IN THE HABIT OF BEING KINKY: PRACTICE AND RESISTANCE
IN A BDSM COMMUNITY, TEXAS, USA

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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“Kinky” is a stigmatized identity in wider American culture. People in kinky communities renegotiate their relationships to themselves and others to incorporate their desires into a positive identity. People take advantage of bodily practices to modify their habitus, or way of being in the world. From an outside perspective, it may appear as if sex and violence are the overwhelming impetuses for the community. I argue these are only two in a suite of corporeal methodologies used to resist hegemonic ideals of gender, age, partner choice, and body size. Intense pleasure and intense pain (physical or mental) may result in a moment of crisis wherein modification of habitus is more possible than during other times. Parallels can be drawn to rites of passage, in which a person shifts from one status to another through the means of a liminal period. In the kinky community, violence and sex create liminal spaces without the subsequent immediate change in status. Over time liminality becomes its own practice through which people modify their identities and relationships to reflect better their perceived ideals.

One result of this modification of the self through practice is a gender system that defies binary categorization. Dominance and submissiveness, as character traits, are disarticulated from masculinity and femininity, allowing for novel combinations not recognized by wider American
culture. Masculinity and femininity are unmoored from the physical body. Gender becomes a performance, varying by context and audience. Additionally, a “switch” identity exemplifies the performative nature of gender by allowing individuals access to multiple gendered identities concurrently.

This work contributes to the growing literature on how sexuality interacts with identity, focusing on gendered experiences in a community in “Cactus,” Texas. People participate in BDSM (bondage/discipline/dominant/submissive/sadism/masochism) activities and engage in other social activities that support membership in a community that resists (and accommodates) hegemonic ideals through modifying bodily practices. The possibilities and limitations of embodied resistance have implications for an anthropology of power.
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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

I began working with the kinky community in Texas in August of 2009. For the purposes of this study, the term “kinky” refers to a set of physical and relational practices based on a consensual unequal distribution of power in a sexual setting. I worked primarily in Cactus\(^1\), a relatively large metropolis experiencing rapid growth. I wrapped up my fieldwork twenty months later. I found the community through serendipity. I knew I wanted to research sexuality in the urban United States, but all my efforts had been stymied, in one fashion or another. So I had begun examining the different retailers of adult goods, a polite way of saying purveyors of sexual items. There were four distinct retailers just minutes from my house. I should have known that Cactus had a sexier side. At one of the retailers, a woman-owned boutique specializing in fetish wear and bondage equipment, I asked the function of an arcane looking piece of equipment. It was a mouth spreader, a kind of metallic gag. The tattooed woman behind the counter suggested I might want to look up Cindy for more information on kinky sex in Cactus. After I finished my survey of the other three stores near me, I went home to look up Cindy. I tried every spelling and word combination I could think of in Google. I found a number of escorts in the local area with the name Cindi or Sindee or Cindy, but no professional dominatrices or other sages of kink. Later that month, I found an ad at another adult store for a class on erotic bondage sponsored by CND (The Collective of unNamed Desires), pronounced CiNDy. I had found my first real lead to the kinky\(^2\) community.

Fortuitously, CND was holding a munch that weekend. After perusing their website, I learned that they held monthly social meetings called munches in public venues on the second Saturday of the month. The website consisted of the club’s party rules, bylaws, and general
information. The location of the munch occasionally changed, but the time and date always stayed the same. At six o’clock on a warm August afternoon, I showed up at a local café, looking for people in latex or with collars. No one fit my imagination, but there was a collection of twenty-five or so people gathered in the private dining room. As soon as I walked in, looking confused, a man immediately asked if I was looking for CND. When I said yes, he hugged me and told me I was in the right place. I later learned that although people espouse the idea that one should not touch another person without explicit permission, including casual hugs and kisses, this often did not apply to women, especially those perceived as submissive. I was introduced to several people, including the current president of CND. I was also given a membership card. This is of note because parties are “members-only” affairs in order to avoid some of the possible legal consequences of holding a public party that involves nudity and sexual activity, even though, in this case, there was no sex by the strict legal definition. In order to obtain membership, one need only attend one munch. After that, one is given directions to the hidden location of the party. Admission is twenty dollars. I was struck by the conversational tactics. No one inquired about what line of work I was in, but immediately wanted to know what I was into. Since I was not sure how to answer that question, I explained I was new to the scene. This attracted many of the male dominants in the room, interested in the phenomenon known as “fresh meat.” Overall, it was amicable, but I could tell I had perhaps triggered something I had not expected. Once I realized that I had become a possible partner in the eyes of those present, I tried explaining that I was married, a claim that held little weight since I had come to the munch alone. From this experience, I learned to bring a partner with me during many of my initial meetings. After I was established in the community, I was able to attend social functions by myself without wading through proposals. I still attended parties with a partner, usually my
husband, Jordan. The exception to this was the Bodice Ripper Book Club, a women-only group that I will discuss in greater detail below.

Having experienced my first CND munch, I decided to attend a party. A couple of weeks after the munch, another group, LUST (Leather University of Sadomasochism, Texas), was hosting a party. After several failed attempts to purchase tickets, I finally set up a meeting the day before the big night in the parking lot of a drug store. It was not that the dealings were secret; it just did not work out logistically as I kept getting lost in an unfamiliar city while trying to get to the bars where the socials were being held. Since it was my first party, I got the virgin price and after the woman checked my id, she traded me two tickets for twenty dollars. LUST does not take money at the door for parties. This serves a dual purpose – the club avoids the appearance of prostitution and it allows attendees to be vetted somewhat. It is the local understanding that if money changes hands and there is sex (defined as any type of penetration), everyone in attendance could be charged with prostitution. Concerns with local law enforcement were often voiced by participants. The community is relatively small, numbering about sixty or seventy core members. Parties varied in size. Some private parties would consist of twelve people, while the larger umbrella groups would draw up to two hundred people. On a social networking site, the local umbrella groups have between 700-800 members. Newcomers were greeted enthusiastically, but there was always some suspicion about their motivations until they were accepted by the community. The tickets were printed on a sheet of paper with directions to “The House” on one side and party etiquette on the other. I wondered about the rules. I discuss rules in Chapter Nine (Hegemony). Parties are held on the fifth Saturday of the month and some special occasions, like Halloween and New Year’s Eve.
The night of the party, my husband, one of my more adventurous friends and I followed the convoluted directions through two small towns and into the country. The poorly paved roads were surrounded by ranch land. Getting there was part of the adventure. It took us just over an hour to find The House. The House was a privately owned two-story house that had been converted to a permanent dungeon by the LUST members through community labor. This party was the inaugural public offering. We parked down the lane and began the trek through the property to The House itself. The cars were nicer than I expected. Some had company logos. No one was trying to disguise their vehicle or acting otherwise furtive. We passed the porch, where many community members visit with each other, to the table where tickets were being checked. The woman I had made contact with, who I later learned was the slave of the Headmistress of LUST, took my ticket and offered to take us on a tour. She was a vivacious woman in her late thirties. She had long blonde hair and was heavyset by conventional US standards. She was also wearing a filmy negligée over a lace bra and panty set and a pair of smart heels. First stop, the kitchen, where people had brought food for the party. It was typical potluck style food, with an emphasis on desserts. Nothing looked gourmet. There were signs in the kitchen with admonishments to “clean up after yourself.” I was reminded of the signs posted in office break rooms or a church kitchen.

Because the minimum age for the party was 18, but the legal drinking age was 21, there was ostensibly no alcohol allowed at the party. Later that night, we met a man reeking of alcohol and very tipsy. He seemed to be an isolated example, and it was early in the morning after most people had left. At LUST parties, people generally abided by the no alcohol rule. Those who did not follow this rule were discrete about their drinking. Next to the kitchen was a sitting room full of overstuffed chairs and couches. Penelope⁴, our guide, explained there is no playing
(a term that encompasses many different types of kinky activity, including physical and mental interactions) in the front room. This served several purposes. It created a physical barrier between anyone coming in and the players. This afforded the players a sort of privacy. It was also a space for people to take a break from the intensity of play. Designated play-free areas were demarcated at every party I attended. They usually centered around the food area. Despite, or perhaps because of, the participants’ familiarity with the more earthly aspects of the body, community food and play were held separate. This room was also often used for recovery after play. Because of the limited play spaces, once a scene (a discrete unit formal play) is done, the participants are expected to relocate to another area. There is a lot of touching and holding that takes place in the front area. Within a scene, the person directing the activity is known as the top, while the person to whom things are being done is called the bottom. These designations are based on activities and may not always correlate with how (or whether) a person identifies on the dominant/submissive spectrum.

The front areas of The House were painted in black and red, two prominent colors found across the scene in décor and attire. The first floor bathroom was also a play-free zone. For those desiring the use of a bathroom in their scene, the upstairs bathroom was designated as a possible play space. In the first floor bathroom, there was a vanity. Penelope pointed this feature out to us, explaining that many of the cross-dressers preferred to get ready at The House, rather than driving through the back roads in full drag. Next to the bathroom was a walk in closet that had been converted into a toy holding area. People often attended parties with their toys in bags. These ranged from backpacks to lunch kits to golf bags. Some people had several bags. Rather than carrying their gear with them, most people left their bags in this area. Although there was an injunction against touching other people’s possessions, it was acceptable
to move bags around in search of one’s own. This was the only time I witnessed unauthorized touching of items and it was generally done in a respectful manner. I am not sure what would happen to someone found rummaging in someone else’s bag, but at the least I expect that the offender would be reprimanded. If it was a person new to the community, the individual might be ejected from the party.

Once we waded through the non-play zones, we arrived at the first of the play rooms. The most notable feature of this room was the suspension points anchored into a beam in the ceiling, Penelope explained that these eye-hooks were rated to support three hundred pounds. Later that night, we would see a full suspension. This is a form of bondage where the person being tied up is completely suspended in the air. Past the suspension room was a room full of St. Andrew’s crosses. These were large X shaped frames braced against the walls. A bottom’s hands could be attached to the top of the cross with a variety of restraints, including leather cuffs, rope, or chain. Alternatively, the bottom could be forced to hold their hands on the cross. A bottom’s feet are usually spread along the lower bars of the cross. Restraints might also be used here, but not as often. Bottoms could be positioned to face the cross or to face the top. On this night, all of the crosses were being used, predominantly for flogging or paddling.

At this point, let me say that the play areas are incredibly well lit. I was expecting The House to be more like a dungeon as I had seen it in popular culture, dimly lit with candles and vibrating with loud techno music. Instead, there were high wattage light bulbs and occasionally someone would have their own sound system. I do not think it was ever quiet, since the slapping of flesh was punctuated by screams, laughter, and the general buzz of conversation. Penelope explained that these are safety features. Loud music would make it more difficult to communicate. Dim lighting would make it more difficult to see exactly what is happening.
Unattended candles were a fire hazard. When people in the scene used open flame, it was with great deliberation and usually not for the sole purpose of illumination. At this point in the tour, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by nakedness and violence. Looking back, the activities I saw were relatively tame.

The House was set on an acre of property away from prying eyes. This allowed for an outdoor play space. Along the wrap-around porch were a number of play stations, including several spanking benches and bondage frames. In the middle of the yard was a kennel (intended for human pets) and a St. Andrew’s cross. The cross was there for people who used single tailed whips. Wielding these whips requires a large amount of space. Past this equipment was a hot tub. It surprised me, but I did not see the hot tub used very often.

Returning to the interior of The House, we climbed the stairs. At the top was a jail cell. This converted closet was covered in black paint and dashes of fluorescent paint. The walls were lit by a black light. The bars of the cell glowed, and there was a space for a padlock. When we passed it, a woman was locked in there, hands bound and ball gag in mouth. People were poking her with a long baton and laughing as she tried to move away. It sounds horrid, but it was obvious that all the participants were enjoying themselves, including the woman in the cage. We passed the bathroom that could be used for play. Penelope intimated that this was for water sports (play involving urine) but I did not see the bathroom being used for play in my time there. Of course, this was one of two rooms with a door, so perhaps I just did not see it. Next to the bathroom was the fire room. Penelope made it a point to show us the fire extinguishers. The fire room had a couple of massage tables set up in it with a table along the middle. No one was actually on fire when we passed by the first time. Everything seemed pretty sedate. We passed another play room with equipment, spanking benches and one St. Andrew’s cross. At this point I
was feeling rather stunned. Finally, we arrived at the medical room. The crowning glory of the medical room was an old gynecology table, complete with stirrups. Up until this point, I had witnessed people being hit, both with fists and floggers, people restrained and naked, and even a woman having wax poured on her. There were screams and moans. I thought I was holding it together pretty well when Penelope turned to us and said brightly, “This is Jennifer – she enjoys being fisted.” The actions in the medical room clearly demonstrated that this was the case. What really blew my mind was how casual Penelope was about making this comment. Later on, recalling my first experiences with her, she did not even remember saying that. After nodding knowingly and hoping my eyes were not too round in disbelief, I made a beeline back to the kitchen and the less stimulating play-free zones. Apparently, this reaction was not uncommon for newcomers and no one seemed put off by my state.

Looking back on that party, I am most impressed with how much people seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was the normal party chatter and obviously many people knew one another. People would stroll about The House and check out the scenes that were going on or wait for a particular piece of equipment to be free. Some particularly intense or spectacular scenes gathered an audience, during which people spoke in whispers and gave the players a lot of space. In the play-free zones and outside, people were less inhibited about loud conversations, but if there was a particularly good scream, everyone would pause and heads would swivel toward the source and there would be general laughter and approving comments. The regulars could recognize players by their screams. Everyone appreciated a vocal display. Part of the draw of playing in a public play space is the ability to make as much noise as you want.

The people there were predominantly white, middle-aged folk. There were very few people who fit the mold for mainstream, contemporary American beauty. Both the women and
the men tended toward the heavy side. On my initial visit, I did not see anyone tricked out in fetish gear. Prior to my attendance, I had envisioned latex body suits, leather corsets, spiked heels. I saw all of these at later dates, but fetish wear was never the attire of the majority. The most common piece of apparel was the leather vest, an item I learned later that has particular importance, stemming from its position in the leather lifestyle. And boots. There were many highly polished leather boots, all black. The kinky community draws many of its symbols and much of its structure from the gay male leather scene, which is substantively different from the predominantly heterosexual kink scene.

Despite the fact that my fieldsite was in an urban American setting, my introduction to the kinky community had all the hallmarks of an anthropological entrance into the field. It was at turns shocking and fascinating. I was profoundly uncomfortable at times and yet desired to learn more about this way of experiencing the world. Everywhere I turned, I saw potential applications of theoretical arguments. It took a while for that initial rush of infatuation to subside and I was able to relate to people as community members rather than practitioners of some exotic art form.

**Thesis**

In some ways, this is a very traditional ethnography focused on a distinct subculture in a current American metropolis. I have collected data along anthropological themes such as identity, ritual, social cohesion, and material culture. In other ways, this ethnography is exceptional in that the subject matter is read as sexual. In the United States, while sexuality is something that everyone has, it is not usually the overt reason for creating and maintaining a community. Although I feel as if studying sexuality should be no more or less meaningful than studying kinship or subsistence strategies, surprisingly, the most powerful insights I have
developed in the course of this work are connected to the ways in which people practice their identities. Many of my conclusions in this work about gender are based on my work with the larger heterosexual kinky community as contrasted with my experiences in the Bodice Ripper Book Club, the women-only club. The conclusions about sexuality are more evenly applicable, although working with both groups highlighted tensions that may not otherwise have been obvious.

This work demonstrates that members of the kinky community resist hegemonic ideals of gender and sexuality by modifying their habitus through changing embodied practices, specifically reinforced in liminal moments of crisis (painful and pleasurable). I use the concepts of performativity (Butler 1990; Hennen 2004) combined with practice theory (Bourdieu 1977) to illustrate the ways in which identity is collectively, intentionally constructed in a consciously counterhegemonic enterprise. From performativity, I draw on the focus on the audience as integral to the performance while I examine construction of the self in practice theory.

Social constructivists have long argued that identity is constructed through practice. The kinky community applies this belief to their own identities. They reject the model that identity is static. Many people believe that they have been prevented from developing their true identities, whether that is viewed in light of gender, sexuality, partner choice, or a number of other variables. They believe society has socialized them away from their essential identity through repression and denigration of desires. They have decided to reprogram themselves to better align their perceptions and experiences with their value system.

This goal may seem idealistic, but it makes sense in light of Butler’s construction of gender as performance, where “performativity is not singular act, but a repetition and a ritual,
which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 1990:118). By understanding identity as based on performance, members of the kinky community have made the theoretical leap that by changing the performance, one may reshape the identity. Origins of practices are difficult to locate, but people in the kinky community know that the moments of crisis created by intense sensation and pleasure (orgasm) have the potential to reframe experiences. This is not a singular occurrence but happens with regularity in similar contexts, modifying the habitus around particular characteristics, especially gender and sexuality.

Bourdieu defines habitus as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained, dialectically produced by those results…” (1977:82-83, emphasis in original). Habitus is formed through the practices of a group, which is informed by ideology but does not always rationally correspond to it. Bourdieu notes, “The habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history. The system of dispositions – a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities… - is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis” (1977:82). Bourdieu stresses the ways in which habitus is below conscious thought as an embodied system that at once shapes and is shaped by culture. In this system,
change is not directed through intention. Introducing Butler’s notion of performativity allows members of the community to critically engage with their habitus by mediating performance through practice.

The kinky community is not anyone’s “natural” community in that people do not grow up in the community. People only become members as adults and therefore the embodiment of the ideology of the community is more explicit than the socialization of children. People also tend to join the community to reimagine their relationships to other people and to their own identity. The intention is to create a new habitus. Since habitus includes all experiences, people cannot start from scratch but must rather modify their existing habitus. This reflexive engagement with the purpose of changing identification may at times seem inorganic but is the logical outcome of a belief in the constructed nature of identity. If it is already constructed, it may be reconstructed. This is not to say that everyone on a conscious level joins the kinky community to reconstruct their identities, but rather this experience has to be situated as part of a larger cultural belief in the ability to modify the self, as evidenced by the proliferation of self-help books and mental health therapists. Part of what sets this self-modification process apart from other enterprises is the way in which it is embodied through play and sex. Noble intentions or not, people continue to be in the community because it is satisfying and even fun.

The question in this project of self-modification revolves around the location of agency. Honkasalo notes, “Agency is something that does not go on in isolation but takes place in a society, in a cultural context where there are already meaningful and intelligible modes of holding on to a world, having a grip on it within social interactions” (2009:58). In her understanding, agency is a way of making meaning that allows one to hold onto the world. Acting as agents, people have the ability to resist and accommodate culture through their practice
and identity. Mageo and Knaupft explain, “Forms of agency are intimately bound-up with the human capacity to innovate upon if not to reimagine existing schemata; these innovations and reimaginings are integral to the activity of self-making” (2002:8). Agency means that people actively engage with cultural forms to create meaning. This “human capacity to innovate” is an important locus of change. In anthropology, it is not enough to explain how people fit in their world. Culture is not static; it is important to account for processes of change. The method I am most comfortable with recognizes individual actors as the movers of culture. However, the system cannot be changed with only intention. In this, I find Foucault’s notion of resistance to hegemonic discourse useful (1986) to explain how even individuals acting as agents cannot reshape culture out of whole cloth.

To counter-balance the futility of resistance that may result from an extreme reading of Foucault, I find the ways in which people apply Bourdieu’s practice theory useful in this community. Moore and Sanders have critiqued Bourdieu, noting, “An emphasis on practical knowledge may question our analytic reliance on language and meaning, and interrogate what we might mean by the term ‘belief,’ but it does not solve the problem of the intentional actor. If body movement, the experience of an embodied self and practical knowledge of the world, then what scope is there for individual creativity, for innovation or social change? Actors do not slavishly follow the rules of their embodied cultural worlds any more than their actions are directly determined by their conceptual models of the world. Strong versions of this thesis come perilously close to stating that a change in environment is necessary before change or innovation in embodied understandings are possible” (2006:12). In hexis, Bourdieu (1977) outlines how a person may resist external definition through the body. The kinky community may actually lend strength to the strong version of this thesis due to the fact that many of the changes in identity
stem from changing bodily practices. Practice theory does not adequately account for where the impetus of change begins, although people in the kinky community have taken the methodology for change to heart.

The question then arises, how did this community strike upon using the body as a means of renegotiate meaning? Moore and Sanders state, “New ideas about bodies may arise and be driven by emerging and/or changing sets of values. But once these ideas enter public discourse, become part of our lived world and our habits, and pass into the way we think of ourselves as embodied individuals, they are naturalized and fall out of conscious reflection” (2006:13). At this moment, new ideas (or at least new for this generation) about the body are emerging. This is a novel moment in the popular revitalization of the body as a site of knowledge in reaction to dislocated experience in shape of mass communications, commodification, and virtual relationships. Just like every generation of American youth believe they are the ones who invented sex, there is a periodic surge in interest in the body as a way of being in the world as opposed to externally focused experience facilitated through media. I hesitate to sound like people now considered passé who warned against the dangers of books, the radio, the television, and most recently, the computer. I believe the tension between embodied and virtual external experiences functions as a dialectic with generative power rather than better/worse dichotomy. In this community at this particular moment in time, practice is shifting and taking with it identity through self-modification.

For me, one of the interesting results of this modification of identity through practice in the kinky community is the disarticulation of dominance from masculinity and of submissiveness from femininity. In many ways, the phenomena shake out much as one would expect in traditional American culture, where dominance occurs with masculinity and submissiveness with
femininity. However, in the kinky community they are not synonymous. Novel combinations are available to members of the community in the form of feminine dominance and masculine submissiveness. Additionally, these gendered performances do not always rely on the anatomical body as a basis, so it is possible for a female-bodied person to be a masculine dominant. People are able to embody these gendered identities (as complexes of masculine/dominant, masculine/submissive, feminine/dominant, feminine/submissive) through performance. Particularly in the beginning of the adoption of a new gender, a person must practice the performance. The kinky community creates a safe space for people to play with the possibilities and nurture desired identities rather than ascribed ones.

People generally did not make a transition immediately. This was supported by the fact that people new to the community were in a neophyte stage where gender was fluid and people were expected to experiment with different types of performances. People might intend to be one gender or another, but were not able to embody it fully. On the surface, they still needed practice in the bodily expressions of that gender, the look, the movement, the vocalization. Moreover, they needed experience with what the world looked like from this new perspective. In play, experiencing intense sensation or creating it for others, people were able to experience power or powerlessness. In sex, people expressed gendered desire and had their own desirability affirmed. Both of these experiences could lead to communitas, strengthening the bonds in the community. In the beginning, practice was a fragile thing that was nurtured in the kinky community through the supportive audience. Over time, as people gained confidence in their new identity, they were able to transpose the lessons learned in a kinky context onto other areas of their lives. Gender relied on context. People performed their gendered identity differently in different settings, depending on the audience and the goal of the interaction. In the kinky
community, this was especially obvious when people met in a vanilla setting devoid of the physical cues of a party. Dominance and submissiveness were dialed back to a more neutral display, as were the more extreme forms of masculinity and femininity.

A more radical result of the belief in gender as performance was the “switch” identity, where a person may switch through any of the possible gender presentations without transition depending on the relationship or the situation. A female-bodied person might identify as a masculine submissive in one relationship while simultaneously identifying as a feminine dominant in another. There was no gendered essence, rather only the performance and the relationship. One of the ways to switch identities was to disrupt everyday experiences through intense sensations or psychological predicaments. With practice, people may embody the habitus of a different gender without the need for the mediating steps of play or sex, switching between genders relatively easily.

Intention cannot be relied upon to explain many cultural phenomena. Ideology often obscures the practical effects of unequal distribution of power. However, by locating the nexus of change in practice, people are attempting to reimagine identity by changing their behaviors. Although people use the discourse of the “natural” to explain their impetus toward a kinky identity, the fundamental belief is that identity is protean and responds to self-modification. This may be more radical because members of the kinky community use embodied practices that create regular moments of crisis in the form of intense sensation and pleasure to reformulate relationships to the self and others.
Methods

This study relied heavily on the classical anthropological methods of participant-observation, informal interviews, and formal interviews. I attended monthly munches or socials for three umbrella groups, including CND, LUST, and Futura (the kinky umbrella group for people 18-35). I also attended monthly meetings for a women-only leather club (The Bodice Ripper Book Club - BRBC) and a submissive support group. On the fourth Sunday of the month, I attended a specialty bondage group that was part teaching seminar, part play party. Once a month, LUST held demonstrations or lectures at the HIV outreach center. CND held parties on odd numbered months and LUST parties, as mentioned above, occurred every fifth Saturday. Futura held parties less frequently. BRBC held demonstrations on odd numbered months and parties on even numbered months. I went to various pool nights and kinky coffee. I went to parties hosted by other clubs and attended a fundraiser. It is worth noting that I located many of the groups I participated in by a mix of word of mouth and online listings. These particular groups had many online manifestations, including original websites, Yahoo groups, and a national social networking site.

After much discussion with my advisor, I decided to limit my participation to hanging out, helping out when I could, and bottoming (being the person receiving sensations in a scene). Ethically, it would be problematic to act as a top and put myself in the position to harm others in the course of my research. I often helped set up for parties or clean up afterwards. I discuss my choice to act as a bottom in the chapter on ethnographic positioning. From the beginning, I decided not to engage in any romantic or sexual behavior with anyone in the community. This may seem self-explanatory in a traditional fieldwork setting, or at least not part of a researcher’s acknowledged principles, but everyone, regardless of relationship status, was potentially a play partner in the kinky scene. It was also up for renegotiation. As people grew close, it was
expected that they would probably play together. After an initial round of polite demurrals, people I got close to would occasionally check back to see if I had changed my mind. In some cases, this decision created some distance between us. Part of what shows membership in the community is the willingness to play in public. I hesitated to play in public in the beginning of my fieldwork, unsure of what messages I would project and unclear on how to choose partners. Although play was a fundamental building block of the community, I am satisfied that I waited until I had a better understanding of the community before diving in.

One watershed moment came after I had been involved in the community about four months. The Headmistress of LUST agreed to an interview. She and her slave talked to me for hours at The House. Afterwards, they allowed me to watch them play in a very intimate way. After this took place, it was as if I had played in public. People began accepting my presence. There were still occasional inquiries about whether I wanted to play, but they were more in the vein of a friendly request rather than pressuring me to show that I had a true interest in the community. People are very concerned with “tourists,” people who only come to parties to watch and do not participate fully in the community.

During the course of my acquaintance with the community and observing, I talked to scores of people informally about what drew them to the scene or the lifestyle, what kind of play they engaged in, where they got their toys from, who they were in a relationship with, and what the philosophies of the different groups were. We also swapped recipes for desserts, talked about the local football team, and had absolutely mundane conversations about the weather. Most people knew I was there doing research. When attending parties, I agreed not to report on specific people or scenes unless I had explicit permission. For this reason, many of the scenes I talk about are general in nature. Although every scene is unique, given the type of play and the
people involved, there are themes that run throughout them that deserve discussion. Because of the private and sensitive nature of the interaction, of course I am using pseudonyms for all people, organizations, and locations, to protect the identities of the people with whom I worked.

The backbone of this study is the in-depth interviews conducted with twenty-two members of the community. I used a semi-structured interview schedule covering identity, ideology, community, and technology. Interviews lasted between one and three hours. I interviewed fifteen women, seven men, and one transwoman (a woman who is biologically male but identifies as female). On equal footing with gender is how one describes oneself in the scene. Although there are a number of permutations on this dynamic, one can broadly classify people into three groups: top, bottom, or switch. A top is a person who performs the active role in a scene or is the dominant partner in a relationship. A bottom receives the action or is the submissive partner in a relationship. A switch may be in either position, depending on the scene or relationship. This is discussed more fully in Chapter Six on gender. I interviewed eight tops, six bottoms, and eight switches.

I made initial contact with the community through public munches and other social events. I recruited people to participate through a convenience sample. Interviews took place at coffee shops, in people’s homes, at parties, on road trips, and in one case, over the phone. The setting was dictated by the person I was interviewing. I transcribed the interviews and coded them using Atlas-TI. Using grounded theory analysis, I identified the categories of analysis for my chapters. Themes that emerged from coding focused on play, material culture, gender, and sex.
Existing Literature on Kinky Communities and Sadomasochism

One of my struggles with performing this work is that there has not been much literature specifically on kinky communities or sadomasochism. I believe this is in part because the topic is taboo. The development of queer theory in the 1990s has created a framework by which to understand sexual topics in context without pathologizing minority sexual practices. Prior to that, anthropologists have examined sexual behaviors as part of the array of cultural practices. I return to that literature in Chapter Seven (Sex). For the purposes of the introduction, I will give a brief sketch of the existing literature in academic writing, that generated by the kinky community, and in popular literature.

As I alluded to earlier, the terminology used to refer to this phenomenon varies by time and location. In Cactus, in the groups I worked with, the term kinky was used as a catchall word to refer to most alternative sexual practices. I define the term kinky more fully below, but I bring this up now to point out that not all of the literature uses the same terms. Kinky, outside of Cactus, usually refers to sex (the act) and not as a marker for identity. In gay and lesbian leather groups, the terminology may be sadomasochism or s/m. This draws the focus toward the giving and receiving of pain or intense sensation rather than sex. In a wider heterosexual community, the term BDSM (Bondage/Discipline/Dominant/Submissive/Sado/Masochist) is used. The stress here is placed on the Dominant/submissive relationship. Sex, intense sensation, and Dominant/submissive dynamics are found in all of these different shades of communities in varying degrees. Without knowing the distinctions between the terms, my initial literature search was a challenge. In the review below, I use the terms used in the literature, but that will vacillate between kinky, s/m, and BDSM.

Academically, there are several disciplines that address issues of kinkiness and sadomasochism, including literature, criminology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. A
direct line can be drawn from literary roots to current psychological studies, which maintain a
discourse of deviance and pathology. In criminal justice literature, there is a focus on sexual
sadism as an explanation for violent crime. Along the lines of Foucault (1986), psychological
and criminal definitions of sadomasochism may be viewed as methods of social control over
sexual behaviors and ways to police non-normative identities. Other scientific studies view
sadomasochism as a risk category and analyze it as an aspect of public health, especially in the
light of HIV/AIDS. Some recent studies approach sadomasochism holistically and examine it as
a social phenomenon. Most of the academic literature ignores entirely the copious amounts of
literature produced by sadomasochists for sadomasochists, from musings on the nature of
existence to practical how-to guides. Finally, articles in popular media, usually focused on
sensational and salacious details, also inform the state of knowledge on sadomasochism.

Many times, this literature does not overlap, each occurring as if in a vacuum, content to
trace the words back to Marquis de Sade and von Sacher Masoch (which I will do as well,
shortly) and then veer off on their own agenda. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual and the
International Classification of Diseases have institutionalized sadomasochism and other
paraphilias as disorders, but have also served to galvanize a protest against the classification of
sadomasochism as an illness. As reflected in the DSM’s classification, the individual is seen
only in a clinical sense, out of context with other aspects of their lives. Theoretically,
sadomasochism has served as a lightning rod for feminist debate. It was seen variously as a
source of oppression or as a source of identity. In the feminist critique of sadomasochism in the
1970s and 1980s, it became an abstract theoretical concept to be railed against or a political
stance. The individual was lost. Recently, researchers have begun studying sadomasochism as a
social phenomenon, examining it in context with other social phenomena such as sexuality, identity, community and stigma.

It is estimated that roughly ten percent of the US population engages in s/m (sadomasochism) behavior. Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinpatz base this number on their own research experience (2006), while Fawna Stockwell (2010) and Samuel and Cynthia Janus (1994) base this estimate on responses given during large surveys on diverse sexual interests. This ten percent figure assesses behaviors, including incidental and occasional behaviors, and does not address the number of people who overtly identify as practitioners of s/m, which in all likelihood is much smaller. Regardless, it is significant that a portion of the population uses concepts like s/m to relate to their sexuality and a further examination of what is meant by s/m (and by extension, kinky) in popular and academic literature. This is not a completely new phenomenon, as Kinsey noted that twelve percent of women and twenty-two percent of men had an erotic response to an s/m story (Institute for Sex Research and Kinsey 1953).

Sadomasochism was first defined as a pathological sexual disorder by psychiatrists. Sadism is a term derived from the name of Donatien-Alphonse-Francois, Marquis (alternatively styled Comte) de Sade (1740-1814), who wrote graphically about sexual cruelty and domination (Weinberg 2006). Krafft-Ebing coined the word masochism, which is derived from the name of the writer Leopold Ritter von Sacher Masoch (1836-1905). Masoch wrote about “his personal erotic preoccupation with pain, humiliation, and submission” (Weinberg 2006:18). Freud saw sadism and masochism as opposite extremes of a continuum of aggressive sexual behaviors directed toward others or the self and the two can often be found in the same person (1938).
Sexual sadism and sexual masochism remain classified as paraphilias, or sexual disorders, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Sexual sadism is defined as

A. Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving acts (real, not simulated) in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the person.

B. The person has acted on these sexual urges with a non-consenting person, or the sexual urges or fantasies cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty. (American Psychiatric Association 2000)

Some have argued that sadism or masochism as a diagnosis pathologizes a minority sexual practice that may in fact be normal (Califia 2000; Kleinplatz 2006; Kolmes, Stock, and Moser 2006). In a review of the current literature on sadomasochism and the DSM, Richard Krueger argues that the diagnosis for sexual sadism is only applied forensically in criminal cases and not in common practice. For this reason, he believes that the diagnosis is not used to stigmatize individuals who engage in alternative sexual practices. He argues that the diagnosis should be retained in the new edition of the DSM, to be published in 2013 (Krueger 2010). He fails to highlight the significance of “non-consenting person” in this definition, which was a change from the previous edition. Consent is a theme returned to often by people who practice and study sadomasochism.

In a subsequent article, Krueger (2010) reviews the literature on sexual masochism and the DSM. The definition of sexual masochism, according to the DSM IV-TR, is
A. Over a period of 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer

B. The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association 2000)

Citing a 1972 study, Krueger states that fifty fatalities a year result from sexual asphyxiation. He writes, “Studies of this practice indicate that nearly all individuals fantasize about masochistic scenarios as they engage in it” (2010a:352). He notes that a sexual masochism diagnosis is of much less use forensically than that of sexual sadism but offers some interesting possibilities for research and argues that sexual sadism or masochism should therefore be retained in the next edition of the DSM (2010). Some of the criticisms leveled against a psychiatric diagnosis of sexual sadism or sexual masochism include the subjective nature of the criteria employed in diagnosis, cv. (Doren and Elwood 2009), the fact that much of the diagnosis is based on experience with forensic populations, and the stigmatization of the individual (The Associated Press 2008; Klein and Moser 2006; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Krueger 2010; Tallent 1977; National Coalition for Sexual Freedom 2011).

American medicine is not the only institution which has a history defining s/m as a disorder. The International Classifications of Diseases (ICD-10) is used by the World Health Organization to classify and diagnose disease. ICD-10 recognizes Fetishism (F65.0), Fetishistic Transvestism (F65.1), and Sadomasochism (F65.5) as paraphilias or perversions (Reiersøl and Skeid 2006). Sweden recently struck down the same language from its national list of diseases
and disorders, citing the fact that “labeling those aspects of sexual behavior and gender identity as disorders can add to prejudices in society” (The Associated Press 2008:1).

In criminal justice, the focus is on deviance and pathology. Sexual sadism is used to explain some assaults, rapes, and homicides (Myers et al. 2010; Richards and Jackson 2011). In some cases, a distinction is made between sexual sadism, where the perpetrator inflicts his or her (but usually his) crime on an unwilling victim, and sadomasochism, which is defined as consensual role play (Mokros et al. 2011). In one of the best-known cases, however, the defense of consent was specifically rejected. In the Spanner trials (White 2006) in the United Kingdom, several members of a gay male leather group were prosecuted for assault based on footage shot of men being beaten and in one case, an apparent genital mutilation. The court rejected the idea that someone can consent to being assaulted. Some of the men were charged as being accomplices in their own assault. Although the men were arrested in 1987, the appeals went on for a decade. In the end, the court found that one cannot consent to bodily harm. Several men were convicted, fined, and placed on probation. After an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, the international body ruled that the state’s interest in protecting the public good and regulating morality outweighed an individual’s right of free will. Although this trial took place in the United Kingdom, many people in the United States feel a similar argument could work in the US court system.

In the United States, there is little clarity on what is meant by sadomasochism, except that it is deviant in the sense that “a large or influential segment of society disapproves of it because it violates explicit or implicit social norms about ‘normal’ sexuality” (McAnulty in Ridinger 2006:192). Because of the lack of definition, the legal system relies on the psychological diagnosis, which I discussed previously.
In early cases in the United States, consent of the “victim” counts for little. In People v. Samuels (1967), the case was tried on the evidence of a video shot by Samuels of himself and a consenting man engaged in s/m. The man, whose name Samuels did not know, was never located and the case was tried without a physical plaintiff. In the end, “Samuels was thus found guilty of cruelty to an unnamed person whose legal existence rested solely on an image and whose input was never sought or deemed necessary to the conduct of the case” (Ridinger 2006:198). In Commonwealth v. Appleby (1980), in Canada, a man fled an abusive s/m relationship and the perpetrator was tried under the same laws used to protect battered women, where consent of the victim is not a defense (Ridinger 2006). This particular case demonstrates the difficulty of defining abuse when similar acts by the same person have vastly different meanings depending on whether consent was given and when it was withdrawn, yet all actions were glossed as assault. These cases represent the difficulty of legal proceedings in determining how to prosecute a case where the victim consents to the acts. The Leather Leadership Council, “an organization dedicated to strengthening the Leather/BDSM/Kink/Fetish community through the development of the leadership skills of community members and fostering a greater sense of connection between and within community groups” (Leather Leadership Conference 2012), developed a handout in 1998 for law enforcement officials outlining how consensual s/m is different than abuse. This was modified by Sir Bamm (a leader in the Texas kinky community) and the full text is included in Chapter Eight (Violence).

Other times, s/m is linked to violent pornography and is legislated in that way. The definition of pornography has shifted from a focus on the genitals and explicit sex to depictions of violence. In Britain, there is a section in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 which outlaws possession of violent pornography. Despite efforts of Backlash, a BDSM group,
to add language to avoid prosecution of consensual acts, the law still bans depictions of extreme obscene behavior, which “must portray in an explicit and realistic way one of the following: (a) an act which threatens a person’s life, (b) an act which results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person’s anus, breasts or genitals, (c) an act which involves sexual interference with a human corpse, or (d) a person performing an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive)” (Murray 2006:86), regardless of whether they are consensual. This legislation stems from the death of a school teacher who was strangled during sex. It was revealed that the perpetrator possessed a large amount of “violent pornography” (with all the messy connotations and subjectivity of that phrase) on his computer. The mother of the victim began a crusade to ban violent pornography on the grounds that it encourages violent behavior (Murray 2009). This is not the first time this argument has been made.

Sadomasochism became a hot topic for feminists in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Many feminists disavowed s/m as inherently violent and degrading, equating it to rape and murder (Atkinson 1982; Barry 1982; Griffin 1981; Rian 1982). Other feminists defined themselves as sex radicals and demanded acknowledgement of s/m as a legitimate lifestyle or choice (Califia 2000; Rubin 1984, 2004; Vance 1984). One of the most notable confrontations between the groups occurred between Samois, a lesbian s/m group, and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM). WAVPM was a group formed to protest pornography on feminist grounds. Almost all of the images they chose to protest contained elements of s/m and they actively worked “to end all portrayals of women being bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, abused, or degraded in any way for sexual or erotic stimulation” (Rubin 2004:5). Similar to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, some made the argument that pornography leads to violent behavior and that s/m is the most dangerous of these depictions
(Klein, Henaut, and Tracey 1981; Griffin 1981). Other feminists found empowerment through playing with power divorced from privilege and argued that s/m (at least in a lesbian context) shook the foundation of heteronormativity (Califia 2000; Rubin 1984, 2004). After the sex wars of the 1980s, people began to question theoretical positions that aligned feminists so closely with the ideology of the far right conservative wing in American politics, both with the aim of shaming women for what they do sexually and controlling women’s behaviors. A new generation of feminists has come of age since them (myself included) and learned about the sex wars after the fact. The controversy has mostly resolved itself in feminist circles, although conservative groups in the United States still link pornography to violent behavior. There remains some disagreement about the role of pornography and s/m, but third wave feminists usually believe there is no one true Feminism and let people pursue their own brand of social justice. I also suspect that the feminization of pornography has relieved some of the pressure of the view of pornography as a male-dominated, heterosexist pursuit which exploits women. Now there is lesbian pornography and pornography written, directed, and produced by women for women. Nothing says a group has come into its own in the United States like being appropriated by the capitalist regime.

**Ethnographic Comparisons**

Holistic studies have reframed what is defined as sadomasochism in order to study it outside of a pathologizing context. Inspired by Moser and Kleinpatz’s (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006) model of a s/m complex, rather than a singular definition, and using grounded theory analysis, I have formed a constellation of components for membership in the kinky community. Not all aspects are always present, but they occur together regularly. Approaching kinkiness as a
complex allows for cross-cultural comparisons with other communities who share some characteristics. My construction of kinkiness includes the following facets:

1. Themes of inversion
2. A dramaturgical performance of identity
3. Consensual
4. Liminal states
5. Erotic context
6. Focus on participation in the community

I will describe each attribute in detail and then compare related literature in the social sciences, with an emphasis on holism and ethnography.

One of the strongest themes I discovered was that of inversion or subversion. Members of the community delighted in combining the sacred with the profane. Kinkiness is based on the pleasure of violating taboos. People have different ways in which they identify as kinky, but the uniting force was the definition against “vanilla,” depicted as the mainstream ideology of sex as monogamous, romantic, heterosexual, and procreative. Vanilla precepts are the manifestations of taboos. These include injunctions against cross-generational romance, especially with children; incest; miscegenation; same gendered sex and relationships; sex divorced from romance; mixing violence with sex; multiple concurrent sexual relationships; the pursuit of pain as its own end; bestiality; necrophilia; and the list goes on. Some taboos were violated directly. For example, many people had both same-gendered sexual experiences and relationships. Most relationships were ideally, and usually practically, non-monogamous. Other taboos were violated in spirit. The community was very vocal in its disapproval of play with actual children (under the age of eighteen) but people often role played the part of children. In other cases of
role play, people acted as animals or close relatives. Normal interactions are turned on their heads, usually through an inclusion of sex in otherwise non-sexual relationship types.

The subversion of norms is a common theme in anthropological studies, especially as regards to clowns and jesters. Clowns function outside of normal strictures, acting variously as sources of entertainment or cultural critics. One example of this is Brightman’s (1999) analysis of the clown in Maidu ritual. He argues that the ritual inversion enacted by the clown in fact strengthens valorized cultural forms. In some ways, this is also true in the kinky community. The disjunction between acting as a child and the injunction against the inclusion of actual children serves to strengthen the taboo against pedophilia.

In a discussion of taboos and their violation in the kinky community, one of the obvious comparisons is to Freud’s (1946) Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Life of Savages and Neurotics, in which he uses cross-cultural comparisons to illustrate the ways in which neurotics have degenerated into more primitive forms of interactions as exemplified by the use of totems and taboos. The taboos violated by the kinky community are very much cultural. It would not make sense in this context to avoid eating the meat of one’s totem or to refrain from touching the chief’s hair (or to do it deliberately in order to enjoy the subversion of power).

By a dramaturgical performance of identity, I mean the ways in which identity is formed in conjunction with the group. Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of the theater is useful here. Actors perform different identities for different audiences. In the kinky community, I observed this most clearly in the realm of gender, although that may be due in part to my bias toward examining everything in light of gender. Goffman draws a distinct line between the audience
and the actors. In the kinky community, the difference between the two becomes blurry and it is more as if each mutually constitutes the other.

As mentioned previously, I have been inspired by Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity. She deconstructs the idea that identity is truly natural, rather it is the iteration of performance which naturalizes cultural categories, such as “woman.” She analyzes the practice of drag to understand the construction of femininity. Esther Newton (1979), an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork among drag queens in American cities, laid the groundwork for Butler’s concepts of performativity.

I discuss the central role of consent in the kinky community in Chapter Eight (Violence). If there is any one precept that is held in universal regard, it is the primacy of consent. It is not enough to simply say yes; people are expected to fully understand the risks they take and to accept the consequences. The legal literature, as mentioned above, does not agree with the same notion of consent that exists in the kinky community. However, anthropology has a long tradition of contextualizing choices that may appear devoid of agency from an outsider’s perspective. One well known study was conducted by Hartman and Marmon (2004). They examined the Orthodox Jewish beliefs concerning menstruation and how women make sense of and participate in what appears to be a patriarchal devaluation of the female body. This, too, may be framed as an issue of consent.

People in the kinky community have desires and identities that are denigrated by the mainstream society. One of the ways they manage these desires and identities is to reframe them. Sex and sexuality become a place of empowerment rather than shame. Identity is not fixed by outside social forces but is rather something one can change through practice. Members of the kinky community create liminal states where modification of identity and behavior takes
places more rapidly than through more conventional methods. In the kinky community, these liminal states may include subspace (the altered state of consciousness experienced by bottoms brought about by the experience of pain or powerlessness), intense sensation, and orgasm. In these moments of crisis, the goodness of being kinky is affirmed. Using liminal states to instigate a transformation from one state to another is classic Victor Turner (1969), a British anthropologist who studied the structure of ritual. Turner’s concept of communitas, the suspension of normal social roles that occur during liminal periods and result in feelings of unity, is writ large in the kinky community. Interestingly, in the kinky community, these are more rites of intensification rather than rites of passage, so a liminal stage does not have an overt function to mark the shift from one state to another.

Lakshmi (2003) explores how the Indian concept of sati (when a woman sets herself on fire following the death of her husband) is a liminal state outside of language. In many cases, liminality is an embodied experience rather than an intellectual one and is difficult to encapsulate in words. Goldberg (2007) examines how Western bio-medicine functions similarly to religion in separating people from the mysterium tremendum (overwhelming mystery resulting in awe) by mitigating experiences through ritual. Rituals, whether religious or scientific, function to contain otherwise unpredictable states.

I struggled with whether an erotic context was a fundamental aspect of a kinky identity in this community. I think the correct answer is (in Cactus) usually, but not always. In some other communities in the United States, s/m is heavily differentiated from kinky sex. I discuss sex and sexuality in more depth in Chapter Seven (Sex), but I emphasize it here because even parties where there was no “sex” (the definition is fuzzy for a number of reasons), erotic overtones were always present. In some ways, kinky activities have much in common with boxing – adults
consenting to possible bodily harm for their own and others’ enjoyment. The erotic nature of kinky activities, among other things, sets them apart from boxing.

The recognition of the eroticism is important because it allows a comparison to other works done outside the purview of kink. One of the richest sources of reference to erotic communities stems from work done in the gay and lesbian communities, including studies of queer women’s bathhouses (Cooper 2009; Nash and Bain 2007), the formation of a lesbian community in India, where the identity was imported and redefined in local context (Dave 2010), work with non-normative masculine communities (Hennen 2008), and how gender interacts with sexuality in cross-cultural settings (Nanda 1990; Mageo 1992; Herdt 2011). Many people in the kinky community self-identify as queer, even if their partner choice looks heterosexual. This heterosexual alliance and identification with gay and lesbian communities deserves to be explored further.

Focusing on the erotic nature of the kinky community also allows for comparisons to work done on sexuality outside of erotic communities. For example, Gil’s (1990) work on the guilt felt by certain conservative Christians about sexual fantasies illustrates another approach to making sense of sexuality. In a different study involving Christians, Mullaney (2001) focuses on how the resistance to temptation becomes a fundamental principle of a group, highlighting the ways in which sexuality can frame even groups which limit the power of sex.

Finally, it is not sufficient to practice kinky activities in the privacy of one’s home. Participating in the community is of paramount importance. Kinkiness is defined in social contexts rather than just behaviors. This is an important distinction, because many quantitative studies focus on behavior rather than group membership. This pushes up the percentage of people in the kinky category (as discussed above) but obscures the number of people who overtly
identify as kinky. Part of the process of renegotiating this stigmatized identity into something positive relies upon the support of community members to affirm the naturalness and goodness of one’s non-normative desires. Obviously, this was a self-selecting sample, so of course participation in the community would be emphasized.

There has been other work on sexuality in general and kinkiness or s/m that deserves mention as well. Vance’s work on female sexuality (1984) laid the groundwork for other anthropological studies of sexuality. Califia (2000) wrote extensively about his experiences in the s/m community, first as a lesbian and then as a transman, and the potential radical sex has for political resistance. Rubin (1984, 1993) worked as an anthropologist in the gay male leather community and discusses the interaction between gender, sex, and power. Newmahr (2010, 2011) has recently published an ethnographic account of an s/m community in the northern United States focused on the intersection of violence and the erotic. Weiss illustrates the ways in which the media informs popular depictions of BDSM (2006).

