

EMERALD INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNEXIONS

KINK AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Interdisciplinary Reflections on
Practice and Portrayal



EDITED BY

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart • Teresa Cutler-Broyles

Kink and Everyday Life

Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions

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Kink and Everyday Life: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Practice and Portrayal

EDITED BY

KYLO-PATRICK R. HART

Texas Christian University, USA

And

TERESA CUTLER-BROYLES

University of New Mexico, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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About the Contributors

Teresa Cutler-Broyles has a master's degree in Cultural Studies and a master's certification in Architectural Historic Preservation. She is a professional writer, published on a wide variety of subjects in both fiction and nonfiction venues. She teaches Film and Cultural Analysis at the University of New Mexico (USA), is Director of Opportunities and Research at Progressive Connexions (UK), and is the Resident Director for a study abroad program in Perugia (Italy). Her research interests include architecture, circuses, cultural theory, dance, film theory, gardens, historical preservation, Italy and Italian history, performance, science fiction (especially *Star Trek*), sexuality and gender, travel, and vampires and other creatures of the night.

Lucie Drdová (PhD, Masaryk University) is a recent graduate of PhD studies in the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University in Brno (Czech Republic). Her research interests include ethnography, gender, identities, marginalized groups, and subcultures. She has published articles on virtual ethnography, virtual identities, current legislation regarding BDSM practices, the development of contemporary BDSM subculture, and the conception of BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (PhD, University of Michigan) is Chair of the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media at Texas Christian University (USA), where he teaches courses in film and television history, theory, and criticism and queer media studies. He is the author of several books about media (including *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* and *Queer Males in Contemporary Cinema: Becoming Visible*), founding coeditor of the academic journal *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, and a recipient of the AEJMC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Interest Group Leroy F. Aarons Award for Lifetime Contributions to LGBTQ Education and Research.

Adéla Mólzer Hrabáková studied Culturology and Anthropology at Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic). A BDSM enthusiast, she also likes to explore human sexuality from theoretical and philosophical points of view. Currently, she organizes BDSM events in the Czech Republic with a group that represents the “new scene.” She focuses primarily on role-playing aspects and how they affect practitioners' behaviors.

Nick J. Mulé (PhD, University of Manchester) is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work, cross-appointed to the Faculty of Health and the School

of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, and is Coordinator of the Sexuality Studies Program at York University in Toronto, Ontario (Canada). His research interests include the social inclusion/exclusion of LGBTQ populations in social policy and service provision and their recognition as distinct communities in cultural, systemic, and structural contexts. He also engages in critical analysis of the LGBTQ movement and the development of queer liberation theory.

Lorraine Rumson has an MA in English Studies from the Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), with a concentration in Victorian literature. Her MA research concerns femininity and modernity in Victorian Jewish writing, and she is currently working on her PhD at the Freie Universität Berlin on Victorian Jewish Medicalism. She has presented on Victorian porn at conferences in Austria and the Czech Republic, and has been interviewed on the subject for Canadian radio. She is the Network Coordinator for Progressive Connexions and editor-in-chief of the Berlin-based independent literary journal *FU Review*.

M. Susanne Schotanus is an Independent Researcher with a master's degree in Research in Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands). Her work has focused on alternative sexual practices and relationship structures, especially forms of kink and BDSM. She aims to show how BDSM practices are an inherent part of Western culture, in that they share some of the same foundational concepts. She is currently a mentor in the CARAS program and involved in the production of several edited volumes on the topics of kink and BDSM, as both contributor and editor.

Noelle Summers received master's degrees in Social Work and Social Policy from Washington University in St. Louis (USA), specializing in sexual health and its intersections with social justice. She has cofacilitated several courses at the university's Brown School of Social Work, including Designing and Implementing Sexual Health Education and Regulating Sex, and has presented across the globe at conferences on Consent and Communication. She is interested in applying kink frameworks to increase sexual self-efficacy on campus, increasing access to reproductive health care, and holistic sex education through policy change.

