

MASOCHISM, SEXUAL FREEDOM, AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY:  
A HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF SADOMASOCHISM IN  
PSYCHOANALYTIC, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND  
CONTEMPORARY TEXTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: MASOCHISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

This dissertation is a study in sexual ethics. It examines a particular set of social practices, which are usually taken up in sexual ethics, identified as masochism.<sup>1</sup> Most commentators, observers, and theorists have already made a decision about the merit of these practices from a variety of perspectives. They ordinarily offer evaluations with a strongly negative pejorative slant. This study will take a closer look at masochism to open up the possibility of fulfillment inherent in human sexual possibilities. Sadomasochism as a set of sexual practices came to be interpreted chiefly through literature, beginning with psychopathology and psychoanalytic theory. Since it was noticed and made problematic in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, masochism has been and remains a creation of literature and the literary imagination. Not only is masochism inseparable from literature, but literature plays an ongoing role in the practices of the masochist. This has been observed by almost every group of psychopathologists who have

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<sup>1</sup> Terminological disputes over masochism, sadism, sadomasochism, S/M, abound. I argue throughout this work that the signs of what is referred to as sadomasochism in contemporary culture operate under the aegis of masochistic subjectivity. When I use the terms masochism, sadism, or sadomasochism, or S/M it is with that presupposition in mind.

examined it. This is partly explained by the literary quality of psychopathology itself, which is a type of writing after all, and which draws on and literature for its imagery and evidence.

In some sense, "masochism" is almost entirely a fictive creation, styled through the decades by individuals utilizing many types of discourse (both discursive and non-discursive practices) to develop and further their particular set of goals. I use the term *discursive* to refer to socially produced groups of ideas or ways of thinking that can be tracked in individual texts or groups of texts. For example, Freud's discursive contributions include "The Economic Problem of Masochism,"<sup>2</sup> "A Child Is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions,"<sup>3</sup> and "Beyond The Pleasure Principle."<sup>4</sup> A further, broader instance of discursive practice is the ongoing theoretical development and analysis of masochism within the psychiatric/psychoanalytic communities. These ideas also demand to be located within wider historical

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<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," (1924) In *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 19: 159-70.

<sup>3</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "A Child Is Being Beaten" (1919). In *Standard Edition*, 17:175-204.

<sup>4</sup> *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, (1920) In *Standard Edition* 18: 36-38.

and structural relations to explicate their developments and changes over time. The production of these literary works succeeded in broadening and often confusing the definition of just what is sadism, masochism, or the hybridized and somewhat inexact designation, sadomasochism. Like many deliberations about literature and what it connotes, this ongoing conversation about the meaning of masochism has not come to any firm conclusion. Indeed, the thrust of this study on masochism will be to show that it is a cultural formation inherently subject to ambiguity and continual shifts in its expression and in its meaning.

Masochism will be examined by interpreting traditional literary texts (novels and works of non-fiction, articles, and plays) as well as by examining whole sets of social action typically in the form of *non-discursive* practice which are subject to similar interpretation as texts. *Non-discursive* modes of representing masochism have taken many forms and structures over the past decades as well. Initially, the realm of the "pervert" and the social pariah who visited brothels to seek satisfaction of the desire for corporal punishment was depicted as a depraved and iniquitous space where only trouble and vice could abound.

In more recent times those in search of partners for masochistic sexual play need only consult the Yellow Pages or the back section of any newspaper to locate the nearest "dungeon" or play space in which to enact their fantasies. An example of non-discursive practice is the type of bondage play that

has developed over the last thirty years among gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area. Increasingly, non-discursive representations of masochism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have taken shape as various kinds of "performance", from the private performance of individual S/M sexual scenes to public performance by such practitioners as Bob Flanagan and Ron Athey.<sup>5</sup>

Masochism and sadomasochism have been appropriated and utilized by many interpreters. While these interpretations have a family resemblance, their disagreements and inconsistencies open up the problem "What masochism is and what it means" to an enlargement of interpretation. In effect, while many of the descriptions of "masochism" share large areas of coherence, there are enough divergences of appearance to warrant a trip to the archives for a thorough inspection of the creation and deployment of these discursive and non-discursive practices. The key to the kind of content analysis of these practices is *interpretation*. I will proceed by looking into the genealogical descent of masochism. Interpretive analysis will be performed on the following types of literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Flanagan is the author of *The Pain Journal*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2000). He and his partner Sheree Rose collaborated on a documentary film about Bob's life entitled "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan Supermasochist," which won the special grand Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1997. Athey's performance art has been documented in a video entitled "Four Scenes From a Harsh Life."



The first interpretation to be examined in our exhumation of masochism's gray and fuzzy beginnings will be the psychoanalytic. The literature of the pioneering sexologists is the first site of masochism's appropriation. It is there that the story begins to grow. From this august and scholarly site, I will proceed to sociological literature, which during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century begins to take notice of the social components of masochism. Finally, a closer look at the historical and contemporary literary appropriations of masochism will show that contests over the meaning and import of masochism are far from any general terms of agreement.

The problem with these three fields of discursive practice (psychoanalytic, sociological, historical/contemporary) is that each tends to be reductionistic. The psychoanalytic field reduces complex behaviors and cultural practices to pathological causes and static images of human flourishing. While illuminating and cognizant of the social and organizational underpinnings of sadomasochism as practiced, sociological analysis of sadomasochism often fails to take notice of the implicit imaginative potential and the shifting content of sadomasochistic imagery. The historical/contemporary appropriations tend to be too narrow and polemical in tone, often missing the broader political import of sadomasochism. I want to make each of these approaches problematic. I want to take a closer look at these reductionist approaches by returning S/M back to its literary, imaginative,

fantasy-generating, and fictive contexts. This will be a hermeneutical project. I will seek to avoid a reductionist approach to these practices, instead favoring a kind of interpretation that is open-ended and connective rather than restrictive. This type of interpretation allows for the view of these practices to remain flowing and creative rather than becoming static and reified.

The hermeneutical evaluation will be balanced by my placement of these practices within the purview of the liberal humanistic democratic understanding of freedom, specifically sexual freedom. Along the way, I will offer a provisional judgment on the moral worth of these practices. The balance between the literary imagination, where sexual and personal freedom is engendered and which contributes richness and difference to individual lives, is balanced by the larger notion of liberal democracy, now often called "radical democracy".

Radical democracy is a blend of liberalism and neo-Marxism that emanates out of a critique of 1930s and 40s fascism and totalitarianism. It traces its descent from the thought of Antonio Gramsci in which the problem of democracy is the bureaucratization of capitalist society. Gramsci was keenly interested in exposing forms of democracy that negate or undermine participation of citizens in determining the kinds of societies they want and their level of participation in those societies. The task of cultural criticism is to advance radical forms of participation on behalf of ordinary citizens. From this point of view the idea of the "organic

intellectual" takes its point of criticism from the site of the populace, in popular culture in advancing their interest in participation in radical democracy. Thus, while radical democracy maintains traditional liberal interest in representative civic democratic participation, it also calls for a radicalization of structures for the promotion of greater participatory action among its populist or ordinary citizens.

In the American context it has primarily been neo-pragmatists who have revived this conception.<sup>6</sup> Seyla Benhabib insists that it is the "public sphere which is the crucial domain of interaction that mediates between macropolitical institutions of a democratic polity and the private sphere."<sup>7</sup> In concert with Benhabib, what I envision is a redrawing of the space of the public sphere. This is a "radically proceduralist model of the public sphere, neither the scope nor the agenda of which can be limited a priori and whose lines can be redrawn by the participants in the conversation."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Among the best examples are works by Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, Victor Anderson, Anthony Cook, and Seyla Benhabib.

<sup>7</sup> Benhabib, Seyla, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

What is required is a legal constitutional framework guaranteeing equal civil, political rights as well as rights of conscience as preconditions for citizenship participation. This democratic socialist vision balances a search for "existential meanings of death, suffering, and love with a traditional Marxist concern with social circumstances under which people pursue love revel in friendship, and face death."<sup>9</sup> It could almost be called it a mode of being-in-the world, a way of life.

If these points are a vital and constitutive part of democratic culture, (as we strive to understand the point of view of not just generalized other, but concrete others) then it follows that mutuality of understanding (i.e. consent), reciprocity (of exchange), and non-coerced bodily exchange are also part of this. These formal categories<sup>10</sup> that I bring to life through study of concrete examples will be more fully explicated below. The increase of the exchange of ideas in the public sphere promotes the goal of more involvement on the part of citizens. The first (consent) promotes real understanding of the interests of individuals and communities. The second (reciprocity

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<sup>9</sup> West, Cornel, "The Making of an American Radical Democrat of African Descent," in *The Cornel West Reader*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> These are derived from lectures and conversations with Victor Anderson.

of exchange) is relative to promoting greater participation, and the third (non-coerced exchange) encourages accord on the goods and ends of democratic society. My text demonstrates concretely various instantiations of these formal principles or "regulative ideals." These abstract principles serve as a warrant to investigate the ethical character of S/M practice. In addition I offer critiques of various representations of these seemingly endlessly controversial practices.

The received tradition of moral wisdom regarding sexuality (predominantly heterosexual and male in orientation) is now being questioned and challenged. My work suggests what it means when these norms travel into different realms. The norms and their correlates are so deeply ingrained that they cry out to be shaken up, especially in the light of globalism and plurality etc.

If one grants that the construction of liberal democracy is predicated on principles, and we specify that those principles include civic responsibility, the rule of law, and the right to pursue happiness, then it follows that the freedom imagined under and engendered by such a political system will always be expansive and filled with possibilities for difference. Radical democracy ought to be open to the principle of inclusion rather than hindered and hemmed in by the limitations of exclusion.

Not only do democratic principles provide for the open participation of persons in the public arena of civil affairs, they also provide for the

enlargement of possibilities for the appreciation of ranges of traditions and practices which persons bring to their participation in cultural life as individuals. Radical democracy is a civic as well as a cultural ideal. The enlargement of this appreciation extends to different kinds of families (non-nuclear, same-sex couples, etc.) and to a multiplicity of religious and non-religious communities. Not only does it extend to these formations of community; it extends to the understanding and appreciation of sexual and gender difference. Lesbian, gay, transgender, and other stigmatized social groupings and sexual practices come under the heading of the "possible" within the realm of radical democratic freedom.

This conception of radical democracy as a construct that fosters both civic and personal freedom follows that of philosopher John Dewey as expressed by Anthony E. Cook: "Dewey placed his trust ...in a democratic culture in which life is guided by the experimental method and inspired by a commitment to a mutually reinforcing conception of individuality and community."<sup>11</sup>

According to this description both individuality and community must be vital and constitutive part of the democratic culture. While sexual matters are private and individual, they are also part of the larger field of difference within the greater

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<sup>11</sup> Cook, Anthony E, *The Least of These: Race, Law, and Religion in American Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 27.

culture and community and as such are open to ethical judgments. This constitutes the ethical field that will be opened to a moral analysis of so-called "sodomasochistic" practices. The backdrop for the discussion of S/M is the overarching ideology of a liberal, humanist, democratic republic, with its attendant ideals of liberty, individual choice, and autonomy.

How will such a hermeneutical project be accomplished, covering as it does a wide variety of texts and social practices, which are deliberately interpreted as textual material? Social action, as well as more traditional forms of literature, will also be treated as a text, in order to bring out its configurations of values, dominant patterns of imagery, rhetoric, rhythms and forms. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies provides a suitable methodological starting point for this examination of masochism as a series of texts subject to ongoing, open-ended analysis.<sup>12</sup> The effort will be one of observation of the various types of hermeneutics that have ranged over the cultural practices described as sadomasochism since its "discovery" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies chiefly developed under the aegis of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson, beginning in

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<sup>12</sup> For a concise and thorough exposition of the genealogy of this field, see Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

the 1950s, puts its focus on "everyday life" rather than the predominant elitist interest that had formerly concentrated on high art or "culture". Fred Inglis, a contemporary scholar and interpreter of the Cultural Studies orientation, recommends "conversation" about meaning as the underpinning of the practice of intellectual life.<sup>13</sup> This dissertation is less a fierce critique of ideology than a descriptive inquiry into the near and familiar aspects of a contested segment of culture by way of interpretive analysis.<sup>14</sup> It is a conversation meant to make problematic a series of representations of a cultural practice that has never quite yielded finally to any of its interlocutors.

Important to the Cultural Studies method of interpretation is the recognition of two critical

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<sup>13</sup> Inglis, pp. 23, 142, 228.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams carves out a place for Cultural Studies thusly: "Culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture." Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, London: Penguin, 1958). This definition is in the background of Graeme Turner's discussion of culture as the basic material of Cultural Studies. He succinctly defines "Culture as the site where meaning is generated and experienced, becomes a determining, productive field through which social realities are constructed, experienced, and interpreted." Turner, Graeme, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.



categories. The first is the *representational force* of practices. What this means is simply those cultural practices have, over time, been "re-presented" again and again within different contexts. For example, the same act will not signify precisely the same meaning for a masochist in the 1940s and an S/M player in the postmodern 2000s. The object of my study is the process through which the signs (re-presentations) of masochism have been joined together with their signifiers. These practices are always open to re-presentation and thus never quite resolve into symbols. The signs and significations of sadomasochism are always just a little bit out of reach, they remain in a realm that resists reification. Sadomasochism has never been easily settled into the category of either art or scientific inquiry. Its representations cut across many boundaries and are never firmly fixed. They are ongoing, open-ended, and never quite complete. Though the psychiatric and sexologist communities attempted to fix a precise meaning for masochism and sadomasochistic practice, there remains a fair amount of something "more" that has not been captured by these representations. This study shows how these cycles of meaning generation, utilizing hermeneutic analysis of the fields of sign/signification, disclose their meaning by way of discourse. In the case of masochism, analysis of discourse includes both discursive and non-discursive practices. I argue that the analysis of masochism may well profit from contributions from both scientific and aesthetic discourse.

Any explication of discourse brings us to the second critical area of importance in our Cultural Studies inquiry. These explications of discursive and non-discursive practices open up the "*priority of difference*". This notion of the priority of difference is an inference that follows from the principles of radical democracy. In this approach the accent is on the prioritization of difference over sameness. This is the non-reductive approach of the Birmingham School. In other words, while there have been many interpretations and representations of masochism over the last one hundred years, it is still a social process that is differently apprehended depending upon the context in which it is theorized, imagined, dressed up, and brought out for public viewing. S/M makes visible the presence of "difference and contradiction as essential constituents of culture and ideology"<sup>15</sup>. S/M is a cultural practice and form that always disrupts the homogeneity of a culture. It performs this disruption within the wider context of heterosexual culture as well as within the field of gay and lesbian sexual culture. This study is a look at the contradictions, taboos, erasures, and displacements generated by masochism that fracture the fragile, always provisional, and temporary picture of homogeneity within modern and postmodern cultural contexts.

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<sup>15</sup> Turner, Graeme, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.197.

S/M is a polysemic text that will be examined for the different interpretations, different expectations, and different pleasures it gives to its various audiences. Not only is the text of S/M polysemic in itself, but its multitude of intertextual relations increase its polysemic potential. That is perhaps the reason why the literature and imagination surrounding masochism remains so rich and open-ended. S/M practitioners derive pleasure that resists dominant ideological positions. The notion of pleasure has increasingly been placed in opposition to that of ideology, notes Graeme Turner<sup>16</sup>. The effect of much of the theorization of pleasure suggests that communication may have more consequences than the generation of meaning. This would square quite well with the postmodern relegation of meaning to a secondary level of importance. Communication may thus produce a kind of pleasure. It is this connection to the aesthetic possibilities inherent to the practices of intersubjective communication, utilizing S/M as a way to access erotic potential, that stand out as worthy of consideration. In other words, the generic impossibility of reducing the aesthetic, intersubjective meaning of S/M to a theory suggest that the proper realm for analysis of S/M is not empirical and scientific, but rather it belongs in the realm of art.

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<sup>16</sup> Turner, p. 110.

Art is disconcerting. It does not fit neatly into any other category of experience, though it often communicates experience. The aesthetic/erotic side of S/M is alternately appealing and disturbing. Art's first use, according to Clifford Geertz, is to render "ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by rendering it in terms of acts which have had their practical consequences removed and been ... raised to ... the level of sheer appearances."<sup>17</sup> The aesthetic space of the S/M dungeon or playroom is thus rendered comprehensible by way of a description of what is happening within the spaces. The themes of masculinity, femininity, power, erotic experience, gender roles, and identity are the things that are ordered into an encompassing structure. S/M may be, for its devotees, a way to render comprehensible their everyday experience of a world that is increasingly fragmented and often devoid of traditional modes of access to transcendence.

Sadomasochistic experience, for its devotees, presents this cultural material in a way that makes sense of it to participants. Its function is neither to aggravate sexual politics nor to duck contentious issues. Rather, it is the function of masochism to display them within a medium of leather wearing, role-playing, fantasy, drama, and imagination. Through the literary and theatrical aspects of

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<sup>17</sup> Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Culture*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1973), p. 443.

sadomasochism these themes are subjected to closer assessment and tend to lose their reified and immutable character. They are brought to some significantly apprehensible view by the means of "play" under which they are approached and displayed.

By play I mean both the structured adherence to rules that characterizes participation in any children's (or adult) game, as well as the more loose and unfettered cooperative effort utilized during more open-ended games whose structure develops while being played and has a more improvisational character to it. Play is used in the sense of actors "playing" their part. Inglis continues this line of reasoning: "Art gives form to a story about ourselves in which we can try out how things might have been otherwise if only we had been or had met the heroine in the movie or the novel,"<sup>18</sup> I argue that this is precisely what S/M "players" do when they adopt costumes, props, roles, and set the stage to act out their representations of ideologies of power, domination, and sexual expression.

The concept of ideology is a rich and multifaceted field that has been explored since the time of Marx. While there is no single adequate definition of ideology, a few preliminary remarks will help set the stage. The following definitions are culled from a book length study entitled

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<sup>18</sup> Inglis, p. 166.

*Ideology* by literary critic Terry Eagleton <sup>19</sup> and will serve to open the matter for discussion in this study. Without entering into the ongoing discussions of the definition and importance of ideology, the following samples shed some light on the definition of ideology.

The process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life;

A distorted representation of existing relations of power and domination;

A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;

That which offers a position for a subject;

False ideas which help legitimate a dominant political power;

Forms of thought motivated by social interests;

The conjuncture of discourse and power;

The medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;

The indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;<sup>20</sup>

Although such relations to social structure and such descriptions of power relations often empower only certain people and prop up the status quo, they

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<sup>19</sup> Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1991)

<sup>20</sup> Eagleton, p. 1-2 *passim*.

are presented as natural and beneficial to all.<sup>21</sup> In this particular context, the ideology under examination is one that sustains the power relations of male domination (together with any relevant associated relations of class or race dominance). Such a reading of the representations of masochism in literature and culture in general may have to look beneath the surface representations of such gendered notions as feminine and masculine, passive and aggressive, and dominance and submission. To explore the ideology, one must search for gaps, presumptions, erasures, or even what is "repressed" in it. It is important to look at what these representations of masochism may show as blocked, omitted, or avoided in standard representations of gender and the relations between the sexes. This study performs disruptive readings of masochism's texts. Forces as disparate and dissimilar as Sigmund Freud and Pat Califia produce these texts. I do not believe that these strategies of reading must rely on any specific psychosexual assumptions.

While critique of ideology informs many of the discussions of this examination of masochism's representations, it is not the primary mode of operation. For I do not believe that critique of

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<sup>21</sup> Inherent to the discussion of the relations between discourse and ideology, but outside of the scope of this work is the notion of *power*. For a discussion of some aspects of power as it relates to discourse see Foucault, Michel, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, Volume 2. James Faubion, ed., (New York: New Press, 2000).

ideology alone is sufficient to disclose the complexity of the operations at work. It is often too reductive to yield a rich enough picture of the complex series of cultural movements at work over time and in many varied environments. The concept of ideology is controversial and overused. I would emphasize that the core notion of ideology has two aspects: an epistemological one (an ideology presents false information) and a dominance one (the false information serves the ends of a dominant class or group).

To show adequately how a type of aesthetic formation such as masochism is ideological in this sense would require empirical studies and support. While I do not oppose this approach, it is beyond the capabilities of my research. Moreover, it is my intent to explore how the genre representations of masochism map the intentions of their creators and give rise to capacities for both rational thought and aesthetic feelings. While S/M may be productive of both pleasure and meaning, these two fields may well counteract or contradict each other in individual instances. It is this action of holding two mutually contradictory positions at the same moment that often makes masochism quite puzzling to strictly rationalistic discourse. That is why it remains best explicated within the realm of the aesthetic, where such tensions and contradictions are understood and even welcomed. One category of aesthetic valuation that might prove useful in characterizing this ambiguous feeling is that of the grotesque. The grotesque is haunting because it does



not offer the resolution that the movement between dialectic poles offers. In the words of cultural critic Victor Anderson:

The grotesque ought not to be thought of as an opposition between two diametrically opposed sensibilities such as would occur in binary dialectics. The grotesque does have to do with sensibilities that are oppositional, such as attraction and repulsion, and pleasure and pain differential. However, the grotesque seeks neither negation nor mediation between these sensibilities. Rather, it leaves them in tension, unresolved by negation or mediation.<sup>22</sup>

Masochism partakes of this aesthetic sensibility and is to be understood as a fictive and imaginative category of human endeavor. However, this does not render the ethical question moot. In fact, the question of the ethical within the parameters of sexual practice and sexual behavior is always a rich field for the examination of relations between human partners. The analysis of masochism and sadomasochistic practice that I present highlights them in their best formulation. While it has often been suggested that sadomasochism is always and everywhere irredeemable and without any basis to commend its practice, I maintain that the intention of its participants is, in the main, aimed at pleasure. Pleasure is certainly to be deemed a component of those astounding rights guaranteed by the founders of the nation. In the same breath as

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 126.

life and liberty, they decreed "the pursuit of happiness" to be an inalienable right. Within this participatory and radicalizing schema the particularly useful tenets that I derive and argue for in my study are mutuality of consent, reciprocity of intention or exchange (pleasure, intimacy, and the like), and non-coerced bodily exchange. In this scheme, as well as in the larger theoretical picture, both individuality and community are vital. I intend to judge whether the practices of S/M do contribute to individual and communal fulfillment. In its best formulations then, I find that masochism conforms to the following principles.

*Mutuality of Consent* Each partner in a masochistic scene or situation agrees either tacitly or explicitly to partake of the practices. Whether this applies to a group situation in which some participants may simply be present as witnesses and may not actually "play", or whether the scene involves two partners in private play, the element of consent must be present. The features of the masochistic contract will be discussed throughout the work.

*Reciprocity of Pleasure (or Intimacy)* What is intended is pleasure and fulfillment through play. Mutual *satisfaction*, however, is not always intended or expected. Fulfillment through participation alone may be sufficient. All players in a given S/M scene must be working toward the same goal of fulfillment.

*Non-coerced Bodily Exchange* The range of exchange of bodies in sexual situations must always

be non-coercive; otherwise it is enslavement, which I always judge to be morally vicious. The importance of human agency in the choice of S/M sexual practice cannot be underestimated. Those who choose to adopt S/M sexuality, even if only occasionally or briefly, are exercising their power as human agents able effectively to choose their own destiny/destination. These activities can engender fulfillment for their participants not only by providing pleasure in times of leisure but also by mitigating alienation and structuring spaces for the construction of erotic and sexual meaning.

Masochism is a fictive category. All of these analyses are based on types of literature, drama, playfulness, parody, and staging. The category of the "theatrical" undergirds all of the interpretations of masochism. The literary imagination at play in sexual scenes begs for further interpretation. The psychiatric, sociological, and historical hermeneutics have proven limited and reductive. This work offers an alternative genealogical reading of the construction of masochism throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and attempts to make critical judgments about the moral worth of the practices.

## CHAPTER II

### HOW SADISM AND MASOCHISM BECAME ONE PHENOMENON: MEDICAL AND JURIDICAL REGULARIZATION

In this chapter I trace the course of the descent of masochism as the discursive efforts of sexologists, psychologists, and psychoanalytic theorists deployed forces of regularization and control across the fields of sex and sexuality. Masochism is a most troubling and perplexing phenomenon to Freud and his successors. They continue the practice of utilizing the literary idiom as both source and expression of masochism. Freud and Krafft-Ebing both confuse and conjoin sadism and masochism, and yet the phenomena they and others endlessly theorize resist such totalization. Even in the hands of the successful scientist Freud, the processes and character of masochism elude satisfactory description. The taxonomic differences between the novels of Sade and Sacher-Masoch go largely unnoticed until well into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Psychoanalytic theories reach no consensus about what masochism is or what it means and as the century wears on, the chorus of voices grows increasingly discordant. Despite the best efforts of psychoanalytic theoreticians, they reluctantly admit that masochistic tendencies are found to exist in non-pathological personalities. Scientific theorization about masochism proves to be unsatisfactory in explaining or illuminating the

practices, even to the theorists. Only with the uncoupling of the yoke linking sadism and masochism as both literary and social practice by a philosopher would this problematic linkage point to the social character of the practices. When the psychological community had all but exhausted their store of analysis the sociologists would join in the effort to describe masochism. But the first act in the staging of masochism's representations belongs to Freud and his fellows.