Recent studies locate s/m inside of a larger social context through the lens of public health. In the 1980s, due to the spread of AIDS, people began exploring the idea of “safe sex” and s/m factored into the conversation because it was possible to have intense connections with others without necessarily exchanging body fluids, thereby reducing the participants’ risk of HIV/AIDS (Ridinger 2006). Hennen (2008) explores this line of reasoning in his work, Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine. He performed ethnographic fieldwork in three distinct masculine communities partly to learn about positive sexual experiences that go beyond genital penetration as an expansion of safer sex practices. I discuss the role of HIV in informing research on sexuality in Chapter Seven (Sex).
Emic Literature

I am puzzled by how rarely the body of literature written by members of the kinky community for the kinky community is mentioned in scholarly works. At least in Cactus, the kinky community relies on an educational model to transmit cultural beliefs and books are a respected avenue to knowledge. Perhaps some of this popular literature lacks an academic pedigree, but some of it is a sophisticated exploration of the philosophical implications of sex and power. It is beyond the scope of this work, but an in-depth study of the narrative style of these books may reveal deeper cultural tropes beyond how people like to have sex.

Although the kinky community is based on much more than sex, satisfying sexual experiences are seen as a fundamental human right. To this end, one must learn about sex. In the media, discussions about sex either create shame or make sex stand in for the most incredible, romantic, intense, heterosexual experience one is capable of having (and if you are not, then there is something wrong with you). The lack of basic information leads to dissatisfaction with sex. In the course of my involvement with the kinky community, I have read two manuals on sex, The Good Vibrations Guide to Sex: The Most Complete Sex Manual Ever Written (Winks and Semans 2002) and The Whole Lesbian Sex Book: A Passionate Guide for All of Us (Blackwood 2007). I found both enlightening and practical. The authors frame their books as inclusive, acknowledging a wide range of desirable bodies and expanding the concept of sex. Partners are depicted as various genders or ethnicities. They discuss aging and sexuality. Many people in the kinky community approach sex in a similar fashion. In these books and in the kinky community, sex is viewed as something positive and natural.

There are several basic primers in BDSM available. These often have glossaries, which I found to be useful. The one most often cited in the heterosexual kinky community was Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadomasochism (Miller and
Devo n 1995). I only read this after I had been involved with the community for a few months, so perhaps I missed the mystique that surrounds the first book to introduce a new subject. I was surprised it was so dated, but I think it is an interesting example of how knowledge turns into lore. I am reminded that some of my favorite anthropology texts were written in the 1980s and 1990s and introduced to me by professors who loved them when they were new. The persistence of Screw the Roses may also speak to the lack of literature written for neophyte heterosexuals (the literature of the gay male leather scene has a longer and more prolific history). SM 101: A Realistic Introduction (Wiseman 1998) is also popular. It, too, is written from the perspective of a male dominant/female submissive heterosexual relationship, which is occasionally problematic. For a fuller discussion of the interaction of heterosexism and gender, see Chapter Six (Gender).

Many of the offerings are technical how-to guides to some of the more esoteric skills fostered in the kinky community. Bean (2000) outlines different ways to use a flogger (a many-tailed whip found in almost everyone’s toy bag). Harrington (2010) illustrates ways to tie someone up using shibari, a form of Japanese rope bondage. This book is interesting because it uses the exotic as a trope to convey sexual energy. Having never been to Japan, I cannot speak to the authenticity of shibari as a cross-cultural practice. The residual Orientalism in the kinky community deserves further study. Japanese pornography was considered “edgier” (more extreme) than its American brethren. Walker, who wrote Flames of Passion: Handbook of Erotic Fire Play (2006), is a native Texan and does presentations within the state and on a national level.

Going beyond technique, there are several books that focus on Dominant/submissive or Master/slave relationship styles. Compleat Slave: Creating and Living an Erotic
Dominant/submissive Lifestyle (Rinella 2002) offers advice on everything from writing a contract (a formal document between Master and slave) and protocol (behaviors observed by both parties) to good communication skills. One of the functions of these types of book is to normalize kinky experiences. While the exotic may be seen as a source of authenticity in such practices as shibari, many readers of these books are novices and want reassurance that they are not alone in their feelings.

Polyamory, the practice of having multiple, simultaneous love relationships, is not specifically a kinky practice. However, many people in the kinky community are polyamorous. Of course there is a book for that. Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships (Taormino 2008) is advice on how to shift from a monogamous mindset to a polyamorous one. In a society where polygamy is forbidden (and very rarely practiced), it is an interesting take on a cross-cultural practice. Taormino stresses the importance of sexual fulfillment as a part of a satisfying lifestyle.

As a researcher, I think it is foolish to ignore what people say about themselves. The Cactus kinky community is extraordinarily literate and produces a substantial amount of writing about the ways in which and what it means to be kinky. The narrative themes I have sketched out here can be seen as well in the online forums. Because the real time community (as opposed to the online one) was so vibrant in Cactus, I did not focus as much attention on the virtual community as I would have liked. The text-based interactions captured on social networking sites are a linguist’s dream and deserve further study.

Because there is not a lot of citation in this type of literature, much of my review is limited to what was available in the community. I think it presents an interesting snapshot of the ways in which people speak about the things that are important to them. Books are strange
externalizations of ideology. When distributed widely, they function to universalize concepts and shape local experience. Reading this literature, it would still be hard to imagine what a kinky community looked like in practice. Yet I still think it is worthwhile as both a research strategy and line of theoretical inquiry.

**Popular News**

Being labeled a sadist or masochist or being associated with an s/m organization may threaten careers (Wright 2006), child custody (Klein and Moser 2006), and even personal safety (Wright 2006). However, disclosures of someone’s sexual proclivities are not always as damning as they could be. In a highly publicized case, a UN inspector bound for Iraq was outed by the press for his “leadership role in sadomasochistic sex clubs” (Grimaldi 2002). Chief Inspector Blix refused to accept the man’s resignation. Recently, a college chancellor has been investigated for alleged immigration violations at the University of Northern Virginia. What has turned this case into a sensation, however, is the revelation that the chancellor “is so into domination and sadomasochism that he has transformed his basement into a suburban dungeon complete with bondage racks” (The Smoking Gun 2011). The online responses to the expose show a good deal of support for the chancellor, critiquing the way the information was leaked and affirming his right to do as he pleases with other consenting adults.

**Literature in Conclusion**

I address further literature in the context of the chapter, most especially in Chapters Six (Gender) and Seven (Sex). In this brief overview, I hope to give the reader an idea of some of the work that has been done on kinky communities, kink as a practice, and other ethnographies to which this one may be compared. There is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the use of liminal states in moments of crisis to intentionally reshape habitus outside of a religious
setting. The fact that these liminal states are facilitated in a sexual setting complicates a straightforward ritual analysis. The liminal state does not harken an immediate change, as it does in a rite of passage, but rather is returned to again and again to reform identity and relationships. I think my participation as an anthropologist in both the heterosexual groups and the women-only group grants me an uncommon perspective on the embodied nature of gender in these groups and how it is shifting away from and toward mainstream understandings. Much of the literature on kinky communities focuses on queer communities or heterosexual communities, but not both. In context, my ethnography will extend knowledge on how hegemony is resisted (or not) through changing embodied practices in an urban American setting.

**Structure**

I have structured this work in order to relieve some of the sensationalism around the topic of kinkiness. I know it is an incendiary topic that may elicit strong reactions among even the most culturally relativistic reader. At a recent panel with other researchers in the erotic field, Beverly Thompson (2012) discussed the moment one feels upon first entering a new field and how the profound discomfort engendered by a novel situation signals growth. I have tried to balance that sense of discomfort with the recognition that the kinky community acts as many small communities in urban setting act. To this end, my account at the beginning is weighted toward ethnographic details – what things are called, how people relate to one another, where people get their stuff. I leave the theorizing until later in the work.

In Chapter Two (Ethnography), I situate myself in this work. Reflexivity can be both illuminating and distracting. To this end, I have separated out my own experiences as a fieldworker as their own chapter. This gives the reader the chance to evaluate my street credentials while avoiding filling up the rest of the work with navel-gazing. I believe that
ethnography is a situated practice and that a researcher’s social position both hinders and facilitates different experiences. I offer some context for how and why I came to work with the kinky community in Cactus.

Chapter Three (Play) focuses on behaviors in the kinky community, especially those bound by ritual. I analyze the structure of a typical scene and discuss the implications of using ritual studies in the kinky community.

Chapter Four (Identity) examines the ways in which self-identification and community level identification are practiced through behaviors and relationships. I look at how the trope of the “natural” is used to ground dialogue about kinkiness. Included in this chapter are basic demographic data about the community.

Chapter Five (Material Culture) traces the movement and meaning of physical items within the community. The toys people use gain significance in their origin story, relationship to the creator, and history of use. People in the kinky community repurpose vanilla items to create “pervertables” (for example, using a rug beater to strike someone). This contests accepting the mass marketed intention of a product, proving that people are not passive receptors of prepackaged culture.

Chapter Six (Gender) is where I apply theory to the ethnographic data. This section has its own literature review of feminist positions on gender. I put forth a seven gendered system that calls into question the binary. Using a structuralist framework in the style of Levi-Strauss (1963), I outline the ways in which binary oppositions create a range of possible experiences, yet the underlying structure of these relationships can be articulated. Anatomy is not destiny; gender may be unmoored from the physical body, presenting the opportunity for biological men or women to experience the world as variously masculine or feminine beings. The existing
masculine/feminine dyad is complicated by the introduction of the dominant/submissive dyad. Non-normative gender presentations, such as feminine dominant or masculine submissive, are less common in the heterosexual community, but their existence calls into question gender as a natural category. The contextual nature of gender is highlighted by comparing the performance of gender in kinky settings to that in vanilla settings. People shift into a more neutral form of the dominant/submissive complex in keeping with their perceived gender in these settings. Something similar happens among peers, such as in submissive-only study groups. Gender becomes a way to highlight contrasts in mixed company. Finally, the “switch” category exemplifies the performative nature of gender. People who identify as switches rapidly shift from one gender to another, such as from feminine dominant to feminine submissive or masculine submissive to feminine submissive, depending on the relationship or context. In many ways, gender may be viewed as an analog wave generated from digital categories. It may shift gradually over time in somewhat predictable patterns. However, switches jump from point to point with little transition. The existence of a homegrown multiple gender system questions the primacy of the binary in wider American culture.

In Chapter Seven (Sex), I examine the definition of sex. This chapter also has its own literature review in order to contextualize the subject matter. What counts as sex differs for different groups. Working with groups that practice sex in public (in certain situations) allows for a rare comparison between ideology and practice. I tease apart desire for behaviors from attraction to individuals and outline different sexual strategies for satisfaction and safety. I debunk the myth of meaningless sex; it may not mean what mainstream American culture says it should mean, but it is not devoid of meaning. Finally, I analyze the different meanings orgasm
has for different groups of people in different contexts. Feminine and masculine orgasms are valued differently and have different implications in terms of authenticity, danger, and power.

In Chapter Eight (Violence), I analyze the definition of violence in the kinky community and compare it to the more mainstream definition. In wider American culture, violence is non-consensual, harmful, and malicious. This contrasts to the kinky community where acts that look like violence on the surface (such as branding, punching, or whipping) are consensual, pleasurable, or meaningful, and performed with shared intent. I frame violence as a natural force that serves as an experience against which to measure oneself. I outline the ways in which the experience of powerlessness can be empowering. I also look at how violence is used as disruption of normality to facilitate a liminal state. Finally in this chapter, I examine ways in which women’s initial experiences in the kinky community are sometimes exploitative.

In Chapter Nine (Hegemony), I discuss the kinky community’s relationship to wider society. In part, this is heavily influenced by its location in a state-level society, where laws are enforced by a freestanding militant body (the police). People in the kinky community have an uneasy relationship with the police, who are seen as agents of vanilla oppression and as admired role models. Within the kinky community, laws are selectively emphasized to maintain the status quo. For example, one group’s decision to bar penetrative sex effectively discourages gay men from fully participating in those parties. I also analyze ways in which kinky relationships mimic state-level interactions in the existence of party rules and contracts. I examine ways in which the kinky community successfully creates counterhegemonic discourses in the realms of sex, gender, age, and body size and yet reproduces hegemony in regards to ethnicity and partner choice.
In conclusion, I argue that sexuality as one location of identity, while problematic, offers an embodied habitus that may potentially reframe people’s relationship to themselves and to an immediate community. People in the kinky community resist and accommodate hegemonic ideals through their practice. In some areas, such as gender, age, and body size, this resistance destabilizes hegemony on a local level, creating sexual acceptance for people who do not fit standard American ideals of desirability. In other ways, the community tends to reproduce hegemony, ignoring or silencing the different experiences of people of color and transgendered individuals (demonstrating that destabilizing gender on one front does not do so on all fronts). This is where the intention of changing practice falls short. Most people in the community do not consciously exclude anyone from the community based on factors like ethnicity or gender identity. One of the key ideologies of the community is the belief in inclusivity. Anyone should be welcomed, regardless of socially ascribed status. In practice, resisting hegemonic ideals requires energy and as a whole the community has invested more energy in fighting some forms of sexism, ageism, and sexual oppression using embodied practices than it has toward in creating a welcoming (as opposed to non-hostile) atmosphere for others. Through examining the moments in which hegemony is successfully contested and whether there has been a corresponding shift in practice, we may better understand means of resistance. It may also be possible to trace whether changes in embodied practices in specific sexual contexts lead to shifts in identity in other aspects of a person’s life. It is possible that the moments of crisis used by the members of the kinky community, in pain or pleasure, are not transferable to resisting other forms of oppression, limiting the usefulness of this strategy to desirability.

Anthropology offers both an intellectual framework and a methodology to study these concepts in context. Bodley notes, “culture has mental, behavioral, and material aspects; it is
patterned and provides a model for proper behavior” (2005:11). At the end of the day, kinkiness and the identities attached to it are cultural phenomena. Examining what people think, what they do, and what they produce offers an avenue to analyzing underlying social structures. Using ethnographic methodology, particularly participant-observation and in-depth interviewing, yields rich data that allows for a “thick description” (Geertz 1973). This contextualization is especially important when working with marginalized or stigmatized groups. Anthropology is particularly well suited for this task.

I have striven to depict and understand the kinky community as I experienced it, with its concurrent potential for transformation and struggles faced by any collection of human beings. I hope the reader finds truths in these pages that transcend the kinky community and speak to the larger human condition.

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1 Cactus is a pseudonym for the city I worked in. There are several medium to large metropolises in Texas. All names of people, places, and groups are pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the people with whom I worked. In several cases, some people have multiple pseudonyms if a feature would make them too identifiable within the community.

2 The term kinky was used by the community as an umbrella term. Later, I was to learn BDSM (bondage/discipline/dominance/submission/sado/masochism) and s/m (sadomasochism) meant similar things. However, the term kinky implies the inclusion of sex in the practice, which s/m does not. BDSM can go either way. (Newmahr, 2012, personal communication)

3 On capitalization – it is the convention within the community to only use lower-case letters for a slave’s name and to always capitalize the first letter of a Master’s name. Because this may vary, depending on a person’s self-identification as a slave, or a submissive, or a bottom, I have chosen to capitalize names according to modern convention to avoid distracting the reader. I continue to capitalize Master, Ma’am, Daddy, and other dominant titles because of their significance as titles.

4 Drag refers to the practice of dressing up as or performing as a member of a gender not one’s own. The performative nature of drag sets it apart from other cross-gendered behaviors. In practice, this usually refers to a male-identified person wearing feminine clothing or vice versa. The goal of drag is not to “pass” but rather to play with non-conforming gender roles.

5 Fisting is the insertion of the entire hand into a person’s vagina or anus.

6 Paraphilia, as used in psychology, denotes a sexual disorder. John Money (1965) attempted to redefine the term to refer to any nonstandard sexual desire without the negative connotation. This has had mixed results.
CHAPTER TWO - WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY

I came of academic age after reflexivity in ethnography was no longer novel. Anthropology had shrugged off the cloak of complete objectivity and emerged as a situated discipline, contingent on the culture and location of the academic. I cut my teeth on Rosaldo’s classic “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage” (1993). It seems inevitable, if not natural, to situate myself within this ethnography. I will limit the navel-gazing to this chapter, for I think the really interesting things that are occurring in this kinky community outstrip my personal experiences. I offer this, instead, so that the reader may know some of what I took to the field and how certain characteristics presented opportunities and challenges. I will discuss the construction of “the field” and the particulars of how I ended up in this specific field. “Who” is just as important as “where” in this enterprise and I will discuss “the other” in relation to myself. Finally, I will reflect on how my social position worked for and against me in this precise instance.

Graduate fieldwork, as has been noted by generations of anthropologists (Bomeman and Hammoudi 2009; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Hastrup 1995), ideally follows van Gennep’s classic three stage rite of passage (1960), moving from separation from the world to the liminal state of betweeness and finally resolving itself into incorporation into the world in a new state. This is fitting, given the emphasis in this work on ritual behaviors. Being “in the field” is the liminal state, when one is no longer a graduate student but is not yet a professional anthropologist. It is telling that most fieldwork involves an actual journey to a location away from the home culture of the researcher and that it is bounded by time. The field is something you “go to” and “leave” at specific points in time. This runs the risk of creating the field as some sort of artificial backdrop for an anthropologist’s coming-of-age ceremony. It is hard to bear in
mind Kant’s categorical imperative, “So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only” (1949: location 652), when people are reduced to actors in a scholastic dramaturgy. However, I think that all anthropologists feel passionately that the people they met in the field are full human beings worthy of respect. The disjunction between people in the local culture carrying on their lives and an anthropologist who is betwixt and between for a season or a year adds to the sense of staging. If the purpose is to collect data that will be used to further the anthropologist’s career and add to some alleged greater understanding of the human condition, is it not by nature exploitative? I do not have any glib answers. The more time I spent in the field, the more I realized that “the field” is a construct, useful, to be sure, but artificial nonetheless. I was the only person in the field. Everyone I interacted with had no shared belief in the field-ness of their lives. It is a lonely ritual to perform fieldwork.

I chose to work in Texas, as opposed to Bolivia, for a number of pragmatic reasons. I stayed in the United States for logistical reasons, including my own medical care. I am interested in sexuality, but the two US cities that come to mind, San Francisco (Weiss 2006; Jenness 1993, 1990; Peacock et al. 2001; Gamson 1989; Queen 1997; Barton 2006) and New York (Roche, Neaigus, and Miller 2005; Gamson 1996; Schulden et al. 2008; Klein, Henaut, and Tracey 1981), already have a relatively active cohort of researchers attached to them. My initial research proposal involved sex workers, and I chose Texas because there is not much activism among sex workers there. I am from New Orleans and many of my friends and relatives relocated to Texas after Hurricane Katrina. I had a social network in place. Of course, one ends up with the field one has and not the ideal one that existed as a graduate student construct of “the field.” I made radical adjustments to my research topic once I arrived in Texas and found that
part of the reason there is not much sex worker activism is that although there are sex workers, there is not much of a sex worker community, or at least no such community I could locate.

In earlier days, I had romantic notions of living with the natives, roughing it with no running water in a remote jungle location, because real anthropology takes place among band level foragers and includes terrible stomach ailments that result in amusing anecdotes proving one was “there.” A field season in Belize for my Master’s degree, albeit in posh conditions by most fieldwork stories, taught me that I was not at my best in a small community, fighting off insects and struggling with the language differences.

Much has been made of emic versus etic viewpoints, which is part of the reason anthropologists do not study their own culture. Bodley defines emic as “relating to cultural meanings derived from inside a given culture and presumed to be unique to that culture” and etic as “relating to cultural meanings as translated for cross-cultural comparison” (2005:17). Emic viewpoints are less useful to the cross-cultural enterprise of anthropology since they are limited to their own culture. It is difficult to make out the gradients of one’s own culture. Comparing two societies from spatial or temporal distance, it is easy to say that one is different from another. There is an anthropological tradition that, as Walcott notes, “until recently it did not matter where the place [of fieldwork] was as long as it was dramatically different from one’s own. Such difference, rife with implicit contrast and the courageously anticipated strangeness and challenge to cope, was built into the choice of place without anyone having to ask” (1999:24). The belief in the past has been that choosing an exotic locale would force one to adopt an etic perspective, since the anthropologist had to act as a translator (literally and figuratively) to make sense of one culture in comparison to others.
I am reassured by Wolcott’s further observation that “Locating an exotic research site is no longer critical for guaranteeing difference because difference itself is no longer universally regarded as a defining attribute of ethnographic inquiry” (1999:33). For me, the difference and sameness of my fieldsite questions the assumption that there is a hard line between “us” and “them.”

As I matured intellectually, I found that people were doing exciting, important work in urban settings (Cintron 1997; Low 2003, 2000; Gmelch and Zenner 2002), and that this was not a new trend in anthropology (Lewis 1966). However, doing urban fieldwork had its own constraints, especially in a geographically mobile, post-industrial city. People lived spread out over considerable distances. Cars made the distance traversable, but people interested enough in the same topic to be motivated enough to become a member of a group often lived miles away from each other. They did not work together; their children did not go to school together; they might go weeks or even months without seeing another community member. Add to this the prevalence of online communication, and “the field” became nebulous, un-centered. Cactus, like many cities in the United States, had a dense urban core surrounded by suburbs. Many neighborhoods were self-contained, sporting their own schools and supermarkets. Many people commuted to work, which might be the only reason to actively leave one’s immediate environment. It was a testament to people’s passion for their group (whatever that group may be) when they were willing to travel an hour or more each way for large events several times a month. The kinky community (or communities, rather) were not entirely unmoored from geography as there are smaller component groups that collected members from a more localized area. It was a challenge for me as a researcher to locate, spatially, where events were happening. Much of the socializing that took place happened in bars. Each club had a preferred location, but
even more importantly, each group had a set time it met, usually something like the first Thursday of the month, x support group would meet at this café, and every Tuesday, there was a pool night in North Cactus, and CND held parties on the fourth Friday of even numbered months. Once I had access to the schedule and the online sites, it was relatively easy to locate public events.

Because I could not live “full-time” with this population, I only had access to public and semi-public venues until I gained the trust of some community members and began to be invited to private parties and to people’s homes. The one thing that made my fieldwork possible up to that point was the internet. One social networking site (which I do not name in order to maintain confidentiality) helped me identify community members and dates and times for events. The website was a social networking site devoted to kink, s/m, fetish, and other alternative sexual and relationship pursuits. The main foci of the site were the discussion board and personal walls. After I created my account, I was able to initiate contact with several local members. During the course of my fieldwork, a Cactus “kinky calendar” was developed, mapping out most of the events in the area. Prior to that, I found out about events through word of mouth and message boards specific to each group.

Population identified and located, I set out for the field, notebook in hand. Anthropology is good for me. I find myself painfully shy on occasion, and “doing anthropology” gives me a way to talk to people. I have more confidence when I have my researcher hat on. During the first couple of events I attended, I only told people I was interested in kink, not that I was doing research. Once I had established that this was a community with which I would like to work, I began my paperwork with the Institutional Review Board and talking to my advisors. After I had received approvals from all involved and I knew this would be my fieldsite, I began to let
people know I was doing research. They seemed generally amenable to the prospect, partially because educating others is such a big part of community interactions.

I had a difficult time imagining this community as “other.” One of the central romantic tenets of anthropology is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. This can only be accomplished through having an ideal otherness, at least a theoretical not-self from which to imagine oneself. If part of the ethnographic narrative is to demonstrate, gee, we are all human and underneath it all we are profoundly similar, one has to begin at a point of difference. When working with the kink community, I had several factors working in my favor for gaining entrée, but that initially made analysis more difficult than if I had been a complete outsider. I am demographically similar to the people I work with, as far as race and class go. I am an English-speaking Anglo American, slightly more educated (but not by much) and slightly less well off than most of the people in the community. I grew up going to sci-fi conventions and renaissance festivals. There is a lot of cross-over between those communities and the kink community. Even more salient to my experiences was the fact that I put myself through my undergraduate degree as an exotic dancer. It is fashionable to have once been a sex worker in some feminist circles. At nineteen, I knew it was a good job. At twenty-five, with my bachelor’s degree in anthropology almost complete, I found another line of work because I was burnt out, not as a feminist protest against exploitation. That experience shaped my understandings of gender roles, sexuality, ritual, theater, materialism and consumption. Though I have long held feminist beliefs, I only began identifying as a feminist at twenty-four, when I discovered that my job did not automatically disqualify me from the movement. Surprisingly, my experiences in the kink world while dancing were limited to knowing a few professional dominatrices casually. Prior to my first munch in Cactus, I had a very definite idea that a kink community would be dominant
women and their submissive males. I remember the shock I felt when I realized that not only was the community primarily heterosexual, but that it was mostly male dominants and female submissives. I will explore what I see as the gender implications of commercialized transactions versus interactions based on shared interest in Chapter 6 (Gender). However, my time as a stripper had inured me to naked bodies and at least made me relatively comfortable with sexualized expressions. It took me about half an hour at my first party to remember, oh yes, that is how real naked people look. In my fieldnotes, I found myself glossing over nudity and sex in favor of ritual details and emotional experience. At the same time, witnessing people having sex in public was a different kind of shock for me. As a dancer, I had witnessed a lot of simulated sex and even occasionally some orgasm, but it was generally furtive, in dimly lit back rooms, and the illusion of privacy was usually in place. It was not so much the people having sex that tripped me out; it was that they were doing it with all the lights on and no music playing, with other people gathered around, offering commentary.

And then there was the violence. Face slapping, genital torture, ball gags, bondage; it all set me on edge. Being a stripper in no way prepared me for this. Dancing, for me, had been about control. I had always been physically strong and worked in a club where the bouncers backed me up. Looking back now, I can see how my choices were not as free as I thought at the time, but my experience had been that my sexuality was going to be used against me, so I might as well make some money from it. Working in a strip club, I learned how to say no to men and have that choice respected. In order to make money, I did not say it often unless someone was breaking the social standards, but I could and did say it when I felt too much was being asked. That is a powerful feeling. To be immersed all of a sudden in an environment where some people (usually women) were saying no, in fact begging for someone (usually a man) to stop
hurting them, went against everything I had learned in my backwards approach to feminism. Perhaps, had I not come to feminism through sex work, I would have been equally astonished, if I had only worked as a secretary or a grad student. Violence, especially gendered violence, is a taboo in early twenty-first century United States, despite its prevalence in media and in the criminal justice system. Anything that remotely looks like rape instantly sets off alarm bells for every feminist I knew up until I began my fieldwork. Having my own limits tested repeatedly as to what I would and would not consent to as a dancer prepared me to suspend judgement long enough to have a rational discussion about consent. I came to understand that while “it” (whatever “it” is) was about sex and violence and control (or loss thereof), it was also about the experience of being present.

I was also prepared to understand a similar type of stigma. I know what it was like, for me, to have to defend myself against the assumption that I was poor, dumb, or less than fully human based on perceived excessive sexuality. I felt confident I could understand what it was like to shelter that kind of secret. This belief, that I understood stigma and consent and public sexuality, took me a long time to work through. My experiences, while similar to those of some of the community members, were not theirs. They were separated from me in time and space. The stigma they sometimes experience is in partly founded on kinkiness as a fundamental aspect of identity. When I was dancing, I could at least build a wall between myself and my job by framing it as just my job. I built the same kind of wall between myself and my participation in the kinky community, by framing it as “just” my research. I ran into a similar challenge with my experiences as a bisexual woman. I thought, because I had had relationships with both men and women, it gave me a privileged insight into queer culture. I have practiced my bisexuality in relative isolation from a larger queer community, although not deliberately. My sexual attraction
to women did not make me an expert on women who are partnered with women. The same argument cannot be made for my experience with men, since I have been in a long term partnered relationship with a man for years and have reaped the benefits of heteronormativity, however inadvertently.

My gender was both an asset and a challenge. As a woman, I had social access to most women and men. Men often assumed that as a woman, I was submissive. This made me less of a threat and often elicited the teaching mode of communication. Other women were less likely to overtly conceive of me as submissive, but as they identified as submissive, they would often take it for granted that I had similar experiences based on my femaleness as a type of submissiveness. With men, I sometimes had difficulty being recognized as a peer. The researcher role did not help. I do not think I ever exited neophyte status, where people did not expect me to have an identity they could predict (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of liminality and identity). My gender was a serious drawback with the gay male group. They were nice enough, and there were definitely women (both biological and transgendered) involved in their group, but their parties were men-only affairs. Had I more time, I would undertake a comparison of gay male leather social structure in Cactus to the heterosexual/pansexual community and the women-only clubs. However, there is existing literature on gay leathermen (Hennen 2004, 2008) that may not be enriched by the data I could gather as a woman in Texas.

Another aspect of erotic subjectivity I was not prepared for was my perceived status as a potential partner, romantic, sexual, play, or otherwise. I have been married for a number of years and have grown out of the habit of evaluating others in relation to possible sexual relationships. All of a sudden, I was thrust into an environment where everyone was a possible partner. Long-term relationships did not automatically preclude other relationships. Most of my initial
interactions with the kink community involved some sort of feeling out of whether I would be interested in pursuing something more than a casual acquaintance. Gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, physical ability, all the cues we use to whittle down the pool of potential mates, were up for negotiation. I still have questions about whether some people I interviewed did it because they were motivated by the possibility of a more intense relationship. I blundered a couple of times, letting my interest in research blind me to the fact that the other person read an entirely different meaning into my request for an interview. On one occasion, this was serious enough to effectively end my relationship with a community member. I think had I been single, I might have been more attuned to at least some of the overtures.

If my experiences as a dancer had prepared me for a sexualized environment, growing up in New Orleans predisposed me to look at ritual. I went to a Catholic girls’ school where we wore uniforms, attended mass every Friday and chapel every Tuesday and Thursday. High holy days were celebrated with pageantry. Catholic iconography and material artifacts permeated the daily rituals of school life. Outside of school, the year was punctuated by public rituals, most well known about New Orleans, Mardi Gras. Halloween, St. Patrick’s Day, New Year’s Eve, all marked by costuming, drunken revelries, and the occasional parade. I have not lived all that many places, but it seems to me, based on the literature (Jankowiak and White 1999; Regis 2001), if nothing else, that New Orleans is more invested in public ritual than other contemporary American cities. I grew up marking time by festivals, where the goal was to either participate in or witness ritual inversions. Masking and masquerading influence many aspects of life in New Orleans.

It is only in retrospect that I realize how growing up there shaped me. At the time, it seems perfectly reasonable that I participated in a several Vodoun groups. This began as a
school project and became an important part of my experience. It was here that I first learned to trance, entering an altered state of consciousness after dancing for hours to drums and singing. I have never been possessed, but I often achieved trance. This state is difficult to describe, a kind of narrowing of perspective to the now conjoined to a feeling of connectedness and possibility. A similar state was created for me through body modification. Hours of being tattooed resulted in a shift in perception, a profound quiet. I continue to engage in ecstatic dance practices. This is all to say that it makes sense I would be drawn to the experience of subspace, the altered state of consciousness sometimes experienced by bottoms during scenes. Subspace was achieved through physical or mental stress, usually involving pain or humiliation. I was willing to learn about this state through experience. I bottomed on several occasions and achieved subspace during most of those times.

My prior experience with trancing allowed me the freedom to give into the experience of subspace rather than trying to analyze it as it was happening (a sure way to stop a trance cold). It also created a barrier that I had to work through. I found myself assuming that my experience was everyone’s experience. Despite my training in anthropology, coming to grips with my own ethnocentric tendencies was difficult. It was not until someone pointed out to me that subspace evolves the longer one engages in it that I realized not everyone was flying as I did. It is a shared experience, but the specifics and the meaning given to subspace vary by individual. For me, a trance is like transcendence. It has a spiritual aspect to it, but I find myself falling back on biomedical language, explaining it in terms of entoptic phenomena (when a person sees objects within the eyeball itself which are not perceivable to others) and endorphins, relating it to a runner’s high. This universalizes an experience that is difficult to describe. As I will analyze later, this is similar to orgasm, where almost everyone has her or his particular understanding of
what that state is and usually assumes that it is the same for others. Other somatic experiences lend themselves to this textual sleight-of-hand, such as sleep. Once I grasped that my subspace was not anyone else’s, it became easier to accept the empirical nature of subspace, that it must be experienced to be known, but that experience was only a beginning of a generalizable understanding.

Playing was a way to “be there” with the people in the community, to make myself vulnerable in a very real sense. To play, whether or not subspace was achieved, was to entrust my physical, emotional, and social safety to another person. The risk became an end beyond research, to feel brave and safe and present. My reasons for playing were my own. Some of them are shared with others. Playing taught me not to judge what I thought people were getting out of a scene based on an outsider’s perspective. It was revelatory that violence and powerlessness could be a source of joy or pride in a way I would not have understood had I chosen to remain solely an observer. I know there will be some doubts about my objectivity, whether my sense of understanding is impeded by experience. I am not the first anthropologist to grapple with subjectivity in an erotic field (Kulick and Wilson 1995; Newton 2000; Altork 1995; Newmahr 2008) and I feel that I have come to the same conclusion, that this participatory experience can be a source of data used in creating etic knowledge.

As anthropologists, we ask to share the most intimate details of others’ lives. This kind of witnessing impacts one’s self, regardless of whether the subject is sex (Day 2007; Queen 1997), death (Platt and Persico 1992; Lock 2002), or hunger (Scheprer-Hughes 1992). Kulick asks, "Where exactly is the rapport, one might ask, in a set of disciplinary practices that seems to demand (in order to avoid rejection and expulsion) evasion, concealment, and lying about one's opinions, identities, and activities outside the field (these are the practices usually lurking behind
the glib phrase 'adaptation') - even as it conditions anthropologists to resist and resent if local people do the same? For the problem is that in anthropology, other people's secrets are valuable commodities. Ethnographic success is often measured, and anthropological careers often made, by the extent to which the anthropologist gets other to 'open up', as this process is so benignly known, and reveal secrets - magical formulae, cult fetishes, esoteric myths, hidden rituals, private experiences, golden stools. But what about our own secrets?” (1995:11).

I do not have a final answer. I did not have a divine revelation that identity is fluid and multifocal, although that is what I believe. I did not throw out all of my vanilla clothes and become kinky as my primary identity. This is a personal way of saying that I went into the field with expectations and had to revise everything I thought I knew. The things that taught me the most were not what I expected. I started out thinking of myself as already almost native and at the end realized how deeply different interpretations of similar experiences can be. There is an artificial separation between us and them, when in fact difference exists between us and us.
CHAPTER THREE - PLAY

“Kinky” is defined by both activities and relationships. The nature and structure of relationships will be discussed further in Chapter Four (Identity). Activities include both formal and informal elements. Here I will describe the general arc of a scene, a discrete unit of formal activity, from inception to close. I will also give a brief overview of the types of interactions that may occur within a scene. A scene begins with negotiation, moves to establishing space, the formal opening of the scene, warm up, climax, then the dénouement, which concludes the scene with a more or less formal ending followed by aftercare. See figure 1 for a graphical representation of the arc of a scene.

Figure 1 - Graphical representation of a scene

Before I discuss the logistics of how people play, I would like to take a moment to discuss the motivation to play. People got very different things out of play. Some enjoyed a
power exchange, where one partner was in control of the actions of the other. Others gained sexual satisfaction from humiliation or pain. Pain could be something to be measured against, to prove one can endure. It might also be reframed as intense sensation and experienced as pleasurable. Some facets of the kinky community did not rely on giving or receiving pain, as exemplified by people with a fetish for an item or body part not usually considered sexual. In Chapter Four (Identity), I discuss how a sense of being outsiders brings the community together. People in the kinky community felt that their desires had been judged as unsavory or even sinful by the vanilla community. There was not any one predilection that one must meet to be a part of the community, but rather a willingness to pursue personal satisfaction (whether sexual or otherwise) and be willing to accept others doing the same, even if it was not comprehensible.

Although parties were held less often than other types of socials, they functioned as a focal point for the community. Central to parties was “play.” These play parties were hosted by various clubs monthly or bimonthly and were organized to facilitate kinky interactions. Not everyone who attended a party would play at the party. Many people only played in private but the point of the parties was to participate, either directly through play or through being witness to play. Parties occurred in semi-private or private venues, ranging from a dedicated dungeon owned by the club to a rented clubhouse to a private residence. Space was organized around play stations, areas that were designated by the presence of specialized equipment or otherwise demarcated by the host. Equipment might be transported to the space by members of the club or it might be stored onsite. Each play station had at least ten feet of room around it. In the case of the clubhouse, CND varied between clustering play areas in the center of the room and having social tables on the outside to placing the social tables in the center with the play stations
hugging the walls. At the LUST dungeon, each room held two to five play stations. In private residences, the setup varied according to the layout of the house.

The equipment

A play station usually had one major piece of equipment anchoring the space. This could vary from a St. Andrew’s cross to a bed to a spanking bench. A St. Andrew’s cross is a large, upright X shaped frame, about seven feet tall. These could be free standing or anchored to a wall. A spanking bench was a type of bench, usually padded, that a person could be bent over, knelt on, or sat upon. Another piece of equipment was a bondage frame, which was a wooden framed rectangle about the size of a queen sized bed with holes or eyelets for rope or other types of restraints. Whipping posts, pillories, cages, and bathtubs were also different types of equipment that might be the center of a play station. Usually, there was some method to restrain the bottom (the person receiving the sensation in a scene).

Figure 2 - St. Andrew’s Crosses
Figure 3 - Spanking Bench

Figure 4 - Hamster Wheel
Pre-scene negotiation and establishing space

Some clubs were more or less formal about the beginning of a party. There was usually an awkward time when people first show up and no one was playing yet. People milled about, partaking of the potluck and chatting with acquaintances. The party truly began when the first set of people started playing. It was similar to being in a nightclub with a dance floor – at the beginning of the night, people were hesitant to be the first to start dancing.

Play could be bound by space and time. For some people, being kinky influenced all aspects of their identity. For others, kinkiness might only be something accessed in particular contexts. Regardless, it was acknowledged that play, in the form of discrete scenes, intensified at parties. People in the kinky community were very insistent on the fact that every scene was different, depending on the participants, the space, the energy. That being said, following Victor Turner’s classic analysis of ritual, I will demonstrate how scenes generally followed the pattern of separation, liminality, transformation, and reintegration (1969).

Separation began before the party even started. Like the pilgrimage in Turner and Turner’s analysis (1978), the experience began with a journey. Most parties were hosted away from the city, where the threat of state interference was lessened by the lack of neighbors. The only way to initially get directions to a party was to attend a social. Locations of parties, while not usually closely guarded secrets, were not common knowledge. Ideally, upon arriving at a party, people left behind vanilla existence and submerged themselves fully in the kinky world. For some people, that involved wearing a particular type of clothing (or none at all) or using a different name.

Negotiation was the opening salvo between people interested in playing with one another. The number of people in a scene varied. I witnessed someone do self-suspension, creating a scene involving one person. Occasionally, I saw scenes with as many as six people. I am sure
there were more elaborate scenes involving even more people, but in my experience, scenes usually occurred between two or three people. I discuss negotiation in context of relationships further in Chapter Four (Identity), but for our purposes here, it is enough to note that negotiation was the initial contact and agreement to play. People might negotiate well in advance or set something up minutes before playing. People played with significant others, established play partners, or first time acquaintances. Once a scene had been negotiated, including what would or would not occur, who would participate, and whether safe words would be used, there was usually a time between the end of negotiation and the beginning of a scene. Emma, a female switch, noted, “Then I spend at least twenty minutes, depending on the amount of time between the negotiation and the scene, fretting because I am like, oh my god, I can’t believe I just asked this person to do this. It doesn’t matter how familiar I am with this person, there is always a fretting moment. I don’t know that it ever gets any easier to surrender to the will and whim of another.” Although the scene had not officially begun, the negotiation was a beginning of connection between the people involved for the course of play.

On a practical level, someone had to start the negotiation. It might be as casual as one person asking another, “Do you want to whip me?” In my experience, unplanned encounters were usually instigated by the bottom. Other times a scene involved an elaborate screening process involving in-depth questionnaires. Code or innuendo could be misleading and was therefore frowned upon. People were expected to know what they wanted and to be explicit in sharing that information. People sometimes turned down play proposals, although this was not usually a direct confrontation. Most people tried to avoid this awkward situation by feeling one another out gradually. A refusal was not seen as a personal affront, if it was done tactfully. It was perfectly acceptable to say, “No, I do not feel like playing right now.”
While some people were fretting, someone had to go about the actual process of laying claim to a play station. With scenes lasting anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and a half, the equipment was often in use. People might wait for specific equipment or adjust their play to suit the equipment available. Rachael, a female dominant, said, “Not to sound silly, but the one thing you know is going to have to happen is that somebody is going to have to stake out a spot where the scene happens. Otherwise, you may never have a scene. In that process, some people may literally erect sacred space in that scene space. What that may mean is drawing a circle or making a circle with rope, calling it a sacred space.” Once the logistics of claiming a station occurred, people might lay claim to the metaphysical space. Keep in mind that not everyone invested play with the trappings of ritual, but there was a significant subset of people who saw their play as spiritual, even though they acknowledged that others dismissed their practice as “woo-woo” or “hippie.”

**Opening a scene and warm up**

Once physical and metaphorical space was claimed, “You may have negotiated an hour before and now it’s time, kind of creating your bubble, saying that, this is you, this is me, and this is you and me and we are in this space and doing our own thing, regardless of what other people are doing. It’s focusing both people’s attention on the moment instead of what you did before or what you want to do after. It is this moment and it’s these people and this is what we are doing now. That can last for a while because the top is establishing their dominance in that space” (Emma). The scene might open in a variety of ways, but there was always an establishment of who was the top and who was the bottom. In Sebastian’s case, a male switch, his mistress put on his collar and it “locks me into being submissive.” In another case, Ava, a female boy (boy as in the submissive in a Daddy/boy relationship), removed her work clothes
and put on her boots and a jock strap. Her Daddy then placed a chain and lock around one of her boots to establish dominance. Other ways of establishing dominance included binding the bottom with rope or placing them in a physically vulnerable position, such as with the genitals exposed. Usually, the top manipulated the bottom’s body to get a baseline of where the bottom was. It was believed that a bottom’s body spoke truth about a bottom’s state of mind, whether they are tense, nervous, desirous, and it was part of the skill of being a top to be able to read a bottom. Skin that was cool to the touch might indicate restricted blood flow. There was also the art of processing pain. People reacted to pain differently, but an experienced top would note whether a bottom was holding their breath or if their muscles tensed up after a sensation. In the beginning, the top usually gave the bottom time to process through each sensation before applying another. Later in the scene, a top might deliberately layer the sensations without giving the bottom a chance to work through them. This created intensity.

The warm up was considered a necessary part of the scene. Audrey, a female submissive, noted, “We’ll start out with a really nice easy flogging warm up, bring the blood up to the surface just to warm you up and slowly graduate to heavier toys as you move on.” A warm up might begin with relatively light sensations. Once a bottom was considered sufficiently warm, play then progressed toward heavier interactions with more intense sensations. Sometimes, however, there was little warm up, shocking the bottom into a state of compliance. One method of doing this was face slapping. Another method practiced by a particular male top was to strike a bound bottom forcefully on the buttocks with a paddle made of a duct taped phonebook. Play involved a multitude of interactions. Some of the more popular types are described below.
Types of play

Play can roughly be divided into three types: physical, mental, and service. Each has a different connotation for the type of relationship between the people involved and the appropriate venue. I will describe several examples of each in order to sketch out some of the practical details and orient the reader to the behaviors involved. This is made difficult by our society’s unease with frank discussions of sex and the lack of appropriate vocabulary. I have chosen to use more formal language for a broader discussion but I will use vernacular terms when they express something lost by a clinical description. The separation between types of play is a theoretical device to allow analysis of tendencies. Usually play happened on a number of levels, shifting throughout the course of a scene.

Physical play refers to play that involved direct physical contact between the top and the bottom, either through their bodies or through toys. Examples of physical play include impact play, rough body play, electrical play, and fire play. Not surprisingly, flogging, a type of impact play, involved the use of floggers, which were a type of whip with many tails. Probably the most popularly recognized example of a flogger was the cat-o-nine-tails. Many floggers had more than nine tails. They could be made of leather, silk, rubber, or other heavy materials. Occasionally they could be made of fur. The fur ones were used for sensation rather than pain. The top would strike the bottom with a flogger on the buttocks, thighs, or back (avoiding the kidney area). With any toy wielded to strike someone at a distance, wrapping was always a concern. This occurred when the tip of the toy unintentionally wrapped around the body. The physics of this motion could cause much discomfort and wrapping was seen as a sign of a poor top. Flogging could cause bruising or welting. I return to the topic of marking below. Impact play was divided into two categories: thuddy and stingy. Floggers were usually an example of thuddy, though some floggers with sharp edged leather or made of rubber could also be stingy.
Canes were an example of a stingy toy. Flexible rods of wood, acrylic or other materials were used to strike a bottom, usually in places similar to a flogger. However, canes could also be used on smaller areas of the body, including the palms and the soles of the feet. Caning could cause bruises, welting, or even draw blood. Bottoms that enjoyed impact play would say they were either into stingy or thuddy, but in truth it was a continuum, with misery sticks (thin sticks that look unimposing but which cut deeply) at one end and the thuddy toy of awesome (a foam wrapped plastic pipe) at the other.

Rough body play was a favorite because it did not require any extraneous toys. It involved punching, hitting, slapping, pushing, pinching and biting. Spanking, although associated with rough body play, was usually separated into its own category. People who enjoyed spanking might not engage in any other forms of physical play. Sometimes, people who only spank are disparaged as not being really kinky. It was the common belief that spanking may be the most pedestrian kink that even vanilla people engaged in.

As a newcomer, one of the more difficult scenes to witness was someone being punched with closed fists. Blows were usually aimed at the meaty parts of the body in order to avoid damage to organs, but there was something that struck me as more violent than the slapping and pinching I had witnessed up to that point. Once I learned that the difference between an open hand and a closed one was the difference between stingy and thuddy, it made more sense. Punching was not considered more violent, though participants recognized that this activity might evoke more feelings of the taboo.

Electrical and fire were two of the more showy types of play. They required more specialized equipment and usually attracted sizable crowds. Electrical play could involve a violet wand or a TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) unit. Violet wands...
generated static electricity which can zap a sub. Think of the science experiment in middle school with the static electricity generator that raised the students’ hair. The shock could be more or less intense, depending on the setting. The electricity ran along the surface of the skin. One attachment for the violet wand was a body plate. The bottom placed the body plate in direct contact with their skin and their entire body became suffused with static electricity. Anything that touched them, especially metal, generated a spark. This led to interesting uses for old Christmas tinsel. A TENS unit ran current through muscle tissue to cause muscle contractions. This device was used in a variety of ways, including on the genitals.

Fire play and its close cousin, wax play, were made for drama. This type of play required its own set of safety rules above and beyond common party rules. In the case of Devil’s Fire, or cell popping, a metal poker (sometimes a dissection needle) was heated with a butane lighter to red-hot then rested on the skin. A small popping noise occurred as the water in the cell was vaporized. This was done repeatedly, usually in a pattern. The sensation was usually considered mildly intense but left pleasing marks. Another form of fire play involved flash cotton. This is the stage prop used by magicians for a burst of flame. The cotton was spun into fine lines which were laid out on the bottom’s body. One end was lit and the design flamed up. Depending on the thickness and length of the lines, the sensation might last three to ten seconds. There might be some blistering of the skin, but it was relatively minor. Wax play, as the name denotes, was dripping melted wax onto a bottom. For more dramatic effect, candles with fluorescent wax were used under a black light. The wax could then be removed using a knife or other bladed instrument.

Physical play could be the least intimate form of play. This was illustrated by the proliferation of “demos,” which were presentations of skill. One of the first events I attended
was a flogging and whipping demo. Sometimes, physical play was just a demonstration of a
technique for the top and an enjoyable experience for the bottom. There would be no
expectation of a real connection or an energetic exchange in these cases. For example, Charlotte,
a female submissive, considered herself a “fire bottom.” She was very choosy who she would
play with in general, but she would bottom to people she would not otherwise play with if they
were doing fire. Physical play was appropriate at parties. In fact, most of the setup was
designed around physical scenes.

