

Reframing Exclusionary Identities Through Affective Affinities:
A comparative study of BDSM community formation in
Budapest and London

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Abstract

In this comparative thesis, I investigate how BDSM communities in Budapest and London form around affective affinities that do not rely on the exclusionary mechanisms of identity politics. I strive for an open, ambiguous definition of kink to support my framing of BDSM as an affective praxis that need not rely on normative identities. My analysis is based on 20 semi-structured interviews and a literature review drawing from sexological, psychoanalytic, gender studies, and ethnographic fields, which chronicles the historical and contemporary social construction of BDSM. Situating myself and my research locations, I discuss what it means to utilize a feminist, embodied, interdisciplinary praxis in my fieldwork. I describe my participant observation and interview methodologies, and detail the pros and cons of mobilizing the term “community” in my research. Illustrating the problem with using identity as a tool for community formation, I explore how identity creates normativities and develop the idea of *kinknormativity*, unique from other normativities in linking the legitimacy of informed consent to social privilege. Moving away from identity, I argue that affect provides the necessary opening for BDSM communities to form, analyzing two main affective modes: feelings of belonging and discussions of gender. I show that affective belonging is built in both locations through solidarity and educational events, which are more frequent in London than in Budapest. Perhaps in part due to differing educational resources, knowledge of gender varies greatly between my fieldwork sites, expressed with more fluency and reflexivity in London through notions of performativity and in a more parochial manner in Budapest through temporal references to the 1800s. My research contributes to continuing efforts to bring BDSM into the academy, moving away from debates around de/pathologizing kink while contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship on sexual cultures, affect, and gender.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographic reference.

I further declare that the following word counts for this thesis are accurate:

Total word count, thesis text only: 21,974

Total word count, entire manuscript: 30,298 words

Signed,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heath Pennington". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Heath" and last name "Pennington" clearly distinguishable.

Heath Pennington

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The acronym BDSM refers to Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism, a group of mental and corporeal practices carried out between consenting adults. BDSM is often called “kink;” practitioners are dubbed “kinksters” and described as “kinky.”¹ I use the terms BDSM and kink interchangeably, though arguably kink is more appropriate because BDSM’s six designations leave out interests and activities such as fetishes and crossdressing, which “kink” includes. The acronym BDSM appears to have originated online circa 1988 and is more inclusive (Brame, n.d.) than the previously-utilized S&M, S/M, or SM (Bauer, 2014), formulations which discursively limited kinky practices to sadism and masochism, or sadomasochism. In kink, a “scene” refers to play within delimited arrangements of time, place, participants, and actions. “Play” frequently describes kinky activities which occur at “play parties.” Much kinky play involves “power exchange,” the consensual and pre-negotiated giving and taking of control. During play, BDSM practitioners often assume roles: a “dominant” (“D”) or “submissive” (“s”), holds or relinquishes power or control; a “top” or “bottom,” does the same but only for the duration of a scene; a “switch” alternately plays in dominant, submissive, top, bottom, or undefined roles. Kinksters frequently adopt and shift between multiple roles.

Studies indicate that BDSM behaviors may be common amongst a significant minority² of the population (Ambler et al., 2017; Janus & Janus, 1994; Moser & Levitt, 1987; “Sexual Wellbeing Survey,” 2005;³ Truscott, 2001). Despite the aforementioned changes in nomenclature,

¹ All but one interview partner described themselves as kinky, though some stopped to ask what “kinky” means to me, or to articulate what it means to them. This openness to definitional plasticity hints at a flexibility which supports my reading of affective affinities as an alternative to identity in Chapter four.

² Between 10 and 20% of the global populace.

³ Though this study was conducted by Durex, a potentially problematic corporate entity, the sample size, covering 40 countries, is as yet unmatched.

defining BDSM remains complex. Kink has no unifying cause nor purpose (Thompson, 2001); despite the development of a “BDSM taxonomy” (Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Ambler et al., 2017), it is not clear which, if any, behaviors can be indisputably classified as kinky (Moser & Levitt, 1987). Hence, there are no essential criteria for identifying who is a BDSM practitioner, or what kink is, nor am I interested in formulating any. I prefer to keep the sign unclear (Butler, [1990] 2004),⁴ following Jana Sawicki’s call for feminists to “explore the meaning of the diversity of sexual practices to those who practice them,” rather than assigning definitions, in order to focus on the “‘subjugated knowledge’ of sexuality” (qtd. in Beckmann, 2009, 7; Foucault 1978).

This catalogue of terms brings the focus to BDSM’s subjugated knowledge, illustrating the diversity of practices which partially comprise this vast arena. I have been writing about this varied topic since 2012. Coming to Hungary, I planned to enter the Budapest BDSM community⁵ and undertake fieldwork exploring the diversity of gender identities my previous experience⁶ led me to expect. My first Budapest-based play party was a surprise. I saw almost no LGBT+ presenting people nor any same-sex play; there was very little play at all. The cool-looking underground venue had several brick-vaulted rooms and low, colored lighting, but seemed to lack kink furniture, toys, or props. My field notes read: “very het. norm party, lots of people wearing black, speaking Hungarian. Play? Introduced around a bit by organizer but felt the outsider.” Unsettled, I wondered how to study gender identity within this community. Because the Hungarian kink population did not appear as diverse as I had naïvely assumed it would be, I thought a counterpoint would yield relevant data. So, despite time and length limitations,⁷ I determined to undertake a comparative

⁴ As Judith Butler argues regarding the sign “lesbian,” in a move to obfuscate normative identities by refusing to delimit who or what is “lesbian” or in this case, “kinky” (see Chapter three.)

⁵ I unpack the term “community” in 2.3.

⁶ I had been welcomed by practitioners and/or communities in Bali, Berlin, Helsinki, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, London, Los Angeles, Manila, New York, Singapore, Taiwan (Taichung, Tainan, and Taipei), and Tokyo by the time I arrived in Budapest in 2017.

⁷ This thesis has been prepared for a one-year Master’s program with a thesis length upper limit of 22,000 words.

analysis between Budapest and another city. Vienna and Berlin both seemed appealing. However, travel costs, community access, and linguistic barriers presented potential difficulties. Then I thought of London. I had a community network, having completed my first MA there in 2013, and a partner who lives in the city could provide accommodation. My contacts were interested, and potential supervisors approved, so I decided on fieldwork in Budapest and London.

I had planned to study kinky gender identity, but the Gender Studies curriculum showed that though identity claims grant a sense of connection and provide likeminded communities, they also reinforce a “fantasy of discreteness” instead of reflecting multiplicity (Puar, 2017, 36), creating divisive, exclusionary expectations around category membership. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” recognized the fracturing potential of identity, suggesting the answer might lie in affinities⁸ (1991). Musing on affect theory, Haraway, and discussions of solidarity in kink scholar Johanna Pohtinen’s “Creating a Feeling of Belonging: Solidarity in Finnish Kink Communities” (2016), I decided to reformulate my research topic, a move which has opened fruitful avenues of exploration for this thesis, and beyond. I set out to empirically and theoretically explore how reframing BDSM community formation through the language of affective affinity could avoid some of the analytical drawbacks inherent in the exclusionary politics of identity, by finding and analyzing ways that affect formed bonds amongst kinksters in Budapest and London.

1.1 Literature Review

Literature which has emerged around the divisiveness of identity grounds my theoretically-informed research framework. Thus BDSM and Gender Scholarship, the first section of this

⁸ Haraway defines “affinity” as “related not by blood but by choice” (1991, 11). Interested in BDSM communities’ social relations of “choice,” I maintain Haraway’s definition for use in this thesis.

literature review, introduces affect theory and chronicles some pitfalls of identity categories as laid out in discourse analytical and queer theory texts, before introducing Michel Foucault, whose work on power and the social construction of sexualities underpins much of my thesis. After touching on trans becoming and affect via Jasbir Puar – whose work is central to my arguments in Chapters three and four – the section closes with an overview of gender as an analytical and performative category, which I mobilize in Chapter four. Section 1.1.b, A Genealogy of BDSM, sets itself against mystification, detailing the social construction of sadism and masochism as pathologies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and then describing the ongoing psychological discourse around this set of mental and corporeal practices. This background is important as I describe *kinknormativity* in Chapter three. Because embattled issues around gender and kink become significant in my analysis of kinky engagements with gender in Chapter four, section two concludes with an overview of the “sex wars,” before detailing kink community formation and popularization during the end of the twentieth century, background to Chapter four’s discussion of kinky belonging. Section 1.1.c, Voices of Kink, engages most clearly with affect, probing three major ethnographies and two scholarly articles on BDSM practitioners, all of which inform my methodologies and help delineate kink’s links with affect, belonging, and gender. This chapter does not include literature contextualizing my fieldwork locations. Because I consider situating myself and my research sites as part of my embodied methodological praxis, I review that literature in Chapter two: Methodologies. I further explore the implications of my cross-cultural comparison in Chapter four as I detail affective relations of belonging and gender within BDSM communities.

1.1.a – BDSM and Gender Scholarship

Uneasy with the term “identity” and its fixedness, I began investigating identity creation within sexual cultures using Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick’s contribution to the field of

discourse analysis, entitled *Language and Sexuality* (2008). The authors work against essentializing, as I do throughout this thesis, asserting a la Michel Foucault that language both constructs and reflects subjectivities rather than showcasing an already-formed “inner perverse essence” (ibid, 81). In order to move away from inner essences, the authors’ call to “bracket identity, leave it behind,” points directly at the subjects of this thesis:

‘[S]exual identity’ by no means exhausts the range of feelings, sensations, knowledges, and relations that compose ‘sexuality’. Indeed, an exclusive focus on identity...compels us to...return again and again to predictable (and finally unresolvable) debates about things like whether or not there is such a thing as a ‘gay community’, who is ‘in’ or ‘outside’ that community, and who or what constitutes ‘authentic’ instantiations of that community (ibid, 105).

Like other identities, sexual identity’s unresolvable debates about community membership leave little room for explorations of “feelings, sensations, knowledges, and relations” – terms which sound remarkably like the embodied vocabulary of affect. Affect theory came to scholarly prominence during the affective turn, a critical shift which began in the mid-1990s as a response to deconstruction and poststructuralism’s purported limitations (Clough, 2010). Affect emphasizes the discontinuity between consciousness and pre-conscious corporeal sensation, foregrounding bodily matter. Two schools developed around affect, the first⁹ interpreting it as a “prepersonal intensity” that implies “an augmentation or diminution in [a] body’s capacity to act” (Massumi, 1987, xvi), and the second¹⁰ expanding Sylvan Tomkins’ attempts to build a theory of mental life, which included enumerating nine affects that combine to form human emotions (1995). Cameron and Kulick’s articulation above aptly reveals that one of identity’s drawbacks lies in its inability to accommodate affective sensations, while reiterating the trouble with identity that queer theory articulated almost twenty years earlier.

⁹ Based on Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Giles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, and including Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough.

¹⁰ Developed from Tomkins by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and including Sarah Ahmed and Adam Frank.

Queer theory, which materialized in the 1990s, works to expose the production of identity as a restrictive mechanism. For example, Judith Butler radically critiques identity categories as exclusionary and oppressive in her foundational text *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006, xxxii). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's introductory chapter to her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) problematizes assumedly solid sexual identity categories. Many essays in Michael Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet* also question identity regimes and identity politics (Ed., 1993). Though only part of its larger aim to destabilize heterosexual, "Western"¹¹ cultural hegemonies and weaken the authority of the "normal," a weakening I take up in Chapter three, queer theory's critique of exclusionary identity categories and politics makes room for the becomings¹² of affect (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010), thus directly informing this project's aims. Arguing against the notion of a pre-formed subject existing before discourse, queer theory builds on the insights of Michel Foucault.

Foucault's work on discourse, power, and the *History of Sexuality* pioneered theory on the linguistic and social construction of sexualities, for example describing how discourses of health and pathology came to demarcate homosexuals as a "species" (1978, 43) during the Victorian era. Foucault's genealogy delineates how "homosexual," as well as terms like "pervert" and "somasochist" came to be conceived as opposed to normative, reproductive sexualities. Gayle Rubin's influential essay "Thinking Sex" ([1984] 2014), draws on this to outline sexual hierarchies, such as those informing the normativities I chronicle in Chapter three. Foucault and Rubin's work indicates that contemporary culture has fabricated the categories "kinky"/"kinky sex" (Beckmann,

¹¹ The terminology "Western"/"West" and "Eastern"/"East" is problematic, if commonly used. I borrow from Kopeček & Wciślik's *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989* (Eds., 2015) to define West/ern as comprised of advanced, post-industrial countries often exhibiting capitalist, liberal democracies; East/ern is comprised of post-communist or post-socialist countries exhibiting nation-building and economic catching-up behaviors to close the development gap.

¹² Seigworth & Gregg define "becoming" as something "always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is" (2010, 3).

2009), continuing “erotic speciation” (Rubin, 2014, 155) through constructions of fixed identity rather than shifting positionality, posited in opposition to heteronormative sexualities. Historicizing the production of sex as constitutive of contemporary subjectivity, Foucault locates in sexual practices a productive will to knowledge (1978). Though he identifies a grand narrative which attempts to persuade society that sexuality has been repressed, as act and discursive subject, Foucault finds this to be a social myth. Against this “repressive hypothesis,” Foucault names power productive (1978, 10, 94), locating it in circulation rather than residing in any specific person or practice (1995). Because power is relational at all times, BDSM practitioners playing with sexuality find the nature of power (much like affect) “always fluid” ([1984] 1997, 169). Releasing BDSM (“S&M”), from feminist associations with patriarchal violence (see 1.1.b), Foucault reads the practice as a way to experiment erotically by self-consciously playing with relations of power – not as a reproduction of oppressive structures (ibid). Importantly, Foucault’s express focus on BDSM as erotic, rather than sexual, uncouples the sex-pleasure link (ibid, 165) and debunks the notion that kink is always about sex (Newmahr, 2011, 66-68), opening space for discussions of affective kinky relations around belonging (see 4.2) and gender (4.3) which are not directly sexual.

Aside from Foucault, affect, and queer theories, trans theory is also important to this thesis. Some trans theory posits the transgender body as a corporeal representation of shiftings and becomings that could oppose monolithically fixed identities or pre-formed subjectivities. Wary of the problematics¹³ of this line of thinking, in Chapter three I mobilize sections of trans theory from

¹³ Claims that transgender becoming represents “‘futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of post-modern promises of gender flexibility’” (Halberstam qtd. in Puar, 2017, 46) overstate “gender fluidity as transgressive capacity,” especially because “becoming has become... a mode through which profit is being aggressively produced” in market economies which “capitalize on ‘flexibility’ as the hallmark of neoliberal economic productivity” (Puar, 2017, 46). Though gender fluidity and BDSM praxis can be hailed as transgressive bodily capacity (Beckmann, 2009), following Margot Weiss (2011) I endeavor to avoid similarly heroic claims. Reading BDSM as a process of becoming through its affective relations can locate it in a zone for aggressive profitmaking in contemporary capitalism, as Weiss charts in *Techniques of Pleasure* (2011) and which I discussed in more detail in 1.1.c.

Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim* (2017) to describe the downside of overinvesting in identity, looking closely at the formation and function of transnormativity, as well as hetero, homo-, and *kinknormativity*. In Chapter four, I mobilize Puar again, this time using her definition of affect to investigate BDSM community formation around belonging and gender, without resorting to the exclusionary language of identity. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, Puar deploys "becoming" to divest identity of meaning,¹⁴ instead offering affect as a way to describe being "awash in pure immanence...marked only by degrees of intensity and duration" (2017, 56). This focus on "intensity" dovetails with Massumi's definition of affect as "prepersonal intensity" (Massumi, 1987, xvi), situating Puar's work within the first school of affect mentioned earlier. Meanwhile Jose Muñoz, whose writing on affective bonds in "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" (2006), also contributed to this thesis, is located closer to the second school. Muñoz interweaves pieces of various theories,¹⁵ in a "stitching" approach to argumentation and methodology which I adopt throughout this thesis. Imagining "a position or narrative of being and becoming that can resist the pull of identitarian models of relationality," he sees affect not as "a simple placeholder for identity" but as "something altogether different... descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other" (ibid, 677). Muñoz' desire, to utilize affect to "resist the pull" of identity politics, is the same as Puar's desire, the same as mine.

Gender theory grounds this identity-resistant desire in the knowledge that sex and gender are separate, non-monolithic, socially constructed systems (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender, a still-developing concept and useful category of analysis (Scott, 2010) is based to an extent in

¹⁴ Puar sees becoming as aspirational, not an occupation of categories but a "dissolution of the binary frames that inform the coherence of the categories in the first instance...not deconstructing or transcending but, rather, overwhelming through infinite multiplicity—sexual difference into incoherence" (187). Andrea Beckmann would prefer the project of deconstructing sexual difference to allow access to practitioners' lived realities without socially constructed stigma against BDSM (2009) (see 1.1.c).

¹⁵ Specifically, object-relations, queer, and critical race theories (2006, 682).

notions of doing and performing. These arise in part from *Gender Trouble*, in which Butler asserts that, while one cannot “be” a sex or gender, one’s citational performance of gender is unavoidable as part of the social construction of compulsory heterosexuality ([1990] 2006, 26). Butler’s later article “Critically Queer” (1993), further explains performative citationality, which she describes through the example of a judge pronouncing a couple married, citing legal language to enact its binding potential (17). Similarly, a BDSM practitioner cites the language of dominance, granting force to words like, “I am your Master.” In both examples, though the words’ power appears to originate in the utterer’s will, the opposite is true: “it is *through* the citation of the law that the figure of the judge’s ‘will’ is produced” (italics in original, *ibid*). Conceiving of power as available through linguistic citation, Butler draws on Foucault’s understanding of power in circulation rather than residing in individuals. This Butlerian/Foucauldian project shows that no gender is inherently empowered, just as no gender is simply a performance. Yet some still read power in BDSM as an individual possession, underscoring the juridical conception (Foucault, 1978) through which “sex wars” feminists saw BDSM as misogynist due to ostensibly stable heterosexist power dynamics. Others misread Butler’s performativity, conflating the performed with the performative by seeing genders put on and taken off at will like an actor playing a part. London-based interview partners¹⁶ frequently spoke of gender in such terms, so I engage with them in Chapter four as part of my exploration of the complex, often mystified understanding of gender at play within the kink communities I studied.