The point of origin for the first part of the genealogy is the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is the historical epoch in which "sex" and "sexuality" emerge as topics of scientific discussions. This scrutiny was oriented toward examination, discussion, and quantification with an eye toward regularization and control. No longer was sexuality, in all its manifestations, permutations, and disguises, simply a matter of one among other types of human activity. With the advent of sexology, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a language of sexuality and perversion was "tortured, coerced into existence."<sup>1</sup> This form of speech has found its way into the popular understanding of sexual life, so that instead of simply enjoying this or getting pleasure from that, we impute to ourselves this "behavior" or that "tendency". Cultural historian Valerie Steele puts it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Philips, Anita, *A Defence of Masochism*, p. 6.

The eighteenth century had been a transitional period, during which traditional attitudes and behaviors began to evolve toward the modern pattern. There was an increasing preoccupation with explicit eroticism, as associations were drawn between free thought and sexual "libertinage". Gradually, people stopped thinking in terms of sexual acts and began thinking of sexual identities. The development of capitalism and urbanization in Europe apparently provided an environment within which "fetishists"<sup>2</sup> could begin to become aware of themselves and contact others with like interests.<sup>3</sup>

By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sexuality had emerged unsurpassed among other motivations viewed as determining human activities. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud herald sexuality's newly designated central mythological importance in the constitution of the psychic life of human beings. Among the types of sexual behavior examined and described by Freud, the "greatest of the myth makers,"<sup>4</sup> perhaps none was as troubling as the perversion that he termed masochism.

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'fetish' and 'fetishist' are yet more contested and ambiguous terms that are multivalent and has been used in many contexts (anthropological, psychiatric, popular culture) since their invention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context I will use them primarily to refer to the costumes, toys, regalia, styles of dress, and means of identification and those who utilize them within the communities.

<sup>3</sup> Steele, Valerie, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> I suggest that, along with Freud, the other most prominent mythmakers are Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Charles Darwin.

The earliest representations of sadism and masochism begin to take shape within the disciplines of medicine and criminology, conforming to the discursive practices of Freud and Krafft-Ebing, respectively. Thus, these early representations are positioned to treat and punish sadism and masochism according to the dictates internal to each discipline. Psychoanalytic theory sought to regularize these errant impulses, first under the libidinal theories of Freud. Later, as his thought developed and his opinions concerning masochism and sadism underwent considerable changes, he sought a place for them within the theories encompassed by the drives, principally the ego and superego drives.

The deployment of discursive practices designed to articulate, explicate, regularize, and establish "normativity"<sup>5</sup> for sexuality and sexual practice are what was new and different in the late Victorian era. Humans had been enacting many of the same dynamics of behavior for millennia. What is different is the way that these behaviors were subsequently typified and represented within specific realms of cultural activity. According to

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<sup>5</sup> This term is derived from Foucault. It is a type of operation of power that establishes and promotes a set of norms (of behavior, of being). While the "normal" might be statistical, norms tend to be *morally* established and have to force of *imperatives*. Heterosexuality might be "normal" in terms of statistics, but the normativity of current understandings of sex grants it the status of a norm, defined against *ab-normal* practices and desires.

Michel Foucault, this transition was already well underway at the beginning of the century:

Sadism is not a name given finally to a practice as old as Eros; it is a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century, and which constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination: unreason transformed into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, the insane dialogue of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite.<sup>6</sup>

Sadomasochism emerges as the most problematic perversity from among the cavalcade of descriptions of sex rendered by Krafft-Ebing, Freud and many others. Foucault gives as silent nod to Freud as his interlocutor as he describes the conversion of imagination. Love and death are categories subsumed into Freud's theorization regarding Eros and Thanatos. "Sex" is rendered problematic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this period sex and sexuality were merely one of many human activities and were not so closely scrutinized for what they might reveal about the inner character of any human being.<sup>7</sup>

Both Freud and Krafft-Ebing rely on literature for their understandings of masochism. Indeed, the forms of this perversion are both named for novelists, Donatien Alphonse François de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, vastly different in

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Random House, 1965), p.210.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault avers succinctly, "In the space of a few centuries, a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I:



temperament and style. Freud successfully hybridized both the names and the behaviors in his restless search for understanding. This onomastic function Freud reserved for himself. It remains largely in place both on a conceptual and popular level to this day. The importance of literature and the literary imagination denoting the meanings of its signs and significations cannot be underestimated in the development and continuity of masochism's production as an organizational social structure. Indeed, the classical mode of psychoanalytic discourse, the case study, is a rigorous and pervasive literary style. Not only is literature important to the understanding of masochism, a higher level of imaginative embodiment is noted in many descriptions of masochism. This category I term "theatricalization," and it remains the definitive mode of self-construction in masochism.<sup>8</sup> I will return to a more complete discussion of the importance of theatrical metaphors, fantasy, and the contested arena of theatricality in a later chapter.

Sadism and masochism begin to be represented under the rubric of pathology and criminology largely through the writings of Krafft-Ebing. In his

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*An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) p.78.

<sup>8</sup> Reik, Theodor, *Masochism in Modern Man*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Co. 1941).

*Psychopathia Sexualis*,<sup>9</sup> sadism and masochism make up half of the four broad categories of sexual variation. The other two are fetishism and homosexuality, which he discusses at length. The essence of masochism, according to Krafft-Ebing's analysis, is not so much the enjoyment of pain as the "drama" of subjection. This subjection is experienced in fictional form as a fantasy, or idea.<sup>10</sup> It is a symbolic act that has a certain "poetry" to it.<sup>11</sup> Krafft-Ebing defines masochism, therefore, as a version of literature. Krafft-Ebing was a natural scientist fashioned in the mold of 19<sup>th</sup>-century positivism. As such, he was convinced that his was a quest for truth. In fact, the literary tropes he used to designate masochism reveal his presuppositions, though not without some paradoxical consequences, as we shall see. He termed his designation of masochism a "discovery", a classical form of modern scientific expression. As a psychopathologist, he looked to juridical texts in

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<sup>9</sup> Krafft-Ebing, Richard, *Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, Trans. F. J. Rebman. 1886, (New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1906, 1934) Many of the salacious parts of this work are tactfully cloaked behind a thin veil, around which only the cognoscenti trained in Latin are able to peek. Presumably these are physicians, lawyers, and ecclesiastics.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

order to find examples of human behavior that revealed its deficiencies. He was not as concerned, as were others of his colleagues, with the complex questions of sexuality and its roots. He believed he was "discovering" universal truths of human nature. For this reason, he drew widely upon examples from past centuries,<sup>12</sup> ignoring the historical coordinates of the behavior. The masochistic perversion that Krafft-Ebing "discovered" was for him a universal affliction. However, this scientific effort at understanding these behaviors and practices limits his view to a rather narrow perspective. As John Noyes points out, this constricted view has its restrictions.

[M]asochistic man as a biologically determined being more or less outside the imperatives of history paradoxically constructed an image of masochistic man as determined by the historical developments of the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Where the positive science of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sought universal objective principles by delving into the objective qualities of matter, the new subjective sciences of psychology, psychiatry, and psychopathology sought universal principles in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 35. He cites the case of Maria Magdalena of Pazzi, a Carmelite of the late sixteenth century, whose "greatest delight [was] to have her hands bound by the prioress behind her back, and her naked loins whipped in the presence of the assembled sisters."

<sup>13</sup> Noyes, John K. *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). pp. 97-98.

sexual drives. Noyes sees in this tendency toward universalization of the "perversion" of masochism as a way out of the nettlesome problem of the constructed and historically bound expressions of masochism. Further complicating the validity of the process is the fact that it takes place in retrospect. It is a process that relies upon a conceptualization of subjectivity that founds it upon a set of universals.

The sexologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, and philosophers who occupied themselves with masochism and related subjects constructed various fictions of masochism's universality. This was a way of solving the paradox that had come to surround the idea of masochism as both a biological constant and a historical contingency.<sup>14</sup>

Masochism, in the etymological scheme of things, is a fairly young word. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no word for the multiplicitous desires and acts that are grouped together within it. This cumbersome onomastic process exerted a kind of violence on the perception of these behaviors and has led to all sorts of confusion. One of the most balanced contemporary defenders of the practices of masochism observes: "Masochism as a term has an invented, ersatz feel about it."<sup>15</sup> It is a slippery concept that has had numerous definitions but which occupies a constantly shifting place in many parts

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, Anita, *A Defence of Masochism*, (London: Faber, 1998) p. 7.

of cultural imagination. The terrain it occupies is so continually contested that even its defenders do not always agree on what it is, what it does, and what it should be. It does not, as do so many other "marginalized" forms of knowledge, have organized recognizable groups attempting to bring about its "liberation."

It has significantly failed to defend itself as a human tendency, resisting reclamation, generalization, the movements of empowerment and integration that have transformed and enlarged views across the centuries; it has so far stood outside these liberating surges; either refusing or being unable to reveal itself as an authentic mode of experience.<sup>16</sup>

Sadism, in contrast to the varied descriptions of masochism, is consistently defined by the early interpreters as the production of sexual arousal (including orgasm) by inflicting pain. Krafft-Ebing derived his understanding from the outlook articulated in the novels of the Marquis de Sade. Sade had achieved notoriety both in the events of his life and through his fiction. The novels *Justine*<sup>17</sup> and *Juliette*<sup>18</sup> are prominent examples. From these works, Krafft-Ebing defines sadism as the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Justine*, in *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, (rev. ed.), trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> *Juliette*, (rev. ed.), trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1988).

opposite of masochism. Whereas the sadist desires to inflict pain and use force, the masochist often has the desire to suffer pain and be subjected to force. In the novels of Sade, the libertines are constantly in motion, setting up fantastic and unrealizable tableaux of sexual coupling. In the novels of Sacher-Masoch, on the other hand, the goal is to achieve a kind of freezing or suspense, where the punishment is imminent but just out of reach. Obviously, if we accept these literary modes as representative of the thought of Sade and Sacher-Masoch, then the overriding ideas of their creators are radically different. Nonetheless, Krafft-Ebing set the precedent for associating masochism with sadism in his definition of the former as "the opposite of sadism ... the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force."<sup>19</sup> He concluded that masochism and sadism were so closely related that the analogy with sadism "alone is sufficient to establish the purely psychical character of masochism."<sup>20</sup> Krafft-Ebing's confident formulation of a unified sadomasochism depended on two underlying assumptions. First, it presupposes the simple reversal of active and passive positions as the distinctive difference between the two perversions. Secondly, and perhaps more important for the later

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<sup>19</sup> Krafft-Ebing, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Krafft-Ebing, p. 131, 215.

representations of masochism by gay men and lesbians, is the designation of masochism as a pathological exaggeration of feminine traits. Many of his rather dubiously founded concepts would be perpetuated in Freud's earlier writings on the subject.

In seeking to define the "opposite" of sadism, he again turned to a literary figure for his term, this time the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, a historian, dramatist, and novelist. Sacher-Masoch was born in 1835 in Lemberg, Galicia. He was of Slav, Spanish, and Bohemian descent. Some of his ancestors held official positions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father served as police chief in Lemberg and young Sacher-Masoch probably witnessed prison scenes and riots early in his life which were to have a profound effect on him. Sacher-Masoch made his reputation first as historian and then turned to the publication of novels. He became famous with the publication circa 1870 of *Venus in Furs*.<sup>21</sup> He was greatly disturbed when Krafft-Ebing used his name to designate a perversion. His writings became stereotypes, almost always featuring a woman in furs, (he had a fondness, and some would say a *fetish* for furs). She, wielding a whip, emblematic of lust, scourged her male lover for his animal lusts. Wanda and Gregor, the protagonists of *Venus in Furs*, signify the active and passive

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<sup>21</sup> Sacher-Masoch, Leopold von, *Venus in Furs*, (1870?) trans. Uwe Moeller and Laura Lindgren, (New York: Blast Books, 1989).

participants in flagellation in Krafft-Ebing's scheme. Gilles Deleuze notes that unlike Sade, whose libertines were always cruel and removed from the feelings of their victims, for Sacher-Masoch the sensual feelings of his male characters was primary:

Severin, the hero of *Venus*, takes as a motto for his doctrine of "supersensualism" the words of Mephistopheles to Faust: "Thou sensual libertine, a little girl can lead thee by the nose." (*Ubersinnlich* in Goethe's text does not mean "supersensitive" but "supersensual," in conformity with theological tradition, where *Sinnlichkeit* denotes the *flesh*, *sensualitas*).<sup>22</sup>

Krafft-Ebing's references to historical cases of sadism, aside from Sade, are the Caesars, Nero, and Tiberius, and Gilles de Rais.<sup>23</sup> Rais was burned at the stake in 1440 on account of his alleged mutilating and murdering over 800 children. While the similarities to Sade are complicated and the cultural circumstances quite different in 15<sup>th</sup> century France, it is fairly certain that Sade was familiar with the transgression of de Rais. Indeed, Sade's profligacy with money and his disregard for the sanctity of family property resemble those of de

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<sup>22</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> De Rais, who is known in a garbled manner by way of the legend of "Barbe Bleu", or Bluebeard, also figures in the novel hailed by some as the first "modern" novel to make use of the "anti-hero", as the protagonist. I am referring to Joris-Karl Huysman's torpid and controversial novel of 1884 entitled *La-Bas*.



Rais<sup>24</sup>. Krafft-Ebing's remaining reference to a more recent historical example of masochism is to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* famously described his desire to be subjected and whipped by a woman. Despite the fact that these examples are vastly different in historical context, Krafft-Ebing easily attributes the same motivations to Roman era dictators as he does to a medieval nobleman and a paragon of the Enlightenment rationality.

Krafft-Ebing argued that sadism was a pathological intensification of the masculine character and masochism a pathological degeneration of the distinctive psychical peculiarities of women. Curiously, however, he included examples of female sadists and male masochists. His concepts of sadism and masochism as examples of individual psychopathology have become part of modern sexology as well as popular culture. Krafft-Ebing utilizes the medico-juridical literary genre to accomplish much the same exposition of vice, though certainly with a more disapproving slant, as did the Marquis de Sade. As Ivan Bloch dryly observes:

Michelet and Taine call Sade "Professor of Crime." He was the theoretician of vice; inasmuch as he collected and described with faithful accuracy from his own

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<sup>24</sup> What finally brought down de Rais may have had more to do with his squandering of family fortune and his sale and dispersal of estates than it did with the use of serfs who were considered chattel and subject to the whims of the seigneur. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there were more legal and popular challenges to these absolute aristocratic privileges. Sade was probably the last of these aristocrats imbued with the combination of such voluminous capacities for both lust and arrogance.

experience and observations all the contemporary anomalies of the sexual life of his times in his main works. Marquis de Sade wrote in the form of a novel what Krafft-Ebing did in his scientific work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a hundred years later.<sup>25</sup>

Here is a direct line from the scabrous and vilified novels of Sade to the technical and scientific tone of Krafft-Ebing's analysis. Even a cursory glance at the pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis* reveals the disapproving tone and horrified glance of the writer. As Tim Edwards observes, the construction of both sadomasochism and homosexuality suffer from similar defects.

Krafft-Ebing defined activities of sadism and masochism in more medical and scientific terms and the construction of sado-masochism is in many ways similar to the construction of male homosexuality though murkier and more distorted through a lack of any really valid evidence or study.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that the two conceptions of perversion developed side by side during the same historical period. Sadomasochistic behavior and homosexuality were both demonized and categorized as pathological from around the period of 1870, as famously observed by Michel Foucault.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bloch, Ivan, *Marquis De Sade: The Man and His Age*, (New York: Julian Press, 1931), p. 267.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, Tim . *Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity, and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 43.

In characterizing sadism and masochism, another lesser known sexologist and contemporary of Freud, Schrenk-Notzing, preferred the term "algolagnia" which he defined as a lust or craving for pain. He deduces both concepts from a higher concept, *algolagnia* (*álgos*, pain; *lágnos*, sexual excitation). However, while he also argued that the two phenomena of sadism and masochism were linked together, he believed that the differences between the active and passive roles in the novels of the Marquis de Sade and Sacher-Masoch were not as sharp as Krafft-Ebing declared.

Havelock Ellis went further and argued that sado-masochism was not based upon cruelty, but instead might be motivated by love. He writes:

The masochist desires to experience pain, but he generally desires that it should be inflicted in love; the sadist desires to inflict pain, but in some cases, if not most, he desires it should be felt as love.<sup>28</sup>

Freud further broadened the concept, introducing the popularly accepted term "sado-masochism" as two forms of the same entity, often found in the same person. However, this conjoining of the two terms may be misleading, and even Freud himself seems to have focused more of his attention on the masochistic part of the pathology.

A sadist is simultaneously a masochist, though either the active or the passive side of the perversion may

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<sup>28</sup> Ellis, Havelock, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 142.

be more strongly developed in him and thus, represent his preponderant sexual activity.<sup>29</sup>

Freud's modification of Krafft-Ebing's seminal discursive practice became institutionalized in psychoanalytic thought. His linking of the two terms and the two types of behavior set the stage for the next two generations of literary analysis of sadism and masochism. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the Freudian version of the story of sadism and masochism that dominated in both scholarly and popular literature. In general, sadomasochism has been seen as intrinsically pathological. Its participants are seen as a particular kind of people for whom the behavior is a symptom of some underlying personality problem.<sup>30</sup>

As he was outlining his theory of libido motivation, Freud developed his earliest views on masochism. In this theory, sexual drives were invoked as basic motivators of all kinds of behaviors. He proposed here that masochism, as a sexual perversion, results from a fixation on or

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<sup>29</sup> Freud, "The Sexual Aberrations", in *Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. A. A. Brill, (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 570.

<sup>30</sup> Both sadism and masochism are still listed as diagnostic categories in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (See Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission*, for a lengthy discussion of this debate and its more recent outcomes.) Noyes, John K., *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

regression to a form of infantile sexuality. One pays the price for pleasure, accepting pain as an appeasement for castration, stressing one's helplessness, or denying sadistic impulses.

However, as he later propounded his theory of the interaction of the ego and the superego, the concept of masochism came to be broadened to include nonsexual forms of masochism. Freud analyzes three forms of masochism in this later elaboration. They are erotogenic, feminine, and moral. Primary (erotogenic) masochism is the root of the other two, which are properly variants upon it.<sup>31</sup> In defining primary masochism he returns to the notion from the 1905 work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*,<sup>32</sup> to suggest that the polymorphous perverse character of infantile sexuality, within which any intense stimulus may be erotically stimulating, is the foundation of erotogenic masochism.<sup>33</sup> This is insufficient, however, and he later adds the concept of instinctual fusing, which is the merging of the erotic and death-oriented interests into a single instinctual expression. "Masochism subjugates the

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<sup>31</sup> Freud, "Economic Problem of Masochism", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 19. (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 192.

<sup>32</sup> *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE, Vol. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193-5.

death drive: it is thus, however idiosyncratically, life affirming."<sup>34</sup> The critical step here, for later developments in literature and culture at large, is the formulation of the category of "moral masochism." Moral masochism is a more generalized realm of behavior and is missing the explicitly sexual character of erotogenic masochism. In moral masochism humiliation and failure replace physical pain and punishment. The individual providing the punishment is no longer immediately present in the environment of the individual. Rather, it comes to be felt as "Fate, destiny, or God" who wields the cudgels of failure and frustration. However, while the awareness is withdrawn from consciousness by these displacements, Freud still thought that infantile sexual motivations remained at their core. This stylization of masochism, absent of its sexual and erotic components, has passed readily into the popular imagination and lexicon.<sup>35</sup>

However, not content with these theories, and still troubled by masochism, Freud finally proposed a radical explanation for masochism that was one of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>35</sup> For accounts of the presence of this movement in the literature of late the 19<sup>th</sup> century see, Siegal, Carol, *Male Masochism: Modern Revisions of the Story of Love*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), Stewart, Suzanne R. *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), and Massé, Michelle A., *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

his most controversial ideas. He awarded self-destructive impulses the status of instinct, ultimately more powerful than the life instincts. He proposed that "beyond the pleasure principle" there was an even more basic "death instinct".<sup>36</sup> This very speculative theory is not generally held within psychoanalysis today, and is based on some of Freud's most metaphysical reasoning.<sup>37</sup>

The contradictions in masochism's mixture of pleasure and pain are not easily explained. However, the representative nature of punishment is essential to understanding the structure of masochistic pleasure. The masochist does not actually lust after pain, as Freud asserted. Instead, as Theodor Reik observes, the masochist always seeks pleasure. There is no reversal of aim or object. Pleasure is simply arrived at "by another road, by a detour," since the masochist voluntarily "submits to punishment, suffering, and humiliation, and thus has defiantly purchased the right to enjoy the gratification denied before."<sup>38</sup> As another psychoanalyst observed as he tried yet again to formulate a theoretical "overview" late in the century:

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<sup>36</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", SE, Vol. 19, p. 245.

<sup>37</sup> Grossman, William I., "Notes on Masochism: A Discussion of the History and Development of a Psychoanalytic Concept," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, No. 55, 1986. p. 381.

<sup>38</sup> Reik, Theodor, *Masochism in Modern Man*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Co. 1941), p. 428.

It is interesting to note that Freud was so impressed with masochistic phenomena that he finally concluded that his initial elaborate theories only partially explained them, and finally endowed masochism with the status of an instinct.<sup>39</sup>

Philosopher Karmen McKendrick notes more evidence of the lack of clarity regarding both definitions of masochism and its appropriate placement within literary genres:

There is considerable psychological, particularly clinical, work available on masochism. As a clinical phenomenon, it seems to attract rather more sympathy (if hardly more comprehension) than sadism. Little philosophical work on perverse literature of Sacher-Masoch, startlingly little compared to philosophical interest and literature generated by Sade's work. Even psychological work on masochism applies only poorly to Masoch; it tends to focus on self-infliction of pain. (Even Freud classifies such acts as masochistic, but his work lacks a separate category of ascetic pleasure-sublimation covers only a part of it.) The idea of masochism as a compulsive, auto-destructive behavior is rather more fearful than it is persuasive or explanatory.<sup>40</sup>

It is quite clear that in successive generations of psychoanalytic theorists and clinical practitioners, the concept of masochism is broadly utilized though most often confused and contested. Many papers, books, conferences, and panel discussions over the course of the last sixty years

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<sup>39</sup> Sack, Robert L, and Warren Miller, "Masochism: A Clinical and Theoretical Overview," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 38, August 1975.p. 245-46.

<sup>40</sup> McKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999). p. 51.



have failed to reach any sort of consensus. This stems in part from the complexity of the behaviors and the psychoanalytic terms used to describe them. Since the behaviors and the nomenclature often have several layers of meaning, it is difficult to come to agreement. In addition, the very terms of the definitions themselves are complex and multilayered: desire, pleasure, sexuality, pain or (rather oddly) unpleasure, and aggression.

William Grossman reiterates his notion that the concept of masochism has been so broadly expanded that masochistic tendencies are to be readily recognized in the normal as well as the pathological personality. "At present, there is general agreement that there are phenomena deserving to be called masochism or masochistic in normal people as well as people with a variety of pathological syndromes."<sup>41</sup> What he finds is that since Freud began to draw attention to the sexually and libidinally organized traits of masochism, later adding to it by way of his nonsexual definitions of moral masochism, the concept of masochism has become embedded into the cultural consciousness as a combination of pleasure and what the psychoanalysts disarmingly call "unpleasure." Not content with the category of "pain", which is itself ambiguous and culturally constructed, the invention of the term unpleasure

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<sup>41</sup> Grossman, William I., "Notes on Masochism: A Discussion of the History and Development of a Psychoanalytic Concept," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, No. 55, 1986, p. 382.

serves to cloud the issue even further. But Grossman is not dissuaded from the thought that masochism is still a useful clinical and theoretical designation. He believes that it is not without significance.

"However, behavior that can be described as masochistic evidently has different significance and consequences when it is found in different character types.<sup>42</sup>" Here Grossman admits that the level of significance of so-called masochistic behavior has rather different meanings depending upon the individual in whom they appear. In other words, for some personalities, masochism may be well integrated into the structure and function of their lives and may not appear as pathological. In others it may be a limiting and debilitating construct that interferes with proper ego development or properly realized self-image. The isolated, self-infliction of pain conforms to this description and it is this typification from which psychoanalytic theoreticians have extrapolated their conclusions about the whole of sadomasochistic behavior. The social and sexual practices of "normal" people may include less debilitating "significance and consequences."

Grossman offers an interesting and potentially useful insight into the importance of fantasy.

"Masochistic fantasies are recognized by a preoccupation with combining something the subject regards as pleasurable with something he regards as

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 385.

unpleasurable.”<sup>43</sup> This juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory, apparently mutually exclusive goals is what makes masochism so notoriously difficult to conceptualize and apprehend on a solely rationalistic, theoretical level. It is this tension, mediated by fantasy, between two categories seeming always at odds (pleasure/pain, discomfort/repose, and dominance/submission) that makes masochism successful and operative as a category of human experience.

