

Deviants Performing Deviance: A Participant/Observer Case for BDSM as Performance

by

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BDSM practitioners work outside the margins of heteronormative, dominant, socially constructed behaviors and ways of being to enact performances that disrupt and queer the formulations of temporal logics enforced outside this counterpublic. In this participant/observer based research, I will identify and define the characteristics that position BDSM practice as performance in several contexts, including “In sex,” “In ritual,” and “In play,” and offer these assertions as platforms upon which a utopian-like queer temporal liminality can be further explored and formulated in these performances.

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Introduction: "Negotiation"

Positioning BDSM as Performance

A man dressed in worn jeans hanging loosely just below his chiseled six-pack abs approaches a nearly naked, slender woman tied to a wooden cross. He holds a leather flogger, his knuckles tight around the grip. The woman's body tenses, hearing his steps and anticipating the initial blow to come.

This scene, or one similar, may have once a short time ago been an unfamiliar one to most Americans. Certainly it was at the very least taboo.¹ And even more certainly women would not be seen openly reading about these types of scenes on a subway car packed with commuters in say, 2010. Enter the prolific writings of E.L. James, author of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.² Suddenly that taboo has been significantly normalized. These scenes could be called many things, but for the purposes of this study will be referred to broadly as BDSM, a conglomerate of abbreviations meaning: Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism. Within each of these categories, terms can often be complicated and/or replaced with other sometimes synonymous, sometimes tangential terms including but not limited to: Kink, Fetish, Leather, S&M, and Sadoomasochism.³ The distinction between BDSM and

¹ Taboo can be defined here as something which is antithetical to the normative social order and customary practices.

² The *Fifty Shades* trilogy and its subsequent films have been extraordinarily successful, each book making the *New York Times* best sellers list, and each film bringing in tens of millions in revenue (Emanuella Grinberg, "Explaining 'Fifty Shades' wild success").

³David M. Ortmann and Richard A. Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2013), xiii.

Kink is a fairly simple one. BDSM is generally seen as those deviant practices which are based on non-sexually specific desires, while Kink practices are based on sexually specific desires. Deviance can be understood as that which is in opposition to the heteronormative order. Of course, there is plenty of crossover. It is important to note these distinctions tend to blur and become rather unimportant to most BDSM and Kink players; in fact, the two terms are used fairly interchangeably in practice.

All this to say, while the terms in BDSM do have specific meanings that are derived from their original use and intention, those distinctions are becoming less and less important to many of the actual members of those communities and render those terms essentially interchangeable. My own assumption that these two terms meant very different things ended up being just one example of the bias I brought into this work. Another was my assumption that the roles of BDSM (such as dominant and submissive) were permanent ones, continually held by practitioners. But this, too, is incorrect. Some do live a BDSM lifestyle almost constantly, either alone or with a partner or multiple partners. Others engage in “one-off” dynamics meant only to take a role on for play. Often these “one-off” players will assume the role of “top” and “bottom.” The top being the one executing the area of BDSM being played at, the bottom being the one receiving it. These terms (top and bottom) can also be used as a general category, since there are many roles that can be taken on “on either side of the slash,” as it’s colloquially known. This colloquialism referring to the forward slash placed in the center of D/S (which stands for Dominance and Submission).

During my matriculation into this community, I learned that many of the assumptions I had about it were not only false, but often harmful. From those whom I've spoken to in preparation for and pursuant to this dissertation, those assumptions are not rare, and such misunderstandings are something the community members battle against quite often. Some of the more dangerous assumptions made about this community come from this recent normalization referred to above.

As Eric,⁴ a dominant man who has been in the Denver BDSM community for more than 20 years explains: "The community that I once loved and cherished as special and unique is now mass-marketed, cold, and commercialized. I look around, and I don't see all of the amazing, interesting [things] I used to see."⁵ As a queer theorist, that concept is nothing new to me. Often (especially when it comes to issues of race, gender, sexuality, etc.) we conflate normalization with acceptance. But as queer theorist Lee Edelman noted (and did note prior to its legalization), gay marriage has not "fixed" the problems of queer life in America.⁶ Having a black President didn't suddenly end racism. Chili's doing a 2-for-1 margarita sale on Cinco De Mayo doesn't ensure that Mexican-Americans can expect livable wages.

Likewise, having an influx of people who now feel it is "fun" and "fashionable" to engage in BDSM, when their introduction to it is extremely homogenized and

⁴ To protect the identity of the participants of this study, each will be identified by a pseudonym of their choosing. No information which could be used to directly identify the participants (such as actual names, addresses, phone numbers, occupation, etc.) has been included in this study. Concurrent with IRB anonymity protocol, none will be provided. Basic census information about the participants was provided at-will at the time of interview, and can be found in Appendix A.

⁵ Eric (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 13, 2018.

⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 19.

heteronormativized (not to mention inaccurate in the case of the *Fifty Shades* franchise) does much more harm than it does good.

In my research of other academic investigations in this community (of which, there are few) I have also found many inaccuracies. The most obvious and heinous of these being a book recently published titled *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011), by Dr. Margot Weiss. In her book, anthropologist Weiss does an excellent job of painting a picture of the San Francisco Bay Area's BDSM community. Weiss also readily (and in my opinion, accurately) describes the acts of BDSM as performance, though she does not elucidate this definition. The conclusions she draws of the performances she witnesses, however, are not insightful. Weiss contends that the performances she is witnessing are in no way separated from any other part of life--in all its complexities and many inequities. "I began to understand SM performance as material. Rather than existing in a bracketed space of play, SM performances are deeply tied to capitalist cultural formations; rather than allowing for a kind of freedom from racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies, such spectacular performances work within social norms."⁷

Where anthropology fails here, performance studies has the capacity to further enlighten and elucidate. We know from performance studies that moments of performance are liminal. They step outside the bonds of time and space, and become extraordinary. When an actor plays Hamlet, they do not truly go mad (hopefully). They play at it, they ritualize it, they communicate it, they enact it, they embody it--but they do

⁷ Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Pleasure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

not actually do it. Performing is not doing. And likewise, when rituals of BDSM are inclusive of the complex inequities and social differences of society, they are not doing those things. They are performing them. Richard Schechner reminds us that while “Performances are actions,”⁸ they are more importantly, “‘restored behaviors,’ ‘twice-behaved behaviors,’ performed actions that people train for and rehearse,”⁹ These restored behaviours, therefore, are differentiated from behaviors.

Thus, in my study of this community, which Weiss herself contends is built on performance, I will elucidate through my interviews with participants of the Denver BDSM community what the steps of the performance are, comparing them to the components of performance as they are defined by Schechner.

In my study thus far, I have conjectured that BDSM relies on performativity as a fundamental component of its being. Performance and the markers of performativity are central to the construction, understanding, and execution of almost all (if not absolutely all) forms and moments found within these communities.

The very act of executing a BDSM relationship for a period of time is called a “scene.” Those doing it are called “players” or “play partners.” The act is often referred to colloquially as “play.” Roles are taken on, not fallen into. While improvisation is employed, the scene is played out in a predetermined sequence; even non-verbal scenes have a narrative structure to them. Spectacle plays a major factor in these encounters. And there is, more often than not, a catharsis¹⁰ that takes place as a result

⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁰ Catharsis for the purposes of this study will be understood as the act of releasing and relieving oneself of pent up emotion.

of these scenes. Combine all of these factors with the fact that an audience is present, and suddenly it becomes clear that there is no illusion of performance here, but rather that performance is intentionally being realized.

Performance studies can be seen to have a purview inclusive of almost everything. And certainly, the case can be made that performance is happening all around us, at all times, no matter what's going on. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with such a notion, it is not unreasonable to say that such a claim requires a sometimes grueling unpacking and re-examining of terms like "performance" and "performers." The beginnings of this research do not shoulder such a burden. Rather, if the assumption can be made that what is seen most commonly to be definable as performance--something along the lines of a production of *The Glass Menagerie* being produced in a fairly typical and normative way for an audience of primarily upper-middle class white folx who frequent the theatre--then the BDSM communities and the scenes produced therein are hardly a stretch from this model.

If we look (as we often will in this study) to Richard Schechner's concept of the eight "kinds" of performance, we will find that BDSM fits easily into several of these, "sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations."¹¹ Namely, "in sex, in ritual [...] and in play."¹² Though cases certainly could be made for, "in everyday life [...] in the arts [...]and] in technology."¹³

¹¹ Schechner, 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Throughout this study, we will identify specific points in the BDSM process that can be identified as steps in a larger performance process.¹⁴ By the end of this study, one should be capable of easily identifying and theorizing those moments when BDSM is performed, how those performances shape not only the events themselves but the narratives surrounding them, and the inherent performativity therein. As Victor Turner tells us: “A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.”¹⁵ If we can, therefore, successfully identify this queer, deviant community's activity as performance and in doing so look at it through that lens, might we not “know one another better”?

This study is well-supported by others like it, but is also necessarily unique. Of course, there are several documented studies of similarly deviant communities: the gay leather scene, “swinging” sex parties, and BDSM communities have been studied in a myriad of fashions through multiple lenses and with varying purpose.

In that same vein, the conflation of performance studies and queer theory is not a new concept as performance studies--and more specifically the scholars who matriculate in that field--often find the antecedent of queer theory and its focus on heteronormitizations and counterpublic studies to be a necessary and vital part of their own research. This connection to queer theory will be relatively important for this study, as the very community I have been immersed in is a queer one, built on the concept of deviance. Lest we assume that “queer” is simply synonymous with “gay,” I will define it

¹⁴ Defined later in this introduction. See page 14.

¹⁵ Victor Turner, *Planning Meeting for the World Conference on Ritual and Performance* (1980).

as queer scholar Jack Halberstam does: “ ‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”¹⁶

One of my personal favorite adages that I have heard many times while in BDSM communities goes something like this, “If you can’t imagine it being something inside the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, then it’s probably BDSM.” In practice, deviance is the key component of BDSM. That BDSM does not just describe a collection of activities, but significantly includes an understanding that those practices taking place under that moniker must not only be consensual, but must only happen with well-informed, enthusiastic consent. There is a common understanding in the community that the prevalence of sub-alternate and deviant behavior taking place in BDSM spaces requires due diligence in terms of consent. And while there are “public” spaces where BDSM occurs (meaning that you are among a community of your peers, rather than just at-home alone conducting this practice), even these “public” spaces are technically considered “private” legally. Of the two clubs and one conference that I attended for this study, all three spaces were considered private membership clubs (or events--as the case may be), meaning that members were vetted, registered, and monitored. On top of this membership (which one pays an annual fee for) one also pays “door fees” for each event, and these fees are handled in cash. This system allows for members to be in “public” in a sense, while also absolving the owner of the space and its other occupants from a certain amount of liability. A former BDSM private

¹⁶ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

membership club manager (self-identified as Richard) explains further, “See, we know people are going to do crazy shit. I mean, I’ve seen it all. Your basic bondage, sure. But also needles [...] cuttings, rape play--you name it. So since that stuff is happening, we know we need to have rules and be really strict about making sure everyone is down with whatever the fuck is happening.”¹⁷

Speaking of the members of the BDSM community, I mentioned earlier that they are often referred to as “players” or “play partners” while they are enacting a BDSM “scene.” Aside from feeding into the narrative of this study, these terms are convenient in that they are highly indicative of what occurs in BDSM specific spaces. A scene has a clear beginning, middle, and end. It has a defined narrative, as well as the convention that demand those involved take on the role of characters. Also in traditional “public”¹⁸ BDSM spaces, there are others involved indirectly in the scene. These audiences observe the players as they enact the scene, though typically participants in this study did not categorize their scenes as being created *for* these audience members. This can be easily complicated though, as you’ll see in later BDSM performance descriptions whereby the fact of an audience being there necessarily enhances the scenes. A scene can be defined as that series of activities under the BDSM banner, enacted over one period of mostly unbroken and uninterrupted time, based on negotiated limits between all participants. The distinction of uninterrupted time is important, as BDSM lifestyles

¹⁷ Richard (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), June 25, 2018.

¹⁸ “Public” here (and throughout) refers to play spaces and dungeons that are not located in private homes. These spaces are still technically private, as they are private-membership clubs. However, any individuals who are of age (depending on the club or event, this can be anywhere from 18-21) and are deemed eligible (usually one must take a class, pass a test, and sometimes even have a background check) may apply to become members. This model is obviously different from a private residence as it is more widely accessible, and therefore is distinguished as “public.”

(and more specifically dynamics) can happen over much larger spans, even inclusive of whole lifetimes. A scene, however, is much more specific in its execution in relation to time.

The execution of BDSM scenes and dynamics can be an extraordinary ritual. Extraordinary in the fact that even the smallest motion or glance can become ritualized. A submissive may, for instance, be required to turn their gaze to the ground every time the dominant enters the room; or perhaps to ask permission each time before using the bathroom.¹⁹ This study will define ritual according to Victor Turner, in that ritual is a ceremony or procedure, whose process may include some “‘extra’-structural or ‘meta’-structural modality of social interrelationship.”²⁰ This modality Turner calls *communitas*. And its interchange, along with Turner’s concept of liminality in time and space, will be crucial to this study. Turner defines a liminal time and space as that which is “in between.”²¹ Liminality relieves participants of their given or chosen identities in favor of a collective transformation of some kind.²² Turner goes on to say that liminality brings about a state that he calls *communitas*, in which a community comes together in solidarity toward a common goal, while at the same time deconstructing normative order.

Queer temporality is born of these concepts of liminality and *communitas*. While queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman have defined what queer temporality is and what it can accomplish, the definition utilized in this study is that of

¹⁹ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), January 23, 2018.

²⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), xv-xvi.

²¹ *ibid*, 92.

²² *ibid*, 102.

Elizabeth Freeman's: "points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically."²³ This sense of being both in and out of time that (as Halberstam argues) is uniquely queer and is one that I feel is central to the counterpublic being studied here. This counterpublic comes from its being a, as Halberstam would call it, "queer subterranean world."²⁴ Speaking of queer theorist Sam Delany's work on the subject, Halberstam explains that counterpublics, "are spaces created and altered by certain subcultures for their own uses."²⁵ Counterpublics, by their nature of being set apart, experience this "temporal order" more readily.

Scholar Jill Dolan has argued that theatre communities experience these ritual and structural phenomena.²⁶ In fairness, it is easy to consider the theatre in and of itself a subalternate community, given our history as transgressive of the norm and our continued penchant toward the rebellious. Theatre--in terms of this study--will be simply defined as a performance which is an intentional production of drama and which can be agreed upon by most who see it as being drama. That may seem vague, and it is. Necessarily so. As I mentioned earlier when discussing the purview of performance, there are lines of inquiry regarding these definitions that have been alone the subject of dissertations. As worthy, relevant, and essential as I find those studies to be, they will not be the focus of this study.

²³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), xxii.

²⁴ Halberstam, 186.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Schechner writes that, “Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more ‘truthful,’ more ‘real’ than ordinary experience.”²⁷ Thus our definition of performance will also be as Schechner states, “an inclusive term.”²⁸ This definition is particularly relevant to this study, as it notes the power of the illusory, an aspect of performance which is a quintessence of the BDSM communities.

Review of Literature

In terms of the literature I’ll be using as a basis for this study, there are four major types I’ll be utilizing: Queer theory texts, performance studies texts, anthropology texts, and BDSM literature.

Texts such as Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) and Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) will be used to position these communities as subalternate, and thereby their performance as deviant. The extrapolation of this into performance studies will support specifically the chapter “In Sex.”

Richard Schechner’s performance studies texts will serve as a basis for studying the performative aspects of BDSM. Schechner has an impressive body of performance studies writings, but his *Performance Theory* (2003) and *Performance Studies Reader* (2002) are of the greatest interest and usefulness to this study, as they outline ethical ways of dissecting performance, and they do the heavy lifting in terms of the “what is performance?” discussion.

²⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), xix.

²⁸ *ibid*, xvii.

The primary anthropologist I'll be working with is Victor Turner. Turner's work is extensive and his work is regarded highly both in his own field as well as others. I acknowledge that this work is heavily questioned for bias and for the practice commonly known as "jungle booking" in which a culture unknown to the anthropologist is viewed through an extremely biased and westernized lens. I hope to utilize some of what I believe are Turner's excellent observations on performance, theatre, and ritual in my own study, whilst also attempting to learn from his apparent mistakes and make a concerted effort not to also "jungle book."²⁹

Other, more contemporary anthropologists, such as Margot Weiss, will be referenced, specifically in the area of sex and sexuality studies. Most of these texts and analysis come from scholars in the UK, and thus I will need to weed through which of their BDSM claims are region-specific. I've found that even within the United States, BDSM communities are very different from city to city. It stands to reason, then, that a sex and sexuality anthropologist working primarily in London may have some different perspectives than I do based on region alone. Thus my study being in the Denver-metro area, will provide new and useful data to this area of study.

I will also look to the more current writings available in my field on BDSM, specifically those handful of writings which are ethnographies of the lifestyle. This includes Margot Weiss (mentioned above) and her book on the San Francisco Bay Area's S&M community, which is discussed at length later in this chapter. I am also familiar with Staci Newmahr's book *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and*

²⁹ Jungle booking is a term commonly used in anthropology that marks the act of viewing a culture outside one's own as an "impartial observer" with little previous knowledge of the customs and culture norms of that which you are studying and no attempt to immerse yourself into those foreign cultural norms.

Intimacy, which is also described as an ethnographic study of S&M participants in the “Caedon” community (a pseudonym for a large Northeastern city that is never actually identified). In her study, Newmar attends events at several private and “public” play spaces, where she readily reveals her status as a researcher and becomes an active participant in the community. She also interviews participants after observing their activities. This very much follows the structure of my own research methodology, though I do not include private spaces in my research. Newmahr’s subjects are primarily white, lower-middle class folk. Newmahr’s book makes the assertion that this subaltern group is drawn together by their marginalized status, and that the BDSM they portray are outward expressions of inner violence. The reason you will not often see it quoted in this book is two fold. First, I believe Newmahr’s method to be unethical given that the way she “quotes” her participants is not direct quoting, but rather an amalgamation of her own narrative with theirs. Second, I feel that she (as with most everyone who seems to write about this subject) knowingly or not places value judgements on the actions of her participants. I have not utilized Newmar's work because I have endeavored to not make the same mistake myself.

