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Powerful Exchanges: Ritual and Subjectivity in Berlin's BDSM Scene

Martin, Richard Joseph

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POWERFUL EXCHANGES:

RITUAL AND SUBJECTIVITY IN BERLIN'S BDSM SCENE

Richard Joseph Martin

A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation provides an anthropological account of the BDSM Scene in Berlin, Germany, based on fourteen months of in-depth participant observational field research conducted among practitioners of consensual sadomasochism (SMlers) between May 2008 and July 2009. SMlers enter into "exchanges of power," practicing a kind of hierarchical relationship of dominance and submission, but they do so within the context of a society that officially privileges egalitarianism. The study explores the ways in which SMlers navigate this experiential incommensurability, whereby BDSM practices subvert the ideologies of individualism on which they nonetheless depend.

This dissertation, framed as an exegetical ethnography of discursive encounter, centers analysis on the ways in which practices that seem paradoxical in one discursive frame would become intelligible in another, even as contextual considerations prevent such frames from being fully utilized. Thus, the study finds that SMlers' ritual practices are articulated in the language of individualism, a discourse to which ritualism is ordinarily opposed. Furthermore, power exchange is conceivable as a kind of gift relation, but cannot readily be articulated as such because these exchanges occur in contexts where people tend to conceptualize exchange in terms of commodities. Both of these findings have significant implications for the ways in which agency can be understood, drawing attention, ethnographically, to the limits of liberal conceptualizations of the individual. Likewise, SMlers' practices of "play" complicate performative notions of ontology: they disrupt the modernist opposition privileging sincerity over subjunctivity by embracing both of these forms at once.

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Introduction

Enabling Frames:

Openings for an Ethnography of Discursive Encounter

"How many people today live in a language that is not their own?"

- Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*

Prelude:

"Let us read between the lines"

I entered the kingdom shortly after midnight. I entered alone: the friend I was meeting was already inside. Nobody was there to greet me at the portal; there was only a large gong, with instructions to sound it upon arrival. I tapped it with my hand, but the sound did not carry. Nobody came. I hit it again, louder, but still nothing. There was a closed doorway to the left, and curtains blocking the remainder of the entrance. I peered through an opening of the curtains, all the way to the right, but didn't see anyone. This outer circle was empty. But then I was noticed by a court jester, clad only in a bikini bottom and a dunce cap, who kept pointing, dramatically, at the gong. I walked over to it, hit it again, and looked at her with exasperation. She shook her head and kept pointing, but all I could do was to stare back at her helplessly. Frustrated, she stomped her foot and scurried over, picking up the mallet, which I somehow hadn't noticed hanging underneath. She mimed hitting the gong with the

mallet, but did not strike it herself. She then placed the mallet back under the gong, looking at me to ensure I had comprehended what was to be done. I nodded, and she scampered back behind the curtain, all the while not having said a word.

When I sounded the gong with the mallet, it thundered. A young man emerged from behind the curtain and introduced himself as the master of ceremonies. I paid my twenty Euros and he told me to wait and that shortly I would be escorted into the kingdom. He went into the doorway on the left and I stood there alone. I was about to ring the gong again when out of the doorway popped a unicorn, dressed in purple, who told me that it was time for me to enter. She was ready for me.

Inside the doorway was a changing room of sorts. We were not alone. The friend whom I'd been meeting, Isaac[1], a twenty-something Israeli, was sitting on a chair in the far corner of the room. People's street clothes were piled neatly along the floor to one side of the room. On the other side was a large rack of costumes and accessories of all sorts. I walked over to the rack, asking the unicorn if I could choose anything from what was hanging. "You may not choose anything at all," she responded: "it is I who put the outfits together. My job is to clothe you, to prepare you for an audience with the king. Have a seat."[2] I did not like this set up at all, but the unicorn didn't seem to notice my discomfort, as she was busy putting the finishing touches on Isaac. For him, she had selected a black dress, and now she was trying to

[1] Throughout this text, I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the SMlers with whom I worked. In an effort to protect identities, sometimes multiple names are used for the same person, and sometimes the same name is used to cover multiple people.

[2] Quotations in English are reconstructions of conversations based on field notes which were written up on the day on and/or after fieldwork interactions occurred. Though this particular conversation was in English (which was the official language of the Kingdom), most field interactions were in German, so that my reconstructions are thus also translations. German quotations, however, are verbatim; my use of German in these instances indicates terminology or phraseology deemed particularly note-worthy.

find the right headpiece to go with it. She decided that a red bandana simply wouldn't do, settling ultimately on a masquerade mask and magenta wrap. The unicorn turned to me, inspecting me for a moment before returning to the clothes. She handed me a black skirt, a leopard midriff-baring top and black heels. She accessorized me with a jacket and top hat, which made me feel completely ridiculous. If I told her I didn't like something, she took no notice, but I discovered that there was in fact a way to get her to remove a piece of unwanted garb and select something else. "The jacket and top hat *don't speak to me*," I told her, managing that delicate balance of getting my point across while still indicating that I was playing along. She removed them promptly, and handed me a shawl. I tried my luck again with the unicorn, telling her I did not know how to walk in high heels. "You'll learn," she said, and informed us that our outfits were complete.

The unicorn stood us in front of the mirror and asked us to select names for ourselves. Isaac decided on Alexandria. I couldn't come up with anything, but the shawl made me feel like a bird, so I said "Sparrow." She accepted the names we had chosen, and led us into the outer sanctum, where we were to await our audience with the king. The inner sanctum was a large arena marked off by partitions with one empty panel for entrance. From where we were, we could not see what was happening inside. There were some others in the outer sanctum, a few gathered around the bar, drinking juice or water or beer, and munching on snacks. In the far corner was a couple, seated on a sofa, making out and stroking each other. I had a sense that all the "real action" was happening inside, so I anxiously awaited my audience with the king, which would mark my entrance into the inner sanctum.

While we were awaiting the king's permission to enter, the unicorn instructed us to be prepared to tell the king a story about ourselves, that we should be able to answer biographical questions to His Majesty's satisfaction. She also asked us think of a gift that we could offer His Majesty as a token of appreciation for his audience. Isaac and I did not speak when the unicorn took her leave of us. We were busy in our heads concocting our biographies. Sparrow was descended from the half-human, half-bird creatures of the rainforests. These creatures possessed an ancient magic, and so my gift would be to sing down the light of a star into a cup of any liquid which, when drunk, would instill in the person who imbibed it a vision of something that was to be, something that would come to pass. To turn one into a prophet, a seer, a gift fit for a king…

The unicorn returned, calling Alexandria into the inner sanctum. I could not see what was transpiring. But I could hear, and it wasn't pretty. His Majesty was not at all pleased with Alexandria. "You don't like the wrap?" asked the unicorn, timidly. "I don't like the wrap, I don't like the dress, I don't like the whole outfit. He shouldn't be a she. He should be a *he*. Take him away, and bring him back as a he!" Alexandria was whisked away to the dressing room. On their way out, the unicorn turned to me and said: "the king will see you now."

That I was petrified must have been apparent, because the first thing His Majesty asked me, very gently, was "are you afraid?" "I don't know," I replied, at which point the king instructed me to tell him about myself. I said that I was Sparrow, and that I had journeyed from the rainforests. I started to explain that I had another identity as well, that of an anthropologist, but the king stopped me. "Here," he said,

"you are only Sparrow[3]." The king made Sparrow an adopted prince. He took him around the kingdom, introducing him as such. In the kingdom, everyone lives according to a hierarchy, so the status of adopted prince helped me both follow the rules and remain comfortable. The king, of course, has much experience and wisdom in these matters, and my fear was really just an indication that I had not yet learned to trust in him, but these things have to be learned. After Sparrow's introduction at court, the king invited him to ascend to the throne and, with a bird's eye view, watch the action happening across the kingdom. It was quite an honor, really, to be allowed to sit on the throne. His Majesty was known to punish people who approached it without permission.

Isaac returned, this time as Tobias, a sailor. The king was pleased with this new incarnation, and asked the sailor what gift he had to offer. Tobias presented the king with an invisible mirror, but His Majesty was not satisfied. He sent Tobias away, telling him to return when he had a better gift. Moments later, Tobias emerged from the outer sanctum, this time carrying a rose, which he said symbolized strength, beauty and wisdom. This time the king was pleased, and so he offered to grant Tobias a wish, a fantasy. The king picked up a notebook that was lying on the throne, turned it to a blank page, and asked Tobias to write out his request. When he was finished, Tobias stood before the throne and read the request aloud: "I have journeyed to the kingdom because I wish to discover its true meaning. Please help me find the true meaning of the kingdom." "That is very nice," said the king, at which point, one of the men sitting

[3] Prior and subsequent encounters led me to interpret this statement not as a refusal to allow the conducting of participant-observational research, but rather an insistence that my presence be in character so as not to in anyway hamper the experience for others by the introduction of an outside frame into the space of the kingdom.

around the throne shouted “read between the lines!” Everyone who was at the throne joined in chorus, shouting this phrase. “Yes,” said the king, “let us read between the lines.”

The man who started the chant picked up the notebook, and, running his fingers across the page, read what was “written” between the lines of Tobias’ prose: “I have journeyed to the kingdom because I wish to give myself completely to His Majesty, to submit to his desires. Please accept my offer of total submission.” “Total submission,” repeated the king: “that is a great offering indeed.” The king decided to grant his wish by accepting this offering, and told Tobias he would be shut up in a box, where he might learn the meaning of the kingdom – a vision quest of sorts. The box would be locked, but all Tobias had to do was knock on it, and it would be opened. Tobias remained in the box for quite some time, and he was checked up on periodically. In the meantime, his Majesty had turned his attention to the court jester, and was in the process of applying large clamps to her back, pulling together and stretching out every inch of available skin. The unicorn reappeared, and suggested that I too might ask the king to grant *me* a wish. Instead, once the jester’s skin clamping had finished, I asked him permission to descend from the throne, which was granted. As I stretched my wings and flew away to another part of the kingdom, the court jester began using the clamps, putting them on the back of the king.

Though the kingdom was a fantastical place, it was located somewhere that might be considered, at first glance, less so: Berlin, in the borough (*Bezirk*) of Wedding, a mostly Turkish neighborhood, at a factory building with large ceilings that had been converted into a large performance space. The organization hosting the party,

Schwelle 7, is run by a choreographer. Generally, this organization known for its cutting-edge combinations of performance art with BDSM, an acronym which – doing a number of double duties – stands for bondage and discipline (BD), domination and submission (DS), and sadism and masochism (SM); it occupies one niche in Berlin's diverse and vibrant scene, or *Szene*. This particular party, "United Kingdom," took place once a month during the spring and summer of 2008, but there were always events occurring at *Schwelle 7*, from BDSM-yoga classes to dance performances to reading groups to massage sessions. Most of the work coming out of this group combines BDSM and performance in some fashion, although some events focus on eroticism more broadly. *Schwelle 7* caters to a pansexual crowd, meaning that it appeals to heterosexuals and homosexuals, which is significant because the straight and gay scenes in Berlin are kept mostly separate; at this particular party, most of the playing was heterosexually oriented. Another significant feature of this organization is that it attracts an especially international crowd. We were in Germany, but the official language of the kingdom was English, although His Majesty and the court jester communicated with each other only in French.

The kingdom, then, was a kingdom encompassed. The changing-room portal was not just any doorway, but the marker of a sanctified space, which was at once apart from the ordinary world and within it. This encompassment is not simply the literal circumscription of topography, geographic and jurisdictional; neither is it simply the imposition of an anthropological analysis: rather, the discourse and logic of encompassment is central both to the ways BDSM practices operate and to the ways in which practitioners of BDSM, known in Berlin as SMlers, articulate their activities.

For example, the premise of the kingdom depended on the idea that, within this world, everyone would have a place in a hierarchical order at the head of which was the king, through whom one's part to play was bestowed. The bestowal of this order was predicated, in turn, on differentiated and asymmetrical power dynamics, again with the king's word presented as absolutely authoritative.

This specific figuration refracts more generally the logic of BDSM practices, to which SMlers refer as exchanges of power. These power exchanges emerge through the assumption of asymmetrical positions, such as tops and bottoms, dominants and submissives – positions which display and communicate these thus-produced performative power differentials. Yet, these positional enactments are consciously framed through the articulation of a context in which they are both circumscribed and rendered null. That is, just as the kingdom is constructed within a juridical-political space in which people adhere to an ideology of liberal or neoliberal democracy, so to do SMlers deploy a discourse of consent when representing their practices to themselves and to others. They note that BDSM is consensual by definition; thus, BDSM can only occur within egalitarian contexts where the choice to submit is possible as such, so that where such role differentials are prescribed or enforceable by law, one must not speak of BDSM (on this point SMlers mostly agree), but of structural violence. Yet structural violence, as the evocation of a monarchical kingdom suggests, forms an imaginative, symbolic basis, a repertoire of sorts, through which these performative practices take shape. The power exchanges of BDSM are therefore practicable only on the concomitant conditions of their juridical impossibility and socio-cultural salience. This dual conditionality makes comprehensible the efficacy

and intelligibility of these practices as a distinct form of sociality, one that is at once transnational and subcultural.

The world of BDSM is a world articulated through a language of encompassment, a language through which what is encompassed is not afforded the same ontological status as that of the world by which it is circumscribed. SMlers articulate this encompassment by referring to what they do as play, a designation that is experientially fraught in a modernist world, because these practices are understood simultaneously as serious and as play in the context of a dominant worldview in which the notion of "serious play" is understood to be oxymoronic. The ideology that makes these two terms mutual exclusive renders equally unintelligible the idea of voluntary submission on which the consensual character of these practices is predicated. The paradoxes underpinning these practices are therefore at once ethnographic and theoretical, and it is precisely in the interstices of that intersection that this dissertation attempts to intervene.

Sparrow flew back to the outer sanctum, becoming remarkably adept at moving in heels. Isaac rejoined me, and we sat down to talk about his experience. I asked him how he enjoyed being in the box. "I'm glad I did it," he replied: "but it's not really my kick." An interesting idea, this "kick," as in "getting one's kicks," experiencing that which is especially arousing: in a way it seemed odd to me that Isaac claimed not to know what precisely his kick was, since he knew enough about what it was he was after to travel to this place, "out of the way" both literally and figuratively: we were far outside the city's center, where most clubs could be found, and far outside the mainstream establishments where people in their twenties go to fulfill their erotic

desires. Isaac and I were at a sadomasochistic performance party netherworld, a long way from Kansas, or rather Israel and Princeton, as the case may be, respectively. So although Isaac knew enough about his "kick" to come to this particular party, he still had the sense that he didn't know sufficiently what it was he was looking for, what it was that would really get him going. He felt that it was there, waiting to be found, he said, if only he looked hard enough.

Equally interesting is the way in which Isaac's quest for his kick subverts modernist discourses of the interiority of the self as the origin of volition: this kick is not to be found by looking within, to what is inside him already, but to looking without, to an engagement with others. Desire here is to be found somewhere else, realized through someone else. In allowing another to "read between the lines," Isaac takes his own literal words not to be the guarantor of his wish, but instead enables an interpretation from without to be the basis on which the "meaning" of his words, and thus his desires, is to be discerned. In such an encounter, tops and bottoms alike must grapple with an imperative predicated on a relational ethics: how to submit in such a way so as to fulfill rather than negate the self? How to dominate in such a way as to enhance rather than diminish one's partner? Agency here does not seem to consist in speaking for oneself, but in being spoken for by another in a satisfactory fashion: appropriation without alienation. Or at least that is the idea(l): Isaac did not realize his desire by being shut in that particular box, making quite literal the anxiety or danger in an exegetical accounting that consists in such a reading between the lines: to be shut away in so many boxes into which one doesn't feel one belongs. Perhaps this moment, this reading between the lines, this picking up of the notebook seemed so profound to

me because of its uncanny resemblance to the task of an anthropologist, dramatizing so poignantly the promises and the pitfalls of a profession predicated on the interpretive appropriation of others' words. One site of convergence, then, between the concerns of SMlers and those of scholars, hinges on questions as to the possibility of engaging others according to an ethics that would enable an understanding of appropriation without alienation.

Isaac's reflections on getting his kicks were interrupted. Then, not by my narration but by a man who held out a golden cup containing what appeared to be large white mints. "Would you like one?" he asked Isaac. "What are they?" he asked in reply. "They are white tablets, and that's all you need to know." Isaac hesitated, uncertain as to whether he should accept the offer and consume an unknown substance. He took too long to decide, though, and the man pulled back the cup and walked away. Here, Isaac lacked the trust necessary to partake in the white tablets; we were never to find out what, exactly, they were, because Isaac couldn't bring himself to overcome the risk or danger in eating something when he didn't know what it was. To do so would be to overcome one of the earliest forms of socialization – the parental injunction not to take candy from strangers – but alas: no overcoming, no kick. Isaac lamented that he didn't find his kick inside the box. He was thinking of asking the woman who was dressed as a General if she would whip him. Maybe flagellation would turn out to be his thing. He wasn't sure, he said.

Several significant themes emerge in this exchange: the transgression of a norm as a basis of erotic efficacy, the articulation of trust as a basis for interpersonal power-asymmetric engagement, and safety, sanity, and risk as bases for the calculus of

consent. These topics will emerge repeatedly, and in different domains, in the pages that follow. Here, I'd like only to flag their problematization as symptomatic of an uneasy entanglement with the ideology of individualism, an issue that will emerge as central to this study. Indeed, the key claim of this work, to be developed in the second half of the introduction, consists in articulating the ways in which SMlers' practices disrupt the individualist ideological framework upon which modernist – and, especially, liberal – thought is predicated. Concomitantly, and likewise implicit in the offer of the unmarked tablets, an examination of these practices suggests circumstances in which an Enlightenment-inspired emphasis on demystification is ultimately unsatisfactory in the analysis of lived worlds. Notice that the man did not reveal to us what those tablets really were: what is essential here, and in BDSM more broadly, is not the truth underneath the enchantment, but the experience of enchantment as a social fact. This dissertation offers glimpses into life after *Entzauberung*, and what social-scientific approaches to such life might entail.

Although I (an anthropologist) was perfectly content listening to Isaac's stories about his kick, he wasn't about to let me off the hook. He turned the spotlight my way and asked: "What is *your* kick?" It was a question I was used to getting, one many people asked me, although I could never seem to answer it to anyone's satisfaction. It was a fair question. We were after all at a sex party, and he had been openly sharing with me. When asked this question, I always emphasized that the reasons for my presence were distinctive, that I was there – at the party and in Berlin – under the aegis of anthropology. I expressed the purpose of my presence as participant-observer according to the terms that were professionally expected: I was there, I said, to

conduct a study of the BDSM scene in Berlin. Yet, for the SMlers, professional explanations did not suffice. What they wanted was a *personal* explanation, one that would account for my interest in this *particular* topic. At stake, here, is the question of what motives count and for whom, and in what contexts intellectual explanations of interest are and are not sufficient. For instance, ever since I began studying in Berlin, people there have asked (quite regularly and complexion notwithstanding) whether I have German ancestry. When I answer that I do not, these interlocutors tend to be taken aback: "How did you learn German then? *Why* did you learn German then?" What registers in these conversations is the way in which further explanation is deemed necessary each time a conventional expectation is not fulfilled. And although when it comes to questions of national origin, one's own answers tend to be taken at face value, in matters of erotic identification, the discourse of the unconscious enables others to circumvent auto-assertions. Once, an interlocutor went so far as to say that "though you *say* your reasons for being here are primarily academic, *unconsciously* I am sure that the opposite is true, and perhaps you just haven't realized it yet."

Throughout fieldwork, I always insisted that I did not identify as an SMler: that I did not attend events in the SM scene at home and that my engagement with the scene in Berlin was as a researcher, scientist, participant-observer. Although I attributed this insistence on an ethical imperative not to risk gaining access through over-identification, others saw it differently. One interlocutor put it thusly: "We all have our ways into SM, and everyone's path is different. And this is yours." That much may be true, of course, but what is significant here is that just as there is a conventional range or repertoire of how to get one's kicks in BDSM, the same could be said of academic

argumentation. Anthropologists might get such "kicks," for example, by using their ethnographic observations to show the limits of some aspect of "conventional" wisdom. In every genre, expectations shape – but do not determine – the possibility of what is communicable and how. Reflexivity, then, might be thought as a critical engagement with the limits of convention, a dwelling at the point where it becomes possible and necessary to articulate that which otherwise would and could not have been said. That point is the point of encompassment, the point of circumscription, and the point at which, for example, meta-reflections on practice become comprehensible as conditions of the practice itself. One of the undercurrents of this dissertation consists in a meditation on questions of how and why to speak and write in a world where one is, as Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980) put it, always already "caught." The particularities of this undercurrent reflect the specific circumstances of an ethnographic engagement with SMlers in Berlin, for whom *Meta-Ebene* (meta-level) is, after all, an indigenous term.

But I hope the insights proffered in this work will be of interest, for example, to others grappling with issues pertaining to discursive inadequacies, especially those of modernist ideologies, and the implications thereof for theoretical/methodological problems underlying epistemologies of encounter. Yet, rather than stipulate "key conversations" into which this dissertation intervenes, what I hope for the reception of this work is that others will find it useful to think with when pursuing their own anthropological commitments, that they will feel encouraged to "read between the lines," following pathways yet uncharted and unforeseen. Thus, although I oftentimes tie together conversations, I do not want to give the sense that boxes can be neatly shut,

or that my own lines of analysis can or should become a "final" word. Although, in the pages that follow, I pursue a number of ideas, I'll be the first to admit that there is much more to be said, and, no doubt, much more to be seen. Indeed, I didn't even notice – although it was right in front of me – the mallet hanging under the gong.

Textual (Dis)orientations:

A Book on the Table

During the summer of 2007, I attended a weekend-long workshop series. The workshops entailed discussions, as well as the cultivation of practical techniques involving BDSM and performance. The SMlers who gathered at this event came from around the city, other locations in Germany, and abroad, including the Netherlands, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, to spend three days in a converted factory (the same space, that would, a year later, become that of the kingdom described above). The geography seemed out of joint somehow; yet, this spatial dislocation might be read as a signpost of a more fundamental unsettling.

A portion of the second floor was constructed as a café and lounge area, where participants could sit and chat during the intervals between sessions, or during times when they wanted to break. In one corner, there were couches and chairs surrounding two coffee tables. On one were placed brochures advertising not only the particular organization hosting the conference, but also Germany's national BDSM *Verein*, or legally incorporated organization. Pamphlets were dedicated to topics ranging from BDSM art to medical resources – helping practitioners, for example, to find kink aware

physicians in their area, that is, doctors who do not read play-induced markings on the patient's body as signs of abuse or endangerment, to a hotline dedicated to emergencies resulting from scenes gone bad – in case of instances where play has crossed a line into reality – sort of an SM-specific version of domestic violence counseling. On the other table lay a dozen books, mainly how-to books or books describing the BDSM scene– *The Topping Book, The Bottoming Book, The Seductive Art of Japanese Bondage, Different Loving, SM 101*.[4] Many of the books were written in English. Yet my eye was drawn to one in particular: *Das Ritual*, the German translation of Victor Turner's (1969) book *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. It was recognizable at once, this text, familiar to me from my days as an anthropology undergraduate at Columbia University, when, in my introduction to anthropology course its central chapter, "Liminality and Communitas," was assigned as representing a key moment in the historical development of anthropological thought. Yet here it was in 2007, on a table in Berlin, among people who were mostly not even academics, alongside the how-to guides and auto-accounts. At first glance, it would seem out of context, out of place; and yet here it was on display, on the coffee table, a statement as to "who it is we are." What does it mean that this group was using, in a display to represent themselves, a classic text in the anthropology of ritual? Among other things, this dissertation is about

[4] In Berlin, texts play a key role in the acquisition of BDSM identities. The importance of books was emphasized in life-course narratives offered by many of my interlocutors in interviews, as well as the Einsteigertreffen, the meeting group for beginners, where books and magazines were displayed and recommended. The most important of these works was *Die Wahl der Qual: Handbuch für Sadomasochisten und solche, die es werden wollen*" (The Choice of Torture/Agony: Handbook for Sadomasochists and those who would like to become one) (Passig and Strübel 2004). The title plays on the common phrase "*Die Qual der Wahl*" (the agony/torture of choice). Chapters include information on issues ranging from theories of etiology and psychological classifications to the history of the subculture to interviews and practical discussions about "outing."

the possibilities that emerge when one places a book like Turner's on a table such as that one.

It is not simply that ritual, as one lens among others, sheds light on the phenomenon of BDSM. Rather, the placement of the book revealed something much deeper about the ways in which these practices more generally disrupt oppositions of the seemingly incommensurable: the relevance of "archaic" theory to this "contemporary" subculture, this conjunction of the discursively opposed, is one instance of a broader dynamic central to sadomasochistic practice. So much of what happens in these activities entails the instantiation of apparent paradox: consensual power asymmetries, egalitarian hierarchies, and agency-in-submission bring together terms that are ordinarily understood as mutually exclusive oppositions; yet, SMlers articulate their activities in these very terms, providing an experiential challenge to the discursive frameworks that would render these forms incompossible. The matter is more complicated still, though, because – as my ethnography will show – SMlers do not deny or dismiss these oppositions, but instead are very much cognizant of and invested in them. That is, they avow that hierarchy is ordinarily the obverse of egalitarianism, and understand what they do as a subversion of this opposition, which otherwise and nevertheless remains intact. They mark their activities as overriding, through consent, the incompatibility that renders their practices intelligible and efficacious in the first place. Participants in BDSM may call themselves slaves and masters, but they do not endorse "real" slavery, even as their terminology and symbolism depend on the historicity of that reality from which they emphatically

depart. In so many ways, then, BDSM practices displace key conceptual oppositions by placing both terms to one side.

Ritual, this dissertation suggests, is a key term in one such opposition, and not just one such term among others. Turner's book does not seem out of place on an SMler's coffee table just because it is academic, or just because it is "classical," but rather and more importantly because ritual itself has come to be understood as antithetical to the modernist valorization of the individual. *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*, ritual externality versus subjective interiority, hierarchy versus egalitarianism, status versus contract, all of these frameworks correlate so that, in every instance, a contemporary, Western, urban, and secular form of social life would conventionally be expected to be discussed according the latter term, the one associated with the individualist ideology characteristic of the liberal imagination upon which modern societies depend. Yet, as I shall argue throughout this dissertation, the frames of modernity cannot adequately make intelligible these practices, which are nonetheless in and of the modern.

Powerful Exchanges shows how the modernist opposition between ritualism and individualism fails to account for the lives and practices of SMlers, as I encountered them in early 21st century Berlin. This failure is attributable to the fact that, as this work suggests, SMlers engage in ritual practices but do so using a discursive framework privileging subjectivity. Likewise, I contend, the "exchanges of power" characteristic of BDSM activities are gift relations, but they get articulated using the discursive framework of commodities. Crucially, though, these forms of conceptual disjuncture are essential to their experiential efficacy, so that the paradoxes

on which these practices are predicated are integral to their analysis. The paradoxes do not get overcome, for they form the conditions under which it is possible for BDSM practices to be understood and experienced as such.[5] Consensual sadomasochism is, in the words of Mary Douglas, all about "matter out of place."

Some readers might be surprised by the evocation of a thinker like Douglas in a study such as this one, considering what could be called a conservative bent to her work: *Natural Symbols*, for example, can be read in large part as a critique of reforms such as those of Vatican II. "Shades of Luther!" she writes (1996:1, see also esp. pp. 39-56). But the citation of Douglas in this way is not without precedent. For a resonant reading, one could look, for example, to Judith Butler's "poststructuralist appropriation" of *Purity and Danger* in her own, now classic, opus *Gender Trouble* (1999: 166-9). One might say that creative (mis)reading (in the Harold-Bloom-*Anxiety-of-Influence* sense) is a constitutive basis of intellectual genealogy-formation, as one idea, breaking from its original context, incites and inspires new ones, each inspiration itself becoming an artifact in the construction of intellectual histories[6]. The challenge is to display sensitivity to context, but to do so without making "out of context" necessarily synonymous with "out of bounds."[7] Put another way, deterritorialization is not tantamount to decontextualization. One might thus distinguish between context and "context" so as to differentiate between the potentially

[5] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, who writes: "A problem is determined only by the singular points which express its conditions. We do not say that the problem is thereby resolved; on the contrary, it is determined as a problem" (1990: 54).

[6] On the salience of Bloom, see Boon on Benedict (1999: 28) and Kushner on himself (1996: 158); for an alternative perspective on literary history, see Bakhtin (1986: 7).

[7] On the dangers of de-contextualization, see Boon (1999: 191-7; 211-20).

infinite ways particularities might be contextualized, and the more limited, expected range of configurations in which they normally are.

In the field, the illuminative potential of such out-of-"context" inspirations were apparent in SMlers' own use of poststructuralist texts, as when one SMler, Edward, commented that "we know from Judith Butler that gender is a performance." This take was not, as is Butler, concerned with Austinian notions of performativity. As Edward explained it, gender being "a performance" meant that one is free to perform one's gender however one wishes, that one is not limited to biology. It was a different kind of reading than that to which academics might be accustomed: it did not interpret the text as embedded in canons of philosophy or feminism. But the take itself becomes a kind of social fact, an instantiation of reinscription through acts of circulation. Of anthropological interest is what happens when people come to understand, experience, and live their lives according to this creative appropriation of ideas.[8] In so many ways, then, the discursive practices of SMlers engender interpretive frameworks through which the normativity of the normal might be denaturalized and better brought to light.

This dissertation embraces the illuminative potential of such moves, and in so doing makes the academic conversations that underpin this work's theoretical concerns parallel to the insights about discursive disjuncture yielded by the ethnography. That is, if the "out of place" is characteristic of BDSM practice, as when "archaic" forms of ritual and exchange come to be practiced within discursive contexts of the

[8] Even if a certain insistence on literalism within the confines of academic discourse would render the simultaneous use of two frameworks ultimately irreconcilable, it could still be productive and worthwhile to think them together (an excellent example of this feat being Žižek's 2004 staging of an 'encounter' between Deleuze and Lacan).

"contemporary," unsettling "contextualization" itself might bring to light that which is left out when one adheres a priori to the frames that "ought" to make given phenomena intelligible. This possibility has led to some experimental moments in this work, which, for example, reads William Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* alongside Marilyn Strathern's monograph *The Gender of the Gift*. I call this move experimental not only because of the pairing itself, but also because the discussion departs from conventions of contextualization that would suggest situating the play within literary studies or the monograph within Melanesian ethnography or 1980s feminism. While such moves would no doubt be worthwhile, what is crucial for *this* work is the way in which the conversation between the selected texts enables us to make sense of the ethnographic material on Berlin's BDSM scene in ways that would not otherwise be possible. I'm not suggesting that "context" doesn't matter: rather, I'm examining the anthropological stakes of such investments, and showing how when historicization becomes the basis on which the parameters of possibility get prescribed, certain existential forms cannot be made intelligible.

It was the framework in which I imagined the book "ought" to be placed, rather than the placement itself, that made the in-the-field appearance of Victor Turner's text appear paradoxical. Back in 2007, I found it noteworthy that this book was so prominently displayed, a symbolic form by which the creator of the organization hosting the workshops was representing his group to all in attendance, but what I didn't know was just how significant this book was. One afternoon in 2009, I again found myself in this space, discussing with the group's founder the various projects associated with Sc*hwelle 7*. I told him that one of the things that drew me to his

organization was that book on the coffee table, because Victor Turner had been so influential to me in my development as an anthropologist, and I wondered why it was that he had put that book there. He explained: "It was important for me too. And in fact that's where the name *Schwelle* comes from, because Turner is very interested in liminality and this word comes from the Latin *limen* and the German translation of *limen* is *Schwelle*: the threshold. And this threshold is this place in between, but he doesn't see it as a border, but as a place in its own right, so that you can stay there, in between." While, during preliminary fieldwork, I had taken the presence of the book as an sign that my hunch was right, that classic ritual theory and BDSM practices could be mutually illuminative, this creative exegesis of Turner offered so much more: moving beyond the Van Gennepian context of the liminal phase as the transitional part of an initiation rite, between separation and reincorporation, my interlocutor suggests that the liminal is not just a border, but "a place in its own right" where one can remain. For him, the "betwixt and between" of liminal entities is conceptual, rather than spatiotemporal; the ritualized practices cultivated in this space are just one example of how this creative possibility might be harnessed. Such interpretations may not change the facts of the work's conceptual heritage, but, as the well-populated events at *Schwelle 7* suggest, its influence and legacy may extend well beyond the paradigms out of which it emerged.

Situating Scholarship:

Promises and Pitfalls of the "virtually unstudied"

One consequence of this interest in and commitment to the illuminative potential of interpretive categories such as ritual and exchange is that my textual engagement with other scholarship on the topic of sadomasochism becomes somewhat oblique, so that, rather than challenging or extending currently circulating arguments, this dissertation might seem to pursue different avenue of inquiry altogether. Partially this dynamic is attributable to (and enabled by) the paucity of ethnography-centered research, by U.S.-based researchers at least, on sadomasochistic subcultures: the first such monograph, written by a sociologist, was published only this year (Newmahr 2011), although, in anthropology, at least two doctoral theses have been written on the subject (Rubin 1994; Weiss 2005). All three of the aforementioned studies are based in the United States, the latter two in San Francisco, and the former in the fictionalized city of "Caeden." This dissertation is to the best of my knowledge the first such work by a cultural anthropologist to examine the lives of practitioners of BDSM outside the United States.

Yet, despite the sense, at least among those who research it, that BDSM is "virtually unstudied scientifically" (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006: 2), there is an array of academic literature on sadomasochism-related topics, especially in literary/cultural studies, law, psychology, and sociology, disciplines characteristically different in the ways they ask questions, consider evidence, and structure arguments. Thus, for example, while literary critic Mark Edmundson explores sadomasochism in relation to

"the Gothic" (1997), sociologist W. Levi Kamel traces the "career" of the Leather Man, in accordance with the framework of the sociology of deviance (1995). Although studies of SM span a number of disciplines, this work has not amounted to an interdisciplinary "SM Studies."

Within the context of empirical research, one key opposition does emerge: that between psychoanalytic and sociological camps. In his 2006 review article, sociologist Thomas Weinberg concludes that sadomasochism "is a complex social phenomenon, not easily nor accurately summed up by psychoanalytic perspectives. Contrary to the psychoanalytic view that SM is an individual psychopathology, sociological and social psychological studies see SM practitioners as…socially well adjusted" (37). Weinberg's commentary depends on a genealogical rendering of psychoanalytic perspectives: he traces them to their origination in the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Freud, whose theories he contextualizes by noting how their exposure to SM was limited to clinical encounters with patients seeking help (18). While such histories are not determinative – indeed, located in the same volume as Weinberg's review is a chapter by psychologist Peggy Kleinplatz about her work with couples for whom BDSM activities were a basis of therapeutic breakthrough (2006: 325-48) – what is at stake are the promises and pitfalls of appropriating (or not) these frameworks as a basis through which to understand a given phenomenon.

Within studies of BDSM, a particularly fraught framework is that of perversion. While a number of psychoanalysts have found the concept useful (e.g. Stein 2005), the current trend in sociological scholarship has been to dismiss this paradigm. These factions have terminological correlates, for example, in the

discrepancy between psychological preferences for discussing "sadomasochism" and sociological tendencies toward terms like "SM" or "BDSM." These latter terms reflect SMlers own usage, based on negative perceptions of psychological paradigms and discourses of perversion, even as they preserve in part this genealogy in the acronym SM. As a term, "sadomasochism" was Freud's unification of "sadism" and "masochism," coined by Krafft-Ebing in his 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a unification that itself has been critiqued, most influentially by Gilles Deleuze, who argues that "the sadist and masochist might well be enacting separate dramas, each complete in itself, with different sets of characters and no possibility of communication between them" (1989: 45). Despite these critiques, some actual SMlers continue to use the terms sadist and masochist, to refer to themselves and as complimentary parts of a whole; likewise, some refer to themselves as "perverts" or "perverse." But the ethnographic question is: What do these terms mean when various groups deploy them? Signification here is very tricky, because the "same" words are often used to very different ends.

In her book *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism*, criminologist Andrea Beckmann critiques contemporary use of Krafft-Ebing's work, which, she notes, "serves even today as a basis for many definitions and meanings given to 'sexuality' as well as 'perversions'" (2009: 40). She continues:

> Krafft-Ebing's *a priori* understanding of the source of 'perversions' was a belief in inherited 'deviant' sexual traits…His focus on the manifestations of 'sadism' and 'masochism' was then combined with the morals and 'sexual ideals' of his time and could only result in a misunderstanding of 'sadism' and 'masochism' as substitutes for

> ‘natural sexuality’…As ‘sadism’ was envisioned as active, represented by the stereotype of the ‘man,’ ‘masochism’ had to be a predominantly ‘feminine’ characteristic or a sign of impotence…As Krafft-Ebing’s theories are completely determined by Victorian morals and stereotypes, which are treated as ‘truths’ instead of being reflected upon, their use is more than questionable as they only reinforce stereotypes of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and generate the image of inherited pathologies of ‘perverse individuals’ that are in need of treatment. (2009: 40)

Beckmann’s line of reasoning underscores the problem of historicist determinism, by performing the impasse that arises when a concept is “completely determined” by its genealogy; needed, here, is a way to navigate between discourses that depend on very different imaginations concerning the stakes and parameters of fidelity to conceptual heritage. Those in contemporary Berlin who define themselves as masochists or sadists do not necessarily equate those terms to stereotypes about gender, nor are they necessarily invested in, or in some cases even aware of, the intellectual-historical contexts out of which such terms arose. In this sense empirical scholarship on SMlers is confronted with the doubly difficult task of distancing the practice from its terminological legacy while at the same time confronting the fact that, in practice, the “same” words are in use, so that these histories may matter or not in unexpected ways.

For instance, as literary critic Jonathan Dollimore points out, the very concept of perversion is indebted to a theological history, a history indebted especially to Augustine, whose thought marks the “beginning of a theory” in which “perversion becomes the negative agency within, at the heart of, privation. Perversion thus mediates between evil as agency and evil as lack; in bridging this contradiction perversion takes on its own paradoxical nature –which is also the basis of its disturbing

power" (1991: 140). In his book *Sexual Dissidence,* Dollimore shows "how the pre-sexual history of the concept inheres in modern beliefs about sexual perversion, and with the objective of replacing the pathological concept with a political one" (1991: 103). The theological pre-history of perversion mirrors other concerns in this dissertation, such as sectarian disagreements over the efficacy of rites; in the latter instance, perhaps, it becomes clearer how the present ethnographic concerns depend on, yet depart from, the genealogical heritage that nonetheless illuminates them. The clarity of distinguishing is important here, as the people with whom I worked were very critical of perversion as an academic discourse (even when they use words like "perverted," "pervert," and "perverse" in reference to themselves), and, as an academic, and therefore a potentially perceived authority, I do not want to run the risk of being taken to refer to my interlocutors in such terms. Thus, while notions like "the perverse social" might seem alluring – and could of course be utilized effectively to make sense of out-of-place dynamics – the particular legacy of this term as used in relation to the people with whom I worked, its connotations and its susceptibility to appropriation, render fraught the use "perversion" as an analytic for the purposes of this study. Frames[9], we'll see throughout, draw attention to some aspects of experience while obscuring others, and while no doubt a more psychoanalytically-informed study would yield certain insights about BDSM that are beyond the scope of the present inquiry, such a move would at the same time make the insights that *do* appear here, if not impossible, at least less likely. Psychoanalytic thought can be

[9] Goffman 1974.

characterized as a theory of the individual and of individuation[10], and at the heart of this dissertation is the idea that individualist ideology does not adequately account for the practice of BDSM.

Within German sociology, the first empirical work on BDSM was the Spengler study, a survey of West German men who engaged in SM, which was published in 1977. Since then, there have been at least two book-length treatments of the topic. The first, *Sadomasochismus: Szenen und Rituale*, was published in 1993. This book is known as the *Trier Studie*, because all of the co-authors were affliated with the *Universität Trier*. The motivating question underlying this work stems from what the authors identify as a paradox concerning violence: "*daß Gewalt einerseits immer stärker <moralisch> tabuisiert, ihre Darstellung aber durch die Medien immer umfassender <visuell> enttabuisiert wird*" [that violence on the one hand is made *morally* ever more strongly taboo, but its representation through the media, on the other hand, is made *visually* ever more widely acceptable[11]] (Wetzstein *et al* 297). In their introduction, the authors note that little is known academically about the lives of actual SMlers, despite the increasing presence of SM "iconography" in media and popular culture (17). The findings, now twenty years old, are heavily colored by this concern, framed as they are by the question of a relationship between (media) representation and reality, which in turn mirrors the underlying premise concerning the relationship between represented and real violence, as when the study's conclusion focuses on

[10] A notable exception is feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, whose emphasis on the traumatic severance of the umbilical cord (1993) signifies an originary interconnectedness and thus suggests the individuated self as product of violent separation from the mother; her thinking vis-à-vis individualism is thus interestingly ambivalent and worth pursuing much further than I have done here.

[11] The German word *enttabuisieren* is literally "to de-tabooize."

transformations of aggressive impulses. My own study departs from this framework, as it formulates BDSM practices as play in the Batesonian sense, thus complicating the univocal utilization of the originary referent (chapter three). The second, more recent, study is Norbert Elb's (2006) book *SM-Sexualität: Selbstorganization einer sexuellen Subkultur*. The author of this "native ethnographic" work is interested especially in SM as a social movement (*Bewegung*), thus framing his study as a conversation between politics and sexology. Especially valuable in this work is its detailed description of BDSM-group organization in early 21st century Germany. My research is oriented differently than Elb's, as it is focused on BDSM practices – or, more precisely, on an exegesis of how those practices get conceptualized, discussed, and debated by those who take part in them, emphasizing what such conversations reveal when brought into dialogue with anthropological ideas. This dissertation does not focus on SMlers as "sexual minorities," as both aspects of this phrase valorize the liberal politics of individualism that, in some ways, the lives of SMlers subvert. That is, whereas Elb writes a "political-sexual ethnography," my work would be better understood as an ethnography of discursive encounter.

This ethnography thus distances itself from forms of contextualization that might be more readily anticipated. For example, although sex and/or eroticism are often integral aspects of SMlers' practices, the discourse of "sexuality," in the sense outlined by Michel Foucault, is not a privileged or central analytic focus in the pages

that follow[12]. Partially, this departure emerged out of a taking-seriously of my interlocutors' own assertions that BDSM is not solely or even primarily about sex: sex may be part of what they do, but it is not, they say, the ultimate core to which everything concerning the analysis of sadomasochistic power exchange can be or ought to be reduced. Significantly, the German translation of Foucault's *la volunté de savoir* (known in English as *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*) is *Sexualität and Wahrheit*, which could be literally translated as *Sexuality and Truth*. Thus, whereas the French title evokes Nietzsche's "*la volunté de puissance*" (*The Will to Power)*, the English and German titles do not foreground, or even suggest, this philosophical conversation about power-knowledge, and could be said to instead offer emphases on different aspects of Foucault's opus: the English title suggests the work is one of historicization, whereas the German title facilitates a reading, one I heard often in the field, that marks the book's central insight as showing sexuality to be the basis of modern self-truth, referencing the opening of part IV of this volume, where he writes: "Between each of us and our sex, the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth: it is up to us to extract the truth of sex, since this truth is beyond its grasp; it is up to sex to tell us our truth, since sex is what holds it in darkness" (1990a: 77). Among my interlocutors, I've heard this insight reframed as "we know from Foucault that sex tells us the truth of ourselves," so that Foucault is made to reiterate (rather than, by historicist denaturalization, contest) the psychoanalytic premise of repression's

[12] The problems for an anthropological appropriation of Foucauldian historicism have been pointed out by Borneman and Hammoudi, who write: "as utilized within anthropology, such procedures and genealogies have frequently had the effect of limiting curiosity" (2009: 10).

centrality, even as they register a discomfort with making sex (and perversion) the basis of their selves.

One way, it would seem, to de-center "sexuality" would be to de-center SM. And, indeed, I spent a lot of time with a number of my interlocutors outside of SM-related contexts: going to concerts or museums, going to church, sharing meals in their homes, riding trains, and so on. But this move would not be a most prudent one, because it would leave readings that reduce BDSM to an analytics of sexuality intact. Thus, the chapters of this ethnography are centered on topics such as "classification," "play," "ritual," and "agency," drawing primarily on "scene-related" materials, integrating insights about sexuality along the way. In that sense, this project might be thought of as having something of a Dumontian spirit, engaging a similar ethos to his programmatic statement of purpose in the opening chapter of *From Mandeville to Marx*: "to reveal the links and relations between the familiar pigeonholes of our mental and occupational inventory, to recover, with the unexpected determination of each of them, the unity of the whole and the major lines of force of our culture in its vital but neglected interconnectedness" (1977: 21). This dissertation pursues that interconnectedness by asking how various conversations among SMlers and anthropologists might shed light on each other.

Interconnecting Conversations:

Getting There from Here

Powerful Exchanges is an exegetical ethnography of discursive encounter. Indeed, many of the exchanges examined here are conversational ones. Some readers may be surprised that there are relatively few descriptions of bodily practices, and that the accounts offered here focus instead on conversations *about* activities. Although some of my interlocutors joked that "voyeurism is a fetish too" – and also, in its own way, a kind of participation – in the case of BDSM, looking in real-time at a session in action might obscure more than it reveals, because the whole premise is that it is play, and thus does not denote[13] what it appears to.

There is also, of course, an ethics of observation, especially observation of intimate moments. One evening, I was hanging out with Marco at Henri's Bar, when Caroline came in and joined us. Marco told her about my study, and she offered to tie me up, to show me what it was like. She was studying rope bondage herself, so she used the opportunity to practice. Don, her teacher, looked on. Because I was a beginner, everything was simple: she didn't put me in any difficult positions, for example, or suspend me in the air. Even so, Marco warned me: "Do not try to be cool, or think that taking pain makes you tough. If something bothers you, you say something." Caroline explained to me what she was about to do. She let me hold the rope in my hands, to see what it felt like. She then instructed me to put my hands behind my back, with the insides pressed together, so that the rope would not touch

[13] Bateson (2000) will be discussed in chapter three.

arteries and veins. She proceeded to tie my upper body, and it felt tight. The rope left marks, which she said I should be proud of. When she untied me, Don decided to tie her up, and they invited Marco and me to watch. We did for a while; even as an onlooker, it was a much more intense experience than I had had myself. There was passion in the air, it was becoming sensual. He finished with her upper body and began to tie her legs. They began to kiss. Marco suggested we go back to the bar area. Once there, he told me:

> Unlike some people, they are not doing it for the performance, to show what they can do, how much they can take. So it was nice of them, allowing us in. To an extent I like voyeurism, but I don't think one should take too much, when one is invited. It is important to know when you've taken enough, not to stay too long when they may have forgotten you're there, not to use it up completely, but to let them do their thing.

Partly, then, the conversational focus follows from ethical considerations of overstepping the bounds of one's invitation; partly, though, the move is itself a conceptual intervention into frameworks that tend to separate "theory" from "practice." While bodily interactions like tying-up are very much present in the SM clubs of Berlin, these places are also sites of fascinating and extensive discussions and debates. Much of the BDSM scene in Berlin centers on discussion groups of various sorts, with different focuses within the realm of BDSM. For instance, there is a group for pet-players (people who like to embody animals); a submissives' coffee klatch; a philosophical discussion group with rotating topics; a BDSM youth group; an artists' group; several non-thematic groups that meet at restaurants around the city for socializing; and a group for Christian SMlers. At many of the events, there is no play

at all, only conversation. Indeed, in Berlin at least, so much of what SMlers do is talk about what they do, and this talk about practice, itself a practice, is integral to understanding the less verbal bodily encounters in which SMlers also characteristically engage[14].

How, then, might conversations among SMlers and those among anthropologists become mutually illuminative? Each chapter of this dissertation entails an answer to that question, an answer that performs a double-work, speaking to the chapter's topical focus while at the same time contributing a step to the work's larger argument about the inadequacy of the modernist ideology of the individual in understanding the lives of SMlers. This dissertation builds on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983; 1987), using their notion of de- and reterritorialization to document processes of transformation at work (and in play). Chapter One emphasizes these dynamics by problematizing the statics of "setting," emphasizing how techniques of "localization" obscure as much as they reveal when it comes to reality's complexity. Concretely, the chapter explores the making of the BDSM *Szene*, or scene, in the context of a city (and country) that itself is being perpetually remade. The ethnographic focus is on history's appropriation, as it occurs in contexts ranging from the Gay Museum to Christopher Street Day, from a club's construction of a "play" East German interrogation chamber to Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and her collection of nineteenth century rooms.

[14] Thus, while in some ways SMlers resemble the "modern magicians" studied by Tanya Luhrmann (1989), here conversations revolve not so much on rationalizations of individualized belief as on ethicizations of intersubjective engagement.

Chapter Two turns to processes of de- and reterritorialization as they emerge in conversation, often manifesting as debates about the meaning of terms. Beginning with a discussion of vanillas (SMlers' binary opposite), the chapter moves to an extended consideration of the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*, a group for Christian SMlers, and their attempts to articulate a singular identity in a context where two definitive aspects of their lives, religion and sex, are rendered discursively incompatible. Building on these insights concerning the importance of coherent identity, Chapter Three identifies "play" as a specifically ontological problem, complicating notions of performativity as a basis on which to predicate being. Using Gregory Bateson's notion of play as denoting something other than that which a given denotation otherwise would, the chapter explores SMlers' sense of the limits of play's possibility, examining discussions of gender, submission, and animal embodiment. This chapter draws largely on my work with *Themenabend*, a philosophical discussion group, and the Pet Players' *Stammtisch*.

What comes next is a reflexive interlude, in which I consider a range of ethnographic encounters that led to my sense that at stake in BDSM is the problematization of individualism; this section considers potential methodological implications stemming from this insight. The interlude thus connects the first half of the dissertation, which focuses on inscription and its limits, and the second, which considers exchange and its possibilities.

In Chapter Four I present the first half of this dissertation's central argument, that SMlers practice gift exchange, but do so within a discursive framework privileging commodities. This chapter makes clear how the "paradoxes" of BDSM practices are

only paradoxical insofar as they are articulated in the language of alienation and commodity fetishism, the language of the individual; these paradoxes would cease to be such when shot through discourses of gift relations, enduring solidarity, and relational selfhood. Yet, I argue, the individual/commodity context in which these practices occur is itself central to the practice, which complicates matters further still. This chapter uses a range of ethnographic observations, but central moments derive from discussions about "slave contracts" at the submissives' coffee klatch.

Chapter Five presents the second half of the argument, showing how the framework of individualism underlying commodity exchange also provides opposition to the efficacy of ritual forms. Thus, ritual in modernist cultures appears to be "matter out of place" precisely because the discourse of subjective interiority is predicated on the rejection of ritual externality. Yet, SMlers practice ritual, but they do so in contexts privileging subjectivity. Ethnographic vignettes in this chapter include a sanctuary's double-occupancy, a rite of initiation, and a night on the planet Gor.

Chapter Six pursues the implications of the previous two chapters in terms of notions of agency. Modernist conceptions of agency are intricately interconnected with issues of ritual and relational selfhood, so that the reemergence of gift and ritual in contemporary contexts are bases on which to underscore the cultural specificity of the ideology naturalized in liberal theorizations of agentive subjects. This chapter brings ethnographic work in a bondage studio and the evocation of sadomasochism in an opera production into conversations on agency-in-submission, which previously have centered on discussions of conservative, religious women, especially Muslims. Pursuing similar questions from this ethnographic angle complicates the assumptions

underlying the terms of that debate. This chapter is followed by a brief conclusion, which summarizes the findings of this study and pursues its implications.

Chapter One:

Imagining Communities:
Territorialization and its Discontents

"In fact, to recompose movement with eternal poses or with immobile sections comes to the same thing: in both cases, one misses the movement because one constructs a Whole, one assumes that 'all is given,' whilst movement only occurs if the whole is neither given nor givable."

- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*

Die Axe der Perverse:

Circulation, Inscription, Sociality

The area around U-Bahnhof Mehringdamm is playfully known, at least among a certain subset of participants in Berlin's BDSM scene, as *die Axe der Perverse* (the axis of perversion), due to the fact that a small number of scene-related venues are clustered in that area. This cluster might otherwise go unnoticed in this neighborhood in the Borough (*Bezirk*) of Kreuzberg, an area known more widely for its Turkish and countercultural populations. At least it *was* known for the presence of these groups which, more recently (as the area has become trendy), are said to be migrating out to neighboring Neukölln, where the rents remain more affordable.

U-Bahnhof Mehringdamm is the point of intersection between two subway lines (*Linien*). The U7 runs east-west, with end stations in Rudow and Spandau, areas far outside the center city, or A Zone, which is marked by the circle line (*Ringbahn*) which, when looked at on a map, is often said to resemble a dog's head. The borders of the zones are important to remember when traveling by UBahn, because one may purchase a ticket that is valid only for some zones and not for others. The train goes on from stop to stop, but if one oversteps the boundary, one will be riding illegally: *Schwarzfahren* (literally: riding black). In which case, one would be vulnerable to a *Kontrolle*, where plainclothes employees pull out their badges by surprise and check whether passengers have their tickets, known as *Fahrausweise*, passenger identification. Passengers without validated *Fahrausweise* are removed from the train. No announcement is made as the train moves from one zone to the next. Passengers are expected to know.

The U6, conversely, runs north-south, between Alt-Tegel and Alt-Mariendorf. If one boards the U6 at Mehringdamm headed north, in two stops one will arrive at U-Bhf Kochstrasse, before continuing on, uneventfully, toward Alt-Tegel. Passing through this station, as one does just like any other, would be entirely unremarkable, except that the station stop at Kochstrasse is directly below Checkpoint Charlie, marking what, during the Occupation, was the border between the Soviet and American sectors of the city. This line was not one a person could simply cross, with armed guards, a wall, and political-ideational demarcations preventing passage, blocking the flow of bodies, goods, and ideologies from one side to the other. Even twenty years after reunification, those who lived in West Berlin still recount their being

terrified by the checkpoints, and how they avoided leaving the city unless it was absolutely necessary to do so. This line, which once, in the era of the "two Berlins," quite forcefully signified the distinction between "us" and "them," can today be crossed freely, above ground as well as below. On the street, Checkpoint Charlie has been turned into a museum, as well as a tourist attraction where people can get their pictures taken with – and passports stamped by – actors posing as soldiers. On the UBahn, though, one simply passes through.

And, using the UBahn (and buses and bicycles) as the arteries of the city, participants in the BDSM scene may find themselves in any number of neighborhoods. *Die Axe der Perverse* notwithstanding, BDSM-related events occur throughout the city, even in the peripheral neighborhoods such as Spandau. Likewise, participants' residences are dispersed throughout the city, so that there isn't a concentrated "ghetto," in terms of either commercial establishments or migration patterns. This contrasts, for instance, with Berlin's gay community, which is concentrated in specific areas of the city[15].

The dispersed and decentralized distribution of locations resonates with other aspects of this scene (*die Szene*) as a form of social organization: participants range in age and socioeconomic status, as well as in place of origin. Some practitioners are exceptionally well-off, while others live on perpetual unemployment. Some are university-educated, while others completed non-college preparatory forms of

[15] The gay magazine *Siegesäule* publishes a map of gay venues. These venues are limited to a few areas, in which they are highly concentrated, with hundreds of establishments being located within walking distance of each other. The most pronounced of these is the so-called Bermuda Triangle section of Schöneberg.

secondary education[16]. Though some of my interlocutors were native Berliners, many came from other places in Germany, or from other countries altogether. This diversity is striking, given the ways in which factors such as socioeconomics, geography, and age figure so prominently in other aspects of social life in Berlin. Gay establishments in the city tend to take on the character of the neighborhood in which they are located. In Schöneberg, places like Heile Welt and Café Berio cater to a posh, older, and wealthier clientele, especially *Wessis* and tourists; the area around Sonnenallee in Prenzlauerberg, by contrast, is popular with younger people and *Ossis*. The ways in which the BDSM scene disrupts commonly observable forms of status concentration makes it unlike other, more traditional forms of community.

An emphasis on localization by means of sociological characterization, then, would reify and reestablish the very terms that these practices are subverting, even as, at the same time, the context in which Berlin's BDSM scene exists is one in which these categories remain salient. That is, to imagine the flows across boundaries is first of all to imagine the boundaries themselves, even if the undoing of blockages – the opening of Checkpoint Charlie, the intergenerational inclusivity of BDSM clubs – may, in the words of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, "deterritorialize and reterritorialize" any number of experiential domains. The task, at once ethnographic and theoretical, is to write in such a way as to pass successfully between the Scylla of assuming social stasis and the Charybdis of absolute perpetual flux. Categorical anchoring remains, even as

[16] Germany has a tiered secondary education system, in which children are tracked into different paths at the end of elementary school (*die Grundschule*). In Germany, those who attend a Gymnasium (as opposed to a *Realschule Hauptschule*) are prepared for the *Abitur* and thus for university admittance. Adults who did not complete the *Abitur*, but who wish to study at university may complete the *Abitur*, by taking night classes, for instance. Generally, though, the tracking at the end of elementary school largely shapes, if not determines, one's prospects.

participation in social worlds sets categories into motion, empirically and imaginatively, unwittingly and deliberately. Throughout this ethnography, I aim to dramatize this dynamic in my presentation of materials as a way of capturing world-making processes at work.

One evening, my partner Michael[17] and I accompanied our friends Norman and Wilma to a club called Avalon, located in an old factory building in Spandau. We were traveling by car, heading from my apartment in Schöneberg's Akazienkiez, where they had picked us up. As she drove, Wilma explained to us the history of Spandau, a region that was a thriving site of industry in the early twentieth century, a *Bezirk* that includes for instance Siemensstadt, a neighborhood (*Kiez*) named after the well-known company Siemens. They talked about how everyone always predicts that one day big industry will return to Berlin, how the city is always thought to be on the verge of really taking off, although this taking off never happens, or at least it hasn't happened yet. Michael asked what direction we were heading in. "South," I replied. "North," said Wilma. We were both right, despite that these answers would seem to be mutually exclusive. Immediately, we were headed south, toward Tempelhof, so as to pick up the Autobahn. Our destination, however, was to the north (and west). In the complex geometry of urban transit, the temporally shortest distance between two points is often not a straight (unidirectional) line; the route taken, however, shapes what one does and does not see along the way.

[17] Although Michael resided in New York throughout my fieldwork, he visited six times during this period, with each trip lasting between four and ten days. My interlocutors were curious to meet him, and he them; each subsequent visit led to his participating in an increasing number of scene-related activities (including, in one instance, a club owner scheduling around his travel schedule). Michael's presence will be discussed more thoroughly in the reflexive/methodological interlude.

Having arrived in the vicinity of the club, we discovered that there was another party happening at a nearby locale, so parking became an unexpected issue. Wilma found what would have been an excellent parking space, except that it was blocking the entrance for the *Feuerwehr* (fire station), the car was only very slightly over the line, however, leading Norman and Wilma to discuss whether it might be alright to park there after all. Before they reached a conclusion, though, a small bus pulled up beside us. The driver rolled down his window and asked whether we were headed to the party *davorne* (in front). "No," they replied, "*dahinten*" (in the back). "Good" he said, and hopped out of the bus, revealing himself to be a transvestite, clad in a slim black dress and thigh-length yellow-and-orange -striped stockings. It was interesting, I thought to myself, that he asked explicitly about the party out front (a formal affair in a different, but visible location), when really what he wanted to know about was the party happening in the back. He told us that it would be fine to park further away, because he would drive us to the club, and then return us to the vehicle when we wanted to leave. Wilma's ultimate parking job was a miraculous feat of precision, as there wasn't an additional millimeter to spare between the vehicles already in place. Putting ourselves in the hands of this driver, we boarded the bus. All of a sudden we stopped, as he had spotted another couple, who joined us. Continuing on, we entered the complex, and rode past a number of buildings speeding along in what felt like the boat ride in the film *Willy Wonka* (the Gene Wilder version), as we rounded corners, bounced over bumps, coming to an abrupt halt was we reached the occluded building in the very back of the complex, which is bordered on the other side by water. When he said *dahinten*, he wasn't kidding.

A large man greeted us at the door to collect our entrance fees. At 50 Euros a couple, this was one of the more expensive events to attend in Berlin. It was more a place for special play sessions than for more mundane socializing. Indeed, the space only occasionally opens its doors to the public for play parties; it is more regularly a professional dominatrix studio, as well as an SM hotel and a site for pornographic film shoots. They also sell a complete porcelain service featuring their logo.

After having paid our fees, we were offered champagne flutes filled with either orange juice or *Sekt*; the latter is like champagne, only it is produced using grapes grown somewhere other than the region of France which alone authorizes the use of that particular designation. Beverages in hand, we were escorted to the changing rooms, where we would remove our street clothes and put on attire that would render us acceptable for admittance to the inner club. The changing room (*Garderobe*) is an area common to most BDSM clubs in Berlin, which generally have dress codes required for entrance into the facility. Dress codes emphasize the color black, as well as particular materials such as latex, leather, and vinyl. More specific or alternative codes are sometimes employed, however, for parties catering to a particular fetish or taste. Practitioners of BDSM do not generally wear their fetish gear on the street, but rather change into proper attire onsite. In this way, the changing room represents a liminal space between the mundane world of ordinary clothing and the ritual attire required for participation in BDSM activities. Requiring all participants to partake in the dress code and, concomitantly, the proscription of ordinary attire, is said to foster the appropriate atmosphere for everyone involved; it is also, though, a way of marking

as sanctified the space in which sadomasochistic exchanges of power occur, rendering it symbolically and experientially distinct from the conditions of ordinary existence.

Exiting the changing room, one finds oneself in a corridor leading to the central bar area, where people gather between sessions to drink, socialize, and munch on passed hors d'oeuvres. Each of the rooms provides a setting conducive to particular kinds of fantasies, drawing on culturally salient symbols of authority. At the entrance to each room is a door that can be closed to ensure privacy, or left open to enable the congregation of an audience. The clinic, a place for those wishing to enact medical fantasies, can be found on the left. This room is done entirely in white, and features a gynecological examination chair, cabinets, and rubber hoses, among other equipment. Adjacent to the clinic is a full-size classroom, featuring a blackboard and chalk, wooden desks, and a podium. Inside the podium one finds paraphernalia confiscated from naughty pupils. Across the hallway is an old-fashioned bedroom, which would evoke the Victorian era except for the suspension contraption hanging from the ceiling.

The remainder of the play areas can be found on the other side of the bar, down a set of stairs that leads initially to a high-ceilinged space featuring a torture table on which, at the time we passed through, a man was having needles inserted into his testicles, and a hoisting area where a vertically-suspended woman was being whipped. On the far side of this room was a throne, for those with a more aristocratic erotic sensibility. From this main area, one enters a tunnel. One could crouch into stables, complete with hay, for those into equine embodiment. There was a corridor full of jail cells and a warden's desk for those who play cops and robbers. For those for whom less earthly forms of authority hold appeal was a space that resembled a confessional.

Heading further back was a sofa, in an area known as the oubliette, from the French *oublier* (to forget). On the floor near the sofa was a removable floorboard revealing a concrete pit in which a person could be confined and forgotten (except, of course, for the intercom system in place, should the confined participant no longer wish to be so). At the very end was a room with a desk on which was placed an old typewriter, an authentic artifact from the old DDR. This was the interrogation chamber, for those wishing to play enact interviews with the *Stasi*, the East German national security police. When we arrived in this room, which completed the tour, Wilma ran over to the desk and started banging on the typewriter. With a deep and commanding voice, she bellowed: "*haben Sie alles zu-ge-ge-ben*" – have you told us ever-y-thing – separating each syllable of the last word, *zugegeben*, as she pounded on the keys. Having finished, she looked up and let out a small high-pitched giggle, a laugh that exuded her usual melodic sweetness.

Each of these arenas – clinic, classroom, prison, stable, confessional – draw on everyday configurations of power and authority that underpin relations in a society that is officially egalitarian and experientially asymmetric. Participation in a session that appropriates such sites enables the transfiguration of these symbolic forms. As discussed earlier, the characterization of perversion entails the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the zones of erogenous possibility, the reinscription of the erotic body. Likewise, then, BDSM entails the de- and reterritorialization of the *social* body, by inscribing and circulating symbolic forms in ways that both draw on and depart from degree-zero significations. The geography of the sex club traces adjacencies and connections between that which would otherwise be discursively distinct.

Concomitantly, the geography of the scene as a form of social organization cannot be made intelligible through an overreliance on the old forms of territoriality, the segmented forms of division and classification into which social specificities were imagined – city, nation, age, gender, class, etc. It is not that these forms lose significance. Indeed, the use of a confessional suggests the continued importance of religiosity of a certain sort, although this use might not be best explained, for example, in terms of the historicization of sectarian developments. Historical questions, insofar as they are to be asked here anthropologically, build on empirical realizations of appropriative possibility, the specific configurations that become efficacious for the particular people with whom I am in conversation. The task, then, is to contextualize without making context a dresser drawer into which experience must be shut, so that the particularities illuminated through these encounters may resonate as having implications for thinking more broadly about human conditions.

The forms of de- and reterritorialization characteristic of this scene require a critical engagement that articulates the particularities of focalization and localization by analyzing them as imaginatively and culturally produced sites of critical intersection rather than the sacrosanct grounds through which ontological specificity can be conferred. That is, it is true that Berlin's BDSM scene is very much in and of Germany, even as, at the same time, it would be a mistake to make Germany the privileged site through which Berlin's BDSM scene is to be made ethnographically intelligible. Indeed, the more crucial question concerns the stakes of discursive deployment, how it is that certain ways of seeing acquire and lose interpretive privilege and prominence; such considerations reveal the culturally particular presuppositions on

which conventional narrative formations of various sorts depend. How does one record the subversion of categories other than in terms of the very categories that would otherwise be undone? These problems – at once epistemological and ethnographic – point to the parameters through which these processes of de- and reterritorialization occur. The work of this chapter, then, consists in tracing the spatiotemporal contours of these processes, so as to show how the dynamics of setting-in-motion instantiate the specific forms of community and sociality that emerge through the organization of the scene.

Preexisting Conditions:
Getting Here from There

BDSM, as noted above, entails the de- and reterritorialization of the social body. Here, I discuss more specifically the ways in which sadomasochistic practices of power exchange engage elements of transformation in the organization of contemporary social life. BDSM communities challenge the localization of cultural forms, subvert the distinction between self and other, and undermine the unidirectional framework underlying social theories that articulate a progressive teleology from status to contract, *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, etc. At the same time, however, these callings into question do not constitute simple reversals or un-doings: they are neither antithetical reactions nor cuttings from whole cloth. Rather, the forms of community constructed through the scene displace previously salient forms of opposition by setting

both terms to one side, and by inhabiting the point at which the opposition would be rendered undecidable.

This section explores the ethnographic and anthropological implications of these emergent social forms under the aegis of "preexisting conditions." This phraseology functions doubly: in the first instance, the word "conditions" operates as a noun, so that the territorial formations are interpreted as conceptually and empirically dependent on a sense of historicity, even as that sense of historicity embodied in the notion of preexistence conditions – as a verb – that which is interpretable in and as the present. This grammatical slippage between noun and verb may help evoke the double dynamic of blockage and flow, substantive ground and movement across terrain, elasticity and constraint.

When it comes to thinking the BDSM scene as a form of community, a site in which ritual activities flourish, the first blockage stems from an ideological undercurrent in the sociological imagination that makes it counterintuitive to imagine that the phenomenon under consideration involves community or ritual at all. Places like "Germany" are not typical sites for studies of ritual. Even as the boundaries of what constitutes a legitimate anthropological field site continue to be remade (cf. e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997), questions as to what constitutes a proper object of inquiry within a given field site may be more firmly anchored in the way prior and current conversations surrounding that site have been framed, in what may be seen as a type of reiteration of what Michael Herzfeld (1984) has critiqued as "the Mediterraneanist dilemma." The subject of ritual falls most often to one side of a series of overlapping conceptual oppositions: that between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies 2002),

that between status and contract (Maine 2008), and that between mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim 1997). Each of these oppositions rests on a conceptual distinction between "traditional" and "modern" societies; this distinction, in turn, is predicated on an opposition between holistic and individualistic worldviews (Dumont 1977; Dumont 1986). Thus, a study of ritual in a place like contemporary Germany involves what Mary Douglas (2002) refers to as "matter out of place," which in this instance indicates forces of de- and reterritorialization at work.

As ways of framing, the conceptual oppositions outlined above serve to instantiate and codify boundaries between self and other, here and there, then and now[18]; in turn, these delineations become the terms through which reality can be thought, reigning in existential messiness and potentiality at one stroke. Power exchange, which consists of relations of domination and submission, enacts the rhetoric of hierarchical encompassment characteristic of holism, associated with times and places outside the perimeter of the contemporary West (the alterity of there and then). Participants in power exchange, who engage in these relations of domination and submission, interpret and valorize their activities using the rhetoric of individualistic autonomy, associated with currently salient (neo)liberal norms (the identity of here and now). This discrepancy suggests a fundamental tension between the practices observed and the discursive frameworks through which those practices would ordinarily be made intelligible. By subverting without undoing the self/other distinction upon which individualist ideology rests, the lives of SMlers open up questions as to what these forms of sociality are doing in a place like Berlin, and how their workings might

[18] See Fabian (2002) for a discussion of the interrelation of these terms in the history of anthropology.

challenge the conceptual distinctions concerning the spatiotemporal presuppositions on which Western self/other images are predicated. Yet, such challenges are enabled through these very predications, so that historicization here operates as a form of retrospective projection outlining existential palimpsests, inscriptive struggles, and in- and divestments of borders of various sorts.

The becoming there of here, the becoming then of now, the becoming other of self, and vice-versa, are fundamental dynamics of de- and reterritorialization. These dynamics are particularly amenable to analysis when observed in terms of "Germany," since this place has been a site of exceptionally dramatic de- and reterritorialization during the last century.

Indeed, some of the most productive anthropological work engaging the German-speaking world has grappled precisely with questions concerning the existential implications of borders and boundaries, and their redrawing. In his classic (1992) study *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, John Borneman shows how, in less than 50 years, East and West Germany became successfully constructed as separate nations, as evidenced through the relative differentiation of life-course narratives espoused by their respective citizens on either side of the Berlin Wall. The arbitrariness of the border, depending on the imposition of Ally-divided districts, attains an experiential significance, Borneman shows, that extends to the creation of a self/other distinction between those who (happened to) reside on one side or the other, thus becoming motivated in the Saussurean sense. With the creation of the *Grenze* (border), a line between here and there is drawn that did not exist prior to the construction of the *Grenze* as such. The border becomes that which jurisdictionally divides, but also that

which blocks flow, or that which severs, as well as that which joins those contained within it; at the same time, the erasure of a boundary enables flow and unites that which had been kept distinct, while at the same time possibly diluting that which had been united. The temporality of reformation is crucial, for it is only in relation to an otherwise- or un-imaginable border that the de- and reconstruction of a given *Grenze* gets to be understood in terms of its (thus denaturalized) historicity.

