

# **Discourses of Heterosexual Female Masochism and Submission from the 1880s to the Present Day.**

**Submitted by Caroline Jessica Walters, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sexuality and Gender Studies, March 2012.**

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a critical analysis of psychopathological discourses (sexology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry) and feminist writings that contribute to the construction of representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission.

Chapter One examines pseudo-scientific ideas about ‘women’ and ‘masochism’ developed in the works of sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. This chapter provides the necessary historical context with which to understand the Anglo-American iterations of discourses of heterosexual female masochism and submission from the 1970s to the present day, which form the case studies in Chapters Two to Four.

Chapter Two complexifies and nuances polarised feminist arguments of the 1970s and ’80s (the so-called ‘Sex Wars’) regarding the political status of heterosexual female masochism and submission. This chapter considers the radical and liberal feminist conceptions of fantasy, sexual orientation and sadomasochism (SM), which are examined in relation to two fictional texts: Jenny Diski’s *Nothing Natural* and Pat Califia’s *Macho Sluts*.

Chapter Three examines the relationship between self-injury and masochism using Steven Shainberg’s film *Secretary* as a case study. This chapter explores *Secretary*’s relation to the generic conventions of romantic comedy; demonstrates how the film borrows from normalising and mainstreaming discourses about SM; and finally shows that it engages implicitly and briefly, with notions of SM as a radical challenge to the prevalent cultural narrative of ‘health and harm’.

Chapter Four examines the discursive construction of heterosexual female masochism and submission in contemporary sex blogs. This chapter brings together many of the currents that run through the thesis to highlight specific ways that blogging

as a medium affects representations of these phenomena. It also examines ways that bloggers have begun to use the medium as a form of 'confessional' to co-opt the gay 'coming out' narrative for their own 'kinky' ends.

The thesis concludes by examining some reasons why the complex political position that heterosexual female masochism and submission occupied when they were first coined in Western modernity persists to the present, postmodern day.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines the links between the history of the concept of *masochism* and meanings of *gender*, paying particular attention to representations of heterosexual women's masochism and submission from the 1880s to the present day. The principal definition of the term *masochism* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (abbreviated to *OED* hereafter) is: 'The urge to derive pleasure, esp. sexual gratification, from one's own pain or humiliation'.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I argue that masochism is more complex because it depends upon ideas concerning gender roles, which are socially, culturally and temporally bound. Although women and masochism were linked by assumptions of a passive feminine 'nature' in early European sexology and psychoanalysis, there is little written from a critical humanities perspective on specifically female masochism.<sup>2</sup> The thesis begins with an examination of these foundational pseudo-scientific ideas about 'women' and 'masochism' in order to provide the historical context for the Anglo-American iterations of discourses of heterosexual female masochism and submission from the 1970s to the present day, which form my case studies in Chapters Two to Four.

The other principal definition given by the *OED* for *masochism* is in its 'weakened sense: deliberate pursuit of or enthusiasm for an activity that appears to be painful, frustrating, or

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<sup>1</sup> masochism, n. Third edition, December 2000; online version September 2011.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114634>>; accessed 22 November 2011. An entry for this word was first included in *New English Dictionary*, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> The following are examples of critical humanities work on male masochism: Carol Siegel, *Male Masochism: Modern Revisions of the Story of Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998); David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

tedious."<sup>3</sup> The term is often used in colloquial discourse in this sense. For example some might describe the act of undertaking a PhD as a 'masochistic endeavour,' since it involves frustration and testing a person's intellectual and emotional capacity. In addition, since the person chose to undertake this activity themselves it can appear to fit the weakened definition above. Another way that the term masochism is used is to refer to self-defeating actions. Sigmund Freud defined this as 'moral masochism', which could offer an explanation for why women might remain in an abusive situation, as it implies the 'willing victim, the person who docilely accepts punishment rather than standing up for himself.'<sup>4</sup> Anita Phillips, who wrote *A Defence of Masochism*, argues that if this were the primary argument for masochism, then it would not be worthy of the defence that she mounted.<sup>5</sup> Instead Phillips focuses upon the initial definition, where masochism connotes sexual pleasure through pain or suffering, and, similarly, it is the representation of masochism as a sexual practice that is privileged in this thesis.

The purpose of this study is to discover how historical and contemporary discourses of psychopathology (medicine, sexology, psychiatry and psychology) and also political discourses (the various branches of feminism) affect the representation of heterosexual female masochism and submission. Since the term 'masochism' has its origins in the psychopathological discourse of sexology, I examine in Chapter One how these discourses have evolved from the 1880s to the present day. In subsequent chapters, I consider how these policing discourses affect, evolve and are negotiated, in cultural representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission.

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<sup>3</sup> masochism, n. Third edition, December 2000; online version September 2011.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114634>>; accessed 22 November 2011. An entry for this word was first included in *New English Dictionary*, 1905.

<sup>4</sup> Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Anita Phillips, p. 27.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the term ‘masochism’ and defined it in *Psychopathia Sexualis*. He considered it to be a sexual pathology of expected gender roles. He considered that masochism was an exaggeration of feminine behaviour and so easier to identify in men. He argues that the principal characteristic of masochism is ‘the unlimited subjection to the will of a person of the opposite sex,’ yet he claims that the desire for pain is ‘subordinate’.<sup>6</sup> This definition suggests that it is impossible to think of female masochism without taking submission into account, because for Krafft-Ebing the desire to ‘submit’ was incorporated within the term ‘masochism’. The two terms appear in the title of my thesis because present-day BDSM<sup>7</sup> practitioners consider masochism to refer to ‘sexual pleasure from pain,’ privileging the physical over the psychological interaction. This change in the use of the terminology by BDSM practitioners has affected the cultural representations, and the two practices raise different theoretical considerations.

In addition, this thesis examines the generic conventions of a selection of representational forms. In literature and art meaning is both conveyed and constrained by its form, thus an attention to generic, formal, and artistic decisions is necessary for close readings of creative products that represent female masochism and submission. Analyses include: the kind of language and imagery used, the accessibility of the cultural item, questions of its perceived audience, its position in relation to the mainstream, and the politics of representation and knowledge production. For example, there is a significant difference in the audience and

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<sup>6</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf [1965], from the 12th German Edition edn. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), p.133.

<sup>7</sup> The acronym BDSM is an umbrella term that stands for Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. Its first recorded use is on the Google groups archives of the alt.sex.bondage Usenet group dates from July 1991. [http://groups.google.com/group/alt.sex.bondage/browse\\_thread/thread/189511cb4b73f703/5d505512dc2d6dac?l nk=gst&q=bdsm+1991#5d505512dc2d6dac](http://groups.google.com/group/alt.sex.bondage/browse_thread/thread/189511cb4b73f703/5d505512dc2d6dac?l nk=gst&q=bdsm+1991#5d505512dc2d6dac) [Accessed on 26 December 2011]. Charles Moser first used the term in academic work in 1998. Charles Moser, ‘A glossary of terms used by sexual minorities.’ *San Francisco Medicine*, 71(10, 1998), 25-26.

accessibility of, on the one hand, psychiatric texts written for medical professionals, and, on the other hand, sex blogs in which individuals publish directly to a mass audience.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

Literature specifically *about* the various discourses that affect representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission is scarce. Thus, for the purposes of this introduction, I will analyse the various discussions and representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission, and identify how this thesis will negotiate these and fills some of the gaps in critical commentary. I am using the term *female* in my thesis to refer to cis-gendered women.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, I do not critique the category of *female* within the thesis but rather examine the impact of feminist and pathological discourses on representations of female sexual practices. I will now provide an in-depth review of the available literature pertinent to the topics of heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and masochism, the latter of which incorporates a discussion on submission.

### **1.1.2 Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity**

Within sexuality and gender studies, heterosexuality was for a long time left under-theorised. However in the 1990s, Stevi Jackson and Lynne Segal wrote key texts on the heterosexuality.<sup>9</sup> Their texts unpick its relationship with patriarchy, examine it as a concept and consider how it functions as a normative institution within hegemonic discourses. Radical feminists argue that heterosexuality is inevitable within a patriarchal society and mirrors its foundational notion of male dominance and female submission.<sup>10</sup> This paradigm is endorsed

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<sup>8</sup> 'cis' refers to a person whose gender is the same as their biological sex. Since this thesis examines cultural representations that do not identify as transgendered, it is assumed that all of these representations are of cis-gendered women.

<sup>9</sup> Stevi Jackson. *Heterosexuality in Question*. (London: Sage, 1999); Lynne Segal. *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*. (London: Virago, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Examples include: Diana E. H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' in eds. R.R. Linden,

within heterosexuality that depends upon the pairing of perceived opposites and the reproduction of society. For this reason, many radical feminists find the eroticisation of the dominant and submissive power dynamic problematic when mirrored in a heteronormative pairing of a male dominant and female submissive. This is because it is a reification and solidification of a structural power dynamic that supports patriarchy. They argue that this dynamic cannot be consensual because of the social conditioning of those involved, and so they reject the liberal feminist argument that it is a woman's 'choice' to be sexually submissive. Since the 1970s this has created an unresolved tension within feminism, meaning the female masochist and submissive was a long-ignored figure. This thesis seeks to redress this balance in the critical literature. While many feminists consider female dominance and male submission, or lesbian dominance-submission arrangements to be less problematic, there is an unresolved tension regarding heterosexual d/s dynamics. It is for this reason that I choose to focus on the role of the heterosexual female masochist and submissive. The thesis examines how differing policing (bio-medical and psychological) and political (feminist) discourses affect the representation of these practices in several Anglo-American iterations.

In 1991 Michael Warner coined the term *heteronormativity* in his essay 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet'.<sup>11</sup> He argued that queer politics offered a way 'to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies', where it functions to maintain the 'regimes of the normal'.<sup>12</sup> In 1998 Warner collaborated with Lauren Berlant in an essay entitled 'Sex in Public', in which they defined heteronormativity as 'the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not

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D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star, *Against Sodomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 176-183; Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse: The Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1987]); Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Warner, 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet.' *Social Text* 29, (1991), 3-17.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Warner, p. 3, p. 16.

only coherent – that is organized as a sexuality – but also provisional’.<sup>13</sup> This is because its contexts evolve, vary and are not confined to areas directly related to sexual practices but also impact upon the foundations of social structure, such as legal institutions.

The concept’s roots are in the ‘sex and gender divide’ analysed by Gayle Rubin and Adrienne Rich’s concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’.<sup>14</sup> For heterosexuality to support patriarchy, the status quo and the concept that a woman is a possession that can be used as a tool for negotiation,<sup>15</sup> entails ‘compulsory monogamy’.<sup>16</sup> This implies that the (dominant) male and (submissive) female pairing espoused by media representations of a ‘normal’ relationship will be monogamous. It is an assumption that is rarely challenged, questioned or acknowledged. This is because hegemonic heteronormativity depends upon the concept of the family as the nexus of the social institution, which is endorsed through the legal and religious institution of marriage. As a result challenging heteronormativity entails challenging the legal, moral and social institutionalisation of emotional and sexual life.<sup>17</sup> Relationship models that dismantle the hierarchy, importance and significance given to the couple help to challenge the importance of these institutions. Examples include polyamory (the consensual practice of

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<sup>13</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, ‘Sex in Public’, in *Intimacy*, ed. by Lauren Berlant (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 311-330, p. 312. [First published in *Critical Enquiry*. (24.2, 1998), pp. 547-566].

<sup>14</sup> Gayle Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 267-319; Adrienne Rich. ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980),’ *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), pp. 23-75.

<sup>15</sup> Gayle Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy of Sex”’, in *Feminism & History*, ed. by Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 105-151.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Emens, ‘Monogamy’s Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence,’ *N. Y. U. Review of Law and Social Change* (29, 2004), pp. 277-376; Jamie Heckert, Meg Barker, and Darren Langdrige, ‘Love Without Border? Intimacy, Identity and the State of Compulsory Monogamy’, in *Understanding Non-Monogamies*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 255-266.

<sup>17</sup> Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, ‘Normative Dilemmas and the Hegemony of Counter-Hegemony,’ in *Hegemony and Heteronormativity: Revisiting “the Political” in Queer Politics*. ed. by Maria do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), pp. 91-120.

having multiple open relationships),<sup>18</sup> BDSM play partners (the rejection of a hierarchy and boundaries of importance given to any specific individual, challenging the privileging of the sexual within a ‘relationship’), and other forms of non-monogamy.<sup>19</sup>

Although the terms *heteronormative* and *heteronormativity* were developed little over twenty years ago, the terms have now reached beyond academia to newspapers. In the UK they feature in the liberal broadsheets such as the *Guardian*,<sup>20</sup> and the *Observer*,<sup>21</sup> but not in the more conservative *Times* or *Sunday Times*;<sup>22</sup> they appear even in the more conservative *Telegraph*<sup>23</sup> albeit in a derisive context. These terms have led to the proliferation of other ‘normativities’, which are applied to other discourses and identities. In these contexts, the term *normative* refers to the concept of something having normative status, where breaking that norm leads to punitive consequences. In 2003 Lisa Duggan argued that ‘*the new homonormativity* [...] is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them’.<sup>24</sup> Duggan adapted this term from Warner’s heteronormativity to demonstrate the ways that gay communities could collude in the formation and existence of a heteronormative society. It also demonstrates how

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<sup>18</sup> Dossie Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*, (California: Greenery Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Tristan Taormino, *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* (Cleis Press, 2008). This volume examines a range of open relationship models from swinging to polyamory.

<sup>20</sup> Naomi Anderson, ‘Videogames Embrace Gay Characters,’ *Guardian*, 4 April 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/apr/04/videogames-gay-characters> [accessed 18 December 2011].

<sup>21</sup> Amelia Hill and Eva Wiseman, ‘Sex, drink and fashion. Is this the new face of American feminism?’

*Observer*, 17 May 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/17/feminism-america-sex-promiscuity-drinking> [accessed 18 December 2011].

<sup>22</sup> ‘No search results found for “heteronormativity”’ *The Times and The Sunday Times*

<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/public/sitesearch.do?querystring=heteronormativity&sectionId=2&p=sto&bl=on&pf=all> [accessed 18 December 2011].

<sup>23</sup> Ben Leach and Melissa Kite, ‘European Commission spent £124,000 on gay activists’ conference’ [30 October 2010], *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/eu/8098792/European-Commission-spent-124000-on-gay-activists-conference.html> [accessed 18 December 2011].

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 50. However this term has not yet entered the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as of a search on their website database on 18 December 2011.

heteronormativity has become a useful lens for analysis, and a way to describe the status quo of Western society. It is in these senses that this thesis is informed by an understanding of heteronormativity.

I argue that there is now also a ‘kinknormativity’, which refers to an expected way in which an interest in BDSM may be expressed. For example, as Margot Weiss and Eleanor Wilkinson argue there has been a proliferation of mainstream cultural representations of its style.<sup>25</sup> Some of the paraphernalia is now available in high street shops (e.g. Anne Summers, a high street fashion retailer, sells some fetish items to be worn as accessories). Now there is a tolerance, acceptance and inclusion of the ‘normative’ types of BDSM but a rejection of those which go beyond its confines. In this sense normativity operates as another kind of policing, which functions through self-monitoring, shame and a fear of social rejection. I explore this idea in more depth in Chapter Three through a discussion of Steven Shainberg’s film *Secretary*.<sup>26</sup> Also in Chapter Four I examine the ways in which bloggers can find themselves negotiating BDSM terminology in order to fit themselves into a category (such as ‘masochist’ or ‘submissive’) within the BDSM community on the blogosphere.

### 1.1.3 Masochism

As I have already indicated, masochism as a phenomenon has its discursive roots in sexology, since Krafft-Ebing coined the term. Before the term ‘masochism’, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing’s term ‘algolagnia’ was used to refer to sexual pleasure derived from pain was

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<sup>25</sup> Margot D. Weiss, ‘Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media’, in *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, ed. by Peggy Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (London, New York and Victoria, Au: Harrington Park Press, 2006), pp. 103-132. [Co-published simultaneously as *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50. 2/3 (2006)]; Eleanor Wilkinson, ‘Perverting visual pleasure: Representing sadomasochism’, *Sexualities*, 12 (2009), 181-198; Robert V. Bienvenu II, ‘The Development of Sadomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States’ (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> *Secretary* dir. by Steven Shainberg (2002).

used.<sup>27</sup> However Krafft-Ebing's conception of masochism expanded upon algolagnia to include sexual humiliation, subjection, and the desire to be under the power of another. Since Krafft-Ebing considered sexual perversions to be a symptom of a troubled society, the sexological project was a political one, intended to help identify society's 'sick' elements. As a result sexual perversions, including masochism, became subject to research by many other sexologists and psychoanalysts. Havelock Ellis considered that the term masochism refers to 'pain only' and 'not cruelty', which is closer to Schrenck-Notzing's definition.<sup>28</sup> Ellis expands this argument to state that 'the masochist desires to experience pain, but he generally desires that it should be inflicted in love.'<sup>29</sup> This demonstrates an expansion of the psychological aspect of masochism that Krafft-Ebing gestures towards, which Sigmund Freud developed further in his 1905 publication *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality*.<sup>30</sup> Indeed he favoured a conception of masochism that enabled and acknowledged pleasure whether derived from pain, 'humiliation or subjection'.<sup>31</sup> In a 1929 publication, Wilhelm Stekel made explicit the connection between masochism and infantilism, where the sexual desire focuses upon 'sexual submission'.<sup>32</sup> Note here that there is no reference to sexual pleasure because he considers that to be covered by the separate term 'algolagnia', and instead focuses upon the psychological aspect.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the theorists before Stekel, who considered masochism to be a feminine perversion, he thought it was bisexual since it is present in both men and women.

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<sup>27</sup> Referenced in Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.' *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works. Volume ii (1901-1905)*, (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> Havelock Ellis, 'Love and Pain', in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume III: Analysis of the Sexual Impulse, Love and Pain, the Sexual Impulse in Women*, (Charleston, South Carolina: BiblioBazaar, 2010), pp. 97 – 246 (p. 214).

<sup>29</sup> Havelock Ellis, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', pp. 135 - 173.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 157.

<sup>32</sup> Wilhelm Stekel, *Sadism & Masochism: The Psychopathology of Sexual Cruelty. The Case Histories of Wilhelm Stekel*. (Solar Books, 2010 [1929]), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Wilhelm Stekel, p. 2.

This was a significant shift in the theorisation of the phenomenon. The relationship between pain and masochism moved further, as Theodor Reik argued that the following were:

characteristic of masochism: the passive nature, the feeling of impotence, and the submission to another person, the cruel, the humiliating, and shameful treatment by this person, and the consequent sexual excitement.<sup>34</sup>

Here again the psychological aspect of submission is explored in more depth, which is why it is an integral aspect in my thesis, since the phenomena of masochism and submission are intertwined. In Chapter One, I explore masochism's sexological and psychoanalytic origins focusing on the work of Krafft-Ebing and Freud, examining the part played in masochism by gender roles, the gendering of perversion, and masochism's relationship with sadism, according to these 'experts'.

Within feminism, numerous anthologies have been produced, which are either pro- or anti- sadomasochism, depending on the feminist position held. One of the earliest is the radical feminist anthology *Against Sadomasochism* (1982), in which the principal line of argument is that these practices reify the patriarchy and are therefore incompatible with feminist principles.<sup>35</sup> A decade later in 1993, another radical feminist anthology moved beyond the heterosexual couple and focused upon lesbianism.<sup>36</sup> In the 1980s lesbians published a few anthologies in defence of female sadomasochism notably the *Coming to Power* anthology by the San Francisco-based lesbian/feminist S/M organisation, Samois.<sup>37</sup> These 1980s feminist debates regarding SM are repeated in the twenty-first century in the feminist blogosphere, as I examine in Chapter Four.

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<sup>34</sup> Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, (New York: Grove Press, 1941), p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star (eds.) *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, California: Frog in the Well, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> Irene Reti (ed.), *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, (Santa Cruz: HerBooks, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> SAMOIS: a lesbian/feminist organization, *Coming to power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981).

Humanities scholarship on the historical and cultural significance of masochism has been examined by a variety of critics. These studies privilege male masochism due to the sexological presumption of its psychopathological nature, and offer reflections upon the formulation of masculinity. Suzanne Stewart argues that masochism constructs a new form of male subjectivity because ‘masochism achieved [...] the reorganization of the relationship between culture, pleasure and masculinity’.<sup>38</sup> David Savran writes a cultural history of representations of white masculinity and its relationship with masochism in contemporary American culture. Savran uses masochism as a way of examining and identifying different forms of white masculinity since the 1950s.<sup>39</sup> Richard Fantina uses masochism in a similar way to examine the role of masculinity, machismo and aesthetics at play in the work of Ernest Hemingway.<sup>40</sup> Nick Mansfield claims that the male masochist ‘is able to operate and refute power simultaneously,’ while Carol Siegel suggests that male masochism with its connotations of femininity might be able to subvert patriarchal power dynamics.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, previous studies have used masochism as a framework for interpretation. Gilles Deleuze’s essay *Coldness and Cruelty* uses the literary fiction of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch to identify a masochistic aesthetic, and argues that the phenomenon of sadism and masochism are distinct entities.<sup>42</sup> I examine Deleuze’s work in more depth in Chapter One of this thesis in relation to masochism’s sexological and psychoanalytic origins. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere uses the idea of male masochism to explore Russian history, while John Kucich uses the masochistic fantasy as a way of understanding, and negotiating ‘imperial and class discourses in late-nineteenth century

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<sup>38</sup> Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Fantina, *Ernest Hemingway: Machismo and Masochism* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Nick Mansfield, *Masochism: The Art of Power* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), p. x; Carol Siegel, *Male Masochism: Modern Revisions of the Story of Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’, in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 9-142.

Britain.<sup>43</sup> John Noyes argues that ‘masochism takes control of the technologies that produce subjectivity’ via discipline and converts them into technologies of pleasure.<sup>44</sup> Karmen MacKendrick develops her arguments in response to Deleuze’s *Coldness and Cruelty*. She also considers that masochism undermines cultural norms,<sup>45</sup> defining masochism more broadly than just sexual pleasure derived from pain and referring to the role of humiliation, bondage and subjection.<sup>46</sup>

Several criminological, psychological and sociological studies focus upon sadomasochism (SM), as distinct from just masochism, since their work privileges the ‘intersubjective lived experience’ of the practitioners. Andrea Beckmann uses a critical criminological methodology to examine the relationship between the social construction of ‘sadomasochism’ and the knowledge developed by practitioners of consensual SM.<sup>47</sup> She concludes by critiquing the criminalization of consensual SM practices on the basis of ‘potential risks to health and safety’.<sup>48</sup> More recently, Staci Newmahr used her anthropological data on the SM scene to examine the role of risk in SM practices.<sup>49</sup> She discovered that ‘at least part of the goal in all edgework [extreme SM practices] is the risk experience itself.’<sup>50</sup> Newmahr argued that risk is ‘rooted in a masculinist perspective,’ which implies that many SM practices are deeply

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); John Kucich, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> John Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 108.

<sup>46</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Beckmann, ‘Deconstructing myths: The social construction of “sadomasochism” versus “subjugated knowledges” of practitioners of consensual “SM”’, *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 8 (2001), pp. 66-95.

<sup>48</sup> Andrea Beckmann, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Newmahr, p. 181.

gendered.<sup>51</sup> While Newmahr considers gender in her analysis of SM, she does not focus upon the impact for the female masochist or submissive, which is the subject of examination in this thesis.

Within the field of psychology, Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige have published extensively on the subject of SM, and non-normative sexualities and relationship practices.<sup>52</sup> Some of their work examines the therapeutic potential of SM for its practitioners, as a way to explore trauma.<sup>53</sup> In a later article, Barker and Langdrige explore the potential limitations of the therapeutic model, as Langdrige fears that it could affirm the psychopathological discourses that they wish to overturn. This work helps to tease out some of the complications in considering the relationship between SM and its psychopathological history. Meg Barker also collaborated with Ani Ritchie on work that analysed interviews with self-proclaimed feminists who were also SM practitioners.<sup>54</sup> I will return to these studies in more detail in Chapter Three.

As well as work that attempts to recuperate SM as on the ‘right’ side of the ‘health and harm’ binary, there is a body of work that chooses to reject the need to work within this binary altogether. It focuses upon SM’s radical potential to challenge the institutional ideal of health, an idea that features in the late interviews by Foucault, and which has been expanded by the contemporary theorist Lisa Downing. Foucault used SM to demonstrate his argument that power functions in a network rather than a simple top-down model. SM is a performative

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<sup>51</sup> Newmahr, p. 155.

<sup>52</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, (eds.) *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, ‘Silencing Accounts of Silenced Sexualities’, in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. by Ryan-Flood, Róisín and Gill, Rosalind (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 67-81.

<sup>53</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, ‘The Power of Play: The Potentials and Pitfalls in Healing Narratives of BDSM’, in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 197-216.

<sup>54</sup> Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker, ‘Feminist SM: A contradiction in terms or a way of challenging traditional gendered dynamics through sexual practice?’ *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*, 6 (3), (2005), 227–239.

sexual practice that provides a ‘strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed.’<sup>55</sup> In addition, for Foucault, SM does not privilege genital sexuality but expands the concept of pleasure (without it necessarily being sexual) and the erotic so that it can incorporate the whole body.<sup>56</sup> Downing uses Foucault’s framework to consider the role of erotic asphyxiation, which is a much-maligned practice within the SM community due to its risk of death and rejection of bodily safety.<sup>57</sup> I discuss this area of scholarship that seeks to move beyond the confines of psychopathological discourses in more depth in Chapter Three of the thesis, which offers a consideration of different theoretical models regarding SM and its relationship with the health and harm binary.

Although, as the above discussion reveals, there are no published monographs on female masochism written from a critical humanities perspective, there is a burgeoning field of non-normative sexuality studies at PhD level and amongst early-career academics. (This thesis contributes to the growth of this field.) Much of this doctoral and post-doctoral work focuses upon BDSM from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including law, cultural studies, film studies, psychoanalysis, etc.

Estelle Noonan’s PhD thesis examines the representation and function of female masochism in the fiction of Elfriede Jelinek and Mary Gaitskill, and she questions feminist responses to this material.<sup>58</sup> Although her thesis, like mine, focuses upon female masochism and feminism, her methodological approach privileges literary analysis, and the theoretical

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity’ in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), pp. 382-391, (p.387).

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, ‘Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity’, p. 384.

<sup>57</sup> Lisa Downing, ‘Beyond Safety: Erotic Asphyxiation and the Limits of SM Discourse’, in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Darren Langdridge and Meg Barker (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 119-132, (p.127).

<sup>58</sup> Estelle Noonan, ‘Rereading Female Masochism: Feminism, Hermeneutics and the Politics of Heterosex’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 2010).

work by Mikhail Bakhtin,<sup>59</sup> while mine situates cultural iterations of female masochism in a variety of media within the relevant discourses (psychology, feminism, psychoanalysis etc.). Jennifer Levin's PhD examines masochism from the point of view of cultural representations of masochism in British literature from 1890-1930.<sup>60</sup> It situates these texts in relation to the discourses of psychoanalysis and sexology. In addition, Levin seeks to nuance masochism and situate its various aspects as distinct 'forms of modern desire'. She reads them as connected to 'particular historical moments and interests.'<sup>61</sup> The focus of Romana Byrne's work is similarly literary, yet it is broader than Levin's, since its thesis is that sadomasochism is a form of 'aesthetic sexuality' (a term she coins).<sup>62</sup> Byrne offers a cultural history that compares works within the philosophical tradition of aesthetics and explores how they function in literature that depicts sadomasochism (Sade to Califia). Helen Hester situates her PhD work within the developing field of Porn Studies, and like me, uses a variety of cultural forms to support her central argument.<sup>63</sup> Her thesis considers the displaced role of sex in contemporary pornography, and theorises upon the 'pornographic as a cultural concept'.<sup>64</sup> While the scholars discussed above are based in the critical humanities, Alex Dymock works within a department of law, where she is undertaking a PhD entitled 'Abject Intimacies'.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> She used this methodology in the following article adapted from a section of her doctoral thesis: Estelle Noonan, 'Towards an S & M Quotidienne? Rethinking "Bad Behaviour" in Secretary', *Women: A Cultural Review*, (2010), 135-152.

<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Burns Levin, 'Literary Masochism and Representations of Sexualised Pain in the Modern Imagination' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Burns Levin, p. vi.

<sup>62</sup> Romana Rosalie Byrne, 'Sadomasochism as Aesthetic Sexuality: a Cultural History from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Helen Hester, 'Contemporary Understandings of the Pornographic: Transgression, Affect, and the Displacement of Sex' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chichester, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Helen Hester, p.3.

<sup>65</sup> Alex Dymock, 'Abject Intimacies' (dissertation in progress, University of Reading, 2010-). Some early work from her thesis has been published: Alex Dymock, 'But Femsub is Broken Too!: On the Normalization of BDSM and the Problem of Pleasure', *Psychology and Sexuality*, 3.1(2012), 54 - 68.

Her work explores the intersection of criminal law, ethics, and sexual deviance, paying particular attention to the role of disgust in the creation of laws concerning obscenity.

My thesis contributes to this arena of study by providing a critical analysis of discourses of female masochism and submission. It does not write from within a single discursive position, but rather examines how discourses of psychopathology and feminisms affect the cultural representation of these practices. Through this analysis, I discovered that the term ‘masochism’ only has currency in a limited sphere – that of white European and Anglo-American conceptions of femininity. This is due to masochism’s European sexological and psychoanalytic roots in educated, white, upper and middle class masculinity and femininity. The implicit focus on whiteness in this thesis is guided by the ethnicity-blindness of much of the material analysed. I discuss the process of developing a female masochistic and submissive corpus of cultural works in the following section, before outlining the methodological tools used in this project.

## **1.2 The Female Masochistic and Submissive Corpus**

Examining the discursive representation of heterosexual female masochism and submission within the space of a PhD thesis necessitates a consideration of which texts to include in the corpus to be studied. The corpus could include numerous writings, films, songs, and other media forms. In this section I outline some of the key literary and filmic texts that could be included in a female masochistic and submissive corpus, demonstrating why I chose the specific case studies used in this thesis.

Krafft-Ebing coined the term ‘masochism’ in response to the fictional work and life of Sacher-Masoch. As a result, Sacher-Masoch’s text *Venus in Furs* (1870) has become one of the principal foundational texts in the masochistic corpus.<sup>66</sup> It includes: fetishism (furs, boots, leather), a manipulative male protagonist who constructs his own ideal scenario by

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<sup>66</sup> Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, ‘Venus in Furs’, in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 143-272.

manoeuvring an attractive woman to be his dominant, yet he experiences dissatisfaction when she alters his fantasy to reflect her own desires. However, its focus upon male masochism means that while it provided the foundation for many subsequent representations, it is not appropriate to discuss the work in depth in this thesis.

Since female submissiveness was an endorsed and expected mode of behaviour for middle and upper class women, many texts could be included in a corpus of female masochism and submission. The case-study method enabled me to select a few primary texts that negotiate feminist and psychopathological discourses in a different way to explicitly theoretical texts. I discuss this in the methodology section of this introduction below. In addition, women author the bulk of the cultural material this thesis examines, yet that was not a principal factor in choosing the material. Some early texts use masochism, sadism, and sexuality as a way to indicate broader political and philosophical concerns. Two of the novels that use female masochism in this way are by male writers – the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791)<sup>67</sup> and Joseph Kessel’s *Belle de Jour* (1928).<sup>68</sup> Although these two texts were written at very different political and historical moments, both comment on the role of virtue and the limited role for women in relation to sex, and both challenge bourgeois conservative morality.<sup>69</sup>

One of the most infamous texts of female masochism is Pauline Reage’s *L’histoire d’O* (*The Story of O*) (1954).<sup>70</sup> Although it has become quite mainstream in terms of its notoriety and content, its depiction of masochism and submission is more extreme than many later texts. It features a woman being given away by her partner, dwells on concepts of ownership and possession, and describes extreme punishments. It inspired spin-off texts, such as Jean de

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<sup>67</sup> Marquis de Sade, *Justine* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Kessel, *Belle de Jour*, trans. Geoffrey Wagner, (London: Pan Books, 1965). In addition, Luis Bunuel directed an infamous adaptation of this novel starring Catherine Deneuve as Severin [the name is a nod to the female protagonist in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*]. His version of *Belle de Jour* (1967) is better known than the original novel. *Belle de Jour*, dir. by Luis Bunuel (1967).

<sup>69</sup> Angela Carter argued that Sade was a proto-feminist in enabling women to experience sexual transgression as well as men. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, (London: Virago, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Pauline Reage, *The Story of O*, (London: Corgi Books, 1996).

Berg's *L'Image (The Image)* (1956), and film adaptations that include Just Jaeckin's *Histoire d'O (The Story of O)* (1975), and a documentary by Pola Rapaport entitled *Ecrivain d'O (Writer of O)* (2004) that included enactments of scenes from the novel and an interview with the original author.<sup>71</sup>

Another shift is seen in the 1970s and 1980s European texts that use SM imagery and dynamics as a way to explore fascist politics. For example Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom)* (1975) is an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's infamous text translated into a fascist Italian setting.<sup>72</sup> Another film that uses the backdrop of fascism is Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere di notte (The Night Porter)* (1974).<sup>73</sup> The film explores the re-meeting of a Nazi concentration camp doctor (Dirk Bogarde) and his Jewish victim (Charlotte Rampling). It uses flashbacks to show their SM 'relationship' based upon exploitation at the concentration camp. When they meet again after the war, their connection and dynamic persists, resulting in her leaving her husband for this complex lover due to the strength of their connection. The Austrian feminist writer Elfriede Jelinek wrote *Die Klavierspielerin (The Piano Teacher)* (1983), which again explores the protagonist's masochistic desires against the backdrop of Austrian guilt relating to the Second World War.<sup>74</sup> It focuses on the interaction between a mother and her daughter, rather than the 'love' story between the daughter and her lover. The latter became the focus in Michael Haneke's film adaptation of the novel entitled *La Pianiste (The Piano Teacher)* (2001) for the purposes of cinematic interest and to push the narrative forward.<sup>75</sup>

In the 1980s the emphasis in female masochistic and submissive texts shifted due to the feminist 'sex wars', in which these practices were contentious. Kathy Acker explored these

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<sup>71</sup> Jean de Berg, *The Image*, trans. Peter Darvill-Evans, (London: Nexus, 1999); *Histoire d'O*, dir. by Just Jaeckin (1975); *Ecrivain d'O (Writer of O)*, dir. by Pola Rapaport (2004).

<sup>72</sup> *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom)*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini, (1975).

<sup>73</sup> *Il Portiere di notte (The Night Porter)*, dir. by Liliana Cavani, (1974).