Another current publication surrounding my area of study is Danielle J. Lindemann’s *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism and Control in the Dungeon* (2012). While I fundamentally do not take issue with any major components of Lindemann’s writing, on the whole it is not helpful to my study, as Lindemann’s only conclusion about performance is not really included in the text itself but can only be found, as Camille

Paglia later says in her review of this book, “Buried in a footnote at the back.”³⁰

Lindemann’s ultimate finding here is also vague, given that she only dips her toes into the idea that Pro Domes are more like theatre artists than they are like sex workers. Lindemann also frequently takes a ‘jungle book-y’ tone, setting herself at odds with or apart from her subjects. Also relevant is the fact that Lindemann’s case study revolves around professional Dominatrixes, which I would argue is fundamentally different than the spaces and persons that I am studying and would widen the scope of my study too far. The participants in my study do not consider themselves “professionals” and do not stand to gain anything monetarily from their endeavors. My subjects’ brand of performance, then, is different from one which seeks financial compensation from similar activities.

I’ll be utilizing many handbooks, pamphlets, and other materials that are circulated in the BDSM communities I’m studying. These types of literature can be useful in defining terms, discussing limit restrictions, club rules of engagement, and also just general knowledge of BDSM forms.

Though it does not directly relate to my area of study, I have been heavily influenced by Stefan Brecht’s *Queer Theatre (1978)*. In his participant-observer study of the avant-garde, queer, New York theatre scene in the mid 70’s, Brecht does a beautiful job of elucidating the experience of witnessing a world unknown to the mainstream in a way that is compassionate to his subjects and authentic guidance to his reader. This is

³⁰ Camille Paglia, “Scholars in Bodage: Dogma Dominates Studies of Kink” *The Chronicle Review*, May 20, 2013.

a style that I very much tried to emulate in my own research and performance narratives.

I was originally introduced to Brecht's book through José Esteban Muñoz's book *Disidentifications* (1999), which will also be used at the end of this study as a way to contextualize the queering of identities and narratives surrounding identity that I believe happens in the BDSM queer counterpublic performances I will be showcasing.

Theoretical and Critical Methods

The most prevalent theoretical method being utilized in this study is performance studies. This field is wide and views on it varied; even the most basic of definitions within it can be hotly contested amongst experts. As Richard Schechner espouses throughout his many texts, performance studies defies definition and, "is dynamic, unfinishable."³¹ These sentiments are often echoed in the field of queer theory. Both of these methods--in all their elusiveness--will be utilized in concert with one another to define what is being performed as that which is queer in relationship to heteronormative narratives, expectations, and ways of being. The time-space sequence used to measure BDSM performance processes will be confused and altered and queered by concepts of queer temporality, and the subsequent *communitas* and liminal space-time created therein. This latter queer concept of liminality feeds directly back into understandings of performance, specifically as they relate to ritual and ritualized performance.

Another area of study which will play an integral role in this research is that of anthropology, specifically, Victor Turner's work on liminality, *communitas*, and

³¹ Ibid.

performance in ritual and theatre. These concepts are, admittedly, already woven into the fabric of what makes up performance studies, thus their presence may seem unnecessary to note separately here. I find it necessary, however, as my use of these concepts will be with a lilt toward the queer, and away from their specific application to and in performance studies. Therefore, the discussions of ritual, *communitas*, and liminality are very present in the field of performance studies and are applied to that area, so too have they been applied by queer theorists to concepts of anti-structure, non-normative logics, and the subaltern. In this case, the latter application will be more useful at times to my study of these subaltern communities.

As this study uses live human participants as its subject, and since those events in which the moments being studied occur would change significantly with the presence of a non-participant observer, I chose to take on the role of a participant-researcher. As such, some of this study will be in first person, written as an account of happenings in the form of field notes or reflections. True to its foundations in anthropology and more specifically reflected in the work of contemporary criminologists and sociologists, this study will utilize field work gathered through participant research to cultivate a narrative and point of view. Complicating this already lofty goal is an absolute necessity and the deservedly difficult responsibility of the participant researcher: intersectionality. As criminologist Dr. Hillary Potter puts it, an intersectional study recognizes and utilizes in its research, analysis, and conclusions, “the concept or conceptualization that each

person has an assortment of coalesced socially constructed identities that are ordered into an inequitable social stratum.”³²

I am very aware of the current problematizations of both Victor Turner and Richard Schechner's early work. Common criticisms point to their lack of diversity in subject, their assumption that a framework can be created to universalize performance, and just generally their “white-maleness” that is so pervasive even today in performance studies. These are all valid criticisms of the work, and I don’t refute them. My reasoning then for choosing to use them is two fold: one, I do believe that a significant portion of their research and findings is still valid and useful. Those will be the pieces that I pull from. Much as it’s easy to problematize Foucault, and yet we still so often look to parts of his wisdom, accommodating it for our needs--I will do the same for these theorists. I do not feel an obligation to these men or their research to use it in full, and in fact feel compelled in my own research to bend it to my will, to “queer” it as the case may be, and throw what is not useful to me away.

The second reason for my using this somewhat antiquated framework is that it is easy for non academics to understand. As I will explain later in this study, I often struggled to have participants describe their performances as performance. Also, they struggled to identify moments of liminality as that. But when I offered them a definition of performance as described in the framework of Schechner, they got it. When I offered Turner’s definition of liminality, they identified that they had experienced something similar. I want this research to speak to more than just academics. I want the people

³² Hillary Potter, *Intersectionality and Criminology: Disrupting and Revolutionizing Studies of Crime* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

who are affected by it most to be able to parse it. And if that means queering and heavily editing problematic theories, then that's what I'm going to do.

Regardless (or perhaps as a result) of my use of white cis hetero male dominated narratives as foundational knowledge for my areas of critical and theoretical methods, I believe that with a calculated and sometimes perhaps tiring steadfastness toward the implementation and incorporation of intersectionality within my own research and analysis, that I might be able to make strides in dismantling some of the "whitemaleness" that is so pervasive and stifling within most academic discourse concerning BDSM communities.

I believe this use of participant research and observation is vital to the accuracy and humaneness of this project, and it is my hope that it will allow for more insightful conversation and understanding between academia and the BDSM community, rather than questioning the ethics of or rate the transgressiveness of said community. Utilizing this methodology, I will be afforded the ability to gain a necessary distance from the material, whilst still not allowing for a "jungle-booking" affect to take place. Richard Schechner further explains this methodological approach:

Fieldwork as "participant observation" is a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses. In anthropological fieldwork, participant observation is a way of learning about cultures other than that of the field worker. In anthropology, for the most part, the "home culture" is Western, the "other" non-Western. But in performance studies, the "other" may be a part of one's own culture (non-Western or Western), or even an

aspect of one's own behavior. That positions the performance studies field worker at a Brechtian distance, allowing for criticism, irony, and personal commentary as well as sympathetic participation. In this active way, one performs fieldwork. Taking a critical distance from the objects of study and self invites revision, the recognition that social circumstances--including knowledge itself--are not fixed, but subject to the "rehearsal process" of testing and revising.³³

My choice to conduct this research in the Denver metro area was an intentional one. The first reason is likely the most obvious: because it is convenient. I live in this area, so acquiring research participants and dealing with issues of scheduling is much easier when I don't have to fly across the country to do it. The second reason is because I have a foothold in this community. I know people in it, and my name and reputation are trusted. This affords me the opportunity to gain participants through word of mouth, as this community values reputation very highly. My final reason for choosing this area to conduct this research is its population makeup and size. Denver is currently one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S.³⁴ This large influx in population is good for my research because it allows a variety of viewpoints and identity markers in my participants. It also increases my chances of finding participants with whom I am not previously intimately familiar (as is a necessity of this study in accordance with

³³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

³⁴ Kurt Sevits, "Denver named 5th fastest-growing big city in US; Loveland, Greeley among fastest-growing overall," The Denver News Channel, October 1, 2018.

the regulations given to me by my university's Institutional Review Board), but who also have a significant amount of experience in this area.

I ultimately did my observations in three spaces. For the purposes of this study, they will be referred to as Club 1, Club 2, and Con. Club 1 is a small club in an industrial area of Denver. It has little foot or vehicle traffic during the times when the club is open (usually very late at night). Club 2 is similarly situated--located in a different industrial area of Denver and also not frequented by outside persons during its hours of operation. Club 2, however, is much larger in size. It has several separate rooms that accommodate different needs. Club 1, in contrast, only has two rooms, one of which is generally used as a place for people to lay down coats and other belongings. In general, those who attend events at Club 2 tend to be an older group who are more experienced in the lifestyle. Those who attend Club 1 events are younger and less experienced, but their play tends to be more toward the side of "edge play." Edge play refers to those BDSM practices which are on the margins, even in terms of the already marginalized BDSM community. I'll delve more into this later. The prices in these spaces are comparable. Annual membership is around \$30 (each club fluctuated around that number during the time of my study), and each event entrance fee can cost anywhere from \$0-\$25.

Club 2 strictly enforces a no drug or alcohol policy either embedded on premise or being under the influence before one walks into the space. Club 1 has a similar policy, though has certain nights where participants are allowed to smoke marijuana before and during the parties.

The final location for my observations (Con) was at a large BDSM conference that takes place in the Denver area once a year. It is held in a hotel, utilizing the conference spaces for events, and offering members the ability to rent rooms in the hotel. It is a membership-only event that has been operating for over 20 years. They boast a very large dungeon³⁵ space with a wide variety of different types of equipment available for members' use, along with instructional programming and demonstrations, a large vendor area, and community-wide presentations. This venue does not advocate drinking or drug use, and it is not allowed in their play spaces, but it is not entirely banned. Though drunken behavior is reason for expulsion from said event.

In all of these venues, events deemed "parties" where the dungeon is open and members play at will happen exclusively in the late evenings and most frequently on weekends; though specialized events do happen during certain weekdays. Other types of programming happen during daytime hours, most normally on weekends so as to accommodate normative work schedules.

Research Method

As I briefly described earlier, I'll be utilizing a participant research model as my primary research method. In an effort to insure my research be ethical and sound, I went through the IRB approval process. During this process, I was required to lay out my research methods, the purpose of this study, the procedures I would follow with my participants, and possible negative outcomes of the study. I have attached several

³⁵ Dungeon here refers to a designated area that has been converted into a play space for BDSM. It will often include various types of furniture designed for the purposes of BDSM play. These can be pieces like large tables and benches, hard points which can be used to hang someone from on ropes or chains, cages of various sizes, St. Andrew's crosses, and many other different types of equipment.

appendices for your reference (Appendix B, C, and D) which show the materials for gaining volunteers, the permission documents participants were asked to sign, and the interview script which was the basis for my interviews.

The subjects I worked with had to fit a number of criteria. These criteria excluded vulnerable populations from this study. Those criteria are as follows:

Fig. 1: Subject Criteria³⁶

- Describe the subject population: 21-65 year of age, many genders (including gender non-binary, agender, etc.), primarily white though some will be people of color, many sexualities, many socio-economic backgrounds.
- Describe any third party/secondary subject populations: Interviewees may, in the course of their answers, discuss their families and backgrounds.
- List the inclusion criteria: Self-identified BDSM player or Kinkster who has been active (meaning attends community events approximately once or more per month) in the Denver BDSM/Kink scene.
- List the exclusion criteria:
 - No participants under 21 years of age.
 - Justification for exclusion: Many BDSM/Kink clubs do not allow members under 21 years of age, and those participants therefore are not able to have as wide a breadth of knowledge as 21+ participants.
 - No participants who have a personal relationship to the primary (and only) investigator.
 - Justification for exclusion: Having a relationship to the primary investigator could lead to bias on the part of either party and should thus be avoided.

In terms of methods for recruitment, the material shown in Appendix B was posted both at BDSM/Kink clubs in the area as well as on BDSM specific social media. Once volunteers contacted me, I required an ID check to insure that they were of-age. Subjects were required to state that they are “active” member of the Denver BDSM/Kink community (see description above). No subjects were studied or considered who had a

³⁶ Justine Leiser, IRB Document HRP-503, January 30, 2018.

personal relationship (that is more than acquaintanceship) with myself. All participation in the study was voluntary, and subjects were allowed to revoke their consent to be a part of the study at any time. This consent was documented using the document that can be seen in Appendix C.

The procedures for data collecting included pre-screening questions to ensure viability of subject (see above), interview responses, and observational field notes during session observations. Audio recordings were taken of the interviews, but no recording was done of the session observations, as it would ruin the integrity of the event and allow for potential negative consequences for the participants. Data was managed through storage on a password-protected cloud software. Participant confidentiality was maintained through a pseudonym system that was not linked to any initial correspondence which used legal names or identifying features.

The risks associated with participation in this study amounted to social consequences if the subject's involvement is discovered publically. These consequences can range from simple embarrassment to potentially much graver ramifications; parents could potentially be considered unfit caregivers, or participants could run the risk of losing their job. In order to mitigate these risks, diligence in keeping subject confidentiality was a must.

IRB imposed several limitations on me as outlined above, but ultimately I found those limitations to be very useful to my study. First of all, I feel very confident that this study in the way it was conducted and ultimately recorded is ethical. I am confident in this because of the inspection and re-inspection that was done by the IRB to ensure just

that. It was also useful in that I was able to understand the potential risks involved in participation, and therefore took great care in doing my very best to keep my participants anonymous.

Chapter Outline

The first body chapter focuses on play in BDSM scenes. Often these scenes are colloquially referred to as “play.” But what does that entail? Can connections to other types of “play” performance be made? If so, what do those connections tell us about the performance of these players?

My next body chapter focuses on the practice of performing BDSM “in sex,” which is one of the three “performance types” described by Richard Schechner that will be utilized for this study. Because BDSM scenes are not as inherently sexual or sex-filled as is most often assumed, this chapter will work to specifically investigate those moments in BDSM play which are inherently and purposefully sexual, as well as investigate the performance surrounding the overt rejection of sex during play by many in the community.

The last body chapter moves to another “performance type”: ritual. Victor Turner’s study of ritual and performance, specifically of liminal states in ritual, will be used to investigate if ritual is manifesting during BDSM play. And if so, how does the existence of ritual affect the performance of BDSM play?

The conclusion will serve as a space to declutter and delimit the arguments previously dissected in each chapter. The goal of the conclusion will be to not only

definitively answer the central questions posed in this introduction but also to outline potential future study.

Each chapter will utilize Schechner's performance process as a way to define BDSM scenes in their different contexts and structures as performance. Schechner has laid out what he calls, "the performance process [as] a time-space sequence."³⁷ This time-space sequence can be charted as follows:

Fig. 2: Performance Process Time-Space Sequence³⁸

Proto-performance

1. training
2. workshop
3. rehearsal

Performance

4. warm-up
5. public performance
6. events/contexts sustaining the public performance
7. cooldown

Aftermath

8. critical responses
9. archives
10. memories

This time-space sequence is what I will use in my study to prove that the happenings of a BDSM scene fit the modality of performance.

In his discussion of proto-performance, Schechner tells us that it is, "what precedes and/or gives rise to performance...a starting point."³⁹ Within this aspect of the

³⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 225.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

time-space sequence, there are three parts. The first step is referred to as training, “that phase of the performance process where specific skills are learned.”⁴⁰ In this methodology, we see performance as having begun well before the first creative idea emerges, or even before the concept of a performance has been agreed upon in any certain terms. The training phase of performance can be acquired in many different ways, both intentionally and unintentionally. A dancer may have very formal training that is absolutely intentional and necessary to achieve an eventual professional performance. An athlete, likewise, must train regularly in order to be eligible to perform. Informal training might look like the training we receive as young children about the performance of seduction. We gain this training through social events, watching our parents, consuming media about romance, etc. And in these and many other ways we are trained (for better or for worse) about how one should treat potential romantic partners, and how to perform the rituals of seduction.

In the next step of proto-performance, we begin to workshop the concepts we have gained through our training. “Workshop is the active research phase of the performance process. Some artists use workshops to explore processes that will be useful in rehearsals and in making performances.”⁴¹ The key in this definition of workshop is the use of the word “active.” Unlike its precursory step, workshop is necessarily intentional. One cannot engage in workshop unless they are conscious of doing so, and are willing to be “opened up,” as Schechner might say. “Workshops are a

⁴⁰ Ibid, 228.

⁴¹ Ibid, 233.

way of breaking down, digging deep, and opening up. Resources are identified and explored. During the workshop phase, possibilities abound.”⁴²

In the final step of proto-performance, one rehearses. For those in the performance world, rehearsal seems ubiquitous and often extremely regimented in its structure and form. Schechner explains,

Rehearsals are a building up process, the phase where the materials found in workshops are organized in such a way that a performance (often public performance) follows. Rehearsals build on, and fill in, the foundations laid down in training and the new materials uncovered and explored in workshops.⁴³

In the rehearsal phase, one must abandon the playful exploration offered by the workshop phase in favor of delimiting and defining what will make the final cut for the ultimate performance. “During rehearsals, actions are separated into what can be used to make a performance and what must be discarded or put aside for another project.”⁴⁴

In BDSM, these steps of prot-performance are almost always completed well in advance of any actual scene that might take place.

When we move on to the performance section of this time-space sequence, we begin with the fourth overall step: the warm-up. “Every performance is immediately preceded by a warm-up.”⁴⁵ This concept, like rehearsal, is very common to consummate performers. But even those who do not realize that they are by definition

⁴² Ibid, 236.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 239.

performing, will also (without fail) engage in the act of warm-up. In this warm-up, we step into “a liminal time.”⁴⁶ We will see this concept of liminality return throughout our performance time-space sequence, and thus I will further delineate it here.

In the case of my area of study, I would add that this liminality is by virtue of where it is situated within the BDSM community, a liminal queer-time that ultimately leads to a space of queer temporality in the next step of the performance time-space sequence. Scholar Victor Turner defines a liminal time and space is that which is “in between.”⁴⁷ Liminality relieves participants of their given or chosen identities in favor of a collective transformation of some kind.⁴⁸ This lays the foundation for what queer theory scholars like Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman further interpret as queer temporality.

Both Halberstam and Freeman begin their explanations of queer temporality by framing it as both queer time and queer space. Elizabeth Freeman tells us that queer time is nonlinear and/or “nonsequential,”⁴⁹ or more specifically, that it is not conceived of in this way by queer peoples during liminal states; and that it, “can also fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye.”⁵⁰ Due to the often clandestine nature of queer time, space, and gathering, one often cannot identify it retrospectively because it is not noted or cataloged in the same ways that hetero-time is, if it is in fact noted at all.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 240.