Jeremy Vaughan, an Independent Researcher (Netherlands), has spent most of his life educating. His multifaceted background has put him in advisory roles for engineering firms, museums, libraries, and other educational resources. He received his MFA from Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, an interdisciplinary program that utilizes Tufts' academic programs and the Museum school's cross-disciplined studio practice. His book *Stop Me If You've Heard This Before* is a self-reflective analysis of travel and relationships.

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List of Contributors

<i>Teresa Cutler-Broyles</i>	University of New Mexico, USA and the Umbra Institute, Italy
<i>Lucie Drdová</i>	Masaryk University, Czech Republic
<i>Kylo-Patrick R. Hart</i>	Texas Christian University, USA
<i>Adéla Mölzer Hrabáková</i>	Independent Researcher, Czech Republic
<i>Nick J. Mulé</i>	York University, Canada
<i>Lorraine Rumson</i>	Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
<i>M. Susanne Schotanus</i>	Independent Researcher, Netherlands
<i>Noelle Summers</i>	Washington University in St. Louis, USA
<i>Jeremy Vaughan</i>	Independent Researcher, Netherlands

Introduction: Kink and Our Everyday Lives

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart

Keywords: Aftercare; BDSM; deviancy; inclusivity; negotiation; nonnormativity

In March 2019, two dozen presenters gathered in Prague, Czech Republic, for an inclusive interdisciplinary conference pertaining to kink in relation to sexuality and technology. This two-day event was organized to explore the numerous ways that kink is practiced regularly in people's lives as well as portrayed in media offerings of different kinds. Its sessions focused on topics including fetishes, kink histories and narratives, kink spaces, pornography, sex work, and sexuality in a digital world.

Over the course of those eye-opening two days, most participants encountered ideas they had never before thought about – or perhaps never before felt comfortable thinking about. At least in part, that is because kink is a topic that has not typically been encountered in mainstream society even though, as my coeditor Teresa Cutler-Broyles notes in her conclusion to this volume, it has been common to many individuals' sexual behaviors for as long as people have been having sex. Different historical eras define what is to be regarded as normal or abnormal, socially acceptable or deviant, with kinky ways of behaving and being historically falling closer to the abnormal/deviant ends of those binary oppositional spectra. However, all of that is starting to change more and more, as kink in the twenty-first century becomes increasingly visible in a wider range of the world's cultures than ever before. Accordingly, the goal of many of the conference participants, as Cutler-Broyles notes, was to collectively endeavor to demystify and destigmatize the concept of kink by candidly articulating and investigating its numerous dimensions – with regard to both practice and portrayal – during our time together in Prague, explorations that have continued long after we all returned to our respective home countries.

By the time the conference concluded, it became evident that many students, researchers, practitioners, and others with personal and professional interests in kink would benefit from an edited volume offering an overview of global perspectives, research approaches and findings, and best practices pertaining to this topic. This is that book. All of its chapters, written by a subset of the conference participants, have grown out of that interdisciplinary gathering. However, from the very beginning, all of the chapter authors were well aware that this book is not a set of conference proceedings. Instead, we collaborated during the early planning stages to ensure that we used the original conference presentations as preliminary starting points for chapters that have blossomed substantially, both in

content and complexity, in the many months since then to form a coherent, fulfilling volume on this truly intriguing topic.

Dynamics of Kink and Everyday Life

As the various conference presentations revealed, the term “kink” connotes different things to different people. For some, hearing this word calls to mind images of deviancy and depravity. For others, it generates excitement for sexual activities and ways of being that are regarded by many as nonnormative, yet are enjoyable and often empowering for those who choose to engage in them. The term was derived from notions of a “bend” in an individual’s sexual practices or desires, which leads one away from conventional (or so-called “vanilla”) forms of sexual expression in favor of engaging regularly in more unconventional ones, including BDSM (a classification category encompassing bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism) and fetish activities. “According to a large-scale survey a decade ago by Susan Wright,” notes Savin-Williams (2019), “the most frequent kink behaviors engaged in by 75% to 90% of practitioners were bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, spanking, leather, role-playing, exhibitionism, polyamory, clothing fetish, and voyeurism” (para. 2).

