

Playing with power: Kink, race, and desire

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Abstract

Although the separation between “real life” and “play” appears to reinscribe liberal notions of autonomy, BDSM practitioners actually mobilize this boundary to trouble liberal understandings of the liberal autonomous rational agent. Through understandings desires as inextricable from power, and fetishes as displacements of anxieties, BDSM practices recognize “irrational” desires and multiple, fractured selves. In examining kink practices of queer women of color in the Netherlands, this paper explores the transformative potentials of BDSM for queer people of color, especially in resisting colonial discourses that privilege liberal discourses of agency and conceptualize bodies of color as nonmodern, inferior, exotic, and irrational. In the face of discourses that pit Dutch freedom and sexual expression against ethnic minorities and sexual constraint, marginalized kinksters are forming communities that radically centralize marginalized kink experiences and reject pathologizing discourses, as they critically alter the implications of and possibilities for slippages between daily life and kink.

Keywords

BDSM, colonialism, Netherlands, sexuality, race

From my field notes:

He took me into the trees; where the leaves hung low enough to hide us from passer-bies’ first glance. he tried to turn me around, I backed away, and he said, “Oh come

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on, I'm not doing anything." then he started touching me. he took out his penis and started pushing it between my legs. i said no, but then he did it again

It was an interesting pattern. Where I would say no and try to push him away, he would say, "Just relax," I would say no and try to push him away again, and then he would stop that particular action. But some things, he did enough times that I became used to it, and I let him, and it was as if my mind had turned off.

There were times I said, "I don't want that." And his response was, "Oh come on."

My least favorite thing was when he said, "It's not fucking. [It's not sexual; we're both queer.] It's play." As if that lessened the intensity of what he was doing.

And the thing is, I see how this can be normal in other terms, if he's been going to that same spot in Vondelpark and getting fucked by guys and then fucking other guys, and he seems okay. And the guys he's fucked (I know not all) are probably also okay. Why am I so affected; why can't I move right now? it's been two hours since he left.

he said after it finished: "You like it; you're just scared." And he said more than once, "Relax; be yourself." – as if I was one of those unfree people he complained about earlier—the straight guys pretending it's their first time cruising in Vondelpark/or female tourists watching other gay men in Club Church pretending they didn't get aroused by the scene, or vanilla people saying "ew, the dark room, that's gross" and then sneaking away and going downstairs to that very dark room in Club Church. So to him, I was in denial, pretending too—and because of that, he justified his insistence when I pushed him away, when I said "I don't want that"...justified that the scene started not by any verbal communication but rather by him trying to turn me around, me backing away, and him saying, "Oh come on, I'm not doing anything."¹

He was an organizer of an annual gay fetish party in Amsterdam, one of two parties that best symbolized the Netherlands' "fetish scene" against which many of my interlocutors explicitly built their communities geared towards queer women of color. I offer this page from my field notes not to make a generalizing hypothesis about all fetishists in the Netherlands but to illustrate a dissonance that I yearned to make sense of—a dissonance that allowed his logic to make sense to him and my perspective to make sense to me—and render others' experiences as illegible. How is it that such conflicting perspectives of consent, safety, tolerance, and kink itself developed between seemingly similar sexual communities in the contemporary Netherlands?

Through an analysis of my interviews with queer women of color in the United States and the Netherlands, this paper explores the transformative potentials of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and/or sadism/masochism) practices for queer people of color, especially in resisting colonial discourses that privilege liberal discourses of agency and conceptualize bodies of color as

nonmodern, inferior, exotic, and irrational. An analysis of interviews that I conducted in 2017 and 2018 reveals how people of color (Adrian, Aina, Unicorn, Denzel, Melanie, Angel, and Iris) have mobilized BDSM to trouble liberal understandings of the self. Through understanding desires as inextricable from power, and fetishes as displacements of anxieties, BDSM practices recognize “irrational” desires and multiple, fractured selves. Although the separation between “real life” and “play” appears to reinscribe liberal notions of autonomy, BDSM practitioners actually mobilize this boundary to refute ideas of the liberal autonomous agent.

In the face of discourses that pit Dutch freedom and sexual expression against ethnic minorities and sexual constraint, an analysis of my interviewees’ stories in the Netherlands then illuminates how marginalized kinksters are forming communities that radically centralize marginalized kink experiences and reject pathologizing discourses, as they critically alter the implications of and possibilities for slippages between daily life and kink. My interviews reveal that a careless slippage across the boundary between daily life and kink scene, or the boundary between assault and rape fantasy play, is a privilege borne of societal structures of power and privilege. Thus, the queer women of color featured in this chapter develop communities that radically centralize kink experiences in which heedless slippage across the boundary between daily life and play is impossible.

Methodology

This article draws from 14 semi-structured qualitative interviews I conducted in the United States and the Netherlands; in-person observation of activist or academic sites such as a queer migrant festival, Surinamese festival, anti-slavery festival, and University of Amsterdam immigration panel; and 21 responses to an online survey I conducted in the Netherlands. (See Appendix 1 for “Interlocutor biographies.”) I coded the interviews and surveys for overarching themes. The biggest themes that emerged were: tolerance in the Netherlands; criticism of Dutch tolerance; visibility; identity discovery; importance to everyday life; entering the community; gay versus straight BDSM; BDSM communities (the biggest category with multiple subcategories); barriers to access; kink definition; appeals of kink; and racism. I refer to all interviewees by pseudonyms.

The survey circulated over Facebook pages AskAnnabel, Queeristan Organizing Group, Queer Rotterdam, Colored Collective, and pride pages and Fetlife forums. Queers in the Netherlands, BDSM Netherlands, Amystique Antwerpen, Asia @ The Netherlands, Young Amsterdam Kinksters, Keep it Kinky, United Utrecht Perverts, and Amsterdam Munch & Party Group. I also asked Dutch queer organizations to circulate my survey. I conducted, recorded, and transcribed my interviews in English, and disseminated my surveys in both Dutch and English. Together, these sources illuminate attitudes towards issues in both the queer kink scene and larger society, and the narratives of queer women of color who have formed subcommunities against the larger kink scene in the Netherlands.

Positionality

As a researcher from the United States, I make observations about racism in the Netherlands not to imply that the United States is devoid of it, but to investigate the racial constructions that are rooted in the history of another nation-state formation and interrogate the portrayal I encountered upon my arrival—the Netherlands as a “place without race”—and the relentless comparisons that my research participants made without any prompting, to “America talking through the roof about race” and “BDSM contracts and rules [that are] too American”. James Baldwin offers that “at the root of the American Negro is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself” and therein arose lynch law, segregation, and terrorization in the United States (1995). On the other hand, he writes, in Europe it is possible for race to be “comfortably abstract” and for Europe to supposedly leave race in its colonies where they “represented no threat to European identity”.