⁴⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 102.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), xi.

⁵⁰ Freeman, xi.

Halberstam further elucidates this theory, adding that queer time is flexible, much like the queer community and the term queer itself. As part of this flexibility, it moves easily and elusively through linear and non-linear logics, and usually does so without reason or explanation. Which is not to say that hetero-time⁵¹ can also be non-linear; but rather that queer time is constantly in a state of irregularity with respect to a linear concept of time.⁵² And also that comparatively hetero time is held to a higher standard of rigidity as it is absolutely subject to public patrol, scrutiny and ridicule; whereas the queer is not, as it is effectively rejected by such institutionalized systems of monitoring and pushed to the margins of carceral logics.

Halberstam also tells us that queer time challenges, but does not entirely deny or subvert, the conventional understandings of time as being hetero-goal oriented.⁵³ Such interpretation relies on the assumption that hetero-time is compelled or driven by benchmarks. Such benchmarks include having and raising children, one's own step into adulthood, and even death. Halberstam is not alone in his⁵⁴ conclusions that the queer community is obliged to live without specific reverence for such benchmarks due in large part to the AIDS epidemic (responsible for the deaths of many young gay men in the 1990's) as well as the queer community generally. However, Halberstam also concludes that due to the extreme "otherness" of queer persons, imposed systematically and directly by heteronormative culture, such a pull away from markers of

⁵¹ Meaning the way in which time is conventionally viewed given the confines of heteronormative, patriarchal society.

⁵² Halberstam.

⁵³ Halberstam, 6.

⁵⁴ Jack Halberstam, though assigned female at birth, uses masculine pronouns and refers to himself as a male. Some of his earlier works are published under his birth name, Judith.

heteronormativity by the queer community is understandable.⁵⁵ It is prudent to mention here that recent social and political advocacy for certain queer rights (such as rights to adoption and marriage) have blurred these lines significantly. However, I believe that one can still easily justify Halberstam's model of queer time as being what Freeman refers to as a "suspended temporality."⁵⁶ In her explanation of suspended temporality, Freeman tells us that the queer community exists in such a state given the ingrained otherness of such a community.

Such markers are part and parcel with the BDSM community I have been in conversation with. Many of the participants identify themselves as part of the queer community regardless of their BDSM affiliation, and others believe that this affiliation with BDSM gives them rights to identify with the larger queer community. Though the latter claim was often refuted by the former group, it is clear that those in the BDSM lifestyle are often categorized and marginalized in the same way "traditionally" queer individuals are. And it stands to reason that their experience of time-space would be more in line with queer temporal logics than conventional ones.

Halberstam also finds that queer space often works outside of the rural-urban postmodern geography binary, and instead takes place on contradictory, transgressive sites.⁵⁷ As such, queer space is often "unlost."⁵⁸ Due to legal restrictions, heteronormativized impositions of morality, and more tactical issues like lack of funds, BDSM spaces (those that are public, rather than done in private homes) are similarly

⁵⁵ Halberstam, 8.

⁵⁶ Freeman, 153.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, 11.

⁵⁸ Halberstam, 47-48.

“unlost.” Left to the margins, talked of only in secret and in the safety of internet sites, themselves considered transgressive. The most common of these sites, FetLife, is often even blocked on public internet sites such as libraries and municipal buildings.

Lastly, Freeman tells us that queer space and time rely and center on a queer temporality, which rejects notions of “natural progression” and/or “formulaic responses to time and temporal logics...”⁵⁹ Again, queer temporality is not compelled to follow a specific path, nor does it seek to normalize outcomes. In the BDSM spaces I have studied, be they private homes or membership clubs, those inside are given a set of rules to follow. Within this structure, their personal choices about what happens beyond that, how performative it is, and what the progression of those moments are is up to them.

This queer temporality is achieved in the fifth step of our sequence: public performance. Schechner tells us that what makes up a public performance is not an easy task. We can loosely define this step of the process as “whatever takes place between a marked beginning and a marked end.”⁶⁰ This means that, no matter what the performance, this step is only definable as a public performance if it contains these *marked* bookends. A public performance must also be nestled within the context of our next time-sequence step: larger events and contexts. “Every focused public performance is nested in one or more larger events or contexts. These events and contexts define the limits of a performance.”⁶¹ Thus our step six must largely be used as a metric to define and identify our step five. So a dungeon party at one of the locations

⁵⁹ Halberstam, 7.

⁶⁰ Schechner, 240.

⁶¹ Schechner, 244.

I'll be studying would exemplify this standard, because it provides the context wherein this live performance will occur.

In the final step of the larger performance phase of this time-sequence, we cooldown. "Whatever the performance, at some point it is over...things return to 'normal.'" This transition between the show and the show-is-over is an often overlooked but an extremely interesting phase. "If warm-ups prepare people for the leap into performance, cooldown ushers them back to daily life."⁶² Like the warm-up step, the cooldown step can serve to illustrate just how much queer temporality is involved in the performance. How much cooldown does one need to slip back into real life--straight life? "The cooldown is a bridge, an in-between phase, leading from the focused activity of the performance to the more open and diffuse experiences of everyday life."⁶³

After our performance phase has ended, we move to the last phase of this time-space sequence: aftermath. "The continuing life of a performance is its aftermath."⁶⁴ The steps of this phase, though listed sequentially, can really happen in any order and do not hold value or importance over one another. The first listed is critical response. Critical response comes in the form of learned, respected members of one's group or community offering their wisdom and interpretation of what it was that they witnessed. The next listed, archives, can occur through one's own documentation of the event, as well as the documentation of others. This can happen in several different mediums and with the use of a myriad of media. This archival process, however, is distinct from the final step of this sequence which is that of memory. Where archiving is

⁶² Ibid, 245.

⁶³ Ibid, 246.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 248.

a concerted effort to record the event as it happened with little to no bias (whether or not that is successful being irrelevant here), memory is not afforded any effort at all. It occurs, in all its imperfection, whether we choose it to or not. And memory will decide which parts to record, which to edit, and which to leave out entirely. Again, all this without our consent or even knowledge.

With this final step comes the end of the performance time-space sequence as defined by Schechner. In addition to this sequence, Schechner also notes the importance and ubiquitousness of rules or conventions in performance. “One cannot stage anything...without rules...Rules instruct all those involved in a performance...about what can and cannot be done.”⁶⁵ Schechner further goes on to say that even in the defying of these conventions or “rules,” we further enforce their necessity and pervasiveness as a part of the contract of all involved in the performance.⁶⁶ In my own study, I will point to the rules and customs of these communities, and explain how they define BDSM activities as performance.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 249.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 1: “In Sex”

In my study of the Denver BDSM community, I have heard the act of performing a BDSM scene referred to in one of two ways: “scene-ing” or “playing.” In either case, these labels are indicative of the performative nature of this endeavor. A large aspect of this performance comes down to sex and sexuality. As we learned earlier, one of the eight “kinds” of performance--according to Richard Schechner--occurs “in sex.”⁶⁷ In sex, it is my contention that BDSM practitioners are enacting very clearly the concept Schechner terms “restored behavior.” Restored behavior, Schechner tells us, “is the key process of every kind of performing, in everyday life [it is] ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned.’”⁶⁸

It is important here to note that the performance of sex (as with all “everyday life” performances) is radically different from one person to the next. Within that person’s own experience, sex can vary from one occurrence to the next. As Schechner tells us, “it is impossible to come at a subject except from one’s own cultural position.”⁶⁹ And I would argue that this subject specifically is a delicate business in terms of cultural position. In the interest of radical honesty,⁷⁰ I feel it important to note that my own position about sex from a young age very much comes from a place of shame. Growing up Catholic, the conversations around sex were that it was bad, dirty, dangerous--and confusingly--that it was meant for the sanctity of marriage. This dichotomy never really sat well with me during Catechism, and quite frankly still doesn’t.

⁶⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

⁷⁰ Radical Honesty is a term coined by anthropologist Dr. Bianca Williams. It advocates truth as pedagogy and asserts the importance of being upfront about our cultural contexts and positions.

During the interview process, I found that the cultural positions about sex of those I spoke to to be widely varied. Of the 34 participants who completed this study, 14 identified as having an upbringing where sex outside of marriage was vilified for religious reasons (of those, four identified as still having discussion about sex in terms of basic mechanics and safety issues, 10 said it was not discussed other than to be labeled as wrong or sinful), 13 identified as having open and frank conversations with family members about sex where sex was not given value judgements of any kind, two identified as having an upbringing in which they were given a positive view of sex and were encouraged to discuss it openly, three identified as having a neutral experience in terms of their conversations around and value judgements placed on sex in their adolescence, and two identified that their experiences in conversations around sex were radically different. (One participant citing that though she went to a Methodist private school where sex outside of marriage was admonished and not further discussed, her father was very open with her about sex, how to have it safely, and discouraged her from believing it was sinful. The other noted that her divorced parents had different views about sex; one discussed it with her and one did not.)

Despite all of these differences, almost all of my participants (save two) identify as sexual. Even one of the two participants who identified as asexual still engages in sexual intercourse as a way to connect with their partner, though they do not themselves seek the act for sexual gratification and see it more as an aspect of their romantic relationship with their partner. When discussing their sexuality, this participant (self identified as Marc) explained,

It's funny because I think this relates to your last question⁷¹ [...] sex is a performance. No one is who they are when they're having sex if they're not having sex.⁷² Like, if me and [name redacted, Marc's partner] are having sex, she's going to call me a puppy and tell me what a bad boy I've been [...] and it's not even really what she's saying or doing even, it's how she's saying it [...] she puts on this persona. And even though she keeps that, or some of it, [...] other times, it's not like she's that all the time. She's not going to use that voice with me if we're sitting like in this place^{73, 74}

I agree with Marc's assessment, as I imagine Schechner himself would. The concept that Marc is driving at here is that of code-switching. NPR's blog "Code Switch" defines code-switching as, "the practice of shifting the languages you use or the way you express yourself in your conversations."⁷⁵ This practice of code-switching can be used as a way to fit in, as a way to get what we need, and can also be a result of "Our lizard brains" taking over.⁷⁶ In sex, all of these reasons are possible explanations for why we are different when we are engaged in the performance of sex, versus the performances of the rest of our lives.

In BDSM, that distinction can become even clearer. When asked about the societal perceptions of BDSM, Audrey noted,

⁷¹ Interview Question: "Do you see any correlation between theatrical performance and BDSM? If so, what?"

⁷² I think Marc here means to say that we are not the same person when we are having sex versus when we are not.

⁷³ Marc here refers to the coffee shop they and I are sitting in. Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), January 19, 2018.

⁷⁴ Marc (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 19, 2018.

⁷⁵ Matt Thompson, "Five Reasons Why People Code-Switch" Code Switch (blog), NPR. April 13, 2013.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

I think everyone assumes that sex is the only thing BDSM is about because we seem sexual while we're doing even stuff that isn't sex. They think that all this other stuff is just foreplay that ultimately leads to orgasms, that that's what we're here for. Which is ridiculous [...] maybe that's true for some, but for us [she and her partner] sex is just one part of the whole big picture. Sometimes, it's not even there at all.⁷⁷

Later in the interview, Audrey's partner Mona further clarified,

When we're [she and her partner] fucking, I'm the same dominant butch dyke I am when I'm flogging her on a cross [...] it's the same energy and she's got that same energy. So it's understandable why someone seeing that might think that the whole thing revolves around sex [...] if we're not just talking about playing with each other's fun stuff, and assuming that sex can be more than [that...], then yeah, I guess the rest of what we're doing is sexual--is sex.⁷⁸

Here, Mona elucidates an important distinction about the performance of sex and sexuality as it presents itself in a BDSM context. Though Audrey's point is well taken that everything done in these contexts isn't always for the heteronormativized sexual purpose of an orgasm--if we categorize the restored behaviors existent in the performance of sex as "sexual"--then it stands to reason (as Mona herself discovered whilst answering) that the other parts of their BDSM performance that are not specifically sex (or that have intentions toward an orgasm, as Audrey defined it) are still

⁷⁷ Audrey (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2017.

⁷⁸ Mona (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2017.

sexual. Making the BDSM act as a whole (for most participants, but not all) a performance “in sex.” The following, then, is the adapted framework of Schechner's performance time-space sequence:

Fig. 3: Performance Time-Space Sequence “In Sex”⁷⁹

Proto-performance

1. Training: sexual education
2. Workshop: sexual encounters outside the dynamic
3. Rehearsal: sexual encounters with involved partners

Performance

4. Warm-up: making-ready the scene and surroundings
5. Public performance: playing the scene
6. Events/contexts sustaining the public performance: dungeons
7. Cooldown: aftercare

Aftermath

8. Critical responses: subdrop and archival commentary
9. Archives: FetLife and other documentation
10. Memories: debrief

Before I begin elucidating this time-space sequence, it is important that I define some of the terms that will be commonly used in this chapter; namely sex versus sexual. Sex will be here referred to as the act of coitus which is intended by all involved parties to be so. Here the intention element is key. Because for something in this context to be sex, it must be intended as such. For something to be considered “sexual,” however, the intention to engage in coitus need not be there. For something to be sexual, it need only possess a relation to those actions or processes which trigger a relation to the carnal, erotic, or sensual impulses of the participants and observers. This

⁷⁹ Adapted from Schechner's Performance Time-Space Sequence. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 225.

distinction is important, as it marks the difference in narratives about BDSM play's relationship to sex among different sub-communities within BDSM. Having delineated this difference, we can begin assessing the time-space sequence of this practice "in sex."

The proto-performance phase of this sequence begins, as with all performance types, prior to the performance in question beginning or even being conceived of. The first step, "training," begins in our adolescence. As discussed earlier, the participants of this study come from a range of backgrounds in terms of their early discussions about sex and the value placed on sexual interactions. Along with these narratives, part of our training about sex comes from our peers. Participant Darnell explains,

When I was growing up, my family didn't talk about sex a lot. Just what was necessary I guess. We learned some stuff in school, you know: sex ed. But that again was just what [STDs] are and how not to get somebody pregnant [...] the person I learned the most about sex from as a kid was my best friend. For better or for worse, him and I were looking at porn magazines from his dad's shop and talking about sex in a more [visceral] way. It wasn't all technical and cold. That's not to say it was always accurate, but it was more real.⁸⁰

In this early training phases of performance, we're not concerned with the performance eventually to come. But we are gaining sometimes useful, sometimes harmful skills for our eventual performance. Darnell further explains, "For the longest

⁸⁰ Darnell (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), March 24, 2018.

time, I thought that all women's breasts looked like they look in Playboy. They were all perfectly shaped, very large, and stayed perky even without bras on [...] I distinctly remember talking to [name redacted-Darnell's friend] about bras and why they even existed. Eventually we decided it was to keep them warm." Darnell laughs, as do I. And I ask Darnell to talk about how those early conversations affects his BDSM encounters, now and at the beginning of his time in the lifestyle.⁸¹ "When I was first coming up, I had just gotten out of a long marriage. I'd slept with two women in my whole life. The first was a girlfriend in college who was very conservative and would never take her shirt off while we had sex. The second was my wife who other than a few times [also stayed covered]. Of course I eventually figured out that this wasn't how breasts were on real women [...] but I had no concept of how to use them properly [...] It wasn't until I had my first girlfriend in the scene that I got an up-close education about what real breasts are--and all the wonderfully mean things you can do to them."⁸²

Here, Darnell elucidates the second step of the proto-performance phase in sex: workshop. In this step, performers utilize the (sometimes incorrect or misleading) information garnered in the training phase to do more "active research."⁸³ This is an intentional step, in which eventual performers codify those pieces of information that will be further useful to them in their later performance, and dispel those notions that no longer serve them. Of the participants who spoke about this workshop phase, most noted that the partners with whom they workshoped these concepts were not the partners with whom they were doing the eventual performance in question. Participant

⁸¹ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), March 24, 2018.

⁸² Darnell, *ibid.*

⁸³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228.

Ivy explains, “I had a lot of partners before her [the partner she was playing with during my initial observation]. And we did some of the same stuff [...but] they were really a chance for me to figure out what I like. And now this is where I’m at with it.”⁸⁴ This idea of “figuring out what you like”--as Ivy puts it--is the core of the active research.

Workshop also doesn’t exclude us from learning new information during this step, “I didn’t know what puppy play was. I had no idea it was even a thing. [Name redacted-former partner] showed it to me. And I loved it [...] so now it’s my main thing.”⁸⁵

So when does the workshop stop and the next step, rehearsal, begin “in sex”? One is not “rehearsing” the sexual components of an eventual encounter when one is not actively in conversation with those participants of the eventual performance--this would be considered workshopping, as described above. Rehearsal begins in the BDSM world with the negotiation of a scene with the specific participants included in the scene. Chrissy, a local club owner, explains, “One negotiates a scene by setting limits. Sometimes those limits are soft, sometimes they are hard.”⁸⁶ When asked what the difference between soft and hard limits are,⁸⁷ Chrissy explains, “Hard limits are those things that you will not do. It’s the stuff that’s totally off the table for you [...] Soft limits are things you’re worried about or anxious about that you don’t totally know where you’re at with but they’re not off limits [...] it’s a ‘we can try this, but it’s not in my comfort zone’ sort of thing.”⁸⁸ Having been overheard discussing it by one of the club’s dungeon

⁸⁴ Ivy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 15, 2018.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 22, 2018.

⁸⁷ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), November 22, 2018.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

monitors⁸⁹ who is currently off-duty, I am asked if I would like to watch a negotiation take place, which I enthusiastically accept. I am led to Audrey and Mona, club regulars.

Audrey and Mona agree to be participants in my study and sign the necessary paperwork and we move to a private room so that I can record their conversation, and then begin their negotiation. Though they are long-term partners who do not necessarily *always* negotiate a public scene in this formal way, they often will just to be sure they are on the same page. Mona let's Audrey know that tonight is going to be an orgasm denial scene, and that she will be edged for long time, with suggestions from onlookers, but only Mona will actually be touching her.⁹⁰

Mona: Do you have any additional hard limits to the ones I'm already aware of for tonight?

Audrey: Um, could we not do any blindfolding please? (Audrey turns to me) I just got my eyelashes done.