Grossman recognizes the vital importance of fantasy for the operation of masochism:

While it has sometimes been said that, in masochism, pain is only a condition of pleasure, or that pain is or is not sought for itself, the essential point is that in the fantasy the combination is obligatory.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the presence of both pleasure (often not adequately described or explicated philosophically) and unpleasure (discomfort, pain, submission) are concomitantly present in the fantasy that the masochist carries with him both prior to and during the enactment of the fantasy of his subjugation and control at the hands of the partner.

Grossman admits later that the attempt to pin down masochism as a distinct concept is doomed to fail:

With any effort to dissect masochism conceptually or to find a universal function for it, masochism

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

dissolves into the specific issues that go into its composition: vicissitudes of pleasure and unpleasure, of aggression, of activity and passivity in relation to authority, of significant identifications, and of impulse control and reality testing.<sup>45</sup>

Masochism works to put an end to the notion that binary oppositions will continue to be useful tools with which to define modernity. In addition, there is in all likelihood only a slight prospect for any understanding of the intellectual history of the masochistic subject to be put forth by those within the established professions of psychiatry and psychology. As well, there is little prospect for genuine understanding of it as a phenomenon by way of this narrow and reductive discursive practice, whether it is viewed as pathologically debilitating or socially integrated and assimilated to a specific cultural realm. As a group of unflinching and astute commentators located within that field recently admitted:

There is no historical development of a theory per se of masochism in psychoanalysis. We believe that the term masochism has had a fascinating history within psychoanalysis and that the recent, impressive reviews of literature on the subject (Maleson, 1984, Grossman, 1986)<sup>46</sup> actually give us a historical account of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>46</sup> Maleson, F.G., "The Multiple Meanings of Masochism in Psychoanalytic Discourse," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 32, (2), Grossman, William I., "Notes on Masochism: A Discussion of the History and Development of a Psychoanalytic Concept," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, No. 55, 1986.

progress of psychoanalysis as an intellectual and political movement, but add little to the understanding of it as a phenomenon.<sup>47</sup>

It is not surprising that a more positive interpretation should come from the side of art rather than science. Anita Phillips asserts that masochism, "[C]an never be seen from a scientific perspective, though the scientist of integrity (Freud, for example) cannot help but see that there is something that he or she is missing<sup>48</sup>." Indeed, Freud wrestled significantly at several moments in his long years of meditation on the subject, never satisfactorily explaining it even within his own system(s). He was never able to quite explain what Phillip's calls the "overspill". Leo Bersani also talks at length about this inconsistency in Freud. That "something more" that Freud is missing is precisely what interests us in the next chapter as the sociologists begin to enter where the psychiatrists have left off.

Taking up this challenge to begin a process of interpretation from an aesthetic and philosophical point of view, Gilles Deleuze begins by drawing important distinctions between the authors Sade and Sacher-Masoch, the eponymous scribes for whom the

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<sup>47</sup> Montgomery, Jill D. and Ann C. Greif, editors, *Masochism: The Treatment of Self-Inflicted Suffering*, (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1989), p. xi.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, Anita, *A Defence of Masochism*, (London: Faber, 1998), p. 8.

perversions and social behaviors were named. Sacher-Masoch was displeased when he learned that Krafft-Ebing named a classification of moral depravity after him. One imagines as well that the Divine Marquis, irascible and choleric as he deemed himself to be, (Sade decreed that at death his remains be buried in an unmarked grave and the site planted with oak trees) would be enraged at having his writings thus misunderstood. Sade considered anarchy to be the truest form of republicanism, and held that vice is the highest virtue. The reduction of his thought regarding the primacy of vice to the signification of a type of sexual perversion misses almost completely the philosophical and political import of his work.

While both of these authors come from aristocratic backgrounds, the similarity virtually ends there. Similarity and complementarity are also ruled out in Deleuze's analysis of the literary typologies and the perversions that bear their names. Deleuze holds that the principle of the unity of opposites and the assumption of the complementarity and dialectical unity within the writings of Sacher-Masoch and the figurations of Sade is quite unfair to the spirit of Sacher-Masoch's writings. He disrupts the yoking of the two literary forms promulgated by Krafft-Ebing and Freud. Deleuze sets us on the road to a closer and more exclusive look at masochism as the operative mode of subjectivity employed in both sadomasochism and S/M. According to Deleuze, Sacher-Masoch has suffered from neglect, and by a system of reversal

and transposition the rather better known clinical and literary studies of sadism and Sade, respectively, have ignored the dissimilar universes of Sade and Sacher-Masoch.

Focusing upon the less well-known writings of Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze questions the linking of the two into an entity known as sadomasochism. He calls attention to the fact that the problems, concerns, and intentions of each author are entirely dissimilar. He suggests that we go back to the literary roots from which these designations sprang and came to be joined in the psychoanalytic and medical traditions. Deleuze claims that each author is in search of a higher function, a higher imperative for language. In the case of Sade, the goal was to demonstrate that reason itself was a form of violence, and that he is on the side of violence. Hence, Sade is in need of institutions upon which to enact his demonstration, where Sacher-Masoch, on the other hand, is in need of contractual relations. Here, Deleuze draws upon a medieval distinction between two types of commerce with the devil.<sup>49</sup> The first resulted from possession, and the second from alliance. The sadist thinks in terms of institutional possession, the masochist in terms of contracted alliance. The primary institutions with which Sade chose to do battle were the church and his mother-in-law, who was largely responsible for

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<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 20.

keeping him incarcerated for many long periods in his life. For Sacher-Masoch, the alliance was always with a woman with whom he wished to instruct on how to be a despot. Thus, he is essentially an educator and his contracted partners may conform more or less precisely to what he envisions in fantasy for the undertaking. Part of the reason for continually renegotiating the contract and for having it cover a limited duration is the thrill of the process of fantasy attendant upon educating a potential new torturess.

In later representations of sadomasochism, one sees much of the same process at work. There is a large degree of education that goes on and almost all of it begins with an advertisement and a contract, just as in the case of Sacher-Masoch. In the words of Deleuze:

We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes.<sup>50</sup>

While the sadist ignores, even abominates and seeks to destroy contracts, the masochist seeks them out and advertises for his potential signatories. In the non-pathological realm of contemporary sadomasochistic practice, in which the overarching predominance of what can be termed "masochism" is operative; it is this contractual feature that calls our attention to the ethical implications of these

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



proceedings. Here one may be tempted to evaluate and offer suggestions as to the meritorious or vicious character of these acts. However, before proceeding to that task, it is important to consider the next series of appropriations and representations that set about to make sense of masochism.

In this chapter I have outlined the first series of literary representations of masochism and sadism. Many of the discordant features and loose ends of these descriptions have been pointed out. The descriptions of psychoanalytic theory, psychiatry, and psychology have failed to prove adequate to the task of describing the ongoing representations and cultural complexity of masochism and sadomasochism as the century wears on toward the mid-point. There is no consensus on what masochism is or what it means. The reductivism of scientific theory has left out the complex motivations of individual human beings as they seek satisfaction and pleasure by way of seemingly destructive and disordered sexual practice.

## CHAPTER III

### SOCIOLOGY JOINS THE FRAY: PUSHING THE LIMITS

From the time of the earliest writings about masochism, there has been a great concern over what it "means." The sexologists attempt to wrest its meaning out of juridical and medical models of aberrant and pathological behavior. However, one notices that even Freud was largely unsatisfied with his renderings of a description of masochism and returned to his writing table many times to attempt yet another representation that would attend to all of its perplexing character. In this chapter, I will outline the series of attempts to describe other aspects of masochism made by a range of scholars during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These thinkers, mostly oriented toward the social sciences, began to notice that sadomasochistic behavior was not always self-destructive and that it contained significant elements of organizational skill and required orientation toward the imagination and fantasy.

The search for meaning continues as sociologists suggested social and cultural strands of meaning, rather than psychogenic and pathological ones, which held clues to the assemblage of masochistic representations. They began to take note of a social character to many expressions of masochism, and found that in order to successfully make contact

with others, assemble the necessary tools and social spaces for the enactment of S/M scenes, a high degree of organizational skill and intentionality is required. They began to look away from psychological models of masochism, recognizing that masochism is often a consciously undertaken social construct involving deliberation, negotiation, and perseverance. They found that psychiatric models failed to explain the use of symbols used by S/M practitioners to escape the frustrations of conventional sexuality and attain some sort of transcendence. These accounts of sadomasochistic practice studied non-pathological, social formations of masochism, where the elements of safety, proficiency, and adherence to limits stipulated in contracts are promoted among devotees. In addition to the critical importance of the contract, the distinction between pain and harm is noted. Inherent to these discussions of masochism is the explicit need for *relationship*, in contrast to strictly sadistic practice in which the sadist takes no notice of the other. Like the previous psychological/psychoanalytic representations, these discourses also take note of the central importance of fantasy and literary creation to the masochistic endeavor. As the story moves forward, the predominance of masochism as the operative function at work in most examples of sadomasochism and S/M play continues to be apparent. While the accounts of masochism put forward by these discursive practices improve upon the reductivism of the psychoanalytic thinkers, they still fall short when it comes to a

fuller appreciation of the historical and political import of sadomasochistic practice.

In his admittedly hostile account of psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalysis, Bill Thompson<sup>1</sup> opens with a scathing and breezy account of Freud's foibles in ignoring the communal and social features of sadomasochism and focusing instead upon its etiologic and all-encompassing psychogenic "causes". He suggests that every work that purports to discover the real meaning of sadomasochism has instead invented one.<sup>2</sup> He credits the rise of the openly gay community with showing that it is likely that a group of people will get closer to the real meaning of an experience within a group of like minded souls rather than from an isolated individual on a psychiatrist's couch.

Thompson introduces the most promising lead from the sociologists who at last begin to take notice of and explore the world of sexuality in the late 1960s. Once homosexuality was recognized as a legitimate expression of sexual identity, and after a contentious internal organizational struggle, the American Psychiatric Association removed it from its medicalized designation as a mental illness (1973). It was not long before attention turned to other, equally complex and stigmatized forms of local

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Bill, *Sadomasochism: Painful Perversion or Pleasurable Play?*, (London: Cassell, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

knowledge,<sup>3</sup> in the form of sexual expression such as S/M sex. It quickly became apparent to the sociologists that interpretations based solely on the concept of giving and receiving pain were adequate neither for describing what is really a very complex set of social behaviors, nor did convoluted theories of psychogenic origin within isolated individuals seeking therapy explain the social world that grew around these cultural practices. Thompson cites the groundbreaking essay by physician, sexologist, and anthropologist Paul Gebhard, whose 1968 essay "Fetishism and Sadomasochism"<sup>4</sup> deflected the notion of an individual pathology described by a few "extreme" examples, and pointed instead toward sadomasochism's cultural roots.

It is not only human beings that seek to dominate and control others in their environment in order to obtain some advantage or good. Aggressive and combative features are present in many other animal species, Gebhard noted. Moreover, it has been shown that there may be positive neurophysiological effects involved in these aggressive moves often oriented toward gaining or maintaining territory or procreative advantage: increased pulse and blood

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<sup>3</sup> This term is derived from Foucault.

<sup>4</sup> Gebhard, Paul, 'Fetishism and Sadomasochism', in *Dynamics of Deviant Sexuality*, edited by Jules H. Masserman, (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1969).

pressure, hyperventilation, and muscular tension. Such behavior, however, medicalized in the realm of human sexuality during the period of 19<sup>th</sup>-and 20<sup>th</sup>-century culture, came to be represented as aberrant. At the same time, Gebhard argued the cultures of the dominant West has promoted many dominant-submissive relationships (teacher-pupil, boss-worker, physician-patient) and thus would appear to assign positive value to social aggression. The American tradition of the self-made man [*sic*] and the rags-to-riches millionaire are well known examples of favored modes of this kind of social aggression. However, what sets these explicitly sadomasochistic examples apart is their connection with imaginative representational structures that require a kind of literature or literary work in order to succeed. Bill Thompson makes this point:

What was really intriguing about sadomasochism was that it appeared prevalent in its organized forms only in literate societies full of symbolic meanings; which meant that, far from being a manifestation of a base instinct, sadomasochism requires a considerable amount of intelligence and organization.<sup>5</sup>

Anita Phillips also makes this point in her insider's view of S/M. She makes a plea for the understanding of sadomasochistic practice as rather much more than the identity bestowed upon it by discursive practices such as psychiatry and psychology. These are bent on pathologizing it because of misunderstandings about the meanings of

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, p. 118.

violence within its practice. She also seeks to set masochism back into the context of the diverse human experiences from which it was first plucked. My project in this work is similar in that it eschews demonizing those who practice S/M and seeks instead to form an understanding of how it is interpreted from within various contexts: literary, sociological, and philosophical. Phillips says it succinctly, adopting and inverting the language of sadomasochism's detractors among the psychoanalytic tradition: "On the contrary, I assert that masochism flees violence and constructs an unusual and compelling scenario that needs to be understood in order to work. It is a very intelligent perversion."<sup>6</sup> Phillips recognizes that it is a scenario that is constructed. Masochism is a consciously undertaken social construct that requires thoughtfulness and understanding so that it does not simply perpetuate the cycles of domination and aggression that lead to violence and harm.

Evidence produced by detractors who would explain masochism by way of childhood psychodynamics is unhelpful. If masochism is seen as a way of living out the punishments and prohibitions of childhood for sexual exploration, it makes more sense to think of it as a way to both relieve guilt and, at the same time, to seek pleasure. What is sought is not pain for its own sake, as we see from

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, Anita, *A Defence of Masochism*, (London: Faber, 1998). p. 2.

the intuition of Reik, who says the goal is always pleasure. Thus, what is sought above all is pleasure. It is simply that said pleasure is often produced alongside varying amounts of pain. Indeed, for many practitioners of S/M, the most pleasure is accompanied by not unexceptional amounts of pain.

It is well known from medical research into pain and its perception by patients that tolerance for pain ranges across a wide margin of variables.<sup>7</sup> In short, some people have higher tolerances for certain types of pain; often the same individual will have different tolerances for pain across different circumstances. For example, a competitive runner will endure inconceivable pain and will delay or ignore the realization of that pain until the race is completed. Or consider the well-known examples of soldiers who suffer severe battlefield injuries. Rather than focusing primarily on their obvious pain and suffering, these soldiers seem to welcome grievous wounds that promise immediate release from the isolation and terror of warfare.

By the same token, it becomes apparent that accidental pain will not suffice either. If masochistic practice was simply about the acquisition of pain, then devotees could quite as easily gain pleasure or sexual satisfaction from accidental pain. Dropping a dead weight onto one's

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<sup>7</sup> For a fine cultural history of pain see Morris, David B., *The Culture of Pain*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).



partner's toe while performing some prosaic household task would secure the same pleasure as the production of an explicitly erotic conjunction of pain and pleasure. But such is not the case. It is only in elaborately scripted and painstakingly detailed scenarios that the masochist is able to derive the "right" pain. It is not simply sexual violence randomly delivered at the hands of a perpetrator emotionally unconnected to his or her victim, as is the case in classical depictions of violence found in Sade and among criminals exhibiting so-called "sadistic" behavior.

Indeed, not all masochists describe a liking for physical pain. For some, the *threat* of punishment is enough to arouse the masochist's desire. For others, the threat must be continued and held above them while they linger in a state of suspense.<sup>8</sup> (This is the classic scenario of frozen, iconic suspense described so fondly by Sacher-Masoch.) Still others derive their satisfaction not in the moment of their bondage or suspense, but in reflecting back upon the

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<sup>8</sup> Sometimes the suspense is literal—suspension bondage is quite popular. Submissives will be routinely but skillfully hung from all manner of pulleys, winches, chains, slings, etc. Often in conjunction with these practices is an additional set of practices devoted to breath control. The practices of S/M begin to resemble ascetic or religiously oriented traditions which seek to control the body and its excesses and privations. However, these practices are consciously enacted to produce pleasure rather than to flee it, as was often the case with Christian ascetics. For an introductory philosophical excursus on masochism and asceticism see McKendrick, Karmen, *Counterpleasures*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

events, or merely in anticipating the next scenario. Many enthusiasts emphatically deny that they like pain, but rather are stimulated by the idea of constraint. Others feel that the sense of helplessness in bondage games is erotically stimulating. For example, among gay male practitioners of S/M, this sense of relinquishing control but not fully abjuring their masculinity is often paramount. For example, for many gay men, to be subjected sexually to the masculinity of another man—but not surrendering one's own masculinity—that is the ideal.

For Gebhard, the explanations offered by the psychiatric establishment simply did not suffice to cover the phenomena they were presumably addressing. He suggests that widespread sadomasochism might follow from the frustrations of living in a hierarchical order premised on dominant and submissive relationships. Paired with the perennial difficulties encountered in the search for sexual gratification, these dominating and submissive representational structures of the hierarchy make use of the representations of sex to describe themselves, and vice versa. For example, who has not overheard someone saying that their boss is trying to "screw" them? Thompson declares:

As a result, organized sadomasochism would appear only in well-developed, complex civilizations with extensive symbolic meaning systems, in which some people sought to transcend the inescapable repressions

and frustrations through the symbolism of sadomasochism.<sup>9</sup>

Gebhard's analysis has some drawbacks, such as a rather murky and circuitous concept of cultural influence, especially as it relates to the taboos against violence, and a limited explanation of the importance of the role of fantasy in cultural constructs. Yet his was the first call by a psychoanalyst for a different look at sadomasochism's roots in society and culture rather than in individual pathology. In the derisive words of Bill Thompson, "the psychobabblers spell had been broken and sociology moved in."<sup>10</sup>

Following the late 1960s, additional important studies were undertaken to define and more accurately characterize the types of people involved in S/M, the sexual acts transpiring between them, and the meanings attached to them by the performers. Add to that the fact that the decade between Gebhard's article and the beginning of the Reagan era were a time of enormous social experimentation and upheaval. The first major study undertaken was by a German sociologist named Andreas Spengler.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thompson, p.120.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Spengler, Andreas, "Manifest Sadomasochism of Males: Results of an Empirical Study", *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, vol. 6, (1977), p. 441-56.

Utilizing a contact list of customers ordering S/M gear through mail order houses in Germany, he sent out a groundbreaking questionnaire. By way of a research instrument contacting self-identified sadomasochists who were *not* seeking therapeutic solutions, Spengler was able to begin to draw a rather different picture of sadomasochism. He found that most of the respondents did not engage in compulsive sexual encounters. Their frequency of experience was low with a mean score of five experiences a year. Simple bondage complemented by some form of corporal punishment was the most common preference.<sup>12</sup> Most respondents reported being at ease with their desires: 90% had never considered going to a physician or other professional about their sexual practice. Those who expressed some negativity about their S/M involvement were generally those who were not integrated into the extensive subculture of Germany's S/M scene.<sup>13</sup> Social isolation combined with a stigmatized sexuality produced negative evaluations of one's personal situation. In the wake of the vast social upheavals of the 60s and 70s, it is this need which was most readily addressed by the flourishing communities of S/M devotees that began to proliferate on the edges of the gay liberation movement in major cities around the world. Men and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 451.

women who felt at ease with their sexual choices and sexual practices begin to gather together and share their experience and to hone their skills.

The study based on German devotees was soon followed up with several American studies that also debunked many of the psychologists and psychiatrists stereotypes. Rather than attempting to involve non-devotees in their outré practices, these surveys found that S/M folks generally keep to themselves, not attempting to persuade others to become involved in their sexual interests. An element of transgression is usually present in much of the behavior. Consistently, social and sexual taboos are a frequent target of some S/M acts. Yet the general preference was found to favor relative privacy for the performance of these acts. Most people in the scene want to avoid deliberate confrontation with "straights"<sup>14</sup> because they tend to believe they would not readily understand the pleasure that S/M has to offer. Concerning the sets of social sanctions and the types of processes that emerged in America around S/M practice, Thompson offers this estimation:

The SM Community which grew up around the devotees' clubs, meetings, organizations, contact sheets, magazines and stores not only generated a set of SM social values which rationalized and justified the devotees' interest in SM, it also went to great lengths to ensure the physical safety of its own

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<sup>14</sup> Those who were not involved in the scene who are perceived to be either lacking in understanding or actively hostile to the behavior of S/M devotees.

members. Far from promoting pain, SM devotees had their own techniques, rules, beliefs, and language to reduce the possibility of harm, promoted by their own organizations, facilities, and experts, who helped new initiates to explore their feelings in safety.<sup>15</sup>

Several important notes clearly and resoundingly reverberate in this brief paragraph. First, on a broad sweep, it is apparent that a coherent social world emerges out of a set of diverse and seemingly disparate practices. It is the social and textual locations where S/M begins to cohere: in the social contact by way of magazines, pamphlets, and public gathering places. Values are articulated, rationalized, and promulgated, albeit with discretion and privacy. This is a world in which the insiders seek to protect, defend, and recognize their own. They also seek effectively to remain open to integration of neophytes tentatively exploring involvement and affiliation in that world. Second, the distinction between pain and harm emerges as a controlling factor in how S/M encounters are to take place within this self-regulating group that paradoxically defies and undermines many other kinds of authority. As the lyric by Bob Dylan claims, "To live outside the law you must be honest." Most in the S/M world would agree. Those who transgress as a way of regular practice must be able to count on each other and to abide in a semblance of trust and trustworthiness. Permission to transgress does not

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<sup>15</sup> Thompson, Bill, *Sadomasochism: Painful Perversion or Pleasurable Play?*, (London: Cassell, 1994), p.122.

include the permission to do harm. This is implied in the assent to the contract that is entered into either formally or informally at the outset of an S/M encounter.

Deleuze, once again insisting that masochism is radically and generically different than sadism, stresses that the crucial component of the masochistic relationship is the *contract*, an agreement that is often formalized (as in Sacher-Masoch). According to this scheme, the modern and postmodern participants who are adhering to the guidelines of "safe, sane, and consensual" are not sadists at all. These are the bywords often repeated among those that lecture publicly and write in various publications about proper S/M procedure and protocol. Promotion and enactment of the watchwords safe, sane, and consensual is meant to counter directly the notion that S/M is inherently dangerous, is somehow an expression of psychotic or troubled personality disorders, and is based on coercion. The contract distinguishes these practitioners from the sadist:

The difference between a contract, which presupposes consent, reciprocity, and obligations that do not affect individuals outside its parameters, is contrasted with sadistic institutions, which are of indeterminate duration, extend their power and authority outside the immediate participants, and are involuntary and inalienable.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, p. 77.

Whereas the contract generates a law, institutions place themselves above the law. However, the law that is generated by a masochistic contract is specific to the actors agreeing to it. Unlike a generalized law that is promulgated by institutions and is meant to regulate relations within large groups of people, each masochistic contract is unique and specific. They do *not* refer to any *a priori* constructs like justice or morality except, as those are intrinsic to the fantasy. Another difference significant to the masochistic contract is that it signifies and ratifies a differential distribution of power:

While the ordinary purpose of a contract is to ensure fairness of treatment among contracting parties, the masochistic contract guarantees an unequal relationship, in which one party has all the overt power, and the other party, none. The contract is a fantasy of contracting the masochist, shrinking him, making him small.<sup>17</sup>

Cowan recognizes the crucial importance of the contract to the internal logic of masochism. She asserts that the strict terms of a masochistic contract serves two purposes: 1) as a boundary, marking the fantasy as *fantasy*, limiting it so it does not spill over into literal role identification. 2) The contract heightens the limitations, giving them specificity. Cowan also recognizes the art of balancing mutually contradictory themes or sensations as one of the

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<sup>17</sup> Cowan, Lyn, *Masochism: A Jungian View*, (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1982) p.74.



chief delights of masochism. She refers to it as an art:

Masochism is an art of holding oneself in oppositional extremity. The masochist sees himself living-appears to live-*in extremis*, at the very edge of danger, madness, death. A masochist's pleasure is extremely painful and his pain, extremely pleasurable. In the midst of such emotional extremity, the need and feeding of the masochistic compulsion is clearly, itself, part of the torture and pleasure. There is pride in this cliff-hanging extremity, in maintaining these impossible oppositions without plunging over the edge. It is an extreme pride, a pride of extremity, of going to extremes and surviving. It is a pride of promethean proportions.<sup>18</sup>

Anita Philips also recognizes the necessity for cooperation and communication that are required for the performance of masochism. She clearly states to the fact that masochism and sadism are quite different in look and in feeling:

The kind of sex we usually call sado-masochism is voluntary, consensual, and therefore, directed by masochistic rather than sadistic interests. Sadistic impulses are not collaborative ones, but rather test their effectiveness against the will of another person. Masochism needs collusion, because of the risk involved in submission. It cannot come into being without some form of relationship, a contractual bond or a mutual understanding, however ephemeral.<sup>19</sup>

Masochists and sadists are rather like oil and water, they can be shaken up together at times but when things settle down, each will revert to its own element. The sadist truly wants no part of the

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<sup>18</sup> Cowan, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, p. 13.

masochistic contract and could not care less for the fantasy of the masochist. Despite the fact that the term "sadist" is part of the lexicon of both popular usage and a part of the "perverts" self-referential slang, it is clearly a misnomer and a transvaluation of terminology. The true "sadist" of classical Freudian and Sadean literature will not mix very well with the masochist. Anita Phillips once again shrewdly observes:

Highly autonomous, the masochists faults are vanity and posturing. While the sadist seeks a victim, and is repelled by the masochist's capacity for pleasure, which diminishes his own, the masochist wants to find a playmate. The opposite number is someone who can be convinced or charmed into acting the role of torturer, not a brutal heavy weight. ... No sadist is any good for a masochist, since each is disqualified from dancing to the other's tune, with the result that both are wrong-footed. The perfect choice may be another masochist.<sup>20</sup>

Phillips confirms my suspicion that the operative function in sadomasochistic scenes in contemporary culture is masochism rather than sadism. While the nomenclature incorporates both the terms "sadist" and "masochist" the practices themselves are subsumed under the descriptions that conform more thoroughly to the scenes described by Sacher-Masoch. Though sadist and masochist have roles to play that are separate and distinct, they are playing in a drama that conforms to the definition of masochistic subjectivity.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

In the search for a playmate, as Phillips terms it, the masochist must find someone who will take into account and willingly enhance the pleasure of the masochist. For some practitioners this involves the axis of pleasure and pain. While pain may be a negotiated part of S/M encounters, it is not the overriding goal or central axis around which its activities proceed. It is not a goal for all S/M participants, either "Top" or "bottom". The signifier Top is used for a variety of significations. In general, a Top is a person who is performing acts upon the body or mind of her partner. In keeping with the higher status ostensibly accorded to dominants, I capitalize the term Top, and use lower case for the term bottom. The term bottom is also multivalent and its usage is often specific to the individuals using it. In general, however, it refers to a person who is submissive to an other (or others) in the practice of S/M. In general usage the bottom can be adequately said to be the masochist.