One result of physical play was the marking of the body. Contrary to what I initially
believed, people often actively sought marks in the form of bruises, welts, blisters, or cuts.
People were careful (usually) to avoid marks that could not be covered by vanilla clothing.
Beyond that stricture, it was common to see bottoms running around a party comparing bruises
and puncture marks. I did not understand this behavior until I began to participate through play.
For me, marking was proof that I had endured. It was also a way to extend the experience into
vanilla life. Every time I bumped a bruise for the next week, I would remember how I was
injured. It was unexpectedly pleasant. In mainstream American culture, there is little room for
corporeal memory. Being marked, however, was occasionally problematic. Many people told
stories of doctors asking whether they were being abused. In one case, a woman played just
before her wedding. Because she had a cold, she was using cough medicine, which caused her to
bruise more prominently than she normally did. She spent the next week having deep tissue
massages and treating her skin with different oils to reduce the marks before her mother helped
her with her wedding dress. A common topic among the submissives in subLiminal was
marking, both how to enhance it and how to treat it.
Spanning the distance between physical and mental play was bondage. This could involve rope, chains, saran wrap, or other forms of restraint. There is obviously a physical component but the mental component is less obvious. Tying someone takes skill. Some quick ties could be learned over the course of an hour but many people in Cactus practiced more intricate forms of rope bondage. One example of this was shibari, a practice based on Japanese bondage. Tying someone using this method could take up to an hour. The mental discipline involved in remaining pliable was part of the achievement of the bottom. Suspension bondage, when a bottom’s weight was partially or completely supported by ropes, required a high skill level and sturdy construction. The time spent prepping for a suspension usually far exceeded the suspension itself. The creation of ties was a form of warm up in itself. The top handled the bottom’s body in a way that established dominance, moving it at their will. Bondage might occur in isolation or might be part of a larger scene.

Mental play occurred less frequently in public. It was considered more intimate than purely physical play. People were also less likely to engage in mental play with casual play partners. Examples of mental play include role playing, humiliation, and mind fucks. Role playing might be as simple as deciding immediately before the scene that the top would be a prison guard and the bottom was the prisoner or it may involve days of planning, including outfits, scenery, and props. Age play was a common form of role playing, when the bottom pretended they were a child or pubescent teen. The top could be cast in the role of parent, teacher, nanny or other adult figure. Humiliation and mind fucks were considered emotional sadism, where the top was deriving pleasure from causing the bottom emotional distress. Humiliation could take many forms, ranging from name calling to forced homosexuality. In forced homosexuality, the focus was on making someone who identified as straight engage in
sexual acts with someone of the same gender. It was only humiliating for someone who would not otherwise engage in these acts. Related to forced homosexuality was sissification, when a masculine or butch person was forced to wear feminine clothing. Gender roles and the transgression thereof will be discussed in Chapter Six. Golden showers, where the top urinated on the bottom, could also be considered humiliating.

Mind fucks were when the bottom expected one thing to happen (usually something extremely dangerous or beyond their limit) and something else entirely happened. For example, a bottom might be forced to drink what they believed was urine when in fact it was chicken broth. In another case, a bottom was forced to place their hand onto what they thought was a live rat trap after witnessing another rat trap snap a pencil. The trap had been modified to barely snap. The point was that the bottom proved their willingness to go that far while the top proved that they would not really endanger the bottom. Jessica, a female dominant, explained her motivations thus, “A lot of my scenes, I don’t know if I’d say that they are emotional sadism, but I definitely try to get past the barriers that women put up to protect themselves because we all have to be strong and amazing, you know, and none of us are strong enough and amazing enough and I think in the scene, in that moment when I am there to protect them, is the perfect time to let them know that I see all of their failings and that they are beautiful and to remind them of the strength in their failures and to remind them that everything is perfect. That is a big responsibility on the top’s part. I believe in the campsite rule - leave it better than you found it.”

Service is a type of activity that could be considered both play and also a manifestation of a structured relationship. In service, the bottom would perform tasks for the top. In the context of scenes, service functioned in a couple of ways. First, service could be a frame for the scene. The top might require the bottom to perform a service, such as cleaning a sink, when there was
no expectation of the bottom being able to perform correctly. The bottom would then be punished, in the form of play, for their misdeeds. Lucy, a female bottom, explained, “I would be really into cleaning, like cleaning someone’s kitchen or cleaning someone’s bathroom, and then you know, specifically Mary in this case, having her mess something up on purpose or change her mind about it and I’d have to go back and do it all and then of course there is something wrong and so have to go back again. That would be cool… I guess it’s the being-kept-on-my-toes aspect of it that, kind of the anticipation. Like I know that she’s not going to let me alone until I’m done. It’s not going to be like, well, you cleaned; there’s going to be stuff [play] that happens and it’s the not knowing that is part of that.” Another purpose of service was to give the bottom a focus. Subspace will be discussed further, but for our purposes here, suffice it to say that it is an altered state of consciousness experienced by a bottom as a result of play. In that altered state, some bottoms enjoyed having a simple task that they could perform well that pleased the top. An example of this could be a massage or a blowjob. In other cases, service was used as a focus to help bring a bottom back from subspace. Rachael offered, “I’ve made people wind up my rope, depending on if they are really out of their head and they need to come back soon. I might give them a really small task because I know they enjoy it or will take the cue to come back.” This thread will be picked up in the discussion on aftercare below.

Despite an overall credo of “your kink is okay by me,” people were more self-conscious of some mental play, making it a private practice rather than a public one. For example, Sebastian cross-dressed in private because he feels like others, especially men, would judge him for his interest in wearing a dress. Another example I address in Chapter Eight (Violence) is rape play, or consensual non-consent. This was a type of role play where the top played as if they would take their sexual pleasure from the bottom despite any of the bottom’s resistance.
Any play that resulted in the top having an orgasm usually takes place in private. I will return to the theme of public versus private and the nature of sex will be more fully discussed in Chapter Seven (Sex).

**Climax of the scene**

During the warm up, the top would gradually increase the intensity of sensation. One common technique was to play close to the limit of what a bottom could stand then pull back some. People could endure more for longer if there was a less intense period. This could be accomplished by switching toys or shifting from more physical play to more mental play or vice versa. Emma explained,

> It builds in intensity and then recedes. I think that is in an effort to prolong the process. I’ve seen really talented tops be able to extract a lot more from a bottom. If you go out guns blazing from square one, you end up with a five minute scene. If you build then recede, then build more, in that space, you can end up with a two and a half, three hour scene, which are the ones I prefer. In that build up and bring down, you build this dance between two people, or however many people are there. For me, as a bottom, I feel like I wonder for a moment if I’ve reached my limit and I am wondering for a moment if I’ve gotten there, they pull back and bring me back down and when they build it back up they go past the point where I thought I’d reached my limit and then they bring it back down and it keeps growing. You are far beyond where you thought you could be at the beginning of the scene. You have a clear expectation of where you think you can go and you’ve by far exceeded that because of the skill of the top.

Ultimately, scenes resulted in some sort of climax. Though the language and graphic at the beginning of the chapter depict the climax as a specific crest in the energy of the scene, the
climax could last for a length of time or it could be a matter of a few seconds. In public, one could identify the climax from a bottom’s behavior. There were several forms a climax might take. One of the most common for female bottoms was orgasm. This did not hold true for male bottoms in public. For a discussion of the implications of orgasm for different genders, see Chapter Seven (Sex). In other cases, the climax was akin to catharsis. This could take the form of crying or laughing or stillness. Returning to Emma’s narrative, she said, “I like to play to the point where there is that release and it feels like this dam has broken and there is this big rush of, almost like water, and more often than not when I am in that space, I am crying and not just crying, but bawling. It’s kind of like crashing waves, it’s very ecstatic. It’s very cleansing and primal as well.” There was something subversive in the ability to scream as loud as one would like. Another reaction to the climax of a scene was known as the bottom going “nonresponsive” or “nonverbal.” A bottom would no longer be able to interact with their surroundings in a coherent manner or verbalize their experiences. This sometimes indicated the bottom has hit subspace. Tops may experience something similar, known as top space. In private, the climax of a scene could involve the top coming to orgasm as well. In public, the top’s display of the climax was usually limited to a dynamic stillness, an intense focus, or occasionally laughter.

Ecstasy is sometimes difficult to witness. There are not many mainstream opportunities to watch someone in the throes of ecstasy. Outside of religious rites, the only common access to ecstasy in present day United States is through sex. How many Americans have seen other people having sex? There is always pornography, but that is usually a product of technology and consumerism. People may know their partner’s reactions to orgasm or their own, but that is a limited sample. The term ecstasy turned up again and again during interviews to describe the climax of a scene, on both the part of the bottom and the top. Of course ecstasy was not always
the result or even the goal of every scene. People’s motivations for scenes could be as variable as people’s motivations for other forms of social interaction - comfort, bonding, boredom, demonstrating skill, or just plain fun.

The resolution of the scene was often less defined than the beginning. Many people said they “just knew” when a scene was over. On a practical level, the play station had to be vacated for the next people in line. That usually signified the end of play and the end of the formal scene. Some people had formal rituals to end the scene. Audrey, for example, said, “At the end of play, we bring the scene to a close. I’ll kneel at his feet, we’ll exchange a few words, I’ll thank him for it, then he’ll remove the collar. Do something to keep it contained, for this amount of space and time, this is what we’ll be doing; this is our head space. Once you can take that off or enclose it, you can go back to normal.”

Although the scene was finished, there was still a period of interaction between the top and the bottom known as aftercare. Sometimes it took place during the scene, but usually it was something that happened afterward. It was recognized that people need time to come down from a scene. One of the most common types of aftercare was cuddling. The top would stroke the bottom or embrace them, perhaps wrapping the bottom in a blanket. Other ways of performing aftercare included meeting the physical needs of both the top and bottom through nourishment. People were split on whether protein or sugar was better after a scene, but everyone agreed that water was important. As mentioned earlier, giving a bottom small tasks, such as cleaning the equipment or packing up the toys, would help them focus and return to functioning more rapidly. Sometimes, the top would reassure the bottom that they performed well and that the top was pleased with them.
An experienced bottom was expected to know what they needed and an experienced top was expected to be good at giving it. I am not entirely sure how this process was learned, as aftercare was considered more private than a scene. People were given space at the end of the scene to regroup. There were some cases when aftercare was negotiated from people not involved in the scene. This often happened when the top was not the bottom’s romantic partner. In a scene that was notable because there was only one person involved, a woman who performed self-suspension negotiated aftercare from others because she knew she would get “spacey” afterwards. The needs of bottoms usually received more attention than the needs of tops. Ethan, a male top, described the situation, “For me, sometimes I find that what I need directly conflicts with what the sub [bottom] needs. I’ve had instances where I’m on such an adrenaline rush, where I am still shaking and in my zone and the sub needs to cuddle and relax and I have to fight to keep myself calm to give them some time and then I need to walk away and just calm myself down. Sometimes it is a conflict. I think that the primary thing that dominants need is a way to come down, to cool off the energy and adrenaline rush that they are experiencing. There are people who joke that aftercare for a dominant is a blow job. That’s of course assuming that the dominant is a guy.”

Not everyone engaged in aftercare. Jenna, a female switch, said, “There are scenes where I need to be left alone. There are some scenes if you try to be sweet and loving, I will hate you because you just hurt me - how dare you try and make me happy now? Or just because the scene is about me being abused and hurt and left alone, just left, like a piece of trash, that’s the idea. If you then try to reverse that, you’re ruining the whole concept.” There was also this weird one-upmanship that happened between bottoms about who needed less aftercare. Bottoms who require less aftercare, or none at all, were seen as tougher than those who do. Interestingly, none
of the tops I interviewed begrudged the bottom aftercare. Jessica, the female dominant mentioned earlier, articulated her need for aftercare thus, “Some people are very much, let me just help you clean up and get done, and they don’t want the cuddling and they don’t want the touching. I like the cuddling and touching. I do some pretty terrible things to people in that space and while I know what I am expressing is consensual, at times it feels ugly and I enjoy and need afterwards the cuddling to reassure myself that I didn’t truly harm anybody. Because I say mean things and some of the emotional sadism that I do, I worry about afterwards, so that cool down is important for me, even if they don’t always want it.” Gender informed aftercare, with the understanding that feminine people needed more aftercare than masculine ones, as illustrated by this quotation from Jo, a female switch that only played with women but engaged in gender play, “When I’m playing a guy-on-guy kinda thing there’s not a lot of aftercare because it’s still like, you know, you have a buddy over for pizza and beer and it becomes mutual blow jobs you know, just - dude, see ya later.” Outside of her partner taking on a masculine role, she explained, “The last person I was with when they finished I got them down and sat them up and held them steady until things stopped spinning and they latched onto me so I held them for a while and I guess when they were able to come back to consciousness, I got a blanket and a bottle of water and set them up on the sofa while I cleaned up and put away stuff. So I’m there, it’s not like I say you’re an object, you’re a thing, I’m done, I have nothing to do with you. If somebody’s gonna cry I’m gonna hold them.” Thomas, a male switch, noted that concerning aftercare, “I like it. I don’t need it. If it doesn’t happen, I’m not going to get upset or something.” Sebastian said, “I don’t feel like I need to be taken care of too much.” Gender will be discussed more fully in Chapter Six.
Interruptions in a scene

Not everything always went according to plan. People acknowledged that mistakes could be made or the world outside of a party could intrude. There was always the risk of something going seriously wrong and someone getting hurt in a way that was unintended. As I discuss in Chapter Nine (Hegemony), the police showed up at a party while I was playing. In another case, a woman had an allergic reaction to the lubricant in a new brand of condoms. The scene had to be ended completely so she could flush the lubricant out of her system. Other times, the scene would have to be interrupted or ended as a direct result of the action taking place. Sometimes the position of the bottom could cause unintended discomfort, such as when an arm falls asleep. In this case, the bottom could ask for a pause in the action, either directly or using a safe word, such as yellow. Safe words will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Eight, along with a discussion of risk and danger. On occasion, a more serious situation would arise. In one dramatic example, Ethan discussed how he was cutting off someone’s clothing and the knife slipped and stabbed the bottom in the foot. Luckily, he was playing in public, so other people helped him staunch the blood flow and remove the restraints. The bottom recovered and did not have to be brought to the hospital. In less dramatic circumstances, either party, but usually the bottom, could decide to end the scene for other reasons. The safe word for this was usually red. This might be a result of going beyond the bottom’s limit of sensation or because the bottom was reacting negatively on a psychological level. If a scene ended early for any reason, ideally there was a debriefing period after the snuggling and reassurance when each party discussed the logistics of what went wrong and how they felt about any issues that came up.

I find that people discuss scenes like narratives, with a fixed beginning, build up, climax, and resolution. Storytelling is how sense is made of experience. For some people, playing was something that was separate from their vanilla life. Limiting it by ritual, or binding it to
particular times and locations, helped people contain that experience as separate from other aspects of their identity or behavior. For others, playing was just one activity among many that reflected a commitment to the kinky lifestyle. This general outline of a scene, combined with the subsequent description of kinky relationships, serves a starting point for theoretical explorations of kinkiness.

**Ritual Is Not the Beginning Nor the End**

Despite the stress I have placed on scenes as measurable entities, play behaviors took place in other, less formal interactions as well. Casual displays of dominance frequently occurred between long standing partners, including hair pulling, biting, and slapping. Sometimes these escalated into more intense interactions not bound in the way described above. Despite the thrill it gives me to write about ritual practices, people’s lives were not over-determined by a slavish devotion to ritual.

Ritual performances, especially those which violate taboos, in a kinky community in the United States beg comparison to other cultures. One of the most familiar comparisons for a Western audience may be the Catholic rite of transubstantiation. This is the belief that the Holy Spirit transforms the bread and wine of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Jesus Christ (Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff 2010). In this ritual, the congregation ritually violates the taboo against cannibalism. This transgression serves to sanctify the rite. In a less well known example, practitioners of ada’mappurondo in Sulawesi, Indonesia engage in headhunting ritual. Headhunting, according to local lore, ceased well before European missionaries and militaries arrived in Indonesia and what remains are ritual practices (George 1993). As George notes, “What makes pangngae [the ritual headhunt] so striking, these days, is its artifice. No enemy is actually slain, no actual head is taken. In place of a head,
villagers use a coconut or some other skull-shaped surrogate” (George 1993:699). The violence of this ritual allows the expression of otherwise forbidden desires in a socially acceptable way.

In the kinky community, liminal states were created in part for their own end. People enjoyed the communitas that results from being in-between. The structure was similar to a rite of passage, but the liminal state did not signify a transition from one state to another, such as child to adult. However, I argue that the liminal state was part of a larger process of shifting habitus. People had decided to embrace identities and behaviors viewed as wrong or sick in mainstream American culture. This required a renegotiation of a person’s relationship to the self and others. Returning to the liminal state over and over gave people the chance to whittle down old perceptions of kinky behaviors as shameful and instead replace them with positive associations. Non-traditional relationships were affirmed as healthy if they were not harmful. At the end of a party, people had to be reintegrated into the vanilla world. However, each party brought participants closer to being integrated in the kinky community. Liminality became its own practice.

1 A note on grammar – I use the “singular they” in cases where I cannot avoid using pronouns. Gendered pronouns presume that a person only identifies as masculine or feminine, which is not always the case. They also fail to recognize gender-fluid people who identify as neither. This convention is common in the kinky community and I have adopted it here, despite the fact that it is disparaged in some academic circles. For a further discussion of gender neutrality and grammar, see Allen (2008).
CHAPTER FOUR - IDENTITY

Identity is not a linear or logical experience, but rather encompasses aspects of the self, relationships to others, and responses to cultural forces. Here I offer descriptions of different aspects of identity in the kinky community. To begin with, I trace the notion of “natural” or “true” identity that threaded itself through most conversations about identity. Afterward, I discuss some of the ways in which people construct a self-identification. Then I analyze the structures that bridge the distance between self-identity and community identity, including interpersonal relationships and mores of the community. Finally, I examine ways in which community identity is created and maintained. While other chapters emphasize how the kinky community is uniquely situated in terms of sex, gender, ritual, and material culture, this chapter focuses on the ethnographic details of the community, highlighting the ways in which the kinky community may be studied in traditional anthropological lines of inquiry, such as marriage patterns and group dynamics. Viewed in this light, the kinky community forms a more or less coherent system similar to other small-scale groups in urban settings.

“Kinky” is a somewhat constructed term I use to encompass the community in Cactus. Many people identified variously as leather, fetishists, perverts, Dominant/submissives, or sadomasochists, but kinky was an umbrella term used by most people. Perhaps I was not asking the right questions when I first entered the community, but I did not hear anyone refer to the community as s/m or BDSM for a couple of months; “kinky” was the term used to refer to various groups and in opposition to the vanilla world. When I asked people how long they had been kinky, they knew exactly what I was talking about. However, when I rephrased the question to “When did you first identify as kinky?” people questioned “kinky” as an identity
category. For this reason, analyzing a “kinky identity” is a bit of a construct. It is something people were, but not necessarily an emic category that people classified as a separate component of identity. This makes sense, kinkiness is viewed as a natural facet of a person’s existence. Unless someone crosses an identity boundary, one does not think of when one first identified as a boy or an American or a Catholic. These become separate identity categories if they are adopted later in life, rather than being an inherent and stable trait. Interestingly, most people can remember when they first discovered the term “kinky.” Rachael was not alone in her feelings that the characteristics predated having a name for it: “Rather than hear about it and go, ‘oh, maybe I’m like that,’ it was ‘oh, I’m like that and that’s the word for that’ […] It seems contrary to how most people self-identify. It tends to be, they find a label, learn about the label, then become like the label in practice.” Most people evinced a sense of relief when they found that not only was there a name for what they were, but there were others like them. This is particularly notable in a community where communication with children about kinky topics is not culturally possible. In the United States, it is not uncommon for teenagers to be exposed to sex through the media but to lack direct information from real adults, and many children are left to draw their own conclusions about sexuality. Technology has opened many doors, and the people under thirty I interviewed were more likely to have embraced a kinky identity at an earlier age, given the access the internet provides to alternative sexualities. For the people over forty, they had kinky thoughts and desires from a young age, but no language to talk about them or community to measure themselves against. The decision for older people to adopt a kinky identity was fueled by conflict, perhaps more so than the decision for younger people.
Identity and the Self

The first question I asked people was to describe themselves. Many people strive to be seen as whole beings, not reducible to check boxes. Charlotte articulated the reluctance felt by many people in the community to pigeonhole themselves but at the same time showed facility with the terms she knew others would find appropriate for her when she said, “You want me to put labels on myself? I am a queer, because I hate the term pansexual because it makes me think of people who have sex with satyrs. Kinky. Poly. Pagan. Geeky. [Submissive.] Is that enough labels?” Labels were disparaged as reductionist, yet everyone used them as shorthand to indicate their own or others’ interests. Interestingly, when I asked people to describe themselves, many people reframed it as, “in a kinky context?” Kinky became not an identity, but a location, where people were and the situation in which they defined themselves. Anyone had the potential to define themselves in a kinky way; it was not exclusionary.

One of the most common denigrating labels for kinkiness in the vanilla world is “unnatural.” Perhaps in reaction to this, many people in the kinky community fell back on the trope of naturalness to explain their identity and desires. There was also great societal pressure to conflate “natural” with “good.” As I discuss in the Chapter Nine (Hegemony), it was as if choosing (rather than being born to) an alternative sexual expression invalidated its authenticity. This is similar to the debate about homosexuality, whether it is nature or nurture. Americans ascribe more legitimacy to things that are genetically determined. I do not see the arguments as being mutually exclusive. Anthropology teaches that many variations on all cultural practices exist, and kinkiness is certainly cultural. However, many people in the kinky community framed their experiences outside of an anthropological, cross-cultural perspective. Nature became an
inarguable force against which no striving could overcome. Ruby, who struggled with her kinky desires, noted,

Ruby: Kinky was outside the norm. That was something you don’t do. That was something weird, sick, unnatural. So that’s something I suppressed, those kinky desires. They came to me naturally, so it wasn’t something that I just one day decided, ‘oh, I’m gonna be kinky.’ As long as I can remember, I had those thoughts but I didn’t openly discuss them because they weren’t acceptable in the environment that I was in.

Sophia: (Which was a very fundamentalist environment.)

Ruby: I think there are a lot of people out there that think kinky is unacceptable but it is who you are. You can’t deny it, which is what I tried to do essentially.

I cannot say how many kinky people there are cross-culturally. It is possible to see analogues in alternative sexual expressions, which are more or less accepted, depending on the culture. There is also the question of gendered expression (although I am not stating that kinkiness is equated to transgenderism). Additionally, there are religious and ritual behaviors that use pain to create altered states of consciousness. However, I believe that kinky as an identity is an artifact of specific confluence of factors, including capitalist-driven consumption, hegemonic ideas of gender and race, power imbalances in relationships between classes of people based on income or nationality, and a sense of alienation from embodied experience brought about by living in a hyper-connected society where virtual experiences crowd out physical connections to others. Without these influences, I do not know what “kinky” impulses would look like. Within the community, there was a belief that kinky dynamics were the natural outgrowth of fundamental personality traits. Audrey accessed this trope when she explained the
power relationship with her partner, “We do a power exchange to some degree. We incorporate some D/s [Dominant/submissive] aspects into things but it’s just more a natural extension of ourselves; he is just more of a dominant personality and I’m more of a submissive personality. It’s not something overt where it’s like, yes, we are exchanging power right now.” A power exchange was an explicit acknowledgement that one person was giving over power to the other. In this set-up, both partners were considered equally powerful, yet one chose to submit to the will of the other. The other accepted the responsibility for directing the interaction. In Audrey’s schema, dominance and submissiveness were part of someone’s makeup outside of any one relationship. There is the question of equating submissiveness to less power, but that was the artifice of the relationship, that one partner could have more power than the other. This concept of a kinky nature, in general, and specifically a dominant or submissive nature fixed identity as if it were unchanging.

In the community, if kinkiness was natural, then play revealed something about one’s “true” nature. It is a common belief in the wider American culture that duress brings out someone’s true nature. Jo questioned her partner’s disavowal of kinky tendencies, asking “How can you not accept who you are? How can you think that there is something wrong with you in your basic building blocks?” Jo felt as though her partner had revealed herself by enjoying being dominant and was disturbed by the prospect of confronting that aspect of herself. Jenna also believed that play had the potential to unlock otherwise hidden selves. Asked about her favorite scene, she explained, “It was amazing, but I can’t share the details. It was a three hour interrogation scene. I’d never done a real interrogation scene before and it was amazing. It changed my life, completely. Have I told you about this before? He broke me. He totally broke me down and I endured it and then he let me go. Through realizing that I survived that, breaking
all those perspectives that I had, I was just able to become a whole person who was there but wasn’t allowed to get out.” In the kinky community, play was privileged as a source of authenticity. It was what separated community members from tourists (people who attend events with no “real” interest in kink, aside from watching). As Emily stated about playing in front of other people, “It is the feeling of being known.”

Play was considered a good time for identity work, to expand one’s definition of one’s self or to correct aspects that are seen as damaging. Jessica, as a top, liked pushing her bottoms to the edge, “I definitely try to get past the barriers that women put up to protect themselves because we all have to be strong and amazing, you know, and none of us are strong enough and amazing enough and I think in the scene, in that moment when I am there to protect them, is the perfect time to let them know that I see all of their failings and that they are beautiful and to remind them of the strength in their failures and to remind them that everything is perfect. That is a big responsibility on the top’s part. I believe in the campsite rule - leave it better than you found it.” Jessica tore down people in order to build them up. Experienced tops in the kinky community took advantage, either consciously or intuitively, of the moment of crisis to engage in identity work with the bottom. If this kind of play was expected, those involved usually discussed what emotions the person wanted to “work through” beforehand. The belief was that by invoking negative emotions, one could confront and eventually conquer them. Rachael explained,

Rachael: Emotionally sadism is about inflicting pain so that negative emotional responses are invoked rather than worrying about a physical action.

Misty: Once you elicit the emotions, how is that resolved?
Rachael: It depends on the response. I’ve had orgasmic responses to this, cathartic responses, there’ve been sort of bad responses. If it’s a bad response, there’s a debriefing period where I’ll inquire about what kind of feelings are happening after the fact, what kind of beliefs have changed or doubts have happened. There will be time spent older beliefs about who they think are. Reassurances about their performance, that they did well, that what they did was liked, [that] who they are is strong, that kind of thing.

People sometimes used these rituals to strive to become better, to change themselves on a fundamental level toward an ideal. More research on the ideal form towards which people were striving could illuminate similarities and differences between mainstream American culture and the kinky community as a subculture. Although I did not pursue this line of inquiry at the time, some people were actively trying to become more in touch with their emotions. Others were trying to let go of perfectionism. It seems to me as if the kinky ideal was messier and less in control than a mainstream American ideal of power as absolute control. Again, the idea was that kink could put one in touch with one’s “true” feelings.

Many people felt as if they had “always been kinky.” To this end, many people evaluated childhood fantasies in terms of kink, once they recognized that kinky is a vantage point from which to re-view formative experiences. This belief that kinkiness began in childhood played into the trope of naturalness discussed earlier. Children were considered to have purer intentions than adults, who had been socialized away from natural behaviors. I asked Jenna when she first started practicing kinky activities and she responded, “I can go back to age five. I was having kidnapping fantasies. I was having rape fantasies. They were bondage. I tied myself up and it wasn’t just a cute thing, it was very much, the seeds were there. With myself, I was doing a lot of it at age five. I tried to get my sexual partners in my teens to force me to do things. To force
me to suck their cocks or hold me down, things like that. They didn’t get it at all […] I didn’t really get active and aware until I was 18. That’s when I really just found it and dove in.” It is beyond the scope of this work to address the psychological implications of childhood fantasies on adult sexual development, but I do think it worth pointing out that childhood is a time of powerlessness and it is intuitive that children would include themes of power in their fantasies. Thomas, like many people, made the distinction between his first kinky fantasies and his first sexual ones, noting that themes of restraint and power well predated any sexual overtones. He explained, “I think I tied myself the first time when I was a kid, maybe ten or nine years old. I’m sure I was tying myself and having fantasies before it became sexual. I mean, I was just having fantasies about being tied up with a girl I like in school or that kind of thing, but I didn’t think about having sex with her or being tied up to have sex with her.” Again, we return to the theme that childhood urges are somehow unpolluted by adult concerns, including sex. Jessica, on the other hand, questioned the idea of normality in sexual development when I asked her if she had fantasies prior to identifying as kinky at seventeen, saying “You know, I was horny as a child. I was sticking things in my vagina at 13, but I didn’t know that that was abnormal. I don’t know that it is abnormal. I know most girls probably weren’t. When it came to enjoying pain, at that point, it was only receiving pain that I enjoyed. Yeah, I had fantasies. I sure did, probably when I first started fantasizing around 13. Kind of a late bloomer.”

Many people reported having feelings, sexual and otherwise, that were different from those around them. Madeleine said, “I knew I was interested in the things that constitute kink for a long time. I don’t remember a time when I was not interested. I remember when I was nine years old and we were into talking about things that were transgressive by the standards of nine and ten year olds and we’d talk about weapons and explosives and we’d talk about sex and a lot
of kinky sexual practices in a joking way, like, look at all the fucked up things adults do, isn’t this shit hilarious? Obviously I was interested in it.” She felt her interest in the topic well exceeded her childhood friends’ interest and it was only as a teenager that she found other people to discuss these feelings with, noting, “The group of friends I made [at summer camp] were explicitly interested in BDSM and I was interested in it too, like hey, I can finally talk about this.” Madeleine’s ability to locate such an outspoken peer group at fifteen may be function of her age in relation to technological innovations in communication technology. At the time of the interview, she was twenty-two and had identified as kinky from the time she was thirteen. Many of the people who recalled fantasies from childhood focused on bottom-like aspects, such as receiving pain, being forced into things, or being restrained.

In other cases, people recalled specific activities that they later defined as kinky. These activities were recalled by tops of dominant behavior as a child. The divide between bottom-fantasy and top-behavior remembrances of childhood may be a future line of research. When asked about when she first began practicing kinky activities, Sophia, a dominant woman, said,

My first kinky experience was before I entered elementary school, a friend of mine’s father had a big leather belt and she put it between my legs and lifted me with it without clothes on and I totally remember that, it was seared in my brain, so leather has always held a fascination for me. When I was ten, my best friend had brothers who talked us into playing strip poker and we all ended up beneath the house and they tied our hands together and examined our pubic area. They didn’t hurt us or abuse us or do anything that would be freaky (except I guess people would think that would be freaky) but I remember thinking, wow this is very interesting, and I remember liking watching what they were doing to her. I did not at that time know it was voyeurism, because you don’t
know what that means, right? I always thought of that as an exciting experience, not something that I’d want to tell my mother, but I didn’t want to go running home crying about it. That’s my first experience with rope or any kind of stuff like that but it had an effect on me.

It is beyond the scope of this work to compare the memories of people in the kinky community to the memories of people who would be classified as vanilla, but I suspect that everyone has private memories of childhood sexual transgression play. They may just be more openly discussed in the kinky community. I think it would also be fruitful to compare this discourse to that of other sexual minority groups. Some members of the kinky community were also apt to share memories that cast them in less than flattering light in order to explain their current identification. For example, when I asked Rachael, a dominant woman, about when she first began practicing kinky activities, she told me,

I would say about four years old, maybe. Maybe younger. I am referring to various sadistic instances or instances of what you would refer to normally as a bully. I had a tendency to tease people verbally and order them to do things and see if they would. Cajole them. I had a tendency to inflict pain on people if I was close to them and if they allowed me to do it. I don’t recall the instances, but there are instances told to me by family, of me, I guess, hurting small animals, by that I don’t mean it in the sociopath-way, I mean it in the chase-them-and-scare-them-way. But then again, I don’t recall that. Basically, a lot of running and kicking. I happen to like animals, so it’s hard for me to wrap my head around that, but apparently I did it a lot. My oldest cognizant kinky experience has to be me ordering this boy to show me his penis in kindergarten. He started crying and I called him a baby or a wuss or something and then he ran away.
Rachael felt as if her current sadistic impulses could be traced to a nature first revealed in childhood. Many people who have a vocation outline the way that they have always been on their path and fit their experiences into a narrative that naturally leads up to their current position. I do the same when explaining how I became an anthropologist and how I ended up researching this topic, reinterpreting my experiences to fit my current understanding of my place in the world. It is not a surprise to witness a similar process in the kinky community.

Jo offered a slightly different take on this type of personal recall in her role as a mother. Her daughters were teenagers when we spoke. She recognized tendencies in both her daughters, noting,

One is obviously gay and came out at about twelve and the other one is obviously kinky and doesn’t know it. When they were younger, she and her best friend would come back from the pool and of course would shower to get the chlorine out of their hair and I had to kind of say, “The chlorine is gonna hurt your suits too so why don’t you shower in your swim suits?” Because one day I walked past and I heard, smack, oww, giggle. Then there was the night we were having dinner with the parents from across the street and my kids had already eaten and been dismissed from the table and they come running in, “Hey Mom, can I have some rice?”

And I said, “You’re still hungry?”

“Oh we’re not gonna eat it.”

“Sweetie, I’m not gonna waste cooked rice if you’re not gonna eat it.”

“Oh no, we don’t want it cooked.”
So they said, “Just about a cup.” I give them a cup of rice. They’re in the kitchen on the tile floor; I look in to see what the heck they are doing. They are holding hands, kneeling in the dry rice, to see who could take it the longest. I find out that the reason they are doing it together and holding hands and staring each other down was because they couldn’t get the other person to count at the same speed so the only way they could know who could take it longest was to do it at the same time. So they had done this repeatedly.

Many parents I spoke with identified kinky penchants in their children, illustrating their belief with anecdotes similar to their own childhood experiences. It remains to be seen if these same children grow up and identify those experiences as kinky.

The lack of Freudian psychological explanations for kinky behavior surprised me. I had initially thought that many people would trace the roots of kinkiness to traumatic events in their psychosexual development, but the only person to use this trope was Sebastian. He was the only person I interviewed with a strong sexual fetish in the classic sense, meaning he found intense sexual pleasure in a part of the body (feet) traditionally considered nonsexual. As I discuss in Chapter Seven (Sex), Sebastian’s foot fetish was a source of uneasiness for him in the broader kinky community because many people found his fetish a source of amusement and a little unbelievable. Sebastian traced the beginnings of his foot fetish to his interactions with his mother, “She was always very proper and always wore shoes. We always had to wear shoes. If I saw a girl barefoot outside, I associated that with being naughty.” Sebastian pointed out that many people believe that someone with a foot fetish is sexually excited by any foot, when in fact he has very particular taste in feet, not finding all of them equally attractive. This was the type of explanation I expected to be offered more, but people generally appealed to the idea of nature
outside of a psychological framework, perhaps because psychology pathologizes kinkiness, whereas most people in the community see it as a good thing.

The “natural” discourse so common in the community was not the only possible understanding of how one becomes kinky. When I suggested it was difficult to pin down exactly what people believed makes a dominant a dominant, Brayan told me, “I don’t know why people would be resistant to define ‘dom.’ Could be a sense of secrecy. I guess it is because I don’t classify myself as a natural dom; I classify myself as a learned dom. I have had to learn to be more dominant. So for me it is a process of understanding what that means, how to go about being that way and exploring doing that.” Brayan came to the community through his long-term primary partner, who identifies as a natural submissive. Her desires drove their initial forays into Dominant/submissive exploration and eventually Brayan discovered he could learn to be dominant and enjoy it. After passing through the Dom Academy, Brayan became an established and respected dominant.

This brings to light another schism about kinky as an identity; people either believed that everyone had the potential to be kinky or they believed that some people were and some people were not kinky. Many people thought anyone showing interest in kink had the potential to be kinky, given the right circumstances. It was also a question of intensity. People in the kinky community assumed that even vanilla people had “a little slap and tickle” (light BDSM) in the bedroom occasionally. Having not interviewed a control group of vanilla people, I cannot speak to the truth of this. In the community, some people believed that the kinky spark existed in everyone and could be nurtured into dominance or submissiveness. This definition of kinky was inclusive, presuming that everyone’s sex life could be considered kinky from the right vantage point. Other people believed that either someone was or was not kinky; no amount of exposure
could change that. Abigail explained, “It’s like milk. You either like it or you don’t. If you
don’t like it, it doesn’t matter how many times you try it. It’s not for you.” In this
understanding, education could only help innate characteristics, not create it. Kinkiness became
exclusionary, although membership was based on self-identification.

Once a person identified as kinky, there was the question about how “out” to be. This
narrative cleaves to the concept of “out” as understood in the queer community, which can vary,
but usually means being open about one’s sexual identity to people in one’s life. This could only
include family and close friends or being completely out to everyone in one’s life, including
employers and people casually encountered in public. This is in contrast to being “in the closet,”
or keeping one’s sexual identity private (or secret, depending on how one feels about the term).
As I discuss in Chapter Eight (Violence), engaging in kinky behaviors carried some risks.
Identifying as kinky also exposed people to the possibility of misunderstanding, discrimination,
and ostracism. I believe that people being out about being transgendered, lesbian, or gay has led
to many of the gains made toward more equitable treatment of these groups. However, being
that publically out can be exhausting. Some people have little recourse besides being out, if they
want their partnerships to be recognized or to be accepted for traits that do not conform to
mainstream standards. Working in the kinky community, I do understand the impulse to pass,
however. Turning one’s sexual identity into a political choice can wreck one’s social capital and
strain or even destroy relationships. People were selective with how out they were. Many
people kept their kinky identity from anyone in the vanilla world while others were out to close
friends. When speaking about family, people most often expressed unease that their mothers
would find out their identity. One man I interviewed was very open about his identity online and
in person, even at his job. However, his partner was pregnant at the time of our interview and he
admitted that he might have to reevaluate his openness in light of having a child. Other people were more open about their identities in virtual spaces, having some social networking accounts that were out and others that were strictly vanilla. It was a constant negotiation between risk and reward. Many people had the belief that kinkiness should be accepted as a legitimate sexual expression and therefore did not want to hide their involvement. However, many people also recognized that this identity is stigmatized and therefore limited how out they were in order to minimize risk.

**Demographics**

I have been talking about members of the kinky community as if their membership in the community erased all other identities. Of course this is not true. Collecting background demographic data was auxiliary to the main thrust of this research, but it is useful to look at the similarities and differences in people’s backgrounds. I collected this information from the twenty-two people I interviewed. People ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-eight. I interviewed women, men, and one transgendered individual. The age and gender distributions are shown below in Table 1.
Ethnically, the people I interviewed were overwhelmingly Anglo. Other ethnicities included Jewish, African-American, and Mexican. The distribution of ethnicity is shown in Table 2.

**Table 1 – Age and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 22-28</th>
<th>Age 29-35</th>
<th>Age 36-42</th>
<th>Age 43-49</th>
<th>Age 50-56</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Female**
- **Male**
- **Transgendered**

**Table 2 - Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Income levels varied between zero income to $75,000 per year. The average income was $44,250, close to the median income in Texas in 2010, which was $48,259 (US News Staff 2010). The income distribution is displayed in Table 3. Income levels were fairly distributed between no income and upper-middle-class, with slightly more people at the high end of the range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$60,001 - $75,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$45,001 - $60,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,001 - $45,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,001 - $30,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0 - $15,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 - Income

Using emic categories, I interviewed eight tops, six bottoms, and eight switches. It was important to me to have a good representation of all three categories in order to understand different perspectives. These results are displayed in Table 4.
I dislike defining partner choice only relative to heterosexuality, but the responses of those who did not identify as heterosexual varied from queer to bisexual to homosexual to open and all stood in contrast to heterosexuality. All six of the men in this study identified as firmly heterosexual. Women’s definition of partner choice varied, as displayed below in Table 5. These results are not representative of all people in the kinky community, but rather reflect the fact that I worked primarily with people in the heterosexual clubs and in the women-only club. Five of the sixteen women (including the three women who identified as homosexual) I interviewed played exclusively in women-only spaces, accounting for some of the other-than-heterosexual percentage, but I find it interesting that among the remaining eleven women who played in heterosexual spaces, only three defined themselves as heterosexual, leading me to believe that gender influences the fluidity of partner choice.

Table 4 - Emic Roles
Seventeen out of twenty-two people interviewed (77%) were college educated. Although I did not take a general survey to establish whether this was representative, it falls in line with the kinky community’s picture of itself as smarter than average as measured by academic achievement. Many people had advanced degrees as well.

This sample is not large enough to permit extrapolations, especially considering it was a self-selected sample of people who were willing to be interviewed and was initially based on snowball sampling. I offer these data more to paint a picture of the background of the people with whom I worked rather than as a representative snapshot of the community at large. The only variable I tried to control for was identification within the scene as a top, a bottom, or a switch and I think my interviews reflect that balance.

Individual identity does not exist in isolation. The relationships people have may shape their identity as much as what are believed to be natural characteristics. I return to the concept of performativity, where identity is constituted in the everyday iterations between people. In this

Table 5 - Women's Partner Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
case, interpersonal relationships are the foundation of the community. These relationships can be classified in four categories: primary, mentoring, play, or peer. Complicating the picture is the question of whether a person is polyamorous or monogamous, meaning whether a person has multiple love relationships or a single one.

Many people had one or two primary relationships. Some people had as many as four. A primary relationship was characterized by intense emotions, whether these were romantic love or feelings involving dominance, submission, or both. It was possible for one person to be in service (as a submissive or slave) to another without the expectation of romantic love or even sexual attraction. This was still a primary relationship in that it was given precedent in people’s decision making. Some people had relationships where kink was only a part of their lives some of the time, whether that was at parties or in the bedroom or other bounded spaces. Some people had 24/7 kinky relationships, where there was always a power dynamic between partners; one was submissive and the other was dominant. For those people, the intensity or the display of this power exchange varied depending on whether the partners are in a vanilla setting, at home, or at a kinky event. That being said, most primary relationships were based on romantic interest. People loved their partners. Many people saw their partner choice as equal to a marriage commitment, although less often with the expectation of monogamy. People referred to one another with possessive pronouns (“my slave” or “my partner”) much as people in the vanilla world refer to a spouse or partner. Some people were also married according to mainstream American traditions or referred to themselves as being in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship (or girlfriend/girlfriend or boyfriend/boyfriend or other gender variations on that theme). People often, although not always, shared a household with their primary partners. They might share finances and other resources. Sometimes they had children together or helped raise one
another’s children in a step-parent relationship. Dominant or submissive status did not always indicate who the head of household was. In one case, the submissive woman earned twice the amount that her dominant husband earned. In another case, a female slave was responsible for running the entire household, although her male Master had the final say if something came to his attention that he disagreed with. In many ways, especially in the heterosexual community, partnerships closely mirrored those found in mainstream American culture.

**Monogamy and Polyamory**

Aside from explicit power differentials in the relationship, one of the major ways kinky relationships varied from mainstream American culture is the treatment of monogamy. Monogamy is the state of only having one exclusive sexual/romantic partner. This stands in contrast to polyamory (or poly, for short). Charlotte, a long time polyamorist, explained, “Polyamory is having multiple, committed, romantic relationships at the same time with open and honest communication.” For the distribution of monogamous versus polyamorous status, see Table 6 below. The unpartnered category refers to people who did not necessarily define themselves as one or the other outside the context of specific relationships and did not have a partner at the time of our interview.
One’s status as monogamous or polyamorous was defined by individual feelings. In many cases, one partner in a couple would be monogamous and the other partner would be poly. This was not entirely unproblematic, as Audrey noted when she explained her feelings about monogamy and polyamory:

Poly to me is multiple, loving, close relationships to people with more than one person. I think it’s different from having outside play partners or swapping or swinging or any of that. That just seems like outside sex, whereas polyamory is more about the relationship, loving other people. I’m curious about it but I don’t really consider myself to be polyamorous because I still have so much of the monogamous mindset that I don’t know if I could go there. I’m happy with being with one person in one relationship; that satisfies me. I don’t need an outside person to be happy. Daddy is polyamorous and it has caused problems for us recently for me to see him with someone else, even if it’s just playing with someone else. It’s very difficult but I’m working on it because I know that
it makes him happy and it’s something that he needs to feel complete. He needs to be able to have the freedom to connect with other people. I know that he loves me, that we are primary partners and that nothing is going to change that, but it’s still difficult. I still consider myself monogamous.

Contrary to what one might believe, given the tendency for other cultures to practice polygyny rather than polyandry, many of the poly women I interviewed had multiple male partners. Even in relationships where both partners were poly, things could get complicated. Many times, people stressed the importance of honesty and communication in relationships. Sometimes in poly relationships, each partner would have their own set of relationships, separate from the primary relationship. However, there were also cases which more closely resembled group marriages, where all of the people involved had romantic or sexual relationships with one another. I will illustrate using one particularly complicated case.

Sabrina was married to Jeff, in the legal, American sense. This was her second marriage and his fourth. They were both dominants. They had a romantic and sexual relationship as peers. They were in a leather family, a family of choice united by leading a leather lifestyle. There was a third dominant in their relationship, Steven. Sabrina had a sexual relationship with Steven. Jeff and Steven had a bond more like brothers. Sabrina was bisexual, Jeff and Steven were heterosexual. Sabrina was in a Mistress/slave relationship with Val. Val, the slave, had a romantic and sexual relationship with Sabrina. Val also had sexual relationships with both Jeff and Steven. Jeff had a Master/slave relationship with Erin. Erin was the slave and had sexual relationships with everyone in the family, although Val and Erin only had sex together under the direction of the Masters. All of these people lived in the same household. Additionally, Sabrina
had a female lover outside of the household as a peer and had several people who were in service
to her but did not have a sexual relationship with her.

Many people had less complicated partnerships, focusing on one or two primary
relationships and perhaps having other people they dated casually or only had play relationships
with. Gavin and Emily were rare in that they had a completely monogamous relationship that
excluded other people, except in play relationships. Gavin explained, “We are monogamous but
there is play with other people. Monogamy is focused on the relationship, not physical
interactions. Monogamy allows a level of focus; more than one partner dilutes intimacy.” There
was a differentiation between a romantic relationship and “just” play. Scenes were often overtly
sexual, but most did not count as sex (see Chapter Seven for a full discussion of sex) and therefore
were not seen as violating monogamous commitments.

There were varying levels of intensity in polyamorous relationships. I have discussed
primary relationships above. Secondary relationships, also called beta relationships, were more
casual and often of a shorter duration than primary relationships. Sometimes these relationships
developed into primary relationships. The limited size of the kinky community meant that many
relationships overlapped. If there was a particularly acrimonious breakup, usually one member
of the partnership would withdraw from the community for a short period but after a time, people
were expected to get along with their ex-partners.

Polyamory, a term was coined in the 1990s, is a hybrid between Greek (*poly* – many) and
Latin (*amor* – love). Polyamory differs from polygamy in that the relationship is not legally
recognized, as polygamous marriages often are in different societies. Cross-culturally,
polygamous marriages carry economic responsibility for the family, making polygamy an ideal
practice, but difficult to carry out in practice. Polygyny, the marriage of one man to several wives, is much more common than polyandry, one woman married to several husbands (Haviland et al. 2008). Polyamory was open to members of all genders, perhaps because of the economic independence of members of the kinky community, especially the women. As illustrated by Audrey’s case (above), not everyone was comfortable with the idea of polyamory but some felt pressured to accept it in order to stay in a relationship. In general, polyamory was accepted as the norm, but as in other cultures, in practice most people have a single primary relationship.

Other Types of Relationships

Play relationships were considered as separate from romantic or dynamic relationships and were often based on friendship or mutual attraction but were not expected to develop into romantic attachments. Many people played with their primary partners in addition to a set of close associates. Some people, however, were in relationships with people who did not identify as kinky and therefore did not play with their primary partners. Play relationships could be casual or intense. Many people had a defined set of people with whom they would play. When I asked Rachael who she played with, she answered, “I play sometimes with my boy [her long-term primary partner who is her slave]. Sometimes, with my roommate. I play sometimes with my boyfriend [secondary partner]. Females that I am dating. Female friends that I am not dating. I play with submissives that are owned by close friends of mine. Sometimes, I play with new people who I am not sure who they are, who come up and ask me, depending on if I am interested, or bored. That sort of sounded like everybody. That’s not true.” Play relationships could be an avenue for growth, to learn new techniques or different styles of play. They usually did not count against a monogamous belief set. Polyamory, or at least non-monogamy, was
more prevalent than classic monogamy in the community, but almost everyone had play relationships outside of their primary partnerships, at least occasionally.

Another type of relationship that existed was between mentor and protégé. In the leather tradition, mentorship was the ideal rite of passage into the leather community. In contrast, the mentor relationship as a close interaction between a neophyte and an older, more established member of the community who vouches for the protégé’s behavior and honor was relatively rare in the kinky community. Instead, in Cactus, there was an institutionalization of mentorship in the form of the Dom Academy. Over the course of one year, prospective dominants moved as a cohort through a three month course of study followed by a month-long apprenticeship to several different specialists. During the course of the Academy, a prospective dominant might work with people who specialized in rope, electricity, cutting, or anal play. For those who made it through the entire year, there was a certification process with the endorsement of one of the established clubs. As a class, elders in the community were accorded more respect because of their position as teachers, rather than individuals as mentors.