Berlin today is a Berlin reunified: the narrative postulation consists in the premise that the city had been whole before it was severed, and it is this double dynamic that structures its experiential articulation in the pluperfect. But what would it mean to think beyond this formulation, to trace the palimpsest even further, to the past of the past of the past? For, before there *was* an initial unity there *had been* a pre-history, in the nineteenth century and earlier, in which one could locate the pieces, themselves formed and reformed, out of which the imagined original whole was fashioned. This history is in part inscribed in the names of the *Bezirke*. But those names have long since ceased to be efficacious markers of belonging and exclusion, or rather their efficacy is enabled otherwise. If, nowadays, one identifies with a particular *Bezirk*, this identification portends not to the depth-roots of genealogy, but rather to the surface-routes of urban dwelling, the pitstops of which engender one *Szene* or another: hipster, artist, punk, bourgeois…

Experientially, (im)mobility is perceivable relative to the imaginability of an otherwise. One can see this in the Berlin Wall, in the temporary permanence of its existence as a border that could once no longer and can now once again be crossed quite freely. As anthropologist Daphne Berdahl suggests: “the paradox of the

borderland" consists precisely in "its dual nature…as a place where identity is both especially articulated and uniquely fluid" (1999: 141, 183). Berdahl's account of Kella, a German "border town," located in (what is now) the middle of the country, shows how the boundary between East and West came to be routinized, but also subverted, a dynamic that extends, for example, to her discussion of interplays between institutional and popular religion which, she notes, have tended to be overlooked in research on Eastern European religiosities (87). The codification of borders, then, is discursive as much as it is geopolitical: the contours of conversation, like routes and roots in the woods, forge pathways, which under certain circumstances become pre- and proscriptive: preexisting conditions.

The mapping of terrain is as much an epistemological and methodological problem as it is an exercise in description. How to determine, for example, the parameters designating who is in and out of bounds as a potential interlocutor for this "*ethno*graphic" study of Berlin's BDSM scene? This question may seem rhetorical, but for my interlocutors in Berlin the boundaries of inclusion were a subject of consternation; the study, after all, bears the seal of science, and with that seal came questions of method, here registered as uncertainty about eligibility for authorization to speak as one covered by the perimeters – this time geographic – of the particularity to be considered. Who may speak as part of this *Szene*? Several participants qualified themselves: "I don't live in Berlin…I live in Berlin, but I'm not a German…I'm new to Berlin…" How might authenticity be perceived when shot through the various lenses of sociological classification? For what and for whom can or should ethnographic particularities be made to speak? Norman, for example, is not from Germany

originally, although he has been living in Berlin for two decades. How does (or should) this fact shape the way he is written and read? Zack, another interlocutor, identifies as half-German, ethnically, but he was raised in the United States. Furthermore, he traces the origin of his participation in BDSM to a vacation in London where he discovered a book on Japanese rope bondage. There is at work here a conceptual and linguistic inheritance that privileges national terms (or urban centers rendered emblematic of the nations they are made to exemplify), even as contemporary configurations of transnational and subcultural forms require a reformulation of how "context" is thought. The two examples mentioned here briefly point to how this empirical research on the BDSM scene in Berlin suggests the necessity of such a move. But it is also important to note that the case of BDSM is exemplary of a larger trend, especially in the setting of a newly "unified" Europe, in which other-than-national cultural forms are being engendered through the production of regions, zones, and achieved, especially, through currencies (see Peebles 2011).

The Schengen-Area, for example, now enables free travel across national borders within the European Union. Driving from the Black Forest region, one heads for the afternoon to (what is now) France, Munster in Alsace-Lorraine. One might hardly notice that this voyage of an hour is an international one, other than that the signs change languages after passing through what looks like an abandoned tollbooth, a structure which had once been staffed with customs officials. This is not the same kind of *Grenze* as the one traversed only with trepidation, even as certain histories and their boundaries continue to haunt. This ethnographic mapping of terrain traces the becoming constitutive of differences as engendered through the circulation of

inscriptive efficacy embodied in the markers that divide: us from them, now from then, here from there.

The above is not to suggest that nation no longer matters, but that how nation matters may matter other than the ways in which it once did or one day might, and that this may be true for a number of other sociological categories as well. How to make intelligible the ways in which some histories, some demarcations, and not others, come to be experientially salient in the sociality of the scene? The next section engages encounters with two queer spaces, the *Schwules Museum* in Kreuzberg and Berlin's annual Christopher Street Day parade, in order to convey a sense of the complexities with which, in the case of BDSM, attempts at topological accounting are fraught.

The Gay Museum and Christopher Street Day: On the Making of Unusable Pasts

The entrance to the *Schwules Museum* (gay museum) is in a courtyard off of Mehringdamm behind an opened iron gate. The ground floor consists of a revolving collection featuring, at a given time, several historical and contemporary artists. Exiting this area, one heads up an external staircase to the permanent exhibition, through which one encounters gay history, emphasizing *German* gay history over the past two hundred years. The walls are set up like a labyrinth to maximize the space of the interior. Each panel on the wall is numbered, enabling the construction of a linear chronology despite the spatiality of the layout. Photographs and other works on paper, blurring the boundaries between art and artifact, hang on the walls: these range from

high cultural works to magazine covers and mug shots from the period in which Paragraph 175, the law criminalizing homosexual acts, was in effect. Explanatory text is posted on each panel, so that museum-goers can be led to understand the significance of the visual material in the constructed narrative of the history displayed.

The trajectory of this historicization is preserved in the gay museum's book, *Self Confidence and Persistence: Two Hundred Years of History* (2008), which is among the items for sale at the cashier's stands on each floor of the museum. The following excerpts are taken from that text:

> Their imaginations sparked by the customs of 'primitive' peoples, by the ancient Greeks, and even by the life of clerics, champions of the Enlightenment spent much time discussing the previously unmentionable topics of pederasty, the 'corruption of youths,' and love between males. Inspired by French models, Frederick II composed mocking poems about Jesuits, in which he made jokes about their homosexuality and even depicted Jesus and John as a homosexual couple. It is therefore hardly surprising that a lively homosexual subculture had developed in Berlin by the second half of the 18th century, or perhaps even earlier. (20, panel 2)

Here, there is an attempt to attribute connections between modern homosexuality and ancient or primitive traditions. Significant here is the logical leap in the phrase "it is therefore hardly surprising." How does one get from Greece to Frederick II's mockery of the Jesuits as an explanatory basis for an actual 18th Century subculture in Berlin, specifically? The territorializing move in this instance entails the imaginative postulation of a relation between actualities, as distinct-yet-connected in time and space, enabling the analysis of these distinctions/connections and the conditions that render possible their efficacy as such.

> Faced with constant oppression, persecution and prosecution, gays had to possess special qualities like self-confidence and persistence to pursue their own desires and a satisfactory way of life. Against all social prejudice, they had to remain steadfast and unshakeable in the search for likeminded partners and friends, in building circles of friends, in creating gay networks. Various factors helped these qualities to develop and flourish.
> Since the Renaissance and Europe's reclaiming of its classical heritage there have been repeated attempts to overcome the Christian condemnation of 'sodomites' and reconnect with the idealized boy love of the ancient Greeks…Bible Stories such as those of David and Jonathan or Jesus and his favorite disciple John could be read as models of intimate friendship and love between men. Hearsay and scholarly research produced lists of famous homosexuals who became role models for the private individual, providing justification for some secret happiness in the face of public hostility. (27-8, panel 4)

This passage suggests an ambivalence with respect to nature/culture distinctions, between "possession" as inherent, and development as contingent. Equally noteworthy is the way in which "hearsay and scholarly research" are combined in an undifferentiated fashion as a dual basis through which models of/for homosexuality are generated. In what spaces does the undoing of these otherwise salient distinctions become possible and necessary?

> The founding of the world's first gay self-help organization took place on May 15, 1897. (57, Panel 13)
> *Der Eigene* (meaning 'the peculiar') published in 1898, was the world's first gay magazine. Earlier initiatives such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' *Uranus* of 1870 and a few English attempts between 1892 and 1894 failed to achieve a breakthrough. Two Oxford student magazines, *The Spirit Lamp* (1870) and *The Chameleon* (single issue, December 1894), had a strong homosexual flavor, especially in their poetry. Nonetheless, the appearance of *Der Eigene* set a new standard for gay publications. (71, panel 18)

In contrast to earlier passages, these panels construct and situate important milestones in the history of homosexuality as originating within Germany: the first gay "self help"

group and the "first" gay magazine. Notice how other prior publications are discursively discounted in the production of the narrative, even as the designation "gay" is in these instances anachronistic. Here, territorialization entails the making of claims as to what counts as what.

> With petitions, public education campaigns, and the lobbying of parliamentarians, individual homosexuals and above all the Scientific Humanitarian Committee (WhK) did their utmost to achieve decriminalization…Along with the leading figures of the movement, Magnus Hirschfeld, Adolf Brand and Friedrich Radzuweit, thousands of gays and lesbians were engaged in various organizations, in the publication and distribution of magazines, in the bookshops that made the vast web formed in the 1920s…The range of periodicals grew and diversified in the 1920s; newly formed editorial groups allowed for the expression of a widening scale of political aims. (97, panel 25)

It is this section of the exhibition that most surprises the various visitors with whom I've encountered the museum. Despite the well-documented history of Weimar-era sexology and politics (cf. e.g. Sigusch 2008), Weimar has been made to exemplify sexual decadence rather than a period in which a serious emancipatory platform began to gather steam. Why is it, for example, that throughout Germany, people identifying as erotic minorities (including SMlers) celebrate events like Christopher Street Day (the equivalent of LGBT Pride in the United States) and Folsom Fest (its BDSM counterpart), named after locations in New York and San Francisco, respectively? At Christopher Street day, a parade and political demonstration, which in Berlin culminates at the *Siegesäule* (Victory Column, where then-Presidential Candidate Barack Obama gave his campaign speech in 2008), speakers recount the story of the 1969 Stonewall riots in response to the police raiding of a gay bar in Greenwich Village. These speeches constitute a kind of origin story, in which the present-day

protesters imagine themselves as the contemporary heirs to these founding figures, positing a continuity that troubles the bounds of national thought.

In constructing Stonewall as the origin of their own gay liberation, there occurs a writing-out of other possible narrative trajectories. As noted in passages cited above, in the 19th century, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was calling for the decriminalization of same-sex sexual activities; a self-identified "Urning," his term for men who desire men, Ulrichs could be said to be arguing for gay rights more than 100 years before Stonewall. Likewise, Magnus Hirschfeld, founder of the Weimar-era Institute for Sexual Research, campaigned for the repeal of Paragraph 175. Given this extensive history, within Germany, of sexology and a politics of sexual liberation, it may seem odd that Weimar-era sexuality is so often captioned in terms of decadence, and that participants in queer events throughout Germany trace their political history to the United States. Yet, the ways in which any reading of Weimar is to be colored by what came after make it impossible for queer activists to construct such a narrative within the framework of an inevitable and unidirectional progressive teleology. So some aspects of history get written out and some pasts are made unusable, thus sustaining a sense of narrative coherence. Which "theres" are made relevant to "here," which "thens" are made relevant to "now," which "others" are made relevant to "self," these are questions to be answered, ethnographically, as social facts observable in their particularity through on-the-ground engagement, rather than by adherence to preordained prescriptions as to the indices of intelligibility. Thus, rather than narrate the lives of Berlin's SMlers through an intellectual history of sadomasochism/sexuality or a cultural history of Berlin/Germany, I ask instead: to what (and with what

ambivalences) do SMlers appeal in their constructions (biographical, historical, etc.) of the parameters through which their participation in the scene can be thought, and what in turn do these constructions reveal about the contours of this social form?

Despite the proliferating letters of LGBTQQI, gay and lesbian have tended to be the conceptual point of departure for thinking about queer lives[19]. Christopher Street Day is a major holiday for SMlers, yet they are not explicitly included in its rhetoric. The SMlers who participate in Christopher Street Day do so as a sexual minority *analogous* to gays; indeed, many SMlers have discussed the social acceptability of BDSM in relation to the "progress" of gay rights.

"SMlers are about 10 to 20 years behind homosexuals in terms of acceptance," Anna said. She continued:

> Right now when you see SM in the media it's always caricature, people who look outlandish, and stereotypical. But that is what it used to be like when gay and lesbian people would appear on television. And homosexuals used to have to live a double life, the way many of us do now, but they don't any more. So I think the day will come when one day we can be open about who we are. I won't have to hide my collar with a scarf when I want to wear it out, to pretend I have a cold. I'll be able to go to a club without being afraid of who will see me. I think that day will come eventually, and I think that we are tied to the gay rights struggle, because we are behind it.

[19] Within professional anthropology, an attempt to correct this emphasis was made in the official name-changing from SOLGA (The Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists) to AQA (The Association for Queer Anthropology). This change was voted on at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2009. Yet SOLGA was not the organization's first name: before that it was known as ARGOH (The Anthropological Research Group on Homosexuality). Interestingly, two histories are preserved in each successive renaming: first, from a time when one's sexual identity could not in professional circles be so easily articulated, to an espousal of identity and the politics of identity, to a moving away from identity-based configurations altogether; second, from "homosexuality" to "lesbian and gay" to an all-encompassing "queer."

Anna, a heterosexual woman, captions her solidarity with gays and lesbians on the basis of an analogy to her own position as an SMler. In referring to her own group as "20 years behind," Anna conjures Gayle Rubin's (1984) ladder of social acceptability, but she does so in temporal rather than spatial terms. The invocation of a future gives hope that over time, SMlers too might get to the other side of the line, even though in most quarters such discussions are not (yet) taking place.

However, not all SMlers see themselves as connected to gays and lesbians. Norbert, for instance, approached the problem of analogy differently. He told me:

> I used to think that gay issues and SM issues were the same, that we were comparable, but now I think of the matter quite differently, because with a gay person, when you have a partner, just having that partner is an indication of your sexual orientation, so that with gay people it is not just about sex. With SMlers, whether gay or straight, SM is a matter of what you do in the bedroom, it is about sexual practices and that really doesn't have to be anyone's business but your own. So I think that SMlers need rights in the sense of it has to be possible for us to do what we want to do, but I don't think we have to be public about it, there's not the same necessity as there is with a gay couple.

Of course, Norbert's understanding of what it "means" to "be" a homosexual very much depends on the naturalization of contemporary notions of committed and socially recognized couples that were not in most places possible as late as the 1970s. What Norbert is getting at, though, is whether thinking of SM in terms of what one does in the metaphorical bedroom has different stakes than does thinking about homosexuality in such a way. Norbert indicates a partial utility of the comparison, but that analogizing has certain limits, limits that don't necessarily discount the analogy entirely, but nevertheless require that one make distinctions.

Norbert and I discussed the possible need for SMlers to disclose the nature of their relationship. For instance, if a couple lives out their asymmetrical roles in real time and not just in demarcated SM sessions, it might be advantageous for those who interact with them to have a basic understanding of what is going on, to have an interpretive framework that takes into account why one person is always doing the serving, or deferring in the making of decisions, and so on. Norbert did say that with the one couple he knows who really live their lives in this way, their signals to each other concerning acts of dominance and submission are so subtle that outsiders cannot pick up on them. He said that he was quite surprised when he was let in on the secret, that once he knew, the signs abounded, but otherwise he never would have guessed. We also discussed his own situation, as he and his wife live in an apartment that is furnished with equipment for SM play in such a way that it is not possible to "dekinkify" (*entkinken*) it for the coming of company, thus necessitating explanations to out-of-town relatives and other overnight guests. These traces of SM activity that exceed the immediacy of sexual practice do not take away from Norbert's argument that SM and homosexuality are not exactly the same, but they do complicate his attempt to confine the "being" of an SMler to the metaphorical bedroom. Nonetheless, his resistance to rendering gay and SMler analogous forms of orientation registers an important challenge to the logic of discussing one in terms of the other when/where there might be incommensurability.

Taken together, Anna and Norbert show that questions as to the usability gay and lesbian histories for captioning BDSM experiences must be taken, ethnographically, as open ones. SMlers have appropriated discourses such as the idea

of coming out (*das Coming Out*), a term that refers to the acknowledgement and disclosure, to oneself and to others, of one's sexual identity. (The verb form is *outen* – to out, often used as a reflexive verb *sich outen* – to out oneself.) Yet, that to which coming out refers may do so differently in varying domains, especially since I've heard Berliners "out themselves" as heterosexuals or as television "junkies," suggesting that what is denoted by the term – similarly to the issue of the geographic *Grenze* – may not be as univocal as one might think. Or as one might wish: the use of terms such as "coming out" by those who come out as something other than queer often encounters resistance from those who feel the term belongs to them. Such resistances and resentments register in many contexts, as for example in religious studies scholar Sarah Pike's ethnographic account (2001: 126-144) of neo-pagan borrowings of Native American symbols and practices for their own religious purposes. In explaining the conflict, Pike notes that the stakes of such appropriations are different for each group, accounting for Native American hostilities by pointing out that "The notion that cultural identities are malleable and fluid makes it difficult for oppressed populations like American Indians to create strong communities and improve their economic social positions" (144). Resonating with Bourdieusian notions of distinction, position, and disposition (although not referencing these terms directly), her analysis suggests that not only the malleability but also the rigidity of boundaries are ethnographically fraught.

These discussions help show how political and experiential struggles underpin the Gay Museum and the Christopher Street Day Parade as these become significant sites through which boundaries of here/there, then/now, us/them get renegotiated.

The museum constructs a history, but a history of a certain sort: certain would-be boundaries are not maintained, such as what some would see, in a Foucauldian light, as the elision of modern gay identity and forms of homo-sexual practice in antiquity and elsewhere. Likewise, the museum draws attention to existential forms, such as Weimar-era liberation politics, that tend not to be emphasized in other venues, such as Christopher Street Day and its memorialization of Stonewall. But elsewheres, pasts, and others that are deemed usable in one register may become unusable in others.

"Why Germany?": Nationalization Reconsidered

The rendering-fraught of historicization is particularly problematic in the case of Germany, a country in which articulating the remembrance of the past has been made sacrosanct by its relationship to the atrocities of the Holocaust. This positionality, within Germany, has had a profound effect on my interlocutors, resulting for example in endless discussions of, and concern about, the ethical treatment of others. The people with whom I worked are keenly aware of the dangers associated with power, and relate these very dangers explicitly to historical events. At the same time, outside Germany, there exists a sense, sometimes articulated, though often beneath the surface, that German people possess a "perverse" national character, into which notions of eroticized dominance and submission readily fit. Though the stakes are different, a sense of the precariousness through which past and present might be

related exists on all sides, an awareness with which I as an anthropologist have been confronted with the otherwise seemingly benign question of localization.

Throughout this project, colleagues confronted me with the question "Why Germany?" This question is not an unfair one, professionally, in that locality is often thought in anthropology in terms of nationality as if by default, which makes sense as soon one accepts an epistemological paradigm privileging the political, given the world-wide prominence (ideological, economic, etc.) of statist mentalities. That is, there is nothing necessarily nefarious about the question; however, given the specificities of the situation, one must be careful about the uncritical adaptation of these terms, given the potential proclivity toward at least unconscious presuppositions about the perverse character of German people. Only once was this problem made explicit. Prior to beginning fieldwork, I was introduced to a colleague, an ethnologist from Germany; his reaction to my project was as follows: "Please," he implored, "do not go to Germany and find Nazis." His comments that day demonstrated an all-too-acute awareness of the potential for such an argument, as well as, he suggested, its potential marketability internationally.

So often have my German friends, not necessarily SMlers, reported encounters that occurred during their international travels, in which the revelation of their nationality resulted in Nazi-related insults or accusations. Some of these people, now in their twenties and early thirties, have parents who weren't even born until after 1945, and yet they continue to be confronted, even today, with such interpolations equating "German" with "Nazi." This equation permeates popular culture as well. For example,

in the 2003 musical Avenue Q, the song "*Schadenfreude*" includes the following dialogue:

> Nicky: "*Schadenfreude*?" What's that, some kind of Nazi word?
> Gary: Yup. It's German for "happiness at the misfortune of others."
> Nicky: Happiness at the misfortune of others. That *is* German.

The exchange between these two characters is played for laughs, but the joke depends on the equivocation of its terms, embodied in Gary's response to Nicky's question of whether *Schadenfreude* was a "Nazi word" by answering "Yup. It's German…" Such jokes provoke laughter among Americans, but on the other end of this punch-line are people confronted with others who, sometimes seriously, construct them in such a way. This construction is doubly dangerous in the case of BDSM, because in addition to assertions about national character generally, there is another discursive strand that links Nazism with perversion, a psychoanalytically inspired analysis that explicates the Holocaust in terms of sexual dysfunction (e.g. Theweleit 1987; 1989). The logic of such equations has been politically appropriated in reverse, however, so that "Nazis are perverts" gets rearticulated as "perverts are Nazis," thus affixing the label "Nazi" to those whose erotic proclivities are outside the mainstream. Again, in the case of BDSM, which *does* entail eroticized relations of dominance and submission, these kinds of assertions are troublesome, but they are all the more fraught when the SMlers under consideration are German. Thus, while there is no place like Germany where issues of sexuality and power are more discursively problematic, for that very reason one might say that there is no place like Germany in which issues concerning BDSM could be more productively thought, so that this particular conjunction of locus and

focus makes the study potentially all the more valuable in its ability to intervene in such discourses.

Indeed, participants in the Berlin SM scene made clear to me that "Berlin is not Germany…in Munich, for example, it is totally different. The people there, they dress up and look pretty, but they just stand around and don't do much playing. In Berlin, we don't spend so much on our outfits, but we do so much more." This comment refracts regional differences through the lens of socioeconomics: unlike western cities, where big business thrives, unemployment in Berlin (and throughout the East) is comparatively high and people get by with less discretionary income. Some Berlin SMlers jokingly label one SM bar as a "Hartz IV" establishment, because it doesn't charge cover or enforce a strict dress code, enabling people with very little means to participate. Hartz IV is the name by which Germany's long-term unemployment program is known, as it is the part of the welfare-reducing "Hartz" reforms that stipulates the monetary benefits to which unemployed persons are entitled.

More often than pointing to differences *within* Germany, though, was the question of national comparison, based on my being identified as an American researcher traveling to Germany: "Don't you have those people where you come from?" I was asked by one Berlin resident: "Why come to Germany to study that?" I had known this man and his wife since I was an undergraduate studying abroad; they tried to direct my interests to what they perceived as more properly German topics, such as the Berlin wall and its aftermath, art, music, architecture, and folklore. That is, their reading of my position as American led to their thinking of my research in national terms: subcultural questions, in this line of reasoning, would be best addressed

in terms of diversity at home, so that research abroad would be most properly formulated in terms emblematic of the host country.

For this man, sadomasochism ought not be thought of as a German phenomenon. Yet, for many in the English-speaking world, the nationalized reading of my project had to do precisely with ideas about Germans as possessing a perverse national character. In discussing my research, some people obviated the "Why Germany" question by asserting that they already knew its response: "Oh, of course you're going to Germany. They're known for that there." Of course, for many SMlers in Berlin, it was unfathomable that I would leave a city like New York where, they told me, so much was going on in the scene, for a place like Berlin which, they suggested, must be provincial in comparison.

This sense that the "real magic" happens elsewhere manifests in mediated forms as well. In the (1999) movie *South Park*, for example, the elementary school-aged protagonists, when surfing the internet, come upon a website featuring "sick German fetish videos." They find "a lady getting pooed on." The gag is that the mother of Cartman, one of the gang, is notorious for her promiscuity; one of the other children asks whether the woman in the video is Cartman's mom, and, in fact, she is. Here, she is involved with a German-speaking man who, with grammatical errors and inconsistencies that would be uncharacteristic for any native speaker, says "*Du hast Scheiße gern! Essen mein Scheiße!"* (You enjoy shit! Eat my shit!)[20] Significantly,

[20] The word "Scheiße" is feminine; thus, the possessive pronoun, for the sake of agreement (a first person speaker possessing a feminine noun as its object, which in this utterance takes the accusative case) would be articulated correctly as "meine" rather than "mein." Also problematic is that the speaker moves from the informal "du" in "du hast" to the formal "Sie" in "Essen (Sie)," the imperative mood rendering, as in English, the "Sie" implicit. In German, the use of "du" or "Sie" indexes the

the German language version of the *South Park* movie translates this scene by reinterpreting it as British.

While the *South Park* example shows that this cultural othering can happen in any direction, in the case of Germany the insinuation of perverse national character is tinged with the historical legacy of World War II. Indeed, the ethnologist's pleas "please do not go to Germany to find Nazis" rested on the fear that my project was all too amenable to the very kind of reading my host family had disavowed: these behaviors could be interpreted as eroticized violence, the sublimated manifestation of an aggressive character that could all too easily be read as emblematic of Germany, as a sign of a continuity with the Nazi past.

In March 2008, the then-extant British tabloid *News of the World* broke what they called a "Nazi" sex-scandal, having secretly videotaped FIA (*Fédération Internationale de L'automobile*) then-chief Max Mosley engaging in a BDSM session with a number of women. The tabloid's logic in calling it "Nazi" included the facts that part of the session involved a prison scenario, some of the participants were dressed in what they labeled "Auschwitz garb," and in part of the clip participants were speaking German. It was also emphasized that Mosley's parents had been active in Britain's fascist party. Mosley was forced to resign from his position as the president of FIA, but he filed suit against the tabloid for invasion of privacy. Justice Eady, in his decision for Mosley, noted that the tabloid's logic relied on a conflation of German and Nazi, as if the two terms could be used interchangeably (Mosley v. News Group). That

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degree of felt proximity between people, a relationship that may change over time, but generally not within the time-frame of a single utterance.

is, the so-called "Nazi" outfits were actually modern German military style; even the English-language elements, such as the use of the term "facility" had been reinterpreted by the tabloid as representing the clinical discourse of the Holocaust. As for the use of the German language, it turned out that one of the women involved had a fantasy of being dominated in a language she didn't understand, but that it had to be a "harsh" language: the judge reported that while French or Italian would not have done, Russian would have been an acceptable alternative (Mosley v News Group 59). While the inclusion of Russian as an alternative possibility suggests that the choice of language was not specifically a sign of Nazi engagement, it is nonetheless only within a symbolic framework where a language such as German can be read as inherently connoting harshness and brutality that this distinction about the efficacy of some languages, in contradistinction to others, first becomes thinkable.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that print-capitalism, coupled with the rise of the vernacular, made possible the imagination of community in national terms: through shared language, people who had never met each other could come to feel they belonged to the same group, engendering the nationalization of consciousness (1991). Today, however, erotic communities imagine themselves not according to language, but according to discourse: the discourse of sexual orientation, for example, enables the imagination of a queer community across national lines. Yet, as cross-cultural research in queer anthropology has repeatedly shown, these imaginings obscure important differences about what queerness entails in the various ethno-local forms "queer" lives may take. Tom Boellstorff, to take one example, argues that attempts to read *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians as commensurable

with Western gays and lesbians are bound to fail because such an elision would obscure the fundamentally different notions of self on the basis of which each group approaches the world. Boellstorff (2005) contrasts the archipelagic notion of Indonesian selfhood with Western notions of the unified, confessional self: *Gay* Indonesians marry women, he writes, and they imagine that their gay "counterparts" in the West do the same. Even generalizing about the West, though, obscures the way that gay life in a European metropolis may be experienced and understood quite differently from that in a rural American community[21]. The double bind is that the anthropological emphasis on located particularities is always undercut by the need for comparative frameworks through which these particularities become intelligible as such. To be clear, my argument is not that nation does not matter, nor that erotic communities are never intelligible, at least to some extent, in national terms. My concern is more specific, and it consists in my noticing that the question "Why Germany" was *not* simply one question among others: "Why Europe? Why Berlin? Why BDSM?" The problem was that, in advance of my research, the nation had become the de facto unit of analysis to which this project was to be held accountable. These assumptions made little sense, given that people came to the clubs in Berlin from many other places – from within Germany as well as beyond it – and were able to participate and, without a need for "translation," could effectively understand communicative norms of engagement. This fact stands out in the context of BDSM, where obtaining and maintaining consent is as complex as it is paramount.

[21] Cf. Gray 2009.

Certain BDSM practices in Berlin are inspired by texts, from the French novel *Story of O*, to the work of the Austrian Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (especially *Venus in Furs*), to the American John Norman, author of the Gor novels. If BDSM in Berlin is in some ways peculiarly German, one must not lose sight of the fact that this peculiarity is situated in the context of a discourse that is not intelligible in national terms. In formulating our projects and communicating our findings, how might we situate the nation as one imagined community among others? And how do we do so in a moment when, globally, nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments appear to be on the rise?

In her (2007) critique of homonationalism, Jasbir Puar points out that the mainstreaming of certain forms of homosexuality (white, wealthy, monogamous) has the effect of undermining queer alliances and bolstering heteronormativity. In ways that recall Gayle Rubin's (1984) hierarchy of sexual acceptability, Puar shows those placed on the bottom of one social order are rendered analogous to those of another. She looks at how the photos from Abu Ghraib are read in a way that represents perversity and terrorism as equivalent. This analysis evokes concerns raised by one SMler I knew in Berlin. She told me she was worried that I was secretly working for the Department of Homeland Security: "The next time I go to New York on vacation," she said, "I don't want to get shipped off to Guantánamo bay." From the perspective of an anthropologist familiar with the politics of grant applications in the United States, I assured her that the Bush Administration was not funding my research.

Yet, her fears were not exactly off the mark: within the United States, Homeland Security *was* using terrorism as a way to shut down *Insex*, which was one of

the most successful BDSM websites. Based in New York, the site boasted 35,000 members who paid $60 a month for access. The Administration did not file obscenity charges through the courts, which might have been difficult given that the credentials of the founder and director included his having been a visual arts professor at Carnegie Mellon. What happened, as reported in the (2009) documentary *Graphic Sexual Horror*, about *Insex*, was that the Administration threatened the credit card companies that they would be charged with supporting "terror" if they continued to process website members' monthly payments. And just like that, one day the website closed. In the documentary, one of the site's former employees points out the irony that the Administration was labeling as terror these consensual practices of "torture" at a time when they themselves were engaging in torture as a means of combating terror. Those tortured by the government, he adds, neither consented nor received monetary compensation, as did the models on the website. In this sense, positioning SMlers vis-à-vis nationalism is fraught, especially in the case of Germany, where the connotations of mixing eroticism and power seem all too amenable to a reading that historicizes them as emblematic of a perverse and persistent national character. Indeed, this fetishization of history happens from within as well as from without.

One night, Marco drove me from a dinnertime BDSM gathering at a restaurant to a night-time BDSM club party, where there was to be a living buffet, something of a misnomer since it wasn't the food that was alive although it was being served on human tables. In the car, he brought up the topic of imagining the nationalization of BDSM:

> Some people, they think of German and SM as going together. It comes from the history, people associate German culture with the Nazis. I have this girl (*Mädchen*, sic) from New Zealand. She is coming to live with me for a month. And she is English speaking. She doesn't know German at all, but she wants to learn. And she has this idea of German as a language of dominance. And so she will live with me for a month and she wants me to speak with her only in German. We will have a 20/7 situation [instead of 24/7] since she will have four hours a day in language school. But the thing is, she thinks of German as being a language of dominance and authority, but in truth there is very little in the way of a radical right here. Not compared to places like France, or my God the sects that you have in the United States. Which is not to relativize it, but there really aren't extremists here. If someone were to hang a swastika from their window they'd be nailed to the wall faster than, well, immediately. And that is a good thing. But still, we have the reputation…

I pointed out that this fantasy was coming from an outsider and suggested that this characterization might be more of a projection than something that was thought from within. He replied:

> That's not exactly accurate. I know a guy who has an SS uniform. Politically, he isn't conservative or anything, so it's not about that. For him, it's about the *Willkür*. The SS could do absolutely anything they wanted. They had total authority: when you were arrested by them you were at their mercy. And I guess part of it is really about the power that it represents. And he's a German.

This fantasy of unmitigated and arbitrary power, of *Willkür*, articulated as the fantasy of another, was a singular occurrence during the time of my fieldwork in Berlin. Only one other time had I encountered anyone who explicitly combined BDSM play with the symbolism of the Holocaust, and this person was not a German, but rather the descendent of Jewish emigrants persecuted during the Third Reich. Rather, throughout

my fieldwork, this period of history was brought up by SMlers as the example par excellence of power gone awry, presented as an antithesis of what it is that they do.[22] Yet, it would be very easy, as the example of Marco above suggests, to narrate the eroticization of power in Berlin's BDSM scene in precisely this way.

This work is informed by studies in "the anthropology of Germany," even if the project necessitates a calling into question of this frame as the one through which the lives of the SMlers who take part in Berlin's BDSM scene ought to be understood. In a way, previous studies have also been challenging the national framing, although from working more or less within a national framework. John Borneman (1992) shows how East and West German subjects were differentially produced through narratives of life course; this study builds on that work by showing how BDSM practices, at once subcultural and transnational, differentiate themselves to some extent from official discursive frameworks, such as those of the state, through which they would more conventionally be made intelligible. Daphne Berdahl (1999) examines the complexities of life on the border between East and West; this study builds on her insights by looking at the salience of conceptual borders through processes of their remaking. Uli Linke (1999) examines the discursive production of the German body in the shadow of National Socialism, and historian Dagmar Herzog (2005) makes a compelling argument about key ways in which the relationship between sex and fascism has been taken up, to different and contradictory ends, in debates about both topics since. This project contributes to these discussions by showing how, in subterranean contexts,

[22] Anthropologist Margot Weiss is currently working on an article about this topic, a comparative study of "Cultural Trauma Play" (race in the US and the Holocaust in Germany). Pers. Comm. November 2010.

contemporary Germans struggle with how to negotiate their national historical legacy. Matti Bunzl traces how, elsewhere in the German-speaking world, Jews and Queers were both produced as "symptoms of modernity" (2004). At the end of this work, he points to post-national, post-modern symptoms, such as Islamophobia, a theme taken up by very recent anthropological work on the marginalization of Turkish populations in Germany (Ewing 2008; Mandel 2008). This project adds to the conversation the lives of others whose abjection is likewise symptomatic of a modernist ideational scheme.

Yet, all these studies take the national as a point of departure, whereas I want to suggest a more complicated relationship between being "in" Germany and being "of" it, to call into question the necessity of that connection as *the* point of departure for a project such as this one. SMlers in Berlin draw on a range of sources in the production of their practices – from French and American novels, to "English education" to Japanese rope bondage – and so one must be circumspect about the way these practices are made to reflect on Germany, even as it is also true that, in some ways, they do. The anthropological possibility of imagining communities otherwise has always been integral to the promise of our discipline, and it is along *these* lines that critical reflection on the question as to why – "Why Germany" – arises in the context of so many alternative and competing possibilities, attains its significance.

(Un)Becoming Other(s):

The House of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

The day after our trip to Avalon, Michael and I rejoined Norman and Wilma for an outing of a different sort, an excursion to the *Gründerzeit Museum*, the house of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who was affectionately known as "Germany's tranny granny." Von Mahlsdorf was born in 1928 as Lothar Berfelde. Surviving the Nazis and in East Germany as a cross-dresser (and making her home, the museum, a center of the East Berlin area gay scene), she became something of a celebrity in the 1990s, becoming the subject of German director Rosa von Praunheim's (1992) film *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* and American playwright Doug Wright's (2003) play *I am my own Wife*. When Michael told Wilma the play's title, she shook her head:

> That's not such a good translation. You see, in German the word *Frau* means 'wife,' but it also means 'woman.' And in German there is a saying '*Ich bin mein eigener Herr*,' which is 'I am my own man,' but '*Herr*' is also 'lord' or 'master,' so it means 'I am in charge of myself.' So 'I*ch bin meine eigene Frau'* is a play on that phrase, on the double meaning of the word '*Frau*,' and so to just say 'wife,' 'I am my own *wife*,' loses something, I think.

The idea for the excursion was Michael's, as he had seen the play in New York and had heard all about the house. On the prior evening, when we were sitting and talking in the bar area, we had told them of our plans to take the S-Bahn out to Mahlsdorf, an area to the East, outside the limits of the city. But they didn't think it was a good idea, telling us it wasn't very accessible by train, and besides that it might be dangerous for foreigners (*Ausländer*). There were rumors there might be Neo-Nazis

in that area, although when I told this to Oskar, an East German friend from Brandenburg, he said "*Quatsch*!" "Ridiculous!" He suggested that this was simply *Wessi* propaganda that the neighborhoods in the East were dangerous. He said that there were people living in poverty, but they were good people who were demonized, and that they were no more likely to commit crimes than anybody else, and that in any case it was the "shit capitalists" who should be known as criminals for making such bad conditions in the first place, and for ignoring the neighborhoods outside the city.

Wilma was, in fact, a *Wessi*. She moved to Berlin in the 1990s, after the fall of the Wall. Before that, she didn't like traveling to West Berlin, she told us, because she was afraid to go through the East, which was necessary to get there. "You had to go the speed limit. That was the big thing. You couldn't give them even the slightest reason to stop you. I don't know how many people actually had bad experiences, it may have been very few, but that was the reputation."

At the beginning of the tour, everyone gathers in a large antechamber, filled with chairs. The tour guide begins, telling the group how, in the old days, Charlotte herself would give the tours. "People could just knock on the door," she said, "and a woman would come, often carrying a feather duster. You would think it was the *Putzfrau* (cleaning woman), but no, it was Charlotte." Charlotte collected rooms, many of which were from the turn of the century, or the 19th century, hence the name *Gründerzeit* (founding time), the early days of unified Germany. She bought the rooms whole, and reassembled them as they were, so that it was almost as if one were stepping back into time, but this stepping back was circumscribed by the present in which the room was now situated. Charlotte collected musical instruments, everything

from phonographs, to a pianola, to what the guide jokingly called a “nineteenth century jukebox,” where one could put in an old coin that would set off a mechanical process, causing the machine to make music.

At the end of the tour, we descended into the basement, which is a restored and transplanted Weimar-era bar (*Kneipe*), complete with a Bordello room, seeing, the guide told us, that the saloons always had them. The Bordello room was located all the way in the back, the last place to which one comes. It was stocked with period implements, such as whips and floggers. Setting out, we didn’t expect that day’s adventure to be BDSM-related, but it ended up that way, after all.

Chapter Two:

Classifying Matters:

Perspectives on the Parameters of Possibility

Some of my best friends are Vanillas:

On the Becoming-Meaningful of Oppositions

One of the problems in attempting, theoretically, to move beyond binary opposition or definition through negation is that, ethnographically, people speak in such terms. This is true of the SMlers, for instance, who will often explain what they are in terms of what they are not. SMlers oppose themselves to two groups of people. The first are those who practice "structural violence. In Berlin, mainly these people were discussed in terms of the Turks, who, in more broadly circulating discourses (see Ewing 2008 and Mandel 2008), represent a crucial other in contemporary German national imaginings. The second is that of the vanillas who, irrespective of power-laden practices, are by definition not SMlers. Below are the revelations of one such vanilla.

Oskar told me that he could never be an SMler because he really likes to cuddle. "I'm such a cuddly guy (*Kuscheltyp*)," he would often say. I tried to explain that many SMlers I knew liked to cuddle, but it was no use. "I don't like pain," he said, "I could never bring myself to hit someone, and I certainly wouldn't be the one who takes it." I told him that many people in the SM scene aren't into pain either, but

he didn't find empirical arguments convincing. He knew who he was and what he liked, and SM wasn't in his erotic repertoire. Of course, I wasn't trying to convince Oskar that he *was* in fact an SMler, or even that he should be. I myself was struggling with the ontological question as to what *makes* an SMler, given that the people who consider themselves practitioners of SM are quite diverse in their erotic practices as well as their demographics. Many people use the label, even as what the label signifies varies widely. As a form of classificatory identification, the matter is quite clear: people know with great certainty whether or not they apply the label to themselves. In terms of practice, though, there is much overlap between those forms of erotic expression marked as SM and those that are not: self-identified SMlers often told me that they had friends who engaged in practices that SMlers would identify as SM, even though those friends would be horrified to hear it, and indeed would reject the idea that what they were doing constituted SM. Likewise, many SMlers regularly engage in practices – such as cuddling – that do not stand out as especially sadomasochistic, so questions as to who adopts an SM identity and why remain enigmatic if one attempts to proceed on an empirics grounding ontology in performance.

Oskar and I had just treated ourselves to some gourmet chocolate. I offered him a piece with a high concentration of cacao, which he said he wouldn't like because he knew it would be too bitter; besides, he said, "chocolate ought to be sweet." "Oh, just try it," I replied, breaking off a section for him. "It's like a revelation!" he exclaimed upon eating it. I found his choice of word – *Offenbarung* – interesting: an ardent atheist, he described his newfound taste for dark chocolate in a language of epiphany, of religious experience. Oskar, a gay man in his mid-thirties, is a self-

proclaimed East German proletarian (*Ossi Prolet)*, who still lives outside Berlin in the village (*Dorf*) in which he grew up. He liked to visit the city, though, and we had been sitting at Starbucks discussing Orwell's *1984*, which he had recently begun reading. A couple weeks earlier, I expressed to him my surprise that he had never read it, since he was quoting it all the time. "Oh, it's just one of those books everybody knows," he said: "it's a cultural good." He was right, of course: comparisons of the contemporary surveillance state (*Überwachungsstaat*) and the Orwellian oeuvre were something in the air in 2008, mainly expressed by Germans in the form of outrage at policies such as the wiretapping of citizens, the "rights-free zone" associated with Guantánamo Bay or the installation of cameras in the streets of London. Still, I told him I found it odd that he was always referencing a work he hadn't even read, because to me citation was (and ought to have been) a sign of textual engagement. At stake in all of these cases, then, are discrepancies of convention: from bitter chocolate to citing without reading to juridical suspensions of the law by foreign powers, perceptions of significance arise out of a sense of disconnect between what is and what ought to be, rendering a given incident worthy of note.

Looking up from his book, Oskar said he was particularly shocked that Winston, the novel's protagonist, was forced to exercise, that the state would exert such control as to mandate a fitness regime for its citizens. Puckishly, I asked him how different he thought Winston's exercise was from his own routine, in which he rode a stationary bike in his apartment while watching television. "The difference is free will," he told me: "no one is telling me to exercise. I decide to do it myself, because I want to." I replied that while it was true no one was directly coercing him to work out,

it was likely that prevailing social standards of beauty and fitness were shaping his desire to lose what he referred to as his *kleiner Bauch*. "You don't want people to point at you," I told him, "and say 'Oh look, there's an American!'" the way he (and other of my gay German friends) often did whenever an obese person was in sight, whatever the actual or apparent national origin of that person might be. "No one says that about me!" he replied, indignant. The point, I said, was that, given that our desires are always already socially mediated, it is difficult if not impossible to pinpoint just where external coercion begins, and that for me it was not a question of whether you have free will, but one of how to determine in what free will consists. "I have it," he replied, "and you cannot convince me otherwise."

For Oskar, recognizing his desires as culturally mediated constitutes a threat to the notion of "free will" he religiously maintains; he sees his choosing to exercise as arising out of an inner disposition that belongs entirely to him, even as he identifies obesity not with individuals, but with a nationality. At the same time, he is open to trying new things, to discovering tastes he didn't know he had, as in the example of the dark chocolate. On the other hand, not all desires are so flexible: when it comes to sexual orientation, he very rigidly polices the borders of what it is possible for him to find erotically appealing. Though Oskar described the discovery of his previously unknown desire for bitter chocolate as a revelation, in this context the expression of a preference is relatively low-stakes. Dark chocolate is not an especially salient marker of distinction in contemporary Germany, so Oskar's epiphany did not seem to entail a transformation in his sense of self. Sexual preferences are another story, though. When it comes to erotic object choices, activities, and expressions, contemporary

Germans view admissions of desire to be coterminous with articulations of certain kinds of identities, with inhabiting certain kinds of selves. Erotic desires, then, have become tethered to subjectivity, so that claims about *these* desires are understood as claims about one's very being; in such contexts, the borders of consciousness are, unsurprisingly, quite fiercely guarded.

Oskar, again, is not an SMler. He is what my interlocutors call a "vanilla," meaning someone who does not engage in BDSM-related activities. Among German SMlers, such people are also known as *Stinos*, a contraction meaning "*die stink normale Leute*" (the people who are so stinking normal). However, whereas *Stinos* is used in a variety of contexts as a derogatory term for those being marked as hopelessly ordinary, *vanillas* denotes, specifically, SMlers' binary opposite. That is, *anyone* who does not share the erotic proclivities of SMlers is a vanilla. But who are the vanillas? "They are people," I was told, "who walk into an ice cream shop where there are a hundred different and exciting possibilities and of all things choose *vanilla*," which, unfairly or not, has the idiomatic reputation of being the blandest of flavors. Vanillas practice "vanilla sex," which is also known as *Blümchen* sex, referring to a ritual, believed by SMlers to be common among vanillas, in which one sexual partner gives flowers (*die Blumen*) to another, reputedly intended as a form of courtship.

Some SMlers believe that their lives would be easier if they were vanillas. Marco, for example, told me: "I've asked myself whether it would be easier to have normal tastes. It wouldn't shrink the partner search so much…there would be less criteria." I asked him if he thought vanillas didn't have criteria. "It's different," he replied:

> Say that I like to play golf. If I have a girlfriend, she may not have tried golf before she met me, but she probably would try it if I asked her to, because people do that for each other. And then, if she didn't like it, it wouldn't be a problem because I could play golf on my own and she could pursue her own hobbies and then we could meet up later. No problem there. With sex, I can't do that…I mean, I can go out to the clubs and find someone to play with, but that's not the same as doing these things with someone you love. And the difficulty with SM in particular is that, while no woman would think twice if you asked her to try playing golf, if I met a woman and told her 'I'd like to tie you up and beat you' she'd think I was crazy and want to have me locked up! So in that sense vanillas have it easier, hetero vanillas anyway, because I think there are probably parallels to gays and lesbians here. I've heard them say similar things, that it would be easier to have normal tastes.

The movement in this conversation is particularly revealing of how SMlers tend to construct vanilla sex as bland and generic. Marco begins by lamenting the ways in which his erotic preferences limit his potential partners, making it difficult to find a match. When confronted with my question as to whether this difficulty is also encountered by vanillas, he responded not by acknowledging that vanillas also have specific erotic criteria and proclivities, but by saying that, for vanillas, compatibility is more a matter of shared hobbies and interests, such as golf, and that in the end even these are irrelevant because past-times, unlike sex, do not depend on intimacy and love for maximal efficacy. Importantly, in saying that hobbies are that which varies among vanillas, Marco implies an undifferentiated vanilla sex, in contrast to his own tastes, tastes he considers to be nuanced and particular, precisely because they are not shared among most of the population. In this way, he analogizes his situation to that of gays and lesbians, arguing that for them, too, there are a limited number of people who are sexually compatible. Discursively, what is "normal" is unmarked and undifferentiated, lacking in terminological specificity. Indeed, most straight vanillas with whom I've

interacted are unaware that there is a "special" term for people like them. When presenting preliminary post-fieldwork findings at a conference in Germany, for example, one fellow anthropologist was excited to learn the word for her sexual proclivities and, for the weekend at least, began referring to her boyfriend as her vanilla. She giggled as she showed me a text message (SMS) she had sent him, addressed to "my dearest vanilla."

There are important limitations to the opposition between SMlers and vanillas, though. Both terms refer to people who engage in a range of erotic and sexual practices that sometimes overlap. Even among people who call themselves SMlers, there are disputes over what constitutes SM. Additionally, most vanillas do not identify themselves as such, and may not see the vanilla/SM binary as an especially salient marker of their sexual orientations. For example, straight vanillas and queer vanillas would both be classed as vanillas, and yet for many, the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is an essential aspect of representing sexual orientation. To complicate the matter further, many SMlers admit that, on occasion, they too practice vanilla sex. They also surmise that some vanillas engage in practices that SMlers would designate SM, although they believe that vanillas would be rather offended to hear themselves labeled thusly. Additionally, SMlers sometimes decide to "go vanilla" and try their luck dating people who do not share their proclivities for consciously eroticized exchanges of power.

Insofar as it is a question of ontology, then, what "makes" an SMler cannot be understood on the basis of one's partner choice or as a correlation with one's engagement in certain erotic acts, the two ways in which modernist "sexuality" has

been conceptualized. Indeed, philosopher Michel Foucault's historicization of the emergence of sexual orientation centers on a paradigmatic shift in the way men who have sex with men are classified in authoritative discourses, whereby "homosexual" replaces "sodomite" in official thought. He writes:

> As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality…It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized…less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (1990a: 43)

Foucault's history traces a move from a definitive notion of sexual *acts* to a belief in sexual proclivities as a truth of one's *self*. In the latter formulation, engagement in particular acts is understood as a consequence of an inner disposition that is ontologically prior to one's acting, so that whether or not one acts upon one's homosexuality, one can be understood as always already having been a homosexual. In this way, the discourse of sexual orientation is not predicated on any kind of performative ground: whereas "being" a sodomite is necessarily coterminous with engaging in acts of sodomy, one can be understood to "be" a homosexual irrespective of whether or not one has participated in same-sex sexual relations. On the surface,

SM orientation appears to be just another version of modernist sexuality, only entailing a reversal of emphasis: whereas, for homosexuals, a proclivity for certain *partners* is viewed as what is central to one's sexual subjectivity, for SMlers it is a proclivity for certain *practices* that matters.

Yet, strictly speaking, "homosexual" and "SMler" do not operate on the same terminological plane. Here it is important to recall John D'Emilio's (1993) distinction between homosexuality and gay identity. In "Capitalism and Gay Identity," D'Emilio argues that while same-sex sexual practices have been present throughout the historical record, it is only with the rise of industrial capitalism that a distinct gay identity based on a homosexual orientation first emerges as a possibility for a viable existence. The multiplicity of possible gay identities, though, have been susceptible to an essentialist reduction in a way that SMlers' orientations are not. In an essentialist reading, culturally and historically variegated forms of queerness are viewed through a biological lens, so that they are seen as stemming from an underlying homosexuality in the singular, an "innate" predisposition *upon which* one may or may not act and/or form an identity, but which "is" in any event. In the case of BDSM, however, no distinction analogous to that between homosexuality and gay identity exists. A straightforward biologization – the quest for the "SM gene" – is not so readily conceivable, because practices are not intelligible as BDSM outside of very specific cultural conditions: whereas same-sex behavior can exist intelligibly without gay identity, a similar claim vis-à-vis BDSM cannot so easily be made. That is, while a bio-psychological interpretation might attempt to reduce BDSM to "aggressive impulses," such concepts do not, individually, account for integral aspects of SMlers'

practices – such as eroticization and consensuality. The "upon which" becomes too complex to be imagined in terms of a simple and straightforward genetic determinism.[23]

If a person claims "I am an SMler" as a statement of self truth, it is a truth of the self that can only be conceptualized as thoroughly mediated by the cultural conditions of its possibility. The SMler/vanilla distinction would not be intelligible, for example, outside of egalitarian ideological societies where formal juridical equality is presumed. In this context, the verb "to be" is predicated on an acknowledgement of the predilection "to do," even though such doing is not in itself indicative of being: both SMlers and vanillas engage in an overlapping range of erotic practices. What is constitutive of the formation of BDSM identities and practices is *the attribution of significance,* the conscious marking of certain activities and actors as differentiated from the eroticism of the vanillas. It is on the basis of this inscription that the discursive production of the SMler occurs. Vanillas who engage in practices SMlers would mark as BDSM would be horrified to hear themselves labeled thusly because they do not attribute the same significance to those practices. The ontological question of what "makes" an SMler, then, must be thought in terms of a relation between signification and performance irreducible to discourses arguing for the innateness of an essentially interior desire.

The statement "I am an SMler" thus constitutes an identification with an affinity for a complex and culturally-mediated configuration of eroticized practices of power exchange; this truth of one's self gets read in terms of certain tastes, tastes

[23] Cf. Marilyn Strathern's discussion of the theory that "what is constructed is 'after' a fact" (1992: 2).

which get articulated as disruptions of zero-degree, univocalized readings of practice. For example, “pain” and “humiliation” are usually thought of as negative; among SMlers, these terms are revalorized in particular contexts and are thus experienced as positive. Crucially, SMlers do not simply reverse the valances of the terms, making pain and humiliation “good” in all contexts; rather, their practices depend on the idea that *usually* these terms are negative, so that their consensual and eroticized experiences of pain and humiliation get marked as an exceptional case. SMlers’ thus depend on the zero-degree reading even as they subvert it. Of course, this semiotic differential is not always readily intelligible, especially to outsiders, such as the police officers and clinicians who again and again read participation in BDSM activities as indicative of a desire for the actual domination of another human being, the ultimate expression of which being murder.

Once, an SMler of my acquaintance played on this stereotypical characterization entailing a slippage between the explicitly subjunctive character of BDSM practices (marked as play) and an interpretation that renders such practices in the indicative mood (marked as actual violence). We were at “Munch,” a bi-weekly gathering for SMlers in an otherwise ordinary restaurant; there, people dress in street clothes, but have the opportunity to chat about SM. A worker from Amnesty International came in, soliciting donations. In this artsy, alternative neighborhood (*Kreuzberg*) the worker thought she had an unassailable sales-pitch: she was raising funds to combat torture she said, and who is not against torture? She had the misfortune of first approaching Rüdiger, who was in a joking mood: he told her that she was out of luck, because she had come upon a table full of people who were

gathered precisely *because* they enjoyed engaging in torture. The woman turned stone-faced and hightailed it out of the restaurant.

SMlers mark their practices as "play," distinct from instances of "real" torture and violence on the basis of conscious, consensual engagement. This distinction between play and reality, however, is not universally recognized, a fact on which Rüdiger capitalized in shooing away the solicitor by presenting a desire for play as if it were a desire for the real thing. Yet, in most cases, this lack of recognition is much more a problem than a benefit. Signe, for example, is a politically active leftist. She is a pacifist and a feminist, but she is also a submissive heterosexual woman. She complains that her would-be political allies find her erotic proclivities problematic, reading them as a desire for violence and an internalization of patriarchal oppression. SMlers insist not only that their practices are not violence and misogyny, but also that they are not even metaphorical representations of these forms; if BDSM play draws on such images, the appropriation is not straightforward, even as symbolic efficacy depends on an implicitly asserted sense, in the terms of Roland Barthes, of "degree-zero."

Signe's predicament derives from two interrelated cultural assumptions. First, there is a tendency to think of symbols as signifying univocally, so that BDSM play becomes indistinguishable from actual violence and oppression. Second, there is a tendency to assume that identity ought to be coherent, so that Signe's erotic proclivities are read as relevant to her capacity to engage in politics. In *The Use of Pleasure*, the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault addresses both of these issues in his analysis of same-sex sexual relations in ancient Greece. Foucault

argues that the problematization of male-male sex was predicated on a "principle of isomorphism between sexual relations and social relations" (1990b: 215). In ancient Greece, the problem was not that a man desired other men, but that a man would let himself be penetrated. The relevant axis was not so much that of male/female, as of penetrator/penetrated, an active/passive binary onto which gendered relations happened to map, but which was ideologically primary as a dividing mark differentiating rulers and ruled as "kinds" of persons. That is, it was thought that one's sexual role as penetrator/penetrated ought to be analogous to one's political leadership/subjection: "What was hard for Athenians to accept…was not that they might be governed by someone who loved boys, or who as a youth was loved by a man; but that they might come under the authority of a leader who once identified with the role of pleasure object for others" (219). To identify as an object for another's pleasure was to render oneself unfit to rule others.[24] Here, the overlap with Signe's predicament is apparent: just as the ancient Greeks believed sexual passivity was incompatible with political leadership, many of Signe's would-be allies take consensual sadomasochism to be incompatible with pacifist and/or feminist identities.

Both Signe's predicament and Foucault's analysis of ancient Greece derive from an equation of taste and truth, whereby one's erotic proclivities are thought to

[24] The problematization results from a question about temporality. This question concerns the extent to which what one has been (in the past) is coterminous with what one is (in the present). If past involvement with sexual passivity renders one suspect, present avowal renders one definitively ineligible. Hence there was a certain acceptance of man-boy relations using age as a marker of distinction to generate the basis for a differentiation of roles; significantly, Foucault reports the cutting of the first beard as a marker of immediate severance of the acceptability of inhabiting the role of the "beloved" (1990b: 199); this temporal rupture constructs a clear boundary between otherwise continuous being, making possible an ethics predicated on the maintaining of this distinction and thus a division in the self into a before and after, which is called into question in discourses invoking the "to have been."

reveal an aspect of a person's very being, with consequences in the domain of formal politics. Certain other self-identified leftists do not recognize the possibility of conjunction between the various aspects of Signe's identifications, just as Foucault's ancient Greeks do not believe a sexual "object" is fit to govern others. In each case, signification in one domain is thought to have implications for another, indicating both a demand for symbolic coherence and assertions about what that coherence entails. The connections between the various domains remain efficacious as long as they are believable: to the extent that one's status as penetrator ceases to be a marker of masculinity, domination, prowess, etc, the linking of one's sexual position with one's capacity as a political actor becomes implausible. Likewise, the extent to which sadomasochistic practices cease to be read as indexical of "real" violence renders null assertions about the mutual exclusivity of SM-identification on the one hand, and pacifism and feminism on the other. Yet, vanillas and SMlers alike live in a world where these linkages wield a certain amount of symbolic force, so that the tensions remain very present in discussions among all parties: relations between "play" and "reality" are a source of anxiety, discussion, and excitement in the discursive practices surrounding BDSM.

Since these symbolic associations are efficacious both among the people with whom I've worked in the field and those with whom I work at home, the arbitrariness of the signifier cannot be revealed on the basis of a cultural comparison between "us" and "them." Notions entertained by all parties – sexual orientation, BDSM, consent, identity, etc – all derive from similar epistemological frameworks, folk and otherwise. One could, of course, imagine an alternative world where other tastes, such as that for

bitter chocolate, formed an axis of identification around which one could understand oneself as a "kind" of being-in-the-world, with any number of possible consequences such a division might produce. In his (1984) parable *The Butter Battle Book*, for example, children's author Dr. Seuss does precisely this. In this satirical take on the Cold War-era nuclear arms race, Dr. Seuss creates a world divided into Yooks and Zooks, whose enmity derives from a diametrically opposed dietary preference: whereas the Yooks eat their bread with the butter side up, the Zooks eat their bread with the butter side down. This opposition results in a (Berlin-style) wall dividing the two populations, and an arms race, the culmination of which can only be mutual destruction. While the basis of the conflict may seem preposterous, its characterization as ridiculous depends on a reader who could not imagine that people really could be invested in such a distinction: the satire works only to the extent that the oppositional identification does not appear believable. What such a text shows, though, is that in any case one is caught: an ontological distinction – once believed – generates its own realities and effects, thus making the ontological status of the division resistant to satirical dismissal. For those who believe in them, competing and opposed identifications – political, religious, sexual, etc – cannot be thought analogous to butter-up or butter-down debates. Belief in and recognition of a reality work to instantiate that reality as a social fact. Ontological claims, then, are predicated, prior to performance, on productions of belief and recognition that render given performances efficacious. The question then becomes: how is it that people come to believe that vanillas and SMlers are distinct types of persons and recognize themselves and others in such terms?

This chapter explores the ways in which SMlers negotiate tensions between investment in the meaningfulness of binary oppositions, on the one hand, and the ways in which their lives challenge and disrupt these framings, on the other. The rest of this chapter stages a conversation between my ethnographic material on the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*, a working circle of Christian SMlers, and the writings of several academics who are also concerned with problems of classification and territorialization. For the members of the *Arbeitskreis*, the problem is one of how to embrace simultaneously these religious and sexual identities in a social context where "piety" and "perversity" are imagined as mutually exclusive, and where identity is expected to be formulated as unified. Since the problem of the framing is both practically constitutive for SMlers and theoretically constitutive for anthropologists, it amplifies all the points of convergence, these site of critical intersection that make for a mutually rewarding conversation between these two sets of interlocutors whose concerns might otherwise have seemed so divergent and tangential to one another.

Making an Altar, Making an *Alter*:
Matter out of Place?

It was an all-purpose room, open to all the tenants of the building; for a nominal fee, they could rent it by the hour. The room was small, nondescript; in the center there was a white table, surrounded by some chairs. No doubt, the various corporations that were housed in the building held conferences there. But we were there for a

different purpose. We filed in and took our seats. As we sat around the table, Edward closed the door and Anna began to unpack her bag. It was time to build the altar.

Anna took out a black piece of cloth and laid it in the center of the table. It was October, so she had brought some red and gold leaves, arranging them neatly in a circle on top of the cloth. In the center, she placed a large white candle with an inscription in red wax proclaiming "Jesus Christ is your light." In constructing the altar, Anna added each object carefully, one by one. Some of these items had personal significance: a postcard picturing thousands of lit candles was a memento from her pilgrimage to a cloister in France, where she had spent an entire week in silence. She spoke of this experience as a great personal accomplishment. A purple scarf was a token of her passion for dance.

Anna had asked me to bring something to contribute to the altar. I was unsure what to bring, but had settled on an amethyst. I had asked Anna beforehand whether such a stone was what she had in mind, but she responded with a question. "Why an amethyst"? For her, it wasn't so much the object itself as the significance attributed to it. Her question was a way for her to glean an indication of my intention; her concern was to interpret the gesture of its offering. I explained that the amethyst was my birthstone. Anna was skeptical: "Is that like the zodiac? I don't believe in such things. I don't think a stone says anything about you because of when you were born. It sounds rather pagan to me. And this is, after all, a Christian group." I told her that my choice of the amethyst didn't have anything to do with magical powers and that I just thought it was pretty. She said I could bring it, perhaps reluctantly, but I couldn't think

of anything else I had laying about my apartment with which to decorate an altar, so I stuck with the stone.

Anna inspected the altar. "Something is missing," she said. She pulled Edward aside and whispered something in his ear. He left the room and went back upstairs to his space. A few minutes later he returned with a collar and leash, as well as some condoms, all of which Anna laid out among the other objects. She attached the black leather collar to the metal leash, and intertwined the latter with the purple scarf; the condoms were placed beside the large candle in the center. With a critical eye, she fiddled with her arrangement, tweaking the edges of the scarf and arranging the leaves just so. Satisfied with her work, Anna lit the candle. The altar was now complete and the service could commence.

Thus began the first meeting I attended of the Berlin chapter of the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*, a "working group" for Christians who also practice BDSM. When I first learned of the *Arbeitskreis*, I was surprised that such an organization existed. While it is unremarkable that Christians engage in a range of erotic practices or that some practitioners of BDSM are of Christian faith, the idea of a group embracing both Christianity and BDSM – in simultaneity – was unexpected: the conjunction seemed to be somewhat of a conceptual paradox. Of course, the apparently paradoxical is standard fodder for the anthropological imagination, but what is significant about this case in particular is that a sense of the disjointedness of the conjunction is not something that exists only in the mind of the outside observer, but is an issue at stake also for the participants themselves. Indeed, uneasiness with the both-at-once encompassed by the "and" of the group's title underscores its very existence: even as

members of the *Arbeitskreis* affirm that they are both Christians and SMlers, they continue to struggle with whether such a conjunction is possible. What does it mean, then, to live a life where one feels compelled, as did many of these Christian SMlers, to ask: is it possible to be what I am? What does the conception of possibility mean in such a context?

The members of the *Arbeitskreis* live in a world where, discursively, two aspects of their lives do not fit together; however, they also inhabit a world that expects expressions of self-understanding in terms of a coherent identity, presenting something of a double bind. Anna often expressed that, for her, a key aspect of her participation in the *Arbeitskreis* was that it was the only space where she could discuss both topics – Christianity and SM – simultaneously. She emphasized the importance of this function; to be able to speak of both at once was, she said, desirable and necessary. Anna was not alone in expressing that she found it just as difficult to talk about Christian themes with fellow SMlers as it was to discuss SM with fellow Christians, an issue that extended to the most intimate of relations. Some participants had spouses who did not share either the erotic or religious proclivities of their partner, who expressed revulsion to the group on those grounds: "(one woman's) husband doesn't like us because we are SMlers; (another man's) wife won't have anything to do with us because we are Christians."

Participants in the *Arbeitskreis* talked of the openness with which they were able to express their proclivities in terms of being "out." The terms *das Coming Out* (coming out) and *sich outen* (to out oneself) are Germanized versions of phrases that, as idioms of disclosure, originated in the United States with reference to

homosexuality.[25] These expressions have since spread to Germany, emerging in all types of situations having to do with the expression of self-identity. Today, one can out oneself as a conservative or come out as a fan of trashy television. Members of the *Arbeitskreis* have experienced problems with being out in both erotic and religious contexts. One couple was kicked out of their congregation (*Gemeinde*) after they came out as SMlers. A woman who is employed by her church lives in fear of losing her job, should her pastor ever learn of her proclivities. Likewise, a man who works with scientists said his colleagues have no issues with SM, but that he could never divulge his religious beliefs out of fear of teasing and ostracism. What is significant about all these examples is that in each case discussed the people in question are accepting of one aspect and not the other. That is, although it is conceivable that there are people who are critical of both SM and Christianity, the members of the *Arbeitskreis* consistently draw attention to instances where one aspect is accepted and the other rejected, highlighting that what is most at stake for them is the possibility of the conjunction of their religious and erotic proclivities.

The question as to whether it is possible to practice both SM and Christianity underlies the group's discussions and activities. Yet, the very existence of the group ought to presuppose this question's affirmation. Since it is already the case, empirically, that Christian SMlers exist, when participants grapple with the question of possibility in terms of experiential existence, they are actually expressing something else: a need for a discursive framework that would make sense of their conjunctive

[25] See Chauncey (1995), who outlines that, in fact, the gay usage of "coming out" was founded on an analogy to debutante balls – initially referring to "coming out into" gay society; gradually, coming out into became coming out of (the closet), and it was this prepositional and idiomatic version that traveled to Germany. On contemporary discursive practices of coming out, see Woltersdorff (2005).

identification with Christianity and SM. That is, these people are practicing both Christianity and SM in a discursive world where these two terms do not fit together, so that members of the group are living in a space of tension between discursive framing and experiential possibility, a tension that makes the symbolic assertion implicit in the construction of the altar all the more significant. By placing the objects associated with sadomasochism on the altar alongside the Christian symbols, and by celebrating a service – complete with Biblical readings, hymns, prayers and even a sermon – around that altar, the group stakes a claim that asserts SM and Christianity as compatible.

For this very reason, that the altar gets constructed in this fashion is significant to the group, especially for Anna, who is the leader of the Berlin chapter, as well as the local group's member most actively engaged with the *Arbeitskreis* at the national level. In constructing the activities of local meetings, including the religious service, Anna referenced her knowledge of and experience with the national organization as a way to shape the proceedings. The decoration of the altar, for example, was not entirely uncontroversial, even among members of the group. At first, Edward was uncomfortable with putting the SM paraphernalia on the altar; after the service, he said that he could have done without it. Anna explained, however, that this was how the altar was made at the national meetings, and that it was crucial to include SM: what better way to affirm that living a sanctified life is compatible with the erotic practices in which one engages than to include objects symbolic of those practices at the literal center of a religious ceremony? This ritual gesture lends an air of certainty, even as doubts about the reconciliation of the two aspects arise from time to time among participants.

Indeed, for the members of the *Arbeitskreis*, not just any combination of religion and eroticism will do. Most participants scoffed at the question as to whether "SM and Christianity" meant engaging in sexual practices entailing role-playing as clergy, or eroticized enactments of Biblical scenes, such as the crucifixion. "People who do those things as dress up like nuns and priests," said Anna, "they do not take religion seriously." Lola, another participant, agreed: "That's right. A believer would not take holy things and drag them through the mud." Edward took a more nuanced position: "I know a person who does that, he likes to dress up as a priest, and his thing is to bless people. Now, I wouldn't say he is religious in the way that we are religious, but I do think that, if in a different way, the priest as a symbol is something important to him, that it is something he takes seriously in his own fashion." While Edward draws attention to the idea that no person has a monopoly on symbolization, Lola emphasizes a tendency toward symbolic codification. It is not simply that she does not see the possibility of mixing the two symbols in a particular fashion, but that there exists in her mind a clear hierarchy that would be violated if the two were blurred: you don't take something holy and drag it through the mud. Discursively, the force of the violation occurs in only one direction.

The discussion turned in another direction: "what about people who practice self-mortification in religious contexts such as *Opus Dei*" asked Franz, rhetorically: "I would say that they practice SM." Edward disagreed: "Perhaps a psychologist might be able to find certain parallels, but to talk about parallels would be offensive, I would say, to both groups. This is not to say that parallels cannot be found, but it is important to say that the people in both groups do not see themselves in this way. The members

of *Opus Dei* would not experience what they do as sexual or erotic, even if it could be argued that it fulfills the 'same' psychological or physiological need." Here, Edward makes an argument for using self-understanding as a starting point for the interpretation of practices. He doesn't discount the possibility that certain outside discursive frameworks might shed light on phenomena, if only by "finding parallels." Not insignificantly, he uses the example of a social scientist to make his point. Edward contends that the expert's elision of categories that participants would describe as distinct[26] would be problematic if simply accepted as truth, so that both experiential understandings and authoritative analyses must be given their proper due. For him, personal experience ultimately trumps expert authority: the psychologist's parallels can only be rendered in scare-quotes (*in Anführungszeichen*).

The implicit claim that experiential self-understanding must have a certain weight in semiotic analysis and classification underlies Edward's approach to other topics as well. In another instance, where Franz claimed that "people in Asian cultures engage in SM but do not call it that, because for them hierarchy is simply a way of life," Edward disagreed sharply, but in doing so first posed the question as to whether the people of whom Franz was speaking would call what they were doing SM. Additionally, he asked whether "their ways of life" had what SMlers take to be integral characteristics of their own practice: that SM is safe, sane, and above all consensual. "When we talk about SM," said Edward, "we are not talking about structural violence.

[26] Edward's distinction between personal experience and expert analysis echoes Clifford Geertz's distinction between experience-near (emic) and experience-distant (etic) formulations in anthropological accounts, where one attempts to "produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of a witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer" (1983: 57).

SMlers are not forced into hierarchical relationships. SMlers choose their roles. They can decide when to stop, if they want to." By drawing attention to the distinction between the voluntary and the prescribed, Edward emphasizes that SM activities occur in a cultural framework where these hierarchical relationships are not enforceable; one elects to interact with another person in roles such as master/slave, dominant/submissive, top/bottom, but these hierarchies are circumscribed by a juridical reality of formal equality, thus differentiating SM from structural violence. In SM, one is free to exit the hierarchical relation at any time; this freedom is central to SMlers' self-understanding, so that the comparison of SM with nonconsensual forms of hierarchy and violence are not acceptable to participants in these discussion groups. When a person, usually a newcomer to the group such as Franz, makes a statement that is incompatible with what is discursively acceptable to the group, that person is corrected. Such corrections constitute attempts to bring articulations concerning discursively inviolable topics, such as consent, more or less into line with the group's expectations.

Framing group discussion is not just a matter of the categories one uses, but also a question of the qualities that experiences belonging to a given category are presumed to entail; the criterion of agreement as to the appropriateness of a term in discussion is both a practical condition of communicative possibility and a political regulation of discursive framing. Edward argues that, by definition, SM is not violence, and that much of the mutual exclusivity of the categories hinges on consent, as well as responsibility towards one's partner. He explains that "some people try to justify violence by saying they are doing SM, by calling themselves SMlers, but in

such a case they are not SMlers, they are engaging in abuse." One important consequence of these discussions, produced through the conversational regulation of semantic borders, is the codification of discursive orders aiming toward the achievement of consensus.