1.1.b – A Genealogy of BDSM

A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause*

¹⁶ To discursively support the “open and active exchange between the researcher and participant in a partnership of co-research” (Humm, 1989, 50), following Bauer (2014) I refer to participants as “interview partners,” or “partners” (see 2.2).

those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* [1990] (2006), xxxi) (*italics in original*).

The first sentence of Andrea Beckmann's *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* reads, "the social construction of 'Sadomasochism' ...[is] a mystification of social reality" (2009, 1). Mark Thompson styles BDSM "cloaked" with "mystery and wonder" (Thompson, 2001, xv). Penelope Eckert contends that the way we use language to discuss sexuality and desire often mystifies rather than clarifies (2001), and Gayle Rubin asserts that mystification shrouds sexuality (Rubin, 2014, 148). Robin Bauer notes that "harmonic sex," an element of heteronormativity which constructs idealized sexual interactions between egalitarian heterosexual partners, serves to mystify the frequency of domestic violence, the power dynamics of sexual relations, and their construction within the private sphere (Bauer, 2014, 3). If understood as biological, personal, or psychological, sexuality remains mystified and resistant to political and cultural analysis (Renkin, 2009, 23; Rubin, 2014, 149). Scholarship on sexual cultures, then, must strip away the mystification of sexualities. In place of mystification, genealogy can work to delineate between supposed "origins" and actual "effects," as Butler notes. However, though psychological understandings may work to mystify their subjects, and often posit effects as origins, this genealogy begins with an overview of psychological investigations into kink, because the field has so heavily influenced the present state of understanding around BDSM and its practitioners.

In 1886, German psychologist Richard von Krafft-Ebbing began the social construction of BDSM as pathology in his catalogue of sexual disorders, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In it, he drew from *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) by French author and revolutionary Marquis de Sade, and from *Venus in Furs* (1869) by Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, to coin the terms sadism and masochism (Krafft-Ebing, 1894, 59-60). A gendered, binary pair, Krafft-Ebing considered

sadism active, aggressive, and masculine, and masochism passive, submissive, and also overwhelmingly a male “perversion.” Krafft-Ebing’s polarized readings of masochism and sadism established the binary which Sigmund Freud expounded in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, [1905] 2000). Like Krafft-Ebing, Freud believed sadism, masochism, and all sexual “perversions” could often be traced back to developmental problems in infancy. But diverging from his predecessor, though he categorized sadism as masculine, Freud saw masochism as feminine (ibid, 13). Many scholars have picked up Freud’s legacy, from sexologists Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) and Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) to contemporary psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, whose radical feminist-inspired book *The Bonds of Love* (1989) typifies the lasting effects of Freud’s work, reading dominant and submissive kink as gendered perversions of a desire for love.

Sexual scholarship from the late 1800s and early 1900s also had lasting effects on how contemporary BDSM scholars (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011) and queer theorists (Halperin, 1990, 2003) construct kinky and queer lineage, respectively, sometimes in a process of normalization. Homosexual identity construction also involves a comparable myth-making. The word “homosexual” was coined in 1869 (Halperin, 1990), yet finding in the ancient Greeks a noble history of male erotics helps elevate homosexuality. Though I believe sexual practices of yore have little relevance to contemporary BDSM due to vastly altered sociohistorical contexts, several influential works on kink do look for an older history. Sexual historian Anne O. Nomis attempts to discursively dignify the dominatrix and her arts, finding early “Dominatrix literature” which situates the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Inanna as part of a legacy of female sexual power (2013, 32). Others claim kink is as “old as Eros” (Brame et al., 1996, 19),¹⁷ note kinky practices existed in ancient Egypt (Smith, 2002), find “rough sex...bites, slaps, and punches”

¹⁷ An interesting choice of words given Foucault’s word-for-word denial that sadism is as old as Eros in *Madness and Civilization* (1988, 210).

and “sounds of pleasurable anguish” in the *Kama Sutra* (Tucker, 2001), or trace cultural fantasies of “power erotics” to the thirteenth century (Desmond, 2006, 3-14). A mythology which mixes contexts and ideas so thoroughly may become sufficiently incomprehensible to support mystifying readings. Yet appealing to the mythos of “ancient” practices fabricates the idea that people “like us” have “always” existed, helping trump pathologization while, paradoxically, reinforcing identity claims based on “deviant” sexualities.

By the late 1970s, identity politics was a hot issue (Wiarda, 2014), and “sex-positive,” “third wave,” and BDSM-practicing lesbian feminists found themselves on one side of the “sex wars,” arguing that consensual sex and pornography could provide liberation from heteronormative, reproductive sexual practices (see Patrick Califia 1980, 1994; Gayle Rubin 1982, 1984, 1991). Facing off against them were radical “second wave” feminists who seemed to agree with Freud, believing all pornography and sex – lesbian sex included – patriarchal and disempowering to “women” as a unified category (Andrea Dworkin 1974, 1981, 1987; Catherine MacKinnon 1979, 1987, 1898). BDSM, an ostensibly oppressive sexist practice utilizing or mirroring male dominance, was especially troublesome for these feminists, who saw in it the “antithesis to women’s liberation” (see Susan Brownmiller, 1993 [1975], 263).¹⁸ 1981’s *Coming to Power*, and its rebuttal, 1982’s *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Linden et al.) represent these opposing views.¹⁹ Written by the lesbian collective Samois, founded in 1978 in San Francisco, California, the collected essays and erotic fiction in *Coming to Power* counterlogics which seek to minoritize sexualities, and argue that BDSM can be read as a feminist practice

¹⁸ Rubin unpacks how “anti-porn propaganda implies sadomasochism is the underlying and essential ‘truth’ towards which all pornography tends. Porn is thought to lead to S/M porn which in turn is alleged to lead to rape” (2014, 164).

¹⁹ It is important to point out that the tendency to view the “sex wars” as a battle between two sides is an oversimplification of heterogenous feminist viewpoints.

because it radically transgresses oppressive power structures. Challenging this view, *Against Sadomasochism* directs a radical, anti-patriarchy critique against sex and against Samois. Rather than reading kinky acts as part of a history of female empowerment a la Nomis, the anthology argues that, despite the “apparent consensuality” (ibid, 7) of sexual intercourse and BDSM, women who willingly engage in practices which eroticize domination (ibid, 75) are brainwashed by false consciousness (Rubin, 2014), playing into a history of violence against women which dates back to witch burnings of the 1600s (Dworkin, 1981).

This second-wave analysis of BDSM makes sense in light of Krafft-Ebing and Freud’s contentions that BDSM practitioners are mentally unwell. These contentions laid the foundation for a social stigma which has remained attached to kink, partially motivating “sex wars” discourse (Newmahr, 2011). The institution of psychiatry continues to pathologize BDSM (Bezreh et al., 2012; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Weille, 2002), and the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), as well as the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10)²⁰ provide diagnostic tools. Yet recent research has refuted BDSM’s pathologization (Ambler et al., 2017; Connolly, 2006; Faccio, Casini, & Cipolletta, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013), occasionally employing affect theory to do so. Drawing on literature I too use in Chapter four to describe BDSM working partially through “affective transfer” (Blackman, 2010), Hammers (2014) describes how the affect generated in kink play helps practitioners heal from sexual trauma.

²⁰ The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (2013), and the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases*, version 10 (2018), are international standards for diagnosing psychiatric disorders, and mental and physical illnesses, respectively. The manuals class certain kinks as Paraphilic Disorders: ‘abnormal’ sexual desires characterized by potentially dangerous or harmful behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Though the forthcoming ICD-11 (2018) will likely remove fetishism, fetishistic transvestism, and sadomasochism, which are currently classed as “paraphilias,” the update will continue to class exhibitionism, frotteurism, pedophilia, and voyeurism as mental disorders (Moser, 2018).

Such studies contribute to increasing public visibility around BDSM practices, which began in the 1980s, and grew in the 1990s with the rise of the internet (Sisson, 2007). Partially because of the “sex wars,” and the advent of organizations such as Samois, aimed at creating and supporting sexual publics; and partially because of the AIDS epidemic and an assault on alternative sexualities by conservative US political leaders (Call, 2013; Rubin, 2014); BDSM practitioners came together to form communities where previously only loose networks of affiliation had existed (Sisson, 2007, 18-19). These communities brought kink into the “mainstream” (Beckmann, 2009, 2; Weiss, 2006, 103) also increasing BDSM marketability as an advertising trope and in popular U.S.-produced films, television, blogs, and news articles (Sisson, 2007; Thompson, 2001).²¹ Margot Weiss (2011) has criticized BDSM’s commodification (see 1.1.c), and Andrea Beckmann has opined that commercialization has not brought with it “a greater understanding or openness for the whole variety of these ‘bodily practices’ as they remain selectively criminalized” (2009, 2). Despite such downsides, the rise of the internet, the increasing size of the kink community, and more mainstream visibility arguably led to the publication, during the 1990s, of the first how-to guides and manuals for active kinksters and for those looking to learn more about BDSM.

1.1.c – Voices of Kink

Introducing *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (2001), a collection of essays which captures the diverse meanings of BDSM to a range of practicing queer kinksters,²² editor Mark Thompson describes the steady increase in publications on alternative sexual cultures since 1990. Though the proliferation of works on kink makes it difficult to narrow the focus here,

²¹ Though I would like to decolonize the social construction of BDSM, US- and UK-based media continues to dominate present-day perceptions. All 10 Hungarian interview partners, when asked to discuss “portrayals of BDSM in popular culture,” mentioned American films such as *Secretary* (2002), and books like British author E. L. James’ *50 Shades of Grey* (2011).

²² Or “leatherfolk,” a term the book coined to refer to the BDSM community (Thompson, 2001, xii).

I will mention a triad of titles which serve as reference points for my own semi-ethnographic work. Between 2009 and 2011, three scholars published in-depth ethnographic research on kink communities: *The Social Construction of Sadomasochism and Desire* by Andrea Beckmann (2009), *Techniques of Pleasure* by Margot Weiss (2011), and *Playing on the Edge* by Staci Newmahr (2011). These ethnographies study BDSM communities and allow practitioners to speak, albeit in a form – much like this thesis – which is ultimately mediated by the voice of the researcher.

Andrea Beckmann's work centers "contemporary debates about the 'body'" and "sexualities" (2009, 1). Her London-based fieldwork shows how the construction of gender and sexuality in kink contexts shapes discourse around BDSM, while providing insights into her UK-based context. Beckmann argues that social "conditions of domination" (Chancer qtd. in Beckmann, 3) are, "in the context of consensual 'SM' practice, replaced by negotiated and consensually agreed upon 'limits'," disqualifying BDSM from enacting violence or stabilizing oppressive power relations, "which was/is an accusation voiced against consensual 'SM' by some feminist scholars" including during the aforementioned "sex wars" (Beckmann, 2009, 3-4). 2012's *Playing Well With Others* (Harrington & Williams), an introduction manual to BDSM, spells out an even more utopian vision of kink culture, characterized by permissive gender play and unconditional gender inclusivity across power dynamics (16, 83, 86, 97).

Such valorizing approaches²³ (Beckmann, 2001b, 2001a, 2009; Harrington & Williams, 2012; Thompson, 2001) are frequently devoted to countering pathologization, a journey upon which Beckmann embarks from a criminal justice perspective.²⁴ Shedding light on the "social

²³ Valorizing approaches also appear in psychological literature (Ernulf and Innala, 1995, in Klement, Sagarin, & Lee, 2017; Weille, 2002; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013) which sometimes makes headlines (Seaman, 2013).

²⁴ Beckmann's text delves into issues around the legality of BDSM which I do not have the time, space, nor legal understanding to tackle here. I do skim the surface of the present state of legal regulation in Europe in Chapter two's discussion of Budapest and London cultural contexts.

research project” of collecting ethnographic, qualitative data on BDSM, Beckmann effectively makes her case against pathologization. I worked to achieve similar results in my first MA thesis. This thesis, however, does not take up the cause, moving away from pathologizing identity mechanisms through a study of affect – a study conspicuously missing from Beckmann’s work on BDSM as an embodied praxis of lived experiences and subjugated knowledges.

Margot Weiss intermittently mentions affect in *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, which critiques BDSM’s promises of transgression by illuminating its links with neoliberal²⁵ inequalities, as evinced through an ethnographic study of the San Francisco kink community. Her argument focuses on demonstrating that, despite common perceptions of BDSM as defiantly emancipatory and empowering (Thompson, 2001), contemporary kink is actually a highly commodified microcosm reflecting and reproducing the same inequalities present in wider society. Even if – as Staci Newmahr convincingly argues – kinksters don’t need to purchase the latest gadgets to be able to play successfully (2011), debates over kinky purchasing power remain heavily whitewashed; Newmahr admits that people of color are underrepresented in the community she studied. Noting this trend, Weiss argues that the material conditions and effects of a racially imbalanced community which practices race-based play²⁶ determine whether such play consolidates, reimagines, or responds to national imaginaries of oppression (2011, 189). Though Weiss presents a US-focused reading, BDSM as it is practiced in the San Francisco kink community ostensibly stands in for BDSM in any culture rife with structural inequalities, especially a culture highly influenced by American consumerism.

²⁵ Weiss notes: “Neoliberalism is typically understood as a global economic doctrine, developed and implemented in the United States (and elsewhere) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. David Harvey (among others) observes that neoliberalism ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’” (Harvey qtd. in Weiss, 2008, 89).

²⁶ I lack the time and space to open this Pandora’s box at present; my summary of Weiss’ views must suffice.

Despite referencing the affective effects of and responses to BDSM (Weiss, 2011, 8), *Techniques of Pleasure* does not utilize the term as a theoretical framework until its appendix (ibid, 103). Within the appendix's interviewee vignettes, readers encounter affect in relation to "national imaginaries" with which Weiss theorizes BDSM scenes involving race-based play and its unsettling effect on onlookers. The management of such affect, readers are told, is a tool for "individual self-cultivation," an important part of the private labor Weiss argues inscribes BDSM within ambivalent neoliberal economies of the self (ibid., 531, 534). Beckmann reads this private labor more positively, discussing how kink can function as a Foucauldian technology of the self, but fails to seize this moment to introduce the vocabulary of affect which Weiss partially takes up. Another way to understand the "self-cultivation of...particular affective responses," Weiss writes, is not as a "fundamentally individual project of self-making" but rather as a "collective, or public, politics" (ibid., 534). I agree that collectively-felt affects like shame index a shared responsibility for racialization, and that audiences involved in kink play can feel, through affect, a collective challenge to acknowledge their prejudices (ibid., 535-6). I also posit that affect's ability to transform an individual project into a collective one points toward shared affinities of belonging (see 4.2) and around understandings of gender (see 4.3), which do not rely on identity categories.

Identity, however, dominates conceptions of BDSM sexualities in Staci Newmahr's 2011 text. Her work is based on the results of a long-term ethnographic study in a community in Northeastern America which she calls "Caeden." Affirming that BDSM practitioners comprise localized communities and are also connected to kinky scenes across America, Newmahr argues Caeden reflects "a larger, national sense of community" (2011, 5). "National" community also connects with a network of local and international communities (see chapters two and four) across which, Newmahr argues, kinksters come together to meet others with whom they share common

outlooks, experiences, or desires (ibid, 42). Aside from a desire to find others with whom to play, the inclination to form communities of social acceptance (see 4.2) may arise from kinksters' feelings of being outside normative sexual cultures (ibid, 51, 8). Newmahr claims these communities do not stigmatize kinksters' otherwise frequently condemned and pathologized interests (ibid, 46), though my discussion of *kinknormativity* in Chapter three indicates the limits of her claim – a claim which contributes to a slightly simplistic, emancipatory view of BDSM. Newmahr writes that kink can be “understood as an all-encompassing lifestyle that represents liberation from the oppressive plight of the everyman and nurtures identities of marginality” (ibid, 9). The awkwardly gendered use of “everyman” aside, this view seems linked to the liberation-from-oppression thesis Foucault named the “repressive hypothesis.” Furthermore, despite acknowledging “recognized and encouraged,” shifts in kinky “identity” between switch, bottom, and top, Newmahr frequently utilizes the term identity rather than searching for vocabulary which would encompass the fluidity of such shifts (ibid, 49).

Eliza Steinbock moves away from identity, finding “affective force” in the “erotic relations” between kinky, transgender sexual players in “On the Affective Force of Nasty Love” (2014, 756). Steinbock’s article is primarily concerned with exploring how contentious, othered bodies – trans, raced, and kinky – make affective possibilities available for growing the self and its relations with others, neatly attaching affect to Beckmann’s discussion of BDSM as a technology of the self à la Foucault while making space for my argument in Chapter four that affective relations of belonging are one mechanism through which BDSM communities form. For Steinbock, “affective intensity” is “formative of alternative sexual subjectivities” (ibid, 750) which build “affiliations and identifications” into common affective responses among racially-, ethnically-, or gender-Othered groups whose experiences are “contingent on the objects, values, and ideas that are circulating and

stuck together with affect” yet outside normative frameworks (ibid, 757).

Weiss, and Foucault, might question the extra-normativity of this assertion, as often seemingly subversive assemblages of kinky “objects, values, and ideas” combine with a mixture of heteronormative sexual tropes. The vibrator, for example, invented during the 19th century to more easily enable doctors to relieve female patients’ “hysteria,” is a heteronormatively-loaded creation. I have from 2012 to 2018 seen at least one vibrator quivering at almost every kinky event I have attended. Often used on female-bodied people in the context of “tortur[ing] by giving orgasms,” the vibrator frequently accompanies an erotic power exchange, utilized in a pre-negotiated play scene (ibid, 755). My discussion of *kinknormativity* in Chapter three should go some way toward negotiating how such objects, values, and ideas can at once reinforce yet question normativity, while my work on affect in Chapter four should indicate how these object/value/idea assemblages often evoke similar intense affect amongst kinksters who share feelings of belonging.