Identity in the Community

There were several characteristics of the community as a whole that were stressed by members that allow the community to form. These included the energy between community members as exemplified during play, the belief that the community as a whole withheld judgement, and the inclusive nature of the community. These characteristics were repeated by many people to reinforce how the community coalesced around minority sexual practices. Like any ideals, they were not always practiced completely, but the aspiration was there.
All things being equal, people probably could have engaged in kinky activities in the privacy of their own homes with less risk of exposure, but people chose to form a community around a shared practice and, furthermore, to maintain membership in the group and strengthen community bonds by practicing kinky activities together. Part of the impetus for this group experience was defined as the “energy.” This ubiquitous term was used to capture the feeling of a party, the connection between two people, or the psychological reaction to physical and mental stimulus. Energy was value neutral, but usually people talked about the amount of energy, rather than the kind. I asked Sophia why she chose to play in public; she answered, “It’s the energy. You feed off the energy. People watching you and around you.” The energy of other people added to (or occasionally detracted from) the play. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are more context dependent than outsiders may realize. People did not want to watch or perform for just anyone. In some cases, the presence of others added to a scene. In others, the participants neglected the audience. In fewer cases, watchers were considered detrimental. The times I heard people critique watchers were because they felt the watchers were judging them or the watchers might be single men, possibly masturbating. I discuss the importance of the idea of withholding judgement below. I discuss the threat presented by non-participating masturbating males in Chapter Seven (Sex). Emma outlined the difference between two of the types of potential energies at a party:

It is the feel of that particular party. Some parties you go to and everyone is being carefully appraised by everyone else. There isn’t a sense of community. There’s an overwhelming sense of competition. Like, my outfit is more hardcore than yours, my scene was more hardcore, and sometimes you get that feeling at a party and if it feels like that, I will opt out of playing. [...] Then there are other parties, that it feels like a
celebration of life or an affirmation of life and an appreciation of that person being there, even if their scene isn’t as hardcore as mine or vice versa. I don’t feel measured or I have anything to prove to them or they to me. It’s just people enjoying a space, being who they are and where they are. Even so far as appreciating all the people that are there because they all contribute to the synergy we’re enjoying. In that space I love to play, because it feels more comfortable, like I’m at home, as opposed to trying to play in the middle of the mall.

It was a fine line between respecting the privacy of scene participants and adding to the energy of a scene. Sometimes this was achieved; other times it fell flat, leaving people feeling either bored or restless. The type of energy varied over the course of a party. Initially, the energy might be a bit frenetic, with people jostling for equipment and playing more to the crowd. Later in the night, the energy became more intimate and less directed outward. People’s individual experiences of the energy of a party also varied, like anyone’s experiences at a large social gathering. A party was made up of microcosms of interactions that dictated an individual’s overall sense of the night. Energy was used to denote a variety of experiences, but it was almost universally regarded as an important ingredient for the community.

Many people in the kinky community felt as if they would be judged harshly were their predilections were known by the mainstream local community. The sense of not being judged for their sexual expression or relationship dynamic was a central tenet of the community. Of course, there is always judgement. It seems to be a universal human trait. However, people were willing to allow a wider range of some behaviors than in the mainstream American community. I discuss some of the limitations of this judgement-free belief system in Chapter Nine (Hegemony). For Audrey, the lack of judgement was a foundational principle in her
definition of the kinky community; “A collection of like-minded people who are interested in the same types of activities, maybe not the same fetish but understand the inclination. They feel ostracized from normal, social community. They can’t be as open about their likes and their interests to the normal vanilla community so it gives them a place to go and be themselves, be completely open, free, no judgements. They have a ‘your kink is ok by me’ kind of thing. It may not be my kink but it’s yours and there’s no judgement.” Even with this belief system, there were exclusions. One exception to this universal lack of judgement was furries. A furry was a person who dressed up like an animal for sexual gratification. This group was almost universally disparaged. They were held up as an example of people who might be truly weird or off. I did not interview anyone who identified as a furry, but it might have been because they were made so unwelcome in the community. For people who did not fit some of the standards of mainstream American culture, due to body size, gender expression (to a point), or engaged in some forms (but even then limited) of exotic sexual behaviors, this environment could appear to be judgement-free.

Hand in hand with a lack of judgement was the notion of inclusivity. Because so many people in the kinky community felt rejected by the mainstream community for a variety of reasons, it was important for the kinky community to feel inclusive. People with different backgrounds were accepted as part of the group. Race, gender, socio-economic class, partner choice, and physical ability affected how well someone was able to integrate into the group, but usually these characteristics were not the basis for immediate exclusion. I discuss how these characteristics are treated in Chapter Six (Gender) and Chapter Nine (Hegemony). For this discussion, the ideal of inclusiveness is important. People took refuge in the kinky community because they could not or chose not to adhere to mainstream American precepts concerning
sexuality, among other characteristics. Many people stressed that anyone could be kinky; one could not tell by just looking at someone. This created a potential connection to everyone one meets based on a possible shared secret. Although members of the kinky community tended to have a relatively homogenized background, it fostered a sense of community to emphasize that everyone was accepted and that a wide range of mainstream American demographics were represented. Ava told me, “We are every shade of the rainbow. I’m serious. The kink community involves everybody. We are from all walks of life. We are from all races, probably primarily White, but we have a mix of folks, Black, Hispanic, White, Chinese, everything. We have a little bit of everything. Some of us are doctors; some of us do physical therapy. Veterinarians, police officers, fire fighters, we’ve got a little of everything. We’re heterosexual, we’re gay, we’re lesbian, we’re transgendered. It’s every shade of anything you can think of.”

Inclusivity generated feelings of safety and belonging. People felt as if they could be their true selves as expressed by an alternative sexual expression without fear of opprobrium. Status was achieved rather than ascribed, depending on one’s actions within the community. People were ostracized from the community based on their past behavior rather than a priori exclusion based on inherent characteristics. This feeling of inclusivity was echoed in the way many people felt like finding the kinky community was “like coming home.” The belief was that people in the community became like family and family would accept you for who you are, no matter what. This was the dominant understanding of the kinky community as expressed by many members. It would be interesting to further tease out how this understanding jives with the experiences of members of minorities in the community.
The Kinky Community Compared to Other Alternative Lifestyle Groups

Although members of the kinky community were willing to expand their definition of kink to include members of other alternate sexual identities, the feeling was not always reciprocated. Many people in the community likened the current status of the kinky community to that of the gay and lesbian community twenty years ago. However, there has long been tension between the faction of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) movement that wants to embrace the institutions of mainstream America (noticeably in the arena of marriage) and the kinky community. Leather Daddies and Leather Dykes have not always been welcomed in Pride parades in different parts of the country. I did not observe this tension in Cactus, but that may be largely attributable to the fact that I did not interact with mainstream LGBT groups. The equation between the current, predominantly heterosexual, kinky community and historic LGBT communities is laced with pitfalls, but the struggle for LGBT rights and recognition were often a model for the kinky community when they felt compelled to action.

Members of the kinky community usually felt that swingers (people who swap spouses for sex, either in private or public) were potential allies as fellow practitioners of alternative sexuality. There was a swingers’ club in Cactus but there did not seem to be a lot of overlap between the groups. On the whole, people in the kinky community seemed to believe that swinging was relatively vanilla on the kink scale, but as practitioners of non-monogamy, swingers should be open to associating with members of the kinky community. Advances from the kinky community had been rebuffed by the swinging community. The kinky community appeared to have more allies in the less-traditional poly community, another group which practiced non-monogamy. It is interesting to think about the correlation between a strong belief in traditional marriage and an aversion to association with the kinky community. I did not work...
with the swinger community or the mainstream LGBT community, but from popular culture it
seems as if the more invested a group is in obtaining or maintaining the privileges of a
heteronormative marriage, the less the group wants to be lumped in with members of the kinky
community. In the poly community, marriage was valued differently from the way it was in
mainstream American culture and the poly community might be interested in a re-envisioning of
the entire institution.

There was one group that on its surface resembled the kinky community but that
members of the kinky community did not want any affinity to – practitioners of Christian
Domestic Discipline (CDD). I only met one former practitioner of Christian Domestic
Discipline but the comparison between the kinky community and CDD happened regularly. In
CDD, the husband was the absolute authority in a household and was responsible for punishing
his wife for misbehavior through corporeal punishment, which was often spanking (CDD 2012;
Christian DD 2012). CDD practitioners distanced themselves from the kinky community by
emphasizing the biblical nature of their relationship and stressing that this kind of relationship
only happened in the context of heterosexual marriage. Many of the websites stressed that there
was no cursing or graphic pictures on the sites. Many members of the kinky community
disparaged CDD, believing it was a sexist practice and that CDD practitioners were really kinky
but not brave enough to admit it. Jenna noted, “Then there’s domestic discipline, which is just
you like kinky sex but that’s too risky to say, so we’ll justify it by saying it’s domestic discipline.
It’s a lot of external justification. There is a lot unspoken, unexamined authority transfer there.”
I met one woman who had been involved in a CDD relationship since she was married as a
teenager. She liked being spanked and would intentionally flout the rules in order to be
punished. She and her husband found the kinky community and adopted a Master/slave
relationship pattern that embraced her desires to be physically punished while at the same time maintaining the dominant/submissive relationship between husband and wife. More study on this group could lead to some fruitful comparisons about the role of corporeal punishment in sexual relationships and the dominant/submissive dyad found in different subcultures in America.

**Groups Within the Kinky Community**

Despite being members of the same community, sometimes with very similar backgrounds, it was important for people to maintain a sense of individuality, so that the community was more of a collective of individuals with comparable goals rather than a unified social position. When asked to define the kinky community, Emma explained,

In terms of the Cactus kinky community, there was a need to be around other people and to share their ideas and grow their experiences because if it’s a kinky couple, they are only going to have experiences to the extent of their abilities. If they incorporate more people, they have more ideas, opportunities, and experiences to develop their kink world. A lot of people have their own vision of what kink is, what BDSM is, what leather is, so in Cactus, there are pockets of groups and in these groups are even still more pockets of other groups. […] Ultimately, it’s a lot of people trying to make their own way. They are really resistant to the vanilla life, or pretending that that’s the only aspect of their life.

This emphasis on specificity led to a proliferation of groups in Cactus, from the large umbrella groups that encouraged membership for everyone to very specific groups based on gender, partner choice, and kinky role. Most people participated in the smaller groups, but when asked what group they identified most closely with, they claimed affiliation with one of the umbrella
groups. Stan captured the sense of unity in diversity when he said, “There is a kinky community in the same way there is a United States. We all have our regional differences but we all fall into that category of being part of the US. There are all these little communities that are a part of the kinky community.” Each group had its own particular history and rules. Many groups formed and then faded away rather quickly, driven by the personality of one or two people.

In the Cactus community, there were many groups that one might participate in on a regular basis. Additionally, there was a conference circuit that spanned the region or even the nation. These occurred once a year. Often, an organization would book a wing of a hotel or the entire thing. A kinky conference was much like an educational or a science fiction conference, with sessions held during the day, the majority of which focused on education. Panels would be held discussing topics of interest for the community. There were vendor areas. Unlike other educational conferences, the nights were usually crowned with parties. When people discussed conferences, they most often referred to the parties. There were also many opportunities for private play. The amount of reflexivity demanded for a conference unsettled some people in the community. Jenna said, “We are getting to the point where there are meta-conferences, conferences about presenters. The LLC, Leather Leadership Conference, whole conference about being a leader in leather culture. It’s not even a conference about leather, but about leading leather. What the fuck? We are evolving to that point. It’s pretty awesome but kinda scary that we are at that point.”

An important component of the kinky community was the idea of service. Most of the clubs operated on a shoestring budget, relying heavily on volunteers for everything from party planning to dungeon maintenance to furniture making. Although there was a charge for parties, it was nominal and usually paid for the space and some basic supplies. According to the kinky
social networks, tickets to parties in other cities cost much more. Many of the clubs were run by
elected officials. Elections were usually held once a year. It was a large commitment of time
and energy to serve on a board or committee. Other clubs did not elect their leaders, but rather
had the same leader for a long period of time until she or he chose to step down or were forced
out. On their own time, leaders were expected to organize events, monitor online interactions,
manage the finances, and find volunteers to do the grunt work. Additionally, many clubs had
fundraisers for the community, adding another layer of responsibility for people who served on
the board. I am reminded of the people who were the driving force behind the church socials of
my youth, the people who like organizing parties to facilitate community.

Fundraisers were an indirect way of benefitting the community, with money often
donated to the local AIDS hospice or for children in need. I witnessed the direct outpouring of
help to a member of the community when she lost her home in a fire. Within hours, there were
posts on the social networking site organizing a place for her to stay with her child and foster
parents for her pets. A couple of days later, a work party was organized to salvage whatever
possible from the damaged apartment. In this way, the community functioned as a source of
social support in traumatic events. It was amazing to witness everyone rally around the woman
and her family. On other occasions, members of the community offered comfort and aid to
people coping with illness or the death of someone close. Being a community member meant
something more than just being interested in a good time.

Emma offered a practical explanation for the formation of the kinky community: “People
learned about 15 or 20 years ago that they needed to fish where the fish are, so they wanted to
create some pools of like-minded people.” Many people cited the importance of the community
in general and parties specifically in finding new partners. Not only was the kinky community a
place to be affirmed in one’s sexual choices and to explore rites of intensification, it also functioned as a potential matchmaking service. It could be difficult to meet new people in Cactus since it is such a large city with many divergent interests. Membership in the kinky community offered a social network already in place with opportunities to socialize at a variety of events. It was possible to attend some kind of function almost every night of the week, if one so desired. The kinky community offered many social benefits.

**Virtual Interface**

The kinky community began recently enough that many people recalled the inception of the community. Although there was certainly pornography about kinky practices prior to the 1990s, the heterosexual community in Cactus coalesced in the early 1990s. Some of the single gender clubs claimed to predate the heterosexual clubs, but only by a couple of years. Many people traced their first contacts to the kinky community to the internet. Sebastian explained that he had been reading and watching kinky pornography for years when the first online groups developed and all of a sudden there was a community where before it had been a private pursuit.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address the interface between the online community and the “real time” (as opposed to virtual) community. Many people in the Cactus community used the internet to maintain communication with other members of the community, but for the most part people’s social networks in the groups I worked with were comprised of people met offline or with the intention of meeting offline. The internet was most often taken advantage of for direct communication with community members, either through email or instant messenger. As a historical artifact, many groups maintained Yahoo groups (a threaded forum maintained through email). For the most part, people were moving toward social networking sites (similar to Facebook but with a kinky intent). Groups, especially the large umbrellas,
usually had a website with meet up times and etiquette guidelines. These uses of the internet emphasized personal connections and served as gateways to the real life kinky community. There was another experience of kink that took place in a virtual landscape that I did not pursue. Of course, which community was better is a source of debate, depending upon which community one favored. Audrey believed the real time community was better for her;

[One social network site] is a nice gateway where you can follow lots of discussions and read other people’s profiles and what they are into. You can message them directly and ask questions or upload pictures. I’ve always been a bit leery about the online aspect of this. You hear bad stories about people on [another social network]. You hear lots of horrible stories about people getting involved with someone they’ve never met and flying across country to be with them and it goes bad. If I meet people who are wary about getting involved in the scene, I urge them to drop the online thing and go to a munch and meet real people because it’s so much different. All those fears of not being accepted or not fitting in immediately drop away when you walk into the munch and start meeting people because you realize these are all normal people, they are very nice, open, welcoming to you. It completely changes when you take that first step and you walk through the door.

Likewise, Thomas found the real time community more fulfilling than the virtual one.

I would say it’s just a group of people with similar interests and with the courage to live their fantasies. There might be people with the same interests as us, but they don’t dare to come out. There are a lot of people on [one social network] who have an account and you have no idea who they are because they never show up at events and they don’t even
participate in the [online] groups or anything. You see them there but they just don’t do anything. Other people participate on [the social network] only but they don’t come out. There is a smaller subset of people who actually come out and do stuff. You can see people with similar interests but they don’t want to come out. The community itself is whatever dares to come out and have some sort of interaction with other people.

People in the kinky community felt more authentic for meeting in person. There was the suspicion that what happens online was not real. Conversely, people worried about becoming too intensely involved with someone they had never met and then making rash decisions about the relationship (like Audrey’s anecdote about someone moving across country to live with their online Master). Rachael found her way to the kinky community online and continued to try to meet people outside the Cactus community through different social networking sites. She explained,

I recently learned that the online kink community apparently has bad stigma at times for lifestylers [someone who has a 24/7 relationship]. Did you know that? I had someone tell me, “I like you and think you would be fun to interact with, even though you’re a lifestyler.” He was thinking about playing, getting together, “even though you’re a lifestyler, I think you could be cool.” I was like, what’s that about? And he goes, “You know how they are all crazy. They can’t possibly think all that stuff is real all the time. You really do seem ok. You seem sane.” And I was like, wow, is that why so many online people won’t meet me in real time? They cancel. They make excuses. It’s like they have these fantasies built up around meeting one day and then they run. I think it’s that they expect me to be like their fantasy rather than an actual person. That was weird to learn.
In a bifurcation of identity, people often maintained two (or more) online personas on social networking sites. Almost everyone I interviewed was a member of multiple social networking sites and most of them kept vanilla and kinky strictly separated. Many people kept their Facebook accounts vanilla because they had friends or family as part of that network who did not know about their kinky identity. At the same time, people did not want members of the kinky community to know about their vanilla life. Charlotte shared,

I only have one Facebook profile. While I have some people on there that I know are kinky, I tend to also know them from other things, from college or the poly world or the geek world but I actually got a friend request from somebody I only know from the kink community and it took me a while to decide how I wanted to respond to that, because with facebook it gives your real name. It was one of those things, I mean obviously they found me, it’s not like I hide what my real name is, but it was just like, wow, I’m not sure if I wanted that overlap. I don’t have a scene name, well, I have one but I don’t use it. So it’s weird all of a sudden having people on facebook. I don’t want to create a second facebook account, so it was an interesting debate about whether I wanted to friend them.

People sometimes had two accounts with the same networking site, one kinky and one vanilla. Interestingly, many people used Twitter, the microblog site, as a blended network, combining kinky and vanilla interests.

Although person-to-person was considered the best kind of communication, many people took advantage of technology to strengthen existing relationships. For example, Sophia had her slave text her every day at the same time as part of the slave’s daily responsibilities. They did not live together at the time and so would use text messages as part of their protocol to maintain
a Mistress/slave relationship. Likewise, Ethan was involved with a submissive who did not live in the same household. She was responsible for emailing him her assignments every day before noon. These assignments could be to describe a fantasy or to name things she liked about herself. Audrey’s Daddy would text message her at random times during the day and she would stop what she was doing and go look at herself in the mirror. The goal of this activity was for Audrey to think of herself as beautiful and to learn to enjoy looking at herself. Many dominant/submissive relationships were characterized by these types of daily rituals, taking more or less advantage of technology. Other activities I learned of included writing a journal and making a scrap book. Jessica explained, “There were just different tasks that I gave her, not only to remind her and to reinforce our relationship but also, a busy slave is a happy slave, so you have to keep them busy.”

Symbols

I thought there would be more symbology employed by members of the kinky community to recognize one another in vanilla settings, but I think the size of the community limited such intrigue. Everyone knew almost everyone else, at least by sight, so there was no reason for a cloak-and-dagger symbology. A couple of younger people said that wearing a triskelion, a symbol of three interlocking spirals, was an indication that a person was into BDSM.
The triskelion was popular in the New Age movement and among sci-fi/fantasy aficionados, so it was not always apparent that it was being worn as an indication of kinky affiliation. Other symbols that were worn were idiosyncratic in nature, not intended to communicate to anyone outside of the immediate relationship. Fetish clothing (collars, locks, jewelry with handcuff charms) was fashionable among some other groups of people, such as Goths, and so was not an accurate clue as to whether someone was interested in kink, although it was a better bet that someone wearing a leather collar might be kinky over than a person in a button-up and khakis. For the most part, members of the kinky community did not feel the need to advertise.

**Strength in Opposition (Kinky versus Vanilla)**

The feeling of alienation from the larger mainstream American culture may be the most unifying aspect of the community. There was very much a sense of us-versus-them, pitting kinky against vanilla. Nothing unites like a common enemy. People became very protective of other members of the community when it appeared that the outside world was impinging on them. Stan explained,
I’ve always been an outsider, ever since I hit my teens. I’ve always had a small circle of friends. I’ve never cared about being part of the mainstream and I think you’ll find that’s true for the majority of us. Some of us have been in the mainstream and got tired of the rat race, the constantly trying to please other people. You’ll find especially the tops tend to be more self-gratified. We are content with being outside of the norm. Some are even proud of it. It’s our thing. […1 We tend to be more accepting of quirks and oddities because we acknowledge that we have our own. In that, we are able to find a method of accepting them in other people. We have the same petty bickerings and issues that you’ll find outside of the community but we tend to be like a family. When I was young, my brother and I fought like cats and dogs and we didn’t like each other but if someone else stepped in and started messing with us then we were very united. You’ll find that the BDSM community is like that. We may bicker and have all these issues and drama but we accept our common outside-ness. When the mainstream society comes in and starts pushing people around, we tend to band together. Persecution makes us stronger.

In my experience, the animosity between the kinky community and the vanilla mainstream was played up in order to intensify the sense of the community. I discuss the ways in which this tension is used by the community in Chapter Ten (Hegemony). Ava echoed Stan’s sentiments when I asked her what unites the kinky community. She said, “I hate to say it, but it’s an ‘us against them’ attitude. This [kink] is a darker aspect of the human personality and not everyone understands it. A majority of the people out there, the vanilla folk, don’t understand it. They’d lock us up if they had their way. That is what unifies us, that is what keeps us more together, more than anything, knowing that within ourselves that we are free to do those things together.”
Not everyone found the idea of a unified front against the vanilla masses reassuring. Madeleine, a transgendered female switch, articulated her unease with the pressure to conform under the auspices of a singular kinky community: “It is important to understand and to talk about and be conscious of, in a consistent way, that the idea of the ‘kink community’ is in a way a recreation of sexual repression and, in many cases, out and out bigotry. The things that politically bring together vanilla gay men and straight sadomasochists are not actually good things. It’s necessary to have these alliances but in a better world there wouldn’t be any sort of association between the two.” In her understanding, if there was no sexual oppression, there would be little reason for people with vastly different interests to form associations. This is a powerful insight. It reminds me of the evolution of the homosexual as a type of person in the nineteenth century, whereas prior to that when homosexuality was discussed, it was as a behavior rather than a certain type of person. A similar pressure is exerted on people who become part of the kinky community. The dominant American perspective demands that a person is a certain way sexually, rather than just engaging in certain practices. From Kinsey onward, sexologists in the United States have demonstrated that very few people fit the standard definition of “correct” sexuality (usually defined as one man and one woman having sex for procreative purposes in traditional positions). Yet as Americans, we still have the impulse to classify people as only heterosexual or kinky or polyamorous. This pressure results in both individuals who define themselves sexually as naturally kinky and a community for those people to take refuge in. If there was less judgement about what people do sexually, there would be less reason for people to band together.

Members of the kinky community emphasized that being kinky is a natural state, whether that stems from genetics or early childhood experiences. This identity allowed a collective to
form that functions in much the same way other voluntary associations do in urban settings, acting as a social safety net, encouraging personal networks, offering potential partners, and providing entertainment.

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1 Please recall that I did not work with the gay male groups in Cactus due to access. If I had been able to work with that group, the partner choice of men would also vary.
CHAPTER FIVE – MATERIAL CULTURE

Material culture was an important aspect of the community. People traced connections and strengthened identity through cultural artifacts, specifically toys and equipment. Members of the kinky community engaged in several types of exchange, including capitalist purchases and sales, making their own toys, gifting, and bartering. Items gained prestige from their origin story and their history. Participating in the community required an investment, both in money and in time. I will discuss the ways in which material culture supports the ideals of the kinky community.

Equipment

Broadly speaking, there were two types of artifacts specific to the kinky community – furniture and toys. Many people, when playing in private, made use of what they had at home for play space, whether it was a bed or a foot stool, but given the option, many people preferred to play on furniture designed for specifically kinky purposes. In fact, some people cited furniture as one of the draws of public parties. It makes sense that there would be a niche market for the specialty equipment that furnishes most dungeons. In my experience in Texas, most furniture was used to position bottoms or to restrain them. Spanking benches were ergonomically designed to place the bottom’s buttocks in the air at a height that reduced the strain on a top’s shoulder that could result from flogging or spanking. St. Andrew’s crosses offered a way for the bottom to stand while playing and exposed more body surface. Converted dog kennels were used to contain bottoms. Some furniture was evocative of the type of play; for example, The House had a gynecological exam table with stirrups for medical play (see Figure 7). Practically speaking, furniture had to be sturdy enough to bear weight and withstand repeated applications of bleach water to prevent disease transmission. Most equipment was designed to be assembled
and disassembled relatively quickly. Some clubs did not have a permanent play space, and the furniture had to be transported, set up, and taken down for each party. While using mundane furniture might be effective, there was something visually striking about dungeon furniture when it was in use. It allowed the top to display both their technique and their bottom. It added to the performance. It also anchored play spaces, each piece of furniture acting as the center of a demarcated area. Furniture was sometimes loaned between people for private use, but, unlike toys, could not be easily exchanged or thrown into the back of the car for a party. Anyone could buy a pair of Velcro handcuffs at an adult store, but owning a piece of furniture (or several) displayed a commitment to the kinky lifestyle. Although more a feature than a piece of furniture, I should also mention suspension points. A suspension was a type of bondage in which the bottom was partially or completely suspended by rope. Suspension points were ideally constructed to bear at least three hundred pounds from a ceiling beam (see Figure 8). Slings could also be used at suspension points, although these were specifically designed to facilitate sex rather than bondage.
Figure 6 - Gynecology Table
Figure 7 - Suspension Points

Three eye bolts are facing the viewer and a carabiner (a coupling link with a safety catch used by rock climbers) hangs directly in the middle of the beam.

Toys

Toys, on the other hand, were usually portable objects directly involved in play. A person’s toy collection revealed the type of play a person was interested in and usually how long a person had been involved in kink. Almost everyone brought a toy bag to the parties. In the toy bag were favorite toys that could be used in public. Sometimes toys were considered too private for public use, as is the case for many people with insertables, such as dildos or butt plugs (see Figure 9). The more specialized a person’s interest, the more likely it was that they had the gear for it. This held true for fire play, blood play, electricity play and bondage. In my experience, the top usually provided the toys unless the bottom had favorites that they would like to play with. Some people were known by the toys they use. For example, there was one top who was sometimes referred to as “phonebook” (mention in Chapter Three, Play), a reference to a paddle
he made from the phonebook wrapped in electrical tape. It was a showy piece with a lot of thud. When people talked about playing with him, there was usually a discussion of whether or not he used the phonebook and if so, how it was. This top used a variety of other toys in public, but this was what he was known best for.

![Figure 8 - Insertables](image)

It is less common for people to include insertables in their public toy bag, but this person had several. Insertables are sheathed in condoms to prevent disease transmission.

Charlotte, a female submissive who is a kitten¹, described her toy bag,

We have a huge toy bag. Everything. We have a whole separate fire play kit, surprisingly enough… We have the fire kit with wands and gloves and cups and a fire extinguisher, and alcohol. So many toys. Lots of leather cuffs and collars. We have these really awesome suspension cuffs from [an online kink store] that wrap around your hands, because if I’m on a cross doing impact play, I just forget to support my own body weight. So having cuffs that aren’t going to hit my thumb because I sag, is really great.
My husband is a wood worker, so we have a lot of paddles, which are great and people hate, well doms love them and subs hate them. A couple of canes, wooden hair brush, nipple clamps, rope, chain. The thuddy toy of awesome... It’s like a club and so it has a metal handle, a piece of metal goes through and then it’s covered in rubber. We also have a dead blow mallet that is really thuddy. Nice big heavy mallet. What else do I keep in the toy bag? Condoms, lube, I don’t really keep the dildos or the anal toys in the play bag, but we have those too. I have a vibrator that’s an egg that has a flicky bit on the end, yeah. You can just turn on the end and it’s really awesome. I have a dildo named Touch. That was the name it came with... Gloves. My husband has a pair of aikido gloves, with the padding, for punching. I don’t think I’d count my knee pads, but they are definitely important for pet play. If you are interested in pet play, you have to go to a sport store and buy yourself a pair of knee pads. I’ve got volleyball knee pads. My owner has a squeaky toy that he throws for me.

Charlotte shared a toy bag with her owner. Some of the toys were used with other people, while some were only used between the two of them. Several themes emerged in this description, including a specialized sub-kit that can stand on its own (the fire toys), the prestige of knowing a specialized kink store online (suspension cuffs), the importance of handmade toys used by the creator and by others (canes and paddles), pervertables (dead blow mallet and aikido gloves), the separation of insertables from the general toy bag, practical items that acknowledge the logistics of play (kneepads), and dynamic specific toys (a squeaky toy).

Before I discuss the meanings of toys, I think it best to give examples of common toys and explain their usage. Figure 10 displays a basic toy kit. Along the top is a yard stick from the local hardware store. Moving from left to right, the toys are a Wartenberg pinwheel, a leather
slapper, a riding crop, a paddle, a flogger and a knife. This person was relatively new to the scene and had not developed a specialized toy bag.

Figure 9 - Basic Toy Kit

Figure 11 is a close up of the Wartenberg pinwheel. Originally a device designed to test the nerve response of skin, the spiked wheel was used by kinky people to poke skin, often in areas that has already been abraded. It could draw blood, but usually just left a trail of red dots on the skin. Although originally intended for a vanilla purpose, this item was readily available in most shops that catered to members of the kinky community.
The slapper was two pieces of leather bound together at the handle. It was a loud, stingy toy and could be intense. The riding crop, paddle, and flogger were all used in impact play. This particular knife was more of a show piece for peeling off melted wax than a toy that would be used in a scene involving cutting. For a blood scene, a top had to be prepared with new razor blades or new needles, a sterilized scalpel, a sharps container, latex gloves, and other accoutrements. Figure 12 is a picture of someone’s blood kit. This gear could be part of someone’s toy bag, but was not considered a toy in and of itself.
People often specialized in one or two types of play. In Cactus, there was a club that focused primarily on rope. They had their own demos, parties, socials, and conferences centered on rope bondage (as opposed to other forms of bondage) and suspension. As the reader can imagine, rope aficionados collected a lot of rope. They also collected various accoutrements that facilitated rope bondage and suspension. Figure 13 is a picture of the rope carried by one rope top. On that night, he had rope made out of hemp, flax, linen, nylon, and a bamboo/silk blend. He makes a majority of his own rope. The next picture, Figure 14, shows panic snaps, a type of fastening that can be released quickly even when there is tension pulling down on the snap.
Figure 12 - Rope

Figure 13 - Panic Snaps
Toy Origins

Toys could be bought, made, or modified. Thomas was typical when he responded to the question of where he obtained his toys, “Different parts, some of those are pervertables, such as I use clothespins as nipple clamps sometimes. I got those at Walmart, whatever. My crop I got it at Eve’s Apple, which is a sex shop. The nipple clamps I got at a vendor at ShibariCon. Rope I got from Home Depot, ShibariCon and also from the Rope Wizard [a nationally renowned rigger] when he has been to Fit To Be Tied, so different sources I would say. My TENS unit I bought on the internet.” Toys were differently valued based on origin. Ones purchased through chain retail stores were less prestigious than those bought at specialty shops. Toys that were purchased could derive status from being expensive (but only if they are high quality) or if they were a bargain. Thrift, while not the only appreciated aspect of toy buying, was still respected and could be a source of status. Toys that were made by the user or made by a local craftsperson were more valued than those purchased. Between the two extremes of purchased and made toys were pervertables, a type of toy that began as something with an entirely different vanilla purpose, such as a spatula used as an impact toy. Finally, a toy gained value when it was given as a gift or was bartered for.

The kinky community had an uneasy relationship with chain retail shops. Many people bought their first toys from so-called “adult” stores that catered to a predominantly male audience. The chain stores I visited in the area focused much of their inventory on pornographic videos and to a lesser extent, novelty sex toys such as vibrators and dildos. There was usually a small selection of specifically kinky goods, such as restraints and riding crops. One woman I interviewed still purchased many of her toys at this type of retail shop, but she admitted that she liked novelty and did not expect these types of toys to last long. People felt as if the quality of
these toys was generally shoddy and they were overpriced. They also believed that the types of kinky toys available were for less serious players or novices. While she was living in the northeast, Charlotte noted, “Every six months in [large metropolitan city] is the fetish flea market. We went to that one time and everything was really overpriced. We got some Velcro cuffs, that’s how baby we were playing then. Now we play with cuffs that lock.” Once someone became a member of the kinky community, one was expected to support kink friendly shops.

Boutique shops were trusted more than chain stores. At the beginning of my time in the Cactus area, there were two women-owned, kink friendly sex stores. Venial Pleasure, which was closed about six months after I arrived, was owned and run by a respected community member. Her employees were part of the community. All of the toys could be opened, and if required, batteries inserted, to test the quality of the product. For obvious reasons, toys could not be returned and people liked being able to handle the product prior to use. This store also sold more esoteric equipment, such as violet wands, mouth spreaders, and bondage frames. The second store, Eve’s Apple, remained in business, although at the time I was writing, one of the two sites has closed. Eve’s focused more on community education, offering classes to the wider Cactus community such as erotic bondage and pole dancing. Many of the presenters at these classes were involved in the kinky community. Toys at both boutiques were more expensive than at chain stores but the quality was perceived as much higher. Both stores also went out of their way to be welcoming to women and couples. In my experience, the staff were friendly and open, encouraging questions and offering suggestions. The support for boutiques extended to well-known stores in other locations, such as Babeland in New York City and Good Vibrations in San Francisco. Interestingly, these stores were also women-owned and women-friendly. Toys from these boutiques usually garnered more significance than toys purchased from local boutiques.
This came more from the exoticism of far-off places rather than the perceived quality of the product. As insulated as Cactus is from other kinky communities in the United States, community members were somewhat impressed by the more cosmopolitan scenes of New York and San Francisco.

People framed shopping in terms of support. This group often felt as if large stores took advantage of their marginal status to sell them overpriced shoddy goods and did not value them as customers. They believed in voting with their money and for some things they were willing to pay more to someone involved in the community or who promoted a sex positive atmosphere. Personal referrals seemed to be an important source of new customers for the local boutiques. Many people in the community lamented when Venial Pleasures closed. In casual conversation, I heard that the terrible economy coupled with the vanilla community’s intolerance of sexuality worked to bring the business down. I cannot say for certain how much of the impetus to support local shops was tied to the kinky community as part of a larger kinky community and how much was dependent on the members living in Cactus. The city had a strong “buy local” campaign and almost everyone in Cactus espoused choosing local businesses rather than chains, for everything from groceries to technology to clothing. This was a conceit of the affluent, as all of these stores were more expensive than national chains such as Walmart or McDonald’s.

Online stores were parsed in a similar fashion. While I did not spend much time with the virtual aspects of the kink community, there were certainly sites that were preferred over others. Personal referrals were a big part of the way that people find sites. Even then, the quality was suspect. Ruby, with help from her mistress, Sophia, described her experience,
Ruby: I’ve ordered some stuff online but the problem with that is you never know the quality you are going to get.

Sophia: Like that ball gag you ordered.

Ruby: I have a hard time getting my mouth open wide so I ordered a ball gag off of [well-known website] for beginners and I could not even get it in my mouth. I couldn’t use it once so luckily I was able to sell it to someone locally and then order another one but I still have a hard time getting that one in. When it’s online, you never know what you’re getting.

Charlotte, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, had better online experiences, but that might be based on the fact that she tried out friends’ toys prior to purchasing. Consumer reviews were important when buying a toy online to try to mitigate not being able to see or handle the item in person. Many of the boutiques had an online presence and these were considered more trustworthy than the average site discovered by googling. Some sites advertised on kinky social networking sites but I do not know whether they were considered more trustworthy than others. A line of inquiry into the online purchasing habits of kinky people may reveal an interesting synergy between sexuality, virtuality, and consumerism.

There was a strong craftsperson movement in the larger Cactus community, where handmade items were valued above mass produced ones. This phenomenon could be seen in events such as Maker’s Faire, a vanilla weekend-long street fair featuring handmade items such as clothing, jewelry, furniture, and art. Toymakers in the kinky community were viewed as craftspeople and the goods they sell had more social value than buying something from a store, even if it was a boutique. Local toymakers hawked their wares at kinky events, such as
conferences, or occasionally at parties. Most of the vendors at events were male, even though many of the local toymakers were women. Everyone had an online presence, either a business website or through the kinky social networking sites. There was a specialty interest group for toymakers every month, where they met to trade tips on the logistics of toy making. There was also a nascent cooperative for smaller scale operations to have a presence at conferences. Many of the items sold include leather goods, furniture, clothing, rope, and wooden toys. I am reminded strongly of the recent up swell in interest in hand-knitted goods. I am a knitter and appreciate the urge to create. However, my creations are not entirely self-sufficient, as I buy copious amounts of fancy yarn and how-to books. In the kinky community, many items were more directly shaped by toymakers, who began with relatively raw materials such as leather or wood and shaped them into floggers or paddles. People in the community enjoyed being able to talk to the creators of toys, in part to judge their quality, but also to feel a deeper connection to their toys. Origin stories were an important part of the value of a toy. Handmade toys were differently valued. A toy that was made by oneself might be of lesser quality than what was available for purchase through vendors or retail stores, but it carried a lot of weight. When that same toy was sold, it could lose some of its prestige unless the maker was well-known. Most local vendors were less respected than vendors who sell to a national market.

I had firsthand experience with these distinctions regarding rope. I spent a day at the Fit to Be Tied studio making rope. Rope making was labor intensive and required two to three people using a simple machine. In this case, we used twine purchased from Home Depot to create three stranded rope. A strand of the twine was secured to a crank that had three hooks. The twine was then looped onto a single hook about thirty feet away. This step was repeated until all of the hooks on the crank were full. A person was required to operate the crank and a
second person held the single hook. A third person stood in the middle with a wooden tool that guided each of the strands while they were being twisted so that the tension on the rope was uniform. The man who owned Fit to Be Tied ran the operation with the help of his slave, a woman who had been involved with him for a few years. Rounding out the work party were my husband, Thomas (one of the few single men accepted as a full member of the community), and another male Master and his female slave. This was toward the beginning of my time in the field, and it was decidedly odd to hang out with couples with male Masters and female slaves. I will return to the gendered and political dynamics in Chapter Six (Gender). We took turns manning the crank, the hook, and the guide. Once the rope was twisted tight, the ends were bound with electrical tape and cut off their hooks. Later on, the individual strands would be tied together in a knot to keep the rope from unraveling. One fifteen to twenty foot length of rope took about fifteen minutes to complete from beginning to end. We made rope from hemp and flax. At the end of the day, we each took home three lengths of rope. They were extremely rough. We were given instructions to boil the rope and then to rub it down vigorously with dryer sheets. The owner of Fit to Be Tied kept the other ten lengths of rope for use in the studio.

This rope was not as high quality as what was available at a store but the fact that we made it ourselves lent it prestige. It was appropriate for personal use or as a gift but would probably not be sold. This stood in contrast to the rope sold by Ralph at local events. He and his business partner/submissive made a massive amount of rope from a variety of fibers, including hemp, flax, cotton, nylon, linen, and a bamboo/silk blend. Some of the twine came from home improvement stores while more exotic materials began their lives as designer yarn. He sold this rope at events and online. Many people in the local scene purchased his rope. Even more prestigious than handmade rope from a local artisan was rope sold by the Rope Wizard at
dedicated national rope events. The Rope Wizard visited Cactus three or four times a year due to his close relationship with Fit to Be Tied. At these events, he would teach classes and offer rope for sale. This rope was highly prized and more expensive than local rope. Rope was one of the easiest goods to trace, as rope aficionados usually traveled with a hefty supply of rope and could rattle off the origins of each length. Initial cost of materials, intensity of labor, and distance traveled also added the monetary value of rope. Rope was an investment. It was acceptable for people exploring rope or that only use rope peripherally to have retail rope. However, true rope tops were expected to have a certain quality of rope that exceeded vanilla standards. The intention of rope was important to its value. Rope that was made with kinky people in mind was better than rope intended to tie up a boat. If someone could not locate the exact rope she or he wanted through a direct vendor, there were a few websites that were acceptable sources as well. The names of these websites were traded to anyone evincing an interest. Rope was more accessible than other types of toys, with people handling one another’s rope pretty freely (but of course with permission). A person could reject a request to handle other types of toys, such as leather goods or insertables, but people often touched others’ rope. There was an entire subset of vocabulary devoted to describing the different ways rope works, how it acts under tension, how easy it is to cut, and more. Rope was a distinct subculture within the kinky community. Madeleine, flaunting her disdain of local mores, stated, “Hardware stores are a great place for supplies. Rope at the hardware store is a lot cheaper than rope that you get at the BDSM store and it’s just as good.” She had only recently moved to Cactus directly from college and only participated on the periphery of the scene. Her age (twenty two) and her transgendered status set her apart from the larger heterosexual community. She simultaneously rejected and protested her
outsider status by going against convention in a number of areas, including where she obtained her toys.

Toymakers had added status in the community. Toy making could also be a route to community leadership. One of the first things Ethan said when asked to define himself was, “I am a toymaker and one of the co-chairs of a group.” Both of these identities followed his identification as a service sadist top, but they were the first things mentioned situating his position in the community. Ethan provided general goods, such as floggers, talons, and paddles. Other people, like Ralph, specialized in one type of good, in his case rope. It bears mentioning that the more esoteric the good, the more prestige generated for the maker. The best example of this in Cactus was Mr. Electricity. He sold refurbished violet wands and TENS units. He also serviced the equipment he sold. Whenever I asked anyone about a violet wand, Abigail’s response was a typical one, “Get it from Electricity. It’s an old, old thing and he reconditions them and fixes them. He’s an electrical engineer. I don’t know if he has any more, but if he doesn’t he can probably tell you where to get one.”

**Disposable Items**

This hierarchy of toy origins applied to long-term toys; disposable items were not accorded the same status as toys and their origins mattered less. This category included condoms, lubricant, needles, gloves, scalpels, and other things designed for one time use. These were considered part of the toy bag or part of a kit but not toys in and of themselves. These items were tainted once they were used and could not be safely reused. This prohibition was couched in medical terms. Items were valued if they were effective and cheap. Preferences developed based on individual taste but there was not any status associated with using condoms from Condomania (a well-known condom shop) or the free ones passed out by the local AIDS
awareness group. People also enjoyed procuring items from vanilla sources, the more vanilla the better. This played into the idea of pervertables, discussed below. For example, piercing needles could be bought from body modification parlors, medical supply stores, and livestock supply stores. The livestock stores were a source of great amusement, since this was Texas, and despite the belief anyone could be kinky, there was a disjunction between the mythic cowboy Texan and the lived experience of kinky people in a metropolitan area surrounded by ranchland.

**Pervertables**

Pervertables were in a gray zone between items bought in a retail setting and handmade goods. These were items intended for a vanilla use that had been pressed into kinky service. These could be as basic as using a spatula or a hardbound book as an impact toy to more creative repurposing, such as a misery stick made of crazy straws or a rubber horse brush used as an abrasive. The greater the difference between vanilla and kinky uses, the more people enjoyed displaying their originality. In some cases, a pervertable was used to gauge interest in a more expensive toy before investing the money. For example, it was relatively common to buy zucchini in a variety of sizes to use as dildos² to determine the size a person wanted in a more permanent toy. In the case of pervertables, thrift was a selling point. Audrey was not alone in noting, “You can have nice, fun, little shopping trips through the Dollar Store or Dom Depot (Home Depot). You can pretty much turn anything into a pervertable. Kitchen implements are great.” People did not often shop at high-end retail stores for pervertables, preferring instead to stick to cheaper stores. An exception to this was medical supplies that were not intended for one time use, such as speculums, or in Jo’s case, a blood pressure cuff. She rolled the cuff, placed it into a condom, and then inserted it vaginally or anally and inflated it. She explains, “I just came up with it, I thought, the whole thing was how to make a non-biological part actually function.
Well, is there a way to pump it? And I have yet to figure it out but I thought ok what is there that? Blood pressure cuffs do that. And I hadn’t figured out a way to reform it but then it dawned on me, well what if you just kinda ball it up? Where can we put that in the meantime? So it’s just, you know, you see something and just about anything is pervertable.” Creativity was the name of the game. It was a revelation to go shopping anywhere and know that anyone could be secretly buying sex toys when they picked up a rug beater or a squash. The idea of upcycling played an important role in creating pervertables. Upcycling is taking items that may otherwise be considered useless and converting them to products of higher quality. This concept had its roots in the environmental movement, but had been adopted by the kinky community.

**History of a Toy**

So far, I have outlined how the origin of a toy grants it status. Another important part of a toy’s prestige was its use history. Gifted toys were particularly significant. Students of Mauss (1990) will not be surprised that gifting relationships were reciprocal and often served to strengthen the community. Gifts could be toys or other items of significance. Sometimes toys were given to an individual and sometimes they were given knowing that they would be used between play partners. Ruby and Sophia explained,

Ruby: I had one of the local toymakers make her a cane that I gave her for Christmas.

We have a friend that gave us a new toy that I love-hate. It’s made out of crazy straws.

Sophia: there are three of them bound into a handle (like from a bike), the soft kind, and then it has wooden beads on the end of the crazy straws and when you whack her with it, it makes a beautiful pattern.

Ruby: the beads are like an impact and it *hurts.*
In this case, Ruby gave a toy to her partner for a traditional holiday (Christmas). Sophia had the option of using this toy with whomever she pleased, since it was hers. The crazy straws were given to them as a couple, and although the toy could be used with other people, Ruby and Sophia would probably check with each other to make sure that it was okay first. Gifts of handmade toys were particularly treasured. Betty showed me a toy called The Reaper, an impact toy made of many pieces of leather joined together to form a thick, solid paddle. This toy had been handmade by a member of her fairy tribe, an extended, exclusive leather family based on the West Coast. The person who made The Reaper had only gifted this type of toy within the tribe and it was a badge of membership on top of being a significant toy. Some gifts were not toys. When Jessica officially began her protégé relationship with an older leather woman, her mentor offered her a bracelet that was passed down from her mentor, a member of the gay leatherman old guard. Jessica wore this bracelet to all kinky and leather events, especially the ones where her mentor would be. In exchange, Jessica offered her mentor a pair of bronze clothespins. This was significant because her mentor was known for her “zippers,” a technique of running a string through a line of clothespins, clamping the pins on the skin, and then yanking the string and the pins off of the skin like a zipper. Gifting between mentor and mentee was a demonstration of the relationship. Rachael was apprenticed to Mr. Electricity for a period of time and he taught her about violet wands. She purchased the initial kit but he made her a gift of some of the accessories as his apprentice. I discuss mentoring and apprenticeship in Chapter Four (Identity).

Thus far, I have discussed three types of toy exchange – purchase, creating oneself, and gifts. Another important source for new toys or services was bartering. Ava recounted one instance, “I’ve traded for some of my floggers in the past at conventions. I used to do massage
therapy. I once traded three hours of massage for a really nice flogger from a gentleman and his wife at a convention. They were out of town and I was out of town so I’d ask him, I’d really like to have this but I can’t afford it. I’m a massage therapist, would you be willing to trade for it? He asked, here at the convention? Basically, we negotiated three hours worth of therapeutic massage. I took my table to their room, set it up, worked on them both, they handed me the flogger when we were done, and left. There’s lots of ways you can get a hold of stuff.”

Bartering was considered a positive origin story because it embraced the thrift characteristic and emphasized personal connections.

Some people accrued toys for play. Others were collectors. As Alexander, a male switch, stated, “It’s hard for me to see a flogger and not buy it. Jenna says I am a flogger slut.” In his case, he did not often use many of the floggers he owned. Novelty became more of a motivation and function became secondary. Floggers varied by material, color, length, weight, or number of falls. In another case, Abigail showed me her Master’s toy closet. Everything was labeled and organized. His goal was to obtain every type of toy in order to have a complete collection. The urge to collect among kinky people was no stranger than philately.

Some people preferred to go in the opposite direction of collection and relied on their bodies as a toy. Madison, a butch leather dyke dominant, believed that people get too caught up in the materialism of toys and preferred to keep it simple. She had several impact toys, but mostly relied on her hands and arms while she engaged in rhythmic hitting. This made it easy for her to play anywhere, regardless of whether she had her toy bag with her. Madison explained that play was a form of energy exchange and that direct contact facilitated that exchange. Audrey agreed with Madison when she says, “Most of what really gets me is when the play becomes more intimate, hands on, right in your face. Toys are nice but there’s so much distance
between the people that once you finally come in, tooth and claw and biting, just right there and it’s much more of a connection thing.” I discuss the understanding of play as an energy exchange and the concomitant intimacy in Chapter Three (Play). Many people considered direct contact as more intimate and would therefore engage in it more often in private.