<sup>74</sup> Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> *La Pianiste (The Piano Teacher)*, dir. by Michael Haneke, (2001).

tensions through experimental writing that challenges femininity, feminism, eroticism, and politics, particularly in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984).<sup>76</sup> Jenny Diski examined the dilemma of a heterosexual feminist woman who experiences masochistic desire in her debut novel *Nothing Natural* (1986).<sup>77</sup> Pat Califia – a lesbian SM activist and writer - wrote a collection of erotic short stories entitled *Macho Sluts* (1988) that depict SM beyond the confines of heterosexuality in response to radical feminist criticisms.

From the 1980s to the present day there has been a flurry of confessional memoirs,<sup>78</sup> autobiographical fiction,<sup>79</sup> and series of novels<sup>80</sup> that focus upon SM. However the thesis does not examine these representations because it does not attempt to be a comprehensive survey volume of representations of female masochism and submission, but rather to highlight case studies that reveal particular tensions or allow for demonstrations of the importance of form to a given content and sexual political project. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a spate of films that included SM.<sup>81</sup> Amongst these was Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2002), the 'coming of age' narrative of a female masochist and submissive. It had a limited cinematic release for its opening weekend with only eleven screens in the USA and thirty screens in the UK,<sup>82</sup> yet it has become a cult hit since its release on DVD.<sup>83</sup> Its director Steven Shainberg argued that 'it is a perfect DVD movie, because it deals with risky, sexy material',

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<sup>76</sup> Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School, plus two* (London: Pan Books, 1984).

<sup>77</sup> Jenny Diski, *Nothing Natural* (London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>78</sup> Kate Marley, *Subtext: A Modern Day Tale of Female Submission* (London: Xcite Books, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Vanessa Duries, *The Ties That Bind (Le Lien)*, trans. Anon (New Milford: Magic Carpet Books, 2005).

<sup>80</sup> A series of novels by Laura Antoniou entitled *The Marketplace* includes *The Marketplace: Book One* (US: Masquerade, 1993); *The Slave* (US: Masquerade, 1994); *The Trainer* (US: Masquerade, 1995); *The Reunion* (US: Mystic Rose Books, 2002); A.N. Roquelaure, *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty* (Sphere, 1987). *Beauty's Punishment* (Sphere, 1987); *Beauty's Release* (Time Warner Paperbacks, 1988).

<sup>81</sup> *Romance X*, dir. by Catherine Breillat (1999); *Quills*, dir. by Philip Kaufman (2000); *The Piano Teacher (La Pianiste)*, dir. by Michael Haneke (2001); *Secretary*, dir. by Steven Shainberg (2002).

<sup>82</sup> 'Secretary (2002).' <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2002/SCTRY.php> Accessed on 12 December 2011.

<sup>83</sup> On Amazon *Secretary* has a ranking of 9,028, which is quite high considering the film was released in 2003 on DVD. [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Secretary-DVD-James-Spader/dp/B0000SVW8G/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323779086&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Secretary-DVD-James-Spader/dp/B0000SVW8G/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323779086&sr=8-1) Accessed on 13 December 2011.

which many people might prefer to watch at home rather than in the cinema.<sup>84</sup> In addition, it has been subject to numerous academic critiques,<sup>85</sup> yet none focus upon the relationship between self-injury and female masochism, which is examined in Chapter Three.

A key aspect of this corpus is that it has followed technological and media shifts; each chapter of the thesis treats a different generic form to demonstrate the multiple ways in which discourses intersect and interact. Since the Internet has shaped, affected and altered how people relate, communicate and are able to consider practices, particularly sexual ones, it would be a notable absence in a discursive history of heterosexual female masochism and submission to ignore this development. Because these sources exist in the virtual realm, they are therefore subject to similar concerns regarding archiving ephemeral material such as pamphlets and letters. Despite their ephemerality, sex blogs have become a phenomenon and generic mode in their own right. They have produced a significant amount of commentary, exploitation, and exploration including: a special issue of an academic journal,<sup>86</sup> adaptations into TV series<sup>87</sup> and books.<sup>88</sup> It is for this reason that the fourth chapter of this thesis focuses upon this ephemeral form: sex blogs.

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<sup>84</sup> Stephen Shainberg quoted in Billboard, 22 March 2003, p.69.

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fw8EAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA69&ots=UMgtL33km&dq=dvd%20sales%20figures%20'secretary'%20'shainberg'&pg=PA69#v=onepage&q&f=false> Accessed on 13 December 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Susan Cook, 'Subversion Without Limits: From Secretary's Transgressive SM to Exquisite Corpse's Subversive Sadomasochism', *Discourse*, 28.1 (2006), 121-141; Estelle Noonan, 'Towards an S & M Quotidienne? Rethinking "Bad Behaviour" in Secretary', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2010, 135-152.

<sup>86</sup> The first half of *Psychology and Sexuality* (3, 2012) edited by Lisa Downing focused on critical analysis of sex blogs.

<sup>87</sup> *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, ITV2, (2007-2011). This is based on Belle de Jour's blog *Diary of a London Call Girl*, whose name refers to the protagonist of Joseph Kessell's novel *Belle de jour*.

<sup>88</sup> Belle de Jour, *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005). Abby Lee, *Girl with a One Track Mind*, (London: Ebury Publishing, 2006). This is from the blog with the same name. For academic work on this area see: Feona Attwood, 'Intimate Adventures: Sex Blogs, Sex "books" and Women's Sexual Narration', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12 (2009), 5-20; Kaye Mitchell, 'Raunch Vs. Prude: Contemporary Sex Blogs and Erotic Memoirs by Women', *Psychology and Sexuality*. 3 (2012), 12-25.

### 1.3 Methodological and Theoretical Tools

The discourses examined in this thesis range from the late-nineteenth century, through the twentieth century, which has been a time of great political, social and technological change, to the dawn of the twenty-first. In particular this period has seen the flourishing of discourses of feminisms, and psychopathology with the development of the disciplines of psychology and sociology. In turn, since the late 1970s and early 1980s we have seen the rise of a neo-liberal agenda, which endorses an ethical relativism, provided that the act or practices in question conform to the heteronormative capitalist agenda. These neo-liberal principles can be found within many sex-positive works that attempt to ‘liberate’ non-normative sexual practices, through the role of advocacy and identity politics. Downing and Peter Cryle argue that the ‘liberationist logic of modern sexology’ still focuses on questions of taxonomy and identity politics.<sup>89</sup> This thesis shifts the focus away from these questions and instead provides a cultural history of discourses affecting the conception of female masochism. The thesis draws upon Foucault’s concept of a genealogy, in the sense that it does not attempt to create a smooth narrative that focuses upon the minutiae of representations of female masochism and submission.<sup>90</sup> Instead it uses genealogy in the sense of taking into ‘full account’ female masochism’s ‘emergence within descriptions of pathology’.<sup>91</sup> The thesis does not privilege theoretical material as offering greater insight into representations of female masochism and submission than creative/cultural texts, but rather considers both as primary material and also as examples that embody and negotiate the discourses examined.

The changing role of technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has affected the range of generic forms available to represent masochism. As discussed in the

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Cryle and Lisa Downing, ‘Feminine Sexual Pathologies,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18.1 (2009), 1-7, (p. 6).

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. by James Foubion (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 369-92, (p. 374); William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory, American Subjects* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000).

<sup>91</sup> Peter Cryle and Lisa Downing, p.6.

section above regarding my selection of the corpus, each chapter of the thesis deals with a different generic form using case studies to examine a few texts in-depth and place them in the broader theoretical and cultural context. Whether I examine a theoretical text or a cultural product, their use of rhetoric and form is examined in relation to its generic limitations. Chapter One considers the work of Krafft-Ebing and Freud, examining the specific ways that they frame their discussion of perversion, female sexuality and masochism. It privileges medical discourse by focusing upon masochism's psychopathological origins. The second chapter privileges literary fiction and erotica, positioning the texts in relation to books of feminist theory and activist pamphlets. The third chapter uses a film as its case study to examine the role of romantic comedy, and explore how a product with a large intended audience has difference limitations concerning the types of masochism it may represent. The final chapter considers the role of sex blogging, where blogs serve as both a way to create and analyse content. Although the texts chosen could seem different, each one references others through their relationship and the development of the corpus discussed above.

The thesis has Foucault's conception that power functions through discourse as the basis of its theoretical analysis, where each text (whether theoretical or cultural) is considered in-depth both in isolation, and in its position within a network of discourses.<sup>92</sup> This approach demonstrates that the construction of sexuality occurs through all discursive representations rather than privileging the authoritative and theoretical texts as the basis for a conception of female masochism.

#### **1.4 Organisation of Material**

This thesis represents an attempt to think through the discursive construction of representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission. It will also theorise the

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<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

complicated relationship between the mainstreaming of BDSM and the further pathologisation of its ‘radical’ practices.

Chapter One focuses upon the work of Krafft-Ebing and Freud, and positions their work within its cultural context to examine the impact of class, religion and expectations of gender roles upon their understanding of perversion. In turn, it examines Krafft-Ebing’s conception of masochism, and explores how Freud developed this work and emphasised masochism’s psychological aspect. Earlier in this Introduction, I outlined the reason for focusing the analysis upon these two theorists.

Chapter Two complexifies and nuances 1970s and 80s polarising feminist arguments (the so-called ‘Sex Wars’) regarding the political status of female masochism and submission. I examine the radical and liberal feminist arguments concerning sexual orientation, fantasy and SM, then analyse how they were represented in two fictional case studies. These are Jenny Diski’s novel *Nothing Natural*<sup>93</sup> and Pat Califia’s short story, which recounts a lesbian SM encounter, ‘Jessie’ from the collection *Macho Sluts*.<sup>94</sup> Diski’s novel enacts slippages between different radical and liberal feminist discourses, and explores the complex relationship between feminism and masochism. It does this by having certain characters embody rigid discursive positions, while the protagonist moves between discursive positions, and as a result experiences an ‘internal war’. By contrast, ‘Jessie’ by Califia embodies liberal sex-positive feminist ideas and critiques radical feminist concepts. In the 1980s lesbian feminists published the only pro-SM feminist texts, thus I chose ‘Jessie’ to represent this positive perspective and to provide a contrasting example to the fraught experience of SM by *Nothing Natural*’s protagonist.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Jenny Diski, *Nothing Natural* (London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>94</sup> Pat Califia, ‘Jessie,’ *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988).

<sup>95</sup> SAMOIS: a lesbian/feminist organization, *Coming to power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981).

Chapter Three examines the relationship between self-injury and masochism. This chapter uses Steven Shainberg's film *Secretary* as its principal case study, since it visually represents self-injurious practices and auto-erotic masochistic ones as existing on a continuum, while the film's 'story' suggests that there is a qualitative difference between the two practices. It also implies that the female protagonist replaces her self-injurious practices with heterosexual couple-based SM practices. In this chapter I examine how the generic limitations of romantic comedy and the melodrama affect how *Secretary* represents BDSM, particularly the impact of heteronormative monogamous culture. Then I offer a brief history of the medicalisation of self-injury and masochism, focusing on the influential American (and influential) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.<sup>96</sup> Medical and legal discourses in (at least in the UK) do not acknowledge that a person may consent to the harm of their body, because they work on the principle that the body is sacred. I position the film in the context of its generic conventions, mainstreaming and normalising attempts for BDSM, and the implicit, but only briefly represented, discourse that considers BDSM as a radical act. This chapter explores how multiple policing discourses affect the representation of female masochism and submission.

Chapter Four examines the discursive construction of heterosexual female masochism and submission in contemporary sex blogs. It uses the blog *Subversive Submissive* as the principal case study.<sup>97</sup> The analysis focuses on the process through which the blogger constructs her sexual identity through discourse and how this is enabled by the blog format. The second part of the chapter examines the function of the 'coming out' narrative for those who practice BDSM and how this implies that these sexual practices help to formulate a sexual orientation and an identity. It compares the ways in which the blogs *Subversive Submissive* and *Clarisse*

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<sup>96</sup> American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders*, 4th edn. (Washington, DC: Author, 2000).

<sup>97</sup> *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com>, [Accessed on 10 July 2011].

*Thorn* use this format in different ways to portray their respective authors' coming out story.<sup>98</sup> The third section explores new iterations of feminisms within the blogosphere, where there is a re-articulation of the so-called 'Sex Wars'. It focuses on a series of five posts attacking BDSM, by the blogger Nine Deuce of *Rage Against the Man-chine* and the responses from the feminist blogosphere.<sup>99</sup> This chapter brings the analysis of discourses of female masochism and submission up to the present day because, although most of this chapter focuses upon material from 2009, it also references blog posts written in late 2011.

In a brief conclusion I give a summary of the arguments and a critique of the findings made in the case studies. I also consider the mainstreaming of BDSM imagery and its impact upon the repositioning of the boundaries of acceptable practices. In addition, I discuss how representations of heterosexual female masochism rarely depict BDSM as a 'radical' sexual practice; instead this narrative principally occurs within LGBT representations of masochism and submission.

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<sup>98</sup> Clarisse Thorn, 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story', *Time Out Chicago*, <http://timeoutchicago.com/sex-dating/74517/love-bites-an-sm-coming-out-story>, [Accessed on 10 July 2011].

<sup>99</sup> Nine Deuce, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainstthemanchine.com/>[accessed on 10 October 2011].

## Chapter One

### Masochism's Sexological and Psychoanalytic Origins<sup>1</sup>

This chapter offers a close analysis of the work of the Austrian sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840 – 1902) and the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) because their theories of perversion resonate in most subsequent discussions of masochism. Krafft-Ebing coined the term ‘masochism’ and so provides the starting point for my analysis, following Foucault’s argument that a practice gains specific meanings once it has been named within a given discursive system, here sexology.<sup>1</sup>

As the aim of this chapter is to interrogate the construction of female masochism in the sexological work of Krafft-Ebing and the psychoanalytic work of Freud, it uses close textual analysis to explore several aspects of their work that are crucial for the readings undertaken in later chapters of the thesis. I begin with an analysis of degeneration theory, a prevalent discourse in Europe in the late-nineteenth century, without consideration of which the ideology underlying sexology cannot be properly understood. Degeneration theory provided the foundational impetus for the sexological project to catalogue perversion in order to identify degenerate elements in society. Next, I examine Krafft-Ebing’s understanding of gender roles and some of the specific ways that degeneration theory influenced his theorisation of sexual pathology. I then situate perversion within a Christian context because the notion of the fall also underpins Krafft-Ebing’s conception of perversion. By contrast, Freud bases his understanding of perversion within a developmental, psychological framework that rejects the tenets of

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 65-66. The direct text quotation can be found on: Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. by James Foubion (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.217.

degeneration theory. In a subsequent section, I demonstrate that the definition of the perversions ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ along gendered lines makes the concept of ‘sadomasochism’ problematic. I situate this discussion in relation to Gilles Deleuze’s essay ‘Coldness and Cruelty’ that provides a literary analysis of Sacher-Masoch and the Marquis de Sade.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I return to Krafft-Ebing and Freud in order to interrogate their under-theorised conceptualisations of female masochism.

## 2.1 Degeneration Theory

In the late-nineteenth century degeneration theory was a prevalent idea across Western Europe, particularly in the industrialised countries of Italy, Germany, France and the UK. These countries had seen rapid change from industrialisation, which resulted in the expansion of urban populations in cities. William Greenslade argues that in these cities ‘extremes of wealth and poverty were concentrated as never before, [giving] rise to new forms of social organisation and new patterns of mobility and access.’<sup>3</sup> He then states that these changes caused unrest and confusion regarding society’s perceived decline.<sup>4</sup> Hereditary degeneration theory emerged as a myth to offer an explanation for these changes. This was because the dominant discourse of evolutionary progress through natural selection, espoused by Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), did not offer an explanation for perceived rising levels of poverty, crime and unrest.<sup>5</sup> Degeneration explained that the evolution of species and culture had reached an impasse, meaning that society was in a process of regression. This theoretical model of

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’, in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), pp. 9-142.

<sup>3</sup> William P. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Greenslade, pp. 15 – 16.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. by Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

degeneration as a form of ‘evolutionary nationalism’ had a significant impact on the writing, thinking and cultural production of the time.<sup>6</sup>

Degeneration theory altered the conception of history as a narrative of progress, as Kelly Hurley argues that degeneration reversed this notion both in relation to individual human beings and European culture.<sup>7</sup> Heredity provided an explanation for the perceived social and moral degeneration of society, and heredity as a discourse implied determinism, suggesting that this process was unavoidable. In addition, while degeneration challenged the notion of progress, the concept of natural selection supported the notion that natural selection could produce degenerate characteristics, as well as those needed for the survival of the fittest. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso used the principles outlined by Darwin regarding evolution and applied them to degeneration theory. He developed a general theory to explain degeneration where it would be possible to identify criminals and the ‘morally insane’ from peculiarities with their physiognomy.<sup>8</sup> He considered that these ‘degenerate’ individuals represented a return to a more primitive type, which is also termed atavism; as such it was unsurprising that they could not adhere to contemporary laws and social norms. He argued that as degeneration was a hereditary condition with the developments of modern science it should be able to be wiped out.<sup>9</sup> Scientists adopted this understanding of degeneration, as it provided an explanation and a method to remove any markers of degeneracy through breeding, which became known as eugenics.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848 – 1918*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Herman, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> For critical works on the role of degeneration and eugenics see: Richard Allen Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill, N.C. & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); G. Robb, ‘The Way of All Flesh: Degeneration,

Hereditary degeneration theory considered micro behaviour, such as sexual perversion, to be symptomatic of broader social problems. It also brought with it a shift in the emphasis from a person who suffered from an illness to the idea that 'the person *was* the illness; in heredity and history, the degenerate was at once symptom and pathogen.'<sup>11</sup> Matt Reed argues that it also had a significant impact on the role of the late-nineteenth-century medical case study:

[It] underwent a subtle, but crucial transformation: it became less a story about the progression of the disease that it was a history of the patient's life. Or rather, it was at least as much a story about the individual - life, habits, relatives - as it was a story about the progression of the malady itself.<sup>12</sup>

This shift is apparent in the case studies written by Krafft-Ebing that explore the role of heredity (in an attempt to ascertain whether the perversions from which the patient 'suffered', or others, were present in his or her ancestors). Case studies also comment on the patient's physiognomy in order to identify any regressive features. In addition Krafft-Ebing presents a detailed description of the patient's sexual desires and practices; sometimes using their own words. Degeneration theory provided the foundation for Krafft-Ebing's sexological project because sexual perversion was both a cause and a symptom of degeneration.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Freud rejected degeneration theory in his work, which is why there is the significant shift from a genetically based model of perversion to a developmental psychical model that focused on the individual's repressed memories of infantile sexuality and the symptoms the repression produced. In

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Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 6, 4 (1996), 589 – 603; Donald J Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Matt T. Reed, 'From *aliéné* to *dégénéré*: Moral Agency and the Psychiatric Imagination in Nineteenth-Century France', in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher Forth and Elinor Accampo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 67 – 89, (p. 85, original emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> Matt T. Reed, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', in *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study* (London: Rebman Limited, 1901), pp. 1-26, (p.6).

the next section, I consider Krafft-Ebing's conception of gender roles, their relationship with degeneration theory and its impact on his methodological approach.

## 2.2 Women and Femininity

Since this chapter is written from a contemporary standpoint, looking back on masochism's origins, it does so through the lens of recent theories of gender and sexuality. From this perspective the term *woman* no longer necessarily implies femininity. Judith Butler demonstrates this in *Gender Trouble* (1989), in which she expands on previous feminist work to incorporate the idea that a gender identity is performative.<sup>14</sup> It is something that is enacted and explored through conscious and unconscious repetitive acts, which implies that femininity is not an essential attribute of being a woman.<sup>15</sup> Rather the word *femininity* gestures towards the artificiality and constructed nature that 'being' a woman entails. With each period of social, political and economic change, the idea of what is feminine alters—not necessarily very much, but it is not a static category. I will now examine ideas surrounding femininity in Western Europe in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, paying particular attention to Krafft-Ebing and Freud.

Krafft-Ebing used what Butler would describe as a sleight of hand to equate femininity and feminine behaviour with what he considered to be natural for the female sex. This removed any distinction between what would come to be known in the 1950s as 'sex' and 'gender', so the ideas conveyed by these modern terms appeared interchangeable. The assumed inevitability of female femininity and male masculinity was a prerequisite of his ideal society. Krafft-Ebing's conception of what was 'natural'

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th anniversary ed. (New York & London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Butler, p. 191.

for each gender affected how he perceived a sexual practice, thus underpinning his ideas of perversion and masochism.

In Krafft-Ebing's late-nineteenth-century Europe, femininity was characterised by behaviour such as domesticity, gentility, passivity and subservience. However, this traditional conception of femininity is class-bound because it presumes a certain lifestyle that does not apply to working class women. These practices were expected in upper- and middle-class women because they were thought to help make them into ideal wives. Most of the theorists discussed in this chapter and thesis,<sup>16</sup> particularly Krafft-Ebing and Freud, focus on upper and middle class women, where it is possible to equate being a woman with being feminine and supported by a man.<sup>17</sup> This is also because these theorists with a scientific background only had access to this class and type of woman, so placing a class bias on their ideas about what constituted a 'normal' gender identity and sexual practice.

In 1886 Krafft-Ebing wrote a treatise on sexual perversion, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which was his attempt to create a catalogue of the different types of sexual practices and fantasies.<sup>18</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, his biographer, highlights that Krafft-Ebing and other psychiatrists had to fight against the common understanding that they 'operated on the margins of medicine as well as of society'.<sup>19</sup> Their profession was

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<sup>16</sup> The exceptions include Pat Califia, Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, who write about BDSM as a sexual community and acknowledge that the concept of femininity is plural (femininities) as opposed to the singular understanding explored by earlier theorists.

<sup>17</sup> This is why some cultural representations of masochism choose to subvert traditional gender roles as a way of revealing its political potential, since Krafft-Ebing's conception of masochism focuses on the desire for control by a member of the opposite sex.

<sup>18</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study*. trans. Franklin S. Klaf [1965]. Translated from the 12th German Edition edn. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexuality, Identity, The Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.13.

considered to lack scientific rigor and respectability. Krafft-Ebing responded to these difficulties by using conservative rhetoric to ensure that his readers understood his text as serious and important. At the time Latin was the language used for scientific discourse and was only known by the educated (usually male) few. Krafft-Ebing chose to situate his work within this framework of privilege by using a Latin title to position it within scientific discourse and he wrote the most graphic passages in Latin rather than German to ensure that only the educated could read them and to make it less likely that the work would fall into the hands of working class readers. This suggests that those who were able to read and understand Latin are safe from corruption because their knowledge serves as a form of self-control. It has its origins in degeneration theory and the idea that by reading the sexually explicit case studies, corruption of the uneducated could ensue. He positioned his psychiatric text within the respected scientific disciplines, as his method obeyed scientific rigor and order, which he combined with descriptive case studies, and followed each with an analytical section.

In addition to situating *Psychopathia Sexualis* in a scientific context, he drew on Christian discourse to help position his discoveries and comments on ‘new’ types of sexuality within a framework that permitted and encouraged discussion of morality. This is particularly apparent in the introduction entitled in some versions of the English translation ‘Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life’. It provided a platform for his ideas on the correct gender role for each sex, which, if adhered to, should lead to a ‘civilised’ and ‘moral’ society, and thus prevent degeneration. He argued that ‘it is of great psychological interest to follow up the gradual development of civilisation and the influence exerted by sexual life upon habits and morality’.<sup>20</sup> This interest in morality and concepts of degeneration provided the motivation behind Krafft-Ebing’s book through which he hoped to document the then current state of (Germanic,

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<sup>20</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.2.

civilised) society; describe the effect that sexuality, particularly in its non-normative forms, had on the morality of society; and warn of what could happen if gender roles were further subverted.

Krafft-Ebing used the introduction to demonstrate the hereditary nationalism inherent within the discourse of degeneration, which he achieved through a comparison of Christian and Islamic societies. He argued that Christian societies were civilised and had more liberal attitudes about what constituted the female's role and her sexuality compared to Islamic societies that he understood to be uncivilised. He compared how these two different societies treated 'their' women in an attempt to demonstrate that contemporary Christian countries offered greater liberty to their female citizens. In reference to the supposedly uncivilised Islamic society he stated:

Woman is the common property of man, the spoil of the strongest and mightiest, who chooses the most winsome for his own, a sort of instinctive sexual selection of the fittest. Woman is a 'chattel', an article of commerce, exchange or gift, a vessel for sensual gratification, an implement for toil.<sup>21</sup>

This quotation supported Krafft-Ebing's argument that in Islamic society women only had value in terms of their relationship to a man because their purpose was to further reproduction, etc. He stated that 'above all things Islamism excludes women from public life and enterprise, and stifles her intellectual and moral advancement'.<sup>22</sup> He discussed Islamic women to highlight the marked difference between them and Christian women, whom he considered to be superior in terms of civilisation, morals and in their ability to have their own virtues.

Of course, Krafft-Ebing's assertion of idealised femininity in Christian women complemented his account of idealised masculinity in Christian men, as the latter would shape the former. According to Krafft-Ebing, Christian men were active, acted on impulse and were more interested in sex than love. Their sexual appetites were prolific,

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<sup>21</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.2.

<sup>22</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.5.

non-monogamous and focused on the physical appearance of their partners. Once they had found a partner suitable to be their wife, work and social interests took precedence. Male femininity (effeminacy) did not and could not fit within this understanding of masculinity because, for Krafft-Ebing, those actions, practices and fantasies that allowed or encouraged effeminacy would lead to moral decay.<sup>23</sup> This is because adhering to a gender's 'natural' role, and thus upholding the masculine-feminine dyad, helped strengthen a country's morality.

However, Krafft-Ebing argued that it was women, not men, who provided a country's moral foundation, and thus could stem the rate of degeneration. This was because within a Christian society a woman's ultimate goal was to be a 'housewife, companion and mother'—all of which were roles that typified 'feminine' behaviour for women.<sup>24</sup> It was from this position of embodied femininity that she could support her family by helping them to be moral citizens and in turn create a society with a strong moral foundation. He argued that ideally moral progress should follow a trajectory of 'steady progress' but he acknowledged that it would often be slow with some 'stagnant and fluctuating periods'.<sup>25</sup> He considered that Germany was in one of the stagnant periods, due to industrialisation and rapid social change, a perspective informed by degeneration theory. Factors that impeded a country's moral development included: urban environments; decadence; and the subversion of gender roles, particularly when it involved dominant women and effeminate men. His solution to this feared moral and social degeneracy was to encourage Christian societies to produce masculine men and feminine women; deviations from this he considered to be both a cause and symptom of degeneration.

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<sup>23</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p. 6.

This resulted in a narrow set of expectations for Christian middle and upper class women. Krafft-Ebing thought that they should strive to be housewives so they could fulfil their ‘innate’ desire to be monogamous and avoid having to endure flirtations with multiple partners. Krafft-Ebing stated that woman’s natural desires led to ‘the foundation of modesty, chastity and sexual fidelity as long as love endures’.<sup>26</sup> He thought that love was more important to the woman than to the man because a woman was in a more vulnerable economic position due to her dependence on her husband.<sup>27</sup> Krafft-Ebing characterised love as requiring the following conditions for women: commitment, sexual desire between members of the opposite sex and stability from which they could create a good home environment. The discourse of love was used as a form of social control to ensure that these kinds of women acknowledged that their chastity was required so that they could fulfil their role as a beacon of a society’s morality, which would enable it to flourish.<sup>28</sup> Considering a woman’s social and moral responsibility, it is unsurprising that an unfaithful wife would receive a severe punishment because she was seen to deviate from her ‘natural’ role. He argued that she ‘not only dishonours herself, but also her husband and her family, not to speak of the possible uncertainty of paternity’.<sup>29</sup> Krafft-Ebing treats infidelity so seriously because he considers that ‘*a woman’s husband means for [upper class women] the whole sex*’ and so, if a woman were to stray, she would flout this expectation.<sup>30</sup> For a conservative male-dominated society to flourish, or even maintain its status quo, women had to live by a different moral code that protected and served its interests, often at the expense of their own.

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<sup>26</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.3.

<sup>27</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.9.

<sup>28</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.16.

<sup>29</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Fragments of a System of Psychology of Sexual Life', p.16.

<sup>30</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', in *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study* (London: Rebman Limited, 1901), pp. 115-207. (p.195, original emphasis).

It seems that Krafft-Ebing interpreted his clinical case studies in conjunction with general observations to help formulate his arguments about the role and nature of women. He also seems to have resorted to received ideas about upper and middle class women because his direct access to them was limited. The imposed dependence of these women on their male relatives meant they would only see a psychiatrist if these male relatives deemed it necessary. Thus few women saw psychiatrists or were in a position to discuss their sexuality on their own terms because a woman's sexuality was understood in relation to a man's and to its reproductive potential, rather than independently or as a matter of her pleasure. Krafft-Ebing's treatise on sexual perversion would always be limited because the majority of the material he used to compile his case studies came from male patients.

A similar criticism can be made of the work of Freud, who sidelined female sexuality in his earlier work, particularly his 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1903),<sup>31</sup> and, besides occasional references in various essays,<sup>32</sup> only paid it closer attention in his 1931 essay 'Female Sexuality'.<sup>33</sup> However, while he did, unlike Krafft-Ebing, discuss 'female sexuality' in this last essay, he did not define or explore what is understood by the terms *female* or *feminine*. Instead he relied on readers sharing his pre-conceived ideas, which was possible as this short essay appeared towards the end of his

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<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works. Volume VII (1901-1905)* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 135-73.

<sup>32</sup> These include: Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis & Other Works, Vol. 17* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 175-204; Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', in *The Ego and the Id, and Other Words. [with Plates.] (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 19)*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 243-58.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)', in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works; Translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 21.)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 223-47.

career, by which time readers would have been familiar with his thoughts and concepts, whereas Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, while offensive to some, was perceived as new and ground-breaking. Freud adhered to convention and used the terms *femininity* and *masculinity* as synonymous with *passive* and *active*, though he did discuss the idea of active femininity in relation to a woman rearing children.<sup>34</sup> It seems that Freud chose not to interrogate his terminology, but instead focused his discussion on the psychical development of female sexuality and how that related to their physiology, paying particular attention to the different way females experience the Oedipus complex.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.3 The Gendering of Perversion

The dictionary definition for the noun *perversion* is 'abnormal or unacceptable sexual behaviour'.<sup>36</sup> It then sends the reader looking for the next entry because it also defines the word as 'the action of perverting'.<sup>37</sup> Claire Pajaczkowska observes that it is difficult to define perversion succinctly since 'the unpleasant connotations attach themselves to the actions rather than to the word itself'.<sup>38</sup> She also notes that the word's meaning changes depending on the part of speech because the noun and verb have different connotations. The noun *pervert* refers to 'a person with abnormal or unacceptable sexual behaviour', and this definition marks a shift from the word referring to a series of practices to an attribute of the person themselves.<sup>39</sup> This nominates the person as a pervert, which marks them out as different and pathologises them.

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<sup>34</sup> Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)', p. 236, 237.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)', pp. 225, 229-230.

<sup>36</sup> 'Perversion', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. by Judy Persall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1066.

<sup>37</sup> 'Perversion', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. by Judy Persall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1066.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Pajaczkowska, *Perversion* (Cambridge: Icon, 2000), p.9.

<sup>39</sup> 'Pervert', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. by Judy Persall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1067.

By contrast, as a verb, the word ‘pervert’ is less objectifying since its two principal meanings do not have a specific aim and so would require an explanation. The definitions are, first, to ‘alter from its original meaning or state to a corruption of what was first intended’ and, second, to ‘lead away from what is right, natural, or acceptable’.<sup>40</sup> It is possible to see how this definition issues from Christian discourse, stemming from the Biblical story of Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden.<sup>41</sup> There the serpent encourages her to defy God’s command to leave the fruit alone and, as a result of her defiance, God introduces shame into the Garden, prompting Adam’s and Eve’s desire to cover their bodies because they become aware of their nakedness. This story provides a Christian interpretation of perversion that depends on the idea that what is ‘natural’ (before Eve was corrupted by the serpent and without the influence of culture) is ‘normal’ and thus the best type of behaviour. It suggests that culture and social influence imply and encourage deviation from what is natural, which may be why discussions of perversion flourish in times of social and cultural change.

Krafft-Ebing uses this religious idea of perversion as a deviation from the prescribed path in *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Fears surrounding the decline of society into a state of moral and social decay lead him to analyse sexual perversion because it represents both a cause and a consequence of this degeneration. This is reflected in the three main factors that provide the foundation of his major work and his approach to sexual perversion: ideas of social degeneration and the hereditary aspect of the biomedical model, supplemented by his emphasis on the psychological. Each of these factors underpin his methodology: his case studies examining physical and genetic deficiencies in families, the impact of childhood and adolescent experiences on an

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Pervert’, p. 1067.

<sup>41</sup> *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. ed. by Robert Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.3.

individual's adult mentality, and physical differences and potential abnormalities which could result in masochistic behaviour. For Krafft-Ebing, engaging in perverse sexual acts does not necessarily mean that the individual suffers from a perversion, as the difference lies in the background and character of the individual. He distinguishes between perversion and perversity, as he states:

[T]o differentiate between disease (perversion) and vice (perversity), one must investigate the whole personality of the individual and the original motive leading to the perverse act. Therein will be found the key to the diagnosis.<sup>42</sup>

It is clear from this passage that Krafft-Ebing considers the psychology of the individual to play an important part in the formation of a perversion. For Krafft-Ebing the successful completion of heterosexual penetrative sex is possible in the case of perversity but not in a true perversion.<sup>43</sup> While Krafft-Ebing uses psychology to supplement his empirical analysis of the case study; Freud shifted the emphasis from empirical analysis to privilege the psychical aspects of the case study.

Freud presents a psychoanalysis of 'sexual aberrations' in the essay of the same title in his book 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905).<sup>44</sup> In the essay he draws information from the work of a range of earlier writers of sexology, such as Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll (1862 – 1939), Henry Havelock Ellis (1859 – 1939) and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862 – 1929).<sup>45</sup> He aims to show how sexual aberrations affect sexual desire and to expose popular misconceptions that surround sexuality. He, like Krafft-Ebing, understands sexuality in terms of the normal and the perverse. However, for Freud, these are not mutually exclusive categories but rather positions that exist on a continuum.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study* (London: Rebman Limited, 1901), p.76.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexuality*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.135.

<sup>45</sup> For the full list see: Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', p.135, footnote 1.