Belonging is of course not unique to BDSM communities. A significant contributor to “an individual’s mental and physical health and well-being” (Hudson qtd. in Pohtinen, 2016, 26), belonging is important for most affinity groups. It has been researched in connection with other sexual cultures and their community spaces (Cavalcante, 2018; Cossman, 2007; Ellis, 2015; Formby, 2017; Probyn, 1996), but is not frequently studied in relation to BDSM outside of Doctoral theses (Carlström, 2016; Zaslow, 2015) and the work of young researchers like Johanna Pohtinen (2017). This dearth leaves undertheorized kinksters’ affective belonging, both in-person and online, built through particular types of corporeal, social practices (see 4.2).

Pohtinen’s “Creating a Feeling of Belonging: Solidarity in Finnish Kink Communities” (2017) has been significant in my theorization of belonging. Discussing finding and entering

BDSM communities in Finland, attending and organizing events, and following community rules, Pohtinen considers how solidarity builds feelings of community belonging in the populations she studies. She notes that interviews in which respondents narrate discovering the existence of kinky communities often show an intensity of feeling (ibid, 24, 25). One interview partner, asked what it means to be part of the kink community, replies, “If this contact with others didn’t exist I’d probably feel like an isolated freak, too lonely,” the last four affectively loaded words indicating a strong sense of belonging and dependence (ibid, 24). Through “feel like,” the partner also conveys a strong impression of knowing how they would react if “contact with others didn’t exist,” without a particularly identifiable reason for knowing. This partner’s attempt to collect their thoughts about belonging within the kink community connects with affect’s pre-cognitive relation to duration and intensity of stimulus, in this case resulting in a cognitively perceptible emotion which helps to create the intensity Pohtinen’s respondents often reflect. Yet while exploring the clearly affective, Massumian “intensity” which permeates kinky bodies and their communal bonds (Massumi, 1987; Pohtinen, 2017), her piece does not mention affect. This thesis begins to fill that lacuna.

The scholarship on BDSM mentioned in this section has furthered constructivist accounts which counter the essentialism common to earlier sexology and psychoanalysis while solidifying the ethnographer’s role in kink research. This body of work foregrounds practitioners’ voices as primary sources, paving the way for my analysis. The genealogy provided in section 1.1.b attests to the need for further research on BDSM, especially research showcasing scholar-practitioner insights which labor to demystify the subject while continuing current scholarly moves away from its pathologized history. Finally, section 1.1.a provides the theoretical framework for my argument in Chapters three and four: that identity’s inherent exclusions do not make it the best mechanism to describe how communities of kinksters form.

1.2 Structure

Moving toward this argument, in Chapter two I weave more material into the theoretical frame constructed above as I work through a review of my feminist methodologies, reflexive and interdisciplinary by design. I first situate myself and my fieldwork sites, describing both Budapest and London through empirical data and literature which helps detail each location's sociocultural context. Next I explain the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out utilizing participant observation and ethnographic semi-structured interviews. I conclude with a brief discussion of "community," transitioning into my discussion in Chapters three and four.

Chapter three develops the idea of *kinknormativity*, a means through which, like other normativities described in the chapter, kinksters construct exclusionary identities to divide the "good" from the "bad." Building on this literature review's framings of identity as problematic, via discourse analytical readings of queer and trans theory, the chapter spells out the difficulty with identity articulated through Jasbir Puar. I then develop the concept of kinknormativity to show why divisive, identity-based normativities work against kinksters. The chapter concludes with a consideration of kinknormativity's political and theoretical implications.

Swathes of affective experiences arise from BDSM, and recently some scholars have looked at kink and affect from theoretical (Hammers, 2014; Martin, 2018; Merla-Watson, 2016; Mondin, 2017; Steinbock, 2014) and empirically-measured psychological (Ambler et al., 2017) perspectives. However, affect's role in forming BDSM communities has been undertheorized. In chapter four, I utilize Eliza Steinbock and Johanna Pohtinen to investigate how kinky affective bonds work to suggest alternative modes of community formation.²⁷ Building on chapter three's

²⁷ Focusing on kinknormativity or the turn to affect is not meant to smooth over differences which exist both within and between kink practitioners and practices.

discussion of kinknormativity, I show that BDSM communities need not rely on identity categories, because affect provides a more nuanced theoretical frame for community building around bonds of belonging and attitudes toward gender. My analysis above rests on both theoretical and empirical data. It is to my empirical data that I now turn.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Qualitative, ethnographic approaches yield useful data in cross-national comparisons (Gómez & Kuronen, 2011), especially when empirical information is investigated across differing cultural and social contexts (ibid, 694). To gather empirical data in Budapest and London, I utilized participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In a move toward Muñozian “stitching,” I view this empirical data through multiple theoretical frames arising from oral history, discourse analysis, academic and ethnographic sources as detailed in Chapter one, and scholarship on Budapest and London, which I set out in this chapter. Such breadth may appear unorthodox, as may the blending of methodological and theoretical sources: oral history and discourse analysis are methodologies; queer theory and gender studies provide theoretical frames; ethnographic sources cover methods and expound theories. Yet this breadth and blend reveals nuance through a synergy of diverse textual and methodological sources. Multiplicity and inclusivity are key in contemporary feminism (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015) and key in my feminist methodology.

2.1 Situating the Research

This methodology aims to give space to what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges,” (1978) “in order to account for the diverse realities of the usually ‘unheard’, distorted and/or de-authorized voices” of BDSM practitioners (Beckmann, 7). The presentation of “diverse realities” is always “distorted” to some extent, filtered and interpreted through a scholar’s situatedness (Coffey, 1999; Crang & Cook, 2007; Frisch, 1990) within constantly changing interpretations, meanings, and contexts (Bauer, 2014). Mine is only one of many possible interpretations of my data and embodied experiences (Frisch, 1990). Yet in attempting to “tap into the realities of the ‘life-world’,” I work to avoid “traditional scientific ‘disembodied’ approaches that ultimately refer

to generalizing, often moralizing concepts of ‘truth’ that create an ‘Other’” (Shilling qtd. in Beckmann, 2009, 6). I avow my own situatedness in section 2.1.a, and discuss my embodiedness as part of my praxis. During field research and analysis, my own knowledge production occurred within these situated “life-worlds,” which I detail in sections 2.1.b on Budapest and 2.1.c on London. I develop the comparison of these sites later in my analysis, in Chapter four.

In section 2.2, I detail how I have attempted to employ interdisciplinary feminist research methodologies while interacting with and interviewing BDSM participants for my work. I describe my methods and sites for participant observation in 2.2.a, and detail my semi-structured interview methodologies in 2.2.b. These empirical methods position my work within a growing trend toward consulting kinksters on research which concerns them (Ambler et al., 2017; Moser & Levitt, 1987), the results of which seem to verify what BDSM practitioners have long declared (Thompson, 2001; Wiseman, 1996) – corporeal kinky activities affectively impact communities of practitioners. Though my thesis focuses on Budapest and London, it also utilizes the idea of “community” more generally, to encompass the international set of interactions, both in person and online, which bring kinksters into relation with one another. In section 2.3, I discuss some pros and cons of utilizing the term “community” in my ongoing research.

2.1.a – Self-situating

I have been researching and participating in BDSM communities internationally since 2012, when I began research for my first Master’s thesis, entitled *Toward a Non-Binary Understanding of BDSM and Rope Bondage* (2013),²⁸ for the program “Performance and Culture:

²⁸ This dissertation looks at performed kinbaku to create a sociocultural contextualization of the practice and thereby undermine binary, gendered attitudes which pervade literature and scholarship on BDSM, classifying it as either positive, connective and empowering (etc.) or negative, pathological, and disempowering (etc.) while aligning it with gendered structures of oppression. I ultimately argue that power in kink is not gendered and that kink need not be pathologized nor deemed disempowering.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives” at Goldsmiths University of London. Integrating theory and survey analysis with semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I gained practice with these ethnographic research methods (Crang & Cook, 2007). I continue to undertake such methods voluntarily, because I enjoy BDSM as both a professional area of study and a personal interest. As a scholar-practitioner, my analysis is necessarily subjective. Though some argue subjectivity is unscientific and insist that objectivity is not only possible but desirable (Behar, 2012; Westmarland, 2001), every researcher’s work is influenced by their positioning and analytical frame (Coffey, 1999), whether kinky or not. If we define subjectivity as arising from “personality formed through lived experience and the emotional responses to those experiences” (Roper, 2005, 65), we must concede that research such as this, based in part on the researcher’s history of lived experiences and emotional responses, mobilizes subjectivity to its benefit (Crang & Cook, 2007).

Acknowledging my own positionality as a kinky scholar, I break down categorical distinctions between practitioner, academic, and activist, and write into a body of work which aims to bring taboo or understudied sexual subjects into the academy. My positionality, however, does not necessarily set my work apart; much queer theory and gender scholarship states the same aims (Halperin, 2003; Hemmings, 2002; Warner, 1993), and because studies show BDSM behaviors may be common in 10 to 20% the global population (Ambler et al., 2017; Janus & Janus, 1994; Moser & Levitt, 1987; “Sexual Wellbeing Survey,” 2005; Truscott, 2001), in this area the Foucauldian “subjugated knowledge” Sawicki and Beckmann reference is perhaps more prevalent than it appears (Sawicki, qtd. in Beckmann, 2009, 7). What does set my work apart is my willingness to own my ongoing involvement in the sexual culture I study, while some ethnographers refuse to disclose the extent of their involvement in kink beyond research (Newmahr, 2011). My subjugated knowledge is also necessarily situated knowledge (Foucault, 2003), and so

I turn to the cultural context of my fieldwork locations. Rather than attempting to explain why mechanisms of kinky affective belonging and gendered presentations differ between the two cities, this historicizing provides a brief historical grounding of the presence of and reactions to non-normative sexualities in London and Budapest, enabling the reader to better understand the findings I detail in Chapter four. I will begin by situating Hungary's capital.

2.1.b – Budapest

To contextualize the cultural milieu in the governmental seat, there are several things I should mention with regard to Budapest's current sociopolitical climate. First, the country has taken an illiberal, authoritarian turn since 2010 under Victor Orbán's governmental regime (Krasztev & Til, 2015). Heteronationalism has entered the cultural discourse (Bozóki, 2016), while anti-gay attitudes continue to proliferate (Toth, 2017). Such attitudes are certainly not new; in Hungary and Eastern Europe heteronormativity and homophobia have traditionally remained culturally dominant (Renkin, 2009). Second, all 10 Hungarian partners noted the complexity of deciding who or what comprises a national Hungarian identity, which sees itself as apart from yet enmeshed within European and EU narratives:

The arguments about Hungarian identity show important parallels to the construction of many other modern European identities - Romanian, Greek, Russian - which, like the Hungarian, were created in the midst of relative 'backwardness' in the periphery of the European political and economic system in the 18th and 19th centuries (Gal, 1991).

To characterize contemporary Hungarian identity as "backward," (Gal, 1991; Kopeček & Wciślik, Eds., 2015) because of the country's geographically marginal position when national identity was coming into being would be reductive. To insist that a monolithic national identity is important to every Hungarian, as opposed to granting a variety of national identities with which individuals align themselves to greater or lesser extents, would be to essentialize. Yet several interview

partners spoke of the country's culture in sweeping terms, as "well behind" (WA),²⁹ "really behind as far as I can see" (YH), and "traditional" (KQ); five mentioned some form of ethnonationalism (Wilkin, 2018), and all 10 linked social and religious conservatism with the difficulties sexual minorities face as traditionally excluded from a national sense of belonging (Renkin, 2009).

Finally, it should be noted that Hungary-based interview partners mentioned a lack of written information on gender, and extended this lack to BDSM.³⁰ Partner KQ noted that aberrant sexualities and genders are "something that people really like to be outraged about." Even "as topics, gender and sexuality... are simply too liberal for a 'traditional' society," so conversation around these subjects is infrequent. In fact, "just being aware of gender, gender theory, is presented as a menace," concluded KQ. Another partner, YH, believes "in Hungary...talking with this terminology, like, like gender, how do you identify your gender, it's not too popular," because "most of the Hungarians have no idea about what gender is in general, what the whole thing is." Partners ZS, IY, and YH attributed the paucity of Hungarian-language literature on gender, and on the history and practice of BDSM, to cultural traditionalism. Thus, because to my knowledge the only scholarly works to document Hungary's BDSM community reside in the CEU thesis collection, and because queers and kinksters have faced similar struggles around their "deviant" genders and sexualities, I continue this contextualization with a short look into the history of the Hungarian LGBT+ community since the end of the nineteenth century.

Judit Takács (2014) investigates queer use of space in Budapest, illuminating a "homosexual infrastructure" extant since at least the late nineteenth century (193). Yet

²⁹ Because the interviewer also bears the onus of protecting interview partners' identities, I have utilized a system of double anonymization, moving from birth name to kinky pseudonym (such as ItsPlay), translating pseudonym to initials, and anonymizing initials according to an alphabetic code.

³⁰ In presenting a discussion of gender and sexuality together, I do not mean to conflate gender with erotic desire (Rubin, 2014). I do mean to showcase the way in which interview partners spoke of both together.

anthropological texts printed between 1920 and 1945 showcase Hungarian efforts to pathologize and control gay culture, and “sexual perversions” were catalogued in what few Hungarian sexuality studies were published during state socialism. Homosexual surveillance continued through this period until long after male homosexuality was decriminalized in 1961, and silence reigned around alternative sexual expression (*ibid*). After state socialism, Takács suggests sexual freedom may have become a flashpoint because Hungary faced calls to integrate with “Western European visions of ‘sexual democracy’” (Fassin *qtd. in* Renkin, 2009, 24). Perhaps congruent with these visions, between 1988 and 1995 three LGBT+ societies formed,³¹ and began building transnational (Szulc, 2017) networks,³² though in Hungary their activities were largely confined to Budapest (Renkin, 2009, 28; Takács, 2014, 200). In the countryside, interview partner GA attests, typical Catholic families relied on government propaganda which remained silent on alternative sexualities, doing nothing to further an understanding of sexual difference. If family members were gay, they were disowned or sent away (GA). In Budapest, gay bars opened from the late 1980s into the 2000s, but often closed or moved frequently; one of Takács’ interview partners felt that even in these public spaces, homosexuals were still “hiding” (2014, 200-201).

The advent of the internet in the early 1990s facilitated a progressively digitized LGBT+ community for whom safe spaces existed largely online (Gruszczynska *qtd. in* Takács, 2014, 202), whereas publicly showing non-heteronormative difference remained dangerous, as violent attacks

³¹ The Lambda Homerosz, Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért (Rainbow Coalition for Gay Rights), and Háttér Support Society for LGBT+ people (Takács, 2014).

³² Lukasz Szulc details the creation of transnational LGBT+ networks in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and points to other authors’ problematic depictions of such networks forming only since the end of state socialism (2017, 184). While I agree that utilizing 1989 as a historical genesis is problematic, the BDSM community I studied in Budapest only formed in 2014 (YH) so I have little empirical access to information predating this point, and because a Hungarian discourse on BDSM is all but silent, I have little evidence to consult on local, national, or transnational kinky networks before the present day.

on Budapest Pride celebrations³³ in 2007 and 2008 illustrate. Though the option to register same-sex partnerships existed since 2009, ensuing police censure of Pride on the grounds of disrespecting public taste and morality (Takács, 2014, 202) illustrates social stigmas against the LGBT+ community. Frequent homophobic (AM; Renkin, 2009) and anti-gender (Kövér, 2015) governmental rhetoric traces a pattern Gayle Rubin sees elsewhere, of conflicts over ostensible “sexual values and erotic conduct” becoming receptacles for contemporary social anxieties (2014). In this case, a “fear of disappearing, Hungarian nationalism, [and] the loss of a way of life” drive these anxieties (AM).

This tension likely shaped the results of the Ipsos Gay Pride March report 2009, which indicates that only 20% of Hungarians “approved of ‘the right of gay people to publicly show their difference’” (Takács, 203). Public shows of difference seem to motivate Hungarian intolerance, Takács notes, and sexuality is “one of the most salient forms of cultural-political difference in post socialist Hungary,” (Renkin, 2009, 20-21). As two interviews highlighted:

In Hungary it is not publicly visible anywhere for same sex people having this on display – so we aren’t used to seeing this and simply cannot relate (WA).

Society doesn’t know much about these kind of things [...] they just can’t relate (GA).

If homosexuality is so unrelatable, having fought for mainstream acceptance throughout Europe for over 30 years, and protected constitutionally in the European Union since 2000 (Charter of Fundamental Rights), Hungarian public acceptance of difference around BDSM sexualities is even more remote, and the Budapest BDSM community lives in that knowledge.