Fundraising

I would be remiss if I did not mention fundraising, although it was only indirectly tied to toys and economy. Several times a year, different clubs hosted fundraisers. The goals of the fundraisers I attended were to support a local AIDS hospice, to supply needy children with toys at Christmas, to help a woman who had lost her home to a fire, and to help offset the cost of sexual reassignment surgery for a longtime community member. People donated items or services (kinky or vanilla) for a silent auction. Often, lap dances could be purchased. There would be raffles. Raffle tickets would be sold individually or they could be purchased in a group as “balls to boots,” where the seller measured the purchaser’s inseam with a roll of tickets and give the purchaser that many. There was an auction where people could be bought for the length of a scene. Female dominants brought the best prices at these auctions. Boot blacking, both erotic and functional, was offered. Despite the kinky nature of the events, I was often reminded of other fundraising events I have been to, although there was more laughter and less clothing. At the end of each event, an organizer would announce how much money had been raised and everyone would cheer. This was another way the community engaged in the economy on its own terms.

Conclusion

When Karl Marx describes a commodity fetish, he relies on a definition of a fetish as an object that is invested with value outside of its functionality. A thing becomes a commodity
when it becomes a relationship between things (like between the commodity and money) rather than a relationship between a person and the product of their labor (Marx and Engels 1967). While items are fetishized as having innate qualities that go beyond their functionality, they are not always commodities in this group. The focus on an object’s origin story, with particular emphasis on the purchaser’s relationship to the creator, blurs the lines of commodification one may see in other forms of mass consumption in mainstream US culture. However, this focus on makers and the history of items is grounded within the larger structure of Cactus, where there is a focus on buying local and using purchasing power to support retailers one “believes in.” Despite this emphasis on creators, members of the kinky community could only avoid capitalism in limited ways, relying on mass production for most raw materials and on the internet to increase markets.

The different values placed on items, based on their origin and use, reflected the larger ethos of the kinky community. Self-reliance was respected, as were creativity and thrift. Preference for individual creators supported the local community over exploitative chain retailers. People were willing to invest heavily in specialized toys of high quality, partially to demonstrate their commitment to their discipline. Gifts were given to strengthen bonds and establish reciprocal relationships. Toys were valued for precision, mitigating unintended harm, and allowing a sense of control. Some people collected toys for the act of collecting, while others eschewed materialist concerns, instead focusing on embodying their play in their physical self. Fundraising allowed for demonstrations of charity and community building. Material culture was inextricably bound up with the kinky community in Cactus.
A kitten is a type of submissive who acts as a young cat in a form of pet play.

Condoms were used on produce to prevent pesticides from entering a person’s system.
CHAPTER SIX - GENDER

Gender is such a funny thing. We can credit in large part the feminist movement with the recent interest in gender. Feminism in its current incarnation in the United States began as a concern with the rights of women (Mill 1870, Stanton 1848), albeit a specific type of women, based on class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other attributes. There were hints that other types of women were also demanding recognition, as many feminists note by including Sojourner Truth’s speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (Truth 1851), in anthologies. From its earliest incarnations, the feminism of the 20th century was concerned with sexuality (Woodhull 1873) and reproduction (Sanger 1920). People believed that women were a class apart from men based on the notion of the naturalness of a dichotomous system stemming from sexual dimorphism.

In sexology (which was founded in psychology), John Money (1965) introduced the term gender to the dialog, which up until that point had only been used in grammatical discussion. Prior to the term gender catching on, anthropologists such as Mead (1950) and theorists such as de Beauvior (1949) were already analyzing “sex roles” as something constructed by, or at least mediated through, culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, mostly due to the strides made by feminists, gender became a distinct analytic category in the social sciences. There was a shift in the 1990s from gender as an essential component of the self toward the notion of gender as a construct. Much of this work was inspired by Foucault’s (1985, 1994, 1986) exploration of sexuality as a construct. I will discuss the influence of his work on my research in the section on sexuality. For our purposes here, suffice it to say that many academics took his lead and began examining gender as a construct.
Other academics were working on the construction of gender as well. Ortner (1972) explores how changing the universal oppression of women may begin with restructuring the analogy of female to nature (as opposed to male to culture). Rubin (1975) also used a structuralist perspective, in her case to parse apart the relation of sexuality to gender in light of the exchange of women in Levi-Strauss’s (1969) elementary forms of kinship.

Building on the ideas of constructionists before her, Judith Butler (1990) redirected attention toward how gender identity was constructed through discursive performance. She argues that through repeated, ritualized acts, gender and sexuality are constructed as “natural” identities when in truth it is the iteration that creates them. She examines this paradox by discussing the performance of gender by drag queens. The juxtaposition between men performing femininity has appealed to many ethnographers as a site to understand gender (Hennen 2004, 2008; Newton 1979) and sometimes as women performing masculinity, although less popularly (Halberstam 1997). Transgenderism has also collected a number of scholars, both ethnographic (Mageo 1992; Nanda 1990; Parsons 1916) and theoretical (Feinberg 1996; Hausman 2001). I would be remiss if I did not mention that transgenderism has also been examined from a kinky point of view (Harrington 2010; Califia 2000; Waters and Dick 1998).

Gender is not constructed in a void. hooks (1981) critiques feminism for ignoring the role that race plays in gender oppression. Additionally, Rich (1980) critiques feminism for actively excluding lesbians in her piece “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Constructionism cracks open the notion that oppression is inevitable or even natural and allows for a deconstruction of vectors of oppression.
The habit of disarticulating biological sex from social gender allows for a discussion of how anatomy influenced the constructed nature of the social aspects of gender. However, later theorists argue that this is a false dichotomy and that even sex is constructed. Fausto-Sterling (2000) calls into question the naturalness of anatomy, noting that sex (male/female) is not as exclusive as the medical profession would have us believe. Anatomy, chromosomes, or hormone levels can all vary, leading to in between states that are neither decidedly male or female. It is society’s interpretation of biological facts that construct sex. Butler (1993) also questions the naturalness of biological sex and then expands into a discussion of heterosexism.

I find it useful to separate gender from sex (the act) for the purposes of this work. However, as noted above, gender and sex are related phenomena. Laqueur notes, “Almost everything one wants to say about sex - however sex is understood - already has in it a claim about gender” (1990:11). I discuss sex and sexuality and the related literature more fully in Chapter Seven.

Gender in the Kinky Community

Much of the classical theorizing about gender is based on a binary division between masculine and feminine. Let me add my voice to the queer theorists and feminists who say that gender is multiplicity, that two genders cannot readily account for people’s lived experiences. I argue that there are at least seven gender identities that are deployed in the pansexual (but predominantly heterosexual) kinky community. People use a dialectical approach toward identity. Hegel (1832) and other philosophers (Fichte 1795, Marx and Engels 1887) use the idea of dialectics to explain how two opposing forces can be resolved into a new state, commonly broken down into thesis, antithesis, synthesis. People in the kinky community took this philosophical argument to an embodied plane by using multiple sets of dialectical concepts to formulate multiple aspects of identity (and in this case, genders). I am reminded that binary code, composed of only 1s and 0s, can be used to capture the works of Shakespeare. In practice, people experienced gender as analog as opposed to digital. Analog systems “have a value that changes steadily over time and can have any one of an infinite set of values in a range” (InetDaemon 2011), whereas digital systems are either on or off. People used digital categories to construct analog experiences. Ideologically, an aspect was one or the other (on or off, 1 or 0) but in practice, it could be experienced as any value along a wave within a range. So enumerating gender is impossible. The range can be identified but specific definitions for exclusive states are arbitrary. A definitive category is illusive. It slips away once you try to nail it down. One can outline the general shape of it, and make hypotheses about why the waves form the way they do, but cannot predict exactly how any one person will experience gender.

At this point, I feel it pertinent to reemphasize that I worked with a specific group in a particular location in time and space. My theories are based on my experience and what I
I do not speak for kinky people, as they have demonstratively proven they are capable of speaking for themselves. Instead, I offer my theories in order to illustrate how gender can be constructed and reconstructed in ways that may be used to understand the greater project of gender and ultimately as a means of resisting gender oppression. The categories I have noted are certainly an etic construct and are not the ways in which people may identify themselves. I hope, however, that members of the community find that my analysis rings true.

The first thing I asked people to do during the interviews was to pick a pseudonym. The second question I asked was, “How do you describe yourself?” The response to this question was usually a long pause. There were several fundamental pairs of opposites that were salient in this context, which I have mentioned previously. For clarity’s sake, I have included a chart of these below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male (biological)</td>
<td>Female (biological)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Bottom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Submissive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder (status)</td>
<td>Neophyte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Younger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight (as in heterosexual)</td>
<td>Sexually fluid (not heterosexual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous when unpartnered</td>
<td>Vulnerable when unpartnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys (young acting)</td>
<td>Brats (young acting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have constructed this chart in such a way as to highlight characteristics that were usually found together based on grounded theory analysis of my interviews. It is not a coincidence that I have broken these into gendered groups. Interestingly, of the twenty-two people I interviewed, only six offered gendered terms not based on a relationship to describe themselves in their initial description (girl, trans [woman], woman, male, butch, boy), while three other people used terms that connote gender in relation to another (Mistress, lesbian, dyke). Two people deliberately used terms that rejected masculine and feminine connotations (beloved child of God, androgynous spirit). However, there was only one instance where the person’s identification as a woman was the first defining characteristic stated. I have several competing ideas as to why this might have happened.

First, I conducted my interviews in person. People might have assumed that their gender presentation was sufficient to not warrant further declaration. This might have been further influenced by the fact I had witnessed most of my informants playing, where gender was most prominently on display.

Second, gender was not something that was difficult for many people. Being masculine or feminine, while fundamental to many people’s perception of themselves, can nonetheless be ignored unless it is problematic. It is interesting to note that of the people who offered gendered terms, most were engaged in the queer community (as opposed to the heterosexual one) where gender is more troubled (a la Butler (1990)). It might not have occurred to most people to mention it. It might also be that many people were engaged in incidental androgyny, a term
explored by Newmahr (2011) meaning that certain people do not perform gender well and therefore end up as androgynous by default, rather than as the result of an active choice to forego a binary gender system. This leads me to my third proposition.

There was a category equally salient to masculine or feminine. People tended to orient themselves around the divide between dominance and submissiveness. This orientation highlighted some aspects over others (age, for example) but it was a powerful trope in the community. This leads me to my seven gendered system. Allow me to introduce an illustration of the ways I see gender working in the heterosexual\(^1\) kinky community. I will discuss how my experiences with the women-only club served to illuminate this system through contrast in my analysis of the “switch” gender later in this chapter.
I often find myself frustrated at overly complicated graphics, but I hope that the figure and the text complement one another so that my argument becomes clear. In the illustration, the distinct genders are dominant masculine, not-dominant masculine, submissive masculine, submissive feminine, not-submissive feminine, dominant feminine, and switch. Masculinity is denoted by a square and femininity by an oval. Dominance is blue and submissiveness is purple. The “not-” category is green. Switch is yellow. The size of the font indicates how prevalent the gender is in the heterosexual community. The capitalization of letters follows the kinky convention of capitalizing dominants’ names while only using lower-case for submissives’.
Let me begin by explaining I deliberately eschewed “female” and “male” for “feminine” and “masculine” because biological makeup (usually glossed as “sex”), while often correlated with these presentations, was not a clear indicator of gender. I could have used the top/bottom split for my other set of variables, but those terms usually denote activities rather than identities. Some people deliberately avoided placing themselves on a dominant/submissive spectrum but it was the focus of interactions for a majority of people in the heterosexual community. I will discuss the genders found at the corners of the diagram before I address the not-submissive feminine and not-dominant masculine categories. The category against which any gender was measured was the feminine submissive. Masculine dominance was seen as the logical compliment to feminine submissiveness. However, feminine dominants and masculine submissives were also primarily judged in relationship to feminine submissiveness before being analyzed as “like masculine dominants” (in either masculinity or dominance).

In light of Butler’s concept of gender as a performance, I believe people strategically switch genders depending on social context. This was most easily observed in the separation between vanilla and kinky spaces. The gender someone expressed in public, non-kinky venues usually fell in line with what was expected in an urban, Texan setting in their role as a man or a woman. A person also accessed gender in kinky contexts. This gender sometimes mirrored the person’s vanilla gender, but was often complicated by the introduction of the dominant/submissive dialectic. In a binary system, an adult person either is a woman or a man. In the kinky community, people performed gender to the point of camp and had access to a multiplicity of genders. A single person could develop over time from one gender into another entirely, morphing from submissive feminine to dominant masculine. The reverse seldom occurred in the heterosexual and women only groups. To further confound the process, there
was the switch identity, discussed below, that consistently transgressed the otherwise somewhat stable categories. In the kinky community, being one gender in one context did not exclude a person being a different gender in another.

**Feminine Submissives**

In the heterosexual community, feminine submissives were generally biological women, although there were a few biological males who identified as such, most of whom identified as transgendered women in all aspects of their lives. In some cases, people who lived their vanilla lives as not-dominant masculine were submissive feminine in kinky contexts. For the most part, feminine submissives played a gender based on an idealized understanding of the 1950s housewife as depicted in popular culture.² There were also other understandings of what it means to be a submissive feminine person, but this was the most prevalent. Feminine submissives usually enjoyed spending time on their dress and wanted the effort to be appreciated. Hair was done, faces were painted, clothing was carefully picked out to display feminine traits. Corsets and high heeled shoes were used to emphasize feminine curves while the sense of restriction or impairment such accoutrements were highlighted. Many feminine submissives would express their deference to others (although primarily dominant masculine people) by engaging in service, which might include fetching food or drinks, cleaning up the area, and running small errands. There were other ways to display submissive femininity. One of the most striking to an outsider was the lack of clothing. As the night progresses, many feminine submissives shed their finery for skin, although people usually keep their panties on. Another behavior often used to mark submissive femininity was that these people did not usually sit on furniture indoors (at parties or private homes). Feminine submissives almost always acted as bottoms in scenes, unless they were acting in an auxiliary capacity for a dominant person.
Submissive people in general, but feminine submissive people especially, were more likely to initiate physical touching in casual spaces with people not their partners (hugging, kissing on the cheek, petting hair). Age was another component of the dominance/submissiveness spectrum, but like gender, it was only loosely based on biology. Submissives, both feminine and masculine, were more likely to identify as diminutive categories, such as girls or boys (or any permutation thereof, such as grrls or bois\(^3\)). Interestingly, sassy “boys” found their complement in feminine “brats.” Boys were considered cute or mischievous when they tested a dominant’s limits, while brats were considered ill-behaved.

At this point, let me state that the events I attended and the groups I worked with were affiliated as kinky rather than leather. As Abigail explained, “The kinky community is a group of like-minded individuals who pursue their own definition of kink and get together to experience it and talk about it with each other. It’s definitely not leather because leather distinguishes between kink and leather. There is a leather community. It’s like a lot of gay people but there are also a lot of het people that are leather. I think leather people are more into honor, tradition, and family. Honor, tradition, and family may be with their leather family of choice.” Many leather people participated in the kinky community but it was generally understood that the groups I worked with were not exclusively leather and the focus was on kinky practices rather than a tradition based on strict codes. Among the leather people I talked with, they traced their lineage back to associations of gay men formed post World War Two. The fact that I did not have access to the gay men’s group impeded my understanding of the leather community in Cactus. I believe the kinky community can be understood without a full exploration of leather, although the two were related. One of the most noticeable differences between the two groups was the ritual behaviors known as protocol. In the leather community,
protocol could dictate where a submissive stood, who may address a submissive, or who had the
right to wear leather. In the kinky community, protocols were less formal and less rigidly
enforced. One example mentioned previously was that submissives did not sit on furniture.

Early on in my fieldwork, I established an identity as a neophyte with bottom leanings. My status as a newbie lent me a fluidity that gradually fades as a person becomes more established in the community. As important as it was for me personally to eschew a submissive identity based on my belief that submissiveness was contrary to my understanding of feminism, my interest in pain and masochism put me on the bottom end of the spectrum. This led to my participation in subLiminal, a collection of submissive people that met for discussion and educational purposes. This gave me an opportunity to meet with people outside of a definitive kinky context. We met at a hotel bar once a month and would have speakers or discussions. Although this group was open to all submissives, bottoms, or switches in bottom mode, this group was predominantly women. One of the coordinators was a man and there were two other men who would occasionally drop in. Once, a new man came to the group. He was a member of the gay leather community who had recently moved to Cactus. I would classify him as a submissive masculine person, based on his dress, carriage, and speech. He was flabbergasted that a meeting of submissives was almost all women. He said he had never met a female submissive in all his time in the community. He left the meeting early, either uncomfortable or bored; it was hard to tell. This further illustrates the gap between the gay male leather community and the heterosexual community. I did not have an opportunity to have much one on one contact with male organizer of the group, but he also identified as gay. Of the two occasional male participants, I know that one was straight in his sexual identification yet he was also a cross-dresser. I would classify him in the nebulous region between submissive feminine
and submissive masculine. When interacting with members of the kinky community known to be other submissives or bottoms outside of a party context, the feminine submissives paid less obvious attention to their own appearance. Discussions were lively, not characterized by the deference usually found between dominants and submissives. If anything, the lines were drawn between established members of the community and new people. I will return to this example in my discussion of the not-submissive feminine category.

Virtual space also had its own set of rules about submissive feminine behavior. In the heterosexual groups, feminine submissives were likely to avoid capital letters for self-identification, foregoing “I” for “i” while capitalizing dominants’ titles, names, or pronouns (for example, “My Master asked me to bring Him the whip.”). Another clue to someone’s submissiveness or dominance could be found in screen names, again following the capitalization convention. Additionally, many submissives labeled themselves as such; for example, names could include designations such as sub, girl, or slave. I discuss virtual space in Chapter Four (Identity).

In Chapter Seven (Sex), I discuss the significance of orgasm. However, in a discussion of gender, the presence or absence of orgasm could be an important indicator of what a person’s role was. Feminine submissives, as a whole, were more likely to display orgasms than any other group.

Feminine submissives had a more open sexual orientation, often describing themselves as “hetero-flexible,” or predominantly oriented toward partnering with dominant masculine people but able to play with someone of the same gender. This category did not rule out long-term same gendered partnerships. On the whole, very few people I talked to were willing to exclude the
possibility of a potential partner based solely on gender. In practice, masculine dominants were the least likely to have a same gendered partner (in the heterosexual community) and feminine dominants were the most likely to have a same gendered partner.

**Feminine Dominants**

My membership in the submissive groups did not, in theory, preclude my participation with dominant focused groups, but in practice made such involvement difficult. Despite the fluidity granted to me by being new I did not have enough of a command of the gender system to convincingly pull off a switch identity that would have allowed me to access both groups. There was a group devoted to feminine dominants, or FEM (Females Enslaving Males), which was created for female dominants and their male submissives. Dominant feminine people in the heterosexual community had submissive partners that could be either masculine or feminine (or multiple partners of each\(^4\)) but did not necessarily identify as gay or lesbian. Sophia, a prominent member of LUST, was in several relationships, including a marriage to a masculine dominant and a Mistress/slave relationship with a feminine submissive. She explained, “I would not call myself gay but I would call myself open for whatever. I just like people as individuals. If there is something in them that really resonates with me, then it doesn’t matter what sex they are at all.” In kinky settings, feminine dominants expected deference from submissives and respect from other dominants, both feminine and masculine. Feminine dominants were much rarer than their masculine counterparts. Like feminine submissives, many feminine dominants also spent time on appearance and wore things such as corsets and high heels, but more with the attitude that they were powerful despite the physical restrictions created by the gear. Feminine dominants invited a masculine gaze but in this case their sexuality became a weapon rather than a vulnerability. Rachael, a feminine dominant, acknowledged it was sometimes hard to find
acceptance in the heterosexual group, “I still run into problems in the community that people will have a problem with my dynamic, in part, I guess because of my age, in part because I’m female, and in part because they have a problem with the concept [of a woman owning a man].” Although Rachael identified as both bisexual and as queer, her primary relationship was with a boy (who is a masculine submissive), so the only space they could play in public was heterosexual or pansexual spaces.

Feminine dominants had to walk a fine line to maintain a foot in each camp of femininity and dominance. Their femininity, if pronounced, could make it a struggle to be treated as a dominant. In some cases, people compensated by emphasizing their dominance and blurring the line into masculinity or at least androgyny. This happened sometimes with older dominants that identified as females but were not necessarily feminine or masculine. In both the heterosexual and women’s group, feminine dominants were seen as meaner than masculine dominants, less merciful and more sadistic. Newmahr (2011) discusses three types of tops, focusing on tops who acted as benevolent dictators, tops who had a bad-ass attitude, and tops who performed as part of service. Feminine dominants were more likely to espouse the bad ass top philosophy, interested in causing pain for its own end, rather than as a means of shaping a submissive in a paternal manner. In practice, I found feminine dominants to be no more or less cruel or solicitous of a submissive’s comfort, but the general understanding was that feminine dominants could be scarier than their masculine counterparts. Feminine dominants shared several aspects with their masculine counterparts, including lack of nudity and lack of public displays of orgasm. Transcending masculine and feminine, a trait of dominance was to always have more clothes on than the submissive in public. Nudity was seen as a sign of helplessness and I only saw a handful of scenes where the dominant was in some state of undress. Orgasm was also
considered a vulnerable state and a symptom of losing control, and therefore avoided by dominants in public. In private, many people saw sexual satisfaction as a logical outcome of a scene.

**Masculine Dominants**

Masculine dominants acted cocky, but were in fact one of the most heavily policed categories. People in other categories could get away with exploring other gender expressions in kinky settings, but for a masculine dominant person to step outside of his gender called into question both his masculinity and his dominance. In appearance, masculine dominants looked as if they did not care what they looked like. In my experience, masculine dominant people spent a fair amount of time on their appearance but the goal was to appear natural. Like feminine dominants, masculine dominants usually remained dressed at parties. In the community as a whole, there was a preponderance of black and red as clothing colors, but masculine dominants heavily favored black. There were a few models of masculinity that were used as the basis for performance – the working class man, the military man, and (it being Texas) the cowboy. Although many of the masculine dominants I spoke with worked in white collar jobs (for example, in the legal profession or in information technology), they displayed a type of masculinity that valued physical prowess. A masculine dominant could be readily identified by his boots, whether they were work, combat, or cowboy. With the exception of one person who always wore a kilt, I only saw masculine dominants wear pants, usually jeans. Black leather vests were abundant. T-shirts with clever sayings, usually about sex and bondage, were common, as were casual button-ups. I met some people who were ex-military or were currently serving in the armed forces. They tended toward a military presentation, wearing camouflage and military caps. On the whole, however, the masculinity projected by the dominants I met was
a jovial, paternal sort of good-ole-boy-ness. On the whole, masculine dominants enjoyed being served food and drink by submissives, but did not seem overly put out to do these types of things for themselves. I cannot separate what is Texan chivalry from kinky chivalry, but masculine people held doors for feminine ones and acted as protectors. There was actually a named relationship, “a collar of protection,” whereby a dominant person (masculine or feminine) publicly acknowledged a submissive person was under their protection. I also know of two occasions where feminine submissives protected other submissives. In practice, this meant that the protecting partner vetted possible play partners and could be trusted to guide the protected person. This was less formal than an official collar or a mentoring relationship. Masculine dominants were also the most obviously aware of playing to an audience. Many professed enjoying being watched for something they were excelled at.

**Masculine Submissives**

The least common gender presentation in the heterosexual community was the masculine submissive. I know for a fact that there were people who would fit into this category in the gay male leather community, but I only knew them tangentially. These masculine submissives were foremost recognized for their masculinity in appearance, carriage, and physical power. Unpartnered, these people might not even be labeled as submissive. Part of their mystique was the idea that their partner was strong enough to tame them. I only interviewed two people whom I consider to be masculine submissives in the heterosexual community, and each of them primarily identified as a switch.

**Gender as Negation; Not- Categories**

Now for a word about the not- categories. Part of this categorization was inspired by the philosophical concept of alterity, where one recognizes oneself in opposition to a “not-self”
This category was not the way people identify, but is rather how they were treated in practice and how others perceived them. In my experience, the immediate evaluation of feminine people was submissive/not-submissive rather than the professed split between submissive/dominance. The analog of this was that masculine people were evaluated as dominant or not. However, submissiveness was the default category for feminine people and a person had to prove that she was not submissive to make it into the not- category. Conversely, although dominance was the marked category for masculine people, a person needed to prove (and have accepted) his dominance. A person had to actively work to establish an identity as either dominant feminine or submissive masculine, thereby escaping the not- category. The not-category was slipped into and out of much more easily than crossing between dominant/submissive. Many people gravitated toward the not- category in gender presentation outside of specifically kinky settings to pass, which I referenced while talking about the SubLiminal meetings. It makes sense that among peers, hierarchical roles ebb. People became not-submissive, in part because there was no one playing the dominant to riff off of. Gender in this way was revealed as relational. In my admittedly limited experience, this same sense of lack of needing to perform did not happen amongst dominants, even in a vanilla setting. If everyone was immediately evaluated against the submissive feminine ideal, gender was performed for a masculine dominant gaze. Even when only masculine dominants were present, it seemed as if gender had to be performed, leading to the kinds of competition that happened in these settings. Masculine dominants often compared who has the best toys, the most submissive partner, or the most extreme behaviors. It even became a statement about dominance when a person forewent participating in the one-upmanship by holding oneself aloof. It was a classic case of protesting too much belying the claim one was trying to make. That aside, the presumption of dominance
receded in vanilla settings. If it showed through, it looked like old-fashioned sexism, and many people wanted to avoid that charge. One illustration of the way in which gender presentations and relationships were disguised in a vanilla setting was how slave collars were hidden in plain sight. Some dominant/submissive pairs were in master/slave relationships, where the slave was submissive to the master. Often the slave would wear a “collar” as a reminder of the relationship. These could be an actual collar, sometimes with a lock. Usually these were reserved for kinky space, at parties or kinky events. Many slaves had vanilla collars that looked like regular jewelry. Ruby, Sophia’s slave, was a teacher. Her “everyday” collar was a gold chain with a charm. Alternatively, Sophia sometimes designated other jewelry as the day’s collar, such as a ring she gave Ruby for her birthday. Abigail had a gold chain with her initials engraved on it, which she joked stood for “always slave.” It was interesting to interact with people at munches, those regular social meetings that took place at vanilla restaurants and bars, and to see how gender presentations shifted.

My personal experience as “not-submissive” crystallized early on in my fieldwork. As a feminist, I found it unsettling that so many kinky interactions looked like sexism (and heterosexism). I am not entirely sure that the kinky community can shrug off that charge completely. Sometimes it was radical to parody gender roles to the point of absurdity. But sometimes it was not a parody. At the third event I attended, a seminar on flogging technique and safety, I was confronted with the disjunction between the ideal and practice. Many people in the community lauded the fact that no one touched another person without permission. In reality, feminine submissives did a lot of touching, but usually only if the attention was welcomed. Masculine dominants, however, were expected to respect this injunction. People also claimed that they did not make assumptions about dominance or submissiveness based on
masculinity or femininity. During a break in the demonstration, I was looking at some of the floggers on display. A well-known masculine dominant began to brag that he could use a rabbit fur flogger to bring someone to their knees. This kind of toy is considered “soft” and not usually used as an intense tool. Lacking a proper model, this man placed his hands on my back to make a point about where to land the blows. I had just learned that my gender presentation put me at risk of being labeled as submissive. I must have given him the glare of death, because he backed up. However, he did not pause in his conversation, much less apologize. I found out later that this was typical behavior for this person. His violation of the general rule about touching illustrated for me the possibility that my gender presentation led people to make assumptions about who I was. Perhaps I would have been more wary about the signals I sent out had I been in an entirely different cultural setting, but doing domestic fieldwork tripped me up. In retrospect, I do not think people would have respected me any less if I identified as submissive, but I wanted to avoid the perception of it. As I identify and present as feminine, I had to struggle to avoid the presumption of submissiveness. However, I also needed to avoid a dominant presentation in order to stay away from the kind of agonistic striving that takes place among dominants. I accessed the “not-submissive feminine” category by structuring my interactions in light of research. I think I am only the most recent of a long line of social scientists to construct an identity outside of the normal roles (gender and otherwise) in a given society in order to operate freely.

**Context**

Kinky people, when brought together under the rubric of kink in a vanilla setting, created a little bubble, allowing for small displays of gender variance, but in general toning things down into the neutral categories. The not-category serves as a representation of this more
dominant/submissive neutral position. This gave me the first hints that people are not wedded to their gender category as innately as some believed. If the munches had clued me into the fact that party behavior was performance, I had a couple of interviews that were downright shocking in the disjunction between how I had seen people behave in kinky settings as opposed to how they presented themselves in a vanilla setting. Ethan, who was a masculine dominant in the scene, revealed himself as vulnerable when explaining “top drop,” the phenomena of a period of let-down after particularly intense scenes, “It’s a mix between an emotional crash and adrenaline withdrawal and a sugar crash rolled up. The next day I felt like crap. I wasn’t depressed or sick; I just had no energy. I just wanted to sit on the couch and just not move. I had nothing left in me. I was shaky a little bit like I was having caffeine withdrawals. A little emotional. Sort of randomly cried for no reason for a little bit.” This admission did not violate his sense of himself as a masculine dominant. Abigail, who in my schema was classified as a feminine submissive based on her demeanor, dress, and behaviors, complicated the dominant/submissive split by saying, “Most of the time, I am defined as a leather slave. A dominant person who is obedient to one person.” Not only was gender presentation varied in intensity, but it could also switch polarity. A woman in a Daddy-girl relationship as the submissive partner was also a successful architect, excelling in a male-dominated field and more than capable of holding her own, financially, intellectually, and emotionally. Perhaps the fact I was so unsettled by the contradictions was due to my own preconceptions about how kinky identity gelled with vanilla identity.

**Switch**

All of my illustrations and enumerations create a framework to talk about switching. While the categories I outlined occurred frequently, they were not static. Switching, as a verb,
was the process of transgressing the boundaries between opposites. There were tops who occasionally bottomed. There were men who occasionally wore women’s clothing. There was latitude in the four dialectical genders (masculine/feminine – dominant/submissive) for people to experience other types of behaviors normally reserved for other genders. There were also people who were defined, by themselves or by others, as “switches” (a noun). In my experience, switches were more common in the queer community than in the heterosexual one. In some cases, people would switch their category depending on their relationship to another person. Beatrice captured this perfectly,

I feel like switch is kind of a non-identity. It’s not some identity that I carry around because it was, if anything, I am a sadist in relation to that person. I am a slave in relation to that person. But I don’t look for other switches to play with, but I don’t tend to switch with people. So it’s like saying, I like to do lots of different things with lots of different people - so I have choices. I can be open to, whatever, that is transforming […] It’s constantly moving. It does feel a little bit like non-static. In that way, it could be kind of a threshold space, the place where you stand when you are moving from room to room. You are moving from ‘oh, I was topping someone a minute ago’ to moving into another room where ‘I am somebody’s slave.’

In other cases, people switched within the context of relationships. Jenna, who was in a long-term relationship with Sebastian, explained, “Sebastian and I switch with each other, so there might be days where he’s dominant and I am submissive to him, not often but sometimes, but there is certainly the - if I expect something to happen, it will happen. But we don’t think about it or actively express it […] 90% of the time, I am the Dominant and he is my submissive. But I don’t want the responsibility or feel I have the capability of owning him and he agrees. We’re
happy with that. 10% of the time, we do switch and he will be dominant over me, but that’s about it.”

In some cases, switches, as neither 100% dominant or submissive, ran the risk of being seen as being good at neither. Sebastian, a male switch who was primarily submissive, felt excluded from the heterosexual community of predominantly feminine switches on account of his masculinity and also felt his submissiveness made other men think of him as less than masculine. He and his female partner, also a switch, had been denied membership in the feminine-dominant/male-submissive club based on the fact that they occasionally switch with each other. Thomas identified as a switch between top and bottom, sadist and masochist, but did not define himself on the dominance/submissiveness spectrum. I asked whether people took him less seriously because he was a switch. He replied,

I have heard the same complaint. I have never had that problem. I mean, I think I have heard some complaints about people who hear other people saying things about them, but I don’t care about that. As long as my friends accept me, I don’t care what other people may say. If someone thinks I am not as good a top as someone else because I’m a switch, I don’t care. On the other side, I think that applies more to people who are into D/s relationships. Especially as Master/slave relationships. That I can see, I don’t know if I can say, a problem or a conflict, because to me, let me tell you this provided I am not into D/s relationships (so this is just my appreciation of a thing) but if someone has a Master, part of the fantasy is seeing that person as a Master or even as a god, if you want, is this god-like visualization of this person. So if this Master submits to someone else, this godlike vision of him will come down, right? Because he is not almighty, he can submit to someone else. I can see a conflict in there. Even though all this is a fantasy. I don’t
see why you can’t be a Master in one situation and a slave in another, if you want to switch, but I can see how for someone who wants to see as always that ultimate Master, it would be hard for them to see them as such if they submit to someone else.

Well enough, you might say, perhaps people switch between dominance and submission, but why tie these categories to masculine and feminine? People also switched between masculine and feminine. This usually occurred in predictable ways, masculine submissive bleeding into feminine submissive or feminine dominant adopting some behaviors of masculine dominant. In one instance, Sophia owned a male slave who was submissive to her, but presented himself as masculine in most contexts. At several parties, I saw him dressed in a frilly tutu, makeup, and pigtails. Sophia called it sissification. The slave found it both humiliating and freeing to adopt a hyper-feminine persona. Some feminine dominants, especially older women (over fifty), would take on more masculine roles, focusing on technique and showmanship. I struggle with labeling the behavior of older feminine dominants as masculine-like, in part because there are not any good models of sexual older women in popular culture. Sure, there are older women who are considered “still” sexy, but because they still look or act young. In a community where experience and age were considered positives, older female dominants (feminine and masculine) sailed in uncharted waters.

Having given examples of people who transgressed categories along the same axis (dominant to submissive or masculine to feminine), I would like to employ Ava’s experiences to illustrate that “switch” as an identity was something entirely different than just changing between two extremes. Ava is a “bio-female,” married to a woman. Within her partnership with her wife, she tends to be the more top partner, although both of them identify as switches. Her wife identifies as “trans-masculine,” “butch lesbian,” and also “non-feminine female.” So within her
primary relationship in kinky practices, Ava had a more feminine dominant gender. In regard to relating to one another, her wife was her Daddy. This trope called her to respond with femininity, though she could also respond with boi energy. At the same time, she was also involved with a gay leather man who was her Sir. In the context of this relationship, Ava identified as a gay boy (not boi, as that implies females impersonating males), wearing men’s clothing (specifically a jock strap and boots) and packing (wearing an artificial hard or soft phallus in the jock strap). She explained that while she and her Sir had a sexual relationship, it was in the context between two males. One expression of that was that they engaged in anal sex (penetration of her anus by his penis) but did not engage in vaginal sex (penetration of her vagina by his penis). At this point, I am going to quote Ava at length.

Misty: I am interested in this idea of you both as gay and yet your sexual interactions do not threaten this identity.

Ava: We are very careful. In the beginning it was a tap dance on eggshells, lots of them. It goes into that identity and role. When I am with him, I identify as if I were a gay boy. I don’t consider myself to what you would call butch in any form, but I don’t refer to myself as a femme or overly feminine. With him, I’m more masculine. With my primary, I tend to be more on the feminine side. So for me, it’s just playing with that line, going back and forth. With him, I’m a tomboy, rough, tough, boots, jeans, t-shirt, jock, pack. With her, it tends to be more on the side of more feminine. I’ll wear makeup, I’ll wear skirts occasionally. I wore a dress to our wedding. Part of what makes it real for him and I is that I can touch into that more masculine persona within myself. Does he go around pretending I’m biologically male? No. Do I? No. But do I think I have that energy and that aspect when I want to or when he needs me to be? Yeah.
Misty: would you say that is transgenderism?

Ava: No, because I don’t want to be bio-male. If anything, it would be more like cross-dressing. You have the drag queens and they feminize themselves and I guess it would be more drag king. It’s more, it’s just, a nuance of myself, it’s part of who I am.

Many social scientists have touched on the fact that people’s gender roles shift over the course of their lives (Butler 1990; Nanda 1990; Newton 1979; Rubin 1984). In this case, Ava was switching back and forth through multiple spectrums in the same time period. In vanilla settings, Ava switched into the not-submissive feminine category. She was a medical professional in a geriatric community and wore skirts and blouses while at work. She was aware that a non-traditional gender presentation could antagonize patients set in their ways. She acknowledged this when she said, “Do I show it [my gender variance] to the entire world? No. Do I share that with the entire world? No. Do I choose the people that I share that with? Yes.” The not- categories allowed for passing in the vanilla world.

In BRBC, the women’s club, most people defined themselves as switches. Some dominants, both feminine and masculine, said they switched sometimes. In a couple of cases, masculine dominants did not ever switch. Even though they were engaged in transgenderism, it was a consistent state. I would also like to remind the reader that while I observed some transgenderism, I did not explore people’s experiences with transgenderism outside of the kinky community and cannot speak to the lived experiences of transgendered people as a daily identity. Further study could illuminate any connection between how a kinky setting allows for or represses expression of traditional transgendered identities. One example that comes to mind was that play space was usually divided into male-only, female-only, and pansexual. Although
transgendered people might feel more comfortable in one of the single-gendered spaces, often they were denied access based on their physical body. Therefore the only space available to them was the pansexual space and in Cactus, that was a predominantly heterosexual space.

The fluidity I found among the women served as a contrast to highlight the more rigid roles in the heterosexual community. I also found that the presumption of submissiveness did not occur in the queer community. However, it was not as if there were no interactions between the two groups. While they were somewhat separate, they moved in similar spheres and the genders of one were options for the other. The gender presentations of a different group were not any less valid. If we see gender as an analog system, the range of the waves in the kinky community was greatly expanded. It was the possibilities that confounded a binary perception of gender.

**Performance**

Once it is established that the range of the possible in the kinky community was wider than that found among mainstream Americans, it remains to be determined what created the peaks. My answer is – the audience. In several cases, I have mentioned that someone was submissive or masculine in relation to another person. If gender is a construct, then its performance is just that – a performance. At a party, people were at their most extreme gendered selves. In the case of the people who attend subLiminal, among peers in a vanilla setting, they performed a perfunctory femininity with few submissive overtones. This same group of people at a party primped and preened, vying for attention as truly submissive (at least to her chosen dominant). Dominants strutted their stuff, playing up their power, either as feminine or masculine. Gender became drag, as people presented hyper versions of traditional genders along a dominant/submissive spectrum. The audience could consist of the entire group of kinky
people, in which case it became gender as exhibitionism, or it could be in response to one particular person. The important thing was to have someone respond to the person’s presentation in an appropriate manner. It would be hard to pull off dominant masculinity if people laughed at the presentation. People were pretty generous in their responses, not denying someone femininity or submissiveness based on characteristics such as age or body size, as is common in the vanilla world.

Using a digital framework, submissive/dominant and masculine/feminine, people created a wide range of genders that were experienced as analog waves, where variation could occur in any point in a range. People shifted through these waves in mostly predictable ways. There was also a gender, switch, that stood outside the wave system, jumping to multiple points without passing through the in-between states. This gender system calls into question the binary divide found in mainstream America. It also illustrates that gender is not a fixed quality. It can be deployed strategically and consciously. As a construct, it can be performed. It relies on an audience. This can help question for whom gender is being performed. In order to combat gender oppression, the lessons learned from the kinky community are powerful. It is one thing to compare the American binary to other cultures with multiple genders, but it is another type of argument to reveal the fact that there is a homegrown gender variant system already in existence. Sometimes just the awareness of options is a potent tool to reshape identity.

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1 The community composed primarily of masculine dominants partnered with feminine submissives usually classified itself as “pansexual” and did not exclude people in same gendered play partnerships but in practice was predominantly heterosexual. Working with the queer women’s group, I understood that they did not always feel welcomed in “pansexual” spaces. I believe that was also why I had such a hard time accessing the gay male groups; they were not present at many of the events I attended. It was not always this way. Abigail noted, “A long time ago, like 16 years ago when I first got into the community, there was only one place to go to have a party, which was CND. And the leather community, which was mostly gay, including lesbians and gay men, and het people played together in one space. Then a lot of the het people had trouble watching especially gay men play and expressed their lack of enthusiasm for that.”
2 Betty Friedan (1997) may be spinning in her grave that some people are embracing the system she denounced. The difference now is that the “problem with no name” has been both named and recast as desire, rather than problem.

3 Grrl was used to denote a rebellious woman or girl who felt the word “girl” to be too girly yet they still identified with some of the gender characteristics of the category. Boi was often used by biological women who identified as young men.

4 Feminine dominants were more likely to be involved in multiple relationships as the dominant partner than masculine dominants. Many masculine dominants often played with several submissive people, but did not have long term partnerships with multiple submissives, despite the fact that this was often espoused as the ideal. This might be an ideological difference, but it might also be the law of supply and demand. There were many more masculine dominants in the community than feminine dominants.

5 Not having experienced kinky communities in other geographical settings, I cannot say for sure, but I am inclined to think the “cowboy” presentation is much less campy in Cactus than it might be in Massachusetts. Many men (kinky and vanilla) in Cactus own cowboy boots and hats, despite never having ridden a horse.

6 My personal favorite: “Duct Tape – turning no, no, no into mmm, mmm, mmm.” I discuss the kinky community’s engagement with rape ideology in Chapter Eight (Violence). Consent was of the utmost importance to everyone I talked to and they would not ever promote actual rape.

7 Boi can mean a variety of things, but is used in this context to mean a female-bodied person who identifies as a younger masculine person in relationship with an older masculine person (in this case, her Daddy).
CHAPTER SEVEN - SEX

In this kinky community, sex served as the framework to perform important identity work and strengthen ties to the community. Sex is a near universal, cross-culturally, and deserves anthropological study. As a matter of fact, anthropologists have been studying sex since the inception of the discipline. Much of the research on sex in the last thirty years has been framed by the threat or experience of HIV/AIDS. I offer a brief literature review below. I discuss how this discourse impacts the study of sex and how the Cactus kinky community responds to the pervasiveness of the HIV/AIDS trope by embracing safer sex. In most cases, a discussion of sex always involves gender. Most of what I have to say about gender is covered in its own chapter (Chapter Six), but I touch on it here as it relates to the construction of sex. At the most basic, sex has to be defined. In Cactus, the definition of sex varied depending on whether one was in the heterosexual community or the queer community, resulting in different perceptions about the amount and quality of sex in the community. Although Cactus was split between the heterosexual/pansexual community, the women’s community, and the gay male community, all practiced alternative sexualities and supported one another through this shared identity. One of the fundamental principles of the kinky community was sexual satisfaction as a right. As with all rights, it came with responsibility. These responsibilities were made explicit in the kinky community. In step with the larger American culture, sex was an intimate experience. This intimacy could be used to strengthen community bonds. Orgasm, considered in mainstream American culture as the natural result of sex, was treated differently based on gender, and its very definition was disturbed by some of the practices of the kinky community. Finally, despite the fact that most activities in the kinky community were glossed as sexual, sometimes activities were not about sex at all but rather about closeness.
Background

Foucault, when discussing the sexual proclivities of the ancient Greeks, notes, “What is historically singular is not that the Greeks found pleasure in boys, nor even that they accepted this pleasure as legitimate, it is that this acceptance of pleasure was not simple, and that it gave rise to a whole cultural elaboration” (1985:23). Sex is shaped by culture and in turn shapes cultural institutions. Although often cast as a natural drive, anthropologists have made it a habit to show the constructed nature of sexuality through cross-cultural comparison. In classic ethnographies, sexual behaviors and attitudes are catalogued along with food production and ritual beliefs. I offer here a brief smattering of anthropological ancestors who have discussed sex. In both Coming of Age in Samoa (1928) and Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1950), Margaret Mead discusses sex as it relates to marriage and gender, but also for its own sake. She reports on the different types of sexual encounters that may take place between young people and the social implications of this. In The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia (1929), Bronislaw Malinowski famously discusses the sexual habits of the natives of the Trobriand Islands. Ruth Benedict (1939) also chose to focus on primitive sexuality in contrast to “modern” (read Euro/American) behavior patterns. Some of the behaviors that anthropologists questioned gave rise to speculation about whether the people studied understood the biological effects of sex (meaning resulting birth) and promiscuity. Later studies in anthropology re-evaluated the claims made about virgin birth (Leach 1966). Negative moral judgements about promiscuity have fallen out of favor, but partner choice, especially the choice to have multiple partners, is still common (Jankowiak, Sudakov, and Wilreker 2005; Levine and Silk 1997; Lindholm 2008; Paul, McManus, and Allison 2000; Ragsdale, Difranceisco, and Pinkerton 2006). Other work focuses on instances of homosexuality in a cultural context including Gilbert Herdt’s (1994) seminal work with the Sambia. Sexuality also
has a pedigree in other social sciences. Frederick Engels (1884) has much to say about sex in relation to the formation of the family, and ultimately, of the state. He outlines primitive forms of sexual relationships, including partner choice in hypothetical group marriages and noted less evolved social systems were exemplified by promiscuity. A discussion of sex and anthropology would not be complete without mentioning *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Life of Savages and Neurotics* (Freud 1913). Freud uses cross-cultural comparisons to make the argument that neurotics had regressed into a more primitive mode of sexuality. Havelock Ellis, a contemporary of Freud, published work on sexual behaviors, including homosexuality and autoeroticism (1896, 1940). Alfred Kinsey shook up academia and the popular American imagination with the publication of his two studies of sexuality in men and women (Institute for Sex Research and Kinsey 1953; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948). Postmodernism, shaped as it is by Foucault’s (1986) *History of Sexuality*, does not escape the influences of sex.

Kath Weston points out social science as a discipline has always studied sex and “yet the history of social science disciplines testifies not so much that sexuality is good to collect, but that sexuality is good to think. For centuries scholars have used what passes for ‘the erotic’ to work their way out of intellectual dead-ends and back to vigorous debate” (1998:23). Weston also notes the reluctance on the part of some social scientists to acknowledge the ways in which those disciplines have studied sex. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton share a common framework when they open their reader on sexuality by stating, “Until the late twentieth century, human sexuality was largely marginalized as a focus for social enquiry, scholarly reflection and academic activism. Perhaps because the experience of sexuality appears to be so intimately linked to our bodies, it was relatively easy to relegate matters of sexuality to the realms of the
biomedical and population sciences” (2007:1). It may be that every generation thinks they are the first to discover sex, both physically and theoretically. Sex is certainly not the sum of existence, but it is powerful. Social scientists (including me) who study sex feel pressure to justify their interest. This results in “cutting edge” theories about sex every ten years or so. I am happy to stand on the shoulders of giants. When I first started this work, I thought that I was going where no anthropologist had gone before. Little did I consider that sex, as a fundamental aspect of humanity, of course would have been studied by anthropologists. My setting was unconventional as were some of the practices, but that may be more a function of the recent coalescence of the kinky community (post World War II) and anthropology’s reluctance to study home cultures.

Collection and presentation of data on sex, regardless of how objective the dressing, is always a political move. In my own work, I hope to present sex as a meaningful human experience that can be strategically deployed to form bonds, affirm life, or create identity. Sex is complicated, and it is not always wonderful. I feel that the dialog about sex in popular culture is full of danger, threat, competition, judgement, condemnation, and alienation. I did not set out to find a group where sex is embraced, but it was refreshing to talk to people who assume sex is fundamentally good. To that end, my presentation of data is political. I am pro-sex. I see sex as something integrated into most aspects of life studied by anthropologists – marriage patterns, child rearing, medicine, ritual, property, and the list goes on. I do not specifically promote kinky behaviors or beliefs for everyone, but I do believe their approach to sex as a positive experience, particularly in a larger society that devalues sex, is valuable. Kleinplatz (2006), in her discussion of her own sex practice, makes a similar argument about learning from BDSM practitioners to engage honestly in sex as a creative experience. Other anthropologists who study less incendiary
topics may not feel the need to share their political opinions. By writing about a sexually charged topic, I have chosen to make a stand that sex deserves serious scholarship. I think it is appropriate to acknowledge this as the political move that it is.

