Working at Play: BDSM Sexuality in the San Francisco Bay Area

Margot D. Weiss *Duke University*

Abstract: In this article, I argue that BDSM sexuality should be conceptualized as a form of "working at play." Considering two dominant models of sexuality, identity and lifestyle, I argue that BDSM is more fluid and less binary than identity. Moreover, while lifestyle focusses attention on BDSM as consumptive labour, this model does not adequately address the pleasure or sociality BDSM practitioners themselves emphasize. Instead, I argue that "working at play" recognizes the ways that practitioners move between registers of work (productive labour) and play (creative recombination). This analysis situates BDSM (and other sexualities) within the shifting cultural geography of U.S. late-modernity, drawing attention to the ways sexuality blurs boundaries between individual–social, real–pretend and leisure–labour.

Keywords: sexuality, BDSM, pleasure, San Francisco Bay Area, play, work

Résumé : Cet article soutient que la pratique sexuelle du BDSM [bondage, domination/soumission, sadomasochisme] devrait être conçue comme une façon de travailler en jouant. En prenant en compte deux interprétations dominantes de la sexualité, l'identité et le mode de vie, je soutiens que la pratique du BDSM est plus changeante et moins binaire que ne le suppose une conception identitaire de la sexualité. De plus, si le fait de concevoir la sexualité comme un mode de vie focalise l'attention sur le BDSM en tant que travail de consommation, ce modèle n'aborde cependant pas adéquatement les questions du plaisir et de la sociabilité auxquelles les adeptes du BDSM accordent eux-mêmes de l'importance. Je soutiens que penser le BDSM comme une manière de travailler en jouant tient compte des façons dont les adeptes naviguent entre les registres du travail (travail de production) et du jeu (recombinaison créative), travaillant ainsi à l'interface des catégories suivantes : individuel–social, réel–simulé et loisir–travail. Cette analyse situe le BDSM (et d'autres types de sexualité millénaire) dans le cadre de la géographie culturelle changeante des États-Unis en période de modernité avancée.

Mots-Clés: sexualité, BDSM, plaisir, Région de la baie de San Francisco, jeu, travail

Over the last 15 years, cultural anthropologists have paid increased attention to sexuality in both older and newer areas of inquiry. Kinship studies, for example, have been reinvigorated by a new focus on non-normative sexualities (Lewin 1993; Weston 1991). Novel work on intersections of sexuality and new global cultures, activisms, networks and media has been made possible by new theorizations of transnationalism (Altman 2001; Cruz-Malav and Manalansan 2002; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000). Finally, reflexive accounts of the ways anthropologists' own sexual subjectivities form and inform fieldwork practices, knowledge construction and relationships between self and other have complicated understandings of positionality in the field as a whole (Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999).

One effect of this work has been to problematize the utility of *identity* as a model of sexuality. As scholars in the social sciences and humanities have argued for some time, identity—a stable, fixed and essentialized form of being—can not accurately describe the diversity and fluidity of sexuality across lives, time or place (Sedgwick 1990; Weeks 1977; Weeks 1995). By documenting the tremendous range of sexual practices, roles and "identities" across cultures, the diverse connections made—and not made—between sexual acts and sexual identities and the ways that sexual identities respond to local and global conditions of change, anthropologists have made important contributions to this growing body of research (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Kulick 1998; Lancaster 1992). This work has generated an exciting set of questions on identity, sexual subjectivity, activism and desire cross-culturally.

Yet, these rich problematics have not often been (re)applied to the study of sexuality in the U.S. As David Valentine has noted, there is very little anthropological work on sexualities in the non-native U.S. that does not explicitly or implicitly employ the identity categories *homosexual* and *heterosexual* as organizing principles.

"Unintelligible desires"—desires that fall outside hetero/homo logics of identity—have received little scholarly attention (2003:124). This state of affairs is due to several factors. First, the non-native U.S. population was not, until recently, considered a proper object of anthropological attention. Second, much anthropological work on sexuality focusses on the diversity of non-Western sexualities in order to argue that models, labels and taxonomies developed in the West to describe Western sexualities are not applicable to non-Western people or their sexualities. While this is a very important contribution, these studies tend to problematize our theorizations of *non-Western* sexualities without questioning the validity of our assumptions about *Western* sexualities. Finally, in the U.S. sexuality is understood as a dichotomous and stable identity (where one is either homosexual or heterosexual). This model is implicit in much of the anthropology of sexuality because it resonates with the folk model of sexuality in the U.S. The current debates over "gay marriage," for example, demonstrate the continued relevance of a framework that maps sexual dimorphism onto gender complementarity and institutions of heterosexuality.

Nonetheless, sexualities that have proliferated in the past 15-25 years in the urban and suburban pockets of the U.S. resist classification as solely (modernist, binary) *identity.* In this article, I discuss BDSM[1] as a case that challenges these frameworks. "BDSM" is an acronym formed from three term-sets: bondage and discipline (B&D), domination/submission (D/s), and sadomasochism (SM). In this article, I use the terms "SM" and "BDSM" to refer to a diverse community that includes bondage, domination/submission, pain or sensation play, power exchange, leathersex, role-playing and fetish practitioners. I show that, to understand BDSM, we need to move beyond fixed, quasi-essentialist understandings of gender and sexual identity as modes of self-making and self-legibility. We must develop the ethnographic and theoretical tools to think sexuality in ways not confined to the identity frame, to ask: what models or logics describe sexualities in the late-modern U.S.?[2]

Based on ethnographic fieldwork (2001-2003) with the semipublic, pansexual[3] adult, consensual BDSM community in the San Francisco Bay Area and semiformal interviews with these practitioners,[4] I argue that the modernist model of *identity* does not capture the fluidity, proliferation or community-directed aspects of BDSM. Yet, at the same time, *lifestyle*—a model of sexuality as consumption—does not capture the ways that the labour of BDSM practice is also extremely pleasurable and communal. Instead, I read BDSM as a form of "working at play," a way of creatively combining both identity and lifestyle forms of sexuality. The tensions between work–play, act–meaning, lifestyle–identity and real–pretend that animate SM practitioners' desires, practices and sexualities are fully entwined with U.S. capitalism, although not in an irreducible way. Situating BDSM within the temporal, spatial and social-economic shift from modernist capitalism to postmodern or informational capitalism (Castells 1996; Fischer 1998; Harvey 1990), I understand SM sexuality as moving between registers of work (as productive labour) and play (as creative recombination). I theorize "working at play" as an interface between the individual and the social world; it is both an intervention into and an interpretation of the "real" or social worlds. Thinking sexuality as "working at play" captures these tensions and contradictions in potentially useful ways for understanding SM and other millennial sexualities.

Identity Confusions: Proliferation, Subjectivity and the Scene

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens her *Epistemology of the Closet* with the statement, "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition" (1990:1). This definition rests on sexual *identity*: a person's bio-sex, gender, gender role, sexual object choice, procreative choice, sexual acts, organs, fantasies, relationships, power and community. "It is a rather amazing fact," she writes, "that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another...precisely one, the gender of the object choice...has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation'" (1990:8; see also Sedgwick 1993:7).

Sexual identity, in Western modernity at least, is a stable, and binary, category that defines the subject as either homosexual or heterosexual. For theorists of sexuality, this idea of identity is also the critical path to subjectivity: the ways that individuals become subjects in relation to regulatory apparati. For Lacan, for example, the subject comes into being through a regulatory ideal of binarily sexed materiality: the sexed body. For Foucault, the subject emerges through a disciplinary mode of identifiable and thus regulatory fixed sexual identity. As Foucault argues, "it is through sex—in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality—that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility...to the whole of his body...to his identity" (1990:155-156). The process of subjection depends

on the regulation of sex and sexuality: the ways sexed bodies, gender and sexuality (as hetero or homo) fit together into a "matrix" (Butler 1990) or "system" (Rubin 1975) that work as the means of subjectification.

