of another in multiplicity. Yost also describes how, in BDSM fantasies, one can become simultaneously aware of feeling as if one is a frightened child, a concerned adult, and a protective authority figure in the same psychic space.

While some practitioners, particularly professional dominatrices, do feel as if they enact repetitive fantasies, this often comes at an emotional toll or cost to one or both of the players (Lindemann, 2011). Lindemann (2011), in a study of the predominantly heterosexual professional dungeon scene, describes how one Asian-American domme had a client who, for each multi-hour session, would request he rub her feet, drink her urine, and that she lock him in chastity. Despite him continually praising her and sending her money, she found the client boring and repetitive. He often told her she was “too good” for the profession, despite her insistence that she enjoyed what she did and was not forced to do anything. After what the
domme described as “hours and hours of marathon scenes,” she said she “slipped” and hinted that she was partnered to a man.

Do you think he ever saw me again? No. Because, for him, the fantasy was to support this woman adrift in a sea of men who just want to use her and abuse her, and he was holding me up like the angel that I was…He was just another Asian fetishist. (Loc 2457)

The dominatrix’s less-than-conscious and possibly sadistic “slip” disrupted her client’s masochistic idealization fantasy. Her participants note that due to the exchange of money, this is a vastly different situation than in the broader “community,” in which such inversion of power dynamics might be described pejoratively as “topping from the bottom.” Even within this model, however, there are dominatrices who break outside the mold. One domme in Lindemann’s study said she told clients she would only consider their specific requests “if they amuse me” (Loc 884). Such enactments and inversions of power structures, as such, break out of classic formulations of the masochistic contract. In these, the shifting desire of the female top may hold the power to hysterize the male bottom.

As a recent and radical example of this, Mistress Velvet, an African-American female domme based out of Chicago, began requiring that her clients read black feminist theory prior to sessions. In a Huffington Post article, Dubermann (2018) writes:

Over time, Mistress Velvet said she began ‘doing a lot of theorizing’ about the dynamics of a black woman holding that kind of supremacy over a white cisgender man. She began introducing black feminist theory into her sessions with clients, who’ve told her that their relationship in that space has impacted their behavior outside it…Just allowing them to be submissive doesn’t always allow for the more drastic shift in the framework and thinking that I want. (p. 3)
Mistress Velvet mobilizes her clients’ fantasies of 24/7 female dominance, regardless of their underlying motivations, for individual and social change. She notes that she does not ask for permission or feedback regarding these readings and believes, as she says later in the interview, that “it really makes them idolize me on a different level” (p. 16). She also advocates for BDSM topping as a form of emotional reparations for black femme women.

Lindemann (2011) also notes that pro-dommes often refuse to provide fantasy “menu-style” but rather, craft their own adventures through fantasy and an intersubjective re-envisioning of what the clients give them. Tops may, through an awareness of their own and the bottom’s fantasies, decide upon a spontaneous action within pre-negotiated limits that changes the direction of the scene. They will also use various forms of symbolization to remove constraints and explore otherwise inaccessible thoughts and emotions (Turley, Monro, & King, 2017). Lindemann’s (2011) dommes noted that it was “necessary to be able to handle the disjuncture between abstract fantasy and physical reality of what a client will enjoy…[to] question clients’ requests, particularly the ‘whatever you want,’ request, rather than accepting them at face value and behaving accordingly” (Loc 1615). One domme gave the example of a client who came in, in a manner similar to the now infamous legal case in Germany,11 with the request to be killed and eaten. Instead, she negotiated with him a role play in which he was tied up, his hand placed in a slow cooker, then the heat turned up to warm. The domme then chopped up vegetables, made soup, and ate it together with the submissive. Whereas some kink practices may serve to

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11 In the case, Armin Meiwes was convicted of the murder of Bernd Brandes, who had responded to an ad Meiwes had placed online looking to meet a "young well-built man, who wanted to be eaten" (Harding, 2003).
productively sever bonds, this scene, might be said to maintain and preserve life instincts over death instincts. For such scenes, Dossie Easton (2007) writes that:

The other person…provides a mirror in which we can see ourselves in new ways…These scripts often start out looking like trauma and end up somewhere else, in sex, in love, in comfort, in orgasm. S/M works by eroticisizng these dark stories. We bring traumas into consciousness and into the flow of eros and give them a healing injection of the life force. (p. 23)

Henkin (2007) describes differences between fantasies that stay within a circular or autistic loops versus those in which practitioners make interventions. She writes that fantasies without any “feedback or new information…may please the fantasizer over many months or years…but neither psychological process nor growth is likely” (p. 237). Following this, an intervention, a change, an act, potentially a rupture or cut, must occur in order to reach the unconscious rather than remain at the level of conscious fantasy.

Nowhere is this dynamic more explicit than with BDSM players who engage in ethical trauma play. This type of BDSM play, most likely to occur in feminist and/or queer kink spaces, involves re-enactments or re-envisionings of previously traumatic experiences, with an eye toward witnessing and new emergences. Scenes can get practitioners in touch with embodied memories in which survivors can feel less shame over their connection to real life events. In interviews with practitioners, Hammers (2013) looks at the ways survivors “‘undo’ somatic dissociation” through BDSM. One interviewee in Hammers’ study, a therapist herself, stated that:

Before, I was living with pain. This was a type of pain that kept me down. Emotional and physical pain, which made me feel insecure and worthless. Since getting into kink my
whole life has changed [...] The pain has shifted. It is still there [...] But now I speak the pain, control the pain. Shifting this pain has also made it so that I’m no longer numb [sexually]. I have desire again, I feel again [...] I had to embody this stuff in order to really get it [...] I needed to somehow experience some of these things I had endured to start connecting the dots of how I gave my power away, how it was taken, how to get it back and how, in this moment I’m doing it by choice. It’s flipping a switch of ‘Oh right I didn’t have the choice then, I do now, I choose this.’ There is a clear difference between how I was pre-kink and now when it comes to how I feel in my body. It is no longer foreign. The numbness, I wouldn’t say it has completely disappeared but there is feeling again. Sexually I’m awake to my desires. (p. 10-11)

Interviewees in Hammers’ study brought up the importance of aftercare and the sharing of public responsibility as key elements in changing the repetitions of their fantasies. Through shared enactments, they reported experiencing, more clearly, divisions between self and other, as they moved through pain. At the same time, they noted that such work was not possible in all kinky spaces, particularly ones which involved the male gaze. In these instances, though, women were able to witness and feel that they could emerge differently, with more awareness, particularly of their own desires, relationships to power and sexual fantasy.

As an illustration of some of the previously mentioned aspects of fantasy and contemporary BDSM, I provide here an example from my own history. After attending a kink convention and watching a demonstration on interrogation play, I sought out a genderqueer top with shared interests in the local community to discuss the possibility of doing such a scene together. We met at a restaurant to discuss what we each wanted out of the scene. I wanted to gain from it a sense of my own mental resilience; they specialized in scenes with those assigned female at birth
involving what they called “forced self-esteem.” I discussed my hard limits: no permanent
scarring, nothing that evoked specific aspects of prior trauma or physical abuse in my history.
They asked about some things they would like to do as a top: I consented to all of these with the
exception of “dental play.” They then asked if they could verbally threaten to use dental torture.
I said yes. The top asked about any physical limitations or medical issues as well as what I
would require for aftercare. We then agreed that they would send me an address and I would
arrive at a designated time, no questions asked. When I did, I was bagged over my head, brought
to a basement, placed in multiple forms of bondage in front of a mirror. The top used various
techniques to try to force me to say negative things about myself. I resisted, even when pushed
to extreme physical duress. At the end of our scene, they asked how I would like to end the
scene, sexually, and I told them my specific desire.

This scene ended up being evocative for me over time in ways I did not recognize prior or
during its execution. Previously in my history, I was used to being hostilely questioned and told
negative things about myself. This was not something I had previously discussed with the top,
nor was I specifically or consciously thinking about this part of my history when I approached
them. I had specifically approached this top, as I had heard positive things about their
commitment to women, trans* and gender-non-conforming folx’s self-esteem and social justice
issues. At the same time, I had also heard they were an “edge player” and I knew their craft
inspired feared in many. As a survivor, I felt, afterwards, both physically and psychologically
strong, not giving in to negative pressure and denying what I otherwise experienced as more
pervasive self-criticism and superego demands. Finally, and perhaps with the most lasting
effects, in the world of non-sexualized fantasy, the top and I began a photographic, poetic and
essayistic reflection that emerged from the scene.\textsuperscript{12} While we did not discuss, in an aetiological way, \textit{why} we liked what we liked, we continued, through our dialogue, to unravel and make more explicit what had happened to us in the past, what we thought, felt, experienced, and what we continued to want and do.

While trauma play provides perhaps the clearest example of these kinds of interventions, most play does not explicitly tarry with fantasy in this way. Fantasy play of all types, as Dossie Easton (2007) notes, has the ability to build upon desires, over time. Turley, King and Butt (2011), in a structural phenomenological study, found that in order for BDSM play to be satisfying for practitioners, it needed to “contain elements of believability and genuineness” (p. 131). They wrote that “participation in BDSM enables a temporary escape into a world of fantasy, provided that there is a sense of authenticity present in that fantasy” (p. 132). This authenticity could be a connection with a non-human world, a fictional fantasy space, an age-based regression, or an other “alternative reality, where, through creativity, anything is possible” (p. 132). Practitioners, while noting parallels with therapy, are conscientious to distinguish their work from therapy, noting it instead as “therapeutic.” In \textit{Philosophy in the Dungeon}, Jack Rinsella (2006) writes that, “Good scenes improve our self-image, build stronger relationships, and give us a sense of self-acceptance and inclusion” (Loc 2085).