The normal sexual aim is regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct—a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger. But even in the most normal sexual process we may detect rudiments which, if they had developed, would have led to the deviations described as ‘perversions’.<sup>46</sup>

While most people might engage in ‘perverse’ activities, they do not necessarily suffer from a ‘perversion’. This is because for Freud if someone engages in perverse activities and are still able to enjoy successful heterosexual penetrative sex then they do not suffer from a pathology. If an action, object or fantasy becomes required for sexual arousal, and if the sexual encounter does not lead to heterosexual penetrative sex, then an individual is a pervert. According to Freud, an activity becomes a perversion once it features two main characteristics: exclusivity and fixity. Freud argues that an integral element of perversion especially ‘in cases of licking excrement or of intercourse with dead bodies’ involves overcoming an immense amount of ‘shame, disgust, horror or pain’.<sup>47</sup> However he does not consider that subjects who practise these perversions ‘will necessarily turn out to be insane or subject to grave abnormalities of other kinds’.<sup>48</sup> This understanding demonstrates a significant departure from Krafft-Ebing’s work that privileged the idea that sexual perversions had a biological basis and was supplemented by the psychological. Instead Freud attempts to demonstrate and explore the psychical and social basis of perversion, an endeavour that has come to influence subsequent definitions of the phenomenon.

Freud understands perversion and ‘normal’ sexuality to be on a continuum with one another. He argues that many of the specific practices of perverse sexuality, such as lingering over touching, ‘are constituents which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people’.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that aspects of perverse desire comprise part of

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<sup>46</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.149.

<sup>47</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.161.

<sup>48</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.161.

<sup>49</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.160.

everyone's sexuality, which implies that those afflicted by perversions are 'further along' a scale of perverse desire, rather than being on a separate scale altogether.

The above discussion of perversion and perversity provides a background to Freud's understanding of masochism, which I will explore later in the chapter. Next I will examine the implications of gender in his model of perversion. Freud's discussion of perversion only applies to males because he does not consider that females can have a perverse sexuality. This is nominally because the potential outcomes of the boy's oedipal resolution differ from the girl's and include the perversion of fetishism, as I shall explain below. But, at the implicit level of his logic, it may be because he considers that the norm (what is 'natural') is to be male, and thus to be female is already a deviation from what is natural. To follow this logic further, a female cannot have a perverse sexuality because that would necessitate a deviation from a norm that she has already fulfilled.<sup>50</sup> In Freud's theory perversion is exclusively male, and I will clarify this gender bias in his theory through a discussion of fetishism, which Freud considers to be the prototype of all perversions.<sup>51</sup> However, before I discuss fetishism, it is necessary to examine Freud's arguments about the castration complex and the Oedipus complex, as these help to explain the origins of fetishism.

Freud argues in his piece on 'Infantile Sexuality' in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905) that all male children suffer from the castration complex and all female children suffer from penis envy.<sup>52</sup> He argues that all boys presume that every other person they see (male and female) will also have a penis. When they discover that women are missing a penis they do not grasp that a clitoris is the female equivalent of a

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<sup>50</sup> This idea is inspired by the thesis of Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> I will examine the implications for gender within the discourses concerning masochistic practices and fantasies in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Infantile Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works. Volume VII (1901-1905)* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 173-207, (p. 195).

penis (though Freud later did<sup>53</sup>) but hold firm to the belief that girls should also have penises. They only abandon this belief 'after severe internal struggles (the castration complex). The substitutes for the penis which they feel is missing in women play a great part in determining the form taken by many perversions.'<sup>54</sup> Freud goes on to define penis envy, the female equivalent to the male castration complex thus:

Little girls do not resort to denial of this kind when they see that boys' genitals are formed differently from their own. They are ready to recognize them immediately and overcome by envy for the penis—an envy culminating in the wish, which is so important in its consequences, to be boys themselves.<sup>55</sup>

While this throws up some thought-provoking ideas about the development of sexuality for both males and females, Freud does not delve any further into these phenomena but changes topic to explore a child's response to adults having sex. Joseph Bristow argues that this is because he only begins to grasp the importance of the relationship between the castration complex and the Oedipus complex in much later works, such as *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' (1924).<sup>56</sup> Even then, however, Freud chooses to focus on the boy's development towards 'normal' heterosexuality, rather than examining female sexuality in any depth,<sup>57</sup> at least until the essays 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1924) and 'Female Sexuality' (1931) in which he begins to explore the development of female sexuality as it relates to the Oedipus complex.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)', p. 228.

<sup>54</sup> Freud, 'Infantile Sexuality', p. 195.

<sup>55</sup> Freud, 'Infantile Sexuality', p. 195.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality, The New Critical Idiom* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997), p. 72; Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Ego and the Id, and Other Works. [with Plates.] (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 19.)*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 12-66; Sigmund Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', in *The Ego and the Id, and Other Works. [with Plates.] (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 19.)*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 173-79.

<sup>57</sup> Bristow, *Sexuality*, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes'; Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)'.

Freud argues in *The Ego and the Id* that the boy must undergo the troubling stage of the Oedipus complex before he can understand the importance of symbolic castration, and thus go through the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.<sup>59</sup> Freud derived the metaphor from the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles.<sup>60</sup> He argues that the boy experiences erotic attraction for the mother's breast while still a baby and when he realises that the father also desires the breast, his feelings for his father change from identification to hatred. The boy wants to be rid of his father so that he can take his place alongside his mother. From this point the boy experiences an ambivalent attitude towards his father and one 'of a solely affectionate kind to his mother [which together] make up the content of the simply positive Oedipus complex in a boy'.<sup>61</sup> However, Freud states that the boy must give up both the Oedipus complex and his close bond with his mother. This gap will be filled by 'either an identification with his mother or an intensification of his identification with his father', though it is more 'normal' (because heterosexual) for it to be the father that will provide an intensification of the boy's masculinity.<sup>62</sup> Freud argues that a girl's femininity can be asserted if she identifies with her mother, though following from this logic a girl's masculinity could be asserted if she identified more with her father.

Freud argues that when the child becomes aware of the castration complex, it causes him or her to reject the Oedipus Complex leading to its demise.<sup>63</sup> This statement applies for boys but is more complicated for girls as, he argues, they do not so readily accept the castration complex. Instead she 'may harden herself in the conviction that she *does* possess a penis, and may subsequently be compelled to behave as though she were

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<sup>59</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> Sophocles, and R. D. Dawe, *Oedipus Rex*. 2nd ed. *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', p. 32.

<sup>62</sup> Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', p. 173.

a man'.<sup>64</sup> The girl who does 'accept' 'castration' becomes aware that her own genitals are akin to a wound and, Freud claims, 'she develops [...] a sense of inferiority' towards other women, much like men, which occurs because the clitoris is inferior to the penis.<sup>65</sup> Freud argues that female masturbation by stimulation of the clitoris 'is a masculine activity and that the elimination of clitoridal sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity'.<sup>66</sup> In other words to be feminine implies a detachment of a girl's sexual desires. This suggests that even Freud is aware that femininity and passivity are learnt behaviours that occur via a process of repression of the active desires. He argues that:

the little girl's recognition of the anatomical distinction between the sexes forces her away from masculinity and masculine masturbation on to new lines which lead to the development of femininity.<sup>67</sup>

He endorses the sublimation of female pleasure in order to adhere to a normative model of femininity. Freud adds that girls can more readily accept the castration complex by denying the pleasure from their clitoris, progressing to vaginal stimulation and by going through the Oedipus complex.<sup>68</sup>

Freud's understanding of the relationship between the Oedipus complex and the castration complex is the background to his understanding of fetishism, which he considers to be the prototype for all perversions. Fetishism, which refers to the fixated replacement of genital sexuality with a specific object, only becomes a perversion once 'the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the *sole* sexual object'.<sup>69</sup> For example, if someone loved their partner's feet and wanted to lavish attention on them this would be part of 'normal' love because it shows devotion to the

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<sup>64</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p. 235.

<sup>65</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', pp. 253, 255.

<sup>66</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p.255.

<sup>67</sup> Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p. 256.

<sup>68</sup> Freud, 'Female Sexuality (1931)', p.225; Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p. 256.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 154, original emphasis.

individual concerned. It would only become a perversion—a fetish—if the individual began to want to lavish attention on and eroticised feet in general. Freud argues that the choice of fetish object often occurs during ‘early childhood’ when, unbeknownst to the individual, a symbolic connection is made with a specific object.<sup>70</sup> He states that men often fetishise women’s shoes because they are ‘a corresponding symbol of the *female* genitals’.<sup>71</sup> The shoe is an object that requires another object, the foot, to fill it, which could connect to the male subject as a need for the female’s genitals to be filled by their penis. In a further footnote, Freud observes that ‘the foot represents a woman’s penis, the absence of which is deeply felt’.<sup>72</sup> This brief discussion of the symbolism of women’s feet and shoes has far reaching consequences because Freud’s theories, while interesting, only allow males to be heterosexual perverts.

Freud’s male orientated ideas about perversion leave room for many questions. What makes a perversion a perversion? What are the social implications of perversion? Can perversion and perverse sexuality be female? How does female perversion differ from male perversion? Are some acts perverse in and of themselves? Twentieth-century feminist literary critic Louise Kaplan argues that what she calls a ‘perverse strategy’ makes a perversion a perversion because it ‘uses one or another social stereotype of masculinity and femininity in a way that deceives the onlooker about the unconscious meanings of the behaviours she or he is observing’.<sup>73</sup> This definition frames Kaplan’s analysis in her monograph *Female Perversion*. She argues that female perversions must manifest themselves differently from male perversions because perversions involve sexual strategies and also relate to social phenomena. It follows that gender and perversion are intrinsically linked because the perverse strategy is considered a

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<sup>70</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 154.

<sup>71</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 155, original emphasis, footnote added 1910.

<sup>72</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 155, footnote added 1910.

<sup>73</sup> Kaplan, *Female Perversions*, p. 9.

primarily male attribute that is an attempt for him to assert his masculinity, virility and potency. Indeed, as stated above, for Krafft-Ebing and Freud perversion can only be male, as females already are deviations from the masculine norm. The aim of Freud's perverse strategy is to establish the phallus as the principal object. As I showed in the preceding discussion of fetishism, the phallus is seen as existing to complete and repair the 'damaged' female genitalia. Kaplan argues 'that perversions, insofar as they derive much of their emotional force from social gender stereotypes, are as much pathologies of gender role identity as they are pathologies of sexuality'.<sup>74</sup> Following on from this, I will discuss why the relationship between sadism and masochism is problematic, due to these perversions' dependence on an understanding of gender roles.

#### **2.4 The Problematic Interaction between Sadism and Masochism**

The idea that sadism and masochism are 'perfect counterparts' to one another originated in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which Krafft-Ebing coined and developed the theoretical basis for both terms.<sup>75</sup> He understood that sadism was an active desire to inflict pain when in a state of arousal and that 'under pathological conditions, man's active *role* of winning woman may become an unlimited desire for subjugation'.<sup>76</sup> Masochism was its opposite for it was passive. He claimed:

Under pathological conditions [masochism may] become a perverse, pleasurable desire for subjection to the opposite sex, which [...] represents a pathological degeneration of the character (really belonging to woman) of the instinct of subordination, physiological in woman.<sup>77</sup>

This quotation suggests that masochism is the opposite of sadism because both focus on re-interpreting pain as sexual and pleasurable in a specific context. It makes sense that Krafft-Ebing believed 'individuals affected with these perversions regard the opposite

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<sup>74</sup> Freud, *Female Perversions*, p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 203.

<sup>76</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 203.

<sup>77</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 203.

perversion in the other sex as their ideal', an idea that Freud concurred with and supported.<sup>78</sup>

Krafft-Ebing might have argued that an ideal partner for a masochist would be a sadist and vice versa. However, it is not necessarily as simple as this. For Krafft-Ebing a sadist desires to inflict pain on another and to subject them to their will, but their sadistic desires focus on acts of cruelty and humiliation.<sup>79</sup> Krafft-Ebing states that sadism 'consist[s] of an innate desire to humiliate, hurt, wound or even destroy others in order thereby to create sexual pleasure in one's self'.<sup>80</sup> This definition of sadism suggests that a sadist's enjoyment would be lessened if they saw that their practices were desired and eliciting a sensual response in a masochistic partner. This could mean a sadist might not desire to be with an individual who has preconceived ideas about their own torture; they might prefer to be with an individual who they could shape and mould. Although a masochist longs to relinquish control of the situation, they only wish to do so within certain predefined limits. Following from Krafft-Ebing's understanding of masochism, a masochist would want to be involved in scripting the scenario of their torture, so they only engage in the practises that interest them. In a twentieth-century refutation of nineteenth-century theories of sadism and masochism, such as Krafft-Ebing's, Gilles Deleuze eloquently states that:

A masochist is 'a victim in search of a torturer [...] who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes'.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, the paradox of the masochist is that they seek another to help enact their fantasies yet within controlled limits. Despite these marked differences between the desires of a masochist and a sadist, these terms are still generally considered in tandem,

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<sup>78</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 203; Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.159.

<sup>79</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 53.

<sup>80</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 53.

<sup>81</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', in *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), pp. 9-142, (p. 20).

partly thanks to the widespread use of the term *sadomasochism* within popular culture and BDSM communities, which will be discussed in more depth in later chapters.

Freud initially discusses sadism and masochism under a joint subheading in his essay on ‘Sexual Aberrations’, which could have led to the development of the term *sadomasochism*. In his 1905 essay he considers the two terms together because he is interested in how sadism is the active counterpart to the passive masochism and found it remarkable that both of these forms ‘are habitually found to occur together in the same individual’.<sup>82</sup> He states that this occurs due to them relying on different levels of aggressiveness, so one aspect will tend to be more present than the other at any one time. Freud chooses not to force a separation between these two perversions but rather suggests that psychoanalysts should choose to connect their simultaneous presence ‘with the opposing masculinity and femininity which are combined in bisexuality—a contrast which often has to be replaced in psycho-analysis by that between activity and passivity’.<sup>83</sup> Here Freud moves away from Krafft-Ebing’s idea that a sadist and a masochist would make ideal partners for one another and towards an understanding of an identity defined as ‘sadomasochism’. The comparison with bisexuality springs from the coexistence of two seemingly disparate aspects of sexuality within the same individual.

However, Deleuze finds Freud’s idea that sadism and masochism can coexist within the same person, forming an entity known as ‘sadomasochism’, problematic. The main aim of Deleuze’s book *Coldness and Cruelty* is to question and trouble ‘the very concept of an entity known as sadomasochism’.<sup>84</sup> This is because he wants to assert that sadism and masochism are not simply opposites but rather separate entities that manifest themselves in radically different ways. Deleuze explores these ideas through a

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<sup>82</sup> Freud, ‘The Sexual Aberrations’, p. 159.

<sup>83</sup> Freud, ‘The Sexual Aberrations’, p. 160.

<sup>84</sup> Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’, p. 13.

discussion of the aesthetic and stylistic differences between the fictional works of Sacher-Masoch and Marquis de Sade. Unlike Krafft-Ebing and Freud, Deleuze bases his analysis of the phenomenon solely on the literary texts. Like Deleuze, I understand sadism and masochism to be separate entities. I focus on masochism because it is a phenomenon that was considered so close to the innate and ‘natural’ female condition that it was too difficult to detect in women as a perversion in its own right. This definition arose when gender roles were perhaps more explicitly demarcated than they are in the present day. As such, my thesis interrogates the impact of a more expansive femininity, resulting in part from feminism, on the interpretation and understanding of masochism in cultural representations.

## **2.5 Masochism**

Before I can discuss the impact of feminism and psychopathological discourses on representations of masochistic fantasies and practices, which will be the subject of the subsequent chapters, I will explore how sexology and psychoanalysis define masochism in relation to both males and females. This will also demonstrate that the term *masochism* originally referred to more than just sexual pleasure derived from intentional painful stimuli. It also includes a psychological dimension, which in contemporary BDSM subculture would more commonly be known as *submission* or a desire for enforced *surrender* to the will of another. This is why the remaining chapters of the thesis examine both masochism and submission. However Krafft-Ebing and Freud fail to separate the psychological/ psychical from the physical aspects of masochism, instead considering both aspects to be integral to masochistic practices and fantasies.

Krafft-Ebing argues that ‘the distinguishing characteristic in masochism is certainly the unlimited subjection to the will of a person of the opposite sex [...] with

the awakening and accompaniment of lustful feeling to the degree of orgasm'.<sup>85</sup> This definition suggests that, while subordination to the other person's will is necessary to the masochist's satisfaction, painful stimulation may not be required for pleasure to be felt. However, he cites a masochistic individual, who argues that 'the person in a state of masochistic ecstasy feels no pain', perhaps due to changes to their ability to interpret pain. With this in mind, he states that 'to a certain extent there is overcompensation of physical pain in psychical pleasure, and only the excess remains in consciousness as psychical lust'.<sup>86</sup> This seems to suggest that when an individual is undergoing a masochistic experience, they are in a state of heightened arousal, which enables them to reinterpret pain as a form of physical and psychical pleasure. Krafft-Ebing chooses not to explore this idea any further than offering this anecdote, so it is difficult to know his opinion on the matter.

However, he does expand the definition of masochism by stating that it is the degeneration of the female psychology; as such it is a passive rather than active phenomenon.<sup>87</sup> Krafft-Ebing considers that the masculine position, fulfilled by biological males, is the social and cultural norm. Men are meant to be active and assertive, and to possess leadership qualities. As discussed earlier, these qualities are not desirable attributes of feminine behaviour because women are meant to be passive. Within this logic it would be easier to identify male masochism because it deviates further from the norm proscribed for males.

As discussed earlier, Krafft-Ebing compiles his research and analysis on sexual perversion by using the scientific method of the case study. In the English translation of the 12<sup>th</sup> German edition there are 28 case studies devoted to the analysis of male masochistic practices and fantasies, yet he only includes two case studies of female

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<sup>85</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 191.

<sup>86</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 201.

<sup>87</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 192.

masochism, as perhaps they were more difficult to identify due to the social norms of his middle and upper class patients.<sup>88</sup> Whatever the reason, his use of case studies allows him to write about a theoretically novel phenomenon in a way that people would take seriously because he attempts to understand and explain how the margin (here masochism) engages with the norm (heterosexual coitus).

Krafft-Ebing attempts to understand if and how someone who exhibits or experiences masochistic fantasies can engage with normal sexuality. It seems that those individuals who engage in these practices and have these fantasies, but are still able to maintain a 'normal' sexual life that involves heterosexual coitus, are less socially threatening because there is still reproductive potential. The man described in case study 47 never realises his masochistic fantasies and still has sexual intercourse but can guarantee himself full arousal when indulging in these thoughts. He claims that 'when not in a masochistic state, as far as feeling and action are concerned, [he is] a perfectly normal man'.<sup>89</sup> This suggests that he can ensure that there is no outward change in his behaviour despite these fantasies because he wants to remain socially included and so must at least appear 'normal' to others. It is an example of someone with perverse sexual desires who is not suffering from a perversion.

By contrast, the man discussed in case study 50 conforms to Krafft-Ebing's understanding of perversion having the twin attributes of exclusivity and fixity. This man has no normal sexual instinct but finds lustful excitement in seeking a woman who will hurt him with knives. He claims this is a consequence of seeing a woman slaughter an animal in his early years. These two case studies exemplify the difference between an extreme and a mild case of masochism in terms of the subjects' relationship with 'normal' society. They also demonstrate that it is a phenomenon that often resides in the

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<sup>88</sup> I have stated the edition, as Krafft-Ebing expanded *Psychopathia Sexualis* with each subsequent edition he did of the work. Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', pp. 115-207.

<sup>89</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 139.

imagination of the individual concerned but the role of fantasy was not accorded diagnostic weight in nineteenth-century sexology, as this was to be an innovating feature of psychoanalysis.

However, Krafft-Ebing does attempt to differentiate between those who engage in masochistic practices and those who only contemplate them, which could now be defined as a fantasy. He defines *symbolic masochism* as a series of practices that have representational content for extreme acts of cruelty. An example would be the man discussed in case study 51 who becomes excited when his wife shaves his face with a cut-throat razor because the proximity to and potential for cruelty is present through this symbolic action.<sup>90</sup> By contrast, *ideal masochism* would be akin to having a masochistic fantasy because it ‘remains entirely within the spheres of imagination and fancy, and no attempt at realisation is made’.<sup>91</sup> This demonstrates an awareness of the importance of the imagination in the development of sexual perversions.

Krafft-Ebing’s concerns focus on how masochism connects with the development of an individual’s sexuality. He claims that masochism is an inherent part of identity and is never acquired at a later stage.<sup>92</sup> He writes that ‘it is characteristic that *the [masochistic] ideas were present before there was any libido*. At that time the ideas were absolutely sexless.’<sup>93</sup> This suggests that masochism could occupy a different part of an individual’s psyche to their sexuality, so it would be possible to enjoy both masochism and heterosexual coitus, for example the man in case study 47. Krafft-Ebing goes on to claim that ‘in masochism the longing for subjection occurs *a priori* before the occurrence of an inclination to any particular object of love’.<sup>94</sup> This suggests that sexual orientation towards other people is acquired and that masochistic desires can

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<sup>90</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 148.

<sup>91</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 150.

<sup>92</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 140.

<sup>93</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 140, original emphasis.

<sup>94</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 197.

transcend this desire. Krafft-Ebing considers that a perversion is a desire that is more important for sexual arousal than the person involved to achieve the desire, who is interchangeable. In turn, the same process occurs with masochism as a perversion. However, earlier in the treatise he argues that the masochistic desire for subjugation to another demonstrated in the case studies is always performed by the opposite sex.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to this logical contradiction in his ideas about masochism Krafft-Ebing seems confused regarding the relationship between masochism and gender. As discussed earlier, he considers masochism to be a perversion in men equated with passivity and femininity. This suggests that masochism depends on a deviation from the norm (male masculinity) by adopting more feminine aspects, which supports the idea that masochism is in fact a perversion of gender roles. However, earlier in the text he claims that ‘masochistic tendencies [have] nothing feminine or effeminate about them’.<sup>96</sup> It is unclear whether this is simply an inconsistency in his argument or whether he considers that, while masochistic practices and fantasies are associated with the passive and therefore deviate from the male norm, they do not deviate enough to actually be feminine. It seems that this is a subtle and unclear distinction, and one that Krafft-Ebing was unable to clarify within his own work.

As I mentioned earlier, Krafft-Ebing does acknowledge the existence of female masochists by the inclusion of two case studies that describe them playing with gender roles, questioning the idea of sanity and showing an imaginative fantasy life. In these respects they are quite similar to the case studies of male masochists. However, for Krafft-Ebing, the defining characteristic of masochism is a desire to be subject to the will of a member of the opposite sex, which he considers to be an innate physiological phenomenon for women. He writes:

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<sup>95</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 116.

<sup>96</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 140.

Owing to her passing role in procreation and long-existent social conditions, ideas of subjection are, in woman, normally connected with the idea of sexual relations.<sup>97</sup>

Here Krafft-Ebing argues that it is more difficult for a physician to identify a female masochist because of the similarity of her practices to the prescribed role of an 'ordinary' feminine woman. He does acknowledge that this is a problem of recognition rather than proof of the impossibility of the phenomenon. He argues that for a woman to be readily identified as a masochist she must abandon social convention and propriety that have been 'insurmountable obstacles to the expression of the perverse sexual instinct'.<sup>98</sup>

After reading about whippings at a mental hospital, the woman described in case study 70 considers having herself admitted to one so she can experience such brutal beatings. At the beginning of the case study Krafft-Ebing situates the case study in relation to hereditary degeneration theory by commenting on her lack of hereditary pathological conditions; her only physical illnesses are headaches. She is unable to find an avenue for her sexuality within a restrictive society where sex is a domain for men or working class women, neither of which she is. She considers that her desire to be whipped, beaten and subjugated by her lover provides markers of an immature sexuality, though Krafft-Ebing does not comment on this aspect of her case study. Yet it is clear that she is aware of the pressures of social convention because she has 'also fancied [herself] to be his [the man she loves] *female slave*; but this does not suffice, for after all every woman can be the slave of her husband'.<sup>99</sup> Clearly this statement situates the case study within its historical context, yet it also suggests that her desires go beyond this level of social expectation because, for her, being a slave to the one she loves means something more.

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<sup>97</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 187.

<sup>98</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 188.

<sup>99</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 190, original emphasis.

By contrast, the woman described in case study 71 had fantasies as a child about being whipped despite never having been whipped in her life. She focuses her desires on being whipped by female friends—never men. However, Krafft-Ebing does not acknowledge this suggestion of same-sex desire coupled with masochistic desire, but states:

The fact that it is a female friend who is conceived in imagination as whipping her, is explained by the circumstance that the masochistic desire was here present in the mind of a child before the psychical *vita sexualis* had developed and the instinct for the male had been awakened. Antipathic sexual instinct is here expressly excluded.<sup>100</sup>

In making this comment Krafft-Ebing draws on a developmental model of sexuality and demonstrates that he does not consider it to be significant that this woman's fantasies involve being whipped by another woman. This is because he understands that her masochistic desires occur prior to the development of her sexual orientation. The woman only recognises her desires to be perverse after reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*,<sup>101</sup> which suggests the importance that representations of sexual phenomena can have for self-definition and identification with a variety of practices. In these case studies Krafft-Ebing demonstrates his broad understanding of masochism through the case studies that use both traditional scientific methodology and listening to the patient describe their own illness. Freud extended the latter method in his psychoanalytic theory, and I now examine his conception of masochism.

In 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905) Freud favours Krafft-Ebing's broader term *masochism* over Schrenck-Notzing's narrower term "algolagnia" [that] emphasises the pleasure in *pain* [and] cruelty'.<sup>102</sup> This is because masochism incorporates the definition of algolagnia but also 'bring[s] into prominence the pleasure

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<sup>100</sup> Krafft-Ebing, 'Masochism', p. 191, original emphasis.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. J. M. Cohen, (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>102</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p.157, original emphasis..

in any form of humiliation or subjection'.<sup>103</sup> Freud finds this definition more useful because it can serve as an umbrella term to explain a wider variety of cases and offers a departure from Krafft-Ebing's physiological hereditary emphasis to one that involves and engages the psyche. This change was possible due to Freud's rejection of hereditary degeneration theory and instead privileges the psychological. For Freud redefines masochism in the following passage:

The term masochism comprises any passive attitude towards sexual life and the sexual object, the extreme instance of which appears to be that in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object.<sup>104</sup>

The essence of Freud's argument is that masochism taken to its conclusion involves a person giving him or herself to be subject to the will of their sexual object. He considers the masochist to be passive in their submission, which is a feminine attribute and it is this deviation from the masculine norm that contributes to masochism's classification as a perversion. Since masochism is a perversion, Freud considers it a male phenomenon. He argues that for men it is 'further removed from the normal sexual aim' because male sexuality is aggressive and often includes a desire to subjugate another which, when taken to extremes, is characteristic of sadism.<sup>105</sup> Masochism is, by contrast, connected with passivity, which Freud and Krafft-Ebing associate with femininity, and so find masochism easier to identify in males than females because of their deviation from the prescribed norm of masculinity. At this point in Freud's thought the absence of a discussion of female masochism is indicative of his attitude towards female sexuality more broadly; it lacks significance beyond its reproductive capacity.

Freud tackles the subject of masochism in the essay 'A Child is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions' (1919). In this essay he discusses the frequency with which patients he is seeing for hysteria have fantasies in

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<sup>103</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 157.

<sup>104</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 158.

<sup>105</sup> Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations', p. 158.

which 'a child is being beaten'.<sup>106</sup> The patients struggle to admit these desires and only reveal them gradually due to a sense of shame and guilt, which both characterise perversion. This is also because the fantasy is unconscious and 'can only be reconstructed in the course of the analysis';<sup>107</sup> so, many people could have this fantasy but be unaware of its existence. He observes that these fantasies begin when the child is around the age of five or six, which is prior to genital sexuality—the point when a child arrives at their sexual orientation. These fantasies occur while the child has their originary bisexuality, which is significant because the child does not often know the gender of the person beating them but is aware that the gender of the person beating them is not constant.<sup>108</sup> At that point it can therefore be difficult to tell whether the child identifies as either a masochist or a sadist. These early fantasies do not necessarily mean that they will experience one of these sexual perversions in later life, providing they repress these fantasies or displace them with something else. However, if these processes do not occur, Freud would expect to find some form of sexual aberration in the adult that develops from the childhood fixation.

Freud uses four female and two male case studies as the basis for his paper, which help him to explore the complex chronology of this fantasy. He claims it 'is certainly not masochistic' even though it does provide an important stage in the development of Freud's ideas concerning masochism.<sup>109</sup> I focus the discussion on the female case studies because his male case studies often later became masochists and are less unusual. Freud argues that 'the masochistic masturbator finds that he is absolutely impotent if after all he does attempt intercourse with a woman',<sup>110</sup> which corresponds with his understanding that perversion has the defining characteristics of fixation and

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<sup>106</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 179.

<sup>107</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 190.

<sup>108</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 181.

<sup>109</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 185.

<sup>110</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 197.

exclusivity. As Krafft-Ebing's understanding of perversion differs from Freud's, it is unsurprising that Freud's conception of a male masochist contradicts that of Krafft-Ebing who thought it possible for male masochists also to be able to function sexually with a woman. Freud considers the male masochists to enact feminine behaviour, which he later defines as 'feminine masochism'.<sup>111</sup>

Among girls the first stage of the fantasy involves seeing another child being beaten by an adult, who is later revealed to be the fantasist's father.<sup>112</sup> The second stage of their fantasy sees a profound shift in which the child fantasises about being beaten by the father, which is clearly masochistic.<sup>113</sup> The third stage involves a child being beaten, as in the first stage, no longer by the father, but by someone who represents a similar role, such as a teacher. Now the child producing the fantasy observes from afar. It is at this point that the fantasy becomes more complex and involves sexual excitement for the child 'and so provides a means for masturbatory satisfaction'.<sup>114</sup> From this point, the girl's affections are fixed on her father, and she realises that if a child is beaten it 'signifies a deprivation of love and a humiliation', so she would rather her father punish the hated child than herself.<sup>115</sup> At this stage the fantasy does not connect with masochism, for that occurs when the girl represses her incestuous attachment to her father as it also leads to a sense of guilt. Freud argues that the fantasy becomes masochistic because being beaten now represents 'a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love'.<sup>116</sup> He states that the punishment not only replaces the genital relation but also provides a regressive substitute for it, and it is that which provides 'the essence

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<sup>111</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', in *The Ego and the Id, and Other Works. [with Plates.] (Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 19.)*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 157-73, p. 161.

<sup>112</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 185.

<sup>113</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 185.

<sup>114</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 186.

<sup>115</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 187.

<sup>116</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 189.

of masochism'.<sup>117</sup> While guilt and passivity are crucial elements of masochism for Freud, he also argues that 'the characteristic of unpleasure belongs to it as well'.<sup>118</sup> Freud analyses this concept in more depth when he defines moral masochism, which I will discuss later in this section.

Freud expands on this earlier work in his 1924 essay 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', in which he outlines three different types of masochism: erotogenic or primary masochism, feminine masochism and moral masochism.<sup>119</sup> Primary or erotogenic masochism is the physical bodily enjoyment of pleasure in pain. Freud uses it as the foundation for his two other types of masochism.<sup>120</sup> It is this primary understanding of masochism that persists today and is closest to the term used by the contemporary BDSM scene, and so it will be the broad definition used when looking at different types of female masochism in the subsequent chapters of the thesis. Female masochism is not to be confused with Freud's secondary type of masochism, 'feminine masochism'. Feminine masochism describes the male desire to undergo a 'feminine' experience, such as symbolic castration or being subservient to a member of the opposite sex. From this definition and Freud's understanding of perversion it seems that this type of masochism could afflict only men. He considers this to be the simplest of the three types of masochism and the 'least problematical'.<sup>121</sup> I will privilege the idea of feminine masochism that incorporates erotogenic masochism in my thesis because its dependence on gender will help to illuminate some of the complexities of cultural representations of female masochistic practices and fantasies.

As I argued earlier this chapter, I use Judith Butler's understanding that gender roles are performative, and so the idea of equating masochism with a 'natural' state of

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<sup>117</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 189.

<sup>118</sup> Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten', p. 194.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 157.

<sup>120</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 161.

<sup>121</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 161.

femininity is extremely problematic. Drawing on Krafft-Ebing and Freud's understanding of masochism as transgressing gender norms, Kaplan argues that masochism enables:

[The male] to identify with the degrading social status assigned to women in the social order, but without losing face. As the plot goes, he is behaving as a female, in the standard feminine position, but he is a female with a penis and is behaving as he does only to achieve the manly end of erection and orgasm.<sup>122</sup>

Based on this, one can argue that male masochism helps to perpetuate a heteronormative society that offers privilege to men. As such, it may follow that female masochism subverts these norms by positioning the female in an extreme version of a feminine subservient position that is chosen rather than enforced. The extent to which, in contemporary society this can be read as a subversive act, particularly for those who self-identify as feminists, will be a key problematic addressed in this thesis. Despite masochism's theoretical potential for playing with gender norms and highlighting the role of female agency, feminism and masochism have long had a problematic relationship. Particular bones of contention in this debate are the limits of female agency under patriarchy, the boundaries between abuse and consent, and the perpetuation of gender norms. I will address these areas in depth in the subsequent chapters of my thesis.<sup>123</sup>

Returning to Freud's essay 'The Economic Problem of Masochism' (1924), unlike the first two definitions of masochism, moral masochism is less connected with sexuality, which is one of the reasons many critics have found it to be the most problematic definition of masochism. It refers to an inner process of guilt and an individual's need to turn this emotion in on oneself through a masochistic scenario that may be physical, but is more probably psychical. This results in a state of suffering,

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<sup>122</sup> Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary*, p. 25.

<sup>123</sup> See Chapter Two for a discussion of Jenny Diski's novel *Nothing Natural* and the so-called 'Sex Wars' (the debate between radical feminists, who were often anti-pornography, and the anti-censorship feminists, who were in favour of exploring sexual desires freely and knowledgeably).

which is vital for the individual regardless of its origin.<sup>124</sup> It stems from a ‘mostly unconscious’ sense of guilt that the (male) individual needs to have revealed to him by a psychoanalyst—a process they often resist.<sup>125</sup> This guilt occurs because the patient is often unaware of suffering from this affliction, so the condition ‘must be inferred from his behaviour’.<sup>126</sup> The necessity to infer moral masochism’s existence from an individual’s behaviour pathologises the affliction because it can only be recognised by a professionally qualified other. It is also pathological because it requires a certain amount of suffering, and if this goes away, then it must be replaced with a new kind of suffering.<sup>127</sup> Moral masochism does not and cannot provide strength or satisfaction to an individual but plays on their weaknesses. It is this type of definition that can lead to masochists being considered dangerous or mentally ill, as they wish to turn harmful desires on themselves. Perhaps moral masochism could be a useful theoretical tool if it is understood as a partial explanation for self-injury, an argument that I will examine in more depth in Chapter Three.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, focusing on masochism’s sexological and psychoanalytic origins, I have offered close readings of relevant work by Krafft-Ebing and Freud. I began by situating Krafft-Ebing's categorisation of sexual perversions as a facet of his adherence to the prevalent European discourse of degeneration theory. Krafft-Ebing considered women to provide the moral foundation of a nation and in turn halt the progress of degeneration by raising their children to be moral citizens who adhered to their appropriate gender roles. Freud argued that a perversion was a deviation from this masculine norm

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<sup>124</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 165.