For members of the *Arbeitskreis*, two sacred discursive orders – the religious truth of Christianity and the self truth of sexuality – come into a potential conflict, so that much emotional and intellectual energy gets devoted to possibilities of resolution. That is, concerns about the compatibility of practicing both SM and Christianity stem from discursive framings that both separate "piety" from "perversity" and mandate an identity that is coherent, hence the double bind of "being" a Christian SMler in a discursive world where Christianity and SM are not seen as fitting together, and where such not-fitting provokes an existential dilemma. In this context, Franz and Edward's discussion about *Opus Dei* becomes significant. At stake in this conversation was the possibility of equivalence between practices such as whipping, performed in erotic and religious contexts: can the wielding of the whip in each instance be considered the same, as Franz would have it, or as distinct despite possible parallels, as Edward contends?

Throughout history, flagellation has appeared in both erotic and religious contexts, as has been documented in medievalist historian Niklaus Largier's work *In Praise of the Whip*. Largier notes that desire and piety can "both arise from or be witnessed by the same gesture of flagellation, the same staging" (2007: 214), but that in modern western thought, "with the introduction of 'sexuality' as a concept, the desire to be whipped came to be seen as a pathology, and even religious flagellation

was viewed as a secret or concealed perversion" (17). Largier argues that in contemporary thought there is a consensus on the idea that the ultimate meaning of such practices resides in an explanation that centers on sexuality: "in the eyes of contemporary scholarship, voluntary flagellation is not a phenomenon to be interpreted in religious, spiritual, and erotic terms – or even merely in erotic terms. Rather, it is viewed as a practice whose meaning can be understood only in its relation to 'sexuality'" (445). It is in this context that Franz's assertion that members of *Opus Dei* are "really" SMlers can be understood: if one were to accept that the ultimate explanation for such practices is to be found in sexuality, religious asceticism would have to be the sublimated expression of a repressed perversity. Interestingly, in no case is the possibility entertained that the motivation for flagellation could be at once religious and sexual. Thus, the argument is not simply about primacy, but of discursive incompatibility. Indeed, Largier traces the turning point in the acceptability of flagellation as a religious practice to 1700 with the writings of the Abbé Jacques Boileau, whose concern was that, even though flagellation could be an act of piety, it could be a sexual act *instead* (207-18). The discursive impossibility of experiencing both-at-once has implications for the experience of each, insofar as the "at-once" is also a question of "in-the-same-person." Among members of the *Arbeitskreis*, the discursively incommensurable gets refracted through concerns about leading a "double life" (*Doppelleben*). In turn, experiencing doubleness as a problem implies suspicions that certain aspects of the self are incompatible, meaning they "ought" to appear in the form either/or and not both-at-once.

The injunction of this "ought," however, is by no means static or constant: indeed, in the very making of their altar, members of the *Arbeitskreis* call into question the inevitability of rendering their identities incommensurable, "the weight of institutional inertia" (Douglas 1986: 63) notwithstanding. That is, these everyday discussions and debates represent deliberate, conscious efforts to reflect on – and even to remake – cosmological worlds. Such possibilities of transformation are essential to Christian SMlers faced with the horrifying prospect that, by claiming to belong to both groups, they will be conferred citizenship in neither. Constitutively, though, the conferral of citizenship is not necessarily, or rather not only, a conferral from without: it is not just a question of whether others will recognize them as belonging to both groups. Rather, when the members of the *Arbeitskreis* problematize the possibility of claiming, as they do, this particular conjunction of religious and sexual identities, they do so in a language that suggests that part of the problem is the extent to which they can recognize *themselves*. There is an elision here between self and other, where the conceptual borders between the two cannot so easily be sustained. Indeed, it would be a mistake to imagine that the existential crisis discussed by these Christian SMlers resulted simply from the internalization of externally imposed categories, even as it is only through these categories that becomes possible for people to identify themselves as such. The existential problem of the *Arbeitskreis* is the problem of the both-at-once: it is the *conjunctive* identification of the Christian SMler that it is at the heart of the problematization that sustains the conversational energies of the assembled group. The significance of placing BDSM paraphernalia on a Christian altar has everything to

do with the assertion – sometimes, but not always an implicit assertion, coming from within as well as from without – that the two do not belong together.

The first point to be made is that it is not the objects in themselves, but the objects as material and symbolic embodiments of "discourse" that enable the problematization. "The discursive formation," writes Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "is the general enunciative system that governs a group of verbal performances (1972: 116); "discursive practices," likewise, are "the conditions of operation of the enunciative function" (117). Yet – and this is a move that reverses the Platonism[27] implicit in a Foucauldian analysis – one must not forget that it is only on the basis of the material and symbolic embodiment, on the basis of the statement, that the existence of the discourse may be inferred, even as the intelligibility of the symbol depends upon the positing of a discursive framework through which the symbol might be interpretive. Foucault induces such formations through interpretations and analyses of (often official-authoritative) documents; strictly speaking, though, a discursive formation does not, as such, exist[28]: the discursive formation is abstracted by virtue of a projection, based on the very practices – verbal and nonverbal – it is said to regulate. This stance reiterates Ferdinand de Saussure's opposition between langue and parole: Langue can only be abstracted from instantiations in parole, even though, for communication to be possible, parole depends upon a sense of langue. We are operating in the subjunctive mood: everything happens as if discourses governed (I would say "shaped") verbal performances. Rather than

[27] See Deleuze (1990: 253-279).
[28] Here, I echo Ralph Milliband's famous (1969) pronouncement concerning the State.

convert the subjunctive into the indicative, and make pronouncements as to what discursive formations "are," I treat discourses as frames, implicitly appealed to within the context of an utterance, the conditions and presuppositions on which a making sense of that utterance depends. Frames, though, never get enunciated as such, and in empirical encounters they are often much less tidy than in official-authoritative texts. If experts arrive at consensus, people may nonetheless continue to entertain divergent ideas, and they may make use of official discourses in unexpected ways. True, these experiences are mediated by the discursively available, as parole is by langue, subjunctively. Even if in many ways people are accountable to discursive powers that be, experiential encounters are far more nuanced; discursive frames are therefore shifting and porous, not entirely fluid, but not necessarily stabile either.

In the case of the altar, the presumption of an experiential incompatibility derives from an assumption about discursive incompatibility: as in Marx's commodity fetishism, we forget that the impersonal forces that have power over us insofar as we believe in and avow such power, are oftentimes the products of our own minds. In one sense, the sacred may be understood as that which, in a given context, is held to be inviolable; so construed, the sacred constitutes a key basis upon which the regulation of experiential understanding occurs. However culturally constructed and contingent, principles of order function as powerful, inscriptive forces.

In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas introduces the idea of "dirt as matter out of place," an approach that "implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (2002: 44). Thus, according to Douglas, "there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of

classification in which it does not fit" (2002: xvii). The position that something is not dirty in and of itself, but only in relation to the contravention of a system of order, finds a correlate in Emile Durkheim's vision of the sacred. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim contends that *any* object can be sacred: "in principle, none is by nature predestined to it, to the exclusion of others, any more than others are necessarily precluded from it" (1995: 230). This sentence includes the footnote "even excrement has a religious quality," with a reference to an essay on "*Der Zauber der Defäkation*" (the magic of defecation) (1995: 230). To claim that even excrement can be considered holy is to draw attention to the radical contingency of symbolic codification; that contingency, however, does not change the fact that symbolic forms, once codified, constitute powerful forces in the regulation of experience. Indeed, Douglas explains that the very act of perception is shaped by classificatory schema:

> In a chaos of shifting impressions, each of us constructs a stable world in which objects have recognizable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence. In perceiving we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they harmonized with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted, the structure of assumptions has to be modified. As learning proceeds objects are named. Their names then affect the way they are perceived the next time: once labeled they are more speedily slotted into the pigeon holes in the future.
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> As time goes on and experiences pile up, we make a greater and greater investment in our system of labels. So a conservative bias is built in. It gives us confidence. At any time we may have to modify our structure of assumptions to accommodate new experience, but the more consistent experience is with the past, the more confidence we can have in our assumptions. Uncomfortable facts which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb these established assumptions. By and large, anything we take note of is preselected and organized in the very act of perceiving. (2002: 44-5)

In this passage, Douglas draws attention to an emphasis on centripetal forces in perception, a conservative tendency favoring that which fits or can be made to fit into established classificatory order. A key aspect of this tendency is the temporal dimension: over time, as experiences confirming order pile up, it becomes more and more difficult to challenge the systems of classification through which we perceive. This emphasis on the centripetal is a marker of the functionalist thinking that underlies Douglas' approach, but this functionalism does not rule out possibilities of transformation: as Douglas herself explains, the modification of structures of assumptions is possible, but it is nonetheless a hurdle for discordant facts to overcome if they are to be integrated into a (thus transformed) classificatory vision.

Douglas argues that these resistances to transformation are a condition of communicative possibility. She writes: "thanks to the weight of institutional inertia, shifting images are held steady enough for communication to be possible" (1986: 63). Impressions made by these shifting images get interpreted through a framework of perception that is communicable, which is to say that schemes of perception must be understood as social rather than individual, a point that resonates with the Durkheimian tenet, outlined in his *Rules of Sociological Method,* that social facts are to be understood in relation to antecedent social facts rather than in terms of individual consciousness (1982: 134). Thus, the temporal dimension of symbolic codification is the product of a dialogic process, in which perceptions get negotiated through encounters: the individual does not just perceive the world as an assemblage of objects that she is free to classify and interpret as she wishes. Rather, classification and interpretation are above all the products of citations. All the words we speak were first

uttered by others, from whom we inherited them. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin writes: "Only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish…(a) dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word" (1981: 279). All the words we utter are thus the words of others, words which we make our own, but, echoing Marx, only to a certain extent and not under conditions entirely of our choosing. Rather, productions and reproductions of words take place in the contexts of communicative interaction into which we are thrust. Thus, insofar as we understand subjectivity to be a linguistically mediated form, its constructions cannot be conceived of as inscriptions upon a tabula rasa: a better metaphor would be that of the palimpsest.

The conception of self-construction as a form of palimpsestic inscription has significant consequences for discussions about agency, as the terms "external" and "internal" can no longer be thought of as a binary opposition. Bakhtin describes the acquisition of language[29] as a creative incorporation of otherness as a condition of possibility for self-expression: "Extratextual influences are especially important in the early stages of a person's development. These influences are invested in the word (or in other signs), and these words are the words of other people, above all, words from the mother. Then these 'others' words' are processed dialogically into 'one's own/others' words,' with the help of different 'others' words' (heard previously) and then in one's own words, so to speak (dropping the quotation marks), which are already creative in nature" (1986: 163). Bakhtin argues that making others' words

[29] Here, I want to be clear that I am not conflating discourse with language; however, discursive frames are learned and acquired, as are languages and cultures. It is in this context that I cite Bakhtin's comments on language acquisition and Durkheim's account of educational socialization.

one's own is a dialogic and creative process: it is not a matter of rote internalization, but of constructive engagement; internal and external cannot be mutually exclusive, but bleed into each other. Compare that passage with Durkheim's vision of socialization:

> All education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously. From his earliest years we oblige him to eat, drink and sleep at regular hours, and to observe cleanliness, calm and obedience; later we force him to learn how to be mindful of others, to respect customs and conventions, and to work, etc. If this constraint in time ceases to be felt it is because it gradually gives rise to habits, to inner tendencies which render it superfluous; but they supplant the constraint only because they are derived from it…education sets out precisely with the object of creating a social being…The pressure to which the child is subjected unremittingly is the same pressure of the social environment which seeks to shape him in its own image, and in which parents and teachers are only the representatives and intermediaries. (1982: 53-4)

It is true that Durkheimian functionalism emphasizes centripetal forces. A standard, if facile, critique often lodged against the functionalists is that their emphasis on tendencies toward the codification of social order results in an apparent lack of any notion of transformational possibility. Yet, such a reading would only be possible if one were to assume that Durkheim is arguing that the effort at imposition could be completely successful, that the inculcation of social ideals could be one hundred percent effective. In fact, his point is quite the opposite: hence his argument that "crime is an integral element of any healthy society" (1982: 98), because there will always be phenomena that contravene social order: he contends that even in a "community of saints" there would inevitably occur the commission of offenses "that appear venial to the ordinary person," which would nonetheless "arouse the same scandal as does normal crime in ordinary consciences" (1982: 100). Durkheim

understands crime – which, he argues, has a transformative potential (1982: 102) – as necessarily comprehensible only in relation to the order it contravenes, and for him contravention cannot be done without. Thus, despite his emphasis on tendencies toward incorporation and codification of social order, he does not contend that constraint can be fully internalized: it will not disappear or cease to be felt completely.

Balancing the emphasis on centripetal codification in Durkheimian functionalism with the notion of centrifugal transformation in Bakhtinian dialogism, the problem of tensions between discourse and experience becomes clearer: in these instances, discursive constraint is not rendered superfluous because experiences call its claims into conflict, rendering it no longer possible for them to be interpreted as natural and inevitable; dialogic encounter provides a counterpoint, a basis for conceptual transformation. Categories get called into question, resulting in personal and political struggles.

"My SM is not the same as your SM": Classificatory Struggles

The existential crisis of the members of the *Arbeitskreis*, who grapple with the question *How is possible to be what we are*, suggests Mary Douglas' Durkheimian notion of "matter out of place," refined through an emphasis on Bakhtinian dialogics and double-voicing. Such a refinement, though, poses another analytic challenge, insofar as the statement "matter out of place" posits, whether explicitly or not, a notion of matter *in* place. That is, it would seem that there could be no compromise between

Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas, because the latter's formulation implies precisely the univocity of signification that the former's theory rejects. Yet, recalling our discussion of parole and langue – the actually-practiced and the conjured system through the positing of which the actually-practiced is made intelligible – it would be a mistake to imagine the efficacy of the system outside of the events from which the system is imagined, even as, according to the Platonic illusion, it seems to be reversed. Just as it is on the basis of actual chairs that the ideal chair is imagined even as the imagination of the ideal shapes the conceptualization of the actual, so too do the members of the *Arbeitskreis* speak of discursive incompatibilities as if they were experiential ones, letting the discursive imagination – an imagination that is nonetheless conceptualized as predicated on the actual practices that are its enunciative conditions of possibility – seem to control the imagination of experiential possibility. The paradox, then, is that their anxieties about "matter out of place" shape their discussions, even as their practices contest the limits to experiential possibility that such discursive constraints otherwise suggest. What is needed, then, is a conceptual bridge between the imagination of discursive inviolability on the one hand, and of transformative resignification on the other, an analytic that accounts for the remaining-in-orbit of the symbol as suspended between centripetal and centrifugal forces. That analytic can be gleaned from the insights of Pierre Bourdieu, specifically from his reflections on classificatory struggle.

In many of their discussions, members of the *Arbeitskreis* grapple with how to classify practices, their own as well as those of others. At one of the national meetings I attended, two hours on a Saturday afternoon were devoted to the topic of "questions

from the outside." Part of the group's mission consists of public outreach work (*Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*) to those who have stopped practicing their Christian faith because of their SM orientations, to those who are struggling with SM because of their Christianity, and to the broader Christian community, to spread knowledge of and, they hope, support for those who call themselves both Christian and SMler. One place where this work occurs is Church Days (*Kirchentage)*, a biannual national event that the *Arbeitskreis* began attending in 2005.[30] The discussion about "questions from the outside" was presented as a simulation of what those who represent the group might encounter, whether during *Kirchentage*, or in conversations with pastors, fellow congregants, or other SMlers. As Lukas introduced the exercise, rhetorical shifts occurred: on the handouts we received, the questions were posed as being from outside, the questions of outsiders. Then, in explaining the activity as a simulation of hypothetical encounters, he presented the questions as questions that *could possibly* surface when discussing the topic of SM and Christianity with outsiders. It was a change from the indicative to the subjunctive mood, from "outsiders ask these questions" to "it is possible that outsiders ask these questions." In fact, these were questions that came from members of the *Arbeitskreis*, questions which with they themselves have struggled: they were the questions of "insiders," presented *as if they were* the questions of "outsiders." That is, even for some of those most inside the group at the national level, there is a sense of remaining somewhat outside, to the

[30] The group first applied to host a booth in 2003, but their application was rejected; whereas the 2005 event was Protestant (*evangelisch*), the 2003 event was ecumenical (*ökumenisch*), including Catholics as well. There was some speculation that it was the Catholic vote that kept them out the first time. Although the *Arbeitskreis* is officially *ökumenisch*, the group is comprised mostly of Protestants.

extent that doubts and uncertainties remain as to the possibility of living one's identification as a Christian SMler harmoniously.

One key question for the group was whether having a play partner who is not your spouse constitutes adultery (*Ehebruch*). In SM, a play partner is often distinguished from a significant other in that the relationship consists entirely or primarily of SM-related activities and does not include a romantic component, or even, in some cases, sexual activity, where sex is understood as intercourse or penetration. That is, play partners get together for SM sessions; they may socialize with each other and have a beer or coffee, but they do not consider themselves a couple. Of course, what the conceptual distinction entails in practice can vary considerably. Some SMlers find themselves constantly correcting other SMlers as to their relationship status: "he is not my boyfriend, he is my dom. We are not a couple," one woman continually insisted, even to her closest friends, who perpetually asserted otherwise. In such cases, it is difficult to arrive at consensus or mutual understanding as to what such relationships signify, and this classificatory struggle is not limited to issues of status. For instance, practitioners vary in terms of their understandings of whether and to what extent SM activities constitute sex in their own right, and these contested definitions of whether such acts are deemed sexual have implications for the acceptability of engaging in such practices outside of marriage.

The question, presented as a hypothetical, emerged from the real life scenario of a participant in the group. Lisa enjoys receiving pain, but this is something her husband is unable and unwilling to provide: he cannot bring himself to hit her. For Lisa, an ideal scenario would be to be whipped by someone with whom she was in a

loving and committed relationship; that is to say her play partner would be the same person as her spouse. As this is not possible for her, she separates the two. The members of the *Arbeitskreis* struggle over the ethics of such situations. In the discussion, several people focused on notions of knowledge and consent: are all the parties involved aware of what is going on, and have they agreed to it? Dagmar told a story about how she was at a party, and played with another woman. She had a boyfriend at home, and the other woman had a girlfriend. Whereas Dagmar's boyfriend knew she was going to an SM party, the other woman's girlfriend had no idea: the woman had lied to her partner, saying she was going to a soccer match. Dagmar said that when she had learned of the woman's deceit, this knowledge gave her a bad conscience (*schlechtes Gewissen*), because she felt that she had unwittingly facilitated adultery. Antonio, however, contended that the adultery had taken place at the moment the woman had lied to her partner: "it doesn't matter whether anything happened or not. The moment she said she was going to a game, when really she was heading to an SM party, the moment she intended to commit adultery, that is where her adultery began, for she committed adultery in her heart." Antonio pointed the group to the Gospel of Matthew: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5: 27-8). Antonio used this passage to propose that culpability precedes action: he claims that Dagmar's own participation did not facilitate the sin, since the act was simply a realization of adultery that had effectively already taken place. Interestingly, for Dagmar and Antonio alike, adultery does not consist simply in partaking in erotic encounters with someone other than your

official partner; what differentiates some acts as adultery is the presence or absence of the partner's consent. Here, demarcations of adultery as sin hinge on an individuated ethics of consent.

Lukas complicated the matter:

> I don't think it would be enough to say that my wife knows and she agrees, because she might agree out of a sense of necessity, that she doesn't feel she has a choice, or even if she thinks she can choose, she might consent because she wants me to be happy. But in that case, I don't think she would be happy with it, with the idea of me going out and playing with other women. And we're responsible for thinking about the happiness of our spouse as much as our own.

Here, Lukas applies a similar argument about intention to argue that knowledge and consent are necessary but not sufficient: the mutual happiness of the spouses is of primary ethical importance. Edgar provided an empirical example of a couple he knew who were in a similar situation to the one Lukas proposed hypothetically:

> At first, the issue was that the husband was into SM and the wife was not. Initially, she didn't have a problem with her husband going out and playing; she thought, 'if these women like to be whipped, that's their prerogative, and it's nothing to me.' She didn't find it threatening. But then over time she started to get into SM herself, and when she began to enjoy being whipped, she got jealous of the idea of her husband whipping other women. She wanted to be the only one to share in that bond with him, because all of a sudden it was something intimate for her, SM, in a way that it hadn't been before. So issues of jealousy and what counts as infidelity can change, depending on whether both partners are into SM.

Arguing for an approach to ethical considerations dependent on a contextualized semiotics of the act, Edgar attempts to navigate the tensions between what members of the group take to be a universal moral code and the ways in which, empirically, the applicability of such norms can change even in the case of the same couple.

Jan expressed discomfort with the conversation. "Are we just making up our own ethical code," he asked, "or are we basing this on what the Bible teaches us?" Others in the group questioned Jan's opposition between Bible-based and fabricated. Dagmar said "I don't think the Bible says anything definitive about these particular issues. It was written in a different time." This point brought up a contentious debate, evoking the opposition between treating the Bible as universally valid for all time or historically contextualized. Edna considered this opposition to be false: "Of course contextualization is important: it helps us understand what the Bible is saying. And the real issue is not whether the Bible is valid for all time – as Christians we believe in the Bible's validity – but the question is how do we take what was written in the Bible, in that time, and from there use it as a guide to our own situations." Edna's notion of the Bible as inspiration and guiding force seemed reasoned and satisfactory to the people in attendance, but the Biblical debate brought out an issue that can be difficult for members of the *Arbeitskreis* to navigate, as participants come from various denominational traditions (*Glaubensrichtungen*), so that theological differences can lead to conflicting stances on and approaches to matters affecting the group. At stake is not just *whether* one uses the Bible as a basis for an ethical code, but *how* the Bible might best be deployed.

When it comes to ethical dilemmas, there isn't always agreement in the *Arbeitskreis* as to which are the proper discursive framings through which experientially-informed questions ought to be explored. This situation is made more fraught when such questions get posed in general, rather than contextualized, terms: there is a tendency among the group to talk theoretically, even though the questions are

generated from specific and personal situations. Moritz pointed to the pitfalls of removing contextual specificity in favor of making generalized claims, arguing that removing subjective references does not make a theory any more valid. In fact, the opposite is the case, because contextual specificities are crucial for him, on normative as well as empirical grounds. He said:

> You shouldn't proclaim you know the answer once and for all. Then you have already lost. The important thing is the process of grappling with the question in a responsible and moral way. There is no shortcut answer, so we shouldn't try to sit here and say that our organization takes a specific stance on what constitutes adultery in any and all situations. What are the bounds of acceptable behavior? That is something that each person must work through for themselves. We shouldn't try to force answers. Each person has to do the work of struggling with the question. The important thing is to ask.

At the service on Sunday, Moritz gave the sermon (*Prädigt*). He cited a passage from the first letter to the Corinthians: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him" (I Cor. 8: 2-3). Moritz emphasized that it would be arrogant to claim definitive knowledge, to pronounce authoritative judgment on questions of morality; rather, the important thing for him is that each individual struggles with his or her own conscience when it comes to questions concerning the bounds of ethical and moral behavior. His point is not simply that each situation must be considered in its contextual specificity, but that one's personal struggle with questions of morality is an important component of spiritual and ethical development. Grappling with moral issues cannot be done without: discussion leads not to teleological consensus, but to personal improvement.

Underneath many of their questions, the Christian SMlers seem to be asking: what belongs together? In discussions among members of the *Arbeitskreis*, there is a tendency to debate the aptness of various couplings and de-couplings; there is not always agreement as to whether two situations can be considered analogous, whether one empirical case or hypothetical scenario can be used to shed light on another. We have seen this tendency emerge already in Franz and Edward's conversations about whether and to what extent it is possible to compare SM with self-mortification as presumed to be practiced by members of *Opus Dei*, or with gendered hierarchy in "Asian cultures" as observed by Franz during the years he spent abroad. In a variety of contexts, one question of discursive coupling continually surfaced: how to relate SM to homosexuality.

One of the "questions from outside" was whether God created all forms of sexuality or whether some forms of sex are perversions that stem from humanity's fallen state since Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. Lukas did not like the question: "We have to be careful here," he said, "because as it is worded this question could also be about homosexuality, and we all know that *that's* a thorny issue." Here, Lukas is pointing to the fact that, as an ecumenical group, the *Arbeitskreis* includes participants from various *Glaubensrichtungen*, which take different stances concerning homosexuality, ranging from approval of same-sex marital unions to the belief that same-sex sexual acts are Biblically condemned. To ask a question about SM in terms of "all forms of sexuality" is to group SM with other types of sexual practices and orientations, to implicate a theological or ethical stance on a range of issues that some believe are conceptually distinct. Antonio said: "I think the Bible is pretty clear on the

topic of homosexuality: that it is forbidden to have sex with someone of the same sex. What is left open is the question of SM, and that is what we are here to discuss." While not all members of the group agreed with Antonio's Biblical interpretation, it was the case that what was at stake for them was the question of the acceptability of SM practices in and of themselves, so that differences concerning the theologically-justified range of appropriate partners with which to engage in intimate activities could be suspended.

At one national meeting of the *Arbeitskreis*, Edgar told a story about how he went to a café and had a discussion with a woman about issues concerning being a Christian SMler. At the table next to them was a gay couple, who were apparently eavesdropping on the conversation. When Edgar and his companion went to leave the men called out to them: "SM and Christianity, now *that* is perversion that is simply intolerable!" The woman, who had contacted him through the website of the *Arbeitskreis* and was speaking face-to-face about these deeply personal issues for the very first time, was distressed and flustered at this public humiliation. Edgar was saddened by the experience: "These guys, they didn't have any sympathy. It was like it didn't cross their minds that 40 years ago they would have been the objects of the same insults they were now hurling at us. I think it's a real problem, the lack of solidarity…you know, at Christopher Street Day the older gay men, the ones who actually had to fight for their rights, they look at us and say it's good that our group exists, but the younger generations, who can take their own acceptance for granted, they don't want any part of us, to find with us a common cause." It is as if these "younger generations" at once take their status for granted but at the same time

implicitly understand that their own position could be jeopardized by forming alliances with those whose socio-political places are less secure.[31]

Associative couplings are by no means constant: shifting forms of comparison emerge, not just over time, but from conversation to conversation. Shortly after the national meeting of the *Arbeitskreis* where the "questions from outside" were discussed, Anna decided to recreate the discussion at the local meeting in Berlin. Whereas, at the national meeting, the question about whether God created all sexualities was interpreted on the basis of a comparison between SM and homosexuality, the participants in the Berlin group took the discussion in a different direction, focusing instead on how SM gets grouped together with "the perversions," such as pedophilia and bestiality. "You cannot group these things together," insisted Edward, "because in SM what we are talking about is safe, sane and consensual, and with pedophilia and bestiality you have a person engaging in acts with another who is incapable of consent, and this is abuse. In SM you have a responsibility to your partner, to engage with them responsibly, and so you cannot generalize about perversions, because we are talking about fundamentally different things." At both the local and the national meetings the use of comparison was deemed unsatisfactory, but each discussion hinged on a different form of differentiation. In the conversation about homosexuality, it was a matter of distinguishing between the permissibility of object

[31] In some ways this is not surprising if one considers Gayle Rubin's (1984) totem pole of social acceptability, in which (vanilla) gays and lesbians occupy a higher social status than do (heterosexual) SMlers. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued, a given class tends to be most threatened by and thus averse to and judgmental of the class immediately below them, which could account for why queer vanillas might feel compelled to speak out against and differentiate themselves from SMlers.

choice and the acceptability of acts; pedophilia and bestiality were distinguished from SM on the basis of a foreclosure of consensual possibility.

Participants in these discussions were keenly aware of the political stakes of such groupings. One question read: "Why do SMlers wear black? Isn't black the color of Satanists?" In his response, Edward focused the combinational rhetoric of the question, which coupled Satanists and SMlers together as one. "The person who asks such a question in such a way as this, they are revealing their own prejudices, because they are making the comparison themselves. Many people besides Satanists wear black. Priests and nuns wear black, and yet no one would pose this question as to why in *that* context." Edward draws attention to the fact that the associative grouping is at once arbitrary and motivated: many groups of people are known for wearing black, yet a particular group with especially negative valences was singled out for comparison. By suggesting another group, one with different valences, as an equally plausible basis for comparison, Edward draws attention to the political stakes of the coupling as presented. A readiness to compare SMlers with Satanists is the thought underlying the question as to their choice of garb; *this* issue, rather than the color of their clothing, is the one with which they need to contend. Again, the specter of the discursive impossibility of the Christian SMler arises. Edward noted, with some sadness in his voice, that "we have to remember that these questions from the outside are questions we wrote ourselves. If even *we* can write in such a way, if even *we* can think in such a way, then it just goes to show us how much work we have to do." This work stems from the perpetual classificatory struggle in which the *Arbeitskreis* is engaged.

Although the members of the *Arbeitskreis* pose their own questions from outside, these same questions come from actual outsiders too. To some extent, what the Christian SMlers struggle with are the ways they have internalized a hostile classificatory framework. While Mary Douglas draws attention to the cultural relativity and inertia of classificatory schemes, Pierre Bourdieu develops these arguments further, interpreting classifications as products and producers of perpetual classificatory *acts*, which he captions in terms of continual political struggles over the imposition of legitimated ways of seeing. In the preface to the English edition of *Masculine Domination*, his critical analysis of androcentrism, he writes:

> To point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labor of eternalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism…is to reinsert into history, and therefore to restore to historical action, the relationship between the sexes that the naturalistic and essentialist vision removes from them. (2001: viii)

What appears in history as being eternal is merely the product of eternalization. Key to Bourdieu's argument is an opposition between the natural-eternal and the historical-contingent: by showing something that seems to be natural, and therefore eternal, as in fact the product of a contingent history, Bourdieu opens a space for understanding social transformation through analytical reflection on that which had been previously taken for granted. Here, the notion of the implicit – that which seemingly can be taken for granted – emerges. Indeed, for Bourdieu the anthropologist is precisely s/he who constructs theories of other people's taken for granted practices, rendering the

distinction between anthropologist and informant in terms of a functional division of labor between academic reflection and practical action.

Bourdieu presents this opposition most forcefully in *The Logic of Practice*, where he insists: "The Kabyle woman setting up her loom is not performing an act of cosmogony; she is simply setting up her loom to weave cloth intended to serve a technical function" (1990: 96)[32]. This statement represents the culmination of a complex argument concerning the mutual exclusivity of practical and theoretical relations to practice, which is worth citing and discussing at length:

> An agent who possess a practical mastery, an art, whatever it may be, is capable of applying in his action the disposition which appears to him only in action, in the relationship with a situation…But he is no better placed to perceive what really governs his practice and to bring it to the order of discourse, than the observer, who has the advantage over him of being able to see the action from outside, as an object, and especially of being able to totalize the successive realizations of the habitus…And there is every reason to think that as soon as he reflects on his practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice, and especially the truth of the practical relation to the practice. Academic interrogation inclines him to take up a point of view on his own practice that is no longer that of action, without being that of science, encouraging him to shape his explanations in terms of a theory of practice that meshes with the juridical, ethical or grammatical legalism to which the observer is inclined by his own situation. Simply because he is questioned, and questions himself, about the reasons and the *raison d'être* of his practice, he cannot communicate the essential point, which is that the very nature of practice is that it excludes this question. His remarks convey this primary truth of primary experience only by omission, through the silences and ellipses of self-evidence. And even this occurs only in the most favorable cases, when by skillful questioning the questioner persuades the informant to give free rein to the language of familiarity. This language, which recognizes only particular cases and details of practical interest or anecdotal curiosity, which always uses the proper names of people and places, which minimizes the vague

[32] Thanks to Carol Greenhouse for her inspiring comment on the Kabyle woman's getting short shrift (personal communication, March 2008).

> generalities and the *ad hoc* explanations appropriate for strangers, leaves unsaid all that goes without saying. (1990: 90-1)

The first argument consists in a privileging of the observer on the basis of a position of externality. Explicitly, Bourdieu claims that seeing another person from outside makes possible a more totalizing perspective, as if – successively – the observer could view the object from everywhere. Such a claim requires one to forget, though, that panoramic pretensions are limited by the range of positions and dispositions, the habitus of the observer, whose interests – academic or otherwise – are no less practical and particular than those of the observed. Underlying this claim is the second argument, in which he contends that the practical relation to practice excludes the possibility of theoretical reflection. It is on this implicit assumption of mutual exclusivity that his opposition between theory and practice rests, so that practice gets associated with the unconscious and the implicit – all that goes without saying – and theorization entails the anthropological work of making explicit, of mapping out reflections on practice at which practitioners themselves not only do not, but *cannot* arrive. This contention rings false: the very existence of the *Arbeitskreis* depends upon the practitioners' own theorizations and reflections on their practices, which by no means go without saying, even among themselves. The apt distinction is not, then, between theoretical and practical engagement, for theorization can often be an important part of practice. In fact, Bourdieu himself acknowledges this when he observes that academic interrogation produces forms of theorization that aren't scientific. In other words, there is room for modes of theorization other than those of

the academic, so that the theorizations of practitioners remain conceptually distinct from those of the anthropologist, but the basis of the distinction lies elsewhere.

In her writings on matter out of place, Douglas discusses various ways with which anomalies get dealt. She lists five possibilities: "by settling for one or other interpretation, ambiguity is reduced…the existence of anomaly can be physically controlled…a rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform…anomalous events can be labeled dangerous," and finally, "ambiguous symbols can be used in ritual for the same ends as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning and to call attention to other levels of existence" (2002: 48-9). In each instance, she writes from the perspective of order rather than from that of the contravention. In an asymmetrical fashion, dirt is rendered in relation to the order it contravenes: order deals with dirt and not the other way around. But matter out of place consists not only of objects, but of people: those, such as the Christian SMlers, whose very existence contradicts cherished classificatory schemes. To the extent that these people can speak in their own voices, there is thus the possibility of the anomalous commenting back on the order contravened. The implied grammar of Douglas' typology places dirt in the position of object and order in the position of subject, but in fact both order and dirt can occupy either position, speaking back to each other in a dialogical fashion, so that neither leaves the other untouched. Though asymmetrically positioned, one must not forget that order and dirt, the production of which occurs relationally and contingently, each vis-à-vis the other, are engaged in a perpetual Bourdieusian political battle, where "Political struggle is a (practical and theoretical) cognitive struggle for the power to impose the legitimate

vision of the social world, or, more precisely, for the recognition, accumulated in the form of a symbolic capital of notoriety and respectability, which gives the authority to impose the legitimate knowledge of the sense of the social world, its present meaning and the direction in which it is going and should go" (2000: 185). Of course, not all people are on equal footing when it comes to these contests for the imposition of legitimated visions; nevertheless, Bourdieu's key point is that to express such visions in terms of reified order and dirt is to eternalize and naturalize that which is historical and contingent.

One problem with Bourdieu's argument lies in his associative logic, which conflates the practical with the implicit; such a move rests ultimately on another tacit assumption underlying his approach, one that has implications for broader anthropological engagement: to presume that social order could be taken for granted by an actor in a given cultural context is to take up, implicitly and in an unmarked way, a point of view that is (at least presumed to be) dominant within that given domain, thus conflating the positions of a particular class with those of an entire multitude, as if those positions spoke for the culture as a whole, without question or contest. Yet to take a marginal group such as the Christian SMlers as a basis for alternate visions of order is by no means an easy task. Even on their own turf, at their own meetings, members of the *Arbeitskreis* found it possible to discuss themselves in terms of a hostile and condemnatory discourse as they wrestled with how to legitimate their own practices. They struggled with questions framed in ways that even they themselves perceive to be the notions of skeptical outsiders, acknowledging themselves to be matter out of place, not fitting into the categories through which they make sense of the

world. That is, they share the same critical frameworks of the skeptical outsiders who dismiss them, who deny them the possibility of legitimately calling themselves both Christians and SMlers.

Bourdieu refers to this phenomenon as symbolic violence, "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted through the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition, recognition, or even feeling" (2001: 1-2). He continues: "When the dominated apply to what dominates them schemes that are the product of domination, or, to put it another way, when their thoughts and perceptions are structured in accordance with the very structures of the relation of domination that is imposed on them, their acts of *cognition* are, inevitably, acts of *recognition*, submission" (2001: 13). Really it is not just those who are the dominated (in the sense of occupying a space of structural inferiority) who are subject to symbolic imposition: all people are equally so subjected, even if the resulting burden is felt to a much lesser extent by those who occupy spaces that better resonate with, and those that are privileged by, sanctified discursive frameworks. Emphases on structural inferiority and anomaly can be attributed to the fact that people who occupy such positions make the oppressiveness of cultural constraints more visible; such constraints appear as such more readily to the extent that they are not practically or ideologically shared.

The notion of symbolic violence helps account for the ways in which the Christian SMlers continue to view themselves through lenses that get applied to them by hostile outsiders; further, it explains why one cannot hold this tendency against

them, effectively "blaming the victims" for their complicity, for not being more definitively heroic in their resistance. Bourdieu writes:

> Symbolic power cannot be exercised without the contribution of those who undergo it and who only undergo it because they construct it as such. But instead of stopping at this statement…one also has to take note of and explain the social construction of the cognitive structures which organize acts of construction of the world and its powers. It then becomes clear that, far from being the conscious, free, deliberate act of an isolated 'subject', this practical construction is itself the effect of a power, durably embedded in the bodies of the dominated in the form of schemes of perceptions and dispositions (to admire, respect, love, etc.) which *sensitize* them to certain symbolic manifestations of power. (2001: 40)

Recall Marx's argument in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past" (Tucker 1978: 595). Bourdieu takes up this line of thought, arguing against a notion of the autonomous individual subject, by attempting "to move beyond the forced choice between constraint (by forces) and consent (to reasons), between mechanical coercion and voluntary, free, deliberate, even calculated submission" (2001: 37). When members of the *Arbeitskreis* make use of comparisons and analogies to understand their own situation, they are drawing on discursive frameworks available to them. The borders they draw for themselves do not constitute the limits of all possibility, but rather represent what is plausibly intelligible in the specific cultural and historical settings in which they are situated. Despite the hurdles of institutional inertia and symbolic violence, these Christian SMlers continue to find hope that reconciliation is possible, that they'll be able to make sense of their identities,

and that their efforts may even be met with acceptance. Their continued struggles are testaments to possibilities of discursive reframing as a mechanism for experiential transformation as well as social change. Bourdieu writes that "there is always room for *cognitive struggle* over the meaning of things in the world…The partial indeterminacy of certain objects authorizes antagonistic interpretations, offering the dominated a possibility of resistance to the effect of symbolic imposition" (2001: 13-14). When Antonio argues that the Bible does not directly address SM practices, he is pointing to one such indeterminacy, opening a space for members of the group to discuss ways in which a Biblically-inspired ethics would offer a discursive framework for embracing the practices in which they are engaged; in so doing, classifications as to what constitutes sex, adultery and fidelity, among other categories, are continually renegotiated, according to the experiences and conundrums reported by members of the group, as well as the various theological and denominational perspectives that inform each discussant's approach to religious, sexual, and ethical life. Balancing these diverse and often conflicting demands is by no means simple in this ecumenical setting; generating productive dialogue constitutes yet another struggle in which the group is engaged in its project to reconcile the discursive and experiential realities confronting participants.

Members of the *Arbeitskreis* attempt to reconcile and affirm in simultaneity aspects of their existences that appear to be discursively incompatible; such endeavors set the group apart from others who are similarly conflicted about religion and sexuality, but who opt instead to renounce one part of their lives in favor of the other. An excellent ethnographic example of a population of the latter sort is Tanya Erzen's

(2006) study of the ex-gay movement. In *Straight to Jesus*, she documents the religious and sexual conversions of people who enter a residential ministry program in order to free themselves from their homosexuality. Their desire to change derives from their underlying belief that they cannot embrace both Christianity and same-sex sexual and romantic activities. These people, Erzen argues, do not become heterosexual, but instead create and inhabit an alternative category of identification, that of the ex-gay. The contrast between the Christian SMlers, who attempt to reconcile their erotic proclivities with their religious beliefs, and the ex-gays, who feel they must renounce their homosexuality in order to lead properly Christian lives, is striking. More illuminating, though, are the similarities of discursive struggles shared by both groups. Both the Christian SMlers and the ex-gays walk on shaky discursive grounds, lacking a strongly codified framework through which to make sense of their lives. Throughout her book, Erzen points to the uneasy place ex-gays occupy in broader Christian communities, as well as to discordant views on the mutability of sexual preferences. Given these conceptual uncertainties, a key function of one's participation in ex-gay ministry is a tendency towards symbolic codification in the formation of a specifically ex-gay identity, a feat accomplished through the production of testimonial narratives:

> The forty-minute testimony was part of the longer process of learning to create a life narrative, a testimony about living as a homosexual, being part of a relationship, having sex with men, reaching a crisis point, and slowly being born again until each man could become a new creation in Christ. Eventually, many of them would perform and speak their testimonial narratives in the church, at conferences, and in published materials…Through the conversion process, they began to reconcile their opposing frameworks of conservative Christianity and homosexuality as they took on the new ex-gay identity… A person's testimonial narrative of conversion becomes more rigid the longer he or she has been involved in an ex-gay ministry. (2006: 67, 12)

For the ex-gays, remaining in the program entails the adoption of a discursive framework that becomes progressively more structured by the premises and positions of the ministry, so that participants come to see both Christianity and homosexuality in ways that resonate with the official positions of the group. Homosexuality comes to be seen in terms of sinful acts rather than as a form of identity (2006: 70), and relapses are tolerated, provided they are understood as sins to be expiated rather than as the potential basis for durable and committed relationships. Indeed, Erzen contends that the ex-gay ministry she studies "creates a monolithic vision of what it means to be a gay man or lesbian…The idea that there are various ways to live as a gay person, just as there are for a heterosexual, is difficult for many of the men to grasp," so that "the ex-gay narratives became a way to stifle other interpretations of homosexuality as healthy, moral or Christian" (2006: 110-11, 68). Participation in the ex-gay movement produces symbolic codification, but at the expense of ontological foreclosures, by delineating specific and rigid visions of what it means to be homosexual, as well as what it means to be Christian. In this ministry, the dialogic production tends towards a discursive consensus that in turn shapes experiential possibilities of both religion and sexuality. For the Christian SMlers, though, the positive recognition of theological and erotic differences leads to discussions that do not terminate with specific answers, but in the production of further questioning and soul-searching. The ex-gays rally around a discursive formation, the experiential achievement of which is never complete (2006: 3); the Christian SMlers grapple with experiences that never quite find solid discursive ground.

What ex-gay testimonials and Christian SM "questions from outside" have in common, though, is the way in which they narrate boundaries in which they inscribe the possibility of their own belonging within the context of discursive frameworks that would render their subjectivities inconceivable. Marco, who was not part of the Christian group, repeated a sentence that I heard from many of my interlocutors, again and again: "My SM is not the same as your SM." He continued:

> This point is important, but it is a difficult place for many to get to. SM Clubs attract all different people. There is a lot of diversity: there are people who are into D/s (Dominance and submission), there are people into pain, there are transvestites; a lot of it is not for me, but we all get along anyway, we all think of ourselves as SMlers, even though what we mean by that is very different. The important thing is to get to a place where that's ok, where you don't feel threatened because you are not personally into the things going on around you. Just because you wouldn't do SM in that way, it doesn't mean it isn't SM for somebody else.

Here, Marco is arguing that it is important not to take a parochial view of these practices, in which your own way of doing SM becomes the standard against which you determine what should or should not be included under the rubric of SM activities, and concomitantly who should be let into the doors of a club. Yet, even for Marco this call to a more democratic approach is not a rallying cry for infinite inclusivity; even for him, you cannot call just *anything* SM. If BDSM practices are in some ways subversive or transgressive of social order, these activities are also quite ordered in their own right, and in many ways practitioners express strong adherence to broader and more mainstream discursive frameworks.

"Das ist kein Gottesdienst, was wir hier feiern":

Deterritorialization, Reterritorialization, and Reformation Day

Anna called to tell me that a meeting of the *Arbeitskreis* had been scheduled for October 31st. This day, she explained, was an important holiday: "It is *not* Halloween. It is Reformation Day." Anna was not happy about the ways in which Halloween practices were emerging in Germany: "Trick or treat. I think that is an awful thing. The children are encouraged basically to say if you don't give a treat I will do something to you. There is no respect in that." Anna noted that while Berliners have to work on the last day of October, it is officially a holiday in neighboring Brandenburg although, Anna worried, some people might use the day off to engage in trick-or-treating and not attending Church.

The *Arbeitskreis* is officially ecumenical, although, of the Berliners in attendance at any of the meetings at which I was present, only Lola was a Catholic. All the others are Protestant, or *evangelisch*. When the meeting began, Anna opened by speaking the praises of the originator of her denomination: "Thank God for Martin Luther," she said. "If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be able to read the Bible in German. And now there are all kinds of Bibles." She went on to describe the *Volksbibel*, which was read from during the sermon of the recent national meeting we had attended. Anna explained to the group that this was a book that took vernacular to the extreme, drawing on contemporary slang terms, for example. Some members of the *Arbeitskreis* found this troublesome, suggesting it was a violation of the lofty spirit of the text, although others contended that anything that brings people to Christianity is

good for the soul, and that if for some people this is what speaks to them, it is a way in, and it is not important how one comes to God, but the fact that one gets to Him.

Lola was visibly uncomfortable during these discussions. When we circled up for a prayer in which Anna was praising God for Martin Luther, Lola sat back outside of the circle. She said she was uncomfortable, as a Catholic, participating in an event that was so celebratory, because for her Luther represented the source of a *division*, a division that was cause for great sadness, and so she couldn't see reveling in the schism. Afterwards, Lola confided that she was glad I was there because "finally there is someone like me (a Catholic)." I was surprised by this comment, as I had made very clear that, although I grew up in a Catholic family, I had long since ceased practicing, and that I thought of my heritage as more of a cultural identity than anything else – burying a statuette of Saint Joseph in the backyard, for example, when wanting to sell your house, or praying to Saint Anthony when you've misplaced something, are things people where I come from simply do – and I've never heard these practices talked about in terms of official theological sanction; you do these things because they work. But still, she said, I was the closest there was.

If Lola's discomfort was especially pronounced on Reformation Day, it wasn't limited to that. For instance, she objected to the fact that others in the group considered the activity a "church service" or *Gottesdienst*. She said: "*Das ist kein Gottesdienst, was wir hier feiern*" (What we do here, this is not a church service). Because, not subscribing for instance to the Lutheran theology whereby every Christian is a minister, for Lola one cannot have a church service without a priest.

The stakes of rendering oneself in discursively intelligible ways exceed the bounds of a symbolic violence predicated only on accountability to oneself; again, notions of autonomous individuality get complicated by the myriad social settings in which the self is situated. Centripetal pressures get exerted in familial, religious and community contexts, but also in juridical arenas where questions of conformity entail significant material consequences. In her study of migrants in Italy, Cristiana Giordano shows how the women she studies "come to inhabit the category of the 'victim'" (2008: 595). She writes: "legal recognition is granted on the condition that women file criminal charges against their traffickers and go through a program of reeducation that evokes the experience of expiation…This process takes place through what may seem an act of self-effacement in which women's stories are rephrased into the juridical language of the state and the religious language of Catholic groups" (2008: 589). Giordano notes that the ubiquitous presence of certain elements in the migrants' stories, such as voodoo, are more the product of discursive expectations of the powers that be than they are reflections of the migrants' own experiential understandings: "Words make things happen. They know that being a victim of voodoo gives them more of a chance to qualify as victims" (2008: 594). Articulations that foreclose on alternative ontological and experiential possibilities find motivation in the socio-cultural stakes of conforming to discursive order; matter out of place, though anthropologically productive, can constitute a practical burden for those who are compelled to stake out an existence in the interstices of the culturally intelligible: "What challenges the official discourses are all the cases that do not fit any of these dichotomies [victim-agent, slave-sex worker] but that, instead, are possibly explained

in between or, better, outside dichotomies that attempt to decode the experience of migration. Although these dichotomies reduce the complexities of migration to extreme poles, they also produce forms of inclusion and exclusion to which migrants can resort" (2008: 594). Giordano observes that these framings are not monolithic; hence, she distinguishes between what she calls the "confessional citizenship" exhorted by the state-church apparatus and the "cultural citizenship" advocated by the ethnopsychiatrists with whom the migrants work (2008: 589). These forms exist in dialogical tension, offering multiple possibilities for inscribing a culturally intelligible story of one's life. As with the Christian SMlers, who struggle with analogical and comparative logics in order to produce more adequate understandings of themselves and their practices, creative possibility here emerges through dialogic engagement with distinct discursive frames.

The stories of the Christian SMlers, like those of the migrants, are not cut from whole cloth, but instead work with (and sometimes against, but always in terms of) available patterns to weave together individual experiences so as to render their lives into a coherent and recognizable form, intelligible to themselves and to others around them. These dialogic interplays between theory and practice, discourse and experience, have an infinite potential for creativity, and yet nevertheless often result in the production of familiar forms.

Here it is useful to draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who, in their writings on *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, depict transformations of social order as dynamic processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Just as Bourdieu interprets the seemingly eternal as a product of eternalization, Deleuze and

Guattari contend that "the territory is the product of a territorialization" (1987: 314). The territory is thus not natural or inevitable, but instead the product constructive acts. Processes of deterritorialization will result in the production of new territorial configurations: "Deterritorialization must be thought of as a perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (epistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or component" (1987: 54). Territoriality cannot be escaped altogether; one territorial formation gives way to another. Experiential realities cannot be understood outside the forces of discursive frames; the frames themselves can shift, but thinking occurs always in terms of one territory or another. Thus, deterritorialization could never be absolute: "the movement of deterritorialization can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations" (1983: 316). At the same time, however, "reterritorialization must not be confused with a return to a primitive or older territoriality" (1987: 174). Instead, these processes result in the production of new territorial formations, likewise suggesting images of a palimpsest: overcoding and reinscribing, but in ways that leave residues of prior significations over which the contemporary formations are built, as well as suggest possible future figurations yet to be erected. Traces remain and specters loom: when the members of the *Arbeitskreis* search for discursive frameworks that would enable them to reconcile their erotic practices with their religious worldviews, they are engaged in ongoing processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, staking out organizational grounds on which their lives might make sense as coherent wholes. Yet, such processes are not simple, for the Christian SMlers are as much beholden to the older territorial forms that have shaped them as they are

attached to the prospective forms they imagine for the future. They struggle with interpreting the Bible, with justifying their visions of ethical life, with classifying their erotic practices.

The struggles over classification – What is October 31st?: Reformation Day, Halloween, or something else altogether – constitute attempts at deterritorialization and reterritorialization, but always there exists a sense of the making of space, the reformulation of boundaries, and the possibilities of reshaping worlds. What space is there for creative reinscription when the forces of symbolic codification are so strong? Dissatisfaction with the smothering of alternative potentialities is at the heart of the Anti-Oedipal critique. Deleuze and Guattari depict the psychoanalytic – but also social – pressure to interpret oneself in an Oedipalized fashion:

> If we here choose the example of the analyst least prone to see everything in terms of Oedipus, we do so only in order to demonstrate what a forcing was necessary for her to make Oedipus the sole measure of desiring production…Melanie Klein herself writes: "The first time Dick came to me…he manifested no sort of affect when his nurse handed him over to me. When I showed him the toys I had put ready, he looked at them without the faintest interest. I took a big train and put it beside a smaller one *and called them* 'Daddy-train' and 'Dick-train.' Thereupon he picked up the train I called 'Dick' and made it roll to the window and said 'Station." *I explained*: 'The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy.' He left the train, ran into the space between the outer and inner doors of the room, shutting himself in, saying 'dark,' and ran out again directly. He went through this performance several times. *I explained to him*: 'It is dark inside mummy. Dick is inside dark mummy.' Meantime he picked up the train again, but soon ran back into the space between the doors. While I was saying that he was going into dark mummy, he said twice in a questioning way: 'Nurse?'…*As his analysis progressed…Dick had also discovered* the wash-basin as symbolizing the mother's body, and he displayed and extraordinary dread of being wetted with water." Say that it's Oedipus, or you'll get a slap in the face. The psychoanalyst no longer says to the patient: "Tell me a little bit about your desiring-machines, won't you?" Instead he

> screams: “Answer daddy-and-mommy when I speak to you!” (1983: 45; citing Klein 1930: 242-3, emphasis added by Deleuze and Guattari)

In their use of italics, Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the ways in which Klein both designates and explains the meaning of objects she is trying to convey to the child: she calls the trains Dick and Daddy, and when Dick brings his train to what he calls the station, she interprets this act according to her predetermined metaphorical scheme: Dick is going into mummy. For his part, Dick calls for the Nurse, which ought to upset the intended familial reduction; ultimately, though, the analyst claims triumph, moving from her own interpretive impositions to attributing to the child the discovery that the wash-basin symbolizes his mother’s body. How does the child “discover” such a thing? Klein writes her report as if the child had arrived at spontaneously the interpretation that the analyst impresses upon him; the difference between “tell me about your desiring-machines” and “answer daddy-and-mommy” is the difference between taking the child’s own insights and interpretations as a point of departure on which to produce theoretical insights, and the imposition of a pre-established framework which the child is compelled to reproduce. Here, the analyst struggles to make the family *the* symbolically central point of departure, eliminating alternative interpretive possibilities.

Deleuze and Guattari note that the disagreement between Freud and Jung begins with the latter’s assertion that the analysand’s imaginative capacity extends beyond parental images, including a range of other archetypical images, such as god, devil or sorcerer. They contend: “The same remark holds true of children’s games. A child never confines himself to playing house, to playing only at being daddy-and-

mommy. He also plays at being a magician, a cowboy, a cop or a robber, a train, a little car. The train is not necessarily daddy, nor is the train station necessarily mommy" (1983: 46). Here the repertoire of interpretive possibility is expanded, but remains within the bounds of culturally intelligible forms; this expansion, though, can serve as the basis for a more radical claim, in which the signification of objects or role-plays can move beyond literal meanings: a child can play with a train without playing trains. To put the train into the station already entails assimilation to culturally intelligible forms of action: a train might become a flying time machine or a treasure to be buried and uncovered in a sandbox. Such possibilities are suggested by Deleuze and Guattari when they write: "The small child lives with his family around the clock; but within the bosom of this family, and from the very first days of his life, he immediately begins having an amazing nonfamilial experience that psychoanalysis has completely failed to take into account" (1983: 47). Even within a familial context, nonfamilial experiences occur, yet these polymorphous experiences get reincorporated, through the interpretations of the analyst, into an institutional framework. Rather than attempting to overemphasize symbolic codification through interpretive imposition, this line of thought provides a way to understand productions of order within a context of alternative and creative symbolic potentialities: "It is not a question of denying the vital importance of parents or the love attachment of children t their mothers and fathers. It is a question of knowing what the place and the function of parents are within desiring-production, rather than doing the opposite and forcing the entire interplay of desiring-machines to fit within the restricted code of Oedipus" (1983: 47). The anti-oedipal critique is an argument for the primacy of experience in the form of desiring-

production over the privileging of restrictive discursive codes. Yet, experiential realities can never be entirely free of the discursive frameworks through which they are made intelligible.

In the same way, the discursive struggles of the Christian SMlers cannot be understood outside of the frameworks that would render Christianity and SM incompatible. Indeed, much of the work of the *Arbeitskreis* consists in grappling with and attempting to move beyond this presumption of incompatibility. Of all the groups with whom I worked, the Christian SMlers struggle with issues of reconciling discourse and experience most explicitly and directly, but discursive paradoxes manifest across a broad spectrum of BDSM practices. At its core, SM produces relationships of domination and submission that are also fundamentally egalitarian, relationships that confound even those who practice them, generating endless hours of reflection among SMlers about aspects of their lives that continue to appear, even to them, as matter out of place. In Berlin, BDSM discussion groups meet regularly: there is theme-night (*Themenabend*), dedicated to an array of topics pertaining to SM, ranging from homemade toys to dress-codes to differences between fantasy and reality; there is a submissives' coffee klatch (*Subbiekränzchen*), a discussion and at times support group for those who take on the role of the bottom, sexually and oftentimes in the context of their intimate relationships or marriages; the pet-player's group (*Stammtisch*), for people who embody animals; and the munch (*Munch*), an opportunity for SMlers of various inclinations to get together, hosted by a local restaurant. In all of these groups, practitioners grapple with how to make sense of their activities, so that processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of symbolic

forms are integral to the SMlers' own engagement with their practice. These processes might be understood as a politics of order, consisting of struggles over how to reconcile discursive frameworks with experiential realities, a politics that permeates many of the activities of these groups. Indeed, such struggles are integral to understanding the efficacy of BDSM as a distinct form of cultu Inscriptions are powerful, indeed, and matter out of place is a hard thing to take lightly.

By regulating that which does not fit into a given classificatory scheme, one has the ability to conserve or transform a given order, so that conceptual and symbolic struggles entail practical and material consequences. In his book *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, John Borneman writes that "conflicts over the right to name and categorize are generally agreed to be primary instances of power conflicts within social groups" (1992: 28). In the context of discussions among SMlers, such conflicts are not only about power in the sense of authority over others; at stake in the disagreements over classification are also about the power to name for oneself, the power to legitimate one's own conceptual understandings, and the power to make sense of one's own life. If some of my interlocutors are not content to leave others' interpretations and conceptual usages intact and unchallenged, part of the need to clear up "misunderstandings" is that, for some, alternative discursive frameworks can be threatening to one's own experiential understanding. In some discussions, people would assert that agreement on the meaning of terms was necessary for communication, but this quest for the univocal signifier was about staking out one's own discursive ground: oftentimes, people would discuss matters in theoretical terms when really they were talking about their own experiences. They would, as Moritz

pointed out, remove the subjective references, as if doing so could make their points more objective, more valid somehow, but oftentimes these actions only obscured productive discussion. My interlocutors struggle with matter out of place; just when they think they have figured it out and arrived at a clear understanding, another person joins the circle and complicates matters with experiences and ideas that do not mesh with their own.

At first glance, BDSM would seem to be understandable in terms of reinscription. That is, terms usually thought of as inherently negative – domination, pain, humiliation, submission – are reclaimed and revalorized, experienced by practitioners as positive, erotically and emotionally fulfilling. SMlers' activities depend upon norms which they simultaneously subvert and perversely uphold. Indeed, the notion of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as a dynamic process in which resignifications occur aptly characterizes, at the level of description, what is at stake in the deployment of terms such as "*Heten*" and "Vanillas," as well as in the use of safe words and the revalorization of experiences of pain and bondage as positive and beneficial. Privileging inscription necessitates a semiotic approach: what does, or can, a given symbol mean? The realm of symbolic possibility and potentiality would thus be thinkable within currently operative de/reterritorializing movements.

In a statement that resonates with Douglas' contention that dirt does not as such exist outside of the construction of an order into which it does not fit, Deleuze and Guattari proclaim: "The territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory" (1987: 315). Going a step further than Douglas, who concentrates her attention on the functioning of ordering systems, the authors of

Capitalism and Schizophrenia focus on inscription itself, contending that inscriptive and reinscriptive forces are of primary importance in producing and reproducing social order: "the central process is not exchanging, but inscribing or marking…society is not first of all a milieu for exchange where the essential would be to circulate or to cause to circulate, but rather a socius of inscription where the essential thing is to mark and be marked" (1983: 186, 142). Arguing for the primacy of inscription over exchange, they suggest social order to be founded not on circulation, but on *Schuld*: "Far from being an appearance assumed by exchange, debt is the immediate effect or the direct means of the territorial and corporeal inscription process. Debt is the direct result of inscription" (1983: 190). As in the doctrine of original sin, *Schuld* (debt, but also guilt) precedes one's own deeds.

What are the epistemological consequences of such a contention? It is particularly significant that Deleuze and Guattari do not simply state that the mark is primary *period*. Their move is a reterritorializing one, making a claim for inscription over and against another (previous) formation: that of exchange. To argue for the primacy of the *making* of marks as creative process over their *circulation* as social process is to emphasize the potency of individual agency and mobility in acts of reinscription over the socio-cultural constraints that make given resignifications communicably intelligible. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari speak of "flows," presuming an amorphous fluidity against which territorializing coding occurs. If an infinity of inscriptions are philosophically possible, actual resignifications are not necessarily anthropologically probable. The efficacy of signification is dependent on intelligibility and viability in given cultural contexts, and can thus not be adequately

understood on the basis of individual psychology, creativity, or agency. Methodologically, therefore, inscriptions such as the label "SMler" are not simply matters of *taste*, in the sense outlined by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

The argument for the primacy of inscription over exchange implies an acceptance of the terms of subjectivization underlying Kantian aesthetics. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer points out the disciplinary stakes of such a move. He writes: "The radical subjectivization involved in Kant's new way of grounding aesthetics was truly epoch-making. In discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge except that of natural science, it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves" (1975: 36-7). Gadamer's key point is that if the human sciences model themselves on natural science, they are doomed to perpetual inadequacy, so that, to conceive of the human sciences as disciplinarily distinct and epistemologically significant, one has to move beyond the terms of Kantian thought.

Questions about collective dynamics, about centripetal and centrifugal forces, become paramount. Even Deleuze and Guattari tacitly recognize the necessity of cultural contextualization when they put forth the idea of the *collective assemblage*, which "is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice" (1987: 84). This idea of constellation undermines their notion of the primacy of inscription, because inscription is only possible on the basis of the constellation, the palimpsests upon which various territories have already been inscribed. Thus, inscription cannot be primary, but must

instead be analyzed on the basis of the cultural conditions that make markings possible and intelligible. Tastes, in turn, cannot be thought of as radically subjective. Rather, subjectivity must be thought in terms of the culturally specific conditions of its enablement and constraint.

To anthropologists, this point may seem self-evident if not banal, but it is important to remember the force of the intellectual current against which one swims in disavowing the "epoch-making" position. In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu provides a sustained critique of Kant, whose privileging of disinterestedness, the basis of the distinction between the pleasing and the gratifying, "is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world…of an aestheticism which presents the aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle and takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit" (1984: 5). Bourdieu's examination of aesthetic preferences among the French shows how certain differences in taste – ranging from music to art to food – correlate closely with differences in socioeconomic status. He finds that, within French society, members of groups are most threatened by the tastes characteristic of those positioned most immediately below them in the sociopolitical hierarchy, against which they define themselves as superior. That is, even within a given society, expressions of taste are closely correlated with one's social position, so that it becomes difficult to sustain a notion of personal preferences as products of a desiring interiority mediated simply by the contours of chance exposure. Rather, Bourdieu contends that people's positioning in the social field predisposes them to

adopt certain dispositions, correlating with those characteristic of the groups of which they are part.

While Bourdieu argues that there are many types of capital (cultural, economic, symbolic) contributing to socioeconomic status, the forms of differentiation he analyzes in *Distinction* are not explicitly extended to alternative mobilizations of identity, ethnic, sexual, religious, and so forth. Yet, these intersectional identifications may help situate, complicate and cross-cut relationships between class origin and trajectory that are Bourdieu's primary concern, as well as provide for a more nuanced understanding of how positions and preferences might be mutually informative in ways that do not necessarily presuppose the primacy of profession as identificatory basis. Indeed, the equation of who one is personally with what one does professionally betrays an allegiance to a certain kind of modern, western folk taxonomy. The German courts ask their witnesses: "*Was sind Sie von Beruf*?" and not "*Was machen Sie beruflich*?" so that here the verb "to be" supplants the verb "to do." In what contexts can *what* you *do* be read as *who* you *are*? What are the specificities of subjects juridical, professional, sexual, religious, gendered, classed, raced, *und so fort und so weiter*?

Whereas in *Distinction* Bourdieu presents a two-variable grid in which actors are variously positioned in terms of the cultural and economic capital attributed to their profession, Gayle Rubin uses two different forms of diagrams in order to represent sexual differences. In her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes to a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," she depicts what she calls "the sex hierarchy" in two ways. First, there is "the charmed circle," consisting of various forms of sex considered

"good, normal, natural and blessed." These include: heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, and, you guessed it, vanilla. Then, there are what she terms "the outer limits," those forms of sex deemed "bad, abnormal, unnatural and damned." In each instance, she takes the binary opposite of the "charmed" expression of sexuality, so that "bad" forms of sex include: homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and, you guessed it, sadomasochistic (1998[1984]: 109, items presented in order listed by Rubin). Using twelve sets of binary oppositions, Rubin's model presents 4096 different permutations. A given sex act, then, may in some ways be "charmed" while in other ways approach "the outer limits." Given the complexity of combinatory possibilities, people feel a need, argues Rubin, "to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex" (108). Yet, just as there are many kinds of capital, there are differing and competing visions of how to evaluate the goodness of sex; yet, whatever their standards: "Most systems of sexual judgment – religious, psychological, feminist, or socialist – attempt to determine on which side of the line a particular act falls. Only acts on the good side of the line are accorded moral complexity…In contrast, all sex acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance" (108, 110). Rubin describes the "struggle" over where to draw the line, with some forms – such as long-term, monogamous, homosexual, vanilla relationships – considered as potentially eligible for

cultural recognition, whereas others, such as intergenerational or interspecies sex, are deemed outside the realm of even the *potential* for valorization.

Common to both Bourdieu and Rubin is the sense that classificatory struggle is political struggle, so that preferences – artistic or sexual – cannot be considered aesthetic in the radically subjective sense as put forth in the Kantian critique. Rather, one's tastes in each of these domains are very much social, for they reflect on moral judgments and collective determinations, which shape their significance in given cultural contexts. If Kant argues that good taste is associated with confidence and certainty, is this not another way of saying that "good" tastes are those most resonant with the tastes valorized in a given social group?

The appearance of objectivity is forged through the production of consensus. Marco argued that it might be easier to be vanilla than to be an SMler, just as it might be easier to be straight than to be gay. Yet, Marco's concerns have less to do with a questioning of his own aesthetic judgment than the difficulties he encounters when searching for someone with whom he can share them. There are fewer who share his tastes, so there are less potential partners. Further, because his tastes are not culturally acceptable in most of the circles in which he travels, the subject is a difficult one to broach: he says that while it would be easy to ask a potential girlfriend to attempt to play golf, asking her to try getting tied up and beaten is a different story. Thus, it is easier to be confident in one's tastes when they are shared and when they are valorized, so that "good" tastes can be said to be so because they are valued and shared, which does not mean necessarily that they are shared and valued because they are, in a prior sense, good.

In an important sense, the classificatory struggles in which members of the *Arbeitskreis* are engaged constitute a microcosm of the broader problem of apparent paradox in BDSM practices more generally. What happens in a cultural milieu where available discursive frameworks are painfully inadequate to the experiential realities for which they ought to account? The ethnographic emphasis of this chapter consisted in showing how a group of Christian SMlers struggle with this question by highlighting their debates over classification. These discussions were then refracted through the lens of social theory in order to illuminate connections between the lives of SMlers and anthropological ideas. Emerging from these conversations is a sense of contestation between inscription and exchange, and the apparent primacy of the former, articulated through assumptions about the univocity of signification, assumptions that, as these discussions show, do not pan out empirically. Before turning in the second half of this dissertation to a more systematic examination of what the valorization of exchange over inscription entails, the next chapter considers how SMlers' uses of "play" provides a context through which to understand the epistemological basis of such a move.

Chapter Three:

Recognizing Performances:

Being and Play

"He should ask permission to sit down, if he's a subbie":

Decorum in a Dungeon

My first encounter with The Gargoyle, one of the more popular and elaborate BDSM clubs in Berlin, was on the night that the newly re-formed "*Subbie Kränzchen*" (submissives' coffee klatch) was to meet for the first time. The Gargoyle itself was a new incarnation of an older club with the same name, but it was built in a new location under the ownership of Cordelia, who had taken over after the proprietor of the old establishment decided to give it up. It was something of a trend among SM clubs in Berlin: clubs reopening in new locations and new clubs opening in locations where older ones had been. The new Gargoyle is located in the Kreuzberg neighborhood, in a section that is affectionately known as "*die Axe der Perverse*" (the axis of perversion), due to the relative proximity of several such establishments, which can facilitate crossover traffic when parties catering to overlapping audiences are planned for the same night. Initially, I walked past the building, because from the outside you'd never know what it was. This happens often, when it comes to BDSM facilities. Unlike the sex-toy display windows outside *Beate Uhse* near Bahnhof Zoo, or the endless streams of gay pride flags adorning the shops in Schöneberg's so-called Bermuda Triangle,

these places do not use their exteriors to draw attention to themselves. Passerby and neighbors wouldn't know what was happening inside. Gay clubs had once been this way, and some of them, especially in the East, still use buzzers to let patrons in. Many SMlers today are not fully "out," something reflected in the lack of exterior advertising on the part of the clubs. Even though I knew the address, I missed the building. On the outside, it almost blended in.

But then I found it, thanks to the doorbell – the face of a gargoyle with gleaming blue eyes – which I rang to be let in. Johannes came to the door and asked me what I wanted. I was dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt, and he looked at me as if he thought I were lost. "I'm here for *Subbie Kränzchen*," I said. He smiled, more invitingly. "Come on in…"

Cordelia and Johannes are partners in the romantic sense; additionally, he works at the club. Cordelia and Johannes are "switchers," meaning that they take turns occupying dominant and submissive roles, depending on what is happening at a particular moment. This dynamic has certain advantages in terms of participation in club events, as it allows for a wider range of possibilities. For example, at "Fem Dom Night," any males present must be submissive. Another party, "Gor Night," is much more male dominant/female submissive oriented; at those parties, Johannes acted as the top, or dominant partner. The creation of different kinds of events allows for the presence of a more diverse clientele; while some people express loyalty to and preferences for particular clubs, others travel to various venues when an event in which they're interested is taking place. Late one evening, I ran into Johannes at another SM bar. He explained he wasn't at The Gargoyle since it was "ladies night," meaning that

no men were invited. The strictness with which rules governing attendance were specified and enforced, however, varied among clubs and events. For example, Tobias, a heterosexual man, told me that he was once invited to a women-only event: he was made an "honorary lesbian" for the evening so that he could accompany his girlfriend Anja, who up until that point had been primarily involved with women and had participated frequently in lesbian SM events.

When you enter The Gargoyle, there is a changing room to the left. There are lockers with keys, so that you can secure your belongings and street clothes and change into attire conforming with that evening's dress code. At *Subbie Kränzchen*, there was no dress code, although black was listed as the preferred color. Rules for dress can be very specific and elaborate: at some parties, only garments made from certain materials, such as rubber, are acceptable. Black clothing will get you into many places, though. In general, there is consensus among SMlers that proper attire is a necessary aspect of creating and maintaining the right "atmosphere" for play. At The Gargoyle, much thought went into creating a certain ambiance. The walls are made of cobbled stones, with candles holstered in black iron holders adorning the walls. There is a large main room divided by a sliding wooden door. In the bar area, there are tables, on which are dishes full of pretzels and peanuts. To the left, separated by a thick black curtain is a smoking room – conforming to new health regulations stipulating that in multi-room bars smoking can only occur in a specifically designated area way from where drinks are served – featuring black leather furniture, red painted walls, and a cage in which people are sometimes kept. In the smoking room is a door which, when opened, leads to the clinic. The clinic is done in white – tiles, walls, cabinets,

everything. There are also white lab coats hanging on the walls. The room features a gynecological chair with metal stirrups, a table, and cabinets full of medical supplies. In the back of the main room is an *Andreas Kreuz* – a device that facilitates flogging – and stairs that lead to a basement featuring a black latex covered bed, a sling, a torture table on which persons could be restrained, and a doggy bed, large enough to accommodate a human, complete with toys associated with biological canines. Black sliding curtains enable people to play in relative privacy, should they choose to do so.