\textsuperscript{12} From the opening segment of a poem that emerged, entitled \textit{interrogatives}: In the dingy realm of the deity, naïvete stumbles, seeking truth, solid, a metal chair upon which to brace/herself against herself/faced with something else, not herself/to whom or which to answer/now, to be accountable/to count or add, to make some sense/of 24 and 39/who she is and want she wants/and oh, such other simple things.
At the same time, other practitioners find narrative assertions of “improvement,” “building” and “health” unappealing, carrying an implicit assumption that BDSM “should” have such outcomes. These narratives, some argue, re-inscribe BDSM into neoliberal discourses that they wish or remain outside. Likewise, as current events involving legal challenges to FetLife.com indicate, the broad and diverse world of what goes under the umbrella of the “kink community” is hardly a utopian paradise of free play and sexuality. Its subculture shows, in places, similar issues as the broader world its users inhabit. The website managers have been accused of asking users not to report abuse or consent violations. Also recently, after a kidnapper searched a forum called “Abduction 101” for information to conduct a non-BDSM related criminal abduction, hundreds of fetishes, some common within the community, were removed from online discussion. While, as Jannis Tenbrink notes, “In the BDSM scene, the top priority of anyone who is not a criminal is consent for *everything* that happens, for everyone who’s involved” (de la Cretaz, 2017), online environments offer no such shared code of conduct and do not separate experienced, known practitioners from novice or curious users.

That said, some long-time FetLife users were disappointed by the wholesale decision to remove fetishes such as “consensual non-consent” (Kale, 2017). In the enactment of such fantasies, players may give consent “without foreknowledge of the exact actions planned” (Kinkapedia, as cited in Sasha, February 21, 2018). Engagement in such fantasies is described by some as a psychological openness, loss of control, or deepening of intimacy between BDSM partners, particularly within an ongoing formal dynamic (Sasha, February 21, 2018). Practitioners nonetheless still strongly advise the use of safewords. Some individuals, however, may wish to play without safewords for particular periods of time or in the context of a longer-term committed relationship. These practices push and beyond the realm of the common
acronym RACK (“risk aware consensual kink”) or the newer 4Cs paradigm involving “Caring, Communication, Consent and Caution.” As a slightly different paradigm to describe the ethics of “consensual non-consent,” some practitioners adopted the acronym PRICK for “Personal Responsibility, Informed Consensual Kink” to emphasize education as well as agency and decision in engaging in risky behavior (Sasha, February 21, 2018; www.kinkly.com, n.d.).

In an article on radical feminist edge play and feminine submission “beyond safety,” Dymock (2012) argues for the importance of subjects’ ability to consent to acts beyond the limits of the Law in BDSM praxis. Dymock cites examples of drowning scenes or erotic asphyxiation as part of an ethic. In her theoretical explication—a rare find in academic literature, combining psychoanalytic theory, legal considerations and real-world BDSM praxis—Dymock advocates for spaces for non-narrative self-shattering. She opposes her reading to healing or therapeutic narratives, asserting that female subjects may have desires other than wholeness or tenderness and, too, seek a prohibitive promise of a beyond. Dymock argues against fantasies of coherence in BDSM praxis and cites a desire to go beyond pleasure in the pursuit of jouissance as an element of women’s edgework. Dymock expresses that these aspects of BDSM praxis break even what Lacan reads as the defence structure of fantasy, as she writes that they “cannot be assimilated into the ego through identification…an excess of jouissance, unsupported by object and fantasy, that a masculine and phallic structure cannot reach.”

Dymock’s considerations of Other jouissance, bring into focus the question of self-transcendence and spiritual experience in BDSM praxis (Baker, 2016). Drawing from traditions prior to Sade and Sacher-Masoch, some contemporary BDSM practitioners identify spirituality as not antithetical but rather a key part of their praxis. Certain practitioners see themselves as performing magical rites through their work while others consider themselves modern day
shamans, drawing from Taoist, Pagan, Occult and other traditions. In Raven Kaldera’s books on BDSM, he writes about BDSM as an “ordeal path,” in which initiates surrender themselves to visionary experiences to develop deeply personal and lasting senses of meaning. A practice called Dark Tantra involves breath play, resilience and the sharing of power between top and bottom (Carrellas, 2012), including deep meditative states and orgasm. Other practitioners draw from ideas around sex magic as a form of prayer or notions around accessing Kundalini energy. In Baker’s (2016) words, these experiences open practitioners “emotionally, physically and psychologically, to a new level beyond their normal expectations and perceived limitations” (p. 6).

These forms of collective rituals involve both personal and cultural fantasies, ecstasy and transcendence. While earlier 20th century forms of sex magick involved cult-like figures such as Aleister Crowley in the Golden Dawn or Anton LaVey and his Church of Satan, contemporary orgiastic rituals are instead developed by groups of individuals and not overseen by any one person. I think here of a ritual I witnessed at a kink festival in which three individuals with hooks on their backs dragged a log around a large fire pit. People gathered around shouting memories or experiences associated with negative emotions such as anger and shame at or “into” the log. Drummers on the side of the pit slowly began a thumping beat as the ritual kinksters continued to pull. As the pace of the drums sped up, people began dancing around the fire in a circle, with some breaking off to perform sexual acts in the bushes or the side of the fire. At the end of the ritual, the hooks were removed from the backs of the individuals pulling the log and the wood thrown into the fire. The revelers continued to dance as the ritual pullers were provided aftercare. Those who wished for a permanent memento of the ritual were invited to the side to be branded with a “sigil,” a symbol considered to have magic power.
Writers on BDSM have described such practices as “contemporary shamanisms” that, like Tantric practices that seek “detachment from rules of morality,” involve an “ongoing process of initiation” (Beckmann, 2013, p. 109) for all players in a scene. In *Philosophy in the Dungeon*, a book based upon his experience as a practitioner, Jack Rinella (2006) writes of “topspace” that, “Topping is a pathway that allows me to enter an altered (sacred) space….a significant part of this variety of topping is the act of worship. The power given to me by my partner and the control that I therefore legitimately and consensually exercise helps me to recognize my divinity” (Loc 1957). In a research study of the experiences of “topspace” and “subspace,” Miller and Devon (2003) write of the former that it involves “intense focus, clarity of thought, a sense of extreme power or high energy” (p. 230). Subspace, in contrast, like masochism, involves “diminished ego awareness, less active cognitive behavior, surrendering of will.” In *Sensuous Magic*, practitioner Pat Califia (1994) describes these states of intensities as “SM orgasms” or “the reaching of an emotional, psychological or spiritual state of catharsis, ecstasy, or transcendence during an S/M scene without having a genital orgasm” (p. 151).

Whereas Sade’s libertines befell the fate of always remaining outside and yet circumscribed by a master discourse, the contemporary attentiveness to radical difference, otherness and the particularity of transcendence distinguish this moment in BDSM praxis. While playing with the enjoyment in and of power dynamics, practitioners also, through communication and care, maintain what, ontologically, can constitute a flat, non-hierarchical plane of what Langdriddle (2007) describes as:

…bodies speak[ing] to each other…through the transfer of flesh and fluid, power and
emotion: speaking outside language and offering that rare thing…a highly refined
version of moments…wherein the particularity of such experiences is raised to a fine art.
(p. 101)

BDSM praxis might then be considered as a way to move beyond or through identifications to
what Beckmann (2013) calls “a creation of anarchy within the body, where its hierarchies, it
localizations and designations, its organicity, if you will, is in the process of disintegration” (p. 114). “The body,” here, I believe, applies not only to the singular “body,” but also the larger
body of the social or socius, and its multiplicities of gendered, raced and dis/abled subjectivities.

Reconfiguring the body: Queer, critical race and disability perspectives

I definitely use SM to explore gender…because being in a role is almost always a gender thing
one way or another and I think just the understanding of role and fantasy…gender is such a
natural extension. I think diversity in my own internal community of being happens through
SM. As I recognize different roles in myself, that’s an experience of diversity. So if that’s
something that people are exploring individually, then in the community that would probably be
reflected[.]

Firesong, transmasculine, genderqueer (in Bauer, 2010)

When engaging in BDSM, practitioners have the chance to move in and out of various roles.
Some of these are not only those traditionally considered to be of the dimension of sexual
fantasy, but also involve aspects and elements of their intersectional identities outside of BDSM
and kink praxis. Particular BDSM and kink subcultures thus provides “safe spaces” for what
Yost and Hunter (2012) describe as “collective identity activities” involving gender, race, and
dis/ability. In some forms of BDSM praxis, practitioners might move through or become
different aspects of identities (Easton, 2013) or have the chance to experience aspects of their
identities that they presumed static as “chosen and changeable” (p. 33). These identity activities
need not be limited to existing discursive categories, but, in producing new possibilities,
constitute what Newmahr (2011a) calls a “creative epistemological approach to the social world.” Sisson (2013) pushes this idea further, stating that BDSM identity production “mocks the concept of a unitary, fixed identity…by facilitating participants’ adoption of various functioning S/M roles” (p. 34). In other words, many BDSM practitioners would not state that they have only one or “an” identity, even at any given point in time, nor need this identity necessarily ever be a “stable” one.

Queer BDSM and kink spaces provide many examples of this. Bauer (2010) writes in an article “Playgrounds and New Territories—The Potential of BDSM Practices to Queer Genders,” offer spaces for individuals to play with “activities that aim at creating non-coherent gender expressions” (p. 186). In differentiating queer BDSM praxes from mainstream or dominant ones, Teresa, one of Bauer’s participants, describes how:

…the SM community that I experience is a community of other folks who understand what it feels like to be nonconsensually dominated or oppressed, queers and trannies and sex workers and people of color and working class, poor folks who understand that our gender’s a creative response to our oppression. And our sexuality’s a creative response and a healthy response. (p. 195-196)

Typically, these queer spaces attract folx in the queer and dyke+ community and, as such, involve expression more diverse than more “high protocol” gay and lesbian leather or butch-femme communities. Practitioners play with different gender roles that may vary from scene to scene and may even incorporate gendered elements discovered in play into their non-BDSM-specific lives.

In his documentary, “Sexing the Transman,” Buck Angel interviews transmasculine folx about their gender identities as well as their sexual and romantic relationships. The documentary
participants speak about the changes they experience in and through their bodies and even, at times, in excess of the particular materialities of their bodies. For instance, a modestly fit trans* man may, through playing with a smaller genderqueer “boi,” embody a more “macho” persona, as if he had larger muscles. Another may orgasm with and through a fantasmatic penis. The documentary interviewees speak about moving from feelings of loneliness, desperation and sometimes even suicidality to feeling more validation and security in their transitions. They specifically describe these changes when playing with partners who experientially recognize them in their fantasmatic bodies, through a kind of visual-haptic-emotive and transsubjective field. The documentary switches between traditional interview style, sex education, intimate/erotic moments and pornography as the interviewees stress the importance of specifically sexual praxis and sexual fantasy on their gender expression.