Mona: Of course my pet. Anything else?

Audrey: No, mistress. Nothing else new.

Mona: Excellent. Anything else I need to avoid?

Audrey: I don't believe so, mistress.

Mona: Good slave. I won't cover your mouth, so what do you do if you need me to stop and check in?

Audrey: I call yellow, mistress.

Mona: And what if you need to stop immediately?

⁸⁹ A dungeon monitor patrols the dungeon to insure safe practices are being adhered to by all players, and is there to assist should the need arise. They are the trained volunteer staff of the club.

⁹⁰ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), November 22, 2018.

Audrey: Red, mistress.

Mona: What should we do to care for you afterwards?

Audrey: I would like my water bottle and some chocolate. And I would like to be held.⁹¹

Though the two are not actually physically rehearsing the motions of their performance, they are very specifically laying the groundwork for how that scene will take place. In this way, it is still active and pursuant to the eventual performance. Also, all “playful exploration”⁹² found in the workshop phase is gone. Instead, a ritualized and refined rehearsal of the performance is taking its place. Once the scene has been crafted through rehearsal, players can move on to the next phase: warm-up.

In the case of Audrey and Mona, their warm-up begins once they’ve found their space in the dungeon. Mona leads Audrey to the space by holding a chain that is attached to Audrey’s collar. She leads Audrey to an open floor space with a mat and a strap which is connected to a hard point in the ceiling that hangs in the middle of the mat. Mona sets down a large bag she’s brought, grabs Audrey by the hair and pulls her head back, exposing her neck. She licks up Audrey’s neck from her collar bone to her ear lobe. Then she puts her lips to Audrey’s ear and whispers something to her that I cannot hear. Audrey smiles, Mona kisses her, and Audrey immediately falls to her knees. Audrey begins to kiss Mona’s boots, and then Mona snaps her finger and motions to the bag. Mona moves off of the mat, and watches as Audrey efficiently and precisely goes through the bag and lays out various ropes and sex toys on a purple

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 236.

blanket. Audrey then covers the rest of the mat with a white sheet, and kneels under the hanging strap, her hands behind her back, eyes turned down to the floor.

Mona calls over the DM and lets him know that there will be verbal participation allowed by other club members, but no physical interaction. She then gives an announcement to those nearby that once she has suspended her slave, they are welcome to call out suggestions for edging her, but no one is to touch.⁹³ During our later interview, I asked Audrey about what she was feeling in these moments, “I felt exactly where I should be. I felt safe and honored [...] and like I was the only one there.”⁹⁴ I noted that Audrey’s demeanor changed significantly from our initial meeting prior to their negotiation, “Yes, that’s normal for me. I get into this headspace when we’re setting up. I know something amazing is about to happen, and I just give it all over to her [Mona].”⁹⁵ The headspace Audrey’s describing here is exactly inline with the liminality so often found during performance. Audrey is here preparing herself to step into that liminal space created during the next step of the performance sequence: public performance.

Public in the context of BDSM, as I’ve previously mentioned, isn’t exactly public. BDSM clubs are not open to just anyone, and only those who seek such spaces do so knowingly. As club-owner Chrissy explained it, “If you’re looking for us, you’ll find us. But you’re not going to stumble your way in here by accident.”⁹⁶ Those in the club are mixed in terms of their demographics, level of experience, and what have you. But their commonality is that they (much like a traditional theatre audience) are there for this

⁹³ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), November 22, 2018.

⁹⁴ Audrey (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2018.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 24, 2018.

event. Sometimes they come knowing they'll be part of the performance as performers, sometimes as audience, and often as a mixture of the two. But when it comes to the sexual nature of BDSM, I have found in my interviews that the act of on-looking, of being a voyeur, is a big draw for spaces like these. As one club attendee Sean puts it,

I like to watch. I have fun coming here and doing my own stuff, but it's amazing to see what other people are doing [...] especially when it comes to sexual stuff. That's something I can't really do, that hyper-sex stuff in public. I mean, I can be naked and have someone poke needles in me, but I'm not going to really let go like they do [...] so that's my favorite things to watch.⁹⁷

And really let go Audrey did. She was bound and suspended with rope from the ceiling, and Mona proceed to take suggestions from the audience about how to bring her very close to orgasm, without actually achieving it. By my watch, it lasted about 37 minutes from the time Mona began tying her to the time Audrey was taken out. During the scene, I noted how different Mona's posture was from when I saw her later that week at our interview. She seemed so incredibly tall to me during her scene (despite being about a half a foot shorter than myself), and her presence was very commanding. Not only was she completely in control of the situation around her (at one point, she very kindly but firmly reminded a man who was getting a little too close to their scene that he needed to respect their space), but she seemed very much in control of Audrey. And Audrey seemed to sink into that control. Despite being obviously physically

⁹⁷ Sean (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), April 7, 2018.

uncomfortable for most of the scene (this was later confirmed by Audrey in our interview), she had a far-away look in her eyes that looked to me like bliss.⁹⁸

Later in our interview, Audrey told me that she felt like she was the only person in the room besides Mona; that she didn't even notice the people there watching her. She just felt so high and happy. She was "euphoric." I asked her how long she thought she was up in the air for, and she guessed that it was probably something like five minutes. When I told her it was actually closer to 40, she was absolutely shocked.⁹⁹ Audrey was experiencing queer temporality during her public performance. A moment in and out of time, separate from heteronormativized conventions of temporal logics. Those in the BDSM community have their own word for the liminal experience of nonnormative temporal logics: sub-space. Participant Shy explains further, "Sub-space is this place you get to when you're in a submissive state. It feels really serene but also full of energy and kind of like being high [...] because you like don't have a sense of how long you've been doing the scene or what else is going on or whatever, it's just you and that person."¹⁰⁰ In all of my interviews that included conversation of subspace, participants unanimously attributed this feeling to a sudden and intense rush of endorphins. And though there is not yet proof of what the exact relationship between our brain chemistry and the effects of BDSM are, there are many scientists--such as Dr. Brad Sagarin and Dr. Geoff Mains--who agree that "subspace does exist" and have "compared it to a runner's high."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), November 22, 2018

⁹⁹ Audrey (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Shy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 5, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Gareth May, "Your Brain on BDSM: Why Getting Spiked and Tied Up Makes You Feel High." *Broadly*, February 16, 2017.

The end of the public performance step of this sequence comes when Audrey is finally allowed to orgasm after so much denial. Shortly thereafter, Mona takes her out of the suspension and very clearly bookends the scene by asking people to please let them be. I step further away out of respect, but having been given permission earlier still bear witness to the rest of the interaction. In the performance time-space sequence, the sixth listed step is the events/contexts sustaining the public performance. I'll further discuss this step toward the end of this chapter. For now, let's move to the seventh step of the sequence, the cooldown. In the BDSM community, the cooldown is referred to as aftercare. Ivy further explains, "[aftercare is] the moments after you're done with the scene. The top will care for the bottom in whatever way is needed to help them come down from the scene."¹⁰² During my interviews, I learned that some common ways of providing aftercare are cuddling, covering with a blanket, providing hydrating drinks like water, sports drinks, or tea, giving words of encouragement and love, providing a stuffed animal for the submissive to snuggle, and giving food (often specifically candy or food with sugar). Club owner Chrissy further explains, "It's the responsibility of the dominant to give aftercare. I would go so far as to say that if they don't, it's abusive to the submissive."¹⁰³ Chrissy explains that specifically when it comes to scenes that are overtly sexual, it's necessary to provide that re-grounding. Putting oneself in a vulnerable position like doing a sexual scene at a club can lead to some intense "subdrop," Chrissy says.¹⁰⁴ Subdrop is the term used to describe the emotional dropoff that can (and often does) happen after a scene. It can happen immediately following the

¹⁰² Ivy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 15, 2018.

¹⁰³ Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 24, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

scene or over the next few days after a scene has ended. For all of those who discussed it during their interview, subdrop was attributed to a sudden loss of endorphins. If subspace is a rush of endorphins, then the sudden loss of that rush would logically lead to some sort of fall. Aftercare seeks to assuage that fall, but it is often not fully capable of completely muting the effects.

Often subdrop can become part of the “aftermath” phase of the performance sequence, in the form of critical responses. The “life” of the performance continues in this way because the effects of it are still felt very viscerally by at least one of its participants. Even if subdrop is not experienced later on, the act of “checking-in” similarly extends the life of this performance, as Richard further explains, “You’ve got to check in with your partner. That’s done in lots of ways, but I like to have them send me a text when they get home so I can remind them to drink another glass of water and tell them one more time that night how proud I am of them and what a good job they did.”¹⁰⁵ Richard also notes that over the next few days he’ll send texts or call just to check in and see how his scene partner is doing. He notes that his tactics are different for each partner, and often become honed over time.

The critical response phase of the time-space sequence can come in many forms in the BDSM community, but the overwhelming majority of these responses are offered via FetLife in response to the archival process that most often takes place following these performances. Dalton explains this archival process further: “We like to show off. Kinky people want you to see what they’ve done because what we’re doing is hard work

¹⁰⁵ Richard (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), June 25, 2018.

and it's often so beautiful."¹⁰⁶ A quick look at popular BDSM websites like FetLife will tell you that there are many options in terms of archiving. Some take photos or videos of the event. Others will write narratives of their experiences in the form of "notes" or "journals" that are then uploaded for public consumption. Almost all of my participants have created archival footage available on their FetLife pages. In addition, others who attended may also archive their experiences of witnessing these events through posts and narratives of what they saw.

The final listed step of the performance time-sequence is memory. One thing that I discovered in the interview process that I did not anticipate was how skewed the specific memory of the performers would be of the public performance phase of the performance sequence. I have already described how Audrey's memory of how long her scene was differed from my calculation or from "normal" time, but this was by no means the exception to the rule. In all of the scenes I was allowed to witness, and the subsequent interviews that occurred, it was very common for both tops and bottoms of the scenes to misremember how long the scene lasted, the specific order of events in a scene, or even things that I found to be exceptional in my notes--such as an obvious interruption to the scene by an outside party. Most of the participants had a very clear understanding of what happened before and after the public performance phase, but during that phase itself their memory differs greatly from my meticulous documentation. I attribute this anomaly to the fact of their experiencing a truly queer temporal moment. Ivy attempted to unpack it this way: "I think that it's just not about remembering the

¹⁰⁶ Dalton (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 27, 2017.

specific sequence of events. I don't do that when I fuck. Sex is so random and passionate, how could anyone keep track of it?"¹⁰⁷ Ivy further says that even though the memory of the thing isn't 100% accurate, it's "hopefully a really good explanation of the feeling of the scene."¹⁰⁸ Another participant, Eric, commented that perhaps the point of BDSM is that it "happens only when it's happening,"¹⁰⁹ and that you can only really remember what the scene gave you, not the scene itself. Which to me, sounds a lot like the concept of liveness and temporality that is so imbedded into the theatre community's understanding of what makes our work transcendent as compared to other forms.¹¹⁰

However, not every member of the BDSM community agrees with my assertion that BDSM acts performed by many players are inherently sexual. In fact, there is a large part of the community that attempts to very clearly define what they are doing as non-sexual. But upon further investigation of this concept, it seems to me that these sub-communities are conflating the terms "sex" and "sexual." During my research, I spoke to Apex, a 22 year old who works as one of the leaders of TNG (the next generation). TNG is a group solely meant for those in the BDSM community ages 19-37. This age rule is very strictly enforced among this group. When asked why, Apex told me that he believes the age difference allows for a lot more understanding and diversity in their group. But more of interest, he said, "The younger group is really into just the hard stuff."¹¹¹ When asked to further clarify, Apex explained that the younger

¹⁰⁷ Ivy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 15, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Eric (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 13, 2018.

¹¹⁰ Ref: Jill Dolan's [Utopia in Performance](#).

¹¹¹ Apex (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 18, 2018.

folx in BDSM aren't involved in very "tame" types of play, which he categorized as actions like beatings, floggings, etc. He also noted that older crowds tended to be a lot more sexual in their play, and that many of the older folx in the community also were often members of other alternative lifestyle communities, namely that of "swinging."¹¹² This, he explained, is different from most of the TNG crowd, who are at BDSM clubs to participate in things like suspensions,¹¹³ needle play,¹¹⁴ extreme degradation and S&M,¹¹⁵ pony or puppy play,¹¹⁶ etc.

I would argue that even if there is no touching of genitals, no kissing, and no overt signs that sex is happening, almost all BDSM play is sexual in that it taps into our most primal, secret, and baser desires. For those of my participants who were reticent or completely not willing to define what they are doing as sexual, I asked them what then they would consider to be sexual. The answer for most included some form of touching or penetrating a partner's genitals. But anyone who has an alternative way of having sex will tell you that your definition of sex is very likely not a full one for everyone else. In BDSM clubs, often there are rules about what types of sexual conduct are allowed. It might surprise an outsider to learn that often the "line" that can't be crossed in a BDSM scene in a club is the male penis. Whether that rule is specifically written

¹¹² Swinging refers to a kink lifestyle in which folx (usually couples but not always) will have open sexual practices outside of their partnerships. Often these are not romantic attachments, but rather simply sexual encounters. Swinging may happen only amongst two couples "swapping" or it could happen at larger parties or swinger clubs. It can include one-on-one encounters, group sex, gangbangs, etc.

¹¹³ In a suspension, a bottom is suspended either by rope, chains, or by hoods inserted into the skin.

¹¹⁴ Needle play refers to any BDSM scene which involves penetration of the skin with needles.

¹¹⁵ S&M (sadism and masochism) are essentially contemporary schadenfreude which is pleasure derived from the giving or receiving of pain.

¹¹⁶ In pony or puppy play, participants play as either the animal in question or the handler of that animal.

down, or whether it is enforced by the groups cultural moral normative--it is most definitely well known to those who frequent these spaces.

Audrey explains, "It is sort of funny because, being a black lesbian, I can tell you that I don't often feel privileged. But in this one way, I do [...] because she [Mona] can fuck me in all the ways we like at that club. She can even put a strap-on on and fuck me [...] but if she had a penis and tried to do that, I wouldn't feel comfortable [...] because everyone would look down on us for doing that if we were a straight couple."¹¹⁷ This is a reality of the BDSM community that I found again and again. One is allowed to do even very conventional sexual practices on female bodies and with female bodies. In addition, I've seen many scenes in clubs where men's penises are apart of the equation, but it is almost always either that they are in chastity or they are engaged in CBT (cock and ball torture). I have also witnessed (though I will say it has been extremely rare in my research) two persons with penises doing scenes that are sexual in that they are engaged in play with one another's genitals. All of these scenes seem to be acceptable, with or without the addition of any other elements to the play (such as flogging, suspension, whathaveyou). But I have witnessed more than once a straight couple (most normally new to the environment) playing in an overtly sexual way, and being asked to stop by dungeon monitors soon after a penis is exposed.

This surprising anomaly (when positioned against a world where straight, cis male sexuality is more highly venerated than all others) speaks to the transgressive, queer nature of the Denver BDSM community, especially in terms of its performance "in

¹¹⁷ Audrey (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2018.

sex.” Even when conventional sex practices involving the male penis happen in these spaces, this must be first pre-approved by those arbiting the rules of the space.

Practitioners are enacting their “restored behaviors,” and even in that act are queering conventional normative reifications of sexual activities. This queering opens this community and its performances up to liminal, ritualistic communal experiences.

Chapter 2: “In Ritual”

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold person”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.¹¹⁸

Victor Turner, in his study of ritual and the ritual process, expands the “necessarily ambiguous” state of liminality: it is not just a part of the rituals of people, it is often the point of the ritual.

During my time studying the BDSM community, I have found what most other scholars who have studied these communities have found: it is highly ritualized. In her study of the San Francisco Bay area’s BDSM community (c. 2000), Margot Weiss describes the ritualized nature of the community and its participants as a circuit: “it is a formally organized community with very particular social and educational practices...I call such dynamics a circuit...”¹¹⁹ While I disagree with most of Weiss’ findings, on this we can absolutely agree. There is a highly ritualized nature to this community. Not only in and among individuals who engage with one another in a recognized BDSM dynamic such as master/slave or dominant/submissive but also among the community as a

¹¹⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 95.

¹¹⁹ Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Pleasure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5-7.

whole, which very often prides itself on the rules it lives by and the enforcement of those rules.

BDSM club owner, Chrissy, further explains, “In my club, we are what’s called SSC. That stands for Safe, Sane, and Consensual... [that means] the rules of my club are created in an attempt to mitigate risks that are often associated with our type of lifestyle.”¹²⁰ She goes on to further explain that the other common moniker for kinksters is RACK, which stands for Risk Aware Consensual Kink. This is differentiated from SSC because it does not attempt to mitigate risks, but rather acknowledges them and allows for participants to make their own informed decisions about the risks they choose to take. So where a SSC club might not allow something like body mutilation or modification, a RACK club may be more lenient in allowing that sort of play. But as Denver BDSM club owner Chrissy explains, “even those clubs have rules, of course. Take [name redacted-another Denver club] for instance, if you go there, you’re can’t like cut someone’s arm off. There are still rules.”¹²¹

Such frameworks are useful in terms of studying these scenarios as ritual, since ritual itself is so often similarly structured. In his discussion of structure and anti-structure in ritual, Victor Turner points to the need for an overall framework in order to create the situation whereby liminality can be ultimately achieved.¹²² The fact of their being a structure in these BDSM rituals allows for their transcendence “betwixt and between” the other formalized, systematic restrictions and structures offered outside of that cultural context.

¹²⁰ Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 24, 2018.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969).

Richard Schechner tells us that, “Rituals and ritualizing can be understood from at least four perspectives: (1) Structures...(2) Functions...(3) Processes... (4) Experiences.”¹²³ BDSM ritual fits very neatly into these four categories. Firstly in its structure, i.e. in which the theory of consent and risk is used in a given environment. Second, in its function. The function of a BDSM performance is going to be different depending on one’s subject position, investment in the scene, and ultimate goals. Despite this variation, though, it always serves a function. Take the scene we discussed in the last chapter between Mona and Audrey (which though it was not looked at through the lens of ritual, could still quite clearly be defined as such). The participants of this edging scene had a particular function of the scene in mind. “I’m always trying to get her into sub-space...that’s what I’m pushing for,”¹²⁴ explained Mona, and Audrey agreed that this was also a goal of hers in doing public play.