<sup>125</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 161.

<sup>126</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 169.

<sup>127</sup> Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', p. 166.

endorsed by Christianity and that an individual had a perversion if they did not desire heterosexual penetrative sex in addition to their perverse activities. He stated that because women already deviate from this masculine norm, they could not experience a perversion in the same way as men. Freud's understanding that perversion is exclusively male meant that he did not examine female perversions. This is why I focus my analysis on masochism (a feminine perversion) alone, and not on sadomasochism that incorporates sadism alongside masochism. (For both Krafft-Ebing and Freud this is a masculine perversion.) As Krafft-Ebing and Freud considered masochism to be a feminine perversion, they argued it would be harder to identify in feminine women. I argue that heterosexual female masochism can be interpreted as an expression of excessive femininity that rejects penis-in-vagina sex and instead derives pleasure from humiliation, pain and subjection to a member of the opposite sex. This chapter has analysed the foundational psychopathological discourses, which inform subsequent theoretical conceptions and cultural representations of female masochism that I will examine in the following chapters of my thesis.

## Chapter Two

### Internal War: Feminisms and the role of Fantasy in Diski's *Nothing Natural* and Califia's *Macho Sluts*

She liked to be surprised out of her laziness. Good/bad, black/white, love/hate, funny/sad, sick/healthy. Nothing, in the actual living, was so exclusive as its material image proclaimed. We choose to think so crudely; things were much more confused and fluid.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter uses two literary case studies—Pat Califia's short story 'Jessie' from hir<sup>2</sup> collection *Macho Sluts*<sup>3</sup> and Jenny Diski's novel *Nothing Natural*—to nuance opposing feminist arguments regarding the political status of female masochism.<sup>4</sup> These arguments can be placed in the context of the so-called 'Sex Wars' that arose within Anglo-American feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, pitting radical feminists against liberal (sex-positive, anti-censorship) feminists. I have chosen to use Diski's *Nothing Natural* because its various characters provide the fictional embodiment of these feminist discourses. Diski demonstrates that these discourses represent theoretical positions that (despite their sometimes dogmatic character) are not fixed but slippery, since the characters are able to move between them. Pat Califia's 'Jessie' engages with feminist discourses in a different way to Diski's text, because it actively critiques radical feminist ideas and embodies only liberal feminist discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, (London: Virago, 2003), p.42.

<sup>2</sup> The use of 'hir' is necessary to respect and acknowledge Pat Califia's changed gender identity: when Pat Califia wrote *Macho Sluts* s/he identified as a female dyke, but now identifies as a transman called Patrick.

<sup>3</sup> Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> The title of this chapter is from Jenny Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, (London: Virago, 2003), pp. 273.

Since the aim of this chapter is to explore the subtleties of the key arguments from the Sex Wars, it begins by offering an overview of radical and liberal feminisms. It examines their contexts, key theoretical figures and debates, particularly with reference to the function of power within society and its relationship with sexuality. I then focus on how each side of this debate regards sexual orientation and sadomasochism, with an emphasis on female masochism. This will be followed by a discussion of genre that evaluates the generic modes used in this chapter—theoretical texts, literary fiction and erotic writing—and determines how they affect the representation of female masochism. Both of the case studies use paratextual material to affect the reader's relationship with the text, which I will argue mirrors the authors' position with regard to the feminist debates concerning sexuality and power. The relationship between fantasy and reality was a contentious one in the Sex Wars and provides the structural focus of Diski's *Nothing Natural*. The final discussion explains how fictional texts are able to nuance discursive positions because they can embody the slippages that occur in lived experience.

## **2.1. Sex Wars**

The Sex Wars within Anglo-American feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s represented clashes between divergent conceptualisations of power as it relates to sexuality. Tensions focused on the following issues: pornography and its relationship with violent sex, questions of censorship and freedom, issues of choice and consent, and whether sadomasochistic sexual practices reinforced already existing power dynamics prevalent in a patriarchal society.<sup>5</sup> These tensions remain unresolved and are still debated in the feminist blogosphere, as I will show in

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed analysis of all of these issues because that would be more than a doctoral thesis in and of itself.

Chapter Four that focuses on sex blogs. Radical and liberal feminisms have fundamentally different starting points making it difficult to negotiate a position between these discourses. Radical feminists, as the name suggests, argue that the only way to implement meaningful change is to destroy the roots of patriarchy; liberal feminists wish to instigate reform from within patriarchy. I will now provide contextual material for each feminist faction examining the origins of these theoretical tensions, key debates and theorists.

### **2.1.1. Radical Feminism**

Radical feminism is a strand of feminism that understands patriarchy to be a monolithic system of power that depends on a model of domination and submission, in which women are oppressed subjects who always occupy subordinate positions. Exponents of radical feminism consider that patriarchal oppression underlies all other forms of oppression (class, racial, imperialist, etc.).<sup>6</sup> Since radical feminists believe that all women belong to an oppressed group within society, they contend that women should be able to overlook their differences and focus on their sameness. One of the principal aims of radical feminism is to overthrow patriarchy and create a society based on equality between the sexes rather than their differences. As such, they believe that freedom is only possible once equality has been obtained. Although the ultimate goal of radical feminism is the erasure of patriarchy, the issues that theorists and activists with this political agenda focus on differ considerably. Key radical feminist theorists include: Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005), Catherine MacKinnon (1947– ), Sheila Jeffreys (1948– ) and Diana E. H. Russell (1938– ). Among the issues these theorists and activists debate—and with particular relevance to the topic of this thesis—are the role of pornography, its

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<sup>6</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*. (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1991), p. 297.

relationship with sexual violence, and the effect of a patriarchal society on women's ability to consent and to make sexual choices.

Arguing against pornography was a logical position for radical feminists because they considered it to be a cultural product aimed at men's sexual arousal in which women were passive objects. Dworkin, a literary scholar, and MacKinnon, a legal scholar, considered pornography to be 'a distillation of woman hating, linked in women's experience to rape, battery, incest, and forced prostitution'.<sup>7</sup> They focused on violent, often fantastical, pornography because it was so extreme and thus would illicit an emotive reaction when shown to the public. In addition, they argued that the US 'left' saw 'pornographers as radicals, not as capitalists' implying that they had greater protection for their freedom of speech.<sup>8</sup> Although the First Amendment of the US constitution states that 'Congress shall make no law [...] abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press', that freedom does not equate with equality.<sup>9</sup> Dworkin argued that the First Amendment only 'belongs to those who can buy it' and have 'economic clout', such as pornographers but at the time of writing not women.<sup>10</sup>

One of the few male radical feminists—John Stoltenberg—expands on Dworkin and MacKinnon's ideas concerning the relationship between power and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> He argues that it would be impossible to have sexual freedom because

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<sup>7</sup> Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, 'Questions and Answers', in *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, ed. by Diana E. H. Russell (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), pp.78-96, p.88

<sup>8</sup> Dworkin and MacKinnon. 'Questions and Answers', p.85

<sup>9</sup> '1<sup>st</sup> Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America.' *GPO Access: A Service of the U.S. Government Printing Office*. <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/constitution/pdf2002/007.pdf> Accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2010, p.3

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Dworkin, 'For Me, Freedom of Speech; for Women, Silence Please', in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Laura Lederer (London: Bantam books, 1982), pp. 255-259, (p.257).

<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising since Dworkin and Stoltenberg were romantically involved from 1974 until her death in 2005. He stated that they work uses the 'same themes, but expressed in very different

we live in a society that is based on inequality, since it relies on a hierarchical patriarchal power structure.<sup>12</sup> Stoltenberg claims that freedom is contingent on justice; social inequalities mean that there is no sexual justice<sup>13</sup> and so there is no sexual freedom.<sup>14</sup> Until a society founded on equality has been created, the concept of sexual freedom is meaningless; thus radical feminists believe that it is not possible to have free choice when women are the oppressed object and there is violence against women.<sup>15</sup> Pornography 'institutionalizes' and 'eroticizes male supremacy' because, if unequal power dynamics are present in the erotic sphere, equality cannot be present in any other sphere.<sup>16</sup> In the following passage he expands this argument:

Increased sexual freedom under male supremacy has had to mean an increased tolerance for sexual practices that are predicated on eroticized injustice between men and women: treating women's bodies or body parts as merely sexual objects or things; treating women as utterly submissive masochists who enjoy pain and humiliation and who, if they are raped, enjoy it; treating women's bodies to sexualized beating, mutilation, bondage, dismemberment. [...] Once you have sexualized inequality, once it is a learned and internalized prerequisite for sexual arousal and sexual gratification, then anything goes. And that's what sexual freedom means on this side of sexual justice.<sup>17</sup>

This passage assumes that within a totalising patriarchy, in which women are the default sex class, consent is meaningless. I will discuss the implications of this argument in more depth later in this chapter through a consideration of the radical feminist understanding of heterosexuality, lesbianism and SM practices.<sup>18</sup>

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ways.' John Stoltenberg, 'Living with Andrea Dworkin,' *Lambda Book Report*, May/June 1994.

<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/LivingWithAndrea.html> Accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Stoltenberg, 'Pornography and Freedom', in *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*, ed. by Diana E. H. Russell (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), pp. 65-77.

<sup>13</sup> He uses this term to mean equality in all spheres of life, that all are equal and protected by the law.

<sup>14</sup> Stoltenberg, 'Pornography and Freedom', p.67.

<sup>15</sup> The South African academic and activist, Diana E.H. Russell focused on this latter angle via critiques of rape and pornography.

<sup>16</sup> Stoltenberg 'Pornography and Freedom', p.69.

<sup>17</sup> Stoltenberg 'Pornography and Freedom', p.70.

<sup>18</sup> This will focus on the work of the British theorist Sheila Jeffreys, whose work made a major

### 2.1.2. Liberal Feminism

*Liberal feminism* describes the project of instigating change for women within existing power structures. The arguments of liberal feminists often react against those of radical feminists, creating a dialectical struggle within feminism. While radical feminists consider that the first amendment of the US constitution (freedom of speech) does not include women or marginalised groups, liberal feminists use the notion of freedom of speech as a starting point for their arguments because it presupposes for all subjects the possibility of agency and the ability to make free choices. Many liberal feminists in the 1970s and 1980s were based in and around sexually liberal San Francisco, where they were involved in women's communities and activism. Most of the principal radical feminist theorists held positions within the academy, but many of the key liberal feminists theorists at the time of the Sex Wars were first and foremost activists and journalists. These include: Gayle Rubin (1949–),<sup>19</sup> Pat Califia (1954– ) and Carole S. Vance.<sup>20</sup>

In 1982 an academic feminist conference took place at Barnard College, Columbia University entitled 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality' (now often referred to as the Barnard Conference). Some argue that this event marked the start of the Sex Wars because there was picketing outside the conference and emotive rather than critical responses to papers, during which radical feminists refused to listen to or acknowledge liberal feminist arguments.<sup>21</sup> The conference papers were published

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contribution in this area.

<sup>19</sup> She now holds the position of 'Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies' at The University of Michigan. 'Faculty Biography – Women's Studies' <<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/women/faculty/facbio.asp?ID=199>> Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>20</sup> I could not find Carol Vance's date of birth, which is why the information is not included here.

<sup>21</sup> Carole S. Vance, 'More danger, more pleasure: a decade after the Barnard Sexuality Conference,' in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. xvi – xxxix.

in a volume edited by Carole Vance entitled *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, which contains some key theoretical feminist articles.<sup>22</sup> In the introductory essay, Vance puts forth her liberal feminist view of sexual freedom, stating that discussions should focus on both the eradication of danger (domestic abuse, sexual inequality, rape, etc.) and the positive aspect of sexual pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

Vance acknowledges that radical feminist work, which focuses on eliminating gender and sexual inequalities, is important, but states that it should not be the only feminist voice:

Social movements, feminism included, move toward a vision; they cannot operate solely on fear. It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: toward pleasure, agency, and self-definition. Feminism must increase women's pleasure and joy, not just decrease our misery.<sup>24</sup>

The rhetoric used here appeals to affect more than reason (which, ironically, was a rhetorical strategy that the liberal feminists criticised radical feminists for using).<sup>25</sup>

Vance elaborates on this statement by asserting that radical feminism's emphasis on the danger associated with sex in a patriarchal society 'unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live'.<sup>26</sup> Vance does acknowledge that radical feminists do have a valid goal: to remove society's ingrained social and sexual inequality, so women can become agential subjects.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Vance insists that feminists must look at both strands (pleasure and danger) as they relate to sex

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<sup>22</sup> Carole S. Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 1-29; Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,' in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 267-319.

<sup>23</sup> Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality'.

<sup>24</sup> Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', p.16.

<sup>26</sup> Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', p.1.

<sup>27</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference,' in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Diana E. H. Russell (London: Bantam Books, 1982), pp. 21-25, (p.24).

because such an approach would allow feminists (and all women) to explore their sexual agency, fantasies and identities. These are important concepts within liberal feminism.

Although Vance critiques radical feminism for being reductionist, her arguments offer a different type of reductive thinking about the relationship between sex, freedom and power. Both feminist factions rely on a binary understanding of freedom as meaning either 'freedom from' or 'freedom to'. While Stoltenberg and radical feminists emphasise 'freedom from' (domestic abuse, sexual inequality and rape), Vance and many liberal feminists advocate that sexual freedom requires 'freedom to' (think, feel and desire). Vance would state that neither 'freedom from' nor 'freedom to' could exist without the other, but she does not believe that for people to experience sexual pleasure they must live in a utopian society that is rid of its inequalities. Instead a principal goal for liberal feminists is to give women (the appearance of) sexual agency within the existing power structure, because this would give them the ability to engage in sexual practices between consenting adults that fulfil their sexual desires.<sup>28</sup> Female masochistic practices and fantasies do not contradict this liberal understanding of 'freedom to' because there is recognition of a divide between one's desires and one's politics. This enables liberal feminists to engage in and discuss non-normative sexual practices without feeling a sense of conflict with their political ideals, as Califia demonstrates in her erotic short story collection *Macho Sluts*.

In 1991, the British organization Feminists Against Censorship (abbreviated to FAC hereafter) published a book examining the debates against pornography, and the reasons that censorship encouraged further oppression by losing freedom of

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<sup>28</sup> However Radical Feminists could argue that whilst this offers sexual freedom and a positive experience for an individual, it does not affect or enact wider social change.

speech.<sup>29</sup> FAC criticise radical feminists who focus on pornography because they examine depictions of sex rather than day-to-day concerns of women, such as problems regarding abortion, domestic violence and rape.<sup>30</sup> Their manifesto encapsulates some of the integral liberal (sex positive) feminist arguments:

We believe that feminism is about *choice*, about taking control of our lives and our bodies, and this must include our sexual choices.<sup>31</sup>

### 2.1.3. Fantasy

Fantasy became a key area of debate during the Sex Wars in part as a response to the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’, which encouraged feminists to evaluate all aspects of their everyday lives. During the late 1970s, feminists used consciousness-raising groups to help minimise social isolation, to aid people in tackling ‘difficult issues’ and to assist them in becoming aware that others had similar kinds of experiences to themselves. This collective understanding and communication led to the boundaries between the public and private spheres collapsing. Radical feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, embraced the politicisation of fantasy,<sup>32</sup> while liberal feminists did not believe that fantasy needed to be politically correct.

Jeffreys is critical of liberal feminist arguments that women are able to consent to sadomasochistic practices because they fantasise about such acts:

It should not be a surprise to find that s/m fantasy is significant in women’s sex lives. Women may be born free but they are born into a system of subordination. We are not born into equality and do not have equality to eroticise. We are not born into power and do not have power to eroticise. We are born into subordination and it is in subordination that we learn our sexual and emotional responses. It would be surprising indeed if any woman reared

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<sup>29</sup> Feminists Against Censorship, *Pornography and Feminism: The Case Against Censorship*, ed. by Gillian Rodgeron & Elizabeth Wilson, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Feminists Against Censorship, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Feminists Against Censorship, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: a feminist perspective on the sexual revolution*. Washington Square, (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1991).

under male supremacy was able to escape the forces constructing her into a member of an inferior slave class.<sup>33</sup>

Jeffreys argues that sexual life should be critiqued because a person's fantasies are a product of the society within which s/he lives. Thus women's fantasies are informed by a hierarchical society founded on a paradigm of domination and submission. Jeffreys wishes to expose the theoretical ideology that grounds fantasy, believing that if society changes, so too would the nature of the fantasy.

Vance critiques this radical feminist line of argument when she asks the following question: '[I]f personal life has a political dimension, did that mean that sexual life was singularly and entirely political?'<sup>34</sup> She does not agree that there should be a politics of fantasy, because to her fantasy is a product of the imagination, which is separate from critique. Other liberal feminists, such as Nancy Friday and Pat Califia, echo Vance's idea because they consider fantasy to be 'an extension of one's sexuality', which should not be censored by one's politics.<sup>35</sup>

Friday wrote *My Secret Garden* (1973), a collection of 'ordinary'<sup>36</sup> British and US women's fantasies. Its aim was to show women that they were not alone in their desires and to provide examples showing the variety of women's sexual fantasies.<sup>37</sup> In this book alone they include:

Anonymity, The Audience, Rape, Pain and Masochism, Domination, The sexuality of Terror, The Thrill of the Forbidden, Transformation, The Earth Mother, Incest, The Zoo, Black Men, Young Boys, The Fetishists, Prostitution etc.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, p.302.

<sup>34</sup> Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', p.21.

<sup>35</sup> See Califia, 'Introduction,' *Macho Sluts*, p.14; Nancy Friday, ed., *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*, (London: Virago, 1975), p.14

<sup>36</sup> I have used the word 'ordinary' to indicate that these women were not necessarily affiliated with a specific political affiliation besides having an interest in sharing their desires to help create community.

<sup>37</sup> Friday, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Friday, p.92.

Friday uses material that women have provided in interviews with her to give examples of the diversity contained within fantasy. She expresses the hope that this book might provide comfort and reassurance to many women who would hopefully 'have the solitary courage to read', even if they could not discuss their fantasies with others.<sup>39</sup> This in turn should lessen their 'visible anxiety' regarding their fantasies, which led them to struggle to acknowledge them even to themselves, and could also create a sense of community.<sup>40</sup> In addition, she writes that she intends this sharing of information to stop women 'driving their fantasies down deep into their forgotten layers of mind'.<sup>41</sup> This is based on the belief that discussing a subject stops it from being taboo, which makes it easier for people to reconcile themselves with their desires. Michel Foucault critiques this conception of confession as providing liberation, a position I will be discussing in depth later in this chapter in a critique of the genre and form of the texts examined.

Friday, and many other liberal feminists, wanted to help women avoid the kind of internal conflict that the protagonist Rachel of Diski's novel *Nothing Natural* experiences when her politics and desires collide.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, radical feminists thought that awareness of this conflict was useful in attaining political understanding and moving closer to their goal of overthrowing patriarchy.

#### **2.1.4. Sexual Orientation**

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<sup>39</sup> Friday, p.16.

<sup>40</sup> Friday, p.15. This process of community-building is important to liberal feminists because when a group meet to discuss a single idea, it can challenge the status quo.

<sup>41</sup> Friday, p.15.

<sup>42</sup> For example: Cherie Matrix, *Tales from the Clit: A Female Experience of Pornography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996) and Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 267-319.

During the Sex Wars sexual orientation became open to critique, with particular emphasis being given to heterosexuality and lesbianism. Key radical feminist theorists of this issue were Sheila Jeffreys, who endorsed lesbian separatism as a way to recreate a society based on equality, and Adrienne Rich, who sought to bridge the gap between heterosexual feminists and lesbian separatists. Many liberal feminists mocked the radical feminist idea that lesbianism was a political act and considered that lesbianism should be based on desire. Pat Califia was a key participant in these discussions and makes reference to this line of argumentation in the short story 'Jessie'.

Adrienne Rich attempts to create a 'bridge' between lesbian separatists and heterosexual feminists in her essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'.<sup>43</sup> She considers the term *lesbianism* to be 'limiting', replacing it with the phrases '*lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*.'<sup>44</sup> Lesbian existence refers to the presence of lesbians in contemporary society and throughout history. The concept of the lesbian continuum 'include[d] a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that the woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman'.<sup>45</sup> Rich privileges the category of woman in her definition of lesbian, not desire, which opens up the possibility of understanding lesbianism as a political and social category, yet could deny its original definition as referring to woman–woman desire.

In the essay Rich argues that heterosexuality 'needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*' because it is a system based on oppression that

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<sup>43</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 227-248, (p. 227).

<sup>44</sup> Rich, p. 239.

<sup>45</sup> Rich, p. 239.

posits women in an inferior position to men.<sup>46</sup> She considers that heterosexuality is maintained ‘by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness’.<sup>47</sup> Rich claims that the concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ is a useful way to explain that, because lesbians were forced into the closet for so long, ‘heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained’.<sup>48</sup> Sheila Jeffreys argues in her book *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* that because Rich only critiques the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” rather than [...] heterosexuality *per se*, she has managed to validate “optional heterosexuality”.<sup>49</sup> For Jeffreys, this could result in women being aware that heterosexuality is a system but still claiming that they are choosing to be heterosexual, which Jeffreys considers to be a falsity in a patriarchal society.

Jeffreys considers that ‘[i]t is the system of heterosexuality that characterises the oppression of women and gives it a different shape from other forms of exploitative oppression’.<sup>50</sup> This characterisation of heterosexuality as a ‘system’ suggests that it is not an innate property of sexuality but is made possible through the existence of patriarchy. Jeffreys argues that because women are the oppressed object in a patriarchal society, there is no option to choose to be heterosexual since it is the prevailing ideal. She considers political lesbianism to offer a way of altering the status quo and helping to dismantle patriarchy because ‘[t]he opposite of heterosexual desire is the eroticising of sameness, a sameness of power, equality and mutuality. It is homosexual desire.’<sup>51</sup> This statement implies that if lesbian

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<sup>46</sup> Rich, p. 232, original emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Rich, p.239.

<sup>48</sup> Rich, p. 238.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffreys,p.295.

<sup>50</sup> Jeffreys,p. 298.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffreys,p. 301.

desire founded on equality were to become the most common form of interaction, it would help to dismantle the paradigm of domination and submission, which provides the foundation for patriarchal society.

Liberal lesbian feminists critique ideas by radical feminists, such as Jeffreys, because they deny the sexuality involved in lesbian desire and consider that lesbianism is nothing more than a political identity. Califia refers to these ideas in the following passage from 'Jessie':

If the only information I had about lesbians was what I got out of women's newspapers, I would never tumble to the fact that we are female queers who actually go to bed with each other. I'd think lesbianism was a political party, like the Republicans and the Democrats, and all these women only got together because of our joint oppression.<sup>52</sup>

Califia raises this issue within a piece of erotic fiction aimed at lesbians because she wishes to highlight what she considers to be the absurdity that underlies the concept of the political lesbian.

### **2.1.5. Sadomasochism**

For radical feminists, who believe that patriarchy is a monolithic system based on a model of domination and submission, SM is patriarchy's poster-child. In 1982 radical feminists published an anthology concerning sadomasochistic sexuality entitled *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*.<sup>53</sup> In the 'Introduction' Robin Ruth Linden states that 'sadomasochism is defined throughout the book as a sexual practice that involves the eroticization of power and

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<sup>52</sup> Pat Califia, 'Jessie', in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), pp. 28-63, (pp. 38-39).

<sup>53</sup> R.R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star (eds.), *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982). It seems that this was in direct response to the liberal feminist anthology *Coming to Power* published in 1981.

powerlessness'.<sup>54</sup> She suggests that inherent in this definition is a critique of the liberal feminist grounds for justifying sadomasochism, particularly the notion of choice and its relationship with consent. Linden's critique of consent and sadomasochism is outlined in the following passage:

I believe the nature of consent and negotiation between partners in sadomasochistic encounters must be extremely problematic. The social psychology of eroticized roles, pressures for conformity exerted within the sadomasochistic community and the commitment of identity that is required of members of a social world such as sadomasochism all militate against the claim that sadomasochistic sexual encounters are informed by open negotiations. It is rather more likely that participation in sadomasochism is predetermined to varying degrees and that the *ritual* of consent is empirically irrelevant.<sup>55</sup>

Linden explains that social conditioning makes it difficult to separate oneself from the rules and constraints of society. For example, there is little difference between the ideal of femininity in the late nineteenth century and a female masochist today.<sup>56</sup> She would argue that female submissives (as she presumes women always adopt this position) are playing out their predetermined role that has been transmitted to them through social conditioning. Since consent is a meaningless concept, they could not be performing a radical act of self-expression but rather female masochists would be conforming to social expectations.

Karen Rian echoes Linden's ideas in her chapter, entitled 'Sadomasochism and the Social Construction of Desire', which seeks to examine why sadomasochism is problematic due to the construction of society and its prescriptive

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<sup>54</sup> Robin Ruth Linden, 'Introduction,' in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. by R.R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star, (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 1-15, (p. 2).

<sup>55</sup> Robin Ruth Linden, 'Introduction,' (p. 9, original emphasis).

<sup>56</sup> See Chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of this conceptualisation of femininity.

roles.<sup>57</sup> Rian's principal problem with sadomasochism can be summarised with the following quotation:

If cooperation, conscious self-determination and the elimination of power imbalances are feminist goals, then sadomasochistic relationships as *goals* are incompatible with feminist goals.<sup>58</sup>

She concludes that sexual liberation requires re-examining one's relationship with the social conditioning of desire, enabling the freedom to redefine sexual desire.<sup>59</sup>

Diana Russell echoes Rian's idea that sadomasochism is limited. Like Rian, Russell outlines how social conditioning has led to a situation where consent has become meaningless, as she articulates in the following quotation:

The defense that sadomasochism is consensual behaviour does not make it feminist. Women have been reared to be submissive, to anticipate and even want domination by men. But wanting or consenting to domination and humiliation does not make it nonoppressive. It merely demonstrates how deep and profound the oppression is.<sup>60</sup>

Here Russell brings together arguments made by Linden and Rian, because she highlights the radical feminist belief that sadomasochism cannot be a positive force due to its engagement with existing oppressive hierarchies. Russell takes her arguments further than Linden and Rian, understanding 'sadomasochism, pornography and rape [to be] connected issues'.<sup>61</sup> She argues that sadomasochists endorse consensual 'violence, pain and torture'.<sup>62</sup> When sadomasochistic pornography depicts these practices, the woman is shown to be suffering, making it difficult to perceive whether consent was present. Russell fears that 'it seems likely

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<sup>57</sup> Karen Rian, 'Sadomasochism and the Social Construction of Desire,' in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. by R.R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star, (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 45-51.

<sup>58</sup> Karen Rian, 'Sadomasochism and the Social Construction of Desire,' p. 49, original emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Rian, 'Sadomasochism and the Social Construction of Desire,' p.49.

<sup>60</sup> Diana E.H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, ed. by R.R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 176-183, (p. 177).

<sup>61</sup> Diana E.H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' p.179.

<sup>62</sup> Diana E.H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' p.179.

that the more clear the message is that the women do enjoy violent acts, the more likely that these images can reinforce dangerous myths about us'.<sup>63</sup> In particular, she is concerned that sadomasochistic pornography endorses domestic violence, rape and abuse. Russell's line of argumentation conflates the interpretation of pornography and the kind of relationships that people enter into, which seems to occur through a lack of understanding about how to 'read' the images. She concludes that a solution to this 'problem' is that people renounce all forms of sadomasochistic relationship as unhealthy regardless of the genders of the people involved.<sup>64</sup>

Russell argues that it is 'disturbing' that some lesbians 'actually argue that sadomasochistic sex is fun and healthy' for them.<sup>65</sup> This is because radical feminists hold that lesbianism can be used as a political strategy to realise their vision of a society based on equality, rather than potentially involving domination and submission. Lesbian sadomasochism is incompatible with the radical feminist conception of lesbianism because lesbian SM works within and manipulates the very power dynamics that radical feminists wish to overthrow. Liberal feminists, on the other hand, consider that SM practices offer a way of engaging in the implicit power dynamics that structure patriarchal society and self-consciously manipulating these dynamics. This requires the ability to choose whether to engage in these activities and the possibility of consent, which are factors that liberal feminists use to distinguish between consensual SM activities and abuse.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Diana E.H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' p.180.

<sup>64</sup> Diana E.H. Russell, 'Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,' p.180.

<sup>65</sup> Diana E. H. Russell, 'Pornography and the Women's Liberation Movement', in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Diana E. H. Russell (London: Bantam Books, 1982), pp. 301-06, (p. 302).

<sup>66</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), p. 26.

SAMOIS, a radical lesbian SM collective based in San Francisco, who had their first meeting on 13 June 1978, were crucial in bringing knowledge and understanding about lesbian SM to their wider community.<sup>67</sup> Notable members included Pat Califia, Dorothy Allison and Gayle Rubin, who each went on to write influential works in the area of sexuality studies. SAMOIS named themselves after the female-run house of SM in *L'histoire d'O*, presumably because it provided a literary example of same-sex female SM.<sup>68</sup> In the 'Introduction' of *Coming to Power*, an edited volume by the SAMOIS collective, Katherine Davis tackles the problematic notion of consent as it relates to fantasy. She states that the collective agreed 'with the idea that fantasy is, by definition, consensual: if you don't like what you're fantasizing, you have total power to change the scene'.<sup>69</sup> The volume also recognised that it did not include all types of lesbian SM, in particular those experiences of 'disabled women or women of color', but it provided a starting point at a time when many lesbian publications did not want to help promote or publicise the book.<sup>70</sup> It contains thirty-two pieces of a range of generic types, including: fantasy, personal experiences, theoretical pieces and graphic photographs. The unifying theme is that they are all by lesbian SM practitioners. The book was written for a community by a community to ensure that those interested in lesbian SM could find like-minded others and avoid the isolation suffered by those such as Gayle Rubin.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco', in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. by SAMOIS, (Palo Alto, Calif.: Up Press, 1981), p.250.

<sup>68</sup> Pauline Réage. *Story of O (L'histoire d'O)*. Trans. Anon. (London: Corgi, 1972), p.190.

<sup>69</sup> Katherine Davis, 'Introduction', in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. by SAMOIS, (Palo Alto, Calif.: Up Press, 1981), pp. 7-13, (p.11).

<sup>70</sup> Katherine Davis p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M', in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. by SAMOIS, (Palo Alto, Calif.: Up Press, 1981), p.222.

One of the key aims of *Coming to Power* was to ‘call for a re-evaluation of lesbian–feminist ethics’ towards accepting non-normative sexuality.<sup>72</sup> Practitioners felt that it was important to have their opinion considered, so this book provided a positive response to radical feminist attacks on SM, such as the following quotation:

I see sadomasochism as resulting in part from the internalization of heterosexual dominant–submissive role playing. I see sadomasochism among lesbians as involving in addition an internalization of the homophobic heterosexual view of lesbians. Defending such behavior as healthy and compatible with feminism, even proselytizing in favour of it is about the most contra-feminist anti-political and bourgeois stance that I can imagine.<sup>73</sup>

Rubin uses this statement by Diana Russell—one of the editors of *Against Sadomasochism*—to help structure her argument about the way that discrimination against lesbian SM practices issues from within the feminist community.<sup>74</sup> Rubin considers that this is because feminist politics have been taken too far: it ‘has generated a lesbian politic that seems ashamed of lesbian desire. It has made feminism into a closet in which lesbian sexuality is unacknowledged.’<sup>75</sup> She argues that radical feminism has led to a return to a conservative interpretation of gender roles, with sexuality being perceived as a male activity while women favour intimacy.<sup>76</sup> Rubin and the SAMOIS collective want to critique this conservative idea and remind people that sexuality should not be connected with masculinity, because that reinforces a restrictive femininity that Rubin’s essay argues against.

The liberal feminist Carol Vance critiques this kind of argument regarding visual representations of sadomasochism, in particular radical feminists’ use of sadomasochistic imagery in their slideshows, because:

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<sup>72</sup> Katherine Davis, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Diana Russell cited in Gayle Rubin, ‘The Leather Menace’, p. 210.

<sup>74</sup> A revised version of the quotation Rubin cited appears in this volume as: Diana E.H. Russell, ‘Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,’ in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 176-183, (p. 176).

<sup>75</sup> Gayle Rubin, ‘The Leather Menace’, p.214.

<sup>76</sup> Gayle Rubin, ‘The Leather Menace’, p.217.

Our visual illiteracy [concerning sadomasochistic imagery] renders the image overpowering. The emotion aroused by an image is easily attached to rhetorical arguments, overwhelming more subtle analysis and response, and the audience as well, by manipulative imagery, as in polemical slide shows mounted by Right to Life groups or some feminist anti-pornography groups.<sup>77</sup>

This use of these images by radical feminists also lacks consent because they can make the audience feel overwhelmed and thus unable to interpret or have an informed critical opinion regarding the images.

Pat Califia wrote several essays concerning the topic of lesbians, feminism and SM, which provide the basis for hir 'Introduction' to *Macho Sluts* discussed in the next section of this chapter.<sup>78</sup> In 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality', first published in 1979, she argues for the existence of lesbian sadomasochistic desire by using herself as a case study in hir home of San Francisco.<sup>79</sup> Califia makes no attempts to sanitise or normalize SM, instead s/he relishes in its difficult nature:

S/M is scary. That's at least half of its significance. We select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. We make use of all the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions. S/M is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent.<sup>80</sup>

For Califia, these aspects make SM her preferred sexuality because these practices are intense and enable hir to pursue pleasure through power dynamics rather than genital sexuality. Califia claims that 'S/M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class. [Hir] own needs dictate which role [s/he] will adopt.'<sup>81</sup> This implies that SM is performative, and these roles have no inherent attributes regarding race, gender, class etc. Califia is careful to distinguish between exploring

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<sup>77</sup> Carole S. Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', p.16.

<sup>78</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality [1979]', in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), pp. 158-167; Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), pp. 168-180.

<sup>79</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality [1979]'.

<sup>80</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality [1979]', p. 159.

<sup>81</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality [1979]', p. 166.

a role, and its psychopathological terminology (e.g. masochist or sadist), because they do have more complex connotations. In this essay Califia's uses herself to demonstrate her desires for SM, frustration regarding its position within the legal system and the controversy that these practices arouse within feminism.