In a qualitative study of the international, queer, dyke+ community, a loose network of associations of “femmes, butches, trans boys and men, dyke boys, genderqueers and transwomen…complimented by identities assumed just for play,” Bauer (2007) observed that:

A number of members of members of this community have assumed gender identities that transgress the binary gender system such as genderqueers. While genderqueers do not identify as either men or women, they do not conceive of themselves as in the middle of the spectrum or androgynous. Their gender is rather fluid, shifting and multiple at the same time, which means that their positioning within a variety of genders depends on the context. (p. 185)

As such, at a queer kink festival or gathering, it is not uncommon for folx with long beards, for instance, to identify with the pronoun she. “Femmes” may wear strap-ons, with long hair and pair suit jackets with billowy skirts. In one study, Taylor and Ussher (2001) found that it was
common for such SM practitioners to identify their praxis with the theme of “dissidence.” In Bauer’s (2007) study, one participant who was identified only as “Lola” said:

Say two femme women are topping two boys, then sit down and life up their skirts and the boys suck their dicks. That’s very political to me. Because that’s fucking with the whole set up of how you expect things to be, how things are portrayed in society, who has the dick, all that. That’s really taking back power and shifting it around and doing all sorts of stuff to it…The act of doing it is political, the act of seeing it is political. (p. 189)

In this sense, queer practitioners, perhaps more so than BDSM practitioners who keep their praxes confined to the bedroom or dungeon, express a more conscious awareness of the intertwining roles of the fantasmatic body, the visual and language in their praxes. Negotiations often involve crucial discussions regarding how practitioners wish for their bodies to be seen and experienced through sexual praxis. Psychic reality, in the Freudian sense, becomes material as body parts are recoded and sometimes even given new language.

Bauer (2013), in another article, looks at the intersection of queer BDSM and non-monogamies. While other BDSM practitioners do practice non-monogamy, their relationships often take the form of rule- and role-based structures (Kaldera, 2010). Bauer reads queer BDSM non-monogamies, particularly in the international dyke+ communities, as having more fluid, less defined structures, in which practitioners interact with others in particular groupings or couplings and then disband. These kind of “relationship anarchies” thus invite multiplicities or what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) call “assemblages” that operate through “points of connection, of disjunction, of conjunction of flows whose libidinal terms a properly unconscious investment they translate” (p. 293).
Queer BDSM also, in privileging sexual diversity, also leads to, at times, a radical attentiveness to particularity. As Pat Califia (1979/2000) writes, S/M roles need not be linked to one’s—or, at times any—specific gender, sexual orientation, race or class. Along with a multiplicity of sexes, thus, comes a multiplicity of subjectivities. In radical shifts in naming, the play personae adopted by individuals might, as Lindemann (2011) describes, become “linked to particular practices in the Scene the way Andy Warhol might be associated with pop art of James Joyce with stream-of-conscious fiction” (Loc 2085). The specificity of queer BDSM subjectivities, thus, might also be linked to the loose knot of the sinthome.

Writers considering the intersection of disability and BDSM sexualities have posited that these subjectivities, may also, in their own ways, be “queer” in their disruptions and transgressions. As Shildrick (2006) writes, disability poses “like alternatives to heterosexuality…probing questions about the nature of [Western] societies, both in terms of their organization and their social imaginaries” (p. 15). Like Edelman’s sinthomosexual, the disabled kinkster challenges relationship based upon empathy and identification. Hay (2016) writes that while for some individuals with disabilities, BDSM is just another facet of life in which to negotiate accommodations, for others, it serves to invert expectations as well as social dynamics. Hay’s article features an interview with Lyric Seal, a.k.a. Neve Be(ast), a black transgender artist, activist and adult performer born with scoliosis and amyoplasia being pulled in their wheelchair by animal-costumed folx attached to rope harnesses crawling on all fours. Lyric Seal asks:

When I imagine sexual situations, I sometimes wonder: Does this contradict this other part of who I am? If I want to bottom in a certain way does that betray the other aspects of my identity in which I am oppressed? Then I remind myself that no, these identities
are all inside the same person. So that helps me grow as a person and helps me understand how three-dimensional other people are. (p. 14)

This kind of critical reflexivity in Lyric Seal’s praxis allows for transgressive enactments of fantasy that may even, in the realm of the visible, seem in conflict with a liberation politic. The disabled subject cannot disavow, as other subjects may do, the fragmentary nature of the body and dependency on the Other. “Crip” BDSM praxis thus makes visible fantasies that Shildrick (2006) argues “had been previously sidelined as politically inessential” and calls for “an enquiry directed inward as well as engaging with material realities” (p. 15). It has, then, the capacity to queer BDSM by revealing other bodies’ dependency on others and the material world.

Scholarship by contemporary black feminist theorists has also explored the implications BDSM and kink praxes hold for critical race theory. In her recent book, Sensational Flesh: Race, Power and Masochism, Amber Jamilla Musser (2014) argues for feminism, queer theory and critical race theory to engage with pleasure and masochism through the body. Musser writes about how fantasies of the boundless jouissance of the black Other can be seen even “in the world of S&M [where] we find this mix of blackness, masculinity, and perversion in the pervasive stereotype of the black butch top” (p. 55). She unpacks assumptions made by white lesbians that women of color, regardless of their desires, are butch as well as tops. In this way, the black masculinized “butch,” like the black man, is made to be a scapegoat for a cultural fantasy (p. 54-55). Musser reads masochism as a challenge to as well as extension of notions of subjectivity, difference, freedom and representation. At the end of her book, Musser writes about Mollena Williams, an African-American BDSM activist and educator and recent International Ms. Leather, who calls herself “The Perverted Negress.” Williams is openly in a s-type relationship with a dominant white man and has given lectures and demonstrations at
BDSM conferences on the dynamics of what goes by the name of “Race Play.” Williams defines race play as “any type of play that openly embraces and explores the (either ‘real’ or assumed) racial identity of the players within the context of a BDSM scene. The prime motive in a ‘Race Play’ scene is to underscore and investigate the challenges of racial or cultural differences” (as quoted in Musser, p. 173). Musser (2014) follows this by stating that “though there are numerous possible ways to enact race play, the foregrounding of historical circumstances of oppression remains constant” (p. 173).

Many BDSM communities and festivals will not openly permit race play due to its potential to be not only misunderstood by many, but traumatizing for people of color. While as Ariane Cruz (2016) notes, while there are BDSM practitioners of color who do not consider critical race as part of their praxis, many, if not most do consider, in their kinky and non-kinky relationships, the intersection between race and sexuality. Cruz argues for a consideration of the racialization of sexuality, the queerness of blackness as well as BDSM, and, like Mistress Velvet, perversion as a mode of becoming for black women. Like Mollena Williams, she opens a space for the exposure of the deviance of cultural domination. In a Lacanian reading, the shock and horror expressed at race play would be the jouissance of respectability politics, in which individuals and groups “politely” pretend that such types of racial domination do not occur in the public sphere. For Williams, African-Americans taking agency and engaging consciously in race play reveals the sexualized fantasies underlying otherwise mystified aggression by, “‘rocking people’s worlds: intervening in the social world by smacking it ‘upside the head’” (as quoted in Musser, 2014, p. 177). In a space in which bodies shocked by electricity, burned by fire, and people wrestling in blood are not considered beyond the norm, African-Americans engaging in race play still hold the power to transgress. This speaks to race play’s uncomfortably close engagement
with ongoing dynamics of power and oppression. With this type of S/M Elizabeth Freeman (2006) asks if we might “risk claiming the most monstrous—some would say—mode of bodying forth a past we can barely look in the face” (p. 135).

With regard to her experiences of racialized trauma, her particular *jouissance*, and its beyond in desire, Williams says: “It is not blasphemy to want to touch that wound. You can’t heal something in your soul by letting it remain in its original state of pain. It HAS to be touched. Otherwise, it will never heal” (as quoted in Musser, 2014, p. 175). Williams retains her choice whether or not to touch that wound and in what situations. To be touched, here, in the context of BDSM praxis, is more than metaphor: The touch here is physical, haptic. This touch might be thought to operate through prohibition or what Derrida calls “the Law of tact,” the prohibition which brings to the realm of touch precisely what it prohibits. In this instance, here, the prohibition is that of daring to touch, open and make visible the intergenerational wounds of slavery and colonialism through masochism, abjection and shame.

In his critique of Oedipus, Fanon looks to the way that European, patriarchal colonialism was used to pathologize the black family and black sexuality in and through white colonialist fantasy. To be outside of Oedipus in colonial culture was to be, in Musser’s (2014) words, “imbued with shame and bad feelings” (p. 107). As such, in my reading, the mere notion of race play brings up not the usual trope of white neoliberal guilt, but the deeper embodied and un-languaged feeling of white cultural shame and the shameful actions of colonial oppression. Race play thus exposes the libidinal nature of such “scenes of subjection” that were always already public, now resignified. This break, this excess can, thus, instantiate a break for a kind of transformative politic. In an intersection queer reading, Jose Esteban Munoz argues against Edelman’s anti-futurity politic, writing that: “The future is queerness’s domain...The here and now is a prison
house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there” (as quoted in Musser, p. 107). What futurity, then, might BDSM praxis hold for theory’s beyond?
Chapter 4: Philosophy outside the bedroom: toward haptic, fantasmatic ethnographies of sexual praxis

**Intimacies in multiplicity**

Because it feels good; because it gives me an erection; because I’m sick…because I was different…because of my parents; because of doctors and nurses; because they tied me to the crib so I wouldn’t hurt myself; because I had awful stomach-aches and holding my penis made it feel better; because I felt like I was going to die; because it makes me feel invincible; because it’s in my nature; because it’s against my nature; because it’s fun; because it flies in the face of what’s normal (whatever that is); because I’m not normal; because my parents loved me even more when I was suffering; because I was born into a world of suffering; because surrender is sweet….because it is an act of courage…because I’m proud of it.