For some, the function of a BDSM scene is to come to orgasm, or find some other sexual pleasure, gratification, or sometimes specifically a lack thereof (in the instance of an orgasm-denial scene, cock and ball torture, ruined orgasms, etc.). In some cases, scenes are used as a way to impress. When asked about her reasons for public scene-ing, participant Ursula responded that she enjoys showing off what she has learned, “I work really hard to be good at this...it’s a pride thing. I want people to see what I can do and say ‘wow, that’s really something’ and I want them to try to best me so that it pushes me to like, do better.”¹²⁵

¹²³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

¹²⁴ Mona (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 28, 2017.

¹²⁵ Ursula (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), February 15, 2018.

The function of a particular performance of BDSM may also be to establish or reestablish relationship hierarchies and/or high-protocol dynamics. This type of function was very clear in a scene I was allowed to observe one very cold evening in mid-January.¹²⁶ Having been told that the scene would be on-going throughout the evening, I arrived at the club early. I was sitting in the front room which is essentially used as a leisure/social area, when the participants arrived. Bull (a 42 year old man) walked in with his submissive, Alex. Alex is 23 and trans. When she walked in the door, she was exactly two steps behind Bull, and remained so unless he told her otherwise. Her head and eyes were cast down to the ground, and her hands were crossed neatly in front of her. Unless Bull gave her an alternate command, this was her constant state for the next four and a half hours.

Bull saw me almost immediately and walked over to say hello. He was very animated and social with myself and everyone else in the club, as he greeted all he knew. And even with this vivaciousness, the very first thing he would say after “Hello” was always something like: “Alex is restricted tonight. She is not allowed to respond to anyone but me and I’d appreciate it if you did not address her in any way.” And thus they went, for about the first hour they were there. Bull greeting friends, Alex trailing behind him dutifully. By my count, Alex did not once step out of her two paces behind Bull, and she stayed steady in her given gestures (head turned down, hands crossed in front). Even though one person (who had not yet heard Bull’s request not to interact with

¹²⁶ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), January 15, 2018.

his submissive) came up behind Alex to greet her, she simply kept her stance and did not even appear to register that she'd been spoken to or tapped on the shoulder.

About an hour into their evening, Bull whispered something into Alex's ear that I could not hear, but Alex walked away from him, keeping her eyes down and her hands in front. She walked over to where the beverages were and poured a cup of coffee, then stirred two packets of Sweet 'n Low into it. She cleaned up her mess efficiently, and then returned to Bull's side, offering him the cup while still keeping her gaze down. Bull continued his conversation, and a few minutes later took the offered cup. At which point, Alex returned to her previous spot.

These type of ritualized behaviors continued throughout the evening. Though the two never did a scene in the dungeon (only ever stepping foot inside to pass through to the smoking room), they were very clearly engaged in an ongoing scene. These actions perfectly illustrate the third perspective of ritual, "Processes--the underlying dynamic driving rituals."¹²⁷ In my later interview with Alex, whom I interviewed separately from Bull, I asked her what that dynamic is like on a daily basis, and how the performance of it is different in a club setting like the one I witnessed. "I think it's different because it's elevated because of the audience."¹²⁸ Alex further explained that when she and Bull are at home, they have similar rules to their dynamic. She must never look at him unless given permission, she must always follow behind him when they walk together, she must be seated or stand in certain submissive and/or stress positions when Bull is present, etc. But the addition of her not being able to interact in anyway unless spoken

¹²⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

¹²⁸ Alex (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 18, 2018.

to by Bull makes Alex feel that she is very much his, “I am owned...I have no need for thoughts of my own or to wonder what I should or shouldn’t do...he tells me and I’m safe.”¹²⁹

This illustrates the final perspective of ritual: “Experiences--what it’s like to be ‘in’ a ritual.”¹³⁰ Alex explains that she has never experienced what many submissives do during scenes: sub-space. But that her experience of the extra-ritualized nature of scenes like the one I witnessed, and the fact of there being an audience present re-ifies her dynamic with her dominant. This is her unique and welcomed experience of this ritualized performance.

This type of relationship and it’s almost constant ritualized nature is commonly referred to in the BDSM community as a “24/7” dynamic. Bull explains, “A lot of people will have their partners and they’ll have names and positions for each other like master/slave or daddy/babygirl but they are not doing that all of the time...Alex and I do it all the time.”¹³¹ I found this type of dynamic interesting specifically because of it’s ritual nature, and wondered if something so “constant” could still be considered performance.

I recall a performance I had heard of in passing once, wherein performers would perform for 72 hours. Audiences could come and go from the performance at their pleasure. And much of the performance consisted of performers completing menial, necessary, everyday tasks such as brushing their teeth or sleeping. In this way, I still feel that a 24/7 dynamic can be considered performance much in the same way that a 30 minute BDSM scene can.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56.

¹³¹ Bull (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 18, 2018.

Alex added to my understanding of the ritualistic, performative nature of her's and Bull's 24/7 dynamic by describing a weekly Sunday dinner that they have. Alex explained,

Every Sunday...we sit down to a nice dinner. We always do take-out because it's the one time I don't prepare our food...Unlike every other night, he sets the table...and we sit down and I'm not the sub and he's not the dom. For that hour, I am just Alex...and we talk about our relationship. Stuff we're liking, stuff I want to change, questions I have...and it's all our of the context of [my] submission...so I can say what I want without fear of reprisal.¹³²

This is a perfect example of how these two drop roles to renegotiate the performance of their BDSM. It serves as both their pre-performance rituals and post-performance archiving. And the rituals of it solidify it as ritualistic performance. Alex adds,

My favorite part of Sunday dinner is that once we're done talking...[Bull] asks me if there's anything else I need. If not, then he commands me to get on my knees, I crawl to him, and he pats my head and tells me I'm a good girl. Then I get him a drink and his cigar, and I clear plates...it just brings me back into the dynamic.¹³³

¹³² Alex (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 18, 2018.

¹³³ Ibid.

Now that we are certain of BDSM's viability as ritual, in that it can be understood from all four of the perspectives of ritual as noted by Schechner,¹³⁴ let us return to our performance time-space sequence in the context of this ritualized nature:

Fig. 4: Performance Time-Space Sequence "In Ritual"¹³⁵

Proto-performance

1. Training: Socio-cultural inforced and systematized understandings of ritual
2. Workshop: Engagement with said rituals outside of the dynamic
3. Rehearsal: Planning phases of the ceremony/ritualized performance

Performance

4. Warm-up: Preparations for the ceremony/ritual
5. Public performance: Performing the ceremony/ritual
6. Events/contexts sustaining the public performance: the conference/dungeon and the attendants
7. Cooldown: Aftercare and post-ceremony/ritual elation

Aftermath

8. Critical responses: Archival commentary and response of onlookers
9. Archives: FetLife, photos, wearable symbols
10. Memories: Debrief and reflections

In order to fully elucidate this, I will recount another scene that I was allowed to witness, wherein I feel the ritual was not only evident in terms of the performers, but also of the spectators. At a large kink conference which takes place in Denver each summer, I was permitted to watch a scene wherein the submissive was being inducted into a triad and collared by her master.¹³⁶ To be collared in the BDSM community can mean many things. It can signify a type of romantic relationship or a marriage. It can

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Adapted from Schechner's "Performance Time-Space Sequence". Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 225.

¹³⁶ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), July 22, 2017.

stand for a specific type of dynamic, wherein its wearer “belongs” in some form or fashion to the collar’s owner. Or it can simply be a piece of jewelry worn by a single person--to them perhaps signifying that they are alt or queer or kinky or what have you. In the case of the scene I witnessed, the collar was extremely significant. “This [Lilith's collar] is like my wedding ring, but way more important,”¹³⁷ submissive Kiara explained to me. Kiara was the individual being collared that evening, and the ceremony around it felt very much like the rituals I associate with marriage. I was invited to watch Kiara and her soon-to-be official mistress, Lilith, ready themselves for the ceremony in a hotel room that was set up for just that. They got their hair and makeup done by their closest friends (most of them women) who very much resembled a bridal party dotting over the bride(s) to be. Sipping mimosas and both of them having their hair curled, the two women were smiling and joyful. They looked radiant. Somewhere else in the same hotel, their mutual “fiance” was also readying himself for the occasion.

Though Lilith had already married Arkham over 10 years prior, she explained to me that to her, this was very much a new covenant--not just with Kiara, but among all of them. “We’re not just adding her into our relationship...we’re changing our relationship because now it’s for all of us.”¹³⁸ The three had met at this same event two years ago, and they hit it off right away. “I was never one to try to be a unicorn.”¹³⁹ That’s just not me...but when I met Lilith, I knew I had to be with her.”¹⁴⁰ The two explained to me that

¹³⁷ Kiara (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

¹³⁸ Lilith (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

¹³⁹ Unicorn is a common phrase used in BDSM communities. It references a person (usually a woman) who would step in and be a third to an already established (usually straight) couple. They are called unicorns because they are so rare, they’re often thought to be a fantasy.

¹⁴⁰ Kiara (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

their relationship began first. They dated for several months, and though Kiara had met and interacted with Arkham, that interaction was limited. “Mostly just because I’m not usually super into straight, cis guys,”¹⁴¹ Kiara explained. But soon, when Kiara started dating another woman (who later ended up not being a match), the foursome would often go on dates together as a group. Liliith soon began to see a shift in the dynamic between her husband and her girlfriend, “After a few months, I could see the spark between them. And that was hard at first because like, you know, ‘she’s mine!’”¹⁴² But after much conversation and open communication, the three decided to try playing together. “It just clicked. It just completely clicked,”¹⁴³ Kiara told me.

Fast forward to today, their collaring ceremony, and the three of them are living together in a closed poly triad.¹⁴⁴ Their ceremony will take place that evening, just after the conference dungeon (located in a large conference room in the hotel) opens. They have chosen to do a rope scene. Kiara explains that as a pagan, she has always wanted her wedding to be a handfasting ceremony. Common among several cultures and belief systems (including celtic, pagan, and wiccan) handfastings are a ceremony in which participants’ hands are fastened together with rope which symbolizes their commitment and bond to one another. For her, this rope scene will signify that ritual. I arrive downstairs to the dungeon area, and situate myself near the hard point¹⁴⁵ where I’ve been told the scene is going to happen. Arkham is deliberately placing rope around

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² Liliith (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

¹⁴³ Kiara (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Closed poly-triad means that the relationship is polyamorous among the three participants, but that no other relationships will be engaged in outside of that.

¹⁴⁵ Hard point refers to a point which is structurally sound enough to suspend large objects from.

him in what appears to be a very intentional configuration. He seems very focused, and so I am obliged to sit silently and watch as he meticulously checks his notes and his rope placement once, twice, and finally a third time. Just as he seems satisfied with his work, the two women walk across the long expanse of the dungeon to the corner where he has positioned his ropes.

Both Lilith and Kiara are stunning. The radiance I noted earlier upstairs has only been magnified by the beautiful coordinating (but not matching) gowns they are now both wearing. I note that even those in the dungeon who are themselves performing their own scenes are drawn to watch the two seemingly glide toward their dominant.

When they arrive, Arkham gestures to Kiara, who kneels. He undresses Lilith down to her underwear, carefully folding her gown and delicately placing her glasses next to it. He motions for Lilith to kneel and has Kiara rise, and does the same. He then escorts both women to the hard point, and begins to tie them. The ties he uses are not particularly intricate or difficult to accomplish, but they are beautiful. And the women (whenever possible) are holding hands during these ties. Each member is always connected to at least one other member of their triad by touch.

After several minutes, the two women are suspended. Arkham fasts their hands together in a neat and quick knot. He checks in with each separately. I cannot hear what is said, but I recognize it as being a safety check-in to ensure both women are comfortable and safe. Arkham then fasts his own hand to the original hand fasting. At this point, I note that there are many dungeon members around us. I recognize many of them from the “bridal suite” earlier, but I also note that several others have just finished

scenes of their own. I deduce that they were not particularly invited to this ceremony, but are simply drawn to it.

The three say vows to each other. They sound very much like wedding vows. “To love,” “to cherish,” “to hold thine needs above my own,” etc. The whole hand fasting lasted about four minutes, but it seemed so much longer. Several onlookers were happy and emotional. One woman even wiped away tears. Once the fasting is complete, and the women are taken out of their ties, the three sit on the floor, Arkham holding each of the women. After some time has passed, he re-dresses them. Like a very well-rehearsed performance, Kiara invites her two partners to kneel. She asks them to recite after her, “I give up this ring, and in doing so sever our bond. I do this to create a bond anew, with you.” At this, the two give Kiara their wedding rings. She puts them into a beautiful box. Arkham then produces a collar that he puts around a kneeling Kiara’s neck, and another (again, coordinated but not matching) collar that he puts on Liliith. All three of them kiss, and the crowd that has formed claps and cheers for them.

Even in BDSM scenes where there is not a common culturally recognizable ritual occurring like the one above, ritual is still identifiable. I offer as an example a puppy play scene that participant Marc invited me to observe. Marc identifies as a puppy. Though he has a partner, their partner lives very far away and so they are not often able to play together in a public setting. As a result, Marc often engages in solo BDSM play. On this evening, Marc was going to be inviting participants to play with him in his puppy

persona. But though these participants would be playing with Marc, they would not be serving as his top or caregiver. Marc would have no top for this scene.

At the top of the party, Marc was chatting with many other club goers. He asked them if they were dog or cat people.¹⁴⁶ For those who answered that they were dog people, Marc let them know that Marc would be doing a puppy play scene later, and they were welcome to come and play with Marc if they would like to. About an hour into the party, Marc went to their car and returned with a large folded up baby gate or playpen structure, and a bag. Marc went into the dungeon area and began to set up his space. They selected a large blank area of floor which had foam mats on it, similar to ones you might see in a gym or even a daycare play space. They then pulled out a piece of paper which they taped to the playpen with the following written on it: "Hello, my name is Marc and I'm a little pup. Please feel free to pet me and play with me. There's lots of toys in my pen that I love to play with. Please don't hurt me or say mean things to me. And please don't call me 'boy.'" There was also a small paw mark stamped at the bottom of the page.

Marc then finished getting their area ready by placing toys inside the pen along with a dog bowl which they filled with water. Marc then retreated to the bathroom. When they came back out, they had changed into a pair of underwear which had a small fluffy tail attached to it (similar to a tail you might see on a pomeranian), a collar with a tag that read "Marc," and a set of small dog ears which matched the tail. Marc crawled back into the dungeon on all fours with the clothes he had been wearing held in his mouth.

¹⁴⁶ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), January 15, 2018.

He crawled over to his play area, set the clothes down outside the pen, and climbed into the pen. For the next several minutes, he played as if he were a dog. He rolled around on the ground, chewed on a toy shaped like a bone, lapped water out of the bowl, etc. Eventually other dungeon attendees began reading the sign Marc had placed, and many accepted the invitation to play with him, some petting him, others throwing a ball for him or playing tug of war with a rope.

When Marc had finished playing, they crawled out of the pen, picked the clothes back up in their mouth, and crawled out of the dungeon to the restroom. When Marc reemerged, they were dressed again and the tail and ears were gone. Marc returned to their station and disassembled their play area in almost exact reverse of how they'd set it up. Odd as it might sound, it struck me how similar this whole scene had been to a Catholic mass. I see this correlation in the ritualistic nature of carefully pulling each item out and putting it into its place (as a priest does when setting up the eucharist), the offering of rules for the ceremony to come (as with the Roman Missal), the adjustment of clothing and other adornments to signify a change in state during the ritual (again, as with the priest at eucharist), and the meticulous reversal of each of these elements.

In this scene, as in the sacrament of eucharist, Marc was creating a queer temporal space for themselves, and they were marking themselves as a liminal personae or threshold person. In this liminal state, the mundane is elevated. This ritualistic scene could also be viewed from the lens of sex and/or play. In fact, I would argue that all of the scenes described in this study can be viewed as performance in multiple categories. While I don't know how Marc would categorize this scene, I connect it to ritual, as it so

similarly mirrored my own experiences with overt ritual, in elevating the mundane during a state of liminality.

As many in the performance studies field have argued, the performance of even the most mundane things in life can and often are ritualized. Something as simple as making a cup of coffee can itself become a ritual practice. But what strikes me about the ritual aspects of BDSM is that they are so overt and stylized. To me, they are instantly recognizable as ritual because they are so similar to the rituals I've grown up with; and they serve so many of the same purposes. One of those purposes that strikes me is liminality, as I discussed earlier in this chapter. The other is that of *communitas*.

When discussing the phenomena of *communitas* as a result of liminal experience, Victor Turner explains

We are presented, in such rites, with a "moment in and out of time," and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.¹⁴⁷

The experience of this recognition being shared among all in a community at a given time is that *communitas*. It's that collective time-space anarchy that so many performance artists (among others) have long coveted. I very much felt this *communitas* when watching the triad's ritual performance. It felt similar to the elation one might feel at a Catholic mass or whilst on a silent meditation retreat or among queer friends at a

¹⁴⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 96.

rave in the desert. It's so extraordinarily intangible, and yet I would agree with Victor Turner and many other social anthropologists when they say it is very much part of what it means to be human.

In terms of theatrical performance, the concept of *communitas* being achieved is not a new one. Jill Dolan describes in detail in her *Utopia in Performance* (2005) that theatre has, "the potential...to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of public."¹⁴⁸ It stands to reason that all performance, despite its context within or without theatre, could have this very same potential. Victor Turner describes many instances where a rite of passage ceremony leads to this feeling of *communitas*.¹⁴⁹ Outside of anthropology, queer theorist Jack Halberstam offers a similar explanation of the subalternate, undefinable experience of queer counterpublics in relation to temporal logics.¹⁵⁰ In keeping with these assertions, I offer BDSM practices and performances as a space in which ritual and structure provide an arena for what Turner would call "anti-structure" and what Halberstam would call an "alternative temporality."

During my interviews with my participants, I would ask them what they thought about BDSM being categorized as a performance. The majority did not have positive associations with it. The feeling seemed to be that if it was categorized as a performance, then the things they were doing were somehow not given the same credence as things that were "real." The idea that because something is a

¹⁴⁸ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁴⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969), 95

¹⁵⁰ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

performance, it is then not real, negate the importance we place on ritual. Take the ritual of graduation, for instance.