In a later essay (first published in 1980), Califia addresses the contentious relationship between SM and feminism.<sup>82</sup> S/he frames this piece in relation to her own experience of being ostracized from the lesbian feminist community after coming out as being interested in SM. Califia explains the reasons for this essay in the following terms:

I describe my feelings about this issue because sadomasochism is usually dealt with in an abstract, self-righteous way by feminist theorists who believe it is the epitome of misogyny, sexism, and violence. In this article, I shall examine sadomasochism in a theoretical way and attempt a rapprochement between feminism and S/M.<sup>83</sup>

Califia's reference to feminist theorists seems to refer to radical feminists whose work I analysed above, such as Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Jeffreys. In this essay, Califia endorses a feminism that is prepared to take a stand on issues regarding sexual minorities, which challenges heteronormativity and all other normativities. Like radical feminists, Califia argues that feminists must overthrow patriarchy by demolishing the 'institutions that foster the exploitation and abuse of women', particularly the 'family, gender and conventional sexuality'.<sup>84</sup> However Califia does not consider separatism to be useful, since s/he argues that patriarchy only provides rewards for men who help to uphold its principles, whilst it can have punitive consequences for other types of masculinity. Before Califia interrogates the function of SM within feminism, s/he frames her work in relation to the existing material. This is because many radical feminists have co-opted precise SM terminology for

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<sup>82</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]'.

<sup>83</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 169.

<sup>84</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 170.

their own ends where the meanings differ from how they are used by the SM community, particularly the terms *domination* and *submission*, as demonstrated in the previous discussion in this chapter.<sup>85</sup>

Califia argues that education is required to improve the awareness of sexual minorities, particularly SM, where many radical feminists consider it to be a form of sexual assault. Instead Califia offers a useful working definition of SM:

It is a consensual activity that involves polarized roles and intense situations. [...] The S/M subculture is a theater in which sexual dramas can be acted out and appreciated.<sup>86</sup>

This definition privileges the principles of consent, fantasy and performance that Califia emphasizes throughout this piece and in the collection of erotica *Macho Sluts*. This essay is a justification of why Califia believes that sadomasochism and feminism are compatible, and urging society to view pain, whether derived from extreme sports, religion or sex, in a similar way.<sup>87</sup> It performs a similar function to the 'Introduction' of *Macho Sluts*, which I examine in the next section that explores the impact of genre and form on the discursive representation of female masochism and submission.

## **2.2. Form: The Impact of Genre and The Role of the Paratextual**

The form and genre of a text necessarily inform the discourses used, providing different ways of conveying and representing information, and have different functions. This chapter examines both theoretical and fictional texts in the awareness that each have their own generic implications, which will be discussed in turn. This will be followed by a critique of the paratextual material of the two literary case studies and an analysis of how this material can inform the representation of masochistic sexuality in the texts.

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<sup>85</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 169.

<sup>86</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 171-2.

<sup>87</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 175.

Many of the radical and liberal feminist texts have monolithic tendencies that refuse to acknowledge other discourses. For example, the essays in the radical feminist collection *Against Sadomasochism* are mostly under ten pages each, use passionate and intense language, and seek to convince the reader of their arguments by means of their polemical nature rather than offering carefully nuanced academic arguments. This style of argumentation appeals to a reader's emotions rather than their critical reasoning. In addition, the didactic nature of theoretical texts implies that their arguments and the discourses that they negotiate are either/or positions and that one must choose a specific side, rather than being able to adopt aspects from both.

Some of the theoretical texts examined in this chapter make use of the confessional mode of discourse in the belief that it will 'free' the subject by revealing a key secret at the heart of her subjectivity. This is particularly true of Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* and some of the argumentation in Califia's 'Introduction' to *Macho Sluts*, which I critique below. Foucault's arguments concerning confession are useful for critiquing the limitations of this mode's ability to 'free' the subject. He argues that in western society confession 'forms the cornerstone of modern sexuality', which he defines as 'a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement'.<sup>88</sup> Confessional discourse is particularly problematic when it concerns sex because:

what is peculiar in modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.<sup>89</sup>

Here Foucault exemplifies the paradox within confession: it is meant to liberate an individual from their secret, yet the process of confession *produces* the secret, reinforcing the idea that a person's sexuality was in the first place a truth that needed to

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<sup>88</sup> Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.91; Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p.61

<sup>89</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p.35, original emphasis.

be spoken. This process can trap an individual, rather than offer them the ‘freedom’ they desire. Thus one could argue that, while Friday’s aim was to enable individual women to acknowledge and discuss their fantasies with others, this cannot change society as a whole, or liberate either women or sexuality.

Fictional texts are able to address the same issues as theoretical texts but in a context where discourses may be placed alongside each other. In *Nothing Natural* Diski exploits fiction’s ability to play with discursive positions as different characters embody a variety of feminist discourses throughout the novel. It is as though Diski wishes to prove that these feminist positions are just that, positions that one can move between and select certain aspects of depending on how they fit with the rest of one’s politics. Diski plays with us as readers because no specific discourse in the text is privileged. This allows her to depict the protagonist as an individual who is uncertain of how life and theoretical positions can coalesce.

G rard Genette defines paratextual material as the parts of a published work that surround the text but are not the text itself.<sup>90</sup> These include the title, introduction, cover art and author’s name. This material allows the author and publisher to influence the way that a text is read and can indicate its genre. For the two case studies, the paratextual material that will be discussed includes the cover art and its text, plus an in-depth critique of Califia’s ‘Introduction’ to *Macho Sluts* and Diski’s ‘Afterword’ to *Nothing Natural*, and how these inform the representation of masochistic sexuality in the texts.

The Califia and Diski book covers signal to the reader that they belong to different genres, erotica and literary fiction respectively. Califia’s *Macho Sluts* features the phrase *erotic fiction* on the front cover, which informs the reader that its principal aim is arousal through the medium of written fantasy. The cover image

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<sup>90</sup> G rard Genette, *Seuils [Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation]*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

augments this position because it uses a photograph that features three individuals engaging in an SM leather scene, which suggests that the book's content will be SM erotica.<sup>91</sup> The cover of Diski's *Nothing Natural* is less explicit in its relationship with any one generic mode. The first edition's cover features an image of a maze, implying that the work within is complicated, nuanced and tangled.<sup>92</sup> However, the 2002 reprint of the novel features a curled up, naked person in shadows with bars across them, the tagline stating that it is Diski's 'controversial and disturbing first novel',<sup>93</sup> implying that it will be multifaceted rather than just a piece of erotic fiction. From this analysis of the covers of the two texts, it is unsurprising that their other paratextual material also differs considerably, indicating how the two authors use self-justification as a form of confession to alter reader's perceptions of their texts.

Self-justification is a defensive strategy that writers can use when they anticipate that their work might have a controversial reception; it is a way of challenging hierarchy by exerting power from the bottom-up, meaning that the writer consciously engages with the power exerted by the dominant discourse. It is a form of paratextual material and more specifically a rhetorical device that often has a confessional tone, which takes the form of introductions, prefaces and afterwords.<sup>94</sup> Self-justification provides a place for writers to explain their authorial intentions, which can affect a reader's response to the text. Since it often has a confessional tone, it can have some of the same problems that Foucault identifies with regard to confessional discourse, as I discussed above. However, the formal

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<sup>91</sup> Califia, front cover, *Macho Sluts*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988).

<sup>92</sup> Diski, front cover, *Nothing Natural*. (London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>93</sup> Diski, front cover, *Nothing Natural*.

<sup>94</sup> It can also function within the text itself, as Ingrid Wassenar argues in her book *Ingrid Wassenar, Proustian Passions: The Uses of Self-Justification for a La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

use of self-justification in *Nothing Natural* and *Macho Sluts* differs from Foucault's understanding of confession.

In a definition that seems reminiscent of, though not identical with, Foucault's conceptualisation of confessional discourse, Ingrid Wassenaar defines self-justification in the following terms:

[It is] an act of speech seeking preemptively to ward off attack which the subject fears might take the form of exclusion, rejection, deprivation, abandonment. The main prompting for an act of self-justification, then, is the desire to avoid pain, rather than the desire to confess guilt.<sup>95</sup>

In the final sentence of her definition she is careful to differentiate between the act of self-justification and the act of confession by discussing each in terms of desire. Self-justification is a process of avoidance rather than a process of confrontation, though Califia's 'Introduction' to *Macho Sluts* offers an example of a confrontational justification because it occurs at the start of the text. I will now critique Califia's 'Introduction' and Diski's 'Afterword' to *Nothing Natural* as forms of self-justification and examine how the position and original intention of the self-justification affect its content, the role of the text's reception and their engagement with the Sex Wars.

Califia's *Macho Sluts* opens with an 'Introduction' that s/he uses to justify and explain hir perspective on SM and erotica, and the relationship this text has with radical feminism.<sup>96</sup> The essay begins with the following paragraph:

The things that seem beautiful, inspiring, and life-affirming to me seem ugly, hateful, and ludicrous to most other people. This may be the most painful part of being a sadomasochist: this experience of radical difference, separation at the root of perception. Our culture insists on sexual uniformity and does not acknowledge any neutral differences—only crimes, sins, diseases, and mistakes. This smug erotic totalitarianism does hidden violence to dissidents and perverts. It distorts our self-images, ambitions, and dreams. We think we

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<sup>95</sup> Wassenaar, p.11, original emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> Califia, 'Introduction'.

are alone, or crazy, or ridiculous. Our desire learns to curb itself, and we come to depend on the strength of self-repression for our safety.<sup>97</sup>

Here Califia draws on hir marginalised status, making it a symbol of pride in defiance of normativity. Foucault argues that, since discourse is the medium for the transmission of power, people (e.g. Califia) are able to subvert the intended disciplinary purposes for which terminology was created, which is a process he terms ‘reverse’ discourse.<sup>98</sup> This refers to the process by which a group is able to subvert the dominant discourse for counter-hegemonic ends and thus disrupt its original meaning. In the above passage, Califia disrupts the desire for normalisation with hir pride in defying this ideal.

Califia is aware that writing about female sexuality, particularly sadomasochistic sexuality, during the Sex Wars makes hir vulnerable to both criticism and controversy. S/he comprehends the potential difficulties that could arise by writing explicitly about SM, yet chooses to write SM stories for those who embrace SM and does not engage in:

watering down the description of frightening acts, softening the dialogue, emphasizing what S/M has in common with vanilla rather than where they part company, and appending endless didactic justifications.<sup>99</sup>

S/he considers the book to be ‘a valentine in its original form’ for all those who acknowledge and embrace their desires.<sup>100</sup> This book was written to arouse desire, just as the stories arouse hir desire. Califia wants *Macho Shuts* to act as ‘a recruitment poster’ for lesbian SM, an aim shared by the lesbian SM collective SAMOIS discussed earlier.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p. 9

<sup>98</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, p. 101.

<sup>99</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.9.

<sup>100</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.10.

<sup>101</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.10. SAMOIS.

Califia's theoretical aims, discussed above, are exemplified in hir story 'Jessie' where s/he does not make any apologies or provide explanations of terminology because s/he does not want to make any concessions to hir readers. About a quarter of 'Jessie' is devoted to the main sex scene that provides the 'climax' of the story.<sup>102</sup> When Liz, the narrator of 'Jessie', is first at Jessie's house, her eyes glance on 'a masochist's bouquet' that contains an array of equipment inside a cupboard:<sup>103</sup>

There was a Victorian walking cane, a riding whip, a cat, a bullwhip, and some others I didn't know by name. A few of them looked too menacing to be applied to human flesh. I hoped they were there for effect only.<sup>104</sup>

Califia does not describe how these implements are used but instead leaves them dangling in the reader's imagination, creating and inciting a state of nervous anticipation mirroring that of the narrator. In addition to referring to components that are integral to SM, the story uses a variety of terms from the lesbian community without explanation. The following passage, describing the narrator's desires, exemplifies this technique:

I love butch-looking women. They are disconcerted by my admiration, my willingness to be flattered into bed and ordered around. Sometimes they treat me with suspicion, which I blithely ignore, continuing to give them what they like without talking about it. I'm not looking for a husband or a daddy, and I don't consider myself a femme—I just turn on to aggressive and strong women.<sup>105</sup>

Califia does not worry about alienating hir readers or making them uncomfortable, if anything s/he relishes it because, to hir, SM is about otherness. Hir stories examine the periphery of existence and include characters who are not conflicted or uncertain about the position they hold in society or their sexuality. While it is not unusual to use the rhetoric of a community when the novel discusses that

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<sup>102</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', pp. 52-59.

<sup>103</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 55.

<sup>104</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 52.

<sup>105</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 29.

community,<sup>106</sup> these features in particular make Califia's short story noticeably different in tone and style to Diski's novel.

Califia's insistence on positioning hir text in relation to norms highlights how lesbian SM, and indeed SM in general, is positioned as 'other' in society. Califia writes an introduction to hir book of erotica to emphasise the particularity of lesbian SM by targeting and in turn creating a focused audience primarily of leather dykes. However, *Macho Sluts* does not focus exclusively on lesbian SM but also represents gay male sexuality ('The Surprise Party'<sup>107</sup> and 'The Spoiler'<sup>108</sup>), a queer gesture that seeks to demolish the defined boundaries that surround lesbian identity.<sup>109</sup> For Califia this is an important act because:

We live in this world, and escapist fantasies about other worlds where we dominate or are the exclusive inhabitants can keep us entertained and in high spirits, but when we open our eyes, reality will still be here, and it cries out for comment, criticism, rearrangement, a mirror.<sup>110</sup>

Califia elaborates this line of argument by stating that although sex involving men might not be within the remit of a lesbian's desired practices, it could be within their fantasy life because as Nancy Friday asserts (and I discussed earlier in this chapter) fantasies are often not identitarian. This queer strategy offered by Califia in *Macho Sluts* suggests a desire for SM to offer radical possibilities expanding the boundaries of identity.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> For example: Vanessa Duries, *The Ties That Bind (Le Lien)*. trans. Anon (New Milford: Magic Carpet Books, 2005); Justine Ettler, *The River Ophelia*, (Sydney, Australia: Picador, 1995).

<sup>107</sup> Califia, 'The Surprise Party,' in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), pp. 211-242.

<sup>108</sup> Califia, 'The Spoiler,' in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), pp. 263-283.

<sup>109</sup> Califia, 'The Surprise Party,' in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), pp. 211-242; Califia, 'The Spoiler,' pp. 263-283. To read more on this aspect of Califia's work see: Amalia Ziv, 'Shameful Fantasies: Cross-Gender Queer Sex in Lesbian Erotic Fiction', in *Gay Shame*, ed. by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 165-175.

<sup>110</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.17.

<sup>111</sup> Foucault previously articulated this argument concerning the function of SM in his late interviews. For example, see: Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity' in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), pp. 382-391.

Califia demonstrates an understanding that positioning SM as ‘other’ helps to preserve ‘the self-image of the so-called majority’ because it rejects the privileged position held by genital sexuality.<sup>112</sup> This shows an awareness of how dominant and often normative discourses have the power to position sexuality and the identities it constructs in a kind of hierarchy. Califia also uses hir introduction to demonstrate that s/he holds a different position to that of other liberal feminists:<sup>113</sup>

I do not believe that sex has an inherent power to transform the world. I do not believe that pleasure is always an anarchic force for good. I do not believe that we can fuck our way to freedom. But this is not what the discourse of sexual repression tells us. In that discourse, unleashed sex has enormous disruptive potential. Minority forms of sex have to be repressed or the social contract will hang in tatters.<sup>114</sup>

S/he demonstrates that the reason non-normative forms of sex are thought to be able to change the world is in response to received ideas and historical discussions of sex. This quotation also mirrors Foucault’s critique of the confession, whereby discussing sex offers the illusion of freedom but serves to keep it in a place where it can be monitored and restrained. Califia encourages hir readers to reject the notion that sex has any inherent and/or essential political meaning; rather it takes on meaning through its relation to other discourses.

In a similar vein to Califia—albeit in a less sophisticated form—the British erotica writer Deborah Ryder writes a self-justifying introduction to her collection of heterosexual masochistic erotic stories *Half Dressed, She Obeyed*.<sup>115</sup> She argues that women ought to write erotica for other women because it helps them to explore their own fantasy life (an idea that Califia encourages<sup>116</sup>) and begin to free themselves from the restriction of desires that are imposed by an other (namely

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<sup>112</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.16.

<sup>113</sup> For example: Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality'.

<sup>114</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p.15.

<sup>115</sup> Deborah Ryder, *Half Dressed, She Obeyed* (Stockport: Divine, 1993), p. 188.

<sup>116</sup> Califia, 'Introduction', p. 16.

male, heterosexual pornography). Ryder believes that radical feminists 'have brought themselves into a straitjacket of their own party line orthodoxy which has become more restrictive than a Victorian whalebone corset'.<sup>117</sup> This is because she considers that radical feminism wanted to shape women's behaviour through their particular ideological belief that women could not choose their desires when living within a patriarchy that fetishises hierarchies.

This kind of critique, exhibited by these self-justifications, is not isolated to introductions to erotic short fiction. Diski makes a similar argument in the 'Afterword' to *Nothing Natural*. Unlike Califia and Ryder, Diski did not think it was necessary to explain her work when it was first published. However, on publication in the mid-1980s the book had a problematic reception: certain feminist bookshops either made the book difficult to purchase or refused to stock it.<sup>118</sup> Diski had an altercation with a feminist novelist in a television interview because the woman found the ending 'most gratifying' in 'the way that Rachel finally outwitted Joshua and broke free of his domination'.<sup>119</sup> (At the end of *Nothing Natural*, Rachel frames Joshua for rape, and I analyse the significance of this later in the chapter.) Diski felt this interpretation of the conclusion of the novel was a misinterpretation of her intentions, so when the work was republished in 2003 she wrote a short 'Afterword' that explained and justified it.

Diski outlines the aims of *Nothing Natural*, which in turn provides inspiration for the argument of this chapter, in the following passage:

I wanted to write about honesty and the difficulty of sustaining it in a variety of relationships of power and knowledge. It was interesting to take an intelligent, independent, politically and socially aware woman and put her in a

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<sup>117</sup> Ryder, *Half Dressed, She Obeyed*, p. 14.

<sup>118</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 273.

<sup>119</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 271.

situation where her desires and her thoughts clashed, and to see what the outcome of such an internal war might be.<sup>120</sup>

*Nothing Natural* is a thought-experiment put into fiction. It explores how SM desires would be confusing for a self-proclaimed feminist conversant with the terms of the Sex Wars. It takes the premise of the incompatibility of feminism and masochism to its logical extreme. Diski wrote the novel as a reaction against radical feminist extremists because she dislikes the way that their 'minds close shut at any attempt [made by another] to open their reality to the light of knowledge'.<sup>121</sup> Instead there is an attempt to endorse a kind of censorship of controversial material, particularly pornography that demeans women.<sup>122</sup> By contrast, Diski believes that an important aspect of 'writing [...] is about exploring the unsayable, about what is too difficult socially or psychologically to confront head on'.<sup>123</sup> However, she does not adopt as confrontational a strategy as Califia, choosing instead to use SM as a way of examining internal conflict and responding to feminist arguments concerning SM. Diski believes these so-called 'difficult' areas, are important to examine because 'the desire for the existence of something unthinkable and unspeakable is too strong'.<sup>124</sup> These arguments concerning Diski's intentions for the novel affect the representation of the main character, the language used and the themes examined.

Unlike Califia's *Macho Sluts*, *Nothing Natural* makes numerous concessions to its readers because it is a self-proclaimed literary novel for a more mainstream

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<sup>120</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 273.

<sup>121</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 275.

<sup>122</sup> For example: Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981); Susan Griffin, 'Pornography and Silence', in *Made from This Earth: Selections from Her Writing* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), pp. 110-61; Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (London: Bantam Books, 1982); Diana E. H. Russell, ed. *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993).

<sup>123</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 273.

<sup>124</sup> Diski, 'Afterword,' *Nothing Natural*, p. 275.

audience. It includes sex, but because sexual arousal is not its principal function—and because Diski’s novel is ten times the length of ‘Jessie’, giving the author more room—the main character is more rounded and there is a greater exploration of her motivations. The book focuses on the protagonist, Rachel, and her struggle to reconcile her masochistic desires, feminist politics and social responsibility, which becomes akin to an internal war. Since this is Diski’s principal focus, it is understandable that Rachel’s sexual relationship with Joshua and her sexual desires occupy a small portion of the novel, while the remainder focuses on contextual material: her mental health problems, her job as a private tutor to ‘troubled’ children and her difficult family history.<sup>125</sup> I will now analyse the first sex scene from *Nothing Natural*, which provides an example of a woman dabbling with SM and does not use specifically SM rhetoric in the manner of Califia’s ‘Jessie’.

Diski uses free, indirect style, whereby the narrative is filtered through Rachel’s perspective yet is presented by a third-person narrative voice. This enables the reader to feel a simultaneous sense of closeness to and detachment from Rachel, which mirrors her engagement with the world and her sexual partner Joshua. The first sex scene of the novel is what Rachel presumes will be a one-night stand with Joshua, yet it leaves her ‘impressed, excited, uncertain. Now she wanted him.’<sup>126</sup> This simple statement precedes an in-depth and detailed account of how they engage sexually, where he touches her and her desires. Diski uses clinical language for the most part—‘clitoris’, ‘vulva’—but switches to a more colloquial register when evoking moments of Rachel’s heightened arousal, using phrases such as ‘wet, excited cunt’.<sup>127</sup> For the most part this sex scene focuses on genital sexual gratification, but during sexual intercourse Joshua spans Rachel ‘quite gently, on

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<sup>125</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.68, p.104-132, p. 71-78.

<sup>126</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.16.

<sup>127</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.17.

the bottom, almost tentatively' to check that she will be comfortable with the practice.<sup>128</sup> A discursive silence shrouds the spanking, suggesting that, at least for Joshua, it was a 'natural' part of the sexual act.<sup>129</sup> It leaves Rachel feeling 'curious and a little embarrassed, but also excited by it',<sup>130</sup> encouraging her to desire spanking and other sadomasochistic practices as the novel progresses. However, the kind of SM depicted by Diski normalises the practices; it does not seek to challenge the boundaries of sexual gratification, but rather to reinforce pre-existing roles.

### **2.3. The Relationship between Fantasy and Reality**

The relationship between fantasy and reality provides the structure for *Nothing Natural*. It uses the interactions between Rachel and her permanently casual lover Joshua to explore issues regarding the nature of consent, the role of fantasy, the role of patriarchal law and the impact of external influences on interpretations of events. In addition it nuances feminist discourses, in particular regarding fantasy and reality, that were discussed earlier in this chapter.

*Nothing Natural* is written in a non-linear order, using a free, indirect style that is mostly filtered through Rachel's perspective, rendering objectivity meaningless. It opens with Rachel reading about the rape of a young girl in Scotland, which she believes was committed by her long-term lover, Joshua. The narrative then moves back three years to the beginning of Joshua and Rachel's relationship, exploring their first meeting and their initial discussions regarding their fantasies. It then follows the duration of their relationship with flashback interludes concerning Rachel's troubled childhood and the ways in which this affected her ability to have emotional intimacy with another. The novel concludes with Rachel deciding that she wants to distance

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<sup>128</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.17.

<sup>129</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.18.

<sup>130</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.18.

herself from Joshua and framing him for raping her, as she believes he raped the young girl in Scotland.

The novel's complicated structure is made possible by the following dialogue that takes place between Rachel and Joshua, where they tell one another their ultimate fantasies:

'Tell me your fantasy,' he said, smiling a little through his wine glass.

She couldn't, it was too difficult. If she were drunker or more aroused perhaps, but even then she would have found it hard.

'No. You tell me yours, perhaps it'll inspire me.'

She was not going to play his game, at least not entirely on his terms. She still felt anxious about the food.

'It's no good if you manufacture it. I want to know what you think about in the dark in bed when you touch yourself. Well ... mine is that I seduce a very young girl, an innocent, an adolescent. I'm the first man who has ever excited her and very slowly, gradually, she begins to come.'

Rachel felt a little disappointed; it was hardly the most inspired or original fantasy she had heard.

'Well, that's a bit exclusive.'

'Exclusive of what?' he asked, a little surprised.

'Me,' smiled Rachel. 'I'm thirty-one and no virgin.'

Joshua laughed, a genuine laugh, his eyes narrowing with amusement.

'Your turn,' he said.

'Oh, the usual rape and violence stuff.'

Joshua's face switched immediately to impassive, his eyes serious again.

'That won't do. I want detail,' he snapped.

Rachel found it hard to remember the thoughts she had, the scenes she invented; they seemed to drain out of her memory as she tried to think of them. Why, anyway, was she trying to give him her authentic fantasies, why not make something up? But she felt impelled to tell him something like the truth.

'Um ... someone, a man comes through my window while I'm asleep. He, well, he ties me to the bed, he's very strong, and he rapes me. Oh, I don't know. Something like that.'

She felt it was very lame. And why the hell, she reminded herself, should I tell him anything, let alone worry about the quality of it?<sup>131</sup>

This passage, occurring near the beginning of the novel, establishes a power hierarchy between Rachel and Joshua that will manifest itself as a sadomasochistic—dominant and submissive—relationship. Joshua has the dominant role, conveyed to the reader through asking the questions and directing the conversation. By contrast, although Rachel might feel a sense of internal

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<sup>131</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 24-25.

resistance towards being put into the submissive position, she adopts this role. Liberal feminists could argue that she chooses to adopt this role.<sup>132</sup> However, the dialogue suggests that it is a reactive response to assertive questions. The assertion of dominance in this passage does not include any overt discussions regarding choice and consent, as explored in Califia's 'Jessie'; instead it depends on implied knowledge.

The establishment of the power dynamic in the above passage mirrors the paradox of the rape fantasy. In Rachel's rape fantasy she desires 'someone' to startle her in her room and 'rape' her, which from the description is most likely to be a stranger.<sup>133</sup> However, since she is telling this fantasy to a man she desires and is engaging in a sexual relationship with, there is an implication that he could be the man to perform this fantasy. If a rape fantasy is to remain a fantasy and not rape, it necessitates that the 'victim' consent to be 'raped' and that the 'rapist' be a consenting partner. If there were an overt discussion regarding consent, liberal feminists would argue that a rape fantasy performed in a 'safe' setting would be an 'acceptable' and safe way to explore one's sexual desires. In addition, they would argue that fantasy does not have a political dimension.<sup>134</sup> Radical feminists would argue that a woman's rape fantasy is a product of patriarchal law, because it is an internalisation of men's violence towards women and of women's objectification.<sup>135</sup> Rachel is aware of both of these discursive positions because they contribute to her experiencing an 'internal war' concerning her sexual desires and her politics.

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<sup>132</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', pp. 172-174.

<sup>133</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.25. I have used scare quotes around the word rape to indicate that in a rape fantasy it would be impossible for the individual to be raped per se because they have given their partner prior consent to the act.

<sup>134</sup> See the discussion on Vance earlier in this chapter.

<sup>135</sup> See the discussion regarding Sheila Jeffreys's arguments on fantasy.

The language used in the above passage also explores the relationship between ‘authenticity’ and sexuality, making particular reference to fantasy. This dialogue represents two discursive positions: one, Joshua’s, believes in the nature of authentic confession and that this can reflect part of the true self; the other, Rachel’s, considers fantasy to belong to the realm of the imagination and so to be inherently subjective. The difference between these opinions resembles debates regarding the validity of the idea of ‘authentic sexuality’ and whether such a thing as an ‘authentic self’ (itself a debatable concept) has any bearing on sexuality. As discussed previously, Foucault argues that this notion of authentic selfhood predicated on the truth of sexuality is a fallacy built into the concept of confession as it is used in modern society. Rachel explores the idea that this is a false relationship because it suggests that it is possible to develop the truth from subjective statements, which, to her, seems a false endeavour. She echoes Nancy Friday’s argument that fantasies can be categorised because they often share the same tropes.<sup>136</sup> Rachel feels a level of disappointment about Joshua because his fantasy does not offer new ideas but seems to replicate existing stereotypes. Since this passage is written through Rachel’s perspective, we have greater insight into her position, which enables the reader to know that she is approximating her fantasies from memory (itself fallible).

When Rachel tells Becky, her best friend, about her sexual relationship with Joshua, the response focuses on the social expectations of a relationship. Diski uses the character of Becky as a voice for the fairytale ideal consisting of a long-term relationship with a ‘happy-ever after’ ending. By contrast, Rachel finds her permanently casual relationship with Joshua a relief because ‘she didn’t want commitment, domesticity or a live-in companion’.<sup>137</sup> Instead the ‘self-conscious’ engagement with an SM-style relationship where the power exchange is ‘overt’ seems comforting to Rachel

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<sup>136</sup> Friday, p. 92

<sup>137</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.20.

because she is able to understand what is happening.<sup>138</sup> In addition this suggests the importance of explicit communication regarding relationship choices and ideals, which is in itself a liberal feminist idea explored by SAMOIS.<sup>139</sup> However, Becky and Rachel disagree regarding Rachel's relationship choices:

[Becky to Rachel] 'You can't live *The Story of O* and be Rachel Kee all at the same time, you'll get confused.'  
'Don't worry, Auntie, it's simply a question of knowing the difference between fantasy and reality.'<sup>140</sup>

This quotation indicates that for Becky maintaining a coherent boundary between fantasy and reality is vital for an '[un]confused' identity. In addition the reference to Reage's *The Story of O* serves as shorthand for an extreme fantasy of female submission, while Becky's use of Rachel's full name is reminiscent of a parent scolding a child though here it is to remind a fellow adult friend of reality. In turn, Rachel's sarcastic tone, implied by referring to Becky as her 'Auntie', suggests that the reader is meant to question Rachel's black and white view of fantasy. Rachel later states that she considers reality to be a 'failure of imagination', which suggests that she rejects the socially perceived importance given to maintaining a coherent distinction between reality and fantasy, something that is often used as an indicator for mental stability.<sup>141</sup> However, Rachel's interpretation of 'reality' could also suggest that for her reality must be dull, or perhaps that she lacks imagination.

Fantasy plays an important role in the development of the internal war experienced by Rachel because the novel explores the transition that occurs when one's fantasies become reality. Diski uses the character of Rachel to articulate these tensions throughout the novel, particularly in the following passage:

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<sup>138</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.59.

<sup>139</sup> This is explored earlier in this chapter through a discussion of the impact that the organisation SAMOIS had on liberal feminist arguments concerning sadomasochism.

<sup>140</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.60.

<sup>141</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.60.

There was an impossible mismatch between what she had felt and what she knew she was supposed to feel. A woman in her thirties at the end of two decades of the women's movement, who assumed equality and lived equally with men, was not supposed to admit to rape fantasies and submit herself to the power play of perverted male sexuality, let alone like it.<sup>142</sup>

Here Diski makes explicit reference to the impact that feminism has had on Rachel's psyche by suggesting that internalising feminist arguments concerning SM has resulted in tensions regarding her sexual desires. This also demonstrates the impact that culture has on an individual because one is a product of one's times. The repetition of the word *supposed* suggests an external social pressure that has been internalised by the individual, leading to the conflict. In this passage Rachel is referring to the initial spanking sequence between herself and Joshua, where she 'was shocked at herself' because she was unable to recognise the sexually submissive desires in herself.<sup>143</sup> This woman 'wasn't anyone she had ever met before—not, at any rate, in the real world of action, away from night dreams and dark thoughts'.<sup>144</sup> Again Diski returns to the relationship between fantasy and reality, as Rachel's sexual encounters with Joshua force these two seemingly separate worlds to merge until the character experiences a sense of disintegration.

It appears that Rachel vacillates between discursive positions, at no point entirely embodying the rhetoric of either radical or liberal feminism, yet allowing both discourses to inform her position. *Nothing Natural* demonstrates the difficulty for a female social subject of living up to either radical or liberal feminist discourse. Diski concludes this overt debate concerning feminism with the liberal feminist voice fighting the radical feminist voice represented by her internal monologue:

You are not supposed to enjoy that sort of thing, said the small harsh voice in her head. "Well, I did," she said aloud, and went to bed.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 33-34, original emphasis.

<sup>143</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 33.

<sup>144</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 34.

<sup>145</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 34.

Diski uses this passage as a way of exploring the complexities that the feminist Sex Wars exerted on subjects and of suggesting that, for Rachel, these debates will remain unresolved and result in tensions. This kind of discursive debate is made possible through the fictional dialogue because it allows for a slippage to occur between discourses.

Diski depicts Rachel as a character complete with contradictions, which create conflict in her and the way that she responds to the events around her. The novel sees a transition from someone who enjoys the ‘pantomime’<sup>146</sup> with Joshua to someone who wishes to deny the human capacity for telling stories because this creates an artificial sense of hope.<sup>147</sup> However, after her first night with Joshua:

The memory of the events was there but not as lived experience, not as if they had actually happened, to her, last night. She might have read it, or seen a movie. It was a recollection of a drama, of a story she had heard, not part of the fabric of her life.<sup>148</sup>

This passage suggests a blurring of the boundaries between fiction (fantasy) and reality in Rachel’s mind, which is significant because, for Rachel, reality is supposed to be dull as she understands it to be a ‘failure of the imagination’.<sup>149</sup> Her encounters with Joshua threaten her sense of self because she is unclear about the location and extent of reality. Her boundaries have become unclear, yet Rachel still believes—or at least thinks—that she sees ‘how things *really* are’.<sup>150</sup> The disjuncture between her internal ideas regarding boundaries as impermeable,<sup>151</sup> and her ‘reality’ in which she does not make concrete distinctions between appearance and reality, suggests a difficult conclusion. This shift occurs prior to the novel’s conclusion, when, during a sex scene, Joshua wants her to

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<sup>146</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 215.

<sup>147</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 93.

<sup>148</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 53.

<sup>149</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 60.

<sup>150</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 93, original emphasis.

<sup>151</sup> ‘She didn’t feel that *she* could ever really blur the boundary between the fantasy and the real.’ Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 246.

confess her desires, yet this verbal articulation of desires is too difficult, as the following quotation demonstrates: ‘She meant don’t do this, don’t make me want, don’t make me say, above all don’t make me say.’<sup>152</sup> This signifies the transition from Rachel being an implicitly consenting participant in the relationship to someone who denies the relationship ever existed, as I will examine by considering the final section of the novel, in which Rachel relies on the visual illiteracy of policemen to invert the relationship’s power hierarchy.

Although Rachel refuses to acknowledge (outwardly) that she understands the codes of the sadomasochistic relationship that would otherwise appear as abuse, she exploits the way that the police have a binary understanding of consent. For an act to be consensual, it must also appear to be consensual. Again, this leads us to the relationship between appearance and reality, whereby the appearance of a practice is all that the police would choose to draw on because, when witnessing a sexual act, it is difficult to interpret it in any other way. Rachel frames Joshua for rape by reporting him as a stranger who has been standing outside her house watching her. In addition, just before she reports Joshua as being her stalker, she wrote him a letter elaborating on the fantasy that she shared with him in the introductory exchange discussed earlier in this chapter, stating that she desires these acts now.<sup>153</sup> While the majority of the novel is filtered through Rachel’s perspective, Diski now switches to the perspective of the policemen:

Two policemen arrived at the door, flicked on the light and saw Rachel lying face-down on the bed, her hands tied behind her back, red wheals on her buttocks, the pillow soaked from the tears which streamed down her face, convulsed with sobs. One of them gently untied the rope and handed her a dressing gown that hung from the door.<sup>154</sup>

This passage demonstrates that Diski’s shift of perspective alters the interpretation of the scene because of the lack of internal thoughts by either of the participants involved.