Scholar Monica Miller asserts that Swedish history constructs race as a recent problem that interrupted the nation’s historically white homogeneity with the arrival of southern guest workers, students and asylum seekers after World War II. And yet, Sweden has had a long history of encounters with racism, from “the slave trade, colonization, nineteenth-century Lutheran missionary work, travel reports, the presence of African captives at Royal courts in Copenhagen and Stockholm, the display of Africans in human zoos and at World’s Fairs in the later nineteenth century, the presence of African American performers on the European stage post-emancipation, and neocolonial development and aid work in Africa”, each of which “brought ‘blackness’ to Sweden in different forms” (Miller, 2017).

Whereas the Netherlands cultivates an identity of naturalized liberalism and tolerance, Sweden constructs “Swedishness” as the industrious and intelligent Nordic worker, an identity that the 1928 and 1933 Social Democratic parties were intent on protecting from racial generation. The construction of a national identity relying on white homogeneity and revolving around concepts like tolerance and industriousness is inherently racialized; as a country claims who is tolerant or industrious, it also claims who is not.

In the interest of acknowledging my own positionality in this research, I identify with the words queer, kink and BDSM, Asian American, nonmonogamy, cis woman, and upper middle class. My background from the United States is undoubtedly a limitation in a project based in the Netherlands. My positionality as an Asian American person makes me marginally more equipped for noticing where race shows up in social discourse, and understanding how racialization operates in a white-dominated country to cast nonwhite persons indiscriminately but also specifically in positions of Otherness. Another limitation of this research is the exploration of class issues. Although I demonstrate the production of class inequality and socioeconomic barriers through racial difference, a different researcher may read between the lines of my interviewees’ narratives and reach

insights that I did not, due to my upper middle-class background. Conducting my interviews in English is a third limit to the comprehensiveness of my research, although it is mitigated somewhat by disseminating my surveys in both Dutch and English, translating documents from Dutch, and the fact that 9 in 10 people speak English in the Netherlands (Europeans, 2012).

Literature review

Overall, scholarship provides minimal insight into racial divisions in kink communities. Of 28 studies on BDSM and polyamory from 2001 to 2010 and eight before 2000, only three studies represented over 15% people of color and most studies around 8% people of color (Sheff and Hammers, 2011). Sociologist Robin Bauer's leading book in the field *Queer BDSM Intimacies* features two people of color out of 49 participants, which he attributes to his identity as a white researcher and not mentioning race in his search for interviewees (2014). Demaj offers the explanation that people of color may be less willing to engage in (white-led) research about sexual activity (2014). In the face of minimal existing research of racial difference in BDSM, this article intervenes not only by lifting the representation of people of color in kink research, but further by focusing primarily on queer people of color's experiences of kink.

This study builds upon the emergent concept in existing scholarship on kink, that kink may hold unique potentials to challenge societal structures of power. Counters to supposedly "feminist" critiques of S/M—such as Deckma's argument that consent to pain in S/M is disproportionately stigmatized compared to analogous situations like consenting to "a movie that makes one cry" or the hierarchical power imbalances of the corporate workplace—open the door for more nuanced investigations into (women's) choices to participate in kink (2011). Various scholars meet this challenge for a more nuanced investigation by underscoring the potential of a kink scene to explore and reveal social power dynamics, even the power dynamics specific to a historical moment (Beres and MacDonald, 2015; Freeman, 2008; Hopkins, 1994). These studies generally locate the value of kink in its "self-conscious performance" of power differentials (Hopkins, 1994). I build upon idea to demonstrate how the explicitness that BDSM practices make of power differentials ultimately challenges colonialist discourses of rationality, leading into a fuller discussion of how BDSM practices resist liberal discourses.

Existing scholarship generally relies upon the subject of consent to initiate a discussion of how kink challenges "neoliberal values of autonomy, liberty, tolerance, and responsibility" (Barker, 2013; Beres and MacDonald, 2015; Fanghanel, 2019). A more complex understanding of consent can move us beyond a "neoliberal understanding of consent between free individuals which pervades wider culture" and towards the "freedom from" (abuse) framework rather than the "freedom to" (choose) framework (Barker, 2013; Beres and MacDonald, 2015; Fanghanel, 2019). This article enjoins these ideas to unearth how queer women of color have deployed BDSM to resist multiple overarching colonial discourses

beyond consent—but more than that, how they have built BDSM subcommunities to centralize these practices and understandings of BDSM.

Through an analysis of my interviews, I explore similar motivations pushing marginalized people in the Netherlands to create alternative kink scenes that centralize non-normative experiences that follow from their intersectional identities. The ways they talk about their opposition and resistance to “mainstream” kink are manifestations of broader societal discourses and recent political shifts surrounding liberation, national identity, and structural oppression. At the center of their stories are the impact of power structures on desire, and the ways life experiences affect one’s relationship to sex and trust, critically altering the implications of and possibilities for slippages between daily life and kink.

The evidence in their life stories, as well as statements by gay leathermen, indicates that these understandings of consent, boundaries and freedom are deeply shaped by racial discourses. By examining Angel, Melanie, and Iris’s life trajectories and their intimate thoughts about their desires, what they want from kink, and navigations of slippage between daily life and kink, I reveal how narratives of racial innocence shape their resistance to the general fetish scene and the care-focused, intentionally inclusive communities they cultivate in response.

Mobilizing the boundary

Popular culture—aided by the 2015 release of the film *50 Shades of Grey* (widely critiqued by the BDSM community as an inaccurate depiction of BDSM)—conceives of BDSM/kink as a form of sex involving pain or domination, oftentimes including implements such as whips and handcuffs. The letters in BDSM stand for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and/or sadism/masochism. In reality, BDSM practitioners, or kinksters generally understand kink to be the consensual staging of power or the transgression of social boundaries of grossness and sexual normality, sometimes involving sex but other times role-plays such as mommy/baby or petplay that do not necessarily require sex. Many BDSM players use kink and BDSM interchangeably—kink oftentimes as a more casual or shorthand way of expressing BDSM. However, others use “kinkiness” to convey certain proclivities or desire (since kinky can be used more fluidly as an adjective) and “BDSM” as a noun to express the broader concept that includes certain signifiers of negotiation and consent. In this essay, I use kink and BDSM to refer to the practice and the overall concept that encompasses signifiers of negotiation and consent.

In simply discussing implements, bondage, pain, and sex, however, the picture of BDSM/kink is not complete. For many of my interlocutors, the central aspect of BDSM, which separates it from rough sex for instance, lies in some other element. I argue that this element is the boundary that kinksters perceive between real life and play.

For some, kink is powerful precisely because of its ability to play with societal power dynamics, which relies on engaging with the boundary and minimizing (or at least intentionally navigating) the slippage between daily life and scene. For

Angel, Melanie, and Iris, the defining characteristic of kink is not the sex or the Dominance/submission role-play in itself, but the consciousness and explicitness they make of the powerplay. Just as Melanie prioritizes the “clear line between what is safe, sane, consensual BDSM and what’s domestic abuse”—a line that she complained people did not want to think about in the normative fetish scene—Angel drew an analogy to the difference between crossdressing and drag, that in drag, there’s a “conscious element to do stuff around crossdressing, while crossdressing does not necessarily have that element”. Thus, when Angel first discovered kink in a book, she was not discovering rough sex for the first time, but the “structure to think about something that I like”. The difference between rough sex and kink is that in “rough sex—you exchange power, you do everything, but kink builds around that, builds around power and acknowledges that it exists”.