Pain, within the negotiated confines of a single encounter or the ongoing S/M relationship is here clearly distinguished from harm. Harm is here defined as immediate physical injury in the form of tissue damage or the more subtle psychological or emotional impairment. While the payoff in terms of pleasure, both physical and emotionally cathartic pleasure, may be great, the infliction of pain is approached with extreme caution and respect within the S/M community. This is not to say that bad things never happen at times, or that people are

unintentionally harmed from time to time. The intention operative behind all of the great care that is taken in initiation and teaching is meant to foster a spirit of consideration. Primarily, the contract negotiated between the Top and the bottom includes concerns for safety and sanity for both players (safe, sane, and consensual; these are the bywords of the contemporary social S/M "scene").

Finally, there is a sense that those who wish to learn and practice the skills necessary for producing the erotic pleasure that S/M promises have available to them a coherent set of social practices under which to learn them. This is not a scene of chaotic or disorganized mayhem. On the contrary, transference of power is highly organized and the performance of the stylized behavior closely watched by others within the scene. In other words, the support necessary to sustain a set of diverse and even highly stigmatized behaviors comes not only from isolated, single encounters between individuals willing occasionally to explore this type of sexuality. It also comes from the structuring of the group, however loosely or temporarily organized that mutually supports, teaches, and facilitates the experience among them. It is the group cohesiveness and structure that sustains and protects the transgressive potential from overturning and becoming harmful.

The sociologists Charles Moser and Eugene E. Levitt contribute the next important set of data useful in limning a representation of masochism that reaches beyond the boundaries of psychology. In a

study prepared for the *Journal of Sex Research* in 1987, they confirmed that it is not primarily pain that is involved in S/M experiences.<sup>21</sup> Only certain types of pain received and given under specific circumstances were found to be arousing. In addition, it was not pain experienced only as pain. For the masochist to receive the pain within an S/M experience and for it to be received according to the rubric of the discipline, it had to be pain that was received concomitant with a certain amount of sexual arousal. In other words, it was pain transformed by and commingled with erotic and sexual arousal.

According to Thomas Weinberg, who also worked with Moser and others in the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, the typical S/M experience displays five characteristic features.<sup>22</sup> First there is dominance and submission. This consists in the appearance or rule by one partner over an other or a group of others. Second, there is role playing, or the exaggeration of familiar roles that are infiltrated with the character of dominance and submission (e.g. daddy/son, teacher/pupil, coach/player, doctor or

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<sup>21</sup> Moser, Charles, and Eugene E. Levitt, "An Exploratory-Descriptive Study of a Sadomasochistically Oriented Sample", *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 23, no. 4, p. 322-37).

<sup>22</sup>Weinberg, Martin S., Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser, "The Social Constituents of Sadomasochism, " *Social Problems*, Vol. 31, No. 4, April, 1984.

nurse/patient, governess or nanny/child, etc.). Third, there must be consensuality or the presence of an agreed upon set of parameters designating practices to be undertaken and limits to be observed. Fourth, a sexual context for the activities is needed. It is presumed that the underlying flavor of the encounter and its activities is to be sexual or sexualized. Fifth, there should be a shared agreement and understanding that the activities undertaken for mutual satisfaction and fulfillment are characterized explicitly as S/M. They found that if one of these features were missing, S/M devotees would not characterize the activities as S/M. From this outline we can see that nowhere is pain mentioned as a primary ingredient. While for some devotees, both as Top and bottom, pain is an inevitable part of the experience; it is not a necessary ingredient in all S/M practice.

These findings also illustrate the importance of what Reik had mentioned several decades before, in his description of the importance of fantasy and theatricality to the performance of masochism. Weinberg and Kamel<sup>23</sup> discovered that the elaboration of the roles utilized in the fantasy scenes of S/M was painstakingly constructed and that this elaboration allowed the participants to sustain the illusion that they were really playing a game. There

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<sup>23</sup>Weinberg, Thomas S. ed., *S&M: Studies in Dominance and Submission*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1983).

is a certain seriousness to many of these "games", since they often involve punishment, sensory deprivation, verbal and physical humiliation, and long periods of careful preparation, both physically and mentally. At the same time, the usefulness of the exaggerated, melodramatic framing for emphasizing the playful and staged character of the scene is inescapable. Both the dominant and the submissive players are conscious of the projected nature of the fantasy and are able to adhere to the lines of their parts, much as an actor on stage does.

This series of studies also found that the types of paraphernalia used by S/M devotees, from corsets and harnesses to hoods, boots, rubber suits, restraints of every sort, hospital equipment such as gurneys and enemas, chains, paddles, and even gas masks, were utilized to enhance the variety of sexual expression. Rather than reflecting sinister or threatening motivations, these objects of "terror" and "fear" are reinvested with a controlled sexual content and transvalued with an eye toward self-direction. Rather than being subjugated by forces that are random and impersonal, one chooses one's oppressor, specifies the limits, and endows that person with power. Rather than terror induced from an exterior, unknown source, the objects invested with power are utilized to invoke explicitly sexualized content that flows coherently from the masochist to his other (Top) and back again.

The participants agree upon their use before the "scene" begins. It is understood that the terror they evoke is particular to that scene only and does not extend to the time following the conclusion of the scene. Today the byword among enthusiasts is "equals before and after the scene." Anyone who breaks the agreement about limits (which specify particular acts or the level of pain to be meted out) or the type of play that will be included in a scene would be quickly ostracized by other devotees. In such a closed and confidential realm as that of S/M, word travels rapidly and those who do not play by the rules are quickly found out. There have been a few widely publicized cases over the past several years of players who intended genuine harm to others, but these are comparatively rare.

This type of self-regulation within the relatively small and discreet groups of S/M enthusiasts in any given urban area underscores the social nature of these practices. Initiation into the realm of reliable and experienced partners is accomplished by way of a network of teaching. Recognized proficiency emerges from a system that roughly resembles a council of learned members or elders. Given these parameters, then, S/M conforms to other established patterns through which social customs are passed along to those who qualify and continue to express interest in their dissemination. Those wishing to become skilled Tops or desirable bottoms must spend a certain amount of time among those who are already proficient.



A dominatrix must learn the ropes from her mentors before she is able to use the equipment, both leather and rubber "toys," as well as psychological skills, to their proper advantage. In keeping with the thematization of S/M as play, devotees refer to their accessories as toys. It is evident that the technical and psychological skills needed for a Top or dominant to make such things as rope bondage harnesses and paddles pleasurable to his or her partners are not easily developed. In this guild system, it requires practice with the tools and toys and sustained interest in the response to the stimulus on the part of the bottom for the Top to gain approval as a talented partner. A Top who ignores or misses the significance of her partner's responses will be weeded out of the scene rather quickly by the lack of partners willing to play with her. Dominants who agree to forceful acts such as caning or whipping are expected to be competent with their tools and techniques. The level of subtlety and communication required for a satisfying encounter for both masochist and Master is quite high, given what is at stake.

With respect to limits, it is much the same as it is with specific and agreed upon practices, though there tends to be less specificity, and at times there is even room for "pushing the limits". The established threshold or "limit", is that point at which the bottom can no longer receive the stimulus, whether caused by pain from a whipping, discomfort from sensory deprivation, or a combination of too many intense stimuli. Often the

general boundaries of an individual's limit are flexible, given the variety of practices that are undertaken. Sometimes participants find that their limit for certain things has increased over time and with continued exposure.

Familiarity with regular partners often tends to produce greater flexibility with limits. The more familiar that experienced partners are with each other, and the more confident both Top and bottom are with the level of skill, understanding, and communication between them, the more likely it is that anxiety and discomfort is reduced. Consequently, erotic potential is enhanced. Overall, the activities most favored by the respondents to this study emphasized that dominance and submission were the most important features of S/M play in both fantasy and in role-playing situations.

This study also suggests that while most S/M players are generally attracted to one role, these tendencies are not inflexible. A "sadist" is not always a sadist, and a "masochist" is not always a masochist. Many people have tried both roles or have started out in one role and have been drawn into other roles. There is a fair amount of elasticity within chosen roles, and this tends to extend across gender lines as well. For example, a woman who enjoys being submissive with another woman might dominate men on other occasions. Among gay men, some begin their experience and come to "learn the ropes" through service as a bottom and then experiment with dominance as they gain expertise and subtlety in the craft. One reason for this trend seems to be the

proliferation of bottoms. A common complaint heard in the scene laments that for every Top available there are at least ten bottoms around. In order to keep playing in the scene, people have learned to adapt by taking on a new set of skills.

Following the lead of Moser, Spengler and other sociologists, Gini Graham Scott published an insightful work in 1983 entitled *Dominant Women Submissive Men: An Exploration of Erotic Dominance and Submission*<sup>24</sup>. Scott writes as an anthropologist and sociologist making use of a participant/observer mode of data gathering. Her interest is focused upon what is termed as the Dominance and Submission categories of sexual behavior. While most S/M participants would include dominance and submission in their list of practices, not all people who practice dominance and submission (D&S) would be willing to categorize themselves as S/M devotees. In other words, these boundaries are often permeable and specific to the persons using the terms at any given moment. Suffice it to say that many of the insights offered by Graham, especially where they concern power exchange, are usefully extrapolated to this detailing of mid-century representations of S/M culture.

Scott clearly sets her work in distinct contrast to the clinicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists,

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<sup>24</sup> Scott, Gini Graham. *Dominant Women Submissive Men: An Exploration of Erotic Dominance and Submission*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983).

who wrote case studies based on people seeking treatments as patients. These men and women were seeking treatment because of psychological disturbances and as such represent a very small segment of the vast population who are likely to practice BDSM or D&S and who never seek treatment. She is working within and among a sample of the population who, like respondents to surveys both by Spengler and Moser, did not identify themselves as unhappy, psychically or emotionally distressed, or in need of counseling. She claims that a spirit of good humor and fun prevailed among the diverse people she interviewed and observed.<sup>25</sup> They were not disturbed or troubled individuals. Rather, they enjoyed their explorations and connections to other folks interested in the same practices. Initially, some struggled with guilt feelings but upon overcoming these, they found D&S a fulfilling form of erotic expression. "They see the power exchange as a creative expression that promotes development of trust and intimate communication."<sup>26</sup>

Scott justifies the importance of the research and her book by suggesting that some form of D&S fantasy and behavior are widespread in culture. Prior to this time only a few works had been published, primarily works of fiction such as

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. x.

Pauline Réage's *Story of O*<sup>27</sup> and Larry Townsend's *Leatherman's Handbook*<sup>28</sup>. In any case, Scott points out that at this time there is more acceptance and a more open practice of D&S. The first D&S club, organized in New York in 1971, was The MLF or Masochist's Liberation Front. It was soon renamed the Eulenspiegel Society, and currently has several hundred members. The Society of Janus, a club for those interested in practicing safe and sane S/M, was founded in San Francisco in 1975. The Society of Janus now has several hundred members and holds regular meetings, training sessions, and large "play parties". It is one of the largest, most active, and influential S/M groups in the US at the present time. Other groups include: Gemini, SAMOIS, (a group of radical lesbians promoting lesbian S/M practice), and Service of Mankind Church (also known as the SM Church (specifically geared toward female domination of males). The commercial worlds of publication and entertainment also evince interest in female dominance. Magazines and videos depicting women in

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<sup>27</sup> Réage, Pauline, *Story of O*, trans. John Paul Hand, (New York: Blue Moon Books, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Townsend, Larry. *The Leatherman's Handbook*, (New York: Olympia Press, 1972). Scott impugns the worthiness of Townsend's book, claiming that this sexually graphic guidebook and depiction of the gay S/M scene verges on pornography. Even among those with a reasonable sympathetic disposition to the sexual context and forbidden practices of D&S, many are still ill at ease with the exaggerated and transgressive behavior of gay men.

positions of dominance over men begin to proliferate beginning in the mid-70s.

By the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, representations of S/M begin to emphasize the social and cultural character of sadomasochistic practice. The proliferation of data assembled by social scientists on the sexual habits of Americans and Europeans by the middle of the century serve to undermine the notion that S/M is exclusively a pathological condition. Instead, it suggested that a highly organized and conscious intelligence is required for the safe and non-harmful practice of S/M to obtain. While the search for the meaning of S/M continues, there is an increasing attention to the practices themselves. Just what do the practitioners of S/M do when they gather in their dark, enclosed spaces, donning their black leather and chains? In the next chapter, I outline specifically some of the details of what goes on inside those playrooms, the social dynamic, and the mechanics of play, and the goal of these inherently transgressive and parodic acts. The psychoanalytic representations pathologized the practice of every form of masochism. Sociological representations recognized the organizational, social character of masochism and sought to understand how the voluntary, occasional practice of S/M fit into the world of complex culture.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOWARD A SOCIOLOGICAL THEMATIZATION OF MASOCHISM

As sociological studies accumulate which tell of the relational, non-pathological, social and organizational character of masochism, there emerges a thicker description of the actual practices of masochists and D&S devotees. Not only were social theories being propounded, participant/observer models of description were being utilized to more accurately sample what goes on within the ranks of S/M groups. In these groupings, proficiency, safety, and adherence to limits emerge as important component of this type of relationship. Violence for its own sake is eschewed, and endurance, catharsis, accommodation of pain and pleasure are sought. People experiment with all sorts of costumes and roles, they admit to having fun while they are also being sexual and creative with other human beings. Bodily sites not often thought of as explicitly or conventionally acceptable as sexual sites are explored and utilized for pleasure. S/m players make use of control, both its maintenance and the relinquishing of it, to heighten and prolong the sensations they cultivate and the emotions they wish to arouse. In this chapter I show more explicitly the practices employed by BDSM players as well as those who designate themselves as D&S players.

Masochism is disruptive partly because it makes overt the connection between desire and the soil,

the dirt from which all organic beings arise. Masochists have rules, though not inflexible ones, by which these connections are realized and reiterated. Through a system of protocol that has evolved gradually over the last several decades, a set of rules for the successful conduct of S/M parties, whether large or small, planned or impromptu, has taken shape. Following from these socially organized parties that have sexual and erotic connections at their center, deep social and political associations have emerged. These associations often subsist and flourish outside the walls of the dungeon or playroom. The research of the sociologists affirms that the psychiatric models of S/M are essentialist and atomistic. These findings indicate that S/M is a set of social acts, not an innate character perversion. The transgressive, erotic, parodic, and playful enactments of sexual desire and pleasure are the goal of these acts.

Gini Graham Scott thematizes or details several activities and play categories of lay utilized by the devotees of D&S whom she surveyed and observed.<sup>1</sup> The following descriptions are easily applicable to people whom also practice what they name S/M.

#### PAIN

Scott maintains that a person can enjoy much more intense stimulation when sexually aroused. Her

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, p. 95 ff.



respondents show a continued and widespread interest in incorporating the use of pain to accompany the sessions of dominance and submission. The heightened state, as noted by Gebhart, may indeed resemble that of the athlete striving for a goal, willing and able to endure the discomfort of pain to achieve the larger goal of victory. In the case of the D&S practitioners, however, the goal is victory in the form of endurance for the psychological goal of catharsis and emotional displacement that accommodates pain and pleasure simultaneously.

#### HUMILIATION AND BONDAGE

The vulnerability that is felt by the submissives and experienced as power by the dominants is placed high on the list of desirable states among the D&S crowd. They speak of an excitement in being out of control, of having another person in charge not only of their very well-being but also fully in charge of their pleasure. Among S/M practitioners there is also a great tendency to praise the feeling of losing control. Especially useful for producing this state of vulnerability and loss of security are the many forms of bondage, some of which involve varying degrees of pain and discomfort. Other forms and practices of bondage do not involve physical pain, but usually include a strong element of psychological tension.

#### IMAGES, TOYS, AND PARAPHERNALIA

Scott suggests that her informants make use of unusual images and objects not generally associated

with strictly genital, or "vanilla", sex in their practice. (Vanilla is a term that ordinarily refers to heterosexual, non-kinky sex.) It carries a mildly negative pejorative charge among most practitioners of S/M. They find that the use of these unfamiliar objects, because they are often invested with power, free participants to take part in the activities taking place. It frees them to experience more extreme feelings, to elevate the level at which their awareness is processing the sexual and interpersonal energy.

#### CROSS-DRESSING

Those seeking to represent masochistic behavior as the exclusive domain of medicalized discursive practice have often noted the donning of clothing usually identified with the roles of women by men in connection with sexual perversion or deviance. Men dressing up as women, choosing to accept a feminized role in costume as well as potentially assuming a feminine role sexually will usually unsettle the mainstream. However, there are those among the BDSM and D&S crowd who utilize cross-dressing and do not demonstrate them as pathological symptoms that would cause them to seek a solution outside of the practices themselves. They are content to dress up, act out, and take their pleasure, then return to their everyday roles and attire. The participants in Scott's survey claim that cross-dressing helps to break down barriers and also promotes the feelings of submission, dependence, and subordination which the Dom (or Top) seeks to promote in the submissive.

They do not view it as obstructive or aberrant. Rather, it facilitates the eroticization of their practices. Not knowing how to move, act, or comport oneself while wearing unfamiliar garb, the submissive looks to the Top for guidance and coaching. Thus the bonds of verbal and non-verbal direction proceeding from Top to bottom are strengthened and made explicit.

#### URINATION, ENEMAS, AND DILDOS

Control of bodily functions of excretion, specifically urination and defecation, are almost always subjected to childhood control by adults. This education and control extends throughout the course of life. Because the organs of excretion and generation share physical proximity, it is not surprising that the transgressive energy of BDSM and D&S folks is drawn to exploit these functions for their own perverse purposes. Waste products and the receptacles (both within and without the body) employed to house them are generally reviled in the culture of the mainstream. It is precisely because of the extreme caution and control ordinarily exercised over these functions and the parts of the body that perform them, that practitioners of S/M seek to reclaim them and reinvest them with significations of desire and pleasure. Once again the theme of power is present here. While the rectum, for example, is normally a forbidden part of the body, shunned and ignored and associated with the dead matter, or feces, that passes through it, some practitioners of S/M are unafraid to explore

the power potential of the rectum. Invading or penetrating this forbidden part of the body is another way of expressing power.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is power present in the possibilities of the rectum and anal areas of the body, but desire and pleasure also are potentially present in stimulating this reviled, sanctioned territory of the body. Stimulation of the anus and rectum are often part of the practices of both D&S and S/M folks. For example, the Top might order an enema before the submissive appears for a play session, so that exploration of this area with toys, dildos, fingers, or hands can proceed. A submissive may show his or her readiness to submit to the will of the Top by surrendering control of this most intimate and purportedly shameful part of the body. The close connection between desire, pleasure, and pain is apparent especially in discussions of rectal penetration. It is not generally admitted that the sensitive tissues of the rectum and anus can be producers and loci of pleasure. However, the fact is that humans have been experimenting with each other's bodies since the beginning of the species, and it is not unreasonable to conclude that the forms of sexual play have often made use of the rectal and anal areas. In some parts of the world

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<sup>2</sup> For a very incisive and thoughtful essay on the impact of gay men's anal sexual practice and the threats it presents to the power of heterosexist culture see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" In *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, edited by Douglas Crimp, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

anal intercourse is the preferred method of birth control. Who knew that there are pleasure centers located amidst the nerve endings of the anus and rectum? Perhaps Judge Schreber really was on to something when he claimed he had sunbeams up his ass!<sup>3</sup> Certainly we can conclude that the transgressive practices of S/M attempt to break down these barriers and reclaim another surface of the body upon which to map desire and pleasure.

In addition to the penetrative pleasures of the rectum, S/M practitioners are known to make use of urine and urination in their array of games involving humiliation, control, or transgression simply for its own sake. Retention of urine is a form of control or power over a submissive. A subgroup of S/M termed "urolagnia" or love of urine is more commonly termed "watersports"<sup>4</sup>. Those in the

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Paul Schreber was a German judge who began psychiatric treatment in 1884 at the age of forty-two and spent the rest of his life in and out of mental institutions. In 1903, at the age of sixty-one, he published his *Memoirs of a Nervous Illness*, which Freud used as the basis of his influential 1911 study on paranoia, "Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud: Authorized Translation under the Supervision of Joan Rivière*, (New York: Basic Books, 1959), Vol. 3. P. 396.

<sup>4</sup> Guidelines promulgated by the vast majority of S/M groups encourage special caution in both watersports and anal play. The possibility during play sessions for transmission of hepatitis, HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as any number of other infectious diseases, is by now well known. Many in the scene do not participate in these activities for that reason as well as for the perhaps more obvious reasons of increased attention required to protect sanitation, or personal preference.

S/M scene have relatively widely divergent takes on the usefulness or desirability of scenes involving urine. While it would not be termed a an "extreme" scene, most scenes involving urine or the active use of feces would be termed "specialized."

It is these dealings with loathsome and degraded/degrading portions of human experience that often give masochism a bad name. Why is this near universal revulsion so strongly felt? In part, it is because the practices take notice of the human facility for desire<sup>5</sup> and combine it with an earthiness that is unsettling. As Anita Philips notes this abhorrence of masochism has two reasons:

One is its link with the literally sordid and the other is its ironical abasement of both partners. Both aspects are involved in the human necessity that masochism holds within it, to remind oneself of the lower aspects of existence, the level of soil. The transgressive move here is to mix up this need with questions of love, which is seen through rose-colored spectacles as being at the opposite end of the spectrum.<sup>6</sup>

After broadly sketching the parameters of the practices that a group of D&S or S/M folks would likely perform, Scott goes on to outline the particulars of etiquette that are operative among those who participate in S/M or D&S gatherings. Typically styled as "parties," these social

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<sup>5</sup> Discomfort with another familiar binary opposition lurks alongside this uneasiness. That is the well-known opposition of eros and spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, Anita. *A Defence of Masochism*, (London: Faber, 1998). p. 75.

occasions are specifically geared toward the validation and support participants are likely to receive from others. They are typically events where like-minded people can gather to explore and learn from each other about the ways in which erotic dominance and submission can be played out. The scope of these parties ranges from small informal gatherings to elaborate themed parties with formal invitations extended to hundreds of out-of-town guests. In the S/M scene these parties also often have a political connection, as in the case of many play parties given during the late 90s following which the proceeds of the admission fee were donated to the so-called "Spanner defendants".<sup>7</sup>

At some of these parties, there may be erotic and playful activity without explicit sexual intercourse taking place. At others, there are not only erotic activities leading up to sexual activity, but the sexual activity is central to the theme and development of the party. The desires and wishes of the host and the guests set the ambiance of each party. Often in larger party scenes there will be a section of the space designated for casual socializing while another more well equipped and

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<sup>7</sup> The Spanner defendants were five British men who regularly engaged in consensual S/M, occasionally videotaping their sessions for their own use and edification. When the tapes got into the hands of the authorities, the five were charged with a range of violations, and the convictions were upheld in higher court in 1996. S/M practitioners in the UK were outraged and came to their defense, as did many sympathetic S/M groups across the US.

specialized space is set aside for sexual play. The operative feature of the party gathering of D&S or S/M folks is primarily one of consensus. Everyone agrees to a general set of guidelines: sex or no sex, level of play with respect to whether watersports, scat,<sup>8</sup> or blood play<sup>9</sup> is allowed. When a scene is taking place between two or more participants, it is understood that no one is allowed to interrupt or join a scene in progress unless specifically asked to do so. Intrusion into another person's scene is considered a serious breach of etiquette. Permission is also required for the taking of photographs. In addition, privacy is sometimes requested for the playing of certain scenes that may involve stronger emotional content, as for example, the ceremonial piercing by which a dominant signifies his or her tie to a submissive. Sometimes individual players are comfortable exhibiting themselves publicly and others may at times require privacy or a limited audience. At larger gatherings there is often a cadre of experienced members recruited specifically to patrol

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<sup>8</sup> "Scat," or, more scientifically, coprophilia, is not unheard of in the S/M scene, but would be considered by most to be well away from "mainstream" S/M play.