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<sup>152</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 267.

<sup>153</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 256-8.

<sup>154</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 268.

If someone was not versed in the codes of sadomasochism and had been told that there was a stalker involved, they would likely conclude that they were witnessing a rape.

Prior to Joshua's arrest Rachel could choose to explain the situation but instead assumes the role of the abuser: 'Her dark eyes held his, locked them in a cold stare as she said quietly, "This *is* what it seems, this is real life."<sup>155</sup> Here Rachel makes a false rape charge, which is something that men reputedly fear yet feminists argue rarely happens due to the traumatic nature of reporting a rape. Rachel's action is problematic because she commits the very act that feminists argue few women would ever, in reality, carry out. It appears that Rachel becomes the abuser in part because she wants to avenge the young girl raped in Scotland and because she is unable to negotiate between the different discourses—of feminism, her sexual desires and her politics—and so chooses to reject her relationship with Joshua altogether. Diski describes Rachel's act at the close of the novel in the following terms:

She was unable to sustain the game, that she finally confuses fiction with reality, fantasy with the everyday world, was, to my mind, a disastrous psychological failure of thought and honesty.<sup>156</sup>

This passage demonstrates the importance of the relationship between fantasy and reality, which the novel explores through this fictional case study, to illuminate the complexities and nuances of feminist arguments. For the character of Rachel, the relationship needs to be implicit because it is the explicit vocalisation of her desires and the privileging of her fantasy of Joshua as an actual rapist (as opposed to him fulfilling her desires) that results in the anti-feminist conclusion of this text, which is a betrayal of all that Rachel claimed to believe throughout.<sup>157</sup>

### **3.3.1. The Relationship between Fantasy and Reality in Califia's 'Jessie'**

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<sup>155</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.268.

<sup>156</sup> Diski, 'Afterword', *Nothing Natural*, p. 272.

<sup>157</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p.267.

Califia's collection of erotic short stories *Macho Sluts* embodies her theoretical ideas regarding SM discussed earlier in the chapter. In 'Jessie' Califia draws on her knowledge of the SM community, its protocols and her experiences to inform the structure, language and themes of the story. In 'Feminism and Sadomasochism' Califia outlines what s/he perceives should be the relationship between fantasy and reality for an SM practitioner:

A sadomasochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the sum total of her being.<sup>158</sup>

Califia interprets the role of SM, as being clearly delineated from the rest of a person's life, which as examined earlier in this chapter was not a distinction that Rachel from *Nothing Natural* was able to make. By contrast in 'Jessie', Califia demonstrates how despite engaging in extreme acts that it is possible to incorporate explicit discussions of consent, boundaries and how to realise fantasies.

The story focuses on two women (the narrator, Liz, and Jessie), who both know that they desire SM. Before an explicit discussion of consent, there is the initial implied consent that arises from sexual attraction, flirtation and Jessie's recognition of the symbolic significance of Liz's braided leather cuffs on her wrists and neck.<sup>159</sup> They indicate that Liz has an interest in submission, since these items are symbolic of a person being another's possession that is a reinterpretation of shackles used in slavery. This flirtation leads to an intimate dance whereby they establish their roles with Liz as the submissive, and Jessie as the dominant. Despite Califia's insistence on the separation between fantasy and reality, Liz and Jessie flirt with blurring these boundaries in their initial discussion:

[Liz] 'I can play any game you can come up with.'

[Jessie] 'But I'm not playing.'

I considered carefully. 'If anyone changes their mind, it will be you,' I promised

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<sup>158</sup> Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadomasochism [1980]', p. 172.

<sup>159</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 35.

quietly.

She squeezed my ass. Hard. 'Do you know, I have never let a dare go by. Not once in my whole little life.'<sup>160</sup>

This exchange focuses on the appearance of buying into the role in order to establish the power dynamic. Liz, as the submissive, sets Jessie a challenge in her bold statement that she can do whatever Jessie desires, since there is no conversation regarding limits this could be posturing for effect as a way of demonstrating her 'worth'. The dialogue above also implies the performative nature of SM and its roles, since the joking tone and set responses gives their interaction a theatrical quality.

In addition to the implicit consent outlined above which results in Liz returning to Jessie's house for the night, Jessie ensures that there is at least an explicit discussion regarding consent and her intentions. However this does not occur until Liz is at Jessie's house, which could be seen as compromising Liz's ability to say no, yet it takes on an erotic overtone:

[Jessie] 'I am going to possess you utterly, for my own pleasure, make you completely and totally mine. Are you willing?'

[Liz] 'I've never wanted anything more.'

'That's the last time I'll ask for your permission or consent. Follow me.'<sup>161</sup>

While this exchange is brief, the tone and language chosen enables Jessie to remain in her dominant role, which demonstrates that discussing consent can be done in an erotic manner. Here Califia enables the characters to embody a liberal feminist concept of consent whereby a person is able to decide whether they wish to engage in SM activities despite the influence of patriarchy. Although in this discussion regarding consent there is no indication of its duration, Califia makes this explicit to the reader through the text's structure.

Califia structures 'Jessie' so the fantasy-infused reality of the characters' night provides the bulk of the story, placing the morning after reality into a separate epilogue.

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<sup>160</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 36.

<sup>161</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', p. 50.

The epilogue functions as the section where Califia reaffirms the argument that it is important to have discrete distinctions between fantasy and reality despite the performative dialogue and roles that can suggest otherwise. In this sequence Liz, the submissive, realises that she was disappointed and angry when Jessie did not ‘play master at the breakfast table’.<sup>162</sup> This emotional turmoil could occur because they had not specified the duration that the domination and submission dynamic would be in place. The story closes with another brief exchange whereby the characters reiterate the importance of establishing boundaries between their fantasies and their daily life:

[Liz] ‘I know I don’t want a twenty-four-hour-a-day S/M relationship,’ I said quietly. ‘I’m not a social masochist. I enjoy taking care of Number One like any reasonably sane, adult woman.’  
[Jessie] She grinned with relief. ‘Hey, that’s not what I want, either. I can’t top somebody full-time. To borrow a famous quote, kicking ass is hard work.’<sup>163</sup>

This passage reiterates the idea that a marker of ‘sanity’ is the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. (The intersection of mental health and masochism will be discussed in the next chapter.) The characters in ‘Jessie’ are able to make this distinction perhaps because their SM interaction is a separate entity from the remainder of their lives taking the form of a one-night stand. It is possible to read ‘Jessie’ as a fictional embodiment of how Califia understands safe and erotic SM encounters.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter focusing on the Sex Wars, I have offered a reading of Diski’s novel *Nothing Natural* and Califia’s ‘Jessie’ through an analysis of fantasy and reality being used as a structural device in the narratives. These texts and their use of fantasy and reality are informed by both radical and liberal feminist arguments particularly concerning their respective interpretations of sadomasochism and consent. Although

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<sup>162</sup> Califia, ‘Jessie’, p. 61.

<sup>163</sup> Califia, ‘Jessie,’ p.61.

'Jessie' embodies Califia's interpretation of liberal feminism focusing on specifics known by SM practitioners, its agenda is also to demonstrate that lesbianism is also a sexual orientation, which is informed by an awareness of political lesbianism endorsed by radical feminists. While *Nothing Natural* embodies neither discourse entirely, its form of literary fiction enables different characters to embody different aspects of feminist discourses at various stages in the novel and to point up the inherent tensions between them. As much as *Nothing Natural* nuances feminist discourse, Diski's inclusion of Rachel's bouts of depression and mental health problems in the narrative implies a causal link with her inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, which is also used as an indication of a slip from sanity. I elaborate on this relationship in my Conclusion where I argue that when representations of heterosexual female masochism also depict the characters as having mental health problems they reinforce the psychopathological framework around paraphilias.

## Chapter 3

### The Politics of the 'Coming of Age' Narrative: *Secretary* and the Relationship between Self-Injury and Female Masochism

This chapter offers a reading of the film and screenplay of *Secretary* in terms of a 'coming of age' narrative and explores how this transformation narrative affects the representation of female masochistic practices.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the film's position as a romantic comedy leads to the privileging of couple-based masochistic practices as superior to and healthier than individual-based practices, which are categorised in the film as self-injury. However, the film uses the visual similarity of the self-injurious practices to the masochistic practices, suggesting that they exist on a continuum. Indeed, I will argue that the film depicts a trajectory from autoerotic masochistic practices to couple-based masochistic practices.

Since the aim of this chapter is to interrogate the discursive construction of female masochism in terms of a coming of age narrative in *Secretary*, it begins with a feminist analysis of the romantic comedy genre and explores how this privileges the role of the couple. It then offers a critique of the ways in which medical discourse represents and defines masochism and self-injury, focusing on the American Psychiatric Association approved text *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (abbreviated as *DSM* for the remainder of the chapter).<sup>2</sup> This is followed by an examination of the relationship between the coming of age narrative and the coming out narrative, which exist on a continuum with one another in terms of their belief in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Secretary*, dir. by Steven Shainberg (Lion's Gate Films, 2003); Erin Cressida Wilson, *Secretary: A Screenplay* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> American Psychological Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders*, 4th edn. (Washington, DC: Author, 2000).

idea of ‘progress’ as a marker of ‘maturity’. I return to Freud in order to examine his conception of female sexuality, in which he argues that clitoral sexuality is infantile and that the shift to vaginal sexuality with a partner signifies maturity. I then argue that *Secretary* mirrors this shift in terms of its depictions of femininity and models a progression from self-injury when the protagonist is single to couple-based masochistic practices. This narrative attempts to normalise couple-based masochism as superior to self-injury, which is mirrored by therapeutic narratives that I will critique.<sup>3</sup> The final discussion examines how *Secretary* deliberately excludes SM as a radical position that rejects the health and harm binary that dominates medical discourse, because this enables self-injurious practices and masochistic practices to exist on a continuum, contradicting the film’s assimilationist and normalising agenda.

#### 4.1 A Critique of Romantic Comedy

In this section, I examine how *Secretary* is able to offer a seemingly transgressive model of female sexuality by positioning its depiction of SM within the normative women’s genre of the romantic comedy.<sup>4</sup> This includes an analysis of romantic comedy’s form in terms of both Hollywood and independent cinema, and a feminist

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<sup>3</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, ‘The Power of Play: The Potentials and Pitfalls in Healing Narratives of BDSM’, in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker, and Darren Langdridge, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 197-216.

<sup>4</sup> Annette Kuhn, ‘Women’s Genres’, in *Feminism and Film*, ed by Kaplan, E. Ann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 437-450. *Secretary* could also be seen to embody another genre of women’s films – the melodrama with its focus on the neurotic ill woman who suffers under patriarchy, and for not conforming. It is possible to read Lee, as one of these women, where her breakdown is taken as symptomatic of a more complex underlying psychiatric illness. These narratives serve to diminish the woman’s position, voice and de-eroticise their fantasies if they can also be read as illness. For more on melodrama see: Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (London: MacMillan Press, 1987).

critique of its particular construction of romance and sexuality.<sup>5</sup> With relation to *Secretary*, I discuss how romantic comedy necessitates a normalising representation of masochism as a healing and therapeutic practice. In addition, I consider some of the changes that arose between Erin Cressida Wilson's screenplay of *Secretary* and Steven Shainberg's film *Secretary*, which will focus on the role of sex, feminism and the representations of female masochism.

Romantic comedies are often considered to be a genre relegated to the status of 'guilty pleasures' because people watch them in a non-reflexive manner and their predictable generic features make them easy to watch.<sup>6</sup> Annette Kuhn writes that in 'women's picture[s] the narrative process is characteristically governed by the enigma-retardation-resolution structure'.<sup>7</sup> Kuhn discusses this structure in relation to soap operas, yet it also applies to romantic comedies because they follow the same structure, as Tamar Jeffers McDonald outlines in her monograph *Romantic Comedy*.<sup>8</sup> McDonald claims that romantic comedies are such a pervasive genre in Hollywood cinema that their ideology becomes naturalised, making critical analysis irrelevant. She proposes the following definition: '[A] romantic comedy is a film which as its central narrative motor [is] a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and always to a successful conclusion.'<sup>9</sup> A romantic comedy's conclusion is 'successful' when the two characters are united as a couple, enabling the film to conclude. The ultimate aim of a romantic comedy is the primacy of the couple and despite the various changes to the genre few 'suggest monogamous coupledness itself is an outmoded concept. [...] At the heart of every romantic comedy is the implication of sex, and settled, secure, within-a-

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<sup>5</sup> Ewan Kirkland, 'Romantic Comedy and the Construction of Heterosexuality', *Scope* (9, October 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Kuhn, p. 437.

<sup>8</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald.

<sup>9</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, p. 9.

relationship sex at that.<sup>10</sup> This privileges the monogamous, heterosexual relationship, and sex within that context, while anything that deviates from that mode is understood to be ‘less’. By this I mean that the kinds of relationships that function in a different manner to the primarily heterosexual, same race, similar age model portrayed in a romantic comedy are considered as less ‘normal’.<sup>11</sup> In addition, this model creates a kind of generic style that enables a viewer to understand their role in relation to these films.

In *Romantic Comedy* McDonald identifies different modes of the genre that reflect social changes. Romantic comedies from the late 1980s to the present day, dominated by the writer and director Nora Ephron (*When Harry Met Sally*,<sup>12</sup> *Sleepless in Seattle*,<sup>13</sup> etc.), are defined by McDonald as follows:

The neo-traditional romantic comedy reasserts the old “boy meets, loses, regains girl” structure, emphasising the couple will be heterosexual, will form a lasting relationship, and that their story will end as soon as they do so.<sup>14</sup>

McDonald expands this definition, stating that this type of romantic comedy ‘prefers to reference popular culture and consumer products rather than political or historical events’.<sup>15</sup> This dehistoricisation and depoliticisation of the romantic comedy genre can both make the film more enduring and also mean that it has less cultural resonance on a broader scale. McDonald also argues that Ephron’s style of neo-traditional romantic comedies ‘greatly de-emphasises sexuality’, which makes it difficult to reflect contemporary dating and social mores.<sup>16</sup> I would situate *Secretary* as a neo-traditional

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<sup>10</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ummni Khan argues that the white hegemony in *Secretary* leads to the film becoming ‘non-raced’. Ummni Khan, ‘A Woman’s Right to be Spanked: Testing the Limits of Tolerance of S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary’, *The Journal of Sexuality and the Law*, (18, 2009), 79-119, (p. 97).

<sup>12</sup> *When Harry Met Sally*, dir. by Rob Reiner (MGM, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> *Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. by Nora Ephron (TriStar Pictures, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald, p. 97.

romantic comedy because once the couple (Lee Holloway and Mr Grey) have met their romantic conclusion—marriage—they continue their non-normative sexual practices within a sanctioned remit. However, it also diverges from this category since it focuses on the sexual dynamic between the protagonists. Although *Secretary* focuses on sex, it is not a sex comedy because only the principal couple are depicted as having sex (and penetrative sex is implied only at the conclusion of the film).

However, *Secretary* does follow the ‘enigma–retardation–resolution’ trajectory of a romantic comedy. I will demonstrate this through a concise plot summary: boy (Mr E. Edward Grey) meets girl (Lee Holloway, his new secretary); a crisis occurs (Mr Grey withdraws from his dominant/submissive relationship with Lee because he fears it is ‘wrong’ and fires Lee, who becomes engaged to someone else, Peter); a test of their relationship takes place (Lee’s hunger strike performed at the instigation of Mr Grey); and there is a ‘successful’ conclusion that ends in heterosexual marriage (Mr Grey and Lee marry and live a suburban life). I will now examine how this ending supports the film’s normative agenda to present a ‘good’ SM, providing it is within the context of a ‘normal’ couple.

*Secretary* ends after Mr Grey rescues Lee from the hunger strike she undertakes while wearing a wedding dress that was intended for her wedding to Peter. Mr Grey does this when he realises she is prepared to risk her life for this love. He lifts her from the desk where she has collapsed, scoops her into his arms and carries her out while she clings to his neck. This translation of a traditional wedding ritual where the groom carries the bride across the threshold to their house is here played out in his office and then repeated on entering his house. Once she has crossed this boundary of his private world, he takes her to the pre-prepared bedroom at his house. There is a bed covered with grass, surrounded by white net curtains that mimic the wedding-night cliché. Mr

Grey resumes his caring role as he undoes the wedding dress and lays her on the bed, which results in Lee stating that:

And for the first time in my life, I felt beautiful. Finally part of the earth; I touched the soil and he loved me back.<sup>17</sup>

The nature imagery suggests that they are creating a new foundation for their life that will include their sadomasochistic relationship and that they consider this to be ‘natural’ too. Indeed both of them understand that ‘love [does not] need to be soft and gentle’.<sup>18</sup> Brenda Cossman argues that in this final sex scene ‘sexual excess [of their non-normative desires] is, at this moment, contained within romantic love.’<sup>19</sup> This is symbolic of the role of the heteronormative imperatives that inform *Secretary*, and romantic comedy as a generic form. Stevi Jackson argues that heterosexuality represents ‘the accepted singular norm against which sexual pluralism must be defended’.<sup>20</sup> The closing section of *Secretary* demonstrates that Mr. Grey is the strong man, who contrasts with Lee’s weak childlike body reduced to near starvation. Ewan Kirkland argues that this difference is essential for the maintenance of heterosexuality within the romantic comedy, where the couple exhibit ‘opposites of gendered characteristics’, specifically active masculinity and passive femininity.<sup>21</sup> Kirkland claims that heterosexuality is a normative and compulsory institution within romantic comedies, thus the heterosexual couple’s eventual declaration – their first kiss – happens in a public arena. Although *Secretary* features non-normative sexual practices, they occur ultimately within the sanctioned and approved context of marriage. While their wedding is in private, their kiss and re-union takes place in his office, which is a public place as

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<sup>17</sup> *Secretary*, my own transcription.

<sup>18</sup> *Secretary*, my own transcription.

<sup>19</sup> Brenda Cossman, ‘Sexuality, Queer Theory, and “Feminism After”’: Reading and Re-reading the Sexual Subject’, *McGill Law Journal*, (49, 2004), 847-876, (p. 876).

<sup>20</sup> Stevi Jackson, ‘Heterosexuality and Feminist Theory’, in *Theorising Heterosexuality*, ed. by Diane Richardson (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), pp. 21-39, (p. 29).

<sup>21</sup> Kirkland.

many people gathered to help care for Lee through her hunger strike. In this sense, I argue that *Secretary* maintains and supports heteronormativity, particularly through consideration of the very final moment of the film.

Shainberg states that, in *Secretary*, Lee and Mr Grey's SM 'activities melted into an everyday sort of life until [they] looked like any other couple you'd see'.<sup>22</sup> The film's final sequence exemplifies this, as we see Lee depositing a dead cockroach into the just made bed, waiting for Mr Grey to find it when he returns home from work. Panning shots that situate them in their environment follow this:

*Then we PULL back to further reveal blocks and blocks of SUBURBAN HOUSES with housewives, husbands going to work, dogs barking, kids playing, cars driving.  
It is all somehow NAUSEATING, FAMILIAR, AND COMFORTING at once.  
And suddenly what has appeared strange to us, we now recognize as quite EVERYDAY.*<sup>23</sup>

*Secretary*'s play with a veneer of normality is reminiscent of the opening sequences of David's Lynch film *Blue Velvet* in which the suburbs are juxtaposed with the discovery of a severed ear in the grass.<sup>24</sup> This enables *Secretary* to offer a different cinematic representation of female masochism, which ends with a close-up of Lee's face staring straight into the camera. There is no smile. Her expression is flat. Finishing the film with just her expression in the frame indicates that her narrative has reached its fruition because now she no longer has to hide or share the frame. She has learnt to perform the masquerade required for assimilation into normative society.

From this summary of *Secretary* and discussion of its relationship with romantic comedy's generic expectations, it is clear that the film both conforms to and yet also challenges the genre by the inclusion of non-normative sexuality, since female

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<sup>22</sup> *Secretary*, my own transcription.

<sup>23</sup> Erin Cressida Wilson, p. 111, original emphasis. I have quoted from the screenplay because it offers a succinct description of the final sequence of the film.

<sup>24</sup> *Blue Velvet*, dir. by David Lynch (1986). Angelo Badalamenti composed the score for both Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and *Secretary*, so perhaps this connection is deliberate.

masochism is its central theme. However, it represents masochism as a form of therapy by replacing Lee's self-injuring practices with couple-based SM practices. In this way, the film's representation intersects with the medical understanding of these practices. The next section of this chapter will critique the discursive construction of these practices in the *DSM*.

#### **4.2 The Medicalisation of Masochism and Self-Injury**

The difference between autoerotic masochistic practices and self-injurious practices is constructed within medical discourse with reference to social norms. I will therefore outline and critique their representation in the *DSM*, one of the standard texts for mental health diagnoses. I offer a brief overview of the history of the diagnostic criteria for masochism within the *DSM* and focus on how these practices are defined in the current, 4th edition of the *DSM* (hereafter *DSM-IV*, with roman numerals indicating previous editions as appropriate) and will examine the proposed changes to the classification of these practices in the 5th edition (hereafter *DSM-5* as they have now moved to Arabic numerals), due to be published in 2013. I will examine how the *DSM-IV* and *DSM-5* define masochism, autoerotic masochism and self-injury.

Within the *DSM* masochism has developed in terms of complexity and specificity of the diagnostic criteria, which Richard Krueger outlines in an article for the paraphilia sub-workgroup for the new *DSM-5*.<sup>25</sup> The *DSM-I*, published in 1952, did not mention masochism. It was introduced in the *DSM-II* (1968) under the category of 'sexual deviations' and not mentioned by its own name. It was not until the *DSM-III* (1980) that it would be categorised with its own code and category as 'sexual masochism', indicating to the medical practitioner that this condition only referred to its

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<sup>25</sup> R. B. Krueger, 'The DSM diagnostic criteria for Sexual Masochism', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, Epub ahead of print (2009).

relationship with sexual gratification, rather than its common usage to refer to self-punishment. The *DSM-III*'s diagnostic criteria state:

- 1) A preferred or exclusive mode of producing sexual excitement is to be humiliated, bound, beaten, or otherwise made to suffer.
- 2) The individual has intentionally participated in an activity in which he or she was physically harmed or his or her life was threatened, in order to produce sexual excitement.<sup>26</sup>

At this point it is unclear what kinds of practices are being referred to, only that they are associated with a risk of death. In addition, an individual could be diagnosed with this condition for participating in any masochistic practice even with a consensual partner, whether it was their favoured or exclusive sexual preference, since at this point either criterion could result in a diagnosis.

Substantial changes were made in the 1987 revised version of the *DSM-III* (*DSM-III-R*), particularly concerning masochism's relationship with risk:

- A) Over a period of at least six months, recurrent intense sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer.
- B) The person has acted on these urges, or is markedly distressed by them.<sup>27</sup>

The substantive change is that the diagnosis now requires two criteria, which is why the classification system changes from numerical to alphabetical ('A' and 'B'). Again, as in the *DSM-III*, these diagnostic criteria are applicable to any SM practitioner even if they are practising with a consensual partner. This makes the practices themselves pathological per se. It is the *DSM-III-R* that introduces both the temporal criterion and the concept of distress to assist with the diagnosis of the condition.

The *DSM-IV* (1994) and its text revision, the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000), have the same diagnostic criteria for sexual masochism. They could lead to a diagnosis if SM practitioners met the following two criteria:

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<sup>26</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed.) (Washington, DC: Author, 1980) in R.B. Krueger.

<sup>27</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed. revised) (Washington, DC: Author, 1987) in R.B. Krueger.

- A) Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer.
- B) The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviours cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.<sup>28</sup>

All of the diagnostic criteria to date permit the inclusion of autoerotic masochism since there is no indication whether the behaviour must occur with a partner. The ‘A’ criterion defines the condition of sexual masochism, while part ‘B’ defines it as a disorder. In the *DSM-IV*, an individual could be diagnosed as a ‘sexual masochist’ if they met criterion ‘A’, even if it did not cause them any ‘distress or impairment’. Thus, in the *DSM-IV* there is no distinction offered between paraphilias (criterion ‘A’) and paraphilic disorders (criteria ‘A + B’), which pathologise individuals who engage in paraphilic practices.

These limitations in the diagnostic criteria of the paraphilias in the *DSM-IV*<sup>29</sup> are being addressed by the proposed changes for the *DSM-5* put forward by the Paraphilias Sub-workgroup. In particular they wish to see:

the [*DSM-5*] make a distinction between *paraphilias* and *paraphilic disorders*. A paraphilia by itself would not automatically justify or require psychiatric intervention. A *paraphilic disorder* is a paraphilia that causes distress or impairment to the individual or harm to others. [...] In this conception, having a paraphilia would be necessary but not a sufficient condition for having a paraphilic disorder.<sup>30</sup>

This would affect the diagnostic criteria of the paraphilias in the following way: now criterion ‘A’ would be sufficient for defining a paraphilia but criteria ‘A and B’ would be required for the implementation of a paraphilic disorder.<sup>31</sup> This change would mean

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<sup>28</sup> BehaveNet® Clinical Capsule™: Sexual Masochism’

<<http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/sexmasochism.htm>> [accessed 18 January 2011]

<sup>29</sup> These criteria are the same for ‘sexual masochism’ within the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000). BehaveNet® Clinical Capsule™: Sexual Masochism’

<<http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/sexmasochism.htm>> [accessed 18 January 2011]

<sup>30</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’

<<http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=187>> [accessed 23 May 2011].

<sup>31</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

that paraphilias themselves were no longer considered psychopathological, yet the distinction between normative and non-normative sexual practices would be retained. The Paraphilias Sub-workgroup suggests that a paraphilic disorder should only be diagnosed if it causes significant impairment to the functioning of an individual. To reflect these proposed changes to the diagnostic criteria they suggest that the psychopathological condition be renamed from ‘sexual masochism’ to ‘sexual masochism disorder’.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the name change, the diagnostic criteria would remain similar to the *DSM-IV*. They are as follows:

A) Over a period of at least six months, recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the act of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, as manifested by fantasies, urges, or behaviors.

B) The person has clinically significant distress or impairment in important areas of functioning.

*Specify if:*

*With Asphyxiophilia (Sexually Aroused by Asphyxiation)*<sup>33</sup>

The only significant change made to the diagnostic criteria was to specify whether asphyxiophilia is also present. Dr Steven Hucker, in a report for the Paraphilia Sub-workgroup,<sup>34</sup> wrote his recommendations for whether to include ‘hypoxyphilia’<sup>35</sup> as a distinct category within the paraphilias. However, he concluded that it was unclear whether ‘sexual arousal was in fact a result of oxygen deprivation; rather it appeared that individuals would primarily obtain sexual arousal by restricting their breathing which secondarily resulted in the subjective experience of oxygen deprivation’.<sup>36</sup> For this reason Dr Hucker considered that the ‘term asphyxiophilia, coined previously by

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>34</sup> S. J. Hucker, *Advisor’s report on hypoxyphilia to the DSM-5 subcommittee on paraphilias.*, 2009 <[<sup>35</sup> This means sexual excitement from a lack of oxygen.](http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevision/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=187#>.”</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>36</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

John Money<sup>37</sup> was more accurate and should be used'.<sup>38</sup> The committee concluded that there was not sufficient research to warrant creating a new category and code in the *DSM* and so incorporated it into a subset of sexual masochism. The relationship between asphyxiophilia and sadomasochism is a fraught one within community-based discourse as within nosology. Lisa Downing has argued that community rhetoric tends precisely to exclude and pathologise this practice, delineating it as separate from 'healthy' SM.<sup>39</sup> I will return to this discussion later in the chapter when considering the politics of intentionally risk-courting SM practices.

Minimal changes were made to the diagnostic criteria in parts 'A' and 'B'. In criterion 'A' the phrase 'real, not simulated' was removed because the paraphilic subgroup argued that it 'did not appear to add any real distinction' to the diagnostic criteria.<sup>40</sup> In criterion 'B' the affective area for sexual masochism now states 'important areas of functioning' rather than specifying areas. While the *DSM-IV* diagnostic criteria provide room for autoerotic masochistic practices, the *DSM-5* makes their possibility explicit. In the proposed 'patient self-rated measure' questionnaire the first question asks whether the arousing behaviour could be 'caused either by your own actions or inflicted by another person'.<sup>41</sup> This enables the collapse of intentional self-injury onto sexual masochism, rather than retaining them as two discrete categories. These practices exist as part of a continuum. The classification of autoerotic masochism or self-injury depends upon the reported intention behind the acts rather than a fundamental difference between the practices themselves.

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<sup>37</sup> John Money, *Lovemaps: clinical concepts of sexual/erotic health and pathology, paraphilia, and gender transposition in childhood, adolescence, and maturity* (New York: Irvington, 1988, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> 'Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5'.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Downing, 'Beyond Safety: Erotic Asphyxiation and the Limits of SM Discourse', in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 119-132.

<sup>40</sup> 'Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5'.

<sup>41</sup> 'Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5'.

Self-injury has a short history within the *DSM*, as up to and including the *DSM-IV-TR* it does not have its own clinical diagnosis. Instead it is one of nine diagnostic criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder, which states ‘recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or thoughts or self-mutilating behavior’.<sup>42</sup> This criterion conflates attempted suicide with self-injury, which have reported different intentions and levels of lethality.<sup>43</sup> Medical professionals often equate self-injury exclusively with Borderline Personality Disorder despite not presenting with the criteria required for that condition.<sup>44</sup> This is one of the reasons that that the *DSM-5* proposes to introduce the condition of ‘non-suicidal self-injury’ (NSSI).

In the proposals for the *DSM-5*, NSSI has four diagnostic criteria, which is necessary for a new condition to be comprehensive.<sup>45</sup> The *DSM-5* workgroup explains why it chose the term ‘non-suicidal self-injury’ rather than ‘self-mutilation’ or ‘self-harm’.<sup>46</sup> The term ‘*mutilation* signifies either the physical loss or loss of use of a body part’, whereas NSSI ‘involves the self-infliction of superficial damage without consequent loss of power or anatomy’.<sup>47</sup> They consider the term ‘self-harm’ to be too broad because it connotes any behaviour that can result in ‘harmful consequences’ for the individual concerned. They conclude that the term NSSI is the most appropriate term because it is ‘the term chosen by practitioners and researchers’.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ‘BehaveNet® Clinical Capsule™: Borderline Personality Disorder’

<<http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/borderlinepd.htm>> [accessed 23 May 2011].

<sup>43</sup> ‘Non-Suicidal Self-Injury | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’

<<http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=443>> [accessed 18 January 2011].

<sup>44</sup> ‘Non-Suicidal Self-Injury | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>45</sup> See Appendix to read the complete criteria.

<sup>46</sup> This is the term that is used by the World Health Authority in the ICD-10. World Health Organisation, ‘ICD-10: Intentional Self-Harm (X60-X84)’, 2007.

<<http://apps.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/>> [accessed 6 June 2011].

<sup>47</sup> ‘Non-Suicidal Self-Injury | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Proposal to the DSM-V Childhood Disorder and Mood Disorder Work Groups to Include

The principal diagnostic criterion for NSSI attempts to define its psychopathology through a process of stating what it is not. Criterion one states:

In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body, of a sort likely to induce bleeding or bruising or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), for purposes not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, etc.), but performed with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm. The absence of suicidal intent is either reported by the patient or can be inferred by frequent use of methods that the patient knows, by experience, not to have lethal potential. [...] The behavior is not of a common and trivial nature, such as picking at a wound or nail biting.<sup>49</sup>

This criterion focuses upon surface injury to the body that is visible to others, whereas the broader term self-harm would also include overdoses. The concept of physical harm to the skin through means ‘not socially sanctioned’ highlights the importance of social norms in the construction of psychiatric disorders. This implies that there is a substantive difference between self-injury and socially acceptable practices such as body piercing and tattooing. The assumption that a practice that is not socially acceptable is therefore automatically pathological is, to my mind, problematic. It opens the question of whether a socially acceptable practice (e.g. leg and bikini waxing, eyebrow plucking) that is carried out in order to attain relief through pain is, in fact, NSSI.

There are similarities in the discourse used for the diagnostic criteria for sexual masochism and NSSI, which supports my argument that the two practices exist on a continuum. Both practices are defined by what they are not, specifically in relation to socially acceptable behaviour, as discussed in more depth earlier in this section. To receive a clinical diagnosis of either disorder requires the presence of ‘clinically

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Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) as a DSM-V Disorder’ Document downloaded from <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=443#> [accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2011]. For further information see: Matthew Nock (ed.), *Understanding Nonsuicidal Self-Injury*, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

significant distress or impairment’ in the patient’s ability to function.<sup>50</sup> Since the concept of ‘distress’ in fact depends on an individual’s relationship with social and cultural norms, it is inherently subjective. This could mean that those who engage in non-normative practices could be distressed due to their awareness that they deviate from social norms, rather than because of the nature of the practices. Both include ‘a period of preoccupation’ prior to engaging with the behaviour that results in a sense of anticipated relief or satisfaction.<sup>51</sup> This could be of a psychic or sexual nature as the wording is ambiguous. It is possible that it could be both, as the transitional narrative from NSSI (or autoerotic masochism) to sexual masochism depicted in *Secretary* suggests. In the next section I will expand upon the function and implications of the coming of age transitional narrative in *Secretary*.

### **4.3 Narratives of Progression and Transition**

In this section I argue that *Secretary* includes multiple parallel coming of age transitional narratives in relation to its protagonist Lee Holloway. These are: a developmental interpretation of femininity from infantilised to a sexualised adult; from masturbation to couple-based practices; and from self-injury and autoerotic masochism to couple-based masochistic practices. These narratives mirror Freud’s conception of female sexuality as being a progression from infantile clitoral sexuality to adult vaginal sexuality.<sup>52</sup> It is possible to read Lee Holloway at the beginning of the film in terms of infantilised femininity, masturbation and self-injury, which provides a kinky mirror of Freud’s clitoral sexuality. The logic of *Secretary*, like Freud’s logic, suggests that these stages are infantile and must be replaced with their adult forms, which represent

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<sup>50</sup> ‘BehaveNet® Clinical Capsule™: Sexual Masochism’; ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>51</sup> Sexual Masochism Disorder | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’ ‘Non-Suicidal Self-Injury | Proposed Revision | APA DSM-5’.