2.1.c – London

While gender mainstreaming is conspicuous on UK governmental priority lists (Sen, 2016),

³³ Comparable attacks against Pride marches occurred in Poland, which was experiencing a surge of homophobia on a similar timeline to Hungary (Graff, 2010). Such surges of attacks, which occurred widely across Eastern Europe, can be read as backlashes against challenges raised in national and EU spheres by LGBT+ activism (Renkin, 2009).

pushing public acceptance of gender equality much higher than it is likely to be in Hungary (Štulhofer & Sandfort, 2008, 5), public acceptance of BDSM in London can be summed up by a “sort of live and let live, not my business” take on “private” matters (VJ), reinscribing sexuality within a public/private binary as it is in Budapest. Yet unlike Budapest, the London community has a long and storied history around one particular kink. Attempting to trace the origins of contemporary BDSM in premodern sensual or sexual activities has little relevance to the practices that constitute BDSM today (see 1.1.b). The sociocultural context in which such actions take place determines their significance and interpretation (Foucault, 1997); social stigmas around pleasure and pain must be historicized to be fully understood (Yamamoto-Wilson, 2013). Yet the history of flogging, also known as “The English Vice” (Gibson, 1978),³⁴ contributed significantly to England’s “historical subculture of S/M” emerging “precisely at the end of the eighteenth century” (Foucault qtd. in McClintock, 1995, 142-43). Though originally a Catholic practice of mortifying the flesh, written evidence indicates flogging was used as a sexual practice in England as early as 1599, while sexual interest in the practice developed throughout the 1600s (Yamamoto-Wilson, 2013). Though the discourse around flagellation seems to have arisen from an English mockery of papism, the existence by 1673 of the term “flogging cully” to label a male sexual flagellant (Mangan, 2012, 7), along with “flogging schools” which provided sexual floggings (ibid, 80-103) seems significant. By the 1830s there were 20 flogging-houses in London (Gibson, 1978, x), “flagellomania...was widespread in Britain” (Van Yelyr, qtd. in Mangan, 2012, 21), and pornography on The English Vice had proliferated.

³⁴ I should note that, while I had previously come across this term, none of the five London-based interview partners with whom I mentioned it had heard of “The English Vice.” However, one partner with whom I did not mention the term offered me the following information: “there have been flogging houses in London going right back to the 17th century” (LO).

Meanwhile, Victorian London was a nucleus of trade and culture, the United Kingdom's largest port, seat of government, and the royal court (Jones, 2013). London's vastness made it a relatively diverse environment while ensuring that social regulation was difficult, a worrying turn for Victorian moralists (ibid). Dialogues around national decay, associating London with various perversions and homosexuality, illustrate the existence of regulating social authorities and the so-called vices they attempted to control (ibid), from the Victorian era to the present. A "huge confluence of people" in which one can remain "largely anonymous," an "international" and "global city" with people from "all over the world" (VJ), London has "something for everyone" (DM). "London is a city where there's a lot of everything," HI concurred. Describing deciding to seek out kink in London, partner TT thought, "I'm in one of the biggest city [sic], I'm sure that there is something like that."

Ostensibly in contrast to Budapest, London has been characterized by its super-diversity (Vertovec, 2005; Wessendorf, 2017); several London partners alluded to a "cultural melting pot" (DM, TT, HI). However, Britain's recent move to pull out of the EU perhaps works to position the country's political atmosphere closer to a certain strain of Hungarian ideology (Outhwaite, 2017). Furthermore, while the country's stance on LGBT+ rights may appear more progressive than Hungary, consensual BDSM-related "bodily harm," remains criminalized throughout the EU because of events which unfolded in Manchester. The infamous *R v Brown* trial during the late 1980s, also known as the "Spanner Case," utilized secretly-obtained footage of gay men practicing consensual BDSM to charge 16 with assault under the Offenses against the Person Act of 1861 (Beckmann, 2009). These charges were later upheld in the European Court of Human Rights, creating a criminalization precedent in cases of consensual BDSM (see 3.3). This precedent still stands; resonating with earlier descriptions of Hungarian secrecy around non-normative sexual

cultures, Beckmann writes of the fear and seclusion these verdicts caused as she undertook ethnographic research in London. However in my own London fieldwork, I did not encounter the same feelings Beckmann describes. Rather, some partners presented London as more welcoming and open toward their sexual preferences than their home countries (RU, DM, and TT), or as a fun place to play (EG), even if some felt “the U.K. is still way behind the times” (LO), or the culture is at times judgmental (IH, VJ, and HI) toward sex and gender difference. Though difference may be a point of contention in London as in Budapest, my participant observation and semi-structured interviews uncovered subjective knowledges – including my own – which suggest a kink culture currently less concerned with censure in England’s capital.

2.2 An Interdisciplinary Feminist Approach

As part of a feminist methodology, qualitative methods from oral history (Sangser, 2015) and ethnography (Crang & Cook, 2007) allow for a focus on subjective knowledge (Duelli Klein, 1983), both personal and shared. Utilizing a reflexive, interdisciplinary approach, I gathered this knowledge through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, and framed it through an affective discourse-analytic technique to transcribe and analyze interview text and fieldnotes (Martin, 2018; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Yamamoto-Wilson, 2013). This work was filtered through my interpretative lens as both researcher of and participant in BDSM (Coffey, 1999). I attempted to make my positionality clear to partners as part of my praxis, presenting a written introduction to those with whom I was not already familiar (see Appendix 3). This introduction was designed to be self-reflexive, emphasizing my positioning as scholar-practitioner.

It has been and continues to be my responsibility to use the insight which emerges from this combination of theory and practice (Spurling, 1978) to from my theoretical grounding and

continually negotiate my practitioner's embodiment. BDSM's consensual "bodily practices" (Beckmann, 2009) which I have undertaken during participant observation over the course of this research have been only some of the embodied relations in which I have engaged. Research is always materially and socially situated (Crang & Cook, 2007), so my interview techniques, research methods, the way I sat on the carpeted floor of the rope studio, leaned against the bar at a Budapest party, and my self-awareness as I write this are all part of my positionality. A body in practice (Miller, 1985), I leave myself open to the same affective-social dimensions which influence interview partners, those with whom I interact during fieldwork, and those I observe (Turner in Beckmann, 2009, 15). Understanding my body's becoming, its opening, in this way locates my feminist interdisciplinary praxis within the affective turn (Puar, 2017a).³⁵

2.2.a Participant observation

Keeping myself open to be affectively impacted (Steinbock, 2014), I was attentive to both the "vibe" of each event (Harrington & Williams, 2012) and the overall embodied "ethos" (Brame et al., 1996) of the kinky communities in which I involved myself. My understanding of that ethos arises both from my synthesis of the personal and professional (Coffey, 1999) as scholar-practitioner and my negotiation of the bodily practices which I observed, undertook, and recorded in fieldnotes (Coffey, 1999). These are practices with which I am familiar – both doing kink, and participating in the community more generally. Often, I was simply consuming a drink, speaking to people, or observing. But the friendships I made and the impressions I noted shaped my research, just as my physical presence shaped each event I attended.

³⁵ In Chapter four I expand on this point, utilizing Puar's definition of affect as "the body's hopeful opening" (2017) to stitch together the threads of corporeal praxis I mention here with my theorization of affect as community bonding tool.

Focusing on the contemporary Budapest and London BDSM scenes, I utilized data gathered in November, 2017 at the *HunCon* (the Con), a Budapest-based BDSM education convention organized by the *Risley&Elias BDSM-fetish community*, and between October 2017 and April 2018 at *Anatomie Studio* (Anatomie), a London-based educational space, performance studio, and event venue specializing in rope bondage. Both were founded relatively recently,³⁶ so I could look at mechanisms of community formation rather than entering communities which had been extant for years. I selected the HunCon 2017 as an access point for participant observation because of its large number of participants³⁷ and international accessibility, being conducted primarily in English with publicity available in English. The annual Con also takes place across an extended duration, from its opening mixer on a Thursday evening to the convention itself, which three to four times daily from Friday to Sunday offers three simultaneous classes on the safety, techniques, and philosophy of a variety of kinks such as fire play, rope bondage, and D/s.³⁸ Nightly on Friday and Saturday the Con provides a play party for participants and interested community members. This extended format facilitated in-depth access for extensive study,³⁹ and allowed organizers to actively use the public event to construct a sense of community belonging, as I discuss in Chapter four. The Con takes place at rented facilities which change annually, so set-up and organization can be difficult; I volunteered to assist in these areas, granted free entry to the entire event in exchange for facilitation support.

The events which take place at Anatomie are not parties, do not change location, and are themed around rope (though the studio recently advertised its first non-rope event, an introductory

³⁶ Anatomie opened on 15 June, 2015 (HI, 2018); the first annual HunCon was in November 2016 (YH, 2018).

³⁷ 104 people attended the first HunCon in 2016, 169 attended in 2017, when I attended, and organizers expect over 200 participants this year (YH, 2018).

³⁸ Shorthand for dominance and submission, sometimes capitalized thus to reflect its power dynamic.

³⁹ Another large kinky party in Budapest, called Luxuria, happens once a year and attracts what interview partner YH estimates to be 250 attendees, but its single-evening format limits immersion.

class called *Kink 101*) (Anatomie Studio, 2018). Though the chosen field research sites are not analogous, because first, “there is no real rope community in Hungary” according to Hungarian interview partner YH and as substantiated by my knowledge and experience, and because second, Anatomie hosts no kink conventions, I selected Anatomie as my London access point for several reasons. First, both Anatomie and the Con have primarily educational missions (see 4.2.b). Second, I was already in contact with the owner, who was willing to grant access to the space and its community. Third, the owner is familiar with academic research, having had one scholar-in-residence completing MA research there in 2017. Finally, I knew several kinksters who frequently attend Anatomie’s rope classes and performance nights, so snowball sampling techniques would allow further access to that population. I paid for entry to events attended between October and February, and was granted free access to events attended in April, in support of my research.

To gain broader knowledge of the Budapest and London BDSM scenes, I frequently attended kinky events in both locales (see Appendix 2 for a list of events attended). In Budapest, available events consist of monthly parties, occasional munches,⁴⁰ and sporadic classes on various topics. Only some parties are advertised on the English-language-based FetLife,⁴¹ and so I narrowed my focus to those.⁴² Said parties migrate rather than occurring in one set location. The organizers attribute this to venue availability rather than the sexual minority status of attendees. Though in London event offerings are much wider, I limited myself to visits to Anatomie and one other kinky event selected by virtue of being London’s biggest fetish-themed market and party. Upon returning from these events, I recorded field notes frequently focusing on the body or bodies

⁴⁰ Non-kinky social gatherings of kinky folks in public settings.

⁴¹ The world’s largest kinky social network, an English-language platform with 6,795,461 users as of 3 June 2018, available anywhere the internet is not censored and accessible via VPN in countries such as China and Malaysia (“FetLife,” n.d.).

⁴² Other parties are advertised in Hungarian on the online kink platform SM Pixie or on Facebook in secret groups, of which I have been made a member but in which Hungarian frequently predominates.

(Coffey, 1999): number of attendees, sex and gender distribution, activities taking place over the course of the event, and other noteworthy information such as my own physical and affective responses. In focusing on these kinds of responses, I attempted to foreground affect and reflexively avoid interpreting the data I recorded from the perspective of researcher-as-authority.

2.2.b Ethnographic Fieldwork: Semi-structured interviews

A feminist methodology works to avoid historical paradigms in which historian or social scientist becomes authority figure (Yow, 2005) over and above “informant-as-subject” (Blee, 1993, 333). Attempting to negotiate structural power relations, I used my knowledge of and exposure to kink to locate myself in a position similar to my interview partners (Bauer, 2014), establishing rapport (Yow, 2005) and authority that partners could share (Frisch, 1990; High, 2009) through their own knowledge and exposure. Yet to gain access to partners’ privileged information, I needed to exhibit some measure of academic authority to support my position as researcher conducting interviews. Partners could not share this authority, so I strove to self-reflexively recognize that both researcher and narrator hold unique authority as givers, receivers, and sharers of information.

To acknowledge partners’ authority, I began every 1.5 to 2 hour interview by stating my aim toward a “nonhierarchical” technique, and encouraged partners to treat the interview as a shared experience (High, 2009). I also stated that partners were at liberty to answer or decline to answer questions as they saw fit, could ask me about my personal life (Subedi, 2006), and ask for my answers to interview questions at any time. As I mentioned to partners, the question and discussion format left room for expansion, and due to the flow of conversation, the order and number of questions would vary depending on the course of our conversation. However, because exchanges involved a semi-structured schedule (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012) based upon a set of 23 pre-formulated questions, they resembled structured interviews to some extent. Several

questions were integral to the data I gathered, so I asked them in almost every interview.

I chose prominent figures in leadership positions in the Budapest and London communities as interview partners, including one of the Con co-organizers who has been throwing kinky parties in Budapest since 2014; a leader of the Budapest ethical non-monogamy scene; the leader of a queer kinky event in London; and a former member of the leadership team for one of London's peer-kink education groups. Another partner is the owner and manager of Anatomie. I then aggregated a total of ten partners in each locale,⁴³ utilizing nonprobability snowball sampling (Cassell, 1988) so that those I had already interviewed could recommend additional participants. Though qualitative studies frequently face criticism for small sample sizes, and purposive nonprobability snowball sampling may be specifically critiqued for building unrepresentative samples (Trochim, 2000), I believe my sample has been adequate to address my research questions; representative of my target populations; and illustrative of the value in "trading breadth for depth" (Hesse-Biber, 2016). In BDSM communities concerned with vetting and vouching procedures conceived to ensure safety from predators, media, or police presence (Harrington & Williams, 2012), snowball sampling's endorsing potential granted me useful access to difficult-to-reach populations (Trochim, 2000) and their community networks (Crang & Cook, 2007). Though I know of no academic work addressing snowball sampling's vouching mechanism in relation to BDSM communities, my experience indicates that this method was extremely valuable in proving the legitimacy of my kinky affiliations (Subedi, 2006), enabling individuals to divulge information to me in my hybrid position as researcher and community member.

Due to space and time constraints, as well as interview partners' desires, some interviews

⁴³ The maximum number I felt I could successfully interview during a one-year Master's degree. Though this keeps my data set relatively limited, it also keeps my data manageable. As each interview typically lasted for two hours, reviewing 40 hours of audio multiple times placed limitations on my ability to process my findings.

were conducted using Skype and/or email. Though eclectic data collection changes the nature of gathered data (Crang & Cook, 2007), I have kept lines of communication open with partners and have engaged in dialogue outside of the interviews themselves, so all participants have had the chance to clarify or elaborate on their views. All such communication occurred in English, because I do not speak Hungarian and did not wish to involve the mediation of a translator. This may have influenced my findings, however because I cannot change the nationality of my birth, I will always be inscribed with some measure of foreignness which might cause certain Hungarian kinksters to see me as a linguistic outsider (Subedi, 2006). Yet I see my English language restriction as only slightly removed from my own national origins, and therefore part of my subject-positioning (ibid).

Negotiating the intricacies of this positioning is part of my commitment to self-reflexively connect theory and practice. During participant observation (see 2.2.a), I focused on an affective openness to the kinky ethos of each community. Acknowledging the paradox inherent in utilizing feminist, collaborative approaches while possessing potential advantages during ethnographic interviews (see 2.2.b), I utilized three tactics. First, I presented a clear positionality as both academic and kinky. Second, I emphasized the “kinky” in order to establish shareable authority. Third, I acknowledged partners’ unique authority. In sum, embodying a reflexive feminist position as scholar-practitioner *is* my praxis during fieldwork with both London and Budapest communities.

2.3 Discussion

Though I use the word “community” to refer to the groupings of kinky people with whom I conducted fieldwork in Budapest and London, I also use the word to name a wider group of kinksters who come together online to discuss and learn about kink on websites such as Fetlife.com and to denote BDSM practitioners globally, loosely affiliated by kinkiness. These multiple layers

help me construct the idea of community across differences,⁴⁴ which is necessary in order to validate a comparison of kinksters in cities as different as Budapest and London. A community across differences allows me to theorize affective affinities between kinksters in a manner not limited by geographic closeness or national identity (see 4.2.b). The affective community support I received while researching this project attests to kinky bonds which span regional divides. For example, one practitioner to whom I reached out on FetLife offered to burn and mail me a copy of a DVD. Another, to whom I addressed a fact-checking inquiry, answered my message like an old friend and offered to help me with historical research on any future projects I might undertake. I had never met either of these people; in fact they live on different continents. These kinds of interactions enrich my work as scholar-practitioner, and support the idea that kink communities can be simultaneously local and global (or “glocal,” as I relate in Chapter four).

An expansively global figuration might seem fitting since it remains difficult to determine who comprises kinky community. The 10 to 20% surveyed worldwide, for example, are not necessarily regularly practicing kinksters – whatever that might mean given kink’s lack of definition. For partner ZE, frequent practitioners are the exception:

A lot of people who have, a little bit of kit under their bed but don’t necessarily explore the community per se, you know it’s hard to know, but- but they are the iceberg, and the people who actively explore the community are the tip of that.

Yet this iceberg’s lack of numeric or definitional certainty, despite a useful conceptual openness, may point toward limitations in applying the term community. Discussing the difficulty of finding an acceptable description for queer people, Michael Warner (1993) points out that “community” can sound problematically homogenizing to a group self-understood as dispersed and comprised of those who remember a time before collective identification (xxv). Certainly kinksters are

⁴⁴ Across, for example, differences that may exist between the London and Budapest BDSM scenes, allowing them to remain together within a broader BDSM community.

dispersed, and all 20 interview partners remember their days before finding others who are into BDSM (Pohtinen, 2017). These facts did not stop them from using the language of community to describe their affective affinities though. Yet Warner also reminds readers that the notion of a “gay and lesbian community” was a tactic of US-American “liberal-national” identity politics based on a “buried model of racial and ethnic politics,” a model which presupposes a minority constituency’s demands for tolerance and inclusion (ibid, xxv-xxvi). Here, Warner is absolutely correct. “Community” can assist minority populations in making rights-based claims within a hierarchy of identity categories. I detail this in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Identity Politics and Kinknormativity

The modern sexual system contains...sexual populations, stratified by the operation of an ideological and social hierarchy. Differences in social value create friction among these groups, who engage in political contest to alter or maintain their place in the ranking. Contemporary sexual politics should be reconceptualized in terms of the emergence and on-going development of this system, its social relations, the ideologies which interpret it, and its characteristic modes of conflict (Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex," [1984] 2014, 155).