One does not actually gain anything during the performance of the graduation ritual, other than a piece of paper which signifies (or performs as a physical manifestation of) your educational accomplishment. Often, the actual diploma isn't even offered during this ceremonial performance. And yet this ritual is glorified; it is well documented, attended widely, and the participants (i.e. performers) exalted. Ask a proud parent who has a child graduating and they will tell you that this ritual is very much real, and that it matters. Performances matter in our culture, as they do in most. They are reflective and symbolic of those things which we hold of the highest import.

Halberstam tells us that, "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience--namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death."¹⁵¹ The alternative temporality and subsequent communitas which can be created in the performance of BDSM is the way in which this queer subculture advocates for those ideals which it holds sacred. Not of heteronormativized collections of ritual and ceremonial narratives, but of those of their own making.

BDSM practitioners use ritual as a way to find and celebrate what they believe to be their truest selves. To relieve themselves of those narratives placed on them societally by queering and performing their own versions of those narratives. In this

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 2.

way, though they often don't see this rituals as performance, they take on a utopian role of what they hope to be--what they can only be in this queer space during these queer rituals. Though this shares so much with the aesthetics and virtues of traditional theatre and performance, it also transcends these, effectively designing (as José Esteban Muñoz calls it) a queer utopia.¹⁵²

¹⁵² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). 1.

Chapter 3: “In Play”

One of the things that most struck me when beginning my study of the BDSM community was the free use of the word “play.” To “play” with someone in the context of BDSM means to enact an agreed upon scene with them. At first, I understood that this term was used as a way to downplay the import of the activities undergone. As Richard Schechner explains of play, it is often trivialized and thought of as “unreal” because it is a reproduction of “real life.”¹⁵³ But upon further study of play as performance, I have come to agree with Schechner that, “a change in how play was regarded began at the turn of the twentieth century, and it has accelerated ever since”¹⁵⁴ and that now, play is often valued as much if not more than other performance forms.¹⁵⁵

This fits with my findings of BDSM play, which is very venerated and valued among those in its community, yet it is so often vilified and misrepresented outside of that context. BDSM play is as real as any other performance, and it should be valued as much in play as it is “in ritual” or “in sex”. The other side of that coin is that as play, and as a reproduction, it is not preparation for an “important” event.

When discussing play, it’s important to note its elusive nature. Schechner observes, “Play is very hard to pin down or define. It is a mood, an activity...sometimes it’s rule-bound, sometimes very free...”¹⁵⁶ In his study of play in culture, Johan Huizinga concludes it is a,

¹⁵³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 89.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly...it proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.¹⁵⁷

BDSM fits very well into this necessarily vague definition of play. BDSM, by the nature of being deviant to heteronormativized standards of behavior, lives outside of the ordinary. And it is necessary that most of the activity be seen as “not serious” in the sense that they are not *actually* enacted. Slavery, for example, is very much illegal in the city of Denver. Therefore if someone is claiming to be someone’s “master” in a BDSM context, this honorific is not truthful in the sense that this person has not literally enslaved the other. As ecologist Gregory Bateson explains it, “The statement ‘This is play’ look something like this: ‘These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.’”¹⁵⁸ When we agree to play, we agree that though what we’re doing might look, sound, feel, taste and/or smell like something--it is ultimately not that thing. This lack of objective truth, however, does not preclude the high protocol relationship from, “absorbing the player intensely and utterly”

¹⁵⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2008), 13.

¹⁵⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. (Germany: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 180

¹⁵⁹ into it. In fact, I propose this absorption into the play is an identifiable marker of BDSM.

As we've already discussed in the chapter on ritual, BDSM conducts itself utilizing its own queer temporal logics and with a very strict set of rules. In terms of its promotion of social groupings, the Denver BDSM community has been very effective in cultivating and maintaining a wide network of persons who identify with this lifestyle. And it has done so in a clandestine manner, made necessary because of its aversion to and from heteronormative culture.

When discussing this clandestine nature with participant Yuri, he explained that, "We need to be secretive because of the potential risks...and we want to be secretive because it makes stuff more playful."¹⁶⁰ He went on to describe the sensation of being a group of children with a secret game that only those playing knew the rules. Even if there's nothing insidious about the game itself, the fact of their being secret about it breeds excitement and wonder.

As to the "potential risks" that Yuri is referring to, I have discovered that there are many to consider in this lifestyle. These risks can include consent violations, physical and emotional harm, and potential threats to "real life" concerns like child custody or job security should the play be discovered outside of its safe cultural contexts. Of play, Schechner tells us, "playing can be physically and emotionally dangerous. Because it is, players need to feel safe, seeking special play spaces and play times."¹⁶¹ This is very much the case for BDSM as a whole, which creates special spaces apart from the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Yuri (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

¹⁶¹ Schechner, 92.

normative order in areas already deemed deviant or nonnormative. In the Denver area, clubs are situated in warehouse districts. Places that at night are not frequented by families or church groups or other normative publics. These are places with dark streets, no signs, and little else near them other than empty warehouses which are only utilized in the light of day. Schechner further tells us that play, “has been considered frivolous, unimportant, and even sinful...if the playing is regarded as risky, sexual, and subversive...whole neighborhoods are fenced off and designated a ‘red-light’ district.”¹⁶²

Though a specific “district” has not been cultivated for these types of clubs, the places where they spring up share the above commonalities. Because they are subversive, they find life and safety in subversive places. Club owner Chrissy explains, “It’s necessary for us to be [here]. This isn’t something you want to do on Broadway.”¹⁶³ Chrissy also tells me that the clubs in this area are generally left alone if they remain in these “out of the way” areas, and that it affords a level of anonymity for her members. “You don’t want people to drive by and see your minivan with the ‘My kid goes to whatever’ sticker on it...most people here don’t want people to know what they’re doing. So it’s safer to be over here.”¹⁶⁴

When discussing the qualities of play, Schechner writes that it contains, “1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objectives; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4) rules. Often special places--not ordinary places--are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in.”¹⁶⁵ It is clear that BDSM play has special

¹⁶² Ibid, 112.

¹⁶³ Broadway is a main, highly trafficked street in Denver. Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 24, 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 8.

spaces, rules, and holds non-normative temporal logics. But does this type of play contain “a special value attached to objectives?”¹⁶⁶ To answer this, we must first investigate if *any* type of play fits this metric. Let’s take a very common use of the word play: to play a game of professional football. Football has value. It has value to those who play it, those who make money off of it, and those who watch it. This value is very much attached to objectives. The objective being to win the game. The strategies and steps to win the game will be different for every participant, but ultimately we are focused on the same objective, be we owner, player, coach, or spectator. The same can be said of BDSM play.

In BDSM play, the ultimate objective is to transcend. Some of my participants reflected on their ability to think more clearly after engaging in BDSM. For others, they noted their sexual and/or emotional release. Sub-space and top-space¹⁶⁷ or some other type of euphoria being achieved was a motivation for doing what the players did. For others, the reasoning was more simple: “Because it’s who I truly am...because I need to do it to feel right.”¹⁶⁸ In this type of play, players hope to (and often do) achieve liminality.

In her book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan describes the feeling of liminality in performance as, “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotional

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ The dominant/topping equivalent of sub-space.

¹⁶⁸ Bull (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 18, 2018.

voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”¹⁶⁹ In comparison, one of my participants Oliver, said this of the feeling she seeks to gain when performing her kink: “Not always, but sometimes, this amazing moment happens [...] and it’s like you’re connected with everyone in that room, even if they aren’t touching you or even looking [...] It feels connected and whole.”¹⁷⁰ Oliver describes beautifully here what Jill Dolan elucidates academically: play can be transcendent. And this is the objective of BDSM play.

When discussing trance, Schechner explains, “Trance is a widespread, complex phenomenon—including hypnotic, psychotic, epileptic, hallucinatory, possession, ecstatic, and shamanic trances.”¹⁷¹ This (and his further explanation of trance) very much coincides with the observations and interviews I’ve done about subspace. Schechner continues:

While in trance, performers are ‘being played with’ rather than playing.

While in trance, a person is possessed by a being or force that takes them over. However, even in trance, performers are not out of control. They perform within defined conventions.¹⁷²

As previously discussed, BDSM play has very defined rules. And its players negotiate the specifics of those rules down to the moment of the play, sometimes even in the middle of play renegotiating finer points. I have witnessed several instances of BDSM play in which a bottom has called their “check-in word” to discuss a needed and

¹⁶⁹ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁷⁰ Oliver (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), April 7, 2018.

¹⁷¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 192.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 105

not previously foreseen change with their top. In one such instance, a rope bottom was feeling a bad pinch in a spot that normally wouldn't bother them, but for whatever reason did that day. They called "yellow" and their rope top assessed the issue, and moved the ropes accordingly.¹⁷³ In another scenario, a bottom who was being paddled extensively asked her top if he wouldn't mind simply switching to her other butt cheek so that she could continue playing, because the current spot of impact was too bruised for continued play.¹⁷⁴ In both of these examples, the bottoms later reported to me that they experienced subspace throughout the scene, and by my observation I agree that they were showing signs of trance like those listed above. BDSM players, even those in trance, are still very much in control.

BDSM performance "in play" follows the same skeletal time-space sequence as it does "in ritual" and "in sex", however, the specifics of those steps do differ.

Fig. 5: Performance Time-Space Sequence "In Play"¹⁷⁵

Proto-performance

1. Training: Socio-cultural enforced and systematized understandings of play
2. Workshop: Playing throughout childhood and adulthood, or witnessing play
3. Rehearsal: Planning and negotiating the scene

Performance

4. Warm-up: Making ready the play space and surroundings
5. Public performance: Playing
6. Events/contexts sustaining the public performance: kink club

¹⁷³ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), July 22, 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), December 22, 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Adapted from Schechner's Performance Time-Space Sequence. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 225.

7. Cooldown: Aftercare

Aftermath

8. Critical responses: After-play check-in and observer commentary
9. Archives: FetLife and other documentation
10. Memories: Debrief

This time-space sequence “in play” was made very clear during one of my observations which looked much like what I would think of as typical child’s play. I was given the opportunity to watch two participants do an age play scene. Age play involves one or more players taking on the role of a younger participant. This person is almost always the bottom or submissive. The dominant or top in the situation most normally then takes on a caregiver role of some kind. In the instance of Drake and Hermia, Hermia (who is in actuality 26 years old) plays as a six-year old girl. Her dominant, Drake, identifies himself as a “DaddyDom” and plays as if he were Hermia’s father. This common age-play relationship in the Denver BDSM community¹⁷⁶ is known as Dd/lg, short for Daddy Dom/little girl. This type of play differentiates itself from the others in the community, because it often does not involve any pain or sensation type of play. But it fits into these spaces for two reasons: first, it is a power exchange dynamic; and second, it is deviant to hetero-normative standards of behavior.

In terms of the training phase for such play, Drake explained to me that when he was young, he was never allowed to “play” in what he considered to be a traditional sense. He was not allowed to have toys or to be loud or to run around with his friends. This experience is what compels him to offer a sanctuary for his partner to explore this

¹⁷⁶ Field Notes, also evidenced in the prevalence of Dd/lg relationships seen on FetLife.

play-time for herself. Hermia described that when she was growing up, she was very much a tomboy, and was therefore not interested in traditionally “girly” playthings or play time. She also said that she rejected her femininity well into her teenage years, because femininity was associated with weakness where she grew up. And so allowing herself to be feminine and “little” in a space where that does not then lead to an assumption of her being weak or lesser-than, is very attractive to her.

In terms of workshopping, Hermia says she’s really just now learning how to play as a little, “I think most people who do ageplay get their play ideas from when they were little kids. But for me, that would mean tonka trucks and stuff [...] and I prefer to do more traditionally feminine play when I’m in little mode [...] so I will actually watch cartoon network so I can see the commercials and see what the new girly toys are.”¹⁷⁷ Hermia goes on to explain that she and Drake will then order those toys that seem most attractive to her, and plan a scene around it. “For instance, the Easy Bake Oven from last week, I saw a commercial for it, and then told daddy I wanted one, and then he asked if I wanted to use it to bake [for] his friends.”¹⁷⁸ Drake tells me that when he asks if she’d like to do “x” for his friends, that’s their way of communicating that they’re going to do something at the club.¹⁷⁹

After the play has been “rehearsed” via this coded conversation, as well as a specific negotiation of the soft and hard limits for the scene, which Drake notes is completely out of role (meaning that the couple’s power exchange is temporarily suspended to allow for open and honest communication about the scene), the couple is

¹⁷⁷ Hermia (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 30, 2017.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Drake (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 30, 2017.

ready to set up their space. This acts as the warm-up to the play. While Drake is already in his uniform, Hermia slips off to the restroom to change into a pink onesie with yellow ducks printed on it. Drake lays out a baby blanket on the floor and readies the Easy Bake Oven, setting it up near an outlet and laying out what Hermia will need for her play. He has also brought some coloring books and crayons, which he takes out of his bag and lays down on the blanket as well. Hermia enters in her onesie, holding a yellow teddy bear and a pink sippy cup that I later learn is filled with juice.

After a quick check-in, Drake has Hermia come sit with him on the blanket and Hermia begins mixing up her first confection. The scene comprises of Hermia making baked goods in her easy-bake oven, and Drake inviting onlookers to enjoy the fruits of her labor. While baked goods are cooking, Hermia colors. Drake is very engaged with her play, attentive to her activities. Asking if she needs more water for making the cakes, asking what it is she's coloring, or why she's making the sun be orange instead of yellow. She refers to him as Daddy throughout their play, and Drake calls her "little one" or other similar pet names. The contact between them is entirely unsexual. It reminds me very much of what an actual father might look like caring for his daughter.

When the baking and coloring are finished, Drake tells Hermia that she must clean up her toys, and so she sets about washing out the dishes she's used and neatly storing everything back into the bag they've brought. Drake sets up a couch for Hermia with their blanket and a pillow. Drake then tucks her in "for naptime." He sits beside her with her head in his lap, and strokes her hair while she closes her eyes. This, they later tell me, is their aftercare. After about 10 minutes, Hermia sits up. Drake asks how she's

feeling and she says that she's feeling great. I note the difference in her voice. When she was playing, she affected a child-like voice in that her register was slightly higher and she often pursed her lips when speaking. Now, after the cooldown of aftercare, her voice changed to a slightly lower register and her words seemed more determined. Her posture also changed dramatically from when she was playing to when she was not, shifting from timid and hyper-focused to confident and present.

This is of particular interest, given that this change in posture codified this play as a performance, especially from Hermia's perspective. Hermia tells me, "I am normally a very strong woman...I'm in charge in the rest of my life. And he [Drake] respects that about me. It's a big part of who I am...so when I'm doing this, when I get to be the little girl and not the big bad ass bitch, it's nice and it's different...it's a break."¹⁸⁰

During our interview, Hermia told me that while she was cognizant of these changes, she would not necessarily consider them to be purposeful. "I think it's like acting, you just slip into them when you're in the right zone."¹⁸¹ The thing that struck me about the critical response phase of this performance was that, unlike other BDSM performances, this one had audience response that was immediate. Observers to the play were very interested in what they'd seen, many commenting that they'd never seen anyone play like that before. One observer in particular noting that it was interesting that in playing at the club, these two were the only ones actually "playing." What this observer is noting is that this type of play looks traditionally like what we would see as

¹⁸⁰ Hermia (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 30, 2017.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

“play” in other contexts. But what he is not connecting is just how much in common this obvious play has with other BDSM play performance.

This connection can be seen by examining another BDSM scene that is very different in tone from the age play scene, but which shares the same time-space sequence in terms of play as performance. (*The next field note description may be potentially very disturbing and triggering to some. Please proceed with caution.*) I was invited to observe the play of two of participants, Luna and Hagrid, at a club in early December.¹⁸² Hagrid and Luna had let me know that this would be a take-down, consensual nonconsent (or rape play) scene. A take-down comprises of the top “taking down” the bottom as if it were unplanned and unwanted.¹⁸³ Because this take-down could happen at anytime in the evening, and would not be announced or discussed prior to the play while the couple was on-site, Hagrid and Luna were kind enough to explain their negotiation happened over a messaging system in the week leading up to the event, and I was allowed access to that correspondence. This online negotiation serves essentially the same purpose as the in-person negotiations I’ve described in other BDSM performance scenarios, and is the “rehearsal” phase of this play.

The warm-up to this play was more subtle than others I’ve observed. The two played at not knowing one another. They arrived at different times in different vehicles to the club. They interacted with other club patrons separately, only really acknowledging each other as two persons meeting for the first time might: very casually and noncommittal. Having seen their interactions at other parties where they were not

¹⁸² Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), December 23, 2017.

¹⁸³ I later learned in other interviews that take-downs don’t have to have the surprise element that Hagrid described.

engaged in this type of play, I noted how very in character they both were, as their behavior was drastically different from other behavior I had observed

About an hour into the evening, I noticed Hagrid retreat into the dungeon with a bag. Luna was sitting on a couch in the social area chatting with some new comers. I followed Hagrid into the dungeon and saw him set up a station with a padded bed. He cleaned the furniture thoroughly, set up a full water bottle under the station, and affixed two cuffs to each end of the bed. He also laid out a ball gag and blindfold. Once his station was prepared, he called a DM over. He informed the DM of his plans to do a takedown scene with his partner, whom he described to the DM. He let him know that they were going to be doing rape play, so that she would be saying “no,” “stop,” and similar other things, but that their safe words would be “yellow” for hold and “red” for stop immediately. He also gained permission to have sex during their scene, as it was directly apart of the story he was telling. She would also be gagged during the scene, and would be given a noise-maker in case she needed the gag removed to call a safe word or for any other reason. The DM then went out to the social area (and I followed) where he asked Luna to confirm the information he’d just recieved, which she did. Once Luna spoke with the DM, she got up and went to the dungeon, where she proceeded to watch other players doing their scenes.

After a short time, Hagrid came up behind Luna quickly and grabbed her around the throat with one arm, and grabbed one of her hands with the other. Luna kicked and screamed “no,” “please,” “don’t,” etc. while she was dragged backwards toward the station Hagrid had set up. The two struggled, Luna fighting to get free and Hagrid

wrestling her into submission. After a long struggle, Hagrid got Luna onto the table, shackled her down at the four corners using the cuffs he'd placed, and gagged and blindfolded her. He then handed her a red buzzer that she would hold the rest of the scene. This would serve as the noise maker discussed earlier.