<sup>9</sup> "Blood play" or "cutting" involves the use of scalpels, needles, or other sterilized equipment to produce cuts in the skin of the submissive. Because of the risk of infection and the precautions necessary for safe play, this is usually considered a type of "edge play" or extreme practice by most in the S/M scene.



and monitor the space where play is taking place. They are on the lookout for unsafe use of equipment and possible infractions of safe sex guidelines.<sup>10</sup> There seems to be some variance in adherence to safe and safer sex guidelines among players. Many players believe no unsafe activity involving exchange of bodily fluids should take place at parties, even among people who are committed and monogamous. However, others are willing to let individual members decide these issues for themselves. Since many practitioners are sensitive to critics who say that S/M is inherently an unsafe practice, the insistence upon strict adherence to safe sex practice is ostensibly meant to show any visitors that S/M is a safe and sane scene. Adherence to these guidelines is meant to demonstrate that the practitioners of S/M do not disregard legitimate concerns for the continued health and well being of players.

For the public relations reason, and for practical reasons involving the usage of toys and equipment that could potentially do great bodily harm, the prevailing view is that very few people indulge in alcohol or recreational drugs while they are playing. The predominant view is one in which

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<sup>10</sup> Safer sex guidelines dictate usage of condoms and other latex barriers to prevent transmission of HIV and other blood-borne infections. At a recent gathering held annually in the Washington DC area, the web page of the sponsoring group, named "Black Rose", published a list of guidelines and practice for those serving as monitors during its convention. For the full text see Appendix A.

safety is foremost and that any dulling of skill or awareness is likely to open the possibility of harm from lack of attention to detail. Of course, individual practice may be different from this view, but most aficionados discourage the use of alcohol and drugs since the requirements and intensity of many scenes necessitate complete concentration and attention to matters at hand. Since these are human bodies that are being played with, the view is that both Top and bottom need to be at full capacity, at least with regard to sensations and limits. Alcohol and other drugs may tend to inhibit or raise limits and may interfere with ability to monitor internal sensations.

A strong determining factor in putting together a successful party is knowing the guests and thoughtfully combining guests who are likely to know and respect each other and who will be likely to have similar background and experiences. In short, it would not make sense to invite a group made up entirely of neophytes, nor would it make a good party if there were only Tops present. Often at large parties there will be a special act to warm up the crowd or to get activities started for the evening. There may be a brief themed scenario, a re-enactment of some dramatic episode, complete with costumes and props, to loosen the mood and get the crowd activated. Occasionally at these themed events a well-known personage will give a special presentation of his or her particular skills. For example, a mistress known for her ability to throw a "single tail" bullwhip will give a demonstration of

that ability. A single tail bullwhip is a long, braided leather whip that is quite difficult to accurately and skillfully use. Its mastery is considered by many to be a mark of supreme accomplishment with S/M equipment.

Gayle Rubin gives a detailed historical account of the development of the "party" procedure as it evolved in the early 70s among gay men in San Francisco. In an article entitled "The Catacombs: A temple of the butthole,"<sup>11</sup> she describes the growth of the party mode among gay men and lesbians. The decade after Stonewall and before AIDS saw explosive growth in gay communities (Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco) in population, economic power, and self-confidence. This led to the emergence of new kinds of leather and S/M social structures. According to Rubin, older organizational forms utilized by gay men and lesbians were infused with fresh vitality. The first explicitly political S/M organizations formed in the 1970s, e.g. the Eulenspiegel Society and Society of Janus. A distinctive feature of the 70s decade was the efflorescence of what she calls the "Great Parties".

Sex parties had been critical to the development of leather social life as far back as the late 1940s. Parties continue to be important mechanisms for building and maintaining leather and S/M

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<sup>11</sup> "The Catacombs: A temple of the butthole" in, Thompson, Mark, ed. *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991).

communities. Perhaps the best known party locales are the Mineshaft (1976-1985), a New York underground location,<sup>12</sup> and the Inferno Run, a weekend encampment for S/M play held every year since 1976 by the Chicago Hellfire Club. The Catacombs opened in 1975 and quickly became a mecca for fisting. Fisting, or fist fucking, is a sexual practice in which the entire hand is inserted into the rectum or vagina of ones partner. Foucault rhapsodized that it was the first truly "new" sexual practice invented in thousands of years. It is considered by many to be both extreme and unsafe, since the tissues of the rectum are mucosal and very sensitive to breakage and tearing, hence hospitable to the entrance of infectious agents. However, regardless of the nostrums against fisting, it has quickly become a favorite "extreme" practice among many groups of S/M devotees. The Catacombs was primarily a gay male venue though it was shared with other groups. It became a community center for local S/M population and was a beloved institution. Outlined within Rubin's panegyric are several transgressive moves-between soil and spirit, between masochistic practice and religious transcendence, and between sex and love.

The location of the Catacombs was privately owned space, and thus exclusive. Steve McEachern,

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<sup>12</sup> For a fictionalized version of this period, with many accurate descriptions of the facility and the temper of the times, see Brad Gooch, *The Golden Age of Promiscuity*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

owner of the property, personally oversaw the guest list. It was not easy to get into the parties. Steve conducted interviews after guests had been recommended to him. Many party givers still rely on this formula. While much of the gay male scene revolves around appearance, youth and beauty being especially esteemed, in the S/M crowd frequenting the Catacombs, there were other priorities. Rubin states:

Physical beauty did not go unappreciated there, but the Catacombs was not about being pretty. It was about intense bodily experiences, intimate connection, male fellowship, and having a good time.<sup>13</sup>

A strict procedure was followed for these parties. This included making advance reservations. Guest were allowed in from 9 PM to 11 PM only, in order to let people get settled without having too many distractions. Rubin describes the atmosphere inside the Catacombs as both intensely sexual and positively cozy.<sup>14</sup>

Rubin's description of the layout of the facilities of the Catacombs is telling. She recognizes that the spatial divisions are critical for defining what sorts of activities are acceptable in certain environments. In order to enter the space where transformation and transcendence of the

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<sup>13</sup> Rubin, p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 124

everyday world was possible, a liminal place was created. She writes:

The "front" room looked and felt a lot like a leather bar but was more intimate and all people present were nude. In this room clothes were removed. Temperature was kept hot to keep naked people comfortable. Lights were low and the mood was low key and friendly. It was in this place that the transition was made from everyday world into "play space."<sup>15</sup>

"Out front" was distinguished from "the back." The front room was for socializing, negotiating, coming up for air. There was no smoking, drinking, or eating in back. The back was for sex. In the back, one found slings, a waterbed, cages, padded benches, gurneys, spanking horses-all manner of play equipment. Walls were painted black and floors sanded very smooth. This carefully constructed space was designed explicitly to allow and evoke a specifically sexual and distinctly transforming experience.

[I]n many cultures the application of carefully chosen physical stress is a method for inducing transcendental mental and emotional states. People came to the Catacombs to do prodigious things to their bodies and minds, and some habitués reported having the kinds of transformational experiences more often associated with spiritual disciplines.<sup>16</sup>

In this environment that was predominantly made up of gay men there occurred some cross

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 128.

fertilization between gay men and lesbians.<sup>17</sup> A comfortable atmosphere was created in which diverse populations could observe one another, appreciate their mutual interest in "kink", and discover what they have in common. Kink, or kinky, have become substitute terms for S/M that are usually considered by most, both inside and outside the scene, to denote milder, and thus more acceptable, forms of S/M practice. Where this imaginary line is drawn is, not surprisingly, open for debate. Although the Catacombs is gone (closed in 1984 under waves of fear and crusades against public sex palaces), it has left a legacy. Sets of Catacombs attitudes have taken root in a larger community.

The Catacombs expressed a deep love for the physical body. A place that could facilitate so much pleasure could make any part of the body feel great. For the most part, our society treats the pursuit of physical pleasure as something akin to taking out the garbage. At the Catacombs, the body and its capacities for sensory experience were valued, celebrated, and loved.<sup>18</sup>

Once again we see the equation between pleasure and soil or "dirt" as Anita Phillips designates it. Pleasure, in the mainstream, is not a goal in itself. It may be acquired as a by-product of other utilitarian goals, but it is not sought as a goal in itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

There often exists a lack of comprehension in many media (even gay press) in their descriptions of places where gay sex, fisting, and S/M occur. Rubin notes that the Catacombs, in her experience was quite different.

Places devoted to sex are usually depicted as harsh, alienated, scary environments, where people have only the most utilitarian and exploitative relationships. The Catacombs could not have been more different. It was not a perfect utopia where nothing bad ever happened. It had its share of melodrama, heartache and the human condition. But it was essentially a friendly place. It was a sexually organized environment where people treated each other with mutual respect, and where they were lovingly sexual without being in holy wedlock.<sup>19</sup>

What was going on at the Catacombs was definitely sexual, but it proved to have more lasting results and fostered growing webs of social support that flourished out of the beginnings of these sexual happenings.

Sometimes the love that happened in "the back" stayed only there. Just as often, it extended into the everyday world. The Catacombs facilitated the formation of important friendships and lasting networks of support. Many of the men who frequented the Catacombs found relationships there that have sustained them through time, nurtured them with affection, cared for them in sickness, and buried them in sorrow.<sup>20</sup>

Rubin applauds the efforts of these pioneering and caring people who created a space play and an

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



ethos for the exploration of sex and the body during a time of great upheaval and change within the culture. She notes that the impetus to create such an environment should be accorded at least equal respect with other kinds of social organization, but in an erotophobic culture this is a courageous move. "The creation of a well-designed and deftly managed sexual environment is as much an achievement as the building of more "respectable" institutions."<sup>21</sup>

In more recent years similar types of occasional play spaces have become available for S/M gatherings. The New York Bondage Club hosts a gathering very similarly designed for its members and guests. A separate space is opened first for socializing as the attendees gather. At approximately 9 PM the doors are locked and the play space is opened. Everyone gathers in a circle and introduces him or herself and groups begin to join up for play. Some stay in the bar area to talk and socialize while others are engaged in scenes. The play ends at around midnight for this gathering as people drift home or venture on to another public club<sup>22</sup>. Often these gatherings are planned months in advance and invitations are sent out via email lists to people around the world who will often travel great distances to attend them. One of the most

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication with Lindsay Thomas, a regular attendee at East and West Coast S/M events.

popular events is a three day fetish event held in London called "Rubber Ball".

Thompson sums up the conclusions of the American sociologists:

These insights into SM activities, and the differentiation debates, reinforced the American researchers' general conclusion that the psychiatric models of sadomasochism were over-generalized, essentialist, and atomistic. They were over-generalized in presupposing motives and meanings not shared by devotees, because they were more applicable to non-consensual sexual violence designed to hurt....The psychiatric models were essentialistic in that they asserted that SM activities and interests were innate to an individual's 'nature'. When SM devotees could take it or leave it. SM sex was really a set of social acts rather than a collection of 'sadistic' or 'masochistic' characters. The previous theories were atomistic in centring on an individual's alleged sexual 'drives', while completely ignoring the important role of the SM scene in constructing the meanings which devotees then drew upon both to define and to shape their sexual activities. Far from being an individual's 'problem', SM could not exist at the level of the individual; SM was a shared activity and a group phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of drawing a distinction between the pathologizing and atomistic conception of the psychiatric and psychological renditions of the story of masochism and the version furthered by the sociologists cannot be understated. Far from being an all-consuming and debilitating mental state or even a state of "dis-ease", participants in the S/M scene are able to construct their own identities, explore the entwined connections between body and

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, p.125.

mind through the creative use of play, pursue intense physical pleasure in groups of other like-minded persons, at times accommodate physical pain so that it becomes transformed into a capacity for pleasure, and form networks of social meaning and affiliation. For some critics of the scene the more disturbing but largely unacknowledged transgression of S/M is the way that it keenly highlights, and scathingly parodies, and pinpoints hypocrisy within the moral standards of the culture(s) from which it springs. The forms of parody, fantasy, or role-play that are identified and rearranged for the production of sexual and erotic pleasure are the very same categories that are borrowed from the moral crusaders' frame of reference. Pat Califia probably says it best:

S&M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our systems, and seeks to reclaim them. There's an enormous hard-on beneath the priest's robe, the cop's uniform, the president's business suit, the soldier's khakis. But that phallus is powerful only as long as it is concealed, elevated to the level of a symbol, never exposed or used in a literal fucking. A cop with his hard-on sticking out can be punished, rejected, blown, or you can sit on it, but he is no longer a demi-god. In an S&M context, the uniforms and roles and dialogues become a parody of authority, a challenge to it, a recognition of its secret sexual nature.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Califia, Pat, "A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," in Weinberg, Thomas S. ed., *S&M: Studies in Dominance and Submission*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995, Revised edition) p. 147-48.

Critics and commentators often wonder why devotees of SM should choose to wear police uniforms and brandish the weapons of power and disenfranchisement that are so often used against sexual outlaws. It is considered to be a perverse mimicry without any sort of reflection. Even an astute critic and writer such as John Rechy condemns the adoption of the drag of cop uniforms by gay male aficionados of S/M, claiming that both this slavish obsession with uniforms the cops who wear them are deadly for gay men:

The proliferation of sadomasochism is the major internal threat to gay freedom, comparable only in destructiveness to the impact of repressive laws and persecution by cops. The basis of both is the same: self-hatred.<sup>25</sup>

However, it is precisely this form of ironic and perverse<sup>26</sup> parody that S/M seeks to employ in its transvaluation of the terms of power in the realm of sexual culture. Rechy fails to understand the perverse reorientation of the S/M practice. It does not seek to adopt and simply redirect onto itself the *machismo* of law enforcement, with its heterosexist, violent, even sadistic practice. The

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<sup>25</sup> Rechy, John, *The Sexual Outlaw*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1977). p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> Perverse is derived from the Latin root *per/versus* [L. turning to the side]. Past participle of *pervertere* to turn the wrong way. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986). It simply means a turning away, or redirection. In its usage by S/M folks it does not carry a pejorative ideological weight.

sadistic law enforcement official of whom Rechy speaks is one that is blind to the presence of the masochist and only seeks his own self-aggrandizement. Instead it is with humor, an explicit avowal of the sexy nature of power, and with delight in play that sadomasochists brandish their sexualized display of power. This display is made either before the eyes of those who choose to view and become involved with these acts, or sometimes inadvertently, those who happen upon a space where S/M folks gather for play or conversation.

It is with this transgressive potential clearly in mind that most aficionados of S/M would represent their practices. This element of transgression must also be positioned clearly at the center of sadomasochism's representation within the realm of culture.

This reminds us that the epistemological space of the transgressive is always edgy, at the edge, at the cut across the boundaries of the possible, at the space opened-for language, for body, for culture.<sup>27</sup>

Those who practice safe, sane, consensual sadomasochistic sex are clearly willing to accept a fair amount of ambiguity and even seem to court a neither-this-nor-that sort of space for their practices. The presence of contradictory feelings (pleasure/pain, freedom/bondage, agony/ecstasy) that never quite resolve into one or the other but

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<sup>27</sup> McKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

somehow always partake of both at the same time in a dance of passion and emotional quickness. Masochism as a transgressive practice constantly sets limits for itself. It is this potential for transgressing the accepted boundaries, the conventional limits that aficionados of S/M have consistently pursued and which the mid-century generation of sociologists began to chronicle. The themes of social organization and affiliation, group transmission and monitoring of specific kinds of knowledge necessary for successful S/M play, and the parodic, playful character of many S/M scenes begins to emerge here. No longer is S/M or sexual sadomasochism a chaotic and destructive isolated series of acts, without any elements of fun or fulfillment. The expressive and self-directed movements of S/M practitioners deploying masochistic subjectivity during the same period will be delineated in the next chapter. The positive input of the social scientists regarding the social and cultural character of masochistic practices and the consequent balancing of the strongly negative representations by the psychiatric community has still not quite captured the movement of masochism through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a further contest that unfolds within gay and lesbian and heterosexual S/M worlds in the wake of the enormous social changes in postwar America and Europe. The next chapter shows how these changes have played out and how the picture of masochism becomes even more complex and contested.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MIGRATION OF S/M FROM THE ANALYST'S COUCH TO THE OPEN ROAD

In this chapter I chart the movement of S/M further away from its stigmatized position, recumbent on the horsehair of the analyst's divan, toward a fully realized and politicized, if somehow at the same time largely a fragmented and decentralized movement. The distinctive presence of gay men, and later lesbians, practicing sadomasochistic sexual scenes was quite unsettling as the massive changes following World War II led to even more change in the 60s and 70's. What some have labeled as a "crisis in masculinity"<sup>1</sup> led to a popularization of an "outlaw" masculinity. By way of an adaptation of this outlaw identity, some gay men seek to refashion their identity, seek to rid themselves of images of femininity pinned on them by the dominant culture. Alongside this move toward organized gay biker clubs is a move toward incipient political embodiment that crystallizes in the feminist and gay liberation movements of the 60's.

Through the changes wrought by this concatenation of dramatic social changes emerges a

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent exposition of this and many other analyses of literature and masochism, see Savran, David, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

general movement among practitioners of S/M. It includes the transvaluation of formerly pejorative terms, the general goal of uncovering and overthrowing stable power and gender relations, and an additional consequence: it brings about the enhanced permeability and diffuse character of marginalized and stigmatized cultural groups. The social dimension of S/M is not a by-product; it is a primary goal. S/M is often adopted, I argue, by gay men and lesbians to deal with the alienation they experience within a largely heterosexual/heterosexist culture. Gay men especially move to S/M to deal with the uncertainty of roles within their marginalized and fragmented social realms. Organized and networked, groups of active S/M players foster deep camaraderie and the desire to share specialized, local knowledge among their members.

However, there are critics of the scene who insist that this transformation, this coming out of the closet, amounts to a sellout, a perfidious and self-destructive act of *mauvais foix*. These critics claim that S/M has lost its legitimacy by taking refuge under the aegis of the rhetoric of the self-help movement. In so enacting this heinous movement of bad faith, they claim that S/M has been co-opted by the mainstream and has encouraged the withering away of the distinct character of gay sensibility.

Far from losing its outlaw status, S/M continues to elude and trouble even the most liberal critics. It continues to trouble gay and lesbian politics because of its linking of sex and violence, because



of its adoption of military and police significations, because of its perceived reinforcement of masculinist and patriarchal gender roles. And yet, there are also voices who insist that S/M is about cooperation and that all of the staging of violence is just that, only a performance. S/M, it seems, is beginning to mature. S/M, along with other groups whose boundaries have become fluid and unstable, is moving toward representations that have the distinct markings of the postmodern. I argue that sadomasochism is still very much a mixture of modern and postmodern representations. Yet the destabilization of categories is precisely what masochism, and by extension those who practice S/M, is attempting to enact. This continual striving to disrupt and transgress by way of theatricalization, parody, and reversal is its way of blurring the line between the "real and the performed."

The social configurations noted by the sociologists in the previous chapter were largely accompanied by a shift in the material and social conditions of the country. At roughly the mid-point of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practitioners of sadomasochism, in response to these changes, continue the shift in internal representations and appropriations. Occasioned by the end of World War II, massive alterations in economic, educational, social, and population distribution brought about a concomitant change in the ways that sexual behavior were lived, exhibited, and written about. Locally distributed pamphlets and magazines began to be

circulated which those interested in bondage and discipline used to meet each other. During the 1950s, photographers such as Irving Claw began distributing images of women dressed in corsets, high heels, and fishnet stockings, brandishing whips and dominating willing men and other women. His images of pin-up girl Betty Page are by now quite well known. Leather and fetish gear begins to be more readily available and both heterosexual and homosexual S/M social clubs begin to form.

It was at this time also that gay men begin to reshape their identities. No longer confined to socially isolated and remote locales, gay men and lesbians begin to congregate and socialize in large urban areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. They are still threatened by the oppressive "blue laws", which could bring police at a moment's notice to shut down a bar where men might be dressed as women. Nonetheless, elaborate networks of social organization began to develop. Often located in out-of-the-way or run-down neighborhoods, near bus stations or train depots, these bars and clubs were a haven for those men and women seeking out others who did not fit the dominant social/sexual pattern.

Alongside the growth of these social networks, there arose a countervailing trend that sought to repudiate and more visibly disrupt the conformist norms prevalent throughout the postwar period. The leather community, as we know it, emerges in the early 1950s with the rise of the first gay biker clubs. It was this trend that incidentally became

the birthplace of the "clone" look.<sup>2</sup> A clone look is a style of dress and attitude that swept through the emerging gay world in the 1970s is still in force in gay milieus today. The clone look is a parody of the rugged, masculine look typified by the lumberjack or cowboy. It is what I would term a "travesty" of masculine attire. Travesty is derived from the Latin *trans*, over, and *vestire*, to dress. Hence to overdress, or to disguise by dress so as to be ridiculous, to burlesque. Gay men sought to parade their masculinity but chose consciously to transvalue existing costumes. Historian Daniel Harris, writing in an essay entitled "The Death of Kink"<sup>3</sup>, laments the assimilation of this transgressive gay male sexuality into the mainstream culture. He asserts that a renegade sector of gay men began to imitate the snarling, contemptuous masculinity of motorcycle gangs who disdained middle-class respectability. These non-gay gangs began to form in many parts of the United States by the late 1940s. However, the gay men who adopted the attitudes and practices of the outlaw motorcycle gang members gave it another twist.

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent account of this phenomenon see: Levine, Martin P. *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Harris, Daniel. "The Death of Kink: Five Stages in the Metamorphosis of the Modern Dungeon" in *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, (New York: Hyperion, 1997) p. 180.

According to Harris, the purpose of the gay biker groups of the 50s and 60s was mostly social. However, underlying this was a shift in the self-image of homosexuals. No longer satisfied with the prevailing stereotype of effeminacy, these men sought to create a masculine environment centered on manly men's pursuits that would mirror the machismo of heterosexual heroes.<sup>4</sup> They strove to emulate men like Hercules, Spartacus, etc. as their ideal types. These "leathermen", whose signifying garment was the leather jacket, which they donned as they straddled a roaring emblem of the open road, the disruptive motorcycle, strove to effect the embodiment of strength and virility in every detail of their lives. The clothing they adopted, the appointments and décor of their bars, the unsentimental sexual styles they adopted, all are attempts to distance this group from effeminate male homosexuality. In some sense, homosexuals solved the image problem of effeminacy by adopting the costume drag of the new social pariahs, the motorcycle gangs of punks that began to appear in large numbers throughout the 1950s.

Thus begins the construction of a new myth for the modern gay person. This man or woman is one who is not subject to outside influence in the construction of his or her identity. His or her identity is less and less forced upon him from those on the outside of his chosen social affiliation. At

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 181-82.

least nominally, he or she was freer to explore myriad aspects of identity. "Black leather gave men permission to be something not allowed in ordinary life."<sup>5</sup> The generation of gay men and lesbians who came of age following the 1950s has been allowed a window of opportunity to self-select the meanings and values appropriate to themselves.

The text of *Leatherfolk* speaks of both leather and "radical faerie" experience in terms of journeys involving risk, a path that must be followed, a spiritual quest. They speak of choosing their gods; the black leathermen choose dark male gods of the underworld and radical faeries choose earth spirits such as Gaia or Pan, the ecstatic one. Awareness of these gods is brought to light through ceremonial celebrations or through play evoking change, changes in the individual as well as change in the social order.

The Radical Faeries are groups of counter-cultural, mostly gay men, who are loosely organized and widely dispersed throughout the world. They are an outgrowth and continuation of the 60s hippie movement and espouse tolerance and understanding of almost any "alternative" sexual and cultural practices. An excerpt from a web page gives an idea of their ethos:

Who are the faeries?

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, Mark, ed. *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), p. 159.

We're decentralized, and nobody's in charge -- so every faerie who you ask will give a slightly different definition of "Radical Faerie." Generally, we tend to be Gay men who look for a spiritual dimension to our sexuality; many of us are healers of one kind or another. Our shared values include feminism, respect for the Earth, and individual responsibility rather than hierarchy. Many of us are Pagan (nature-based religion).