When I arrived, the submissives' coffee klatch had not yet started because none of the participants were there. One couple was present, but not for the meeting, and I took a seat on the other side of the room, as I had the sense that I shouldn't disturb them. Johannes, trying to bring a group together, sat down near them and called me over. "Don't be shy," he said, "we don't bite unless we're asked to." He explained to the couple that I was there for *Subbie Kränzchen*, to which the woman, looking me over, replied: "He should ask *permission* to sit down, if he's a subbie" (*Er soll uns um Erlaubnis bitten, sich hinzusetzen, wenn er Subbie ist*). I explained that I was there not as a subbie, but as an anthropologist doing research for my doctoral thesis, an explanation meant not only to clarify my presence, but to account for my failure to follow "proper" protocol. My answer surprised them. "You look too young and innocent to be a researcher," she said. "It's true," added Johannes, "when you walked through the door I wasn't sure if I should ask to see your ID" (and, seeing as the requisite age for entering the establishment is 18, I wanted to tell him he was my new best friend. I would have, had we been in America, but in Germany such a statement

would have been culturally unintelligible given the circumstances of our just having met).

While the subtleties of humor in everyday interactions might be lost in translation in cross-cultural encounters, behavioral norms in BDSM-related practices are remarkably consistent across national boundaries. Differences in statutory and other laws aside, the rules and semiotics of appropriate interaction are widely understood among practitioners regardless of place of residence, to the extent that patrons frequenting The Gargoyle hailing from locations ranging from New York to Paris to Tel Aviv can actively participate without a need for explicit instructions on how to engage others in a BDSM club. Given that the most basic of mundane interactions can go awry due to cultural misunderstanding (I've seen Germans recoil when Americans unwittingly ask them 'How are you' upon first meeting), it is quite remarkable that complex erotic interactions can be navigated so smoothly. That is, the behavioral norms governing BDSM-related interactions are consistent and communicable transnationally. Such norms include, for example, the use of safe-words, which are utterances that when articulated by the bottom will cause the top to cease and desist the interaction instantaneously. A safe-word might be "banana split," a phrase otherwise unlikely to be spoken during erotic engagement. Use of safe-words has the effect of allowing the bottom to scream out words like "no," "stop," and "don't" – words that would typically be understood as a revocation of consent – without stopping the action. By employing safe-words, both parties can sustain the illusion of force, making it seem as if the bottom does not have any say, which is especially important when enacting rape fantasies and other control-oriented scenarios.

The basic safe-word system is a tiered "stop light" code of green-yellow-red (*grün – gelb – rot*). As at a traffic intersection, green means "keep going," yellow means "slow down," and red means "stop." The stop light system is especially recommended for beginners and those who are partnering for the first time, because it facilitates the exploration of personal boundaries and limits. More experienced practitioners, it was explained to me, almost never have to employ these words in practice, because tops become adept at "reading" the bottom's tolerance and enjoyment, and bottoms learn to communicate without using words, by sighing, moaning, or writhing, for example.

Thus, if it is appropriate to speak of a constitutive "cultural" difference concerning decorum in a place like The Gargoyle, the key opposition would be between those who are initiated into the BDSM scene and those who are not, regardless of national origin. Of course, a person lacking awareness of behavioral conventions is unlikely to wander unwittingly into an establishment such as The Gargoyle, although during one meeting of *Subbie Kränzchen* Cordelia recounted the story of such an incident occurring leading to a man, Sven, being expelled from the club (*Hausverbot*). Cordelia found Sven's lack of comprehension unfathomable: "I cannot believe that it didn't occur to him that you can't just go up to a woman and hit her simply because she's tied up. You cannot touch someone without their permission in an SM club, just like everywhere else. In a singles' bar, he wouldn't think to do such a thing." One participant, Hans, surmised that in fact "a guy like that" would be apt to engage in such behavior even in non-BDSM settings, and that he seemed to be someone who was using the sadomasochism as an alibi, as a way of justifying inappropriate engagement. This problem was often discussed, both for the practical necessity of identifying and

avoiding such people, and for the political problem that people who were not considered part of the scene but who tried to rationalize abusive behaviors by calling them BDSM reflected poorly on everybody, especially because they believed members of the mainstream media were apt to pick up on such stories as if they were an accurate reflection of what SMlers actually do.

In effect, Hans was critiquing Sven for conflating subjunctive and indicative moods: while it might *appear* that a top can just go and hit a bottom as s/he pleases, such is not *really* the case. Here, Hans is arguing for an ontological difference between BDSM and abuse, a difference that depends upon a maintenance of the distinction between illusion and reality, a boundary which Sven's behavior elides. Cordelia, on the other hand, draws attention to the ways in which Sven prevents others from sustaining a view of the illusion *as* reality, which she deems necessary for these practices to remain efficacious:

> It is terrible to have to go and tell someone these things, that you cannot just hit somebody, partly because they should know this, but also because it ruins the mood for everybody else. There are many ways of approaching someone, with your eyes, seeing if they return your glance and invite you to come closer. And then when a master and slave are playing, you ask the master, who knows how to decide without using words. But if you just go up and touch somebody, it ruins it for everybody, and we can't have that. People need to feel safe, especially women, and one reason that so many women come to my club is that they do.

Here, Cordelia suggests that explaining the rules in the middle of a scene ruins the event for participants because it dispels the illusion by making explicit that what the master and slave are experiencing is "only" an "as-if" and that another set of rules is really in force. Of course, the participants know this, but a certain amount of

suspension of disbelief is crucial if the subjunctive "mood" is to retain its experiential force. Taken together, the statements of Cordelia and Hans reveal a crucial tension in BDSM practices: SMlers understand what they do as "play," but such play takes place in terms of an ambivalent and complex relationship with "reality." As Hans makes clear, BDSM play must be distinguished from practices of "real" violence and abuse. Cordelia, though, points out that for these practices to be enjoyable, they cannot be understood as "mere" play, insofar as the subjunctive mood must be engaged, within the parameters of the practice, as serious and "real" so as to be efficacious. There is an anxiety that if the fact of illusion is made too explicit, it threatens the mood: just as the use of safe-words allows the bottom to scream "stop" to no avail, the creation of a space in which what is being enacted seems to be really real is experientially essential.

What does it mean to take seriously SMlers' claims that what they do is "play" while at the same time understanding their anxieties about the term as conveying a sense of "mereness" that threatens even their own sense of the importance of these practices as contributing substantially to who they take themselves to be? We cannot forget that the statement "I am an SMler" is an ontological claim in which a person identifies as a player. Part of the ambivalence about the term "play" stems no doubt from a cultural-historical context in which the status of play as less than reality has come to be implicitly assumed, in both contemporary scholarship and popular wisdom. Consider, for example, the differentiation between ritual and play posited in *Ritual and its Consequences*:

> Some subjunctive worlds claim to be true and eternal, while others are ephemeral and ad hoc. In play we can create worlds of cops and robbers, goalies and forwards, or pawns and knights, but we can choose

> to abandon those worlds at any time…ritual's worlds – performed or not – are eternal, while play's are ephemeral. Hockey…could disappear forever from the universe, and while some few hockey players and fans would feel the world had fundamentally changed, most would probably shift their sports passions elsewhere. Remove communion, however, even for a Catholic who rarely takes it, and everything is different. (Seligman *et al* 2008: 73)

In light of their book's larger argument, which emphasizes tensions between the subjunctive realities of ritual and those of the outside, mundane world which circumscribes them, there are only two possible grounds for their ontological differentiation of ritual and play. First, the authors could be supposing that the claims to the eternal made *within* the context of religious rituals such as communion are to be taken as valid *outside* the circumscribed frame in which such rituals occur; this position could accurately reflect the beliefs of a Catholic, but an atheist might be more apt to characterize such rites as no different than the workings of pawns and knights. In this case, the eternal/ephemeral distinction is nothing but a reiteration, displaced onto play, of the arguments about "mereness" that the authors are criticizing vis-à-vis ritual. Second, the authors minimize the effects of imagining a world without hockey by claiming that the people for whom the world would be changed fundamentally are few in number. In this case, the "cafeteria" Catholic is privileged over the devout hockey fan on the basis of the size of the group to which each individual claims to belong, which effectively implies a theoretical justification for disenfranchising minoritarian ontological claims. To say "I am" is an assertion of identity and, in the ideology of modernist subjectivity at least, identity has become sacralized, indeed. Thus, when *any* subjunctive form becomes a basis for identification, a notion of the eternal is at work,

insofar as one's "being" a Catholic, a hockey fan, or an SMler, extends beyond the moments in which one is at church, or watching a game, or partaking in an erotic session. In all of these cases, when people who so identify speak of their identification, they are not referring only to the moments of literal communion with the respective groups to which they claim to belong; rather they are articulating a sense of who they are. This notion of ontology is not limited to the spatiotemporally demarcated instants in which each group's respective rituals are at their most intense, but extends to who it is, in general, these people take themselves to be.

This take on on BDSM practices resonates with the work of Johan Huizinga, whose argument runs against the position on ritual and play taken up in later scholarship[33]:

> Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to performance of an act apart. Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here, we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game," robs it of its character, and makes it worthless. (1950: 10)

In this passage, Huizinga quite carefully claims that temple and playground cannot be distinguished on *formal* grounds, and that in all instances the "consecrated spot"

[33] Roger Caillois disagrees with Huizinga on this point about temple and playground, co-opting the argument of *Homo Ludens* while undoing what I take to be one of its key insights; Caillois' re-/misreading of Huizinga has been influential, to the extent that Huizinga seems oftentimes to be read through the lens of his successor. Seligman *et al*, for example, misattribute (2008: 89) the spoil-sport/cheat discussion to Caillois, when it in fact originates in Huizinga (1950: 11).

functions to engender among participants a feeling of being "together apart," through the performative enactment of a circumscribed world encompassed by the ordinary one. In Huizinga's reading, ritual *is* play, the subjunctive creation of a spatiotemporally demarcated order "within which special rules obtain." Again, the "limited perfection" experienced in the height of ritual experience does contrast with the imperfections of the everyday world, but traces of that order persist – as identification – in the times between ritual events: "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (12). In this way, Huizinga resonates with familiar Durkheimian logics of alternating space-time and collective effervescence. In BDSM ritual practices, order is constructed through shared symbols, customs, and clothing, and people congregate in places like The Gargoyle to partake in such activities together, a togetherness that is apart from the mundane world; yet practitioners take themselves to *be* SMlers even apart from these performances, so that distinctions between eternal and ephemeral cannot be clearly delineated.

Attempts to codify a hierarchical differentiation between ritual and play reflect an ideological milieu where both terms are suspect. Contrasting religious rites with "mere" play serves to displace anxieties about the emptiness of ritual. In his essay, "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," Victor Turner cogently argues that modern notions of "play" depend on its opposition to "work," a contrast which he takes to be "an artifact of the Industrial Revolution" (1982: 32). Coupling these political-economic transformations with religious-ideological shifts *à la* Max Weber's

Protestant Ethic, he writes: "As against the Catholic notion of 'vocation' as the call to a religious life, the Calvinist held that it was precisely a person's worldly occupation that must be regarded as the sphere in which he was to serve God through his dedication to his work. Work and leisure were made separate spheres, and 'work' became sacred, *de facto*, as the arena in which one's salvation might be objectively demonstrated" (38). That is, theological suspicions about the emptiness of ritual occur in a context where ludic forms in general are being divested of their social function: Turner thus notes that the post-industrial division of time into work-time and leisure-time corresponds to a rendering of play as individual optation rather than social obligation, an opposition which in turn underpins his distinction between liminoid and liminal, respectively.

According to Turner's historical schematization, ritual practices occurring in places like contemporary Berlin should be classified as liminoid, and at first glance, this characterization would appear accurate: whereas liminal phenomena are associated with mechanical solidarity, social processes and rhythms, social integration, collective representations, and normatively functional, liminoid practices are characterized by organic solidarity, individualization, marginality, idiosyncrasy, and social critique (53-54). Yet, in practice, the reality is far more complex. One might speak of SMlers as marginal vis-à-vis an imagined, unmarked, dominant order, but the acculturative dimensions of conveying and enforcing behavioral norms within the group are very much a form of social integration and normative functionalism. Likewise, when SMlers enact a scene in The Gargoyle's clinic, they are drawing on cultural symbols of doctor and patient in order to achieve experiential efficacy. Such play may be

resignifying or subversive of zero-degree interpretations of medical discourse, but they cannot be said to be idiosynchratic, and are individualized only to a certain degree. Such sessions are highly stereotyped and generally intelligible, regardless of who is occupying lab coat and chair, even if the specifics of what happens in that room do vary from case to case. Turner argues that bars and clubs are liminoid "settings and spaces," which "tend to generate rites of passage, with the *liminal* a condition of entrance into the *liminoid* realm" (55). With BDSM, though, I argue that the situation is reversed: in SMlers' practices, it is on the basis of engaging in liminoid forms that they attempt to experience liminality. That is, SMlers strive toward the achievement liminality within the discursive frameworks of liminoidity.

Additionally, the limits of thinking BDSM in terms of optation are clear to the extent that being an SMler constitutes a form of identification, because the discursive milieu in which SMlers emerge understand identity as obligatory. Thus, the aesthetics of The Gargoyle, ranging from décor to dress code to decorum, are understood by practitioners of BDSM as integrally related to their identities as SMlers, as parts of their very being. What does it mean, then, that an inclination to engage in certain kinds of performances is understood as inextricably interlinked with the "truth" of one's self? This chapter explores the ontological problematization of play in the context of BDSM, showing how, ethnographically, the rubric of play both depends on and subverts the rhetoric of inscription, thus laying the groundwork for the argument about exchange taken up in the second half of this dissertation.

Unterwerfung leads to Rome?:

"Making it simple" at *Themenabend*

On the third Thursday of every month, a number of SMlers gather at *Sonntagsclub*, a *Verein* located in the *Bezirk* of Prenzlauerberg. This East Berlin neighborhood was once thought to be avant-garde but now, critics of gentrification complain, the area has been "completely overrun with baby strollers," middle-class and middle-age families being presented as indexical of bourgeois respectability. This club, however, was there in the "old days," I was told, before the fall of the wall which, my interlocutors point out, is significant, given what it is. *Sonntagsclub* is primarily a gay and lesbian *Verein*, although it accommodates a number of others as well: in addition to *Themenabend*, and a meeting for beginning SMlers, the space also hosts a group for asexuals. The name *Themenabend* itself is a reference to a late-night talk-show where, for example, philosophers and other intellectuals discuss issues of contemporary import. Each meeting of *Themenabend* focuses on a different topic; at the end of each session, the group determines collectively the topic for the next month's meeting, which is then advertised on the BDSM-Berlin internet list-serv. Topics (*Themen*) addressed in these gatherings varied from "Dress Code" and "Home-Made SM Toys" to "What Will the BDSM Scene Look Like in 20 Years" and "Differences Between Fantasy and Reality." In 2008-2009, a core group of eight participants would come regularly, but depending on the topic there were as many as thirty.

On this particular occasion, the topic was "*Unterwerfung und Demütigung: Was sind die Unterschiede*?" (Submission and Humiliation: What are the Differences?) This question had been raised at the previous meeting by a woman who was new to the group and struggling with teasing out the differences with respect to her own relationship. The group felt it was a good question, one to which there was no simple answer, but as it was late in the evening, and somewhat off-topic, it was decided that the solution would be to discuss the matter more fully the next month. As it turns out, the woman who raised the question didn't end up coming the next month, and so the practical-experiential basis of the question was lost, and participants treated the problem as a more or less theoretical one.

Intuitively, and embedded in the logic of how the topical question was constructed, is the idea of a value judgment differentiating the night's central terms. For the SMlers present, it was taken as obvious that the first term, submission, was meant to signal "good," whereas the second, humiliation, was meant to signal "bad." That is, the question as to the "differences" between these terms was trying to get at how it is possible to practice (good) submission without having to endure (bad) humiliation. That this opposition was clear and thought to "go without saying" is significant, especially considering the broader context in which liberal individualist ideologies are salient, since these would render "submission" itself a necessarily negative term.

Markus emphasized that, as used among SMlers, the two verbs differed in terms of voice: "It is a matter of active and passive," he said. "One submits, but one is humiliated." This comment maps the valance of the terms onto a rhetoric of activity

and passivity, themselves grammatical reflections of an ideology of the agentive subject. "I look upon submission favorably," Tanya informed us, "but I wouldn't want to be humiliated." Valerie, however, didn't understand Tanya's espousal of this position, given her well-known proclivities: "When you are led around a club on a leash…that is humiliating." Tanya shook her head: "No, that is not humiliating. That is *hot*." (She used the term *Geil*, hot in the erotic sense.) Valerie laughed: "That's because you find it hot, to be humiliated, but that doesn't mean that it's not humiliating." Tanya said she was having trouble wrapping her head around this distinction, "because *Demütigung* is something negative, but to be led on a leash is something positive." Valerie offered a solution: "Let's make it simple…*Das, was du magst, heißt Demütigung*!" (That, what you like, is called humiliation!)

Participants discussed a range of common BDSM practices that entail humiliation, such as being made to be naked, being slapped in public, being talked down to, and the like. Boris said that humiliation is not his thing, but that in certain circumstances he has done it because his partner wanted it. He talked about one of his prior girlfriends, who he said had a need for such things, and told the story of how he would pull up her dress, put his fingers between her leg before raising them to her mouth and nose, telling her that she stank. A few of the people present expressed discomfort with this story, saying it was "hard." One person asked: "Do people do that?" Markus replied "people do all sorts of things, it's just a question of taste, that some things are okay for some people, but would not appeal at all to others." Here, Markus was suggesting the idea that what counts or not as *Demütigung* is both culturally and personally constructed, labeled differently based on varying proclivities.

Throughout my fieldwork, I found it noteworthy that people expressed discomfort precisely with those practices that did not appeal to them, effectively imagining their own erotic proclivities as the basis for consensual norms, despite the recognition that their tastes were themselves nonconforming to mainstream notions.

Tristan, especially, struggled with the notion of cultural construction as it was discussed among participants at *Themenabend*. He expressed issues with constructivism in other contexts as well, especially in discussions about gender, which he firmly believes to be biologically determined, despite the inevitable evocations of Judith Butler he receives in response to such pronouncements. He was wrestling with the issue here, though, saying: "well in some cultures it is humiliating for women to show their bare feet," as if to say it would be ridiculous to assume that bare feet could be thought of as humiliating in itself. "And take saliva," he went on, "if I give a woman my saliva through a kiss that is romance, but if I spit on her it is humiliation, and so it's not the saliva that's humiliating, but the way our culture encodes its transmission." He stopped, though, not following the implications of the line of thought he had been up to that point pursuing. "But surely," he said, "there are some things that are humiliating in and of themselves." Tristan's evocation of saliva as context-dependent conduit of gift or curse, kiss or spittle, gets reincorporated into a logic that at its limit rests on an assumption of univocal signification: the postulation, in theory, that "there are some things humiliating in and of themselves," becomes the inscription of an imagined absolute against which the relativity of a cultural relativism can be thought.

The conversation, fittingly perhaps, shifted into a differentiation between *Grenze* and *Tabu*, border/limit and taboo: *Grenze*, the group suggested might be thought as a limit that can be pushed and possibly transcended, but *Tabu* is something that is absolutely forbidden. It was pointed out, however, that time may play a crucial role in such matters, in that something that is taboo for people at one point in their lives might not be so forever: "For me," one participant said, "the idea of getting slapped in public, that was a taboo, it was something unimaginable, but it's an idea I got used to and now, it might still be a limit, but under the right circumstances, I could see myself going for it." Here, too, the group theoretically postulates an opposition that is experientially undermined, and yet the opposition remains conceptually intact.

The conversation then turned to the opposition between power as exchanged in BDSM relations and the forms of violence and hierarchy against which SMlers define their own practices. The discussion moved to how, in most discourses on slavery, it is about getting free of power relations, whereas in SM it is about consensually entering into such relations, and maintaining them in a way that is mutually satisfactory. Wolfgang disagreed that BDSM was the only exception, and referred the group to ancient Rome: "In Rome it was the case that some people decided to become slaves, it was a status, maybe they couldn't support themselves financially for example." Tristan was incredulous: "I have never heard of that. I thought that the Romans acquired slaves when they invaded other places and took captives. That's how the Roman Empire worked, it was built on capturing others and turning them into slaves, which is what supported the privilege of the citizens. We look to Rome as the foundation of our culture, but I'm not sure you can label that *Kultur*, at least today, no one would call it

that." Some people, in turn, disagreed that Rome was "the foundation of our culture," suggesting instead Greece as the site of origination. But others defended the other premise, contending that, historically, it was specifically encounters with Rome that were central to Germany's development.

Of particular interest was the notion of the right of the Roman father over his family, including the right to life and death of his wife and children. "Well, except in the case of his sons," said Wolfgang, "where he would first have to get official permission, because the conditions of the son's subjugation were considered temporary." Participants objected that even if such things were officially legal, they couldn't imagine them often, if ever, being put into practice. Valerie retorted: "What would the neighbors say?" Yet, Wolfgang noted that it might not be so important that these laws were put into practice: just having them there as a possibility engenders a certain power dynamic. As this historical debate continued, one could almost forget that the whole point of this gathering was to discuss differences between *Unterwerfung* and *Demütigung* in the context of BDSM. Yet, there was a similar ethos underpinning each aspect of this discussion, in which participants attempted to negotiate definitive explanations as to the meaning of terms and their differentiation, an investment in the power of inscription as marker and guarantor of truth, even as the logic of play, the logic on which their practices are founded, upsets any straightforward assertions about anchoring meaning in whatever "degree zero" might be.

"Truly," said Markus, "the idea of humiliation in SM is something of a paradox, because if a person wants to be humiliated is it really humiliation? But then, if it's not wanted, it's not consensual, and if it's not consensual, then it's not SM."

This comment gets at the heart of how "play" becomes a specifically ontological problem, insofar as it depends on degree-zero meanings which it nonetheless subverts. Markus argues that wanted humiliation must be understood to be phenomenologically distinct from unwanted humiliation, in which case the "reality" of the humiliation-as-enacted itself becomes as a designation questionable. Is it *really* humiliation when it's not humiliation degree zero? Despite these questions, humiliation as an idea nonetheless remains the basis upon which acts such as being slapped in public achieve their efficacy for those who desire to experience such things. SMlers define play as distinct from reality, especially when they differentiate their practices from unacceptable forms of hierarchy and violence. Yet, insofar they are so seriously committed to their practices, to the extent that "SMler" becomes not just what one does, but also who one is, this differentiation, expedient in the first context, becomes something of an existential crisis. What does it mean when play becomes definitive of one's very being?

"You Play, Therefore You Are…":
Internet Connectivity and the Problem of "Fakes"

The difficulties in determining just what "makes" an SMler have fueled many interesting debates among participants in the BDSM scene. Franz, for example, often argued that religious flagellants and members of "Asian cultures" were "really" SMlers. Others were critical of such claims, though. Edward refuted Franz's arguments, contending that while there might be "parallels" between religious

flagellation and BDSM, the two forms are phenomenologically distinct, and neither SMlers nor those who engage in religious flagellation would appreciate the comparison. Likewise, he said, it is important to distinguish BDSM from "structural violence" (*strukturelle Gewalt*), so that where hierarchy is a compulsory way of life – as Franz claimed was the case in the "Asian cultures" in which he had lived – one cannot speak of BDSM, since there is in such cases a constitutive lack of individualized consent. Other debates focused on erotic acts. Tanya asked: "Where does SM begin? Does it begin with handcuffs, or a blindfold, or a slap on the ass? Many so-called vanillas do such things, but for me that already belongs to SM." Here, at stake is the extent to which one's own self-understanding legitimates classification, in contexts where people "draw the lines" differently. Jens, however, came up with a seemingly straightforward question that would determine one's status as SMler or vanilla. "I would ask: do you play? If you say yes, I would say: you play, therefore you are an SMler" (*Du spielst, also bist du SMler*). Jens's formulation requires not just an action, but a conscious reflection on action: for him, it is not enough to use handcuffs or blindfolds; rather, to be considered an SMler, the person in question must understand their actions in a particular, culturally recognized form, that of play. In Jens's terms, an SMler is at once one who plays and one who is conscious of playing.

The above discussion in which Jens made his pronouncement took place at another meeting of *Themenabend*. The ethnographic material presented in this section derives from conversations that took place during one *Themenabend*, in July 2008, when the topic under consideration was "How Has The Internet Affected Our BDSM Lives?"

Everyone in attendance agreed with the topical questions' assumption: that the internet *did* in fact affect their lives as SMlers. Even Jens, the lone participant who did not use internet, remarked that his lack of connection with the web circumscribes his ability to participate in the scene: "the internet has affected my SM life," he said, "because not having it means that I am always left out, that other people need to tell me what is happening. But I know I'm always missing something." Not only do SMlers use the internet to find partners to meet in actual life or exchange ideas over chat, but websites such as *Sklavenzentrale* (which would translate as "Slave Central") indicate what is happening around the city as well as who is attending. Those with profiles on *Sklavenzentrale*, or SZ, as it is more commonly known in the scene, can RSVP to various activities, letting others know where to find them. In addition to developing and maintaining social networks and calendars, many SMlers discuss the internet as an important "place" where they first learned the terms with which they identify, where they made contact with others who are like them, and where they were socialized into the scene. Likewise, many SMlers report the importance of the internet to having found past, current, or prospective partners. Local BDSM organizations in the actual city of Berlin, then, owe their existence in part to virtual, cyberspace worlds.

In the discussions at *Themenabend* (and elsewhere in the scene), however, the internet was characterized as much in terms of pitfalls and perils as it was in terms of positive possibilities. Much of the evening's conversation was devoted to the subject of fakes. "Fakes," explained Markus, "are people who do not want to engage in SM in real life, but only want to chat on the internet, oftentimes because they are not who they say they are." Fakes are people who chat about SM online, presenting themselves, for

example, as if they wanted to enact master/slave relationships in actual life, when really all they want to do is "pretend" over the internet. BDSM practices construct asymmetrical power relations in social contexts privileging formal juridical equality; SMlers engage in relations of domination and submission, yet remain committed to egalitarian ideologies. What does such an ontological distinction between real and fake mean, then, in a context where the enactment of master/slave relationships already occurs in the subjunctive mood? Distinctions between "fakes" on the internet and those who practice SM in "real" life forges a differentiation between online pretending and those forms of subjunctivity in which real-time practitioners engage. Real-time SMlers separate one form of "as if" from another, and in so doing construct their practices as real and serious by way of contrast.

One concern about online fakes stems from a belief that the internet makes possible a wide discrepancy between the person presented in chat and the person sitting behind the keyboard. The example of gender arose frequently: "men can pretend to be women and women can pretend to be men. I may think I am chatting with a woman, but what if it is really a man, and it is a man who is turning me on?" To prevent misrepresentations of this sort, websites such as the *Sklavenzentrale* have installed verification systems. One can only access the site by providing a valid German cell phone number for verification; only one profile is allowed per number, making it difficult for people to create multiple accounts or rejoin if they have been banned. Even then, one only has limited access. Full access is possible only if one achieves the status of "real." A person can become real by getting that status conferred by another member of the site whose reality has already been certified by other "real" people. If

you want to become real, someone who is already "real" must vouch that they have met you in person, and that the characteristics you advertise – including age, sex, height, weight, experience, and preferences – are true, as well as certify that you will use the privileges associated with being real responsibly. People who were new to the scene were advised to join *Sklavenzentrale*, "because no one will talk to you if you're not on it, because it is strange to not be there. Once you're on it, you have to become real, or you will be treated as someone who does not exist." One's credentials to participate in real-time activities, then, are in part gauged by one's certification as real in a virtual domain.

Jacob was outraged by the idea that a person would fake their gender. His reaction is particularly significant, because he said that he would chat with both men and women. That is, his reaction cannot be read as a threat to his sexuality: *that* he could be turned on by a man or a woman did not trouble him. What bothered Jacob was the possibility of deception: to imagine oneself to be speaking with a man, when really a woman is behind the keyboard, destroys the fantasy. For him, to retain the efficacy of the idea that the fantasized relationships could be made real, he has to be able to imagine that the person behind the keyboard really matches his vision of who that person is.

Jacob's case is also interesting because he admitted to lying about some of his own characteristics when chatting online. He said that he sometimes pretended to be different ages. This comment provoked a strong reaction from the group; Franz questioned how he could get upset about other people lying about their gender when he did the same thing with his age. "It is not the same thing!" Jacob protested. "Gender is

something fixed, but age changes, it isn't permanent, it isn't essential." Edward disagreed: "At a particular moment in time, you are a particular age, and that is no more or less essential than your gender. Besides, we know from Judith Butler that gender is a performance. But age? I for one would be very upset to find out that someone lied about their age." Part of what troubled the group about Jacob's admission of lying about his age, though, was that he was a very youthful looking twenty. He said he pretended to be older online, but what if he were pretending right then? This was an adults-only conversation group, but it was also an anonymous group. People did not have to give their official names, much less verify their identities. Nonetheless, certain parameters of age – such as the line demarcating attainment of majority – wield juridical as well as psychological force: participants made it clear that they would not feel comfortable discussing intimate matters in the presence of minors, a discomfort inseparable from political demarcations of propriety and legality, especially in contexts where evocations of youth protection can be deployed to regulate the activities of consenting adults. Also disturbing to the very premise of their discussion, though, was that the specter of Jacob's deceit made clear that discrepancies between representations and realities are not limited to the internet.

Tanya brought up the issue of blindfolding. She said, for instance, that a man who only likes women could be blindfolded, have a man play with him and enjoy it, believing he was being touched by a woman. "But then," asked Markus, "wouldn't he be disappointed when the blindfold came off, if he realized that all along it was a man who had been touching him?" The word Markus used for disappointment – *enttäuscht* – drew Edward's attention. "That is an interesting word you use, *enttäuscht*, because if

you break it into its parts you have the verb *täuschen* (to deceive) and the prefix *ent* (to undo or take away), and so in a way what this word suggests is that we are disappointed when we are undeceived, when our deception is taken away." The example of blindfolding shows how imagination of reality can contribute to experience and interpretation. Edward suggests that disappointment comes when we are undeceived, when we are forced to grapple with discrepancies between experience and imagination. Deceit may come from within as well as without, from the blindfold, and from the exclusions that would preclude pleasure in open-eyed engagement. Given that blindfolding is a common practice in BDSM, how does one navigate between those forms of deception or pretending that positively contribute to the efficacy of the "as if" and those that are deemed unacceptable or unethical? Which forms of pretending are legitimate?

Tanya proposed a situational and contextualized ethics of subjunctive engagement: "If a person is only looking for chat, then I think it is fine to play at being whatever, because as long as it is clear that your activities with that person will always be limited to the internet, then you can be whatever you want. I have done this myself, taken on other identities, and explored them through chat, and that was an important part of discovering myself, even if there are things I could or would not be or do in reality, if they are things I only do in fantasy. It is different, though, if the other person wants something outside the internet, if that person is looking for a life partner, or even a play partner, then I think you have to present yourself in a way that you could live up to in real life, because it is unfair to waste other people's time, pretending you can meet expectations when you know it isn't possible." Here, Tanya does not limit her sense of

being to a notion of an essential truth of the self; rather, she contends that pretending and playing can be constitutive aspects of self-making. That which one is not, actually, but which one enjoys enacting, virtually, becomes in a certain sense a part of the self: for Tanya, an affinity for certain forms of subjunctivity is as much a part of one's self as those characteristics held to be immutable in real-time. Importantly, Tanya does not subordinate the virtual to the actual; rather, she calls for a consciousness as to the contextual possibility of meeting the expectations of one's partner: in the virtual realm, she can be recognized as a man, and interacted with as such, but in person, she says, this is not possible. For Tanya, the question is not one of ontological essence: what is it possible for me to be? It is one of recognizable potentiality: to what extent do I imagine I will be able to live up to another's expectations?

"Play," then, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, designating BDSM activities as in certain ways not "real" serves to differentiate them from forms of hierarchy and violence that are viewed as unethical and to emphasize the spatiotemporal demarcations that distinguish these practices as distinct from mundane experience. On the other hand, suspicions about the emptiness of "play" and "ritual" characteristic of modernist ideologies give pause to many of the people with whom I worked, who take their engagement in BDSM seriously to the point that they consider it part of their "real" identities. Yet, the forms of play that SMlers wish to valorize must be distinguished from those forms of pretending that they label as "fake." Here, Tanya's argument for a contextually specific understanding of what it is possible to be suggests that a performative notion of ontology cannot be thought once and for all, but must be situated in terms of what, in a given setting, can be recognized as legitimate.

To some extent, Tanya's statements resonate with Judith Butler's account of ontology as normative injunction rather than foundation (1999: 189). Butler argues that "One 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*" (1997: 5). Butler's emphasis on signification predicates ontological questions on possibilities of interpellation, drawing on Althusser's classic example of the police man, who represents state attempts at classificatory monopolization. In Tanya's statements, though, there is an important way in which recognition gets negotiated dialogically, so that there are multiple possibilities for interpellation that cannot be reduced to a monolithic notion of authoritative discourse. To pursue anthropologically Butler's insight that recognition is predicated upon being recognizable, one might look to contextual specificities of when, how, and by whom such recognitions can be conferred, not only in terms of a politics of the official, but as a condition of participation in various social worlds. For Tanya, truthfulness about one's being becomes a question about what others will recognize as the truth of one's being, and these possibilities of recognition depend on the parameters of interaction. Tanya's statements, however, provoked resistance from some members of the group, who argued that there must be consensus in terms of what significations are deemed possible; indeed, throughout my fieldwork I noted many attempts among various members of the group to curtail usages of terms that fall outside those significations deemed acceptable. There is a tension here between a desire to understand the world univocal signification and a sense of creative possibility, and a real ambivalence toward the monologic regulation of ontology suggested by Althusser's officer.

Though the ontological problem is often posed as an abstract question of "what is it possible to be," more at stake, it seems, are possibilities of being rendered recognizable. SMlers complicate discussions of performativity and recognition in several ways. Insofar as they move beyond state monopolies on symbolic classification, the question of who is authorized to confer recognition and in what contexts becomes subject to meaningful debate. Conflicting visions between what constitutes real and fake or what is meant by safe and risky have real-time consequences in an acephalic setting, in which people are mutually negotiating engagements. Of course, in many ways the state is very much present, insofar as its statutory laws regulate consensual possibility, though governments have taken conflicting stances on the seemingly paradoxical notion of consensual assault. In Germany, *Körperverletzung* is in most cases not prosecuted when it is consensual[34], whereas in the United Kingdom people have been convicted of aiding and abetting assaults against themselves (the infamous Spanner case[35]) for their participation in a BDSM session that was filmed. Here, though, there is a territorially specific singular vision of whether and to what extent a juridical ontology of BDSM as a certain kind of

[34] In their contribution "SM in Germany," Mark-A, Kathrin Passig and Johannes Jander note that in German laws on consent (*Einwilligung*), "The bottom can legally consent to any kind of battery that does not conflict with 'good and just morals'," which would be prohibited under §228 (2006: 268). The authors delineate three categories of progressively severe forms of *Körperverletzung* covered by law: "The first category, 'simple' cases (§223), consists of spanking and mild whippings which leave no enduring marks…The second category is 'dangerous' cases (§224) in which any kind of weapon is used or when two or more tops stage a scene that involves any potentially life-endangering techniques, e.g. breath control. The final category is grievous bodily harm (§226)... [whereby] a permanent disability results (e.g. castration, amputation)" (267-8). The authors suggest that, while there is no definitive law on the parameters of consensual possibility, "it is…safe to assume that any sane adult can consent to any play that falls under §223 but no one can consent to the cases ruled by §226" (268).

[35] Cf. White (2006).

performative act can be maintained, but interpretations of many everyday practices are considered open to debate.

In J.L. Austin's classic (1975) example of performativity, "I thee wed," there is an assumption that whether or not the person pronouncing these words is authorized to do so is clear. The minister in church actually marries people, whereas children playing in the backyard do not. SMlers acknowledge that the acts and fantasies that make them who they take themselves to be, though serious, are in some sense pretend. And yet they distinguish themselves from "fakes." What is the role of performativity here? If the pronouncement "I thee wed," is efficacious to the extent that the person who utters it is believed to be authorized to do so, what happens when there is no singular authority enforcing belief? Among SMlers, there is very little in the way of official or standardized channels by which such certifications occur. Butler understands the problem of interpellation as an issue of inscription, but it seems that more fundamental than inscription is exchange: performative efficacy must be thought in terms of the exchanges that might render given performances efficacious in the conferring of ontological recognition. Participants in these discussion groups work to create, maintain, and shape what it means to "be" in SMler, engaging in exchanges where there is no standard currency that might settle such matters once and for all.

During the conversation at *Themenabend*, people made much of the internet as a conduit for fakes. It was thought that fakes were enabled and emboldened by the anonymity and lack of physical presence that internet forums provide. While the internet has become an important site both empirically and imaginatively, cases such as that of Jacob illustrate how the problems raised in contexts of cyber interaction appear

also, if less blatantly, in face-to-face social engagements. I concur with Tom Boellstorff when he argues that internet worlds reveal that "our 'real' lives have been virtual all along" (2008: 5). If the phrase "virtual reality" is redundant, it is *that* slippage which proves productive in discussions of ontology in BDSM, which is, after all, a community of people who define themselves as players.

It is here that Jens might have something on Descartes. Crucially, in claiming "you play, therefore you are," Jens reconstructs the phrase in the second person, displacing ontological authority from the solipsism of the subjective I to the gaze of the other who recognizes me. My authority to claim "I am" is in many ways constrained and shaped by what others will recognize as true, but there are an infinite number of potential others on whose recognition I predicate my sense of security as a being in the world. Here, we can recall Merleau-Ponty's (1962) formulation of the house as seen from everywhere (as opposed to the house as seen from nowhere), because it is always in the context of relations with others that the self can be articulated. Jens has reclaimed from Descartes the indispensability of the other; moreover, in choosing the verb "to play" rather than "to think," he has moved beyond the dichotomization of interior and exterior, insofar as playing depends both on understanding from within and recognition from without.

However, the nuances of complex significations are difficult to maintain. Halfway through *Themenabend* we took a break, and some of us went outside to pose for a photograph that would be published by the organization hosting us. Not everyone consented to be photographed, mainly out of concerns for possible professional consequences. But it skewed the image of the group: for example, only one woman

was in the photo, although there were several present. I took part, although looking at the photograph there'd be no way to tell I was there as an anthropologist. Afterwards, Markus turned to me and said "hopefully there won't be a regime change, you know, away from democracy, because then they have our pictures. I don't think it's likely, I mean I agreed to be in the photo, but then the people of Weimar didn't see it coming either." What could such a picture prove? We were a bunch of people in street clothes, standing on a sidewalk. Later, when the booklet in which the photograph was printed appeared, I realized just how much a discrepancy there was, between the image I saw before me and the experience of that evening. There was no indication of grappling with ontological questions and ethical dilemmas. Looking at the photograph, nothing outside the frame of its borders could be recovered. There was only the picture, and the caption below, which read: "BDSM group" (*Gruppe BDSM*).

"You Don't Fuck Your Dog":
The Pet Players' *Stammtisch*

Although much conversation among SMlers concerns the possibilities of transgressing metaphorical boundaries, traveling across literal ones can be equally tricky. International flights can prove problematic for SMlers, who oftentimes bring equipment to and/or from their travel destinations. Border and Customs officials who inspect bags are often perplexed by what they find in SMlers' suitcases, because these items are often unexpected and being put to uses other than those with which they are commonly associated. During my fieldwork, I heard many stories such as this one:

> Once, I had a dog collar in my bag. The officer asked me:
> 'What is this?'
> 'A dog collar,' I replied.
> 'And it gives electric shocks?'
> 'Yes, small ones,' I told him.
> 'And you use this on your dog?' he asked.
> 'Well,' I said, 'You could use it for a dog too.' He got all red in the face and didn't know what to say! And then he let me through.

SMlers who travel with paraphernalia get used to negotiating such encounters, and apart from first time scenarios, it is often the official, rather than the SMler, who is portrayed as embarrassed by the discussion, as was the case above. Yet, some SMlers do express anxieties about confiscation, especially considering that some of these items can cost thousands of Euros. While collars and leashes are often employed by SMlers in general as markers of hierarchy, in this case the person telling the story belonged to a specific subset of SMler who deploys these symbols more literally: he identifies as a "pet player," which is a term referring to a person who likes to embody an animal during erotic encounters, a person who likes to play with someone who is embodying an animal, or both. In Berlin, there is a monthly meeting, or *Stammtisch*, for pet players, which takes place at an otherwise ordinary restaurant. The organizers identify the table to which participants in the discussion group should come by placing a large stuffed dog on top, at least until the food arrives.

Importantly, pet players are not zoophiles. That is, pet players are humans who embody some other animal as a form of erotic play with another human: though it is possible that a person might belong to both groups, pet players as such do not engage in sexual acts with members of other species. On one occasion, a person identifying himself as a zoophile did find his way to the Pet Players' meeting, announcing abruptly

upon his arrival that he would be interested in having sex "*mit richtigen Tieren*" (with actual animals, as opposed to people pretending to be animals). Karl explained to him that officially, pet players and zoophiles have nothing to do with each other, and that in general it was not a good idea to discuss those particular proclivities with pet players, who are overwhelmingly protective of animals. Kevin went on to say that while the people in this room prided themselves on not being judgmental, "to be honest, that's just not my thing." The man continued the conversation, emphasizing that he was interested in doing things that were *illegal*, with an unmistakable emphasis on that term. Karl elaborated his understanding of German laws on the subject: "the commercial distribution of pornography involving animals is a crime, but simple possession is not. Transporting it across international lines is something else." As for the actual act, asked the man? "Well, not in Germany, there aren't laws against it, but don't do it in Switzerland." "Oh come now!" replied the man, not exactly what you'd expect to hear from a person articulating a desire to act on such proclivities.

Indeed, the man to me seemed very much out of place. Most pet players are younger, in their twenties, and this guy was older, appearing to be mid-to-late forties. He claimed to be a business man from out of town; it was unclear how he found his way to the meeting. I also found it odd that he implied this was the first time he was talking about such things. I've seen people reveal things for the first time, and the struggle is visible. Faces turn red, words get choked on. The difficulty is apparent, as is a look of relief after the fact of disclosure. This guy just came out with it, as if he were announcing he preferred *Currywurst* to *Wiener Schnitzel*. I found him suspicious, thinking he might be some kind of undercover agent, and became increasingly

uncomfortable as the conversation continued. To me, he seemed to be provoking people into making an incriminating statement, although, apparently, no one else saw things this way.

The members of the *Stammtisch* attempted to explain pet-play to the zoophile by reframing it as a subset of BDSM practice. The man became interested in BDSM, and asked whether it was possible to "convince" people to do things when they say they're not interested. "No," Kevin replied, "it is unacceptable to try to force someone to do something when they don't want to do it. Sometimes people do have an opening to be pushed further, but that is a special case. Besides, it wouldn't work anyway, if you try to push someone to do something they want to do, because even if they do it, it is for the wrong reason. If they just do it to make you happy, and not because they want to, you shouldn't go to that place even if they do say yes." Frederick went on to take a more nuanced position: "it can also happen that someone finds themselves over time, so you may see something and say 'this is not for me' but then maybe six months later you may decide to try it. But that is a change in you. For instance, I know a guy who was straight and had no experience with SM, but then he ended up doing an SM session with other men. But the change came from him, he discovered something about himself, and nobody forced him." People were responding to him as they would a beginner, explaining the basics of BDSM decorum. A few weeks later, I brought up the incident with Helene, asking whether she thought there was something "off" about him. She said she didn't think so, other than that he was a zoophile so the group wasn't for him. In any case, I never saw him again.

As such, pet players do not engage in bestiality, nor do they simulate engagement in bestiality. Rather, they imaginatively enact interspecies relationships, where one partner performs the role of the human and the other partner embodies the pet. Although it is possible to take on any animal role, most pet players I've encountered have been dogs, ponies, pigs, or cats. All of the pet players I met had one preferred animal role; Helene theorized that there was a correlation between a pet player's human personality and the stereotypical characteristics of their pet persona. "I am a cat," she said, "because cats are independent and a bit touchy (*zickig*). Cats do things on their own terms and aren't submissive (*unterwürfig*) like dogs. A cat would never fetch. Plus, I think that cats are more feminine, and you'll find that most (pet players who embody) cats are women" (there was one male cat who regularly attended these meetings, and he often demonstrated his being in-touch with his feline side by responding to comments with variously-inflected gesturing swipes of his paw). In Helene's apt description, playing a cat or a dog entails drawing on culturally intelligible stereotypes of that animal vis-à-vis its relationship to humans, and acting out that relationship. The same is true for ponies, who like to pull carriages bearing their owners.

Pets of any species may purchase gear to facilitate embodiment of their chosen role. Depending on willingness and ability to commit to these practices financially, outfit enhancements may range from a simple dog collar (obtainable from any local pet shop), to rubber masks, to "ergonomically correct" suits costing several thousand Euro. Many residents of Berlin are not particularly wealthy, and spending a fortune of BDSM paraphernalia is not an option for many participants in the scene. Most SM clubs in

Berlin have low entrance fees in comparison with those in other cities in Germany and throughout Europe; among pet players, too, low and no cost options were often discussed. The more expensive and elaborate suits are especially important for those who wish to take on an animal for longer stretches of time: it becomes much more feasible, for example, for a pony to pull a chariot through a six hour parade when clad in a way that allows the human body to adapt to the necessary position comfortably and without inducing injury. Pet players who spend long periods of time on all fours without the aid of such materials can end up with joint, back and other forms of injury. 24/7 pet-owner relationships are virtually unheard of.

Helene and Kevin's pet-play relationship may be characterized as part-time in several senses. Helene characterizes herself as *doppel-monogam* or *bi-monogam* (double-monogamous or bi-monogamous), meaning that she is involved in committed relationships with two different men (the more common term referring to such relationships is polyamory, but Helene prefers to invoke monogamy to emphasize the sense of exclusivity she has with both partners). Helene splits her time each week between the two men, spending half her week in the home where each man resides full time. Although Helene is sometimes a cat, mostly she is the owner of Kevin as pony. The couple has hosted workshops for those wishing to learn more about pet-owner relationships, and has participated in weekend-long retreats. Kevin jokes that when his colleagues ask about his weekends away, he always makes it sound mundane, that he went away to the country and spent some time in the farmlands. He said he is often teased about always being so boring, but that once a colleague joked that "you're probably secretly going away on some *SM-Urlaub*!" (in Germany, the idea of an SM-

getaway is somewhat present in popular culture as something outrageous, but something that some people actually do). "Yes, I was!" he reported having told them; everyone laughed, he said, his colleagues not realizing how very accurate they were.

It is also possible to be a pet without being in the company of an owner. Fido often wears a tail, not only to the pet-players' meetings but to a variety of scene-related events, as well as a dog collar, and likes to be addressed by his dog name. It is not that he is trying to be anonymous, he explained, and indeed he signs his emails with his human name in parentheses. Rather, he said, his human name refers to "the person who goes to work, the person who pays the bills. When I am here, I am not that person; that person lives in a different world. Here, I am Fido, so I want to be called Fido." For Fido, maintaining the proper boundaries between human and canine selves was important to his experience, and answering to his dog name was a sign of that differentiation.

Bastian, a man in his early thirties, explained to me that "there is nothing as wonderful as being a dog, to have no worries, to know that your master will take care of you. It's great to have a session for an evening or even for a whole weekend. But you have to do it with the right person." He went on to talk about the challenges facing a dog in search of a master:

> Looking online, many people do not understand, or they think that just because you want to be a dog it means that they can do anything they want with you, or that you shouldn't be able to turn them down. A lot of times, when you tell someone 'no thanks' the insults start flying. And then some people just don't get what it means to have a dog, like they want to have sex. You don't fuck your dog. You don't beat your dog. A tap, maybe, but nothing like SM. If you want to beat me, if you want to fuck me, take me out of the dog role. I mean, I'd wear a dog

> mask as a slave, but being a dog, that's not what you'd do with a real dog, so with a human dog you don't do anything different.
> Other people do not understand the time commitment involved. Regardless of your experience, with every master you start your training anew, because every master is different. And that's a good thing. You start as a *Welpe* (puppy) and it takes time, just like with a real *Welpe*, with regular *Erziehung* (training/education), between six months and two years. And a lot of people aren't prepared to put the time into it.

Here, Bastian's concerns about finding the right partner center on maintaining proper boundaries, and arriving at a consensus about the imaginative framework within which the enactment of a puppy-master relationship is efficacious. When searching online, he notes that many potential masters fail to distinguish between what he wants as a dog, and how he is to be engaged as a human. When chatting on the internet, some would-be masters engage Bastian as if he were already his dog, as if it were already his place to obey, and this tactic does not get them anywhere. Then, during a pet-play session, there is the problem of the reverse dynamic: whereas an internet chatter might make the mistake of treating a human as if he were a dog, the master who wants to "beat and fuck" his dog commits the error of treating an animal as if it were a human. Significantly, Bastian distinguishes between being a dog and wearing a dog mask: he says that as a slave wearing a dog mask, he would be happy to engage in such activities, but that this configuration must be kept distinct from what occurs when he is being engaged as a dog.

This distinction, whereby the mask can sometimes function as a "mere" prop but other times suggests the inhabiting and accessing of an alternative way of being one's self, is reminiscent of philologist Wendy Doniger's observation that certain forms of pretending reveal otherwise inaccessible truths. In her encyclopedic cross-

cultural study of *The Bedtrick*, she writes: "Masqueraders pretend, and stories pretend, and yet their pretenses ultimately provide a kind of truth that is otherwise unobtainable, compelling us beyond all other sorts of more falsifiable truths" (2000: 11). For Bastian, a mask is at times just a mask, but that same mask can also be an instrument through which he accesses his canine self, and it is crucial to him that his partner recognize that difference. Here, too, we see tensions between "empty" and "full" ritual, within a context that leaves room for both, each in its own time and place. Doniger discusses a wide-range of stories and myths, taken from a variety of cultural and historical contexts, in which sex and masquerading involving animal embodiment are depicted (105-39); her work is thus suggestive as a way of situating the ritual practices of pet players in a cross-cultural imaginative framework of depicting animal embodiment as a way of accessing otherwise inaccessible erotic truths.

As with pet players, the tales Doniger analyzes reveal that "the animal matings we most often care about are those that involve species in which we ourselves have an investment" (134), so that societal investments in real-life animals are reflected in the prevalence of imaginative depictions. However, while in the tales analyzed by Doniger the animal persona constitutes a concealment of one's true form to be revealed by the story's end, for pet players the inhabiting of an animal role is not thought as a form of trickery. Rather, for them embodying an animal allows one to express certain aspects of one's personality, as with Helene-as-cat, or to experience life in ways that are not possible in human form, as in Bastian's assertion that being a dog allows him access, however temporary, to a life that is care-free. Although their animal lives are in an important sense encompassed by their human ones, pet players do not think of their

play as “false” or “less true” than their everyday existence; rather, as Fido claims, these selves are to be understood as distinct and separate forms of subjectivity, each with its own place.

In this sense, the discursive practices of pet players run against the grain of modernist notions of (sexual) identity, which demand above all subjective coherence. Pet players experience these aspects of self as distinct and compartmentalized, but do not find the disjuncture that ensues problematic. That is, they do not express their human-form activities as “living a lie,” but instead recognize the part-time nature of pet play as integral to the experience. As in the above discussion of “fakes,” pet-play relationships reveal the crucial role of the other in conferring recognition: Bastian is troubled mainly by those who do not treat him as they ought in a given context. By treating interacting with him as a dog when he is in human form, or vice versa, failed would-be masters are in effect preventing him access to his desired experience, which requires that the subjunctive mood be shared. Fido, in requesting he be addressed as such, demonstrates that even without a master a certain amount of recognition from without is crucial. These practices, then, are not indicative of solipsistic subjectivity, but are essentially social, depending on others for their desired effect. Here, the semiotics of inscription must be situated within the framework of the exchanges that render a given sign efficacious.

As exchanges, practices of pet play defy a Marxian analytic framework because pets do not alienate themselves to their owners; owners are the enabling condition for pets to achieve their selves as such, and vice versa. As Bastian and Helene make very clear, interactions between pet and owner do not constitute a forfeiture of self, but must

be engaged through the enabling constraints of the self that is oriented to and realized through such relations. Indeed achieving a mutually agreed upon sense of what such a relationship entails is no easy task, within and beyond the actual sessions. To that end, Bastian recounted an experience with a master who was a heterosexual man. He said this relationship didn't work out for several reasons, firstly because the man wanted to have six dogs "when he couldn't even take care of one" and secondly because Bastian began to fall in love with (*sich verlieben*) his master, and he knew that this man would never think of him as anything other than a dog. "So now," he said, "I will only be a dog for a gay man, or for a lesbian." He reasoned that with a gay man, the possibility for a romantic relationship would be mutual; with a lesbian, both parties would be assured that the other's interest was strictly to remain at the level of canine-human interaction. In the more common (and often idealized) variant of having pet-play and romantic interests combined in a single partner, one has the double difficulty of achieving compatibility on both inter- and intra-species planes. And, as Bastian's experience with the heterosexual master makes clear, contractual stipulations often can neither account for nor contain the generation of emotions and desires in either party.

In many ways, the experiences of pet players bring together the various concerns with which this chapter is occupied. Pet players are very concerned with creating and maintaining proper atmosphere and decorum, achieved both through clothing and behavioral norms for engagement. As discussions of clothing and Bastian's criteria for a master make clear, both of these aspects foster a ritual atmosphere in which a subjunctive enactment of an interspecies relationship might effectively occur. Likewise, pet players associate their tastes with notions of identity

and self-truth, as with Helene's analysis of correlations between human and animal personas. Yet, this "truth" is not understandable in terms of a modernist sexuality: if one's desire to be a dog or cat correlates with certain features of one's overall personality, identification as a pet player cannot be reduced to those desires, and the desires cannot be said to lead to the practice of pet play in a deterministic fashion. It is on the basis of cultural stereotypes that these affinities take shape, resisting re-articulation in the language of a biological essentialism. It would not make sense to speak of a "gene" for wanting to be a dog as form of erotic engagement; the biology/choice opposition, so common in contemporary popular discourses on sexuality, loses its force when confronted with these practices: the cultural specificities of these symbolizations also are suggestive of cultural constraint, so that "choice" must be understood as circumscribed within possibilities of recognition. In a cultural context where ritual formality is viewed with suspicion, however, it is only with tension and ambivalence that the recognition of "performance" can occur, so that performativity as ontological ground remains fraught, even for SMlers such as Edward, whose sacralized reading of Butler as Truth emphasizes the need for anthropological and ethnographic analyses of the taking up of philosophical theories within the "practical" world beyond the borders and conventions of academic ivory towers.

Significantly, while pet players understand their pet and human identifications as distinct, they do not imagine themselves as leading a "double life." That is, they do not experience these separate aspects of self as contradictory, or as necessitating a notion of "living a lie" or as a philosophical conundrum. Much discussion in this group focuses on past or upcoming parades, a singular opportunity for pet players to

engage in their preferred activity in a public, outdoor context. Marching through the streets, they can show people "how they live" in a context where it is safe to do so. Otherwise, limiting play to private spaces, pet play parties, and weekend retreats does not pose for this group any kind of ontological dilemma. They do not experience discursive incoherence as did, for example, the members of the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*, the "working group" for people who identify as both Christians and SMlers discussed in chapter two, for whom these two distinct aspects of their identities are a source of anxiety and discussion.

Edge Play:

Resignification and the Problem of "Degree Zero"

In July 2008, I attended a weekend-long conference entailing workshops and performances on BDSM. The event was organized around the idea of "materiality," so sessions were focused on specific materials employed in SM practices. Some workshops were mostly demonstrations; some were discussion oriented; some centered on practical exercises. At any given time, there were three sessions happening, so people could choose the workshops were of most interest to them. Sometimes there were multiple versions of a workshop: in some cases, participants were meant to attend all of the sessions, which built on each other; in others, a workshop was offered once in German and once in English, because there were a number of international attendees.

I was attending a session titled "urine." We were outside in a large tent, a group of about 40, sitting around in a circle. A woman walked in. She was carrying a

punch bowl, a large empty medical urine container, a bottle of *Litschi Bionade*, and a jar with the label removed containing a yellow liquid. She kneeled down in the middle of the circle and spread the objects in front of her. People adjusted their seats so they could see her. She opened the *Bionade* and poured it into the urine container. She held it up. It looked as if it were urine. She proceeded to drink from the container, which made me nauseous even though I knew it was only *Bionade*, a beverage marketed as a healthy alternative to sugary sports drinks. She capped the urine container and put it down. She didn't say a word throughout the entire demonstration. Next, she took the unmarked liquid and poured it into the punch bowl. She held the bowl up to her face and contemplated it. Slowly she lowered her face into the bowl, first one side and then the other so that her face and hair were dripping with the liquid. Finally, she held the bowl to her face and drank from it. The wind blew in my direction, confirming that this time the liquid in question was in fact urine, which she later explained was her own. She put down the bowl, stood up and took a bow. Everyone applauded. She sat down amongst the group and the discussion began.

In Germany, erotic practices involving urine are referred to as *Natursekt*, (natural champagne)[36]; similar practices involving excrement are known as *Kaviar* (caviar). When references to these activities occur in print, such as on personal dating websites, they usually appear in abbreviated form, as NS and KV, respectively. Conspicuously, both the terms *Natursekt* and *Kaviar* take products of bodily waste and recaption them in terms of gourmet cuisine. It is not that NS and KV necessarily entail

[36] *Sekt* refers to sparkling wine, as opposed to *Champagne*, which comes from a specific region in France; nevertheless, I've always heard *Natursekt* translated as "natural champagne" rather than as "natural sparkling wine."

oral consumption; rather, the naming of these practices suggests that a symbolic transformation underlies their experiential efficacy for those who engage in them. Indeed, at both the sessions on urine and excrement, conversations about transformation occupied a central place. For example, in both groups the topics of shame and disgust arose: participants noted that practices such as NS and KV go against deeply ingrained notions tracing back to their earliest forms of socialization, in which hygienic notions were instilled (*Sauberkeitserziehung*). One participant in the excrement seminar argued that shame and disgust could not be fully overcome. She said: "shame and disgust are precisely the point. Part of NS and KV is overcoming that. If you had no aversion to urine or excrement, I don't think you would get anything out of doing these things." Thus, symbolic transformation is necessary for an eroticization of these practices.

She went on to say that working past such feelings was an important part of being able to accept that part of another person which is considered to be most vile: "if you can do that," she said, "if you can take even that part of another person, than there is no greater form of intimacy." This notion of intimacy divided the participants in the group on urine: some people felt that to urinate on someone or to be urinated upon was a sign of degradation and humiliation, an aggressive act that they could not imagine to mean anything else. Some people argued that urinating on someone was a "fundamentally masculine" thing to do, an act of aggression, a marking of one's territory. Other people did not see NS that way at all; for them, such activities signified closeness, a breaking down of barriers between self and other, bringing one towards a communion with the other through the sharing of a part of one's self.

Significant, though, is that many people in each camp had difficulty understanding the other's position; in each case the alternative signification did not make sense in terms of their own experiences and understandings.

Charlotte tried to reconcile the discordant views on NS: "it can mean different things to different people, and there can also be differences in the way that it is done. I could use a pulsating rhythm and I could see that as aggressive. Or I could just let loose, and that might be gentler…it all depends on how you do it, on the mood you create." Here, Charlotte is arguing against an attempt to settle on a univocal meaning inherent in the act; rather, one looks to contextual variations as to how one engages in a practice, to experiential specificities. For her, there is no one or right way to experience NS (or for that matter KV). Of the latter, she said that for her it wasn't a sexual thing, that she found it to be more maternal – a combination of authority and service, the way that a mother has authority over her children, but also must attend to their needs. "I get a kick from these things," she said: "but I don't get it there," pointing to her vagina. Participants conceptualized these activities in variegated ways, but at the same time they felt that the stakes of conceptualization were high. "Concepts make worlds," said one woman, "so we have to be careful of how we talk about things." This comment followed a discussion in the workshop on KV, in which another person described the practice in terms of regressing to a child-like (*kindlich*) state, prior to socialization; another participant disagreed with this characterization, saying she would not describe it as childish (*kindisch*). Another participant commented on the conflation of *kindlich* and *kindisch* in the second commenter's assessment. The discussion was emotionally charged; for many people it constituted the first

opportunity to discuss such a taboo topic with others in-person. Tobias said "these things are taboo. They are literally unspeakable…at least in most circumstances. These aren't topics you'd talk about with your mother." "God no," Charlotte replied: "my mother would *die* if she knew I was doing this." Here too the issue of discursive incompatibilities surfaced: it is not merely that one does not speak with one's mother about such things as NS and KV, but that even the thought of her mother being made aware of her daughter's activities is inconceivable, to the point where she emphatically projects the death of her mother, were she to find out – Oedipus in reverse. That which is held to be discursively inviolable is so at all costs. What made these conversations fraught, then, was that unlike Charlotte, who was able to moderate with an open mind, many people were seriously invested in their own particular ways of conceptualizing the practices; captioning NS and KV in other terms were like affronts to their own experiences, threatening the sanctity of the understandings at which they had arrived for themselves. .

In the discussions on NS and KV, people expressed a strong interest in issues of hygiene. How to engage in such practices safely was an important topic of conversation. Charlotte explained that "even though diseases such as HIV, at least according to the *Deutsche AIDS Hilfe*, are not transmissible through urine, other diseases, such as hepatitis, are an issue. Obviously, you shouldn't do these things with just anyone, but should know and trust your partner. You should know about their medical issues, if they have anything they can transmit to you." When dealing with the hygienic safety of practices entailing transmission of bodily fluids, conversation was captioned in terms of self-protection rather than ethical responsibility towards others,

as tends to be the case in most discussions of SM practices. Here, the issue was not so much power as it was microbial contagion, suggesting that "safety" was being thought through an AIDS-informed discourse of sexually transmitted disease rather than through an SM-specific lens of eroticized power exchange.

Of course, hygienic and ethical concerns are not mutually exclusive. In a workshop on knife-play (SM activities involving cutting or piercing), Otto, the man running the session taught us that "it is best to cut your victim in his or her own home, because they are used to the germs that live there. If you cut them at a party, they will not be used to the germs, and the wounds will be more likely to get infected and you don't want your partner to get sick. Of course you must always sterilize your knives before playing…you can never ensure a completely sterile environment, so there is always some risk of infection." His considerations went beyond medical hygiene, and extended to social considerations:

> before playing with areas that are visible, such as the neck or the arms, you need to know how sensitive the skin of your victim is, how easily it marks. Now some people want to be marked, and if that is the point you don't have to worry about how much the skin scratches, but in most cases this is impractical. If your knife leaves a visible scratch on the neck for example, your partner will be upset; this happened with my girlfriend once and she had to pretend to have a cold for a week at work and wear scarves. And it was no fun to have to pretend to have a cold in the middle of the summer! This did not make her happy, and I always want her to be happy. So you must always know how your victim's skin reacts, and everyone is different.

Practitioners of SM characterize activities such as those outlined above as inherently risky, falling under the domain of "risk aware consensual kink," as opposed to a more generalized notion of the mantra "safe, sane, and consensual." Empirically,

the line between “safe” and “risky” might not always be as clear as it is in the abstract, because any activity can involve some amounts of risk, psychological as well as physical. In general, though, practitioners mark some activities as “risky,” in contrast to others designated “safe.” Also, the mantra “safe, sane and consensual” does not necessarily assume that practices are inherently safe, but that, when done correctly, risk is minimized and minimal. Some activities, however, are considered inherently risky, even when exercised by the most practiced of hands. Otto explained the proper technique for vaginal insertion of a knife, for example, but he noted that even the most minor of movements by either party could result in serious injury, so that the avoidance of accident cannot be guaranteed. He showed the group various activities that could be done with knives. He scratched his girlfriend’s arm with different blades and pierced her tongue with a needle; he held a knife to her throat, explaining correct positioning as well as how to ensure that the blades of the knife, which are like saws, do not cut. These demonstrations were punctuated with stories of what they’d learned, including mishaps such as the scarf incident. Throughout, they laughed and smiled, suggesting that for them these activities were as much about affection and intimacy as they were about domination and submission. And yet, in both dirty play (NS/KV) and knife-play, practitioners are swimming against a strong symbolic current, and in some circumstances placing themselves in potentially dangerous situations.

SMlers tend to categorize these practices as extreme. In the NS and KV workshops, many participants did not admit to engaging in dirty play: a number said they were attending only out of curiosity; some spoke in terms of “I’ve heard that” rather than, as in most other workshops, citing direct experience. Even amongst

themselves (*unter sich*) there was a conspicuous self-distancing from NS and KV. In the KV workshop, only one man admitted having experience, and throughout his story he shook, stammered and turned red. At one point he even got up and looked around the corner, to make sure no one was listening in. It was visibly painful for him to speak, and yet he felt compelled to do so. At the end of the knife-play workshop, Otto offered participants the opportunity to practice holding a knife to someone's throat or having a knife held to one's own throat. He looked around, but after a few moments of silence he ended the workshop, as there weren't any volunteers.

In the urine and excrement workshops as well as the session on knife play, the exchange of substances is subordinated to the resignification of symbols, or rather the possibility of symbolic resignification such practices might entail. These conversations were not limited, either, to the practices deemed by SMlers to be more extreme (edge play), but extended to conversations concerning a variety of practices. Recall Tristan's assertion that signification was not necessarily to be found in the substance itself, but in the cultural encoding of its transmission: "When a person shares saliva through kissing, this is romance, but the same saliva would be humiliating if a person spits on you," so that, much like Charlotte's discussion about urine, the signification of the act is prioritized over the signification of the substance: it is all about the way in which transmission occurs. Inscription, then, may be thought of as encompassed by circulation, the domain of exchange in and through which the inscribed achieves its experiential force.

This dynamic of inscription-in-circulation gets brought to light quite dramatically in practices of play which, as Gregory Bateson famously observed,

establish a paradoxical frame. To say "this is play" is to assert an alternative ontological status, demarcating that which is coded as play from that which otherwise would be. Bateson's example is that of dogs, playfully nipping rather than viciously biting. He writes: "Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional…the playful nip denotes the bite, but does not denote that which would be denoted by the bite" (182-3). Key, for Bateson, is the metacommunicative dimension that is shared among participants, since the dogs must be mutually aware that they are nipping and not biting; indeed, even onlookers have the sense of a distinction between the two. This communication might occur even if the words "this is play" aren't uttered. Again, within the context of the play frame, the designation of the activity as play must be understood but not articulated.

Formulated in semiotic terms, play postulates implicitly a degree zero meaning, while at the same time performatively contesting that postulate by enacting an alternative signification. It is on the basis of a shared understanding of that which *would be* denoted by the bite that we may differentiate the nip as playful act. One way of contrasting play and reality would reference the distinction between playful resignification and the zero degree meaning against which that resignification may be defined as such. In Bateson's terms, "Not only do the playing…not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist" (182). In this sense the paradox identified by Markus becomes illuminating, insofar as what is occurring is not "really" humiliation , not humiliation degree zero.

Yet, it is only on the basis of this postulation of a degree zero – this understanding of the bite – that the playful nip is intelligible as such. In this sense, play cannot be understood except in terms of the degree zero signification from which it departs. At the same time, however, play cannot be reduced to the degree zero signification. Of course, play can only be determined through its framing as such, rendering the ontological problem acute in instances where the frame is not effectively communicated, either among participants or to an observer.

Consider, for example, a man and a woman playing. They are enacting a rape scene. What would be happening, though, if the woman who is tied up feels she could no longer stop the action if she wanted to? To prevent the scenario of miscommunication, SMlers use what are called "safe words" – magical incantations that transport participants out of the frame of play. But the most skillful players seldom, if ever, have to use such words. Everything depends on the successful communication of the frame, and the balance is precarious, because the simulation must be "real" enough to be efficacious to the participants, while being distinguished from "reality" enough that the act is experienced as play and not as rape. To cite the questions of feminist philosopher Wendy Brown, asked in another, although not entirely unrelated context: "What happens when 'experience' becomes ontology, when 'perspective' becomes truth?" (131). These questions are particularly interesting ones to pose ethnographically, in the ethnography of play, because the conceptualization of play is so thoroughly imbued with intersubjectivity.

One evening, Gargoyle hosted a gay night. Nathaniel, the party's organizer, came up to the bar while Cordelia and I were chatting. He told us they were preparing

for a fisting session. He put on a latex glove, grabbed a pretzel and snapped it in his mouth. He looked at me: "*Würdest du freiwillig zur Verfügung stehen*" (would you make yourself available of your own free will)? I replied that I wasn't allowed to, because I had a partner. "Where is he," Nathaniel asked. "In New York." Nathaniel looked at me: "Well, I have a partner too, which is worse for me, because theoretically mine could walk in at any time." He turned to Cordelia and told her it was mean that I was there but unable to be played with; Cordelia told him it was equally mean that she was there wanting to be played with, but since the party was full of gay men nobody wanted to play with her. But then Nathaniel had an idea: "We could rape him," he said: "getting raped isn't the same as cheating." Cordelia shot me a glance, as if to inquire without my articulating it whether such a solution would be amenable. I shook my head no. "That won't work," she told him: "We can't have him going around saying he was raped in my club. And I certainly don't want Michael to be mad at me." I told him I would come again to gay night when Michael was in town. "Promises, promises," he said, flipping his hand to me as he turned around and headed downstairs where the fisting was to commence.

Note, though, how expertly Nathaniel deploys the play frame, moving between play and reality with a magician's sleight of hand: while rape isn't the same as cheating, he was soliciting permission without making that permission explicit, in which case it wouldn't be rape and it would be cheating. Yet, Nathaniel was trying to construct a scenario in which one could have it both ways, where the play would justify the appearance of reality even as the appearance of reality would justify the play. Nathaniel's impromptu solution, I should note, was not common among SMlers, who

by and large take very seriously the commitments one makes to one's partner, whether they be refraining from erotic activities with others or refraining from eating pizza without explicit permission.[37]

There is an interruption of an ideology of the liberal subject in BDSM play, for SMlers realize themselves only in the context of relations that sustain and produce them as such. The proprietorial logic on which the notion of subjective autonomy is founded precludes the possibility of understanding the transfer of parts of self other than in terms of alienation. That eroticized exchanges of power in BDSM are articulated in terms of domination and submission renders such practices more suspect still. Insofar as agency is measured in terms of resisting, bowing to the will of another is the antithesis of agency par excellence, and anyone who claims to experience such relations otherwise will be subject to accusations of false consciousness. There is an underlying anxiety: how can one be sure that the "nip" is not a bite after all? This question is raised by Richard Schechner (301), who asks whether BDSM practices – exemplified by the man who likes to have his penis nailed – might be a limit case to Bateson's concept of play. Schechner evokes but suspends the agency question, opting instead to focus on the reality of the pain as that which might make the nip and bite indistinguishable (301). But, as Nietzsche famously pronounced, it is not so much suffering as the senselessness of suffering – here we might say the perceived senselessness of suffering – that causes indignation. That is, it is only through tacit

[37] The latter example is taken from an actual contract published on the website Sklavenzentrale. This particular contract was discussed at a meeting of the Submissives' coffee klatch (the practice of "slave contracts" is discussed at length in chapter four).

presumptions about the agency question that the problem of nip/bite uncertainty in BDSM can be understood.