One of the reasons that some social scientists only trace back the study of sex to the end of the twentieth century was the flurry of research that exploded after the HIV/AIDS epidemic began. Despite the fact that the virus can be transmitted by means other than sexual contact, the disease was labeled as sexual. It was used as a means to judge behaviors that were out of step with hegemonic ideals, including gay sex, IV drug use, and promiscuity. As religious moral codes waned, these behaviors went from being morally reprehensible to being medically life threatening according to the new hegemony, science. Sex has been medicalized and even pathologized. However, some people believe that this is what makes it a legitimate area of study. It becomes about disease vectors and harm reduction. Important work has been done to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, but that framework has come to dominate academic discussions of sex (Burgoyne and Drummond 2008; Gamson 1989; Pliskin 1997; Schuldén et al. 2008; Smith 2011; Penha et al. 2010). On a policy level, the United States tries to legislate morality by withholding funding from HIV/AIDS programs that promote the legalization of prostitution (Middleberg 2006; Saunders 2004). In some instances, sex itself is pathologized and the amount or type or intensity is considered in light of compulsivity (Kelly et al. 2009). It is a common belief that the only way to get funding, particularly from the government, for research that involves sex is to frame it in terms of HIV/AIDS. Ralph Bolton (1995) took advantage of this concern with HIV/AIDS in order to pursue his original interest in the location of sex in gay male identity. Other studies are in direct reaction against the de-eroticization of sex through the lens of HIV/AIDS (Spronk 2011). Jeffrey Weeks (1995) and Peter Hennen (2008) explore the ways
HIV/AIDS has impacted sex for gay men. All of this academic discussion has had a direct impact on the sexual practices in the kinky community, which I discuss below.

HIV/AIDS was not the only influence on sexuality studies. In feminism today, it is the norm to separate gender from sexuality. This is most easily seen in work on sexual orientation. Women and men who have same-gendered desires are still classified as women and men. Transgendered people complicate the picture, but often their desired partner choice is still held separate from their gender identity. This split between sexuality and gender was not always recognized, especially when sex was tied so tightly to reproduction. This connection between sex and reproduction became less tenacious with the popularization of effective birth control options (Sanger 1920). The dialogue centered on women controlling their own bodies. In the middle of the twentieth century in the United States, the response to this (and women’s rights in general) was a moral panic at how women would become wanton, sex-driven maniacs, and in the process destroy the family (Binhammer 1996).

I now turn my attention to the current political landscape of the United States. Lest the reader believe that the fifty years since the invention of the birth control pill laid these fears about immoral women to rest, one needs only to look at the current attacks on birth control and abortion which employ the same arguments. One of the most notable recent sorties by the ultra-conservative faction is the proposal for a personhood amendment, which would recognize fertilized eggs as full human beings (Gray 2011). Some of the consequences of this amendment would be an outright ban on abortions and birth control viewed as preventing a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterus (such as intrauterine devices and Plan B, also known as the morning after pill). This measure was defeated in Mississippi in 2011, but not by so huge a margin as one might expect. On the other hand, some elements of the popular media clamor
about “The Sex Addiction Epidemic” (Lee 2011) and how it destroys families and careers. The answer to both of these issues? Controlling female sexuality. As of the writing of this work, the Obama administration is suffering political backlash from the decision to require employers or health insurance companies to provide women birth control at no cost. In response to a woman’s testimony about the cost of birth control, Rush Limbaugh (a popular conservative commentator) attacked her as a slut and a prostitute. I am somewhat comforted that his attacks on this woman were met with disapproval resulting in sponsors pulling funding from his show, but it makes me nervous that slut-shaming is still being used as a tactic to prevent women from accessing birth control (Hart and Mirkinson 2012).

For a cross-cultural perspective, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) documents how women in northeastern Brazil struggle with multiple pregnancies, many of which result in still births and a ridiculously high infant mortality rate. Part of the reason women do not use birth control pills is the teaching of the Catholic Church, which is against all forms of artificial birth control. They are also suspicious of the pill’s side effects. Tubal ligation, while ostensibly an option, is in truth only available to poor women through government assistance after they have given birth multiple times and is also opposed by the Church. Recently, a concern with women’s fertility and sexuality has focused on teenage pregnancy, both in the United States (Elliott 2010) and Brazil (Heilborn, Brandão, and Cabral 2007). Reproduction is still tethered to both sex and gender.

**Defining Sex**

Sex. I thought I knew what this term meant when I began my fieldwork. I have been sexually active since I was a teenager. I’ve read The Joy of Sex and watched pornography. It is like sleep; everyone (almost) does it and we assume our experience is at least similar to others.
Unless we restrict ourselves to a strictly procreative definition of sex, the lines become blurry. When does nudity become sexual? Is desire always sexual? What influences the definition of sex? Who has sex? On a practical level, which acts count as sex? Working in both the heterosexual and women-only communities highlighted the pertinence of this last question. Although I will discuss orgasm at length below, in the heterosexual community, female orgasm was not considered sex. Many female bottoms experienced and displayed orgasm in a prominent way. However, while sexual, it was not sufficient for sex as an act. The focus instead was on penetration. This could have been in part a response to pressures from the state, which had a narrow definition of sex based on the prosecution of prostitution. Of course, the state was a cultural creation, so a feedback loop was formed. For reference, the Texas Penal Code states,

Sec. 43.01. DEFINITIONS. In this subchapter:

(1) "Deviate sexual intercourse" means any contact between the genitals of one person and the mouth or anus of another person.

(2) "Prostitution" means the offense defined in Section 43.02.

(3) "Sexual contact" means any touching of the anus, breast, or any part of the genitals of another person with intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person.

(4) "Sexual conduct" includes deviate sexual intercourse, sexual contact, and sexual intercourse.

(5) "Sexual intercourse" means any penetration of the female sex organ by the male sex organ.
CND followed the legal definition of sex, particularly because tickets were sold at the door and the threat of criminal prosecution on prostitution charges loomed large. I discuss the implications of state control of sexuality in Chapter Ten (Hegemony). Despite the gender neutrality of the law, “with intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person” did not apply to women’s orgasm at heterosexual events. In the midst of women having orgasms, people in the heterosexual kinky community bemoaned the fact that there was not more sex at parties, in part because there was no penetration and, I would argue, no male orgasm. At BRBC (the women’s group), female orgasm was seen as sex. That group, as well, wished there was more sex at parties, but the baseline of how much sex actually occurred was higher. I would venture to say that on a per capita level, the same number of female orgasms took place, but in the heterosexual group there was the belief that very little sex took place at parties while in the women’s group there was the belief that about a quarter of the time, scenes involved sex. Similar acts, similar performances of orgasm, totally different perceptions. People were cognizant of the disjunction between the definition of sex and female orgasm, but usually attributed the beliefs to someone else. Abigail, a fifty-four year old female slave partnered with a man, explained,

There are some people who don’t consider it sex unless it’s vaginal. I don’t know what they call the other stuff but it’s not having sex. It’s playing around or messing around. If I have an orgasm, it’s sex. When they talk about no sex at parties, they are talking about no penetration. It’s at mainly the CND parties that there can’t be any penetration because they take money at the door. But like LUST and other parties that don’t collect money at the door, you can have penetration. Penetration with anything, including fingers and dildos.
Charlotte, a thirty year old female submissive partnered with a man, also emphasized penetration,

Charlotte: Usually I’ll have a couple of orgasms, especially if I am playing at home with my owner. After I get to the point that I can’t take it anymore, or I can’t stand, or I’m crying, wherever the catharsis of the scene, the dénouement of the scene is, then there is usually sex. Yay sex! I like sex.

Misty: You have sex in public?

Charlotte: At parties, sometimes. Not a lot of the time but sometimes we do. We have it at private parties. We have it at LUST parties.

Misty: And define sex please.

Charlotte: Sex is whatever you consider sex with the person that you are with. In this case, with my owner, I am talking about penetration. With other people it really depends the person I’m with and how they are talking afterwards, and if we feel we had sex, then we had sex.

Charlotte initially downplayed her own orgasms as less than sex but when pressed for an exact definition, allowed that what sex was depended on who was involved. This was standard in the heterosexual community – when asked ideally what sex was, to focus on the understanding between people and to treat women’s and men’s orgasm equally. In casual conversation, however, sex was understood to mean penetration, usually by a man, either vaginally or anally.

Jessica, a thirty-eight year old female dominant who was a member of the women’s group also downplayed a bottom’s orgasm, as demonstrated by her statements:
Misty: Do your scenes usually involve sex?

Jessica: No. I’d say 99% of the time, they do not.

Misty: But do your bottoms usually orgasm?

Jessica: Yes.

Misty: So that’s not sex?

Jessica: I don’t touch them.

Misty: Please define sex.

Jessica: I would define sex as either manual manipulation of the genitals, oral or penetration. I usually, most of the time, have the girls keep their underwear on. But most of the women I play with are masochists and are able to have an orgasm from pain. Or I’ll let them rub themselves against my boot, which I would consider sex, but I don’t let that happen very often because that’s very private.

In Jessica’s case, it was not penetration that was the focus of sex, but rather genital touching. It is tempting to flatten the gender distinctions and claim that it is the bottom’s orgasms, rather than women’s orgasms, that do not qualify as sex. Below, I discuss how perceptions and valuations of male and female orgasms differ. At its most basic, “sex” means wildly different things to different people. One of the interesting things about working in the kinky community, however, was that some sexual behaviors were public and people discussed the topics frankly. It was a chance to compare notes between people and to observe firsthand the differences between ideal and practice.
Desire and Attraction

Although it is a bit of an artificial divide, I find it useful to differentiate between sexual desires (for behaviors, especially kinky) and sexual attraction (between people). Most people had a clearly defined set of practices in which they enjoyed engaging. There was also a recognition of attraction between people. These two things might not coincide. I asked Jo, a 46 year old butch switch, who she played with. She responded, “My spouse and anyone who asks nicely. [laugh] oh, I take that back - anyone who asks nicely and I am interested in, because I am not interested in playing with everyone. And there’s people that I find sexually attractive and there’s nothing that I would want to hit. It’s just not that feeling. There’s people that I would have nothing to do with sexually who I can hit so they’re not one and the same. It’s really great when you can get both to happen in the same person.” In Jo’s case, desire was more grounded as kinky activity versus attraction, which could be purely sexual or even emotional.

Sometimes, people were willing to engage in desired behaviors with people they were not attracted to, or, conversely, to engage in behaviors they did not desire because they were attracted to a person. Charlotte, a 30 year old female submissive, explained, “I’m kinda really picky about who I play with. There has to be a connection of some kind, some sort of energy. And I have to be attracted to them in some way, or I have to really respect them. Because I’ll do fire play with people that I’m not maybe attracted to or don’t feel like some sort of spark connection, but if I really respect them and know that they are a good fire top - that’s really just with fire. When it comes to fire play, I don’t really get into a head space, like a submissive head space, it’s more I enjoy the sensation and I’m enough of a pyro - hey, I get lit on fire. It’s awesome.” Fire play required a fair amount of skill and the few tops well-known for their abilities were in high demand. It was also a pretty specific desire. The chances of a person who
enjoyed being lit on fire lucking into a relationship with someone who enjoyed (and was skilled at) lighting other people on fire were slim. On the other hand, Jenna, a 30 year old female switch, returned to the theme of energy, noting, “I always like to say it’s not about the play, it’s about the connection. That’s why I can get into things like necrophilia, even though I myself have never had necrophiliac fantasies, I hook into that person. If that is what is driving them, I hook into that drive and I just go with it.” The idea of “connection” spanned the gap between desires and attractions. Of course, it was not as neat as those examples make it seem. For some people, it was important that desire and attraction meet. I asked Madeleine, a twenty two year old female switch, about who she played with and she replied, “Generally [people] in some sort of romantic context, definitely a sexual context. I’ve never played with anybody I haven’t kissed. I’m not saying I wouldn’t do that but that’s my history. I think about play in very sexual terms. It’s not something I section off.”

Often in feminist circles, striving to be attractive is considered as suspect, possibly even giving into heteronormative hegemony. But people are, by definition, attracted to attractive people. In the kinky community, attractiveness was radically reimagined. Body size, gender, age, race, or physical disability did not exclude someone as an object of desire. Admittedly, people who embodied a mainstream aesthetic (young, thin, white) did not lack for partners. It was not as if there was a rejection of traditional standards of beauty but rather an expansion. There is something to be said for being considered desirable. My Master’s fieldwork was in Belize and I explored how globalization impacts beauty standards. One of the most powerful things I learned was that when asked who they considered beautiful, many women answered, “I am.” In Cactus, I did not ask in my interviews about attractiveness, and therefore did not really have the opportunity to discuss the topic with men. The women I spent time with, however,
generally felt beautiful and sexually desirable. Koch, et al (2005) researched whether middle-aged women felt attractive and compared that to the quality of their sex lives. Unsurprisingly, the more attractive a woman felt, the better sexual experiences she reported. Being desired does not always lead to feeling objectified.

**Partner Choice**

Sexuality was a defining aspect of identity in the kinky community and partner choice influenced how people perceive their sexual identity. Most men I interviewed identified as heterosexual. However, this heterosexuality did not exclude the possibility of same-gendered sexual experiences. I asked Brayan, a thirty four year old male dominant, whether all of his partners were female. He then included his sexual orientation as part of his self-identification with a caveat, “I hate to back track, but there you go, predominantly heterosexual male dom. Open to the concept of a same sex relationship but I just honestly haven’t found anyone cute enough or attractive enough to pursue.” Thomas, a thirty one year old male switch from Mexico, was only attracted to women. Below, he discussed his experience with same-gendered relationships in the Cactus community:

Misty: All your partners have been female?

Thomas: Yes, even though recently I gave my first lap dance to a man, I don’t know if that counts as something. I didn’t feel attracted to him, it was just I was volunteering for a party and I was just giving lap dances to whoever wanted one.

Misty: Did it make you feel weird?

Thomas: No. I think it was a good milestone, if that term applies, because before I joined the lifestyle, gay people were, I don’t have anything against them, but for me it was
weird, because in Mexico, they are very very concerned about coming out. Because in Mexico people are very conservative and very anti-gay, so for them it’s very hard to come out. So I really never met anyone who was gay or bisexual, probably they were, but I wasn’t aware of that. But here I have been hanging out with a lot of gay people and some of them are really good friends of mine. Even though I don’t feel attracted to them, I see them as very good friends. I feel pretty comfortable doing that here. I think that’s one of the good things of the lifestyle is it let you know people better and be more accepting.

In practice, most of the men in the heterosexual groups did not have relationships or sexual experiences with other men. Identity as a heterosexual male was ideally fluid, but actual partner choice reflected a tendency to exclude men as potential sexual partners.

Women often had at least play relationships with other women. The term “heteroflexible” was used among women in the heterosexual community. This was not a term that came up spontaneously in interviews, but rather stems from the profiles people used on the kinky social networking site. People used a drop down menu to select traits to list on their profile, and heteroflexible was popular among women in the Cactus community. I found this to mean that a woman’s primary romantic relationship was usually with a man, but she was open to secondary relationships with women or having sexual experiences with women. There were also women who identified as bisexual, a term I did not hear any men use. Jenna, a thirty year old female switch, explained her partner choice as “bisexual. I keep it pretty standard, although I know that’s a debated term now, especially with the fluids and the queers and all those possibles, but bisexual just seems to fit me. I do see the world as male/female and I recognize that there are many greys there but for quick labeling purposes, I don’t care about that so much, so I just throw
out bisexual.” Rachael, a twenty seven year old female dominant, defined herself as “queer, more specifically bi.” Both of her current partners were male and she said, “It drives me nuts to try to explain it to people, no really, I do prefer women. It really is a matter of me not finding queer space fast enough because if I had, this [only having male partners] wouldn’t be the case.”

Homosexual was a term that no one used in conversation to refer to themselves or others and rarely appeared online. Queer, gay, lesbian, and dyke⁴ were used variously to capture non-heterosexual identities. This made sense, because these identities were not the negation of heterosexuality, but rather their own categories. In my experience with the women’s group, identity could be founded on ideal partner choice and not disturbed by actual sexual practice. Beatrice, a thirty four year old female switch, identified as queer, “I definitely identify as queer. I sometimes play with men but I also have a male lover, which is really new. I never had sex with a man until I was thirty. And he’s a member of my leather family.” Having a male lover does not invalidate her identity as queer. In Jo’s case, she identified as a butch lesbian and although her partners might have masculine presentations, “Yeah, even if they look like a boy, they are women.” In both the heterosexual community and the women’s community, people hesitated to rule out someone as a potential partner based on gender, at least in theory.

Sexual attraction could transcend orientation norms and change over time. Ruby, a forty year old female slave, had a primary relationship with Sophia, a fifty eight year old female Mistress. They were active members in the heterosexual community. Earlier, I mentioned that Sophia did not see herself as gay, despite the fact that one of her primary relationships was with a woman. She also had several active relationships with men. Ruby noted, “I really never identified as someone who was bisexual until I met her [Sophia]. It’s kind of a new identity for me. But yes I am, but it’s a little bit selective bisexual though. I wouldn’t say that I am attracted
to many women or a bunch of different types, mainly what I am attracted to is what is inside women.” How people identified their ideal partners, rather than the partners they had in practice, influenced which community they were most active in. Regardless of which community people had the most ties to, all of them considered themselves as practicing an alternative sexuality which served to unify the community. Many people drew parallels between the kinky community and the gay (vanilla) community in terms of struggle and rights. The similarities and differences between the two could be a fertile line of future research. Identity based on sexual behaviors does inspire one to think of these experiences as similar, but my feeling is that the two are less analogous than they appear on the surface.

**Pleasure and Responsibility**

All theoretical discussion of how sex is used for identity definition and community formation aside, it is important to remember that pleasure is fundamental to an understanding of the role of sex in this community. Jack Rinella, writing about leather and s/m for the leather community, states, “Among all the reasons there are for engaging in mastery, slavery, or sadomasochism, the most valid and most significant is to evoke pleasure. Pleasure is the basis and the purpose of being involved in leather. If you’re not having fun, then there is a problem. If it’s not fun, then don’t do it. I mean those words. SM is meant to give you and pour partners a good time. Your play needs to generate laughter, pleasure, and enjoyment. It’s meant to be relaxing, recreative, and fulfilling” (2002:15). It is easy to lose sight of while writing about all of this that people are doing what they do because they enjoy it. Sex, however you define it, can be fun and full of pleasure. In this community, sexual satisfaction was considered a fundamental human experience and a right. One might give up control over one’s ability to orgasm during the length of a scene, but on the whole, people expected to have fulfilling sexual experiences. While
doing this work, someone asked me if people in the kinky community in Cactus were into clitoridectomy (the partial or complete excision of the clitoris), since they were into pain and sex. Even though “genital torture” was a category of play, no one I talked to would be party to removing someone’s ability to experience sexual pleasure.

**Shifting from Shame to Pleasure**

Part of grounding sexual pleasure as a right is going beyond the shame or guilt that can accompany an interest in sexuality that is perceived as wrong. I encountered very little current shame, although people talked about struggling with it in the past, especially once they identified as kinky but before they found a community. Jo said, “I came from a very conservative southern Baptist home and where I had no idea about anything, much less [kink]… I had thoughts, but I thought (just like when I figured out I was gay) that these thoughts were me being sick. That they were wrong and they should never be acted out on and I should do my best to push them far from my mind. Realizing that I was kinky, if that’s the word you are looking for, becoming involved in the [kinky] groups, trying to accept myself, was just like realizing I was gay and trying to accept myself.” Thomas had a similar experience. I asked him when he first knew he was kinky and he replied

I realize that that [having abduction and bondage fantasies] was not normal at some point, when my friends were not talking about that sort of things. Then I start thinking that something was wrong with me. And I think this is pretty common for people like me who are having these kind of fantasies when they are small. When the internet started, I started finding people who were into this kind of bondage, kinky side of a thing, but in those days, I actually didn’t know there was such a community. I was able to find some kinky porn but even in those days I was feeling bad because I thought the people who
were in the photos or the videos were really forced to do that and I couldn’t believe that it could be consensual. I felt bad and I actually never bought any of that porn because I was saying, no this has to be criminal. When I really realized that this was for real was when I came here [Texas] and went to my first party ever.

Finding a community of like-minded individuals created a space where most people could work through, or at least set aside, their shame.

This did not always happen. Sebastian was an exception in that regard. He had a foot fetish, which was relatively rare in the heterosexual community. Classically, “In psychology, erotic attachment to an inanimate object or a nongenital body part whose real or fantasized presence is necessary for sexual gratification. The object is most commonly some other body part or an article of clothing” (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia 2011). As a straight man in a relationship with a woman, the only play spaces Sebastian had access to were heterosexual/pansexual spaces. He felt ashamed of his foot fetish and did not indulge in foot worship at most public parties. I witnessed some occasions of people teasing him for his foot fetish. He sometimes attended “pay for play” parties, where members paid a set amount in order to engage in their desired behaviors with a willing partner. At foot parties, he would pay twenty dollars to have ten minutes with a model that enjoyed foot worship. He felt much more comfortable there than at community parties. His attendance at foot parties made him more accepting of his fetish, but he still hesitated to share it with others, even within the kinky community.

It is tricky to negotiate other’s desires, particularly when they are non-traditional. There was a common mantra - “your kink is ok by me.” People tried to be non-judgmental,
recognizing that while what they desired might not match with what someone else desired, the vanilla world would judge them equally perverse. It was powerful to experience something that could be both shaming and exciting and be able to trust another person with that. Beatrice explained, “It’s this sense of, she is never going to make fun of me for being in this state. In fact, she loves it, she feeds off of it. So she’s never going to tell me, oh, you didn’t suck it up enough or you weren’t being tough enough. She’s not going to shame me for it and that’s a really important thing for me, to know I can go there with someone.”

Shame was transformed into a sort of pride, where feelings and behaviors once considered shameful (or even sinful) were now enacted with a sense of self-worth. Linguistically, this was apparent in the renegotiation of words once considered derogatory, including sadist, masochist, and the ever popular pervert. Rachael, when asked how she describes herself, said, “A pervert. I think it would be more accurate to call myself a pervert than any other kind of label that other people use. There has been miscommunication when I try to use labels that other people are using. I’m clear about the pervert part.” For other people, it was more effective to distance themselves from classically negative words. Thomas explained, “But I don’t consider that most of kinky things are perverted, I consider them fun or just an alternative…” Part of the reason this transition between shame and pride took place was the support of the community. In the moment of crisis created through intense sensations such as pleasure or pain, people would affirm the goodness of their behaviors and relationships.

Another way that shame was transformed into pride was through education and taking responsibility for oneself. Prior to becoming members of the community, many people felt they were at the mercy of their desires. Learning about the techniques to satisfy these desires safely and of others’ experiences with them gave people a sense of control. At the end of the day,
people were responsible for their own satisfaction, both sexual and personal. Part of the process of learning was an honest engagement with different desires. People often had “hard” and “soft” lines. Hard lines were lines that were not to be crossed and were not up for negotiation. Jenna, when asked if she practiced safer sex methods, responded, “Absolutely. That’s one of my hard limits. I have very few. I don’t define between hard and soft limits. They are things I am going to discuss with you and there are things I won’t. Unprotected sex is one of the few things I won’t discuss. It’s just not going to happen. There are some people that require more precautionary measures than I usually take and I either accept what they want or we don’t have sex. It’s very simple. The same with me. For me, it’s condoms. And I don’t swallow when I go down on someone and no blood sharing. I don’t use dental dams unless the other person requires them. That’s standard across the board.” A soft limit was something that a person felt uncomfortable about, but might be willing to discuss once more trust was formed. The level of detail that Jenna gives was common. People were expected to know exactly what they would not do and communicate it clearly. This responsibility extended beyond the negotiation, because people in the kinky community recognized that a person might not respond in the way they thought they might, or the energy was wrong, or something had been triggered. At that point, each participant was responsible for stopping the activity. Safe words played an important role here. “No” and “please stop” did not necessarily mean no or please stop, but red always meant stop. Either partner had the ability and the expectation of responsibility to stop a scene if things got out of hand. This applied whether there is sex involved in a scene or not.

People practiced having sex. One of the ways to do this was to watch others, noting what techniques they used that might apply to one’s own practice. People were expected to try new things. Everyone believed having a good sex life was important and that required mindful
attention and allocation of resources. People set aside time specifically for sex. Masturbation was seen as a legitimate source of sexual satisfaction. They could invest in tools and toys to enhance sex. Many community members were open to spontaneous sex, but most knew that great sex usually required some planning and commitment. There were manuals about sex – spiritual sex (Harrington 2010), lesbian sex (Newman 1999), kinky sex (Miller and Devon 1995), to name a few. Many of the groups had lending libraries where books written for kinky people could be borrowed and read. There were book clubs, study groups, and homework assignments for protégés. Sex was taken seriously. Once people knew what gave them pleasure (or that they were interested in trying), the second half of the equation was to communicate this clearly. This was part of the negotiation process. It could get very technical. For example, some of the women I talked with volunteered that they have a preference for having their clitorises licked, sucked, flicked, or bitten during oral sex. This was not information one just stumbled upon. Euphemisms were frowned upon.

Once a person established what gave them sexual pleasure, there could be a negotiation of who was responsible for satisfying those desires. In a dominant/submissive interaction, the submissive was expected to provide the information to the dominant, but it was (ideally) up to the dominant how to make use of that information. Emma explained,

In kinky sex, regardless of whatever accessories are used, it’s the understanding that I no longer have control over my sexual pleasure. It’s not mine any more. It’s someone else’s to determine whether or not I get to experience sexual pleasure. It’s completely in their hands. After all the negotiation, ultimately, I could be forced to have many orgasms or forced to wait or forced to ask permission and have to make sure my body complies with all those things or having not enough pleasure or too much pleasure or having a little pain
in my pleasure but it being out of my hands. That’s what makes it kinky, there is some kind of power dynamic that frees me from the responsibility of having to tend to my own pleasure but does not guarantee that I will have pleasure. I mean, usually I do. Sometimes, it’s not on my watch, oh, I’d really like to come right now, no, oh? Crap. I have to wait. That kinda sucks but ultimately, I think it’s very satisfying when I do get to come. In that, it could easily be oral sex or missionary position or doggy style or hanging from the chandelier, it doesn’t really matter because ultimately it’s surrendering to the will of another. That’s what makes it kinky sex.

The expectation here was that the dominant would be skillful enough to be able to give or withhold sexual pleasure on demand. I am not entirely certain what happened in cases where the submissive was not able to orgasm. Before someone was able to surrender control, one had to be in control in the first place.

**Safer Sex**

The specter of HIV/AIDS impacted the idea of responsibility in the kinky community. Responsibility for safety was shared among participants, but at the end of the day, people were responsible for themselves. There were not that many people living openly with HIV/AIDS in the heterosexual or women’s community today, but twenty years ago, the leather community (which preceded and was the forerunner of the current kinky community in Cactus) was devastated by the disease. At the same time that kinky heterosexual groups were forming in Cactus, there was national attention focused on safer sex practices. LUST, the group that focuses on education, held its monthly seminars at the local HIV/AIDS outreach center. Many of their classes focused on safety, with an emphasis on reducing negative outcomes, including disease transmission. Kinky activities could be practiced without penetration, which was seen as the
riskiest behavior. This has led to kink being defined as an alternative to penetrative sex (Day 2007; Hennen 2008).

There was a high awareness in the community that some pathogens can be transmitted through bodily fluids, including semen, blood, and vaginal secretions. Therefore, much of the material covered in educational outreach included information about safer handling of blood. I saw a number of cuttings and piercings that involved blood. The person doing the cutting or piercing always wore latex gloves. Razor blades and needles were disposed of in labeled sharps containers, much like one would see in a doctor’s office. Discussion about blood was often framed in terms of fluid, and therefore discussed together with forms of safer sex and fluid transmission. During my interview with Abigail, she showed me her toys. Accidentally breaking all sorts of rules, I reached out to feel a set of vampire gloves (gloves with tiny metal spikes through the palm). She grabbed my hand before I could touch them and said, “It just has my blood all over them… It’s probably ok. It’s [the gloves] been out and I don’t have any diseases and it’s been sitting out so anything on them could have possibly died but it’s better not to.”

Safer sex meant being careful about the possible adverse results of sex, including avoiding disease (with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS) and preventing pregnancy. One of the primary means used to prevent both of these outcomes was to use barrier methods (condoms, dental dams, or gloves). Condoms were distributed freely and were often included in people’s toy bags. In the heterosexual community, barrier methods were used in penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) by penis, dildo, or hand, but not for oral sex. Ethan, a thirty one year old male dominant, answered my question about whether he used safer sex methods, by saying, “Yes. I don’t do any sort of fluid, well oral sex. I do not use protection for oral sex. But vaginal or anal I do.”
found that many people said they always used safer sex methods but if I asked about oral sex, they would state they did not use barrier methods in that case. Jenna, as discussed earlier, was one of the few exceptions in the heterosexual community in that she used barrier methods in any sort of fluid exchange. Rachael also responded affirmatively to whether she uses safer sex methods, “In fact, I have protocol written into my contract. I have sex protocol. Yes, with my primary partners. It gets different if they are fluid bonded… Well, no, it doesn’t get different - I still use them. Barriers for penetration, yes. Barriers for oral sex, yes, unless we are fluid bonded, absolutely. I’m sort of a nazi. It means I have less sex sometimes.” Fluid bonding was an interesting response to the threat of disease, which I will discuss below. Viewing oral sex as less of a threat was in step with the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions guidelines, “It is possible for either partner to become infected with HIV through performing or receiving oral sex, though it is a less common mode of transmission than other sexual behaviors (anal and vaginal sex). There have been a few cases of HIV transmission from performing oral sex on a person infected with HIV. While no one knows exactly what the degree of risk is, evidence suggests that the risk is less than that of unprotected anal or vaginal sex” (2011). Barrier methods for oral sex were more common among women who have sex with women. People were very specific about how to use barrier methods. There were some practical tips I picked up while in the field. If a sex toy might be shared among multiple people, one could put several condoms on it before a scene and just peel off a layer between users. Jo pointed out to me that dental dams can be broken if the person receiving oral sex has a genital piercing and the dam comes in contact between a tooth and the jewelry. The pragmatic level of detail demonstrated how often these methods were employed.
Another way to avoid disease was to have sex only with people who had been tested and were not having unsafe sex with others. Deciding to exchange fluids with another person was called fluid bonding. This was usually a step taken after people had an established relationship. The first step in fluid bonding was (ideally) for everyone to get STI (sexually transmitted infection) tested. Usually people received a note from their doctor saying they were STI-free. Some women discussed how their gynecologists question their need to be tested and given a note, especially if they were married. Jessica was in a relationship with both her husband and another woman and when the three of them decided to become fluid bonded they went to the doctor “individually and got notes, which is ridiculous when you ask your doctor for a note because they laugh.” It was difficult to explain kink or polyamory (the practice of having multiple love relationships that usually involve sex) to a vanilla doctor. People felt the need to be safe, but medical professionals often did not take requests seriously. Charlotte explained, “I get tested for other stuff when I do my annual women’s exam. I had to explain to my GYN what polyamory was last week… I’ve always been very open about it, I’m always like, I need to get tested and she’s like you’re married, and I’m like yes, but I’ve slept with other people.” None of the men I talked to mentioned having problems getting tested.

Fluid bonding was more than just a disease prevention method. Audrey explained that in her current relationship, they decided to become fluid bonded when “we just realized that we are more than just play partners, we have a much stronger relationship and we weren’t currently playing with anyone else at the time so it just made sense to take that step. Condoms are less of an issue.” Stan framed fluid bonding in terms of trust and respect, “If I’m fluid bonded with someone, I will exchange bodily fluids whether that be blood, semen, whatever, without barriers because we have agreed that we respect each other and care for each other enough that we are
not going to put each other at risk.” Deciding to have sex without barriers as a measure of the relationship has been noted in other groups. Sophie Day (2007) discusses how some prostitutes in London use condoms with clients, but do not use them with romantic partners as part of a strategy to differentiate between sex without emotional attachment and sex with it.

HIV/AIDS was not the only disease people are concerned with. I asked Jo about whether she was particularly concerned with HIV/AIDS, as a woman who only has sex with women, and she said, “It’s anything really. HPV, anything. If nothing else, I mean, I don’t want somebody’s yeast infection. [laugh] You know, what is this itch? Where did this come from?” The threat of a yeast infection was less intense than the possibility of passing along a life-altering illness, but it was still considered bad manners and poor hygiene to expose someone to any type of infection. The general feeling in all the groups I worked with was that the decision to have unprotected sex was not made lightly. This is not to say that it does not happen, but ideally fluids were only exchanged after at least a serious conversation, if not vetting by medical doctors.

Pregnancy was also an issue for many women. This issue was often separate from barrier methods. IUDs were popular among women sexually active with men, as were birth control pills. Some men had vasectomies. Many people in the kinky community did not wish to have children at the time (whether because they already had them, or they did not want any at all). During my time in the field, I did not hear about anyone becoming pregnant by accident. In one case, a couple was actively trying to become pregnant. The woman stopped using hormonal birth control and had unprotected sex with her male partner. Since they were polyamorous but wanted to make sure the child was biologically theirs, she used barrier methods with her other male partners. Pregnancy was a common concern in the community, but contraception seemed to be both practiced and effective.
Sex as Intimacy

Sex was intimate in the kinky community. Despite the fact that it could occasionally take place in public, it was considered intimate by the people engaged in it and even the people witnessing it. The public/private split is a useful theoretical construct, but like most theoretical constructs, does not always hold up in practice. There were certain acts in the kinky community that took place in semi-public venues that did not occur in most mainstream American contexts, including nudity, pain, ecstasy, and, of course, sex. However, the fact that something could occur in public did not mean that it always did. At most parties, the potential for sex existed, but in fact it did not happen all that much (relatively speaking, and using participants’ own definition of sex).

One way sexuality was on display and the potential was present is in the nudity of participants (particularly bottoms or submissives; see Chapter Six (Gender) for the implications of nudity and submission). There are nudist groups in the United States that argue that nudity is not sexual. The Naturist Society of America states, “The Naturist Society has no interest in passing judgment on sexual activities among consenting adults; however, TNS adamantly rejects the use of the term ‘naturism’ as a cover for sexual activity. Naturists do not deny the sexual nature of human beings, but they reject the all too prevalent view in our society that nudity and sex are synonymous, and that children should be ‘protected’ from nudity regardless of context. To repeat: nude is not lewd” (2011). This was definitely not the case in the kinky community. However, to be naked did not invite sexual advances, nor did it necessarily signal an interest in pursuing sex. It just added to the sexual charge in the air. Some people enjoyed looking at partially-dressed and naked bodies. Others enjoyed being looked at. Nudity also, of course, made it easier to engage in some activities during a scene where skin needed to be exposed. In
other cases, nudity might not be required (spanking, for instance, can be accomplished over clothing), but usually bottoms opted for exposed skin.

Despite the pervasive nudity and the sexually charged atmosphere, many people refrained from having sex at public parties. At some parties at private homes, people could pull the door to a room mostly closed (but not shut) in order to indicate they would like privacy, particularly for sex. Audrey made a distinction between public and private when I asked her whether sex was part of her play, “It is. Less so in public. We’re both not really comfortable with it. We’ve talked about it but we’re just not quite there yet. [laugh] If we’re going to be playing at a public party, we use the scene as foreplay and then go home and have sex. If we’re playing at home, he’s generally not clothed either and it generally leads to it. I like incorporating sex into it; I think it brings more intimacy between the partners, just adds a lot more to the play, whether it happens during the scene or after as a reward or whatever. It’s nice to have it as an aspect.”

As I mentioned earlier, many people bemoaned the fact that there was not more sex at parties. Madeleine, who was relatively new to the Cactus scene, noted, “At the parties I’ve been at there hasn’t been a lot of fucking. I don’t know how much that that is an unwritten rule that you’re not supposed to do that or that’s not what the party is about.” Staci Newmahr, who worked with a kinky community in the northeastern United States, told me that sex rarely occurred at parties there (Newmahr 2011, personal communication). Different clubs had different expectations about whether sex could occur or not. As mentioned previously, CND took money for parties at the door and was therefore concerned with making sure that they could not be accused of prostitution. For that reason, sex (penetration) was not allowed at parties. LUST only sold tickets ahead of time and actively encouraged sex at parties, with limited success. Other parties hosted in people’s private homes tended to encourage more sex.
CND celebrated its anniversary every summer with a particularly elaborate party. The two anniversary parties I attended were deliberately pro-sex. Logistically, tickets had to be sold beforehand. The first pro-sex party was a big deal, since this was a break with tradition. The party was crowded and everyone was excited. I had been to several parties previous to that one, and that was the first one I attended that I would call a sex party. It still fell well short of an orgy, but both men and women were having orgasms and engaging in penetrative sex. Because I did not know the community well at that point, I thought the party was an unqualified success. There were more people there than normal and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Later, I found out that there were a lot of reservations about allowing sex at a party. Many people vowed to stop attending CND functions if sex continued to be endorsed. After the first pro-sex party, CND returned to a no-sex policy. The next anniversary party was also pro-sex, but generated less excitement (and less controversy) than the initial party. The people I talked with who were unsettled by the pro-sex parties feared that an actual “sex party” would attract unsavory people from outside the community or unwanted attention from the police.

Sex could increase feelings of closeness. This is not a huge surprise in a society where sex is cast as a magical, romantic experience. However, many people in mainstream American culture believe that in subcultures where sex occurs outside the context of a monogamous, loving relationship, it must be devoid of meaning or somehow cheapened. In the kinky community, sex was used as a bonding method, both between participants and for group cohesion. In a clinical study, Sagarin et al (2009) showed that positive consensual BDSM activities resulted in lower amounts of cortisol (a hormone associated with stress) and led to greater relationship closeness after the activity. This direct affect made sense for participants, but the community also felt closer by witnessing intimate acts. It was common for people to approach scene participants
after the scene was complete to express their admiration for the performance. There could be something powerful about witnessing someone else having an orgasm. There was the belief in the kinky community that during orgasm, one’s true self was revealed. Public sex could also create a sense of *communitas*, because the act is both transgressive and signifies the existence of a liminal state and because of the good feelings that could accompany orgasm. This potential for closeness was also what made sex less likely at parties. Even people who were practiced at polyamory could have reservations about having sex at parties. Beatrice explained, “It’s also kind of poly-complicated too. [The women’s group] is really the space where I’m with [my primary partner] and where we’re together, even if we don’t tend to play together there, we sort of co-top, which is really fun, but it’s kinda advanced poly to watch someone else fuck your partner.”

Sex could also be used as aftercare, that period of bonding and regrouping that happened at the end of a scene. I asked Stan whether his scenes usually ended with sex. He replied, “It depends on if I am in public or not. In public, no, in private, yes. It depends on whether I am pushing for a specific goal. For example, my primary partner has a difficult time with tears. She was raised to be stoic and not to cry. Sometimes my goal is to push her past that, to let her open up, to take down those defenses. The end of that kind of scene will be soft and nurturing and enforcing it’s ok but if it’s a scene where it’s a bonding experience, then yes it will usually end up in a sexual encounter.” Sex might also be a reward for a good performance, on either the part of the top or the bottom. Ethan said, “There are people who joke that aftercare for a dominant is a blow job.” People recognized sex as a culmination of sorts.
Orgasms

I have elected to discuss orgasm as a separate event in relation to the grander enterprise of sex and sexual behaviors because of the way it was treated in the community. Gender played an important role in the perception and experience of orgasm. In much the same way that many theorists now speak of feminisms and sexualities, it might be more appropriate to speak of orgasms, rather than the singular orgasm, as if there were only one. The same person might report different experiences of orgasm, so how can we expect that everyone has a universal experience? This applied to both men and women, although women were considered more mysterious, since there was not necessarily some physical sign like ejaculation to prove an orgasm had taken place. Popular culture, reinforced by selective science, advocates the idea of the one true orgasm. For example, an article published on the popular website ABC News proclaims “Brain Imaging Captures Female Orgasm in Action” (Moisse 2011). This view of orgasm as an event with measurable qualities is not new. Kinsey (1953) recorded women having orgasms. There are several devices meant to specifically measure orgasm, including the “photoplethysmograph,” a blood flow sensor in a woman’s vagina, and a “penile cuff,” which measures blood flow to the penis (io9 2011). Part of the impetus to quantify responses to orgasm is to control it. Women’s magazines give advice about how to have (or give) the best orgasm, as if it were a menu item on a five-star restaurant that one only need order. As Carole Vance (2007) put it, “The physiology of orgasm and penile erection no more explain a society's sexual schema than the auditory range of the human ear explains its music” (48).

In the kinky community, as opposed to mainstream American culture, there was some recognition that not all orgasms were similar. Men’s orgasms were considered readily apparent yet shunned, while women’s orgasms were enigmatic yet desired. Penetration was one
way to define sex. Other authors have shown that penile-vaginal sex is seen as the only “real”
sex, even in cross-cultural settings (Chandiramani 1998). Another common way to establish
whether something qualified as sex in the community was to use male orgasm as a stand in for
sex. As discussed above, female orgasm was not always sufficient to be considered sex. The
difference I observed between pro-sex parties and parties where sex was not allowed centered on
penetration and male orgasm. Men were aware of the strictures placed on their orgasms in
public. Thomas explained, “I have been completely naked in public for instance. I have had
erections in public, but I have not had an ejaculation in public.” Despite the fact that bodily
fluids were allowed at most parties (including blood), semen was considered messy and
somewhat dangerous. Special precaution had to be taken when handling ejaculate. One of the
ways this was apparent was the concern with what to do with used condoms. They had to be
disposed of in a lined trashcan immediately after sex. Even if partners were fluid bonded, most
people used condoms at parties if they had sex. One of the concerns raised about CND’s pro-sex
party was that there would be men watching scenes and masturbating. The women I talked to
felt very threatened by this. It was specifically the “being watched” by a single man aspect that
was disturbing, as they were comfortable with the idea of another couple having sex next to
them. Orgasm was seen as a vulnerable state, and most men in the heterosexual community
preferred not to be seen as vulnerable, in part because it could damage their identity as a
dominant. George, a forty four year old male dominant, recognized the type of judgement that
could occur in public, stating he did not have sex in public, or even went naked, because he was
“a grower, not a shower” (meaning he felt his unerect penis did not look sufficiently large but
when erect, it was of a sufficient size).
In the literature, orgasm, particularly women’s orgasms, stands in for pleasure. Part of the feminist debate of the 1970s and 1980s focused on clitoral versus vaginal orgasm and considered the sexual nature of women’s genitalia (Irigaray 1985). There has been feminist backlash against the movement in science to pin down exactly what an orgasm for women is by situating it socially and culturally. Some of this critiques work on the evolutionary purpose of orgasm (Lloyd 2005) or examines why some science thinks it is important to prove (or disprove) the existence of female orgasm in other species (Bosley 2010). Other work reconstructs female sexuality through a re-examination of history and literature, even questioning whether what we understand as orgasm now was the same thing discussed in history (Blackledge 2004). In the kinky community, female orgasm, while not sex, could be considered a sign of a good scene. Orgasm was framed as resistance overcome or submission to the will of another. The ability to experience pleasure was placed into the hands of another. The vulnerability of orgasm was what made it such a powerful display on the part of the bottom. It was also recognized that orgasm was a type of crisis whereby relationships and identity could be reformulated immediately afterward.

Women usually vocalized loudly and shuddered noticeably. I do not believe that women were “faking” orgasms or lying about them, but I believe that the experience might be different from what the scientific discourse would lead one to believe. I find Saba Mahmood’s (2001) discussion of ṣalāt (the Muslim act of prayer) enlightening in this regard. She argues that women practice ṣalāt, the bodily rituals and habitus, without initially experiencing the ecstasy the prayer brings about. It is only through practice that one is eventually able to embody ecstasy and after a while, the habitus creates the ecstatic experience. I surmise that something similar may be happening with female orgasm in the kinky community. There was some question about the
authenticity of women’s orgasms; even in the mainstream American discourse, women are accused of “faking it.” In the kinky community, it seemed likely that women were not lying about whether they experienced orgasm but instead were embodying ecstasy through practice.

Along these lines, it was commonly accepted that women could achieve orgasm through a variety of means, not just genital stimulation. These included having an orgasm from pain, tickling, spanking, kissing, or biting. Charlotte was not unusual when she said, “I can come [have an orgasm] from impact play. I can come from spankings and flogging. Usually I’ll have a couple of orgasms, especially if I am playing at home with my owner.” Women often experienced multiple orgasms over the course of a scene. Abigail also discussed nongenital orgasms, “I can orgasm from kissing, from having my feet played with or my neck bit. For me it doesn’t matter.” Any action became potentially sexual.

Closeness

Despite my verboseness on the topic of sex, sometimes the goal and result of a scene or a party was not sexual at all. They could be framed by sex, but people were trying to achieve closeness. In wider American society, many people are suspicious that people of different genders can have strictly platonic friendships. Once this assumption is reframed to account for the possibility of anyone being a potential sexual partner, it is easy to see how every relationship may be evaluated in terms of sex. However, the sex was sometimes incidental. It was an avenue to bonding with someone. It is difficult to think of examples where two unrelated adults are intimate without it being read as sexual. When speaking of close relationships, Abigail explained that sex was not central to the experience, “Sex is like the icing on the cake and SM is like the sprinkles on the cake.” Jessica was also content to have close relationships that were not sexual, “I mean, I have equipment here [at home], I have furniture here, even. I have a bench
and I have all my toys here and a lot more privacy and I could get sexual here if I wanted to, and I do bring girls home to play with, girls that I am in relationships with, but I don’t usually bring a play partner home. I think it’s just, I just don’t. It’s like bringing a date home on the first night. You know? It’s kinda slutty. I’m kinda a prude. I know that sounds like a shock from all the things I do but I’m very, like, a little prude.”

Some play was deliberately non-sexual. One example could be pet play (where a submissive person plays the role of a pet, usually a dog, and the dominant plays the role of trainer). For Charlotte, her pet play involved both partners imagining themselves as cats, and therefore may be sexual. She explained, “It was interesting to talk to other people who did pet play because a lot of time there’s nothing sexual to it, they are just an animal. Whereas for me, there is a sexual-ness to it, I think it’s really hard for me not to be sexual.” Most pet play did not have sexual overtones. Jo liked to be treated like a special pet who was doted on. When the person who was playing her trainer places a treat in front of her, “I am going to do my best to hold it until you say yes, and that’s it. Just because it’s exciting to me. It’s a very innocent, playful, you could let your mind disappear. Because how do dogs think? I don’t know but they think ‘ball’ - that’s it. ‘Outside?’ ‘Cookie?’ or ‘Oh, ear scratch’ - that’s about it. There’s no conscience, well maybe, conscience, guilt, whatever, but still, I think it’s a whole lot simpler.” For Jo, pet play was a way to feel close to another person without the entanglement of sex. I did not meet anyone who played as a little (a type of age play where the submissive partner takes on the role of a young child), but people explained to me that this could also be non-sexual play.

Sex is powerful. People in the kinky community embraced sex as a positive experience and deployed it to form close bonds and strengthen the community. Anthropology and social science have been entwined with sex from the beginnings of the disciplines, which is not
surprising given the universal experiences of sex. People used sex to create identity-forming experiences. How one was during sex was considered part of a hidden, true self that was guarded during day-to-day activities. Sharing this self with others created bonds between active partners and more globally, the community. It was a display of trust. At the end of the day, it was also a lot of fun.

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1 In this chapter, I use the term sex to refer to sexual acts, not the physical characteristics of a person in contrast to gender.
2 Given the recent medical literature on hormonal birth control, this seems like a perfectly legitimate concern.
3 This is not so different in the United States. In my own experience, I asked my doctor about tubal ligation when I was 22. She told me she only recommends that procedure for women who already have three children or who are at least 32 years old. Anecdotally, other women have told me the same thing.
4 Keep in mind that I did not work with the gay male community, so my experiences with the queer community are grounded primarily in the women’s group I attended.
5 Orgasm as a verb dates from 1973 and refers to the process of a person (usually a woman) coming to sexual climax (Harper 2012).
CHAPTER EIGHT – VIOLENCE

Violence was a tricky issue for the kinky community. It looked like violence from the outside, but the ideation of violence was conspicuously missing. Outsiders often perceived kinky actions as violent, while the community did not. Violence, as a concept and as a term, must be defined in order to facilitate a discussion, since people often talk past one another on this topic. Play and violence were sometimes linked. Rape fantasies were somewhat common and women discussed how they were warned against behavior that could lead to rape. There was concern in the community that the activities they engaged in not be defined as abuse. To this end, there was much discussion and distribution of statements against abuse. Despite the public conversation about abuse, many women were at risk for an exploitative relationship when first entering the kinky community. An examination of types of violence may lead to a fruitful understanding of the implications and experiences of violence in a wider perspective.

Violence

For people who are not involved in the kinky community, one of the defining aspects of kink is the violence. We see it dramatized in Law & Order, a popular crime show, or used to titillate in Lady GaGa videos. In mainstream American culture, depictions of violence are graphic in popular media. I recently watched The Walking Dead, a cable show about a post-apocalyptic world swamped with zombies. Every drop of blood and brain matter was rendered in detail as the protagonists smashed in the heads of the zombies. Entrails were spread around and the sound of squelching was distinct. I only mention this because this type of portrayal of violence is pretty common, or at least more common than graphic depictions of sex. Our society approves of depictions of graphic violence far more than similarly explicit illustrations of sex. It
is not difficult to imagine then why mainstream culture would emphasize the violence of kink. Otherwise, it would just be sex, which is frowned upon.