My goal in this chapter is to show why rights claims and identity categories ultimately fail the groups which make and comprise them. First I explore the pitfalls of identity politics and pathologization, and then use pieces of Robert McRuer's⁴⁵ "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence" (2006) to frame ideas of normativity and ab/normality, laying the groundwork for my exploration of *kinknormativity*. I subsequently explore the impossibility of "vanilla" sexuality⁴⁶ before moving to Jasbir Puar, who expands on the formulation "transnormative"⁴⁷ in the first chapter of *The Right to Maim* (2017) to investigate how pathologization plays into discourses of normativity. I then discuss the specific taboos which constitute kinknormativity. To conclude, I look at the political and theoretical implications of my analysis, affirming identity's exclusionary nature and endorsing kinknormativity's conceptual importance by specifying how it differs from other normativities.

3.1 The Problem

The literature review section of this thesis mentions the origin of BDSM's pathologization

⁴⁵ McRuer traces his lineage to Adrienne Rich and Gayle Rubin, upon whose theories, taken together, Michael Warner synthesized the term "heteronormative" in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993).

⁴⁶ In BDSM communities, the term "vanilla" is often used to demarcate those who do not engage in kinky activities, whether sexual, sensual, or of any other kind.

⁴⁷ See Snorton, C. R., & Haritaworn, J. (2013).

as well as cataloguing later texts which refer to both the reality and the specter of pathologization in contemporary kink. This is a discourse which may be changing, yet has caused some BDSM practitioners to call for equal rights and inclusion based on their identities as kinksters.⁴⁸ Problematically, as Jasbir Puar points out in “Introduction: The Cost of Getting Better,” identity-based claims “produce human beings in order to give them rights,” cultivating certain bodies as “vested with futurity” while others are not (2017b, 15, 20). Privilege determines which bodies can make these futurity-vesting identity claims, which in Puar’s text revolve around disability and here involve being a BDSM practitioner. As with other identities, the protected privilege of claiming one is “kinky” grants access to community membership. And, as with other identities, this privilege functions based on exclusion – setting up divisive criteria to determine who is in or out of a community (Cameron & Kulick, 2008).⁴⁹ This is the core problem with identity: identificatory namings are fundamentally exclusionary. Consequently, identity becomes a mechanism for normativization: once a body has an identity, stipulations arise around what it can and cannot do, and the rights it can and cannot have (Lim, 2007).⁵⁰

Within biopolitical (Foucault, 2003) societies of control (Deleuze, 1992), the desire to actively manage populations finds its machinery in identity and rights claims based on privilege and exclusion. To create the privileging, exclusionary systems which can regulate a populace, some notion of normativity is necessary. Citizens must emulate those behaviors which will earn

⁴⁸ Occasionally with members of other sexual cultures. Take for example the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, whose mission statement reads: “The NCSF is committed to creating a political, legal and social environment in the US that advances equal rights for consenting adults who engage in alternative sexual and relationship expressions” in the “BDSM-Leather-Fetish, Swing, and Polyamory Communities” (“National Coalition for Sexual Freedom,” n.d.)

⁴⁹ This also points to the problem with identity in sociolinguistic studies, reducing the multiple potential meanings of social and linguistic practices to simple indicators of privileged category membership (See Penelope Eckert’s discussion of Don Kulick’s essay “Gay and Lesbian Language” (2000) in *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*.)

⁵⁰ Thanks is due to Jason Lim’s introduction to his chapter “Queer Critique and the Politics of Affect” in *Geographies of Sexualities* (2007), which assisted as I formulated my argument in this thesis.

them privileges while eschewing or appearing to eschew those which will cause exclusion. This performance of normativity may occur side-by-side with fights to expand said privileges to greater numbers while lessening the amount of people excluded from the benefits of the system. Campaigns to legalize gay marriage provide a case in point. However, such fights still necessitate persisting notions of normativity in order to dictate who should receive social benefits and who should not. As normativity persists, so does its inverse: pathologization.

Because decades of scholarship have already grappled with conversations about “the pathologization versus normativization of sexual identity,” I agree with Puar’s insistence that we should not just argue to depathologize disability, or in this case BDSM; we must look at the very construction of what it means to be an embodied creature (ibid, 16), work I have begun to undertake while crafting my scholar-practitioner praxis as detailed in Chapter two. Following Puar, I acknowledge the need to interrogate the frameworks which create stigma around BDSM embodiments in the first place, rather than directly arguing against pathologization as numerous kink scholars have.⁵¹ I establish the groundwork upon which to interrogate such frameworks by presenting the notion of *kinknormativity* in the next section of this chapter.

Advancing a queer agenda, the goal must be to move beyond “soliciting tolerance, acceptance, and empowerment” built on rights- and identity-based claims, instead directing attention to the systemic conditions that construct privilege and normativity (ibid, 16).⁵² The key is not to fight for equality within a broken system: ““We don’t want to simply join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them”” (Mingus qtd. in Puar, 2017, 16). Instead of bonding over stigmatized identities and demanding reparations,

⁵¹ For instance, sex educator and medical practitioner Charles Moser has contributed much to scholarship on BDSM since 1979, yet continues to focus primarily on issues around de/pathologization. (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005, is an excellent example.) As mentioned in the literature review, Beckmann (2009) is another example.

⁵² The introduction to *Geographies of Sexualities* (2007) similarly articulates this queer activist project.

debating who should or should not be pathologized, and why, BDSM practitioners must dismantle the structures upholding pathological/normative binaries (Puar, 2017, 16).⁵³ Two such binary-upholding structures are compulsory heterosexuality and its partner, heteronormativity.

3.2 Kinknormativity

McRuer writes that “compulsory heterosexuality’s casting of some identities as alternatives ironically buttresses the ideological notion that dominant identities are not really alternatives but rather the natural order of things” (2006, 301). This supposed “natural order” works ideologically by validating “dominant identities” while invisibilizing the mechanisms which work to keep those identities dominant, simultaneously subordinating alternative identities. Against this backdrop, I develop the concept of *kinknormativity*:⁵⁴ an identity-producing mechanism which polices BDSM by including some bodies and practices within normative acceptability while excluding others.

3.2.a Conceptual framework

Heteronormativity names heterosexuality the default state, and heteronormative societies stigmatize those who are not heterosexual. From this, homonormativity names homosexuality’s ability to fit within heterosexual society by upholding heteronormative structures such as marriage, depoliticizing itself, and remaining private and contained (Duggan, 2002). Keeping “deviant”

⁵³ Michael Warner articulates the same point in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*: “Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts” which would grant tolerance or equality but maintain sexual hierarchies (1993, xii).

⁵⁴ Following scholarship on hetero-, homo-, and transnormativity, the term “kinknormativity” was first coined in Margot Weiss’ “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics” (2008), later satirized on kink parody site *The Daily Flogger* (“BDSM Party Themes Deemed Offensive,” 2015), and then loosely sketched in Meg-John Barker’s *Queer: A Graphic History* (Barker & Scheele, 2016). To my knowledge, the concept has not yet been developed as I do here.

sexuality out of the public eye is important for homonormativity, which distinguishes “between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gays,⁵⁵ the former being the nice same-sex couple next door, the latter demonized as perverts in leather on the streets,” delineating a strict hierarchy which, unsurprisingly, allies ‘bad’ gays with kinky sexualities (Thompson, 2001, xii). Homonormativity relies on a “story about the linear progression of the bestowal of rights,” in which access hinges upon a tipping point beyond which the minority group becomes comprehensible, included and includable in dominant discourses (Puar, 2017a, 34). Transnormativity, then, extends the push for “access to rights and citizenship” to some transgender bodies: those which follow a “‘universal[ized] trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization’” (Haritaworn and Snorton, qtd. in Puar, 2017a, 34). The core problem with this discourse of rights and recognitions, argues Puar, is that it is complicit with structures of oppression; bodies which do not or cannot follow the script remain oppressed (see 3.1), and such oppression even seems justified within neoliberal systems which name wellbeing a matter of personal responsibility (ibid). Once rights discourses’ oppressive mechanisms are exposed, questions arise around the “efficacy of arguing for inclusion within and for the same terms of recognition” that maintain oppression (ibid). These “terms of recognition” can also be called normativity, ideologically constructed as desirable.

Normalcy and normativity are often held up as the social ideal: “‘Nearly everyone,’ Michael Warner writes in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, ‘wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all’” (Warner

⁵⁵ Thompson’s inverted commas do not direct the reader to any citation, however he may be drawing upon Gayle Rubin’s diagram in “Thinking Sex” which shows the need to maintain a line between “good” and “bad” sex (2014). Alternately, “good” and “bad” may come from Carl Stychin’s *A Nation By Rights* (1998): “lesbians and gays seeking rights may embrace the ideal of ‘respectability’, a construction that then perpetuates a division between ‘good gays’ and (disreputable) ‘bad queers’ (see Robson 1994, pp. 895-991). The latter are then excluded from the discourse of citizenship.” “Robson” refers to Ruthann Robson’s “Resisting the Family: Repositioning Lesbians in Legal Theory” (1994).

qtd. in McRuer, 2006, 302). Though this might beg the question if there is indeed a choice to embrace abnormality or deviance,

[w]ithin the context of consumer culture ‘unruly bodies’ (Foucault)...are ‘bad bodies’ which show the external signs of a management gone wrong and therefore are interpreted as internal failures of the agent, instead of being regarded as different and valid choices (Foucault qtd. in Beckmann, 2009, 16).

In other words, making the political choice to occupy stigmatized positions is not so much a choice as a failure.⁵⁶ Foucault calls unruly bodies’ ways of taking up and identifying with or through socially constructed stigmas “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1978, 101). Though while mobilizing “reverse discourse,” these bodies remain subscribed within the terms of normalization, this idea at least acknowledges the wide range of what abnormality can signify.

3.2.b The abnormality continuum

Because of this range of signification, I posit something I call “the abnormality continuum.” To construct this continuum, I utilize Adrienne Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” (1982), through which she imagines a broad range of women’s experiences and relations beyond the desire for genital contact.⁵⁷ Translated into the “abnormality continuum,” Rich’s idea represents shifting positions not defined by compulsory genital-reproductive-heterosexuality, beyond a specific desire for BDSM or other “abnormal” sexual contact. Positions on the continuum of abnormality vary extensively. Some do not strive toward the hegemonic ideal, some choosing not to, some failing to, and some demanding that people “doing” normalcy accept those who do not. Some attach

⁵⁶ Perhaps, a failure to matter. As Judith Butler contends, the only bodies that matter are those positioned within the heterosexual matrix (1993a).

⁵⁷ I do not mean to suggest the continuum should be conceptualized like a rainbow, with colors fixed in place. Rather, it is more like a Möbius, perhaps with “abnormality”/abnormal on one side and “normative”/normal on the other, interconnected where one side curves into the other. After all, where abnormality can be read as resistant, “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power,” instead existing “in the strategic field of power relations” just as reverse discourse remains inscribed within mechanisms of normativity (Foucault, 1978).

especial value to perceived abnormality by taking pleasure in it.⁵⁸ There are also positions labeled “abnormal” yet displeased by this abnormality. Then there are positions indifferent to the abnormal label, but aware of the difficulties being labeled as such may pose, and therefore wishing to alter the label, change the boundaries that demarcate “abnormality,” or destroy the category altogether. I currently occupy this last position. Therefore rather than attempting to answer questions like ‘does the continuum essentialize abnormality?’ or ‘does it suggest that kinky sex is intrinsically abnormal?’ I hope to explode the socially constructed ab/normal binary which underpins such questions through my imminent discussion of the impossibility of “vanilla” sexuality.

Considering the diversity of people and practices within BDSM, it would be reductive to endeavor to typify where society places BDSM practitioners along this abnormality continuum, or to delineate where kinksters place themselves. Self-described relations to deviance may be reported inaccurately for any number of reasons, and – as with all erotic behaviors – “the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it” causes fluctuations in the interpretation of self as sexual creature (Foucault, 1997, 142). Therefore I do not mean to dissolve differentiations between various potential positions along the continuum, or to suggest any universal truth which every position should recognize (Rich, 1993). The concept is simply meant to aid in imagining the variety of positions which describe the failure to *do* normativity, generally encompassing BDSM practitioners – though anyone can occupy any position, and move between positions with an ease dictated by intersectional privilege.

3.2.c Impossible vanilla sexuality

While the relation between kink and abnormality is difficult to theorize, the abnormality continuum is inherently threatening. Against its shadow, McRuer argues, many institutions are

⁵⁸ Even here there multiple positions, including finding pleasure in what society labels abnormal, and therefore enjoying BDSM; and specifically taking pleasure in BDSM due to its abnormality.

designed to showcase and bolster the legitimacy of normality via able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, the “ground on which all identities supposedly rest” (2006, 304). Yet following Judith Butler, McRuer notes the impossibility of ever achieving “identities that are constituted through repetitive performance” (ibid). If the “repetitions required to maintain heterosexual [and able-bodied] hegemony” are bound to fail, the normalcy of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness is unattainable (ibid). The implications here are very important when it comes to compulsory vanilla sexuality.

Theorized as pure, loving, and reproductive (Rubin, 2014), vanilla sexuality is a held up as the social ideal against which pathologized and marginalized sexual cultures like BDSM are conjured. Kinksters too utilize this formulation when imagining their own sexualities. In the documentary *BDSM: Alternative Loving*, dominant Master Dragon says, “we stepped out of the box and are redefining our own sexuality, as opposed to what our... grandparents dictated should be our sexuality,” his use of “we” demonstrating that in his opinion, the kinksters he knows – if not kinksters everywhere, depending on his conception of community (see 2.3) – have chosen to renounce vanilla sexuality (qtd. in Smith, 2002). Yet, ideal vanilla sexuality is also impossible to perform. According to veteran kink educator and spokesperson Viola Johnson:

Unless you are in the missionary position for the purpose of procreation only, you are probably kinky. There are all kinds of jokes made about doing it with a feather or doing it with the entire chicken. But once you pick up the feather, you’ve already crossed the line. If someone drapes a scarf across your eyes, congratulations, you’ve entered my world. ... If you’ve ever given your partner a hickey, or had one and enjoyed it, you’re playing S & M games, whether you know it or not. Would the housewife in Peoria who just said, “spank me Daddy” consider herself kinky? No. She is. Would the young college student who has suddenly decided that she likes tying up her boyfriend, just a little, so that she can be in control of the sexual situation, consider herself kinky? No. But she is (ibid).

Psychologist and kink scholar Gloria Brame agrees: those “who privately roleplay as conqueror and captured...those who hold a partner’s wrists down or bite their lovers during lovemaking understand that rough stimuli may enhance sexual response. Many couples who enjoy extended

D&S⁵⁹ roleplaying do not know...that their erotic lives might be perceived by others as outside of the mainstream” (Brame et al., 1996, 7). Partner YH said, “you never know who is kinky,” describing the experience of meeting a cousin’s former classmate at a Hungarian BDSM party. As Johnson’s inclusive definition of what it means to be “probably kinky,” and Brame’s view into the “erotic lives” of “many couples” show, elements of kink are often present in sexualities that might otherwise be called vanilla. Johnson and Brame also force viewers and readers, respectively, to consider whether they fall somewhere on the abnormality continuum, and – by verbally diagramming pieces of the repetitive performance of sexuality – support McRuer and Butler’s assertions of the impossibility of achieving compulsory identities, be they able-bodied, heterosexual, or vanilla sexual.

In fact, Johnson, Brame, and YH’s words seem to indicate that when it becomes impossible to know who is kinky, and when elements of kink are considerably prevalent in sexual expression, perceived vanilla/kink and ab/normal binaries break down to the point that “vanilla” and “kink,” “normal” and “abnormal” can no longer exist as their ostensible binary opposition ceases to have meaning. If everyone and no one is kinky, it is impossible to be too kinky or not kinky enough, and equally impossible to posit a “genuine” kinky sexuality or create a taxonomy of kinky acts. Both vanilla and kinky sexual identity categories melt like ice cream under this scrutiny.

3.2.d Pathologization

Yet accepting the impossibility of performing a vanilla sexual identity which cannot in actuality exist, or openly claiming a deviant position on the abnormality continuum through reverse discourse, does not equate with accepting the pathologization that accompanies BDSM. With that in mind, I return to Jasbir Puar to theorize kinknormativity. Starting from the assertion

⁵⁹ Another way of writing D/s, the Dominant/submissive play defined in Chapter two.

that trans bodies have a “contradictory relationship...to resisting pathological medicalization yet needing access to benefits through the medical-industrial complex,” Puar traces a history of trans pathologization, and how the struggle against it created transnormativity (2017, 36). While I cannot claim that kinky bodies have the same contradictory relationship with the medical-industrial complex that trans bodies have, I do claim that kinky bodies have a similarly tumultuous relationship with pathologization, which has in turn brought about kinknormativity.

Like trans bodies, kinky bodies have been pathologized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (ibid, 37) (see 1.1.b). Puar relates how, until 2013, trans bodies were diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) which was thereafter replaced with the supposedly preferable term Gender Dysphoria. However, kinky bodies remain pathologized in the DSM as “paraphilias.” The debate around the DSM’s inclusion or exclusion of paraphilias is as crucial for BDSM practitioners (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006) as the inclusion or exclusion of Gender Identity Disorder is for transgender individuals and groups. This is because of the implications medically-sanctioned pathologization has for medical and juridical decisions, and because the fight against pathologization also creates frameworks of normativity.

An anti-normative critique of sexual cultures works to dismantle any “social hierarchies and norms that privilege one kind of sexual and intimate relating over others” (Bauer, 2014, 2). BDSM sexualities have been stigmatized as a whole according a set of sexual hierarchies (Rubin, 2014), which posit kink as opposed to and below heteronormative sexuality. Yet within BDSM the same hierarchization is at work to privilege certain forms of kinky play, as kinksters fight for recognition as a sexual subculture, battling pathologization while insisting on normativity.⁶⁰ For

⁶⁰ There are, however, tensions between de/pathologization and claims for normativity, in both trans and BDSM studies, as Puar’s chapter illustrates and this paper hopes to show.

example, my fieldwork leads me to conclude that blood play; consuming scat, urine, or flesh; incest and paedophilia; zoophilia;⁶¹ and instances of consensual-non-consent⁶² are almost universally recognized within BDSM communities as taboo.⁶³ Thus, beyond the pathologization and judgment which comes from outside, kinknormativity allows kinksters themselves to construct dividing lines.