<sup>52</sup> I have discussed this in more depth in Chapter One.

maturity. In turn, Freud's successful developmental narrative concludes with a woman attaining pleasure through vaginal sexuality, which *Secretary* mirrors when Lee becomes a sexualised adult who engages in couple-based masochistic practices (and, indeed, intercourse). This narrative of progression reflects the privileging of the couple, while sexual practices that only involve an individual are arguably considered less important and a sign of immaturity.

Erin Cressida Wilson, *Secretary's* screenwriter, deployed slightly differently the logic that I am arguing obtains here when she planned the adaptation of Mary Gaitskill's short story 'Secretary' from the collection *Bad Behaviour*.<sup>53</sup> Wilson's adaptation alters the role of power from an abusive context in the story to that of an erotic power-play dynamic in the screenplay and film. In Gaitskill's story the protagonist (Debby) does not self-injure; nor does she have masochistic desires or a relationship with her boss Mr Grey. Instead Debby chooses to leave her job because she has become disillusioned with the power difference and has become a victim of sexual harassment. Wilson outlines her reason for changing the narrative emphasis in the screenplay's introduction:

I didn't want to create yet another drama about a woman recovering from her problems or perversions. Then I thought: What if this were a coming-out film for a submissive? What if she were to stop fighting it—and instead—she embraced it, defined it, and then became empowered? What if her real problem was not her submissive behavior with her lawyer? What if I added a visually upsetting self-destructive activity for her in the first act? So, I gave her a painful situation to come out of—self-cutting—and worked from there.<sup>54</sup>

Wilson's argument posits an unproblematic coming out narrative, whereas I argue that this film instead depicts a problematically normative transitional narrative from immaturity to maturity. Although it could seem that these narratives are identical Wilson positions self-injurious practices as being the antithesis of masochistic ones,

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<sup>53</sup> Mary Gaitskill, 'Secretary', *Bad Behaviour* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), pp. 145-162.

<sup>54</sup> Erin Cressida Wilson, 'Introduction', *Secretary: A Screenplay* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2003), pp. iii-vii (p. vi).

whereas I argue that they exist as part of a continuum and that the logic that seeks to separate them is based on value judgments.

In line with the transition narrative, Lee Holloway undergoes an ‘ugly duckling’ to ‘swan’ transformation, which in human terms is from being an awkward adolescent to a sensual woman. However, the film’s credits show Lee in an outfit that conforms to the stereotypical idea of the sexy secretary: a black pencil skirt, black heels and a fitted white blouse. She wears a collar and bar attachment to ensure that her wrists must be in the air, far away from her body. Shainberg included this snapshot sequence to entice the audience and to ensure they are aware that the film contains titillating content.<sup>55</sup> The film then cuts to a scene six months earlier in which Lee sits outside a mental institution in an ill-fitting outfit, pulling up sagging knee-socks that are reminiscent of both a child and a poorly dressed old woman. This situates Lee as the ugly duckling. In terms of attire, the film depicts Lee in either of these two modes but she only makes the transition to ‘adult’ attire at Mr Grey’s instigation.

*Secretary*’s sets echo Lee’s transition from a child to an adult, particularly in the depictions of her engaging in autoerotic masochistic practices (or self-injury) and masturbation or couple-based masochism. Lee’s bedroom in the family home is where she masturbates, self-injures and seems to retreat into a childlike state. Her bedroom seems to belong to a hyper-feminine child, not an adult woman. It is filled with pale pink gauze, soft textures and a white canopy surrounds her bed as though she were a princess from a fairy tale. The first time the audience sees Lee in her room she retrieves a box from its secret place under her mattress where it is wrapped in a multi-coloured heart-patterned fabric. She caresses the box before opening it, as though it contains some precious treasure. It does: her cutting paraphernalia. Lee removes a figurine of a ballerina from the box then sharpens its foot that is already en pointe until it is an

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<sup>55</sup> David Breskin and Steven Shainberg, ‘Interview’, *Secretary: A Screenplay* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2003), pp. 139-155 (pp. 151-152).

implement she can use to cut herself. This conflation of the childlike and feminine with self-injury implies Lee's immaturity and her infantilisation within the narrative.

By contrast, Lee's transformation to conforming to an adult femininity occurs while working for Mr Grey at his office. When Lee attends the office for the initial interview, she wears a hooded purple rain cape, reminiscent of the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood.<sup>56</sup> The use of this trope implies to the audience that she is the innocent going into the hands of the wolf, her future boss. In turn, it is at his insistence that she changes her attire because she is a 'visual representation of [his] business... and the way [she] dress[es] is disgusting.'<sup>57</sup> This moment in the film again silences Lee but results in her conforming to a clichéd ideal and under his control.

I will now move the focus to what I would define as the pivotal scene in the film because it is where Mr Grey exerts his control and forbids Lee from self-injuring again. This forces her to make the transition from childlike masturbatory sexuality to becoming a sexual adult. The transition is implied through the tone of voice used by the actors and the pacing of the scene. Since I will focus upon this scene in depth, I provide its full transcription below:

Mr. Grey: Lee, I'm going to be frank with you. I know I'm your employer... and we have a prescribed relationship... but you really should feel free... to discuss your problems with me.

Lee [*realization what he's going to ask her*]: Oh. [*nervous giggles*]

Mr. Grey: What's going on with the sewing kit and the Band-Aids?

[*Lee takes a deep breath and looks nervous.*]

Lee...?

Lee: I feel...

Mr. Grey & Lee in unison: Shy.

Mr. Grey: Do you want some hot chocolate?

Lee: Okay.

Mr. Grey: Why do you cut yourself, Lee?

Lee: I don't know.

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<sup>56</sup> Its original title however was 'little red-cap' before it entered popular culture as 'Little Red Riding Hood.' The Brothers Grimm, 'Little Red-Cap', in *Fairy Tales* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. 137-144.

<sup>57</sup> *Secretary*, my own transcription.

Mr. Grey: Is it that sometimes the pain inside has to come to the surface... and when you see evidence of the pain inside... you finally know you're really here? Then when you watch the wound heal it's comforting, isn't it?

Lee: I... [pause] that's a way to put it.

Mr. Grey: I'm going to tell you something, Lee. Are you ready to listen?

Lee: Yes.

Mr. Grey: Are you listening? You will never... ever... cut yourself again. Do you understand? Have I made that perfectly clear? You're over that now. It's in the past.

Lee: Yes.

Mr. Grey: Never again.

Lee: Okay.

Mr. Grey: Now, you know what I want you to do? I want you to leave work early. You're a big girl... a grown woman, [pause] your mother doesn't need to pick you up every day. I want you to take a nice walk home, [pause] in the fresh air, because you require relief. Because you won't be doing THAT anymore, will you?

Lee: No, sir. [*look of adoration*]

Mr. Grey: Good. [*takes a Polaroid photo of her*]

[CUT]<sup>58</sup>

In this exchange there are several themes at play: Mr Grey transgresses the professional boundary and adopts a parental role; he treats Lee like a child and there is also an erotic power-exchange dynamic at play. Mr Grey opens the dialogue aware that he is transgressing their 'prescribed relationship' because it seems that he wants to know Lee on a personal level, not just as his employee. As in Gaitskill's short story, this could be abusive, yet here Lee seems happy to follow his cues. He has prepared for this encounter because he offers her some hot chocolate that he has already made and hidden behind the sofa. His choice of drink positions Lee in the role of child because throughout the rest of the film they drink coffee. Later in the exchange he tells her that she should start walking home from work because she is 'a big girl... a grown woman' who needs to learn her independence and not be picked up by her mother. This enforced maturity mirrors the rite of passage that many children undergo when they are given their first taste of independence and are allowed to walk home from school alone.

Mr Grey also treats Lee like a child when he speaks for her to describe her experiences with self-injury, temporarily removing her ability to have a voice. This

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<sup>58</sup> *Secretary*, my own transcription.

silencing implies that he does not consider her able to speak for herself, which reflects the role of the parent who knows best. By silencing Lee, Mr Grey places her in a submissive position, which is indicated through the many pauses, his leading questions and her brief answers. He uses this dominant position to inform Lee that she will ‘never... ever... cut [herself] again’. Through this scene Mr Grey’s role alters from the boss to a dominant figure who engages with Lee as a submissive. Although consent is never made explicit in the film, Lee implies it when she responds to his command with ‘No, sir’, said in a coquettish slow manner and maintaining eye contact with him. Her choice of the moniker ‘sir’ connotes authority and is used to indicate the superiority of the male to whom it is addressed. The word *sir* is often used within the SM community for dominant and submissive relationships as an explicit awareness of the power difference at play.<sup>59</sup> This dialogue is a pivotal point in the film because it marks Lee’s transition from self-injurious, autoerotic masochistic practices to couple-based practices. The first spanking sequence occurs shortly after, and it is as though in this dialogue Mr Grey is testing whether or not Lee is willing to play his sexual game of domination and submission.

The argument of transformation depends on the relationship between the signification of wounds, intentions and power dynamics involved. Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn offer some useful terminology to help unpack the different roles and functions of wounds. Their terms are ‘the wounder; the wounded; the wound(s) produced; and the wound(s) healed’.<sup>60</sup> To break this down further, the wounder is the person who inflicts the wound upon the wounded. This then produces a wound, which can have one interpretation but take on a different significance when it becomes the healed wound. In

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<sup>59</sup> Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 2003), p. 161.

<sup>60</sup> Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn, ‘Introducing the Erotics of Wounding’, in *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding*, ed. by Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 1-15 (p. 4).

self-injurious and autoerotic masochistic practices, the wounder and the wounded are the same person, meaning that the power circulates within a single individual. By contrast, in couple-based masochistic practices, the wounder and wounded are different people, so power is exchanged between them. *Secretary* depicts Lee's transition from the first of these two positions to the second. I will demonstrate that although the film depicts the protagonist Lee Holloway as self-injuring, the visual representation of Lee's reaction to the self-injurious practice mirrors her reaction to the masochistic practices that she engages in with her boss Mr Grey. I will use this visual similarity to argue that *Secretary* engages with the blurred boundaries between self-injury and autoerotic masochistic practices, and that the film depicts a trajectory from autoerotic masochistic practices to couple-based practices.

Towards the beginning of the film Lee witnesses her father in an alcohol-fuelled rage beating her mother until there is broken glass on the floor. Lee's immediate response to witnessing this scene is to desire to feel an intense sensation, so she is shown to grab the kettle that is boiling on the stove. In the screenplay Erin Cressida Wilson describes it in the following terms:

*Lee lifts her night gown up and picks up the tea kettle.  
CLOSE ON her face, as, off-screen, she very deliberately brings the kettle to the  
flesh of her thigh. Her face slowly relaxes. The desperation leaves. The tears  
leave. She is CALM and peaceful. A WASH OF VIOLET SPREADS ACROSS  
THE SCREEN*<sup>61</sup>

In the film, just before Lee reaches the sense of calm described, she is shown to go through an orgasmic state of release where she gasps, her face relaxes and she makes a moan, releasing tears at the same time. This is significant because later in the film after Mr Grey has spanked Lee for the first time her facial expressions mirror exactly those shown in the self-injury sequence, which shifts from pain to euphoria. After the first spanking, we see Lee:

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<sup>61</sup> Erin Cressida Wilson, p. 23, original emphasis. I have used the screenplay here as it offers a succinct description of the action on screen.

*Lee quickly moves to the full-length mirror, LIFTS HER SKIRT, PULLS DOWN HER PANTIES and steals a glance at the RED on the CHEEKS OF HER BOTTOM.*

*The screen is WASHED WITH VIOLET as a calm appears on Lee's face.*<sup>62</sup>

The film uses the same representational techniques for Lee's emotional reaction to both the wounds she receives from Mr Grey and her own intentionally injurious practices. After both sequences the screen is described as being 'washed with violet' and the sense of relief marked on Lee's face is the identical in both sequences: one of erotic satisfaction, calm and relief at externalising emotions.

As explained above, in both self-injuring practices and autoerotic masochistic practices, the wounder and the wounded are the same person. This means that the power dynamic exists within the same individual, yet the reactions to the wounds could be markedly different. In a 2008 chapter, Ani Ritchie explores the relationship between self-injurious practices and couple-based masochistic ones by using a focus group of self-identified practitioners, who are bisexual, polyamorous women.<sup>63</sup> Ritchie discovers there are a range of interpretations of the wound, the process and the emotions surrounding their self-injurious practices and SM. I now offer a brief overview of the differences between those who see the practices as connected and those who do not.

Some argue that self-injury and SM are fundamentally different and adopt a variety of strategies to retain this difference. These include: using different implements, being in different emotional states and using different locations on the body, favouring the arms or thighs for self-injury, while using more sexually focused areas for SM. They hold that self-injury is a private act, while within their community SM is communal, positive and an expression of sexual pleasure. Another comments that she finds

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<sup>62</sup> Erin Cressida Wilson, p. 53, original emphasis. I have used the screenplay here as it offers a succinct description of the action on screen.

<sup>63</sup> Ani Ritchie, 'Harming or Healing? The Meanings of Wounding among Sadomasochists who also Self-Injure', in *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding*, ed. by Viv Burr and Jeff Hearn (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 71-88.

watching aesthetic cutting or play cutting to be a beautiful process, while she feels that cutting as a self-injurious practice is ‘scary and uncontrolled’.<sup>64</sup>

By contrast, those who feel that the practices exist on a continuum comment on the aesthetics of the wounds and their emotional state, avowing that ‘the processes involved in both are a kind of escapism’.<sup>65</sup> Another argues, ‘Aesthetically there is a similarity. I like the look of having cut myself and I like the look of it having been done.’<sup>66</sup> The same participant again critiques the expectation that self-injury is mainly associated with negative, hostile feelings and a sense of punishment towards oneself. For her—and, I would argue, for Lee in *Secretary*—it is a way to ‘control [her] environment and to create something new’.<sup>67</sup>

These participants engage in multiple narratives to understand and interpret their own relationship to these practices that have a contentious relationship within society. One participant thinks that in society at large self-injury is understood as a more acceptable practice than SM, yet both are still considered pathological. By contrast, another participant argues that within their marginalised subculture SM is an acceptable and normalised practice, while self-injury often signifies mental turmoil and so is considered pathological. Ritchie’s paper starts to explore this complicated area where nuances overlap and it concludes with the following statement:

Generally participants privileged the visible wounding of self-injury as a private expression of relief, endurance or punishment but expressed anxiety about that marking being seen by anyone. The visible marking of SM was used to evidence similar experiences, but were less tensely related to within participants’ own social context, worn as ‘badges of honour’ and cherished as reminders of desirability.<sup>68</sup>

I would argue that these different significations and interpretations of wounds are

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<sup>64</sup> Ani Ritchie, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> Ani Ritchie, p. 80.

<sup>66</sup> Ani Ritchie, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup> Ani Ritchie, p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Ani Ritchie, p. 86.

intimately related to social norms, acceptability and the West's privileging of the couple as a symbol of sexual maturity, as has been argued by, for example, Ros Gill and Lynn Comella.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.4 Therapeutic Narrative

Within romantic comedy's normalising imperatives *Secretary* represents some ways that SM can have a positive effect upon its practitioners, leading to a sense of fulfilment or a therapeutic effect. This mirrors a move within the theoretical literature concerning SM that seeks to examine the ways in which it can be distanced from pathology<sup>70</sup> and challenges its position within the *DSM*.<sup>71</sup> The work of Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi has a symbiotic relationship with contemporary media images of SM, as both engage in a healing narrative, particularly *Secretary* and the documentary on Bob Flanagan *Sick: The Life and Death of a Supermasochist*.<sup>72</sup> These media narratives draw on beliefs coming out of SM communities that through certain SM practices it is possible to resituate and re-appropriate trauma so that it no longer has the same traumatic resonances.

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<sup>69</sup> Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (London: Polity Press, 2006), p. 239; Lynn Comella, '(Safe) Sex and the City: On Vibrators, Masturbation, and the Myth of "Real" Sex"', *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 (2003), pp. 109-112.

<sup>70</sup> Darren Langridge and Meg Barker, *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, 'Silencing Accounts of Silenced Sexualities', in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 67-81; Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216; Peggy Kleinplatz and Charles Moser, 'Is SM Pathological?', in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 55-62; Darren Langridge and Trevor Butt, 'The Erotic Construction of Power Exchange', *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 18 (2005), 65-73.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, 'DSM-IV-TR and the paraphilias: An argument for removal', *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 17 (2005), 322-337.

<sup>72</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216; *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, dir. by Kirby Dick (1997).

Barker, Gupta and Iantaffi recount their personal experiences of SM practices as therapeutic to support their argument about media texts.<sup>73</sup> They use this methodology as a way to shift the focus away from grand universalising narratives and towards particularities.<sup>74</sup> Their paper suggests that it is possible to construct SM as a safe space, a fantasy that is constructed as separate from reality. Indeed this narrative involves a deliberate engagement with the discourse of health and harm that is a principal element of the pathologising narrative put forward in the *DSM*, as I discussed earlier. This engagement with the debate from the practitioners could be seen to enact Foucault's theory of 'reverse discourse' because it is a way of engaging with the pathologising narrative that issues from the authority discourse and repurposing that narrative to benefit marginalised sexual subjects.

Barker, Gupta and Iantaffi argue that:

some BDSMers see their practices as contributing to a therapeutic technology which enables them to deal with issues such as abuse and discrimination and/or to cope with physical and emotional pain or tension, perhaps as an alternative outlet to self-injurious practices.<sup>75</sup>

However, there are problems with this logic in that it recreates the pathologised discourses and simply moves the signposts concerning which practices are sanctioned and which are not. This is particularly problematic because, while it repositions SM within a palatable framework, it serves to pathologise further self-injurious practices. However, Barker, Gupta and Iantaffi are aware of this problem because they acknowledge that both practices 'can be seen as socially constructed'.<sup>76</sup> Indeed they are aware that work has been examined that suggests there are different emotions and

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<sup>73</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216.

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>75</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, p. 197.

<sup>76</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, p. 212.

concerns behind SM and self-injury,<sup>77</sup> which again cohere with *Secretary's* argument that 'BDSM provides a "healthier" way of exploring some of the feelings that may have otherwise been released in self-injury'.<sup>78</sup> Like me, they are concerned that this distinction posits an artificial distinction between the two practices regarding mental health.

The strategy behind this distinction is understandable, since SM is still categorised within the *DSM* as a pathological practice. It may be that arguing that SM is of therapeutic value contributes to pro-SM arguments and campaigns, such as those by Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, who seek to remove non-normative sexualities from the *DSM*.<sup>79</sup> Moser and Kleinplatz assert that the paraphilias themselves are not mental disorders, and so including them as paraphilias enables potential discrimination towards practitioners. Richard Krueger addresses Moser and Kleinplatz's concerns by arguing that 'the misuse of the DSM to diagnose [the SM community] could be addressed by strengthening caveats circumscribing the application' of the paraphilias categories to the general population.<sup>80</sup> The proposed revisions for sexual masochism in the *DSM-5* suggest progress because, despite the practices still being listed as paraphilias, they are deemed to be paraphilic disorders and thus pathological only if they interfere with an individual's ability to function in society. While Moser and Kleinplatz's work is important, in that it seeks to protect practitioners' rights and responsibilities, it still operates within a medical framework, which does not permit discussion of those practices within SM that embrace and deliberately court danger.

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<sup>77</sup> Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher, 'Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account', *Sexualities*, 4 (2001), 293-314. Ani Ritchie, pp. 71-88.

<sup>78</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216 (p. 212).

<sup>79</sup> Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz, (2005), 322-337; Peggy Kleinplatz and Charles Moser, (2007), pp. 55-62.

<sup>80</sup> R. B. Krueger.

Although Barker, Gupta and Iantaffi posit some therapeutic possibilities for SM, they are aware that this discourse has its own limitations. If the therapeutic narrative became the dominant cultural one, it could suggest that it ‘is only for those who are positioned as sick, mentally unbalanced or marginal in some way (queer or disabled)’.<sup>81</sup> Both the endorsement of the healing narrative and the community rhetoric that SM must be ‘safe, sane and consensual’ creates an artificial categorisation between ‘good’ and acceptable SM practices on the one hand, and those that fall outside this remit on the other. This argument will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter through a consideration of SM and its radical potential, as well as a consideration of the political reasons why this would not be the dominant discourse offered for SM. Indeed there is a concern that:

healing narratives could be in danger of constructing a ‘good BDSM’er who, like the ‘good gay citizen’, sits at the top of a new hierarchy above all relationships and practices which do not fit this image, pressurising people to assimilate this rather than embracing a variety of different identities.<sup>82</sup>

*Secretary* manifests this concern through its juxtaposition of Lee and Mr Grey’s ‘good’ SM and the ‘bad’ SM Lee discovers while she is temporarily separated from Mr Grey. Lee meets these other ‘bad’ SMers through a newspaper advert, which we are shown in close-up, that says:

SADIST SEEKS MASOCHIST. S&M adventures in paradis [sic]. Find your ‘darker’ side with me. Whips? Chains? I’m the one. Pain/Pleasure. Let’s try Now!<sup>83</sup>

This advert draws upon various clichés about SM within the popular imagination, which suggests that practices are more important than dynamics. Lee’s voiceover serves to position these dates as socially awkward men who have fetishes that she considers bizarre. The scene lasts for less than a minute but incorporates the following:

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<sup>81</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216 (p. 205).

<sup>82</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216 (pp. 205-6).

<sup>83</sup> *Secretary*.

[voiceover by Lee]

There was one [man] who tried to grab and pinch my nipples before we even made it to his car. [...]

Another guy kept ordering me to pee on his patio and when I refused, he said 'I thought you were a masochist.'

Then there was the one who liked being tied to a gas stove while the burners were on full blast and I had to throw tomatoes at him.<sup>84</sup>

The film intones judgement of these other characters by the brief amount of time given to them and the fact that Lee's encounters result in her deciding to 'stop trying' engaging in masochistic encounters.<sup>85</sup> This repositions Lee's relationship with Mr Grey as the 'good' type of SM because it focuses upon the practices within a normative heterosexual romantic couple.

In a 2009 chapter Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige explore the limitations of the therapeutic model because of its inherent links with the pathologising discourse favoured by the medical model.<sup>86</sup> They pose the question whether, as researchers, they should affirm or find alternatives to the therapeutic narrative. Through a conversational format Barker and Langdrige adopt divergent positions regarding the ethical position of and function of the discourse of SM as therapy. Langdrige argues that it is 'dangerous' to include narratives of SM as therapeutic because it risks suggesting that SMers themselves are ill, which 'has the potential to be perverted by the social world'.<sup>87</sup> He goes on to argue that he is concerned that the narrative that understands SM as therapy is problematic because it could make troubled individuals worse and he does not think it is an appropriate avenue for those with 'big' problems.<sup>88</sup> For Langdrige, those individuals would do this work more appropriately in a psychotherapeutic setting that has more rigid boundaries. Langdrige states that his

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<sup>84</sup> *Secretary*, my transcription.

<sup>85</sup> *Secretary*.

<sup>86</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, 'Silencing Accounts of Silenced Sexualities', in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 67-81.

<sup>87</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, pp. 67-81, (p. 70).

<sup>88</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige, pp. 67-81, (p. 72).

main worry is the notion of ‘healing’ [...] and ‘cure’ [...] being conflated. As soon as you start naming something as healing there is an implication that a person can be cured by it. This should not necessarily be the case but - probably due to the dominance of the medical model - that is what tends to happen. Two implications follow, that SMers have a need for healing and second, that once ‘cured’ people will stop doing SM.<sup>89</sup>

Langdridge concludes by stating that the fundamental problem is that ‘the therapy story comes out of medical discourse and is still in it’.<sup>90</sup> His proposal is that because the SM community is new and still quite vulnerable it ought to be cautious about the kinds of narratives that are being developed and used to discuss it until it has a less pathologised interpretation in the media, following the example of the gay community and its campaigns for liberation. Langdridge considers that this is of particular importance because SM practices still are categorised as paraphilias within the *DSM*.

Barker’s comments in the chapter are positioned as oppositional to Langdridge’s because they attempt to show the ways in which therapeutic narratives can be beneficial. She argues that they ought to be incorporated into narratives concerning SM because they are the ‘lived experience of many people’ and that to silence these narratives would be further silencing an already marginalised minority.<sup>91</sup>

There is a responsibility as a researcher, to try—as far as possible—to predict how the media and wider social world are likely to take up the accounts that are produced, especially when the sexualities we write about are largely silenced with available narratives either non-existent or stigmatising.<sup>92</sup>

Barker suggests that rather than silencing any individual narrative that it would be better to emphasise that ‘there *are* multiple stories’ to counter the fact that contemporary media offers few versions of these practices and cultures.<sup>93</sup> Barker and Langdridge state:

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<sup>89</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81, (p. 72).

<sup>90</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81, (p. 74).

<sup>91</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81, (p. 70).

<sup>92</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81, (p. 71).

<sup>93</sup> Estelle Noonan develops this idea through an interpretation of the ‘hunger strike’ scene in *Secretary* as offering multiple interpretations of the same action. In this sequence, she is visited by a variety of

If the only stories available [in the media] are those of trauma and pathology there is a real danger that SMers will monitor and police themselves in negative ways, potentially further fuelling these very limiting and pathologising discourses. Media stories have the power both to offer up new potentialities and to twist and pervert them.<sup>94</sup>

This process is exemplified through two mainstream cultural examples that engage with the trauma and pathology narrative, and SM as pleasure: the book and the film *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*<sup>95</sup> and the TV series *True Blood*.<sup>96</sup> *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is the first part of a crime trilogy. It collapses sexual assault and violence with SM and uses them to provide both the trilogy's catalyst and its denouement. The protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, is anally raped, beaten and bound by her legally appointed guardian in the first part of the narrative.<sup>97</sup> She then returns to his apartment to seek revenge, tattooing 'I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST' across his stomach.<sup>98</sup> *True Blood* incorporates multiple interpretations of SM as both suggestive of crime and of pleasure. In the first episode of the first season, entitled 'Strange Love',<sup>99</sup> Jason, the brother of the central character, suspends a woman's hands from the ceiling while having sex with her from behind with his hands around her throat. Later that night she is found dead, and those investigating the death later find a video of him engaging in this practice. The police assume that Jason's non-normative desires thus indicate he is a murderer, yet he is later found innocent. Later in the same series, SM is represented as playful when the same character is left handcuffed to his

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different characters (her father, a feminist, Mr Grey's ex-wife, her mother, a priest etc.) who each offer Lee with a different perspective upon her actions. Estelle Noonan, 'Towards an S & M Quotidienne? Rethinking "Bad Behaviour" in Secretary', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2010, 135-152.

<sup>94</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81 (p. 73).

<sup>95</sup> *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (Män som hatar kvinnor)*, dir. by Niels Arden Oplev (2009); Stieg Larsson, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (London: Quercus, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> *True Blood*, Alan Ball (HBO, 2008-2012).

<sup>97</sup> Larsson, pp. 223-4.

<sup>98</sup> Larsson, p. 235, original emphasis.

<sup>99</sup> 'Strange Love', *True Blood* (Channel 4, 2009).

girlfriend's bed as a joke while she goes to work.<sup>100</sup> These examples demonstrate some of the different ways that the media represents SM as a trauma and pathological narrative (often in crime programmes), while it depicts SM as pleasure when it is within the remit of 'playfulness' or carried out by an established romantic couple.

A principal problem with examining the 'SM as therapy' narrative is that '[b]y encouraging a story of SM as healing we may also be serving to support the continuing notion of SM as pathological, rooted in trauma'.<sup>101</sup> This concern is one that is difficult to ignore and yet there are few ways to move away from this narrative. As Barker states: 'It's like there's a kind of loop with people drawing on dominant discourses and putting stories back out there which reinforce them.'<sup>102</sup> Although the therapeutic narrative is appealing because of its representation in films such as *Secretary*, it offers many problems that, rather than offering and enabling a non-pathologised interpretation of SM, can instead further pathologise these practices. Langdridge's concern that the concept of healing contains the related concept of curing is an important concern and one that is suggested by the developmental narrative in *Secretary*. Barker and Langdridge do offer a solution and a way to move beyond the therapeutic narrative's engagement with pathology while retaining its meaning in their concluding question:

Might it not be better—politically speaking—to encourage the telling of stories of growth and transcendence which might be anchored into representations other than the traditionally Western medical model?<sup>103</sup>

However this does suggest a reification of non-Western narratives as offering all of the solutions, when perhaps the question that needs to be kept in mind is how to alter the structure of the Western narrative itself, which requires a 'radical' (in the sense of returning to the 'root' of the solution) reappraisal of SM. This is the kind of rereading of

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<sup>100</sup> 'Mine', *True Blood* (Channel 4, 2009).

<sup>101</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81 (p. 73).

<sup>102</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81 (p. 74).

<sup>103</sup> Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, pp. 67-81 (p. 76).

*Secretary* that I hope to offer in this chapter because, although it engages with a normative and pathologising discourse, it does in turn provide an alternative interpretation of a mainstream text.

#### **4.5 Radical SM: Rejecting the Health/Harm Binary**

In this section I examine the radical potential of some SM narratives and practices that reject altogether the health and harm binary dominating both the medical and therapeutic narratives concerning the role of SM. This deliberate refusal of pathologising discourse is not compatible with an attempt to normalise SM because it wants to position itself as outside of the ubiquitous imperative of health. The radical narrative of SM is visible in Foucault's late writings and interviews and has been expanded by contemporary queer theorists Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett.<sup>104</sup> I explore why this narrative is intentionally absent from *Secretary* and the political reasons for this choice, and consider how *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan* navigates between SM as a healing and as a radical narrative. I will conclude by considering some of the reasons for these divergent representations of SM in terms of gender, audience and genre.

In his later years Foucault gave many interviews in which he discussed the ways that SM could offer the radical potential to reconfigure existing sexual power dynamics. He considered that SM offered 'the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure' that challenged the 'norm' of genitally focused heterosex and its reproductive imperative.<sup>105</sup> Instead SM enabled a process of 'the eroticization of the body', focused on 'the

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<sup>104</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e)), pp. 382-391; Downing, 'Beyond Safety', pp. 119-132; Lisa Downing, *The Cambridge introduction to Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 'Viewing Critical Psychology through the Lens of Queer', *Psychology and Sexuality*, (2011), 4-15.

<sup>105</sup> Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', p. 384.

desexualisation of pleasure'.<sup>106</sup> Foucault often cited fist-fucking as an exemplary case of this process that challenged preconceived notions regarding genitally-focused sexuality:

The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure. I think *that's* something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.<sup>107</sup>

This interpretation of SM diverges from the discussions of SM as therapeutic, healing or part of a 'bonding' exercise. Indeed, Lisa Downing has argued, using the case of erotic asphyxiation, that practices that use the whole body or non-genital bodily regions can be understood through a Foucauldian framework, as offering a chance to attain so-called 'limit experiences', a term borrowed from Bataille. These are 'extreme experiences that push us to the limits of consciousness and shatter rationality'.<sup>108</sup> Foucault argued that the limit experiences accessible through some forms of SM could provide a chance to reinvent the relationship with the self from a focus upon identity to a relationship 'of differentiation, of creation, of innovation'.<sup>109</sup> This process may, however, bring an identity that can develop into an SM subculture, according to Foucault.<sup>110</sup> However, I am interested in how this kind of re-evaluation of SM as 'radical' and enabling limit experiences seeks to move beyond the discourses of SM as pathological by rejecting the concepts of health and harm.

In a recent article examining the role of critical psychology through queer theory Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett argue some of the ways in which the so-called 'antisocial turn in queer theory' that focuses on concepts of negativity and questioning the role of the future, also enables a re-evaluation of the concepts that critical

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<sup>106</sup> Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', p. 384.

<sup>107</sup> Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', p. 384..

<sup>108</sup> Downing, 'Beyond Safety', p. 127. Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Michel Foucault: Essential Works, 1954-84, Volume 2, Aesthetics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 69-87.

<sup>109</sup> Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', p. 385.

<sup>110</sup> Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', p. 385.

psychology utilises.<sup>111</sup> Lee Edelman's *No Future* embodies the antisocial turn in queer theory because he 'suggests that queer might understand the antisocial and the anti-reproductive as the site of its politics and pleasures, rather than as ideologies to be disowned, denied or repudiated'.<sup>112</sup> This concept enables an interpretation of practices associated with SM as radical because it draws upon the notions that Foucault was elucidating in the passages cited above that non-normative sexual practitioners should insist upon their difference and avoid being normalised. Downing and Gillett argue:

Queer's avowed dissociation from the politics of identity marks its potential applicability to the deconstruction of all normative and non-normative sexual positionalities, behaviours and practices—its capacity to question the very usefulness of continuing to think in such value- and power-laden terms.<sup>113</sup>

Here they outline some of the ways that queer theory could enable a radical re-engagement with SM and other non-normative sexualities because it avoids dividing SM into healthy and unhealthy practices.

Downing and Gillett suggest that a different aim of critical psychology could be to re-examine the role of the discourse of health and harm, and choose to 'resist [...] the category of "health" altogether'.<sup>114</sup> In an earlier chapter on erotic asphyxiation Downing argues that 'the wish to dissociate SM from danger or destructivity can lead, and has led, to a policy of censorship within community contexts'.<sup>115</sup> She states that this is exemplified by practices such as erotic asphyxiation because that practice is routinely excluded from SM safety manuals, such as those produced by SM educator Jay Wiseman.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, autoerotic asphyxiation is known often to lead to death, as in

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<sup>111</sup> Judith Halberstam, 'The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies', *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 5 (2008), 140-156; Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 10.

<sup>112</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 10.

<sup>114</sup> Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Downing, 'Beyond Safety' p. 121.

<sup>116</sup> Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction*. (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 1996).

the famous example of Michael Hutchence.<sup>117</sup> Elsewhere, Downing has examined representations of what John Money termed ‘autassassinophilia (stage managing the possibility of one’s own murder for erotic satisfaction)’<sup>118</sup> as the limit point at which certain practices that are on the edges of ‘SM’ call into question the discursive, political and ideological construction of SM. Indeed Downing also argues that erotic asphyxiation is not a form of SM because that discourse ‘plays it safe’ as demonstrated by its mantra ‘safe, sane consensual’.<sup>119</sup> Both autassassinophilia and erotic asphyxiation deliberately resist and refute a discourse of health because they welcome the risk of death, and reject reproductive futurity embodied in heteronormativity.<sup>120</sup> Their intensity and the risks involved are a crucial part of their outcome. Downing and Gillett conclude their article with the following powerful paragraph:

To ethically embrace the otherness of such practices, without taming their intentions or reducing them to discourses of pathology, victimhood or insanity, entails a Levinasian resistance to the wish to make them fit the comprehensible or familiar model of sexuality that psychology recognises. It demands a Foucauldian recognition of the investment of the mental health disciplines in regulating the behaviour—and the life and death—of citizens in the operation of a biopolitics that is not benevolently protective, but rather an exercise of normalising institutional power. Finally, it involves a queer strategic undoing of the meaning of the binarism of health and pathology, for so long as that model is in operation, so totalising is its meaning that one has no choice but to divide practices into ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’; just as the psy sciences have done since the modern history of sexual taxonomy began. The question may not be where we draw the line, but on what basis we believe it is right to do so; at what cost that decision is taken; and in the name of which ideologies lines get drawn at all.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Anon, ‘22 November 1997: Michael Hutchence found dead in hotel.’ *BBC News* [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/22/newsid\\_4006000/4006205.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/22/newsid_4006000/4006205.stm) [accessed 2 January 2012].