In queer and feminist theory, it is this categorical and regulatory defining of fixed and binary sexual identity that is the prerequisite for subjectivity. Judith Butler defines subjection, noting "indeed it is unclear whether there can ever be an 'I' or a 'we' who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being" (1993:7). Regulatory norms of gender and sexuality constrain and define the possibilities for subjectivity. These apparati consist of everyday forms of domination, what Foucault calls "discipline" (1995), as well as ever-increasing and invading modes of bio-power (Foucault 1990:135-145), each of which "subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1983:212) through technologies such as identity (other forms of biopower include biomedicine, sociology, population control, health, citizenship, and racialization).

However, some theorists have suggested that sexuality under Western late-modernity (or postmodernism) has changed, that it is no longer a fixed and binary system of sexual difference that makes and marks the subject. Donald Lowe, in *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA*, argues that today we have "sexual *differences without* stable sexual *identities*" (1995:127). He contrasts this new sexual lifestyle to Michel Foucault's "bourgeois assumption of an interiorized sexual identity" (1995:127), arguing that with the "acceleration and expansion of production/consumption and the commodification of social reproduction in late-capitalism, we now have a very different sexuality...the result is a sexual lifestyle" (1995:127). For Lowe, the modernist binary of hetero/homo has been destabilized by the increased segmentation and differentiation of various sexualities, sexual styles and relationship forms. Sexuality has become almost entirely commoditized, a sign of and an impetus to sexualized consumption. In his argument, sexuality as lifestyle promises sexual pleasure through consumption; it is no longer disciplinary and repressive but rather generative (mainly of consumption and further segmentation or differentiation). Linking the proliferation of sexualities to the increased marketing of sexuality-as-position in the market (or positionality as variegated consumer), Lowe argues that as new sexual products, services and technologies proliferate, this results in multiple, fluid, unfixed desires (not identities).

Indeed, the BDSM community seems to reflect these shifts. New sexual identities, communities and technologies *have* proliferated in late-modernity (see Curtis 2004; Hall 2000; Kipnis 2000; Lowe 1995; Singer 1993). Some of these technologies—sex toys, reproductive technologies, sex work, therapeutic sex services, new forms of erotica, sex clubs, phone sex, pornography, internet technologies—have also had a direct impact on SM sexualities. In fact, BDSM has become the example par excellence in a certain new left theorizing about sex-as-commodification. In this argument, BDSM is a paradigmatic late-capitalist sexuality because of its tremendous market appeal, its ever-expanding paraphernalia, its non-reproductive nature and its affinity for the leisure demands of the U.S. (see Brooks 2000; Ehrenreich 1986; Lowe 1995:131). Today, for example, proliferating SM toys (whips, floggers, bondage equipment), clothing, nightclubs, furniture, internet web-pages, online stores, SM pornography (videos, internet, magazines), BDSM guide books (how-to books written by practitioners), personal advertisement web-pages and professional domination services are each important and visible components of the BDSM community.

Formalized classes and workshops are an increasingly important part of the BDSM scene in the Bay Area, and many of these classes focus on training practitioners in necessary skills for particular toys (for example, how to use canes, rope bondage or floggers). In a typical week, a pansexual BDSM practitioner in the San Francisco Bay Area can choose from on average five classes or workshops on techniques, skills, relationship styles and other scene dynamics. As an example, during the week of March 14, 2004 there were seven classes: an introductory BDSM course for couples, two classes on cock and ball torture (CBT), one class on rope bondage, one on non-monogamous relationships, one on tantric SM, and one on "aural sex." This rise of classes, which I explore elsewhere, has shifted SM from peer-based skill-acquisition and networking to organizational or more formal modes of self-creation.[5] At the same time, the explosion of specialized equipment, toys, educational material and spaces, and the increased segmentation of the scene mean that BDSM—a coalitional acronym to begin with—has bred increasingly specialized identities (or roles).

Along with the rise of this more formal, commoditized scene is a proliferation of labels and terms used within SM. The profusion of identity claims in SM destabilizes the primacy of sexual orientation/identity as the ground of sexual subjectivity. In these recombinations, BDSM challenges assumptions about being and positionality that rely on an understanding of sexual orientation as a fixed, stable and binary category. My interviewees identified themselves in very specific, and relational ways: pervert, voyeur, master, masochist, bottom, pain slut, switch, dom(me), voyeur, slave, submissive, pony, butch bottom,

poly perverse, pain fetishist, leatherman, mistress and daddy. For those who identified themselves as tops, there were just plain tops, but also service tops, femme tops, switches with top leanings and dominant tops.[6] Further, these SM orientations are typically modified with sexual orientation (for example, het, dyke, gay, hetero-flexible, bi, genderqueer), relationship style or dynamics (for example, poly[amorous], Master/slave, TPE [total power exchange], married) and interests (for example, flogging, Japanese rope bondage, canes, pony play).

In David Valentine's (2003) analysis of the introductions at an "alternative lifestyles" support group, he argues that his informant's drag, fem and transgender subjectivities challenge a binary gender/sexuality matrix. Similarly, BDSM sexuality troubles a tidy mapping of sexual identity onto clearly sexed and gendered subjects. For example, at the monthly Society of Janus lunch (called a "munch"), held on Saturday afternoon at a tapas restaurant in San Francisco, each attendee stands to introduce themselves to the gathering (usually between 50 and 75 people). This introduction generally takes the form of name, sexual orientation, BDSM orientation, important interests or styles, some autobiographic data and relationship status. It has the pattern of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings: "Hi, I'm Ralph, and I'm a bi poly switch. I just moved here from Ohio, and this is my first munch. [clapping, cheering]"; "I'm Joe. I'm a het, sensual top. I'm teaching next week's QSM class on canes, and I'm still looking for demo models, so come talk to me if you're interested"; "I'm Carla and I'm the treasurer of Janus. I'm a bondage bottom."

This identity proliferation, tied to the proliferation of commodities and techniques, troubles a neat reading of SM sexuality as (modernist) identity. Patrick Califia-Rice's iconic quote is worth reprinting here; Califia-Rice, an author, SM activist and leatherdyke at the time, writes, "if I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I'd pick the boy" (Califia-Rice 1994:158). The surprise of this statement is the way Califia-Rice unexpectedly privileges SM desire (sadism) *over* sexual identity (lesbianism), emphasizing BDSM practice or power relationships over the naturalized, sexed body that is at the base of sex-gender-sexuality. Thus, in contrast to the model of modern sexual identity based on dimorphous sexed bodies, complementary gender and binary sexual orientation, BDSM challenges a cleanly differentiated reading of sexuality (although it does not completely subvert it).

Critical to the heterosexual/homosexual binary that organized modernist sexuality identity is the relationship of privilege and power between these terms: the ways heterosexuality functions as a master signifier, deployed yet contested, rigidly enforced yet always incompletely rendered on the bodies of the subjects in question. As Linda Singer notes, following Baudrillard, "regulation works through the installation of a set of binary relations that entail the legalization and normalization of some practices at the same time that others are criminalized" (Singer 1993:42). These deployments rely on an oppositionality—a binary relationship—between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As Valentine argues, the subjects of the support group are marked by "difference *from* heteronormativity" (2003:135; see also Valentine 2002). Valentine's informants articulate desire in ways that challenge the gendered assumptions underlying the hetero/homo binary, combining and recombining gender, sex and sexuality in unexpected ways.

In contrast, although BDSM desires are fluid, open and diffuse, they are not all oppositional to heterosexuality. BDSM practitioners' articulations of desire, while similarly suggesting other organizations of gender and sexuality, do not always offer a non-conformist reading of gender or heterosexuality. For example, Panther, a heterosexual dominant top, told me that for him, BDSM was an identity or orientation. He continued:

> But it depends on which aspect you're talking about...for a lot of people...it's not about whips and chains, it's about control, it's about power exchange. I think there are a lot of people that can relate to the power exchange: losing control, who holds the remote, who holds the checkbook, who chooses the radio station, who's driving, who decides where we're eating, where we are going on vacation.[7]

For Panther, if "whips & chains" are obvious signs of difference from normativity, than holding the checkbook, driving or deciding where to go on vacation are marked (in this logic) by similarity to heteronormativity.