The structure of BDSM implies a boundary between the scene, where kinksters take power dynamics and exaggerate or reverse them in a process that has been communicated, and daily life, where it is not acceptable to “play” upon these power dynamics because they have not been communicated. The significance of the boundary is more than the safety of the ropes or physical safety; rather, it is the boundary itself, or the assurance of fantasy—the assurance that one can always say no, and the assurance that this is separate from daily life.

The fear of blurring boundaries reflects the magnitude of this assurance. For example, Aina said, “I definitely want to ask John to call me a slut, but I’m scared how it would affect my normal day-to-day relationship”. Because of this, Aina professed that hook-ups, as opposed to long-term relationships, may be more suited for BDSM scenes. Similarly, Adrian stated:

I would act substantially differently if I knew someone was watching/would later watch me... Someone anonymous online wouldn’t bother me too much, but if it’s someone watching my main identity, or I know them, then... I would be afraid of what they’d think of me and would alter my behavior on that assumption.

That is, they feared that observers would develop assumptions that—even implicitly or subconsciously—shape their views of Adrian’s identity outside of the scene. For Aina, however, this threat of blurring boundaries extends beyond interpersonal relationships. When I asked her about raceplay, she interrupted me quickly, saying, “Oh, I think it’s completely fine”, before continuing to describe the way in which race infuses the totality of life and desires. Yet, she continued, “But I also understand why it’s important for [raceplay] not to be super socially acceptable... Because it’s hard to be respectful while also acknowledging that this exists. In my head, I’m like this is my intellectual side of my brain and this is the animal side of my brain. I’m going to let the animal side of my brain rule in specific moments”. Thus, the absence of a clear demarcation implicates Aina’s self-identity in “real life”.

This boundary between real life and play is thus fundamental for many BDSM practitioners—and the proof of “I can tell the difference between reality and

fiction”—that despite fantasies of choking a significant other or a parent or any other figure of authority, ultimately kinksters are in control of their desires and they would not act on these desires. This boundary enables kinksters to say, “It is not immoral unless I act upon it”. Using this boundary, BDSM practitioners can resist the pathologizing of desires, or society’s impulse to mark desires that stand on the edge of pain, love, and violence (BDSM ethnographer’s Stacey Newmahr’s (2011) “edge” framework) as abnormal and in need of fixing.

Real life and play: Consenting to nonconsent

Under this demarcation between real life and play, kinksters within the space of the “real world” would strive to create an egalitarian space, devoid of power dynamics, where two (or more) autonomous individuals with equal purchasing power can agree upon a BDSM script. Upon first glance, this method of consenting to nonconsent in BDSM appears to recall a tradition of scholarship on agency that presumes liberal individualism. In Christman’s requirements of free will (rationality, lack of substance control, self-reflection, and capacity to resist), he rejects the “influence of factors that inhibit self-reflection (unless exposure to such factors was autonomously chosen, in which case that choice had to be made without such factors)” (1991).

Denzel’s approach to BDSM appears to exemplify this logic that consenting (in real life) to nonconsent (in play) autonomously chooses factors that inhibit self-reflection. She said, “When I feel like the power dynamics are a little more equal in real life, [and] you’re doing play within them, it’s easier. You’re granting and taking away [power]”. Meanwhile, “if someone, for example, has more power in normal life and they’re taking on a lot of power in the sexual romantic relationship, it can just seem unbalanced”. Thus, for Denzel, although the power within a scene is intentionally unbalanced, the process of designing the scene should ideally occur in a space with as few power differentials as possible. Several of my interlocutors’ reasons for preferring queer and people of color (QPOC) play partners moreover suggest that the “safety” and “equality” of other QPOC provide a more equal power vacuum in which to negotiate the construction of “artificial” power dynamics.

And yet, many BDSM scholars recognize that consent can be context-dependent and irrational.³ Furthermore, while consent is treated as a “rational choice”, the core of consent—whether a sexual advance is acceptable or triggers traumatic feelings of fear, violation, and paralysis—is entirely affective. Consent felt “in the body” determines whether “a certain action is desired in this situation or not” (2014). So, despite negotiation contracts and communication of hard limits, the only guarantee that boundary violations will occur is when kinksters act “against their intuition, following reasonable arguments or formal rules instead” (Bauer, 2014).

Indeed as Bauer writes, general statements that follow a notion of independence like “I (don’t) like bondage” become almost impossible, given that all the choices

we make are relational in nature—both to the person and the situation. Furthermore, the knowledge of whether a deed is consensual is not always clear either, and the mechanisms of BDSM do nothing to enhance the clarity. After all, despite pre-scene negotiations, the interpersonal power dynamics become very real in a scene—and when subs enter subspace, they become “glassy-eyed, unsteady, intellectually impaired, and genuinely powerless” (Newmahr, 2011). Thus, in subspace (the headspace subs may occupy that is commonly compared to feeling drunk or high), “one might lose the awareness of the possibility to veto” (Bauer, 2014). Indeed, the line between play and real life—which justifies BDSM as “merely” role-play—is not as clear as some kinksters claim.

It is this element of sexual desire—the irrationality of it all—that BDSM ultimately seeks to explore. It is the reason that kinksters establish this mental boundary between real life and play (rational and irrational) in the first place—to take the deep dive into the irrational side of the boundary. For example, Unicorn desires a “kind of anger that’s not always logical or rational”—“not socially acceptable anger”. This is the drawn-out, *irrational* anger of being “so angry with my parents because when I was seven, they wouldn’t let me have chocolate ice cream and my wife doesn’t let me have chocolate ice cream because the kids are getting fat and nobody fucking understands me and therefore I fucking hate ice cream . . . That kind of anger is what I am attracted to”. And yet, Unicorn only “accepts someone’s anger” in a safe scene, which is determined by clear steps of negotiation and logistical scheduling. In this way, the sense of safety and the drawing of the boundary open up possibilities for exploring the irrational.

Thus, despite seeming to sidestep the fantasy-reality boundary, BDSM actually interacts with the boundary head on, radically acknowledging the permeability of the boundary and opening up heretofore closed opportunities to explore the irrational “dark” side. Unlike what scholar Ariane Cruz insinuates of disclaimers at the beginning of race porn videos, pointing to the boundary does not necessarily only reinscribe the boundary (2016). Cruz argues that these disclaimers “are engendered by a desire to disclaim the belief that pornography might be accountable for shaping the behavior of viewers, even though it is this very belief such warnings seek to deny”. However, upon closer examination, it is not paradoxical at all. Indeed, viewers’ desires and real-life behavior are connected, but pointing to the boundary between those two sides allows deeper exploration of precisely those desires.