Our defining events are Faerie Gatherings, where we'll get together for an extended retreat, usually in the woods, separated from the outside world. A lot of that time is spent in "heart circles," where we open up emotionally.<sup>6</sup>

Part of the import of both leather and faerie organizing impulses was a political move to shed the image of the lisping, sweater-wearing, effeminized man. Underneath the sensual pleasure of the individual acts themselves was a larger political aim. Less important than the sexual acts was the burgeoning sense of community and affiliation. According to Harris:

In the 1950s and 1960s, S/M sex was not about pleasure and pain, about the allegory of domination and submission; it was about gay liberation, about creating an alternative image of the subculture. For most of the early participants in the leather phenomenon, rough, unsentimental S/M sex was less a means of erotic fulfillment than a political affectation.<sup>7</sup>

These initial social groupings and organizational activities had great social and

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.RadFae.org/about.html#faeries>

<sup>7</sup> Harris, p. 183.

political consequences. However, Harris's analysis of the overtly political nature of these groupings is somewhat anachronistic. Were the 50s and 60s participants even remotely aware that their actions contained and expressed a political component? It was not until the even more extreme upheavals of the late 1960s that gay men and others began to see and act upon the connections between sex and sexuality and political action. The fact remains, however, that the present movement to free gay men and lesbians from restrictive social roles and from repressive sexual boundaries owes an allegiance to these pioneers. In Chicago there is a museum being established at the present time to house artifacts and archives of the leather movement. Is there any better measure of the historicity of a movement than a museum? Interestingly, the building acquired for this purpose is the site of a former Orthodox synagogue.<sup>8</sup>

Harris recognizes an important feature of the S/M subculture that is present in many of its representations in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the capacity of its adherents to adopt other cultural forms and turn their valuation around to the peculiar usage of sadomasochism. For example, the language of Freud has been co-opted and made to serve the interest of S/M devotees. Very often,

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<sup>8</sup> See Phil Julian, "The Leather Archives and Museum: At Last, A Place for Our Past, and Our Future", Leather Navigator Website, [www.leathernavigator.com](http://www.leathernavigator.com)

people in the diffuse and amorphous social world of "BDSM" and its ancillary factions of Goths, Vampires, drag queens, and punks will refer to themselves as "pervs" or perverts. Many of the boundaries of these communities are permeable, unstable, and resistant to firm delineation. "BD" refers to those who enjoy bondage and discipline primarily. "S/M", refers to those who participate in bondage activities but more consciously identify what they are doing as sadomasochism, and refer to themselves as sadists or masochists. The compound formation, "BDSM", covers a multitude of representations. Rather than the pejorative or clinical sense that Freud and generations of psychoanalysts intend, these aficionados have taken hold of these pejorative terms to highlight and seize a certain group pride in their status as outlaws. This capacity for invention and transvaluation will resurface later in the discussion of fantasy and the use of theatrical framing in S/M scenes.

In addition to this capacity to turn pejorative terms on their heads and to adapt the characteristics of so-called straight, heterosexual culture for its own parodic uses, Harris points out that the most salient feature of gay men's attraction to S/M is its potential for organizing a social realm that is scattered and often incoherent, even to those who live well within its boundaries. He states:

The vibrant social dimension of the leather world ...is not a byproduct of the S/M fetish, but one of its



primary incentives, the motivating factor that continues to attract teeming hordes of gay men who disingenuously claim to share the same fascination with violent sex. Just as the widescale practice of S/M was originally motivated by the need to masculinize the image of the homosexual in the eyes of straight society, so its eventual triumph as a "lifestyle" ...was the result of the intense isolation homosexuals experienced in the world before Stonewall,<sup>9</sup> which gave rise to the urgent social needs to establish connections with other gay men.<sup>10</sup>

Here one can see clearly the emergence of strong resistance to the pathologization of masochistic behavior. No longer were those who practiced S/M viewing themselves placidly as deviants unable to express their need for social interaction. Theirs were not developmental disabilities expressing "self-destruction" nor were they dwelling in isolation bent on self-inflicted suffering. Rather, they were adopting a set of costumes, mannerisms, social codification, and sexual practices that were mutually satisfying and affirming of their sexuality. They were consciously identifying as inhabitants of sexualized realms. It is out of a need to establish social connections with other gay men who are self-identified as people willing to

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<sup>9</sup> The series of riots in July 1969 in which New York City Police officers raided a gay tavern called the Stonewall Inn where mourners were marking the passing of tragic icon Judy Garland. Patrons were rounded up for arrest but a group of drag queens (female impersonators) fought back. Many commentators trace the beginning of the "gay liberation" movement to this event.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, p. 183-84.

explore something new and possibly edgy, transgressive, and fulfilling that men and women (gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals) begin to adopt the sexual practice of sadomasochism.

Harris maintains that since the first political, public stirrings of an organized S/M movement, at mid-century, the cult of leather has served as a way for gay men to identify themselves to others and is only incidentally a way of fulfilling overpowering erotic urges to engage in vilified, ostensibly illicit practices. Far from representing an epidemic of sexual pathology, he claims that those who choose to become involved in S/M sex have a new pretext for a perverse act of networking.

Instead, in the case of the vast majority of homosexuals who engage in S/M sex, leather is a social fetish, an "acquired" or "learned" fetish that has little to do with an inherently kinky predisposition for alternative erotic practices.<sup>11</sup>

This, I argue, works to demonstrate that the pathologization of those who engage in S/M is largely misplaced and is the construction of a cadre of psychoanalytic writers and therapists who are ill at ease with the relatively small number of clients who exhibit such dangerous, isolated, self-destructive behavior. They have extrapolated their conclusions from small numbers of clients who have sought them out for treatment solutions to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 184. I argue that most, if not all of human sexual behavior is learned. This reinforces the notion that gay men consciously choose to express their sexual selves through these behaviors and within these social spaces.

untenable, usually solipsistic problems. Usually these clients exhibit their symptoms in social isolation and not as a shared, articulated strategy for attaining specifically sexual pleasure. Often these cases involve individuals who are not practicing the craft sporadically or intermittently as in the cases studied by Spengler, Moser and Madeson, and others. It is something they are driven to do and cannot avoid in their obsessive need. On the other hand, if it is a *chosen* activity, it is not something that its adherents are trying to shake off. Rather than some perverse inner drive that compels people to place themselves in perpetually slavish and degrading situations, this social affiliation process is aimed at integration and acceptance of sexual orientation and practice that is consistently made problematic by the circumambient culture.

Harris is correct in observing that men and women may not have a "kinky predisposition" to engage in S/M practices. What he fails to observe, or perhaps chooses to ignore due to its denigrated place within the majority culture, is the importance, within the gay and lesbian culture, of sexual pleasure simply for its own sake. Sex is not always about marriage, family connection, procreation, or even love and romance, for many gay men and lesbians. It is simply a goal pursued for the possibilities of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual pleasure offered by the very bodies that are present to humans and with which identity is often primarily associated.

Gay men and lesbians are already on the outside, by many accounts. According to the Kinsey Report, which is now widely accepted on this particular point, the percentage of the population identifying itself as predominantly homosexual is roughly 10%. Even if all of these homosexuals were "out;" that is, self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, dyke, faerie, etc., the remainder of the population would still vastly outnumber them. For many gay men and lesbians, I argue, it is the intolerable uncertainty of roles and identity within the marginalized and often veiled world of gay social interaction that draws them to the S/M scene. In the S/M scene, while there may persist ambiguities centering on gender and sexuality, there is a way to read much of what is going on with a fair amount of certainty. The gatherings are laden with the air of sexual gratification and fulfillment. There is no mistaking that S/M is about sex. The leather, rubber, latex clothing and specialized fetish gear is elaborate and most often readily identifies its wearers as players in the scene.<sup>12</sup>

Gay men have often created group allegiances throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century that have allowed them to communicate with each other. Harris maintains that

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<sup>12</sup> Harris, p.185.

"fandom"<sup>13</sup> and fetish have served the same purpose among groups of gays and lesbians. The worship of stars, often and especially those women perceived to be assertive and more likely to dominate men rather than being dominated, is a continuing theme for many gay men. In a similar way, leather and uniforms as fetish items become a banner uniting large numbers of isolated homosexuals.<sup>14</sup> There is among devotees of S/M an intense spirit of camaraderie. Practicing psychotherapist and longtime elder of the scene, Guy Baldwin speaks of the feeling of a kind of tribal relationship that subsists among S/M players.<sup>15</sup> In most large US cities there are organized groups holding sessions for dissemination of arcane knowledge about whipping, rope bondage, suspension, care and proper construction of play spaces, whips,

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<sup>13</sup> His term for star worship by gay men. Among the favorites: Judy Garland, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Cher, and Diana Ross.

<sup>14</sup> Until the late 1980s and 90s this was largely the case. At this time the fetish/leather look became very popular in many fashion houses. See Valerie Steele's, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). While the fetish/leather look still remains popular, I suggest that most occasional S/M players restrict their wearing of leather and fetish gear to their play times. On the other hand, those who are consistently living the leather lifestyle, the so-called 24/7 arrangement, are most often recognizable by other cues such as body piercings, tattoos, and the well-worn look of their leathers.

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin, Guy, *Ties That Bind: The SM/Leather/Fetish Erotic Style*, (Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing Co., 1993).

etc. In many cities during the 1990s there were also benefit "play parties" for causes, such as the defense of the Spanner defendants in the UK.

Despite the wish to create a new and more distinctly traditional masculine gay ethos, albeit with a travestied and parodic twist, this movement toward solidarity among gay S/M folks has engendered more problems than it has solved. At least this is the worried notion of Harris:

Whether this trend has solved the problem of effeminacy it nevertheless created a new difficulty: it unleashed a wave of criticism from both the psychiatric establishment and the squeamish mainstream American public who interpreted S/M as further evidence of the homo's innate perversion. In an effort to prove masculinity gay men only succeeded in reinforcing prevailing belief in unsavory status as unbalanced psychopath.<sup>16</sup>

Harris declares that the early writings of what he terms "leather apologists" in the 60s and 70s begin a process of self-reconstruction. Depravity is refuted and erotic experimentation is held up as a method for promoting a healthier lifestyle. Harris claims that the movement adopted the jargon and mindset of the self-actualization movement, then popular and influential in such movements as EST, Esalen, and various Gestalt therapies. He insists that by trying to pass itself off as a method for self-discovery, the movement sold out and abandoned its outlaw status in favor of assimilationist politics. He quotes writer, activist, and longtime

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<sup>16</sup> Harris, p.185-86.

elder of the S/M scene, Larry Townsend, on the successful S/M session producing the same cathartic benefit as the hated sessions on the "enemy" couches of psychiatrists.<sup>17</sup> Harris decries this movement toward the jargon of therapy; this attempt to use the tools once used for condemnation not only of gay sex but especially S/M sex. He says this effort to rehabilitate gay men and lesbians is a betrayal of the transgressiveness inherent to being gay or lesbian. He grumbles:

Rather than accepting their illicitness and welcoming their reputation as a subversive fringe element that skirted the margins of respectable society, leathermen engaged in a self-betraying act of bad faith.<sup>18</sup>

He claims that the jargon of the human potential movement still colors S/M literature.

By adopting the human potential lingo and accepting that the accommodation to an S/M lifestyle would make those gay men and lesbians healthier individuals, Harris asserts that this move also encouraged the use of a set of metaphors for reinforcing the rationalization of often startling contradictions between the recreational activities and careers. He claims that the subjectivity produced by this move toward S/M is

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<sup>17</sup> Townsend, Larry, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, (New York: Olympia Press, 1972). p. 173. It is worth noting that Townsend is also a psychotherapist.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, p. 187.

"compartmentalized," and "fractured", a "Sybil-like conglomeration of multiple personalities"<sup>19</sup>:

Such language has enabled the S/M community to justify the extraordinary act of self-dismemberment involved in living the leather lifestyle, which requires its followers to erect impenetrable barriers between their careers and their professionally damaging private fetishes, every trace of which must, by necessity, be banished from the boardroom, the staff meeting, and the job interview.<sup>20</sup>

What he fails to acknowledge here is that these coping skills are precisely what have kept gay men alive and able to contribute meaningfully in many realms of the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. Gay men have always had to live at least two, and often more, realities simultaneously. The intensity of the activities and the rarified air of the dungeon or playroom are not something most people want to imbibe without interruption. In fact, it is often precisely the transgressive quality, the hiddenness and forbidden character, and the secrecy that keep S/M activity appealing to its adherents, both gay and non-gay. It remains a special language and set of behaviors for the initiated. Harris also fails to appreciate the humor involved in much of S/M practice. While it is often serious and meant to be a fierce and virile expression of sex and sexuality, much of what is fun and expressive about leather and S/M is the theatrical part of it, the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



stagy and showy part. The compartmentalization that he disdains is a functional necessity for gay men. This is true not just for gay leathermen, but also for most other gay men. In order to exist in a straight world that is at best disinterested and at worst hostile and actively violent toward them and their interests, it is necessary that gay men negotiate potentially hostile and certainly permeable and diffuse boundaries. Rechy understands the theatrical aspect of S/M:

One must point out also that gay S&M observes definite boundaries of time and place for its enactment; it does not spill over into the unwilling arenas of "reality." Actors, clerks, hairdressers, truckdrivers, teachers, salesmen, even ministers—the whole spectrum of professions—these participants in gay S&M lead lives no different from those in any other segment; like actors in a play, performing only on stage—stepping out of their roles once the play is over.<sup>21</sup>

Harris goes on to claim that the rhetoric of human potential facilitated the acceptance of S/M among larger numbers of gay men who now saw it as a way to actualize hidden and undervalued "facets" of the self. He sees this compartmentalization as a hindrance to the integration of one's sex life with one's daily life. He claims that the practitioners of S/M, to make the practices palatable to larger numbers of the gay and non-gay milieu, depended upon the notion that it was desirable and even healthy to compartmentalize the personality. The underlying message here is clear, that one should never be

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

anything but integrated and that to sublimate aspects of ones sexuality is to be a traitor to the cause of gay liberation.

Harries clearly misunderstands, as many interpreters do, the cooperative nature of S/M practices. He insists that there is a foundational theme that undergirds all of S/M, as if there is one answer to its origins and one source of its continued popularity. He believes that S/M is "sex based on physical restraint and even literal imprisonment."<sup>22</sup> He makes a further unsupported and categorical denunciation:

S/M denies free will, encourages relationships of servile dependence, and glorifies the most despotic forms of external control, from handcuffs and gags to anonymous hoods that reduce the masochist to little more than a gaping orifice, a dehumanized mouth slit, a warm wet hole at his master's disposal.<sup>23</sup>

Harris claims that there is an inner conflict between this rhetoric of independence and the "physical and psychological realities of S/M, which categorically preclude autonomy and delight instead in duress and captivity."<sup>24</sup>

Harris notes that self-correction to this gap between theory and practice follows the criticisms of psychiatric circles but more importantly, appears

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 190.

in response to protest from within the gay community. Feminists also recoil from the similarity of S/M practices to the patriarchal fascism they are desperately attempting to unseat. They are also troubled by the extreme objectification of the body. Another disturbing aspect for many critics is the fascination for military and police paraphernalia. Then there is another faction of centrist, assimilationist gay men who preach a gospel of tolerance and who wish to pair up just as their parents had been happy couples in the late 50s and 60s. They want to put forth the image of gay men as wholesome, rosy-cheeked good citizens. The publication in 1982 of *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*<sup>25</sup> was one of the strongest attacks against the leather community. This series of often vitriolic essays kicked off a debate that has raged on and off for two decades. The politics behind this conflict continued to rage through the 80s and 90s. It points up the fragility of the coalition groups that formed in the wake of Stonewall. The so-called "gay community" has been, and continues to be, a volatile mix of contradictory forces that does not always hold together very well. The controversial and contested case of S/M could hardly be excused away. It remains largely an embarrassment in the assimilationist-oriented trend of gay identity politics. Harris claims that in

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<sup>25</sup> Linden, Robin R. editor, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, (Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1982).

order to retain legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow members of the subculture, the proponents of S/M, who wrote the articles and guidebooks, instead begin to recharacterize aggression as affection, sadism as tenderness, cruelty as kindness. Even the title of Mark Thompson's edited collection, *Leatherfolk*<sup>26</sup>, reflects this unfortunate softening, according to Harris. No longer leather "men", the word is now "leatherfolk". Harris sees this as a desertion, a watering down that is unacceptable. What he fails to recognize is the fact that just as the rest of many formerly heterogeneous segments of American culture have become increasingly diverse and its boundaries more fluid and permeable, so have the categories of expression and affiliation among gay men. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari conclude in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, there can be no revolutionary actions where the relations between people and groups are relations of exclusion and segregation. They assert that groups must multiply and cross-fertilize in ever expanding new ways, freeing up space for the construction of new social arrangements.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thompson, Mark, ed. *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People Politics, and Practice*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Harris asserts that this process of mitigation and compromise led S/M apologists to drop the emphasis on the allegorical and figurative elements of S/M and instead direct attention to the sensual reality of experience.<sup>28</sup> Forgetting about the unpleasant similarity between police interrogations and fraternity house hazing to the practices of S/M people in a back room or party scenario, the new emphasis was on how S/M experiences *feel* as opposed to what they *mean*. He points to evidence of this de-allegorizing by examining Larry Townsend's two editions of the Leatherman's Handbook. In the first (1972), the emphasis, according to Harris, is on the psychological import of leather sex scenes. However, in the newer version, only eleven years later (1983), the discussion shifts to recommendations for heightening the sensory pleasures of a scene. While this may be a legitimate criticism of the two editions, it's not entirely clear that Townsend has vacated his claims to the importance of the fictions of sadomasochistic sex. It's still very important to Townsend and other commentators what meanings S/M generates for its loyal tribes. For example, a prominent Domina related the following story. She knows a man who enjoys getting dressed up in inexpensive clothing that is appropriate for a hooker. He prides himself on being able to dress for under \$20, wig, shoes, and all. Then he strolls the streets of San Francisco where men are likely to

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<sup>28</sup> Harris, p. 192.

pick up streetwalkers for a trick. He performs sexual services for them, charging them money while his sexual needs and desires are also fulfilled. Here is a gender-bending situation that is quite complex. A man who does not consider himself gay puts on cheap, tacky clothes and does not attempt to "pass" as a woman. He allows men to pick him up, has sexual relations with them for money. Clearly, part of the excitement for all concerned is the tacit recognition that he is a man, but still he is dressed as a woman. On one occasion, predictably, he was picked up and received a severe beating from a group of thugs. He came to the Domina after some time in search of some healing and understanding. She helped him work through and understand the meaning of these senseless acts by way of some compassionate sessions of cross-dressing and role-playing.

The next consequence of the alleged exchange of allegorical richness for "raunch-for-raunch's-sake"<sup>29</sup> is the reversal of roles in the dynamic of the S/M sex scene. Whereas before it was the responsibility of the slave to see to it that the Master was pleased and stimulated in every way, it is now the bottom that must, by all means, be satisfied. Instead of the Top taking his or her pleasure unmindful of the masochist's needs, it is now the masochist who is the director of the scene. No longer is the sadist a callously detached torturer,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

but rather he/she is an emphatic sensory engineer who plays on the subject like a musical instrument until songs of ecstasy ring out. I suspect that part of what is operative here is a generational shift among those who write about S/M, the so-called apologists. Not only have present-day writers grown to maturity alongside feminists, they have in many cases internalized and incorporated into practice the wisdom of two generations of feminist thinkers. Nor does it seem plausible that the representational and allegorical layering of meaning has entirely faded away. More likely, I believe, is that yet another layer of representation, inclusive of affection and tenderness, qualities often essentialized and associated with femininity, have become more acceptable to people educated and enculturated in the decades following the 60s.

In a passage that purports to mourn the changes that he chalks up to the abandonment of some precious and golden past, Harris actually highlights the growing maturity and self-awareness beginning to dawn in the S/M scene in the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

The sexual politics of domination and submission have become so complex and so closely scrutinized by the feminist sex police that the inequalities of power in the traditional scene have swung in the opposite direction. The top has swapped roles with his bottom, who, in an extraordinary act of manumission, is actually gaining ascendancy over his supposed master.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

Once again we see the importance of literary portrayals of masochism, sadomasochism, and in the more contemporary terminology, S/M. These contests for the *real* meaning and the *true* value of S/M are not being waged in a court or legislative body. They are being waged in a battle of words in which the more persuasive, the more salacious, the more disturbing or incendiary the account; the better off its proponents will feel themselves to be in the battle. There is a lot at stake here in this battle for cultural capital. As Lynda Hart points out:

The movement of sadomasochistic sexuality is toward a delicate precarious borderline where testing and transgressing the line between the real and the phantasmic deeply troubles a feminist movement invested in consciousness and clarity.<sup>31</sup>

The key word here is "transgressing". It undergirds all discussions of radical sexuality and subjectivity. Masochism and its attendant transgressive potential are simultaneously a damned desire and a desire for damnation.<sup>32</sup> This has created a seemingly never-ending string of debates in the feminist/ women's movement regard the "place" of S/M. It was hotly debated in the so-called "sex wars" of the 80s, raging over both the appropriateness of women being submissive to men in

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<sup>31</sup> Hart, Lynda. "Blood, Piss, and Tears: The Queer Real", *Textual Practice*, p. 60, no. 1 (1995): 55-66.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, Tim. *Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity, and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1994), pg. 77.



S/M scenarios as well as the even more troubling specter of women participating in lesbian S/M scenes. Some men in the gay male community noticed that sadomasochistic acting potentially perpetuated through active-passive dualisms and the debasement and degradation of oneself and one's desire for other men.

Once again the gay apologist fails to understand the uses of parody and reversal that are operative in S/M activity. It is not the brutality and repressive violence that gay men seek to inhabit when they don the costumes and attitudes of would be oppressors. Rather, as Pat Califia has pointed out, it is the power that redounds to the wearers of those emblems that is sought. What is not often stated explicitly by gay apologists, however, is that few gay men have failed, at least on occasion, to fantasize or practice sexual activities enacting submission to a dominant "masculine" man.<sup>33</sup> This may be troubling to those who wish to gloss over power differentials or insist that masculinity can be entirely shorn of its dominant character.

It is true that in the public relations campaign to rehabilitate the image of S/M over the last two decades in both gay and non-gay audiences, its apologists have emphasized importance of the tenets, "safe, sane, and consensual." For the most part, it

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<sup>33</sup> The same perplexity is encountered, *mutatis mutandis*, when feminists attempt to explain away the "rape fantasy" often experienced and reported by women.

seems that gay men and lesbians who engage both publicly and privately in S/M adhere to these guidelines. It is also true that there are more complaints heard of something called a "pushy bottom". It appears that the true masochistic character of modern and postmodern sadomasochistic sexual practitioners is revealed more clearly. In other words, it is the masochist, who, though bound and gagged, is directing the scene. "Topping from below" is a touchy subject among both Tops and bottoms. A Top does not like to feel that the bottom is in control, but it is difficult to escape the fact that the bottom's wishes, limits, and stop words must be heeded. Yet this does not tell the entire story. The term pushy bottom is a mildly negative pejorative phrase entailing the notion that a bottom is inappropriately directing the scene from the position of the submissive. There is a fine, seemingly often contested line between the Top who wields the rope, whip, flogger, or other means of restraint, and the bottom, who holds the power of submission enabling the Top to occupy that "powerful" position.

Harris complains bitterly that the sharp definitions in sex roles are being lost, as tops routinely switch roles, even in the middle of a scene. He states that sexual roles were once adopted for life and were as inflexible as caste stations among Hindus.<sup>34</sup> An increase in versatility and the

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<sup>34</sup> Harris, p.196.

dissolution of formerly prescriptive labels of Top and bottom has gone by the wayside. He roasts Guy Baldwin for transgressing the sexual precepts of his elders and admitting that a Top can have freedom to shed his role and submit to another Top:

This debonair treatment of roles that were once viewed as basic ontological classifications, like "left" and "right" or "inside" and "out," reveals that the very structure of the S/M scene is finally succumbing to the concept of personal liberty implicit in the human potential movement, whose cult of free will has, over time, destabilized the basic divisions of top and bottom.<sup>35</sup>

Hard and fast roles are now nothing more than "lifestyle choices" or whims based on a moment's fancy. Harris predicts a dire future for S/M community, in which sex roles will have evaporated entirely, killed off by their embarrassing and problematic political fallout. However, it is precisely this destabilization that masochism is after in its use of parody, irony, and theatricality: the constant juxtaposition of the "real" and the "performed".

Lynda Hart shines a critical light upon this area of representation that Harris seems not to have considered in his analysis of the construction of S/M sexuality. Harris looks for stable and fixed identities and identifiable characteristics for gay men and their sexual lives. But that is often what gay men and lesbians are seeking to flee. Hart clearly enunciates again the paradox of S/M,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.197.

particularly with respect to the theatrical space it most often occupies:

*Only S/M sexuality is absolutely permeated by theatrical rhetoric. People (two, three, or more) do 'scenes'. They do not 'have sex' like 'normal' people. Non-kinky heterosexual sex acts rarely if ever are described as doing scenes. ... It seems that the 'anti-theatrical prejudice', which has been functional since at least the time of Plato, is an operative paradox in s/m performance. For, on the one hand, by virtue of the very 'fact' of their theatricality, these practices occupy a denigrated space in our cultural imaginary. On the other hand, practitioners of s/m sexuality have found some means of defence against the onslaughts of both the New Right and some feminists by appealing precisely to that theatricality that is otherwise demeaned. Depending then on the context, s/m performers may find themselves saying something like this: 'it's not real, it's only a performance', in an appeal for tolerance.<sup>36</sup>*

It looks as if S/M will always be permeated by the play of the real against the performed. Hart points out another problematic for the practitioners of S/M. Considering that part of the theatrical wardrobe and stock of identities used in S/M consists of the wearing of uniforms and the adoption of attitudes held by oppressive and punitive representatives of cultural groups (e.g. Nazis, police officers, prison wardens, school officials, physicians), many critics have found this problematic. Since S/M scenes deal with the use, exchange, inversion, and reversal of traditional forms of power, it is not surprising that its

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<sup>36</sup> Hart, Lynda. "Blood, Piss, and Tears: The Queer Real", *Textual Practice*, no. 1 (1995). p. 58.

devotees make use of clothing and other signifiers of that power. Not only do perverts like to play with doctor's and nurse's uniforms, they also like to play with the authority connoted by the highway patrolman's uniforms, the cowboys' chaps and branding irons, and occasionally even the jackboots of a Nazi or Stasi<sup>37</sup> official.