3.2.e The taboos

Many in the community differentiate themselves from those who practice othered taboos.⁶⁴

Doug Harris, who at the time *BDSM: Alternative Loving* (2002) was filmed co-owned BDSM dungeon The Sanctuary of the Dark Angel,⁶⁵ reflects:

[T]here are a lot of us who are very open minded and open to everybody and open armed. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people who like to pretend that they are. And they carry the prejudices along with 'em, and no matter how much they try to cover it, they still have their natural prejudices against the different facets of the lifestyle (qtd. in Smith, 2002).

Harris' problematic naturalization of prejudices aside, this sentiment reflects what numerous kinksters convey when describing divisions which form when some players deem others' practices unacceptable, unsafe, or taboo. As London interview partners TT and HI expressed, the BDSM community – like almost any community – is a microcosm of what's available in the wider world, so it is no wonder that society's prejudices and pathologizations find their ways in. Budapest partner AM similarly said:

I wouldn't consider kinky communities to be different from the world [...] there are people who go there reacting to, to, to that world, and I mean there are people who go

⁶¹ Frequently referred to as “bestiality.”

⁶² The common title for “rape play,” consensual non-consent is, as the name emphasizes, consensual.

⁶³ As a case in point, activities fitting within these categories are banned at one of London's biggest monthly fetish events, the London Alternative Market, a bazaar followed by a play party. (“Newbie Meet and Greet,” 2018). Vagina-vagina, vagina-penis, penis-penis, and penis-anus sexual acts are banned as well, perhaps indicating that kinknormativity is also invested in undoing stereotypes which claim that BDSM play is all about sex.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Weiss (2008) on how the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) utilized normative claims in media outreach to counter negative publicity around a BDSM event (88-89).

⁶⁵ A venue in Atlanta, Georgia which closed its doors in 2004. Many thanks to MsSuzan, who provided this information to me in a message on FetLife, 5 May 2018.

there reacting to the established norms of what they live in their everyday life and there are other people who go there, I don't know, independently. Though some make valorizing claims that kinksters are more advanced in a variety of ways,⁶⁶ Brame sums up the issue by opining that practitioners might be more open-minded, but are paradoxically no more enlightened or tolerant than those who inhabit the world outside of BDSM (1996, 7). This is in part because practitioners comprise what can be termed a "counterpublic" (Felski, 1989; Warner, 2002), not subscribing to any one "set of norms and values" but rather reflecting diverse positionings, effected by multiple, intersectional affiliations (Felski, 1989, 164) and prejudices, which often hinge on an awareness of subordinate status (Warner, 2002).

Disavowing this subordination while legitimizing a demand for rights and inclusion based on avoiding unacceptable practices, kinknormativity outlines kinky identity built upon a population of compliant bodies within a group otherwise seen as pariahs (Puar, 2017, 38). Enabled by pathologizing discourses, kinknormativity's taboos fall under tacit, socially constructed rubrics which denounce so-called threats to physical health, mental health, or legality – despite the safe, sane, and consensual nature of kink.⁶⁷ Blood play, scat, and zoophilia are potential disease vectors; incest is associated with producing mentally or physically disabled offspring, a distasteful outcome in a culture of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. Additionally, society questions the mental health of those who enjoy eating flesh or excrement; drawing blood; having consensual sex non-consensually and/or cross-generationally, with family, or animals. Furthermore, these taboos have a dubious relation to common law in many countries, whether enactment merits arrest

⁶⁶ See a 2013 article from the *New York Times* which asserts that kinksters are better communicators and more respectful in relationships (Haber), or a *Reuters* article from the same year with a title that announces "BDSM practitioners aren't mentally ill" and text which asserts that kinksters have "better wellbeing," positively overstating the findings of Wismeijer and van Assen's 2013 study (Seaman).

⁶⁷ "Safe, sane, and consensual," otherwise known as SSC, is one of BDSM's guiding principles.

or jail time, or is governed by obscenity laws and banned in pornography. Lamentably, demonizing these taboo yet desired behaviors serves to blur lines between sexual violence and consensual acts.

Also lamentable is kinknormativity's construction of a "good" kinky identity which continues the legacy of the "sex wars." BDSM practitioners writing on kink are no strangers to feminist battles being played out on kinky grounds (Bauer, 2014; Brame et al., 1996; Samois, 1982; Truscott, 2001). Thus some kinksters see it as in the community's best interest to construct a discourse of genderblindness in kink, addressing the feminist objection that BDSM organizes power around gender differences (Brownmiller, [1975] 1993). This is often intended benevolently, as when several interview partners attested to selecting play partners on the basis of mutual kink interests alone and not due to gender, as detailed in the next chapter. They were likely unaware that their words may play into kinknormativity and exclude kinksters and practices not aligned with a "harmonic sex" framework (Bauer, 2013, 3). On the wild converse, there are those within BDSM who believe the radical feminist "sex wars" discourse that kink is inherently gendered and affirms innate hierarchies (likely, however, without ascribing these views to radical feminists). An entire style of power exchange, for example, exists around John Norman's *Gor* novels, naturalizing female submission and male dominance (Harrington & Williams, 2012). In London, said partner MO, there are some groups where male dominance is the norm and queer, sex-positive circles are seen as upstarts. In these cliques, talk of feminism or gender is the taboo.

Importantly, kinknormativity constructed around condemning or condoning gender equality is not directly connected with medical pathologization – though it would be easy to pathologize a kinky group based on its stance on gender. This distinction helps clarify that

kinknormativity is not meant to construct a normativity/pathologization binary.⁶⁸ In fact, this binary cannot exist, as populations become normalized (Foucault, 2004) under “biopolitical control,” itself

an effect and cause of the ‘normative’ undergoing ‘rapid inflation, as classificatory and regulative mechanisms are elaborated for every socially recognizable state of being... ‘normal’ is now free-standing, no longer the opposite and necessary complement of ‘abnormal,’ ‘deviant,’ or ‘dysfunctional,’ as it was under disciplinary power (Massumi qtd. in Clough, 2010, 222).

In other words, societies which exert biopolitical control in order to classify and regulate populations do so by expanding the normative beyond dichotomous relations with its supposed opposites. Plenty of what David Bell terms “citizen perverts” (1995) illustrate this, as does, I hope, envisioning the “abnormality continuum” as a möbius looping into normativity. Instead of a binary, historically relative, socially constructed kinknormative rationales play on rubrics of differentiation, whether based on pathologizing logics or radical feminist complaints. Drawing culturally specific lines to demarcate what is permissible sexual behavior (Rubin, 2014), kinknormativity allows some practitioners to claim “good” normative kinky identities to gain access to rights discourses by excluding and pathologizing taboo practices and their practitioners.

3.3 Discussion

This chapter’s examination of identity and kinknormativity has important political and theoretical implications for normative, compulsory systems of any kind. Normativity indexes the construction of identity. Just as homonormativity and transnormativity essentialize which gay and

⁶⁸ While it may sound as if Andrea Beckmann (2009) is constructing the such a binary in writing: “it is important to analyse [sic] the interrelatedness of certain ideas about ‘Sadomasochism’ and its binary construction of ‘natural sexuality’ that is cast as ‘normality’” (6), her emphasis on the “interrelatedness” of these ideas, as well as on the “construction” of naturalized/normalized sexualities, suggests that her intention is not to solidify such binary constructions but rather to deconstruct them.

trans identities are worthy of recognition,⁶⁹ kinknormativity defines the “good” kinkster as able to benefit from rights-based claims. What differentiates kinknormativity from the other normativities I have detailed, and helps make it so theoretically and politically significant, is the fissure it maintains in consent. Deeming some consensual kinky behaviors acceptable and other – also consensual – behaviors not, kinknormativity plays into the “sex wars” radical feminist argument that even consensual female sexual activity is the result of false consciousness (Linden et al.), while reifying sex law discourses which fail to designate between coercive and freely chosen practices, deeming certain acts contemptable and criminal by nature (Beckmann, 2009; Rubin, 2014, 168).⁷⁰

Furthermore, normativity claims are frequently made to counteract pathologization and fight for inclusion, which is supposedly the basis of equality in opportunity, rights, and status. Thus kinknormativity, like homonormativity and transnormativity, could be framed as a political identity-construction tool to aid struggles for tolerance. Certainly attempts to point out that everyone is “probably kinky” work toward erotic egalitarianism, and also serve to support kink’s inclusion as a topic of study within academia. But as my earlier analysis of identity indicates, fighting for inclusion and equality by simply expanding the definition of normativity means

⁶⁹ And by extension homonationalism and femonationalism justify imperial wars by claiming the necessity of protecting essentialized homosexual and female citizens (Farris, 2012, 187).

⁷⁰ Rubin describes “a famous S/M case” in which “a man was convicted of aggravated assault for a whipping administered in an S/M scene... The man appealed his conviction by arguing that he had been involved in a consensual sexual encounter and had assaulted no one. In rejecting his appeal, the court ruled that one may not consent to an assault or battery ‘except in a situation involving ordinary physical contact or blows incident to sports such as football, boxing, or wrestling’. The court went on to note that the ‘consent of a person without legal capacity to give consent, such as a child or insane person, is ineffective’, and that ‘It is a matter of common knowledge that a normal person in full possession of his mental faculties does not freely consent to the use, upon himself, of force likely to produce great bodily injury.’ Therefore, anyone who would consent to a whipping would be presumed *non compos mentis* and legally incapable of consenting. S/M sex generally involves a much lower level of force than the average football game, and results in far fewer injuries than most sports. But the court ruled that football players are sane, whereas masochists are not. Sodomy laws, adult incest laws, and legal interpretations such as the one above clearly interfere with consensual behavior and impose criminal penalties on it. Within the law, consent is a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest-status sexual behavior. Those who enjoy low-status sexual behavior do not have the legal right to engage in it” (2014, 168).

fighting for a place within hegemonic power structures on those structures' exclusionary terms (Puar, 2017b, 23; Warner, 1993, xi). Like hetero-, homo-, and transnormativity, kinknormativity shows that when some adopt identities which grant equality within hierarchical systems of oppression, others will always, by necessity, be left out.

To deconstruct the systems which utilize pathologizing and exclusionary mechanisms, rather than debating who should or should not be pathologized, the BDSM community, and any other community wishing to demolish exclusionary identity categories and their technologies, will need an alternate mode of community formation. Bonding over exclusionary identities is a hypocritical move for a community which protests its own exclusion from normative sexual cultures. Therefore is not enough to simply arrive at, and bond over, the identity "kinkster," as Butler argues regarding the identity "lesbian" ([1990] 2004). Just as Butler wishes to keep the sign "lesbian" unclear, my refusal to delineate who or what is "kinky" is an attempt to muddy the sign and resist kinknormativity. This definitional unsettledness leaves room for the intensities and durations of affect, a readiness for connection (Massumi, 1987) and an openness (Puar, 2017) through which BDSM practitioners form affinities with one another. Rather than necessitating a strict kinknormative identity and its exclusionary politics, affective relations can form between anyone who feels kinky. Thus affective kinky connections could encompass kinksters across multiple locations (see 2.3), and across multiple play preferences, genders, races, or abilities. This is the promising potential of embodied, affective BDSM relations, which I detail in Chapter four.

Chapter 4: Affect

Laughing and crying, she covers her face with her gloved hands and tries to kiss him. He lays partially upright on the table, curling forward to inspect his crotch while gulping deep breaths. She has just burned off all the hairs around his anus during a fire play scene. Still maintaining a finite distance between themselves and the players, some of the impromptu audience are crowding closer, eyes wide. Others turn away, their noses crinkled as the smell of burnt hair wafts through the vaulted underground space (HunCon fieldnotes).

Drawing upon Mauss (1979) and Merleau-Ponty (1968), Beckmann designates the social phenomenon of consensual BDSM “body practice” and “bodily practices” (2009). Affect arises from kinksters’ investment of time and energy into these embodied practices. When I discuss affect in this chapter, I refer to an embodied force (Massumi, 1987) by which bodies work on and are worked on by other bodies. My formulation revolves around Jasbir Puar’s tripartite definition of affect as “at once an exchange or interchange between bodies and also an object of control,” and “the body’s hopeful opening...a porous affirmation of what could or might be” (2017, 19).⁷¹ Seeing affect as a “force by which bodies work on and are worked on by other bodies” aligns with Puar’s “exchange or interchange between bodies,” while her thinking on affect as an “object of control” connects with normalizing readings of BDSM around kinknormativity. Investigating the “body’s hopeful opening”⁷² allows me to speculate on how kinksters’ open themselves to each other⁷³ through affective relations. Using this definition, I argue that affect is a key factor in building BDSM community, resting on two pillars: a sense of belonging, and discussions of gender.

⁷¹ It would be worthwhile to look at affect in BDSM via psychologist Silvan Tomkins’ affect theory, and to consider how that lineage relates with Puar’s Massumi/Deleuze genealogy. However, the complex application of a Tomkinsian lens to the affective relations I study here is beyond my scope at present.

⁷² Which perhaps plays with Baruch Spinoza’s oft cited assertion that we “do not yet know what a body can do.” See EIIIP2S in Spinoza, B. (2002).

⁷³ And to myself as scholar-practitioner.

This chapter has three parts. First, I revisit my previous chapter's dismantling of restrictive identity systems, mobilizing Puar to explore modes of relating which do not necessitate identity. Utilizing Eliza Steinbock's "On the Affective Force of 'Nasty Love,'" I show that instead of relying on exclusionary, kinknormative identities, kinky communities can form around a shared affective sense of belonging. I transition into the second part of this chapter through Puar's words on corporeal comportment, which reveal how affect opens the body to relations of belonging. Next I employ Johanna Pohtinen's "Creating a Feeling of Belonging: Solidarity in Finnish Kink Communities" as I probe three ways in which groups of BDSM practitioners utilize affect to build connections of belonging in a manner that is not accountable through the vocabulary of identitarian sameness. First I look at kinksters' bonds of solidarity in order to substantiate affect's role in creating belonging, mainly in London, and then I discuss purposefully constructed educational events and spaces with local and global reach in Budapest and London. Necessarily intertwined with that analysis, I chart affective bonding around kinky education, in both cities, and detail how each location's educational offerings differ in order to establish community leaders' "civilizing" missions. Continuing to trace affective relations between kinksters in the third part of this chapter, I move to the ways in which affect sticks⁷⁴ to conversations around gender. I contrast levels of conversance on the topic in both fieldwork locations, and juxtapose London practitioners' comprehension of performativity with Budapest interview partners' fixation on the 1800s, respectively, as each community's locus of affect. I conclude by noting how the divergent "civilizing" missions of each community leader reflect differing sociocultural concerns: Budapest's negotiation of "Eastern" regional connections (Gal, 1991) and embattled social

⁷⁴ Though understanding affect as "sticky" comes from the Tomkins line via Sarah Ahmed, it is useful in imagining how affect works with relation to practitioners' conversations on gender (Ahmed 2004, 2010).

recognition of gender discourses (Štulhofer & Sandfort, 2008), and London's "Western" fixation on gender diversity (Sen, 2016) and inclusivity (Kopeček and Wciślik, 2015).

4.1 Affect as Alternative to Identity

Affect-enabled relations can allow BDSM communities to form without relying on kinknormative identity exclusions. Embracing modes of relating which see people as "more alike...than different" (Puar, 2017, 4) across heterogeneous groups requires moving away from identity, perceived as coherent and distinct, that works to classify diverse populations yet is always ultimately a "theoretical dead end...unreliable and ill-fitting" (Steinbock, 2014, 750). Self-reflexive interview partners in London noted the problems with identity without much prompting. For example interrupting as I asked, "Do you say, like, I'm kinky? Like, do you consider yourself to be—" partner VJ (L)⁷⁵ said:

Yeah, it is a big part of my, my sexual orientation. Which I don't- I- I hesitate to draw my identity with anything to do with like, like I hesitate to like draw anything as part of my identity. Like I don't like to be like, 'Well I'm an historian,' I like to be like, 'Well I study history' or you know, like I, so... um, I would be more likely to say, 'I'm part of the kink scene' than I would be to be like, 'I'm kinky,' but that's just cause I don't like boxing myself in.

VJ steps away from boxes, undertaking the work of destabilizing Puar's "alignments of 'alikenness' and 'difference'" (2017, 4) by designating kink something one *does* rather than something one *is*. This distinction helps move away from the exclusions built by identity-structuring normativities. Replying to my query, "Is being kinky a big part of your identity?" partner ZE (L) seemed to pick up where VJ ended:

It's only, cause we need to make a distinction from other activities because of its sort of general social unacceptability that we need to, like even classify it [BDSM]. So I would quite like to just put everyone on a spectrum and just be like, 'oh I just happen to enjoy

⁷⁵ (L) denotes London, while (B) denotes Budapest.

these more than the next person,’ but there comes a point where you need to make a binary choice whether you identify a certain way or not, so the first question is ‘am I kinky or not?’ And like, some people might have some kinky interests or not, but like you know more or less or so on, um and then at some point you need to be like, ‘well is this sufficient to be, like, am I pursuing something explicitly?’ or is it just like, ‘oh well some of these things on TV are kind of hot,’ but that’s just that. Um, so... like I would not, like, it’s a shame that you kind of have to make that part of your identity? rather than it just being like part of a spectrum, so you can appreciate that this is how much you like something and people like it less or more [...] I don’t feel like I would need to necessarily differentiate myself if there wasn’t a taboo around these activities.