In fact, what could be paradoxical is not the boundary drawn between “scene” and “not scene”, but rather the designation of “real life” and “play”, or rationality and irrationality. For in some ways, the guise of “normality” and the scripted pretense of the rational human and the monogamous, white, vanilla, heteronormative couple is the scene. And meanwhile, the authenticity of irrational emotions could be “real life”. However, the spokenness, the openness, of BDSM scenes articulates a staged quality that emerges from the muted, taken-for-granted, naturalized backdrop of daily vanilla life. This staged quality offers a novel recognition of boundaries, distinguishing BDSM from vanilla sex. After all, one could

argue that for some people, vanilla sex too generates a different headspace. Oftentimes, people speak of their partners becoming “completely different people” in the day versus when having sex at night due to the complicated web of discourses in which sex is implicated. What separates a scene from vanilla sex, then, is not the different head space, but the spoken rules and stagedness of a BDSM scene. BDSM offers the recognition, sometimes the exaggeration, of boundaries, whereas vanilla sex involves the unaware slippage between mindsets or as Unicorn stated, a suppression of irrational desires.

Aina further argued that the absence of power dynamics is an impossible goal, in recalling an incident in which her boyfriend called her “Jasmine” during a scene:⁴ “I mean race will *obviously* factor into this. It would be really weird if he didn’t have a single racial-based thing”. The statement “race will *obviously* factor into this” reflects the impossibility of the “ideal of harmonic sex” and sociologist Robin Bauer’s assertion that unlike feminist and anti-violence persons, anti-racist BDSM folks are more focused on exposing and demonstrating the scriptedness of power, not eliminating power altogether. The ideal of harmonic sex “serves to obscure the fact that the sexual, constructed as the most intimate and private sphere of interaction. . . is infused with power dynamics just like every other area of life” (Bauer, 2014). Thus, for Aina, the pretense of not having race-based fantasies indicates a refusal to acknowledge power dynamics, a racial innocence that does not exist.

Indeed, BDSM acknowledges that almost everything is an illusion of will anyways—the illusion of agency, of a safe space, of the ability for coping mechanisms from drinking to hard work to grant the brief illusion of safety or stability, or of the fleeting moment of happiness or power. BDSM, then, is just another carefully constructed artifice, but at least BDSMers are aware it is an artifice, unlike the untroubled discourses of rationality, heteronormativity, family, and race.

Challenging notions of self

However, this is not to say that there are only one (or two) desires—the irrational and rational. BDSM embraces multifaceted desires and multiple, contradictory selves, in a world that demands a coherent narrative between work life and home life—or rather alternates between cohering and separating home and work worlds.

As Aina said, “It’s internalized shit”. Oppression structures society on the levels of institution, interpersonal relationships, and desires; white supremacy paves the conditions for a diversity of fantasies for people of color. The diversity of response to systems of oppression—and responses that may arise simultaneously and contradictorily—make an additional revelation about BDSM. On one day, Aina desires to dominate a man, flipping the power script to reclaim her power. Later the same day, she is aroused by the idea of a white man calling her Jasmine. The coexistence of contradictory desires shatters any notion of a coherent self.

Through its conception of desires, BDSM accepts the fracturing of selves and refuses the call for a coherent, rational self.

BDSM embraces multifaceted desires and multiple, contradictory selves, in a world that demands a coherent narrative between work life and home life, or, rather, alternates between cohering and separating home and work worlds. One can find proof of this demand for coherence in the assumption that people with mental health issues cannot “succeed” in the workplace, or in interview questions that ask for the number of unread emails in one’s mailbox, as though chaotic personal lives or coping mechanisms preclude organizational adeptness. Society invalidates the possibility for incoherent selves when it does not understand the fact that some people of color have learned the politics of respectability to survive in institutions, but they drop those politics and become louder or quieter at home, in ways that seem to disprove “leadership skills”. But through recognizing the conditioned formation of desires and fetishes as displacements of anxieties, BDSM rejects the demand for the performance of coherence.

Anne McClintock’s analysis of hand fetishes offers useful language for understanding fetishes as displacements of anxieties. She discusses a Victorian man, Munby, and his compulsive infatuation with documenting working women’s “swollen, lumpish, reddish hands”—observing the maid filthy with fat and water, accosting milkmaids setting out on their rounds in foul-smelling sculleries and cellars, and visiting dingy pits of music halls, markets and wretched docklands—at a time when middle-class women went to “incongruous lengths” to erase the evidence of work from their hands (1994). Hand fetishes appear “at the very moment when manual labor was about to be replaced by mechanical labor.” Thus, she writes (1994: 99):

Hands represent a historical memory trace, a nostalgia for a vanishing economic moment . . . a vanishing sexual moment (that is directly related to the vanishing economic realm). They carry the force of a fetish . . . it was hands that did the ‘dirty work’ of masturbation. . . chastisement, meting out the economy of pleasure and pain in the [Victorians’] flagellatory rituals.

Munby so fetishizes hands because they participate in the “theater of transgression” over the social boundary between upper- and working-class, between cleanliness and the unclean. In transgressing this boundary, they represent a nostalgia for the “vanishing economic moment”.

The fetishization—or displacement of contradictions—onto the human body in BDSM further complicates notions of relationality and the self. BDSM also constructs power imbalances through fetishizing the human body. For instance, Unicorn glories in being “the symbol of whatever’s fucked up in your life” during a scene. In particular, she marveled upon the discrepancy between the behavior of her current partner outside of the bedroom (“such a respectful person”) and inside a bedroom as he chokes her and calls her a “bitch”, and as a result, the exceptional “joy he gets from that release”. In this way, if we accept

McClintock's definition of the "fetishized object" as an object onto which personal and social anxieties are displaced, Unicorn's body serves as the fetishized object in the scene. The skin is two-sided, as Caribbean studies scholar Michelle Stephens argues. "The world can act upon the body through relational skin", thus creating the "racializing white gaze". But, the skin also frames "the black male performer's intercorporeal relationship with his audience and with his own fleshy, desiring, orifice-filled, relational self" (Stephens, 2014). Thus, the displacement of her partner's anxieties—or "whatever's fucked up in their life"—onto another human body further blurs boundaries between the self and surroundings, disrupting notions of a contained self.

The possibility for exploration beyond the contained self that is constructed from society's prejudiced conceptions is central for some kinksters, who practice kink to process trauma or to enact gender or racial scripts that are inaccessible in their daily lives. Although her boyfriend is initially reluctant to assert his dominance, and Iris described him as meek and polite in daily life, he nonetheless is the Dom in their kinky relationship. Thus, this approach allows possibilities for exploration, and it allows her partner to adopt a role that may be contrary to daily personalities or societally imposed stereotypes.