Kink has evoked an array of cultural responses over time, ranging from curiosity to disgust, arousal to fear. Nevertheless, it has simultaneously experienced an intriguing expansion in popularity and increasingly surrounds us in our everyday lives, even among individuals who opt not to participate in kinky activities as part of their own sex lives. Most people encounter kink regularly nowadays – whether in films, television series, works of literature, preferred sex establishments, or their own bedrooms – and the range of its potential activities and their variations is quite broad. Consider, for example, entries from the scrolling list of kinky practices and potential choices of relevance to them that appears on-screen during the opening moments of director Rupert Everett’s 1996 film, *Skin & Bone*, about the daily lives of three male sex workers in Los Angeles. Options pertaining to bondage include “precede by humiliation,” “verbal count of blows,” “gleeful, amused sadist,” and “turned on, aggressive sadist.” Options pertaining to spanking and flogging include “blacksnake,” “bullwhip,” “cat o’ nine tails,” and “schoolboy cane.” Options pertaining to tolerance include “no marks,” “welts,” “long-term bruises,” and “painful, month-long bruises.” Options pertaining to flesh mementos include “no blood or scars,” “scars OK,” “scars desired,” and “lots of blood.”

In addition to BDSM, kink in our everyday lives can take the forms of experimentation, fetishism, gender bending, group sex, performativity, public sex, and sexual role-playing, among many others. It is quite impressive, therefore, that director Gregg Araki, in the combined offerings of his teen-apocalypse trilogy during the decade of the 1990s (i.e., 1993’s *Totally F***ed Up*, 1995’s *The Doom Generation*, and 1997’s *Nowhere*), explicitly included references to and representations of all of the following kinky phenomena: ass play, body shaving, bondage, diaper play, discipline, dominance, enema play, erotic humiliation, face-sitting, fetishism, fisting, fun with sex toys, golden showers, group sex, paraphilic

infantilism, public sex, rimming, sadomasochism, sexual fluidity, spanking, submission, voyeurism, and even the occasional turkey-baster insemination party. In this regard, it is important to note that Araki intentionally incorporated such phenomena in his creative output at a time when they were only quite rarely encountered in U.S. cinematic offerings. In doing so, he endeavored intentionally to acknowledge the existence of, and destigmatize, such kinky activities, helping to pave the way for the growing number and range of kinky representations on film that have begun to appear more frequently since then. It is further impressive that, while doing so, Araki refrained from imposing any sort of moral judgment on these various on-screen activities as they unfolded, providing no guidance whatsoever as to how individual viewers should regard or respond to them (Hart, 2013).

At its core, kink requires “negotiating with a prospective partner before anything happens. If that negotiation is done right, it’s more like a collaboration toward a common goal: each party’s pleasure” (Yu, 2019, para. 9). This negotiation process simultaneously enables participants to overcome the socialization message that it is shameful to ask for what one desires sexually and helps to ensure, in most instances, that they do not experience any unwelcome violations of consent (Yu, 2019). Aftercare – the physical and emotional caretaking that enables participants to reset their equilibrium and readopt their everyday roles in relation to one another – is also an essential component of any kinky sexual encounter (Jones, 2020, para. 5).

Researchers have found that kink can provide safe spaces for individuals of all kinds to establish and experience inclusive environments; it can also enable members of marginalized communities (such as trans people) to become more comfortable in their relationships with their own bodies and with others (Desai, 2019). In addition, research has shown that many individuals who embrace and indulge in kink tend to be less neurotic, more extroverted, less rejection-sensitive, and more open to experiencing new things than those who do not (Aswell, 2019; Hers, 2020). It is important to note, however, that kink is experienced quite differently by different people – what is regarded as kinky by some may be considered ordinary or “vanilla” by others. Along these lines, the editorial team of “A Beginner’s Guide to Kink” point out:

Kink is usually looked at through the lens of what a given culture or society deems normal, but it’s also relative to each couple and individual. If the missionary position seems foreign to you, but you don’t think twice about using blindfolds, missionary could be defined as one of your kinks. (Hers, 2020, para. 2)

This means the many manifestations of kink are regarded and experienced differentially by a wide range of participants, at least in part because significant differences exist within and among societies and cultures when it comes to conceptions of human sexuality (Patton, 1991). Despite those important realities, a recent survey nevertheless found that nearly half of its respondents were interested in kink, even if they have not yet explored it themselves (Aswell, 2019).