Instead, what differentiates BDSM practitioners is a collective sense of belonging to a "kinky" community of practitioners. It is this non-axial (Sedgwick 1995) relationship between SM and sexual identity, the way Panther's heterosexuality mimics hegemonic heterosexuality, for example, while Califia-Rice's sadism, more than his sexual identity, dictates object choice, that I want to stress. In this way, BDSM works as a collective community, an abbreviation that unites diverse practices, roles and behaviours. And, while at base, BDSM is the adult, consensual exchange of power, pain and pleasure, in practice, the community embraces a wide range of practices, relationship types, roles, desires, fetishes, identities and skills as WIITWD ("what it is that we do"), the most open definition of SM.[8]

BDSM, as an open set of practices, is contrasted to "vanilla": "what it is we don't do." Vanilla, for practitioners, does not have a stable referent; it is what BDSM is defined against, a slippery and variable sense of normativity. Vanilla, for some, is heterosexual, missionary-position sex within marriage. It is sex without toys, costumes or role playing for others. It is almost always mundane: "if all I had was vanilla sex, I would just get so bored!" For some it is sex without power exchange; Estrella, a lesbian femme top, told me that vanilla sex would be the 1970s lesbian-feminist ideal of two womyn lying in bed, holding hands and reading poetry to each other. Here, BDSM is differentiated from "vanilla" sex based on *practices,* not stable identities. In this way, if BDSM is an identity, it is a loose, collective identity based not on a fixed, essentialized binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but rather on a fluid assemblage of practices.

BDSM as Practice: The Doing and the Being of BDSM

In her work, Judith Butler argues that gender is a series of acts, doings, which cohere in identity only through a misreading of doing and being. As she states, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (1990:25); it is the appearance of being, an effect of the ways repeated, stylized acts congeal over time into substance (1990:33). These confusions over being and doing, where identity means being, although it can only ever be a doing, apply to BDSM in an interesting way. For, although BDSM is sometimes thought of as an identity, it is explicitly imagined as an identity based on doings: BDSM is a practice of pleasure.

Jay, for example, a heterosexual switch with top leanings, argues that SM activists fighting against discrimination should not follow the model of sexual orientation, which would argue that BDSM practitioners are a sexual minority deserving of rights based on (immutable) identity. Instead, he understands SM as a sexual activity. He tells me:

> It's very clear that the kind of SM that is common in the community doesn't deserve to be pathologized, but the question is: which way do we take it? Do we take it the route of "we are another sexual orientation, and should therefore be protected under alternative sexual orientation theory"? Or do we say that SM is comparable to oral sex: it's a sexual activity that shouldn't be understood as inherently wrong. I'm more inclined to go with the latter.

Jay feels that, because of the tremendous variation in SM identities and relationship styles, the best political directive is one that emphasizes SM as practice, not identity. Similarly, Lady Thendara, a bisexual top, explains that to her, BDSM is not such a deep part of her personhood that she needs or wants to "come out" as a practitioner:

> I don't feel it's so integral to who I am as a human being that I need to tell my mom about it. I certainly don't want my mom to tell me what she and my dad like to do in the bedroom; I really don't want to know it! I mean, to me it would be horrifying if I told my parents and my dad said, "Me too! I love to tie up your mom!" I'd be like, "Oh dad, I really don't want to think about that"...Being gay is totally different, because if you're in love with someone, you ought be able to tell your parents, your friends, your family, "I love this person." But I can say that about my partner, male or female, without saying what we do.

Her comments on the ways the politics of coming out are very different for SM practitioners than they are for gay men and lesbians suggests that BDSM is more practice than identity, or at least less like identity as it is most often defined.

SM is about doing rather than being; as an obvious example, people who do BDSM are generally called "practitioners" (those who practice SM) or "players," not BDSMuals. In SM there is no overarching word that conveys being-identity (like lesbian, heterosexual, woman); while words like sadomasochist, kinkster, lifestyler or dominant are common, they each convey a specific mode of relating that makes sense within the scene, not a larger, fixed, stable and essential identity.

This scene-specific terminology is a reminder that BDSM is not simply a practice; unlike most devotees of oral sex, for example, BDSM practitioners participate in a community: the scene. The SM scene is a space of belonging, shared attachments and sociality. At most of the semipublic play parties I attended, the "social area" was busier than the play area (the dungeon proper). The space, a sort of lounge, was usually filled with people hovering around the cheese cubes and the M&Ms, drinking water and sodas, sitting on slouchy couches and talking about their lives, jobs, children and relationships. Munches, too, are seen as *social* events: one cannot play at a munch, and scene dress is not usually acceptable. A large part of the pleasure of being an SM practitioner is about belonging to the SM community.

This is especially true for the people I worked with, who had made the SM community in the San Francisco Bay Area home in a variety of ways. As Malc, a heterosexual, mostly dominant man put it, participation in the SM community differentiates between "people who are

identified as BDSM practitioners and people who just do rough sex." Others noted that participation in the scene differentiated "public," "lifestyle," "heavy," "real" or "experienced" SM practitioners or players, from "private," "weekend," "bedroom," "unsafe," or "newbie" players (for an analysis of the ways the gay leather club The Mineshaft similarly forged community and belonging, see Brodsky 1995). Part of this particular binary is the ways SM practitioners have learned to be practitioners through participation in a social, sexual, educational community.

At once deeply personal and deeply communal, identity and practice, BDSM highlights the limitations of thinking sex as only identity, or as a set of stable taxonomies based on sex-gender-sexuality. BDSM sexuality is a polymodal combination of identity, orientation, lifestyle, hobby and practice, based around a community. For example, Estrella told me that for her, BDSM "is definitely an orientation in the same way my sexual orientation is not a sexual choice, it's just who I am, so that makes it an identity. And it's a practice in the sense that I do go to classes and I do take the practice of my craft seriously on the level of activities." At the same time, Estrella notes the ways SM is also a community for her, and the ways that identity and practice merge with community:

> It's similar to the way I grew into my lesbian identity: oh, this is who I am, other people do it, there's a name for it, and there are rules about it. And I can choose to learn those rules, or not, be part of that community or not, follow those rules or not, but yeah, there's a name and now I know what I am.

Estrella's comments reveal the ways that BDSM for her is simultaneously an orientation or identity (like being lesbian), a craft (like a hobby), a practice and a community or social scene. This complex constellation of meanings is typical for BDSM practitioners. Some practitioners experience SM as a stable, life-long identity, but others experience it primarily as a sexual lifestyle, unfixed desire, social scene, hobby, practice or spiritual journey (especially, perhaps, in Northern California).[9]

The proliferation of identity-forms, roles and personae in BDSM communities, and the communitarian nature of SM, makes theorizations of BDSM as an *identity* of limited value. In this, BDSM is not unique; this theoretical limitation holds for many sexualities in late-modernity. In his recent article critiquing the ways much work on gay and lesbian language reifies identity, Don Kulick notes that sexuality-as-identity misses "everything that arguably makes sexuality sexuality—namely fantasy, desire, repression, pleasure, fear and the unconscious" (2000:270). In the remainder of this article, I will rethink SM in light of this urging, reading the specifics of SM sexuality to begin to track the complex ways sexuality—not sexual identity—works on the ground. I will focus on the ways practitioners understand and enact tensions between work–play, leisure–labour and performed–real in BDSM play, developing an analysis of BDSM as "working at play."