Angel similarly complained of being coded as a submissive crossdressing man, as a trans Latina who does not wear leather and sports many colors. "That's what I get in those scenes, and that's not me", Angel stated. Kink provides a way for Angel to live a certain type of femininity. She and her two roommates are Dommes of color, which

brings a certain strength to these femmes who are usually seen as less, especially in this country where you see all these white dudes taking up so much fucking space. I think it's super powerful when you have these strong femmes saying, you do what I tell you, take all this fucking space and throw it out the window because *I'M* taking this space.

Kink offered Angel a femininity that did not seem possible when she was transitioning. Using kink, Angel was able to write her own gender and racial scripts, when she found that the existing scripts for masculinity and femininity, as they intersect with her Latinx-Dutch identity, were uninhabitable.

Thusly, when queer women of color deploy the boundary between "scene" and "not scene" in BDSM to explore power differentials that are masked in vanilla relationships, they also disrupt the Western, Enlightenment-era understanding of the self as "a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe" that is also "authentic" and "unchangeable". Their practice of BDSM resists colonial discourses, which privilege liberal discourses of agency and conceptualize bodies of color as nonmodern, inferior, exotic, and irrational. This resistance defies a society that structures itself around the inclusion of "rational" subjects and exclusion of "irrational", pathological subjects. When an oppressor successfully marks a community as irrational or pathological, then they have established a justification for colonizing this community. The tool of marking

populations as childlike, irrational, or pathological pervades the oppression of queer communities, colonized populations in the Global South, Black subjects, and indigenous communities (e.g. Manifest Destiny), and therein lies the importance of imagining beyond the Enlightenment-era understanding of the self.

Of course, one may argue that although it may be true that kinksters mobilize the boundary, the very fact that they acknowledge this boundary reinscribes norms. However, as Mahmood writes, “Agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (2012). Thus, it may indeed be impossible for kinksters to operate outside of pervasive notions of autonomy and rationality. However, they can and do mobilize these assumptions to radically inhabit these norms. BDSM for queer people of color cannot be contained in binaries of resistance and subordination, but there may be something about BDSM as a framework that stands in the face of existing discourses—or at least provides new ways of interacting, engaging, and inhabiting.

Thus far, I have examined people of color kinksters’ experiences of BDSM, unrooted in any particular locality. Now I focus upon a regional manifestation of kinksters’ interactions with one nation’s discourses of liberalism and free will.

The ghost of white innocence in kink

In this section, I explore similar motivations that inspired people in a specific locality to form resistant communities that centralize their interactions as queer women of color in the Netherlands with the boundary between “scene” and “not scene”. The evidence in the life stories of Angel (a trans Latina leader in Rotterdam’s queer kink community) and Melanie (a Black cis woman kink store founder), as well as surveys of other queer female/nonbinary participants of color, indicate that understandings of consent, boundaries and freedom are deeply shaped by Dutch racial discourses. That Iris, Ukrainian immigrant and participant of her youth community, conveyed similar perspectives on consent and boundary-drawing, indicates that dissent from mainstream kink does not map neatly along racial lines. I focus on these leaders both as individuals, to discern their experiences of marginalization and understanding of kink, and as anchors to examine the communities they built.

The Netherlands has long mobilized Amsterdam’s global reputation to construct itself as the “birthplace of liberalism”, from its inception on the famous canals—representing a supposedly unique Dutch balance of individualism and cooperation while the rest of Europe followed a feudal system of lords and serfs—to the world’s first stock market, to Rembrandt, the development of secular art, and Enlightenment-era intellectual freedom, to the triumph of liberalism over totalitarianism post-Hitler and the “New Golden Age” from 1950s to 1990s, when the Dutch threw off the vestiges of the Dutch Reformed Church and constructed itself as a post-war liberal capital.

In rejecting the call for a coherent self, my interviewees in the Netherlands use the boundary in BDSM to reject colonial presumptions of rationality that are foundational to the discourse of Enlightenment-era liberalism through which the Netherlands defines itself. Queer women of color, in recognizing this boundary, deploy it to dive into the irrational, instead of ignoring its existence—again, a refusal of the innocence structuring dominant Dutch discourse.

But there is a further discourse of innocence that threads its way through Dutch kinksters' identities and community formations. Dutch Afro-Surinamese anticolonial scholar Gloria Wekker posits Dutch "white innocence" is the posturing of childlike naivety, not capable of international influence over big players like the United States, and above all, an angry, militant innocence (2016). The contemporary deployment of homosexual acceptance as a "limit test" for people of color's integration into the Netherlands further cements whiteness with a longstanding white innocence and posturing of tolerance.

However, this discourse of white innocence, which followed the Netherlands through the Holocaust and various postcolonial migrations, further solidified in the 21st century when conservative politicians constructed the (conflated) POC/Muslim/refugee/"migrant" and queer dichotomy. In the 21st century, second and third generation postcolonial migrants, whom the Netherlands had invited as temporary migrant workers in the post-war industrial boom, were settling in growing numbers (Hekma, 2002; Shield, 2017; Wekker, 2016). In response, gay conservative politician Pim Fortuyn mobilized the Pim Fortuyn List party to protect "women and homosexuals" from what he named in a speech as the "ghastly backward culture" of Islam (Shield, 2017). Even as Fortuyn's popularity declined, two impactful high-profile murders by Dutch-Moroccan men followed that crystallized the logic of pro-gay, pro-women, anti-Islam political rhetorics.⁵ Mepschen et al. insightfully observe that in 1998, conservative critic Gerry van der List argued that gay men were "'obsessed with sex', led 'a horrendous lifestyle', and should return to 'their darkrooms' and 'orgies of sperm,'" but three years later embraced gay rights as "exemplary of 'Western gains and ideals'" (Mepschen et al., 2010).

While the concept of race originated "in Europe and has been one of its main export products, still it is generally the case that race is declared an alien body of thought to Europe, coming to this continent from the United States or elsewhere", Wekker writes (2016). Or as Surinamese-Dutch race scholar Philomena Essed argues, "white Dutch do not generally see themselves as members of a racist society" nor do they ever believe that a problem of racism has ever existed in the Netherlands. Instead, white Netherlands perpetually attributes issues of racism to other countries in the world, never themselves (Essed, 1991). That this observation resonates across different patterns of migration and colonial relations (i.e. refugee, Arab, and Afro-Surinamese) reflects a commonality in perception of Dutch society's willful ignorance to racism.

In a similar vein, many BDSM subcommunity participants whom I interviewed or surveyed gestured to a broader gay Dutch kink scene—the normative "outside world" of kink, so to speak—against which they defined their own smaller

communities. Thus, while power dynamics, anxieties, and exoticisms are of course identity-specific, this essay engages more with the similarities in how their identities impact their dissent from the mainstream kink scene and participation in BDSM sub-communities.

The idea of race as “coming from elsewhere” threads its way through fetish discourses. Melanie suggests that some mainstream fetish participants consign kink to a mythical land of innocence and fun that is devoid of political purpose or racial consideration:

They say Americans are just through the roof talking about race and kink is “supposed to be about fun. Like why do you need to bring politics into it?” There is a lot of denial. The Dutch were some of the biggest suppliers of ships, bringing slaves to the New World and then bringing back tobacco to Europe. But a lot of Dutch people will tell you, ‘Slavery is an American problem. We didn’t have anything to do with it.’