Bob Flanagan, *Why?*

[W]hat…would it take to maintain the multiplicity of the erotic? To produce an erotic multiplicity that could enliven not only black female bodies, but others, I suggest we shift sensational registers and, to this end, think of the erotic as a polyphony of voices.

Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power and Masochism*

While research work in BDSM studies begins to tentatively break the link between sexual expression and pathology, theoretical narratives of BDSM are also becoming subject to decolonization as well. Queer authors have explored and continue to explore the possibilities for ethical sadism while critical race and feminist authors view the radical potentiality of sensation through masochism. Likewise, I argue, praxes outside the umbrella of BDSM—kink and non-human becomings—hold different potentials as well. While some practitioners might call for a doing away with theory altogether, in this chapter, I argue against this, as I believe the underlying dynamics of BDSM and kink may not only illustrate or mirror currents in post-structuralist thought, but also inspire creative operations beyond the material specificity of sexual praxis. In this chapter, I move towards psychoanalysis’ beyond in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Bracha Ettinger, and queer psychoanalytic theorists. Foucault and, following him,
Halperin, make an argument that fist-fucking is the only new sexual practice of the 20th century, which, I believe to believe absurd in its conflation of content and process. Contrary to this, I argue that awareness and discussion of fantasy and trauma has dramatically altered sexual praxis. The temporality of contemporary BDSM praxis, from negotiations to aftercare and the mutability of relational assemblages, moves beyond Foucault’s repressive hypothesis. As what bodies write about sex changes, so, too does sexual praxis change, opening new ways of thinking-doing philosophy. After Sade, contemporary kink, I argue, is a philosophy beyond the bedroom, an ethic of sex that need not be secret or private, yet still retain an ethic of intimacy. This intimacy goes beyond the dyad or the triad, into Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizomatic,” predicated on the creative and non-Oedipal logics of sexual difference.

*Schizoanalytic interventions: Deleuze, Guattari, and the production of subjectivities*

In the opening pages of *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) write that as a model for analysis, “A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on an analyst’s couch. A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world” (p. 2). Taking up and following what the authors see as the revolutionary aspects of Freudian and psychoanalytic thought in work by Klein, Reich and Lacan, they explore the possibilities in tracing the productions and productivity of the unconscious in “desire, the social, and nothing else” (p. 29). They critique psychoanalysis for its attempts to domesticate desire and reject the notion of sexuality as a link back to family dynamics. Instead, they read sexuality as an action that creates through production. Though many position Deleuze and Guattari’s work against psychoanalysis, I argue, along with other contemporary critics, that their work does not constitute a radical break from its philosophical foundations, more with its practices in late capitalism. What they posit, instead, is akin to a *psychoanalysis in extension*, in its movements and extra-clinical praxes.
Instead, I believe that what Deleuze and Guattari call schizoanalysis expands, through its attentiveness to the affective-material, what a psychoanalysis can more than say, do. In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari (1995/1992) writes of this as an “ethical choice,” in not “objectify[ing], reify[ing] or scient[izing] subjectivity…on the contrary, we try to grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity” (p. 13). In this section, I will provide an overview of key concepts in the Deleuzoguattarian system. Philosophical concepts for Deleuze and Guattari are not idealist notions, abstracted from function. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari (1994) define philosophy as “the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” rather than “contemplate[ing], reflect[ing] or communicat[ing]” (p. 2).

In contrast to psychoanalytic descriptions involving sublimation and repression, Deleuze and Guattari seek to demystify sex and sexual praxis: For them, sexuality is social; as in psychoanalysis, it is everywhere, yet on what Lacan might call the “extimate” or intimate surface. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983/1972), they write that sexuality involves “not one or even two sexes, but $n$ sexes” (p. 296), by which they mean that there can be any—possibly an unlimited number—of different sexes, sexualities, or sexual subjectivities, all of which involve material practices, couplings and encounters, such as those in BDSM praxis. Clare Colebrook (2009) clarifies this point in her article “Queer Vitalism” in which she writes:

> To say, as Deleuze and Guattari do, that we are composed of a thousand tiny sexes is to place race, politics, history and sexuality *within*, not between or among, individuals. Any body’s desire and therefore its relation to other bodies’ desires, is composed of multiple and divergent series. My relation to other sexes may have familial determining points; one might relate to something like ‘masculinity’ through the image one has of one’s father. But every father, in turn, presents a certain racial, economic, political and sexual
Deleuze and Guattari conceive of each of these “tiny sexes” in a machine-like manner, in which “flows” of libido and desire move. Here, we can harken back to the example of Lyric Seal in the previous chapter, with their multiple and often co-occurring and yet conflicting identifications. Also returning to the example of Bob Flanagan, the performance artist with cystic fibrosis, one author writes that the community of which he was a part saw “the human body as consisting of infinite variations” and suggests that “the flexibility of BDSM philosophies offers an additional explanation of why BDSM may be an important activity for people with disabilities who elect this lifestyle” (p. 44).

As opposed to psychoanalytic emphases on castration, repression, sublimation and lack, their concept of desire and sexuality is Eros-oriented. Libidinal energy and investments become motor forces for social productions: There is, for them, no desexualization, anywhere, of the libido. It is only, they write, “through a restriction, a blockage and a reduction that the libido is made to repress its flows in order to contain them in the narrow cells of the type ‘couple,’ ‘family,’ ‘person,’ ‘objects’” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983/1972, p. 293). Oedipus is but one myth among many possible myths, a kind of mapping or “territorialization” of desire, a cordonning off of many possible myriad points of connection. Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of psychoanalysis is an objection to Oedipus as a foundational myth for analysis. They write:

By boxing the life of the child within the Oedipus complex, by making familial relations the universal mediation of childhood, we cannot but fail to understand the production of the unconscious itself, and the collective mechanisms that have an immediate bearing on

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13 In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994), writing on his own, reads Thanatos as the transcendental principle “which gives repetition to Eros” (p. 18).
the unconscious. For the unconscious is an orphan, and produces within identity of nature and the human…neither social relations nor metaphysical relations constitute an ‘afterward’ or a ‘beyond’; diffuse, generalized oedipalism radically distorts the life of the child and his later development. (p. 48-49)

Without a particularly human father or mother to which to constantly refer back to or maneuver around, Deleuze and Guattari argue that schizoanalysis allows for more freedom to follow the ever-shifting “drift of desire.” Deleuze and Guattari thus turn to the “non-neurotic” case studies of Freud—Schreber, the Wolf Man, and Little Hans—to visualize these operations of the unconscious. Schreber experiences a “solar anus”; the Wolf Man draws multiple wolves on branches of trees; Little Hans asks if a train has a “wiwimacher” or penis. The unconscious, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not a depth unconscious, but a materialist and machinic one, parts connecting to other parts, in what they describe as a complex delirium.

Whereas some psychoanalytic conceptualizations of fantasy consider the existence of the autoerotic or individual fantasy, for Deleuze and Guattari (1983), there is no individual conceptualization of fantasy or the subject. They write:

The group fantasy includes the disjunctions, in the sense that each subject, discharged of his personal identity but not of his singularities, enters into relations with others. (p. 63)

For them, the subject exists only in multiplicity, as an aggregate or assemblage of what they call “desiring-machines” or partial objects driven by the energy of the libido. As with “sexes,” any individual can be comprised of any number of desiring machines that, in turn, connect with other desiring-machines that operate through “points of connection, of disjunction, of conjunction of flows whose libidinal terms a properly unconscious investment they translate” (p. 293). Thus, “sexuality and the desiring-machines are one and the same inasmuch as these machines are
present or operating in the social machines in their field, their formation, their functioning” (p. 294). Fantasy, then, is always group fantasy and, for Deleuze and Guattari “a position of reality” (p. 280).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guttari (2003/1987) write about how forces of group *becoming* occur through what they describe as “becoming-animal.” “Every animal,” they write, “is fundamentally a band, a pack” (p. 239). They describe the motions of becoming as lacking any particular subject in a non-personal, affective manner. Deleuze and Guattari describe participation in the pack as a choice that exceeds the individual and they say “has nothing to do with the preferred, domestic and psychoanalytic individual” (p. 244). In the case of BDSM praxis, one can most literally see this materialization of the non-human group fantasy most clearly in “primal” play. In “A Romp on the Wild Side: Erotic Human-Animal Role Playing,” Lee Harrington (2012) writes about showing up to a “human puppy romp” at a fetish club in a Rottweiler persona in which he wandered around with eight other human puppies and about 60 other people. He writes:

I wandered around sniffing crotches and having fun playing with the other puppies, until I noticed a problem. A man had brought his girlfriend to the event as a human pony, and the other dogs were barking at her. She was scared. I rushed away from the person I was flirting with, still on all fours. I was barking at full volume, a loud angry bark, as I got between the pony and the human puppies. Yipping and snapping, they were confused at me—why wasn’t joining the fun and scaring the pony? In that moment I realized that I held a core value that the fun of others is never worth the true suffering of another. It was through my own animal role playing that I realized how deeply I felt about my own convictions. (p. 266)
While Harrington later reflects on and integrates his actions after the scene, in the moment he felt these to exceed him. What was most real to him during those moments were what Deleuze and Guattari would call the animal players’ “unnatural participation” in which affect—of the dogs as well as the pony—effected the pack and threw it into upheaval (p. 240).

Deleuze and Guattari describe these movements of sexuality as occurring on a micro level, in which there are “so many uncontrollable becomings.” Even a less literal example of “becoming-animal” can be seen through the masochist Severin in *Venus in Furs*. The masochist subjected to the mistress with her whip, for Deleuze and Guattari, is also in the process of “becoming-animal” by “becoming-horse” (p. 155). Deleuze and Guattari thus argue along with other writers for the productive possibilities of masochism and the sensations produced as passages to “becoming-minoritarian” as “sexuality proceeds by way of the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming-animal of the human” (p. 279).