Sexuality as Labour, Sexuality as Play

BDSM practitioners spend much of their time, money and energy being practitioners. Almost all of the practitioners I interviewed had invested a tremendous amount of money in their toy collections, wardrobes and, in some cases, play spaces (home dungeons). Estrella, who has a larger-than-average collection because she works as a professional domme, told me:

> I have thousands of dollars worth of toys, and I still don't have everything I want...there are definitely things I'd like to have that I can't afford, like a vacuum bed [or vac sack, a bondage device made from two layers of latex stretched in an 8x4 foot frame], a cage, some of those things I don't have space for. I mean I could theoretically put them on a credit card, but where would I put them? My daughter's room? "Honey, can I store this in here while I'm not using it?" But yeah, all the other toys, I have 15 floggers, and 15 canes, maybe 20 canes, paddles, electrical equipment; I have some big leather [items] like bondage toys, miles of rope, corsets, fetish wear, shoes and all that...I always go to Folsom [street fair, an annual leather/SM street fair in San Francisco] with a budget and a list of things I definitely want.
>
> **MW**: What's your budget?
>
> **Estrella**: For Folsom, at least $300. I've spent as much as $800. But yeah, $300, that's a couple floggers, or a flogger and a couple of toys.

Floggers, especially desirable handcrafted ones, cost between $150-300, depending on their size, number of tails and material or type of leather. Leather or wooden paddles are mid-priced, between $30-150. Other toys are less expensive; one can purchase rattan (to make canes) in bulk at garden supply stores for $1 a foot. Clothing also ranges in price, but leather pants, vests, jackets, corsets and fetish clothing (made of vinyl, latex or rubber) is expensive. Madam S., a store on Folsom Street that specializes in women's fetish clothing, carries latex dresses in a range of colours and styles for between $200 and $1,000. Dark Garden, a corset store, will make a customized leather corset for around $500-$600.[10] A de rigueur black leather jacket can be a gift, scrounged from an area thrift

store or acquired at one of the "lower quality" leather emporiums in the Bay Area, but ideal SM clothes can easily cost several hundred dollars.

Although most practitioners, like Estrella, don't have the money or the space in their apartments or houses for a dungeon room, some did. These practitioners outfitted the room (an extra bedroom or furnished basement) with custom-made bondage and play furniture. Mark, a heterosexual switch and bondage aficionado, for example, appeared to own every available bondage item, and hosted bondage parties at his home to give friends a chance to play with his heavy cages, full leather table, home-made bondage chair, vac sack, custom-sized leather body bag, numerous eyebolts for suspension play and customized horizontal stocks. Investing thousands of dollars in bondage furniture is unusual (and not every practitioner could afford this kind of spending) yet most practitioners had accumulated a large number of toys, clothes, books, videos and other paraphernalia over the years.

In addition to spending much discretionary income on toys, practitioners also devote a tremendous amount of time to SM practice. In a half-joking exchange, Stephanie, a bisexual dominant/sadist tells me she spends 50 hours a week doing SM or SM-related activities. Anthony, her husband, a bisexual dominant, responds "I spend at least forty hours a week doing scene related stuff," and Stephanie laughs, "Oh my God honey...Do you get health benefits with that? You should get a raise. You'll be employee of the month!" Many practitioners spend about 15 hours a week doing SM-related activities: perhaps one munch, one or two play parties or scenes (in public, semi-public or private spaces) and one class, workshop or organizational meeting each week. Dylan, for example, a bisexual/lesbian submissive, estimated eight to 15 hours a week, and then added a few more hours to account for the quantity of pornographic writing she does. Hailstorm, a heterosexual top, estimated three hours a day, every day; while Donald, a straight-ish service top, estimated between 10 and 15 hours a week. I suspect, based on the sheer size and volume of several very active local email discussion lists that my interviewees underestimated the time they allot to reading and responding to email. Mollena, a bisexual, submissive bottom, originally estimated that she spent around 25 hours a month on SM, and, when asked about email (she had already explained that she spent an hour a day on SM-related email lists), laughed and said, "it's got to be ten hours a week. I can't lie" (I suspect this is still a low estimate).

In addition to organized events, practitioners spend time looking at internet pages on SM (stores, personal advertisement sites, online magazines, political groups); following the latest news on SM in the media; reading and watching (and for some, writing and producing) books, magazines and videos on BDSM and going to local BDSM stores. Mark, for example, is developing a bondage website, and spends at least 60 hours a week on that alone. Participants who are officers of various clubs spend time performing their volunteer tasks as well: updating the online calendar of events, collecting money at the door or phoning to arrange classroom space rental. Finally, for many participants, most of their friends and social circle are people involved in the scene, so going to movies, celebrating events or having friends over for dinner is also part of BDSM sociality. Gretchen, for example, estimates that 80% of her friends are in the scene; in this, she is not at all unusual. SM sexuality, then, describes something both inside and outside the bedroom; it is attending classes and workshops, meeting scene friends for a drink, volunteering as membership secretary for an SM organization and planning yearly trips to BDSM conferences or retreats, as well as having SM sex.

The time and energy participants devote to SM is connected to the ways BDSM is understood, by practitioners, to be a form of work or labour. As BDSM has become more mainstream, more organizationally focussed and more middle-class, practitioners work on their SM in self-conscious ways, mobilizing American discourses of self-improvement, actualization and education. Today, SM practitioners learn how to be practitioners by attending a newcomers discussion group, going through an orientation to become a (card-carrying) member of a BDSM organization and taking classes on basic topics (flogging, spanking, aftercare [post-play soothing, dialogue, and processing]). They graduate to more advanced topics (edge play classes [such as rape play], suspension bondage, master/slave relationships), attending play parties and munches as they become more involved and integrated into the scene. Eventually they may become teachers, munch leaders, recognized experts or officers in SM organizations.

This new discipline is organized around working at SM sexuality. Even once they have achieved advanced knowledge some practitioners describe themselves as "journeymen" practitioners, referring to the way they remain an apprentice, always learning more about their craft. Mollena describes her initial foray into BDSM: "I really became really geeky about it: I was on the 'net, I researched everything, I found the books and went out and bought them...I really spent a lot of time and did a lot of personal research and introspection and a lot of writing about it." After finding out about the Society of Janus and The Exiles, Mollena attended an orientation, and started going to classes and munches:

> At the Berkeley munch I met a bunch of other people, and I was invited to my first play party and it sort of blossomed from there. The involvement purely is not enough, to get you really, fully involved; you have to really work at it. It's like a project, you know?

Similarly, Chris, a heterosexual dom, explained that he and his wife "have certain goals for our own growth and development" as practitioners, and that they use their "BDSM relationship as an opportunity for general work" on their relationship. They make explicit plans for progressing along their goals, such as "daily affirmation, daily motivation, exercises that we do," each designed to work on specific SM goals (such as behavioural training) as well as their larger relationship. These are sexual practices organized around labour; the practice of BDSM is a time-consuming, expensive, formalized form of working at sex.

In her (2000) essay on adultery, Laura Kipnis argues that modern marriage is about extracting labour, that marriage-type relationships are about work. Her essay makes explicit the sense that there is something bad about working so hard at sex. For Kipnis, following Marcuse, sexuality should be liberatory; it should be free from labour, work and capitalist regimentation. Lowe too decries the ways that late-capitalism has conscripted sexuality into exchange practices, imagining that before this moment of late-capitalism, sexuality was (safely) located within bonds of alliance and kin, inaccessible to capitalist absorption.[11] In this analysis, the reach of capital has affected sexuality for the worse. Yet, for BDSM practitioners, SM sexuality is about desire, pleasure and play; it is a re/creative practice. It is not the soul-deadening, vampiric labour that Kipnis describes, even as the SM scene becomes ever more formal, disciplined and organized. BDSM is not an empty consumptive lifestyle; it becomes meaningful to practitioners as a community that is about the pleasures of play.

Martin F. Manalansan uses the phrase "play with the world" to describe the ways that diasporic Filipino gay men reorganize social belonging in a racist urban U.S. space. For these men, play is a way of "negotiating the interplay of difference, borders, and hierarchies" (2003:140); it is meant to "confuse, distract and fool the public" (2003:144). "Play" here refers to an everyday mode of performance that negotiates and renegotiates relations between self and other in terms of collective belonging. Manalansan's deployment of play focusses attention on the ways that negotiating this space between the self and the social is also fundamentally about power; play is a way of working with and against racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, anti-immigrant and other forms of social inequality.