The commercial side of the fetish scene, Melanie argues, “doesn’t want to talk about politics at all”, which is a disavowal of “serious topics” that extends to safety issues. “Safety training is not fun”, fetish party producers responded when Melanie offered to give them safety trainings. Also, “too American” were BDSM contracts and fetish club rules.

Likewise, for Melanie, the white Dutch attachment to fun and innocence in kink scenes and general society is grounded in the aggressive commitment to ignorance. However, the avoidance of racial issues is untenable for Melanie, because fetish leaders’ kinky policies and general politics are inextricable:

There’s a big party promoter who thinks that the Quran should be banned in the Netherlands, all Muslims should be shipped out of Europe, and he makes his racist views clear on Facebook. But people are just like ‘Ah, yeah, that’s just him, he throws a good party though.’ And I’m like ahhhh!!! No!

In Melanie’s view, the safety of people of color in the scene inevitably depends on personal politics, and it is impossible to ensure the safety of fetish clubs while segregating personal politics and scene policies. The fetish scene’s loyalty to “fun” precludes discussions of external power differentials, not just the manufactured Dom/sub power differentials that exist in the scene.

A former Mr Leather Europe/leather historian and popular fetish club owner both offer some insight into the “mainstream” ways of approaching kink, that in America “there is a stress about contracts, you should not just start whipping somebody, you should do a workshop”, whereas “Here, you don’t need to discuss everything. When you meet each other in a certain environment or assume a certain position or role, it organically plays out”. Thus, seduction and presentation create an “organic” method of negotiating for Mr Leather Europe. The fetish club owner whom I interviewed conjures a nightmare of walking into a

club and “having a whole wall full of things you’re allowed to do or not allowed to do” as indicators of a moralistic nanny state—a phrase that reflects not only white innocence but also connotations of femininity, weakness, and people of color—which the Netherlands is not. These statements suggest the more vague or abstract forms of negotiation that Unicorn and Melanie ground in Dutch national identity, in which an explicit contract detracts from the fun of kink.

But for my interviewees, kinky desires are themselves borne of personal anxieties and political realities. Angel articulated this concept: BDSM is everyone’s “truth...based on the fuck ups and the successes of their life”. Not only are Lu’s kinky desires intimately tied to her gender and racial identities, but these identities, and the societal structures forming these identities, also affect how and when she practices kink. For instance, she explained, “everything went upside-down with her transition”—her polyamorous relationships, daily life, and of course, kink:

My own personal things...transitioning...and antidepressants, those two things cut up a lot of the libido, and if you don’t have libido, kink is... (long expressive sigh) It’s hard to do anything when you’re not feeling that well about yourself, especially being dominant. I tend to think that femme Doms have a more similar understanding like me—kink with a lot of care, everybody’s more aware, whereas a lot of the male Doms tend to be very neglectful and a bit rougher, even in gay male kink scenes.

In this statement, Angel connected her identities, the impact of oppressions on her desire for kink, and the amount of care that a kink community practices.

My interviews demonstrate that the privilege of slippage is a privilege that is not available to all, not least because marginalized communities encounter (micro) aggression and/or trauma on a daily basis, thus demanding clear structures to explore desires that play with this aggression or trauma. “We used to go to this kink party in Rotterdam”, Angel remembered, “but it’s really hard for me... For me, I really need to have a bit of a more intimate, safe feeling with someone before I can actually do kink with them”. Certainly, trust is a central part of kink for white cis men as well, but the trust they describe is different from the trust that Melanie demands and fosters. Melanie requires a trust that encompasses sensitivity to racial issues, etiquette codes against nonconsensual touching, and the prioritization of politics over apolitical sex, if that even exists (so, trusting a community to hold a party producer accountable for making Islamophobic statements). Trust is also more loaded for Iris, shaped as it is by her “dog-eat-dog” background in post-communist Ukraine. In these cases, daily experiences of oppression impact what they require of kink: the maintenance of the boundary between play and daily life, which is a boundary that they can then mobilize to enact their desires. Indeed, in this view, the ability to ignore this careful navigation while practicing kink is impossible.

In these cases, kink is a way to explore forms of relating that are inaccessible in daily life, such as relations that depend on trust. Take an opposing example: Several weeks after I interviewed someone, and refused their advances stating

I had a negative recent history, the person messaged me, “I thought you were open enough since you were researching this. . . my bad lol”. The impact of life experience on kink practices, inherent to Iris, Unicorn, and Melanie’s understandings of kink, was entirely extrinsic to this person’s practice of kink. But for the queer women of color I interviewed, a litany of personal histories—both recent and past—explicitly inform practices in BDSM.

Melanie and Angel create communities in which this understanding of kink constitutes the norm, and not the exception. Their rejection and reversal of the norm radically resists the pathologization of marginalized communities that has marked societal discourse surrounding people of color. As the state assimilated white gays into the norm, societal agents, including the Dutch Institute for Multicultural Affairs, created a dichotomy between the normative, healthy and desirable white gay subject who is able to “come out”, and the underdeveloped Other and radicalized queer, “held back from achieving the white gay’s liberated state by their homophobic culture of origin” (El-Tayeb, 2012). Where the “out” liberated white gay represents the norm, the closeted queer of color will always be the underdeveloped Other.

This same discourse shapes the normalization of the liberated gay kinkster who is able to freely participate in a fun play space and manufacture power dynamics seemingly out of a power void; he is unencumbered by politics or personal histories of trauma. The Other, in this scenario, is the kinkster who brings politics to the bar, who lets her personal histories affect her participation in a scene (disregarding the fact that the white man’s personal history is not “neutral” either), and who drains a party of fun. To use Sara Ahmed’s framework of feminist complaint, this kinkster is always complaining, in a structure of hearing that diminishes everything she says “whatever we say, however we say it” to a level of annoyance and insignificance; she bogs down the conversation by injecting excessive emotion into rational spaces (Ahmed, 2014).

In this *structure of hearing*, the only responses to queer kinksters of color’s complaints are dismissal or pity. Angel, Melanie, and Iris recounted their experiences in the mainstream fetish scene, where they sensed their needs to be contrary to the norm in the mode of interaction, definition of safety, and relationship of daily life to kink. They revealed that even when people in the scene try to accommodate the feminist complainer, they do so from a place that implies she is the exception and not the norm, for the norm is unencumbered and fun sexual encounters. Melanie discussed the friend that the fetish party producers “let in only because they wanted to be on good terms with me”, and Angel drew connections between her mainstream kink experiences and the Dutch way of “assuming you should know something” as a method of exclusion. In these stories, the complainer is the only one who is troublesome enough to demand these accommodations, when in reality the sexually liberated white male citizen (unencumbered by personal history and free of trauma) fails to represent a significant portion of kinksters. This reflects the tendency for dominant groups to believe that “peripheral” experiences—the experiences not contained in the dominant narrative—are rare

exceptions (i.e. comments that only 1% of the population is trans, or nonbinary, so “why should the majority of the population have to change bathroom rules just for them?”) The Othered kinkster becomes a drain on society to be assimilated (stop complaining) or saved (an act of pity), like the victimized queer Muslim saved by western humanitarianism or the self-segregating immigrant who must be integrated (El-Tayeb, 2012; Wekker, 2016). In either case, she cannot continue on as she is.