Analyzing Kink in Everyday Life

This book explores kinky sexual phenomena (past and present) as experienced in bathhouses, circuit clubs, dark rooms, fetish clubs, hookup culture, pornography, sex shops, and other domains and as represented in literature, film, and television. Acknowledging that individuals outside the kink scene continually make assumptions about its practices and participants that are based heavily on fictional discourses rather than factual realities, it is intended, at least in part, to challenge such uninformed, inaccurate, and frequently deleterious notions. In doing so, it serves also to demonstrate how nonnormative sexual activities and ways of being constitute healthy expressions of human sexuality for an increasingly wide range of individuals and contribute to ever-evolving notions of inclusivity and acceptance. For as Savin-Williams (2019) emphasizes:

In the public mind, kink is often equated with “weird sex,” which they don’t understand and usually don’t approve of. However, it is critical from a kink perspective that what kinksters do is not just about sex but, more importantly, about enhancing intimacy between partners. Thus, kink is usually a partnered rather than a solo activity. (para. 4)

The first four chapters in this collection, grouped under the heading “Reflections on Practice: From Suspension Hooks to College Hookups,” explore everyday experiences and manifestations of kink that result in exciting, safe, and healthy expressions of human sexuality. Their topics span the center and the fringes of the kink community, offering insights into a world in which kink is no longer regarded as being dangerous, deviant, or perverse.

The first chapter in this section, “Kink-Space and the Body: Transforming the Liminal” by Teresa Cutler-Broyles, analyzes a 2019 BDSM performance, by Maegan Machine, as a performative event that occurs within a particular “kink-space.” It demonstrates how instances of such ritualistic performance frequently render established understandings of kink power dynamics obsolete and, in this specific case, can serve as a powerful expression of women’s oppression in a patriarchal society.

Next, in his chapter “Creating Spaces, Maintaining Places for Male-on-Male Kink,” Nick J. Mulé articulates the significance and importance of establishing and maintaining places where male-on-male sexual activity on the premises can regularly occur. In doing so, he focuses on the role that backspaces play in enabling individuals to present different sides of themselves in different contexts (including, in relation to his argument, bathhouses, circuit clubs, dark rooms, and porn theaters) and the centrality of male-on-male subaltern spaces and places in serving as fantasy-based alternatives to the monotony of everyday life.

From there, Lucie Drdová and Adéla Mólzer Hrabáková, in their chapter “United Collars of BDSM: Critical Exploration of Changes in the New BDSM Scene in a Postcommunist Environment,” endeavor to address the dearth of kink research devoted to postcommunist countries and contexts by focusing on the

establishment and ongoing evolution of a BDSM subculture in the postcommunist Czech Republic. They reveal how the contemporary BDSM subculture in that country is far more diverse today than in past decades and substantially reflects the current generation's mindset.

Rounding out the contents of this first group of chapters is "There Has to Be a Better Way: Kink-ifying Campus Culture to Overcome Communication Challenges" by Noelle Summers. In it, she argues that use of an intervention called the Hookup Card can enable college students to experience more positive outcomes of their casual sexual encounters, whether kinky or otherwise.

The additional four chapters in this collection, presented under the heading "Reflections on Portrayal: From Victorian Porn to Contemporary Media," identify ways that kink culture generally, as well as various of its subcultures, have been represented in a range of media offerings over time. They demonstrate how conceptions of kink continue to evolve and how media portrayals of kink can potentially – and actually – impact audience members in different historical eras and stages of life.

In "Kink in the Time of Sexology: An Interdisciplinary Approach to 'Abnormal Sexuality' in Victorian Culture," Lorraine Rumson explores how contemporary reactions to kinky sexual activities are rooted in categories that emerged in the legal and medical discourses of the Victorian era. In addition, she examines representations of nonnormative sexual practices in noteworthy literary offerings of Victorian pornography.