Throughout the rest of their scene, Hagrid played at raping Luna. He was very rough with her physically, slapping her hard across the face, choking her for long periods, spitting in her mouth etc. He penetrated her vagina, mouth, and anus with not only his penis and hands but also several toys that he had brought. All of this was also very rough. He said things that were very degrading to Luna; things like, "You're nothing but a dirty little whore for my use," "You deserve worse than this," etc. During this rough play, Luna continued to struggle to no avail against the cuffs, shaking her head violently and crying. Anytime her gag was removed she would scream and beg him to stop, call for help, etc.

Of all the BDSM play I have observed for this study, this one was the most highly watched. Dungeon goers were transfixed on this scene. Despite it being tucked away in a corner, the audience managed to form a large semi circle around the table. The audience, having been oriented to this private membership club and its rules, are aware that this type of scene can and does happen in this space. During orientation, members are instructed that should they take issue with the safety or allowability of a scene that they are not involved in, they should seek help from a DM rather than intervening themselves.

This large audience did not seem to phase the players, as they never acknowledged the large crowd during the scene and when asked about it later didn't seem to realize just how many people had been witness to their play. Though she did not call "yellow" or "red," at some point Luna became unresponsive. She no longer struggled or tried to yell and she was no longer crying. Hagrid explained to me that this was his cue to stop the scene, despite her not giving a verbal cue to do so. "I could see that she was done, and I think it's important as a dominant to realize that it's not all on the submissive to say stop [...] it's a yes means yes thing, and she wasn't there enough to say yes anymore. She was too high."¹⁸⁴ Here, Hagrid refers to the trance-like state of subspace that Luna was in at this point in the scene. Upon noting this, Hagrid freed Luna from her bonds and covered her with a blanket, laying down next to her and tucking her into an embrace and speaking to her in a low volume. I could not hear what was being said, but Luna later told me that he was helping her "come down" from subspace by telling her that they were done playing and that she did a good job. "He will also tell me that I'm safe, that no one's going to hurt me [...] because sometimes you need to hear that because this type of scene can put you into a really scared headspace."¹⁸⁵

This cooldown looked very much to like other aftercare protocol I've witnessed in BDSM play, and in the context of play is also very familiar. Think of the transitional phase that occurs when children must return to classes after recess. We must become more quiet, move less, calm down and focus. These markers were all present in the

¹⁸⁴ Hagrid (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 5, 2017.

¹⁸⁵ Luna (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 5, 2017.

cooldown phase of this play. The aftermath portion of this performance's time-space sequence was notable. Once Hagrid and Luna had effectively both come back into the real-world, Hagrid helped Luna dress, made sure that she drank water, and then asked her how she was doing. This is not abnormal behavior for a post after-care check-in, but their interaction was very different from others I've seen during this "critical response" phase. Once Luna told Hagrid that she was doing okay, he asked her to describe the scene in detail to him, and she did so. He then asked her if any moments were triggering for her. I later learned that Luna is a survivor of sexual assault, and that part of their negotiated dynamic is to not intentionally trigger that trauma. "It can be really hard because sometimes even just the act of playing like I'm being raped can trigger it, but mostly as long as [its] not similar in circumstance to my actual rape, I can separate them."¹⁸⁶

In terms of critical responses to this scene, the observers at the club that night had several. Some asked Hagrid about it directly, others talked about it amongst themselves, and I noticed many women come up to check in with Luna later on in the evening--not standard practice for all scenes. I conjecture that this was due to the nature of the scene and also how convincing their play both prior to and during the scene had been. Of these responses, Hagrid said, "I like when people check in with her [...] I don't want people to take me or anyone in my position on their word that what they're doing is okay. They should ask the sub."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Luna (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 5, 2017.

¹⁸⁷ Hagrid (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), December 5, 2017.

This scene was also notable in its archival process. Not only did Luna post a detailed note¹⁸⁸ about it on FetLife, but several responses from others who were there were posted to Luna's note as well. Some of these outside responses were very positive, noting and appreciating the care and attention that was taken by all parties in setting up this potentially very emotionally tumultuous scene. Others were not so complimentary, one in particular condemning the club owner for allowing this type of scene to occur as it was "too real."

These mixed responses add significantly to the final phase of the performance time-space sequence for play, that of memories. Not only are the two players left with the memories of this event, but those who witnessed it (again, a very large number) seem to have competing narratives about what it was that they saw. Certainly some of the things that were claimed by folk both at the party itself but also in terms of hearsay do not line up with my own field notes about the event. But then, that's one of the finer points of memory in play: memory is imperfect and it is difficult (albeit impossible) to correct.

I offer this consensual non-consent scene because it makes the best and most important case for viewing BDSM as play. Richard Schechner says of play: "I believe play is what organizes performance, makes it comprehensible."¹⁸⁹ Not given the context of a BDSM rape scene as "play," I can imagine it could be difficult to see beyond a need to categorize it as thinly veiled abuse or as simply a reification of hegemonic, patriarchal power. Scholar Margot Weiss, for instance, draws this exact conclusion in her viewing

¹⁸⁸ Notes that are larger posts on FetLife are sometimes used as blog posts, other times as spaces for erotic stories, and also as space for archiving memories of scenes.

¹⁸⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002). 103.

of the Bay area SM community, “I began to understand SM performance as material. Rather than existing in a bracketed space of play, SM performances are deeply tied to capitalist cultural formations...”¹⁹⁰

I bracket this scene “in play” for many reasons. Though I can understand why some might consider it to be better suited to the context of “in sex,” it is important to note that rape (even when it is play) has little to do with sex, and everything to do with power.¹⁹¹ The struggle for power, then, seems more suited to a conversation surrounding play dynamics rather than a sexual one, and frankly makes me feel more comfortable academizing it.

I think it is easy to look at this scene and condemn it. If I’m being honest, that’s certainly my initial impulse. But when we remove the context of play, in which this type of activity most assuredly should be “bracketed,” we remove the agency of those involved. We assume that we know what it “best,” and that by completely admonishing the narratives that these persons are playing at enacting, we are somehow going to extract them from the “real world.” This disavows two crucial points of play. First, that play, according to Batesonian theory, “is a way around violence, a way to express aggression without doing harm.”¹⁹² As explained earlier, the message “this is play” removes the objective truth of that playing. Luna was not actually being raped, and Hagrid was not actually doing the raping. This distinction is extremely crucial to separating this narrative from the sociologically imposed narratives it mirrors. The

¹⁹⁰ Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Pleasure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6

¹⁹¹ Jill Filipovic, “Rape is about power, not sex” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2013.

¹⁹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002). 103.

second crucial point to remember is that when we make assumptions and value judgements about others' consensual choice, political capital, and embodied identities--we negate their agency.

This practice calls to mind the common second wave feminist narrative of condemning sex work, specifically porn. Theorist Catherine Mackinnon defines pornography as, "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words."¹⁹³ And again, while I fully understand the initial impulse to reduce pornography to such a definition, doing so negates the contributions of women to that field, and the agency that many women who perform sex work find in such an occupation. It also assumes that just because sex can and has been used as a tool to demean, degrade, and hold power over women in the past, that the act itself (and further its depiction) are responsible for such aggressions. It makes the assumption that women don't enjoy sex, or rather that they shouldn't. As self proclaimed "pro-sex feminist" Ellen Willis explains, "As we saw it, the claim that 'pornography is violence against women' was code for the neo-Victorian idea that men want sex and women endure it."¹⁹⁴

I do understand the impulse to reject BDSM play as simply another way for hegemonic power to enforce misogynist, patriarchal values under the guise of a "safe-space." But it is ultimately reductive and naive to do so. Doing so assumes that we know better, that our academic affiliations affords us some ultimate claim to what is

¹⁹³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁹⁴ Ellen Willis, "Lust horizons: the 'voice' and the women's movement." *Village Voice* (50th Anniversary special ed.), October, 2005.

ethical and allowable among consenting adults. And it negates this activity for what it is:
play.

Conclusion: “Aftercare”

In academia, we often talk about safe spaces. How we craft them, what they look like, and how to maintain them. In his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1993), Augusto Boal describes a system by which performance can be used to create these safe spaces.¹⁹⁵ In Boal’s techniques, he leaves room for those aspects of society which many might consider to be undesirable. Things like racism, sexism, ageism, and the like are allowed to pass through the performance space. In many instances, these impulses and moments are not just allowed for: they are encouraged. Boal calls his system a “rehearsal for the revolution.”¹⁹⁶ Boalian techniques have been used in several capacities as a method for uncovering inherent bias, problematizing it, and investigating strategies toward the revolution from those bias’.¹⁹⁷

When utilizing Boal’s techniques, what I find most interesting is the necessity for that problematized factor to be represented in the room. Theatre of the Oppressed is not a system in which a group of performers represent something they feel is bad, and then vilifying it--acting as moral guides to their congregants (audience) vis-a-vie after-school-specials on drug and alcohol use. In Boal’s system, there is a necessary dialogue between all participants of all beliefs. No one is allowed to be isolated. The audience themselves must become performers (or spect-actors, as Boal called them). Everyone must work to uncover the problems of the day, and then work toward the solution--toward revolt.

¹⁹⁵ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ ITP, Centre for Community Dialogue and Change, Medical Humanities Group.

If Boal's system is effective, then we must conclude that there are performance methodologies in which problematic societal aspects (like misogyny, racism, neo-capitalism, fascism, etc.) exist as a part of those performances without negating the efficacy and integrity of said performances. In this study, I have come up against difficult material. I will fully admit to at times being shocked and even angered by some of these scenes. I have several times felt my own trauma triggered during moments of observation, and I have witnessed performances that, if taken out of the context of consensual play, would certainly be cause for abject scrutiny and alarm.

One such performance I witnessed was done at the large BDSM convention I attended, between participants Tiana and Merlin.¹⁹⁸ (*The next field note description may be potentially very disturbing and triggering to some. Please proceed with caution.*) Tiana is a black woman and Merlin is a white man. Tiana described their performance as a race and rape play scene.¹⁹⁹ Tiana explained to me that she and Merlin have the dynamic known as Master/Slave, in which she consensually submits to Merlin and plays at being his slave. This relationship is not a foreign one in the Denver BDSM community, but I was struck by the language used between these two participants, because of their races. This is made even more striking by the way their performance highlighted their races, and the historical systematic oppression codified therein. In their scene, Merlin was whipping Tiana with a bull-whip and calling her a "Nigger bitch" among other similarly disturbing epithets. And Tiana was taking the beating, responding to questions asked with a simple, "Yes, Massa," or "No, Massa," as the case may be.

¹⁹⁸ Field notes, taken by the author (Denver), July 21, 2017

¹⁹⁹ Tiana (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), July 23, 2017.

After she had been beaten for several minutes and was bloody and crying, Merlin told her that she needed to stop all that wailing, or he would find a way to stop it for her. When she continued to cry, though it was quieter than before, he put her on all fours and put her head through a stockade type of furniture piece, and played at forcing her to perform fellatio on him in a very rough manner. I did note that she had a noise making object in her hand, and at one point she did use it and the scene was momentarily suspended to address the issue she was having (I later learned that her knee was bothering her and in her current position she was not able to adjust on her own, so Merlin assisted her). But even during this portion of the performance, she was being called all manner of racist names by Merlin, and he was playing as her Master in terms of forced servitude, not consensual (though it of course was consensual). Later in the scene, Merlin played at raping Tiana further by penetrating her vagina, which in their performance was meant to be her "first time" having penetrative sex. In this scene, not only was the white master raping, beating, and humiliating his black slave, he was also taking her virginity. And this was said by both parties many times as part of this role play. I found myself extraordinarily uncomfortable with this scene. I questioned its morality and my own ability to study it objectively. At one point when Merlin said something to the effect of, "I'm going to cum in my slave so I can make me some more slaves," I was almost forced to leave the room for fear my discomfort would show on my face.

Having said all of that, I also know from my studies of Boal's work, that there are two components to perception: intention and impact. The impact of the scene described

above was a strong one. I felt it for days, and I wrestled with how to think about it objectively, to little avail. My reaction to it was visceral. But then, I've had similarly negative, visceral reactions to scenes in conventional stage plays as well. The first time I saw *Blasted* live, by Sarah Kane, I was struck with a similar revolt when watching a vivid series of violent images which end in a man eating the corpse of an infant.²⁰⁰ But the question of the morality of the production or this play as a whole did not arise for me as it did for the aforementioned rape play scene. This anomaly intrigued me. I questioned why I felt safe with one vivid violent depiction, and not another. In the case of *Blasted*, I felt that the intention of the work was not to shock me or to do me mental or emotional harm. I felt it was to some higher purpose. And this knowledge allowed me to categorize the work as allowable, and my viewing of it as being valuable. This, too, can be said of BDSM performance.

In his preface to *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz describes how a seemingly racist performance transcends such base narratives,

Disidentification is the process in which the artist reformulates the actual performativity of his glittering B movie archive, which is to say that the [racist] images that [Jack] Smith cited were imbued with a performativity that surpassed simple fetishization. Glitter transformed hackneyed orientalisms and tropical fantasies, making them rich antinormative treasure troves of queer possibility.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Contemporary Dramatists, 2001).

²⁰¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), x.

Here Muñoz explains that when we are queering something through performance, we are transcending the effect and social impositions of what otherwise would be problematic content. I refer back to my argument earlier in this study about radical feminism completely admonishing sex work and pornography for its supposed link to women's disempowerment. When the performers disidentify, they transcend the original narratives that they are employing. Lest we incorrectly assume that a display of heteronormative, harmful power structures is a simple reification of those structures, Muñoz is explaining here that we can replicate harmful narratives while at the same time subverting them through performativity. It is my assertion that this is what I was viewing in moments like the scene I described above.

This is not to say that such moments should exist without critique or problematization. But I would argue that when our first instinct is to admonish something because it makes us uncomfortable, we are demonstratively missing the value that lies there.

In academia and in life, we must dispel the notion that a "safe space" is an easy, unchallenging, non-threatening one. If you described such a space to Boal, he would be quick to tell you that this is no way to incite a revolution. We cannot make actionable, meaningful change without allowing for the complications and intricacies of humanity. I believe that the method I used to study this body of research, and my own emotional attachment to it, ultimately allowed for a better product in this sense. I think that Muñoz would agree with that, since it is so similar to his own research method. Rather than remove myself from the narrative as other anthropological studies attempt to do, the

method of actively involving myself in the community, gaining the trust of those in it, and complicating my own view of this world into an “us” rather than “me vs. them” propelled me to view the participants and players as more than just studiable objects.

I believe that even in moments of observation where I felt my own trauma triggered, I was doing more of a service to this work than if I had tried to distance myself. Though I often worried about how “objective” I could be as a participant-observer, I soon began to realize that objectivity should not be the goal; but rather, honesty should be. I would not have been allowed such intimate connection with these folx and been invited into their most vulnerable, truthful moments if I had attempted this study in any other way.

Having said that, now at the end of my study, I recognize that if I had the resources, it would be a better, more inclusive, and a more comprehensive study if I were able to include more than just the Denver area. If I am afforded the opportunity, I would like to continue this study on a larger scale. I would also ideally like to work with a criminologist to look at the criminalization of some of these activities, and decipher whether or not that same criminalization would occur should these activities be redefined as performance. This, I believe, is the next step of this research and it’s most important potential contribution.

I also believe that in future, this study could be used as a way to open up conversation with participants about where the BDSM community could go. As I have discussed previously, the prevailing narrative in the BDSM community is that as long as all involved parties are consensual, then what you’re doing is acceptable. I don’t

disagree with this adage, and would never try to enforce my own (or anyone else's) further moral delineation onto BDSM players. But I have seen evidence that when one in the community does try to interrogate or problematize the happenings of a BDSM performance, they are often shut down so completely by the "consent makes it okay" logic.

I have seen several examples of this on FetLife, in which a member of the community will post something that problematizes something that they have seen, and the comments section to that post will be filled with things like, "It is not your place to judge other people's kink" or "this is kink shaming. Stop." I understand this impulse. I have heard during my interviews how difficult it can be to explain to people outside of this community that what we are doing is not rape, not abuse, etc. So the impulse to close ranks and not allow "kink shaming" to infiltrate inside the deviant space--to disallow what is perceived as prescribing behavior--makes a great deal of sense.

I wonder, then, if the burden of ambassador fatigue that so many BDSM players feel to the outside world were lessened, if it would open up space for folks to feel comfortable exploring and interrogating why it is that they do what they do? If the need to always be on guard from the outside were lifted by the notion that what they are doing is performance, and therefore does not exist as the enactment of the thing itself, but rather as a queered representation of that thing--would this allow for introspection on a level not before conceived of?

In each of my chapters, I have outlined how different aspects of BDSM (sex, ritual, and play) can be identified and studied. By naming and examining these aspects

of BDSM, we can further delineate the larger practice itself as being performance in accordance with Schener's theories. But why does its being performance *matter*? For that matter, why is its being *anything* relevant? Schechner argues for the importance of performance,

[H]umans are able to absorb and learn behavior so thoroughly that the new "performed" behavior knits seamlessly into ongoing "spontaneous" action. Performance magnitude means not only size and duration but also extension across cultural boundaries and penetration to the deepest strata of historical, personal and neurological experience.²⁰²

Here, Schechner elucidates the need for and importance of performance studies. The magnitude of a performance lies not only in the performance itself, but of what it can offer to cultural, societal, ontological, political, and so many other ever-complicated narratives. BDSM performance (as with any performance) should be mined for its potential to tell us something larger about the performers themselves, their audience, and humanity at large. There is no reason not to critically analyze and even problematize the content of BDSM scenes. BDSM practitioners do it all the time, constantly policing consent and reimagining ways of gaining it enthusiastically--as can be evidenced by the many observations of such activities that have been catalogued in this writing. But is consent the only thing that should matter in this community?

There is a common saying in the Denver BDSM community that I ran into many times during the course of my study. It goes: Your kink is not my kink, and that's okay.

²⁰² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 327.