How this becoming-minoritarian happens, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is through “deterritorialization” and “molecularization,” as opposed to “territorialization” and “molarization.” As such, a category such as “the sadist” or even “the masochist,” might be thought to be a territorialization. A schizoanalytic approach, in contrast, looks at phenomena on a “micromechanic” scale (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari eschew any notions of castration and lack inherited from psychoanalysis, instead, seeing deterritorializations through affect as causing “schizzes” or breaks that reach an edge or “open up to a chaos” (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 89). The molecular unconscious, they write, contains:

Everywhere a microscopic transsexuality, resulting in the woman containing as many men as the man, and the man as many women, all capable of entering—men with women, women with men—into relations of productions of desire that overturn the statistical
order of the sexes. Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand. (p. 296)

Deleuze and Guattari thus emphasize the radical particularity and micropolitics of sexuality, the “schizorevolutionary” potentials of molecular becomings. At the same time, they also acknowledge that with any deterritorialization of desire, there also comes “global or local reterritorializations…that always reconstitute shores of representation” (p. 316). In other words, the molecular does not function independent from corresponding molar territorializations that frame and structure the social.

Turning toward implications for investigating BDSM praxis, Deleuze and Guattari’s work gives a way of topologically mapping interactions and change through sexual praxis. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2003/1987) introduce their notion of the rhizome. The rhizome is a mode, for them, of becoming as opposed to being, and modeled like a “subterranean stem absolutely different from roots and radicals. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. Plants with roots or radicals may be rhizomorphic in other respects altogether…some animals are in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes” (p. 6). Other examples could be invasive weeds like kudzu or constellations of stars changing and reforming. What Deleuze and Guattari emphasize is connection and heterogeneity, change and difference that is not entirely linked to the linguistic signifier. Harrington’s human puppy pack can thus be thought of as an assemblage formed through a rhizomatic becoming in which “multiplicities with heterogeneous terms, cofunctioning by contagion, enter” (p. 242). It is in and through assemblages, even in other forms of heterogeneous collectivity, Deleuze and Guattari write, where “human beings effect their becomings-animal” (p. 242).
Different types of kinship structures in BDSM and kink, as described in the previous chapter, can be considered rhizomes as well. As an example of this, on the social networking site Fetlife.com users may have multiple profiles or avatars with names they choose for different elements of themselves, in as many different types of relationships as they desire. A drag queen may have two different but related profiles for himself—one in and out of drag—and link them as “married” to each other. As an example, one user may link herself as being “married to,” “in an open relationship with,” and “owning” her submissive husband while also, herself, being, say, a “submissive to” another FetLife user. This same user may also have another avatar that she uses for human-animal play, which is then in turn “in a pack” with any number of other avatars. This can then be contrasted with the constrained “molarized” and Oedipalized family systems of Facebook and its “real-name” or “true identity” policies.

In Deleuze’s notion of the event, he explores the ways in which change occurs in complex, hierarchical or molarized systems. The event, for Deleuze “atomiz[es] and evacuat[es] the space in which it has just ‘taken’ place” (Conley, 2000, p. 310). In other words, what the event does is allow new possibilities in materiality to emerge. Events, for Deleuze, occur through what, following Spinoza, Deleuze calls affect, the “measure of the material equation of an interaction, the gain and loss recorded in a body…as the result of an encounter” (Hickey-Moody, p. 79). Through affect, a body either extends or decreases its capabilities and limits of what it can accomplish or do. An important note here is that, in Deleuzian terminology, the concept of “body” is not limited to the human or even the organic—instead it refers to any changeable assemblage or mixture. This could be of one singular person, becoming-animal through something like costume, leather, whip, or a group of players together. As such, affect moves not only through individual human bodies and neuronal circuitry, but also through different humans,
between humans and the non-human, and between the non-human and non-human. The event thus affects bodies and allows them to reform and novel and creative ways that create what Deleuze and Guattari call “lines of escape” for new “schizzes” and thus “flows” in and between the desiring-machines connected through the rhizome. Moments such as the introduction of the human pony to the puppy pack or Harrington’s Rottweiler puppy’s act thus, in a Deleuzoguattarian conceptualization, both literally and figuratively move and transform subjectivity. These changes occur both on the level of the material as well in what Deleuze, following Bergson, calls the “virtual” or “ideal” aspects of reality.

As such, Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas can provide ways to, through a dynamic methodology, map, in groups and between individuals, change through praxis. Schizoanalysis, thus, performs a kind of “spectulative pragmatism” that Manning (2015) says asks: “What modes of articulation precede or exceed language? What about new modes of subjectivity that cannot be defined through the split between subject and object, analyst and analysand? What modes of existence…open new encounters with experience?” (p.66). Seeking again to go beyond psychoanalysis, Deleuze (1990/1969) posits, in The Logic of Sense, what he calls, following Klein’s “paranoid-schizoid” and “depressive” positions, the “sexual-perverse” position. Privileging the role of Eros and binding over what he considers the transcendental operations of Thanatos, Deleuze describes the sexual-perverse position as a “triumph of libido over the destructive drives and the emergence of the surface of the body as an independent topological dimension” (Swiatkowski, 2015, p. 89). This, he describes as a non-Oedipal position predicated on desire and pleasure through the surface of the body. Deleuze uses the example of what he describes as Chinese sexual practices involving the restraint of chi or non-orgasm-based sexuality and pleasure. This integration phase involves a “liberation of sexuality from the
destructive drives or from the death drive,” no longer aiming at states of discharge, but rather the 
“productive work of the surface” and “an intensification of the experience” versus “an 
unreachable state of rest” (Swiatkowski, 2015, p. 104). Rather than a depth unconscious, 
Deleuze prioritizes sensation and masochism as a process of transformation through breakdown, 
a politics of affinity through non-identity (Musser, 2014).

Deleuze and Guattari’s affective-materialist ontology and Deleuze’s creation of the sexual-
perverse position provide modes for inquiry into change and difference through sensation, tactile 
interaction beyond the linguistic signifier. As Guattari (1995) writes in _Chaosmosis_, the creation 
of subjectivity involves “sonority, material significations, verbal connections, 
emotional/intonation/volitional, feeling of motor elements of articulation…mime, gesture, soul” 
(p. 15). These formulations may not so much be antithetical to psychoanalysis, but rather parts 
of its less considered legacy, from Laplanche’s reconsideration of touch to the exiled Reich’s 
somatic psychoanalysis. The conjunction of psychoanalysis and schizoanalysis provides a way 
to consider temporality and trauma in fantasy productions, as well as an ethic not only of 
deterritorialization, but, perhaps, looser reterritorializations through co-emergence and 
concatenation of historical fantasy in flux and transformation: language and sensation, past and 
future, knotted together differently, through encounter.

**Bracha Ettinger, the matrixial, and subjectivity-as-encounter**

In their work, Deleuze and Guattari argue that all becoming is becoming-minoritarian: 
becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-Other. While they call for 
a serious consideration of minor literatures such as those by Kafka and Beckett, the sexual 
landscapes of Henry Miller, George Bataille, and D.H. Lawrence, notably absent from their
considerations are works written by writers coming from positions of more radical difference, including women writing about sexuality and sexual praxis. In her book, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Bracha Ettinger (2006) takes up the work of Deleuze and Guattari in conjunction with Lacanian psychoanalysis. She challenges the exclusion of feminine sexuality from becoming as radically Other. Instead, she considers the way in what she calls “matrixial transsubjectivity” happens through “subjectivity-as-encounter.” Ettinger, an artist and psychoanalyst, considers, in a non-essentializing way, how, for n sexes, the interweaving that occurs in intrauterine development continues afterwards throughout life. In doing so, she braids together the perspectival planes of Deleuze and Guattari with the clinical insights of psychoanalysis, to think subjectivity as co-occurrence, a positive articulation of feminine signification, and the “somatic underbelly of psychic processes” (Pollock, 2006). Her consideration of matrixial transsubjectivity includes considerations of trauma and fantasy along with encounter, connection, and topologies of desire.

Against an axiology of paternal or linguistic signification in psychoanalysis, Ettinger argues for a serious consideration of the signification of the “co-poeisis” of becoming that all sexes go through in continual states of emergence with other and world. I think here of Julia Kristeva, in both comparison and contrast. Kristeva (1980) calls for considerations of the role of what she describes as the semiotic, or the poetic, feminine and pre-Oedipal mode of signification. For Kristeva (1982), the subject oscillates between the semiotic and the symbolic throughout life, with entrance into the symbolic involving a process of separation she speaks of as abjection. Separation from the mother’s body by way of abjection involves the radical exclusion of the world of animalism, where meaning breaks down. In and through the abject, the disgust-evoking Real of feces, vomit, pus and open wounds harken to that which disturbs identities, borders,
positions and rules (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The abject also refers to the fear and *jouissance* of the dead body, the corpse, and that which, despite its powers of horror, to which subjects are continually drawn back. Religion and art, for Kristeva, are two modes of “purifying” the abject; the ritual and protocol of BDSM praxis, I believe, is another. These purifications serve to draw the borders between bodies and autonomous selfhoods. The prototypical images of BDSM, I believe, often evoke the abject work Kristeva describes. I think here of the example of a masochistic submissive after an intense bottoming scene, whose body may be naked, bruised and bleeding, leaky and crumpled, while their tops remain fully clothed. The bottom, in some ways, embodies this space of the abject in collapse, an expulsion and destruction of the mother figure. Yet, in the temporal dimensions of BDSM praxis, the bottom or submissive “comes back” from this space, in, through and beyond aftercare.

Whereas Kristeva reads pregnancy as an event of heterogeneity, alterity and the splitting of the subject, Ettinger, in contrast, reads it as an event *with* a subject and subjectivity. As Pollock (2006) writes, Ettinger sees feminine subjectivity and sexuality “from the site or space of the fundamental event of severalizing, humanizing becoming” (Pollock, 2006, p. 26.7). As such, her work provides a way to view shits, from separations to new becomings, oscillations through subjectivizing encounters in BDSM praxis. I consider here, for instance, the ways in which individuals come to “switch” between and through positions, from top to bottom, masochist to sadist, and find through these changes, moments of self-transcendence.