In "Ooh, Shiny! From Catwoman and Mrs. Peel to the Latex Submissive," Jeremy Vaughan applies concepts of objectification, fetishism, and the aura to the pervasive phenomenon of shiny bodies in the kink aesthetic. He utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to reflective practice, involving personal reflections from different stages of his life combined with noteworthy viewing experiences of different media offerings over time, to cultivate a clearer understanding of the appeals of shiny objects and bodies to audience members of all ages.

In my own chapter, "Kinky Sex Lives and Groundbreaking (Exploitation) Cinema," I analyze the contents of two groundbreaking cinematic offerings – *Cruising* (1980, directed by William Friedkin) and *Feed* (2005, directed Brett Leonard) – that depict kinky sexual activities and ways of being, and were targeted primarily to mainstream audience members, at historical moments when doing so was highly atypical. In the process, I demonstrate how both of these films, as a result of their exploitative approaches to representing their chosen subject matter during their respective historical moments, likely ended up doing far more representational harm than good when all was said and done.

Finally, in "Healing the Image: A Conceptual Investigation of the Healing Narrative in Cultural Representations of BDSM," M. Susanne Schotanus problematizes the concept of the "healing narrative" when it is applied to both BDSM practices and media offerings that represent them. More specifically, she explores the concept of "healing" in relation to relevant representations contained in the feature-length film *Secretary* (2002, directed by Steven Shainberg) and the Showtime cable television series *Billions* (2016–present).

As sexual-health consultant Francisco Ramirez explains:

Kink is anything that falls outside the bounds of culturally defined expectations, which, because of often wildly puritanical societies, could basically be anything that's not penile–vaginal intercourse. [...] Whether you have kinks or fetishes or both or none, remember that all options can be perfectly healthy so long as sexual events are consensual and enjoyable for all parties involved. (Mandriota, 2019, para. 5, 10)

Accordingly, when considered both individually and collectively, the chapters in this collection demonstrate how kinky activities and ways of being are not only “normal” but also becoming the norm for the many individuals who regard them as empowering, exciting, healthy, liberating, safe, and stimulating expressions of their sexuality. It is hoped they will provide practitioners, scholars, and others with an understanding of past and present approaches to thinking about and analyzing kink and inspire new avenues of exploration in this intriguing area of interpersonal, sexual, and research activity.

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Reflections on Practice: From Suspension Hooks to College Hookups

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Chapter 1

Kink-Space and the Body: Transforming the Liminal

Teresa Cutler-Broyles

Abstract

Much scholarly examination of BDSM and kink attempts to make meaningful various specific practices as cultural “texts,” and analyzes them for what they might signify within a particular culture or subculture. This approach has often focused on interpreting specific acts in relation to human sexuality or psychology – specifically deviance – or on critiquing them from a feminist perspective. I propose to approach an examination of (a particular) BDSM (event) itself as (a) performance, and I argue that it is not only performance but that it is *performative*, creating a liminal space within the already liminal space of the fetish club in which it occurs. This “kink-space” then becomes the place within which the embodiment, and the dissolution, of binaries occurs, creating possibilities for the audience and upending the structures upon which identity is based. Ultimately, BDSM as performance is an avenue for the understanding of the concepts of liminality and power and how they function to create and contain selves.

Keywords: Fetish club; kink-space; liminality; performance; performativity; suspension

Not an insignificant amount of feminist critique of BDSM since the 1970s has centered around the argument that scenarios in which male (or male-identified) people dominate female (or female-identified) people has the negative effect of reinforcing socially constructed, heteronormative patriarchal gender and societal roles.^{1,2,3} This is most easily argued in scenes in which women are bound, flogged, or otherwise in submissive positions to a male dom, but the critique extends as well to such events as suspension, blood work, and various other kinds of edge play in which women are sometimes the sole participants. What has been elided in these ongoing discussions is a recognition that within the BDSM Scene,

and more importantly in specific scenarios acted out as ritualized performance, a very particular kind of space that I term “kink-space” is created that makes inapplicable terms and concepts used to discuss social and cultural interaction.⁴ Even terms as integral to the Scene as “dominant” and “submissive” can become subsumed, and ultimately meaningless in this space, in relation to the larger social order.