At first glance the use of the signs of the most repressive regimes is lacking in any sort of redeeming value, for they have come to stand in metonymically for all that is cruel and repressive within modern governmental and totalitarian apparatuses. However, keeping in mind that S/M has as its general goal the uncovering and overthrow of stable relations of power, it appears on closer inspection that the deployment of these signifiers is more complicated when the sexual and erotic elements become overt. Thus, masochism focuses on the eroticization of social relations and cultural stereotypes and on the way that eroticization can be used as a strategy of resistance. However, Harris decries this move toward the aesthetic appropriation of sadomasochistic practice.

All that will remain is a series of elaborate techniques for creating intense situations, an abstract aestheticism that will replace the exaggerated dramas of control and dependence.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The secret police of the former East Germany, known for their repressive, brutal tactics, often including torture.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, p.197.

Harris despairs that the turn to a more aesthetic understanding of S/M, with less rigid boundaries and more communication between both individual partners and the loss of ontological status for the categories of Top and bottom will leave nothing more than a catalogue of techniques.

In contrast to Harris's limiting view of masochism as a cultural production, theoretical perspectives with more perspicacious dimensions put forth by both Franz Fanon and Kaja Silverman encourage a second look at the way that masochism works against both traditional configurations of the boundaries of gender and the inflexibility of power relations. According to literary critic John Noyes:

Fanon and Silverman both show us that if we are to do justice to the strategies of masochistic representation, we will have to address masochism as an enactment and a staging of subjectivity. Their readings ask us to regard masochism both as a social production of masochistic desire and as a conscious staging of conflict, whose aim is to neutralize conflict. ...The masochistic scene not only attempts to reconfigure the power relations of liberalism, it also unsettles the boundaries of gender that liberalism tries so hard to fix. In the process, it casts doubt on any system of meaning that relies on fixed relations of political power, or fixed boundaries of gender.<sup>39</sup>

The next move that Harris makes in tracing the story of the sell-out of S/M is to connect it to the movement known as "modern primitives," whose best

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<sup>39</sup> Noyes, John K. *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 114-15.

known public figure is Fakir Musafar.<sup>40</sup> These folks cover themselves with tattoos and piercings, often during New Age festivals. While the modern primitives share some common ground with S/M practitioners, and the two groups are often friendly, I believe it is a mistake to conflate the ethos undergirding the two groups without some serious qualifications.

It is true that the modern primitives are seeking a kind of transcendent state where the private, individual pain of piercing is subsumed in a kind of ecstatic awareness of communal energy. And while both S/M and modern primitives utilize techniques and procedures that make use of pain, it seems to me that the world of S/M remains focused primarily on sexual scenarios and the eroticization of dominance and submission. He claims that the world of S/M has imported an alien and contradictory recharacterization of itself as a kind of "feel-good" esoteric practice with traces of Eastern meditation, and considers its practices as a way to redress the sins of colonialism by adopting the wholesome pagan methods of union with the cosmos.

S/M sex has thus been transformed from an exaltation of patriarchal fascism into an educational foray into multiculturalism, a method of creating out of the body itself a politically correct artifact that advertises

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<sup>40</sup> For a popular account, complete with photographs, of Musafar and others of the modern primitive movement, see Vale, V. and Andrea Juno. *Modern Primitives*, (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1989).

the wearer's disdain for Western culture and his admiration for the quaint customs of noble savages.<sup>41</sup>

S/M thus becomes, in Harris' view, a kind of ashram where jaded and harried Westerners can revitalize themselves. His summary of the transformative sellout of S/M has an almost unbelieving, slightly covetous sound to it:

Leather was first psychologized, then sensualized, and now at last, in an effort to create a kinder, gentler S/M, it has been spiritualized. What began as a satanic movement has become an angelic one; behavior that was once immoral and transgressive has become righteous and pure.<sup>42</sup>

S/M was a way for middle class homosexuals to get in touch with their masculinity and begin to shed stereotypes of effeminacy. This version of S/M idolized a machine, the motorcycle. But Harris complains that this reverence has shifted to a preference for the world of the primitive savage who lives in a mud hut in a preindustrial haven of bliss away from the contemporary consumerist culture of the West. The erotic tribute to industrialism is gone. It is replaced by the fetish of "feeling good" and searching for transcendent states. Harris claims that when kink stops being kinky and loses its outlaw status, leathermen will conjure their own demise.

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<sup>41</sup> Harris, p.199.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



In seeking the legitimization of kink in the eyes of mainstream society, leathermen are committing a very slow act of suicide, a process of self-eradication in which sadists the world over are engaging in the deadliest form of S/M possible, a snuff scene—their own.<sup>43</sup>

Harris' point here is that the entire subculture of gay America, but especially gay S/M, has been co-opted by fashion cognoscenti, advertising and sitcom writers, and by this process the gay sensibility has been obliterated as a distinctive and outlaw voice. Acceptance of homosexuals by mainstream America is predicated on turning this distinctive sensibility into flavorless pabulum. The image of the leatherman is softened and his pursuits sanitized and relegated to a "play space" far removed from the careers that these pursuits might potentially damage were they revealed in the daylight.

The metaphors of selfhood generated by the human potential movement have performed an essential task of preserving the homosexual's economic viability by devising for him an undercover identity that allows him to keep socially unacceptable elements of the subculture out of public view.<sup>44</sup>

Yet another representation of contemporary S/M as a literary and historical creation, with a more felicitous and less vituperative slant, is put forward by Mark Edmundson in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of*

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.201.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

*the Gothic*<sup>45</sup>. In this text, Edmundson likens Freud's invention of the ego and superego to the earlier literary tropes utilized by Monk Lewis and Ann Radcliffe. Where Lewis and Radcliffe had given us literary tropes of castles and dungeons and cruel torturers pursuing hapless victims, Freud gives us the superego as potent and punishing master, and the ego as an enslaved and frightened captive.<sup>46</sup> In place of Lewis' castle of Otranto we have a psyche located deep inside each one of us. Appropriate to a Gothic tale, much of the action pertinent to the psyche takes place within the world of dreams or spirits, to phrase it in an older terminology. According to Edmundson, Freud has internalized the Gothic.

This representation of sadomasochism as a Gothic tale internalized rings true in several of its 20<sup>th</sup>-century variations on a theme. If Eve Sedgwick<sup>47</sup> is correct, there are three elements that are central to the Gothic. It is a literary tradition dependent upon many of the same features as the modern melodrama or the postmodern S/M theatrical performance. First of those features are a cruel

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<sup>45</sup> Edmundson, Mark. *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 8-9.

hero/villain; second, a cringing, pursued victim; and last, a gruesome and horrific locale, usually hidden from public view. The events take place in cloistered and remote places such as abandoned medieval fortresses or even monasteries. In 20<sup>th</sup> century American contexts the dungeon is the preferred locale for the practice of sadomasochism. The dungeon can be formal or makeshift. Often practitioners with sufficient disposable income will modify a room or entire section of their home or apartment to house the equipment and apparatus of S/M.

In summary, the enormous changes during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century brought forth a burgeoning and more public appearance of gay men, and consequently a more visible presence of gay leathermen. A transvaluation of formerly pejorative terms operated to turn formerly stigmatizing discourses on their heads. Practitioners of S/M seek to overthrow stable relations of power and gender and the practices are passed along through organized networks of devotees who shared their specialized knowledge. S/M begins to mature and this destabilization of categories is precisely its goal. The discursive practices of sociology and its fellow social sciences have significantly altered the reductivism of the psychoanalytic approach, but it remains the task of S/M practitioners to fill out those gaps with their performance and with their adherence to the guidelines they have stipulated themselves as they search for a balance between transgression and marginal acceptance. In the next chapter I will look

at some more contemporary expressions of S/M culture and practice in an attempt to flesh out the details of this search for a masochistic subjectivity that will unsettle the boundaries of gender and cast doubt upon any system of meaning relying on such fixed boundaries.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: UNTYING THE KNOT: OR, CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF MASOCHISM AND THE ETHICS OF DEMOCRATIC SEXUAL FREEDOM

After these excursions into the various realms where representations of masochism have been deployed and their interpretations have been curiously fertilized and have crossed into almost every level of cultural awareness, where does that leave the ethical question of masochism? If masochism is an truly an underlying component of social reality (in both sexual and non-sexual scenarios) in late-capitalist, postmodern social structures, is it possible that sexual sadomasochism is an acceptable, even desirable mode of relationship between human beings? The question hinges on whether sadomasochistic sexual scenarios conform to the idea of accountability within the radical democratic environments we uphold. If and only if, as its defenders and proponents argue so consistently, the participants in these scenes are not coerced am I prepared to advocate on their behalf. Only if the participants are maintaining safe procedures that do not knowingly cause harm to other players can these practices be endorsed. Sexual pleasure is a premoral good. It is assumed that pleasure is produced through these encounters. Part of the work of this essay has been to show that it is possible that sadomasochistic performance

between consenting adults can produce sexual pleasure and thus fulfillment in several senses. It is liable to produce fulfillment in the sense of a social connectivity often denied to those who practice unusual or stigmatized forms of sexual behavior. It is also prone to produce fulfillment in explicitly sexual terms among its practitioners. While this fulfillment entails pleasure, it is not necessarily oriented toward procreation, lifelong commitment, or even strictly genital pleasure.

Surprisingly, at the conclusion of this study of masochism and sadomasochistic practice, to complete this hermeneutical journey, I return to the realm of psychoanalytic and literary theory for a retrieval that facilitates an evaluation of the ethical significance of these practices. After some additional description of current sadomasochistic practice and the social networks that hold their devotees together, I utilize the works of Jessica Benjamin, psychoanalyst and literary theorist, as a springboard into the waters of a new direction in the consideration of masochism. Benjamin suggests that if the ideologies of power, pleasure, sex, and gender, inherent to discussion of S/M, are to be understood, then it is critical that the issues of eroticized violence and the search for transcendence via these practices be examined more carefully. Even if the curious mixture of rationality and passion evidenced in the practice and theory of sexual sadomasochism conforms to the requirements that its adherents stipulate, that is, safe sane, and consensual, it is likely these practices will

continue to unsettle. Contemporary expressions of S/M are configured to raise issues about power, gender, and pleasure and to disrupt conventional boundaries of what is permissible or even possible for bodies and culture. The impossible subjectivity of masochism holds together the logical contradictions between pain and pleasure, reason and passion, power and powerlessness, without subverting either pole of these binaries. S/M continues to give rise to ambiguity and shifts in its expression, meaning, and representation.

Throughout this work I have insisted that masochism, especially in its cultural formation as sadomasochism, is an experimental mode of both literary creation and social configuration. S/M is an experimental mode of human sexual behavior, always searching for new ways of pushing limits, questioning identities, and producing pleasure. Accordingly, I suggest that if those who practice S/M conform to non-coercive guidelines, maintain consensual, negotiated limits, and do not intentionally harm their partners, then the search for transcendence via this mode of cultural practice should be included under the wider expanses of liberal democratic freedom. Aside from the more narrow requirements for safety and consent, I suggest that the richest field for further studies of representations of masochism and sadomasochism remains the aesthetic realm, where its inherent ambiguities, paradoxes, and uncertainty are welcomed, even admired. I have opened up the discursive fields of psychoanalytic theory,

sociological analysis, and historical representations of masochism to a closer look. Although the problem of reductivism remains in each of these fields, each is worthy of note and carries considerable weight in the representations of masochism one finds today. However, because of the fictive, inescapably literary quality of masochism, the most fruitful consideration may well come from the realm of aesthetic theory.

In the contemporary world of S/M practice, the masochist is often in search of a partner who will listen and understand, at least nominally, his needs and desires for subjugation and dominance, and who will adhere to the outlines of a contract that is either verbal or written. For this reason, I argue that the form of sadomasochism more commonly termed S/M in its modern and postmodern cultural formations, is derived predominantly and shaped in the mold of masochism. Even though the term sadomasochism implies the inclusion of theoretical elements from the literature of Sade and practical components of sadism, contemporary social formations utilizing waiting and suspension (of both pleasure and pain) are more characteristic of masochism. These elements, combined with the mandatory contract, are more characteristic of the literature of Sacher-Masoch and the practice of masochism.

The form of advertisement currently utilized by practitioners in search of a playmate in a public gathering is often a display of characteristic clothing or postures. In the absence of person to person initial contact, bulletin boards or specialty



advertisements, usually in a locally circulated publication or perhaps in an adult novelty establishment or nightclub is employed. More recently, the placement of ads or personal profiles on an Internet web page or a response to another player's personal ad is used as a way to connect and find partners for play. For example, a highly specialized and literate website called "LeatherNavigator" is available for both popular articles on various topics of interest to gay leathermen, as well as for hosting personal ads and individual webpages. It is within cultural sites such as these that the advertisement and negotiation leading to some type of contact takes place. A bottom will approach a potential Top in response to a personal ad or web page with an email letter listing his particular interests and fetishes. He might specify that he is interested in any or all of the following: bondage (e.g. rope, chain, suspension, mummification), CBT, breath control, verbal humiliation, cross dressing, enemas, electricity (use of a "violet wand", or even a cattle prod), or Total Power Exchange. A few words of description are in order regarding the specific shape of these practices. "Cock and ball torture" (CBT) refers to the practice of binding, stretching, and restricting movement of male genitalia with cord, rope, clothespins, etc. Cross-dressing is the practice of donning the attire and occasionally the mannerism of the alternate gender. For many the blurring of these gender lines is important for marking out the space of masochism as one that is

not governed by everyday rules. Often the use of women's clothing in both gay and heterosexual play connotes and emphasizes the element of submission and subservience to the dominant in charge of the scene. The violet wand refers to use of the low level D/C power appliances employed to electrically stimulate parts of the body, often in combination with some form of bondage, corporal punishment, or other stimuli. Total Power Exchange is an agreement between two (or more) people in which arrangements are made to share many aspects of communal life together under the rubric of S/M. Some choose to become devoted entirely to a Master or Top, up to and including control of finances and dictation of schedule. In return for total devotion to a Master, a slave becomes the property of the Master and has all of his or her duties mapped out. The slave or bottom is under the complete control of another person. Sometimes this arrangement will cover an evening or weekend, at other times the arrangement is made for a specific period of weeks, months, or even indefinitely. As with other types of contracts, the permutations of this contract are endlessly varied. Unlike many other contracts, however, these do not have the force of law behind them. These types of play and their attendant social configurations may seem harsh and strange to those on the outside, bordering as they do on uncomfortable images of domination and violence. However, they are often likely to be invested with a search for transcendence.

From within the psychoanalytic corps, which steadily attempts to wrest meaning out of the various manifestations of masochism and sadomasochistic practice, a voice emerges, imbued with the measured, steady tones of a philosopher. Though still deeply permeated with Freudian pessimism, Jessica Benjamin addresses the issues of violence that are inseparable from any discussion of the moral worth of sadomasochism. In an important article, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination",<sup>1</sup> Benjamin explores the general cultural association of dominance with men and submission with women. As a psychoanalyst, she is seeking to understand masochism as a way of constructing selfhood and phrases her discussion in moderate terms without resorting to condemnation. She is serious about getting to the heart of both pathological and more moderate forms of sadomasochistic behavior. Benjamin does not ignore either the issues of consciousness and subjectivity or the importance of the body and sensuality in her outline. She is interested in "the strange union of rationality and violence that is made in the secret heart of our culture and sometimes enacted in the body."<sup>2</sup> Here, one takes note of the recognition that

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Jessica, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination", in Ann Snitow et al. (Eds.) *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, London: Virago Press, 1984, pp. 280-89.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

rational choice plays an important role in the selection of masochism as a primary or occasional form of social/sexual expression.

Benjamin ultimately views masochism, insofar as it appears within the clinical framework, as a dead end leading to numbness and coldness. In other words, the lone practitioner cutting his or her flesh is still rendered pathological. However, along the way she draws some important distinctions for a moderated understanding of representations of sadomasochism, especially as put forth by those who view their own activities neither as pathological nor in need of intervention. She recognizes that despite the association of domination always and everywhere with violence that is harmful both to perpetrators and victims, it is just as possible that erotic violence involves a deployment of the self's struggle for recognition. She holds onto a "utopian possibility of a passion that could ignite the whole self."<sup>3</sup> In her portrayal of masochism as a social practice rather than a psychoanalytic malady, Benjamin recognizes that it is an orchestrated and participatory enterprise. It is a mixture of several important areas of interest for her theory of development. Her insight touches on several points worthy of consideration. At the outset, Benjamin is troubled by the elements of violence within sadomasochism, but admits that it is within a context of voluntary participation. She writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

This rational violence mingles love with issues of control and submission. It is a controlled, ritualized form of violence that is expressed in sexual fantasy and in some carefully institutionalized, voluntary sexual practices.<sup>4</sup>

Controlled, fantasy, voluntary: these words allude to the important elements of masochism that begin to emerge from the more nuanced study of masochistic practice and its social connectivity. Far from being a pathological condition in which its adherents are deformed in character, we can begin to see that there are elements of choice at work in the selection. Where random violence is most often without any sense of consideration, the eroticized violence of masochism is preceded by fantasy that outlines its contours. Forethought and planning are necessary ingredients to the successful completion of a performance. Consultation and negotiation between two or more parties are necessary prerequisites for the elements of voluntary consent to obtain. The violence of S/M is, according to this view, something that is always under control, always within the bounds of reason, though not without the strong presence of passion as well. It does not resolve entirely into the territory of either reason or passion. The terrain of subjectivity occupied by the masochistic subject never fully coalesces into one or the other; that is the reason it is so troublesome for psychoanalytic thinkers. It is they who do not think of themselves primarily as artists

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

giving literary form to their observations of human art and artifice, but often, paradoxically, envision themselves as scientists unveiling or discovering the truths of the human heart.

Benjamin recognizes that while the forms of human valuation and the search for connection, selfhood, and understanding by way of sadomasochistic practice may be unfamiliar, the outlines of the underlying search are identifiable. Again she writes:

The fantasy of erotic domination embodies the desire for both independence and recognition. However alienated from the original desires, however disturbing or perverse their form, the impulses to erotic violence and submission express deep yearnings for selfhood and transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

Within the ceaseless movement of the struggle between the conflicting polarities of independence and recognition, Benjamin admits that a deep desire for transcendence is discernible. The rhetoric at play here cues us to the fact that Benjamin is after a solution to a very complicated psychoanalytic conundrum. The infant struggles to set itself apart from the environment (beginning with the mother) and at the same time requires recognition from the mother to accomplish the life-affirming task. However, this chore is not easily realized, laden as it is with paradox.

What is required to become a human being, in the psychoanalytic take on human development, is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

referred to as *differentiation*. This means being able to see oneself as a separate and distinct being. This is a process that takes place as the infant gradually realizes she is not a part of the mother. The struggle crystallizes in the most familiar conflict of differentiation—that between the need to establish autonomous identity and the need to be recognized by the other. The child's acts that assert independence paradoxically require an audience, thus reaffirming its dependency on others. Differentiation and recognition are the poles of the impossible subjectivity between which Benjamin situates the drama that oscillates in the sadomasochistic scenario. In this psychoanalytic theory of development, the goal is independence of the person, accomplished while maintaining the power inherent to both the dynamic of independence *from* and recognition *of* the other. Benjamin states:

A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognizing the other. Domination is the consequence of refusing this condition.<sup>6</sup>

From this theoretical perspective a fine distinction begins to emerge. Benjamin shrewdly observes that the failure to maintain the tension between self-assertion and recognition of the other results in domination. When a partner refuses to

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, Jessica, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, (New York: Pantheon, 1988), p. 53.

acknowledge that she is dependent upon the person with whom she is interacting on some level, whether on the level of sexual play or at some other level of interpersonal relations, then domination of the other is operative. Here, I will draw an important distinction between domination, as it is used in this theory, and the type of dominance that is cultivated in S/M scenarios. The sort of domination deemed proper to the S/M role play falls short of an all or nothing domination that tends to obscure the personhood of the other. Domination of the other, after negotiation and within specified limits, does not necessarily preclude the possibility embedded within it for recognition of the other on an important level.

Benjamin recognizes that Freud's all or nothing description of the hypothetical self given in masochism is limited. She writes:

The hypothetical self presented by Hegel and Freud does not want to recognize the other, does not perceive him as a person just like himself. He gives up omnipotence only when he has no choice. His need for the other—in Freud physiological, in Hegel, existential—seems to place him in the other's power, as if dependency were the equivalent of surrender.<sup>7</sup>

Here is another distinction that I extrapolate from Benjamin's theory, the difference between surrender and submission. I argue that in order to hold together the tension between recognition and independence, and to circumscribe the total

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 53-54.



domination that annihilates the other person, what is required stops short of total surrender and takes the form of *submission*. Submission implies yielding without complete abrogation of one's internal and personal sense of self. Surrender, on the other hand implies the loss of self and the total giving up of the individual self. In surrender, one partner is overrun and defeated. In the Hegelian description of master and slave, the possibility for differentiation ends here. For if the Master succeeds in completely controlling the slave, the slave ceases to exist. But Benjamin is open to the possibility that a way out of this polarity may exist; that a way of balancing these needs for differentiation and recognition may be possible by way of a paradoxical *sharing* of power. The paradox of masochism is that the subject presents himself to the object (the sadist) in complete submission, it is with the understanding that it is primarily, even solely, the masochist's wishes that the object is directed to carry out. Benjamin affirms:

The structure of individuation which permeates our culture, and which privileges separation over dependence, cannot simply be countered by its mirror opposite. Rather, it must be criticized in the light of a vision of a balance in which neither pole dominates the other, in which paradox is sustained.<sup>8</sup>

The structure that is capable of sustaining this paradox is the theatricalized and fantasy-driven space of masochism, in which power crosses and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 82-83.

recrosses the boundaries between the many binary oppositions which sadomasochistic practice seeks to emphasize. The requisite submission that allows the masochist to divest himself of power over movement and vision, even occasionally welcoming the administration of painful stimuli commingled with intensely pleasurable stimulation, is indispensable for the sadist to be fully engaged and present in the scene. Without a willing masochist the sadist is merely a sadist and remains isolated and disconnected from the circuit of power exchange that is operative in the fully consensual sadomasochistic encounter. One remarkable feature of contemporary sadomasochistic social phenomena is the multiplicity of fields or discursive formations in which these operations of power take place. Primarily as a sexual formation, but also in the fields of class, leisure, and aesthetics, sadomasochism is configured to raise issues and disrupt boundaries in many areas.