While Manalansan understands play as thoroughly imbricated with the workings of the everyday, play is typically understood to refer to a space that is bracketed from the everyday. In his classic analysis of the Balinese cockfight, Clifford Geertz argues that the cockfight, because it is "only a game," allows the activation of kin and village rivalries and status tensions in play form (1973:440). "Deep play," for Geertz, drawing on Bentham, is play with dangerously high stakes, capable of dislocating actors from the social field. The cockfight, then, is an expression and negotiation of social status, safely located in a space of play. Yet expressing status tensions (which could not be directly expressed) in game or play form also has an impact on "real" social structures: "it is this kind of bringing of assorted experiences of everyday life to focus that the cockfight, set aside from life as 'only a game' and reconnected to it as 'more than a game,' accomplishes" (1973:450).

In BDSM, play is a form of collective belonging based on the bracketed activity of SM. In the community, sexual practices, styles and dynamics are referred to as various forms of play. Play refers to any particular BDSM scene/event ("Jon and I played last night"), as well as to general categories of BDSM styles or activities ("My play style is butch bottom," "Sara is really into hot wax play"). Rachel, a bisexual pain fetishist/submissive explains that she calls doing SM "playing," in part because the alternative, "scening," just "isn't a word!" (Although I have heard this usage, "scening" is much less common than "playing"). Rachel continues, "I will use the verb 'play' because that's how I regard what I do. I mean that is my recreation...I'm not really into very many sports, I take my dog out once in a while; what I do to play as a recreational activity is to get beat up." For Rachel, SM is recreation, a leisure activity (for a discussion of gay SM sex as recreational, and not romantic, see Lee 1979).

At the same time, practitioners are quick to assert that, just because it is "play" does not mean it is not "serious." Some are nostalgic for the Old Guard Leathermen days when, instead of "play," SM was considered "work" (as in, "I'll work you over") and whips were "tools" not "toys" (e.g., Magister 1991:98). David Stein writes that the rise of the new SM scene[12] "occurred during the same period that S/M activity came to be almost universally referred to as 'play,' S/M practitioners as 'players,' and the tools we use as 'toys.'" He continues, sarcastically, "the same revolution that decoupled heterosex from procreation and gave us sport-fucking has turned S/M into a sex-optional form of recreation....Less hazardous than football but almost as strenuous, it even has aerobic benefits" (2002:5). As Jezzie, a bisexual slave put it, "I don't

like people trying to convince us that what we're doing is play and fun because we put so much work into it, so much work. It's not easy." When I asked Jezzie, and her husband Anton, a heterosexual master, what they meant by "work," he answered "emotional, intellectual, also just thinking day-to-day, how do you do it?...How does one set up your life so that it's, so that it will work? You know, we do a lot." He went on to describe the kind of "work" he meant: talking, being honest, self-examination, organization, planning and perseverance, even though "there's a lot of times when you just don't feel like putting forth the effort." Hayden, a lesbian masochist/slave tells me, "It's very serious to a lot of people. It's not a game. It's not something to be taken lightly. Hollywood and movies, and even fiction, puts this kind of glow on it, like it's so romantic and it's so fantasy oriented and it's not. It's work."

This emphasis on the ways SM is both work and play—recreation, re-creation and labour—is important. In a roundtable discussion about the word "play," Jeff, a heterosexual dominant top, notes, "for some people it's not about play, it's about a deep spiritual connection." Paul, another heterosexual dominant top responds, "the separation of play and seriousness is something that needs to be notated. Why is that such an obvious distinction?" Here, SM is an example of what Sherry Ortner calls the "serious game." Social life, she argues, is organized and constructed like a *game* because it is social (relational and interactive), because it has given rules, actors and goals and because actors play with skill, intention, wit and knowledge. At the same time, it is a *serious* game because it has extraordinary high stakes, is always about power and inequality, it is intense and it is played in earnest (1996:12-13, this is very similar to Geertz's understanding of "deep play").

Thus, as I have been describing, the time, money and energy practitioners spend on their SM practice is a form of sociality. Combining consumption, community and pleasure, contemporary BDSM sexualities are a form of working at play: a serious game that blurs boundaries between labour and leisure, work and play and real or everyday life and fantasy or scene life. It is to this latter issue that I turn to next, to ask: how does SM play map out relationships between the individual and the social world?

Play, Performance and the Real

In September 2002 I attended a workshop entitled "Role Play: Daddies, Mommies & More." The description of the class, circulated via email, read:

> Childhood spankings aren't supposed to be erotic. No self-respecting Mommy, Auntie or babysitter would ever touch her tiny charge inappropriately while changing a diaper...and a game of ball is not a power exchange. Those were the rules when we were actually children. But consenting adults can make any arrangements they want. This is a class about choosing, exploring and enjoying roles. Anyone can role play. It doesn't matter whether you're male or female, Top or bottom, gay or straight...and you don't have to be a polished actor. Learn to determine the characters and scenarios that arouse and engage you, and how to negotiate and set boundaries with your partner. Even experienced players are sometimes uncomfortable with the idea of scenes built around such taboos as childhood memories.

The class was on "age play": dynamics that play on and against age (e.g., daddy/boi play, incest play, adult babies). As Estrella began the workshop, she said she would be focussing on incest play, because of all the forms of age play it "is the most taboo...it inspires guilt and squicks [to be squicked is to respond with visceral disgust to some form of BDSM play]." Incest age play is a twist on a role that everyone knows: it is a way of perverting, by re-enacting with a difference, one's own experience of being a child. Estrella included a discussion of some of the common forms of age play, some of its risks and concluded with a 20-minute demonstration of incest play.

During the presentation portion of the class, the "brother" and "sister" (adults performing children perhaps eight years old) played with toys on a blanket at the side of the presentation stage. When the demo began, Estrella became the daddy, arriving home. "He" sat on a chair at the centre of the stage, and began speaking to his children, asking them what they had done today and whether they would be nice to their daddy this evening. Daddy coaxed the girl over with the promise of reading her a story. After the daughter sat on Estrella's lap, he began reading to her from a children's book. As the reading progressed, Estrella began adjusting the girl, positioning her more firmly against his crotch. Continuing the reading as the girl squirmed, daddy began rubbing himself against the girl's ass, holding on to her hips. As the audience watched, daddy pushed against the girl; Estrella was talking both to the audience and to his daughter ("daddy likes it when you sit on his lap," "be a good girl for daddy now," "stay still for daddy"). As daddy started touching his daughter between her legs (over her white, cotton panties), he told her she was a good girl, to stop fidgeting and to "give daddy a kiss now" (a big, wet French kiss).

The demonstration was both riveting and disturbing for the audience. The enactment of this form of incest was

uncomfortably "realistic," yet at the same time, of course, the girl and daddy involved are real-life peers: they are friends who both work as professional dominants in the East Bay. The girl, though younger than Estrella, was clearly an adult. Yet, the role play, which included costumes, a setting and specific, culturally familiar personae, worked like any (successful) performance to transport the audience, enabling us to suspend disbelief and experience the interaction as a real exchange of power. The girl was wearing knee socks, a skirt and pony tails; Estrella was wearing suit pants, a tucked-in oxford shirt and had loosened her tie as she sat down in the chair. The toy and blanket spread and the children's book set the scene, and their performance during the demo (the creepy coercion of the daddy, and the squirmy confusion of the girl) established an emotional, physical and relational dynamic familiar enough to be believable.