Setting the Stage

I argue that the existence of kink-space – a liminal space created through the public performance of BDSM, which has its own rules and boundaries – allows for and perhaps requires an inversion of power dynamics, societal norms, and expectations and gives people, especially women, an embodied stance from which to claim power.⁵ Through ritualistic performance and by claiming both submissive and dominant roles within given scenarios, practitioners/performers (re)create and subvert socially understood power dynamics, and through their bodies allow for a dynamic that makes obsolete the binaries of dom–sub and powerful–powerless.⁶

Kink and BDSM are not interchangeable, of course, and as the focus of this chapter is BDSM specifically, the use of the term “kink” in “kink-space” requires some deconstruction. The broad sense of kink as “an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of sexual activities that are considered to be unconventional or unorthodox” (*Definition, n.d.*) is worth considering. While this definition depends heavily on what are considered *conventional* and *orthodox* sexual activities, it serves as a starting point. In this sense, the larger social order within which the current, American BDSM Scene exists serves as the measure, and its views on sexuality the boundaries outside which kink begins. While those edges are difficult to discern given the relatively ubiquitous imagery and representation of what would be termed kink in popular culture – and given the cultural shift around nonheterosexual sexual orientation (such as gay marriage), nonessentializing gender identities (such as transgender and nonbinary identities), and the preference for sexual activities (BDSM and kink) – it is safe to say that most fetish and BDSM practices transgress them. Such practices become, thereby, specific incidents of kink. Kink is not necessarily BDSM, but BDSM is part of kink. As an overarching concept, therefore, it is useful.

Engaging in BDSM necessitates setting aside conventional, generally understood-as-normative rules of sexual engagement and entering an alternative place in which kink is the norm. While this can be a physical place, it is also, and importantly, a liminal state of being in which the societally proscribed rules and boundaries are suspended. This liminal state becomes a space of possibility (i.e., kink-space), and it functions to enclose, reify, and make possible a wide range of nonnormative behaviors, and in the process reshape their meanings. And it goes farther than that. In specifically pain-related performance, the performers themselves enter a second level of kink-space that imbues upon them a kind of transcendent status, conferred by the presence of pain, an audience that observes,

and bodies that respond. These components make up, in part, what Nick Mulé, elsewhere in this volume, calls “backspaces.” Mulé deploys this concept in pursuit of his examination of male sexual spaces that allow men to experience a liberated sexuality that does not exist for them outside of these liminal spaces, and his attention to the concept of spatial practices is an intriguing counterpart to, and augments, my own discussion here.

While a discussion of the relationship between BDSM and ritual falls outside the scope of this chapter, I utilize a number of ritual-related terms and their related meanings. First, rituals are important to the practice of BDSM in a number of ways within the Scene overall; within scenarios as played out by practitioners they can be found in stylized interactions, expected responses to stimuli, modes of speaking, the choosing of floggers, the donning of leather or latex, the methodical unwrapping or wrapping of ropes, and so on. Examining a particular performance as itself a ritual is a logical step, and the parallels to other rituals are easy to draw. In the specific instance I describe, understanding these ritualistic aspects is vital to the way kink-space is functioning.⁷

2019 – The Performance

For hours the cavernous, dark club in Mesa, Arizona, has seethed with a steady, and steadily shifting, mass of people dressed in variations on a leather-leash-cuff-fishnet theme. Hard industrial dance music has played almost nonstop, broken only by announcements, by the very male-appearing drag queen, of upcoming performances that have included a woman dropping to her knees and rolling around in a carpet of broken glass, lip-synched leather daddies with their pajama-clad daughters and sons, and some burlesque and strip teases. Scattered throughout the room, providing ongoing entertainment when the stage is empty, both men and women have wielded floggers of all kinds on eager volunteers, experienced and newbies alike. Orgasms have happened in the corners, new partners have felt the press of bodies along the rails of the dance floor, and the tension in the room has built throughout the night.

Toward the end of the evening, a scaffolding is erected on the stage in practiced motions by two scantily clad men. They disappear off-stage, replaced by a man and a woman dressed entirely in fishnets and lace who bring out a small table laid with a vial of rubbing alcohol, bandages, and stainless steel hooks. Big ones. The crowd stops dancing, gradually at first and then more quickly, as people notice what is happening on the stage and turn to watch. The music cranks louder. The tension heightens until it feels as if the room might burst into flames.