Benjamin also touches on other cultural shifts that have prepared a place for the inclusion of sadomasochism among popular modes employed to seek continuity and for experimentation with various modes of subjectivity. She suggests that the erosion of once predominant modes of cultural identity have produced an insecurity forcing people to look for newer forms of association and identification by which to achieve transcendence. She is worth quoting at length:

The tendency toward rationalization in our culture has a number of important consequences. Ironically,

domestic privatization seems to encourage strange new collective forms of violation. The secularization of society has eroded many of the previously existing forms of communal life that allowed for ritual transcendence. The experience of losing the self, of continuity, is increasingly difficult to obtain, except in the erotic relationship. Consequently, sexual eroticism has become the heir to religious eroticism. Erotic masochism or submission expresses the same need for transcendence of self—the same flight from separation and discontinuity—formerly satisfied and expressed by religion. Love is the new religion, and the psychological components of erotic domination are repeated in the eroticized cult politics of our era.<sup>9</sup>

I take Benjamin to mean here that rationalization—which is the Enlightenment dream of a utopian field of progress where the mind is omnipotent, and is meant to banish all the superstitious ghosts that plagued humans for millennia—turns out to be as unsatisfactory for achieving human fulfillment as romanticism's apostasy had been. The irrational and incongruous, the parodic and grotesque, all of these return in the form of sadomasochism. While the answers formerly found in religious contexts have disappeared, or at least receded behind a veil of skepticism cloaking the uncertain promises of science as the *new* religion, the questions posed are still at hand. Benjamin sees the great themes of human relationships being played out in the spaces created by erotic partnerships within masochistic settings. Love and aggression, destruction and

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, "Master and Slave". p. 295-96.

survival, pain and suffering, sublimation and transcendence, power and powerlessness; all these elements figure in her account of sadomasochism and erotic domination. However, she cautions that it is too much to ask that the simple recognition of gender roles associated with masculinity and femininity will solve all of the puzzles presented by this conjunction of eroticism and violence. Benjamin is worth quoting again at length on this point:

Beneath the sensationalism of power and powerlessness, the yearning to know and be known lies numbed. Real transcendence...implies that persons are able to achieve a wholeness in which the opposing impulses for recognition and differentiation are combined. The psychological origins of erotic domination can be traced to one-sided differentiation, that is, to the splitting of these impulses and their assignment to women and men, respectively. In fact, all forms of gender distinction and domination in our culture bear the mark of this split. I would conclude not that the issues of differentiation and recognition are the explanations for gender domination, but that they help to reveal some of its inner workings.<sup>10</sup>

For Benjamin the problem of masochism becomes understandable when viewed through the lens of inflexible, impermeable gender roles as they are culturally assigned and transmitted. Male identity is achieved typically within this psychiatric understanding of development by the distancing of boys from the mother. Female gender development is spared this disruption and repudiation of the mother. Consequently, Benjamin argues, following

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

Nancy Chodorow,<sup>11</sup> that male identity emphasizes difference from the nurturer over sameness, separation over connectedness, boundaries over continuity. This stance is plausible and the argument regarding the shaping of male differentiation is well known. While recognizing that there are multitudinous ways in which this pattern can be played out, it seems fair to admit that in Western, 20<sup>th</sup>-century, capitalist economic cultures, masculinity is linked to the values Benjamin lists: separation, boundaries, and difference. What she indicts in her argument is styled as "male rationality."<sup>12</sup> She avers:

The Western rational worldview emphasizes difference over sameness, boundaries over continuity, polarity and opposition over mutuality and interdependence. It does not tolerate the simultaneous experience of contradictory impulses, ambivalence.<sup>13</sup>

It is precisely this middle ground, this unstable and shifting space between categories that masochism seeks to evoke and occupy. I argue that this ground which Benjamin terms ambivalence is one in which all binarisms are both supported and overturned, all gender roles are exemplified and

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<sup>11</sup> Chodorow, Nancy, *The Reproduction of Mothering Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, "Master And Slave", p. 295.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

transgressed, and genuine transcendence is made possible. Masochism effectively undermines and destabilizes; yet at the same time it paradoxically recasts and reconstitutes many, if not most, of the binary pairings that are basic and familiar to modern culture. The culturally codified categories of masculinity/femininity, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, growth/decadence, same/different, sincerity/sentimentality, all of these are brought under the scope of masochistic production.<sup>14</sup>

It is fairly clear that masochism, as a non-sexual mode of human behavior is not dwindling in its frequency within the culture of the US. Examples of moral masochism abound, the most famous case in the US being that of Bill Clinton's dalliance with the infamous intern. It is also clear that, whatever its representations within gay and lesbian circles or within the larger world of fashion and celebrity, that sexual sadomasochism is likely to remain an ingredient in postmodern formulations of subjectivity. Masochism always presents ambiguities as it alerts us to the inconsistencies in configurations of power, gender, sexuality, desire, and pleasure. Its very use of parody, imitation, exaggeration, and flashy and disturbing costumes and images, consistently evoke questions about the boundaries of body, language and culture. The

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<sup>14</sup> These categories are derived from Eve Sedgwick's groundbreaking work *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 434.

transvaluation of images of violence and tyranny with goal of physical pleasure in mind seems to evacuate the political consequences of such images of terror. Yet significant questions remain about the relationship of the eroticized realm of violence to the political identity of those groups demanding freedom to express such behavior. Even when they avow that such behavior has been "de-realized" by elevating it to the realm of performance or theatricality there remain questions of safety for the players.

Insofar as the pursuit of pleasure by way of these practices, there can be little doubt that such pleasure, like all pleasure, must be understood from within the mind and experience of the participants. If, in addition to pleasure, no unwanted bodily harm is being inflicted upon the participants and they are deriving some consistent social affiliation and personal benefit from the practice, then I submit that it is an acceptable social practice from an ethical point of view.

Individual and communal fulfillment may be brought about through sadomasochistic sexual practices as participants come to know their sexual selves more deeply through experience and through play with other like-minded individuals. Very often in the current expressions of sadomasochism it appears that these practices are not taken up in a pathological way. Instead, the practitioners evince a devotion and seriousness about their craft and find ways to spend free time devoted to connecting

with others who understand and appreciate the ways of S/M.

If radical democracy is indeed a civic and a cultural ideal, then these practitioners who are experimenting with their bodies, their minds, and their potential for happiness ought to be accorded some inclusion. Rather than foreclosing on the spirit of experimentation and aesthetic creation that they evince, I argue that more careful and studied observation of these persons perceived to be at the margins, "out there," may tell us more about those who consider themselves to be at the "center."

Subjectively, it is apparent that masochism has a very significant social component, if it conforms to the non-pathological representations and remains an activity always performed with others. Meaning is produced for those who partake of the practice of masochism in its postmodern formulation as sadomasochism. Whether that meaning is understandable or apparent to the uninitiated, that is rather another matter entirely. On a larger cultural scale, if the past generations of mutability, ambiguity, enlargement of interpretation, and sheer multiplication of images and narratives is any indication, then I envisage that masochism is an ongoing tale whose last chapters are far from being written.



## APPENDIX A

A Black Rose DM's Guide

Version 4

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PURPOSE 2

Section 1—The Essentials of Play Monitoring

Section 2—Play Rules

Section 3—Things To Watch For / Danger Signs

Produced BY THE BLACK ROSE DM TRAINING SQUAD Jack  
McGeorge, Chris M, Scott P. Kristen, Max Steiner,  
Frazier, Joseph Bean

A Black Rose DM's Guide

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to highlight the importance of your duties in monitoring our Play Spaces to keep them safe and hot. Please take ten minutes to read this orientation so you will have a better idea of what a DM actually does.

In short, a DM is a LIFEGUARD whose primary purpose is to monitor the Play Space with an eye towards assistance, intervention, or instruction in the unlikely event that you have to step in. You are also a GUIDE. As a DM, people will be asking you where to find the bathroom, Band-Aids, cleaning supplies, etc. You will probably direct more people to the restroom than you hand out Band-Aids, and hand out more Band-Aids than you will have scene interventions. You may also be called on to be a COP in enforcing the Play Rules as well as miscellaneous safety rules contained in the "Danger Signs" section of this guide.

This guide was developed to support a national-level effort to improve BDSM education at all levels. While this guide was written to support 1,200 person events, it is the hope of the team that this document can be modified and tailored to other groups, events, and parties (which may not require walkie-talkies, DM partnering, or mobile supply packs). Use of this document what is useful. For any interested in participating, please contact the teams principal writer, Chris M at brboard@br.org or by phone (703-553-0441). This document benefited greatly from the APEX Dungeon Monitors Guide and the Dungeon Masters Handbook by Oregon Guild Activists of SM (ORGASM). Thanks to many others who contributed to this effort. And a special shout to educators everywhere, Gil Kessler, Andrew Harwin, Master Lawrence, Peter Fisk, Gayle Rubin, and all the others who are helping make our dungeons safe and our play hot.

Play Safe and Play Hot! THE BLACK ROSE DM TRAINING SQUAD

## Section 1—The Essentials of Play Monitoring

The DM Mission: To Ensure a Safe, Enjoyable Play Environment.

Your DM Duties:

To attend necessary orientation and training sessions;

To be friendly and courteous;

To provide orientation and assistance;

To assist the Chief DM in supervising all SM activities in the play (and social areas if mandated by the Chief DM) and take appropriate steps to ensure the safety of all participants; to consult with the Chief DM in all instances where unsure of the safety or advisability of any activity;

To be familiar with general SM etiquette, specific play rules, and all BR '98 policies that apply to the play; to enforce these rules and policies;

To conduct safety inspections of play areas and equipment; and take appropriate corrective action if unsafe equipment is identified;

To ensure that play rules are available to players;

To maintain a clean and orderly play environment;

To report shortages of expendable supplies to the Chief DM;

To monitor play activities for danger signs and substantial breaches of scene etiquette. DMs may be called on to deal with other non play related issues, as well.

To assist players with minor injuries as necessary. Contact the Chief DM as soon as you encounter a medical emergency.

To ensure that players clean up when a scene is complete.

Remember: Your attitude should be one of service, not enforcement. Do not let your DM training or your shift responsibilities go to your head.

Your Shift As DM:

Before Your Shift

1 Study:

- The posted Play Rules
- This Play Monitor Guide

2 Report to your shift 10 minutes early:

- Meet your partner (you will be doing your patrols together);
- Familiarize yourself with Play Space and supply locations (with special attention to first Aid, fire exits, bolt cutters, telephone, fuse box, flashlights, etc.),

- Get a feel for the scenes in progress and the mood of the Play Space in general. Check in with the event organizer or the Chief DM) who may have changes to add to this DM Guide.

3 Get a debriefing from the DM you are relieving: Find out about any key events of their shift.

4 Get your Gear

DM Vest Walkie Talkie (1 for each pair of DMs) - Fanny Pack with Gear (1 for each pair of DMs) Fanny Pack Contents

• Information packet; Front Pocket: Flashlight, Trauma Shears, Ammonia Inhalants, Gloves, CPR mask, Pad of Paper; Back Pocket: First Aid Supplies, Cravat, Vironex Disposable Bacterial Wipes 5 Review Walkie-Talkie Procedure

If the event is sufficiently large to warrant walkie-talkie usage there are some protocols to follow. Unless there is a naming conflict, your first name is your call name. If there is a conflict, resolve it at the beginning of your shift. You must have call names that are unique.

The following codes are to be used in communications. The goal is to avoid using words like "dungeon", "SM", swearing, or words that could be interpreted as obscene (FCC regulations make obscene language a crime); Play Room - Not Dungeon Play Monitors - Not Dungeon Monitors ("DM" is okay) Over - End any transmission for which you expect a response with "Over" Out - End any transmission for which you do not expect a response with "Out".

Do not combine Over and Out in the same transmission.

The Shift Itself

Patrol the Play Space with your Partner with the aim of facilitating a safe and enjoyable time for all: During your shift, keep an active pattern of movement. Keep social conversations to a minimum. Mix when your shift is over.

Patrol the Entire Play Space: As DM you have access to every scene and every area in the Play Space unless you were told otherwise by the Chief DM.

Look: Keep your eyes moving; focus actively but not exclusively on the play. Watch for over-obtrusive voyeurs, drug use, drunkenness, or over-aggressive come-ons. Watch analytically, with an eye towards safety and effectiveness in the play. There will be time for voyeurism after your shift.

Listen: Listen for trouble; you may hear something go wrong before you see it. Yelling, screaming, sounds of equipment breakage, or collapse should be investigated immediately. And remember that even happy screaming might disturb others. Loud conversation in play areas should be discouraged

Communicate:

With Other DMs (especially your partner):

- Share impressions of scenes in progress
  - Communicate equipment maintenance information
- Confirm whether intervention is necessary, or whether the Chief DM should be called in to have a look

With Players:

To provide orientation: restrooms, cleaning supplies, house rules. To provide aid: answer questions, stalker complaints; and to enforce Play Space Rules when necessary.

Good opening lines:

- "Is everything okay?"
- Excuse me, may I be of assistance?"

Vocal Tone: Calm, professional, friendly. Do not be smug or bossy. Do not wag your finger.

Enforce House Rules: Violations of written Play Space rules can and should be enforced without qualm.

Monitor for Unsafe Play: Watch for violations of house etiquette, and if you observe clear violations of

house rules or etiquette, you have a right to ask for compliance to Play Space Rules. Unless the play seems truly hazardous with imminent harm a possibility, you may want to obtain a second opinion of your partner, another DM or the Chief DM.

**Intervention:** Make sure that your point of concern has a legitimate basis in the Play Space Rules, and is not influenced by your personal likes and dislikes. Remember everyone has signed an agreement to abide by the Play Space Rules. Determine the level of response needed, and do the right thing. Your word is law.

**Discreet Intervention:** Get the attention of the top and signal him/her aside.

**When Intervening:** Be diplomatic, be discreet.

**Be Fair:** Explain your concern to the involved party; point out the area of your concern in the house rules.

**Be Assertive:** If the guest is breaking a hard rule, insist that they refrain from doing so. Say you'll call your supervisor if you can't get your point understood.

**Be Firm:** Be firm in your resolve that the house rules be obeyed. If violations continue, you are within your rights to suspend the scene

**If Problem Persists:** Intervene again and notify the Chief DM. If the Chief DM overrides your decision - take it in stride, and continue your patrol. Do not argue back with the Chief DM.

**Assist in maintaining the space:** Empty the trash cans as they become full. Watch for equipment failure. Any broken or unsafe equipment should be repaired or marked "do not use" with a paper sign. Make sure to notify the Chief DM

**Emergency Procedures Number One Rule:** Stay Calm and Radio the Chief DM

**Common Medical Problems**

- **Blood Drawn:** Disinfect the wound with antiseptic wipes and a Band-Aid

- Fainting or near fainting: Lay subject down; cushion head (a folded vest or jacket works well); elevate legs slightly. When subject is feeling better, allow them to sit up. Only then offer water or fruit juice for energy.

Fights and Physic/al Confrontations: In the extremely unlikely case that a fight breaks out, do not leap into the fray. Use your voice. Tell them to stop. Radio for help. Say you've got a fight and give your location in the Play Space. Security will be on the way.

- Police and Other Official Visitors: Be calm, and cooperative. If the Play Space is being properly run, there won't be a problem.

As you prepare to end your shift

- Meet your shift replacement and explain where things are and answer any questions they might have
- Hand over walkie-talkie, vest and fannypack to your replacement
- Check out with the Chief DM by Walkie-Talkie

#### COMMON SUPPLIES

A Supply station should be centrally located and clearly marked (for larger play areas helium balloons on a string help identify their locations). A supply station should typically include:

First Aid Kit Disinfectants Sharps containers Fire Extinguisher Trauma Shears Cleaning supplies Clean Towels Clean Blankets Fuses, Main Switches Telephones Rest Rooms

#### CONCERNING THE CHIEF DM

Regardless of the size of the gathering, there should be one primary person responsible for dungeon safety, the party host, her designate or the head of DM staff. This person is responsible for scheduling the DM

shifts, training the DM staff and settling any disputes about safety and house rules for the duration of the event.

#### TRAINING

Schedule and publicize a training date prior to the event, and prime the pump by inviting people to attend you think would make good DMs. Plan on between two and three hours. The more students, the more questions, the longer it may take.

As minimal training DM staff, provide a verbal walk through of this guide, fielding questions as they arise (This can take anywhere between 90 minutes and 3 hours)

Provide a copy of this document to each DM who will be working a shift.

#### STAFFING

Make sure you are properly staffed. A DM shift can range from one to three hours. For small events, with ten play stations or less you can probably get by two people per shift (a DM doing performing a scheduled shift and the Chief DM, available if need be). An additional DM per shift is probably in order for each additional ten pieces of equipment. For events with fifty play stations or more you can probably plan on a DM for every fifteen play stations, depending on the play area configuration, DM experience the experience of the guests etc.) Obviously the more trained DMs the better. For larger events, DMs should be assigned to work in pairs. Even if they split occasionally to patrol on their own, situations arise where it is good to have two DMs working as a team (second opinions on play safety, do interventions, managing a situation AND go to obtain help)

#### YOUR AUTHORITY/RESPONSIBILITY

You are the final authority in the Play Area. If you feel you need to override a decision made by one of your DMs do it, but do it in a way that does not humiliate, or undermine your DMs.



If one of your DMs is unreasonable, refusing to listen to you, or power tripping, it is your prerogative to dismiss them at once.

Keep in mind that you may have to interact with the event sponsor, the building owner, the owner of the play equipment, the police or your event security personal

## Section 2—Play Rules

For a Play Space to operate safely there must be posted play rules that dictate basic operating procedures on conduct and play. Your club, organization, or home play area may have specific needs that require specification, and these should be reflected in the Play Rules. As a starter set, however, the following dungeon rules were used during BR98:

The house safeword is "Red" for stop and the house caution word is

"Yellow." A DM will intervene in a scene if s/he hears the word "Red" and the top in the scene does not stop the scene.

Prostitution, solicitation, and negotiation of compensation for sexual services ARE ILLEGAL and shall not be tolerated. Violations shall result in removal.

Safe sex practices are required for all activities. Safe sex supplies are located throughout the Play Space.

DMs must be obeyed. If someone unaware of scene etiquette or breaking the rules is bothering you, please notify a DM.

No cameras, video, or audio recording devices are allowed in the Play Space.

Cleaning supplies are available throughout the Play Space. If you do a wax, blood, or other messy scenes, please use a tarp or drop cloth.

Please clean up after your scene. Leave all equipment free from sweat, blood, other bodily fluids, wax,

toys, etc. Bring bodily fluid contamination to the attention of a DM.

- Normal party etiquette is required. Do not interfere with a scene. Do not touch anyone or anyone's gear without permission. You are not required to say or do anything. Watching is acceptable. Please keep all conversation, laughter, and comments to a minimum in the play space. Play fair. Do not monopolize equipment to the extent that others do not have the opportunity to use it during the event. Abnormally loud screaming and talking within a scene is discouraged as a courtesy to other players. Tops may be asked by DMs to quiet or gag loud bottoms if complaints are made.

All attendees must present a badge for admission.

No alcohol or any illegal substances of any kind may be brought into the Play Space. Alcoholic beverages may be purchased at the facility's bar.

Smoking is prohibited in the party space. Smoking is permitted outside the Play Space only.

Food and drink (with the exception of water) shall not be brought into the Play Space, but shall remain in the food service area.

Facility and fire regulations prohibit fire play.

Neither Black Rose, its board of coordinators, nor the management, owners, or operators of the facility, nor any agents, successors or assigns of any of the foregoing shall be liable to any attendee for injury to person or property incurred as a result of attendance at this event.

By your entry into the Play Party, you acknowledge that you have read these rules, understand them and will abide by them and that you assume all risks incident to your attendance at this event.

Section 3—Things To Watch For /Danger Signs

Categories of Danger Signs

The following list catalogues a variety of common play mistakes, grouped by scene, that the DM should watch

for. Remember, your role during your DM shift is that of lifeguard, helper, and guide; not a power-tripping grade school hall monitor. We have grouped the danger signs into three categories:

M - Monitor: Danger signs rated (M) may or may not be a problem. This includes harmless oversights, mildly risky behavior, or advanced play by experienced players. Make no intervention, but stay alert. Get your partner's opinion, or radio the Chief PM. There may be a problem brewing.

I - Intervene: Danger signs rated (I) are situations in which PM intervention is deemed appropriate. This rating does not necessarily mean that a violation of safe, sane play has occurred. Intervention can and should be done for a number of valid reasons:

To demonstrate how a technique is performed, or how a piece of equipment is used.

To inquire about how a scene is being conducted (some players take one gallon enemas, or use wire whips).

To inform players about some external circumstance (closing time, the presence of police, etc.).

To offer assistance or provide materials to a scene in progress (dental dams, latex glove to a finger-fuck scene, condoms etc.).

To share an observation the top may not have noticed (bluing of hands, spilled drink on flogger, etc.).

To inform players that they are approaching or have exceeded a safety threshold.

To be courteous and helpful. The issue may be something the players are too inexperienced to know about. It may be advanced edge play performed by expert players accustomed to doing it. Satisfy yourself that all is well, help them find a way to do what they want to do safely, or ask politely that they refrain from the activity in question.

S - Stop: Danger signs rated (S) are so clearly in violation of Safe, Sane, and Consensual behavior that they should not be permitted regardless of cir-

cumstance. This does not mean suspend the individual's right to play, but the proscribed behavior must cease and desist. Stop orders are also appropriate when repeat warnings from the DM have not been heeded. Again, be polite and helpful, but firm. One can't do everything in public.

In summary: M means potential trouble to be noticed and monitored. I means intervention is appropriate, not necessarily that a play activity must cease. S means a hard limit has been exceeded and the DM would be within her rights to demand the activity in question stop. In general, watch for potential risk. Do the players seem to know what they're doing? Are they a couple or two strangers playing for the first time? If it helps when intervening, point out where the behavior in question appears in this Play Monitors guide.

#### General Play Space Behavior

I or S

Any violation of posted Dungeon rules

Repeat offenses S.

Arguments or loud swearing; loud offensive speech involving race, religion, or orientation

Weeping or screaming disturbing other players, or complaints

Bottoms having breathing difficulties: gasping, wheezing, unable to catch breath

Individuals monopolizing play space/equipment  
Observers crowding a scene too closely; getting in the way

Play area being vacated without cleanup

M or I Aggressive and persistent stalker-like behavior  
(M) then (I)

M or I Drunkenness, belligerence, slurred speech (M) for observers, or (I) for players. Keep a close eye out for anyone who appears to be drunk, and warn your fellow DMs and event organizer(s)

M or I Bottom weeping, screaming, exhibiting possible distress

(M) then (I)

Play Equipment Safety (always notify event organizer)

Bondage

Play Equipment appears structurally unstable, not up to the job. Stop the action explain concern and see if the piece can be made safe.

S Player collapses, or falls accidentally

Ropes tied around neck, collar fastened to an attachment point in a way that could result in strangulation

Clips or clamps around eyes

Breasts bound tightly causing ballooning. Tough call. Intervene if bondage is on over 15 minutes, or if ballooning appears severe.

Standing mummification without a spotter

Standing unsupported with ankles bound together (especially with high heels)

M

Collar too tight to allow free breathing (allow room to insert

two fingers)

Bound player left alone with no spotter

Absence of emergency release tools: knife, shears, bolt cutter, hacksaw

Hands or feet becoming discolored or cool to the touch

Noticeable swelling (I) or redness (M) from bondage or weights

M or I

## Anal Play

S

Blood (more than just spotting) from the rectum. (M)  
if spotting, (S) otherwise

Forcing air into the rectum

Absence of drop cloth, towels, or other enema cleanup  
supplies

Fisting without a fresh latex glove or ample lubricant

No obvious place for bottom to void after enema

Object for anal insertion does not have a flared base  
or long handle, or string for beads

## Impact Play

Flogger or whip infringing on other scenes Hard  
paddling on the ribs, back, knees, tops of feet, shins  
Hard striking on bones or organs, especially kidneys,  
spine, neck and head Striking bleeding wounds, causing  
airborne blood droplets

Striking with the buckle end of a belt

Whip inappropriately long for play space

Hard impact play on the breasts, especially large  
breasts

Striking on pre-existing bruises. If its heavy and  
repeated Intervene.

Flogger tips "wrapping" around the body being hit.  
(M), then (1)

Are the flogging strokes fluid and even, or are they  
choppy, uneven, and hitting things not intended to be  
hit?

Bottom snapping head back sharply when struck

Facial expressions or cries of apparent anguish

M or I Flogger tips dragging on the ground Paddles or canes are cracked, split, or broken Cutting or Piercing

I or S No first aid kit (1) provide if available, otherwise (S)

Antiseptic wipes and dressings are not close at hand

Blood or other fluids on floor or equipment not cleaned up promptly

No sharps container or container not being used (provide one if available)

Area of skin to be played with has not been cleaned with alcohol

Bottom showing signs of difficulty breathing, attempting to form words Intervene if only to enquire whether this is genuine distress

Gag not easily removable

Gag with hood

Mouth stuffing is not attached to a strap to prevent blocking the throat

Use of a "pump gag" (can over-inflate and block the throat)

Negotiation and Consent

I S I Ignoring safeword "Red" M Pushing bottom (or top) too hard to take or give more

Stress and Emotional Danger

M Shallow breathing, cold, clammy, glassy eyes (possible endorphin shock)

M Overly frightened expression

Breath Deprivation

E M Bagging or causing bottom to inhale carbon monoxide

More than momentary deprivation of air

Suspension (ALL Bondage Danger Signs Apply Here)

Wrist suspension: bondage too tight, or too loose, potentially causing nerve damage (room to insert one finger is ideal)

Absence of panic snaps at heavy load points.

Limbs taut (especially from overhead suspension)

Electricity

Any direct current electricity (TENS or OMRON units) used above the waist, or on opposite arms, anything potentially running current through the chest or head.

Violet wand or static electricity used near flammable liquids (alcohol, perfume) or vapors.

Violet wand or static electricity used near the eyes.

Strong current (cattle prod, stun gun) applied to strong muscle groups

Violet wand or static electricity used on metal Jewelry (generates heat)

Wax, Fire, and Temperature

Absence of nonflammable drop cloth. Scene cannot proceed without one. Candle flames in the vicinity of curtains or other flammable materials Absence of wet towel, provide one Excessive spillage of wax

. Mentholated ointments spread over the bound player without soap and water handy .

Mentholated ointments placed inside the vagina or rectum

Breast Play

Breasts bound tightly causing ballooning. Tough call. Intervene if bondage is on over 15 minutes, or if ballooning appears severe.



Hard impact play on the breasts, especially large breasts. Intervene if it continues beyond a few swats

### Genital Play

Note: some players may be "fluid bonded" but should still observe safer sex practices in public play space. Blood (more than spotting) from vagina or rectum (may need to call 911 ) Forcing air into the vagina

Moving objects directly from anus to vagina (can lead to bacterial infection) Sharing toys or objects without changing condoms

\_ Bodily fluids on floor or equipment not cleaned up promptly Fisting without a fresh latex glove and ample lubricant.

\_ Stop if they refuse glove Sudden yanking or twisting of testicles

### Water Sports

If done anywhere it may make a mess (bathroom shower or special designated area preferable)

Thank You For Doing Your Share To Keep Our Play Spaces Safe And The Play Hot!

The Black Rose Collection

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