Regardless of how the larger society perceives it, the notion of violence must be addressed in a discussion of kink, if only because it is a powerful trope that is being made use of. Just so there is no confusion, I am speaking of acts that were they perpetrated on non-consenting people would be considered assault, unlawful restraint, or rape. It is one thing to discuss violence in theory, which is much of what I do in this chapter. I would like to ground my discussion in particulars without giving in to prurient interests. I saw people whipped, bound, gagged, punched, cut, set on fire, electrocuted, and pierced. I am not trying to sensationalize the acts, but it is difficult to discuss them without redefining violence. In general, people in American culture talk about violence as if it were one indisputable thing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines violence as, “1. behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill. 2. strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force” (violence, n. 2008). In the first definition, violence is a physical act based on intention. In the second, violence is an amoral force, yet focused on destruction. How then, are we to classify acts found in the kinky community? The acts were embodied, in that they involve one body acting against another. Some people in the kinky community spoke in terms of wanting to hurt others or liking to be hurt. However, the word “violence” did not occur in any of my interviews and the term “violent” occured only twice. In the first instance, a woman described, “the kind of sex that [my Master] and I have is really intimate for me and it involves things like her trying to violently fist me while I beg.” This was the only example I have of someone describing an act as violent. The second time the term occurs, a woman stated, “Sometimes, scenes are really intense and you get
to that violent cry phase where it’s just a huge release.” In both examples, violence may be understood as a force of nature.

In order to understand how these acts that appear violent on the surface were actually practiced as something else, it is important to understand how the ideas of conflict and consent were contrary to the mainstream definition of violence. In popular understanding, violence occurs in the context of conflict. The people involved are opposed to each other in some way. The violence is a result of the conflict. In a similar vein, the person to whom violence is being done does not consent to the act. There is ideally a clear line between perpetrator and victim. Using the Oxford English Dictionary again, a victim is defined as “a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, etc. A person who has been tricked. A person who has come to feel helpless and passive in the face of misfortune” (victim, n. 2008). In the case of some acts in the kinky community, there was an apparent actor and person being acted upon. However, prior to the apparently violent act, the participants discussed what would happen, in more or less detail, depending on the relationship between them. The people involved had the same goal in mind and were agreed on the methods to achieve that goal. All parties consented. There was no conflict. Consent was not something people throw around lightly. While the term violence did not make an appearance in my interviews, consent dominated many of the discussions I had.

**Consent**

Consent was not taken lightly in the kinky community. Participants, both tops and bottoms, were expected to be fully informed of the risks of any particular action. Watching someone negotiate a scene with a new partner was about as intense as my Institutional Review Board, although people in the community seemed more concerned with safety of participants,
rather than institutional liability. Sexual history, current disease status, emotional triggers, and any other physical conditions that could create an issue were discussed. Audrey was typical when she outlined the necessary conditions for consent for her, “If there’s any kind of altered mind states then it’s not consensual. You do not renegotiate during a scene. That is a rule I have for myself. Avoid all drug and alcohol use because that can alter your state. If you can negotiate things well before the party it’s better than when you get there because you want to play and you tend to be a little more loose with your limits when you’re actually at the party. I personally wouldn’t play with someone who was 18 or that young because typically they don’t have a lot of experience. I’m leery of playing with someone who could harm me and not realize it or that could harm someone else because they aren’t aware of what they are doing or their surroundings. I tend to not play with those people.” Drugs and alcohol were publicly verboten, although in one-on-one conversations, people sometimes discussed using them in private with established partners. There was also a stress on acknowledging that play alters one’s state of mind and should be treated like any other intoxicant. Age was not solely based on the legal limit, although that was many people’s starting point. I discuss the ways in which laws about age are employed to serve community standards below.

I asked Emma under what conditions consent was compromised. She deserves to be quoted at length to demonstrate the amount of thought members of the community put into what it means to consent.

Apparent and untreated mental illness can make it so a person can’t consent… I don’t think play is therapy. It can be cathartic and healing but it takes a grounded person to be able to articulate what they want in that space and to get it. If you are all over the place in a mania or super depression… I know that I am not qualified to be someone’s
therapist. I can be their dominant and their facilitator if they want to process through something, but I think there is a difference between ‘I’m a grounded person and I’m going through a hard time and I just want some help passing through it’ and ‘I’m an unstable person and I just want you to beat the hell out of me until something happens.’ That won’t work for me. Mental illness, for sure. Death or dying. Dying for sure. I was really uncomfortable with one story that I heard about someone on their death bed and a group of submissives got on him and tried to please him while he was in a virtual coma. That was disturbing to me. Without being able to say the words or being able to communicate, ‘this is what I want,’ I don’t feel comfortable with that. I also don’t think animals can give consent. I don’t think they should be used for our purposes. Some people disagree with me but I’m not a fan of non-consensual animal inclusion into my play. I think if someone is unable, it’s kinda hard to articulate, but there’s a fair amount of the kinky population where there are women, primarily, or submissives, but a lot of them are women, who are, for whatever reason, not ready or willing to actively participate in their own existence and they are looking for someone to call the shots… There is something else going on. It’s not submission; it’s running and hiding. I would like to see more dominants aware of that and keeping an eye out for that and not accepting that kind of submission as consent.

Emma’s level of self-awareness was not commonplace in the kinky community, but neither was it a rarity. Many people had considered what consent means for them, in both personal and political ways. It is one thing to take a political stance on something that may never occur in one’s life, but part of the radical possibility of kink was that anything might happen and it was one’s responsibility to have at least thought about it beforehand.
The longer people were in a relationship with one another, whether play or romantic, the less explicit consent was likely to be. Ava explained, “We’ve [she and her primary partner] had consent with each other for a long time and if one of us looked up and said, hey I’m not liking this, I need to stop, we do. Period. A big part of it is just communication. The better you know somebody, the better you communicate with them, the more they are likely to know what you will and won’t be willing to do or interested in or whatnot. Probably the biggest risk we take is playing with new people, because we don’t know them. We don’t know where their triggers are or how they are going to react, which makes it more exciting but also makes it kind of scary.” Part of consent was the willingness to say, “We have to stop.” I met a few people that would intentionally push the limits of a new partner in small ways to see if they stop the scene, either with a safe word or directly, in order to ascertain whether the new partner could be trusted to stop the scene, if necessary, once things became more intense.

Just because the other person consented to something did not free someone from responsibility. Many people felt it was imperative to judge whether the other person’s consent could be trusted, based on age, experience level, sobriety, or even instinct. I saw several negotiations fall through because one party or the other was not convinced of the other’s ability to give informed consent.

The rules were not the same for bottoms as they are for tops. Bottoms were particularly distrusted in making rational decisions while in subspace. Having been in subspace and witnessing many others in similar states, I believe this was a wise perspective. My top was keeping an eye on me after a particularly intense scene. I knew I was impaired, but like someone who has had too much to drink, I thought I could compensate by being overly conscious of my actions. I do not know how long I stood at the kitchen table, looking at the pot luck, but
eventually she came over and took the knife out of my hand that I had forgotten I was holding. I did not intend anything more than to cut some bread, but she knew better than to let me wield sharp objects. Much like imbibing individuals, it was common to keep bottoms at a party until they had come down and could be trusted to drive. Brayan acknowledged that subspace could affect someone like drugs or alcohol when I asked him what impairs consent, “Pretty much alcohol and drugs are the major ones. Even if someone is just overtired and feeling flighty, you can’t trust their consent. If you’ve negotiated a scene and you’re in the middle… don’t try to renegotiate because if they are flying, they are not giving informed consent. If someone is in subspace, it’s not consent if they agree to something, because they are in an altered state of consciousness. That’s really the key to it, ‘altered state of consciousness,’ whatever that altered state may be or resulted from, impairs consent.”

Tops were held to a higher standard of sobriety. Jessica discussed how she felt as a top in regards to drugs and alcohol:

Jessica: I think sobriety does not need necessarily to be there. I really don’t. That might be terrible of me, but I don’t. I do need them to be conscious and in their right mind. I’m not excluding drugs or alcohol but I don’t want someone who is wasted, if that makes sense. But I don’t need them to be sober and signing a contract beforehand. I’m ok with a little drunk play as long as I’m not drunk, since I am the one that has to do the hurting. Has to, like it’s a hard thing.

Misty: So you think it would be ok for a bottom to be slightly buzzed?

Jessica: I’m ok with, if I know you, and I’ve played you before and you’ve had a couple of drinks, sure, I’m gonna keep playing you, I’ll play you. If I don’t know you, and I don’t know how much you’ve had to drink, no way. Because then your limits are
different than if you are sober. But if I already know your limits because I’ve played you sober, then it’s ok if you’ve had a few drinks. I know where your limits are. You may think you’re ok, because you’re a little inebriated, but I know and that’s why I can’t be drunk or be on anything.

Misty: So as a top, you feel like you need to be sober though?

Jessica: Yes. I’ll have a drink before I play someone, but I won’t play someone if I’ve had more than one drink though. That makes it incredibly dangerous.

Jessica’s explanation illustrates the fact that consent was not approached like an abstinence-only program, where the only correct answer was, “Don’t do it.” While the party line was firm on age limits and sobriety, in practice, people adapted what they thought was right for themselves. I would like to emphasize, however, that they had given it thought. People knew one does not always make rational decisions in the heat of the moment and therefore prepared by considering any possibility and working them out as thought exercises with other kinky people. It was not as if my questions were causing people to think through something novel. Consent formed the foundation on which every interaction was premised.

Although Rachael articulated beliefs beyond many others in the community, she brought to light other considerations involving consent, “I think it’s interesting to think about the boundaries, especially what the intimate is doing, around consent and observers. When I did that photo shoot with that photographer [on a public street], it had not crossed my mind that since it would be the day time, we would be exposing people who were vanilla and exposing that entire space to our kink and what we were doing without their consent. I had not occurred to me at that point, I had not thought about it.” Part of her concern stemmed from not incurring the wrath of
the vanilla world, but most of Rachael’s unease centered around the idea that she involved nonconsenting people in her kink.

Consent is not always as clear cut as people talk about it. Madeleine explained,

We like to talk about consent like it’s this binary thing that is very clearly defined but things get sticky very quickly. I’ve hooked up with people or even played with them when there has been alcohol involved which is a big ‘no-no’ officially. I’ve definitely done some things that have been in a gray area legally. It’s especially complicated when you are in a relationship because there is that whole standing assumption that you can initiate sexual activity and some people have different senses of how much permission to ask first. I think consent matters. I think rape is bad and consensual sex is good but there are a lot of gray areas and there are times when consent is not enough. If somebody says they are going to do something that they aren’t going to enjoy, you have to think about how much effort you’re going to put into trying to recognize that. For a lot of people, the answer is zero, which I am not wild about, but that’s what’s out there.

Ideally, consent was always present. In practice, based on what I witnessed at public and private parties, consent was a conscious act that is integral to a scene. I would be obscuring the picture, however, if I did not acknowledge that things sometimes get murky.

Consent was not a one-time act. The better participants knew one another, the less explicit consent happened. However, everyone I talked to affirmed that anyone could withdraw consent at any time, for any reason. Lucy was in an abusive relationship prior to moving to Cactus. One of the qualities that defined it as abusive was her partner’s unwillingness to recognize that she had withdrawn consent. “He would definitely ignore safe words or I would safe word and he would freak out because I’d used a safe word, and he’s like, no, and he’d pull
this whole bullshit, like ‘What does this say about me that you had to safe word?’ and basically tried to create an environment that it wasn’t ok to do that in. He’s gross. Gross.” The kinky community maintained distinct lines between what was abuse and what was not, discussed below.

**Why Engage in Violence?**

Contrary to a mainstream definition of violence, in the kinky community consent was present and conflict was absent. Instead, I argue that violence was tapped as a natural force channeled through the top or dominant. This idea can be compared to how self-violence is experienced by penitents in some Christian mystic sects, where mortification of the flesh is seen as an avenue to enlightenment. The methodology of violence is present, but the ideology of violence is absent. Malevolence is lacking. The question then becomes, why engage in violent behavior? What the desired result? One answer lies in the loss of control experienced by participants, particularly bottoms. This was not the same thing as subspace, the altered state brought about by physical or mental trial. Charlotte told me, “I used to get into this state, especially with the roleplaying scenes, the being captured and forced to submit and lots of impact, where eventually it’s like being mentally broken, where I couldn’t stand [physically] and I couldn’t refuse and whatever he wanted to do to me was going to happen.” There are so few areas in mainstream American culture where people are allowed to acknowledge they have no control, even though almost everything in a person’s life is dependent on circumstances beyond an individual’s command. It was freeing to be mastered by some force greater than oneself, and if it happened to be another person who could do so in controlled circumstances every other Saturday night, even better. Jenna articulated how this desire plays out for her,
As a bottom, I do very much like humiliation play. I like mental humiliation. Objectification, humiliation, and degradation. I get into all of them. Partly because it’s hard. It’s hard for someone to humiliate me. I’m very confident, aware, educated. I’m smarter and more capable than 90% of the people I hang around. And I know it. I like them. They are nice people, but I know I am superior to them in those ways. So when someone can, like the man [with whom she had a scene at a leather conference], can reach in and flip my switches and he proves to me he can and will do it whenever he wants and there’s nothing I can do about it, that is amazing to me. A godly hand, reaching down and doing what they want with me makes me feel very helpless, very humble towards them because I am an arrogant person and I know I’m smarter than most people. To get smacked down like that is really hot. To be forced down on my knees. To admit that you have that power over me is pretty awesome.

The trope of “losing control” relied on the person experiencing it to feel powerful in the rest of their life. It was as if in feeling they had lost control in one aspect or setting created a feeling of empowerment in other facets of life. There is something to be said for feeling powerless and coming out the other side of the experience still intact. Even if a person felt as if they had no control, they survived. In some intense scenes, a person was left feeling that they failed, because their resistance was overcome. On the other hand, they learned they can withstand more than they imagined.

The feeling of losing control was highly structured in controlled situations. The characteristic of control was of paramount importance in the creation of violent experiences. Safe words were employed to make sure consent was abided by. “Red” meant stop and “yellow” meant check in or pause. All of the clubs had party safe words that could be invoked at any time.
It was the responsibility of all present to respond to a safe word. In this way, the bottom had more control over the violence than she or he would in a private setting. People also tried to mitigate unintended violence through following strict safety measures. As mentioned previously, fire scenes required an outside second stand ready to help in case things got out of control. The goal was to minimize the risk of permanent or unintentional harm while maximizing the experience of violence.

Consensual Non-Consent

Many people engaged in what is conventionally called “consensual non-consent.” My first reaction to this type of play was to label it as “rape play.” While a couple of people accepted my terminology, many of them avoided the word rape and instead focused on consensual non-consent. An example of this was when a bottom says “no” or “stop” but intended for the scene to continue. This could be a feminist nightmare, when for decades women have been chanting “No means no!” at Take Back the Night rallies. It was difficult and disturbing to witness at first. At one of the first parties I attended, I saw a woman crawling away from a man with a paddle, crying and begging him to stop hurting her. It was too much for me. I had to leave the room. It is one thing to celebrate people having satisfying, if non-conventional, sex. It is another to stand by and witness a scene that looked like rape. It took me some time to understand that resistance overcome could be part of the power of the experience. In the end, the existence and use of safe words allayed many of my fears and I was able to envision why this experience might be desirable or even enlightening. I would not recommend this to everyone. Even within the kinky community, consensual non-consent was considered “edge play,” an activity which carries even more risk than normal activities. Beatrice discussed why she practiced consensual non-consent as the person losing control,
Beatrice: A lot of the play I do right now, with the [Master], is based on, even the sex that we have is based on this, her ideal scene is one in which it feels nonconsensual. Thing is, she is trying to, like she’s doing things that I don’t like and she’s also doing things that are sexually really difficult for me, like her idea of a really good time is trying to shove a whole hand in my cunt. She’s not gonna, like, break me, right? But she likes to do it until I cry and beg her to stop, but in a really good way, if that makes sense.

Misty: When you get to that point where you really do have to beg and cry, what is it about that space that makes you want to return to that?

Beatrice: I like feeling out of control of myself. I mean, it turns me on when someone’s doing something that turns me on, right? But, really, “oh, it feels good” - that’s just being pleased, it’s about pleasure. But that feeling of feeling like your agency is taken away from you. You don’t really have any choice in the matter, how you feel about it in the moment, it’s just happening. It doesn’t matter. It’s part of giving up part of your ego. I usually feel incredibly vulnerable.

Despite the fact that consensual non-consent looked like, felt like, rape, people in the community were quick to correct my assumptions that rape as a non-consensual act might be acceptable. I asked Ava if she engaged in rape play and she responded,

Occasionally. I’m not usually top for that, I’m usually bottom for that. It’s more about the control, the release of control, the over-power-ment. It’s that essence of letting go of the day to day right/wrong aspects and just letting things happen. Obviously it’s not rape because it’s with a partner I trust. I put my life in their hands. In that aspect it’s just role play. It’s fantasy play. Would I actually want to be? No. Would I actually let myself
be? No, I’d rip their eyes out. I’m not referring to my partners, I’m referring to some outside person. There’s a key difference between fantasy play and reality. When you are looking at rape in fantasy roles, it is about letting go of control and letting someone else take over and do things to your body that isn’t within your control. In essence, you always have control. You can always say, “Hey, stop, I’m losing my interest in this, this isn’t right tonight, my head’s not in the space for this.” The reality aspect would be you fighting off an attacker, I’d hope, which would be me, or being forced to allow someone else to do something to you. That’s where rape is rape. That’s the big difference, you are either allowing it or not allowing it.

Bond and Mosher (1986) tested how women responded to the guided imagery of rape, giving them one of three scenarios. One scenario posited that the woman was having a fantasy about rape that she was in control of. Another described a forcible rape that a woman did not desire. The third model was thrown out, as it mixed elements of desire and force. Bond and Mosher concluded women have a more positive response to guided imagery when they imagine themselves in control of a rape fantasy rather than a realistic description of rape, thus proving the willing rape victim myth false. Having a fantasy about rape does not mean that a woman wants to be raped.

Interestingly, some women discussed that one of the ways people tried to prevent them from exploring kink was by warning them that they would be raped and murdered. If anything, the people I met were more concerned with consent, rather than less. From the outside, that may not be apparent, but any time in the community corrected that assumption. Men, especially male tops, sometimes worried what they were doing could be misconstrued. One of the strategies used by some tops (male and female) to avoid accusations of rape was to play in public with new
partners. Rachael explained that that is part of her motivation to play in public, “I play in public so that there are witnesses. That sounds so ominous. That is the main reason I like, because people are there and now if somebody says, you did this thing, there can be twenty people who can say, I was there and yeah, you did this thing or no, you actually didn’t. I like that. It makes me feel more secure when I am deciding to play with someone I don’t know. With people I don’t know, I prefer to play publically, exclusively, actually, until I know them better.” Another strategy was to get everything in writing beforehand, possibly as a contract. This was no guarantee, however, as many jurisdictions have ruled that consent is not an affirmative defense in assault or rape cases (White 2006). The argument is that no one can legally consent to being beaten.

I argue in Chapter Six (Gender) that gender may be conceived of as an analog wave, with presentations varying along that spectrum, but generally moving gradually from one state to another. There remains, however, the switch identity, which allows someone to jump from node to node without passing through the gradual stages. One of the methods that allowed for such switching could be violence as disruption. Beatrice further explained what it meant to her to engage in consensual non-consent activity (the epitome of violence as force without malevolence):

It can be a place of real incoherence, too. Because you’re no longer rational. For me, I feel like things are no longer orderly or planned. I feel like it becomes really nonlinear. It feels like all of this is going on at once and it feels like it’s not easy to replicate. It really has to be the right person to take me there. And I’ve also experienced it on the other end… It’s just not logical. My mind just stops thinking. Initially, my mind is like,
why the hell am I doing this? Or, I wish that they would stop. But then I can kinda relax into it and realize it’s going to be ok.

Moments of violence, like moments of pain and moments of orgasm, created the possibility to re-envision one’s self. They were not guarantees and in fact often fell short of this transformative potential. But the possibility existed and the remembrance of the times when this radical shift took place was strong enough for people to try to recreate them. With practice, people could embody this practice of shifting with just the forms of violence, much like the performance of orgasm can create ecstasy (discussed in Chapter Seven). Violence was ritualized, as discussed in Chapter Four (Play).

**Pain as Performance**

It surprised me that I understood some of the motivations behind wanting to experience having violence done to oneself before I understood why some people chose to define their actions as violent. Culturally, violent behavior is approved of more readily than victim behavior. In Texas, particularly, with its love of guns and cowboys, power is seen as capable of causing violence. It makes overly simplistic sense that when one causes pain through violence, one is therefore powerful. Some people defined themselves as service sadists, people who only hurt others because they want to be hurt. These people were sometimes considered by members of the kinky community as less than true sadists, because a true sadist would not derive pleasure from acceding to someone else’s wishes. By that definition, there were very few sadists in the community. In practice, people always played with willing partners, so I did not witness unconsenting sadism. Some people truly enjoyed inflicting pain.
Pain was one symptom of violence inflicted. Sadism involved violence. Sebastian explained that he did not enjoy playing with submissives who go “non-responsive.” He was not alone in desiring a reaction to the stimulation he was inflicting. For this reason, submissives learned to be expressive. Stoicism was sometimes an acceptable response, but for the most part, people liked to play with partners who gasp and moan and cry. The performance of pain made it seem as if there was more violence going on than there was. There are not many acceptable outlets for expressing pain in mainstream American culture, but violence is a constant undercurrent. Movies and television lionize violence. Video games offer immersive experiences of virtual violence. Even being diagnosed with cancer is framed in terms of battle (“fighting the war against cancer”). In these metaphors and depictions, violence, for the most part, is done with malice.

Brayan discussed why he liked physical matches, trying to overpower his partner, “If there is no resistance, takedowns\(^1\) or wrestling matches don’t work. I mean, imagine wrestling a dead weight. If I don’t have physical exertion, if there isn’t some way for me to release some of the pent up energy that I have, i.e. struggling against someone, it’s not going to be all that enjoyable. It can be, but I guess that’s my kink. Resistance. Because, you know, it’s futile in the end\(^2\).” Response was a large part of what is looked for in defining one’s own behavior as violent. Jessica defined herself as a sadist and valued having someone respond to her. Subspace might make a submissive withdrawn and unresponsive, which occasionally interfered with the dominant’s experience of being violent as a source of disruption. Jessica explained,

Jessica: I’m a sadist, so if someone is in subspace, they’ve kinda gone away and are no longer experiencing what I am inflicting and so I don’t play people for the hope that they are going to go away. I want them here I want them present. I want them to suffer for
My goal as a dominant, as a top, is not to get someone to go into subspace, I don’t care. If that happens with what we’re doing, great, have a great ride, but I will get mine, too.

Misty: Does top space [the top’s version of subspace] happen for you?

Jessica: Absolutely. Absolutely. I describe top space as being a fourteen year old boy and having your first hard-on and having no idea what to do with all that energy. It’s like feeding on people, it truly is, you are a hundred feet tall and invulnerable and this beautiful, intelligent woman thinks of you as a god and it girds the loins. You really feel ready for battle, that’s truly how you feel afterwards.

Top space could be intoxicating. In my interviews, it was always linked to violence (in the sense of a powerful force). Ethan also framed his narrative of top space in terms of violent behavior, “It was at a public party. I had one of my play partners tied to a whipping post and I was going after her with a flogger and the music was actually good that night. I found myself flogging to the beat of the music. I was aware that she was there, that she was a person, that she was human, but I sort of just didn’t care. The world collapsed down into the five feet in front of me - me, my arm, my flogger, and her ass. I was aware that we had drawn a pretty big crowd and that there were people watching but it didn’t bother me. It didn’t register. I could see them but it didn’t click. We played long and hard.”

Violence was also interpreted in the community as a primal instinct or a universal deep-seated desire. While much play was technical (for example, creating a pattern with needles or the intricate rope work required for a suspension), many tops simultaneously valued and worried about the times when they felt only marginally in control of violence. Stan explained, “Most of
my scenes are very controlled. I stay in a headspace where I am observing and I am aware of my partner and everything is calculated and measured. My favorite scenes are the ones where we go beyond that, where I can strike a more primal chord within myself and it’s more of almost an animalistic encounter between the two of us and if she finds that same headspace it can be very intense and deep. It’s difficult to put into words.”

**Violence versus Abuse**

If it is possible to see violence as something potentially value neutral, it is possible to understand why violence is appealing. The force of violence may make one feel out of control. Under specific circumstances, people reveled in this loss of control and used it to renegotiate identity as a powerful agent, either through submission to violence or in its wielding. However, violence as a value neutral experience can easily slip into violence as malevolence directed toward another person. For this reason, people in the kinky community were vigilant for signs of abuse. There was also the recognition that from the outside, it might not be obvious that consensual sadomasochistic behavior was not domestic violence. There have been several versions of the “SM versus Abuse” published. This type of material occurred most frequently at the interface between the vanilla and kinky worlds, aimed primarily at people just entering the scene or toward people who would be called in case of domestic violence (primarily the police and the justice system). I have reproduced here Sir Bamm’s (2011) chart explaining the difference. Sir Bamm was a male dominant who gave lectures in Texas about the use of single tail whips and living a BDSM lifestyle. His partners were female. He differentiates between D/s (Dominant/submissive relationships) and SM (sadomasochistic activities) in his discussion of abuse below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant/submissive Relationship</th>
<th>Abuse</th>
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D/s is about the building of a trusting relationship between two consenting adult partners.

Abuse is about the breach of trust between an authority figure and the person in their care.

D/s is about the mutual respect demonstrated between two enlightened people.

Abuse is about the lack of respect that one person demonstrates to another person.

D/s is about the shared enjoyment of controlled erotic pain and/or humiliation for mutual pleasure.

Abuse is about a form of out-of-control physical violence and/or personal or emotional degradation of the submissive.

D/s is about loving each other completely and without reservation in an alternate way.

Abuse is hurtful. It is also very damaging emotionally and spiritually to the submissive.

D/s frees a submissive from the restraints of years of vanilla conditioning to explore a buried part of herself.

Abuse binds a submissive to a lonely and solitary life of shame, fear and secrecy… imprisoning her very soul.

D/s builds self-esteem as a person discovers and embraces their long hidden sexuality.

Abuse shatters and destroys a person’s self-esteem and leaves self-hatred in its place.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SM</th>
<th>Abuse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An SM scene is a controlled situation.</td>
<td>Abuse is an out-of-control situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation occurs before an SM scene to determine what will and will not happen in that scene.</td>
<td>One person determines what will happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable consent is given to the scene by all parties.</td>
<td>No consent is asked for or given.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bottom has a safe word that allows them to stop the scene at any time they need to for physical or emotional reasons.</td>
<td>The person being abused cannot stop what is happening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone in the SM scene is concerned with the needs, desires, and limits of others.</td>
<td>No concern is given to the needs, desires, and limits of the abused person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The people in the SM scene are careful to be sure that they are not impaired by alcohol or drug use during the scene.</td>
<td>Alcohol or drugs are often used before an episode of abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After an SM scene, the people involved feel good.</td>
<td>After an episode of abuse, the people involved feel bad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are never always our best selves and if we all measured up to the self-help manuals and talking points listed on posters in counselors’ waiting rooms, the world would be a much different place. Of course abuse is bad. Things were not often this clear cut in the real world, but it reassures me that the conversation had at least been started. I cannot speak to the
experiences of the gay male community, but it seems to me as if there is a gendered component to the threat of abuse. Some women I met had experienced what would be defined as abuse according to Sir Bamm’s list. Lucy, who was quoted earlier, had a long term relationship with a man her own age in college where he did not respect her limits. He escalated the relationship into a Master/slave format before Lucy was sure that was what she wanted, but she was in love with him and went along with it. He demanded that she structure her life around his needs, including vanilla pursuits, like going to class.

Lucy: When I was with the horrible dude, there was a point where it started being ok for him to use the word “slave,” which was kind of a big deal at the time. I’m not actually sure what that meant at that point because I was pretty much at his beck. Saying no is obviously not cool, but it was more… I think that the reason that it was a big deal was that I had been so not-ok with it and at the point that it happened was like, fine. It was more of like, “ha-ha, this was a barrier that I’ve broken down” rather than “this entails a new set of expectations or responsibilities or whatever.” But that felt different because it was such a big like barrier that had been broken.

Misty: How would you define slave?

Lucy: For me it meant having it spill over into vanilla life or everyday life a lot more, rather than something that was done in scenes or something. It wasn’t necessarily something that was part of my identity all the time but that it was something that was integral to what I was doing all the time. Everything that I did was some way dictated by what he wanted me to be doing. I mean a lot of that was sort of a basic take-care-of-yourself, go-to-class, eat, kind of thing but it did also mean that he trumped everyone else
and trumped what I might want to be doing at the time (which I think people can do, and do responsibly, but that wasn’t the case). It was sort of like “do with me what you will,” basically.

For Lucy, it was the relationship that was problematic, not the physical violence. She felt emotionally manipulated into performing acts she did not want to do, but she did not discuss feeling physically threatened. In another case, Donna had a relationship with a girl when she was sixteen in which her limits were not respected. She recounted a couple of times when she asked her partner to stop and used a safe word and her partner continued. She reported feeling violated and was wary about practicing kink afterwards. I met other women whose initial experience with the kinky community was also problematic. Novices, particularly women, were vulnerable to exploitation. Men recognized this, either as an opportunity to protect young women or to exploit their naiveté. Stan explained,

Having a middle aged guy going after a younger girl, they tend to get a lot of looks in the community. Some people are jealous or envious. Some people are disturbed by it, because even though an eighteen year old is legal, that doesn’t make them fully capable of appreciating what they are getting into. A lot of the times they end up getting burned or leave the community or are scarred and have to go through a lot of work to get through the repercussions of getting involved with someone who has a totally different set of expectations and understanding of how the world works than they do.

Stan was in a unique position to comment on this, since his primary partner was almost twenty years younger than he. He knew people looked askance on their relationship when it first began.
He served as a mentor in the community and made it his mission to help neophytes find their way. He told me,

I also tend to go to sites and look for new people that are just coming into this. I send them an email or post something to them so they can find out about the local groups, the things that are available to them in the hopes that I can get them into a safer environment and away from some of the less savory types that like to frequent those types of places. Back when I had only been involved [in the scene] for a couple of years, there was a fellow in Kansas who was found to have bodies stuffed in fifty five gallon drums that frequented the website that I go to for chatting. That’s where he met a lot of his victims. It can be safe, but not necessarily. The first thing I usually do, if it’s a submissive, is I tell them about the submissive groups in town so they can get associated with people who are in the same situation as they are, but have experience, so they can have someone to talk to. There are people out there, especially dominant males, who look for little submissive girls that are brand new to this and gather them up and have that first experience with them. It’s not necessarily the best thing for the girl and so I want to help them find a better avenue to enter the community that is not likely to leave a bad taste in their mouth.

This role as protector was easily deployed as part of the benevolent male dominant presentation. It was easy to impress novices with one’s wisdom, even if one was not actively exploiting them. Of course it was heady to be around someone who had a newly awakened passion and saw the older person as a guide. It was this situation that could lead to an exploitative, if not abusive, relationship. People reported that this conundrum was resolved somewhat in the leather community (as opposed to the kinky one) by the mentoring relationship, where an established
community member educated the novice and took responsibility for the novice’s behavior. Many people supported the idea of mentoring, but in practice most people did not have a formal mentorship in the leather tradition. The Dom Academy, a year-long commitment to a group approach to mentorship, took the place of the one-on-one mentorship found elsewhere. It was only directed at dominants, so did not alleviate the risk for novices who identified as submissive or did not know how they identified.

Many of the women that I met who had a positive entry into the kinky community found a same-gendered protector who was not necessarily a possible romantic entanglement. Jo had never formally mentored anyone, but often found herself acting as a guide to women new in the scene. She said, “I tend to be the one that sidles up next to a new person, even at a job or something like that, shows them around. I’m there if they need questions answered. In this group that seems to be kind of where I fall into place again. Mainly because I am not out looking for someone, I’m not looking for a partner, so I am kind of a safe, sane person to deal with… To me, mentoring, even if it’s playing with someone for their first time or just the idea of the way I think it should be done, I think it’s lead by example rather than a arranged mentorship.” Women guiding other women through the tumult of first experiences of kink might not be a sure answer to avoid exploitative or abusive relationships but that seemed to temper the danger. The undercurrent of inequality and presumed sexual tension between men and women, particularly dominant men and submissive women, could be too strong to allow a supportive peer relationship to form between many experienced members and neophytes. Many relationships in the kinky community were non-exploitative, especially for women who had experience, but it was the coming by of that experience that was tricky.
Conclusion

Violence comes in many forms. In the kinky community, physical violence may be understood as a consensual activity which lacks malevolence. In this manner, it can be seen as an amoral force that can be channeled through the top in order to create an experience for all participants. It can serve as a means to lose control of oneself and yet at the same time feel more powerful. Violence can be a disruption in the analog shift of identity, allowing one to jump from one point to another without experiencing the gradual change that usually accompanies such a change in perception. Violence is not read as value neutral by the larger society and for that reason, people in the kinky community are very aware that their activities could be defined as abuse. Many women experience exploitative, if not abusive, relationships when first entering the kinky community. Community education and informal mentorships usually guide women away from such relationships. Different experiences of violence point to the problem of understanding violence cross-culturally. The controlled violence constructed by the kinky community has only the most tenuous relationship to other forms of nonconsensual violence. I am not advocating for people in violent situations to learn to find empowerment in helplessness or to simply accept horrible situations, but rather pointing out that violence, as an experience, is culturally constructed and understood.

1 A “takedown” is a maneuver to physically pin down a submissive.
2 The Star Trek reference reveals many community members’ attachment to “geeky” things, like science fiction.
3 All pronouns have been taken verbatim from Sir Bamm’s text. I find it interesting that he uses the singular they in most of his list, but uses feminine pronouns when discussing an abused submissive.
CHAPTER NINE - HEGEMONY

Cultural hegemony is a concept used by social scientists and philosophers to explain the existence and reproduction of oppression. Following Borón, by “hegemony” I refer to “the Gramscian concept of an ideology-based dominance that is exercised by the state and enjoys consensus, thus legitimating the interests of the upper-classes” (Martínez and Breña 2007:47). The term has been variously deployed to understand phenomena including current American imperialism (Martínez and Breña 2007), English exploitation of Irish peasants in the eighteenth century (Quinlan 1998), the relationship of geography to colonialism (Myers 1998), gender in British households in India (Alison 1999), China’s role in globalization (Ling 1996), and even the bioethics of research using human embryos (Salter and Salter 2007), to name only a few. I focus less on the economic forces of hegemony than the ideological and social implications of cultural domination. Intellectual and cultural hegemony is often teased out as the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The kinky community was certainly not colonized territory, but the concept of hegemony is useful in understanding how the dominant ideology of the United States, especially as codified and enforced as law, was both contested and embraced by members of the kinky community. Members of the kinky community were concerned with the role the state played in persecuting or sanctioning their activities. The law was not cut and dry; it left a lot of leeway for the discretion of law enforcement. The police were seen simultaneously as a threat and as role models. If the police became involved with kinky activities, the ultimate destination was the court system. However, the more immediate threat from the court was not prosecution for a crime, but its role in divorces, particularly child custody. While under threat of state interference from legislators, the police, the judicial system, and the medical community, members of the kinky community also deployed these same threats
toward their own ends, using laws and mainstream cultural conventions to functionally exclude certain groups of people from of parties or to monitor behavior and membership. Members of the kinky community also adopted state-like methods to police violence and sexuality within the community through procedures such as party rules and contracts. The role of the hegemony in the kinky community illustrates how fully this group is integrated into a state-level society.

One of the fundamental beliefs of the kinky community was that its members were at constant risk of exposure and ostracism from the vanilla community. It is useful to parse this belief into two versions. On the one hand was the real risk faced by members, including fines, arrest, loss of child custody, and loss of employment. On the other was the romanticized risk, the titillating sense of breaking the law but not in a way with any serious consequences. Indulging in fantasy in no way meant that one desired the actual experience. More than the fear of being charged with a crime, many people feared the social stigma that a criminal charge would bring. How the law was enforced was in large part up to the discretion of the police involved. Several of the laws people were wary of were prostitution, unlawful restraint, assault, rape, kidnapping, and anything to do with a child. Because it is such a flash point, I will state now that at no point did I witness or have knowledge of anyone involved with a person under the age of eighteen. If anything will set off a moral panic, it is the hint that a child may be involved. While many people operated in legally gray areas, almost everyone was quick to disavow any involvement with minors. There were a couple of exceptions, which I discuss in more detail below. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that there were many accommodations made for acting according to the law, I did not meet anyone who had personal experience of being charged with anything based on kinky behavior. Although many people questioned the law as it pertained to their behavior particularly, this did not lead to questions about the fundamental
nature of the law, where the authority to enforce it derived from, nor whom the law benefited or oppressed. At the end of the day, most members of the kinky community reaped the benefits of living in this law abiding society. “Common sense” (Gramsci 1992) makes people see that their aims are furthered by staying in step with hegemonic ideals.

**Agents of the State**

The police played a particular role in the kinky community which was a distillation of the wider American society’s uneasy relationship with law enforcement. On the one hand, the police were admired and even lionized. On the other, they were feared as agents of oppression. In the kinky community, masculinity was often performed as an imitation of military bearing and discipline. The kinky community traced its roots to the gay male leather community, which was founded, according to lore, by gay service men returning from World War II. Some men and women, who served in the military, found themselves drawn to the kinky community. It functions as a feedback loop – ex-military people intensified the militant feel of a community, which in turn attracted more veterans, etc. It makes sense that this militant atmosphere engendered a sense of fraternity with the police. Both groups served the country in potentially violent situations, to enforce order and distribute justice, at least ideally. Even many people who did not serve in the military emulated the example of law enforcement. Simultaneously, the police were seen as agents of vanilla oppression. In their role as enforcers of morality, their power was anxiety provoking. Another reason for the community’s uneasy relationship with law enforcement was that the police’s power revealed the constructed nature of the power exchange relationships between community members. Haviland defines power as “the ability of individuals or groups to impose their will upon others and make them do things even against their own wants or wishes” (2008:655). Consent was the bedrock on which the kinky
community was based, making it a society of peers. Not everyone had the same influence or prestige as everyone else, but there was no raw, awesome power. The presence of the police, with their ability to strip away freedom, backed up by the authority of the state, exposed the performative nature of kinky relationships. Police could serve as rupture in what was otherwise a mutually agreed upon pretense. It was for this very power that the police inspired awe.

Most of the people I talked to either did not have children or their children were grown. Logistically, it was difficult to juggle small children with any kind of intense involvement in a community where children were banned. Children made participating in the kinky community more risky by their very existence. For parents with traditional-looking relationships, married with no acrimony, there was always the outside possibility that their fitness as parents could be called into question by someone in authority. Things could escalate when the parents of a child were in the midst of a divorce and child custody was at stake. It is in this role that the courts were seen as most dangerous. Many ex-spouses used whatever ammunition they could to paint their former partner as a poor parent. All too often, involvement with the kinky community was used as part of the basis of denying a parent custody of a child, even if it was clear that there was no child abuse (Klein and Moser 2006).

Reproducing Hegemony in the Community

Many people in the kinky community felt oppressed based on their sexual preferences and expressions. It is difficult to critique whether people should feel oppressed. In the kinky community, being kinky was seen as a fundamental aspect of identity, one in which a person did not have a choice. This was similar to the argument that there is a genetic component to homosexuality. The belief was that a lack of choice makes something natural and therefore good. I will not take a position on how other people’s sexual desires develop, whether it is
nature or nurture, but part of the oppression people in the kinky community experience was based on the fact they felt discriminated against for something they could not help. This sense of persecution strengthened community bonds. Nothing unites like a common adversary.

**Racism**

This “united we stand” attitude functioned to silence other intersections of oppression, particularly for people of color. The scene in Cactus was overwhelmingly Anglo and middle class. I will quote Emma, an African American woman, at length for her piercing analysis of the role of race.

As is also the case in the queer community, there’s the gay and lesbian community that is its own bubble, very structured. There is a set of values and the thing they focus on is ‘we are gay’ and often times they are very ignorant of the concept that being an African American in that experience changes the dynamic of my experience, so there seems to be a little ignorance of that. I find that some people in the scene that do approach me, do so because they have a fetish for black women, which is not really my thing. I don’t want my race to be fetishized. I want to be seen as attractive, of course. I don’t know who wouldn’t, but I don’t want someone to say, “I like you because your skin is dark.” That doesn’t really work for me. I have a couple of other things working for me and if they can’t see that, I’m not wasting my time. There are a couple of people who their big thing is race play and that’s a huge trigger for me. It may just be some of my personal experiences bleeding into that. I know that they probably see what they do as incredibly hardcore and edgy, and it is, way too hardcore and edgy for me. I’m not at all interested. I run into a lot of people who fetishize race or ignore it. Like, it’s not really an issue, ‘we treat everyone the same,’ and they don’t really. Even the fetish art depicts these
beautiful, thin, white, long-haired Anglo girls. There are very few representations of African American women and if they are depicted, it’s as the dominatrix, which is fine. We are either invisible or fetishized in a way objectifies us in a way that doesn’t exist as much for white people. A lot of the African American males in the scene, there a lot of white dominant/white submissive males and females that are looking for a black stallion to come in and rape the girl. It would feel very progressive and edgy, if it wasn’t like these people had come full circle. It’s like, this is how they see, this is truly how they feel about black men - that their goal is to find all of the vulnerable white women and rape them. It perpetuates this idea of what black men are. The same thing is true of black women being depicted as dominatrices or slave girls, very plantation slave girls. It irritates me. Cactus’s gay and lesbian scene is very much the same. It’s very Anglo and it’s all we have space for. It’s fine, a lot of people assimilate to that but it’s also very ignorant of the fact that people of color have unique experiences in that space and maybe make space for that voice to be heard too, which I don’t think we do. Contrary to what most people in the scene want to believe, the experience for African Americans in the Texas scene is different and it would be nice for people to recognize that and maybe try to accommodate that by giving us a voice. There’s a failing group for people of color and people that love them but it hasn’t picked up. Cactus is not really a place that embraces racial and cultural differences.

It was as if the experience of being oppressed in one facet of life exculpated some members’ responsibility to recognize other forms of oppression or to even take account of it in their own practices. A transgendered woman shared with me that being tolerated is not the same as being accepted; just because people allowed her to play at their parties did not mean they
understood her position or allowed room for her experiences that varied from their own. I am not saying that people in the kinky community were actively racist or heterosexist or classist, and I do not mean to turn this into an “oppression Olympics.” I believe oppression and discrimination based on someone’s sexual expression is wrong. It just did not occur to many members of the kinky community that by embracing some of the hegemonic ideals of the larger, vanilla community, they were excluding or silencing those with experiences that differed from their own. I think the same can be said about most groups, and members of the kinky community were more likely than not to at least consider other viewpoints.

I had my own experience with how hegemony functioned in the form of state interference and the resulting discourse at a LUST party. I had been hesitant to play in public, for a number of reasons. However, my interviews were wrapping up, and I felt that I would benefit from the subjective experience of public play. I admired Stephanie and had finally screwed up the courage to ask her to play with me. She was a skillful fire top who never lacked for play partners. That night, she was surprisingly free. After much stumbling and awkwardness on my part, she said yes and began to orchestrate the scene. We found an area in the fire room that was open. She notified the DM (dungeon master, who is responsible for monitoring the safety of scenes) that we were going to do a fire scene and made sure that the fire extinguisher was close by. She sent me to find a towel and soak it in water, just in case. Her friend acted as her second, a person appointed to help put out any potential problems, a necessity in a fire scene. Once the logistics were finished, Stephanie had me undress. Despite usually being blasé about being naked in public, given my history as an exotic dancer, I felt intensely aware of people’s gaze as I stripped down to my panties. At that point, I took off my glasses, making it easier to tune out the other people in the room. I lay face down on a massage table and Stephanie rubbed my skin with
rubbing alcohol. I felt the whoosh as it was ignited. I had seen her play before with fire wands, metal rods tipped with cotton soaked in alcohol, so I knew what she was doing, but I was lost in the experience. The amazing thing about this kind of play was that by the time I had processed that there was fire on my skin, Stephanie had extinguished the flames. She had me flip over and laid out spirals of flash cotton over my chest and belly then ignited them with a wand. It did not exactly hurt but I understood the word “intense” in a new light. My body began to physically react to the fire, shivering uncontrollably as endorphins washed over me. I felt subspace taking over. For me, it is a quiet, narrow place. I felt present and connected to Stephanie. I stopped worrying about the anthropological implications of ritual or counting how many people were in the room. My eyes began fluttering and I recognized a trance state setting in. I gave myself up to it.

Then I heard, “The cops are here.” Later, Stephanie and I joked that this was my safe word – the cops are here. Although I had admired Stephanie prior to playing with her, what she did next made me trust her. I was startled, not a good thing when there is open flame on skin. She pressed her hand against my chest and kept me from bolting upright into her lit fire wand. She then said, “You are not a minor. We are not doing anything wrong. It will be fine.” I believed her. All the while, she continued to play the fire across my skin. People became more insistent, saying, “No, the cops are here. Get her dressed.” Stephanie’s calm demeanor reassured me, in my dazed state, that it would in fact be ok. After a few more passed with the wand, she announced, “Now, I am done.” She helped me sit up and got me dressed in short order. Partly due to the endorphin high, I was in a happy place and she seemed to be taking care of everything, if moving expeditiously. I dimly recalled my advisor’s admonition not to get arrested because the university would have a fit. By the time she had wiped down the table and I
had my shoes on, the all clear rang up the stairs. The police had left. Stephanie acted as if the cops had no impact on her at all. We went downstairs where we collapsed on the couch, after she got me some water.

Later, I pieced together what had been going on in other parts of The House while I was being set on fire. Some neighbor had called the town police, complaining of noise. As soon as the police pulled into the long driveway, anyone outside in costume or undressed made their way into The House. Apparently, one of the male dominants with a military background appointed himself as the spokesperson. He explained that there was an adult oriented party taking place and that there were no minors or alcohol. The police then warned the group to keep it down and left. On the whole, not a threatening encounter. By the time Stephanie and I made it downstairs, the police had been gone for five minutes, and everyone had that manic relief that every child who has got away with something knows. At the time, I was too spaced out to truly appreciate the threat presented by the police. Everyone felt chastened, and most people decided not to play the rest of the night, although people remained at the party, retelling where they had been when the police came and what role, if any, they had in the encounter. Stephanie was much lauded for maintaining her composure and not ending our scene abruptly as soon as the first cries of “the cops are here” were heard. Much later, she confessed to me that she was freaked out, but the situation elicited her contrary streak and she would be damned if someone was going to make her finish her scene. I thought that was the end of my experience with the police, a little exciting, but certainly not the most intense encounter I have had with law enforcement. I had no more interaction with the police, but the story grew. After that party, I spent some time with my transcripts, only keeping in touch with members of the community through email and sitting out a couple of rounds of parties. The next event I went to, I heard the story of the LUST party.
retold, only this time as something bigger, more grandiose. To hear it again, it was a veritable showdown between the kinky community and the forces of vanilla oppressors, not quite a Cactus Stonewall, but certainly a skirmish. In the retelling, the threat presented by the police in that particular situation was emphasized. This narrative accentuated members of the kinky community as outlaws. It lent teeth to the feeling that every meeting was a risk that could end in disaster. I cannot say how the police felt about the encounter, nor was this the only run-in I heard about. Cactus as a whole was pretty tolerant of nontraditional life paths. I interviewed one police officer, and he seemed amused by my questions about whether he would charge adults engaged in consenting behavior with a crime. He said he had never encountered the situation, but he imagined that it would not be that big of a deal. He then went on to warn that other officers may not view kinky activities in such a light, and a variety of responses to the situation were possible.

**Laws as Applied in the Community**

Laws were selectively applied by different groups, usually to the advantage of the status quo. The most universally espoused edict was “no children.” The definition of child was occasionally debated, but whatever it was, it should never occur in the kinky community. In Texas, an adult could be prosecuted for having sex with someone under the age of seventeen. In the kinky community, the lower limit was usually set at eighteen. In some cases, the age limit was twenty-one. I can understand this paranoia, since in my own experience with the Institutional Review Board, the committee was very concerned that I not even discuss possibly illicit sex with someone under the age of eighteen, and they emphasized it was my duty to report child abuse. I never had to confront how I would have handled that situation, in large part due to the kinky community’s very public stance against involving children. It would be difficult to
imagine a person more abhorred in the United States than the child molester, and people went to extraordinary lengths to avoid accusations of pedophilia. In most cases, people would not even discuss kink with younger people for fear of sounding as if they are promoting it. Jenna found this problematic and questioned the wisdom in it:

Jenna: I agree that age is not a hard limit. It gets me in a lot of trouble. Even when I started at eighteen, it was so double standard. Kinky people are crazy like that. They all say, ‘oh yeah, I was doing kinky stuff when I was in high school and I had fantasies early on’ and then you say, ‘why don’t we talk to these now sixteen-year-olds and let them know they don’t have to go through that dark period that you did?’ And, no, no, no, can’t do that. That’s horrible. I’m not like that. I will not start some ‘educate teenagers about kink now’ but if someone came to me I would be totally out to them.