When I interviewed Estrella later, she told me that she had designed the class to respond to people who "look at age play as light, like SM-lite, because it's thought of as role play, it's thought of as pretend." When I asked her what about age play wasn't "pretend," she differentiated sensation play from role play, and went on to explain that because age play is about children, it is imagined as just fun, not a serious, difficult or challenging form of play:

> Well, if you pick up a stick and hit somebody, there is no way that that's pretend....Even role play that's designed to be pretend is thought of differently than age play. Like boss-secretary, or goddess play, I think people take that more seriously even. And I think it's because what it entails is one person playing the role of a child. And kids are light, right? I mean kids play, kids have fun; there's nothing difficult or challenging or even interesting about what kids do. So I think it's our adult attitudes towards children in general that influence our attitude—you know it's just for fun, it's easy, kinda weird, and so I wanted to give people a perspective that it could be serious stuff....Those roles [e.g. mommy, aunt, babysitter, baby, toddler] that we've all lived through can be very profound and very deep and very real.

Linking "pretend" play (role based) and a general sense of the "lightness" of children, Estrella stresses that age play is, in contrast, very real, profound and serious, even as it is play. This is deep play, serious play, play with very high stakes.

It is in part the fact that the adults in the BDSM community have lived through these life stages themselves, and build on real life experiences, attitudes and cultural dynamics to construct age play scenes, that lends intensity and vérité to these scenes. Estrella is the mother of three teenagers, who live with her and her wife in her home. At the same time, Estrella stresses that she is not using age play as a form of sexual therapy; she is building upon the familiar to construct something new.

> **MW**: Some people have told me that people who have kids wouldn't do age play, just wouldn't touch it . . .
> **Estrella**: Well, obviously they are wrong...people separate things all the time, I don't know why age play would be any different...we are all capable of making detached informed choices about the activities we engage in...There are experiences that are from my being a mother that I probably use in age play, like that feeling of your kid going to sleep and you are stroking their head—that bond, that love, I think I tap into that in my acting that out with somebody. But I've certainly...I mean I wouldn't even think of, there is a line with your kids! It's really separate. I don't know how to say it, but it's separate. I've had plenty of bosses, and never had sex with them, but I can do boss/secretary seduction, easy...I mean, things are separate because they're just separate.

Play here is a transformative, active process of engaging with the world and re-imagining, tweaking or recreating it. Play is recreational (something pleasant, not-work) as well as re-creational (productive of new worlds or relations). As Estrella reminds us, play is not *just* fun; play is a form of labour in which things that are deadly serious (social inequalities, power differentials, structural forms of suffering) are reworked in new ways. Age play is a particularly useful object of analysis in this discussion because it illustrates the connections between sex, play and subjectivity. The child, as a cultural entity, is a not-adult; in modern, U.S. legal terms, the child is not-yet citizen subject, even though the child has been subject to sexualization. Play about the child mobilizes a host of political and social potentialities: it foregrounds the tensions around liberal models of agency and consent as it also launches a critique of the very ground of such subjectification. Toggling between the wanton, polymorphously perverse child, and the modern, disciplined sexed adult/citizen, both bracketed from the everyday and drawing its animating tensions from it, these forms of play exist in the space between.

Further, play is pleasurable because it is an intervention into the social world; it recodes familiar and mundane experiences of power, relationships and intimacy in new ways, in a safe space called "the scene." The freedom to experiment with alternative subjectivities is real, but because the space is bracketed, special and, above all, safe, it is also insulated from the real. As Annalee, a bisexual, genderqueer/pervert commented:

> I like it to feel as if there is a role for me to play so...I think there is less anxiety...even if you're not playing a specific role like "I am the waitress" or "I am the cop," because rarely am I in scenes where there is specifically designed top and bottom [roles], it's just nice to feel like you...don't have to be nervous about people judging your performance because they're kind of looking at you as being within a role. I think that there is just a certain amount of safety in that feeling like stepping into a role that isn't quite you and it's not as dangerous to reveal yourself in that way somehow.

For Annalee, SM sex is safer because it is not quite her; even without a specific role or persona, Annalee's SM sex is bracketed from real life. The safety Annalee points to is one where, because it is *the scene* and not everyday life, she feels freer to experiment with different modes of being. This understanding of the real in play relies on a situation where, as Anne Allison notes (drawing on □i□ek), play is meaningful and motivating even if one does not believe (1994:25). This dynamic creates a kind of alibi through which challenges, critiques and other social reckonings can take place in a veiled or oblique way.

For some practitioners, this emphasis on play as "playacting" is off-putting. Many of my interviewees distinguished the serious play that they did with "fantasy roleplaying." Jezzie explained, "I'm really turned off by fantasy role play...because to me that detracts from the reality of what's going on...you know, I'm not a pirate...it seems like cheating or playing games." When I asked for clarification, Anton explained that it seemed "not as serious. It doesn't feel as genuine to me." Jezzie continued, "if you're pretending that he's a pirate and I'm a captured whatever, then might not the power also be pretend? If he has to pretend to be a pirate in order to have control over me, then the control is pretend." Bailey, a heterosexual bottom, also felt that thinking of SM as a performance diminishes the "reality" of the scene: "I've never been much into role play, you know, 'you're the pirate and I'm the captain.' I am just into down and dirty emotional and sensation exchange with my partners....It all becomes real to me. It's not a fantasy."

This anxiety about the line between just for fun performance and serious, real play draws attention to the fact that for most practitioners, SM is very "real." The majority took great pains to explain that, while they might sometimes enjoy costuming, roles and the like, WIITWD is *not* acting. Rather, they most often described SM as a deep, innate, necessary part of themselves, in many cases the more "real" part of the self. As Hailstorm put it:

> The reality is, that's [SM is] your reality. This [the real world] is the fantasy out here, this is where we put the mask on and go battle the world. This is where you follow the rules. This is a trite fantasy world where you conceal who you are, where you conceal your feelings, where you conceal the truth because you have to get along with people. And the fantasy world, that's the reality because that's where people come out, that's where you see who people are and people see who you are. And you live for that world; you live for those few hours that you play in the evening. That's what drives you if you're a player, if you're a part of the community, that's the serious part of it. Everything else is paying the rent, getting by, but that's where you live. That's where the masks come off. That's where you become yourself and that's why it's important to people to play because that's their reality.

Gretchen, a bisexual bottom/submissive, agreed: "the real me is the life outside of work versus the one that goes to the engineering office and solves complex engineering problems." As Stephanie explains, SM is real, and transformative: it remakes the self:

> One of the things that's enthralling to me is that it is so real. It is so completely, genuinely real to your partner. It is not screwing around...I mean, it's a whole different life afterward...as I always say to them [submissives], you will look at yourself differently in the mirror tomorrow morning when you're shaving. You'll remember what happened at our house last night.

Carrie, a bisexual bottom/submissive, was one of very few practitioners I interviewed who argued that SM was acting, but even for her, it is also—in the same breath—not acting:

> What I'm doing when I'm playing is acting out a role. Even though it feels like it is coming from inside of me, it's still a play, it's still an act. I am an actress playing this role. And so it's not real....But let me tell you, when I do it, it sure feels real then. When I'm deep in the middle of it, there's no acting, it's definitely so intense and it's so good. It just makes me feel so complete.

Play mediates between the external and the internal; it is a way of creatively negotiating, constructing and communicating the gaps between the self and the other/external world.[13] As Teramis, a lesbian slave, explains, SM is "bonding, it's energy exchange, sometimes it's a communion with each other and with something that's greater than us." For her, SM "isn't play." The common understanding of "play" is too "benign and unthreatening," too light, for the kinds of SM she enjoys. At the same time,

just as a performance inside the scene is *real*, so too is play something serious.