In this sense, we see the connections between the problems of the paradoxical ontology of play and the imagination of a degree zero signification from which interpretations marked as "reinscriptions" or "resignifications" are thought to depart. This degree zero is presumed, however implicitly or unconsciously, but inaccessible: like the Lacanian Real it is the empty center around which everything else nonetheless turns. It is the positing of this degree zero, this however impossible univocal signification imagined as reality, that is crucial in understanding play as an ontological problem. Produced under real conditions, play departs from that on which it is nonetheless dependent. The key, though, is that this "problematic" emerges under certain conditions, conditions that idealize signification degree zero, that posit that the imaginary center ought to be that on which the signification hinges. This centripetal impulse has significant implications for SMlers as they struggle to interpret their worlds, because they are constantly policing the boundaries so as to ensure that that which would be denoted by the bite is not in fact denoted by the nip. The stakes are high: as Daniel, in the discussion on submission versus humiliation, pointed out: "*eine Verletzung der Würde eines Menschens ist verfassungswidrig"* (an injury to human dignity is unconstitutional), so that it became all the more crucial to distinguish BDSM "play" from "real" violence. Even so, slippages often occur.

For example, in that same discussion Valerie commented that "in principle, we are living the way our grandparents did," suggesting that in a way BDSM practices constitute a return to ultratraditional hierarchical relationships. This point would of

course obscure the facts of choice and consent, as well as the fact that BDSM relationships are not always male dominant and female submissive, so that this return to patriarchy cannot be easily presumed. Tristan objected that "our grandparents" didn't eroticize these relations, although Valerie contended that it is impossible to know whether in fact they didn't.

One problem with the frame of play consists in the fact that the "reality" of the degree zero signification is posited, even as it is denied, and it is denied both at the level of denotation and at the level of mimesis, because one is not simply simulating the reality of that which would be denoted, even if one is playing with the symbols that would be simulated. Deleuze argues that "the simulacrum is not simply a false copy…it places in question the very notion of copy and model" (1990: 256). If the play of SMlers is a simulacrum, it is also embedded within the social processes of signification at work that makes such play intelligible and communicable. That is, play is a framing of process, but it is a framing of a process that, though made up, is, in the words of Michael Taussig "really made up" (1993: xvii). If the made up is also real, in the sense that it is really made up, one cannot stop, as SMlers do, in calling their practices play, and thus a break with native exegesis is epistemologically (and not just disciplinarily or conventionally) necessitated.

Thus far, we have seen that a tension exists between the modern characterization of play and the seriousness with which SMlers play, a seriousness that causes anxiety among SMlers about the very use of the term. Following Victor Turner, we have seen that the modern characterization of play results from an opposition between work and play, between economics and leisure. The obvious analytic move,

then, would be to situate these practices within the context of economics, and indeed much contemporary academic work on various forms of eroticism and sexuality do precisely this. Yet, while all of these writings trace such practices, at least those occurring in modern contexts, in terms of capitalism, I've found that another form of economic engagement, that of the gift, makes these practices intelligible in ways that an emphasis on commodities obscures.

Interlude

Representing Others:
"Methodological" Individualism and Ethnographic Encounter

"To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I."

- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Clever Glances:
On the Epistemological Conditions of the Ethnographer's Magic

One evening I was with Pierre, a German friend who is a devout Francophile. We were at a restaurant having dinner, something I took to be a break from fieldwork *proper*, as Pierre is not at all involved in BDSM. Over the course of our meal Pierre, a physician, confessed that it took him a long time to wrap his head around what it was I did for a living: "Well, at first I really had no idea why anyone would be paying you to come to Germany and just hang out with people. I mean, yes, in part because of the topic, but more generally, how is it scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) just to spend time with people? It made no sense to me. But then, whenever you're around, we can be talking about anything, the most ordinary conversations, and I look at you, and you get this *look* in your eye, this *clever glance*, and it's just clear to me that the wheels are turning. And when I see this look, this clever glance, I think to myself, yes, this is why you are

here, doing what you are doing. This is why they're paying you." The look in my eyes – what Pierre termed the clever glance – revealed to him a kind of mental processing whereby I was able to see something, something of "scientific" interest, in seemingly ordinary and everyday conversations.

Anxieties about assigning scientific status to individual experience have focused on a "deceptively innocent charm phrase" in Bronislaw Malinowski's methodological introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Stocking 1992: 59). This phrase, "the ethnographer's magic," condenses the problem: in a society that sees magic as a form of trickery, where science is thought of in terms of experiments and verifiable hypotheses, how do we bestow the word "scientific" on knowledge that is not experimental, whose sources are not re-consultable? How do we know that anthropologists are not but cunning magicians? In Malinowski's text, the reference to the ethnographer's magic occurs not as a declarative, but in interrogative form. He asks: "What is then this ethnographer's magic, by which he (sic) is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life?" (1922: 6). What follows are three methodological prescriptions. First, the anthropologist must go to the field with scientific aims: "Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of the scientific thinker," so that prior "theoretical studies" become the basis on which ethnography gets written: "the more problems he brings with him to the field, the more he is in the habit of molding his theories according to the facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work" (1922: 9). Scientific preoccupations are thus both a hindrance to anthropological ethnography and the very conditions of its possibility.

The second criterion is that of immersion: this is the injunction to live "among the natives" so that one forces oneself to "seek out the natives' society, this time as a relief from loneliness, just as you would any other companionship" (1922: 7). Stocking reads this passage as invoking solitude and loneliness as methodological prescriptions (1992: 52), but really the key is getting oneself to spend as much time as possible with those about whom one is writing. Malinowski did not take the Trobrianders to be his "natural companions" (1922: 7), so he needed to prevent himself from seeking alternative company, either by flying elsewhere for recreation or engaging Europeans in the area. Rather than prescribing isolation per se, Malinowski is showing that one must know oneself and use one's own motivations advantageously so as to maximize and make enjoyable one's immersion in the field. Reading loneliness as a virtue in itself, rather than Malinowski's own means to achieving immersion, serves to conjure an image of the anthropologist as singular and autonomous, rather than dialogically engaged.

Malinowski's third "commandment" concerns the working up of data: "find out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community, and formulate the results in the most convincing manner" (1922: 23). This injunction entails the use of direct statements and local terminologies, working in the original language rather than translation, but also predicates anthropological authority on an epistemological break with the explanations proffered by one's interlocutors. He writes: "I consider that only such ethnographic sources are of unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and

interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and anthropological insight" (1922: 3). Compelling interpretation thus requires both rendering and breaking from the "native's point of view." If one drops the focus on the word "native," this injunction is not disciplinarily specific, for when scholars engage each other the way to make a name for oneself is to both draw on and disagree with one's interlocutors: scholarly production is nothing if not Oedipal. It is not difficult to see why these dynamics have been rendered problematic in a post-colonized world. But in what sense are these methodological concerns rooted in anxieties about magic?

If one traces the "crisis" in representation to disciplinary events rather than geopolitical ones, the posthumous publication of Malinowski's diaries gets credited as a mythical point of origin. Clifford Geertz summarizes the issue thusly: "The myth of the chameleon fieldworker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism, was demolished by the man who had perhaps done most to create it" (1983: 56). Though Malinowski's methodological prescriptions were founded on practical injunctions and not on intangible personal characteristics, what the "scandal" makes clear is that the notion of "the ethnographer's magic" had come to be interpreted as defining the ethnographer not as a person who engages in particular disciplinary practices, but as a certain type of person. The use of a personal characteristic, such as extraordinary empathy, as a criterion for scholarly qualification is striking. The demand that the anthropologist be a "walking miracle" effectively asserts authoritative status by an act of consecration: ethnographers get attributed with possessing special interpretive powers by virtue of

their *being* rather than reading their analytic abilities as *products* of institutional processes of training in critical thought. Indeed, the assertion of endowment with special characteristics emerges when terms such as "bright," "smart," and "talented" are invoked. Recall the way in which Pierre asserted that my being paid to "hang out with people" was justified: not by any explicit argument on my part about a particular social problem I hoped to address, but by his discernment – based on a look in my eyes I got when I was listening to him – that somehow I possessed a special mental capacity. Pierre's observations did evoke for me something that others might not have seen (I would attribute this observation to my training in anthropological canons): essentially, he was calling me a magician.

Marcel Mauss, in his *General Theory of Magic*, notes that magicians are often given away by their eyes: "It is thought, for example, that the pupils of a magician's eyes have swallowed up the iris, or that his visual images are produced back to front…all over the world there are people who have a particularly cunning look, who appear odd or untrustworthy, who blink at one strangely" (2001: 33-4). Such people, according to Mauss, are magicians. Yet, he argues, magicians "possess magical powers not through their individual peculiarities but as a consequence of society's attitude toward them and their kind…It is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields" (2001: 35-50). The power of the magician is granted by social consensus, even as "magic" is marked by the doubts of epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, Mauss points out that "we do not define magic in terms of the structure of its rites, but by the circumstances in which these rites occur" (2001: 30). This passage follows a distinction between religious rites and magical ones: "First

there is the choice of place where the magical ceremony is to be performed. This is not generally inside a temple or at some domestic shrine. Magical rites are commonly performed in woods, far away from dwelling places, at night or in shadowy corners, in the secret recesses of a house or at any rate in some out-of-the-way place. Where religious rites are performed openly, in full public view, magical rites are carried out in secret…both the act and the actor are shrouded in mystery" (2001: 28-9). Ethnographic research often occurs outside the traditional places, such as archives and laboratories, with which formal humanistic and human science research is often associated. Traditionally, anthropology has been associated with "out-of-the-way" places (Tsing 1993), often drawing on the lives of marginalized people and their everyday lives. Anonymity of sources and the characteristic isolation of the field worker make for a milieu seemingly shrouded in mystery. History and psychology might be considered, relatively, as "religious" disciplines (in the Maussian sense), whereas anthropology could be characterized, comparatively, as "magical."

This religion/magic distinction has significant implications for possibilities of "officializing" anthropological knowledge, but similar conundrums concerning officialization emerge in the context of BDSM, where perceived transgressions of the normative play a constitutive role in the efficacy of power-exchanging practices. That SMlers produce asymmetrical relations within an egalitarian ideological framework is just one of many examples of tensions that lead attempts to officialize SM, to render it as fully socially legitimate, to be met with ambivalence even among those who are themselves practitioners.

In her article "Mainstreaming Kink" (2006a), Margot Weiss shows that sanitized mass-mediated depictions of SM negatively affect actual SMlers, in part by eradicating the possibility of deploying their erotic practices as effective challenges to normative discourses about sexuality. If legitimation and social acceptance in the "mainstream" are desired by some SMlers, others note that officialization is fraught with peril. This ambivalence might shed light also on anthropology's disciplinary positioning: if one solution to the "crisis" in ethnographic authority in contemporary anthropology is to make our research practices look more like everybody else's, another could instead to focus on the distinctive insights and contributions a "magical" discipline might offer. In any case, the perks and perils of officialization pose a significant dilemma, for SMlers as well as anthropologists.

If distinctions between religion and magic highlight one aspect of the "crisis" in ethnographic authority, another key site of tension can be found in the secular implications of theological debates distinguishing between ministers and priests in Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity. If "special characteristics" of the fieldworker render ethnographers suspected magicians, the fieldwork experience could be criticized as a rite of ordination. Like the anthropological ethnographer, the priest can serve as both mediator and interpretive guardian: the authority of both is shaped in part by limitations of access. In his critique of "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," Martin Luther criticizes the requirement that any authority to interpretive claims must be ceded by the laity: "ordination, if it has any validity at all, is only the rite through which someone is called to the ministry of the church, since the priesthood is simply the ministry of the word" (1962: 349). Luther refuses the clergy a consecrated *status*,

insisting instead that the minister serves a *function* – preaching – and that legitimate authorization to perform this function must come from the laity itself: "we, who have been baptized, are all uniformly priests in virtue of that very fact. The only addition received by the priests is the office of preaching, and even this with our consent" (1962: 345). The secular implications of this argument for academic authority would be a criticism of those who attempt to monopolize interpretive claims by virtue of territorial arguments based on instituted status. Indeed, much "anti-intellectual" discourse resonates with Luther's critique by arguing that it is not necessary for people to submit to the interpretive claims of institutionalized academic experts, just as Luther rebuked the necessity of ceding interpretive ground to the clergy on the basis of a consecrated status.

Luther's seemingly democratizing impulse can also be seen in his emphasis on preaching in the vernacular, making scriptural writings accessible to those not formally trained to read them. Recall that, according to Mauss, "even if the magician has to work in public he makes an attempt to dissemble: his gestures become furtive and his words indistinct" (2001: 29). In this light, it seems that Luther's critique of the Eucharistic rite insinuates the performance of a magical act: "I wish that, at the same time as he 'elevates' the sign or sacrament openly before our eyes, he would pronounce, in an audible and clear voice, the words of the testament; and that he would do it in the vernacular, whatever that may be, in order that faith may be more effectively awakened" (1962: 288). Considered in terms of its implications for authority, this argument is rather complex: on the one hand, the use of the vernacular – in contemporary academic contexts one might think of oppositions between writings

deemed “accessible” and those labeled “jargon-laden” or “dense” – makes it possible for a broader audience to attempt their own interpretations, which apparently displaces the mediating and interpretive authority of the institutional expert. Looked at more closely, though, Luther’s argument is that this accessibility is a means to awaken faith “more effectively,” so that popularization might actually strengthen authoritative forms. Thus, writing “accessibly” cannot be equated with writing in a non-authoritative fashion: perhaps the absence of markers, such as jargon, that make authoritative constructions obvious, serves only to hide authority covertly enacted.

Among SMlers, imperceptible and unconscious forms of domination are considered particularly insidious. Indeed, for SMlers conscious engagement constitutes a distinguishing feature separating their practices from what they term “violence”; here, awareness serves as a yardstick for ethical considerations. Awareness is thus a higher standard than consent: it is not enough to agree to participate in SM: participants must demonstrate adequate conceptual and technical mastery, including expressing consent as the product of “free” choice. If it is not desirable or possible to escape from engaging in power-laden relations, it is necessary to attempt to be reflexive about them.

If I was hanging out, I was also collecting data based on conversational interactions, interactions that were shaped by my own dialogic participation, which even included non-verbal cues – such as a gleaming of the eyes – indicating to my interlocutors an interest on my part that no doubt played a profound role in shaping those interactions as well as any insights emerging from them. To say that the knowledge produced through these encounters is not replicable is true, but also trite:

what is needed is not a standard of impossible objectivity, but a sharpened reflexivity about the kinds of engagements that sustain the encounters through which ethnographic and anthropological insights are produced. Pierre read something significant in the widening of my eyes: there was a pattern in which I was revealing heightened interest in aspects of conversation which, to him, seemed ordinary. In his observation, Pierre handed me an interpretive key; all that remained was to discern the pattern. What was provoking my bodily response?

Even in those instances – such as my dinner with Pierre – when I did not see myself as formally conducting research, my very presence was informed by the fact that I was living in Berlin to conduct fieldwork, on the basis of which I would write a dissertation in order to complete a doctorate in anthropology. Conforming to disciplinary norms, I presented my project topically and geographically: I was there, I said, to conduct a study of BDSM in Berlin. My interlocutors, though, did not hold this conjunction to be self-evident, and interrogated my conceptual framework: would I be relating the BDSM scene in Berlin to other cities in Germany, or would I be comparing it to scenes in other places, such as New York, where I lived when not in the field? Was I looking at BDSM in Germany to understand German culture more broadly, and, if so, one what basis might one generalize about a nation on the basis of a subcultural group? Was I interested in particular aspects of the scene, such as gender roles or rituals, or specific subgroups, such as pet-players, or specific practices, such as 24/7 SM? Their ideas about what a researcher ought to be demanded I clearly articulate highly specialized interests. My interlocutors were dissatisfied – often to the point of disbelief – at what they took to be my lack of methodology, but our mutual

misunderstandings turned out to be instructive, for me at least, because these conversations led to my receiving a lot of advice as to what my "book" should be about. Such advice was rich in its contradictions and the field of contestations it delimited.

Oftentimes, my interlocutors in the field referenced my "book," not taking much stock in making the distinction between book and dissertation that is scrupulously observed in my home institutional setting. In German, the word for dissertation is *Doktorarbeit*, as opposed to *Buch*, but in Germany many dissertations are published as books with little or no revisions, so that when I insisted that these two written works were distinct, and that a book would come – if it were to come at all – only much later, these explanations were met with much skepticism. In Germany, it is considered a major problem that students take far too long to finish their degrees – my roommate, for example, was in his early forties and had only just completed his degree after more than fifteen years of being a full-time college student. If pressed, I said I hoped to finish the *Doktorarbeit* in 2011, meaning that a book could not be published until much later. Even this most overly optimistic of estimates was, in their eyes, dragging. Several people offered to translate this as yet unwritten book. That way, they said, there wouldn't be a delay on the German edition.

The interest for such work, even among those who are not professional academics, was striking. My interlocutors made clear that they wanted my work to be disseminated, and reflected on the personal stakes in what I would write about them, for many of them described having turned to academic works on BDSM as an important factor in coming to understand their own identities. Many people offered

advice as to what I should write and how I should write it. For some of my interlocutors, it was essential that I not be an SMler myself. That way, I was told, I could be "objective" and "scientific." Others held the opposite view: to them, it was impossible for someone to "truly" comprehend SM without experiencing it, so that phenomenological and participatory approaches were the best and only ways through which an understanding of these practices could be reached. For these people, it was only in gaining near-native fluency though immersion that I could then act as a translator to those who were outside. For some people, the most important thing about my book would be that it was academic: "there is not enough literature on this subject, not enough scientific literature, so it has to be written in a scholarly tone." For others, academic jargon and parochial disciplinary concerns would only get in the way: "there is so much academic writing on SM, but the problem with most of it is that the authors are so concerned with making themselves sound scientific that they lose a sense of the scene entirely, it gets lost, and it's just about their own issues." Some wanted my work to be celebratory, an act of diplomatic advocacy; others wanted me to be critical; yet others said that the existing literature was too polarized. In their eyes the extreme positions of SM-is-wonderful-and-healthy-and-normal and, at the other end, SM-is-sick-and-perverse are well represented, what was needed would be a book that could explore adequately the positives *and* the negatives. In any case, they expected me, as a scholar, to pass some form of judgment. It's like being a modern day Goldilocks, really: one can never seem to get it just right.

There's another reason, though, why any book I might eventually write will not live up to the expectations of my interlocutors in the field – namely, that I answer also

to another set of interlocutors, those in the academy. That is, my task is not just to write any old account of the BDSM scene: it is to make a contribution to the anthropological literature. There have been ethnographers who weren't anthropologists, but I was setting out to write something that served both ethnographic and anthropological functions: to caption what I learned in the field in terms of and in relation to disciplinary debates. How, then, to keep alive the tensions between empirical materials and scholarly engagements, rather than write a work that makes it seem as if an ethnography of BDSM spoke directly to anthropologists?

After my dinner with Pierre I started paying attention: when did I get that "clever glance," what was it I was honing in on that seemed so unremarkable to everybody else? Eventually, I came to associate the widening of my eyes with moments in conversation when I perceived the possibility of theoretical intervention, where I heard in the words of my interlocutors in the field something that seemed to challenge the accepted wisdoms of another set of interlocutors, those "at home" in the academy. It was this potential for critical engagement that most inspired me, this idea that the sayings and doings of this particular group of people might make a difference in the way professional interpreters of social life think about "big" issues – community, subjectivity, agency, exchange, ritual, individualism.

The problem, then, is that of domination and authority in a world that espouses a belief in an egalitarian ideology. Western academics, like SMlers, tend to avow an adherence to what Louis Dumont has identified as the modern ideology of individualism (1977; 1986). Anthropology is an interesting discipline through which to think about individualism because, as a cross-cultural enterprise, so much of what

anthropologists write about is "holism" in other places, other ways of viewing and being-in-the-world that are more fundamentally social and intersubjective. Yet, the conceit is the distinction between us/them gets superimposed with here/there, in ways that allow us to let ourselves off the hook. If this study were to describe practices of flagellation, erotic or otherwise, in some remote tribe, it could be perceived as another matter entirely: that's just how "they" do things, and "we" can go about living our lives without feeling implicated in the critique. Here, though, the challenge to individualism comes not from without, but from within, so that one cannot affirm the "us/them" distinction as an ontologically grounded one.

"*Der Weg ist das Ziel*":

Of Wandering, Research, and (Re)presentation

We were at Munch, having a group conversation, when Wilma turned to me and said: "Is it okay if I tell them your story? I know it's *your* story, but it just tickles me, and I'd really love to tell it." It was odd, in a way, not only this table-turning, but even the asking of permission, given that I was constantly taking in their stories with the intention of retelling them. It would seem like the least that I could do. Of course, I wasn't exactly sure what "my story" was until she started telling it, and to my chagrin she recounted one of my more flagrant misadventures: "You see," she told her friends:

> he was going to Bad Saarow (a retreat town about an hour outside Berlin) for a choir rehearsal weekend (*Chorwochenende*). They were staying at a youth hostel (*Jugendherberge*), you know, as they do for these rehearsal retreats. So our Richard here, what does he do? He gets a train ticket, gets on the train, and all he knows is that he's headed to a

> youth hostel in Bad Saarow. But which one? He doesn't know! How does he get there from the train station? He doesn't know that either! So he gets off the train, with his luggage, and he doesn't know what to do, and because it's evening on Friday so the tourist information center is already closed, and at the convenience store they couldn't help him either because he didn't realize that there are *many* youth hostels in Bad Saarow, it being a resort town and all, and so all he knows is it's about three kilometers away and so he just starts walking…*kannst du so was vorstellen* (can you imagine!)…but then the best part is that he actually gets there, because he meets someone from his choir who was riding her bike from another train station and so she leads him there. *Oh, es tut mir Leid* (I'm so sorry), Richard, it's just such a great story!

It was an odd experience, hearing my life narrated by someone else. Of course stories, once told, stop being one's own, even if it's strange to have one's life, particularly one's calamities, aired to others, especially when one is trying to make a good impression. The context in which Wilma interjected this story is significant, in that her friends were asking me about my project, specifically about the methods of my research. They were incredulous, as was often the case among my interlocutors in Germany, especially those who were educated, but not in *Ethnologie*, that the parameters of my inquiry hadn't been worked out in advance. In this sense, Wilma's interjection was like an ethnographic vignette, in which she was showing her friends through an empirical example that despite my not knowing exactly where I was headed, I got to where I needed to go, thanks to the woman on the bicycle whom I encountered along the way; perhaps, the implication seemed to be, I'd "actually get there" with my study, too. Indeed, when it comes to narrating participant-observation research methodology, I couldn't have said it better myself.

Throughout fieldwork, it was amazing the little things that people picked up on. Wilma would often explain to others, for instance, why I generally would not drink

alcohol at events like Munch, even though doing so was customary: "that's because when he's working when he's with us, you see, when he goes home he will write up his notes, and he has to remember what he's been told, what we tell him."

Important to remember is the fact that Wilma's telling "my" story was elicited during a conversation about my research methods. Indeed, methodology was something of which my German interlocutors were especially concerned. Oftentimes they expressed disbelief in the possibility of conducting a "study" by hanging out with people: instead I needed a *Thema* (research topic) and specific areas of concern, for interviews, in which I could find out precisely what it was I wanted to know. Toward the end of my fieldwork, for example, Marco was incredulous that, in his mind, I still didn't have a proper focus for my research, even as it was about to end:

Marco:	I couldn't imagine writing a *Doktorarbeit* like that, just: "This is what I did when I was in Berlin. I went to this party and that party and talked to the people I met." Because if you'd gone to other parties and you talked to other people, you'd have found something totally different. No, to my mind, you need categories. You need an outline (eine *Gliederung*), and then and only then can you start writing your *Arbeit*.
Richard:	Well, I really haven't started writing yet. I'm still doing research.
Marco:	But you don't have a topic.
Richard:	SM in Berlin.
Marco:	But that is such a wide field. There's so much. You can't address everything. You have to know what you're looking for.
Richard:	Well, but what if I were writing a history paper? I'd go to the library. I'd read the books that had been written. They would be wider than what I'd be doing.
Marco:	So Berlin is your library and we'll be your footnotes.

The analogy made my "research" comprehensible to Marco, even as the analogy precludes precisely a sense of disciplinary differences, losing the possibility of articulating what it is that specifically anthropological ways of knowing offer that, say, libraries and footnotes do not. And yet, in the moment, I let it go, feeling content that he seemed satisfied, and not dwelling too much, in the moment, on the complexities that would for such contentment have to be sacrificed in the process.

When it came to methodological advice about my research, Marco was consistent. During one of my first conversations with him, two months into my fieldwork, he told me: "the important thing will be to focus on a specific aspect, because otherwise you'll be writing for the rest of your life, and the study shouldn't just be a description of things you experience but a theory of SM." Later in that same conversation, though, Marco told me his own theory of BDSM: "The important thing is personal development (*Entwicklung*). This is also a rite, you could say. In SM, *der Weg* ***ist*** *das Ziel* (the means *is* the goal, the journey *is* the destination). When speaking of BDSM, Marco is clear that it's not so much the destination as the journey that enables it, yet when speaking of research, Marco suggests the reverse: that one must have a clear goal in order to best utilize the means. But what if anthropological field research were more like BDSM as Marco characterizes it, a processes of *Entwicklung*, a development of the self, to be sure, but one that leaves neither self nor other untouched?

Though SMlers divide themselves into tops and bottoms, there is often talk about how apparent power dynamics aren't always what they seem. Much conversational energy gets devoted to a phenomenon known as "topping from the

bottom," whereby the bottom exercises control by virtue of stipulating the conditions under which domination is to occur. While tops and bottoms alike agree that relations must be consensual, those who identify as "dominant" fret about situations where they are made into "service tops," exerting so-called dominance only to fulfill the desires of the other, so that the articulated dynamic might be thought of as the carnivalesque reversal of what, in actuality, transpires (which, if accepted as how things are, would be satisfactory to no one). Talk about topping from the bottom is interminable, so that there is no clear solution to the problem, only a sense of problematization leading to a negotiation of bounds.

A common metaphor for anthropological fieldwork is that of apprenticeship, whereby the academic investigator avows a position subordinate to that of the "expertise" of the "natives." One evening at Munch, Daniella pointed out that there is something about the apprentice metaphor that seems disingenuous. For her, too, the topic of BDSM in Berlin was "far too wide," and our discussion led me to analogizing myself to an apprentice (*Lehrling*). "But," she said, "in the end you will have the last word." "In my own writing, yes," I replied, "but people will respond if they don't agree or find what I've said to be inaccurate." For a moment, this formulation seemed to suffice, but then the conversation continued. Daniella asked about my study's key term, ritual. Her friend Sebastian and I were having a discussion about ritual, in which he said he thought that ritual was important because "without ritualization, you are just hitting someone, so it is necessary to reflect on your actions, to have the agreement of the other person, and to understand what you are doing is not just hitting." This reflective element in ritualization, the term used by Sebastian here, does recall

Bateson's formulation of play: here the hit does not denote that which hitting would denote. Yet, in this context we were discussing ritualization rather than play on the basis of not making the activity amenable to a formulation where Spiel would be opposed to Ernst. Sebastian asked me if I agreed with his theory of the necessity of reflection, and when I said I did Daniella interjected: "*So würde ein Lehrling aber nicht reden*!" (But an apprentice would not speak that way!) Of course, I pointed out, but here I was being called upon to play the expert, and so I was simply complying to his request by answering the question as to what it was I thought. How to speak for oneself, here, in this world where there's so much topping from the bottom and bottoming from the top, where the rhetorical assumption of authority (or not) does not necessarily denote that which it otherwise would?

Singing in classical choral groups wasn't something I had planned. I hadn't participated in a choir in almost a decade, since high school. It was a decision I made rather spontaneously, on a train ride with Anna, on a trip to one of the national meetings of the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*. It was several months into my fieldwork, and I still didn't know Anna very well, so I savored the opportunity to spend five hours with her each way as we traveled to and from the small town in central Germany where the meeting was to be held.

Until this point, most of my work had consisted of participant-observation in discussion groups and at clubs; I had conducted interviews as well, but these lasted only one to two hours and tended to be focused on biographical questions. In general, these interviews were a less organic way of interacting. In truth, I did them mainly because so many of my interlocutors expected that this was the proper form in which

social-scientific "research" ought to be conducted. Sometimes, I would know someone for less than twenty minutes and they would volunteer for an interview – to tell me all the things they presumed I needed to know. Mostly, they gave me narratives of childhood and coming out, offering psychological self-explanations as to why they were into SM. Indeed, interlocutors in the field – SMlers and vanillas alike – presumed that the question "why" was the one I was or ought to be asking. In such a framework, deviations from culturally normal erotic practices are to be explained in terms of an etiology tracing its origin to early biographical events. In such discussions, the etiological question was posed implicitly as a product of the deviation. That is, people had a sense that SM was abnormal, and it was the abnormality that necessitated explanation. Instinctively – anthropologists, after all, are taught both to understand and to break from "native" exegesis – I thought I had better look for something else, only I wasn't sure what. Interviews were difficult, then, because they put me in the position of the one who asks rather than the one who listens. Needless to say, I was looking forward to chatting with Anna, in a context where the pressure wouldn't be on me to ask questions, to know in advance what information I was looking for. Instead I could listen, following the flow of conversation and learning something new along the way.

Things did not start out so well. I had forgotten to procure a German translation of the Bible and needed to do so at the last minute: the stores didn't open until ten o'clock, and our train was departing from *Hauptbahnhof* at ten-thirty. Suitcase in tow, I ran to a Buddhist bookstore near my apartment, made my purchase, hailed a taxi, and was completely out of breath by the time I reached the platform, only moments before the train was to depart. *Pünktlichkeit*, on-timeliness, is an important

virtue in Germany, and Anna remarked that I was living up to the reputation of Americans. She was worried, she told me, that I was going to miss the train. Then, it turned out that I had inadvertently purchased a first-class ticket[38], which would have led to our separation and thus nullified chances of conversation. Better get down to business, I thought, anxious about what I feared would be our impending separation, and proceeded to ask Anna about the national organization. She started telling me about the people I was about to meet, when the train conductor came by. I was relieved when he allowed me to stay with Anna, but when he passed, she clammed up. She got a panicked look on her face, like a deer caught in the headlights, and then reached into her backpack and pulled out some sheet music, burying her face in it. Wonderful, I thought, realizing that the conversation was over; I played our interactions over in my mind without a clue as to what it was I had done wrong. I couldn't figure it out. I pronounced myself a failure as an anthropologist: what on Earth was I getting myself into?

After a few moments of what, for me at least, was awkward silence, I turned to Anna and asked her what she was working on. She told me that classical singing was one of her hobbies, and that she was involved with a semi-professional group. I took an interest in that, telling her it had been so long since I had sung in a choir and that I missed performing. "Oh, we could actually use a few more singers for this project," she told me. With a brutal honesty I was only beginning to get used to, she added: "if

[38] I had purchased the cheapest seat available from a machine at the train station, not realizing it was a first-class ticket; if you make your purchase more than three days in advance, you can opt for a restricted first-class ticket, which can only be used on one particular train. This option is cheaper than an unrestricted second-class seat, which can be refunded or exchanged or used on any number of trains during a two-month window.

you're good, that is. Are you a tenor?" "A counter-tenor, actually," I replied, "so I would want to sing alto." "You're an *Altus*!" she exclaimed, "Oh you should really do this project with us…a talent such as that, that is a gift from God, and it really shouldn't be wasted." I told her I would think about it, because the rehearsal schedule was very intensive, with several back-to-back all day sessions; although I had had voice lessons in the past, that was almost a decade ago, and my only recent experience performing was my karaoke renditions of Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All," not exactly Bach, which is what we would be performing. In any event, turning the conversation to music helped, and we resumed chatting for the rest of the train ride.

It wasn't until our ride home that Anna told me what had happened, why she broke off our discussion so abruptly when the conductor had passed. "Because I'm traveling on a special ticket," she said, "I have to show my *Ausweiss* to the conductor, and on this card is my name, which I don't give out to people in the scene, and I was afraid that you had seen it." She pulled out her identification card and let me look at it. "But since we're going to be singing together, since you're going to get to know me in another context, you're going to have to know my other name too." The name on her identification card wasn't Anna at all; officially, she was called Regina[39]. Gravely, she instructed me: "Be sure to keep these names separate: when we are singing, never utter the name Anna, and when we are at *Themenabend* or doing something with the *Arbeitskreis,* you must not call me Regina." Significantly, Anna did not think of Regina as her "real" name; instead she referred to Regina as her "first name" and Anna

[39] Of course, Regina is a pseudonym too, and Anna/Regina found it amusing that, in fact, she now has *four* names.

as her "second name," which she had invented for herself. To her, both names are real in their own fashion. I marveled at how adept she was at keeping the two separate: when she was calling or emailing me about music, she always referred to herself as Regina; when the topic of conversation was SM, I only heard from Anna. She even used separate email accounts to keep these personalities distinct. I was not the only person to know both Anna and Regina, but she did express some anxiety about people who encountered her in both worlds. She feared that someone might utter the wrong name; she constantly reminded me of this danger, even as she assured me that I wasn't the one she was worried about. For her, this separation is a practical necessity: Regina works for the Church, and worries that she would be fired if her employer were to find out about her second self. She laments the necessity of leading what she calls a "double life," and wishes that a second name would be something she could do without.

There is, though, quite a bit of diversity among people who adopt second names, which is a very common phenomenon among SMlers in Berlin. Fido, for instance, is a pet-player: he likes to embody a dog. He has no problem letting people in the SM scene know his official name, Tobias, but feels that Tobias and Fido are distinct: "Tobias is the person who earns money, for example; he has a very different personality than Fido. When I'm Fido, things are quite different. Fido does things that Tobias never would. So it's not that I care that people know that my name is Tobias, but when I'm here, I want to be called Fido." Thus, the adoption of second names occurs in the SM scene for a variety of reasons, and the idea of a double life signifies variously. Significant, though, is that in a number of contexts, SMlers demarcate their

participation in the scene from everyday reality. Though the stakes of demarcation are variegated, there exists a marked separation between the mundane realm and activities that occur within the scene. In practice, of course, such sharp demarcations cannot be maintained as they can in principle: Anna's anxieties, for example, centered on fraught possibilities of intersection. When going out to a club, something she didn't do very often, Anna would wear a scarf over her collar. She often rehearsed aloud what she might do or say should she run into her employer or laypersons from her Church. Of particular concern were entrances and exits – if other people saw her in the club, it would be a problem, because she was contractually obligated to uphold a "standard of morality." Her contractual injunction was to lead an exemplary life; what such a life entailed was not specifically delineated, but she felt that attending SM clubs would be a problem. She told me of a minister elsewhere in Germany who had been disciplined for his public advocacy of the *Arbeitskreis*. At least inside the club those who saw her would be there too, although blackmail by insiders was also a possibility. Comings and goings, though, were particularly fraught: here she was most vulnerable, because she could be seen by outsiders, who were thus, in her mind, more apt to compromise her.

Anna and I began singing together. She concocted a plausible explanation as to how we knew each other, telling me to state that we met each other "through friends" because "when you say that, nobody asks any questions." As we rode the *S-Bahn* together on the way to our first rehearsal, I asked her: "what if people inquire as to what I do? Inevitably they want to know about my research. Will it be a problem if I tell them I am here studying SM?" She replied that "even if it doesn't have anything to

do with me, I'd rather the topic didn't come up, but you're right that people might ask. I trust you, though. You'll know what to say. The important thing is that it doesn't have anything to do with me." I struggled with her request: how could I present myself honestly, while at the same time preventing an inevitable mention of SM? I opted for vague language and introduced myself to the choral group as an exchange student (*Austauschstudent*), refraining from using the more accurate and exalted title of Ph.D. Candidate (*Doktorand*). Because I said *Austauschstudent*, people assumed I was an undergraduate, so they followed up by asking me "What is your major" rather than "What is your research topic" (*Thema*). Because in Germany students typically begin their University studies later and take longer to finish, it did not strike them as odd that someone in his mid-twenties would be in college. In fact, being a *Doktorand* at my age was for them an unbelievable feat, as I learned at the foreigner services office (*Ausländeramt*), where the woman reviewing my visa application could not get over the combination of my age and status: "You are only twenty-six and you're already a *Doktorand*! That is unbelievable, *aller Achtung*!" I tried to explain to her that in the United States it was quite normal to finish college at twenty-two, but it was no use. She pointed to the file she had on me, which documented my previous stays in the country; she noted the year I had spent in Berlin on a Fulbright grant, and told me that I shouldn't be so modest.

There were other times that I played with cultural expectations to avoid discussing the nature of my work. Both at home and in the field, I've always found it difficult to discuss my project with older people, out of my own sense of shame and embarrassment about discussing sex in public and with elders. I've never been able to

fully overcome my inhibitions, so that I've often struggled with how to navigate my own limits, my own sense of taboo. In Germany, this issue manifested most blatantly in interactions with a retired couple I have known since I was an undergraduate studying abroad. Whenever we got together, I discussed my research vaguely, dodging follow-up questions by rephrasing my previous statements rather than delving into specifics. "The German language is a difficult language," they would tell me, strengthening their stereotypes of Americans as incapable of learning foreign tongues: "it is a hard thing to discuss such scientific things in a language that isn't your own." Feigned linguistic incompetence only got me so far, though: eventually, my vague explanations would not suffice. "You have spent so much time in Germany," the husband said to me, "and when you stayed with us you spoke the language so well. What has happened? You should be able to talk about your work. This is what you do for a living. You should be able to say, specifically, two or three sentences about your research." So I told him, and the reaction was not any better than I had thought: "You came here to research *that*? Don't you have *those people* in your country? Why do you have to come all the way to Germany, where there are so many other things you could write about? It's not as if we are known for such things." "Actually," I said, "Berlin is quite *renowned* for its perversity." He changed the subject, and the conversation went on as if nothing had happened; we made a silent pact to leave certain things unsaid.

Such "pacts" manifested in other ways as well. Throughout much of my time in graduate school, many members of my family didn't have much of a sense of what it is, exactly, that I do. They knew I was in school, but didn't have a sense of what

graduate school entailed. When going to Germany for research trips, I was asked, for example: "Are you going to get a job there?" In this framework, the sense that I was in school seemed to be all there was to say, and so, for quite some time, questions about my work did not arise.

That changed, of all places, in a car ride with my grandmother, who looked at me and said: "Well, you keep going to Germany, and I know you're studying anthropology, but you must be doing something while you're there, not just studying, so what is it that you do when you go on those trips? Not just anthropology, but more specifically?" I didn't feel comfortable discussing the topic: not only is she my grandmother, but she's also, well, older, and extremely religious, devout to the point of attending Mass daily, so that the conversation felt in so many ways to be matter out of place, and this despite that there are "older" people in the BDSM scene and, as my work with the *Arbeitskreis* shows, religious ones as well. As much as I should have known better, I felt completely caught in the very frameworks that my research would otherwise disrupt. Further, my engagement was predicated on those frameworks, projecting onto her a sense of what she should be, even as the conversation turned out other than I would have anticipated. I told her I was studying sadomasochism. "That's when people whip each other but for, well, sexual pleasure" she said. Though it's more complicated that, I just nodded. "See, I know a thing or two! I've *never* done it. But I know a thing or two." she said. I changed the subject. But she came back to it and said: "So this book that you're going to write, that's what it will be about?" Again, I nodded. "Well, that's okay. I'll just have to hide my copy under the coffee table when my Catholic friends come to visit."

The memory of that conversation returned to me at a meeting of the *Arbeitskreis*, in which participants were asked to share experiences or concerns about discussing SM with other Christians. It turned out to be one of the more positive reactions, so that afterwards, one member of the group came up to me to thank me for sharing it. He told me that the story of my grandmother gave him hope. Through the telling of that story then, she and he, despite in so many ways not speaking the same language, came for a moment into contact, so that his world felt, even if momentarily, enriched. Her words traveled, translated, and spoke, even through the incredible contingencies through which they circulated.

Such conversations suggest that while the categories through which we approach and understand the world, ourselves, and others do not get so easily overridden, there are nevertheless quite a range of interstices into which understandings can be forged, and ultimately transformed. And it is this process of transformation, this fundamentally intersubjective negotiation predicated on encounters that are much more dialogic than dialectical, privileging the instantiation in its concreteness and complexity over the form that would be thought to account for it, whereby participant observation becomes a method not just for research, but also for living.

"I'm not your research assistant!":
The Politics of Becoming Oneself

Although everything tended to be articulated as if professional and personal realms were to be kept distinct, in practice it was often difficult to say where "research"

ended and "life" began, for the two became inextricably intertwined. As I developed friendships with my interlocutors I spent more time with them outside the SM scene, but outside the clubs and discussion groups I always felt the situation was precarious, that someone might be recognized by virtue of their association with me. Practically, it became virtually impossible to separate public and private selves: when it comes to participant observation, work and personal life are inextricably intertwined. Yet, this entangled context is precisely the basis upon which ethnographic and anthropological knowledge gets produced. I could not anticipate, much less control, the circumstances in which I found myself caught.

Work on this project led to particularly challenging ruptures of the otherwise salient division between personal and professional life; while this distinction is often undercut in ethnographic research, here it was complicated by the way in which it cross-cut another disrupted distinction. "Sex" is generally thought to belong to the sphere of the private and personal, so that when "sex" becomes one's work, the boundaries of the privatized self are not just empirically, but also conceptually put into play; at the same time, however, there is an equally insistent demand that those borders remain intact. Otherwise seemingly innocuous questions as to one's professional life take on new meaning. In the field, this became especially poignant when I was with interlocutors in non-BDSM settings, where there was always a danger that questions directed at *me* might give something about *them* away. How does one navigate the ethical quagmires into which the anthropologist is thrust?

For example, I went to a house-warming party to which I had been invited by an academic couple who were good friends with Jeremiah, who ran one of the

discussion groups I attended. As my choice of wording had worked so well among my co-singers, I had planned to use the word *Austauschstudent* rather than *Doktorand* while at the party. This plan was foiled, however, by an American couple who were in Berlin as guest professors. They knew I was too old to be an undergraduate and, though they weren't anthropologists, knew enough to realize that I could not be writing a dissertation on life in Berlin in general. As we were speaking in English, I could not turn on incoherent explanations in German either. In short, I was trapped. So I told them what I did, hoping that they would be among the people who would say "Oh how nice" and move on to a new topic. I had no such luck, though, and cringed inside every time they said "S&M" at what was no doubt a normal volume but felt as if it were being shouted at the top of their lungs. Please don't let anyone hear them, I found myself praying, worried as I was about what I feared was to be an impending disaster. Outing somebody, even inadvertently, is bad enough for anyone; but as an anthropologist I felt a particular obligation to protect my friends, and yet my very presence was a possible source of compromise. In this case, the seemingly innocuous question "what do you do," a question that would appear to be located squarely in the domain of public fact, had all sorts of private implications concerning perceptions of status, not only for me, but also for those with whom I associated. Indeed, some of my German friends who were not part of the SM scene felt the need to make clear that they did not know me from my research.

Oftentimes, as with the academics at the party, people made assumptions about my work that entailed projections about my own identity: one woman introduced me to her husband as "an anthropologist doing fascinating work on the gay S&M scene."

When I replied that, in fact, I was working predominantly with heterosexuals, she replied: "Oh, I had just assumed…because *you*…well, when you say S&M the first thing you think of is gay S&M." I think she realized that I hadn't mentioned my own sexual orientation either. Of course identity projections of this sort are intimately tied to my subject matter: other research topics might imply other identifications, and in some cases issues concerning the researcher's identity might be thought of as irrelevant altogether. I discussed the problem of projective identification with a medievalist historian who works on prisons: he told me that, for him, no one really asks about his personal relationship to the material, but if he were working, say, on contemporary prisons, colleagues would demand he make explicit his political leanings: they would make assumptions about personal investments in his professional work that are not thought to be important when dealing with topics that are construed to be inherently distant. While the particular entanglements of personal and professional lives with which I am forced to grapple are specific to my topic, trends as to when and how personal identifications are thought to be in play, or not, constitute an issue with broader implications for ethnographic and anthropological research. To return to the party, projections about identity fortunately were limited, at least explicitly, to me: the question of how I came to receive an invitation was left unasked, and no one else seemed to notice that we were discussing "S&M."

In this instance, ethical quagmires about research abounded, even though this activity would seemingly be outside the bounds of what, on paper, research would entail. I was at the party as a friend of the person I was accompanying. I was not planning on taking notes. And yet, the presence of these other guests made anything I

said about myself risky in what it might give away about the person I was accompanying. My methodological preparation was focused on presentation to those who would be participants in my study, not to those outside it, even as in practice that which was "outside" sometimes became crucial to what was "inside." Likewise, the underlying assumption in all this, the premise on which the ethics of self-presentation is founded, is that researchers can more or less control how we are perceived, that what we think we are saying about ourselves is in fact what others understand. Yet, this framework does not account for the fact that, just as we in our interpretations break from "native exegesis," so too do the "natives" break from our self-understanding, so that their interpretations are artifacts of encounter as well as powerful forces that disrupt and challenge our own sense of who we are and what we do, and with which we must dialogically contend. I learned this to be true not only among those encountered in the field, but even among those we know most intimately.

Though my partner, Michael, did not live with me in the field, he visited often. Inevitably, his visits entailed trips to SM clubs or other activities with my interlocutors, who were very eager to meet and spend time with him whenever he came. Oftentimes we met in clubs because it was practical for everyone: Michael flew to Berlin for long weekends, so everyone was headed to the clubs anyway. His presence also facilitated my work at play parties, as it was a much more comfortable experience to be there with a partner than to go by myself: I didn't feel like people were taking me to be a voyeur, and my interlocutors didn't have to feel responsible for me – they didn't have to leave me alone in order to go off and play, which was, after all, their purpose in going to the clubs in the first place. Participant-observation in clubs was always more productive

and enjoyable when Michael was present than when I was at a club by myself. We had to adhere to dress code, but stood out anyway as the only gay couple at primarily heterosexual venues. We were always made to feel welcome, and one club owner in particular often lamented to us how unfortunate it was that straight and gay scenes in Berlin were kept so separate.

On this particular evening, Michael was to meet Norman and Wilma. The party we were attending was called *Strafgericht*, or penal court. One man was dressed up in red robes, as a judge, and a man and a woman were playing the attorneys. Various patrons filed *Anklagen* (charges), and the cases were heard and punishments meted out one after the other. Michael, who is himself a lawyer, found this activity amusing even though he doesn't speak the language and couldn't understand what people were saying. The four of us settled at a table in the corner of one of the upstairs rooms. Michael explained to the couple: "I find this so fascinating, particularly because of what I'm wearing. When Ricky told me what to bring, I didn't believe they would let me into an SM club, where they have such strict dress codes, wearing this outfit. I'm in a suit, a suit I would wear to court, to real court. And here I am in Berlin wearing the same suit but to a pretend court." Michael was amazed that his outfit, which he thought of as everyday garb, could take on a new meaning as proper fetish attire. Norman explained that dressing up in a suit gets you in pretty much anywhere, not just for court parties, unless there is a particular theme – such as rubber – that would by definition exclude other options. Wilma commented that she liked both our outfits. Although I had purchased rubber pants specifically for my research, on that night we decided to try something new. As Michael is visibly older than me, we decided to play

with symbols of age and status: where he dressed up in a suit, I dressed down, wearing only black underwear and a white tee-shirt. A collar and leash were added for effect, as he was concerned the clothes alone would be insufficient. Had I been on my own, the outfit wouldn't have said much. Crucially, people commented on how they liked the combination, at how well our outfits worked together, as a couple.

Michael was busy admiring Wilma's outfit, which was homemade. Sharp, shiny metal spikes were sown onto the breastplates of her black garment. Norman had also made some silver floggers, at which Michael was marveling when he unwittingly tilted his beer, spilling some of it on the floor. He noticed and, playing the part quite well, he looked at me as if to say, without uttering a word, that I was to go and clean up the mess. I stood up and he unclipped my leash, and I went off to the bar get some paper towels. I returned to find Michael regaling the group with commentary on our relationship, interpreting aspects of our everyday lives – such as the making of dinners – as laden with dominance on his part and submission on mine, making it sound not only as if we were SMlers, but also implying our practices were of the 24/7 variety. In 24/7 SM, there is no demarcation between play and everyday life; power dynamics, even if they do not manifest all the time, are always implicitly present. I was extremely uncomfortable with the conversation; to make matters worse, I had been instructed not to speak, and Michael was not picking up on my attempted visual instructions for him to cease and desist. Norman and Wilma saw me turning red, and offered their compliments in front of me, without addressing me directly. "Yes," said Wilma, "he is doing a very good job. It was very impressive how he got up to clean the mess without your even having to say anything." "And to think," said Norman: "he

always says that he doesn't have experience with SM and that he is participating only as part of his work. He is actually quite advanced." Norman and Wilma decided it was time to go; we didn't stay much longer either.

Outside the club I confronted Michael. "What were you doing," I asked him: "this is very bad. We can't pretend we are more involved than we are. I can't over-identify with the people I'm studying. That would be unethical; you can't gain access that way. We need to emphasize that our participation is limited. We have to stick to the truth." Michael stared at me: "But it is true, what I said, I didn't make it up. It didn't come from nowhere. Of course, I emphasized certain things. I told the story in a certain way, but we're in an SM club, and so what better time is there to do that than here? And I thought the whole point of coming here was to participate." I tried to explain my understanding of research procedures, but he cried out: "I'm not your research assistant! I'm a person! You can't just bring me here and expect that I'm going to do exactly what you want. I have to be myself. I don't want to mess up your work, though. I just don't know what it is you *want* from me." Of course, Michael was not my research assistant, but he also wouldn't have been there at all if it hadn't been for my project. Yet, in a certain sense, that was true of Norman and Wilma as well, seeing as we had together decided which party we would attend: *Strafgericht* was of interest to me because I had set out to study ritual practices. If it hadn't been for us, Norman and Wilma might not have gone out that night at all, or they might have ended up somewhere else. Designating our night at the club as "research" is true, but also inadequate; I was there conducting fieldwork, but I was also there as a friend, as a partner, and these multiple entanglements preclude the possibility of designating my

involvement "purely" in terms of work. These multiple, cross-cutting ethical responsibilities make demands that can be difficult to satisfy all at once.

What of Michael's claim that my emphasis on our presence at the club as *work* was preventing him somehow from being his *self*? My efforts at self-presentation were true, although they conflicted considerably with his characterizations. I emphasized that we did not call ourselves SMlers, we never went to SM clubs or discussion groups in New York, and we were participating in these events was part of my project. Yet, here was my partner, interpreting our interactions in ways that made us seem very much at home in this particular field site. Of course, he was right in drawing attention that we were, in fact, in an SM club, so that it was in that sense "the time and place" to think about things in such a way: even self-proclaimed SMlers interact in their everyday lives differently than they do in a session, so activities that take place in a club must not be mistaken for more generalized, everyday realities. Of course, I was also there for work, so it was not "the time and place" to be exploring in ways that hindered rather than enhanced ethnographic engagement. Michael's question "what do you want" becomes inflected by these conflicting contexts of our being there: what did I want in my capacity as a researcher, and what did I want as a partner? How to satisfy both aspects of "self" in simultaneity?

Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, draws attention to the ways in which one manages the various ways in which one "is." He writes:

> To *be* a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto. The unthinking ease with

> which performers consistently carry off such standard-maintaining routines does not deny that a performance has occurred, merely that the participants have been aware of it. (1959: 75)

To "sustain the standards of conduct and appearance" is to perform or present oneself effectively to others, to achieve recognition from the other that one's identity is secure. In ordinary experience, routinization may be apt to minimize the insightful unsettling to which fieldwork encounters are conducive: being away from one's literal or metaphorical "home" disrupts the routinization that allows us to perform ourselves unaware. If Michael's visits tended to generate some of my best material, this may in part have been because each of his visits disrupted anew, providing a break in whatever pattern there was to which I had been becoming accustomed, preventing the entextualization of experience to which the repetitive assertion "I am" falls prey.

Ironically, by the end of my fieldwork Michael would joke that he had in fact become my assistant, as he was constantly printing out and clipping newspaper and magazine articles for me, sometimes at my request and sometimes of his own accord. In addition to such tangible participation, though, Michael was part of my work in more diffuse and indirect a fashion: my fieldwork meant living in a long-distance relationship, which we both viewed as a short-term sacrifice for long-term career and personal goals: for me as an individual and for us as a couple. He was always present in a way, even when he was physically in New York: I talked about him constantly, and aspects of our relationship – for example, the fact that we are monogamous – shaped possibilities of interaction in the field. It might not have gone over so well had I said I abstained from certain kinds of "participation" due to research ethics or

personal proclivities; “Michael,” however, constituted for most an acceptable answer, especially when my interlocutors began to articulate the reason for my abstaining from playing with them in term of what Michael “doesn’t allow” me to do. And of course, even if it is not the way I would put things, the way they frame it isn’t in any way untrue (queer and feminist critics of monogamy might be apt to point this out). For the most part, people were very respectful and encouraging of this commitment. Michael was thus very much part of the project, even when he was not physically present, and even if he was in no way *officially* involved.

Toward the end of fieldwork, Norman confessed that it was Michael’s visit to *Strafgericht* that first intrigued him to get to know me better: “So many people come to research us,” he said. “You said you were coming for a year, and me, I’ve been living in Germany for twenty years and so a year is not, to me, a very long time. But I have to say, you are a big exception. And also we were relieved when we realized your motivations weren’t *only* scientific. A lot of times, you get people (researchers) who ask really stupid questions and have really crazy things to say, because they just don’t get it at all.” Wilma agreed, “Yes, you’re definitely the right person to be doing this work.” They didn’t go so far as to suggest I had gone “native,” and to this day I don’t think anyone with whom I worked would characterize me as a full-fledged SMler. But it is also true that, when wearing a dog collar, it is difficult to convince others that one is “only” a scientist, “standards of conduct and appearance” being what they are. I also suspect, though, that their characterization of me as being not only an ethnographer had as much to do with Michael as my outfit. For it was the exposure of ourselves to them

that first made them comfortable enough to open up to me, on their deciding I was "different" than the many other (student) researchers who showed up at their events.[40]

What, then, are the consequences of writing such realities back in, drawing attention to the kinds of relations and encounters that otherwise tend to get written out, erased from the focused and finished product? Taking seriously the ways in which these various significant "others" with, to, and through whom we relate does expose us ethnographically, but these exposures lead to an engagement that pushes reflexivity beyond the simple assertion of one's own positionality. The break with native exegesis requires also a break with our own self-understandings. Not presuming a God's-eye-view of ourselves that we insistently deny others requires a methodological refutation of univocal and unidirectional signification as a normative ideal, in favor of a semiology grounded in the social *relations* through which significations are produced.

"*Ich stehe auf Jeans*":
Signifying Lives of Others

Problems of delineation and univocal signification manifest in many forms. It was gay night at The Gargoyle, a mostly heterosexual club where I had been conducting fieldwork by attending parties and participating in discussion-oriented events, such as a coffee klatch for submissives. Other than the owner, Cordelia, who is a woman, everyone in attendance was male, ranging in age from mid-twenties to late-fifties. It was a Wednesday evening and therefore not necessary to conform to dress

[40] See Behar (1996).

code. Since it was a gay event, I wanted to make an extra effort to position myself as an observer rather than a participant, in a way that I didn't feel was necessary at heterosexual parties. Working in the "straight" scene usually had the advantage of providing a context where self-identifications delineated a mutual lack of erotic interest, making clear that their interests and mine were grounded firmly in anthropological fieldwork and that our overt declarations of intention were not informed by the subtext of a desire, by either party, to find a potential play partner. Among other self-identified gay men, I reasoned, this could not be presumed to be the case: although I never identified myself as "being" an SMler, even the heterosexuals with whom I worked doubted that my interests could be "purely" intellectual. So I opted to wear blue jeans rather than my usual rubberized black pants, thinking that this would send the "right" message.

Uwe sat down on the bar stool next to me. He was naked, and began masturbating as he stared at me, or, more specifically, as he stared at my pants. At first I tried to ignore it, and continued a conversation with Cordelia, who was behind the bar. When Cordelia went to make another customer a drink, Uwe made his move and struck up a conversation. I explained that I was there as an anthropologist, and he took an interest, and started telling me about his life. Throughout our conversation, he kept returning his gaze to my jeans. I started to get the feeling he was telling me things, revealing personal details, as a way to keep my attention: I had disclosed my interest and made my intentions clear, or so I thought; his own desires were tangibly palpable, but as yet unarticulated. I couldn't bring myself to name it, but I also didn't know another way out. He stopped his story, and took a sip of his beer. Then he turned to

me, again looking down, saying "*ich stehe auf Jeans*" (jeans turn me on), as he reached down and put his hand on my leg. I moved away, and Cordelia, registering my discomfort, returned to our end of the bar. Nathaniel, the party's organizer, was walking by. Cordelia called to him, pointing to Uwe, who continued to stroke himself as he watched me, saying "if he sprays the bar, I'll make *you* lick it up." Nathaniel shot him a stern look. "Don't worry," said Uwe, "I won't cum." At this moment another man walked by, offering to put Uwe in the dog cage. Off they went, and I returned to my conversation with Cordelia, firmly believing that the personal details which had been revealed to me ought not be written up.

Though I had intended the jeans as a signifier of distance, Uwe interpreted them differently, reading them through the lens of fetish gear. It is true that some gay clubs in Berlin include jeans in their dress code (along with leather, rubber, and nudity), but at the Gargoyle jeans were never otherwise interpreted in this way. Indeed, jeans are explicitly mentioned as a kind of "street clothes," which, on evenings when dress code is enforced, will be disallowed. For me, jeans are mundane, and the extent to which they might be considered erotic would be more a matter of the physical body they suggest than the look and feel of the fabric itself. Yet, for Uwe, fetishizing my jeans enabled him to interpret me as a potential participant in his fantasy. But, in addition to my jeans, he used my own anthropological desires as a way to attempt to hold my interest through the revelation of personal fact, while suggesting, through intermittent glances and gestures, that my participation in his erotic desires might constitute reciprocation for the material which, without my asking, he offered up.

In his (1995) discussion about the ethics of sexual interactions with one's interlocutors in the field, anthropologist Ralph Bolton emphasizes that he "*never* engaged in sex for the purposes of collecting data" (151). This pronouncement derives from concerns about the intentionality of the ethnographer towards his informants, that he might use sex as a form of enticement to gain access to data, which would constitute a kind of manipulation of one's (implicitly vulnerable) subjects. Though I thought I was clearly resisting Uwe's advances, he interpreted these actions otherwise, eventually feeling the need to make his intentions explicit by touching my leg and announcing that jeans were his fetish. In so doing, he attempted to elicit an acknowledgement that my jeans should be interpreted this way, and that I ought to enable him to act on the basis of this interpretation. As the bar was not a designated play area – as the polite but firm intervention of Cordelia and Nathaniel suggests – his move also constituted an attempt to redefine my rather deliberate spatial positioning. Uwe was actively trying to use me, and my ethnographic interest in him, as a means of fulfilling his own sexual desires. That is, whereas the norms of disciplinary discourse (especially in the ethnography of sex) often frame the methodological ethics of engagement as emanating solely from the researcher, the ways in which one's interlocutors in the field attempt to use the anthropologist to their own ends – erotic, interpretive, and otherwise – call out for analysis and exploration.

I want to make two points here. First, univocal assumptions about the agency and positionality of one's "subjects" can be problematized by the complexities and messiness of ethnographic encounters. While, before entering the field, I spent plenty of time thinking about how to avoid any suggestion that I was manipulating my

interlocutors, sexually or otherwise, in order to obtain access or information, I was in no way prepared to think about how "research subjects" might use access and information to manipulate me to their own erotic ends. Partly, this unidirectional thinking stems from the specific ethical responsibilities of one acting in a professional capacity, but partly it is a product of the ways in which discourses of ethnographic interaction have been shaped by the colonial context in which modern participant-observation developed, and an ethos of an ethical injunction to present one's interlocutors in the best possible light. But not thinking about *their* manipulation, or thinking about it only as "misinformation" to be weeded out when writing up as a process of evaluating one's evidence, obscures much, including the ways in which these manipulations can be productive in the encounters themselves and, at times, even illuminating.

Indeed, these experiences of manipulation were often quite revealing. For example, at another gay event, a private party I attended early in my fieldwork, Bernd was being prepped for a torture session. Bernd was naked, except for a cock-ring, and the rest of us were clothed. Dirk was stroking Bernd's penis, while Dieter twisted his nipples. Jan was taking photographs of Bernd using a cell phone camera, while I was standing off to the side. I had been in Berlin for less than a month, and hadn't known in advance that I was being invited to a play session. In fact, I had only been made of what was to happen that night a few moments beforehand. Jan showed Bernd the photograph. "Doesn't that look pretty?" he asked, rhetorically, adding "Oh yes, it does, and Richard is going to need it…for his book." I'm not sure who turned redder, Bernd or I, and I almost interrupted the session to protest that I would never do such a

thing, but then it dawned on me that, in truth, Jan had no intention of giving me the photographs. Rather, he was using me, so my presence as an ethnographer would not be experienced as an outside distraction, but would contribute to the erotic efficacy of the session. My impulse to interrupt the proceedings – which most certainly would have killed the mood – stemmed from my training to present myself accurately and to immediately correct any misperceptions of which I became aware. Yet, here, the presentation of a misperception was deliberate, a play on signification that ought not go overlooked in the analysis of such an encounter. Indeed, Jan's strategic misrepresentation of my presence and intent is not something to be written out, but is rather integral to the interactive production of encounter-based data, and a testament to the entanglements through which ethnographers and their interlocutors negotiate their relationships. Rather than write these entanglements out, our methodological thinking must find a way to account for and theorize the consequences of our mutual appropriation and exposure, in a way that a discursive emphasis on unidirectional and univocal signification and responsibility on the part of the researcher will never quite achieve.

The second point, which follows from the first, is that these implicit normative ideals of univocal and unidirectional signification make for inadequate discussions of positionality. For instance, discussions of studying "up" and studying "down" basically assume the concrete codification of a singularly vertical relationship, one way or the other, between anthropologist and informant. Yet the realities of these positions can be cross-cut by multiple hierarchies that render one both "up" and "down" – depending on the hat one is wearing. Karl is an SMler, for instance, but he is also an

academic. At one event, he told me: "Oh, tomorrow I shall be seeing your doctor father (rather than refer to my "adviser" – who was also in Berlin for the year conducting research and giving lectures – Germans use the paternalistic idiom *Doktorvater*), he's giving a lecture at --- ." "Oh, you know his doctor-father?" his girlfriend asked, impressed. "Of course," he went on, and the couple chuckled about this, with an air of "Oh, isn't that cute," inscribing me in the role of student/child, which is quite different than how I positioned myself, especially in designing my research and going through human subjects review. That is, throughout the process, no one – myself included – thought to articulate the methodological issues in my study as those of a person studying "up." The discursive framework through which my study would be most readily intelligible, especially in the regulatory framework of human subjects' review, is one of sexual "minorities," a "stigmatized" population requiring care toward issues such as social jeopardy. Insofar as Karl gets positioned as a member of that population, one could read our interaction as a studying "down"; but he didn't see it that way, and indeed in his professional and socioeconomic positionality, I was certainly studying "up." In fact, the people with whom I worked spanned the socioeconomic spectrum, and it is only by effacing these other factors that one could imagine my study in terms of a unidirectional dynamic. Crucially, even if the ethnographic focus is on one kind of position, one ought not simply write out the others; rather, the complexities of these intersections and entanglements are crucial to our capacity for interpersonal and ethnographic engagement. Though my own focus on Karl would be his life as an SMler, one cannot forget that he is simultaneously already in the kind of position to which – as a doctoral candidate – I currently only aspire.

That is, however neat it would make things to crop out – as, in the old days anthropologists did to the missionaries – that which our lenses might otherwise obscure, cross-cutting positional valences make for a kind of signification that demands a nuanced contextualization to which simple classificatory gestures could never do justice.

"*Wir sind deine Ureinwohner*!": On the Conventions of the Subject

Pierre invited me to one of his dinner parties. After I arrived, the seven course meal commenced almost immediately, and this eclectic and sophisticated ensemble of eight – successful people in their forties and fifties, and me, a graduate student in my mid-twenties – conversed about politics, travel, the arts, and other such subjects befitting such an occasion. Despite my collared shirt, I didn't quite blend in. Perhaps it was my age. Perhaps it was my accent. In any case, when asked "What is it you do?," I replied: "*Ich bin Ethnologe*." Technically, German academics make a distinction between *Ethnologe* (an ethnologist) and *Kulturanthropologe*, an (American) cultural anthropologist. But I was being hosted at the Institute for Europeanist Ethnology (*Europäische Ethnologie*), and to non-academics especially this differentiation proved confusing, so I adopted the indigenous term. I was then asked what people I studied, but Pierre answered for me, dramatically putting down his wine glass as his eyes lit up: "He studies *us*, the Germans," he said. Turning to me, he continued: "I just find it

hilarious. *Wir sind deine Ureinwohner*! (*We* are your aborigines)!"[41] At which point, Pierre began beating his chest, letting out a primal scream. Everybody laughed, everybody except me, who could only find bemusement in the fact that, during this display, Pierre managed not to knock over his glass, or any of the fine porcelain on which our meal was being served.

Central to what, for me, was significant about this encounter, is the striking of a nerve. What is it about Pierre's performance that made me uncomfortable? When he says "*we* are your aborigines," Pierre posits an analogical representation of the relations between anthropologist and informant: his statement conjures up historical and stereotypical configurations our discipline might rather repress, even as its geographically "open" job advertisements often continue to exclude the United States and Europe. Such expressions make explicit certain unarticulated representational norms of the otherwise unmarked category: my affiliation, remember, was with *Europäische Ethnologie*, as opposed to *Ethnologie* (proper, unmarked, and unqualified); these designations highlight the risk, that my fieldwork might be rendered in scare-quotes, *analogous* to the implicit ideal and therefore – as Kath Weston notes – "one step removed from 'the real thing'" (1997). The joke, then, in Pierre saying "we are your aborigines" is precisely that those encompassed by this "we" are not understood to be "aborigines" at all. Pierre claimed to be amused by the idea of fieldwork in Germany because, to his mind, Germans don't live in a place that could be understood as "the field," and Germans could not be the (proper) object of an

[4141] Interestingly, Geoff Mains published the book *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leather Sexuality*. This work, ethnographic though not anthropological (Mains, a "native" ethnographer, was professionally a biochemist), adopted terms such as "tribe" to discuss the leather community.

ethnographic inquiry. Indeed, my inability to participate in the evening's laughter might have been due in part to the fact that Pierre's joke hit just a little too close to home. It is not accidental, of course, that within the Anthropology of Europe most ethnographic works by Anglo and American scholars tend to get framed as either Mediterraneanist or Post-Socialist, codifying tropes of cultural and political differentiation into legitimated areas of expertise.[42] That is, is there not something to Pierre's statement after all, insofar as what makes Euro-American populations ethnographically interesting is the possibility of painting them as the others (or "aborigines") *within*? In any case, this encounter with Pierre made it impossible for me to submerge the question of "the aborigine" as model anthropological informant, to not refract my project through the lens of a crisis in fieldwork epistemology, one that is not limited to the problematic of the self-other distinction but rather extends to the radical contingency on which ethnographic insights precariously rest.

This dinner party chez Pierre might not be thought of as within the bounds of fieldwork at all. The stated focus of my study was not, as Pierre suggested, "the Germans," but another group to which neither Pierre nor anyone else in attendance that evening professed to belong. It would be easy, then, to crop this evening out, or at least to write it as peripheral to the task at hand rather than as a point of departure. What the trouble boils down to is this: although Pierre is emphatically not part of my study, my encounter with Pierre cannot *not* be part of it. Everything hinges on how Pierre is to be thought: as an isolable individual subject, or as an inextricably

[42] See Passaro (1997) on pressures to frame a field project that was to take place in France as "Mediterranean" and Herzfeld (1984) on "The Mediterraneanist Dilemma."

interlinked part of a web of experiential interactions from which certain insights cannot be unraveled. The implications of the decision between these poles, or of the radical assertion of the choice as ultimately un-decidable, are epistemological, methodological, and ethical, constructing the (im)possibility of an ethnographic out of bounds, whatever way we turn. How, then, to propose and conduct a study, under institutional pressures to formulate unsustainable boundaries, boundaries that require the specification of a center around which research is to occur? If the previous vignette exemplifies anything, it is the problem of predicating the question of what counts on the imagination of an exemplary center against which all empirical realities could be measured, according to which their validity could be recognized or not. For who among us could help feeling implicated in Pierre's beating of his breast as a statement of what anthropology *is*?

Conversely, might the self-conscious appropriation of such terms expose the insidiousness of certain implicit disciplinary norms? Just as it is likely not accidental that the "crisis" in ethnographic representation coincided, historically, with a liberal becoming-uncomfortable with the colonial relations with which ethnographic engagements were at the very least entwined, so too does the currently popular traffic in illuminating suffering speak to a sense of guilt at the self-suspicion of one's own complicity in now globalized relations of domination, perversely presenting what is largely the product of those relations, the academic oeuvre, as a token of atonement for securing one's own place in the socioeconomic hierarchy that, paradoxically, is solidified through that very object. Yet, the description of suffering – and the trope of the blameless victim that is its ideal – leaves out of the anthropological imaginary those

who do not so neatly fit into these slots. Several anthropologists suggested, for example, that I "humanize" the people in my study: as if they must be thought of as lacking humanity to begin with, or as if I would be so patronizing as to imagine myself the hero who could confer for them such recognition. Repugnance is both assumed and disavowed, displaced onto others. These tendencies are characteristic of what feminist political theorist Wendy Brown (2006) has called "tolerance talk," symptomatic of contemporary liberal attempts to depoliticize the regulation of aversion. In effect, it is precisely *because* sadomasochists are others within that they are troubling – but in the end all the more valuable – as the subjects of an anthropological inquiry: it exposes the hypocrisy of a disciplinary ethics predicated on pointing out the injustices of other peoples' prejudices while leaving one's own intact.

Later on at Pierre's party, one woman asked me "are *we* in your study"? At first, I thought the question was ridiculous, because as I had explained my study was of SMlers and none of the people in attendance professed to belong to that group. But, the more I've thought about it, the more I've realized how astute the question was: how does one delineate the boundaries of what constitutes research? Pierre's comment haunted me, and so it made its way into my dissertation, despite that my intention at that party was to be taking a break from fieldwork proper, in the company of other kinds of companions; yet, as Joanne Passaro notes in her (1997) essay "You Can't Take the Subway to the Field" with respect to extreme wealth and poverty, Pierre and his friends might only seem removed from what is at stake in the lives of SMlers, so that imagining interactions with those "outside" the scene as somehow disconnected from fieldwork is the very kind of "imposition of coherence" Clifford critiques. The

question, then, is not so much one of where does the field begin and end, as it is one of what interests such delineations serve, and what possibilities might be opening up by imagining these communities otherwise?