In creating intentional BDSM communities, Melanie and Angel normalize an impactful relationship between daily life and kink. With the normalization of these experiences, they also try to normalize more empathetic practices of consent and accountability. Whereas some disavow contracts as “too American”, my interviewees instead try to implement explicit processes of communication. For example, Iris told me about one characteristic of her communication practices:

If they have a question in the middle of it, they can ask me, and it's okay. We can pause, or we can stop. Or if you don't what you're doing to me, if that makes you feel uncomfortable, then I also don't wanna put you in that position.

In addition, even though she is submissive, she tries to monitor her partner's reactions, uncomfortable facial expressions, muscle strain, and other possibly ambiguous bodily signals. Angel has her own monitoring methods:

I remember once with this partner I could see this fear in their eyes, that really destroyed me. Made me feel *SO* bad, like a monster; It's hard to even talk about, I can't not be empathetic. It even bothers me if I see other Doms who are being neglectful—imposing their will without that connection, without that feedback on what they're doing. It made me almost step into someone's scene.

When she receives that negative feedback, however, she believes that one should never think, “OH you should have said this... Like, no. It [should be] oh shit, I'm sorry, you're right, I'll do better next time. Lesson learned, I'll do everything I can to not repeat it”. For her, this response is an issue of accountability. Angel stated that a responsible way of assuming accountability is to consider, “You screwed up badly, right? Yeah I did. AW. FUCK. Okay let me talk to them. A lot of people are not like that. They're afraid of being accountable”. It does not necessarily follow that these philosophies absolve all instances of neglect in resistant communities, for neglect exists everywhere. However, these values—common across these disparate oppositional communities—reflect ways in which social histories can impact understandings of kink.

Racial, gender, and class identities fundamentally affect one's relation to kink, as they affect one's relation to authority and bureaucracy. They affect kink practices not in the sense that all women of color have the same experience, but in the way that, for example, the intersection of blackness and womanhood fundamentally changes the implications of mandatory state intervention for domestic violence; state-sanctioned police brutality, hyper-surveillance, and unattainability of a

private sphere inevitably complicate ramifications of policies that seek to explode the privacy of domestic violence (Nash, 2005). It takes a certain privilege to engage in an understanding of kink that regards sexual liberation as the willingness to indiscriminately engage in kinky activities, that naively disengages it from the conditions that surround this willingness, and that in the end, echoes discourses that urge non-Western countries to adopt certain freedoms while ignoring how “historically specific relations of subordination” like colonialism and militarism alter “capacity for action” (Mahmood, 2012).

The structure of hearing created by processes of normalization impacts which desires and needs are heard as rational or complaint. To step into a kink party and pretend that nonwhite/women/nonbinary/trauma survivors do not exist, is to reproduce a basic heteropatriarchal strategy of hearing: the consideration of marginalized experiences as a rarity. When marginalized experiences are deemed an occasional exception, the normative structure of hearing easily excuses systems that do not accommodate the lesser privileged. The neutrality and innocence of the dominant discourse prevails yet again, because the Other is yet again painted the complainer or the one to be pitied.

Kink is a rich site to study the productions of desire and need, because it comprises so many levels of them: erotic desire, interpersonal desire, societal desire. But this is a question that extends quite beyond kink: When is a way of acting excusable, because it is the norm, because the other person is the exception, and because the privileged cannot be expected to know? Unearthing the sentiments in various kink narratives takes one step towards answering this question. By definition, kink—the consensual staging of power through pain and pleasure—is supposed to make explicit the power dynamics of an interaction, and by extension make explicit the collision of social histories and power structures. Kink is supposed to create space for the interpersonal exploration of vulnerable intimacy. When kink communities or practices begin to contradict this definition, as when social realities contradict the equation of Dutch and tolerance, the sites of contradiction reveal the hegemonic discourse of a deceptive normativity shrouded in innocence. The tendrils of this hegemonic discourse creep into different communities’ needs and desires that form out of each historical moment, shaped by anxieties surrounding migration, tolerance, and integration, and into these communities’ unequal attempts to satisfy these needs and desires.

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Notes

1. Field notes. My purpose at Vondelpark was to speak to an organizer of an annual gay fetish party that started in Amsterdam in the 1990s and has spread to other European cities. At the end of our discussion, he offered to show me where the rose garden was, famous for BDSM encounters. I accepted, thinking that I could collect data on the external area of the rose garden (i.e. its conduciveness to meeting, whether it was sparse or dense, etc.) I have not used any of the information he provided me in this thesis, with the understanding that not all fetish organizers reflect his views or actions.
2. People who engage in kink.
3. For example, "sexual desire depends on uncertainty, contradiction, and paradox, and that one may want, above all, to not know what one wants" (Harvard Law Review, 2014). Thus, paradox can be inherent in consent for some people—that one may want to not know what one wants.
4. Princess Jasmine is a Middle Eastern fictional character in Walt Disney's feature film *Aladdin*, which is set in the fictional Middle Eastern kingdom Agrabah.
5. In 2004, Dutch-Moroccan men assassinated filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, who produced the film *Submission* about violence against women in Islamic societies, and gay-bashed American gay journalist Chris Crain.
6. Fetlife is one of the most popular social networking kink websites, with over six million members and available in 14 languages.
7. Munches are gatherings to meet other kinksters in a nonparty setting.
8. Zwarte Piet is Saint Nicholas' companion, depicted with black skin, thick lips, Afro hair, and creole earrings.

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Appendix I. Interlocutor biographies: Angel, Melanie, and Iris

Angel: Claim your space on the dancefloor

I met Angel over coffee in an area where one hears more Arabic than Dutch, sees Arabic letters on storefronts, and walks past numerous Surinamese markets. She is 33 years old, Latina, transfemme, polyamorous, and queer, “but Scorpio is the label that defines me the most”, she said laughing. Webcomic *O Joy Sex Toy's* review of the film *50 Shades of Grey*, introduced her to *50 Shades of Kink* by Tristan Taormino, a book that “started giving me structure to think about something that I already liked”. Not only that, but kink empowered her “to be this badass bitch, like fuck you. Shut the fuck up, sit down and you're going to behave or else you're gonna go. To give someone pleasure in a way that not only gives, but also controls their pleasure. . . I already have a strong personality but adding the kink into it just blew that up and I have fun with it”. Kink became a way for her to forge an empowered femininity.