In his classic essay, Gregory Bateson argues that the "play frame" carries the understanding that what players are doing is "just for play," not for real. His example of this: "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (1955:41). Further, the frame, which says on the surface that what happens is just play, also enables what Bateson calls its opposite (but is really, perhaps, its mirror): that what happens in the play frame is *really* much more than play. It is this tension that distinguishes SM sexuality. Bracketed from the real ("just for play") but also reconnected to the real, SM moves between these registers. Here the real is not the Lacanian Real (that which eludes symbolization), but rather the real of power: the ways that regulatory apparati, technologies of discipline, produce subjects and subjectivity in everyday ways. As Patricia Duncan, in her analysis of lesbian SM, argued, play is about the construction and negotiation of identities, power and difference in a space called the scene. As she summarizes, SM practitioners are "very aware of s/m as *play*. Although they recognized the way power differentials are based in reality and in our culture, they also made it very clear to me that power, in their s/m practices, is a dynamic process, exchanged between two or more partners within the parameters of a scene" (1996:102). For the women Duncan interviewed, as well as for my informants, SM is a "site of transformation," a safe space to play with real, structural inequalities in pleasurable ways.

BDSM reflects these gendered inequalities; it is often about polarized roles: top/bottom, dominant/submissive, master/slave. Although many practitioners identify as switches, one's positionality is generally stable for a given scene, relationship or period of life. At the same time, these roles are not fixed to a genital-sex-gender matrix. This fluidity disrupts the heterosexual logic that animates these binaries within the scene as it troubles this logic in "real life" (for a similar argument on the fluidity of identities in power exchange in the U.K., see Langdridge and Butt 2005:71). Reductive or essentialist arguments about body, biology or genitals are almost completely absent from the BDSM scene. The practitioners I spoke with were adamant that there is no essential, generalizable or immutable correspondence between one's body or genitalia, one's gender presentation and one's BDSM practice. Many people in the scene enjoy roles opposite to their "real life" roles: the businessman in bondage; feminized, cross-dressed heterosexual men (called "sissy maids"); female dominants with enormous strap-ons; adults in diapers; lesbian women as butch bois. Further, even when there isn't this sort of visible discord between scene role and historical or social roles, when, for example, heterosexual, white men are dominants, or black women are slaves, scene roles are *performative* (Butler 1993).

By "performance," I do not mean some sort of play-acting, where the real of the world is contrasted with its staged representation. As Lynda Hart argues, "the controversy about whether s/m is 'real' or performed is naive, since we are always already in representation even when we are enacting our seemingly most private fantasies" (1998:91). SM sexuality is performative because it is conditioned by structures of domination, but these structures do not fully constrain the effects of the performance. Following Butler, performance is a "reiterative and citational practice" (1993:2) that leaves open the possibilities of doing it differently. Like butch-femme dynamics in lesbian cultures, polarized roles in pansexual BDSM evoke pieces of dominant sexual organization, but in their own particular, emic forms. They reference larger power differentials, but also create the space within the scene to put those power relations into play: to make them mobile, or mobilize them, in new ways. SM practices and identities dismantle any clean connection between bio-body, gender and sexuality, and this is why I emphasize *play*.

There are other forms of SM play that explicitly work–play with cultural or national boundaries, categories and roles. Some SM practitioners use the phrase "cultural trauma play" to describe this kind of play, which includes race play, Nazi play, rape play, "forced" feminization and interrogation scenes. Yet, even play that at first glance does not explicitly reference the social, works within these kinds of boundaries and tensions. Sensation play (flogging, spanking), blood play (cutting), medical play (catheterization), electrical play (shocking), bondage, sexplay (tit torture), and dominance and submission (Mistress/slave)—the most common categories of BDSM play—are all described as play precisely because they are performances of the self in ways that deploy, recreate or reanimate existent social forms.

The pleasure of this play lies in its depth, in the creation and subsequent transgression of boundaries around what one is and can be, what is safe and what is dangerous and what is set aside and what is reconnected. Play is also disarming; because it is *just play* practitioners can play with dangerous "taboo" topics more explicitly than one can in real life. In some ways, the bracketing function of the SM community provides an alibi to make re-enacting power plays safe. At the same time, these performances produce new bodies, subjects, relations and sexualities. By evoking shared power differentials in potentially new ways, SM sexuality is a community-based

practice of play that works with and against social inequalities in a safe, pleasurable, satisfying and dramatic way.

It is this tangling with self and world, real and pretend in a safe space that animates BDSM play. However, although the bracketing of the SM scene provides an important reassurance, play is always already of the social world. Play, desire, pleasure and indeed sexuality itself are always relational, social and communal; as Lancaster argues, "desire is thus always part of the cultural, economic and ideological world of social relations and social contexts" (1992:270). *Play* captures the ways SM is dramatic, productive and pleasurable, positioned on the border between the internal and the external, the agent and the social world.

In Conclusion: Working at Play

In SM, work and play are not oppositional categories; rather, the scene reflects the ways that line between work and play has been eroded in the shift to late-modern capitalism. In the context of the decline of public play space, the loss of urban jobs and the commodification of black men's expressive culture, Robin Kelley (1997) argues that forms of work–play such as hip-hop, basketball and sex work (for women) are increasingly viable means of attaining both material benefits and pleasure. His analysis of the rise of "play-labour" as a form of work in the inner city is, to be sure, a different nexus of play–labour than that at work for the majority white, middle-class practitioners of BDSM. Yet the kinds of shifts experienced by these players in the Bay Area are not totally unrelated; in SM, as in basketball, play is labour, although not labour for wages. Instead, this form of play–labour is a reconfiguration of the boundaries between work and play in the context of late-modernity.

In this way, I read work as an alibi for play, and play as an alibi for labour. This analysis draws on the way Anne Allison theorizes "play" to describe the space of a Tokyo hostess club. By linking work to play, social to business, the hostess club builds a commitment to business, and indeed produces certain gendered, classed worker subjectivities. In Allison's analysis, because the club is bracketed enough to feel "relaxing," play functions as a sort of alibi for the extension of work into leisure time, but as it does so, it transforms work into something pleasurable, sexual and fun (1994:197). Play here reads social performances as consolidations of social structures, providing a place where participants can enact and reenact social relations and hierarchies in a safe space.

Play stands in, as an alibi, for labour, where labour is both a disciplined way of working at sexuality, and a recreative way of producing and recombining social relations. BDSM is neither just work nor just play; it is the movement between and across these terrains that makes SM pleasurable for practitioners. Thus when David Brooks argues that BDSM is increasingly popular in the U.S. because the "Bobo" (bourgeois bohemian) has confined pleasure to something productive or useful, and contemporary BDSM practitioners (like rock-climbers and adventure travelers), with their blend of self-improvement and consumption, fill the bill, he is not totally off the mark. By couching various pleasures as work on the self, SM can be located within an American tradition of self-development: "the Protestant Work Ethic has been replaced by the Bobo Play Ethic, which is equally demanding. Everything we do must serve the Life Mission, which is cultivation, progress and self-improvement" (2000:200).

This ethic is not entirely new, of course, but what is new at this particular historical moment is that the register of work–play increasingly available in the late-modern U.S. is sex. And as we embrace sex as consumers, labourers, lovers and hedonists, we are also producing new forms of sexual subjectivity. As BDSM demonstrates, this subjectivity reflects the experiential dimensions of informational capitalism: the increased commodification of subjectivity, the technicalization of bodies and relationships and the erosion and reestablishment of boundaries between labour and leisure time. If we accept that, under late-modern capitalism, subjects are produced through consumption practices (rather than identities or production; see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), this is not the only form of biopower, of subjectification, at work. Rather, we must also remember the crucial function of pleasure, community and play in sexuality, even within registers of labour or work.

BDSM cannot be understood as a modernist, binary sexual identity, *or* a post-modernist, consumerist sexual lifestyle. As Ann Pellegrini, in her (2002) critique of Lowe, argues, contemporary U.S. sexual politics is marked by a mixture of both lifestyle/consumption and identity/discipline discourses of sexuality. Since the relationship between capitalism and sexuality is neither stable nor inflexible, slippage or seepage between conflicting discourses of identity–lifestyle, consumption–production and work–play complicate any clean master-model of sexuality. Thus, while BDSM is a consumptive practice, this is not the only or even primary interface between capitalism and SM sexuality. Rather, the SM scene, as a space of consumption, desire, connection and contradiction, is neither divorced from, nor confined to, the market. BDSM is a form of playful, pleasurable labour.