The “richly psychotic dance” of Sade’s Eugenie and her mother Madame de Mistival can be considered through Ettinger’s notions of the matrixial. Ettinger (2006) is interested in precisely these possibilities of “relations-without-relating” and what “emerges from…exchanges of phantasy relating to non-Oedipal sexual difference and interconnectivity” (p. 68.9). While
Sade’s work ends with a triumphant sewing shut, Ettinger instead argues against this kind of foreclosure, insisting that the matrixial is not psychotic unless the “feminine” is foreclosed by such demands of forced binary choice. Beyond the dualities of “love” and “hate,” Ettinger looks to the creativity of matrixial subjectivity in producing affects such as “awe, alertness, astonishment, or compassion” (p. 64.5). She explores the possibilities prior to Kristevan abjection to create a concept she calls the “corpo-Real,” which conjoins the Lacanian notion of the jouissance of the Real with an idea of the womb as a time-space of encounter for feminine-matrixial sexual difference. Through this, she makes the case that subjectivity in plurality “emerges from…exchanges of phantasy relating to non-Oedipal sexual difference and interconnectivity” (p 68.9).

Subjectivity, Ettinger theorizes then as “subjectivity-in-encounter.” Of this, Pollock (2006) writes:

...[subjectivity-in-encounter] occur[s] at shared borderspaces between several co-affecting partial-subjectivities that are never entirely fused or totally lost, but share and process, with an always-already minimal difference, elements of each unknown other. This might suggest ways to think not only subjectivity in this abstracted theoretical form, but also aesthetic encounters...irreducible elements of otherness in our encounters with human and even nonhuman events in the world. We could argue that racism, xenophobia, and fascism are premised on an extreme of the castration paradigm...Significant possibilities are offered in subjectivity as encounter—an encounter almost missed, never completely lost, and not only formed in desire-induced severance (as conditioned by castration). (p. 2.3)
These “borderspaces” Ettinger describes as involving multiplicities and delicate processes of transmission, a kind of aesthetic incorporation. Lane (2017) describes how, as a sexual assault survivor, recovery began for her when she “switched” roles and became dominant through submission. Lane wrote that these sexual practices were “revolutionary for [her] mind and body” (p. 6). Ettinger’s theory allows for a way to understand these kinds of individual and group change in BDSM praxis in their subtlety. In her formulation, subjectivities are “unknown and unknowable to the other” and yet, “mutually co-affect [each other] in unpredictable and yet subjectivizing ways” (Pollock, 2006, p. 2.3). Processes of attunement in these ever-changing subjective emergences allows what she calls the “body-psyche” to “co-emerge with the other and the world.” This process of “subjectivity-as-encounter,” Ettinger describes as occurring through a process-concept she call wit(h)nessing, an unsettling of the usual meaning of “witnessing.” Wit(h)nessing, for Ettinger, involves a fundamental interdependency, in which affective change occurs through senses beyond the visual, a radical form of being-with that changes the witnesses. Trauma, then, in Ettinger’s (2006) description, is shared, with individual phantasy moving “to a matrixial web of borderlinks, a feminine jouissance between trauma and phantasy” (p. 102.3). What she calls “subknowledge” is produced “between phantasy and desire, in an enlarged subjectivity” (p. 102.3). In other words, co-poetic becoming occurs between the movements of the unconscious and the more conscious direction that emerges. One can think here of the kinds of becomings and realizations of potentialities that happen after-the-fact in BDSM praxis.

The examples of rape and trauma play from Chapter Three and the transformations that occur through them provide examples of the operations of Ettinger’s concept of wit(h)nessing, which goes beyond seeing or hearing and into the co-experiencing of phantasy and trauma. This is not to say that these experiences occur symmetrically or in parallel. To wit(h)ness in ethical BDSM
praxis is to be beholden to the desire of the Other, not only to engage in the collectivity of fantasies, but also to encounter and experience the schizzes within and between them.

Wit(h)nessing, Ettinger writes, involves “sliding from the structure of fantasy to more archaic trauma, from there joining the path leading to further encounters” (p. 146.7). This conceptualization allows for the space for falling away, moving through abjection and then returning to co-produce subjectivities. Despite the asymmetry of sexual relationship and lack of parallelism in fantasy, BDSM scenes evoke and conjoin fantasies that may align with or tear apart from those of others. I consider here, the example Mollenia Williams gives of race play and its possible impact. Wit(h)nessing in race play evokes the affects of the slave chattel no longer abstracted, for participants with different subjective and intergenerational positions with regard to the trauma of slavery. Such scenes thus de facto involve an experience of trauma and traumatization that cannot be consciously rationalized, explained nor ignored.

Going beyond binaries to multi-directional forms of change, Ettinger describes these workings of subjectivity-in-encounter as happening through a process she calls metramorphosis. Each encounter, such as one of a BDSM scene, engenders “jouissance, trauma, pictograms, phantasies, and affects and channels death-drive oscillations, libidinal-erotic flow, their imprints and affected traces in several partners, in co-passion, conjointly but differently” (p. 140.1). This process, unlike the dialectical ones described in Chapter One, are not those of mastery, nor a narrative of separation and differentiation. The Sadean legacy of a subject acting upon an object or Sacher-Masoch’s masochist bound to the desexualized contract is replaced by knowledge transfer, an erotic co-response-ability. This kind of conceptualization does not mean a too facile joining together in wholeness or as one, but a “desire to join-in-difference and differentiate-in-co-emerge with the Other that does not promise peace and harmony” (p. 146.7). Ettinger’s
theorizations, then, I believe, provide a way of considering the potentials of BDSM and kink not only through masochism, but ethical sadism as well, as the figure of the “dominant” need not only be a perversive Sadean figure, but any number of “top” potentialities that evoke creation, healing and change. Ettinger’s reading is always already informed by trauma, fragmentation and vulnerability. While attending to the affective material of the surface, she preserves the possibilities of psychoanalysis for “accessing a psychic Thing encapsulated and hiding in an outside capture inside—in an ‘extimate’ unconscious space” (p. 146). The invisible, thus, is visible, legible, and Ettinger’s work, I believe, provides a space, for a com-passionate kink theory, in and through dialogue, touch and difference.

*Ethics, from Eros to aftercare*

Communication with the other can be transcendent only as a dangerous life, a fine risk to be run. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

Despite the centrality of notions of sadomasochism to psychoanalytic and philosophical thought, it is perhaps surprising how rarely a consideration of sexual praxis has appeared in the works I have described. Despite beginning *What is sex?* with a condemnation of psychotherapists’ avoidance of direct discussions about sexuality, Zupancic, too, shies away from what might be called the explicitly sexual of sex and alludes that it is too reductive, simplistic or crude for ontological consideration. She instead argues to take sexual description out of psychoanalysis to return “sex” to its radicality as that which cannot fully be known or embodied. In contrast to this, I believe that an ethical 21st century consideration of the radical ontology of sex and its disruptive potential can and must include affective-material accounts in their polyphonic discontinuity. These are what Deleuze, following Liebniz, calls the “compossible” existence of heterogeneous truths. In this section, I consider how research ethics
might work with psychoanalytic, schizoanalytic and philosophical notions to consider the
temporality of trauma, fantasy, and the act in BDSM praxis. This is not to, as Zupancic rightly
critiques, believe that “the crack that in-forms human sexuality [would] simply disappear if we
accepted the idea that there is colorful multiplicity of sexual identities” (p. 116). Instead, it is to
dive into said cracks or schizzes, the space of Ettinger’s subknowledge between fantasy and
desire through the movements and productions of those who engage in BDSM praxis. Given the
attentiveness and multiplicity of awarenesses of BDSM practitioners, this provisional sketch
involves what I will describe as a queer, haptic erontology and a fantasmatic historiography that
does not “closet” the experiential psyche.

To return to Freudian fantasy, I foreground here the way Freud sought to learn from the
mistakes of his predecessors in treating hysteria. He relied not on the unquestioned power
differentials of hypnosis or the medical use of vibrators nor did he abandon treatment, as did
Breuer, at the moment of sexual attraction and attachment. As such, Freud could show how
conversion disorder was transformed specifically through speech and its connection to the
body. In the context of BDSM praxis in the 21st century, these kinds of transferences, fantasies
and desires can be spoken, more consciously, in the context of pre-scene negotiations. With
Laplanche’s re-reading of Freud, I argue, comes an inquiry into the intergenerational,
intercorporeal and enigmatic signification of touch that applies to physical contact in its many
valences. Likewise, Laplanche’s considerations open a way to consider the role of fantasy in and

14 I have not, in this dissertation, focused on debates over Freud’s seduction theory, with the core
belief that ongoing and increasingly conscious and spoken awareness of fantasies, histories and
desires rather than reductive aetiology or pathology are as important to survivors of abuse as
anyone else.

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for adult fantasies with contact and external objects. In the context of BDSM, certain forms of touch, erotic or sexual, likewise, can open to prior temporalities as well as new sensations, through rewritings in and through the body in fantasy. The charged nature of physical contact, unacceptable in most clinical contexts or at best employed with delicacy and caution, is what lends to sexual praxis its particular power. The role of touch in the pre-Oedipal, semiotic or matrixial, thus, may have the power to open up locked “crypts” of mourning and trauma, in which signification and language is often lost, and provide access, through sexual fantasy and praxis, some form of conscious signification. Rather than characterize sex acts through psychoanalytic language of a pejorative “acting out” or less-than-conscious repetition, a queer, feminist and schizoanalytic intervention can move these toward possibilities of considering subjectivization and fantasmatic change.