Misty: Would you play with them?

Jenna: Yes. If I felt they could give informed consent, absolutely. I wish I had been given that option.

It was a common theme in people’s personal narratives that they discovered they had kinky predilections early in life but felt that it was somehow wrong or they were the only ones who felt that way. In some ways, the internet alleviated some of that pressure, but most people refrained from even discussing kink with people under eighteen. Jenna was a maverick in the community, outspoken in her beliefs, even when they did not match with the social mores of the larger community. She felt it her duty to question everything, making a case that while some hegemonic ideals are furthered in the community, people did not buy into them wholesale.
Applying age standards led to some behaviors which have greater implications beyond preventing an underage person slipping in. Young people (by that I mean over eighteen but under twenty-five) occupied a contested space, where they were at once desired and discriminated against. People enjoyed the energy that young people brought as novices but refused to recognize their kink identification, suggesting that they were still exploring. For example, Mark was a young man who said he was a dominant. He went to the Dom Academy and worked with other dominants. People teased him relentlessly and rejected his presentation, assuming he was at best a switch. He struggled with this. For young male dominants in particular, it was more difficult for them to find play partners. Young female submissives did not have this problem, but people sometimes gave them a wide berth because they were considered emotionally immature. Ava was not alone when she explained, “Typically, I like to see them at least somewhere in their twenties. I don’t play with somebody under- I mean, they are not adult enough to know their own minds, they are not experienced enough to know what’s even going on in life, much less themselves. […] Can I look at a cute little thing and say, yes, that’s cute? Yes. Would I want to do that cute young thing? Not likely.” Young people were often considered to be physically attractive, but that was not always enough to balance the deficits people perceived in them as a class. For this reason, there was a special interest group, Futura, that was composed entirely of people aged eighteen to thirty-five. I attended some of their meetings and one of their parties, but at thirty-two I was on the upper limit of the age range and did not fit in well. The kinky community stood the wider American culture’s valuing of youth on its head, discriminating against young people and painting experience (and thereby age) as desirable.
Some groups checked identification to make sure that everyone was at least eighteen (or twenty one). This was an embrace of the state. People who did not have proper identification were barred from attending certain parties. In a state with a booming immigrant population, it was amazing to me that I only met one Mexican national. I do not think the case is strong enough to say that many people without documents would flood the kink scene if identifications were not checked, but it had to be at least a small deterrent. It also lent an air of officialization to the process. At one club in particular, people had to show their identification while signing a waiver and the information would be taken down. Sophia explained,

[The other club], when you go there, they have waivers but you can just sign them with an X, which doesn’t protect your members. [Our club] has the waivers, if somebody came here and said, ‘hey, let’s go have some coffee and talk’ and you went off with them and they took you off and raped you or something, then you could come to me and I could find out who it was because they have to show me their driver’s license. We send those to our lawyer’s office and he keeps those. If the police gave a warrant, they could only get the one waiver, not the whole bunch. We’ve done it that way on purpose. If you just go and sign an X and somebody took you off and no one had ever seen them before and no one would know who they were, so we’re really careful about that. We want to keep our members safe and coming back. And the people who are no longer members of [the other club] had a really big issue with those waivers so they rammed everybody’s face in them for years and years and told us how terrible we are and that we just want to out people and that’s so not true.

There were people who would not attend that club’s parties because of the need to show identification. Despite Sophia’s protestations that the only reason to check ids so closely was for
the safety of the members, it was a display of power to have physical proof that someone attended a kinky party. Police might not have ready access to the waivers, but if they were focused on an individual, it would not be difficult to obtain a warrant. Sophia used the threat of rape to emphasize the unreliability of new people and reinforced the protective role the club played. Again, it is hard for me to judge how valid this threat was, but I am reminded of how women are often warned about rape for doing things unbecoming to their sex, like wearing short skirts or walking after dark. I discuss waivers below in the section on state-like methods of social control.

As mentioned in Chapter Seven (Sex), many clubs made allowances for prostitution laws. Legally, “a person commits an offense [prostitution] if he knowingly: (1) offers to engage, agrees to engage, or engages in sexual conduct for a fee; or (2) solicits another in a public place to engage with him in sexual conduct for hire” (Texas Penal Code 2012). There were four strategies to avoid looking as though people were paying for sex, each with its own repercussions: only sell tickets ahead of time, only take donations, require a membership fee, or do not allow sex\(^1\) at the party. All of them involved drawing a line between what was being paid for and sex; often what was being bought was access to the party or membership in the club. The first strategy, practiced by LUST and sometimes by CND (depending on whether the party was pro-sex), required an investment in the community. The groups in Cactus valued relationships more than activities and focused on making a community rather than a party circuit. By only selling tickets in non-party venues, members (both new and old) were forced to engage with other people socially, making it more likely that people would be more involved in the community outside of parties. I only attended a couple of parties where donations were taken. In the community, this was felt to be the riskiest strategy, since it placed money and sex in the
same physical location. I am not sure how successful this strategy was; I did not spend a lot of time with this particular group. It seemed to have the function of leveling income disparity, with people paying what they could afford. These parties would not have been possible without the patrons offering their spacious house as a play space for free. I can also see how this set-up could easily lead to a “tragedy of the commons” situation, with many people taking advantage of what was offered without contributing equally. Membership dues were a more stringent form of enforced community than selling tickets to parties beforehand. Clubs that required more than nominal membership (some clubs gave anyone who attended one function a membership card) usually mandated some sort of service in addition to participation in social events. Members were also held accountable for their behavior. Abigail was one of the leaders of a leather club. She told me,

I go on [online social network site] if somebody calls me up and says so-and-so did such-and-such and I’ll go on [the social network site] to read it, but I don’t go there for gossip purposes. I do it because I am a leader in the community. It will be like, especially in the [my] group, because they have a code of conduct, and if you don’t abide by the code of conduct you can get kicked out. So they will say ‘so-and-so did this, said that, I don’t think it’s appropriate.’ It’s usually not even them tattling on one another, it’s the other leader in the group calling me, saying, you have to read this. Then they usually get told, ‘if you want to be part of the […] group, you can’t represent yourself like that,’ and usually, ‘stop doing that.’

Generally rules of conduct were explicit in membership clubs, more so than the unspoken customs of the wider kinky community. The final strategy to avoid prostitution charges was to ban sex at parties. In this case, sex was considered penetration, with penis, fingers, or dildos.
This was a rather arbitrary line, since exchanging money for any “sexual conduct” (including “any touching of the anus, breast, or any part of the genitals of another person with intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person”) was prohibited. In practice, this rule worked to exclude gay men from heterosexual parties because penetrative sex was considered an integral part of play for many men in the gay male leather scene. I do not think most people actively tried to exclude people from parties, but the legal justification for some of the rules reinforced hegemonic ideals of appropriate behavior.

**Sexism**

In the heterosexual community, gender roles most often resembled heteronormative relationships, usually a dominant man partnered with a submissive woman. Many of the women I met in the scene identified as feminists at the same time they were in a relationship as a submissive. I asked Emma about the ubiquity of male dominants and female submissives. This was her reply:

> I think it can be incredibly radical. I know this one fem leather dyke who is in service to a gay leather man and she’s certainly not a fan of men, just in general, she’s not sexually attracted to them, she doesn’t feel called to serve them, she’s certainly a feminist in her own way. I think it’s incredibly radical that she’s in a place where owning her own sexuality and her own leather spirit, however that manifests, is being in service to this man. Some people suggest that the movement of feminism will be complete when women can be in the home and it cannot mean anything else but that they are in the home at the moment. Not meaning that they are in any way inferior to men but that is an option for them. The same is true if a man can be in the home without it meaning anything else. I think it can be incredibly radical but I don’t see that manifest in the local kink
community. I see it as a bunch of chauvinist pigs. I’ve met a lot of these people and a lot of time they are chauvinist pigs. There were some staunch Republicans at the last [heterosexual] party I went to. It’s becoming more unacceptable for vanilla relationships to have a traditional Ozzie and Harriet reality to them, so how best to secure that than to invoke D/s and call it dominance and submission rather than “I hate women and think they should be subservient to me.” There are a lot of people, especially on Craigslist, who say, “I’m a dominant man,” and what they mean is they want to be able to have their way with a woman without any requirement for reciprocation. That’s ridiculous. It’s very traditional men and women roles. I see some of that reflected in the kink community in Cactus.

In Chapter Six (Gender), I discuss my own experiences with people assuming I am a certain way because of the way I present my gender, mostly men assuming that I was a submissive. I think many people thought intellectually about the role of gender, but in practice, hegemony in the form of heteronormativity usually took the day, at least outside of the queer groups. The construction of kinky identity as “natural” makes it difficult to debate things like feminism, since people believed they were being true to themselves by behaving in ways that appeared to be the result of oppression from the outside. As I describe in Chapter Eight (Violence), the act of submission could make someone feel very powerful. I am more suspicious of a woman having a “naturally” submissive personality when submission looks so much like a traditional woman’s role (always putting others before self, not making decisions, being vulnerable). Charlotte recognized the tension between her position as a submissive and her feminist identity:
It [discovering I was submissive] was actually really hard because I was going to a small liberal arts college that was all women, very strong women, very powerful women, and people that graduated from my college, you know the names of these people. They are famous. So then to have this, I’m a strong woman at this strong college full of strong women and yet I want to be tied up and forced to do things in the bedroom. It really took me a long time to reconcile. I finally realized, of course, that feminism is about being given the power of choice and if it’s my choice to do what makes me happy, then who is anyone else to judge me?

Again, the focus was on feminism as an ideology of choice, that women should be free to pursue whatever sexual path they want. I do not disagree with that. People (including women) should be able to make choices based on what they believe is best for them and those around them. I am just nervous that the social justice potential of feminism gets lost when the dialog is about individual lifestyles. The greater the privilege someone has, the wider the scope of their choices. It is relatively easy to be a feminist, even in the kinky community, if it simply means that a woman’s opinions count as much as a man’s. I only briefly discussed the economic situation of the people I formally interviewed, but averaging it out, the women made about $10,000 less per year than the men. This was due in large part to the fact that the people who did not have any income (as members of households) were women. Since I only interviewed one transgendered person, I cannot extrapolate any trends, although she was getting by on minimum wage. Gender has an impact on material earning potential that cannot be erased by a discussion of personal fulfillment. That being said, the average salary of the twenty-two people I gathered employment data on was $44,250. This was pretty solidly middle-class. There were sometimes allowances made for people who could not afford membership dues or the price of a party ticket,
but maintaining membership in the kinky community required a steady income and leisure time, discouraging people in lower earning brackets from becoming members.

Men did not escape hegemony unscathed either. Hegemonic masculinity put pressure on men to conform to an ideal masculinity. In the vanilla world, most of the men in the kinky community would not be considered to be part of the elite few able to perform hegemonic masculinity. Connell notes, hegemonic masculinity “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (2005:832). Many men in the kinky community did not fit the vanilla stereotype of a manly man (young, strong, classically handsome). Indeed, some of the traits most highly valued in men in the kinky community, intuition and the ability to tune oneself to a partner, were usually denigrated in the wider American culture. However, the creative flux and patience with performance in the kinky community allowed men to reimagine their gendered selves. As discussed in Chapter Six (Gender), masculine dominance was highly valued, when performed correctly, and highly policed. The scope of hegemonic masculinity was widened by who may perform it, but on the whole, it still functioned to leave many men feeling they had fallen short of an ideal and supported the treatment of women (or feminine people) as a subordinate class.

**Body Consciousness**

Body consciousness was different in the kinky community than it was in mainstream American culture. People who were heavier than the mainstream ideal were considered desirable, but this did not mean that people had escaped the tyranny of thinness that permeates wider American culture. Emma noted,
Emma: I think that large women have similar issues [with discrimination] in the scene.

Misty: I found it to be accepting.

Emma: Here in Texas, yes, but elsewhere, not so much.

Misty: I hadn’t thought the size thing was limited to Cactus.

Emma: It’s regional, because people are often of different sizes and Texas is kind of a pudgy state. I think there is a lot more respect for curvy women here than elsewhere but there is still a lot of men who themselves are very curvy in their own way that still want the stick skinny submissive. And you are like, how the fuck is that fair? You go to the gym. With the smaller ones, you have to have a lot more skill. You have to aim true, because if they are really skinny, you can injure their spine, whereas the curvier women, if you hit that area, there is a lot of flesh between your whip and the sensitive spine. A lot of brand new dominants, I hope, are not seeking out the tiny submissives or at least not playing with them until they know what they are doing because they could really hurt them. I know a lot of teeny-tiny submissives that can take a lot more pain than other people. I think they are often underestimated. But if you look around for that perfect-bodied submissive, they are not single. They may talk about how they are discriminated against, but I guarantee you they were snatched up well before the curvy girl was.

**Imitation of the State**

Although members of small-scale societies are under great pressure to conform to community standards due to the limited size of the group, the pressures to conform in a state-level society manifest differently. Large urban areas attract people who are otherwise out of place in small communities, such immigrants or people in sexual minorities, granting them a
measure of freedom in the anonymity of the vast city and the ability to find others with similar experiences. Clubs in the kinky community monitored and controlled behaviors through methods which were drawn from living in a state-level society. In the larger community, iteration of community standards via party and club rules and the proliferation of waivers cast the club in the role of the state, with a vested interest in maintaining order (and thereby avoiding adverse interactions with the police). In the relationships between individuals, contracts and negotiations were somewhat standardized and externalized, again mirroring state-level interactions.

Each club had its own set of rules, some more involved than others. Some clubs adopted Robert’s Rules of Order\textsuperscript{2} for member meetings. Most made do with party rules. These rules were usually part of the waiver if there was one. All groups have party rules available, usually online. I reproduce one set here as an example. These were the rules of one of the major clubs with references to the club’s name omitted for confidentiality reasons.

**PARTY RULES**

1. To attend one must sign a waiver or have one on file for that year.

2. All play shall be consensual.

3. Attendees must be over eighteen years of age.

4. NO ALCOHOL or illegal substances of any kind are allowed at [club] events.

5. Bring your own equipment, props and toys for your type of play, but be aware that you must keep up with your own things. [Club] is not responsible for breakage or theft.

6. Never handle others’ toy bags without permission.
7. Clean up after your scene. Leave all equipment free of sweat, blood, other body fluids, wax, toys, etc. (Bring bodily fluid concerns to the attention of the DMs [dungeon monitors])

8. Firearms and firearm replicas may not be brought to any [club] event.

9. Pictures can only be taken in the designated photo area.

10. Sex is allowed. Safe sex is encouraged.

11. Smoke in designated areas only. (The left side of the house/deck). Please use ashtrays provided and NEVER throw your butts into the yard as this is a wooded area. DMs can direct you to the smoking area.

12. Wax, fire, water sports and scenes involving bodily fluids need to be brought to the DMs attention prior to play. Areas have been set aside especially for these purposes – just ask the DMs where they are. For fire play put the extinguisher next to the scene, have a wet towel with you, a bowl of water and whatever other safety precautions your scene requires need to be in place. Also arrange for a “second”.

13. Do not touch other people’s bodies or property (toys or human) without first asking permission. Never assume a sub is “fair game” because of their orientation. Always ask first.

These community standards needed to be articulated, since there were often new people attending parties that had not been socialized. Rules were enforced by DMs (Dungeon Monitors). DMs policed the party, making sure that everyone followed safety guidelines. They and the leaders of the club were the only ones who could officially intercede in a scene, unless a
safe word was used and the top did not stop. Otherwise, people were expected to respect other people’s space, regardless of what was going on. It would defeat the purpose of a party to have people barging in on someone else’s scene because they thought it was too edgy or unsafe. Even though there were not generally explicitly stated behaviors that were not allowed, there was a set of unwritten standards. Stan explained,

In the BDSM community, your reputation is your coin so you’re safe to walk through an event because if someone misbehaves, their reputation suffers and they become ostracized by the outsiders. Reputation is so important and peer pressure is hugely influential in our community. At our parties, there are certain kinds of activities that are frowned on. Scat play, animals. You’ll find very few groups where they will say, ‘bring your dog, we don’t mind.’ We all have our limits of what we’re willing to watch, what we’re willing to participate in. Most of the parties that you’ll find with the local groups, they are very much the same - floggers, canes, violet wands, different kinds of play but it’s always the same. Very seldom will you see someone step outside that box and do something truly edgy. If it’s too edgy, we all go ‘Eww, we don’t like you.’ Your reputation in our eyes is lessened because you do this kind of stuff. While the BDSM group is pretty accepting, we have our limits too. Once you get ostracized by the outsiders, where do you have left to go?

Ostracism was the most effective form of social control, like any anthropology students know from reading about the !Kung (Shostak 1981). People in the kinky community were very indulgent with many forms of behavior. As mentioned earlier, one of the credos was “Your kink is ok by me.” If someone went outside of accepted behavior (for example, a person had a kinky relationship with a child or violated consent), the group would make them unwelcomed. Word
of mouth traveled relatively rapidly, resulting in the offender being barred from events. I did not witness this happen during my time in the community, but enough people referenced it that I am pretty confident it happens this way.

Contracts were another method of interpersonal regulation that drew on bureaucracy. Contracts were often used to codify a set of protocols between master and slave. Not every master/slave pair had a contract, but many people saw it as the ideal. Many people developed their contracts after a period of involvement together, but it was primarily directed by the master.

Rachael explained her process with writing a contract:

I didn’t write a contract until this year during the Dom School. I’m not going to sign it until the anniversary of his collaring. [...] The things that he had trouble with dictated the things that I thought to put in there. The things that I saw helped him were the things that I put in there. The things that I was finding most useful to tell him to do, the protocols that we wanted to remember (there aren’t many, I’m not protocol heavy), the ones I wanted him to remember, are in there. It’s very much tailored by our real life experience. He’s very much a part of it but I wrote it completely by myself. When he saw it, what it looked like to him was, ‘Oh yeah, we do that. Is that what that is called?’ Or, ‘Is that how you think of that thing?’ I actually have a glossary section that I was working on. [...] They are words that I’ve made up, things that only he would understand. I think of it as an opportunity to ask, ‘What do you think that this means?’ If there are differences, I know where to go next to clarify these terms that are important, or values. He’s very much a part of me writing it [...] Now that I am writing, I’m finding that it’s only completely relevant to what I’m doing, looks nothing like anything I’ve seen and it helps both of us remember.
Contracts were not taken lightly. This worked to my advantage during my fieldwork, as people who looked askance on my role as researcher were sometimes won over by my paperwork. At one point, a person at an event demanded to see my IRB approval. She was a social scientist at a neighboring university. Like every good researcher, I had copies of my informed consent sheet on me in case the opportunity to interview popped up. After I proved that I was not just on a lark, she was willing to give me a chance to demonstrate that I was not in the scene to write an exposé. There is something powerful about the written word, in both the kinky community and the larger, mainstream American society. It is as if writing something down makes it more real or more objective. As anthropologists, we are trained to write. I had a professor who said, “If you don’t write about it, it is like it never happened.” This need to articulate on paper the truth of a matter is part of the same movement that has inspired contract writing between people. The ritual in the words, the cabalistic weight of signing a document, becomes a compact, a promise of a future relationship. They were very private documents. People told me about slaves who signed their contracts in their own blood, but I did not meet anyone who said they had done so themselves.

On the other hand some people were explicitly anti-contract. Enshrining a relationship in static discourse was anathema. I met more people in the queer community who felt this way than I did in the heterosexual community, although there were members in both sectors who rejected codification. In some cases, it was because contracts were considered silly and a bit pretentious by some. In other cases, the rejection was based on a fundamental questioning of the process of enumerating.
Conclusion

There were many instances of hegemony at work in the kinky community, including racial and gender disparities, heterosexism, and state regulation of sexuality. There were also counter-hegemonic forces, such as the discrimination surrounding age and even body size that stood mainstream standards on their head. By parodying some aspects of American society at large, such as power imbalances in relationships, sometimes people in the kinky community created a space for radical resistance to hegemonic ideals. In other cases, parody slipped into mimicry, and it was difficult to tell the difference between exploitation and expression. Hegemony is slippery, since it allows elites to stay in power by making people feel invested in a system that exploits them. Participation in the kinky community was used by some to question the very nature of authority based on people’s lived experiences as members of a minority group. In other cases, it was just enough to get by without attracting the wrath of the state, so no one wanted to rock the boat. I do not think that everyone has to make waves all the time. Sometimes people just want to have fun. However, I believe that there is room in hedonism to make the personal political. Pleasure could be a powerful force for change, if it did not distract people into pursuing it for its own end.

It is here that we can see the limits of changing bodily practices to resist hegemony. Certain types of repression respond more easily to direct interference of habitus than others. Using sex to trouble understandings of embodied characteristics, such as age or body size, leads to expanding the circle of desirability, although not entirely destabilizing it. Pain and violence, used as moments of crisis, create an opportunity for self-work, but do not address society-level inequalities, such as racism. The transformative potential of moments of crisis are limited to individual experience. On a theoretical level, culture is founded on individuals, so this means of
resistance could potentially shift hegemonic practices over time with some direction, as
individuals create space for alternative sexual practices and identities. Barring some social
pressure, either from the vanilla world in terms of further oppression or from within the kinky
community to reshape accepted forms of interactions, the change in habitus only resists
hegemony to the point of satisfying pleasure. The shifts that have occurred are predominantly
incidental to the grander project of creating a positive association with sex.

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1 For a discussion of what constitutes sex and why this is important, please see Chapter Seven.
2 Robert’s Rules of Order are rules based on a book of the same name used to delineate parliamentary authority by a
deliberative assembly. These rules are used by many nonprofit organizations throughout Texas when holding
meetings.
CHAPTER TEN - CONCLUSION

The kinky community illustrates different methods of making meaning in a particular subculture in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Anthropology offers a framework to understand how people actively make meaning and negotiate identity through practice. I return to Bodley’s definition of culture as “Socially transmitted, often symbolic, information that shapes human behavior and that regulates human society so that people can successfully maintain themselves and reproduce. Culture has mental, behavioral, and material aspects; it is patterned and provides a model for proper behavior” (2005:11) to outline how the kinky community’s modes of meaning making can be understood as cultural behavior that both resists and accommodates the broader culture in which it is situated. Culture is composed of three facets – ideology, behavior, and artifacts. Additionally, it is important to locate agency and power in a model of culture. As Moore and Sanders note, “Anthropology increasingly came to see culture as something constructed, reproduced, and transformed by the activities and ideas of human agents. It was recognized that this is rarely a matter of intentional design, but was most often the consequence of unintended actions. Far from being coherent and systematic, culture is contingent, conflicting and shot through with power relations” (2006:17). Making culture is a messy affair, made doubly so as members of the kinky community rejected parts of wider American culture while still fully engaging in others. The rejection did not take place as a negative but rather entailed a creative renegotiation or even invention of cultural structures.

My work with this community cannot be separated from the fact that members maintained footholds in both the kinky community and the vanilla one. As insular as the community may be, members could not avoid the fact that they were embedded in the culture of
Cactus, Texas, and the United States. However, the community had hit upon several strategies to make meaning out of and through their shared experiences. In some cases, the embodied response of the kinky community in shifting identities and relationships to external pressure of being marginalized by mainstream American culture is the logical outcome of practice theory. If, as has been argued, the only way to change habitus, or way of being in the world, is to change the environment, people in the kinky community took that lesson to heart by encompassing bodily practices in the negotiation process. They also pushed the envelope in regards to the performative nature of gender, forcing disjunctions between what had been pictured as innate characteristics. In the kinky community, these practices resulted in an expansion of erotic agency and a re-evaluation of the meaning of suffering.

I discussed the ways in which my own effort of meaning making, in the form of this ethnography, were similar to the narrative approach applied by many members of the community to express their experiences. After an examination of the ways anthropologists make meaning, I moved onto how members of the kinky community make meaning through culture. The meanings of play and sex were discussed as they structure and are structure by the shared culture of members of the kinky community and the ways in which they are used as liminal states. Material culture was a result of both behavioral and ideational impulses and was analyzed as external artifacts of cultural processes. Identity, binary oppositions, and hegemony were addressed as part of the ideology of the community. Meaning making is a human universal, and an examination of the kinky community in Cactus reveals that this subculture both resisted and accommodated the meanings provided by the wider American culture. One of the major strategies of the community to do so was based on changing habitus through embodied practices in order to modify the self and relationships.
Anthropologists are in a funny position, simultaneously trying to understand the world from an emic perspective while reformulating the experience into etic anthropology. The entire discipline is a very specific way to make sense of experience in that most concepts are usually second-hand, experienced as an outsider participating. Ethnography as a particular result of the anthropological enterprise is one giant exercise in meaning making. The methodology structures the data collected, in my case focusing on qualitative data based on participant observation and interviews. The interviewing process demands narrative responses. These disparate narratives are further channeled into a more or less coherent whole by the researcher to create an account that (hopefully) reflects people’s experience in light of an anthropological understanding. This is not so dissimilar to the way members of the kinky community interpreted their interactions with the vanilla community, construing those interactions in light of their own particular understandings of power and sexuality. In that, I have not always felt alone in my position between worlds. Many people in the kinky community straddled two worlds as well, although what I consider emic for them becomes etic.

Classical anthropological fieldwork resembles the classical stages of ritual, separation, liminality, and reincorporation. This lends to the narrative structure of ethnography, with a set beginning, a transformation, and a final product proving the new anthropologist’s place in the profession. The very process of writing, that mystical, magical act that allows for an extracorporeal transmission of experiences and interpretations, forces coherence from out of the chaos of lived experience. Anthropologists are their own subculture, and as such have resisted and made accommodation to their own larger culture. In the face of a cultural impulse toward atomization and simplification, anthropology demands a contextualized, holistic understanding of cultural practices. On the other hand, much of the anthropological effort in this regard is
channeled back into the academy, sapping some of the potential for a large scale shift in perceptions into a rarefied setting only accessed by some members of the culture. A literature review, a purely ideological pursuit, is used to contextualize a work and draw on the traditions of elders. For an academic, authenticity is based on establishing oneself as an authority through the display of a grasp of the literature and habits of those who have come before. This embodiment of tradition is similar to that practiced in the kinky community when people ground their positions relative to the established literature and the existing social networks.

I have focused on two of the behavior patterns of members of the kinky community which are constitutive of their membership: play and sex. These activities were ways to both experience and generate meaning. They were also sites for resistance to dominant ideology. People repeated bodily practices with the intention of shifting perceptions and ways of being in the world. In doing so, relationships to the self and others were renegotiated through a change in habitus. Relying on these two sites of resistance limited the effectiveness of the strategy to combat larger questions of structural inequality that existed beyond the relationships limited to the kinky community.

Many times, play was performed in scenes which may be viewed as rituals in the classical anthropological sense with a structure that resembles a plot diagram and functions to identify the beginning, increase in intensity, climax, and dénouement of play. There remains the question of whether these scenes acted as ritual in the sense that Turner (1969) described. This narrative notion of the phenomenon is based on an understanding of ritual historically grounded in Euro-American ethos, or as a result of the influence of social science on popular understanding of the structure and function of ritual. Because the kinky community in Cactus had really only been around for twenty years and many members had college educations, many
of the rituals were consciously constructed based on Western interpretations of ritual in other cultures and religions, accessing both popular notions of native cultural traditions and popular social science. Of course, not all play was bound by ritual into discrete scenes, but could permeate a party, creating an undercurrent of potential intense interactions outside of the formulaic structure found in more formal play. Play could serve as a rite of intensification, strengthening community bonds through a sense of *communitas*. Without engaging in a specific change from one status to another, as seen in rites of passage, people still entered a liminal state where meaning was in flux and redefinition of identity and relationships were possible to a point. It was in this liminality out of context that people shifted their habitus and acted as agents. At the junction of betwixt and between, people preferred to experience a liminal state through their bodies, forgoing linear narratives and articulation. This was especially prevalent in subspace, the altered state of consciousness experienced by many submissives. This trance state was often bound by ritual, as it was an unstable and potentially dangerous time for the submissive. Ritual created a framework for this experience to occur and, perhaps more importantly, to end. Many times, the goal of play was made explicit beforehand, so during this liminal state, the embodied experience could usually be channeled into the agreed upon interpretation. Play, even more than sex, was a defining feature of this community, allowing one to prove membership in the community and affirm connection. It created meaning in its practice.

Sex occurred much less frequently than play at parties, yet was still invested with and generated meaning. The definition of sex was fluid and depended on the participants. This fluidity stands in contrast to the mainstream American cultural understanding of sex as limited set of activities, usually culminating in at least male orgasm. The potential for non-penetrative sex has been seized upon by HIV/AIDS activists who have helped popularize safer sex practices
that create a space for kink as a healthful practice. People in the kinky community believed it was a fundamental right to have good sex and that this required mindfulness and practice. The opportunities to perform and observe sex gave people concrete examples of other people’s sexual experiences, inspiring a sense of adventure while helping people gain self-confidence. Nudity, as a subset of sexual practices, served to highlight sexual tension and at the same time demystified assumptions about who counted as a desirable partner. Sex as an act could facilitate relationships through pleasure and subsequent bonding. The meaning of orgasm was very different for women than for men. In public, women’s (especially bottoms’) orgasms were used as a sign of a successful scene, but did not usually count as sex in and of themselves. Men’s orgasms were seen as a definite indication that sex had taken place, but were considered dangerous for both the person having the orgasm, because it displayed vulnerability, and for observers, usually framed in biomedical terms of contamination. Orgasm served as a moment of crisis where there existed the potential to reshape meaning, if taken advantage of. Sex was one of the practices that embodied the shift from shame to pride in identity, whether that be based on sexual desires, body consciousness, age, or a number of other ways mainstream American culture denigrates people. Sex was not always reserved for romantic relationships, but rather was usually a signal of closeness. One of the phrases bandied about by people who believe that promiscuity is immoral is “meaningless sex.” In this community, sex always had a meaning, although it might not be as rarified as eternal love. Locating resistance to hegemony in erotic agency limits the usefulness of this strategy as it is usually only effective in redefining desire and the appropriate responses to desire. It is possible, however, to see other nascent changes in a broader context through the shift from monogamous romantic relationships to polyamorous ones.
The practice of violence is one of the more complex behaviors to situate in an American context, where the mainstream understanding is that violence and love (as exemplified as sex) are opposing forces. As practiced by members of the kinky communities, some activities questioned the definition of violence. Punching, cutting, and electrocution may be defined as always violent by mainstream American standards. However, these same behaviors in the kinky community differed from a mainstream understanding in two important ways: consent and intent. Consent was a fundamental tenet in the community. People often considered at length what it meant to consent. Very few complete taboos existed in the community and violating consent was one of them. Codes developed around consent, including the practice of negotiation between play partners, contracts between members of a relationship, and the existence of safe words. The intent of the violence was also very different than a standard American definition. Violence in the kinky community lacked malice. All participants agreed on the desired effect of violence beforehand. Violence could serve to disrupt normal states, forcing participants into the liminal state that was often the hallmark of an effective scene. Many times, violence made people, especially bottoms, seem as if they had lost control, which paradoxically increased their sense of agency in other parts of their lives. This was in part because they endured a trial and came out the other end relatively unscathed. In response to violence, the performance of pain was encouraged. This had the added effect of making it appear that there was more violence occurring than might actually be taking place. Violence, because it can be so shocking, embodied meaning, especially under such tight controls. Again, I return to the moment of crisis. This could be a time to reimagine oneself and one’s relationship to the wider world. This meaning-making activity may be difficult to understand from the outside, yet in context made sense to those involved. Part of the challenge when describing embodied ways of knowing is
that language hardly seems sufficient to convey the experience. This is also what makes it a powerful strategy to reframe identity, as it is not amenable to rational argument.

The fact that there was meaningful material culture will come as no surprise to anyone who has studied anthropology. Artifacts are the concrete manifestations of culture, firmly embedded in the production of knowledge and skill. Toys could be objects of form and function, appreciated for their aesthetics and their ability to elicit sensation. Furthermore, objects acquired meaning through both origin story and history. The emphasis placed on the origin of a toy illustrates members’ concern with the connection between people. Objects created for one’s own use or purchased from a community member reflect the value people placed on sustainability in the community. People also believed that they wield influence through their purchasing power (not an unreasonable assumption in a capitalist society) and therefore privileged vendors who embraced the kinky community and a sex positive experience, as demonstrated by the preference for boutiques over chains.

Not all objects were equally imbued with meaning. Many of the objects used for safety practices were single-use (such as condoms and razor blades), and the fact that they were disposed of after each person illustrates the pervasiveness of the biomedical model of contamination. As enmeshed as the kinky community was in the economy of the wider American society, members took pleasure in subverting the uses of vanilla objects into kinky toys in the process known as making pervertables. This speaks to the ways in which the meaning of an object is determined by the user, not the producer. Toys acted as social lubricants, strengthening bonds through shared creation, reciprocal exchange, and a display of commitment to the kink lifestyle. They create a sense of tradition in the sense that there was a physical body of work to collect and cherish. At the same time, tension existed among those who made a
conscious choice to reject the materialism of the kinky community and American society at large by focusing on play through the body rather than an experience mediated by artifacts. The materials of culture are polysemic, drawing their meanings from a number of arenas, as artifacts everywhere are. A flogger was seldom just a flogger, carrying with it its own history and significance.

The ideology of the kinky community was at once explicit and nebulous. Members of the kinky community were extremely reflexive, resulting in a large body of work produced by and for other people who identify as kinky. This also led to a proliferation of discussion groups, both in real time and online, about the meaning of it all. As an anthropologist, I value the emic understanding of what it means to be a community member, but I have also imposed an etic filter to examine underlying structures. I traced the ideology of members of the kinky community through identity, the gender system, and the community’s relationship with hegemonic ideals. These different aspects of ideology coalesced into a more or less coherent whole which was at once embedded in and yet resisted the meaning imputed by the wider American culture.

Identity is experienced both individually and collectively. Individually, people traced their kinky identity to an innate expression of a natural force. The concept of “the natural” was an important rhetorical device in that it sidestepped arguments about choice. Drawing on the trope of the natural, people in the kinky community saw themselves as acting out their true selves despite the hardship that came with claiming such an identity. In keeping with a larger American understanding, what was natural was seen as good and powerful. Members in the kinky community deployed this understanding to shift the focus away from moral judgements passed by the vanilla community and toward a dialogue about authenticity. Many people understood their identity as kinky in relation to other people. The most fundamental split was
between kinky and vanilla. Ideally, one either was kinky or one was vanilla, but in practice, people could simultaneously occupy space in both worlds in a kind of leather Schrödinger existential state that shakes the illusion these were two mutually exclusive states. Among members of the kinky community, one’s true identity was considered the kinky one and the vanilla identity a façade put on to avoid castigation. By participating in kinky organizations, people affirmed their commitment to a kinky identity. Once that fundamental distinction was made, other aspects of a kinky identity developed in relation to other members in the community. Identity is performed in the iteration of interactions and quotidian practices. The kinky community created a space with a forgiving audience for people to experiment with different identities and then offered practices, such as play or sex, which could embody an altered identity. This was one of the generative aspects of the community. The community also emerged in response to pressure from the wider American society’s denigration of non-standard sexual expression, creating alliances between groups that might not necessarily have much in common outside of outlawed sexuality. The community could serve as a safe haven for the misunderstood. People performed their understandings of their selves and found meaning in both the ideology and the practice.

Gender was also an ideological arena for meaning making. Although the masculine/feminine divide was recognized as a salient set of oppositions in the community, distinctions between dominant and submissive also carried weight. The gender system was influenced by both of these apparently dichotomous categories, creating a constellation of combinations that varied in a somewhat predictable manner. “Traditional” gender roles were parodied (and exemplified) by the prevalence of masculine dominance and feminine submissiveness, especially in the heterosexual community. These traditions were confounded by
the existence of feminine dominance and masculine submissiveness. There also tended to be bleeding between the presentations of less traditional genders, muddying the waters. Almost everyone modified their gendered experiences and performance depending on context, making the argument that gender is not a fixed asset but rather a situated practice. Even further complicating the picture was the existence of the “switch” gender, an identity not wedded to any one concrete gender presentation. Despite the fact that these gendered identities were delineated in terms of dichotomies, the categories instead act dialectically to create an explosion of gendered identities, calling into question the mainstream American cultural understanding of gender as a binary. Gender is a powerful mediator of experience, and it is here that I find the resistance of the kinky community to hegemonic ideals most powerful.

Cultural hegemony makes it difficult to resist the status quo because people feel the existing system benefits them in some way. The ways in which cultural hegemony is perpetuated is obfuscated by ideology that encourages an understanding of the system as benevolent while silencing the voices of the disenfranchised. The kinky community illustrates both resistance to and complicity with hegemonic ideals. The radical reimagining of relationships, sexuality, and space was a powerful place to begin questioning authority and privilege. This opportunity was sometimes undertaken and sometimes ignored by members in the community. The counterhegemonic potential of the community can be seen in the uneasy relationship the kinky community had with the vanilla one as mediated through the police. At the same time, elites within the community selectively deployed specific interpretations of the law to sustain existing power structures, which were not always hospitable to people of different ethnicities, sexual partner choice, or gender presentation. The myth of a singular kinky community standing united against the vanilla oppressors erased the difference in experiences of members based on
other vectors of oppression. In other ways, members of the kinky community actively fought against tyrannical stereotypes by embracing a wide array of people as sexually desirable and valued partners, especially in the areas of body size and age.

There is no one grand ethos of resistance or accommodation, but rather a sum of quotidian practices that add up to a community that creates meaning through practice, material goods, and ideology. It is a profoundly cultural enterprise. Anthropology allows a perspective that situates practices in context and forgoes the tawdry sensationalism of popular media. Practice theory makes an intelligible whole of the three facets of culture. It gives the researcher an avenue to understand how people embody change, though it does not adequately account for the motivation for change. For that, I turn to Foucault’s notion of resistance embedded in every hegemonic discourse. People in the kinky community have been marginalized by the mainstream American culture due to their sexual expression, yet this expulsion is the seed of resistance. Rather than capitulating to dominant ideology, people use the opportunity to renegotiate identities and relationships seen as natural and fundamental to the American way of life. Their success in resistance, although not always guaranteed, serves as a demonstration that hegemony may be fought against. People are not passive receptacles of culture but rather are active agents engaged in creating meaning.

I have learned innumerable lessons from the Cactus kinky community, some personal and some anthropological. I am touched that I was able to share in their lives for my own liminal experience of fieldwork. I have been shaped by my experiences and I can only hope that it has been an equally positive experience for the people with whom I worked. In closing, I will quote Emma one last time, about the best aspects of being in the kinky community, “When we go to parties where there is that really awesome energy and it feels like everyone is getting along and
everybody’s having a great time, it’s often because they are together in that space, just in appreciation of people making their own way and not people trying to one up another person. I’m here being me and you’re here being you, and damn, isn’t that beautiful?”


Newmahr, Staci. 2011.


APPENDIX A – GLOSSARY OF KINKY TERMS

**Aftercare:** The period following a scene when the needs of the players, particularly the bottom, are met through cuddling, reassurance, or by providing nourishment.

**Ball gag:** A type of gag with a ball (usually rubber) that is forced between the teeth.

**BDSM:** Bondage/Discipline/Dominance/Submission/Sado/Masochism. This term is generally used in the heterosexual community and is used as an umbrella term for a collection of alternative lifestyle practices.

**Bondage frame:** A wooden or metal rectangular frame about the size of queen sized mattress with holes or eyelets where restraints can be placed. It stands upright so that the person restrained is upright.

**Bottom:** The person receiving the action in a scene. Some people also choose to identify as a bottom rather than a submissive to denote their interest in activities but not necessarily Dominant/submissive relationships.

**BRBC:** Bodice Ripper Book Club. A leather club comprised entirely of women. It is not a requirement for members to be lesbians, only that they have an honest desire to experience s/m with other women.

**CND (pronounced Cindy):** Collective of unnamed Desires. Large umbrella group. Predominantly male dominants and female submissives, although the club is open to anyone.

**Collar:** An object worn by a slave or submissive, usually a collar or sometimes a necklace, used to represent a dominant/submissive relationship. In some cases, a collar might be analogous to a wedding ring in terms of representing commitment.
**Contract:** A formal document between a Master and a slave outlining the rights and responsibilities of all parties in the relationship.

**Cross-dress:** To wear the clothing of a gender not one’s own.

**Cutting:** Using a scalpel or a knife to cut open the skin.

**Drag:** To perform a hyper-version of a gender not one’s own.

**Dungeon:** An area that has been transformed into a play space, complete with equipment. It may be permanent or transitory.

**Dungeon Monitor (DM):** The person at a party responsible for making sure that safety measures are observed.

**Edgy:** An activity considered more extreme than normal, especially one that could result in permanent injury or death.

**Fetish gear:** Clothing worn to appeal to a fetish, including latex, leather, corsets, harnesses, and others. People dressed in fetish gear wear elaborate costumes compared to most participants.

**Flogger:** A many-tailed whip used in flogging.

**Fire play:** The practice of lighting a fire on a person’s skin through the use of rubbing alcohol or flash cotton, or using fire to heat something like a needle red hot before placing it on the skin. The latter is not the same as branding, where the metal covers a large surface area.

**Fire room:** A room equipped to handle fire play, usually with a fire extinguisher, bowls of water, and wet towels.

**Fisting:** The practice of placing one’s entire hand into a person’s vagina or anus.

**Fit to be Tied:** A bondage studio.

**Furry:** A person who dresses as an animal for sexual gratification.
**Futura:** A specialty interest group for people in the community aged 18-35.

**The House:** LUST’s dedicated dungeon located outside Cactus city limits.

**Impact play:** One person strikes another with an implement or a body part.

**Insertable:** A toy designed to be inserted into a person’s vagina or anus. Dildos and butt plugs are types of insertables.

**Intense sensation:** Pain is often re-framed as intense sensation. This sensation can be anything.

**Kinky:** Umbrella term used to refer to a variety of alternative sexual practices. In Cactus, kinky implies sex, whereas terms such as s/m may not carry the same connotation.

**Leather:** A lifestyle that focuses on discipline and tradition while embracing s/m. There is more structure in the leather community than in the kinky one, although the overlap between the two is large. The kinky community finds its progenitors in the gay male leather community.

**LUST:** Leather University of Sadomasochism, Texas. A predominantly heterosexual leather group with many male dominants and female submissives. Membership was open and people were not excluded based on gender or partner choice.

**Mouth spreader:** A metallic gag that forces the teeth apart with a crank.

**Munch:** A social event in a vanilla setting.

**Newbie:** A new person with no firmly established identity.

**Paddle:** A long, flat striking implement, usually made of wood or plastic. Used in paddling.

**Pansexual:** A group which welcomes anyone of any gender orientation or partner choice. This stands in contrast to heterosexual and single-gendered groups.

**Pervertable:** An object with an overt vanilla use that has been repurposed for a kinky end.
Pet: A human submissive who acts as an animal, usually a dog or cat. This person’s partner acts as the owner.

Play: Any activities engaged in with kinky behavior. Can be used as a noun or verb. This is used in most settings, but it is interesting to contrast this to “work,” the word used in some gay male leather communities.

Play station: An area where play takes place, usually anchored by a piece of equipment.

Piercing: The insertion of needles into the skin, generally at a shallow level. The needles may be left in as temporary piercings for an hour or so.

Polyamory: The practice of having multiple concurrent love relationships.

Power exchange: The consensual practice of the submissive yielding power to the Dominant.

Protocol: Rules that are followed to remind participants of the Dominant/submissive dynamic. These are found more often in leather settings rather than kinky ones.

Rough body play: Play that involves slapping, punching, pinching, biting, or pushing. Rough body play is defined by the lack of toys involved.

Sadomasochism (s/m): In general, sadomasochism denotes an interest in giving and receiving pain, usually considered pleasurable. More specifically, it is used in some gay leather groups to differentiate between their practices and “just kinky sex.”

Scene: A formally defined unit of play characterized by a defined beginning and end.

Shibari: A form of rope bondage based on Japanese style.

Single-tailed whip: A whip with a single tail. Harrison Ford used a single-tailed whip in Indiana Jones. This is usually contrasted to a flogger, which has many tails.

Spanking bench: A piece of equipment used to position a bottom for spanking or other forms of impact play.
St. Andrew’s Cross: A large x shaped frame made out of wood to which a bottom may be bound upright.

Stingy: A type of sensation in impact play characterized by a sharp or cutting sensation. Compare to thuddy.

Submissive: A person who takes the submissive role in a Dominant/submissive dynamic. A person may also identify as submissive outside of any particular relationship. Submissives often act as bottoms in scenes. There are different types of submissive, including pet, girl, boy, or slave.

subLiminal: A submissive support group. Predominantly composed of women, a majority of whom were in relationships with dominant males.

Subspace: The altered state of consciousness experienced by a bottom due to intense stimulation, either physical, emotional, or psychological. Sometimes experienced as a trance state. Compare to top space.

Suspension (full or partial): When a bottom’s weight is completely or partially supported by rope anchored to a suspension point.

Suspension point: A structural feature which allows weight to be suspended via rope. These are often drilled into ceiling beams of permanent structures, but there is also a portable version created out of a metal frame.

Switch (noun): A person who identifies as both a top and a bottom or as both dominant and submissive.

Switch (verb): To change between identities or behaviors based on context, either between relationships or within the same relationship.
**TENS unit:** Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation unit. Used to cause small muscle spasms through electrical current.

**Thuddy:** A type of sensation in impact play characterized by a deep, diffused sensation. Compare to stingy.

**Top:** The person performing the action in a scene. Some people also choose to identify as a top rather than a submissive to denote their interest in activities but not necessarily Dominant/submissive relationships.

**Top space:** An altered state of consciousness experience by tops during a scene. May be characterized as intense concentration and a feeling of power. Compare to subspace.

**Tourist:** A person who only goes to parties to watch and judge others rather than being honestly interested in kink.

**Toy:** An implement used in kinky activities, usually repeatedly. This includes such things as dildos, paddles, or floggers but excludes single-use items, such as needles or condoms.

**Transman:** A man who is biologically female but identifies as a man. This identity differs from other forms of transgendered behaviors such as cross-dressing or drag.

**Transwoman:** A woman who is biologically male but identifies as a woman. This identity differs from other forms of transgendered behaviors such as cross-dressing or drag.

**Vanilla:** Most simply defined as not kinky. Vanilla refers to mainstream American sexual mores that are violated by members of the kinky community. It may also be used to refer to anything normal, boring, or unexciting.

**Violet wand:** A piece of equipment that uses high voltage electricity to create an electrical charge used to zap someone with more or less intensity.
**Virgin price:** The price of admission to a party offered to a person who has never attended a party.

**Warm up:** The period at the beginning of a scene characterized by light sensations gradually morphing into more intense sensations. A bottom who is warm can handle more sensation than one who is not.

**Water sports:** Play involving urine.

**Wax play:** Play involving dripping melted wax onto skin.
APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions about kink identity

Please use a pseudonym that is not your real name or your scene name.

How do you describe yourself?

Are you in one or more relationships? Please describe.

Please define kinky.

When did you first start practicing kinky activities?

How did you know you were kinky?

Did you have a mentor? What was that relationship like?

How often do you play?

Who do you play with?

What kind of play do you engage in?

What kind of toys do you have?

Where do you get your toys?
Do you engage in aftercare?

Do you use safe words?

Is there anything you do in your daily (vanilla) life to express your kink identity?

Please describe a typical scene or your favorite scene.

Questions about community
Please define the kinky community.

Do you see yourself as a member of the kinky community?

What types of events do you attend?

How often do you attend events?

Is there one group you identify with more than the others?

If you have a partner or partners, do they participate in the kinky community?

How did you find the organizations you participate in?

How do you communicate with members of the community?

Questions about technology
Do you have a mobile phone?
Do you have a smart phone?

Do you have a land line?

Do you have a computer?

Do you have a web cam?

Do you have access to the internet at home?

Do you have access to the internet elsewhere?

Do you use any social networking sites? Which ones?

Do you use any of the previous technology to communicate with others in the kinky community?

Do you use any of the previous technology in order to participate in kinky activity?

How do you use this technology?

Other topics
Define subspace. Have you experienced it? How was it created? What do you get out of it?

Why do you play in public?

What rites of passage have you been involved in?
Please define vanilla.

How is a scene negotiated?

Explain polyamory.

Explain what a leather family is.

What is edge play?

Issues of consent.

Do you use safer sex practices?

Demographics
Age?

Gender?

What type of work do you do?

Educational background?

What is your approximate income?

Do you have children?