The Netherlands was a complicated place for Angel to undergo this exploration of her queerness, transness, and kinkiness. The Dutch way of meeting strangers alienated

her—the faraway handshake instead of the easy entrance into friend groups through mutual friends, what she calls a “subwhite status” of being not black but also not white, feeling racism for the first time whereas she never noticed it before she moved to Europe, and realizing shared histories of colonialism. “My ex”, she explained, “was a darker skinned Latina. I paid 2000 euros because of my citizenship for my tuition. My ex times three”. Ultimately, the sense of shared oppression—that in a particular instance, she might be fine, but people she knows are “fucked because of this, this, and this”—persuaded her to adopt the identity of person of color.

Faced with white queer scenes, persistent exclusion of nonwhites to the peripheries of cities, entitled kinksters who take up space at parties and ignore consent, and darkrooms catered towards gay men (“and I’ve been a lesbian since forever”), Angel entered community-building activism. She planned parties for Rotterdam’s nonbinary queer scene. The Facebook page for this social group, which shares queer-related blogs and YouTube videos every week, accumulated 1155 Facebook likes as of December 2018. A glance at its “About Me” section reveals the eye-catching phrases, “FEMMES (of any gender) TO THE FRONT! claim your space on the dancefloor!”, “**CONSENT IS KEY**”, and “no beauty standard—we encourage genderclowning, drag, crossdressing, kink, and nakedness”. Emerging from an alternative queer scene, rather than a gay male scene, this kink community centralizes different types of participants, goals, and beauty standards.

After returning to the United States, I learned from an online public statement that the social group is on an indefinite break; the founder cited mental health issues and activism burnout. While the continuing activity on the Facebook page demonstrates the community’s endurance beyond organized events, the trajectory of this community reflects the complex navigation of personal lives, jobs, emotional labor, knowledge exchange, and community work that the leaders of these less institutionalized BDSM subcommunities balance.

Melanie: The ugly belly of Dutch tolerance

In her kink and sex-positive store, three minutes from the 95-meter-high church tower in the center of Utrecht, Melanie was sitting behind the counter next to a box of complimentary lollipops. In between sales, Melanie told me about the history of the store and brand, which she founded from her frustrations with the mainstream fetish scene.

Melanie is 51, Black, fetishwear and toy designer, and a BDSM, queer, and polyamory activist. Her Fetlife⁶ biography reports that she specializes in corsetry design, fetish fashion and crossdressing styling. A small blurb at the bottom reminds the reader that she is available for private shopping outside of store opening hours, if a customer is shy or needs discretion. This gesture demonstrates a conscious inclusion of kinksters whose life situations or multiple identities may not allow for the unthinking entrance into an exposed kink scene.

She was tired of the discrimination and unsafe practices in the mainstream fetish scene: the bouncers trying to keep out the “Moroccans with their jeans”,

statements like “I don’t think he was that black” or “we’re not a racist society but he was Moroccan”, and the way that “white men get to go to as many parties as they want”, but not people of color or women. She called this one example of the “ugly belly of Dutch tolerance”.

And so, 10 years ago, she started the store as a nonprofit private project to provide an explicitly safe, sane, and consensual kink institution that also educates kinksters. They produce Dutch sex educational videos, because “it’s scary that people are getting their sexual education from porn”. The social side of the project organizes pub quiz teams, rope study groups, and munches.⁷ Their Fetlife page, as of December 2018, has 3174 members online.

When I thanked her for sharing this history with me, she sighed and nodded. “We do what we can”, she said. That phrase seemed to carry the tone of the conversation. Over time, she has come to terms with the hypocrisies of Dutch tolerance, the pervasiveness of these discourses and the limits of her impact, but she is not completely disillusioned. *Still, she does what she can.* “Onward!” she said faintly, in a kind of self-deprecating humor.

Iris: A potluck of kinky advice

Iris is 23 years old, a counseling psychologist, bi, polyamorous, blogger, podcast owner, and an avid scuba diver. She discovered kink online in high school, first in fanfiction and then in porn, before quickly realizing that the portrayal of kink in porn “wasn’t actually real”. She told me that her childhood environment contributed to her shame surrounding kink:

There is a lot of emphasis on perfection in Ukraine where I grew up. Women have to look a certain way, dress a certain way, wear makeup. There’s a lot of things that have to do with the exterior. There’s no conversation about female sexual health, the human body.

When Iris moved to the Netherlands at 21, she found a home with “artsy and weird theater people” who would make her feel comfortable with her kinkiness and anorexia. They were

all very, ridiculously close. Very sex-positive, queer people. People who are open to talking about their relationships. Also because a lot of them are in the counseling program, very empathetic.

The second day I was there, we ended up going to a fast food place, and for some reason it came up that I wanted to bring up anal sex to my boyfriend. And they were like, ‘Girl, you gotta do this,’ and we spent like three hours talking about how to do it.

Iris found solace in the visibility of sexuality in the Netherlands. Yet still, she found it difficult to access the Dutch LGBT community. “I know a large gay

community exists here, but I haven't spoken to them, because it's really difficult to find and open those channels", she said. She continued:

The Dutch live very comfortably, for the most part. There's a stable middle class in the Netherlands. So, there is a disconnect where I still need to tell people to check their privilege. Which is a little surreal, because I'm not in the worst position. And of course, the Netherlands is also quite . . . It can be quite racist. With the whole *Zwarte Piet* thing, don't get me started.⁸

She explained that her positionality makes her more receptive to other minorities' experience, even though she "do[es] not claim oh my plight is worse than yours, because it's not".

Currently, she practices kink with her boyfriend for almost six years and her girlfriend for several months. She does not consider herself part of the hardcore BDSM community, which she defined as "I don't know, people who maybe do it professionally, or live a 24/7 dominance/submissive dynamic. Like, I don't see myself investing in a swing or a bench or anything". And yet, she has found a different kind of community. She and her friends, who are very sex-positive and queer, frequently discuss sex and educate each other. "It's like a potluck of kinky advice", she says. "We're the new guard". Like others, Iris found in kink structures of community and networks of knowledge exchange to realize her desires.

Aina, Unicorn, Denzel, and Adrian

Aina identifies as brown and Muslim from Pakistan, living in the United States for college. About her sexuality, she says, "In my head, I call myself bi, but I never use it. I joked with my sister yesterday, I'm like, maybe someone's bi, like, someone here!!" Unicorn is poly, bisexual, and a switch. She states that she is "constantly reminded she is black" even after living in Boston for so long, because she grew up in Kenya where race did not manifest in the same ways as it does in the United States. Denzel identifies as multiracial, mulatto (black and white but her dad has Native American roots, so she reclaims this colonial term for Spanish race-black and indigenous), femme, androgynous, cis woman, kinky, switch, poly, and pansexual. Finally, Adrian identifies as "American nationally, Japanese/German ethnically, and multiracial/Asian/White in that descending order of importance", "tentatively asexual", and "leaning towards female" in terms of gender. They use predominantly he/him pronouns in their daily life out of habit, but "maybe she/her would be better? I don't really mind either way, or even they/them (laughter). So I guess that isn't that helpful".