And then, Maegan Machine appears.⁸ She wears leather shorts and a tiny leather top and is covered from head to toe in tattoos, a tapestry of color and black-work that draws the eye almost as much as do her intense beauty and brilliant red hair. The crowd screams as she hangs her head, shaking it so her hair flies. She shakes her arms and shoulders as if preparing for a fight and takes deep breaths. Then, hyped so high she seems drugged, she sits restlessly on a metal chair on the edge of the stage and continues to shift her weight and shake her arms and head.

The crowd goes quiet. The woman in fishnet approaches her with one of the huge hooks, and a quick and easily missed communication between them occurs. A whisper, a nod. Machine holds up her arm, forearm toward the audience members who are now utterly silent, rapt, letting the scene and the music wash over them. A quick swipe with alcohol and then, without warning, the woman with the hook drives it through Machine's forearm, straining to puncture the skin and exit on the other side. The crowd surges, screams. Machine's arm and entire body shake with pain. Another quick communique, another nod and a swipe, and another hook a few inches from the first is thrust through the skin. And a third. The crowd is breaking up now. A few people leave the area hastily, their faces white.

The process is repeated on Machine's other arm, her quaking visible each time. Her hair hangs over her face, and each time a hook finds its mark she violently shakes her head as if shaking off the pain – or drawing it into her body. The crowd members who have stayed let out a roar with each hook placement, with each piercing of the skin.

Two larger hooks drop from the ceiling, and the man in fishnet goes through the same question-nod-swipe process before he punches the hooks through the skin on Machine's back, one at a time. The crowd seethes anew. Leather ropes are attached to each hook in her arms and, although it does not seem possible, the music becomes more intense. Suddenly, after more vigorous headshaking, she stands and kicks the chair aside, nods off-stage, and – as the crowd loses its collective mind – is jerked hard into the air by the straps attached to the hooks in her back.

She writhes and launches herself toward the crowd; they scream louder, and the entire crowd sways as she swings toward them. Her two co-scene members grab the leather straps attached to her arms and pull on them to swing her back and forth and outward. She fights them – or appears to – and their tug-of-war grows more harsh as they twist her from one side to the other. Her body arcs, pulls in on itself, gyrates in time to the pounding music in an embodiment of both pain and ecstasy as her frenzied movements pull her ever higher and outward over the audience. She swings in ever-larger arcs, and those audience members who have endured the intensity to this point reach for her, seeming to believe that if they can touch her, they can partake even a little in the dark claim she has made to power.

Machine seems oblivious to them; she has entered the second level of kink-space and embodies both pain and power, both submission and dominance. She has become herself liminal, embodying all the potential that state of being holds as she claims the right to her own place within it that outstrips the boundaries of pleasure and pain and sadism and masochism, and lies both outside and internal to us all.

Performance and the Embodiment of Meaning

The above scenario, this scene within the Scene, has a number of important characteristics endemic to the BDSM performance space that not only contribute to the formation of kink-space and all it allows, including an embodiment of power, but also seem to necessitate it.

The first is the concept of performance itself. Many people in the BDSM Scene do not themselves believe they are performing. After all, a lifestyle does not feel like a performance; it is daily routine, habits and rituals of one kind or another. However, according to [Richard Schechner \(2002\)](#),

...our lives are structured according to *repeated* and socially sanctioned modes of behavior [...] [therefore] all human activity could potentially be considered a 'performance', or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. (p. 31, emphasis added)