Analyzing this discourse reveals that ZE felt the need to “identify” as “kinky,” and to “make a binary choice” only in response to a perceived “taboo” around BDSM. In saying, “I would quite like,” ZE shows enthusiasm for a way of relating to others which would use a spectrum based on enjoyment of and appreciation for various kinky activities, continuing Puar’s call to look for likeness rather than difference. A person “pursuing something explicitly” and another who “just” thinks “things on TV” are “kind of hot” could find affinity on ZE’s spectrum, because both “appreciate” BDSM and accept that “people like it less or more.” This demonstrates that affective responses to an interest in kink could form bonds between BDSM practitioners across difference, as kinky affect overcomes the tendency to “form exclusions” (Steinbock, 2014, 758).

Building on Amit Rai’s “reformulation of sexuality as...affect instead of identity” (Puar, 2017, 4), which exceeds gay/straight, or in this case, vanilla/kinky binaries (see 3.2.c), Puar asserts that affect makes identity possible and impossible because it forms what constitutes identity: the shifting habituations and curations of the body (ibid, 19, 21). Steinbock agrees; affect’s “*felt sense of more*” (italics in original) overflows identity yet connects those who feel it through embodied experience (2014, 758). Deploying the “quotidian and banal activities of sexual self-elaboration” as a way to embrace Steinbock’s connective “*more*” and explode “presumed differences between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’,” Puar makes room for the praxis of BDSM (2014, 3). Whether viewed as “banal” or not, this affective praxis “highlight[s] constantly shifting assemblages of power” (ibid,

15, 20) rather than conceiving of power as solidly monolithic in relation to equally solid identities.⁷⁶ Utilizing the “affective force and expanse of erotic relations,” Steinbock argues (2014, 750) BDSM undoes gay/straight, female/male, and other calcified identity categories built on rigid binaries and juridical conceptions of power, substituting affective connection in their place.

In Puar’s chapter, affective LGBT+ self-elaboration – “corporeal comportment, and an array of diverse switchpoints of bodily capacity” takes place via social media (ibid). Though sexual self-elaboration in BDSM can occur via social media (see 2.3), it can also occur in person, or some combination thereof. Despite this difference, I find the first and last parts of Puar’s quotation useful because they encapsulate the way I see affect working bodily in kink communities. Puar’s affect and kink work with the same collection of terms around embodiment, feeling, and intensity, so I read “corporeal comportment” as the embodied affective praxis of kinksters relating to each other online or at social gatherings, through talk or play. I agree with partner TT (L)’s affective description of kink’s corporeal comportment as “a lot about contact, bodies, and expressions, and pleasure and sensations.” Further, Puar’s “bodily capacity,” similar to “a body’s hopeful opening,” describes affective ability. It captures a kinky body’s capacity to open to and connect with other members of a community – through affect rather than identity – especially by means of social relations around gender and feelings of belonging.

4.2 Belonging

As a personal yet shared feeling arising in the practice of social relations, encompassing mental and often physical closeness, belonging is always already affective (Kanai, 2017). A body’s hopeful opening to affective capacity makes belonging possible, indicating that affect reflects a

⁷⁶ An analysis which rests on Foucault and Butler’s work on power in circulation, as described in 1.1.a.

more nuanced understanding of the affinities of belonging than an identitarian frame would allow. Feelings of belonging are, writes Pohtinen, “one of the most distinctive features of the kink community,” evoking “strong positive emotional response...when introduced to and participating in the community” (2017, 21). Finding the kink community is frequently likened to finding “your tribe” (FH (L); Pohtinen, 2017; Thompson, 2001; Wiseman, 1996) or “my people” (HI (L); FH (L)).⁷⁷ As these shared terms circulate across kinky groups, they underscore how solidarity is one way in which communities create a sense of affective belonging (Pohtinen, 2016).

4.2.a Solidarity and consent, mainly in London

BDSM Practitioners frequently describe the tribulations of being outcast for sexual preferences (Brame et al., 1996; Dominguez Jr., 1994; Rubin, 2014; Wiseman, 1996); London partners ZE, MO, and TT had major reservations about “coming out” as kinky (Thompson, 2001) to family, friends, coworkers, doctors, or mental healthcare professionals. Others said, “I thought I was just a freak. I thought I was sick in the head, basically” (HI (L)), and thought, “‘I am crazy,’ ‘this is not normal,’ ‘I know it feels good but maybe I’m all wrong’” (EW (B)). Facing such negative feelings, EW continued, “[it’s] really helpful when, um, people are there for you that it’s ok. Um, it’s also helpful to have- to- ask for advice and talk to people,” evincing how kinky counterpublics (Warner, 2002) in London and Budapest⁷⁸ serve as support networks (Pohtinen, 2016) in the face of social bias and the self-judgment it produces.⁷⁹ Partner ZE (L) mused:

⁷⁷ Interestingly, not a single partner referred to kinksters as “family.” Perhaps the connotations of “tribe” versus “family” underscore BDSM’s affinities through ties other than blood. However, the discourse of “family” is present on BDSM social networking site FetLife, balancing the community’s potential for tribal identification.

⁷⁸ It should be noted that, while interview partners in both locations spoke in terms of solidarity and support networks, only in London did practitioners discuss “coming out” as kinky. This links with Chapter two’s discussion of the differing climates of public acceptability in both fieldwork locations.

⁷⁹ Judith Butler (2002) has described disruptively variable nonbiological kinship relations which address human emotional dependency and provide support outside of formalizable normative rules. Such a notion of kinship may also be applicable to the communities I explore here.

you know when like slightly harder subjects just come up, like in passing, when you talk to colleagues or family members or whatever, and you're kind of thinking, 'they wouldn't even be able to process that some of this exists.' Like, they would either freak out or be scared or... just kind of not like, just- just move on, just not wanna really talk about it or acknowledge it.

The phrase “you know” and the repeated direct address by means of the word “you” invited me to connect with the vignette through the assumption that I would understand. In contrast to “colleagues or family members,” ZE included me in an affective bond,⁸⁰ noting that “in terms of social community, like most of my close friends who I can be all-out open with are into kink.”⁸¹ Tellingly, ZE chose the word “open,” supporting my interpretation of Puar’s affect. Expressing a similar sentiment, MO said:

I think that like the general public wouldn't get BDSM as long as they don't get consent. It's like that's just everything for BDSM, it's just about consent. They don't get it for like, vanilla-land so how the hell are they, ever gonna understand consent in BDSM?

MO’s remarks might seem to concretize an identitarian divide between kinksters and the “general public.” On its surface, “how the hell are they ever gonna understand consent in BDSM?” reads like an angry us/them bifurcation. Yet the affable, reflective mode⁸² and the phrase “wouldn’t...as long as” indicate this divide is not constructed as monolithic. Those in “vanilla-land” are not discursively figured as unable to understand BDSM. They simply will not understand *until* they “get consent” – a possibility which remains distinctly available. MO placed the last sentence’s affective force on the word “ever,” indicated by the short pause (,) in the utterance. This “ever” links with the implied “until” in the first sentence, reinforcing a temporal frame which indicates

⁸⁰ Nodding and occasionally murmuring “mmhmm” in gestures of affirmation while ZE spoke, I showed my sympathetic subjectivity, as a scholar who is also “into kink.” I carefully monitored these nonverbal responses of active listening during each interview, reflexive constituents of my feminist methodology and positioning (Yow, 2005, 99) as a vulnerable researcher (Behar, 2012; Subedi, 2006) (see 2.2.b).

⁸¹ Interview partner TT (L) similarly said, “Most of my conversation, most of my friendships now comes from there [the kink community]” and said, about vanilla co-workers “they wouldn’t understand.”

⁸² A way of reflecting on or analyzing one’s own understanding that is less emotive and more likely to explain experiences and the personal conclusions one has drawn from them (Frisch, 1990, 64).

that one day, the “general public” could be educated around consent, “understand” BDSM, and possibly realize they are the iceberg (see 2.3): they have been including kink in their sexual repertoires as well (see 3.2.c).

Given the general public’s perceived lack of an understanding of consent, a core value in BDSM play, discussions around consent might seem just as important to creating kinky belonging through solidarity as the mentions of social support discussed above. While consent was mentioned by five partners in London (ZE, VJ, TT, MO, and HI), only one partner in Budapest (ZS) used the word, conversant with consent by virtue of having trained as a professional dominant. This might suggest radically opposed states of kink: London exhibiting the Foucauldian promise of BDSM as a creative enterprise of consensual pleasure (Foucault, 1997); Budapest as a second-wave feminist nightmare of de Sadian proportions. One explanation of these asymmetrical mentions is that consent is inbuilt in kink play. Yet the phenomenon more likely stems from two things: an unequal availability of kinky education in each scene, detailed in the next section, and the communities’ disparate conversance with vocabularies around gender and performativity, which I set out in 4.3. The topics of education and gender are by no means separate; where the Budapest community’s mission seems to be utilizing education to cement regional and international relationships through its annual Con, the London community’s similarly international mission centers on embodied practice in an empowering, female-led space.

4.2.b Educational gatherings in Budapest and London

Kinky education is a social and corporeal practice incredibly important to BDSM (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011) for reasons of safety and technique (Weiss, 2011; Wiseman, 1996). Education-centered in-person gatherings are key to building affective belonging (Pohtinen, 2016) in both London and Budapest. Investigating the iconography of publicity materials for

Budapest's Con and the text of promotional content on Anatomie's website helps make sense of how the organizers of these educational spaces mobilize affect. In addition to showcasing the dissimilar "missions" of community leaders, and setting the stage for each city's differing relationship to gender (see 4.3), these kinky events and spaces work to claim both local, regional, and global community bonds, forming a glocal sense of belonging.

4.2.b.i Budapest

In Budapest, the Con, occurring annually over several days, is the prime space in which organizers construct feelings of glocal community. The badge for the event features the Hungarian flag emblazoned with the triskele BDSM emblem in its center. The large flag and the event's official title, "Rise of the East," work to establish claims of national belonging (Renkin, 2009). However, the BDSM emblem is utilized in communities worldwide; its central placement over the Hungarian flag seems to indicate that kinky belonging is more important than national belonging. This is reinforced by the five smaller flags in a row along the bottom of the logo: USA, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Denmark, and Czechia, from left to right. Each of these flags represents a country from which one or more presenters traveled to teach at the Con – neglecting Romania, from which a presenter also hailed. Budapest community organizer YH mentioned specifically inviting educators from countries in Western Europe, and the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region, showing the Con's transnational reach (Szulc, 2017) as well as indicating that the community to which organizers are appealing goes beyond national borders. This fusion of the global BDSM symbol, Hungarian flag, and small national flags presents a sort of iconography of international kink as the face of the Con, demonstrating the globally-resonant, communicable momentum of affective connections (Clough, 2010), expanding extant networks, and knitting together Hungarian organizers, Con attendees, and kinky communities at home and abroad.

Guests at the biggest kinky educational event in Hungary are treated to a three-day timetable featuring nine to 12 classes per day scheduled in blocks of three. Classes teach safety, tips, and tricks, while occasionally delving into philosophical understandings of BDSM, in areas from fire play, rope bondage, and D/s as mentioned in Chapter two to workshops like “Triangles are my Favorite Shape: How to Find Your Unicorn and Relationship Navigation,” “Dangerous When Wet: Drool and Spit,” and “You’re A Mean Bitch: Emotional Sadism.”⁸³ Despite the interest in these offerings, there is to my knowledge no dedicated Hungarian BDSM educational setup aside from the Con. The occasional kink class is taught by someone visiting the city or a member of the community showcasing a particular skill, but play parties and munches are not specifically educational events. Practitioners who want to learn about kink must become autodidacts, watching YouTube videos or reading how-to books. Aside from the Hun Con, education is not a visible marker of community membership.

YH desires to make it so, as part of a sort of civilizing mission to both to address the lack of education and to showcase Budapest kink. On the Con’s homepage, the “Aims?” section reads: “To improve the local culture of BDSM & Kink and to show the international community the city of Budapest and the local community” and the “Work” section details that the Con’s goal is to “enhance our community and standards” (“Hungarian BDSM Conference 2017,” n.d.). Here the Con seems to be building on its iconography, utilizing its “Aims” and “Work” to forge local and international affective ties. This mission appears to encompass both importing the “West” (in the form of presenters and potential attendees) to “backward” Hungary (Gal, 1991; Kopeček & Wciślik, Eds., 2015), and strengthening transnational links (Szulc, 2017) across the somehow equally “backward” CEE periphery (Hajdú, 2007), all while showcasing the kinky “Rise of the

⁸³ Course titles reprinted with permission from kinkysprinkles.com. A unicorn is “a single, bisexual person who enjoys dating or sleeping with couples” (kinkysprinkles.com, 2018).

East” in a version of the catching-up narrative (Kopeček & Wciślik, Eds., 2015) which claims it will educationally enlighten the entire region while building belonging.

Nevertheless, my field research indicates that the sense of belonging organizers set out to grow is precarious. Some in the Hungarian community were not happy to see presenters from the USA, the Netherlands, and Denmark at a Con with such a title. Ironically, other community members grumbled about presenters from Bulgaria, Romania, and Czechia. YH mentioned that in a Hungarian-language Facebook group discussing the Con, someone said they didn’t care whether “foreigners” felt comfortable or welcomed, because the Con should be “for Hungarians” – indicating that for some, affective bonds only “stick” through national belonging. Even more ironically, some complained at the teaching quality of a presenter from one of Hungary’s neighbors, saying the educator seemed to have learned everything from the internet. These affective backlashes may support the need for YH’s civilizing mission, and also signal it has more to achieve in terms of both increasing education and building transnational belonging.

4.2.b.ii London

While Anatomie’s logo (a cutaway skull, with gears and circles interlocking inside) would be harder to read for national and transnational iconography, the studio’s tagline, and the line which follows it on studio’s homepage, make claims for belonging remarkably comparable to those of the Con. The tagline reads, “The UK’s first and only dedicated shibari studio!” and the second line announces, “Anatomie is owned by [names] — London based international rope educators and shibari artists” (“Anatomie Studio,” n.d.) These pieces of text spotlight the UK as home country and London as home city, creating national and local frames for the studio’s practice and practitioners which emphasize both that the studio belongs in the UK and that Londoners belong in the studio. Meanwhile, from the owners’ self-description as “international,” the reader

deduces that both owners travel abroad to teach and perform, marking their connection to a broader affective community. Ostensibly, this means that expatriates and international visitors in London will be welcome at the studio just as its owners have been welcomed abroad.

The website also offers an educationally open welcome, rather than alienating visitors. Should one not know the word “shibari,” Japanese for “to tie” (Master K, 2008), a tab next to “Home” reads “What is shibari?” leading to a page which explains the word and the roots of the practice as contemporarily understood. By aligning itself with “shibari,” Anatomie illustrates that the rope bondage taught at the studio has international significance as a practice claiming Japanese origins (Pennington, 2017), further cementing the studio’s international connections. Crucially, the website’s setup also initiates Anatomie’s educational function even before visitors physically enter the space, openly offering a shared knowledge of corporeal praxis. This shows that the education on offer is inclusive and affective, rather than exclusive and identitarian, proffering learning instead of shutting out all but those who already know about the mystified art of “shibari.”

Central as rope is at Anatomie, London does offer other forms of kinky education. BDSM classes take place at venues across the city on most weeknights and every weekend, serving the broader London kink community with social opportunities and education in all sorts of kinky skills. Whipping and flogging are popular (see 2.1.c), in addition to rope bondage. At Anatomie, educational events occur two to three nights per week on average, and on most weekends. Though it is also a performance venue, one of Anatomie’s main functions is as an educational space. The studio’s tutelage consists of rope bondage group classes and private tuition as well as “rope jams,” and is extending into non-rope-based kink. Classes are offered for levels from beginner to advanced, and cover topics like “Discover Shibari: Beginners Foundation Workshop,” “Self Tying: A day with Glü Wür,” and “So you want to get tied? Rope bottoming for beginners and the

curious!”^{84, 85} During “rope jams,” for a modest fee anyone can visit the studio to practice tying or being tied. Jams are social occasions but not parties; the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed, and the studio’s resident rope tops, bottoms, and switches are available to chat, assist, or demonstrate.

This setup underscores London’s ethos of education, with a local and international reach; becoming a member – no matter where one comes from – is partially predicated on an education in the bodily praxis of kink. Despite this, London partners wished to avoid describing their community’s sense of belonging through the vocabulary of identity, instead discussing spectra and temporally framing a time when the general public might also understand BDSM. Diverging from this, Budapest kinksters display a willingness to be educated through the Con, however this willingness does not seem to drive the community nor extend to fully supporting the Con’s mission of affectively uniting Hungary with other parts of the world through kink. Partly, London’s sheer size and diversity helps account for this uneven distribution of teaching and awareness between it and Budapest. Economic resources are another contributing factor, as is Hungary’s geographic location in an area where BDSM is not as culturally available as it is in Western European cities,⁸⁶ where the social biases discussed in Chapter two predominate, and where national identity is a core focus (Krasztev & Til, 2015). London’s status as a super-diverse (Vertovec, 2005; Wessendorf, 2017), gender-forward (Sen, 2016), relatively wealthy metropole provides the interest and population to sustain a self-reflexive BDSM educational community; Budapest at present cannot support the Con more than once a year. Furthermore, as I detail presently, London seems

⁸⁴ Glü Wür is a visiting bondage performer from Chile, and “rope bottoming” means being tied up, as opposed to “rope topping” which means doing the tying. I took Anatomie’s rope bottoming course during my fieldwork.

⁸⁵ Anatomie’s frequent use of punctuation, in class titles and elsewhere on the website, (“So you want to get tied?” “What is shibari?” “beginners and the curious!” “The UK’s first and only dedicated shibari studio!”) conveys affective intensity through text.

⁸⁶ As a point of reference, only one of 10 London-based interview partners had heard there is a kink community in Budapest, and one other was not sure if they had heard anything about it or not. None had visited. Conversely, eight Budapest-based interview partners had heard about the London kink community. Some related stories, had gleaned “positive” things about it from friends, or even described it as “amazing” (IY). Three had been.

to have a comparative openness which facilitates a kind of “soul searching” (TT, HI) and curiosity that supports both education and gender “exploration”/“self-exploration,” as mentioned by seven partners. While four Budapest-based kinksters seemed interested in gender expression and exploration, during interviews the drive did not feature as prevalently as discussions of Hungarian cultural traditionalism, detailed in 4.3.b.