The intention behind it seems to be a righteous one: even though what you're doing isn't my cup of tea, I'm going to allow you to do it without judgement. The idea of "kink-shaming," in which an onlooker is showing disgust or disdain for the practices of other BDSM players, is not an allowable practice in BDSM spaces. That's because it creates what Chrissy described for me as a "slippery slope" in which someone takes on the role of "kink arbitrator."²⁰³ Of course, this is somewhat ironic, given that Chrissy herself is a "kink arbitrator" of sorts in her own club, enforcing what is and is not allowable conduct vis-a-vie the rules and regulations. But outside of those rules, which are lofted for safety of individuals in the space as well as the club and it's owner/operators, are not meant as inherent judgement or exclusivity to kinks they disallow. But this need to be so blindly inclusive leaves little room for the critical analysis suggested above.

When discussing the possible effects of such policies, Megan, who runs her local TNG (the next generation) chapter (a group of BDSM players ages 19-37) had this to say,

Yeah, I think it could be bad. Especially with what we were talking about earlier with kink being, like, racist and stuff. I think we see sexism, especially transmisogyny happen a lot in like gay bars and stuff [...] so that could definitely happen here [...] It's something I do worry about because I see all of us trying to one-up each other. This week I do a scene with a knife, the next week someone's got a machete, you know?²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Chrissy (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), November 24, 2017.

²⁰⁴ Megan (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), September 15, 2016.

And that “one-upping” isn’t relegated to the mere physical aspects of kink, “Yeah there’s the psyc part of it too. There’s lots of taboo play that happens at TNG [...] but how do I tell someone who is doing something I find crosses a line that they’re doing that? The rule is consent, and if they have it, they have it [...] we can’t arbitrate morality in an amoral space.”²⁰⁵ But I wonder if it’s really a matter of questioning morality. The act of moral arbitration in this arena has been enacted by scholars in the past. In his article *Safe, Sane, and Consensual--Consent and the Ethics of BDSM*, Morten Nielsen makes the argument that a practice in BDSM relies ultimately on the virtue that consent is a form of personal autonomy. However, it seems to me that more rigorous critical inquiry beyond simply consent verification could be very useful to this community. Foucault once said of sex that,

we demand that sex speak the truth [...] and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness. We tell its truth by deciphering what it tells us about that truth it tells us our own by delivering up that part of it that escaped us.²⁰⁶

In the sexual practices of BDSM (even those which are not explicitly “sex”), its participants seek some higher truth. Whether that truth is ritual, visceral, sexual, playful, what have you--it is sought. But if we don’t take the time to “decipher” the information garnered during the liminal moments of BDSM performance, there is little truth to be gained. The part that escaped us will continue to elude our grasp.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 69-70.

We must, even when it is uncomfortable to do so, interrogate the materials, the impulses, and the outcomes of performance. It is vital to make the distinction, however, between interrogating the performers and their own wants and needs. If the consent of the performance by all participants is not in question, a value judgement need never be raised on said performance by those outside it. The interrogation must be deeper than that. In the end, BDSM has so much more to teach us than just methods of fulfilling carnal desires.

Just because BDSM players themselves don't see what they're doing as material ripe for theoretical potential doesn't mean that it is not. This is much in line with my common finding that the performers themselves don't even categorize what they are doing as performance. Which really says more about how societally, we've systematically demonized and/or trivialized performance to the point of its not being valid as a method of expression or truth. I recently heard Marina Abramovic (renowned, well-known, and often beloved performance artist) when trying to describe what it is that she does tell the interviewer that what she does is real, it is not theatre. "Performance is real. In theatre you can cut with a knife and there is a blood. The knife is not real and blood is not real. In performance the blood and the knife and the body of the performer is real."²⁰⁷ By Marina's very high standards, the things that these BDSM performers are enacting is real performance. What they are doing is essentially high-stakes performance art, much like Marina herself. They do so not only within their own limits, but also within the limits of the club or space they are in, and also taking pain-staking

²⁰⁷ The Museum of Modern Art, "Marina Abramovic: What is Performance Art?" filmed [March 2010], Youtube video, 00:25.

care to ensure that the limits of the other participants are met, monitored, and respected.

If BDSM performers can so diligently and articulately communicate with their partners about their needs, wants, and feelings (a skill that I can certainly vouch for among my own participants)--why not then use those same skills to open up a dialogue with themselves about their own consciousness and embodied subjugations?

Participant Velma described to me her process for dealing with subdrop thusly, "I get drop often. And when I do, I journal. I think about why it happened and what I can do to get out of the drop."²⁰⁸ Velma later explained that she started using this same journaling method to help organize her thoughts about what she wanted out of her scenes and relationships, "It's the same thing as with my drop journal. I would make a list of my limits and what I want[ed] [...] and then I started pulling that apart. Because sometimes I thought I wanted like say a really intense flogging scene. And I would realize that the reason I needed that is because I wanted to prove to myself that I could handle the pain [because] I wasn't handling other things I wanted to in real life [...] and knowing that made it easier for me to get what I wanted out of the scene."²⁰⁹

Velma is explaining beautifully what I am ultimately trying to suggest, which is that if BDSM performers take the time to individually decipher their own impulses, they may gain some of that deeper meaning they seek in the scene itself. In short, deeply critical and personal analysis might allow for more meaningful and impactful scenes. This opens the door for their practice to do even more than it's currently doing for them,

²⁰⁸ Velma (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 21, 2018.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

and it offers an assuagement to those outside the community who might suggest that what is happening in BDSM performance is merely a cover for what is really just overt subjugation and harassment. Asserting that anything and everything which is consensual is allowable is a fine metric. But that does not preclude a push for self-reflection and honest, rigorous personal examination of practices and impulses.

In his novel *The Giver* (and in its subsequent stage play version), author Lois Lowry writes, “Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything.”²¹⁰ The authenticity of a performance, and why it matters, should be important to the performers. If we detect that those performing for us do not care about the performance they are enacting, then there will be no “magic” (as Jill Dolan calls it) to the performance. That magic of which she speaks are the effects of liminality that live beyond the performance and its temporal logics. BDSM practitioners are nothing if not generative artists. They use their craft as a type of folk art, creating with little to no formal training beautifully crafted scenes and scenarios that are rich in text and purpose. They do this because it is what they love. They do it to momentarily touch the liminal. “This is not about just trying to do something different. It’s beyond that [...] I do this because it’s what matters most to me, because to me it is holy.”²¹¹ Velma further explains that she once heard her grandmother talk about the first time she gave birth. “She said, ‘I touched the face of God.’ That’s what this is like for me.”²¹²

BDSM as a deviant practice and in its queer formulations of counterpublics is a recognition and simultaneous rejection of normative orders and ways of being. José

²¹⁰ Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993). 156-157

²¹¹ Velma (pseudonym), interviewed by author (Denver), January 21, 2018.

²¹² Ibid.

Esteban Muñoz tells us that, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world”²¹³ I offer, humbly, for the consideration of academics and BDSM practitioners alike this final thesis: BDSM is transcendent, queer performance, and the bounds of that transcendence are yet to be reached.

²¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). 1.

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Appendix A

Name	Gender	Pronouns	Sexuality	Race	Role	BDSM Interests	Age	Experience	Relationship type	Relationship Status	Reference #	Location of Observation	Observation Dates	Location of Interview	Interview Date(s)
Eric	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	Mixed Race	Dominant	Sado-Masochism, Violet Wand, Fire, Impact, Little/Big	48	20+	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM1	Club 1	2.10.18	Coffee House	2.13.18
Richard	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Switch	Rope (shibari and bondage), rape play, flogging, cuck play.	43	25+	Romantically Monogomous, Sexually Open	Unpartnered	SW11	Club 1	6.23.18	Home	6.25.18
Marc	Trans/nonbinary	They/them/theirs	Asexual/romantic	White	Submissive	Puppy play	22	3	Poly-romantic	Partnered	SUB1	Club 2	1.15.18	Coffee House	1.19.18
Audrey	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Lesbian	Black	Submissive	Light bondage, Dominance and Submission, Slave	31	5	Monogomous	Partnered	SUB2, P-a	Club 2	11.22.17	Home	11.28.17
Mona	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Lesbian	White	Dominant	Light bondage, Dominance and Submission, Slave	36	7	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM2, P-a	Club 2	11.22.17	Home	11.28.17
Darnell	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	Black	Dominant	Sado-Masochism, Impact, Needle, Bondage	45	15	Polymorous	Partnered	DOM3	Club 1	3.16.18	Coffee House	3.24.18
Ivy	Trans woman	She/Her/Hers	Lesbian	White	Submissive	Rope, Gender fuckery, Dominance and submission, puppy play	23	2	Relationship and Anarchy	Partnered	SUB3	Club 2	2.14.18	Home	2.15.18
Chrissy	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	Mixed Race	Submissive	Dominance and Submission, Impact and sensation play.	42	25	Non-mongomous	Unpartnered	SUB4	Club 2	11.22.17	Club 2	11.24.17
Sean	Trans/nonbinary	They/them/theirs	Queer	White	Switch	Sensation play, mind-fuckery, needles.	24	3	monogomous	Unpartnered	SW12	Club 1	4.4.18	Coffee House	4.7.18
Shy	Trans Man	He/Him/His	Gay	Hispanic	Submissive	Dominance and Submission, Impact and sensation play, Pony handler.	23	2	Monogomous	Partnered	SUB5	Club 2	12.22.17	Home	1.5.18
Dalton	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Queer	White	Switch	Shibari Rope.	26	5	Monogomous	Unpartnered	SW13	Club 2	12.22.17	Coffee House	12.27.17
Apex	Man	He/Him/His	Queer	White	Switch	Rope bondage, pony play.	22	1	Relationship and Anarchy	Partnered	SW14	Club 2	2.27.18	Home	2.29.28
Ursula	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Straight	White	Rope Top	Dom/Sub, High Protocol, Impact.	28	5	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM4	Club 2	2.14.18	Home	2.15.18
Bull	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Dom/Sub, High Protocol, Impact.	42	15+	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM5, P-b	Club 2	1.15.18	Home	1.18.18
Alex	Trans Woman	She/Her/Hers	Straight	White	Submissive	Dom/Sub, High Protocol.	23	1	Monogomous	Partnered	SUB6, P-b	Club 2	1.15.18	Home	1.18.18
Klara	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	White	Submissive	High Protocol, needles, flogging, rope, impact.	26	4	Polymorous	Partnered	SUB7, P-c	Con	7.22.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Lilith	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	White	Switch	High Protocol, flogging, rope, wax.	37	10+	Polymorous	Partnered	SW15, P-c	Con	7.22.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Arkham	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	High Protocol, flogging, rope.	44	10+	Polymorous	Partnered	DOM6, P-c	Con	7.22.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Yuri	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Pain play	35	5	Monogomous	Unpartnered	DOM7	Con	7.21.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Oliver	Trans Woman	She/Her/Hers	Gay	White	Submissive	Rope play	24	2	Polymorous	Partnered	SUB8	Club 1	4.4.18	Coffee House	4.7.18
Drake	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Age Play	37	13	Romantically Monogomous, Sexually Open	Partnered	DOM8, P-d	Club 1	12.23.17	Coffee House	12.30.17
Hermia	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	White	Submissive	Age Play	26	3	Romantically Monogomous	Partnered	SUB9, P-d	Club 1	12.23.17	Coffee House	12.30.17
Luna	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	White	Switch	Rape Play	34	5	Sexually Open Polymorous	Partnered	SW16, P-e	Club 1	12.2.17	Home	12.5.17
Hegrid	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Rape Play, Edge Play	42	10	Polymorous	Partnered	DOM9, P-e	Club 1	12.2.17	Home	12.5.17

Appendix A

Name	Gender	Pronouns	Sexuality	Race	Role	BDSM Interests	Age	Experience	Relationship type	Relationship Status	Reference #	Location of Observation	Observation Dates	Location of Interview	Interview Date(s)
Megan	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Straight	White	Switch	Impact play, knife play	29	3	Polymorous	Partnered	SW17	Club 2	9.12.16	Coffee House	9.15.16
Velma	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bi-curious	White	Submissive	Impact play, forced orgasms	41	12	Monogomous	Partnered	SUB10, P-f	Club 2	1.15.18	Home	1.21.18
Luke	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	Mixed Race	Dominant	Impact play, forced orgasms	37	7	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM10, P-f	Club 2	1.15.18	Home	1.21.18
Tiana	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	Black	Submissive	Impact play, forced orgasms, age play, rape play, race play.	26	2	Monogomous	Partnered	SUB11, P-g	Con	7.21.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Merlin	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Impact play, forced orgasms, age play, rape play, race play.	38	10+	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM11, P-g	Con	7.21.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Venom	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Dominant	Fire play, impact play	44	10+	Monogomous	Partnered	DOM12, P-h	Con	7.21.17	Coffee House	7.29.17
Sarah	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Straight	White	Switch	Fire play, impact play.	42	10+	Monogomous	Partnered	SW18, P-h	Con	7.21.17	Coffee House	7.29.17
X	Man	He/Him/His	Straight	White	Top	Rope play	46	15+	Monogomous	Unpartnered	DOM13, P-i	Con	7.22.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Clark	Trans Man	He/Him/His	Gay	Mixed Race	Bottom	Rope play	23	2	Relationship Anarchy	Partnered	SUB12, P-i	Con	7.22.17	Hotel	7.23.17
Spock	Man	He/Him/His	Hetero-flexible	White	Switch	Rope play, fire play, pony play.	29	5	Polymorous	Partnered	SW19	Con	7.21.17	Hotel	7.22.17

Appendix B

Volunteers Needed!

Graduate Student Researching
Performativity in BDSM and Kink needs
research subjects to observe and interview.

Requirements:

- Must be 21 or over
- Must be an active participant in the Denver
BDSM/Kink community (attends community events
approximately once or more per month).

If interested, send an email to
roxxyleiser@gmail.com

Appendix C

Title of research study: Performativity in BDSM/Kink

IRB Protocol Number: 17-0517

Investigator: Justine R Duda

Sponsor: Bertram Coleman

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to discover and define the performative aspects of BDSM and kink. These discoveries and definitions will allow a bridge to be built between academic communities and the BDSM and kink community, in order that both might be better understood by the other. We invite you to take part in this research study because you are an active member in the Denver BDSM and/or kink scene who is over the age of 21. We expect that you will be in this research study for approximately 2, 1-2 hour sessions which may occur anytime within two weeks of each other. We expect about 35 people will be in this research study.

Explanation of Procedures

The primary investigator will view your BDSM and/or kink session in the venue of your choice. No devices will be used. Sometime after, either immediately or within two weeks, there will be an interview between you and the investigator debriefing that BDSM and/or kink session in the venue of your choice. Devices used will be a laptop for taking notes which will be disconnected from the internet as well as a sound recording device which will also be disconnected from the internet.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

Instead of being in this research study, your choices may include: Leaving the study at anytime. The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include discovery that you are under 21 years of age.

Risks and Discomforts

Potential risks and discomforts associated with this study are only possible should your anonymity be compromised. In this unlikely scenario, you risk exposure of your BDSM

and kink participation, which could have potential negative consequences socially, financially, and/or legally.

Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

There are some things that you might tell us that we CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:

- Child abuse or neglect
- A crime you or others plan to commit
- Harm that may come to you or others

This study will include identifiable audio recording. These digital files will be stored on an external hard drive that is password protected, and will be deleted no more than 90 days after completion of the study.

Payment for Participation

You will not be paid to be in this study.

Contact for Future Studies

We would like to keep your contact information on file so we can notify you if we have future research studies we think you may be interested in. This information will be used by only the principal investigator of this study and only for this purpose.

Please initial your choice below:

Yes, you may contact me for future research studies. The best way to contact me is: (enter preferred telephone number and/or email address)

No, you may not contact me for future research studies.

Questions

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at roxxyleiser@gmail.com

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB).

You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signatures

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

____ Signature of subject Date

Printed name of subject

____ Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Appendix D

Please tell me under what pseudonym you would like to be referred to as for the purposes of this study.

State your age.

How would you identify your role as a BDSM player/kinkster?

What are your current romantic and/or BDSM relationships and how are they structured? Please don't offer any identifying information about the other members of those relationships.

Describe the dynamic between yourself and the other participant(s) in the scene that I observed earlier.

Is that an average scene for you? If yes, how so? If not, what was abnormal?

What BDSM clubs do you belong to?

How long have you been in the scene?

What are some issues that you think are facing BDSM players currently?

How do you gain or give consent in your BDSM interactions?

What are the rules (or limits) of your dynamics?

Do you see any correlation between theatrical performance and BDSM? If so, what?

If someone were to refer to your BDSM play as a 'performance,' how would that make you feel? What would be your response to that person, if any?

Do you feel people outside of the BDSM community have a valid understanding of what it is you do, even if that understanding is not a complete one? If not, how so?

What do you think the societal perceptions and stereotypes of BDSM are?

How do you think those perceptions were formed?

Which of those perceptions are true and which are false?

Do you believe kink and BDSM have their own internal morality as communities? If so, what is that based on?

Have you ever been discriminated against based on your kink? Was that from those outside of your kink community, internal to that community, or both?

Can you describe those instances?

Please describe for me the process of creating the scene that I observed from your perspective. Include the negotiation process, the gathering of any materials needed, the act of setting up the scene, etc. Please be as detailed as possible.

In terms of the scene I observed, were there any safety concerns? How were those concerns addressed?

In terms of the scene I observed, were you hoping for any particular aesthetic factors to be highlighted? If so, what were they? How did you go about attempting to highlight them? Do you think that came across?

Why did you choose this space and/or event to do this particular scene in? After the fact, do you feel that was the best choice?

What were you hoping to gain from the scene?

What did you end up gaining or learning from the scene?

Did you set any intentions or goals for yourself in this particular scene that you have not yet explained in previous answers?

If so, do you believe those intentions were met? If not, why do you think that is?

How does the presence of (or lack thereof) observers change the dynamics of your scene?

Do you feel that you notice the presence of observers during your scene?

Can you describe to me the moments just before the scene began? What were you doing physically and what was going on for you mentally?

Can you describe to me what was happening during the scene? What were you doing physically and what was going on for you mentally?

Can you describe the ending of your scene? What were you doing physically and what was going on for you mentally?

Did the scene end as planned? If not, what happened versus what was meant to happen?

When the scene was concluded, describe for me the procedures that followed.

In general, can you talk to me about some of the rituals associated with your kink, offering examples from the scene that I observed?

What do you think makes your kink unique from others like it? What commonalities do you think you share with other kinkster's and their acitvities?

What rituals are most important in the community at large? Which should be given more reverence in your opinion?