Repetition here is key. Typically, enacting a scenario does not happen by accident or without ritual. And there are indeed rules within the Scene, though they differ from those in non-kink interactions. Within the overarching framework of BDSM, each scenario might involve different positions, actions, words, toys, tools, or modes of enactment but they play out in ritualized, repeated ways. The behaviors, movements, even the language of BDSM are learned, handed down, the basic moves codified and imbued with relatively stable, understood meanings. They are “a known, organized, and formally transmittable semiotic system of meaning separate from everyday behavior” in which “the actors have consciously mastered a system separate from ordinary behavior” ([Schechner, 2002](#), p. 186). This last notion, and the earlier emphasis on the word *repeated*, forms the basis for conceptualizing BDSM as performance. The repetition of understood actions, the use of recognizable props that convey agreed-upon meanings, and preferred reactions and behaviors all constitute participation in BDSM scenarios. In other words, whether occurring on a stage for the purposes of creating a spectacle or simply entertaining an audience, or in a mixed space in a dungeon (which hosts private, invitation-only, or semi-public scenarios), or in the privacy of one’s own home, BDSM (as do all behaviors that make up our lives) constitutes a performance.⁹ Even so, not having a grounding in performance theory many members of the BDSM community – even professional dominatrices – do not believe they are performing, as noted above.^{10,11}

Using Maegan Machine and her literal, undeniable performance as a focus for analysis negates the necessity of presenting an argument for it *as* performance, and allows a focus on what that performance is *doing*. What it *means*. *How* it means. And what kinds of power dynamics it makes possible.¹² But meaning is not created in a vacuum. As with most performances, an important element that contributes to its meaning and to the way it is understood to participate in, or resist, societal norms is the audience. While in this case audience members are in a sense participating – vocally, sensually, and in action as they reach for her as she swings – the boundary between performer and audience members is relatively clear. They are not performing in the specific ritual performance but rather are contributing to its meaning, its significance.

Their collective reaction is akin to that of observers of (or participants in) various types of rituals during which an appointed representative of a group

ascends, or descends, into trance and vision, carrying with them the soul of the larger group and returning with knowledge or some kind of divinity that the gathered group desires to partake in, touch, or be touched by. David Cole, discussing the similarities between the theatrical event and ritual, and drawing on Victor Turner's concepts of ritual, suggests that a "group – any kind of group – trends toward singleness of response" (Cole, 1975, p. 69). Cole's work involves distinct parallels between the theater and shamanistic ritual, and while drawing on this idea is potentially problematic and will be limited, it is true that, in this case, the similarities are uncanny; Maegan Machine transcends, becomes other, and the audience surges toward her, toward participation in the sublime she has embodied for them. They cannot travel with her to her state of transcendence but they can await her return and revel in her embodiment of the thinning boundary between sadism and masochism, dominant and submissive, and pleasure and pain.

In this particular performance, the audience members are immediate beneficiaries of the performative nature of her actions.¹³ As she embodies and, in the process, dissipates the tension between pleasure and pain, she bridges the distance between her body and those of the onlookers as her performance brings forth that which it enacts: kink-space. Here, these dichotomies no longer exist as oppositions but as nodes or points of possibility in a nonpolarizing web. Audience members, for as long as they are in the same space as her performing body, share in this web. Even submission and dominance cease to signify what they do in the outside, normative culture and, importantly, how they are practiced within BDSM frameworks as well. Maegan Machine embodies both/all poles as she submits to the pain she inflicts upon herself, and these concepts have become an intricate blend that collapses all the boundaries between them.

The second component is that of liminality. Meaning "betwixt and between" and "occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold" (Lexico, n.d.), the word can refer to structures, events, people, or states of mind. Descended from the word *limen* in Latin (meaning threshold or sill) and likely related to *limus* (meaning transverse), liminality is essential to the event noted above and its resultant meanings and potential. Liminal spaces are transformational, productive spaces, highly receptive to the nonnormative, and generative of new identities. They create possibility as they exist outside the everyday world. Often this characteristic of outsider is metaphorical, or occurs only during ritual or performance of some kind; other times the outsider status is literal, as when a structure – an enclosure of space – sits outside the boundaries of the social. Stages are often set in such outside places.

Brook (2008) tells us that most of the world's stages are empty spaces, and Schechner (2002) notes that "an empty theater space is liminal, open to all kinds of possibilities" (p. 67).¹⁴ The club in which the event described above took place is one such liminal structure. It is set off the road in an otherwise little-visited area of Mesa, Arizona. As with many of the original trash cinemas of the 1970s and 1980s, it is deliberately outside the mainstream in location, decor, and acceptability, recursive in meaning in that in order to visit, one needs to make a deliberate choice to go outside the norm, leave everyday life, and expend some