4.3 Affective Gender

Despite uneven levels of both openness to experimenting with gender and fluency in discussing it, as I detail in 4.3.a, affective relations “stick” to the subject in Budapest and London. The practice of BDSM, like affect, centers on embodied relations, which are inescapably gendered according to Butler. My empirical data reflects this: all 20 interview partners commented on the role their gender takes in their choice of play and/or partner,⁸⁷ illustrating how gender “sticks” to BDSM via “affective transfer” (Blackman, 2010). At Anatomie, though classes do not overtly teach gender awareness, they may help bring kinksters’ attention to gender and its fluctuations. The studio is known by its community as an empowering, female-led space:

It is a feminist environment, it is a well-informed environment, it is a sex-positive environment... it’s encouraging to women... encouraging and supportive of nontraditional dynamics [...] There are other sub-communities where, you know, male dominance is perhaps more normative and so on, um, but at the moment that’s- that’s not providing as consistent a space or an event or a tangible community as the sort of this epicenter that Anatomie is, so that is influencing you know who is, is feeling close, who is learning, who is coming back (ZE).

Anatomie is also seen as a place for self-reflexivity and gender experimentation:

Open and inclusive, [Anatomie] helps you to grow as a, as a person and as a- as a gender well-knowledged, I don’t know how to explain but like if you, if you work [on kink] in these spaces, where there are different people, there are different sections of sexualities, of gender, and stuff like that? you kind of introduce yourself to stuff that maybe you

⁸⁷ Even if only to avow that they are “gender agnostic” (ZE (L)), which is still an engagement with gender, or to conflate sex and gender and affirm heterosexuality (GA (B)).

don't know? but you grow a knowledge about them, and maybe you develop these ideas. (TT).

To my knowledge, in the Budapest community gender exploration is not perceived similarly. Of the 30 classes advertised on the Con's website, for example, none focus on gender ("Hungarian BDSM Conference 2017," n.d.). The organizing team is led by two cisgender males and, while it may be sex-positive, it is not seen as "supportive of nontraditional dynamics." This polarity seems to indicate the state of gender understanding in both locales more broadly (Sen, 2016; Štulhofer & Sandfort, 2008, 5), which is reflected in how conversant practitioners are around ideas of gender.

4.3.a Conversance in Budapest and London

Thematic discourse analysis (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) indicated that nine out of 10 London partners were either conversant or very conversant with gender as a concept and in relation to kink. Only five of 10 Budapest partners were conversant with gender, and of those five, only two were very conversant – both of whom studied for a Master's at an American-style university. When asked to describe their genders, Budapest partners gave responses like:

I always get confused with, with, with questions about, uh, gender. So, I guess there are like multiple answers, possible answers for this, right, so... (YH).

I never understood the difference. Clearly there are boys and girls, that's what the world is like (GA).

I would say there are two differences between men and women, the first one men being physically stronger, the second women being able to, to be pregnant, it just seems to naturally divide into what the roles are into protector and protected (AM).

Answering the same question, London partners' responses showed a more reflexive understanding:

Gender? how much time do you have [laughs.] Currently floating somewhere between agenderism and gender nihilist (EG).

I identify as queer. [Laughter.] Uh, if that's, uh, useful. So for me that's a political stance, and a kind of way of viewing gender and sexuality that's I think a little bit more, uh, antagonistic maybe, and also a bit more playful (FH).

London partners also downplayed gender's role in choices of kinky corporeal comportment:

I tend not to care a lot about gender? Because if I am in a [play] situation where I like the person, where I like... what is happening, where I like what I am doing with this person, I tend not to care about her own gender (TT).

I feel to a large extent what I do [in BDSM] is gender agnostic, in terms of it could be identical if I was male or female or any other identifying (ZE).

Kink is almost like more important than gender, in some senses, like I feel like people are more interested in like playing with people who have similar interests, rather than like identifying gender first and then kink. Like I'm more interested in tying with another human who has like the same compatibilities with me (HI).

All three interview partners above claim the kinky activity is more important than a play partner's gender, mirroring how affect is mobilized around gender in the queer, trans, kink porn film "Nasty Love," in which the main characters "refuse to participate in gender identity naming based on static positions of identity," rejecting "stable" or referential categories in favor of affective connections (Steinbock, 2014, 759). Only Budapest partner ZS, who studies behavioral science at the university level, said kink "helps us to think about each other as people, not, not gender-based identities." However, while London partners seem more conversant with topics around gender than their Budapest-based counterparts, they may not be as conversant with gender theory itself.

4.3.b Performativity in London versus the 1800s in Hungary

Judith Butler describes performativity as a community-building mechanism amongst drag performers (Butler, 1993b). I believe the London kink community can also be argued to coalesce based in part around some notion of gender performativity, due to the discursively thematic frequency of the word in four interviews. London partner VJ used the term "performative" most frequently, in reference to both kink and gender. When I asked VJ what the word means, I received the following answer:

I'm trying to convey the concept that, there is... often a, a gender or a thing that you feel or do... but when you are doing it performatively it's less about doing it or feeling it or just being yourself and more about how others perceive you. So, somebody who is... masochistic, enjoys, pain. Enjoys feeling it. Some who is performatively masochistic will play in the middle of a room and scream every time they get hit. At the top of their lungs.

[...] So gender, you know someone who is feminine will you know wear skirts and dresses when the weather is appropriate. Someone who is performatively effeminate will wear like a pink poodle skirt, in London, in the winter.

Conflating *performativity* with *performing*, VJ's understanding runs directly against Butler's. Yet I am not so much interested in Butler's definition as I am in the fact that London partners mobilize the vocabulary, and seem to see gender theory as a signifier of open-mindedness:

So it [gender] kind of help you to become aware? of things and ideas and maybe you get interested in theory as well (TT).

It's not so much about... that kink people understand gender more, necessarily, but I think it's more just that again there's more and more people who are open to the idea of otherness? even if they don't necessarily have like a sort of academic or particularly evolved understanding of what these other things mean (EG).

Even if they are not "academic[ally]" cognizant of the theory, when London-based practitioners FH, EG, RU, and TT describe "play"/"playing" with gender, they view their embodiments like the "radical 'shifting' back and forth and 'playing with' gender expression" that actor Papí describes in "Nasty Love" (Steinbock, 2014, 753). This radical "shifting" depicts the affect-enabled becomings which open London-based practitioners to the affective corporeal comportment of their socially sexed and gendered bodies, constructing kink as an affective pivot for gender exploration (Harrington & Williams, 2012) while destabilizing sex wars feminists' juridical conception of stable, patriarchal power relations in BDSM.

Meanwhile in Budapest, kinksters manifested no understanding of gender performativity, true to theory or not. EW, the only Hungarian practitioner to mention Butler – but without introducing "performativity" – studied gender, and was frustrated that Butlerian notions were not more prevalent in the community. Instead, my thematic discourse analysis reveals partners' prevalent vocabulary fixated on the country's restrictions as compared to the "West" (YH, KQ, ZS, IH, EW), most notably utilizing the 1800s as a temporal marker of progress or stagnation. I argue Budapest kinksters used this marker to "stick" affect to a locus in discussions on gender.

The countries, uh as far as I can see, which are, which are closer... to the West, either, either uh geographically or politically, as far as I can see they have more, uh modern, um ideas. So, um... that's, that's, that's why I think that uh, for example when Hungary in the 19th century when we had one of our biggest revolutions, uh, we had very modern ideas, and uh we were improving. We were getting closer to the West. But it was 150 years ago (YH).

YH contrasts an 1800s cultural “evolution” to today, when Hungary seems “held back” from progress. Indeed, all 10 Hungarian partners described the sociocultural climate as limiting what a body can do in one way or another, and thus all 10 understood it as directly linked to what happens in the kink scene.

Specifically, because this climate works to keep notions of gender more constrained (Štulhofer & Sandfort, 2008, 5), kink play which challenges gender normativity is also constrained. Ideas of “traditional” (KQ) and “typical” (RZ) gender “roles” (AM, GA, ZS) often surfaced amongst partners, who uniformly agreed that kink was a place where gender could be explored, but were divided over the extent to which societal perceptions around gender in Hungary influence the kink community. Directly after GA said,

If you feel you, uh, being a dominant uh, uh position it ignites you, turns you on, why should it matter if you are a female? We are not in 1800s like females should shut up and go in the kitchen,

partner KQ maintained that Hungarian society wants to “go back to the 1800s,” noting that traditional male dominance and female compliance and dependence in wider Hungarian society exert an “old fashioned” influence on kinky life in Budapest.

Using the 1800s as reference point, three partners framed the notion of what Hungary, and Hungarian kink, is like. Where GA applied the century to show how perceptions of gender have changed, broadening the range of acceptable kinky play, for YH it represented a failed promise of progress, and for KQ it marked traditional Hungarian mentalities. While Budapest kinksters may

not maintain these mentalities, they effect the scene nonetheless – indicating how influential a kink community’s surrounding cultural norms are in defining its ideas of advancement.

4.4 Discussion

In this chapter, I have provided both theoretical and empirical analyses to support my argument that, instead of forming based on stable, exclusionary identities, BDSM communities might utilize affective affinities to form and hold together around two things: practices of belonging, and understandings of gender. I have refuted a politics based on the supposed solidity of identity, arguing that sexual identity, always in a state of Deleuzian becoming, can never be “discrete and knowable,” (Puar, 2017, 4). In place of such supposed solidity, I have explored two affective relations which arise through kink, connecting the BDSM community without necessitating it fit within rigidly kinknormative structures. Communities form affective connections around ways of belonging, and through ways of understanding and relating to gender; these differ broadly between Budapest and London, diverging around issues of consent, education, leaders’ “civilizing” missions, and conversance with conceptions of gender.

While the ready availability of education in London, and Anatomie’s educational function specifically, supports an international culture of education and exploration, Budapest, despite the wealth of teaching provided at the Con, reflects a kink culture struggling with parochiality. Across differences between my fieldwork locations, both reflect how BDSM becomes a place for debates over what it means to be civilized in sexual practice within a localized context. Each community’s leaders are on civilizing missions – one to reflect diversity, female empowerment, gender exploration, and reflexivity; the other to increase Hungarian recognition and build belonging on a regional and transnational scale. These differing missions depend upon each community’s cultural

context, detailed in Chapter two. Both Budapest's struggle to negotiate between "Eastern" European nationalism (Kopeček and Wciślik, 2015), regional connectedness (Gal, 1991), and "Western" values (Kopeček and Wciślik, 2015; Takács, 2014) such as a progressive outlook on gender; and London's "Western" European fixation on diversity (Vertovec, 2005; Wessendorf, 2017), inclusivity, and gender mainstreaming (Sen, 2016) highlight the ongoing struggles of the societies in which each community is located, and illustrate that there is no one kink, kinky identity, nor praxis, but a set of affective embodiments dependent on culture, time, and place.

Conclusion

In this comparative thesis⁸⁸ I have investigated how BDSM counterpublics problematically mobilize exclusionary identity categories, and argued that the affective affinities which already exist between kinksters locally, online, and internationally provide an opening through which kinky communities can form around ideas of belonging and conversations on gender, instead of resorting to identitarian divisiveness. I have done so in four chapters. The first reviewed relevant literature, stitching theories across the fields of sexology, psychoanalysis, gender studies, and ethnography. In Chapter two I moved into a methodological assessment, situating myself and avowing my own positionality before detailing my situated fieldwork locations. I then discussed my feminist, embodied, interdisciplinary praxis for participant observation and semi-structured interviews in each “community,” a useful, if problematic term for describing the multiple layers of affective social relations between BDSM practitioners locally and transnationally (Szulc, 2017).

In my third chapter, I illustrated the problem with using identity as a tool for community formation by exploring the ways identity functions to create exclusionary normativities. I showed the divisiveness of debates over abnormality and vanilla sexuality, and developed the idea of *kinknormativity*, unique from other normativities, which supports psychopathological understandings of deviant sexuality linking the validity of informed consent to social privilege. In my fourth and final chapter, I undertook the bulk of my comparative, affective, discourse-analytic investigation into my empirical data, arguing that affective relations around belonging and gender provide a much more promising lens than identity for investigating BDSM community formation.

⁸⁸ Given the limited timeframe and word count, my goal has not been to thoroughly compare Budapest and London. Instead, I have aimed to empirically and discursively investigate how affect works to bond BDSM communities in both of my fieldwork sites.

I explained the ways in which, under the guidance of their leaders' civilizing missions, London and Budapest utilize events and education to build similarly affective communities, but differ over the availability of education and understandings of gender, in line with broader social struggles in their respective countries.

This thesis calls for future research in, and hopes to make contributions to, several scholarly and political causes. Continuing to bring BDSM into academic research, working to “kink the academy” – especially through scholar-practitioner-ship – is one ongoing goal. Contributing to kink scholarship within the affective turn by showing how kink and affect's shared rubrics of corporeality and sensation allow scholarly insight is another. I also hope to have illustrated how applying interdisciplinary theories and methods to BDSM can begin conversations and open spaces for discussion around this fruitful ground for research. Following Jasbir Puar, I hope these conversations will move away from discourse around de/pathologizing kink, perhaps instead adding to academic work on gender performativity and gender identity, as well as compounding work around ethnographies of kinky subcultures. Finally, I am optimistic that my open, ambiguous definition of BDSM has successfully modeled a response to my argument even as I have built both argument and response, reflexively refusing to construct exclusionary boundaries on what kink is, how it should be practiced, and by whom, leaving the sign open for affect.

Appendix 1

List of Interviews

I do not disclose interview partners' age, job title, or other common identifiers because for the purposes of this analysis, these are not determining factors. After location, S = Skype interview, and E = email. "Known?" indicates whether the researcher knew the partner prior to the interview. "Years" indicates self-reported length of time the partner has been participating in BDSM.

No.	Location	Date	Name	Sex	Known?	Years
1	London (S)	5 November, 2017	IH	F	N	4
2	London	14 December, 2017	ZE	M	Y	14
3	London (S)	17 January, 2018	EG	F	N	11
4	London (S)	24 January, 2018	RU	M	Y	2
5	London (S)	6 February, 2018	VJ	F	N	7
6	London (S)	12 February, 2018	DM	F	N	2
7	London (S)	23 February, 2018; 6 March, 2018	TT	F	N	1
8	London (E)	6 April, 2018; 7 April, 2018	LO	F	N	25
9	London	23 April, 2018	MO	M	Y	14
10	London	23 April, 2018	HI	F	Y	6
1	Budapest (S)	22 November, 2017	YH	M	Y	6
2	Budapest	19 January, 2018	GA	M	N	6
3	Budapest	25 January, 2018	KQ	M	Y	11
4	Budapest	5 February, 2018	AM	M	Y	9 mo.
5	Budapest	9 February, 2018	ZS	F	N	3
6	Budapest	12 March, 2018	IY	F	Y	4
7	Budapest	21 March, 2018	RZ	M	N	4
8	Budapest	23 March, 2018	CL	M	N	4
9	Budapest (E)	5 April, 2018; 9 April, 2018	WA	M	N	3
10	Budapest (S)	18 April, 2018	EW	F	N	1

Transcription Conventions

Word followed by comma (,) = short pause

Word followed by en dash (-) = self-interruption

Ellipses (...) = long pause

Bracketed ellipses [...] = words omitted

Repeated words and vocal ticks are transcribed.

Bracketed descriptions such as [laughter] included to convey extratextual features.

Appendix 2

List of events attended

Budapest:

HunCon Meet & Greet. Rizmajer Sörház, József Körút 14, Budapest.

9 November 2017

HunCon. József Körút 60, Budapest.

10-12 November 2017

Back to School BDSM Party. Fészek, Kossuth Lajos Utca 20, Budapest.

8 September, 2018

Rooster BDSM Party. Trafik Klub, Mikszáth Kálmán Tér 2, Budapest.

27 January, 2018

National BDSM Feast Party. Trafik Klub, Mikszáth Kálmán Tér 2, Budapest.

10 March, 2018

London:

Performance night. Anatomie Studio, 7-17 Latona Road, Peckham, London.

20 October 2017

Tuesday Rope Jam. Anatomie Studio, 7-17 Latona Road, Peckham, London.

24 October 2017

3 April, 2018

17 April, 2018

24 April, 2018

London Fetish Fair. The Renaissance Rooms, Wandsworth Road, Vauxhall, London.

8 April, 2018

Appendix 3

Written introduction sent to interview partners

I'm Heath, otherwise known in the scene as ItsPlay or IP.⁸⁹ I've known I was into kink for years, before I knew what it was called or that there was a community doing it. I first started finding community in Los Angeles, when I attended a kink club night called *Club Hell* in 2010, and I took my first kink class, "Kink 101" at *The Stockroom* in Los Angeles in 2012. At Burning Man 2012 I began looking at kink culture as a potential topic for study for my then upcoming MA at Goldsmiths University of London in Performance and Culture. Upon moving to London in September 2012, I jumped into the community and began making kinky friends, attending munches, classes, parties, performance nights, and rope meet-ups. I studied my favorite kink, *kinbaku* (also known as *shibari*, or Japanese rope bondage) as the subject of my MA dissertation. When I moved to Hong Kong after finishing my MA, I entered the community there, going from participant to conference presenter to part of the organizing team of the Hong Kong Kink Con during the three years I lived in the territory. I then traveled for six months visiting kink communities in Asia and Europe, informally conducting research and working as the promoter for a sex educator and activist named Kristina Marlen. Now I live in Budapest and am again studying kink, this time for my current MA in Gender Studies.

⁸⁹ The majority of interview partners utilize Fetlife. On that site, my profile is accessible under the name ItsPlay. This profile also contains a link to my website, itsplay.weebly.com. So, a fairly large amount of information about me is available.

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