This reading of SMlers' practices as subverting the ideology of individualism while at the same time affirming it depends upon a willingness to think cross-contextually, to see the lives of others and elsewheres as, methodologically, within the realm of illuminative potentiality. These possibilities are at odds with an epistemological framework predicated on historicization, a framework that makes the appearance of "urban aboriginals" (Mains 1984) seem paradoxical.

Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that "History is a discontinuous set composed of domains of history, each of which is defined by a characteristic frequency and by a differential coding of *before* and *after*" (1966: 259-60). If history's constitutive division is that of before and after, anthropology's could be characterized as that of self and other. Yet, what is the nature of this self/other divide, this differential that conditions the possibility of an ethnographic encounter? Historically, this self/other distinction has corresponded with a "the West and the rest" approach that has come under considerable critique in the post-colonial era. But something that Pierre's statement, first presented in the introduction, that "we (Germans) are your aborigines" makes clear, is that this differential positionality leaves much room for play, for departing from the degree zero signification, just as historical relations of power between man and women in patriarchal cultures shape, but do not determine, the significance of play in practices of BDSM. With these possibilities of resignification in mind, let us turn to a contemporary version of that critique.

Drawing on the work of Foucault to create a "neo-Boasian" anthropology, Matti Bunzl writes that "to offer a genuine alternative to what critics have come to think of as the Malinowskian field, we need to look for a conception of fieldwork that frames the ethnographic encounter beyond the Self/Other dichotomy" (436). Bunzl argues that difference might be historicized rather than reified through Boas-avec-Foucault: "Boas took the historical specificity of cultural and ethnic phenomena for granted. But rather than focus on their inherent Otherness (in an act of reification), he sought to understand them as products of particular historical developments" (437). Arguing that "Boas drew no leverage from the different subjectivities of 'anthropologist' and 'informant,'" he contends that "anthropologist and informant were united in a common epistemic position vis-à-vis the real Other of Boasian anthropology. That Other, ultimately, was the history that had generated the present condition, a history that eluded immediate description due to the absence of written records" (438). Here, Bunzl advocates an epistemology that is ultimately historicist – founded on a distinction between Before and After – so that, through processes of focalization and localization (historicizing, contextualizing, etc) one can construct a vision of how the "after" was generated by and through the "before"; this "history of the present," which frames questions and answers in terms of causality, that would make no room for practices and peoples whose lives were "out of place." This vision of anthropology as a form of history necessitates fieldwork "due to the absence of written records," making ours a Discipline-of-the-gaps, ultimately predicated on a hierarchical vision that makes archival work more credible than ethnography, glorifying the textual mode of knowing the world, which, as Edward Said has shown

(1994), has likewise been, historically, fraught. It's not that the "textual attitude" must necessarily produce such forms, but within the historicist logic, there is no means of escape.

Indeed, Bunzl applies the historicist approach to the Self/Other problem in anthropology. Reading the critiques of Kirin Narayan and Kath Weston, he argues that "even the most radical attempts to rethink the concept of 'native ethnography' have fallen short of deconstructing the foundational Self/Other divide that organizes classical fieldwork and produces the native anthropologist as a virtual member of the discipline. In the dominant tradition of post Malinowskian U.S. cultural anthropology, the epistemic division between ethnographic Self and native Other is simply doxic" (436). Here, Bunzl makes these historical documents by Narayan and Weston the archival evidence from which he generates a critique of epistemological possibility within the Malinowskian tradition. Since the most radical critiques have failed, it is implied, the way to move beyond the "doxa" is to move away from an epistemology of encounter. Yet, these texts were both very much concerned with reception, and with critiquing their reception as native and virtual ethnographers, and as such, might be better read as milestones in the theorization of a problematic than the final word on fieldwork as a way of knowing the world. The danger of historicist thinking by anthropologists lies precisely in the way in which this infinite contextualization, this focalization and localization, when historicized, becomes amenable to reading contingent particularities as inevitable bounds of conceptual possibility, turning the singular into the representative or the exemplary, fetishizing structure at the expense of

agency, so that the event can only be read through the focal/local point in which it has been delineated.

Instead, one might think of the Self/Other distinction that is the basis on which fieldwork happens as more a matter of organic solidarity, a division of labor, that is contingent on circumstance (rather than an essentialized positionality of an unmarked knower). Cordelia, the owner of Gargoyle, for example, herself has a degree in sociology. She told me she had initially intended to earn a doctorate, but then the department in which she earned her *Magisterarbeit* (including having written a thesis entailing methodological reflections on participant observation) dissolved, and the politics of the German academy being what they are, it became difficult for to secure a space as a *Doktorand* due to the dispersion and retirement of her advisors. Likewise, my own coming to anthropology was serendipitous in that I got into the discipline in the first place through cross-over literary/anthropological courses that, though taught at Columbia, are not characteristic of the discipline nationwide. There was nothing inevitable about my becoming an anthropologist, or her not becoming one. Had either of us chosen different undergraduate institutions, this work would not have been written, or at least it wouldn't have been the same study. And so our positions, insofar as those positions extend beyond particular divisions of labor in which some people set out to write about other people, are not ontologically fundamental. That is, one cannot make the assumption of a fundamental Self belonging to the ethnographer, or of a fundamental Otherness of those who participate in an ethnographic study, even though there have been, historically, an assumption that there was something fundamental about the split. Once we remember that "every I is an Other," we must acknowledge

that one person's other is another person's self, and so an ethnographic encounter is not so much between Self and Other as it is a *relation* that is fundamentally and irreducibly *inter*subjective. The second half of this dissertation shows how certain aspects of BDSM become comprehensible when one analyzes them through the lenses of gift and ritual, frameworks that conventionally are thought of in opposition to individualist social forms.

Chapter Four:

Authoring Selves:

"Masochism" as an "Economic" Problem

"It is as if repetition were never the repetition of the 'same' but always of the Different as such, and the object of the difference in itself were repetition."

- Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

"Gift Exchange among the Switchers":

On the Becoming-Artifactual of an Anthropological Idea

Cordelia asked if I could help one of her friends, a cartoonist, who wanted to produce an English-language version of her work, which she would sell at Berlin's upcoming German Fetish Fair. This event is an annual weekend-long exhibition at which BDSM paraphernalia (toys, clothes, etc.) is available for purchase from commercial vendors at booths. Cordelia had been so helpful to me throughout my time in Berlin; I was more than happy to reciprocate by assisting her friend. The artist was taking some of her cartoons and putting them into an "extra long" calendar, running from June 2009 to December 2010. The cartoons are BDSM-themed, involving anthropomorphized animals, hedgehogs primarily, who are part of an inter-species SM scene. The task was to translate the captions of these cartoons into English, although the key, the artist said, was to make sure they were funny, so that an emphasis on "literal" equivalency was not necessary.

The cartoon for December 2009 is Christmas-themed. It features a pair of hedgehogs, in a home decorated with a stocking and an angel hanging on the wall in the center of the image, and a Christmas tree to the right. In the German version, the title headlining the page reads "*Weihnachten bei Switchern*" (literally: Christmas with Switchers). On the left, the female hedgehog is smiling. She exclaims: "*Überraschung, ich shenk dir mich zu Weihnachten! Du kannst mit mir über die Feiertage alles machen, was du willst*!" (Literally: "Surprise, I give myself to you for Christmas! Over the holidays you can do with me everything that you want to!"). To the right, the male hedgehog looks despondent. He replies: "*Oh, da hatten wir wohl diesselbe Idee*…" (Literally: "Oh, we both had the same idea…").

The humor in this cartoon derives, implicitly, from the problem of the temporality of reciprocation. In his classic essay *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss writes: "in every possible form of society it is in the nature of a gift to impose an obligatory time limit. By their very definition, a meal shared in common, a distribution of kava, or a talisman that one takes away cannot be reciprocated immediately. Time is needed in order to perform any counter-service" (1990: 35-6). Just as a common meal cannot be reciprocated immediately, so too in power exchange must the roles of giver and receiver be distinct within a single temporal frame, at least insofar as the exchange is conceptualized as a unidirectional one, as the designations "top" and "bottom," "dominant" and "submissive" would suggest.

To be a switcher, then, is to occupy both positions in the dom/sub dichotomy, but not, the humor of the cartoon makes clear, at once. The disappointment apparent on the male hedgehog's face results from the realization that he cannot give his gift –

submission over the holiday – if she is to give hers, and vice versa. SMlers engage in many conversations about switching, debating for example whether it is "possible" to occupy both positions with respect to the same partner, even though those who engage in switching manage just fine. Such conversations register anxiety and ambivalence about how such exchanges "work." Some SMlers reported thinking of these positions as "natural inclinations," if not in general at least with respect to a particular person. How can a person submit to another person one day and dominate that same person the next? In other words, what happens when an asymmetrical relation of power is thought of along a temporal trajectory that would render it symmetric? Even if asymmetric relations among switchers are balanced, that does not make them vanilla (or power neutral), and yet the conceptual challenges abound.

In BDSM, the discourse of gift exchange is just beneath the surface. The calendar doesn't make generalizations about gifts, but speaks in the language of the concrete example of Christmas. This holiday is one in which gifts are exchanged simultaneously. The immediacy of such exchanges evokes more the logic of commodity transaction than gift relation, and indeed there is a lot of anxiety about the commercialization and commodification of the holiday. Immediacy, then, is crucial: required by the context "Christmas," which is the cartoon's setting/framing device, the pair of switchers must give their presents at once; extending beyond the holiday itself, the problem of exchange in the cartoon speaks to the everyday possible conflicts of positional-desiring that may emerge in a switching relation. But also, I suggest, this evocation of the immediate gift highlights the conceptual tension between gifts and commodities, by presenting them at the point at which they are rendered undecidable.

That is, underneath the humor of this double gift that cancels itself is the tension between gift and commodity frameworks as such, the evocation of a gift in a world of commodities, a gift that runs the risk of itself becoming commodified, in ways both discursive and experiential.

But "exchange" framed as an anthropological problem is not apparent in the rhetoric of the German cartoon; rather, it emerges through exegesis, as proffered above. In the English version, however, the anthropological angle is more readily apparent. The *translated* caption reads: "Gift Exchange among the Switchers," conjuring the discursive distancing of a social science article. The couple's conversation, too, underscores the anthropological stakes of the problem. She says: "Surprise! For Christmas I am giving to you…myself! Entirely. For the whole holiday, you can do with me anything and everything you'd like!" The key difference, though, is to be found in his reply: "Oh, well that was going to be <u>your</u> present…" Whereas the original punch-line, as articulated, was that both partners "had the same idea," the (anthropological) English translation – or, perhaps more accurately, anthropological (English) translation – highlights the way in which the exchange of *presents* has been rendered an impossibility. How, then, to conceptualize analytically this act? In the context of explicitly anthropological writing, the disciplinary bases of such translations would be more readily detectable and expected. Likewise, as shown above, the relevance of "gift" can be excavated even from the German version, so it is not a matter of imposing something that wasn't there already, but rather one of making explicit that which was under the surface.

When writing the translations, I constructed captions that in my mind captured the humor, and, as it turns out, my sense of humor is anthropological (another caption includes the phrase "division of labor"). Yet, at the time, I didn't think of my translating these cartoons as an anthropological intervention, even as in my academic writings I would understand such "translations" in precisely this way. It was only later, after I had acquired a copy of the calendar (along with a number of other "artifacts" from the German Fetish Fair) that I realized what had, however unwittingly, occurred. The identity of the translator was entirely unmarked. There'd be no way for anyone to know that it was an anthropologist who, as it were, wrote what would become his thesis "into" the object which, as a material form put into circulation, could then be read as apparently independent evidence confirming that such an idea was in fact, not only accurate, but obvious all along. Unintentionally, my translation into English was also an unconscious excavation of an anthropological idea, an idea that my presence in the field put quite literally into circulation before I myself had even conceptualized it in those terms. Discursive encounters may result in the becoming-artifactual of ideas in ways that may exceed our ability to account for them.

This chapter builds on discussions in chapter three, in which we saw the "native" exegesis of SMlers, who describe their practices as play. There, we saw how this framing raises the ontological problem of what it means to define oneself as a player, the problem of the denotative referent, and the problem of the "seriousness" of play, since, being formulated as a form of identity, for SMlers this play is quite serious indeed, even as it occurs within the context of an ethos that some would dismiss as "mere" play. Here, then, we'll see that the broad anxiety about the category of play,

even as it is deployed, correlates with a similar tension, underlying the this time *unarticulated* discourse of exchange, an economics from which the rhetoric of play is, in practice, often dissociated.

The distinction between work and play separates these activities from the sphere of economics, a distinction historicized by Victor Turner in his essay "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual." He writes: "Perhaps it would be better to regard the distinction between 'work' and 'play,' or better between 'work' and 'leisure'…as itself an artifact of the Industrial Revolution, and to see such symbolic-expressive genres as ritual and myth as being at once work and play or at least as cultural activities in which work and play are intricately inter-calibrated" (1982: 32). This articulation of ritual as a practice in which work and play are unified evokes as socio-historical the unsuitability of such forms in a post-industrialized setting in which work and play are rendered distinct. Turner's thought suggests a connection between exchange and the conditions of possibility in which ritual is efficacious. The separation of work and play thus resonates with a commodity-based logic that is, according to Turner, unfavorable for the production of liminal forms, those in which ludic elements are taken seriously. The discomfort that SMlers express concern the characterization of their activities as "play" reflects these particular connotations of the term, revealing the assumption of a commodity logic as the underlying basis on which they conceptualize their practices, a basis that is unsurprising according to a historicist vision, since these practices are occurring in post-industrial, neo-liberal settings.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that when approaching exchange, academic literatures on modern and post-modern "sexuality" tends to deploy capitalist

frameworks. John D'Emilio's famous (1993) article "Capitalism and Gay Identity" argues that while homosexual practices exist throughout history, capitalism provided the necessary socioeconomic conditions for the formation and organization of modernist "gay" identity. Likewise, German sexologist Volkmar Sigusch develops the concepts of "lean sexuality," a reflection of post-Fordist notions of "lean production" (2001), and "*Neosexualitäten*" or Neo-sexualities, emphasizing neo-liberal dynamics of dispersion, proliferation, and choice (2005).

Addressing BDSM specifically, anthropologist Margot Weiss analyzes the San Francisco scene according to logics of late capitalism. In her article, "Working at Play," she notes that "In SM, work and play are not oppositional categories," an observation with which this study is in accord; "rather," she continues, "the scene reflects the ways that line between work and play has been eroded in the shift to late modern capitalism" (2006b: 241). Weiss' central argument in that text is that BDSM cannot be adequately understood using either modernist identity or lifestyle models of sexuality, but rather constitutes "a form of 'working at play,' a way of creatively combining both identity and lifestyle forms of sexuality" (230), so that "BDSM cannot be understood as a modernist, binary sexual identity, *o*r a post-modernist, consumerist model" (241). She argues that BDSM "reflects the experiential dimensions of informational capitalism: the increased commodification of subjectivity, the technicalization of bodies and relationships and the erosion and reestablishment of boundaries between labour and leisure time" (241). Her analysis is, characteristically, brilliant throughout, complicating the terms of debate while working within them,

showing how combinations of aspects of each currently salient model might be brought together to more adequately account for the practices she has observed.

Thus, my departure from the historicist framework in which these authors are embedded is not a critique of their work as such; it is not that they are wrong, but rather a question as to what happens if we look at the erosion of the work-play distinction and the consequences thereof *not only* through the lens of unprecedented emergence, *but also* through the apparently archaic conversations about exchange and ritual in which the work-play distinction had not yet come to be. In this half of the dissertation, I pursue this angle by decentering emphasis on discourses of commodities and consumption, taking instead discourses of gift relations and ritual as bases on which BDSM power exchange might productively be thought. In this chapter, I argue that SMlers' practices can be thought of as a form of gift exchange, but this gift exchange occurs in a discursive context where everything is discussed according to the logic of commodities.

"What is a curtsey *worth*?":
Shakespeare, Strathern, and the Substance of Exchange

In a chapter on the exchange practices of SMlers in 21st century Berlin, the work of William Shakespeare is not the most obvious or conventional of places to dwell; and yet, there are a few key passages from *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* which, when placed alongside Marilyn Strathern's insights from *The Gender of the Gift*, get to the heart of the problem to be addressed in the pages that follow. In the play, Caius

Martius (having become known as Coriolanus) was to become consul, but for the plebian opposition whipped up by the conspiring tribunes Brutus and Sicinius. Falling into their trap, he rebuffs these "Triton[s] of the minnows," stating that if one is to follow plebian rule, one might as well "break ope the locks o'the' senate and bring in/ The crows to peck the eagles" (III.1.141-2). The tribunes label him a traitor to the people. Valumnia, his mother, attempts to persuade him to put on a display of humility for the masses, to flatter them, so that he may nonetheless achieve the post for which he was acclaimed:

> VALUMNIA
> I prithee now, sweet son, as thou hast said
> My praises made thee first a soldier, so
> To have my praise for this, perform a part
> Thou hast not done before.
>
> CORIOLANUS Well, I must do't.
> Away, my disposition; and possess me
> Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turned,
> Which choired with my drum, into a pipe
> Small as an eunuch or the virgin voice
> That babies lull asleep! The smiles of knaves
> Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up
> The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue
> Make motion through my lips, and my armed knees,
> Who bowed but in my stirrup, bend like his
> That hath received an alms! I will not do't,
> Lest I surcrease to honour mine own truth,
> And by my body's action teach my mind
> A most inherent baseness.
>
> VALUMNIA At thy choice, then.
> To beg of thee it is my more dishonor
> Than thou of them. Come all to ruin. Let
> Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear
> Thy dangerous stoutness, for I mock at death
> With as big a heart as thou. Do as thou list.
> Thy valiantness was mine, thou sucked'st from me,
> But owe thy pride thyself. (III.2.107-130)

Much in this exchange is striking: underlying Coriolanus' resistance to Valumnia's request is a belief that the "part" he is being called upon to play is at odds with the truth of his self. At the start of the scene, he asks his mother: "Would thou have me/ false to my nature? Rather say I play/ The man I am" (III.2.13-15). There is a tension here between playing and being: one can play at being what one already is, but one can also play at being what one is not. Significantly, Coriolanus does not ground his notion of interior disposition in a vision of an *a priori* nature; rather, it is on the basis of *acts*, here martial activities, that he constructs a self-image. Hence, Coriolanus suggests there is a danger to playing in ways that go against one's nature: he fears he might "by my body's action teach my mind a most inherent baseness." In effect, he argues that the mental and bodily dispositions comprising the self are co-constitutive, a *habitus* produced through one's engagement with the world. For her part, Valumnia emphasizes the role of external influences in the shaping of the self: if Coriolanus identifies as a soldier, she reminds him that even he acknowledged it was *her* praises that first made him thus. However, she does not take credit for everything he is, as if he were entirely a product of her making. When she states: "Thy valiantness was mine, though sucked'st it from me, but owe thy pride thyself," she asserts herself as the origin of one aspect of his being, while disavowing another. She takes credit for only *parts* of his person. What both of their statements preclude is a conceptualization of personhood in terms of autonomous individuality: Coriolanus cannot be said to be the sole author or proprietor of the acts and attitudes that contribute to his selfhood.

Though Coriolanus agrees to his mother's request that he display humility, in the heat of the moment he finds himself unable to comply and winds up banished. He joins the Volscian army and, driven by a desire for vengeance, plans to lead an attack on the country that slighted him. At the last minute, his mother intervenes, bringing along his wife, Virgilia, and son Young Martius. Valumnia confronts her son with the double bind in which she and the others have been placed:

> Alas, how can we for our country pray,
> Whereto we are bound, together with thy victory,
> Whereto we are bound? Alack, or must we lose
> The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,
> Our comfort in the country. (V.3.108-112)

In her monologue, Valumnia draws attention to how her son's campaign against Rome has forced his relatives into a dilemma of conflicting allegiances: they will be forced to make the impossible choice between kinsman and country. The choice is impossible precisely because Valumnia does not imagine persons as autonomous individuals, but as entities that exist as the product of relationships. And it is these very binds that she evokes in her intervention. Likewise, Coriolanus acknowledges that such relations must be overcome if he is not to falter in his resolve to sack the city:

> My wife comes foremost, then the honoured mould
> In which the trunk was framed, and in her hand
> The grandchild to her blood. But out, affection!
> All bond and privilege of nature break;
> Let it be virtuous to be obstinate.
> *Virgilia curtsies.*
> What is that curtsey worth? Or those dove's eyes,
> Which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not
> Of stronger earth than others.
> *Valumnia bows.*
> My mother bows,
> As if Olympus to a molehill should

> In supplication nod, and my young boy
> Hath an aspect of intercession which
> Great nature cries 'Deny not' – Let the Volsces
> Plough Rome and harrow Italy! I'll never
> Be such a gosling as to obey instinct, but stand
> As if a man were author of himself
> And knew no other kin. (V.3.22-37)

Significantly, Coriolanus does not describe his visitors as named individuals, but depicts them as relations: he expresses who they are in terms of the bonds through which he is tied to them. In describing their acts (one might call them *rituals*) of greeting, he turns to the language of religion: words like "supplication" and "intercession" suggest a spiritual efficacy, conjuring the voice of "great nature," which cries "Deny not." It is against such bonds and cries of nature that Coriolanus reacts: he tries to minimize the efficacy of the ritual gesture. By asking "what is that curtsey worth," he tries to deny his entanglement in relationships, so as to "stand as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin." It is at this moment that Coriolanus evokes the prospect of what it would mean to be an autonomous individual: yet, the grammar of the phrase is crucial. It is in the subjunctive mood that Coriolanus makes his proclamation. To say "as if a man were author of himself" is to say that he is not, in fact, his own author. Crucially, his statement expresses recognition of the fact that the conception of an autonomous individual is predicated on a denial of the relations through which the self is constructed.

At stake in the tragedy of Coriolanus, then, is a tension in the thinking of the subject, a tension between recognizing the consequences of a fundamentally relational self and attempting to realize a desire for autonomous agency. This opposition

between relational selfhood and autonomous agency resonates with the work of Marilyn Strathern, who critiques theorizations that assume an antinomy between society and the individual on the grounds that, ethnographically, this dichotomy does not universally exist. Drawing on an immense array of anthropological and feminist research, she argues that the Western individual can be contrasted with the Melanesian "dividual," also known as the "partible person." Strathern claims that while in the West notions of agency are predicated on an idea of subjective autonomy, in Melanesia people are thought of as composite, acting on the basis of the relations of which they are composed: "To be individuated," she writes, "plural relations are first reconceptualized as dual and then the dually conceived entity, able to detach a part of itself, is divided. The eliciting cause is the presence of a different other" (1988: 15). Thus, "identity is an outcome of interaction" (127-8). Thinking identities as products of interactive engagement with others precludes the possibility of formulating notions of an anterior or interior self: the self cannot be thought of as *anterior*, because it does come into being prior to the relations that constitute it; neither can it be thought of as *interior*, because it does not exist independently of the relations that sustain it. Crucially, for Strathern the acting subject constitutes a particular pivot of these multiple relationships, so that while singularly positioned, these agents are fundamentally and irreducibly interdependent.

Strathern frames the individual/dividual distinction not only in terms of a contrast between "Western" and "Melanesian" existential frameworks, but also as resonating with an opposition between commodity- and gift-based economic logics. That is, notions of autonomous subjects and commoditized objects are inextricably

interlinked. She writes: “An idiosyncratic feature of popular Western concepts of property is that singular items are regarded as attached to singular owners. The fact of possession constructs the possessor as a unitary social entity, true whether the owner is acting as an individual or a corporation. Property is construed as a relation between persons and things, and the person is an entity to which things are external. Whether property is ‘private’ or ‘communal,’ the possessor is the singular author or proprietor” (104). Thus, she continues: “As long as things are ‘owned’ or the ‘use value’ of labor is enjoyed, the one-to-one relationship between proprietor and product is assumed. The visibility of such a one-to-one relationship gives the person’s subjective autonomy with respect to others its recognized cultural form” (158). This one-to-one relationship not only creates and sustains the notion of the autonomous subject, but also legitimizes the rendering of authorship and proprietorship indistinct. The slippage between “author” and “proprietor” is effaced as the two become conceptually indistinguishable. One consequence of this slippage is that “the common proprietorial metaphor of an identity between the person as agent and the agent’s acts/products implies that they are his or hers before they are appropriated by another” (158). Here, the notion of authorship is crucial, because it “combines two elements in this constellation of ideas – the property-derived conceptualization of legitimate ownership and the critique based on a metaphysical definition of the conscious individual agent who is the singular source of his/her own acts. Persons ‘are’ what they ‘have’ or ‘do.’ Any interference in the one-to-one relationship is regarded as the intrusion of an ‘other’” (158). Crucially, Strathern points out that according to this logic, intervention of others cannot be expressed other than in an idiom that connotes illegitimacy: the language of

appropriation suggests discourses of encroachment and alienation, invasion and dispossession. What the proprietorial metaphor precludes is a recognition of authorship as fundamentally multiple; in such a framework appropriation without alienation would be unimaginable.

While Strathern is quite right that the notion of subjective autonomy has achieved hegemony as the privileged mode of imagining the self within the West, the example of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* shows that this was not always the case. Likewise, while Strathern is also correct in her insistence on the cultural particularity of her ethnographic examples (indeed, the specifics of how the partible person manifests in Melanesian contexts are no doubt peculiarly Melanesian), it is nonetheless striking that, within the West, at a time when the modern subject had not yet achieved an authoritative status, the metaphors used to represent conceptual tensions between relational and autonomous selves are quite similar. In claiming that Coriolanus sucked his valiantness from her, Valumnia conjures the image of breast-milk, thus deploying the transference of bodily fluids as a metaphor for the acquisition of the substance of self. This metaphor resonates with the imaginings of insemination rituals in the Melanesian literature on initiation; in that context seminal transactions, conceptualized as nourishment by male milk, facilitate the acquisition of character.[43]

Also significant is Coriolanus' use of the notion of authorship. It is only through the assertion of an imaginary self-authorship that Coriolanus can conceive of a possible break from the relations through which his potential agency is shaped. For Coriolanus, it is precisely because a man is not the author of himself that he feels

[43] Cf. e.g. Godelier (1986) and Herdt (1994 [1981])

compelled to act on the basis of the relations through which he is constituted. For him, no clear boundary between external and internal, between self and other, can be maintained. A belief in the subject as proprietorial self-author requires that the subjunctive mood in which Coriolanus made that famous statement – "as if a man were author of himself" – fades from memory, so that through this grammatical slippage, the metaphor comes to be experienced in the indicative, lived as an actual reality.

But what does any of this have to do with BDSM, a subcultural community organized around practices of consensual sadomasochism? As it turns out, a lot. Practitioners of BDSM, or SMlers, engage in eroticized relations of domination and submission, taking on roles according to a differentiated power dynamic expressed in binary oppositions such as top/bottom, dom/sub, or master/slave. The consensual adoption of master/slave relations appears paradoxical in modern Western social frameworks, precisely for the reasons elaborated above: if persons are conceived of according to a proprietorial metaphor, it is impossible to alienate the self legitimately to another, and alienation of self is the only language in which submission to another can be expressed. Hegel tries to solve the paradox by means of the dialectic. Famously, he argues that the master cannot truly be a master, because he cannot be a master autonomously: rather, he is dependent on the recognition of the slave. That is, he cannot subjugate the slave entirely, because then the slave would become objectified, and an object would be incapable of conferring the relationship on which the designation "master" depends. Thus, he argues, the master and the slave are mutually interdependent (1977: 111-119). Yet, the fact that the two depend on each other for relational self-definition is only problematic to the extent that one's being, to

be true, must be autonomous, independent of contextualized relations. That is, those invested in notions of partible personhood would likely respond to Hegel: of course. For if identities consist in relations, then the fact that the master depends on the slave is no longer perceived as a threat to the designation, but is rather understood as a condition of its possibility. Thus, what makes master/slave relations appear paradoxical is an investment in the proprietorial metaphor of self-authorship as the basis of legitimate agency. What is tricky, though, is that SMlers do not simply reject modern notions of subjective autonomy: rather, they predicate the ethical justification of their practices on notions of consent. Above all, it is consensuality that, for SMlers, differentiates what they do from illegitimate power relations, such as violence, hierarchy, and coercion. Thus, in invoking a discourse of consent, SMlers depend on the very notions of subjective autonomy that their practices call into question.

A second point of intersection between the discursive practices of SMlers and the Strathernian/ Shakespearean problem concerns the economic logic concomitant with modern notions of subjectivity. Interestingly, SMlers describe their activities as "power exchange." What does it mean to take this notion seriously, to think of these eroticized practices as exchanges, but exchanges in which power is the object? Here, too, Strathern paves the way, in her discussion of what she calls "unmediated exchanges," or "gift exchange without a gift" (179). Distinguishing between mediated and unmediated exchanges, she writes:

> Through mediated relations, items flow between persons, creating their mutual enchainment…Through unmediated relations, one person directly affects the disposition of another towards him or her, or that person's health or growth…Despite the absence of mediating objects,

> these latter interactions have the form of an 'exchange' in so far as each party is affected by the other. (178-9)

In this sense, relations of domination and submission in BDSM practices can be thought as a form of unmediated exchange, in which an asymmetrical relation of power generates dispositional effects through which parties engage each other. Strathern notes that while, to Western eyes, unmediated exchanges do not appear to be exchanges at all, it does not make sense in the Melanesian context to differentiate between the two forms in terms of an opposition between gift and non-gift relations, because "the unmediated mode takes its force from the presence of the mediated mode, and vice versa" (179). That is, within the economic logic of the gift, mediated and unmediated relations are co-constitutive, producing the forms of enchainment on which relational conceptions of personhood are predicated.

To construct interpersonal relations, as SMlers do, on the basis of unmediated exchanges of power is to engage in the economic logic of the gift. Thus, it is impossible to resolve the "paradox" of BDSM within the framework of the proprietorial metaphor. Yet, the power-exchanging practices of SMlers do not constitute a simple rejection of capitalist logics in favor of a "return" to gift-based economies. Rather, just as the language of consent, which presumes liberal subjectivity, is the idiom through which SMlers' practices challenge the notion of the liberal subject, it is equally crucial that SMlers are creating communities based on gift exchange *within* a discursive framework in which commodity exchange is the privileged economic form. That is, SMlers draw on idioms of commodity exchange in constructing relations that are only comprehensible in terms of the gift. The fact that

these relations occur within a commodity exchange framework is crucial to their interpretation, even as the practices in which SMlers are engaged are subversive of the commodity-based logic on which those practices nonetheless depend.

The economic form through which SMlers engage is that of the contract: in consenting to relations of domination and submission, some SMlers go so far as to literally write and sign agreements stipulating the specifics of how they are to engage their partners. Significantly, such contracts are not juridically enforceable, but are considered by many in the scene to be "morally" binding. Examples of such contractual agreements include: "the slave will always be naked in the presence of his mistress" or "the slave will never cut her hair without her master's permission." In deploying the form of the contract, SMlers voluntarily obligate themselves to act, or not act, in specific ways. From Hobbes and Rousseau onward, the contract is deployed in political thought as a founding myth for subjective autonomy, constructing at once the opposition between individual and society as well as the framework through which the opposed terms might legitimately engage. The masochistic contract, however, deploys consensual reason in order to generate literal relations of enchainment, revealing the contract to be a mechanism through which obligation comes to be understood as voluntary, and voluntarism obligatory, so that contracts come to preclude the very autonomy they have been thought to produce and ensure. How, then, does the interplay between gift and commodity logics in the power-exchanging practices of SMlers suggest the possibility of overlooked *tensions* between autonomous and relational notions of the self *within* contemporary Western epistemological and

experiential frameworks? How do practices of power exchange suggest possibilities for what a post-autonomy politics might look like?

Scholarly debates about subjectivity and exchange share a problem in common: underpinning both discourses are concerns about the possibilities and limits of agency, concerns that get articulated in terms of anxieties about fetishism, which entails "improper" attributions of agency. Such improprieties appear both in gift and commodity-based economies: generally it is said that in gift exchange objects are personified, whereas in commodity exchange persons are objectified (cf. e.g. Godelier 1999). But if both systems fail to maintain "proper" boundaries, is this not because the grounds on which subject and object "ought" to be delineated are autochthonous to the logic of neither? Marx, speaking of commodity fetishism, argues that fetishizing commodities is a problem insofar as people come to believe that the products of their own labor have power over them (1976: 165). Freud, speaking of sexual fetishism, argues that fetishizing erotic stimuli is a problem insofar as a non-genital object displaces, to the point of exclusion, the genitalia as the object of the libidinal aim (1962: 20). In both cases fetishism is a problem of misattribution, of investing an object with a power that, according to a given system, it "ought" not have; by living life on the basis of such investments, people convert "improper" forms of agency into actual social facts, which in turn possibly threatens the credibility of the distinctions being subverted.[44] That is, divisions between subject and object are ideological before they are empirical, consisting in political struggles through which "what ought to be" might (or might not) be converted into "what is."

[44] For a detailed analysis of fetishism in modernity, see Böhme (2006).

The relation between "what ought to be" and "what is" is a relation between subjunctive and indicative moods; the former implies the imagining of a prescriptive vision constructed in the grammatical form "as if." In their power-exchanging practices, SMlers draw on tensions between the "ought" and "is" of transactional idioms currently salient in contemporary Western cultures, which is to say according to a discourse of commodity relations. But, as exchanges, these practices are paradoxical unless discussed in terms of the language of the gift, a discourse to which the SMlers with whom I interacted seldom, if ever, appealed. That is, to call these exchanges "gift relations" is to break with "native" exegesis. Yet, SMlers' own interpretations remain crucial to my analysis even within the context of this break, as what is paramount is the dynamic of tension: *SMlers attempt to instantiate gift relations within the discursive framework of commodity exchange*. This tension makes for an interesting angle from which to reconsider some of the anthropological literature on the gift. This review centers on two key questions. First, what are the consequences of thinking transactional relations without a material object as "unmediated" exchanges? Second, and concomitantly: how do tensions between subjunctive and indicative moods underlie the "problem" of gift relations generally, and of power exchange specifically? With these questions explored, we move, in the third section, to the study's final key term: ritual. As it turns out, underpinning these discussions of agency, exchange, and subjectivity are anxieties about the efficacy of ritual acts, anxieties that manifest poignantly and explicitly in the discursive practices of SMlers. Coriolanus asks: what is a curtsy worth? In the pages that follow, we shall see.

Voluntary Obligations:

The Grammar of the Gift

The idea of an "unmediated" exchange – an exchange in which what is transferred is not a material object – is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend according to a commodity-based economic logic. This difficulty concerning unmediated exchanges is symptomatic of an incommensurability, having to do with what I conceptualize as grammatical differences between gift/commodity and relational/autonomous conceptualizations of agency.

Modern discomfort with the gift as a viable form of economic relation is often expressed in the form of accusations in which gift exchange is said to be irrational. Such critiques tend to focus on one of two ways in which the "irrationality" characteristic of gift exchange manifests: the spirit of the gift and the temporality of the interval. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss draws on the Maori term *hau* (spirit) to argue that, in Maori law, "What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him…the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing possesses the soul, is of the soul" (1990: 11-12). In subsequent literature, this spiritual explanation of exchange is critiqued as a form of mystification, as a spell to be broken (e.g. Godelier 1999). Here, too, the assertion that reading the gift in terms of spirit constitutes a mystification depends on a particular vision of subject/object relations, a clear separation between persons and things, and a localization of agency entirely within the realm of the human. Maurice

Godelier re-reads Mauss so as to strip the gift of any force that is not entirely explicable in terms of human agency; towards the end of his critique of the "enigma" of the gift, he argues that demystification as such is the province of social scientists: "their task is precisely to put man in his place, where he was and where he is, *at the origin of himself*" (1999: 198; emphasis added). That is, part of the process of "demystification" in which Godelier is engaged entails a rendering of "man" (sic) as originator of himself. Moreover, his critique of the spirit of the gift is indicative of a refusal to recognize "spirit" as such, so that, for Godelier, social-scientific theorization must be cast in materialist terms.

Like that of spirit, the conceptualization of time central to the economic logic of the gift has been critiqued as a form of mystification, in contrast to "real reality" as imagined in contemporary Western political/epistemological frameworks. That is, the open-ended intervals between gift and counter-gift are juxtaposed with the fixed periods on the basis of which, in a capitalist system, interest accrues during the repayment of a loan. In her book *A Moment's Notice*, Carol Greenhouse charges that "for the most part, anthropological studies of social time have proceeded from the double assumption that linear time – 'our' time – really *is* our time and really is *real*" (1996: 2). The ethnocentric claims inherent in these assumptions are particularly insidious because, as Greenhouse argues, "other kinds of time are actually other forms of agency" (5). Thus, a refusal to take non-linear forms of temporality seriously constitutes a foreclosure through which articulations of agency implicit in alternative visions of time are refused ontological recognition. But the fact that constructions of time serve as a proxy for constructions of agency is suggestive. With respect to the

supposed irrationality of the gift's temporality, Greenhouse notes that "the social architecture of exchange might be about things other than intervals between prestations. The interval is imported into exchange theory from its central position in official Western theories of social order and institutional practices built on them" (67). That is, if the interval between prestations resists integration into a rationalized temporal framework, is this not because the unpredictable duration is integral to producing effects that would otherwise be impossible? Rather than mystifications to be unmasked, the spirit of the gift and the temporality of the interval constitute crucial features of gift-economic logic; by taking these aspects seriously, rather than explaining them away, alternative possibilities of agency can be more fully explored.

Practices of BDSM center on the eroticized transfer of power; these practices, I have claimed, constitute "unmediated" exchanges. Yet, the designation "unmediated" does not necessarily connote a lack of object – indeed, in this context, *power* is the "object" being exchanged, although, in a materialist sense, power is not an object at all. Mauss, following the logic that "a tie occurring through things, is one between souls" argues that "to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself" (12). That is, in an exchange mediated by material objects, what is central are not the objects themselves; rather, an item being exchanged is a conduit through which a tie between souls is created: the material item therefore symbolizes the spiritual transaction; rather than a mystification, the connection between souls might even be conceptualized, according to this logic, as the end to which material transfers are a means. Strathern tells us that "as an exchange, an unmediated relation works through the directness of the effect which partners have on one another and, in the case

of the metaphoric gift, creates a mutual dependency between them for their own definition. They 'exchange' identities as it were" (207). In unmediated exchanges, the exchanging partners transfer parts of themselves without the intervention of a material object. Crucially, in Strathern's topology, "metaphorical" contrasts not with "real" – as it would within the context of a Western ontological framework that would render such transactions "only" metaphorical – but with "metonymical." The metaphor/metonymy contrast precludes the possibility of thinking unmediated exchanges as somehow less than real.

We are now in a better position to understand the limits of attempting to understand these unmediated exchanges within the confines of Marxian critiques of capitalism. First, the exclusive emphasis on materialism within Marxist thought makes it impossible to understand spiritual force as anything other than mystification. Second, the proprietorial logic on which the notion of subjective autonomy is founded precludes the possibility of understanding the transfer of parts of self other than in terms of alienation. That eroticized exchanges of power in BDSM are articulated in terms of domination and submission renders such practices more suspect still because, insofar as agency is measured in terms of resisting, subverting, and varying from externally imposed structures, bowing to the will of another is the antithesis of agency par excellence, so that anyone who claims to experience such relations otherwise will be subject to accusations of false consciousness. In the context of her own work on gender relations, Strathern points to a similar discursive impasse:

> If I say that men's exchanges are oriented towards their wives' domestic concerns, then the statement will be read as men appropriating those concerns and turning them to their own use. If I say that women's

> domestic work is oriented towards their husbands' exchanges, then this will be read conversely, not as their appropriating men's activities but as being subservient to them. I know of no narrative device that will overcome this skewing, because it inheres in the very form of the ideas in which we imagine men's and women's powers. (329)

In noting this "skewing," Strathern points to the possibility of an otherwise, an alternative that she is nonetheless not entirely able to articulate within the discursive frameworks she has at her disposal.

Just as preconceptions about men and women constrain in advance the ways in which relations of gender are thinkable, so too do preconceptions about domination and submission constrain the possibilities of thinking power exchange in terms of mutual agency. Partly, such limitations follow from a grammatical ideology in which the differentiation between subject and object maps, in a certain fashion, onto a differentiation between activity and passivity. Western metaphors of intercourse, for example, imagine an active penetrator and a passive penetrated. In the grammar of gift relations, though, one does not so much speak so much of donor and recipient as of giver and receiver. That is, unlike the relation between donor and recipient, that between giver and receiver constructs both parties as actively engaged in producing a complimentary, if hierarchical, relation. The inter-activity characteristic of the grammar according to which gift relations proceed makes room for intersubjectivity in a way that is not possible within the framework of donor/recipient or of penetrator/penetrated. It is not so much that in gift exchange objects are treated as persons and in commodity exchange persons are treated as objects as it is a grammatical insistence, in modernist ideology, to characterize everything in terms of a

subjective/objective dichotomy that, in practice, any form of exchange is bound to complicate.[45]

Thus, one cannot simply map the opposition between dominant and submissive onto an opposition between active and passive, or one between subject and object. Yet, in the context of BDSM, this argument is complicated by the ethnographic fact that sometimes even SMlers themselves characterize domination and submission in precisely these terms. Although SMlers, in conversational reflections on their practices, highlight the ways in which submission entails active engagement, there were moments when, in expressing desires, some of the people with whom I worked articulated fantasies of "being treated as an object" underlying their inclination to submit. Here, too, gift exchange theory provides an angle from which to recast the apparently paradoxical in a more intelligible light.

Building on Annette Weiner's (1992) notion of "keeping-while-giving," Godelier argues for a distinction and a kinship between "precious" objects, which are given, and "sacred" objects, which are kept. He writes: "Mauss found his path blocked because he did not seek to bring together and to think, within the same theoretical framework, the sacred objects which do not circulate and the precious objects which do" (74). The fantasy of being turned into an object, therefore, is a fantasy about giving what "ought" to be kept. Strathern writes:

> Western culture imagines people as persons existing in a permanently subjective state; this is their natural and normal condition, and a person can dominate another by depriving him or her of the proper exercise of that subjectivity. Expressed proprietorially, one's person properly

[45] The use of active and passive voice as mapping onto processes of objectification plays a central role in Freud's analysis in his essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1995b).

> belongs to oneself. But one may be made to do things that override or ignore that property relation, being coerced against one's nature thereby. Thus a person is made to act in such a way as to deny her or his subjectivity and personhood. A subject can be turned into an object. (338)

Again, within this modern Western ideological framework, domination figures as objectification accomplished through coercive deprivation. SMlers do not have access to any other language in which to articulate their fantasies, despite the inadequacy of the available terms. The people with whom I worked articulated the paradox quite clearly. In BDSM, they explained, "ultimately one wants to be coerced" (*letztendlich will man gezwungen werden*). Although the subject/object dichotomy is hermeneutically inadequate to the practice of BDSM, it is nonetheless phenomenologically indispensible. That is, it is only within the context of a sacralized inalienability of the self that this particular form of power exchange could take its current form. An overriding sociopolitical injunction against – and moral aversion to – alienation-qua-objectification are the grounds on which consensual exchanges of eroticized power relations are rendered efficacious.

In this context, the spatiotemporal dimensions of these practices become crucial. Oftentimes, contractually negotiated exchanges of power are bounded by particularities of time and space. Examples of such limitations include: "nothing contained herein may be used to impinge, in any way, on the slave's ability to conduct her professional life," or "the slave may express a veto right, a right not subject to negotiation, when confronted with any command that he feels will result in damage, including moral and/or psychological damage, to his person." The first example

constructs an interval – work-time – during which the powers otherwise conferred upon the master may not be enforced; the second example confers upon the slave the ability to stop time, preventing the fulfillment of the law by the assertion of a veto. The second example, especially, makes clear the seemingly paradoxical sovereignty of the slave (at least according to Carl Schmitt who, in his *Political Theology*, equates sovereignty with the ability to decide upon the exception).

Oftentimes, the spatiotemporal demarcations are even narrower than they are in the examples above: in many cases, the rules governing proper relations between master and slave are limited to "sessions," which might occur at home or during an outing to a club, specifically designated for and devoted to activities in which the desired relations are to be expressed. Others, however, attempt to create contexts in which such power relations might be enacted permanently. These practices include "total power exchange" and "24/7 relationships." In total power exchange (TPE), the slave gives total control to the master, without exceptions, such as the veto right or work exemption mentioned above. In 24/7 relationships (24 hours a day, 7 days a week), the contractually negotiated relations are always in effect; unlike TPE, 24/7 relationships leave room for exceptions written into the power dynamic to be permanently enacted. Juridically, of course, the slave's ceding of the right to withdraw consent could never be enforced, so that even in TPE there is an external reality – that of the state – which encompasses and frames the ways in which the exchange of power can be understood and experienced. Many people I worked with talked about the "impossibility" of 24/7 relationships in other terms; for these skeptics, such relationships are not possible because "no one can be engaged in SM all the time. How

tiring it would be for someone to be always getting whipped, or getting yelled at, or crawling around on all fours! That would be exhausting, and no one could really do that." Yet, those who say they live in 24/7 relationships articulate their understanding of what such a commitment entails is quite different than those who imagine the practice as a perpetual session. For them, 24/7 does not mean that one engages in such overt practices as whipping all the time, but rather that, even at the office, the power dynamic is always implicitly present, and that there is always the *possibility* that, at any time and in any place, that power dynamic might be acted upon.

Here, too, we see the limits of thinking BDSM in Marxian terms vis-à-vis the notion of temporality. In *A Moment's Notice*, Greenhouse notes that contemporary academic debates about social time have tended to reflect tensions between Marxian and Durkheimian thought. "In modern writing," she states, "the Durkheimian inflection tends to relativize time; the Marxian inflection tries to decode time's mystifications" (2). The emphasis on demystification inspired by the latter is consistent with the critiques of spirit-qua-fetish elaborated above. Of what, though, does Durkheimian relativism consist? In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the text from which Durkheimian approaches to temporality derive, there is a crucial theoretical parallelism of time and space: that is, passages in which Durkheim discusses time tend to be coupled with discussions of space, in which spatial relations are shown to correlate with temporal ones. In his introduction, he writes: "We can conceive of time only if we differentiate between moments…The same applies to space…To have a spatial ordering of things is to be able to situate them differently…That is, space would not be itself if, like time, it was not divided and

differentiated" (1995: 9-10). Thus, space and time become at once possible and necessary on the basis of a differentiation, a differentiation that, for Durkheim, originates in the opposition between sacred and profane. Durkheimian relativism therefore originates according to the logic of relational opposition. Durkheim elaborates this logic in his discussion of ritual, in which he argues that two fundamental tenets epitomize and govern the system of prohibitions under consideration: "First, religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space. If religious life is to develop, a special place must be prepared for it, one from which profane life is excluded" (312). In the next paragraph, he continues:

> Likewise, religious and profane life cannot coexist at the same time. In consequence, religious life must have specified days or periods assigned to it from which all profane occupations are withdrawn. Thus were the holy days born. There is no religion, and hence no society, that has not known and practiced this division of time into two distinct parts that alternate with one another according to a principle that varies with peoples and civilizations. In fact, probably the necessity of that alternation led men to insert distinctions and differentiations into the homogeneity and continuity of duration that it does not naturally have (313).

Thus, for Durkheim, divisions of time and space do not derive so much from their natural properties as from a conceptual need for differentiation; these differentiations are socially salient to the extent that they are shared by, which is to say mutually intelligible among, members of a collective. Here, I follow Greenhouse's observation that, for Durkheim, periodicity is first and foremost a *hermeneutic* problem (1996: 27). In this sense, the ethnographic task is to determine the conditions under which particular forms of spatiotemporal differentiation are rendered efficacious for a given group of people. What is at stake in the interval is a qualitative differentiation between

two forms of experiential reality, where each form is intelligible as a relational opposition to the other. In BDSM, everyday life contrasts, not with a universalized sacred, but with the specified session, in which the concentration of power exchange is at its most intense. Attempts at 24/7 relationships or TPE express a desire to experience, in a more or less permanent fashion, what Durkheim would call the "effervescence" of the session as an experiential reality, thus minimizing the intervals in which one's sense of participating in power exchange is least concentrated. Significantly, oppositions between mundane life in ordinary time and erotic effervescence in the session are not rationalized in terms of a calendar: at heart, the relational contrast is qualitative, not quantitative, even as it is only in terms of days, hours, and minutes that, in contemporary Germany at least, schedules can be coordinated and sessions can be arranged.

TPE and 24/7 relationships are therefore limit cases insofar as they draw attention to the asymptotic line beyond which power exchange, as it takes shape in BDSM, cannot be thought. This limit is conceptualized on Durkheimian grounds, as BDSM discursive practices depend on a distinction between the play (contractual) reality in which sessions are experienced and the juridical (institutional) reality of everyday life, which encompasses BDSM experiences, and indeed marks them as such. The social fact of a qualitative differential, conceptualized temporally as an interval or spatially as an arena, is essential to the experiential efficacy of these practices, at least in their current discursive form. That is, these discourses depend on the fact that SMlers live in milieux where master/slave relations are not only juridically unenforceable, but also culturally taboo on the very principle of self-determination in

the name of which the liberty to engage in such practices is nonetheless asserted: only in such a context does this form of "serious play" make sense. This phrase, an invocation of anthropologist Victor Turner, suggests yet another seeming paradox to be reconsidered in terms of the gift's grammatical logic: under what circumstances does the notion of serious play appear (or not) to be oxymoronic?

In the opening passages of *The Gift*, Mauss precedes his central question about what, in a gift-exchange context, compels reciprocity with an observation about the form such an obligation takes. He writes: "we seek here to study only one characteristic – one that goes deep but is isolated: the so to speak voluntary character of these total services, apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested. Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (3). What interests Mauss is not the form of the present, but the pattern of the dynamic through which such transactions occur: the gift, he argues, seems to be voluntary, when really it is obligatory. Yet, that seeming voluntariness is actually essential: it cannot be done without. Remove the "polite fiction" and the social solidarity created in and sustained by these relations would no doubt fall apart. For this reason, Marxian efforts to "demystify" the gift ultimately constitute attempts at rendering void this form of economic logic altogether by suggesting the rationality characteristic of commodity exchange as the "real" reality of all transactions. The crucial point is that, in gift exchange according to Mauss, obligation is presented *as if it were* voluntary, which is to say in the subjunctive mood.

A crucial point of differentiation between gift and commodity logics, then, concerns the experiential efficacy of the as-if. In a way, the force of the subjunctive in BDSM is more complicated still, to the extent that the assertion of a "when really" cannot easily be presumed. One might ask: *are SMlers engaged in voluntary practices as if they were obligatory and/or are they engaged in obligatory practices as if they were voluntary*? The ways in which this double question can be approached would depend on conceptions of structure and agency, so that any final determination of an either/or would necessitate in advance the presupposition of its conclusion. Discursively, we are at a dead end, unless we take subjunctivity seriously, and not as something to be demystified, unmasked, or otherwise explained away. Building on Mauss, the gift opens up the possibility of thinking in terms of voluntary obligation (as well as of obligatory voluntarism) insofar as the "as-if" is thought to contribute to the experiential efficacy of practices that, in rationalist terms, would be considered paradoxical. In BDSM, discourses of play constitute a way to articulate the crucial importance of the "as-if": contractually negotiated power relations between master and slave are play insofar as they occur, conceptually, in the subjunctive mood, even as, empirically, the practical consequences of that play actually occur, manifesting, for example, as bruises and welts. As in gift exchange, the "as-if" cannot be explained away if the experiential significations entailed in these practices are to remain efficacious and intelligible.

"*Ganz im Gegenteil*":

Slave Contracts

Each month, the club Gargoyle hosts a group called *Subbiekränzchen*, a submissives' coffee klatch. The name evokes images of old-fashioned ladies sitting around, perhaps at a quilting bee, discussing their lives over coffee and cake. Indeed, homemade pastry, *Kuchen*, is a tradition at each of these meetings, brought by different participants each time. As the meeting does take place at a bar, however, beer and wine are at least as common choices of beverage as coffee. At one meeting of *Subbiekränzchen*, discussion was devoted to the topic of *Sklavenverträge*, or slave contracts.[46] It is interesting that these contracts are so-called, because, as Donna, the group's leader, explained, they lay out obligations and responsibilities for both partners, dominant and submissive. In this sense, it is ethnographically illuminating that the focus is not on the mutuality of agreement but on one particular side. Rather than depicted as an agreement between two partners, the terminological framing makes it appear as if only the submissive partner were becoming obligated by virtue of the contractual relation.

One person in attendance, Patricia, was new to the scene, and had never heard of a *Sklavenvertrag* before, so Donna clarified for everyone the nature of the agreement: "The contract makes quite explicit what the rules are, what is and isn't allowed. These things can range for instance from the slave must come barefoot to

[46] The use of contracts is widespread in BDSM, tracing back to the novel *Venus in Furs*. For more on the conceptual underpinnings of these practices, see Victor Smirnoff's (1995) essay "The Masochistic Contract."

bed, to regulating clothing, or saying that the slave cannot modify her body, for instance by changing her hair color without permission, to things like the slave must give up control over finances, giving the dom access to all her accounts." Patricia was incredulous: "What? That is crazy! Who would do that?" Significantly, the discussion went right to what SMlers would consider to be a most extreme example – financial control – rather than the more mundane practices that are empirically more common: indeed most of these contracts specifically foreclose incursion into financial or professional domains.

Donna, though, pointed out the irony in Patricia's position: "Well, actually," she said, "a lot of people do just that…only instead of a *Sklavenvertrag* they call it an *Ehevertrag* (marriage contract), because in marriage you have the same situation with common accounts and you have to trust the other person isn't going to mishandle things and create a *Schuldenberg* (debt mountain, or mountain of debt), but if you give someone – whether dom or spouse – access to your accounts, that's a risk you are taking." Here, Donna points out that the practice involved in this seemingly "extreme" version of BDSM play, when considered in another context, one which effaces rather than emphasizes dynamics of power exchange, seems to be most mundane. She continued: "Actually, a lot of these things in the *Sklavenverträge* exist outside of SM. At work, I also have *Dienstkleidung* (work clothes, a dress code for work). I can't have free shoulders or open-toed shoes. It's made clear in my contract, what I can and can't wear, and so a work contract is also a kind of slave contract." Brian, another member of the submissives' group, added: "yes, and if you think of actors and models, they

can't cut their hair or change their hair, either." Patricia objected: "well, but in that case, they're getting paid."

Cordelia, though, noted that in the slave contract it is not money, but something else that is exchanged. In response to Patricia, she said: "Yes, but as a slave you're getting attention and love." Patricia remained incredulous: "So, if I don't sign (*wenn ich nicht unterschreibe*), then I don't get love?" "No, no," explained Cordelia, "I mean it's important not to forget in all this that these contracts are voluntary (*freiwillig*), and in SM it's not necessary to have a contract at all if you don't want one, and at the end of the day people do it because they find it hot (*geil*). Also, these contracts are not legally binding. If you do legally binding things because of them, such as give someone access to your accounts, that is something else. But the consequences of breaking a contract itself are between you and your partner."

Patricia said she would laugh if someone told her she couldn't change her hair, or that if she were threatened with scissors as a punishment: "Actually, though, I might enjoy the threat as long as I knew he wasn't really going to try to cut my hair off." Here, the line between play and reality resurfaces, in that Patricia emphasizes that the "play" would work for her as long as she knew it was just play. Cordelia, however, disagreed that the "just play" aspect could be taken to such an extent: "But then it's just laughable if it's an empty threat…it doesn't mean anything unless it really is a possibility. Besides, irrespective of SM, if your partner really likes your hair, it would be odd not to discuss changing it." Donna agreed: "In the end, hair grows back. It's not permanent. The question is: how important is it to me? It's just hair." Here, Cordelia and Donna emphasize that there must be something "real" about the power

dynamic if it is to be efficacious, as well as that the commitments agreed to within the context of an explicitly formulated power dynamic might symbolize commitments to one's partner regardless of power relations. If the designation "play" is taken to negate the possibility of enactment, there is the specter of meaninglessness, at least insofar as the agreement is thought to guarantee, generate, or sustain a certain kind of intimate connection.

Throughout this discussion, there is a slippage between the discourse of gifts and that of commodities: something that proves troubling in one framework is seemingly ordinary in another, and that distinction makes the question of framing all the more urgent. That is, while in professional situations regulation of an employee's dress is unremarkable, when extended to the personal sphere, agreeing to limitations of self expression becomes thought as something else. Of course, people give in to such tacit regulations all the time – the fashionable, the socially acceptable, the dress-code of a particular establishment, whether four star restaurant or BDSM club – but the key here is that it is ceding rights to self determination within the context of an intimate relationship and relegating control over one's decision making to another. In the language of commodities this is an alienation, but a form of alienation that has not been naturalized in the way that dress code at work might be. Indeed, the non-commoditized nature of the relation might be what is especially troubling, since, as Patricia notes, what seems to be conditional is the exchange of love, a substance thought not to be captured in material form. The key is that love is thought as an enduring tie – a social relation of gift exchange – and yet this love is shot through the

contractual rhetoric of the commoditized marketplace. Hotness is the force, in Cordelia's formulation, that compels the parties to enter into exchange.

Cordelia insists that the contracts are between the parties involved, which would make them individualized rather than group matters. In a way, she is right in that, just as the contract is not legally binding, there is no force within the BDSM scene that would enforce the upholding of such contracts. On the other hand, SMlers have the sense that these contracts are "morally binding," so that there is a shared sense that it is a matter of character to carry out that to which one has committed. Of course, these matters are considered in relative terms, because for example SMlers would not advocate for a person to remain in an "unhealthy" contract, so that in this instance the sanity of the agreement itself trumps any sense of individual responsibility to uphold the contract. I once observed a conflict at a club, where a master was upset at a club owner for having neither discouraged nor reported his slave for engaging in activities that were forbidden her per their agreement. The club owner's position was that, ultimately, she could do what she wanted, and this position was emphasized through the insinuation that the agreement itself was unhealthy, to the extent that concern was expressed about the slave's ability to function in the world should the relationship end. The master, on the other hand, took the position that the slave is his property (*Eigentum*) and, as such, it is up to him to decide. Despite the master's assertion to the contrary, the institutional framework of the BDSM establishment clearly values personal well-being over the contract, and indeed does not attempt to enforce contracts (by, for example, shunning those known to have broken them). On the other hand, people who develop a reputation for breaking contracts, especially contracts deemed

reasonable by others, may have a hard time finding partners willing to enter them. That said, there is a strong sense of moral obligation to one's ethical commitments among SMlers, in which an ethos of the "morally binding" becomes an alternative rubric of the reality or meaningfulness of contractual engagement in a context where juridical enforcement is out of play.[47]

In an essay that analyzes capitalism itself as a transformation of slavery, David Graeber adds to a Marxian emphasis on growth demand and wage-labor another crucial aspect of capitalist production. He writes: "The industrial revolution also introduced the first form of economic organization to make a systematic distinction between homes and workplaces, between domestic and economic spheres. This is what made it possible to begin talking about 'the economy' in the first place: the production of people, and of commodities, were to take place in different spaces by entirely different logics" (2007: 103). Graeber goes on to note that "slavery too involves a separation of domestic sphere and workplace – except in this case the separation is geographic," since slavery entails the appropriation of labor produced elsewhere (104). In this way, he argues, "We are dealing with the same terms, differently arranged: so that rather than one class of people being able to imagine themselves as absolutely 'free' because others are absolutely unfree, we have the same individuals moving back and forth between these two positions over the course of the week and working day" (106). The problem, then, with slavery as practiced in BDSM becomes apparent, because the logic it defies is precisely the imagination of an unconditional freedom associated with the

[47] Interestingly, in their (1996) study of international commercial arbitration, Dezalay and Garth highlight the importance among arbitrators of cultivating a reputation for virtue.

personal sphere, by applying a logic of restriction reminiscent of the workplace in that of the home. For this reason, prostitution too is troubling in a capitalist regime, because it commodifies precisely that which must not be made into a commodity for the system as a whole to conceptually function. In this sense, the imagination of marriage as a kind of slave contract, as Donna characterizes it, involves precisely this slippage between the two modalities of capitalist and gift economy. Marriage would be a kind of gift relation, and the problematization of marriage as the exchange of women, made commodification of women (as in Gayle Rubin's 1975 piece) relies precisely on taking something out of the realm of gift and placing it into the realm of commodities.

In the slave contract, the problem of signification is not limited to the gift/commodity distinction, but extends to and even exacerbates the conceptualization of BDSM as play. Patricia decided that there were some circumstances in which she could imagine the contractual ceding of control: "I know some people who aren't capable of caring for themselves, so I could see in that case it might be useful. But only women, I don't know any men like that." Donna rejected this view: "Completely the opposite (*Ganz im Gegenteil*)," she said. "If a person his difficulties doing things for themselves, then precisely in that situation the dom should not take over, but instead use the power dynamic to help the sub better herself, to teach her how to care for herself." Brian concurred: "There wouldn't be much of a kick without a play element, and it wouldn't be play if it is out of necessity." Donna continued: "In my own life, I am strong. I have responsibilities of leadership at work, and I am capable (*fähig*), but there's a balance, and giving up control, putting yourself in someone else's

hands, that's something I'd like with the right person." Here, Donna suggests that it is only the capable person who can willingly give up control, because the person who is incapable is incapable of giving up the enactment of capability. That is, even though what is being exchanged is not a material object, there is the necessary understanding of a certain kind of existence of this immaterial object, the gift to be conferred. Donna likewise posits an ethics of power exchange when she says that the dom has a responsibility to care for the sub, and to engage in relations that further the sub's development as a person. And this facilitation of growth benefits both, because the more capable the sub the more meaningful the gift of submission. While Patricia returns the dynamic to a normative ideology of gendered roles, for Donna, Brian, and Cordelia, it is precisely the freedom to choose, and the willingness of choice rather than, and indeed against a notion of inevitability that makes the practice work: one cannot sacrifice that which one does not possess.

As in the classical gift, the obligatory and the voluntary are placed to one side rather than opposed; here, though, it is the seemingly obligatory nature of the ritualized structure that makes voluntarism seemingly disappear, even as the voluntarism is absolutely essential to the efficacy of the exchange. Unlike the classical gift, however, these exchanges are articulated in the discourse of contracts, a discourse of commodity exchange; it is this *articulation* that renders such practices paradoxical.

Objectifying Forces:

On the Existential Problematic of the Economized Self

"The existence of a masochistic trend in the instinctual life of human beings," writes Sigmund Freud, "may justly be described as mysterious from the economic point of view. For if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and the obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible" (1995a: 274). Freud's characterization of masochism as an "economic" problem suggests a paradox concerning thinking of these practices in terms of exchange: since pleasure is thought to be desirable, whereas "unpleasure" is thought to be not so, there is a contradiction inherent in desiring the undesirable: like trading that which is valuable for that which is not. Significantly, Freud goes on to say that the problem does not exist in sadism: this asymmetry in the problematic shows that what is at stake is the pursuit of that which is not valued, whereas the sadist, in achieving pleasure through the administration of pain to the other proves comprehensible to Freud there is no equivalent for the desire to receive such administration. In economic terms, this dynamic would seem unfathomable, returning from a modern to a primitive theory of exchange. Louis Dumont writes: "The primitive ideas is that, in trade, the gain of one party is the loss of the other….to think of exchange as advantageous to both parties represented a basic change and signaled the advent of economics" (1986: 109). If the sadomasochistic relation is to be thought as an exchange between a winner and a loser, then the exchange does not make sense

in economistic terms, making for a problem when thought specifically from the standpoint of the masochist.

Part of the problem, though, may stem from thinking the parties to the exchange in individualistic terms in the first place: sadist and masochist, as opposed to a power *relation*. Indeed, in her forward to Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, Mary Douglas outlines the Durkheimian opposition to English liberalism and empiricist philosophy precisely in terms of a resistance to what she terms "unfettered individualism" (xii). Summarizing the summary of Larry Siedentrop, she writes that the latter: "was based on an impoverished concept of the person seen as an independent individual rather than a social being…neglected how social relations change with the mode of production…and…had a too negative concept of liberty and so failed to appreciate the moral role of political participation" (x). Indeed, she continues: "English empiricist philosophy did not explain the role of social norms in shaping individual intentions and making social action possible" (xi). In this way, Douglas claims that "the theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity" (x), so that Mauss' idea might threaten "methodological individualism and the idea of a free gift" alike (xvi). The economic problem to which Freud points, then, operates on the double false assumption of constructing participants in masochistic play as individuals rather than as components of a solidarity-infused whole and of imagining the economic relation in utilitarian terms.

Indeed, the "economy" of sexuality has in modern western thought been imagined according to the logic of commodities, which is to say according to a framework of individualism. This is paradoxical when one considers that sex is an

activity seldom if ever idealized as an activity done alone: if sexuality has come to be thought of a truth of one's self, this truth is only realized through an engagement with others. In this way, there is a tension between the commodity-individual-identity discourse through which sex has been constructed and the gift-social-relational dynamic through which erotic engagement is achieved. What are the theoretical and epistemological predicates of such a treatment?

Gayle Rubin, in her seminal article on "The Traffic in Women," traces the production – semiological and empirical – of the oppressed woman in part to the transactional logic of exchange, drawing heavily on Lévi-Strauss' formulation of marriage as the exchange of women between men. On the one hand, Rubin is at pains to demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which the logic of gift exchange is irreducible to a capitalistic articulation, the very language with which she works constrains the possibility of imagining the "ultimate" reality other than in individualist terms. She writes:

> If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is the men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges – social organization. (1975: 174)

It is only within the framework of a sharply delineated, univocal binary opposition between subject and object that such an analysis makes sense. Only in a world where subjects and objects constitute mutually exclusive categories, could one imagine that being the conduit of one relationship (the present) means that one cannot be the partner to another. That is, there is an "I know, but still" articulated here, when Rubin writes that although "the exchange of women does not necessarily imply objectification in the modern sense," still the distinction between giver and gift, as a distinction between subject and object, becomes a primary reality in contrast to the mystification, or quasi-mystification of other articulations of social relation.

Of course, the key point in Lévi-Strauss was that marriage is never only or even primarily about the dyadic couple, as modern western ideology implies, and for this reason the exchange of women between men gets emphasized as a way of demonstrating the couple as a nodal point of connection between groups. In his essay "The Family," Lévi-Strauss argues that this articulation would work also the other way around, whereby marriage would be the exchange of men between women, and even that "both sexes can accommodate themselves to a slightly more complicated description of the game, which says that groups consisting of both men and women exchange among themselves kinship relations" (1985: 60). The main point, though is that "marriage is not, never has been, and cannot be a private affair" (48), and that "it is between…groups, not between individuals, that marriage creates a bond" (47). On all counts, then, the ideology of individualism is being contradicted: becoming the object of an exchange is not tantamount to objectification, for one is simultaneously "subject" and "object" of various exchanges; one's self positioning is part of an intricate web of

the positions of others, through whom one's self is realized in the first place. In marriage, the men are *also* exchange partners – becoming brothers'-in-law, etc – but they are not exclusively so, and so one cannot read marriage *only* as the union of two persons, for the creation of the couple's new positions as spouses is one relational production of linkage among others at the moment of wedding even if, in the modern west, it is the one highlighted. Of course, such highlighting is indicative of the very ideology of individualism.

How, then, to imagine exchange without presupposing autonomous individuality? In a chapter from his work on Sade, entitled "Noncontractual Exchange," Marcel Hénaff notes that the thought of theorists of the social contract "puts forth as a fact of nature (that is, as a primordial given) a figure that is actually the fruit of a long history: the modern autonomous individual" (1999: 220). Yet, even this formulation suggests historical entelechy so that critiques of individualism are to be constructed according to here/there, then/now, self/other, when all of these oppositions themselves presuppose the very individualism that the gesture of historicization would seemingly seek to relativize. In another book, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, a work centering on problems of exchange, Hénaff writes:

> Gift exchange is a ceremonial duel in which autonomous beings who wish to associate without relinquishing their freedom confront each other. This is why a failed encounter can degenerate into conflict. To give is at the same time to give up what is being given and to prevail through what has been given; it is at the same time offering and challenge, game and pact, agreement always on the verge of disagreement, peace at the edge of a potential conflict. The background of the relationship remains agonistic; consensus is not a given but a horizon. (2010: 139)

There is always the danger of a slippage between the two aspects of the individual that anthropologist Louis Dumont, in his work on individualism (1977; 1986), so carefully renders distinct. These aspects disentangle the empirical individual (description) from the moral one (prescription), especially crucial since the empirical fact of individuated being never really overcomes the sociality of becoming, the inscriptions of morality in, through, and out of which the individual emerges as such. Antagonism itself is a term imbued with atomism…why not use ambivalence, instead, to characterize the horizon of consensus? Everywhere it is a question of within and without: ambivalence describes intra-psychic conflict, and antagonism conflict between parties whose ambivalence and multiplicity must be effaced in order to be aggregated as such. Individualism presupposes identificatory coherence that does not, on closer examination, ever play out ethnographically. Exchange can only be agonistic once one presupposes the individualities of the parties of exchange, so that we are in the realm of *Gesellschaft* rather than *Gemeinschaft*, the world of fundamental separation rather than fundamental integration.

But what SMlers do, in exchanging power, is to subvert these distinctions by proclaiming the possibility of a holism within the ideological framework of the individual. Atomistic psychological readings seek to interpret these practices as aggression: toward the other or toward the self-made-other. But as soon as one sees dominant and submissive as parts, rather than wholes in and of themselves, it becomes possible to understand the production and realization of the self through the exchange of parts of oneself – the giving and receiving of power – in a way that draws attention to the specific cultural conditions that engender the paradox in the first place. Yet, the

paradox cannot be resolved, for it is only according to the discourse of individualism that these exchange practices become intelligible in the first place.

Indeed, key for the SMlers is that they are giving precisely that which must not be given, the inalienable self that is so sacred to individualistic modernity. Indeed, much recent work on exchange (e.g. Weiner 1992, Godelier 1999, Hénaff 2010) has made something of the "sacra," that which must not be given, as central to understanding the practice of what is exchanged. In modernity, it is precisely the self that is the sacra, the sacred: it is the self that must not be exchanged. For this reasons practices that involve the exchange of selves seem problematic in the modernist logic of commodities.

The problems of conceptualizing interpersonal practices in terms of commodification become apparent in contemporary scholarship in the anthropology of gender and sexuality. In her exceptionally nuanced analysis of *Gay Fatherhood*, Ellen Lewin for example grapples with problems of "consumption" among gay fathers, whose practices of surrogacy and adoption are often expensive, involving money in the production of familial forms which, ideologically, must be separated from spheres of capitalist exchange. She observes that gay men "enter the market for children…as disadvantaged consumers; just as children are evaluated according to race, gender, age and health, potential parents who are single rank below married couples, and gay men (or lesbians) appraised below them" (2009: 73). Lewin shows how the discourse of consumption makes sense of how adoption and surrogacy work, even as all parties involved distance themselves from such forms. In this analysis, the surrogate's body becomes commodified, rather than taken to be part of a relation of gifting, because

capitalistic individualism has become thinkable only in terms of the discourse of alienation, and so there seems, in modern societies, to be no other language in which to articulate the gift, which represents the economies of "other" times and places, which is nonetheless the only language in which such exchanges make ethical sense.