To delve into the “cracks” of rupture or change involves a de-closeting of sexual fantasy and non-linear history. It would mean, for researchers, not to shy away from the uncomfortable space from which fantasy, in its overdetermined complexity, dynamically produces its structures and imagery. I turn here to two recent scholars in literary studies, Carla Freccero and Elizabeth Freeman, for some possible methodological considerations. Freccero (2006) in her writing on early modernism, calls for “queerer” approaches to history, which she describes through a practice of “fantasmatic historiography.” She challenges the ways in which material processes of history leave out overdetermined operations of sexuality. The model she proposes involves an ethics of responsiveness, an openness to the porousness and permeability of temporality, an

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15 For instance, Laplanche considers how even fantasies involving the breast have other referents. He writes of how psychoanalytic theory has long avoided considerations of the hallucinatory adult fantasy of the breast involving the previous material reality of milk in nourishment and feeding.
awareness of affective investments of the present in notions of the past, and, importantly, the effects of trauma (p. 70). As one example in her work, Freccero traces the contemporary re-emergence of the figure of the dog breed presa Canario. She explores how reinterest in the breed appeared after a dog owned by a right-wing extremist mauled and killed a lesbian woman in San Francisco. She considers the affective investments in the breed across different historical time periods, from Spanish conquistadores to American drug dealers and dog fighters. Rather than doing only a linear history of the breed, Frecerro considers how the signifier and image of the presa Canario evoke particular fantasies and responses across time and history, across different individuals and groups.

Like Frecerro, Elizabeth Freeman (2006), in her book *Time Binds*, also argues for a “queer asynchronous” challenge to traditional historiography. Against a queer history based solely on loss, she argues for what she calls a haptic “erotohistoriography,” in which sensation and the body give access to elements of the past. Freeman writes that:

> [h]ow we come to know both ourselves and others, and the world itself is a matter of material engagement, often through the direct contact of flesh and blood encounters that do not simply affect us at a surface level, but effect the very constitution of embodied becoming. (p. 25)

Combining Freeman’s notions with those of Ettinger as discussed in the previous section would involve a consideration of pain as well as pleasure, touch and what it evokes. Importantly, the kind of somatized historical knowledge that Freeman describes and argues for does not demand exactitude or “correct information” about past events. Instead, it is a kind of co-poetic art that places past events into a moment of overdetermined relationship with a haptic present.
Queer and feminist approaches, thus, I argue, can take an ethnographic approach such as that of Stoller even further. Stoller’s bold and unique move was to take psychoanalytic research outside the clinic. A crucial turn he did not perhaps live long enough to make was how to reintegrate his ethnographic findings into implications. What a queer, haptic and fantasmatic ethnography could do is consider the subjective passages and collective becomings of BDSM praxis, through poetic languages, artistic and subjectivizing productions. This goes beyond cognitive, descriptive or linear understandings of BDSM subjectivities and cultures. Instead, such an ethnography would take into account not only the “visible” and “observable” practices of sexual praxis, but the “invisible” and subjective poetics of fantasy unfolding dynamically and temporally, through practitioners’ accounts of flux in various contexts. A consideration of the roles of the haptic and sensation in fantasy enactment is thus an ethical one and involves an attunement of what is evoked and in which assemblages. This process-based approach attends to speech, structure and touch to articulate the interplay of the intra- and inter-psychic events of BDSM and kink praxes.

What queering the fantasmatic and queering ethnography offers here is a way to consider how images, fantasies and figures repeat or change for practitioners throughout their encounters. As I will turn to in the conclusion, it provides a way to investigate how certain images, fantasies and forms of BDSM are evoked and change in social contexts as well. Queer theory’s consideration of radical differences in morphology provides what Shildrick (2006) writing on disability and sexuality, calls an “effective methodology for opening up a better understanding of the relationship between bodies and the constitution of corporeality in general” (p. 125). In line with this, Colebrook’s (2009) reading of Deleuzian vitalism involves the notion that “every body is queer…the queerness is positive. No body fully knows its own powers, and can only become
joyful (or live) not by attaining the ideal it has of itself…but by maximizing that in ourselves which exceeds the majoritarian” (p. 88). Moving past psychoanalytic language regarding “regressed” or “unintegrated” parts of the psyche, BDSM and kink personae can be instead seen as positive multiplicities of any one body. Praxis then provides, through the co-poetic evocation of fantasies, these multiplicities to become more accessibly known.

I assert the importance of this ethical paradigm in a historical and materialist context. In this dissertation, I have focused on best contemporary practices in the descriptions I have chosen to represent BDSM. As such, sexual praxis here includes the full temporal range of a scene, from scene “negotiations,” through the enactment of fantasies, and afterwards, in the processes of “aftercare.” Each of these processes involves a kind of erotic techne or “know how” that includes a profound responsibility for others. Unlike the masochistic contract fictionalized in *Venus in Furs* or the list of submissive sexual acts delivered to Anastasia Steele to approve or reject in *50 Shades of Grey*, most BDSM negotiations occur through spoken discussion of desires.¹⁶ Negotiations can include, but are not limited to: what each practitioner hopes to get from the scene, hard and soft “limits” that cannot be crossed, emotional “triggers” and concerns, specific language to use or avoid, signals and “safewords.” Pragmatically, negotiations also include current medical or emotional concerns, accident planning, and immediate and longer-term aftercare plans for physical and emotional contact after the scene.

In contrast to Sade’s literary sadism, enacted in isolated castles outside the Law, considerable responsibility falls to the ethical top or sadist. In consent and negotiations, the scope and

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¹⁶ Jay Wiseman, writing in *SM 101*, notes that writing down lists of desires prior to but not in lieu of spoken negotiations may work well for new or inexperienced practitioners to better articulate wants and needs without the pressure or the presence of others.
execution of the scene is often predominantly, though not entirely, guided by the knowledge, experience, sensitivity, skill and attunement of the top. Engaging in BDSM and kink thus opens participants up to one another not only through the scene’s present, but also the radical past and unknown possibility of the future beyond it. A top, thus, can make herself susceptible to the contingencies of her play partner, for whom she assumes a responsibility. As described earlier, for some trauma survivors who have lived through having a sexual techne or know how, from speech to act, forcibly robbed from them, re-experiencing themselves as capable and actively making choices for and about their sexual desires can, in itself, be a radical, daring act, enjoyable with, through and because of other partners’ co-poetic participation.

I would be remiss to ignore completely the continued prevalence of non-consensual acts of sexual sadism and violence, including consent violations and more serious acts within and outside “the Scene.” As BDSM’s cultural visibility increases so does the possibility for its misuse, misrepresentation or appropriation. Likewise, it may evoke, even in consensual encounters, deeply traumatic repetitions. The history of psychoanalysis, likewise, has struggled with this tension: How to account for the possibility of the abuse of power in analytic work as well as the evocation of increased pain through the transference? What is the ethical balance between pain and healing, pleasure and the hope for connection? This returns us again to questions of ontology in sexuality, which, as Rosalyn DiProse (2002) notes, arise from the ontological problem of always being a body for others. Ethical paradigms for these frontiers in sexuality research will provide space to consider how subjective constitution effects and is effected by BDSM praxis. A haptic, fantasmatic ethnography informed by queer and feminist psychoanalysis and schizoanalysis gives a direction to consider subjectivity in process. Taking seriously Zupancic’s claim that ontologically, life instincts and eros “are a form of know-how
necessary for the preservation of detour from fundamental negativity” (p. 96) gives a way to explore more in-depth the “know-how” of specific BDSM praxis, including the skillful and unskillful handling of negative experiences: aborted scenes, traumatic triggers, scenes gone awry and consent violations. This is to take seriously the affective Real not only as a site of radical possibility but also a place where, as in and through non-consensual sexual violence, can occur deep abuse with devastating effects.

This is uncharted space and perhaps rightfully so, as it pushes, at times, at the limits of legality and the Law. The reality of contemporary BDSM praxis is that practitioners consent with each other to acts deemed illegal and/or ones that read radically differently in the broader social sphere. Some practitioners joke that they engage in “violent displays of affection” or VDAs as opposed to the more colloquial PDAs (“public displays of affection”). Yet, at the same time, as with other relationships, violation may also occur on a deeper ethical level than the immediately spoken. There is no established court of justice for affective boundary violations, invasions of personal space, misuses of language, or profound and blatant misattunement to Otherness and subjectivity. These are violations that are not illegal yet still problematic, wounding and destructive to individuals and social links. They do not, however, always result in sanctions, a banning or expulsion from the community. What a fantasmatic ethnography could thus explore is how these are worked through in BDSM subcultures, with third-party figures, “dungeon masters” or DMs, or in large- or small-group contexts. To shy away from the problem of the jouissance of these overdetermined moments is to shy away from the radical Real of sexuality that Zupancic (2017) encourages psychoanalysis and philosophy to return. Here, the maps we chart of the realm of the sexual matter.
As such, I believe that ethical investigation into BDSM praxis gives space for these multiplicities. It can include both the psychic effects of trauma along with the temporal processes of working through, in and between subjectivities in flux. At the micromechanic level that Deleuze and Guattari describe, this could involve a mapping of the discussions, sharing of fantasies and erotic stories of BDSM practitioners as they engage in various roles and scenes. It may also involve how practitioners come to experience their bodies, relationships and histories after these scenes. What I argue for here is a consideration of queer and feminist theory’s expansions in a way that more precisely describe the topos of fantasy in its haptic, erotic materiality as well as its affective excesses. While the dimension of the Real may be what makes a pleasure sexual, to only consider it as a beyond rather than with its intertwining with other registers runs the risk of making illegible subjugated knowledges about erotic forms of becoming.

If, following psychoanalysis, all social life can be considered as constituted by initial separation and trauma, a consideration of sexual praxis can, in addition to a point of radical non-connection, also be a motor force for the emergence of new styles of social linking through fantasy. In his considerations of creativity, Freud (1908) wrote that “a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one.” Yet, at the level of desire, many have, in non-neurotic fashions, have had their desire and subjectivity suppressed through non-consensual racial, gender or colonial domination. What BDSM and kink praxes provide is a modality of expression for taboo fantasies. Rather than “satisfaction” as a goal, the kind of erotic co-response-ability that Ettinger describes may involve a sharing of these intertwined individual and cultural traumas and thus change and healing. In this context, the unsatisfied need that instantiates fantasy might not be the individual and personal problem suggested by Freud, rather, a call for a more equitable
beyond. To voice one’s sexual desires and fantasies—particularly as a non-dominant subject—in a carefully negotiated and attuned context may even in close relational or therapeutic contexts feel difficult for many. In spaces and places dedicated to the enactment BDSM and kink fantasies, comes the potential for speaking and materializing these as possibilities.