BDSM's pleasure derives from the ways it moves real power differentials into the flux of play space, and back

again. Through labour, consumption and work, BDSM produces its practitioners as disciplined subjects. In this labour, however, BDSM also carefully constructs spaces of play, creating, if only to blur, boundaries between real and scene, work and play. The pleasure of BDSM play is around these borders and limits; the desire to transgress, to uphold, to violate or to enforce borders is incited by the very borders themselves. BDSM creates a place for this play, and in so doing produces new social relations through its combinant logics.

The proliferation of alternative sexualities and ever-increasing sexual specialization is an essential part of late-modern sexuality in the U.S. The challenge for anthropologists and others is to read these sexualities, sexual identities and sexual communities in all their complexity. The growth of the organized BDSM community reflects the increasing desirability of a disciplined, ordered, formalized, technical and consumptive sexuality, a sexuality one must work at or on to perform. This kind of sexuality is amiable both to late-capitalism and to the subjects of such a regime. Yet, what these labouring subjects produce is not simply more consumption, but also pleasure. When BDSM practitioners play in these ways, they are labouring at play. I understand play, then, to describe a kind of sexuality that is both work and play, that moves ceaselessly between these transfer points. At the same time, the ways such play scenes are structured, bracketed and limited both incites desire and produces these kinds of sexual subjectivities. In BDSM, play works to repackage work as fun/sex and to rework fun as productive/labour. SM play moves back and forth between registers of play and work, enacting a spectacular, bracketed performance that at the very same time works to muddy the logics of our everyday performances of power and inequality. It is this recombination of terms that makes BDSM play an avatar of the new kinds of pleasure and power, consumption and desire that animate late-modern sexuality in the U.S.

Margot Weiss, PhD, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University. Box 90091, 108 Social Sciences Building, Durham, North Carolina, 27708, U.S.A. E-mail: mdw8@duke.edu

Notes

1 Throughout this article, I use the terms "SM" and "BDSM" interchangeably. "BDSM" is of relatively recent (and many suggest Internet) coinage. The use of SM, S/M, or S&M as a term for the entirety of this community predates BDSM, but, in the semipublic, pansexual community at least, BDSM is fast becoming the inclusive term of choice. Leather, on the other hand, is most often used in gay, and, in some cases, lesbian, SM communities to describe a community oriented around a leather fetish, motorcycles, butch masculinity and, sometimes, SM practices (see Kamel 1995; Rubin 1997).

2 Here I am referring to the temporal, spatial and social-economic shift from modernist capitalism to postmodern or informational capitalism (e.g., Castells 1996; Fischer 1998; Harvey 1990). While some scholars use "postmodern" or "late-capitalist" to describe this culture/economic regime (e.g., Jameson 1992), and although there are critical differences in theory that these terms reference, I am less interested in parsing these differences, and more interested in sketching the general effects on sexuality of what Fischer and Jameson call the "third industrial revolution" (Fischer 1998; Jameson 1992): the technological shift from Fordist production to data technologies, informatics, electronic media, the silicon chip and biotechnology.

3 "Pansexual" is a term used by the SM community to describe organizations, spaces and scenes that are open to, used by, or include people of various sexual and gender orientations. In practice, the "pansexual community" in San Francisco usually means the community of practitioners who join and participate in organizations like Society of Janus and SMOdyssey, take classes and workshops in places like QSM, attend munches, and semipublic play parties, and otherwise participate in the formally organized scene (as I describe it below). In general, the men are, in the majority, heterosexual, the women are bisexual and heterosexual, and there are a fair number of transgendered practitioners and professional dominants of various orientations.

4 I initially located interviewees through an email solicitation. As my research progressed, people I met at events expanded my interviewee network. In total, I interviewed 51 practitioners: 27 men and 24 women (including two transgendered women). Their average age was 41, they were 87% white and most were involved in long-term relationships: 25% were married, and 38% were partnered. Of my female interviewees, 50% were bisexual, 29% were lesbian, and 15% were heterosexual (the others did not identify themselves in these terms). Of my male interviewees, 59% were heterosexual, 26% were bisexual, and 15% were gay. Almost all of my interviewees would be considered middle class, based on education, profession, and income; 26% worked in the computer or tech industry, more than any other category of employment, including "other." I draw on these interviews not for statistical analysis, but rather to use my informants' language and ideas to illustrate key points that developed during the 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork I did in the San Francisco Bay Area.

5 The San Francisco scene as described by leathermen and scholars (e.g. Magister 1991; Mains 1991; Rubin 1991; Rubin 1997; Rubin 1998; Thompson 1991) has changed dramatically, due to gentrification, HIV/AIDS and the rise of the pansexual scene. I explore this dramatic shift from an urban network of gay male bars and motorcycle associations to a suburban, formally organized scene populated primarily by Silicon Valley's many heterosexual, white, computer professionals in more detail elsewhere (Weiss 2005).

6 The word "top" refers to the person on the giving end of any form of BDSM. "Bottom" is the corresponding word for the person on the receiving end. The word "submissive"

refers to the bottom in a more explicitly power-based relationship; "dominant" is the corresponding word for the top. "Switch" describes a person who switches between roles.

7 Power exchange is scene term for relationships built on relations of dominance and submission. The term emphasizes that these relationships are about power (more than sensation or role play, for example), but also that they are an *exchange*: although roles are usually relatively stable, power is understood by practitioners to be mobile and shared between practitioners.

8 Patrick Califia-Rice argues that contemporary SM is less about pain, and more about control: "the basic dynamic of S/M is the power dichotomy, not pain" (1994:162). He continues, "handcuffs, dog collars, whips, kneeling, bondage, tit clamps, hot wax, enemas, penetration, and giving sexual service are all metaphors for the power imbalance" (1994:162). Sociologists Thomas Weinberg and G.W. Levi Kamel agree, noting "at the very core of sadomasochism is not pain but the idea of control—dominance and submission" (1995:19). This understanding is shared by other SM researchers (e.g. Alison, et al. 2001; Langdridge and Butt 2005; Taylor and Ussher 2001:298-300), as well as by practitioners.

9 In their study of SM practitioners in England and Amsterdam, Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher similarly note the tremendous variation in the interpretative frameworks practitioners use to explain their interest in SM. They identify eight common frameworks in their research: SM as dissidence, pleasure, escapism, transcendence, learned behaviour, intra-psychic, pathological and, finally, inexplicable (2001).

10 The customization of BDSM (in terms of customized toys, tools and clothing, as well as customized identities, relationships, roles and personae) is another important interface between BDSM and late-modern economies.

11 Here I want to differentiate between the history of sexuality, which did entail a structural shift from systems of alliance to those of technique/capital (e.g. D'Emilio 1983a; D'Emilio 1983b; Foucault 1990; Rubin 1984) from the assumption that sexuality was somehow freer or more libratory in pre-modern eras.

12 I explore the particular dimensions of the new scene elsewhere, but one of its most salient characteristics is its emphasis on safety. The development of classes and organizations, the rise of "Safe, Sane and Consensual" as a motto (and the safer sex, no drugs or alcohol, fully informed consent rules that go with this motto), the development of negotiation checklists, house rules and agreements one must sign to play in semipublic places and the development of "Dungeon Monitors," certified "lifeguards" who ensure adherence to party rules at play events, are some key examples of this shift (see Weiss 2005).

13 This analysis is indebted to the child psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's (1971) theorization of play. For Winnicott, playing involves the "potential space" between the me (inner subjective world) and the not-me (external reality). Play is "immensely exciting" and "essentially satisfying" because of the very precariousness of the relationship between internal and external during play (1971:47), not because it is masturbatory, drive-related or instinctual; though play builds to a "climax," it is not erotogenic. Playing is about negotiating this space between external/internal: "we experience life in the area...that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals" (1971:64). For Winnicott, play produces and communicates creative relationships between the self and the environment whether the play is with others, with mothers or alone.

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