BDSM practices provide an ethnographic opportunity to think this logic in reverse, whereby explicit articulations of commodity logic obscure the social dynamics in play. At another meeting of *Subbiekränzchen*, I was told the story of how Daniel came to be owned by his current mistress. He and Jens were at a club, where they met a woman Daniel found attractive. Jens approached her, presenting himself as the owner of Daniel, having procured him through capture (which he produced paperwork – written on a napkin not unlike those in use at that particular bar – to prove). Jens offered to sell Daniel to the woman. His price would be two beers, one of which would be consumed by Daniel, the other he would drink himself. The woman accepted and bought the two beers, at which point her ownership of Daniel commenced.

Everything about the telling of this story depends on irony: living in a society where persons cannot be bought and sold, participating in an exchange where the gendered norms of drink-buying and power-hierarchy are apparently reversed, the resourceful play on conventions (contract, wingman, etc.) all help engender the story's humorous effect. In the end, Daniel "gets the girl" as well as the beer, as well as the beginning of a relationship in which his desires for submission might be fulfilled. Indeed, the story wouldn't work if it *could* be taken literally. It is only from the position of subjective certainty, a certainty magnified in this instance by the same "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2001) that renders dominant men and submissive

women more apparently problematic. Here, though, the story's discursive impossibility is harnessed to comic effect in its portrayal of the "sale" of that which can and must not be sold.

BDSM practices both depend upon and subvert the sacralization of the self on much the ideology of modernity rests. But the economic instantiation of the problematic leads to another insight, which is that modern ideology discursively precludes another "archaic" form: that of ritual. Just as the submission of the self cannot in modernity be articulated other than in terms of alienation, so too is it not in this framework possible to see the rite as generative of a productive transcendence, for in this discourse the individual is the apex in whose image gods are made. Modernist subjectivity takes the place of ritually realized selves…as Mary Douglas heads her opening chapters of *Natural Symbols*: "Away from Ritual," and "To Inner Experience." But this historicization is not ethnographically inevitable: just as SMlers are practicing gift exchange within the discursive framework of commodity exchange, they are also practicing ritual within the framework of modernist subjectivity.

Chapter Five

Desiring Subjects:
Speaking of Ritual in a "Secular" Age

"*Die deutsche Sprache ist eine technische Sprache*":
Classificatory Struggles, Continued

When setting out to conduct fieldwork, I described my project as a study of ritual in Berlin's BDSM scene. This formulation provoked a lot of questions, often resulting in inquiries by other academics as to why it was that "ritual" should be the category of analysis in the first place. To anthropologists, ritual seemed out of place in a study of subcultural erotic practices in a place like Berlin. In the field, however, the topic of ritual was greeted not with skepticism, but with an overall consensus that this angle made intuitive sense. At *Themenabend*, for example, during my first week into fieldwork in May 2008, I introduced my project as a study of ritual in BDSM. "Oh," said Tanya, one of the group's organizers, "this is a great topic. We've actually already had a meeting devoted to this very theme, but it's been over a year since then, so we could have another one." At the end of that meeting, Anna, whom I had just met, told me that since I was interested in ritual a good group for me to know was the *Arbeitskreis SM und Christsein*, effectively introducing me to the Christian SM group. Among many SMlers, then, "ritual" is (in Geertzian terms) an experience-near symbolic form through which they understand and articulate their practices, among

themselves and to others. Yet, this surface designation obscures a number of critical issues pertaining to the seemingly out-of-place nature of the term. As the ethnographic account proffered below reveals, though SMlers may agree on the *use* of the word "ritual," there is a wide range of ideas as to the meaning of the term, so that what "ritual" entails was, for my interlocutors, a matter of heated debate.

It was decided that "ritual" would be the subject of conversation for the September meeting of *Themenabend*, because, Tanya and Edward reasoned, more people would attend in the fall when people weren't as likely to be on vacation. It also had the "advantage" of allowing them to advertize that an American researcher would be there to converse with them. While this move was successful in generating the largest of any such meeting I attended – the room was so full that we used up all the available extra chairs – it also had the effect of generating expectations that would not be met. As it turned out, people attended thinking that a "professor" was coming to "lecture" them on the topic of ritual in BDSM, and were thus disappointed when they realized it was their expertise, not mine, that was to be the basis of conversation, especially when it came to questions concerning the definition of the term.

Throughout the room, people raised questions as to whether a given practice was or was not a ritual. Some described rituals in which they participated, only to have others in the room question whether such activities constituted "ritual" at all. The concern stemmed from a perceived need for terminological precision. One participant was particularly concerned about "repetition," one of the qualities participants suggested as a component of ritual practice: "For it to be a ritual," he asked, "does it need to be something one repeats? But then, if it has to be repeated, does the repetition

need to be exact? If I change it slightly, is it not a ritual anymore, like if I use two fingers instead of three?" Interestingly, what is being expressed here is a desire for categorical certainty, less about the quality of an experience as an anxiety about how an experience is to be designated. It might in some context matter whether one uses "two fingers instead of three," – the Boy Scout's oath, for example – but in others, such a difference might be irrelevant. At stake here, then, is a matter of what differences make a difference and when, yet the problem is posed by generating thought in terms of classificatory absolutes, investing experience with a binary logic of a mutual exclusivity in which it is or it isn't.

This logic underpinned a number of conversations that arose throughout the evening: one participant, despite no familiarity with Horace Miner's writings on the Nacirema, asked: "Is brushing your teeth a ritual?" A number of those present argued that this act did not constitute ritual, raising a range of objections. One participant contended that a key component of ritual lacking in teeth-brushing was meaning, so that ritual had to be symbolic of something and not simply a practical or technical activity. Others emphasized that *Ritual* must not be confused with *Gewohnheit* (habit), although Stefan objected that this dichotomy was not so clear-cut, offering the example of his morning coffee and newspaper, which he considered to be ritual as well as habitual, because it was not simply something he did, but something he repeated in a particular, stylized way, always doing things in the same order, always sitting in the same chair, and so forth. Participants noted that this characterization still didn't attest to symbolic import, and seemed more within the realm of ordinary technical behavior: "we walk on the street always with one foot and then the other, but that doesn't mean it

is a ritual." For some in the room, the key difference had to do with whether the activity was social, insofar as it involved the fostering of connections to others. Jens offered that "coffee drinking and paper reading might be a ritual if, for instance, you are doing it with your partner, and it is how you spend time together as a couple." In this formulation, the distinction between ritual and habit has to do with the extent to which a given activity is shared, and as such, generative of bonds beyond the activity itself.

Most participants seemed to feel comfortable with this emphasis on the generation of connectivity, although some felt put off by what they felt to be intrusions into their own conceptualizations. Afterwards, in a reflection on the evening's conversations, Markus told me:

> It is hard to think about these things theoretically when they are so personal, because if someone tries to tell me that my ritual is not a ritual, I think: Who are they to tell me this? But, on the other hand, the German language is a technical language, and so we need to be precise. Big problems can arise from small differences in meaning. I knew of this one couple, a female dominant and male submissive, where he wanted to marry her but she felt he was uneducable (*unerziehbar*) and relationship incompetent (*beziehungsunfähig*). Can you imagine? They saw the situation so differently.

Oftentimes in these conversations, people would resort to assertions about what a term such as ritual means to them, so as to avoid treading on others' ideas or ending encroachments on their own characterizations of life. Yet, these discussions would often slip into generalizations, as if technical precision in definition could somehow order the experiential messiness with which they were confronted. In these moments I sensed a desire and a belief in the power of definition, as if somehow through

conversation one could get to the bottom of things and make them make sense. And yet, in fact, each addition to the conversation served to give only another counterexample or complication, so that conceptual consensus remained ever elusive despite the repeated ritual attempts to attain it.

Throughout the conversation that evening, participants identified rituals in which they or others participated. For example, Valerie discussed a female dominant, male submissive couple she knew and their daily ritual of greeting. Each day, when she arrives home from work, he must take off her shoes and stockings and kiss her feet. In response, Marie talked about a similar ritual practiced by a male dominant, female submissive couple of her acquaintance. Each day, the sub had to offer a gift to her dom, such as a rose or a poem. Interestingly, these conversations all focused on particular acts that might be labeled ritual: no one in the room theorized that BDSM constituted ritual in and of itself. Yet, BDSM, like ritual, was consistently demarcated from mundane reality, marked as "play," specifically framed in time and space as distinct from ordinary existence. The question, then, is whether this characterization as play takes the place of ritual as an overarching designation, so that, within play, specific activities might be said to be ritual, or whether the conceptual encompassment works the other way around, so that this play itself can be understood as a kind of ritual practice.

Secular Theology:

Ritual and Subjectivity

In modernist cultures, which privilege notions of interiorized subjectivity, ritual appears to be matter out of place. Religious Studies scholar Catherine Bell delineates the problem in the opening pages of her monumental work *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*: "ritual is first differentiated as a discrete object of analysis by means of various dichotomies that are loosely analogous to thought and action; then ritual is subsequently elaborated as the very means by which these dichotomous categories, neither of which could exist without the other, are reintegrated" (21). Several pages later, she continues: "Thus, a model of ritual based upon our two structural patterns- in which ritual is both activity and the fusion of thought and activity – ultimately involves a third pattern, one in which the dichotomy underlying a thinking theorist and an acting actor is simultaneously affirmed and resolve. It is this homologization that makes ritual appear to provide such a privileged vantage point on culture and the meaningfulness of cultural phenomena" (31). From here, Bell invokes Frederic Jameson, asking: "to what extent is the object of study the thought pattern of the theorist rather than the supposed object, ritual?" (31). Mapping onto the various binaries that Bell identifies, thought/activity, thinking theorist/acting actor, is yet another differentiation between self/other configured as a relation between subject and object, insofar as the "supposed object" is thought to be exterior to the thought pattern of the (subjective) observer: here, too, the implicit charge is solipsism or navel gazing, that in apparently speaking of others we are really looking at ourselves.

Nearly two decades prior to Bell's formulation of this dilemma, Clifford Geertz first published his essay "The Native's Point of View."[48] Responding to the crisis in professional identity provoked by the posthumous publication of Malinowski's diaries, Geertz argues that anthropological analysis ought to tack between experience-near (emic) and experience-distant (etic) conceptual formulations:

> Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in the vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him (sic) stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon. The real question, and the one Malinowski raised by demonstrating that, in the case of the "natives," you don't have to be one to know one, is what roles the two sorts of concepts play in anthropological analysis. Or, more exactly, how, in each case, ought one to deploy them so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer. (1983: 57)

Geertz's positioning of anthropology as a discursive mediation of the experience-near and experience-distant troubles the framework in which Bell poses her question: the promise of the anthropological project consists of the opening of the possibility of thinking through others in ways that open up the possibility of transcending the limits of the very distinction between self and other.

The principal objection to examining BDSM practices in terms of ritual has been that these practices do not appear to conform to any of the classic categories into which rituals have been grouped. These categories – cosmological events, rites of passage, and healing – in this formulation come to represent a taxonomic rubric through which the category of ritual might be thought. Yet, though it is true that

[48] I cite from *Local Knowledge,* compiled nearly a decade after the essay's original publication in 1974.

BDSM practices do not conform to any *one* of these categories, they in fact incorporate elements of all three. That is, while BDSM rituals do not generally celebrate or commemorate a calendrical event, they do performatively evoke a cosmology, one of hierarchical order in which each person plays a part in terms of a status marked by relations of power. The resistance to thinking of these practices as cosmological, then, stems not from an observation of the practices themselves, but of the difficulty in reconciling the observed practices with the broader ideology of individualist egalitarianism within which these practices occur. Thus, they appear to complicate a straightforward application of Durkheimian functionalism, in which ritual serves to codify social order.

Likewise, BDSM rituals would seem not to be rites of passage, in that their initiatory character does not extend beyond the framework of the ritualized world itself: that is, reintegration does not give the initiand a new status outside the framework of ritual, whereby ritual would be a means to transition the initiand from one status to another. On the other hand, there is a strong discourse of novices and experts, and participation in these ritual practices are the means by which a novice is made expert, but also constitute the means through which an SMler achieves status as a player.

Finally, though SMlers do not generally characterize their practices as a form of healing, where one is cured of one's sickness through ritual enactment (although psychological and psychoanalytic portrayals of masochism sometimes characterize practices in this way), there is a strong element of redress, for instance, in domination-submission scenarios of punishment: taken at face value, the submissive is punished for

a wrong committed, and thereby order is restored. In this way, all the classic tropes of ritual resonate with the practices of BDSM.

But it is not simply *that* the practices do not seem to fit the categories: what is significant is the particular *way* in which the practices do not seem to fit the categories. Everything stems from the problem that the analytic category of ritual itself is the product of a secularization of theology, articulated in a discursive arena where theological underpinnings tend to be explicitly disavowed; here the arena is one of an implicit Protestantism. How is it, then, that we come to imagine scholarship as a secular enterprise?

In the closing passages of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell writes: "Certainly, analyzing the social and cultural import of ritual activities is a form of practice known only to secular societies that make a distinction between the pursuit of objective knowledge and the practice of religion…the formal study of ritual itself, therefore, may be more than a simple reflection of secularism; it might be yet another arena for negotiating the relations between the practice of knowledge and the practice of religion" (222). Yet, it is only within a particular religious framework that the separation of religion and knowledge becomes possible. As Talal Asad points out in *Genealogies of Religion*: "what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings…is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history" (1993: 42). Asad goes on to argue that "Anthropologists have…incorporated a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task – that is, the preoccupation with establishing as authoritatively as possible the meanings of representations where the explanations offered by

indigenous discourses are considered ethnographically inadequate or incomplete" (60). That is the formulation of ritual and the construction of its exegesis – in ways that constitutively break from "native" exegesis – originates in a theological arena, whose origins are effaced in the process of avowing the secularism of the academic enterprise. Asad points out that "things first have to be construed as symbolic before they can become candidates for interpretation, and in fieldwork situations it is the ethnographer who identifies and classifies symbols" (61). Here, the identification and classification of certain behavior as symbolic is part and parcel of marking behavior as ritual, whereby the designation ritual comes to embody the category imposed, a category largely shaped by Christian, specifically Protestant, concerns.

Drawing on the history of religious studies, J.Z. Smith characterizes the origin of "the study of religion as, essentially, a Protestant exercise, a heritage that continues to haunt theorists of religion even to the present day" (98). Smith goes on to note that "The study of ritual was born as an exercise in the 'hermeneutic of suspicion,' an explanatory endeavor designed to explain away…the Protestant insistence on the 'emptiness of ritual has had a number of consequences that persist" (102). Here, I would like to extend Smith's insights concerning the theological origins of the study of ritual by noting that its confinement within the category of religious experience reiterates the very problems of the making-autonomous of the religious field critiqued by Asad: the demarcation of ritual as a practice that is religious in the sense constructed by Western modernity writes out ritual forms that do not occur within this domain by marking them as "secular ritual," "ceremony," or other formulations that render them a kind of ritual-light (cf. Moore and Myerhoff 1977); this move is particularly

problematic in that such analyses do so while drawing on Durkheimian theory, but effectively forgetting the crucial equation of God and society central to the argument laid out in *The Elementary Forms*. Furthermore, it is only by maintaining an insistence on a Protestant distinction between religious and secular that the study of ritual comes to be imagined as secular in the first place. This particular problem is symptomatic of broader acts of misreading, such as the idea that the Weberian notion of *Entzauberung* is external to religion, rather than, as is the case, a manifestation of an explicitly religious process of rationalization.

In order to move forward here, it is necessary to go back, and to re-enter the conversation from another angle. I thus return to the critique of commodity fetishism, in which Marx grounds his analysis of capitalist alienation on the basis of an analogy to religious experience. In both, Marx argues, the products of humanity come to be granted power over their creators, a power that is constitutively illegitimate according to the proprietorial model of modernist agency. The Marxian precept of demystification therefore rests on an ideological prescription: Marx assumes that things ought to be otherwise, so that the elimination of false consciousness represents an attempt (in accordance with his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach) to transform what "ought to be" into what "is." Here, Marx's notion that all religions are false insofar as they constitute illusions contrasts with Durkheim's notion that all religions are true insofar as they constitute social facts. That is, the exclusive emphasis on material reality in Marxian thought derives from a dismissal of any social facts which depend entirely, for their continued existence, on a belief in their efficacy; for Marx, the spiritual is ultimately illusory and the ultimate is all that counts.

Though one could critique Marx's utopia on Durkheimian grounds (as I have suggested above), it is Max Weber, in his writings on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, who provides a most cogent and sustained critique of the exclusive emphasis on materialist explanation characteristic of Marxian thought. Weber opens his study with the problem of the underrepresentation of Catholics among leaders in business. Effectively summarizing a Marxian position, he notes that a simple, though incorrect, explanation would focus solely on materialist concerns, such as the historical distribution of resources in regions where different denominations prevailed, or statistical inequalities of access, among denominations, to the education and training necessary for entry into the business professions. Yet, Weber argued, there were crucial facts for which such a framework could not account. For example, he notes:

> among those Catholics who *do* attend secondary school, the percentage of those educated in the modern institutions designed to prepare students for *technical* studies and *commercial and business* careers, or indeed for any middle-class occupation, again falls *well* short of that of Protestants…Catholics prefer the education offered by the classics-based grammar schools. This is a phenomenon that *cannot* be explained by differences of inherited wealth. However, it may help to explain the low participation rate of Catholics in capitalist business life. (2002: 3)

From here, Weber concludes that material constraints alone do not account for statistical differences in the career trajectories of Catholics and Protestants; rather, at least in cases where access is possible, "the choice of occupation and future career has undoubtedly been determined by the *distinct mental characteristics* which have been instilled into them and indeed by the influence on them of the religious atmosphere of their locality and home background" (4). Throughout his work, Weber emphasizes

theological tensions – those between Catholicism and Protestantism as well as those among Protestant sects – as a basis on which divergent economic ideologies might be explained. Crucially, Weber shows how these theologically-grounded concepts bleed out into secular domains, shaping experiences and processes far beyond the contexts in which they originated. He writes: "The Puritans wanted to be men of the calling – we, on the other hand, must be. For when asceticism moved out of the monastic cells and into working life, and began to dominate inner-worldly morality, it helped to build that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order" (121). Thus, in addition to documenting the empirical validity of a spiritualist counterpoint to Marxian materialism, Weber shows how aspects of the modern economic order can be thought, in part, as the products of a secularized theology.[49]

Writing in a Durkheimian tradition, Mary Douglas makes a similar point, this time concerning ritual. In academic debates in comparative religion, she sees the secularized remnants of "an ancient sectarian quarrel about the value of formal ritual" (2002: 23). Further, she sees in secular social movements, such as the New Left, a recapitulation of these conflicts. In *Natural Symbols*, she opens her argument about the shift "away from ritual…to inner experience" with a critique of anti-ritualism. Critiquing New Left author Jack Newfield's assertions about mindless conformity to authority, she writes: "Shades of Luther! Shades of the Reformation and its complaint against meaningless rituals, mechanical religion, Latin as the language of the cult,

[49] In A Moment's Notice, Carol Greenhouse observes the secularization of theology vis-à-vis time, noting how linear time derives from a specifically Christian discourse of eternity, where human life unfolds between The Creation and The Last Judgment. Taken alongside Douglas, Keane, and Weber, one could argue against Charles Taylor's historicization of secularization as rendering religion private and optional; it seems rather that certain aspects of religious belief become implicit, no longer marked as such, and therefore all the more obligatory (cf. Taylor 2007).

mindless recitation of litanies. We find ourselves, here and now, reliving a worldwide revolt against ritualism" (1996:1). She thus notes the correlation between a rejection of condensed symbols, mediating institutions, and standardized/formalized expression on the one hand, and the exaltation of inner experience, instantaneousness, and intuition on the other. Following this line of thought, the stakes of the opposition become apparent: the tenets of anti-ritualism Douglas outlines are the constitutive characteristics of modern subjectivity. It is for this reason that attempting to analyze BDSM activities as forms of ritual practice seems to be, in Mary Douglas' terms, matter out of place: "ritual" and "subjectivity" tend to be thought of as conceptually opposed, and yet discourses of the modern subject are at the very heart of SMlers' ritual practices.

In order to better understand the ways in which ritual and subjectivity come to be opposed in modernist thought, one might thus revisit the theological conflicts in which key contours of the opposition took shape. These debates between Catholics and Protestants center on contested visions concerning the efficacy of Eucharistic and liturgical rites. Douglas writes that "the crux of the [Catholic] doctrine is that a real, invisible transformation has taken place at the priest's saying of the sacred words and that the eating of the consecrated host has saving efficacy…sacraments are not only signs, but essentially different from other signs, being instruments. This touches on the belief in *opus operatum*, the efficacious rite, whose very possibility was denied by Protestant reformers" (1996: 50). At stake in the conflict over the Eucharist, then, is a disagreement about symbolic efficacy: in the Protestant vision, it becomes possible and necessary to say that the bread is "only" a symbol, drawing a distinction between

symbolic and actual that is unsustainable in the theology of transubstantiation. The Protestant vision thus posits a "real reality" to which the symbol points but does not embody; in this vision the "really real" gets constructed as above and beyond the symbolic, thereby relegating symbolism to the secondary or derivative ontological status of the "mere."

In the remainder of this chapter, I present three ethnographic examples of ritualized practices, which suggest ways in which the conceptual opposition between ritual and subjectivity does not adequately account for the experiential realities of BDSM. In these instances, I argue, the tension between these two visions of symbols cannot be resolved, because these practices depend at once on both of these seemingly incommensurate frameworks: an appeal to symbolism as ontologically mere grounds the ethics and understanding of BDSM as such, while the efficacy of symbols here constitutes a necessary condition of possibility of power's exchange. Both sides of the opposition, therefore, get set to one side, as SMlers engage in ritual practices, but do so through a discursive privileging of subjectivity, the very discourse of individualism to which ritualism is ordinarily opposed.

"A male slave does not expose his genitals…":
Gor Night

Several times a year, The Gargoyle hosts a party called *Gor Abend* (Gor Night). The planet Gor is an alternate universe version of Earth in which all people exist in a social order predicated on asymmetric power relations. On Gor, there are two classes

of people: masters and slaves. Gor is the setting of a series of twenty-seven science fiction novels by John Norman, pseudonym of John Lange, a philosopher who received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1963. Cordelia, the owner of the club in which the Gor party was to take place, made it clear that the party was not attempting to be faithful to the novels. She explained to me that, while SM and Gor overlapped, there were important differences. "The novels aren't all that interesting," she said: "they get repetitive after a while. And he (John Norman) has a very misogynistic vision, for him women are slaves and men are dominant by nature, and of course in SM it is not this way at all. But we like the ambiance." This brief comment raises a number of issues concerning the production of ritualized practice: Cordelia notes how her party departs from the novels which nonetheless serve as inspiration for the evening's activities, pointing to tensions between authoritative traditionalism and constructivist innovation when it comes to the practical appropriation of textual forms. There are, she noted, some Gor dévotés who might not find the gender neutral interpretation satisfactory, seeing as they adhere strictly to the text, and to an ideology of a gendered delineation of dominance and submission, which they take to be both descriptive and prescriptive. This perspective exists in tension with the ethos of BDSM as it is practiced in Berlin generally, and at the Gargoyle specifically. For SMlers, there is no necessary correlation between gender and power position: men and women alike are free to take any position. Indeed, SMlers use precisely this rhetoric of choice to distinguish what they do from the "structural violence" characteristic of other societies in which power asymmetries are prescribed. Thus, there may be tensions between SM versions of Gor and communities forged by persons who take a more fundamentalist view of the

novels' gendered ideology, even as both groups claim to be inspired by the same text and the "ambiance" it offers.

Cordelia told me that no knowledge of the novels was necessary: she would tell me all I needed to know. This information consisted not of the history or geography of planet Gor, but rather the practical realities of status communication at this particular play party. "The important thing is the dress code. The slaves are called *kajirae*. The singular is *kajira*. It comes from the Latin. For the male slaves, therefore, we say *kajirus* in the singular and *kajiri* in the plural. Slaves wear one of three colors. White means 'I only belong to my master.' This is what beginners should do, so you will have to wear white. Red means 'you have to ask my master before you can play with me.' Yellow means 'I am the property of everyone and you can do with me whatever you will.'" Cordelia told me that in the history of doing the party no one had ever worn yellow, and her website made clear that, obviously, there would be limits: even if someone were to wear yellow, they wouldn't *really* be consenting to give up the necessity of obtaining consent for the duration of the party, because the planet Gor on which this event was taking place was located in Berlin. Indeed, this demarcation is essential to the efficacy of SM practices, which hinge on the idea that one is consenting to asymmetrical relations within a context of formal juridical equality. SMlers very explicitly reject instances of structural violence, situations where women, especially, are formally subjugated to male authority. Very often, they invoke the image of the veiled woman as *the* example of an unacceptable form of submission. Even if choice and consent are not sufficient conditions of ethical possibility, they are, for the SMlers, necessary ones.

"What about Michael," I asked: "What should he wear?" Cordelia had specially scheduled the party so that it would occur while Michael was visiting because, as she explained to me, "there are some things you just can't experience by yourself, and so it will be best if you attend with your partner." Not everyone present that evening was partnered, although most of the attendees were. Cordelia made sure I could get the maximum possible experience with this party in particular, she said, because it was so ritualistic, and I had always talked about ritual as the topic central to my study. Partially, though, it may have been because Cordelia had a special place in her heart for this party in particular, seeing as she met her partner Johannes at this party several years prior. At that time, Cordelia was a bar wench, meaning that she was a slave who belonged to the bar and the patrons could make use of her. Johannes had a girlfriend at the time, but there was a real spark between them, and after the evening Johannes informed her that he was looking to take on a second sub. Eventually, though, the other woman faded out of the picture and Cordelia and Johannes became a couple. Although they are switchers, Cordelia now is mostly the top, even though the relationship began mostly emphasizing the reverse dynamic. Despite the usual configuration, though, Cordelia would be the *kajira* that night.

"Michael should dress up in a way that suggests the Middle Ages," Cordelia said. Unfortunately for Michael, the only costume we could find was a silver and black knight's outfit, which we found at a costume shop. It was a one-piece and he felt it looked less Richard the Lion Heart and more like a dress. He fared better than I did, though. When we searched for proper slave attire on the internet, we realized that

basically, they wear thongs. We procured a sash, which we transformed into a loincloth.

The changing room in the entrance way was set off by a curtain, so that it was impossible to see inside until after entering. When in street clothes, it was impossible to cross the threshold, although Cordelia and Johannes went back and forth to open the outer door and provide key to the lockers. Michael and I changed, not knowing what to expect, he in his knight's costume and I in my white sash. Despite mental preparation, I found it embarrassing to be practically naked in front of large group of people, especially when it turned out that my loins were clothed the least of anybody's. Cordelia, however, was very pleased with my outfit: "don't be ashamed," she said to a very red-faced me, "you have to learn to be comfortable in your body. You look fantastic." We settled down in a corner, and – in typical topping-from-the-bottom fashion – I made Michael sit with his legs up so as to block my lower half from everyone's view. Cordelia and Johannes sat down next to us. The room was decorated in sheepskin rugs, flowing sheer fabrics, and candlelight. Gregorian chant played on a stereo, so electricity was being used even though most aspects of the evening's ambiance were made to appear otherwise. Beverages were served in wooden gourds or horns, and the plates were wooden too. The evening included a dinner of grilled meats, the centerpiece of which was a large leg of dried beef, with the hoof still attached. The slaves did all the serving, getting up at their masters' and mistresses' bequests.

At one point Cordelia and Johannes took all the slaves into a side room to learn the ritual for properly serving a beverage. Although Cordelia and Johannes are switchers, Cordelia is generally the top in the relationship, so this party was a rare

instance in which I saw her bottoming for Johannes. Cordelia gave us a demonstration: "First, you kneel down in what is called the tower position. For *kajirae*, you kneel with your legs open, so that your 'shame' (*Scham*) is exposed. For *kajiri*, you do a modified tower, which means that you keep your legs closed. A male slave doesn't expose his genitals because the mistress or master does not want to see that." Johannes interrupted: "Unless of course your mistress or master wants it that way. Ultimately, what they say goes, and this is just one version. Some people will say that this is not how it is in the books, but there is a lot in the books and this is what we took from them, so it is something we are showing you, but you don't have to do it that way. It's just an option."

Cordelia continued: "You lower your eyes. You hold the glass to your shame, then to your breasts, then to your lips. You take a sip, and you count seven heartbeats. This is to make sure that the beverage has not been poisoned, that you are not trying to poison your master, or if someone else poisoned it then you die and he doesn't." Johannes interrupted again: "Now there is also debate about this…some people say that a master would never drink from a glass after a *kajira* drank from it, but I think this is ridiculous." "Right," said Cordelia: "Then, after you wait seven heartbeats, you hold it out to your master, still looking down, and then he takes it when he is ready. Then after he accepts the offering he will often give you a kiss to thank you." After the demonstration, we returned to the main room to practice what we had learned. Cordelia and Johannes looked on with anticipation as I exercised my newly acquired knowledge. When the ritual was completed, I looked back at them to see how I had

done: Johannes was clapping and Cordelia had a huge grin and was clasping her hands to her heart. They were like proud parents whose baby had just taken his first step.

In teaching us the ritual, Cordelia and Johannes emphasized two different aspects of what authenticity in such a context entails. Cordelia emphasized the formal gestures, admitting modifications for gender, but presenting them as how things are done. Johannes, on the other hand, suggested that being true to the ritual meant being true to oneself: the formality's ultimate purpose had to do with one's particular partner. Thus, although the general prescription was for male slaves not to expose their genitals and for female slaves to do so, Johannes emphasized that it was ultimately a question of what pleased one's own mistress or master. Likewise, Johannes brought out debates and schools of thought within Gor communities, whereas Cordelia tried to convey their adaptation as more of a consensus.

As the evening went on, separate groups began to merge, with persons in red acting as links among the otherwise unconnected. A hand gloved with metal spikes caressed another's bare flesh. The increased energy of the room became palpable. The few singles present began, one by one, to leave. The gravitational pull toward the center of the room was like an accelerating pulse, drawing bodies into the rhythm of the group which, to the steady tune of moans punctuated at intervals by screams, was becoming as one. At last, Michael and I too decided to go, although no doubt the collective continued to wax effervescent into the early hours of morning.

"*Wenigstens ist mein Bleistift nicht verschmutzt worden*":

Merchant Training

Early in my fieldwork, Edward invited me to his space, known as the *Zentrale* (the center). We were going to go to one of his favorite hangouts, the Kit Kat Club, also known as Kitty. I arrived around 11pm. The space was a factory area in the old East Berlin, and the street was deserted. There was a large gate with a locked door at the entrance to the factory. Edward said the door would be open, but it wasn't. I called him, worried I was in the wrong place. "The door isn't open?" he asked, "Okay…I'll come and get you." When he arrived, he realized my mistake. "Richard, Richard. *Das ist ein Tor* (a gate). *Das ist eine Tür* (a door)." I had misunderstood two words that sounded similar, to my ears, over the telephone. If not the vowel sounds, though, I should have at least noted the difference in gender, since the word for "gate" is neutral and that for "door" is feminine. I was still getting used to things.

Edward was having what he called a night for the gays, as his partner Tanya was visiting with her family. There were four other guys in attendance – Markus, Jürgen, Hans, and Peter. Edward explained that Hans and Peter were married, as they had had a civil union ceremony, which in Germany is known as *Homo-Ehe* (gay marriage) even though technically it is an *eingetragener Partnerschaft*, which as a category, is juridically distinct from that of *Ehe*. Jürgen was a friend of theirs, and Markus was a friend of Edward's. The group was finishing up some drinks at a picnic table, and I was introduced. Rather, I was left to introduce myself. "I thought I'd let you tell them what you're up to," Edward said. I told them I was an anthropologist, in

Berlin studying the BDSM scene. We all went upstairs into the factory, and Edward took me into his space and told me about Markus.

Markus, he said, is his *Arbeitssklave* (work slave). He had recently returned to the *Zentrale* after some time away. "You see, I had a lover (*eine Geliebte*) and then there was Markus, and Tanya and I, we thought it would be fun to mate the two of them (he used the word *zusammenficken*, a term which doesn't really exist, but is a kind of word play suggesting 'to bring them together for the purposes of fucking' as in to merge them). Anyway, he and she hit it off, and decided to get together. It wasn't so bad to have one less lover, but to lose a work slave, that was not good. But eventually they broke things off and now he is back." While Edward was telling me this story, the group was holding council. They were deciding what was to become of my presence for the evening. I was unaware of this at the time, so skillfully was I taken out of the picture by Edward unawares. Markus knocked at the door. Edward bid him enter. "You are hereby invited," he said, "to witness a training session. The room is prepared, and so, should you choose to accept this invitation, please follow me." Edward and I followed, although he broke off in order to make coffee for everyone. He noted that this would involve going into the women's space (*das Mädchenzimmer*, the girls' room), which is normally sacred turf and off limits to men, although he had special permission to enter, he explained, since neither Tanya nor any other woman was around and coffee needed to be made.

Markus informed us that Jürgen, whose mundane profession is high school teacher, was to undergo secretarial training. We were outside the room where the main event was to take place, and Jürgen was being prepared for his session by means of

cock and ball torture, or CBT. Markus, who was in the military, took pictures with a cell phone as two other men were alternatively hitting Jürgen' penis and massaging him. "Oh, your cock looks nice," said Markus, "these pictures look great. They are perfect, and you know, Richard will need them for his book." If there had been a contest as to who turned redder, I'm not sure whether Jürgen or I would have won – he was taken in by the illusion that I would use them; I was taken in, just for a moment, by the illusion that Markus wanted to give them to me. Of course, that momentary efficacy was precisely the point. I was surprised, as this event occurred less than a month into my fieldwork, at how easily they incorporated me – as a researcher – into the scene, even though I had done my best to frame my participation in a way that was limited to the role of a spectator.

The room was set up like a theater. There was a large table in the front, like a set piece on a stage. Chairs were placed in two rows. Edward and I were placed in the front row, and Hans and Peter in the back, although they would be getting up to partake in the training. Jürgen was escorted in, he was stood at the table, facing sideways, so that he wasn't looking at us but neither was his back to us. It wasn't exactly a performance for an audience, but it wasn't not that either. Jürgen was informed that he was about to begin his *kaufmannische Ausbildung*. The word *Kaufmann* means merchant and *Ausbildung* is apprenticeship. Such apprenticeships, which last for three years, are quite common in Germany, and are required in most professions for which university education is not required. Apprentices are known as *Azubis* (short for *die Auszubildende*, meaning literally 'the ones to be educated'). Here too was a simulation of a current rite of passage, although it did not attempt to replicate an actual model of

the process, as much as it took a model of the process as a fantastic image that provided the basis of a fantastic, rhizome-like line of flight.

Markus explained to Jürgen (and, incidentally, to us) of what his training would consist. Jürgen was presented with an old Tschibo catalogue which had been lying around. He was told that his task would be to circle, on each page, the items that were under a certain price, to count the total number of items, and to put the complete count at the top of each page. He would be punished if he missed an item, or if he miscounted, or if his circles weren't pretty enough, or if he was taking too much time in executing his task. The variations were endless, and no matter how well he did, there was always something for which he could be reprimanded. Edward explained to me that this was the beauty of the design of this task, because it could be made just hard enough that Jürgen couldn't succeed. No matter what he did, the criteria could be adjusted, so that inevitably he would be punished, but at the same time would be almost in the realm where succeeding and avoiding punishment appeared to be a possibility. He was at a table, set up in the front of the room as if it were a stage, and the rest of us were sitting in chairs as would an audience. But it was clear that the performance was for Jürgen, not for us. When Markus had to laugh, which he did a few times, he would turn to us and away from Jürgen, so that, for him at least, the illusion of earnestness could be maintained. Markus ignored it if Jürgen smiled or laughed, which he did. But if his laughter got to be too overt, he would be punished for that too. Within the frame, the activity was to be taken seriously, even as there was a clear outside to the frame.

Victor Turner writes that "ritual asks us 'let us believe' whereas play tells us 'let's make believe'" (1987: 142). Here, then, we are at the liminal space between ritual and play, for within the frame of play it is clearly an instance of let us believe whereas the appeal to the outside is that of let's make believe. In Jürgen's session the boundaries are pretty clear. Afterwards, we all had coffee or beer and laughed and joked about what had transpired. Yet, when the activity moves from a demarcated session to a relationship, there is or might be the cultivation of a relationship dynamic that extends beyond the actual session, even if the dynamic is most highlighted in the explicitly demarcated BDSM activity.

These ritual acts have a kind of initiatory character, only one's status doesn't necessarily change permanently after the ritual is over. One returns to the mundane world. Yet, the next time one enters the ritual frame, one's education may be continued, so that these activities become progressive. One can learn to take more, learn to give more, and this increased capability, as well as knowledge, does contribute to one's status as a participant in the group. Elsa and Georg They had played for well over an hour one night, with Georg slapping and tickling Else with various implements. In this way, they were playing "school," where Georg as teacher administered tougher punishments as Elsa progressed through the grade levels. "At first I only got to the third grade (*dritte Klasse*)," she said, "but tonight I made it to fifth." They had played for well over an hour that night, with Georg slapping and tickling Else with various implements. Else was still in elementary school (*die Grundschule*), though. It would be quite some time before she could get through the school entirely. At one point, prior to my arrival in the field, Edward had run a "school for uneducable girls." This

evening was referenced often among those who had participated, a reminiscence that suggests a memorable, perhaps indelible, event, and the salience of the symbolic form of the school, upon which the enactment was predicated.

The Meditation Room:

On the Utilization of Sanctified Space

One national meeting of a group for Christian SMlers took place at a retreat house in a quiet little town in central Germany. The group, it was emphasized, was not "out" to their hosts, and so it was crucial not to dress up outside the house or otherwise advertise the specific nature of the organization. Participants assembled from around the country. Most of those present either lead or take part in one of the "regional" groups. During the time of my fieldwork, there were four, one for each of the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. The Berlin chapter represents "east"; not all of the groups meet in, or draw a majority of their participants from, urban centers, but most of those who attended regional meetings of the "east" chapter were active in other SM-related activities in Berlin. Although there are four chapters, the national leadership consists of three organizers, known as *Orgas*, a term used in a variety of groups, not just among SMlers. Part of the national meeting is devoted to the business of the group, which takes place in an *Orgarunde*. Up until the first meeting I attended, the *Orgarunde* was open to everyone (voting was limited to those who had attended at least one prior national meeting) but divisions in the group made for difficulties, and so it was determined during that *Orgarunde* to abolish that format and create the three

person committee that could make decisions in between the semi-annual national meetings, at which point elections would take place.

All participants lived in the retreat house for the weekend. It was set up like a *Jugendherberge* or youth hostel, with bunk beds in rooms. Most of these beds were only large enough for one person, although there was one room with a bed for two, which Anna called the honeymoon suite. Meals were all had communally. Before each meal, Anna gathered the group for the singing of a hymn. She led us in song as we stood around the table before sitting down to eat. Everything was done communally. At the beginning of the weekend, a schedule was made, so that everyone had turns shopping, preparing meals, setting the table, cleaning up, taking out the garbage and recycling, and so forth. All the tasks were shared equally. There were no tasks reserved for men or women, or for subs or doms. Every participant had an equal number of shifts, but certain people (who had been participants longer) were put in charge where leadership was necessary, as in determining the menu and shopping list. That the group was dedicated to participation in hierarchical relations threw the painstaking egalitarianism concerning divisions of labor all the more into relief.

The space reserved for meals doubled as a meeting space, but there was one room set apart. This was the meditation room, which was used for two purposes only: the Saturday night play party and the Sunday morning church service. Anna explained that she found both aspects to be central to these meetings because, although some people didn't feel the play party was necessary, she thought that SM was a key aspect of the group, and that a play party was an important way to experience that, a symbolic assertion reiterating that of the altar discussed in chapter two. After dinner, people

changed out of their street clothes and into party attire, before assembling in the meditation room. When they arrived, Anna put on some music and began an interpretive dance which she invited me to join. The dancing, she said, would create the right atmosphere, because in her experience people were shy and slow to get started, and so there needed to be something to break the ice. The two of us danced in the center of the room, with everyone sitting around us along the edges. When our performance was finished everyone applauded, and then there was a lull as the music continued.

After a while, the playing began. It began slowly, with the sounds of a light spanking. At first, I didn't think much would happen, reading – despite Anna's comments – the group's hesitancy more as a lack of enthusiasm. But as the evening went on, the playing became more intense. Angelika let one man tie her up: her hands were attached, above her head, to a beam hanging across the ceiling. Her legs were spread, likewise cuffed in a long metal bar that was placed on the floor. The man began to whip her. The lashings intensified for a while, and then subsided. As they did, another man approached her, with a device that administers small electric shocks. He would touch her with the device between her legs in between the thrashings of the whip. Over the course of an hour and a half, five men and one woman would take turns whipping Angelika.

Whippings, like spankings, require habituation, so that the person administering a whipping begins gently, gradually progressing to greater levels of intensity. As the pain became more intense, Angelika let out screams, which became louder as the session went on. When she screamed, the person lashing her would stop, but then she

would taunt him, as a way of saying "continue." Another participant looked at me: "I bet you find this very hard to understand," she said, "how people can find pleasure in this. But we do. Don't look so sad. She's strong. She can take it." I nodded at the time, but it wasn't so much sadness I was feeling as it was fear: we were in a small town, a quiet town, in a retreat house. What if people heard the screaming? What if the police came to investigate? What if people barged in? Things would look, I worried, very much other than what they were.

Eventually, Angelika stopped taunting the men when the whipping subsided, and she was untied. After a while, she recovered, and accepted one of the men's request that she whip him. She tied him up, just as she had been, and she gave him an exercise. He was to count the lashes, and would be punished for miscounting, or not counting audibly, similarly to the merchant training activity discussed above. He kept fumbling the counts, though. At first this resulted in a harsh expression, and more strikes of the whip. Eventually though, in all the excitement, he was really having trouble with the count, and she was having a hard time suppressing her laughter. Here too she did her best to do it behind his back, so as not to break the illusion for him, again making clear that in these scenarios the performance is very much intended to be experientially efficacious first and foremost for the sub.

The effects of this communal gathering spilled over into the next morning. The cohesion at that breakfast that was tangible. Angelika giggled with glee as she showed one man, who had retired prior to the festivities, that her backside was still gleaming red. After breakfast we broke into groups to prepare the church service. There were groups for liturgy, decorations, music, and prayer. The liturgical group

picks out the biblical passages to be read; one member of that group gives the sermon, and another leads the breaking of bread and drinking of wine in commemoration of the Last Supper. The decoration group sets up the altar in the room's center and sets up the communion. The music group, which was led by Anna, picks out the hymns to be song. And the prayer group leads the group in prayer, which at this service consisted of each attendee lighting a candle and asking God for something: for acceptance, for the health or wellbeing of those not present, for an unemployed or sick relative to get a job, for people not to feel alone.

From Inscription to Exchange:
Sincerity and the Subjunctive Mood

In all of these instances, ritual provides a spatial and temporal framework in which enactments of dominance and submission occur. In addition to space and time, salient symbols of power, whether through clothing or cultural institutions, provide a basis through which the exchange of power can be articulated and communicated. Yet, as the descriptions of merchant training and the meditation room activities bring to light, so much of what happens in this exchange is for the benefit of the bottom or submissive. Markus makes especially clear that it is the erection of his apprentice that is of central importance, and he used this erection as a barometer for assessing the sub's pleasure throughout the scene, adjusting his own behavior to the corporeal response he was getting. But this attention is not understood among practitioners as "topping from the bottom," in that this dynamic is not experienced as itself a form of

service. Rather, caring for the bottom is understood to be a responsibility of the top, a responsibility that comes with the privileges of dominance. This care must be conveyed outwardly in the actions and expressions of the top's power. Thus, these actions do not "merely" symbolize a form of power existing external to its expression, but rather they in and of themselves cultivate the experiential efficacy of power-asymmetric positionality. At the same time, it is essential that this notion of care is bound up with a sense of the sub's pleasure, suggesting that, for SMlers, pleasure itself is an integral component of what caring must entail. And the concept of pleasure valorized here is grounded in the rhetoric of individualist choice. In teaching the ritual of service, Johannes emphasized that one's own needs were the necessary basis of the rite's efficacy. Throughout, these ritual forms disrupt the conceptual dichotomies through which they might be made intelligible, by falling to both sides of the line at once, by presenting one side but doing so by appropriating the discourse characteristic of the other.

As argued above, the apparently paradoxical nature of BDSM can be effectively read as a continued (albeit secularized) grappling with conflicting theological visions of symbolic efficacy. One the one hand, SMlers subscribe to the logic of the "mereness" of symbols: it is precisely because their practices, such as whipping or simulated rape, are constructed as "only" symbolic that they can be differentiated from "real" forms of assault and structural violence; to that end, BDSM practices challenge notions of automatic symbolic efficacy, insofar as the bruise or cut comes to mean something other than what it appears to mean, even as the apparent (or, in the terminology of Roland Barthes, "degree-zero") reading is the basis upon which the

differential signification derives its experiential force. On the other hand, in order for BDSM practices to generate and sustain the desired power relations, these activities cannot be thought to be "merely" symbolic. The danger that a ritual, such as kneeling before one's master, might be "empty" – that is, devoid of the feelings of submissiveness of which such a gesture "ought" to be indicative – is seen by many SMlers as an existential threat to the efficacy of their practices, an efficacy that depends upon an assumption of a mutual understanding through which exchanges of power can be said to take place. That is, SMlers are very much concerned with negotiating the distinction between BDSM as "serious" play and BDSM as "only" play, a distinction that depends upon contested notions of symbolic efficacy.

These contests over symbols, though, correlate with discrepant visions of subjectivity and agency; these discrepancies manifest in articulations about fetishism, as Webb Keane has shown in his book *Christian Moderns*. Keane defines fetishism as "an imputation directed at others who have purportedly confounded the proper boundaries between agentive subjects and mere objects," so that "the concept of fetish arises in a comparative context, as an observer's response to seeing *other* people attribute false values to objects. Such discourses of fetishism and idolatry are marked by their doubleness: they require both a fetishist and an outside observer in whose eyes the fetishist is trapped in misrecognition" (2007: 77, 225). Here, Keane draws a crucial connection between fetishism and idolatry: both consist in accusations of false attributions of agency, of distinguishing "properly" between subject and object. Equally importantly, Keane notes that it is only from the perspective of another epistemological system that accusations of fetishism can be made.

In this way, debates about symbolic efficacy constitute refractions of conflicting visions about what it means to be a subject, debates that play out theologically as a contrast between the formality of ritual and the sincerity of belief. Keane writes that "Calvinism's semiotic ideology sharpened the distinction between material expression and immaterial meaning and put them in a hierarchical relation to one another, endowing this distinction with grave moral consequences. It privileged belief, associated with immaterial meaning, over practices that threatened to subordinate belief to material form" (67). To illustrate this point, he turns to the Nicene Creed. Although the creed itself constitutes an embodied liturgical form to be recited collectively, he argues, it is nonetheless deployed in Protestant thought as paradigmatic of an inward act, emphasizing the moral project of making the recited words one's own. Thus, the opposition of ritual and sincerity does not depend on an eradication of semiotic form (which Keane declares ultimately impossible), but on the establishment of a hierarchical relation in which the interiority of thought and intention are granted primacy over the external forms through which such thoughts are symbolized and communicated. The privileging of sincerity depends on an ideal of autonomous subjectivity, of accountability to oneself (cf. Trilling 1972). Sexual orientation as self-truth, for example, is a product of this ideal; SMlers both deploy this discourse, insofar as they claim to "be" SMlers, and subvert it, insofar as that "being" is predicated on doing, that is, on engagement in ritual forms. The man who kneels before his mistress without "feeling" submissive cannot be said to be engaged in empty ritual to the same extent that a nonbeliever reciting the credo could be said to be insincere, insofar as engaging in such behavior despite the fact that one isn't in the

mood could be thought as genuine submission in one sense, just as the same man kneeling precisely because he *wants* to might be thought as not "really" submissive at all. These tensions between the subjunctivity of ritual and the sincerity of subjectivity are in fact central to the semiotic form in which BDSM practices occur.

In depending on sincerity as an ideal, modern notions of subjectivity presume the consciousness of the subject, who must be thought of as capable of being in a position to discern the extent to which s/he is sincere. Thus, accusations of fetishism are, at heart, assertions about true and false consciousness, constructing an opposition between "real" and "mystified" realities: in such a framework, the subjunctive as-if is thought to be an illusion to be demystified rather than as a potent instantiating force to be embraced. In this sense, there is a certain parallelism between accusations of fetishism and analyses of ritual forms: "analyzing the social and cultural import of ritual activities is a form of practice known only to secular societies that make a distinction between the pursuit of objective knowledge and the practice of religion" (Bell 1992: 222). Here, religious studies scholar Catherine Bell notes a *pattern* to the break with native exegesis characteristic of anthropological theories of ritual practices: "a focus on ritual performances integrates *our* thought and *their* action" (32). She writes: "The thought-action dichotomy not only differentiates ritual-as-activity as an object of theoretical attention; it also differentiates a 'thinking' subject from an 'acting' object – or, when pushed to its logical conclusion, a 'thinking' subject from a 'nonthinking' object" (47). Even without going so far as to claim that "we" think while "they" act, a subject/object distinction between ethnographer and informant is

nonetheless introduced, because "we" are interested in "them" to the extent that "their" actions provide the grounds upon which "our" thoughts can be developed.

This tendency can be observed, for example, in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. In *The Logic of Practice*, he argues that "The Kabyle woman setting up her loom is not performing an act of cosmogony; she is simply setting up her loom to weave cloth intended to serve a technical function. It so happens that, given the symbolic equipment available to her…she can only think what she is doing in the enchanted, that is to say, mystified, form that spiritualism, thirsty for eternal mysteries, finds so enchanting" (1990: 96). He goes on to claim that "Rites take place because, and only because, they find their *raison d'être* in the conditions of existence and the dispositions of agents who cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation, mystical effusions, or metaphysical *Angst*" (96). In a Marxian vein, Bourdieu contends that it is not enough to simply point out the internal logic of rites, but to identify and describe the *material* conditions that make such practices possible and necessary (97). But in confining an explanation of these practices to their production in a context of economic subordination, Bourdieu perpetuates a logic of *spiritual* subordination as well: any cosmological claim the woman at her loom might make is rendered null, a product of the mystification of a spiritualist false consciousness. What such an analytic framework constructs, then, is an opposition between ritual and subjectivity, because investment in rites is read as symptomatic of a deficiency in subjectivity's proper exercise.

In order to overcome this formulation of a subject/object relation, Bell suggests "ritualization" as an advance over thinking in terms of ritual:

> How can the distinguishing features of so-called ritual activities be approached without cutting ritual off from what it shares with social activity in general? One solution to this impasse would suggest that we refer to the particular circumstances and cultural strategies that generate and differentiate activities from each other. This approach, which assumes a focus on social action in general, would then look to how and why a person acts so as to give some activities a privileged status vis-à-vis others. Rather than impose categories of what is or is not ritual, it may be more useful to look at how human activities establish and manipulate their own differentiation and purposes – in the very doing of the act within the context of other ways of acting.
>
> With this approach in mind, I will use the term 'ritualization' to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities apart from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors. (74).

Bell proposes "ritualization" as way to obviate arguments about what does and does not constitute ritual, a preoccupation of ritual theorists which, she notes, has resulted in the "cleaning up" of data that do not fit the theorist's definition of ritual over and against the empirical realities with which that theorist is confronted. In effect, the "impasse" to which Bell refers stems from a refusal to take empirical realities seriously enough; her prescription for reformulating in terms of ritualization follows a Durkheimian logic emphasizing differential relations, while adding emphasis to the "strategic" dimensions of such differentiations as a form of active engagement in cultural, historical and political processes rather than deploying a discourse of the product as detemporalized object. It is not surprising, however, that ritualization, as Bell herself notes, "is now frequently the preferred term for studies focusing on ritual

in technologically advanced societies" (89). That is, the emphasis on conceptual engagement is already the norm for those writing about societies where modern subjectivity is presumed; while Bell argues for a universalization of the conciliatory term, such a move down plays the genealogical significance of the emergence of ritualization as a concept that distinguishes certain ritualized activities from "ritual" proper, which functions as a proxy for a division between the West and the rest. In other words, there is a way in which a move to the term ritualization leaves the problematic elements of ritual intact. Emphasizing ritualization as active engagement is an important step, but as soon as one speaks of the products of ritualization, the old impasse threatens to resurface, along with all of the prejudices that Bell seeks to circumvent. From the beginning, my proposal to study the ritual practices of SMlers posed something of a conceptual problem for many of the anthropologists with whom I consulted as the project took shape. Yet it would be a mistake to subordinate the discussion of ritual to the classic categories – the celebration of cosmological events, rites of passage, practices of healing – and to determine the extent to which my empirical research resonated with any of those forms, and if not, to conclude that ritualization would be a more appropriate term, after all. Such an approach would construct the very logic against which Bell is writing – that to talk about ritual one has to arrive at a definition of what does and does not count as ritual, effectively cleaning up the data in order to preserve a conceptual framework – while simultaneously offering Bell's own terminology as a way of maintaining the very distinction Bell herself was attempting to negate.

This, then, is the danger in Bell's attempt to universalize a particular terminological alternative: because the ritualization/ritual distinction already operated as a euphemistic way to assert a differentiation between technologically advanced societies and their others, an implicit opposition between modern and primitive – an opposition that could not be explicitly articulated among contemporary professional anthropologists – nonetheless persists in a tendency to code some activities as ritualization and others as ritual (proper). The problem is that "ritualization" tends to be invoked when those engaging in ritualized practices belong to populations in which modernist subjectivity is presumed and/or investigated; "ritual," however, tends to be reserved for the ritualized practices of those populations whose members are not analyzed in such terms. Here, problematic presuppositions about true and false consciousness remain, so that the characterization of ritual as "mindless" gets preserved through the bracketing out of explicitly conscious practices. Alternatively put, as soon as one thinks of *all* rituals as products of ritualization – which is Bell's argument – what remains is not an opposition, but a discursive emphasis, whereby a preference for the term ritualization is symptomatic of a tendency to emphasize modern, conscious subjectivity. That is, while I agree wholeheartedly with Bell's argument about ritualization, I find it necessary, given the particular ethnographic circumstances in which I write, to reverse and extend her terms: while Bell argues that, effectively, all rituals can be thought as forms of ritualization, I claim that the reverse is also true. Moving away from a framework that opposes strategic ritualization and mindless ritual resituates the assertion of consciousness as one kind of strategic engagement among others.

The valorization of consciousness emerges in contexts where individualist formulations of subjectivity are salient. This valorization coincides with an ideology of subjective autonomy and an investment in the proprietorial metaphor of self-authorship. As secularized theology, the invocation of the interior/anterior self derives from attempts to overcome sectarian concerns about the emptiness of ritual through a heightened investment in belief. In this framework, the religious becomes dematerialized as the material world becomes despiritualized, so that *Entzauberung* comes to be falsely thought as a moving away from religion, rather than as a phenomenon occurring *within* the framework of a specifically (if not explicitly) religious outlook. Like the academic theorists alluded to by Douglas, the SMlers of Berlin have inherited the terms of this sectarian struggle. SMlers express and adhere to a belief in subjective autonomy in the name of which they claim the right to dominate and submit in ritualized exchanges of power. That is, SMlers construct their rituals using the discourse of subjectivity.

Yet, given the conceptual opposition between subjectivity and ritual, there is little available language with which to express having both. Concerns about "empty" ritual abounded among the people with whom I worked; indeed, many of the SMlers I encountered expressed deep anxieties about using terms such as ritual and play, that these terms would somehow mark their practices as *less* than what they are. Likewise, the devaluation of play as "only" pretend proved challenging for many practitioners, whose own subjectivities became ontologically uncertain on the very conceptual grounds through which their practices were ethically distinguished from illegitimate forms of domination: what does it mean when "play" is what defines who these people

take themselves to be? What do terms like "play" and "reality" signify in such a context, and how might their differentiation contribute to contemporary debates about performativity as an ontological ground?

As we saw in chapter four, Mauss underscores the importance of the subjunctive mood in relations of exchange; yet, modernist ideologies, privileging inscription, valorize notions of sincerity. In *Ritual and its Consequences*, a recent work in the field of interdisciplinary ritual studies, discussion hinges on an ideal-typical opposition between subjunctivity and sincerity as two poles from which experiential realities might be approached. The "as if" of subjunctivity contrasts with the "as is" of sincerity: if subjunctive forms are maintained through the externalized practices of ritual, sincere forms depend upon the interiorized intentions of an individual subject. Arguing that ritual "is an endless work of creating a subjunctive world in overt tension with the world of lived experience" (Seligman et al 28), the authors contend that modernist critiques of ritual, in privileging sincerity, constitute a refutation of the subjunctive mood as such. Thus, the modernist ideology of subjective interiority is thought to be predicated on an opposition between the subjunctive and the sincere; yet, in their exchanges of power, SMlers access both discursive frameworks at once.

SMlers thus posit the simultaneous coexistence of two kinds of reality. The first, the reality of play, contrasts with the second, that of everyday life. Yet, these two realities do not constitute a simple opposition; rather, the latter encompasses the former, thereby generating its experiential efficacy and cultural intelligibility as a particular form of discursive practice. Here, too, SMlers do not simply reject one kind

of order in favor of another, for it is only in relation to the everyday that the specificities of the session take shape. Demarcation comes to signify interdependence rather than mutual exclusivity, in accordance with the spatiotemporal framework elaborated by Durkheim in his discussion of ritual practice. But if the maintenance of the subjunctive mood is crucial to the experiential realities of power exchange in BDSM, the valorization of subjunctivity remains nonetheless fraught in the context of a modernist ideological framework, which privileges above all else sincerity as an ideal.

Daniel, for example, brought up the issue of prostitution. He said that it was important to differentiate between a person who has sex for money and a submissive required to engage in sex with another at her (or his) master's (or mistress's) bequest. Daniel said there was an important difference between these two because "with the prostitute it is just for money, but to prostitute oneself for a master, that is something else, because there is the meaning behind it, there is the connection to the master." Here, without articulating it directly, Daniel proposes a connection between ritual and gift. The ritual prostitution of the submissive here functions also as a gift, so that the act of gifting "oneself" in this way is thought of in opposition to the commodified vision of prostitution for money. Crucial, here, is the way in which sincerity intermingles with the subjunctive mood, because it is only as a result of sincere submission that the "as-if" character of the act can be understood as such.

It follows, then, that the apparent paradox of BDSM can be articulated in yet another way. SMlers require a valorization of subjunctivity that is discursively inaccessible in contexts where sincerity is the privileged ideological form; yet, BDSM practices only emerge in such contexts, and indeed depend on the very notion of the

interior subject to which the emptiness of ritual and subjunctivity are juxtaposed. That is, we have arrived at a second thesis, parallel to the first. In fact, the first thesis – that SMlers engage in gift relations, but do so within discursive contexts privileging commodity exchange – turns out to be a corollary of the second, to which it is subsidiary. The key, then, is that *SMlers engage in ritual practices, but do so within discursive contexts privileging subjectivity*.

This point has implications for our understanding of how inscription and exchange operate socially. We have seen that the salience of the mark depends fundamentally upon its social positioning, which is to say its circulation, in the social sphere. Signification requires at least some degree of consensus to be communicably intelligible, and it is only insofar as symbols circulate that they may function as territorializing marks at all. If we imagine inscriptions as powerful in and of themselves, that is because we fail to recognize the exchanges through which such power is produced. In arguing for a privileging of inscription over and against the frameworks in and through which inscriptive forces circulate, Deleuze and Guattari seem to fall prey to fantasies idealizing an individualistic autonomy that is not empirically possible. In this sense, their critique is not only anti-oedipal, it is anti-cultural. Indeed, they draw on anthropological works in order to critique psychoanalysis by analogy. They claim: "There is no ethnological interpretation for the simple reason that there is no ethnographic material: there are only uses and functionings…there is no unconscious material either, but only uses, analytic uses of the syntheses of the unconscious, which do not allow themselves to be defined by an assignment of a signifier any more than by the determination of signifieds. How it

works is the sole question" (1983: 180). Yet one would have to be quite naïve to believe that functionalist thinking really assumes that uses and functionings actually "work" all the time. Even in functionalist writings, though, a key value of ethnographic material consists in its intricate documentation of instances of breakdown and transformation, its ability to refute the totalizing gestures of sweeping generalizations through an insistence on the importance of empirical specificities.

Deleuze and Guattari's privileging of inscription over exchange results in an apparent call for a re-disciplining of the anthropological project: "The great book of modern ethnology is not so much Mauss' *The Gift* as Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. At least it should be. For the *Genealogy*, the second essay, is an attempt – and a success without equal – at interpreting primitive economy in terms of debt, in the debt-debtor relationship, by eliminating every consideration of exchange or interest '*à l'anglaise'*…Far from being an appearance assumed by exchange, debt is the immediate effect or the direct means of the territorial and corporal inscription process. Debt is the direct result of inscription" (1983: 190). Before returning to the claim that modern ethnology should be founded on Nietzsche rather than Mauss, let us look more closely at the second essay of the *Genealogy*. What do Deleuze and Guattari mean when they say Nietzsche eliminates exchange?

Nietzsche believes that autonomy and morality are mutually exclusive (1967: 59), but at the same time he contends that the right to make promises is the mark of a sovereign individual governed by his conscience. Yet, Nietzsche also observes that the efficacy of the promise requires a certain degree of calculability only attainable through social cultivation: "with the aid of the morality of mores and the social straitjacket,

man was actually *made* calculable" (59). Thus, paradoxically, the conscience of the sovereign – "the right to affirm oneself" – arises necessarily out of the very morality that is characterized as antithetical to autonomy, for the right to make promises is above all dependent on being believed to be worthy of making them, which is to say dependent on the standards of others. Nietzsche's chief concern, though, is the phenomenon of bad conscience – *schlechtes Gewissen* – in which one feels shame, guilt, or disgust at one's actions or thoughts. He writes: "I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced – that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace" (84). Being ashamed at one's "natural" instincts – such as taking pleasure at other people's pain, and taking others' wills as equal to one's own – these are the symptoms of the "disease" of bad conscience. Thus, Nietzsche writes these symptoms as later historical developments, away from the originary autonomy and self-satisfaction on which his view of human nature is founded. His narrative of the genealogy of exchange serves to further this individualistic ideology.

Exchange enters the picture on the basis of the homonymy of the word *Schuld*, which in German signifies both debt and guilt. Claiming that the "oldest and most primitive personal relationship" is traceable to the contractual relation between creditor and debtor (70, 63), Nietzsche contends that guilt originates as debt, which can be repaid through punishment: "every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the *pain* of the culprit" (63). Thus: "An equivalence is provided by the creditor's receiving, in place of a literal compensation for an injury

(thus in place of money, land, possessions of any kind), a recompense in the form of a kind of pleasure – the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely upon the one who is powerless…the enjoyment of violation" (64-5). For Nietzsche, the pain of an injury suffered by the creditor can be repaid by the pleasure of cruelty. Furthermore the effect is reciprocal: significantly, he contends that whereas "punishment is supposed to possess the value of awakening the *feeling of guilt* in the guilty person…generally, punishment makes men hard and cold," so that "it was precisely through punishment that the development of the feeling of guilt was most powerfully *hindered*" (81-2). That is, just as the pleasure of cruelty compensates the creditor for material loss, the suffering on the part of the debtor removes both his debt and his guilt, *Schuld* in both senses of the term. In this representation, a perversion occurs when the creditor feels guilty in the exercise of cruelty: when morality disrupts the pleasure of causing another to suffer, the isomorphism of the homonymy no longer functions.

Deleuze and Guattari contend that Nietzsche eliminates exchange by virtue of the fact that he does not present a notion of interest; yet, his account cannot be said to be strictly transactional, limited to two parties. Central to his narrative is the notion of the *spectator*. He writes: "the invention of 'free will,' of the absolute spontaneity of man in good and in evil, was devised above all to furnish a right to the idea that the interest of the gods in man, in human virtue, *could never be exhausted*. There must never be any lack of real novelty, of really unprecedented tensions, complications, and catastrophes on the stage of the earth: the course of a completely deterministic world would have been predictable for the gods and they would have grown wary of it…the entire mankind of antiquity is full of tender regard for 'the spectator,' as an essentially

public, essentially visible world, which cannot imagine happiness apart from spectacles and festivals" (69). In addition to the creditor and debtor there is the spectator, the observer, the "third" so central to anthropological approaches to exchange. The spectator gods take an *interest* in man, above all because he is *interesting*, which is to say not *entirely* calculable or predictable. The idea of earth as a stage implies both performance and audience, so that the contractual nature of exchange extends beyond the two parties involved, and indeed can be thought of in part as a performance in which the spectator is inextricably implicated.

In Nietzsche's account, the third shifts from spectator gods to community (partially prefiguring the famous Durkheimian equation of god and society, if in not nearly as nuanced a fashion): "the lawbreaker is above all a 'breaker,' a breaker of his contract and his word with the whole in respect to all the benefits and comforts of communal life of which he has hitherto had a share. The lawbreaker…has actually attacked his creditor: therefore, he is not only deprived henceforth of all these advantages and benefits, as is fair – he is also reminded of what these benefits are really worth. The wrath of the disappointed creditor, the community, throws him back again into the savage and outlaw state against which he has hitherto been protected: it thrusts him away – and now every kind of hostility may be vented upon him" (71). Here, to break with one's creditor is to break with the community, because the force of the community backs the creditor. Indeed, for Nietzsche the problem with contractual logic is that it requires external force, which could be enforced against the strong by the weak. Thus, he reasons that the genesis of the social out of an originary independent state of nature could not be based on an image of social contract: "He who can

command, he who is by nature 'master,' he who is violent in act and bearing – what has he to do with contracts!" (86). Thus, if the contract is in his account the oldest form of personal relationship, contractual engagement nonetheless presupposes a social milieu as a practical condition of its possibility, so that the contractual inscription depends upon a preexistent domain of circulation for the efficacy of its enforcement.

What, then, are the stakes of the differences between Nietzsche and Mauss if not, through the elimination of interest, a de-socialization of exchange? Contractual engagement, according to Nietzsche, precludes the possibility of an autonomous subject. Thus, if the transactional contract is the oldest form of personal relationship, there must be an antecedent form of relationality from which the personal relationship can be derived. It would seem, then, that Nietzsche actually valorizes Mauss' insistence on the anteriority of the gift, but there is more to the story, for there is in fact something strikingly absent in Nietzsche's account.

Laying out his program in *The Gift's* introduction, Mauss writes: "we seek here to study only one characteristic – one that goes deep but is isolated: the so to speak voluntary character of these total services, apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested. Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest" (1990: 3). Mauss' study is really a meditation on a dynamic – that of the social reality arising out of forms of interaction that *seem* to be voluntary, yet are *actually* obligatory. When exchanging gifts, everything takes place as if the interaction were voluntary, when

really it is obligatory. Again, a crucial point of *The Gift*, though, is that the seeming voluntariness is actually essential: the efficacy of gift exchange depends upon the valorization of the "polite fiction" of the as-if so that, if gift exchange is to be understood, one cannot eliminate the subjunctive.

There are, then, several crucial distinctions between Nietzsche and Mauss: first, in the former's account of exchange, there is no valorization of the subjunctive mood as a salient social force in its own right. Nietzsche's primitive economics is founded on the very "icy utilitarian calculation" that for Mauss "is not behind us, but lies ahead" (1990: 76). Second, whereas Nietzsche argues that the earliest forms of exchange produce stable asymmetrical relationships between creditor and debtor, and that it is only a later, perverse development in which a person comes to consider other wills as equals, Mauss traces a more dialectical relationship between giver and receiver, where each becomes the other in turn. For him, asymmetries in status are transient, volatile and contingent, produced and reproduced socially through engagement in exchange rather than as effects of the assertion of an individual will to power. It should be clear why the "great book of modern ethnology" (or, in its American manifestation, socio-cultural anthropology) is not so much Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* as it is Mauss' *The Gift*. But if the epistemological stake of the difference between them *seems* to be about the relative primacy of inscription and exchange, *actually* it is a question of the salience of subjunctivity in social life.

It is here that the ethnographic and anthropological aspects of this project intersect: just as subjunctivity is central to Mauss' notions of gift exchange, it is essential to SMlers' notions of power exchange. As with the Maussian gift, the

practice of SM is predicated on a distinction between the subjunctive and the indicative, where the former cannot be simply eliminated in favor of the latter, in a gesture of *Entzauberung*, but must be socially salient if its discursive and experiential dimensions are to remain efficacious. If questions about conjunctive identification seem to be struggles over signification, inscription, and the meanings of signs, actually they are contests over domains of circulation, and yet here too the emphasis of the apparent is central to dynamics of the actual.

The mark makes the territory, but as the existence of territory is the product of acts of territorialization, there can be no unmarked categories, no outside to the dynamics of territoriality. In BDSM, the broader egalitarian ideological framework makes the consensual exchange of power intelligible and possible for practitioners in ways that would not make sense in settings where such structural inequalities were juridically real. But if discursive conventions make certain modes of existence possible, they also pose problems for people attempting to live their lives in ways that do not necessarily conform to the expectations to which they are ultimately accountable, as well as for anthropologists studying those whose ways of being do not fit into one such framework or other.

SMlers discuss their practices, entailing asymmetrical relations of domination and submission, as exchanges of power, but these exchanges are circumscribed by inscriptive frameworks that make them intelligible and communicable: semiotic frameworks concerning clothing, décor, and the uses of language and symbols; juridical and political frameworks delineating the possibilities and limits of consent, creating zones of acceptable spaces in which certain practices might occur; ritual

frameworks demarcating these practices from mundane activities in space and time; economic frameworks designating and differentiating access to certain activities; and frameworks of kinship that serve as a basis for depicting various forms of relationships. Taking power, as SMlers do, as an object of exchange, one can examine broader possibilities for grappling with the powerful inscriptions that discursively shape the contours of experiential existence, providing the groundwork for understandings of subjectivity that do not depend upon impossible notions of individual autonomy. Thus, we now turn to the implications of SMlers' discursive practices for discussions of agency.

Chapter Six:

Concerning Agency:

The Magic of Consent

Learning the Ropes:

A Shibari Lesson

When I arrived at the building, I thought I must have written down the wrong address. It was an office complex: attorneys and accountants mostly, not exactly a location where one would expect to find an SM studio. As discussed in chapter one, a key feature of the "scene" is its geographic deterritorialization: rather than being concentrated in particular zones/ghettoes or neighborhood-districts, locales emerge and thrive in variegated and unexpected contexts. In contrast to older territorialized forms, these venues are practically invisible to those who aren't looking for them, and can be difficult to find even for those who are. In many instances, I walked past a destination without realizing it: with the exception of a leather store and male-only bars located in the Bermuda Triangle (the heart of Schöneberg's gay district), most SM establishments do not utilize their exteriors so as to call attention to what transpires inside. As with the munches (biweekly discussion groups that take place in an otherwise-ordinary restaurant), this studio inhabits a mundane space, reterritorializing it for scene-related purposes, but in ways that seem to leave the larger arena unmarked.