Returning to the notions of schizoanalysis with which I began this chapter, Deleuze and Guattari argue that it is both an ethical and pragmatic approach that unfolds in its experimental creation. Lorimer (2005) describes schizoanalysis’s flexibility in attending to “shared experiences, fleeting encounters, practical skills, affective intensities [and] enduring urges” (p. 42) while Vannini (2015) describes it as well-sited to more-than-representational “events, relationships, practices, performances [and] affects” (p. 9). These each speak to the processes and ethics of BDSM praxis. In a mode of speculative pragmatism, I consider the movements of BDSM, kink and sexual as a philosophy that gives “rise to [and] draws a line of flight to ‘other’ philosophical concerns, purposes and practices” (Taylor, 2013, p. 43). Rather than a displacement of sex and the sexual onto mathematics or logic, an erontological poetics of sexual praxis can go beyond research, fetishization and the pornographic Imaginary.
Conclusion

Why kink, why now?

There is always something intrinsically political about the claims psychoanalysis makes, not about the sexual as such, but brings us to what is sex, sexuality itself. Freud said that where there is a problem, there is sex…it is because sex is this very point where some social problem of impasse is played out, names its very juncture.

Alenka Zupancic (2018), interview, New Books in Psychoanalysis

BDSM is currently experiencing a particularly visible and culturally salient moment. With the accessibility of information online and the ability to access it anonymously, many can now research and learn about customs and practices previously confined to urban enclaves and hard-to-find subcultural spaces. White, heterosexual norms, while still the mainstream prototype, are being challenged continually by increasingly visible content producers. As an example, a Muslim-American woman recently published a guide to sex for Muslim couples that includes a chapter on BDSM (Muladhat, 2017). In January 2019, popular comedienne Margaret Cho announced the release of a web series, “Mercy Mistress,” that she produced based upon the real-life experiences of Yin Q, a queer, first-generation Chinese-American dominatrix. While smaller in scope than traditional productions—*The Muslimah Sex Manual* is a short sixty-five pages and episodes of “Mercy Mistress” run between three and ten minutes long—the micropolitical works are nonetheless reaching wider audiences. In an interview about “Mercy Mistress,” Yin Q was asked what she hoped viewers would take away from the web series. They responded:

Compassion…I also want to reveal the practice of transformational and transcendent BDSM rituals…BDSM ritual work is a way for the participants to activate trauma recovery, psychonautic explorations, and/or cathartic release. (Hinzmann, 2018, p. 6-8)
Yin Q also spoke to the modes of production of the web series, noting that it was produced, directed, shot, edited, scored and distributed by an all-female or non-binary crew. “[I]t matters,” they said, “how the story is made and by whom” (Hinzman, 2018, p. 11).

These descriptions of contemporary BDSM are clearly far from those of the Marquis de Sade and his castles of perversion in Chapter One. Yet, I have attempted here to trace a through line of BDSM fantasy and praxis that considers these legacies in their fantasmatic social and cultural unfolding. Despite Sade’s emphasis on non-consensuality and a rampant immorality, his works, in part, sparked a consideration, critically and theoretically, of the nascent possibilities for female pleasure and subjectivity, sensation and the material body, and the structural uses of cruelty to unveil hypocrisy. With the Deleuzian 21st century micropolitics of the body, kink praxis beyond the acronym of BDSM is open, now, to not only female, but a diversity of subjectivities in multiplicity, feminine and otherwise. I believe that the Freudian 20th century and psychoanalytic praxis—despite its lacunae—gave diverse sexualities a place to be spoken into language if not always honored in their lived reality or given agency to be performed. As such, psychoanalysis, in many ways, I believe, opened the doors to the contemporary diversity of sexual expressiveness. At the same time, if psychoanalysis continues to adhere only to mainstream or literary accounts of sadomasochism rather than those of kink praxis, it will miss critical engagement with the insights practitioners have into trauma, fantasy, becoming and transformation.

In conclusion, I ask: why kink, why now? The dynamics of late capitalism involve increasingly visible power differentials of class, race, gender and national borders. As the pace of technology accelerates, tracing and delineating these flows of capital and subjectivity, the proliferation of language to describe sexuality, as Foucault showed and predicted, has perhaps
never been more active or greater. Certainly more transgressive forms of BDSM, which eroticize and play with these social dynamics, make the non-consensually sexualized nature of such interactions more visible. These dynamics rely not only on identities in flux, but culture in flux, and the most stigmatized of their practices often reveal certain truths of the logics of late capitalism. As an example of this, one of the most contested practices, even within BDSM cultures and with professional dominatrices, is that of “financial domination” of “findom.” “Findoms” are dominant women who are sent money online by submissive men known as “cash pigs,” who may ask for nothing in return. It is telling that in societies in which capitalist exploitation of labor by wealthy men is celebrated, for a woman to benefit from not touching, not being sexual, not providing emotional labor at the request of and for a man’s sexual gratification, is considered most taboo. It evokes a beyond even of Sade’s Juliette, for the findom requires no moral backstory: She desires and will explicitly demand what she desires, promising nothing in return, not even, sometimes, the fantasy of continued connection. This practice lays, perhaps, all too bare the underbelly of colonialism, domination, excess, guilt and implication without the possibility of reparation. The trauma of late capitalism is that it is always already perverse.

As such, not all BDSM praxes are acts of healing between individuals; there is jouissance that reveals ambivalent engagement in social ills. At a talk last fall, I was asked why, as BDSM changed and more people became involved, its dominant images seemed to remain the same. Why, the questioner inquired, had marketing companies and mainstream producers not appropriated images from pet play or age play? I answered that perhaps what has become acceptable in mainstream images of BDSM is the eroticization of symbols of monetary power: latex boots, leather whips, stylized corsets are merely high fashion in a more “explicitly” sexual form. If theory is to tarry with the lived praxes of BDSM, however, it must go beyond this and
representations in the Imaginary, where even works like “Mercy Mistress” run the risk of remaining without a discussion of sensation and pleasure. It must tarry with the fantasmatic and bodily aspects of abjection, masochism, sadistic cruelty, and jouissance that exceeds the subject and “lie[s] outside the bounds of liberal subjectivity” (Musser, 2011). It must push at static, simplistic and individual sexual identities based exclusively upon notions of “object choice.” As Foucault observed, S&M, at its most radical, is poised to work with strategic forms of relation and respond to changing forms of power flows. In contrast to social power stabilized through institutions, what struck Foucault about S&M was its fluidity and change through and with practitioners. Following this, I believe that the art of BDSM and its praxes provide, in the context of late capitalism, creative, non-sublimation-based responses to symbolic power. Here, I do not stray far from psychoanalysis. Instead, the call is for psychoanalysis, rather than disavowing affinities with BDSM practitioners or, perhaps more poignantly, sex workers, to reconsider uncomfortable proximities, from the realm of speech to the haptic.

I close here with the somatic psychoanalytic notions of Wilhelm Reich, who believed what he called “neurotic complexes” were carried through the tightness and positions of the body he called “character armor.”17 One of Reich’s (1972/1933) major notions was that psychic repression relies on social repression and that many so-called psychological disorders have social determinants.18 Somatic or body psychotherapy he developed as a way to access, loosen and treat other-than-hysterical complexes of the body. As psychoanalysts were abandoning the

17 Reich theorized sadism and masochism as “character structures” rather than aspects of sexuality and fantasy, which is why I have excluded his analyses from this current work.
18 One such notion of Reich’s was that symptoms that now might fall under the diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder could be a response to conditions of poverty and trauma. In contemporary clinical practice, echoes of this can be heard, I believe, in Judith Hermann’s conceptualization of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD).

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theory of libido as energy of an unconscious sexual instinct, Reich followed this through to his ultimately disastrous conceptualization of “orgone” (or orgasm) energy as the route for individual and social healing. Reich’s disgrace and poor standing in psychoanalytic community, however, over-wrote his insights into in what were, in psychoanalysis at the time called the “actual neuroses.” These “actual neuroses,” as opposed to “psychoneuroses” such as those of obsessional neurosis or hysterical conversion, would include, today, things that fall under the category of the “New Symptoms”: eating disorders, self-injury, addictions and other psychopathologies of the surface. These neuroses were thought to be the result of disturbances in the pre-Oedipal, the time of Klein’s language-less phantasy, and of a more sexual origin. In other words, these symptoms might perhaps be thought instead as disturbances in or of the pre-linguistic time of the haptic.

Commentators on the life of Reich, including one of his children, have remarked on the possibility that he himself may have had a history of childhood sexual abuse. While evidence for this may be left to the historical unknown, it is notable that in his book The Sexual Revolution Reich (1986/1945) actively advocated for sexual freedoms and rights that continue to be part of global queer and feminist movements. Reich argued against what he called “compulsory marriage,” while arguing for candid sexual education, an end to the persecution of abnormal sexualities, women’s right to choose, and no-fault, no-shame options for divorce. He cited family as the cause of neurosis and the Oedipus complex, as the child is forced to bind to individuals toward ad with whom they may or may not feel tender attachment. Freud was deeply critical of this work, as he believed too great a sexual revolution would lead to social chaos. Yet here, I believe, it is important to inquire into this fear by asking: Chaos for whom?
Reich’s mistakes could be seen in his scientization of sexuality and instrumentalization of the orgasm, with his “orgone boxes” prescribed as a cure-all retreat from societal ills. In contrast, BDSM practitioners’ accounts of transformation through sexual praxis involve messier temporalities and, like psychoanalysis, promise no pat or simple answer to the problems posed by sex. In a post-Oedipal world, BDSM and kink are creative praxes that can, as Shanna de la Torre (2018) describes the relationship between structuralism and shamanism, “become useful when…engag[ing] with the non-Oedipal logics of femininity and psychosis.” Such sexual praxes, I believe, can move through intergenerational traumas to create new and different social links. These somatic knowledges, however, cannot be expressed if they are considered to be of a different order than psychoanalytic free speech, relegated to an excluded realm of the regressive or shameful. Nor can they be if the expressive logics of touch and sensation are disavowed or left unexplored in considerations of ontology. Temporality in BDSM praxis goes beyond individualistic or identity-based notions of sexuality to inform, in an ongoing way, an anti-fascistic, anti-narcissistic politics of desire.
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