I rang the doorbell and was buzzed in. The space was at the end of a long corridor, with other offices lining the hall. This arrangement probably wouldn't be possible in a city such as New York, where business professionals are known to keep long hours. Punctuality is a highly-regarded value in Germany, though, so the three-piece-suited neighbors are long since gone by the time the bondage classes begin. Don, the instructor, came out into the hallway to greet me; three women including Caroline, his assistant, were already inside. Two others, a man and a woman, came later. I was the only new student that week, and I had very minimal experience with Shibari, or Japanese rope bondage. Shibari, from the Japanese *shibaru*, to tie or bind, is the term used in Germany to refer to these practices. Germans consistently emphasize that Shibari is an "ancient" Japanese martial art. Although, as I was told, the erotic use of bondage practices in Japan has been documented only in the twentieth century, and in any case differs phenomenologically from combative engagement, the symbolism of elsewhere, antiquity, and war nevertheless remain imaginatively central to these German practitioners' own interpretations of rope play. That is, the subjunctive framework in which these practices become efficacious requires everything to happen as if they were transformations of a violent impulse into a mutually-fulfilling, sensual engagement. Of course, as practiced in SM contexts, there is nothing particularly violent about rope bondage; indeed, great care is taken to make sure that the person being tied up is comfortable and not at risk for injury. But the imagination of an originary violence and its subsequent transformation in and through erotic practice is essential to the ways in which practitioners discuss the form.

In fact, Don informed me that I was not in an SM studio at all. "This is a Dojo," he said: "That is, what we do here is a martial art. All we do is teach you the techniques: the lessons consist of technical exercises. What you do with what you learn here, on your own time, well that is up to you." Part of this insistence on a purely technical approach may have at least as much to do with the way in which businesses are officially registered and categorized as with an ideological commitment to a pure focus on technical competence-building. In any case, all of the teaching is consistent with the official approach: the other is presented as an opponent, an opponent who wants to escape. Thus, after the opening ritual, the first lesson consisted of movement training: how to bend one's knees and step in a certain way, how to engage the other in such a way as to render oneself the least vulnerable to attack. The evening begins and ends with all participants kneeling before the Dojo, a plaque hanging on the wall. Don utters some words in Japanese, words he doesn't explain, and students and instructors bow to each other. Before entering or leaving the mat, even for a break, one must bow one's head slightly so as to recognize the atmospheric shift between the mundane world and the ritual space in which Shibari occurs.

We learned the basics of rope usage: how to ravel and unravel a piece of rope, how to tie two pieces of rope together. Caroline told us: "this is something that everyone needs to know. Some people say 'well I am just a bunny, why do I need to learn to do this?' but really, these are basic things that anyone doing Shibari, whether a bunny or not, should absolutely be able to do." I was surprised to hear the English word "bunny"; in fact, I thought I was misunderstanding, so I asked Caroline what she meant. "In Shibari, the person being tied up, the bottom, is referred to as 'bunny,' you

know, like a captured rabbit (*ein gefangenes Häschen*). It's not a Japanese term, it's something the Germans came up with. I don't know why they used the English word, but somehow it's been naturalized." She used the term *eingebürgert,* which literally refers to an immigrant's being made into a citizen; the more expected term would have been *eingedeutscht* (adopted into the German language), but Caroline's formulation is revealing. For the incorporation of the foreign into the familiar is not only a matter of insertion into a dictionary: whereas foreign loan words may be adopted into a language, they retain something of their exoticism. They are pronounced differently; they employ letter combinations that do not exist in the native tongue. They are made to be one's own, but not completely: like citizens with foreign roots. A linguist or language teacher would have used *eindeutschen*; I had never before heard *einbürgern* used in such a context.

Yet, the difference between these two words gets at the heart of a major social conflict in contemporary Germany: the problem of the "parallel society," where those with visibly "non-German ancestry" (*nicht-deutsche Herkunft*), are thought to be incapable of assimilation, even though such people are native-born, and in families that have resided within Germany for as many as three generations. A student of Turkish descent majoring in American Studies put the matter succinctly: "I went to New York for a week, and because I am fluent in English, people mistook me for an American. I was born in Germany. I've lived here all my life. German is my mother tongue. But no one would ever mistake me for a German." All this is not to say that the borders aren't porous, but rather that there are socially imagined and thus very real limits to cultural incorporation, which in this case can render one *eingebürgert* without being

eingedeutscht: there are some forms of otherness not imagined to be capable of full inclusion. Shibari as practiced here is in many ways a local cultural form, but nonetheless the appeal to an originary and insurmountable otherness is an integral part of its experiential efficacy. Hence the Japanese writings on the wall, the utterances the group of students cannot comprehend, and the insistence on presenting techniques in terms of captives attempting escape, when in fact these activities are practiced with very willing partners.

Yet, though consensuality plays a key role in SM discursive practices, in the case of Shibari – at least as practiced in this dojo – there is an ethos of repressing the fact that the bunny is cooperating willingly. My "sparring partner" of the evening, Joanna, reproached me for not properly enacting my role as bunny. Having not yet learned the niceties of bunny socialization, I kept offering her my arm while we were practicing basic right- and left-hand knots. At first she pushed my arm down gently and then grabbed it herself. But, as I didn't get the message, she explained to me the proper etiquette: "No. A bunny does not give its arm. Bunnies are lazy. They are docile. They spend their time just daydreaming about whatever, completely passive." The conception of the passive, daydreaming bunny allows one to practice one's arm-grabbing techniques, but in practice, bunny pays attention. Safety is of crucial importance: the knot must be tied so that, when pulled, the rope tightens against itself rather than around bunny's wrist. As Shibari includes suspension, incorrect knots could be very dangerous. Thus, before pulling with all our might, we check with a slight tug to ensure that the knot functions properly. If, when pulled, the rope starts to tighten around bunny's wrist, the bunny lets out a dramatic yelp and exclaims: "bunny

dead!" I was having a bit of trouble in the execution, and so Joanna exclaimed *Bunny tot*! a few times before I got the hang of it. We had quite a few laughs.

In addition to safety, there are also aesthetic considerations. The loop at the end of the knot must be within a specified length (six to eight centimeters), so one has to know how much rope to let out, which can vary, depending upon the size of bunny's wrists. Don came around inspecting the knots, as well as the process by which they were tied. If the rope is too loose around the bunny's wrist, or if one is not standing or holding the rope correctly when tying the knot, then he would exclaim *Bunny weg*! (bunny escaped). Apparently, in addition to being docile and passive, bunny is always trying to get away. Or at least one goes about tying the bunny up as if the possibility of escape were at stake, so as to create an atmosphere where the bunny couldn't get away, even if it wanted to.

In subsequent discussions, more advanced practitioners emphasized the complexities of communication within the framework of Shibari etiquette. If the subjunctive evocation of captivity is to be effectively maintained, the bunny must not articulate possible discomfort in words, because doing so lessens the intensity of the ritual frame in which the bunny is rendered a helpless victim. In truth, the safety and comfort of the bunny are of paramount concern. "When working with a bunny, especially for the first time," Caroline informed us, "it is important to ask it before starting about any problems with movement or joints, anything that might be a problem. And it's important to speak up if you're uncomfortable. Don't try to hide it because you think that's the way to be a good bunny." While the verbal articulation of discomfort is important in the beginning, there is, both implicitly and explicitly, the

idea that with time and practice two people can build a communicative repertoire that obviates the need for words, allowing adjustments to be made in such a way as not to break the subjunctive frame. One bunny put it thus: "as a top, working with the same bunny, or at least the same few bunnies, regularly, is the only way to advance. You can learn what facial expressions mean, how body movements signal pleasure or discomfort, as well as more mundane, but important things such as how much rope to use. If you are really going to do this, you should find a bunny to work with regularly. Otherwise you can only get so far." That is, communication works best when it is within the mode of interaction proper to ritual practice; it is not that the bunny is completely passive or docile, but that the bunny articulates in ways that are at once ritualized according to specific and proper etiquette, and individualized as expressivity. When interpreted in terms of everyday communication in liberal socio-political settings, where verbal self-expression is a core value, the bunny's mode of interaction might appear restrictive and oppressive. But if one imagines self-fulfillment to be achievable through the creation of connections of intimacy, trust, and sharing, values of interdependence that practitioners argue transport one to a more intense experiential plane, then an alternative ethical framework becomes possible.

In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes writes: "It is not the voice (with which we identify the 'rights' of the person) which communicates (communicates what? Our necessarily beautiful – soul? Our sincerity? Our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive infantile character" (1982: 10). It seems that in Shibari, too, the displacement of the voice onto alternative corporeal

communicative mechanisms is the ground on which an interpretive approach to agency here must be thought. Yet, as Barthes implies, the intertwinement of "voice" and "rights," a combination integral to the liberal imagination, hinders our sense of possibility with regard to other forms of bodily expressivity and communication. What does it mean for practitioners to create modes of interpersonal connection according to communicative rules resistant to vocalization, and how do these mechanisms shade our understandings of how hierarchy and power are experientially produced and/or mitigated in such contexts?

The trope of voice – giving voice, voicing, finding one's voice – is central to modern Western notions of agentive personhood: speaking one's mind is rendered tantamount to freedom, while to be silenced is to be oppressed. In Shibari, Bunny is literally tied and figuratively gagged, and yet these very constraints enable an alternate mode of expressivity and communication, culturally encoded, that has to be learned in all its nuances and complexities. Practitioners may devote hours a day for months and years on end perfecting their techniques, adapting them to the partners they encounter. Yet, here too, it is not simply that SMlers are opting out of the Western conceptual framework. In relying on forms of bodily expression not culturally associated with agency, they enable the creation of a zone in which the expression of the submissive occurs without needing to be recognized as such, so that Bunny "speaks," and is all the more free to speak, precisely on the condition of "its" verbal silence. The symbolism of silencing is a powerful component of the experiential efficacy of the practice, so that the exchange of power can be felt to be both real and play at once.

The classes run for five hours, from 6 to 11pm. Participants generally stay for the entirety of the evening. Each hour consists of 45-50 minutes of instruction and/or practice, and 10-15 minutes of rest. During the breaks, there is an array of food – salami, cheese, cookies, chocolates – for refreshment. Caroline commented that because the dojo's training methods rid Shibari of its erotic potential, the sensual element is brought back in through food. As it was my first session, Don and Caroline asked me how I was liking it, and whether I would be interested in participating regularly. I replied that I would, and she asked whether it was a personal interest or for my research. "It's definitely for my book," I said, "but in terms of my being here, the big practical difference is that I'll probably ask a lot of questions, maybe odd questions that don't have to do with the immediate task at hand." She looked at Don: "Do we want to be in a book?" I assured her that everything would be anonymous, but she said that they might want the free advertisement.

In truth, her concern lay elsewhere: "How do we know that you weren't sent by Homeland Security? I wouldn't want to go to America for vacation and end up in Guantánamo." As mentioned briefly in chapter one, both within the SM scene and among Berliners more generally, the prison at Guantánamo Bay is the subject of much political discussion: what does it mean, they ask, for a powerful country to create a zone outside the rule of law (*rechtfreie Zone*)? People have told stories about how others they knew of had laptops taken at the border, without explanation, and never to be seen again; there is much anxiety about new fingerprinting requirements and the keeping of biometric records of tourists entering the United States. Concerns get articulated not so much in terms of invasions of privacy as they are couched in fears of

the abuse of power, applying lessons learned in twentieth century Germany to contemporary global political realities.

Caroline was worried that I was a spy sent from the Department of Homeland Security (*Heimatschutz*). She interrogated me as to how I was financing my research, why I needed to come to Germany to do research on BDSM, what the title of my "book" would be. Hers was not an ordinary curiosity; she was checking for consistency: "well, if you're writing about ritual, you could really be writing on an array of topics. So why pick this one? Won't it be more difficult to get a job if your expertise is SM?" To her, BDSM did not seem to fit with her idea of a scholarly project, and so she generated an alternative explanation that seemed to make more sense. Yet, there is something eerily poignant about her logic, in the way that she makes clear how easy the discursive slippage can be, and how seemingly unrelated life-worlds can be grouped together to devastating effects.

Don approached the question of my relationship to the government in another way, by asking me where I live. "Akazienkiez," I said. (Akazienkiez is Schöneberg's café-filled artsy neighborhood, in the area around Akazienstrasse and Goltzstrasse.) "That's good that you live in Schöneberg," he said, "they'd think you were a communist if you lived in the east." "Ridiculous," said Caroline, "most people don't even know which neighborhoods are which, the lines were so zigzagged. When people ask me, I say I live in the south." Don decided to lighten up this "political" discussion with a joke: "What do you get when you mix an East and a West German?" he asked. "*Ein arroganter Arbeitsloser* (an arrogant unemployed person)!" Everyone laughed. The joke, which made fun of both groups, successfully diffused any political tensions,

but it also got at ways in which there are divisions that persist between those who grew up in a divided Germany. Otherwise, there would be no need to conceptualize the partnering of an East and West German in terms of crossbreeding. The joke wouldn't make sense if it were not for the stereotypes – and, given high unemployment in Berlin, a certain reality – imagining Easterners and Westerners as separate populations with distinct character traits.

Caroline's suggestion that the "war on Islamic terrorism" might be used to persecute sexual minorities, even sexual minorities abroad, under the guise of protecting the homeland, speaks to the ease with which the slippage between "BDSM" and "terror" is perceived to be officially thinkable. This slippage is documented by Margot Weiss in her (2009) article "Rumsfeld!," which examines the use of "sadomasochism" as descriptor of the photographs documenting torture at Abu Ghraib. Drawing on Lynndie England's being labeled a "diminutive dominatrix," she writes: "Though diminutive, England is no dominatrix; describing her this way facilitates a disavowal of institutionalized torture by framing the abuse as England's personal psychosexual predilection…This commentary borrows from the icon of The Dominatrix…to pathologize this small-town girl, offering us the story of a sick, sadistic woman and obscuring a larger, institutional context of power" (188-9). Indeed, Weiss continues, "calling the practices depicted in these photographs 'sadism' instead of 'torture' does something *political*: it draws attention to the shocking mix of violence and sex in these pictures, rather than the shocking abuse of power and dehumanization. This shift depoliticizes the imperial violence depicted in these photographs by transferring our discomfort or disgust with torture onto the 'sadomasochistic' practices

of US soldiers" (190). Here, Weiss underscores the stakes of approaching such questions through the lens of individualistic psychology rather than socio-political ethos, showing how the former discursively absolves the latter through its rhetorical focalization. The stakes of this *alter*ation, on its constitutive other side, is apparent in Caroline's articulation of the fear that she might under its guise be persecuted and prosecuted.

There is something ironic about the attribution of individual agency to a low-ranking soldier, an irony that works just as effectively in the reverse. In the United States, for example, a woman lost custody of her child on the basis of the revelation by her ex-husband that she was practicing SM; the woman likewise lost her alimony, and was required to undergo counseling for domestic violence (Klein and Moser 2006). These three simultaneous consequences are discursively incoherent, and at each turn, this woman finds herself on the losing end, being attributed agency with respect to her status as "perverted" while at the same time being designated as victim. This paradoxical treatment of agency figures likewise in the (2007) documentary entitled *Zoo: We Are Not Who We Appear to Be*, which examines the aftermath of the Enumclaw, Washington "horse sex" scandal, in which a man died while engaging in receptive anal sex with a horse. Here, the agency in question is that of the horse: commentators discussing the case emphasized the horse's incapacity to give consent for such acts; yet, immediately upon the horse's confiscation by authorities, the animal was immediately castrated on the basis of attributed deranged desire for human sexual partners. Officially, the horse is rendered victim and perpetrator at once, a logic that is reiterated in the custody case, and in the discursive slippage between BDSM and terror.

Statutory laws consist in the performative construction of codified limits in which the efficacy of consent can operate, and in this sense constitute something of a magical force. In stipulating categories of entities and actions that are outside the realm of consensual possibility (in Germany, among SMlers, the relevant transition is that between acts covered under §223 and §226 of laws governing consensual assault; age of consent laws are also at stake, and especially relevant for members of the BDSM youth group), statutes as such instantiate, officially, limits as to an individual's ability to decide for oneself, socially inscribing self-determination, so that here, too, notions of agency as "autonomous" are inaccurate because it is only within the realm of what is rendered possible, conferred from without, that the agency of consent can be recognized as such.

From the experiential efficacy in Shibari of the evocation of Japan, to the naturalization of foreign terms such as Bunny, to the utilizations of *alters*-at-home such as Ossis, the notion of the other is integral in the articulation of the self. In *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that one must "move beyond the forced choice between constraint (by forces) and consent (to reasons), between mechanical coercion and voluntary, free, deliberate, even calculated submission" (2001: 37). For Bourdieu, this opposition is "forced," and false, because it obscures the durable effects of "symbolic force," which "is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint" (38). The attribution of symbolic violence, however, in drawing attention to the way that social formations shape individualized subjectivity, negates the very possibility of "free" consent on which SMlers predicate the differentiation of their practices from "real" violence. But consent itself is a

magical force: however statutorily circumscribed, its existence is the (according to Carl Schmidt) sovereign declaration of an exception to the rules of engagement, enabling the doing of something – whipping, tying, etc. – that could not otherwise be done. The task, then, is to navigate conceptually the experiential efficacy of consent as it is practiced in BDSM while, at the same time, not losing sight of the socially-structured and structuring conditions of its possibility in the first place.

Parallel Societies Unassimilated:
Specters of the Veiled Dominatrix

Agency, then, is always already encompassed, liberal ideology notwithstanding. The self is at the center of our individualist thought, and yet it is only through others that the self can be realized as such. Therein lies the paradox at the heart of modernist political theory, a paradox out of which emerges the problematic of agency, a key concern of contemporary anthropology. Questions of agency surface so poignantly through taking them up in terms of BDSM practices of power exchange, since the exchange of power implies an irreducible intersubjectivity from which the individual cannot be extirpated. That these practices should give pause to liberal thought should come as no surprise, and yet what *is* surprising is that so often they are instead shot, as in the Shibari lesson, through the lens of religious fundamentalism and/or Orientalism. The limits of construing these practices this way are clear: doing so betrays two key prejudices at the heart of Enlightenment thought in the first place, so that these

discourses effectively rehearse their very premises rather than reconsidering the question through the prism of an alternative formulation.

Key works in the academic literature on submission have grappled with the problem of agency in submission by engaging, ethnographically, the lives of religious and conservative people. R. Marie Griffith, in her (1997) book *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, explores contexts – both religious and mundane – in which wifely submission is understood by those who practice it to be beneficial. In *Engaged Surrender*, Carolyn Rouse shows how the African-American women with whom she worked express agency while working within the context of Islamic discourse (2004); this theme emerges also in Saba Mahmood's (2005) work on Islamic Revival in Egypt. Whereas Rouse positions her work as a critical engagement with Marxian frames, Mahmood grapples with the tensions between her interlocutors' lives and the liberal imagination. For instance, in her chapter on ritual, she argues that the proclivity to pray must be produced. "Desire," she writes, "is not *antecedent* to, or causal of, moral action, but its *product*" (126). Thus, she argues, the inward dispositions privileged in modernity can be thought in part as produced through the very ritual forms to which they are ordinarily opposed. All of these works grapple with the tensions between submission, perceived or avowed, and the liberal discourses to which such practices are, in the contemporary secular West, held accountable. SMlers, of course, are grappling with similar questions, but BDSM provides the possibility of thinking through questions of individualism and agency, questions at the heart of modernity, in a way that does not simply reiterate the terms of oppositions between

secularism and religiosity, between the West and the rest, the very terms in which these questions are so often articulated.

Louis Dumont notes that "the very word 'hierarchy' commands profound aversion in our societies" (1986: 8). He writes: "our culture is permeated by nominalism, which grants existence only to individuals and not to relations. Nominalism, in fact is just another name for individuals, or rather one of its facets" (11). Dumont traces the movement toward individualism to the writings of Martin Luther, who he summarizes as having argued that "any authority or special function can only issue from delegation or representation," effectively instantiating "the overthrow of the holistic view, the sudden transition from the hierarchical to the individualistic universe" (78). Thus, the move away from hierarchy and the move away from holism occur at a single pass. The missing term is "force," so that, for Dumont hierarchy is to holism what force is to individualism: "Hierarchy is the social obverse, force the atomistic reverse, of the same coin. This is how an emphasis on consciousness or consent immediately issues into an emphasis on force or power" (85).

This distinction between social and atomistic recalls also Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (sometimes translated as community and society). Tönnies writes: "The theory of the Gesellschaft deals with the artificial construction of aggregate human beings which superficially resembles the Gemeinschaft in so far as the individuals live and dwell together. However, *in the Gemeinschaft they remain essentially united in spite of separating factors, whereas in the Gesellschaft they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors*" (65, emphasis mine). Everything hinges on the question of whether, "essentially," human

beings are interconnected: whether the connectivity is the social stuff comprising the person as an individual, or whether the social is instead composed of individuals that pre-exist it. What matters, though, is the context in which the question is asked. One must not forget that the original political-philosophical posing of the problem occurred as a result of a theological debate between the nominalists and the scholastics (Gillespie 2008); a particularization that may help refocus one's take on the matter so as not to extrapolate from this specifically *theo*logical problem the proclamation of an *onto*logical necessity. While there may be specific reasons for which the political-philosophical production of the individual is expedient, a generalized apotheosis of the individual in ethnographic-anthropological terms may be another matter altogether.

In the SM scene, people come from socioeconomic backgrounds that range across the political spectrum to an extent I have not experienced in any other context. Scene-related venues range from free events, such as the theme-night discussion groups, to the renting out of an upscale French restaurant; at certain bars, you can spend as little as 5 or 10 Euros on a weeknight; some places have entrance fees upwards of 80 Euros a couple. And yet, there is a sense of community among practitioners that transcends these practical divisions; there are places where people of various means come together. In other contexts, I've been in social situations where hardly anyone was from the East; at one party, an East German cookbook was given as a gift. "You mean they had food?" someone joked, "does it give you directions for how to stand in line?" I talked of this experience with East German friends, who found it "offensive but typical of the rich," conflating Western with wealthy. But the SM scene is a major exception to social-segregation based on income, education, or origin

in a milieu where access and opportunity is largely circumscribed, via a very rigid, very early educational tracking system, by a combination of these factors.

There is one major limit, though, to the diversity of Berlin's BDSM scene. Despite the sizable Turkish population in Berlin, there is a notable absence of people of Turkish descent in the venues in which I conducted my research. Indeed, at discussion-oriented events, hierarchical relations in Turkish families are explicitly discussed – brought up only to be rejected as unacceptable forms of dominance; that is, practitioners partake in broader discourses concerning submission in ways that resonate with mainstream assessments, differentiating themselves from and rejecting any possible identification with those others. It is in this context that Caroline's expressing concern that I might be working on behalf of the department of Homeland Security becomes significant, in that it implies a conceptual link between two very different social forms that trouble cultural norms of individual autonomy, a link that is otherwise repressed.

In one discussion group, a man named Franz, who has spent much time abroad for professional purposes, spoke of his many years living in various Asian countries. When he speaks, though, he does not differentiate between them. He talks only of Asia: "While here SM is a subculture; there it is reality. Hierarchy is the way of life." Other participants in the group were very critical of his conflation of SM with social forms in which hierarchical organization is the norm. His comment was unorthodox, a breach of social order in the group. He was promptly corrected by Edward, the group's de facto leader: "Here, we are not speaking about structural violence, about practices that result from structural violence. What belongs to SM falls under the rubric of safe,

sane, consensual (SSC)." Edward tried to get Franz to understand the difference by posing a rhetorical question: "Would people in those countries understand what they do as SM?" The question was not simply nominal, not simply a question of whether the people Franz was discussing would use the same term to describe their relationships. Rather, he was emphasizing the centrality of discursive practices concerning consent and individual choice as the hallmark of SM activities, differentiating them from instances of "structural violence," where hierarchical ordering is presumed to be the product of social coercion rather than individual desire and self-determination.

Hierarchical practices in BDSM are at odds with socially prescribed behaviors in the cultural milieu in which they are situated. The authority of the dominant partner is not backed by the force of law or society, making these practices less susceptible to readings of structural violence. However, even in this setting the idea of a patriarchal cultural heritage causes some unease, particularly in cases of heterosexual male dominant-female submissive pairings. One woman joked to another: "you are a woman, a sub, and an Ossi (someone from the East). It doesn't get any worse than that!" The latter replied that being a woman had nothing to do with it, but did not dispute structural disadvantages in the other two cases.

Even then, there are difficulties to structural arguments vis-à-vis possibilities of imagining agency in context that affirms, rather than subverts, cultural norms, as Saba Mahmood (2005) has shown in her work on female Islamic revivalists. She questions "the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms" (14), and asks: "how do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the

distinction between the subjects own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot easily be presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving a subject's potentiality" (31). Edward's argument seems to reiterate the tendency Mahmood critiques insofar as he locates the acceptability of submission in opposition to structural violence vis-à-vis an emphasis on discursive practices of consent. Yet a key aspect of his posing the question, even if he did so rhetorically, is to open up the possibility that, even if such practices in "Asia" reinforce social order, participants' own understandings must be taken into account when interpreting whether one is in the realm of acceptable or unacceptable forms of interpersonal engagement. His argument does not rest on the claim that SM is subversive of social order, but instead centers interpretative possibility within the discursive frameworks in which practical experience occurs. The problem Edward has when Franz groups SM with socially-prescribed forms of hierarchical relations is precisely that he renders all relations of dominance and submission alike. In invoking structural violence, Edward is also pointing to the possibility that desires must be interpreted within the cultural frameworks that make them intelligible. It is not that practitioners of SM would argue that agency lies in resistance – indeed they often speak of the fulfilling power of submission, but the framework in which relations of domination and submission occur is essential to their understanding. While agency is not reducible to liberation, the balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces must be taken into account. Rather than opposing agency to structure, one might better use potentials and limits of symbolic transformation – how specific actions and objects can

and cannot in a given context be interpreted – as the basis for a hermeneutics of practice.

While interpretive practices in BDSM highlight the wide potential for symbolic transformation, public discourses tend to read symbols in more reified a fashion, so that certain objects, people and practices are treated in such a way as to prevent much room for maneuver, as if stereotypical treatments constitute the frame in which real lives are situated. This dynamic certainly colors the headscarf debates in Germany. In her book *Stolen Honor*, Katherine Ewing discusses how arguments supporting a headscarf ban in German public schools base themselves on a reading of the headscarf as necessarily a symbol of the oppression of women. She contrasts this reading with that of crucifixes hanging in public classrooms: "In the highest court's ruling…the minority opinion characterized the Bavarian crucifix as a 'cultural symbol of openness and tolerance' that therefore did not threaten students' religious freedom; it was distinguished from the headscarf, which, according to the opinion, represented the subservient role of the woman and thus conflicted with the Constitution." She goes on to note that "in this opinion, the issue of gender equality was linked with neutrality" (2008: 188). Not only does the opinion suggest rather restrictive limits as to possibilities of what the headscarf and crucifix might signify, it also advances a particular vision of what equality entails as interpretively neutral. That is, the court is acting as arbiter over what are in reality "struggles over meaning and classification" (Bourdieu 1991); by performative declaration, the verdict attempts to decide such struggles once and for all, to remove them from the political field, and to render impossible certain interpretive possibilities. Of course, practical engagements will always be more complex and

nuanced; the territorial inscription does not finally succeed. But, official discourses can also have a constraining effect on how those who take such discourses seriously interact with their world.

This power is especially precarious in this case of Orientalist envisioning, in that it is much easier to imagine that stereotypes faithfully represent a reality that is foreign, with which one has little or no practical experience, and thus slim potential for contradiction. Indeed, Ewing notes that even members of Turkish families living in Berlin entertained negative stereotypes about such families, viewing their own experiences as exceptions to what they imagine as an otherwise valid rule (60, 85). Her study begins from the premise that the image of the Turkish-male oppressor has gone virtually unquestioned; she observes that, in Germany, "the media have tended to take up particularly extreme cases of such [oppressive] practices and use them as typical of Turkish family relations, as representing a form of 'cultural practice'" (182). Throughout her book, she shows that it is always the image of young women, evoked as victims to be liberated, that rally negative sentiments directed against men, positioned as incapable of being assimilated. Though the focus of her work is on the stigmatized men, the study is a profound reminder of the gendered fantasy of rescue that underlies these discourses, in which it is only as feminized other, this time literally embodied as young women, that Orientalist redemption is constructed as necessary and possible: the Westerner assumes a masculine position vis-à-vis the other to be liberated. It is in this, classically Orientalist, context that the agency of Turkish women becomes a matter of national concern.

Official discursive formulations are powerful social forces, making it difficult to imagine hierarchical practices as grounds on which agency might be thought. In Western discursive formations, resistances to reading agency into submission make for the unlikely symbolic interchangeability of the veiled woman and the dominatrix. In the 2008 US presidential elections, for example, many commentators had difficulty with Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin. Many of Palin's positions ran contrary to traditionally feminist ideals, and yet some commentators seized on her gender to argue that a woman could not be misogynist. Rather than analyze these commentaries, which are outside the scope of my research, I will focus on two symbols used to characterize Palin, and the imaginative difficulty of sustaining both at once.

Salon's Gary Kamiya, in an article entitled "The Dominatrix," argued that "at first glance she looks like the girl next door. But on closer inspection, that house next door turns out to be the Mansion of Mistress Palin…this isn't a winning electoral strategy in except in some parts of San Francisco or New York, which are not likely to go Republican anyway." He concludes: "In the end, I think most Americans will vote with their pocketbooks, not their pocket rockets. That is, unless the voters of this great nation turn out to be a herd of masochistic moose, yearning to be field-dressed[50]." Kamiya evokes the SM populations in San Francisco and New York, notes that the political inclinations of these populations are not in-line with Palin's policies, and yet proceeds to argue that the election of Palin would be indicative of masochism, thus conflating two very different forms of domination. In another Salon article, published the very next day, Cintra Wilson refers to Palin as a "slave" who wears a "virtual

[50] http://www.salon.com/opinion/kamiya/2008/09/09/mistress_palin/index1.html

burqua[51]." Wilson evokes the burqua as a symbol of slavery, disregarding the religious and cultural specificities of wearing the veil, so that its imagery may be applied in very different sociopolitical context. Wilson does not refer to SM practices, just as Kamiya nowhere in the article refers to veiled women. Yet, their simultaneous publication sparked the ire of conservative commentators. In an article for the National Review Online referring to these two articles, Jonah Goldberg writes: "On Tuesday, Salon ran one article calling Palin a dominatrix (a "whip-yielding mistress") and another labeling her a sexually-repressed fundamentalist no different from the Muslim fanatics and the terrorists of Hamas. Make up your mind, folks. Is she a seductress or a sex-o-phobe?[52]" Significantly, Wilson did not mention Muslim fanatics or terrorism; her critique of religious fundamentalist practices was aimed also at conservative Christianity. But for Goldberg, the evocation of the burqua is not, as it is for Wilson, indicative of religious fanaticism *generally*, but of *specifically* Islamic forms of repression. Likewise, Goldberg suggests that this image of the burqua-wearing woman signals a general rejection and repression of sexuality so that persons who experience religiosity and those who embrace eroticism are seen as inhabiting mutually exclusive forms of subjectivity.

It is in this either/or domain that the seductress and the sexually-repressed become impossible to consider together, so that the dominatrix occupies a symbolic world utterly distinct from that of the veiled woman. Yet, both draw on symbolic forms of gender-organization and hierarchy held to be problematic within a liberal

[51] http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2008/09/10/palin_feminism/index.html
[52] http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MjE4ZTcxZjQ5YjBiYzFlMGJlMzk5YjNjOTkyZWQyMTg=

framework, though they do so in different ways. It is not that the two are the same – and eliding them is politically dangerous – but that the two reveal an underlining liberal anxiety when it comes to questions of submission, a perpetual sense of paradox concerning the possibilities of individual agency under such conditions.

"What Would Mozart Say to This?"

Of Seraglios and Sex-Workers

A man is holding a woman captive, but she is defiant, unwilling to accept his authority and yield to his lustful demands. He wants to demonstrate his power over her, but says nothing. Another man, his minion, leads another woman – dressed all in pink – into the room. The minion, called Osmin, sets up a chair, in which the first woman, Konstanze, is made to sit, forcefully held down by her captor, known as Bassa. The woman in pink is never named. She is apparently willing to take part in the demonstration. She unzips Osmin's pants and pulls him toward her. He thrusts his torso against her face. Violently. When he is finished, he puts something into her mouth to gag her, and she becomes afraid. He takes out a knife and cuts her with it. For a moment it looks like she is dead, but she was faking. The woman in pink revives, and reaches out to Konstanze for help, but Bassa kicks her hand away. Osmin slices the woman to death as she struggles. Osmin cuts out a lump of flesh, holding it up for Konstanze to see. After the woman finally goes limp, Osmin carries the corpse

away[53]. Bassa sits on the chair, placing Konstanze on his lap, speaking to her softly and sweetly, which in light of what has just occurred all the more chilling: "I want you," he tells her, "to let yourself be fucked by a pig. Will you do that for me?" The scene has become unbearable.

The above scene comes from Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail* (Abduction from the Seraglio), in a production[54] at the Komische Oper, one of Berlin's three major opera houses. While the Komische Oper, which attracts international talent, is known for its off-beat, contemporary interpretations, this production pushed the limits of what many opera-goers could accept. At this point in the show, ushers stand at the doors in anticipation of the numerable walkouts that occurred in every performance I attended.

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[53] During this action, Konstanze is singing an aria (my translation):

Martern aller Arten	Martyrs of all kinds
Mögen meiner warten,	May anticipate mine,
Ich verlache Qual und Pein.	I laugh in the face of pain and torment.
Nichts soll mich erschüttern.	Nothing can shake me.
Nur dann würd ich zittern,	For the only thing that could cause me to tremble,
Wenn ich untreu könnte sein.	Would be if I were capable of infidelity.
Lass dich bewegen, verschone mich!	Let yourself be moved, spare me!
Des Himmels Segen belohne dich!	And heaven's blessing will reward you.
Doch du bist entschlossen.	But you are unyielding.
Willig, unverdrossen	Willingly and constant,
Wähl ich jede Pein und Not.	I choose torment and affliction.
Ordne nur, gebiete,	Order and command,
Lärme, tobe, wüte!	Fuss and rant and rave!
Zuletzt befreit mich doch der Tod.	For in the end, death will liberate me.

Although the dramatic action draws attention away from Konstanze's singing, her words become all the more powerful, her resolution all the more remarkable, in the face of what she is forced to witness. In the aria, earthly love and fidelity is elevated to the plane of religious devotion, so that suffering and self-sacrifice in the name of romantic fidelity gets spoken of a sacralized language of martyrdom and eternal salvation. Negative discourse on domination is presented in an idiom of immanence and individual pathology, contrasting with the language of transcendence, whereby death can be imagined as a form of liberation. Yet, the religiosity is rewritten in worldly terms to which it is discursively subordinated: martyrdom in the name of the romantic couple would render Konstanze, the martyr whom all others would attend.

[54] This production premiered in 2004 and ran in repertoire through the 2007-2008 season; I attended the production four times, twice in 2007 and twice in 2008.

During this scene, Konstanze is singing an aria, though the silent action onstage is attention-grabbing; in this extreme example of director's theater (*Regietheater*), a trend in contemporary Germany where the director asserts broad interpretive license to the point of making changes to plot, dialogue, setting, and character, the staging adds the unnamed woman in pink as a silent character, whose presence transforms the plot. In this scene, leading character Konstanze is upstaged by a silent role. Audience reactions at this point reference directorial choices and not performance quality. Of the four times I saw the production, her singing was applauded only once at the end of the aria; in contrast, audience protests were directed at the staging.

Some people were not content just to leave. In a way that is uncharacteristic of audiences in Germany, where public etiquette and social order are very much observed, people shouted at the actors, even to the extent of temporarily stopping the performance. When Bassa is giving his monologue about the pig (which, of course, is not in the original libretto), one man yelled "the director is a pig!" (This comment, in contrast to Konstanze's aria, received quite a bit of applause that night.) One woman screamed: "This is supposed to be art! This is disgusting!" A man seated in the balcony bellowed: "What would Mozart say to this!?" Each heckler was expressing a visceral reaction to transgressions of aesthetic convention: the invocation of the composer suggests that there are limits to interpretive possibility, which ought to be guided by a sense of authorial intention. An interpretation, in this view, is acceptable if the author would approve; the balcony bellower's comment implicitly asserts this principle or expectation by calling attention to the way in which the performance failed to conform to it. The woman's comment suggests that what is "disgusting" is by virtue

of that fact excluded from the possibility of characterization as art. The ad hominem attack on the director asserts that work one produces yields insights into one's personal character; the comment suggests that the director identifies with the male characters, that the production is an expression of his own personal/erotic deviance. These hecklers use the production's failure to meet their expectations as license for their own defiance of public behavioral etiquette. Group dynamics changed from performance to performance: on the night there was applause, there was no heckling at all. In another case the heckling was discouraged: other audience members instructed dissatisfied customers to "simply leave" (*einfach ausgehen*) rather than disrupt the performance. But on two occasions, the audience found solidarity in the verbal articulation of discomfort during the show. The social contract of acceptable behavior in a theater was at its breaking point. If anything, the production was certainly successful at finding an edge.

The "snuff scene," as I labeled it in my notes, is certainly the most overt and sensationalistic assertion of directorial liberty, but it is only an (albeit intense) example of the underlying interpretive analogy put forth by the production. In the choice of setting, there are two transpositions: rather than presenting *Seraglio* as a period piece, it is made contemporary. This modernization is accomplished by transforming the seraglio into a bordello; the "violence" of the former manifests in the depiction of practices associated with SM. The chorus of prostitutes includes a whip-wielding dominatrix, and scene changes of the revolving stage include onstage simulations of floggings and spankings. In this interpretation, the dominatrix and the veiled woman merge into one. Discursively, these two figures could not seem further apart:

contemporary images of the dominatrix tend to focus on permissiveness, decadence, and sexual licentiousness, whereas the veil gets treated as a symbol of sexual oppression and female subordination. What, then, could account for this slippage between the two figures, this superimposition of the one onto the other in the production's dramatic argument?

In the program available for purchase prior to the performance, there is a lengthy interview with the production's director, Catalonian Calixto Bieto, in which he discusses and explains his interpretation of the piece, a move that suggests an at least implicit acknowledgment that the production is pushing interpretive boundaries. Interestingly, Bieto tries to efface the aspects of the libretto that concern cultural clashes between Occident and Orient, making the politics of the drama about gendered violence within Europe. He states:

> *Zumindest aus Spanien kenne ich es, dass Männer Frauen töten, aus dem Grund, weil sie das nicht kontrollieren können. In Spanien starben von Januar bis jetzt zwanzig Frauen allein aus diesem Grund…Es ist ein Faktum, dass Männer in Beziehungen Angst davor haben, die Kontrolle über die Frauen zu verlieren.*
>
> At least in Spain, I know that men kill women for the reason that they cannot control them. So far this year, twenty women have been killed in Spain for this reason alone…it is a fact that men in relationships fear that they will lose control over women.

Here, Bieito argues that, for him, what is at stake is contemporary European relationships between men and women, thus moving away from an approach that places the action in a foreign cultural environment wherein different sociopolitical rules hold. In erasing the intercultural dimensions of the plot, he interprets the critique as one about power dynamics within European culture; by setting the action in a

bordello rather than a seraglio, he is emphasizing a refusal to read the opera in an Orientalist fashion. The opera becomes an indictment of European relations between men and women, and the violence over a feared loss of control men feel, and of the inability of men to control their emotions, resulting in fatal abuse. As for the erasure of the Orientalist element, given the history and familiarity an opera-going public would have with the story, and given contemporary world politics, especially in Germany, it becomes difficult to imagine that it is written out entirely. That is, the comparison is explicitly absent but implicitly present.

The seraglio becomes the equivalent of the bordello; the Orientalist image of excessive uncontrolled masculine dominance and feminine submission becomes the signpost against which inequalities in a European setting are interpreted. Indeed, even within his interview, the evocation of the comparisons with Orientalist visions of Islamic culture in the singular emerges. Bieto discusses his artistic choices:

> *Ich wähle ein extremes Ambiente für Mozarts Stück. Ich denke, selbst ein wirklicher Serail im Sinne des Islam stellt extreme und harte Bedingungen für eine Frau dar. Auch wenn ich die islamische Kultur und die Existenz von Serails akzeptiere, denke ich, sind sie nicht gut für Frauen. Übrigens handelt das Stück nicht im geringsten von Fragen und Problemen islamischer Kultur oder vom Kampf zweier Kulturen. Mozart schrieb ein Stück, wo sich Europäer über sich selbst auseinandersetzen. Insofern, es ist wirklich mein Interesse, das romantisch orientalisierende oder exotisierende Klischee, das der* <u>*Entführung aus dem Serail*</u> *oft angeheftet wird, zu zerstören – dieses Klischee ist eine Verharmlosung des Stückes.*
>
> I choose an extreme environment for Mozart's piece. I think, even a real seraglio in the sense of Islam would present extreme and difficult conditions for a woman. Even if I were to accept Islamic culture and the existence of seraglios, I think they are not good for women. Incidentally, this play does not in the least have to do with questions and problems of Islamic culture or the clash of civilizations. Mozart wrote a piece in which Europeans were grappling with their own issues. In that

> regard, it is really my purpose to destroy this romantic orientalizing or exoticizing cliché that gets associated with Abduction from the Seraglio. This cliché constitutes a rendering-harmless of the piece.

Bieto's statements are problematic to the point of contradiction: what does "acceptance" mean in a context where one nevertheless pronounces a judgment against that which one rhetorically accepts? "Even if I accept Islamic culture and the existence of seraglios, I think they are bad for women." The doubleness of the comment gets at certain limits of discourses about pluralistic tolerance– the conflation of Islamic culture in the singular with the seraglio, as well as the dynamic of judgment within the rhetoric of acceptance. Bieto contends that his interpretation is not an attempt to comment on questions and problems of Islam or a clash of cultures. Yet, the Orientalist situation of the plot and action, as well as predominant issues in current events, set up this very kind of a reading. While it is true that, even in the eighteenth century, such representations of the other are really about Europeans working out issues concerning their own self images, the point is that these Europeans are constructing a sense of self through projections onto others, and that the image of the other is central to the discursive work being performed. This imagination of alterity is something that remains – perhaps all the more insidiously – when the Bassa is made European, for one has recourse to the absent figuration, which can be superimposed onto the one that is present.

Bieto makes an important point when he says that to simply interpret the opera in a clichéd fashion, just making it an issue of culture-clash, does minimize European dynamics of power and violence by letting Europe off the hook as seemingly

egalitarian by contrast. That is, one effect of the orientalizing discourse is the production of abject others. By discursively circumscribing difference in terms of controlled symbolic representation, one can valorize one's own value system by comparison. The comparison between the seraglio and the sex-workers in the bordello is implicit insofar as the "modernization" of a production operates as a palimpsest, dialogically recalling the "zero-degree" interpretation of the classical setting and script. Sexophobic portrayals of Islamic cultures and the image of licentious sexual subcultures seem to inhabit separate and opposing discursive worlds, yet the production moves seamlessly between them. Thus, the opera portrays of erotic practices associated with BDSM in terms of real violence, so that the female characters are presented as captive, helpless victims in a world that is – both imaginatively and practically – controlled by men.

While this reading resonates with certain political characterizations of dynamics manifesting in "Islamic cultures," characterizations that derive at least as much from western cultural fantasies as they do from empirical concerns about actually-occurring examples of practices deemed unacceptable to a liberal modern West, it is difficult to justify this reading in terms of the framework of Mozart's piece. Here, the point is not only that the interpretation is a mirror of contemporary political concerns, but more importantly that it is in the discrepancies between the original libretto and the contemporary script that one can see most clearly the places where the interpretation strains, the moments where the comparison becomes especially unstable.

It is accurate to read *Seraglio* not as a confrontation with actual others, as it is a European exercise in thinking about its own political formulations in terms of a

projected image of an Orientalized other. An important figure in the opera is Blonde, an English character who speaks of English customs and the freedom of English women. The imaginative contrast between English and Ottoman resonates with discourses circulating at the time the Singspiel was written; importantly, these discourses were nuanced, not presented in ways that fully valorized one at the expense of the other (see Ewing 2008: 40-42). Not only does Bieto write out this heritage, he turns Blonde into a drug addict, removing her as a philosophical counterpoint to the Bassa. Indeed, Bieto makes clear in his interview that he felt it necessary to cut certain of the Bassa's lines: those that humanized him or made him philosophical.

Importantly, in the standard libretto of Mozart's opera, the Bassa pardons the couples and grants them their freedom; in this production, he hands Konstanze a gun, allowing her to shoot him. His inability to pardon them signals an inability to change, his own character is rewritten as incapable of redemption. In the finale, police come and arrest all the main characters except Konstanze, who shoots herself in the breast as the final chord sounds. In the contemporary production, no freedom is possible, and a nuanced contemplation of differing political philosophies gets lost in the adaptation. Death is the only possible resolution for all involved. This reductivist logic of alterity is characteristic of popular us-or-them discourses in our own times, and the necessity of rewriting the libretto to make these discursive configurations possible speaks volumes about contemporary discussions, indicating a willingness to rewrite histories and co-opt symbols in ways that make them conform to imaginative expectations.

The problem of Orientalism in Germany is highlighted in terms of tensions with the Turkish population (see Ewing 2008; Mandel 2008), tensions that get articulated by

SMlers when they clearly delineate what it is they do from what they imagine to be the unacceptable practices of hierarchy and domination present in Turkish families, which they refer to as "structural violence," as opposed to their own consensual practices. A key point of differentiation for them is the way in which domination and submission in BDSM do not map onto gender in any straightforward way – men and women are equally free to become bottoms or tops. The most important dimension for the ethical justification of asymmetrical practices in BDSM, though, is that of consent: these practices are differentiated from unacceptable forms of hierarchy by virtue of their characterization as consensual. The magic of consent, then, consists in its ability to – by the performative efficacy of its utterance – render that which would otherwise be unacceptable into a form of ethical interaction, a catalyst for symbolic and interpretive conversion.

There are those, however, who read these practices as but reflections of a culturally absorbed violence, an asymmetry following from a patriarchal mindset that gets compounded both in the case of BDSM and in Orientalist discourses. In debates about "violent" pornography or, in the extreme articulation, of heterosexuality in general, such practices are thought of as replicating the violence of gendered domination.[55] Yet, paradoxically, as anthropologist Nicole Constable points out in her study of "mail order" marriages, such characterizations deny agency to those who are made into only ever victims. Like the specter of the veiled dominatrix, the women who partake in such marriages are, Constable shows, characterized both as "dragon ladies"

[55] Writings that exemplify this particular school of feminist thought include Dworkin (1979) and MacKinnon (1991).

intent on scamming their way into citizenship and as hapless victims of "loser" western men who trick them into thinking that they offer a good life, when really they want servants who don't know better because "Western" women won't have them (2003). The problem with constructing an analysis in this way, Constable shows, is that it leaves no room for agency, and though global flows of capital and imperialist history certainly play into both imaginary and material aspects of those who partake in or observe such marriages, such features do not really determine the way these marriages work, and certainly not how those involved in them speak of their relations.

Within the frame of structure and agency, either way one is caught: how then to balance the ways in which one speaks for and of oneself with the social, cultural, political, and psychological contexts that are the very conditions of the possibility of an utterance? Consent is a contextual magic, its power in force by virtue of another performative magic, that of statutory law, which regulates who may consent and to what. But it's also a slippery form of magic, in that it becomes very difficult to establish after the fact, should a challenge arise requiring the need to do so.

Cordelia told me she thought that one reason why SMlers play in clubs might have something to do with the social aspect of having others around, that one could be confident that, in the event something goes wrong, that there would be witnesses who could attest as to the consensuality of what had transpired. Consensual assault – *Körperverletzung mit Einwilligung* – will not be prosecuted, but without consent, it is simply assault. Perhaps one of the reasons that SMlers spend so much time and energy talking about their practices is that so much of their practice consists in the magical efficacy of the word.

Representations of BDSM, though, when viewed without the context of the frame of play, the frame of gift, the frame of ritual, the frame of agency, look like something else. If one presumes that a submissive is without agency, without wherewithal, duped by a patriarchal order, then that presumption denies the very agency that such a discourse posits as having already have been lacking. Yet, as I have shown, the "out of context" element has been central to the interpretation of the practices all along. If I have drawn connections among the impossibility of individualism in various domains, individualism nonetheless remains the basis of these practices as well as their discursive efficacy. BDSM is constitutively a practice, then, of "matter out of place," subverting in its highly ordered way each framework through which it would be made intelligible, and thus highlighting the paradoxes inherent in all these discourses, and drawing attention to the magic of modernity in attempting to circumvent them by constructing so many oppositions as if they were reflections of a preexisting empirical condition. But for all that, these very practices illuminate the extraordinary potential of anthropological inquiry, a practice of the trans, the cross, and the comparative, which enables the bringing together of frames that otherwise would be held distinct.

Throughout this dissertation I have been arguing for an interpretive method that I see as a corrective to historicization and contextualization as the basis on which to analyze empirical phenomena: indeed, my entire argument has consisted in showing how the frames of modernity fail to make intelligible these practices, which are nonetheless in and of the modern. In previous chapters, we dealt with the interconnected problems of the paradoxical ontology of play and the imagination of a

degree zero signification from which interpretations marked as "reinscriptions" or "resignifications" are thought to depart. This degree zero is presumed, however implicitly or unconsciously, but inaccessible: like the Lacanian Real it is the empty center around which everything else nonetheless turns. It is the positing of this degree zero, this however impossible univocal signification imagined as reality, that is crucial in understanding play as an ontological problem. Produced under real conditions, play departs from that on which it is nonetheless dependent. The key, though, is that this "problematic" emerges under certain conditions, conditions that idealize signification degree zero, that posit that the imaginary center ought to be that on which the signification hinges.

This quest for an Enlightenment unmasking, this refusal to see play as its own reality, was traced to two key, and interrelated, aspects of modern thinking: first, it was shown that the problem of framing "play" was symptomatic of broader issues of framing. The symbolic reality of play and its attendant anxieties was traced to the privileging of the economic. It was then shown that BDSM practices are to be thought of as being in the world of capitalism but not of it. Rather, they are a kind of gift exchange, but this gift exchange gets discursively constructed within the framework of commodities. The gift/commodity problem, then, turns out to be symptomatic of a split between ritual and subjectivity, where the former is thought of as external societal imposition "against the self" (Nabokov 1995), as opposed to interior and internal self realization and expression. Yet, BDSM practices disrupt this opposition, too, for they are ritual practices constructed using the discourse of the modernist subject, indeed

they are constructed according to the logic of liberal individual freedom that they nevertheless subvert.

Thus, the problem of framing resonates throughout, and the final step was to consider the broader implications of this argument with respect to the problem of agency, which runs through both the notions of exchange and ritual: agency, its presumption, and its discursive conjuring constitutes the magical force that enables the transition from one discourse to the other: from reality to play, from commodity to gift, from subjectivity to ritual, and back, and it is this very performative efficacy of agency, and its deployment in these practices, that makes them so troubling to a conceptual order that hinges on the very distinctions being subverted. The mantra "safe, sane, consensual" depends on the articulation of the categories, the naming that causes to exist by virtue of that naming (to invoke Pierre Bourdieu). Belief that the word is the guarantor of its own reality, belief in the magic of words – confession, testimony, etc. – is a necessary fiction, a foundation that is the foundation of itself, on which the social functioning of subjective modernity hinges; yet, skepticism about the truth of the word, about the conditions and contingencies in which the word is produced, especially when the word, though produced conventionally, challenges conventions, calls the possibility of the freedom of the will into question. Submission-as-agency pushes the bounds of permissible variation in a world that privileges formal equality: consensual relations of power seem to be a paradox, in fact the ultimate paradox, in a modernist world view. At every turn, anxieties about "agency" in relation to "structure" emerge precisely in those instances where the "structures" in question diverge from a liberal framework, so that agency-as-liberalism seems less a universalized claim to freedom than the

enforcement of a particular way of living that is as if by magic pronounced to be free. Taken together, though, a comparative approach to the incommensurable forms of incommensurability vis-à-vis the liberal imagination, embodied in the specter of the veiled dominatrix, enables us to see more clearly the ways in which the experiential inadequacies of the modernist ideology, even amongst those who embrace it, are in need of an insistently ethnographic exegesis.

Symbolic violence is all around us, in the inscriptions that circulate and which, through that circulation, come to form the indices of intelligibility through which we approach our own and others' experiential worlds. Because our desires are always already mediated through and by the social, agency must be thought, from the beginning, not as an enactment of a universalized autonomy, but as a contextualized product of the very ties that bind us, where such bindings are constitutive of who and what we become, made (in)visible through our engagements with others. If the efficacy of consent is attributable to the magic of word and will, modernism and liberalism cannot be thought of in terms of *Entzauberung*. Rather, the breaking of one spell seems only to engender the creation of another. Its secular aegis notwithstanding, ours is a rather magical age, indeed.

Conclusion

Revealing Masks:
Mystification as a Social Fact

"Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think."

- Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*

How does ritual occur in contexts privileging individualism? How do gift relations appear in contexts privileging exchange? This dissertation has explored such questions as they emerged through considerations of the lives of SMlers as I encountered them during my fieldwork in early 21st Century Berlin. This ethnography of discursive encounter arose out of an attempt to convey something of the practices with which it has been concerned. The forms in which territoriality, identity, play, exchange, ritual, and agency manifest in BDSM are suggestive, I have argued, of a temporality out of joint: from "living as our grandparents did" to "following behind gays and lesbians," these discursive practices simultaneously evoke past and future, even as they do so in the subjunctive mood. This grammar is essential to the cultural practices at work, since, as I have shown at every turn, attempts to render them in the indicative fail insofar as BDSM occupies the point at which so many modernist oppositions are rendered undecidable. BDSM thus entails, for those who practice it, the navigation of existential incommensurability.

Here, then, an anthropologist has something to contribute to an exegesis of these practices, as there is a long history in anthropological theory concerning problems of classificatory incommensurability. Traditionally, the problem of classification has been posed in terms of cross-cultural borders[56]: "their" way of doing things vs. "ours." More recent writing, though, most notably that of David Valentine, has turned to issues of classification in terms of subjectivity formation and organization intra-culturally. Valentine's 2007 book *Imagining Transgender*, subtitled "an ethnography of a category," pursues how the institutionalization of the term "transgender" shapes the possibilities within and through which the lives of his interlocutors come to be intelligible: "in both scholarly and activist work the use of transgender as a category of analysis and action restricts the possibilities of explaining gender variance as much as it enables it" (17). He shows, for example, how the *analytic* distinction between "gender" and "sexuality" comes to be an *experiential* one, and the violence, symbolic and corporeal, done to those who would live their lives otherwise. This dissertation has built on the ethnography of categories and categorization, offering an ethnographic approach to *discursive* encounter. The encounters traced here have occurred in a number of registers: among SMlers, among academics, and between the two. To paraphrase Isabelle Clark-Decès, the ethnography in this work is predicated as much on conversation as it is on observation (2005: 161).

Throughout, I have examined not only the relationship between the official and the everyday, but have also focused on the ways in which SMlers negotiate problems of classification and definition for which readily authoritative answers are not readily

[56] E.g. Wagner (1974).

available. Indeed, this unavailability is itself characteristic of what John Borneman has coined the "post-paternal" social order. Borneman argues that in contemporary Germany "authority is no longer necessarily phallic; there is no single measure and often no identificatory father" (2004: 91). Without a single measure (phallic or otherwise), without univocal signification, it becomes possible and necessary to negotiate dialogically the parameters of possibility, between the centrifugal mantra of "to each his own" and the centripetal basis upon which communicative interaction becomes intelligible.

This dynamic underpins how historicist notions of "context" become problematic when sacralized as preconditions of an explicitly experiential epistemology. In this research, it was the shadow of an explicitly historicist imagination that posed obstacles to what was to be the dissertation's central ethnographic insight. Studying a "sexual" subculture in a "contemporary" place like "Germany" seemed to foreclose possibilities of ritual and gift in favor of psychology and commodification. These interrelated analytic problems of focalization and localization, though, are symptomatic of a societal injunction to identificatory coherence.

The topical and geographical framings of anthropological projects reflect a broader pattern of territorialization extending to, or rather originating from, a politics of identity. Importantly, the question is not simply one of a particular academic discipline and the acts of territorialization it often performs. Rather, the problem of the "project" within anthropology is part and parcel of broader epistemological assumptions in the West about the nature of personhood. The attribution of this "nature" is at once

descriptive and prescriptive: the presumption that lives are coherent goes hand in hand with an assumption that they ought to be so, and these assertions of coherence are often applied *before* the fact. This slippage between the empirical and the normative dimensions of historicist context correlates with the slippage between the empirical and normative individual with which Dumont contends (1977; 1986).

It is at the interstices of that intersection that this work engages the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze; indeed, the corrective to historicization for which this exegetical ethnography of discursive encounter has argued resonates with the critique of Platonism at the heart of Deleuze's thought. The Platonic dichotomy consists of an asymmetric relation between form and instantiation; the instance exemplifies the form, and it is only as example that the empiricism of the instance, according to the Platonic vision, counts. Privileging the Ideal-type of a chair over actual chairs is an act that runs counter to an anthropological ethos that stipulate theoretical insights are to be generated out of empirical encounters. Yet, this ethnographic impulse swims counter to a very strong philosophical current, in which the Platonic vision is maintained. An investment in statistical probabilities would be an example of Platonic social-science, that might result, for example, in the dismissal of outliers. Deleuze, on the other hand, provides a conceptual framework through which to think the variegated realities of occurrences in their singularity and specificity rather than a line-of-best-fit that may or may not explicate any actual occurrence at all, that is, unless and until such models themselves become social facts.[57] Thus, I have throughout this dissertation shied away

[57] Cf. Geertz's notions of 'model of' reality and 'model for' reality (2000 [1973]); of particular interest here is the moment of slippage whereby a descriptive "model of" becomes a prescriptive "model for."

from presenting sociological characterizations as if they were preexisting conditions of interpretative possibility, opting instead to emphasize the ways in which such categories emerged ethnographically; they did so not as a priori truths, but as fields of contestation. Such designations emerge as they attain significance in the context of existential negotiations.

Such negotiations have been at the heart of all the discursive encounters explored exegetically throughout this work. In the case of BDSM, the problem of incommensurability is not founded on alterity as an epistemological necessity, even if it is true that those whose otherness appears radically often bring issues of incommensurability most dramatically to light. The lives of SMlers illustrate that the problem of classification-as-territorialization is not one that concerns only academics: indeed, it is a matter about which SMlers in Berlin are constantly reflecting, even if they often do so in a language other than that of the "theory" in which I as an academic formulate my own thoughts. It is not simply an act of translation, but an opening for synergistic effect: How might we productively think through each other?

To that question, this dissertation has offered one particular answer in the form of a central argument, a form conducive to the discursive framework of the genre "dissertation," a framework which itself enables and constrains the possibilities of this utterance in ways I have reflected on, and the limits of which I have pushed, throughout. The justification for my thesis was set up in the first three chapters by elaborating the shortcomings of the logic of inscription, a logic according to which an indexical or emphatically denotative relationship between terms and their meaning (ultimately, in the singular) is pursued. First, I deconstructed the seemingly innocuous

category of geographic context, showing how "setting" itself is a category in motion. There, I emphasized the ways in which historicization operates experientially as much as the product of projective conjuring and appropriation as it does as grounding in the actualities of the past, suggesting that an anthropological approach to geography and history might be thought as one that questions the conditions under which the "usability" of such forms for particular groups becomes (im)possible and (un)necessary. Chapter two continues the critique of an investment in inscription by showing how, despite their investment in the "meaning" (again singular) of terms, whereby the pursuit of definitions becomes a social fact to be considered ethnographically. Thus, this chapter analyzed the SMlers' quest for truth and what that quest revealed rather than taking up the cause of making an independent pronouncement of what the "meaning" of terms might be.

In this way, my work departs from a vision of demystification as the task of social science. This vision is exemplified in the work of anthropologist Maurice Godelier who, in *The Enigma of the Gift* argues of the social sciences that "their task is precisely to put man in his place, where he was and where he is, at the origin of himself" (1999: 198). This emphasis on demystification is not only the product of a specifically Marxian framework, but characteristic, more broadly, of Enlightenment paradigms, a parable for which could be found in the children's cartoon *Scooby Doo*, each episode of which consists in a gang of detectives pursuing a mischievous ghost or ghoul who always, in the end, is unmasked, and revealed to be a criminal in disguise. In the show, the mystical element is but a ruse; and yet, although this sequence always happens, this dynamic nevertheless fails to result in the gang disavowing a belief in

supernatural beings as such. Every time, the gang begins again, in pursuit of that which is to be unmasked as unreal, never "learning" the lesson that mystical beings do not as such exist. The endless repetition of this dynamic itself suggests the impossibility of an ultimate *Entzauberung*; for every ghost unmasked another pops up in its place. In each episode, the world is *Wiedererzaubert* anew. As social scientists, we have something to learn from this children's cartoon: if unmasking is ultimately unsatisfactory, then mystification itself must be understood as a social fact, and indeed the social-scientific task may be less to demystify than to understand how and why mystification works in the first place. These tasks are not tantamount to the same thing, for, as SMlers observe, the interminable analysis of power dynamics in which they engage, whereby they argue that surface relations may not be as they appear, nonetheless do not diminish the experiential efficacy of power exchange in the moment.

Thus, the question is less one of revealing what is "beneath" the mask, and more one as to what the mask itself reveals. In his own version of "turtles all the way down," Deleuze writes: "Behind the masks, therefore, are further masks, and even the most hidden is still a hiding place, and so on to infinity. The only illusion is that of unmasking something or someone…There are no ultimate or original responses or solutions, there are only problem-questions, in the guise of a mask behind every mask and a displacement behind every place" (1994: 106-7). Demystification, then, itself becomes a mystification, insofar as the explanatory gesture obscures the ways in which the "as if" retains experiential efficacy as a condition of social life's possibility.

This idea is taken up ethnographically in chapter three, in which I document the ways in which SMlers grapple with how to reconcile tensions concerning the production of their identity as people who define themselves through play. Their discursive practices complicate performative approaches to ontology by conferring the mask, and thereby the playful act, with an ontological reality of its own, generating a logic of encompassment, in which everything hinges on the communicability of the ontological plane felt to be in play. These forms of circumscription disrupt claims to univocal signification, and therefore the modern ideology of purification, ontological and otherwise. For example, whereas in modern contexts, carnival forms get read as temporary reversals that ultimately reinforce social norms (cf. Bakhtin 1984), these practices cannot so easily be assimilated into such a vision.

The possibilities opened by the discussion of play set the stage for the central argument, which consists in a move from an individualist ideology of inscription to a socio-centric theory of exchange, but one that accounts for the ways in which the modernist vision nonetheless persists. Thus, in chapter four, I argue that SMlers' practices may be understood as gift relations, but these exchanges occur according to the discourse of commodities, which is the salient form of exchange in which they occur. Submission appears to be paradoxical according to an individualist ideology whereby such acts can only be understood as alienation; understood as a form of gift exchange, the paradox is not resolved but displaced, because it is precisely in the language of individualism that these exchanges are understood by those who practice them. The chapter builds on Mauss' insight that the seeming voluntariness is actually essential to obligatory gift exchange, setting up chapter five's argument, which

emphasizes the importance of subjunctive forms even in a world where sincerity is discursively privileged.

The opposition between subjunctivity and sincerity has been constructed as parallel to that between ritualism and individualism (Seligman et al 2008); yet, here too, BDSM disrupts this conceptual dichotomy. Sincerity is central to modernist subjectivity and its emphasis on interiority, whereas the "as-if" of the subjunctive mood is associated with ritual externality. SMlers practice ritual, but these practices are constructed using the discourse of the individual subject, the very discourse to which individualism is ordinarily opposed. Their play, then, is both sincere and subjunctive at once, a duality that in part accounts for why it is that an ultimate signification of what these practices "really" mean must remain an ever-elusive task. This realization has serious consequences for debates about agency-in-submission, an issue I explore in chapter six.

Because subjugation is the constitutive other to which liberal thinking is opposed, submission is especially problematic for proponents of liberal theory, especially when it registers, through consent, as the point at which oppression and freedom are rendered undecidable. Indeed, in his book *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, literary critic John K. Noyes writes: "The figure of the European masochist arose out of intense inner conflicts and contradictions in discourses of liberalism and modernism…to interrogate 'masochism' is to interrogate these crises and contradictions in liberal thought" (1997: 8). Within anthropology, however, the problem of agency-in-submission has been pursued, in a variation on Michael Herzfeld's (1984) "Mediterraneanist Dilemma," through ethnographic

writings on conservative religious women, often Muslims. This ethnographic specificity results in the construction of these questions in particular ways; approaching the contradictions of liberalism through an ethnographic focus on BDSM opens up alternative possibilities, and, through comparison, highlights the particularities of asking such questions in the other, discursively opposed, population, making concrete through ethnographic elaboration the dangers of what might otherwise become universalizing abstraction. I document these issues in my discussion of the "veiled dominatrix" especially, considering the interrelatedness of what would seem to be distinct concerns of "sexual minorities" and Orientalized others. The conversations in this chapter are thus suggestive of what an "anachronistically archaic" ethnography might offer, illuminating that which historicist contextualization would in all likelihood obscure.

The dangers of such moves, even for those trained in anthropology, abound. In his book *Modernity's Wager*, for example, Adam Seligman takes issue with how, in modernist societies, "We have wagered our idea of the sacred on beliefs in individual rights" (2000: 12). Critiquing immanent authority as "idolatry" and authority by reason as unsustainable, he suggests that "What remains is the third form through which authority and community have been defined: the idea of a transcendent and fully heteronomous source of authority, that same conception of authority that came to human consciousness in the so-called Axial Age and that modernity, in the person of the Enlightenment, rejected" (54). Thus, he concludes, "we must enlist the help of precisely those beliefs – chief among which are beliefs in revealed, transcendent truth – of the three revealed monotheistic religions" (141). Underpinning this argument is a

logic of historicism, whereby the genealogy of a problem sets the parameters of possibility through which it might be negotiated, so that the "failure" of secularization necessitates a return; citing the specter of an unbridled fundamentalism, Seligman's *Wager* is that a post-liberal reiteration of a specifically religious framework, one that makes enough room for tolerance, becomes the only preferable/viable dialectical synthesis, restoring monotheistic notions of transcendence to what appears to be, for him, its rightful place.

My point is that one can agree with the empirically demonstrable premise that a linear march toward ever-increasing secularism is not occurring, *and* with the social-theoretical premise that an individualistic ideology is ultimately unsatisfactory, *without* thereby concluding that it is necessary to "enlist the help" of monotheism. Indeed, this wager rests on a tautological acceptance of the terms of such religions, in their distinction between immanent and transcendent that renders certain forms of authority "idolatrous" in the first place. What the lives of SMlers show, I suggest, is that there are other salient ways of framing the problem, so that transcendence, experienced socially and in tension with an individualistic ethos, becomes thinkable in ways that do not necessarily reiterate the terms out of which it historically nevertheless emerged.

Experiences of transcendence, like experiences of mystification, are indeed constitutive of social life: gift relations and ritual forms are emerging even in the most "contemporary" milieus. Such social forms are suggestive of openings that the magic of human agency, the magic of encounter, might produce, so that the past may inform but not imprison us, so that exchanges, more than inscriptions, may sculpt the bounds of existential possibility.

Coda:

"What will we do when you're no longer observing us?"

About halfway through my fieldwork, I took a trip home for the holidays – Christmas and New Year. We discussed my upcoming departure in a car ride home from a local meeting of the *Arbeitskreis*, and everyone wanted to be certain that I was coming back, that I wasn't leaving for good, even though it may well have been on their minds, as it was on mine, that eventually my time in the field would come to an end. "What will we do when you're no longer observing us?" Anna asked. I was really touched by this question, at a point where I had come so far and yet still had a long way to go, it made me feel like it was all worthwhile. The group had met Michael at an earlier meeting, and decided they liked him and that we were good together, although Edward jokingly changed his mind when he realized it meant I'd be leaving Berlin: "What was I saying, Richard? He's no good for you! Stay with us instead!" Valerie opted for a more moderate solution: "The best would be if you and Michael together would *permanently* move here (*Am besten wäre, du würdest mit deinem Freund permanent hierher ziehen*)". Although Anna said that one advantage of my returning to New York would be that I could begin an American chapter of the *Arbeitskreis*. She is, after all, *evangelisch*.

This sentiment arose again in February, at the Gor party, when Michael was telling Johannes he was happy that my anticipated return at the end of July no longer seemed so far away. "But we don't want Richard to leave us" said Johannes. "But I need him home," Michael replied. "But we need him here," said Johannes. When July

came, there were lots of goodbye parties (*Abschiedsfeiern*), but it just didn't seem real. It takes so much time to get into the field and then, one day, you just leave it.

At the last meeting I attended of the *Arbeitskreis*, Anna gave a sermon about going on a journey. To me it was returning home, but to them it was going off into the world. In any case I'd be writing about my time in Berlin, which for them was a place from which I would depart rather than, from Michael's perspective, a place from which I would return.

We closed, as always, with a hymn. This time – appropriate in such a transnational scene – with an Irish blessing:

> May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be always at your back.
> May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon your fields.
> And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

Of course, we sang it in German:

> *Möge die Straße uns zusammenführen und der Wind in seinem Rücken sein;*
> *Sanft falle Regen auf deine Felder, und warm auf dein Gesicht der Sonnenschein.*
> *Und bis wir uns wiedersehen, halte Gott dich fest in seiner Hand.*

One of the problems of fieldwork – as well as of writing – is that it is difficult to conclude. Relationships with interlocutors are forged, connections develop, and then one day, you leave; indeed it was odd to think that everything would continue to go on as it had, only I would no longer be part of the conversation, the plane carrying me away from people I saw daily; the date of return, a deadline, a compulsion to finish up. In writing, one can construct the conclusion with exquisite care, make it poetic,

make it neat; but in life there is no such neatness, everything continues, so much left unseen and unsaid. Narrative devices notwithstanding, endings are not ever satisfactory, relationships do not leave people untouched or unchanged, and the loss can be traumatic, a severance that even if not permanent feels as if a part of one's self has been left behind, so that one comes to inhabit a state of perpetual *Heimweh* for the people and places to which one remains, despite whatever distances, attached.

Separation is also a problem for SMlers. At one meeting of the submissives' coffee klatch, Cordelia spoke about how, although SMlers have elaborate rites and rituals for building relationships, there isn't an apparatus for dissolving them. The misery of the break-up is a consequence of our individualism and a testament to its inadequacy: we spend time and energy building connections because we imagine ourselves to be fundamentally apart to begin with; what is occluded in this framework, though, is the way in which connections to others are constitutive of the very becoming of the self. Cordelia talked about these difficulties for people she has known, attributing the challenges of ending such relationships to how, in BDSM, there are rites for getting a collar, or getting a ring of O; this buildup to a relationship is all very ritualized, she noted, conducive to uniting two into one, and yet there are no such rituals for breaking up, no rites for separation: a person says "it's over," and that is that. Cordelia suggested there was something sad about the instantaneousness with which such separations could be performatively instantiated, even as her description of the process was very matter-of-fact. "One simply ends things," she said. *Man macht einfach Schluß.*

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