<sup>118</sup> Quote in Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, p. 11 referring to Lisa Downing, ‘On the Limits of Sexual Ethics: The Phenomenology of Autassassinophilia’, *Sexuality and Culture*, 8 (2004), 3-17.

<sup>119</sup> Lisa Downing, ‘Beyond Safety’.

<sup>120</sup> Staci Newmahr explores the relationship between gender and risk, and considers that these practices embody a ‘masculine’ understanding of risk since they reject a consideration of the future and the concept of nurturing. See: Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 118.

<sup>121</sup> Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 11.

In this quotation Downing and Gillett challenge many fundamental concepts within work concerning sexuality and psychology. In particular, a queer reinterpretation (as they define it) depends on understanding, examining and critiquing the foundations of the discourses that enable the health and harm binary, with the *DSM* being one of the principal tools used to discuss and categorise mental health in the western world. The *DSM* works on the principal of classifying symptoms that form the basis of the diagnoses of various mental health conditions. Foucault's work challenging these categories comes out of a broader anti-psychiatry movement exemplified by the work of R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness*.<sup>122</sup> This movement sought to reject the 'normal' and 'pathological' binary, shifting towards a continuum of practices that just 'are'. The addition of queer theory enables a shift beyond the concept of continuum. Instead, an antisocial interpretation of queer theory can permit the questioning of 'methods that idealise a norm of health as unquestioningly "good", when this has been shown historically to be of dubious ethical merit'.<sup>123</sup>

This chapter has argued that *Secretary* attempts to normalise SM through its use of the romantic comedy genre that relies upon certain socially conservative expectations. The film is an assimilationist example of SM that encourages a liberal expansion of the category of healthy and normal practices, and an acknowledgement that SM does not need to be pathological.<sup>124</sup> In this sense it would not be able to acknowledge or explore radical and transgressive SM because the arguments that I have

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<sup>122</sup> Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College de France, 1973-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); R. D. Laing, *Knots* (London: Penguin, 1972); R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin, 1974); R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Family and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1978); Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1981).

<sup>123</sup> Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 12.

<sup>124</sup> Susan Cook explores this concept in more depth by contrasting the type of BDSM portrayed in *Secretary* and Poppy Z. Brite, *Exquisite Corpse* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997). See: Susan Cook, 'Subversion Without Limits: From Secretary's Transgressive SM to Exquisite Corpse's Subversive Sadomasochism', *Discourse*, 28.1 (2006), 121-141.

just discussed reject assimilationist politics. However the film departs from its principal agenda in the hunger strike scene, in which Lee Holloway follows Mr Grey's instruction to remain seated at his desk with her hands on the table. She takes this to its logical conclusion, not moving for three days even to use the toilet and there is a close-up shot of Lee's urine dripping down the side of the chair from her wedding dress. The urine's visibility could incite feelings of disgust because it is bodily waste that is often hidden, avoided or disposed of in a toilet. The urine becomes the abject object that is neither inside nor outside the body, which disrupts the romantic comedy narrative.<sup>125</sup> In a recent theoretical essay on female masochism, Alex Dymock has borrowed from Lacanian-inspired concepts of *jouissance* and anti-utilitarian sexuality to argue that: 'pleasure is sought through the act of suffering [...] so that pleasure and pain become indistinguishable'. This provides a useful framework within which Lee's act can be viewed.<sup>126</sup> This scene suggests that Lee Holloway derives her 'pleasure' from a desire to be obedient to Mr. Grey rather than the 'suffering' (dehydration, starvation etc.) that she endures. In this sequence, Lee also embodies Dymock's masochist who seeks 'pleasure' beyond social norms.<sup>127</sup> Although this scene departs from the film's assimilationist and normalising agenda, it soon returns it to this paradigm by concluding with Mr. Grey caring for Lee until she regains her full health. This suggests that masochism may be understood as a radical moment that can rupture an otherwise normative narrative.

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<sup>125</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3. Noonan offers a different interpretation of this scene where she discusses it in terms of there being no explicit judgement made but that utilises multiple characters to each offer their own perspective. She analyses this by using Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. Estelle Noonan, 135-152.

<sup>126</sup> Alex Dymock, 'But Femsub is Broken Too!: On the Normalization of BDSM and the Problem of Pleasure', *Psychology and Sexuality*, (2012): 54-68, (p. 63).

<sup>127</sup> Dymock, 64.

I will conclude this section with a consideration of the documentary film *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.<sup>128</sup> Although it focuses on a male rather than female masochist, it warrants inclusion in this chapter because of its rare engagement with both the therapeutic and the radical narratives of SM. The film examines the life, art and death of the performance artist Bob Flanagan, who was a long-term sufferer from the genetic condition of cystic fibrosis (CF). It is also a portrait of a relationship between a heterosexual male masochist and his partner Sheree Rose, which includes a public declaration by Flanagan that he will be Sheree's slave and her his mistress. *Sick* situates the radical BDSM practices within the framework of their relationship.

Flanagan states that he engages in masochism as a way of regaining a sense of control over his body because his medical condition brings daily pain and discomfort. It could seem an unusual choice to then engage in masochistic practices, yet Flanagan describes CF as being a kind of physical bondage that he has not chosen for himself and instead he longs for physical sensation. Since Flanagan is a performance artist, he already exists beyond the assimilationist tendencies of films such as *Secretary* and wants to challenge boundaries. He chooses to test both his own physical limits and those of his audience.

For example, the film features an in-depth 'scene' between Flanagan and his mistress, Rose, which features strangulation by a cord, knife play, spanking his buttocks until the marks are purple and using play piercings in his scrotum. This scene shows the pain that Flanagan experiences and deliberately rejects the desire to position these practices as either good or bad beyond his own sensation. Another scene in the film shows one of Flanagan's performances in which his body becomes the object of the spectacle. He has himself strung up by his ankles until he is suspended above the

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<sup>128</sup> Kirby Dick.

audience, but before he does so he hammers a nail through his penis. I was surprised and intrigued by his decision to then show himself removing the nail from his penis, leading to blood spurting out and covering the camera. This intrusion into his physical world is not the only example of challenging the audience's visual and emotional expectations. Towards the end of the film there are many shots of him dying in hospital with tubes attached to his nose so he can breathe oxygen, and there are photographs included of his dead body at the morgue and from his funeral. This film seeks to challenge boundaries, test limits and represent a radical SM narrative.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have offered a rereading of the film *Secretary* via a reconceptualisation of the discourse, which holds masochism and self-injury as discrete categories. Via a number of visual means, the film confirms my contention that they should be seen to occur as part of a continuum. I have also discussed the range of discourses that see SM practices as alternately pathological, therapeutic and potentially radical. Although *Secretary* implies that masochistic practices are preferable to autoerotic ones, it positions female masochism as good by re-enforcing an existing binary of healthy and unhealthy, acceptable and unacceptable, that practices should and can be divided into. As Downing and Gillett suggest, this epistemological division is a means by which control is exerted by the mental health institutions and, in turn, by the state, in order to create manageable citizens (the Foucauldian notion of biopower). Challenging the meaning of these practices challenges the foundational principles that society uses to organise the population within the categories of sane and insane. *Secretary* engages in this process through its coming of age narrative, which, as I argue, privileges an adult, sexualised conception of femininity and the heterosexual, monogamous couple who engage in moderate SM practices.

Underlying these different SM narratives is the social construction of gender roles, which in turn impacts on discourses of sexuality. Broadly speaking, the therapeutic narratives may be seen as traditionally ‘feminine’ in that they focus on caring and nurturing, while the radical narrative that rejects the health and harm binary embodies what Staci Newmahr considers to be the stereotypically ‘masculine’ qualities of risk and a disavowal of the future.<sup>129</sup> Newmahr argues that SM should challenge this relationship between gender and risk, yet *Secretary* and the therapeutic discourses reaffirm a normative relationship with these concepts. Perhaps the hunger strike scene in *Secretary*, where Lee risks her health for her SM devotion is an attempt to disrupt this relationship because it subverts the feminine when her urine soils the wedding dress and she risks death by starvation. Thus, although *Secretary* does normalise SM, this episode ruptures the otherwise assimilationist narrative by nodding to the ‘masculine’ radical SM narrative - and perhaps suggesting, as Dymock’s argument about ‘femsub’ does, that the designation of risk as ‘masculine’ is itself a conservative and misogynistic social fiction.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadoomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 118.

<sup>130</sup> Dymock developed this term ‘femsub’ in relation to mirror the terminology used in *Bitchy Jones’s Diary*, which she critiques in this article. She defines it as offering a theoretical reflection of the desires articulated in the piece, and it is divorced from the psychopathological framework that is integral to the term ‘masochism’. Dymock, 2012, 65-66.

## Chapter Four

### ***Subversive Submissive: Sex Blogs, Feminism, and Female Masochism and Submission***

In this chapter I focus on how female sex bloggers who discuss their masochism and practices of BDSM use the blogging medium to construct their identity through discourse. While blogs are a new generic form of writing specific to the Internet, they intersect with multiple pre-existing genres and forms, including autobiographies, memoirs and diaries.<sup>1</sup> To critique this ‘new’ form of writing, I position the analysis of sex blogs within discussions of these pre-existing genres. They can be a way of cultivating a form of memoir<sup>2</sup> or autobiography,<sup>3</sup> influenced by the personal diary format,<sup>4</sup> or they can provide a new form of conversation.<sup>5</sup> In addition, personal blogs in which the blogger uses posts as a form of confessional can create an illusory intimacy between the reader and the blogger through the blogger’s confidential revelation of intimate details of their lives enabled by their

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<sup>1</sup> A full-length book on the theory of blogging exists Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). It does not concern itself in any depth with sex blogging in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Feona Attwood, ‘Intimate Adventures: Sex Blogs, Sex “blooks” and Women’s Sexual Narration’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12 (2009), 5-20. Kaye Mitchell, ‘Raunch Vs. Prude: Contemporary Sex Blogs and Erotic Memoirs by Women’, *Psychology and Sexuality*. 3 (2012), 12-25.

<sup>3</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Laurie McNeill, ‘Brave New Genre, or Generic Colonialism? Debates over Ancestry in Internet Diaries’, in *Genres in the Internet: Issues in the Theory of Genre*, ed. by Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 143-161.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Burstein, ‘Introduction. From Cave Painting to Wonkette: A Short History of Blogging’, in *Blog! How the Newest Media Revolution Is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture*. ed. by David Kline and Dan Burstein (New York: CDS Books, 2005), pp. xi-xxv, (p.xiii).

anonymity.<sup>6</sup> Most bloggers also use the first person *I*, which readers find seductive because it implies authentic recollection, description and analysis.

The foundational case study for this chapter is the blog *Subversive Submissive*.<sup>7</sup> It is a single-authored blog written by a woman, which blends fantasy, debate and personal reflections relating to female masochism. The blog was active from 2006 to 2010 and, like a book, has an introductory and concluding post. The ‘posts’ are akin to diary entries in that they are written in sequence, yet can also stand alone. While the blog structure is similar to that of a printed text, its virtuality removes the necessity for a central thesis because there is no prescribed way to read a blog. Its links, tags and comments enable a reader to read the blog in any order they wish. In addition to *Subversive Submissive*, I will analyse posts from other blogs, including *Clarisse Thorn, Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces* (abbreviated to *SM Feminists* hereafter) and the radical feminist blog *Rage Against the Man-chine*.<sup>8</sup> Using these blogs as case studies, this chapter has a tripartite structure with each section tackling a different aspect of the formation of female masochistic identity through the medium of sex blogging. I will now outline each of these three sections in more depth as a way of introducing the salient topics that inform the chapter as a whole.

The first section examines the specific ways in which *Subversive Submissive* uses the blog format to construct her sexual subcultural identity. I examine the unifying principle between the different genres that influence sex blogs, namely the fact that they all use confession to enable the blogger to construct their sexual identity. In turn, the use of confessional discourse implies that there is a ‘truth’ that lies at the kernel of the authors: their

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<sup>6</sup> B. Garrick Harden, ‘In Blog We Trust - An Antiphon’, in *Co-Opting Culture: Culture and Power in Sociology and Cultural Studies*, ed. by B. Garrick Harden and Robert Carley (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 251-272, (p. 262-264).

<sup>7</sup> *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com> [accessed on 10 June 2011].

<sup>8</sup> *Clarisse Thorn*, <http://clarissethorn.com/blog/> [accessed 10 June 2011]; *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*, <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/> [accessed 8 July 2011]; Nine Deuce, *Rage Against the Man-chine*, <http://rageagainsthemanchine.com/> [accessed 7 July 2011].

‘true’ sexual orientation (the very assumption that is put in question by a Foucauldian reading). The blogger’s confession offers readers the appearance of intimacy and authenticity, which creates a community through confession.<sup>9</sup> Subversive Submissive demonstrates an, albeit implicit, engagement with Foucault’s concept of ‘reverse discourse’. It does this by critiquing the pathological term, *masochist*, interrogating its function and where necessary altering the meanings of terms to reflect a desire to move away from a pathologising discourse. This playing with language enables these bloggers to renegotiate the terms of their sexual identity where language mirrors their experiences.<sup>10</sup> I further examine this through an in-depth critique of terminology that applies to sexual identity, practices and relationship patterns.

The second section examines the notion that BDSM is a sexual orientation and explores the masochist’s coming out narrative through the blog form. I frame the analysis using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s arguments regarding the relationship between the closet, coming out and confession.<sup>11</sup> This stems from an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) narrative structure of coming out, which many BDSM individuals have since co-opted. Subversive Submissive offers a fragmentary and partial coming out narrative, embedded in multiple posts. As a point of contrast, Clarisse Thorn writes a specific in-depth post explaining in detail her coming out, which was simultaneously published on the lifestyle website *Time Out Chicago*.<sup>12</sup> Clarisse recounts that she ‘discovered’ her masochistic desires after a drunken encounter with a dominant man. As a result, this narrative offers a complex

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<sup>9</sup> Fiona Handyside, ‘Authenticity, Confession and Female Sexuality: From Bridget to Bitchy’, *Psychology and Sexuality*, 3 (2012), 41-53.

<sup>10</sup> Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker, “‘There Aren’t Words for What We Do or How We Feel so We Have to Make Them up’: Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of Compulsory Monogamy.’ *Sexualities*, (2006), 584-601.

<sup>11</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Clarisse Thorn, ‘Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story,’ *Time Out Chicago*.

<http://timeoutchicago.com/sex-dating/74517/love-bites-an-sm-coming-out-story> [accessed 26 June 2011].

emotional reaction to this ‘discovery’ and examines the controversial role of ambiguous coercion as a way of discovering those desires. Finally, this section examines the relationship between liberal identity politics and questions of sexual identity, and how these affect the representation of female masochism.

The third and final section explores new iterations of various branches of feminism within the blogosphere, the reappearance of the ‘Sex Wars’ on these sites, and the effect that blogging as a medium has upon these debates.<sup>13</sup> It examines the ways in which many of these feminist disputes seem to occur regarding BDSM because (BDSM defenders would argue) acts have meanings within subcultural contexts, and these meanings are not understood outside the relevant context. This is particularly relevant when considering the concepts of consent, abuse and BDSM practices. The focus of this section is a series of five posts by the radical feminist Nine Deuce on her blog *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, which claim to offer insights into the male dominant and female submissive dynamic. At the time of posting they were controversial among feminist bloggers sympathetic to SM, leading to a flurry of comments and posts appearing on many blogs responding to her claims. I analyse how the Sex Wars function in their new iteration in the blogosphere and examine how issues relating to BDSM and feminism are dealt with from both within and outside the specific subculture.

Feminism as enacted in the blogosphere is always an evolving and multiple movement, as is apparent from the numerous posts concerning the feminist perspective on BDSM and definitions of feminism. These debates continue, develop and repeat themselves, in ways similar to those explored in Chapter Two. In addition, conflicts between ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’ feminists, similar to those seen in the 1980s, have occurred due to a series of posts on the sex-positive feminist blog *The Pervocracy*. The author labels these posts ‘Twisty Faster is Fucking Insane’,<sup>14</sup> referring to the name of the radical feminist blogger responsible

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 2 for an in-depth analysis of the 1970s and 1980s Feminist Sex Wars.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Posts with the label “*Twisty Faster is Fucking Insane*”’ *The Pervocracy*.

for the blog *I Blame the Patriarchy*.<sup>15</sup> One of the posts on *The Pervocracy* offers a usable definition of sex-positive feminism: ‘Sex-positivity is, in a nutshell, the belief in sexual freedom as a key component of women's freedom and of having a better world in general.’<sup>16</sup> This definition suggests that its ultimate aim is similar to that of radical feminists who wish to dismantle the patriarchy. The article also critiques radical feminist arguments that deny the concept of agency.<sup>17</sup> Clarisse Thorn followed up with a post on the hub-site *Feministe*—one of the oldest feminist blogs with multiple bloggers—giving a direct link to the post on *The Pervocracy* because she thought it provided a salient analysis of critiques of sex-positive feminism, particularly by radical feminists.<sup>18</sup> I provide this example because it shows the cyclical nature of in-fighting among feminists owing to the fundamentally incompatible basic tenets underlying their positions: liberal feminists want reform within the patriarchy, while radical feminists want to dismantle the patriarchy.

### 5.1 Authenticity, Confession and Community

*Subversive Submissive* provides the exemplary case study with which to examine some of the specific ways that the blog format enables the representation of an ‘authentic’ narrative of female masochism. Leigh Gilmore argues in relation to writing an autobiography that when writing about one’s own life there are many linguistic obstacles that must be overcome in order to craft a self-representation that is stable and reflects the person as they see

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<http://pervocracy.blogspot.com/search/label/twisty%20faster%20is%20fucking%20insane> [accessed on 30 October 2011].

<sup>15</sup> *I Blame the Patriarchy*, <http://blog.iblamethepatriarchy.com/> [accessed on 30 October 2011].

<sup>16</sup> ‘Sex-Possie,’ *The Pervocracy*, <http://pervocracy.blogspot.com/2011/10/sex-pozzie.html> [accessed on 30 October 2011].

<sup>17</sup> ‘Sex-Possie,’ *The Pervocracy*,.

<sup>18</sup> Clarisse Thorn. ‘The Pervocracy nails it on misguided critiques of sex-positive feminism.’ *Feministe*. <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2011/10/22/the-pervocracy-nails-it-on-misguided-critiques-of-sex-positive-feminism/> [accessed on 30 October 2011].

themselves.<sup>19</sup> However, bloggers do not share all of these constraints because their work exists only in the virtual realm, and the immediacy of this writing enables readers to read the posts as they appear in time and observe how the blogger develops. This recalls Michel Foucault's dictum, "One writes in order to become other than what one is," [which] suggests that autobiography offers an opportunity for self-transformation.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Foucault's dictum is applicable for bloggers because their writing is a process both of self-discovery and of community-building with the intention of 'creating a community of like-minded people'.<sup>21</sup> This is achieved through a variety of rhetorical strategies that endorse and supplement the concept that appearing to confess creates an 'authentic' narrative.

The concepts of confession and authenticity underpin the sex blog because it is a forum that privileges analysing 'the secret' of modern life: sexuality.<sup>22</sup> Fiona Handyside argues that this 'authentic' narrative is made possible by 'the very act of appearing to confess, with its implications of intimacy and breaking of taboos'.<sup>23</sup> This enables other readers to identify with the blogger's process and experience. She expands this point in the following passage:

Their 'authentic' voices encourage readerly identification and the creation of a kind of community we could liken to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s which provided 'a space in which the isolated "I" could, by means of identification, collapse into collective, rescuing "we"'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilmore 2001, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Gilmore 2001, p. 11. Quote from Charles Ruas, "Archéologie d'une passion," *Magazine Littéraire*, no. 221. (July-Aug. 1985): 100-105; translated as "An Interview with Michel Foucault," in Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The Works of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas (London: Athlone Press, 1986), pp. 169-86 (quotation on p. 182), quoted in David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 228.

<sup>21</sup> Handyside, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Handyside, 42.

<sup>24</sup> D Siegel, 1997, 'The legacy of the personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's third wave.' *Hypatia*. 12.3. pp. 46-75. Quoted in Handyside, 42.

In particular, this can encourage the identification of a 'we' from the 'I', as readers are able to see their own lives in the 'authentic' confessions of others. This has the effect of community building because people can read a unique individual experience, identify with it and realise they belong to a broader group: a community.<sup>25</sup>

Blogs can encourage the formation of community through properties relating to the form, particularly the extra-textual material that affects whether and how a reader reads the blog's content. A reader can respond to the posts through the use of the commenting facility such that a kind of conversation can be held between multiple commenters (and the blog's author) underneath each post. Unlike the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, this community permits anonymity and is not restricted by geographical location. In addition, the blogroll (a list of blogs that the blogger believes are important and their readers might enjoy due to their topic or style, etc.) can give a reader insight into how the blog positions itself within the blogosphere. In the case of *Subversive Submissive*, her blog roll includes: *SM Feminists*, *Bitchy Jones's Diary*, *Sex Geek* and *Memoirs of a Genderqueer Femme Anarchist*.<sup>26</sup> Without reading the blog *Subversive Submissive* itself, this selection of links indicates to the reader the politics, interests and kind of community that the blogger wishes to create.

Most sex bloggers choose to remain anonymous for fear of recriminations in the 'real world' and so use a handle, the Internet equivalent of a *nom de plume*. Although the blogger's choice to use a handle rather than their real name could appear inauthentic, the famous statement by Oscar Wilde implies the opposite: 'Man is least himself when he talks in

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<sup>25</sup> Handyside, 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*, <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/> [accessed 8 July 2011]. *Bitchy Jones's Diary*, <http://bitchyjones.wordpress.com/> [accessed 8 July 2011]; *Sex Geek: Thoughts on Sex and Life*, <http://sexgeek.wordpress.com/> [accessed 8 July 2011]; *Memoirs of a Genderqueer Femme Anarchist*, <http://anarchafemme.wordpress.com> [accessed 8 July 2011].

his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.’<sup>27</sup> This suggests that a facade can enable the illusion of ‘truth’ and in turn augment the author’s ability to confess their inner ‘self’.<sup>28</sup> If anything, the paradox of the handle is that it both distances the reader from the blogger and implies an intimacy between them. In addition, these handles tend to refer to an integral aspect of the blog and do not often take the recognised form of a name. This is because names are ‘thoroughly imbricated in the juridical’, indicating legal status and civic responsibility.<sup>29</sup> Once a name is removed there is an intentional separation from the idea of kinship.<sup>30</sup>

The majority of the bloggers examined in this chapter use descriptive handles that are quite unlike a name. However, the blogger Clarisse Thorn’s name is a pseudonym she uses for her public engagements as a sex educator and all of her writing on sexuality, meaning it is an alter-ego rather than a handle. By contrast, Subversive Submissive is both the title of a blog and the handle the author uses for her writings. This handle indicates to the reader that this blog will challenge mainstream conceptions of a submissive and masochistic identity. She makes this apparent in the casual, jokey short description of the blog, which appears at the top of the blog: ‘Just another vegan, anarchist, feminist BDSM weblog.’<sup>31</sup> This is an adaptation of the phrase that appears at the top of blogs hosted by the site Wordpress: ‘Just another Wordpress weblog.’ Subversive Submissive’s alteration of this phrase, using a series of identificatory labels relating to herself, indicates her affiliation with a number of political positions that challenge norms.

As well as the extra-textual material discussed above, a sex blog uses specific rhetorical devices to create intimacy with readers by implying authenticity. Specific devices

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<sup>27</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist,’ *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, (Wordsworth Editions, Ware; Hertfordshire, 1997), p. 1002.

<sup>28</sup> See also Handyside, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Gilmore, 2001, p. 124.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmore, 2001, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> *Subversive Submissive*. <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com> [accessed on 10 June 2011].

that the blogger uses to create a sense of intimacy include the repeated use of the first person with references to the reader as the second person *you*, which closes the gap between the reader and the text. This device presumes that there is a ‘sympathetic community of readers’.<sup>32</sup> Some of these strategies are apparent in the short opening paragraph of the *Subversive Submissive* blog:

If you’ve found this blog, welcome. Currently, this blog is primarily my own outlet for writing about my experiences with BDSM and putting fantasies into words. Here’s how it all began.<sup>33</sup>

Analysing this passage in close detail reveals that it performs all of the strategies I have outlined. The second word is the second person plural *you*, inviting the reader into the intimacy of the blogger’s world. There are two uses of the first person possessive *my*, indicating possession of the experience and the writing space, at least as far as the content goes. The final short sentence, ‘Here’s how it all began’, recalls oral storytelling traditions, where signpost phrases, such as ‘Once upon a time’, indicate to the reader that a story will follow, so the audience—in this case blog readers—should be ready to listen. After this brief passage *Subversive Submissive* tells readers how her relationship with her masochism began, her own version of a ‘coming out’ story, which I analyse in more depth below.

*Subversive Submissive*, in contrast to the other case studies, chose to stop blogging in 2010, after four years, thereby exiting the community she found through an engagement with the blogosphere. She makes explicit statements about the reasons for this choice. I will quote from this final post at length because she articulates multiple tensions involved in writing a sex blog:

My reasons for continuing this blog are completely different from the reasons I started it. When I first began writing here, all I wanted was to give voice to the thoughts I’d been wrestling with for so long and to find support from others who thought like me—to find reassurance that I wasn’t alone. Thanks to this blog and that support from everyone who’s read it over the last few years, I’ve gotten exactly what I wanted: I no

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<sup>32</sup> Handyside, 47.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Introduction’ [22 March 2006], *Subversive Submissive*,

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2006/03/22/introduction/> [accessed on 25 July 2011].

longer feel overwhelmingly ashamed or afraid of my desires; I feel confident in my sexuality; I have a better understanding of different BDSM subcultures and histories and can articulate both defences and critiques of them.

[...]

I really like having the connections with other kinky bloggers that I've made over the past few years, and I miss the cross-blog conversations that I used to take part in on a more regular basis. But kink is simply not as enormously fascinating to me now as it was even a year ago; it's now simply a normal part of my life, not something new and exciting that I want to process, dissect, analyse, and share with others.<sup>34</sup>

In this post she outlines the reasons she began writing, how they have changed and her relationship with SM at the time she chooses to end the blog. In the beginning, her blog was to provide a place where she could grapple with her masochistic desires and their connection with self-harm,<sup>35</sup> and reconcile her feminism and her desire to be a sexual submissive. She wanted to use the blog as a place to seek community and connections. Having found these, she was able to feel confident rather than ashamed of her desires. However, the blogosphere held a greater appeal when she lacked the access to a 'real life' community and SM was new for her. Yet once blogging and its community had given her confidence, she found a real life community, which helped her to start a group in San Francisco called Anarkink.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while Subversive Submissive's engagement with confessional discourse helped to create a virtual community, through that virtual community she was led to a 'real life' community (which was presumably more satisfying as she subsequently abandoned the online version).

Discussion in comments on kinky sex blogs often focuses on the meaning of the terminology used to describe sexual acts, states and desires. Such terminology has its origins in the project of taxonomy undertaken by early sexologists.<sup>37</sup> We have seen in Chapter One that, through the creation of 'perversions', the concept of 'normal' was also created and reinforced. A similar process risks occurring on sex blogs (though lacking, of course, medical

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<sup>34</sup> 'Thoughts on Continuing this Blog' [28 December 2009], *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2009/12/28/thoughts-on-continuing-this-blog/> [accessed on 10 July 2011].

<sup>35</sup> 'Introduction' [22 March 2006], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>36</sup> 'Anarchist BDSM Group' [4 September 2008], *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/09/04/anarchist-bdsm-group/> [accessed on 10 July 2011].

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter One for an in-depth discussion on this as it relates to masochism.

authority). Definitions of acts provide boundaries that can appear discrete rather than permeable. This can lead to calcification of terminology and the imposition of community rules and standards, yet the process of negotiating discourse also challenges this process. Before the blog *Subversive Submissive* concluded, the writer contributed to this web of discourse through her reflections on terminology used within the BDSM scene, particularly the identity label *submissive*. I will examine how Subversive Submissive understands this term and engages with BDSM discourse, whether that is through the blogosphere or ‘real life’. Many heterosexual female masochists have a problematic relationship with the term *submissive* whether in relation to feminism or in negotiating its precise definition.<sup>38</sup> I examine heterosexual female submission’s complex relationship with feminism in the third section of this chapter, and I will now examine the ways in which bloggers negotiate naming discourse. Despite its psychopathological history the term *masochist* seems to be less problematic for both Clarisse Thorn and Subversive Submissive as it is subject to less discussion. This is because for them masochism focuses on bodily sensations, whereas submission focuses on psychological power exchange. The latter challenges feminist conceptions of women as being strong individuals, as discussed in Chapter Two in the context of Diski’s novel.

As a result, many of these sex bloggers construct part of their sexual identity through redefining, examining and interrogating the definitions of the terms they use to construct said identity. I will examine some of the ways in which Subversive Submissive explores the same process, particularly negotiating between the terms *submission* and *bottom* in BDSM discourses. Subversive Submissive indicates that the term *submissive* seemed a simplistic

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Subtle Differences,’ [3 July 2008], *Subversive Submissive*.

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/07/03/subtle-differences/> [accessed on 28 October 2011];

‘Submissive, Bottom, or...?’ [4 Aug 2007], *Subversive Submissive*.

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2007/08/04/submissive-bottom-or/> [accessed on 28 October 2011].

umbrella term and this only became more complex when exposed to the discursive web that is BDSM on the Internet.

A few years ago, I thought of my kink very, very differently than I do now. Back then, I thought of myself primarily as a ‘submissive,’ and assumed that everything I was into could simply be classified under that one term.

Now, everything I do is in shades of gray. [...] It is mind-boggling, when you stop to think about it, how complex this stuff can be...<sup>39</sup>

In her initial understanding of the term *submissive* it could encompass multiple and not necessarily simultaneous desires: for pain, to have her submission forced from her,<sup>40</sup> to offer her submission freely and to be a possession. For her, all of these desires could be encompassed within the single term ‘submissive’. However, when she began reading and engaging with discourses surrounding BDSM it became apparent that there were reductive tendencies within the community. Subversive Submissive observes:

A disturbing trend [...] that tries to define ‘submissive’ in a particular way, and to cast all those not fitting in with that definition as ‘not real submissives’—it strongly reminds me of debates around the term ‘feminist’.<sup>41</sup>

Subversive Submissive considers that the continual attempt to define a submissive is reductionist in a way that does not enable people to enjoy the practices in the multiple ways that they desire. For example, Subversive Submissive quotes a passage from *A Place To Draw Blood Laughing*,<sup>42</sup> a blog by Trinity, who also blogs at *SM Feminists*, in which she

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Subtle Differences,’ [3 July 2008], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>40</sup> This refers to the process of giving herself to another where her pleasure is derived from her partner’s pleasure. For example she experiences anal sex when there is no lubrication, yet because she has not asked for it to stop it continues. She states that: ‘I give myself to him completely in this, the surrender of myself to sensation not pleasurable, nor pleasurable painful, but decidedly unpleasant and uncomfortable. And in that, in that surrender, I touched a state of submission I had never felt.’ In ‘For the Very First Time.’ [11 January 2008], *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/01/11/for-the-very-first-time/> [accessed on 28 October 2011]. Also see: ‘Rape Play/ Forced Submission’ [28 November 2008] *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/11/28/rape-play-forced-submission/> [accessed on 28 October 2011]; ‘Rape Play (part two) [30 December 2008] *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/12/30/rape-play-part-two/> [accessed on 28 October 2011].

<sup>41</sup> ‘Submissive, Bottom, or...?’ [4 Aug 2007], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>42</sup> The site itself was defunct at the time of accessing Subversive Submissive’s blog.

distinguishes between ‘real’ submissives and ‘fake’ submissives, whom she respectively terms *submissives* and *bottoms*. Trinity writes:

There are a lot of people out there in the world who love to talk about how sub they are but as soon as you talk to them, ‘Oh, no pain. Oh, wait, you’re not gonna wear a corset for me? ... What is this, anyway?’ ... That to me is assuming bottoming (wanting to do something for one’s own fun) is submitting (wanting to serve, obey, please.)<sup>43</sup>

The distinction that Trinity identifies in this quotation is between what she understands as a ‘bottom’ and a ‘submissive’. The principal difference is that a bottom does not engage in psychological power exchange; they enjoy the acts for themselves (e.g. the sensation of being beaten) and have their own idea of what should happen for the duration of the scene. In this sense there can be an overlap between the definitions of *masochist* and *bottom*, except that, unlike a masochist, a bottom derives their pleasure from sensation and not necessarily from either humiliation or painful stimuli. As I examine later in this chapter, feminism has fewer problems with physical sensation play than submission because bottoming does not require an explicit manipulation of power dynamics.

This continuous process of negotiation of terms occurs as these labels define and offer a communal language for a person’s desires, which is particularly important on the Internet which is, in part, a text based social networking medium. It seems that debating, refining, clarifying and complicating the definitions of terms is a way to find membership in the Internet ‘community’. This is because negotiating discourse connects with a desire to be ‘authentic’ regarding the choice of descriptive terms used for a person’s identity, which results in anxiety over their definitions, meanings and function. This anxiety inducing process, which Jodie Dean in her book on ‘blog theory’ refers to as increasing the role of ‘doubt’, is an integral aspect of the blogosphere and in turn helps enable the formation of

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<sup>43</sup> Trinity, *A Place To Draw Blood Laughing* quoted in ‘Submissive, Bottom, or...?’ [4 Aug 2007], *Subversive Submissive*.

community because there is the belief that someone else will always know better.<sup>44</sup> Indeed these anxieties are an integral part of blogging because it is a phenomenon that depends upon the inevitability and fragility of communication, which can be counteracted by yet more communication and blogging, drawing the bloggers further into the discursive web.<sup>45</sup>

## 5.2 'Coming Out'

Coming out narratives imply that there is a space to 'come out' from, and equally they are a form of confession because the person doing the coming out is perceived to be revealing a secret part of themselves. This implies that their secret forms part of their 'true' identity—an orientation—rather than just being something that they practise or do. For example, when Eric Anderson examined bisexual experience in men, he included straight identified men who have sex with other men.<sup>46</sup> He does not label these men as gay or bisexual because that label relates to identity rather than the practice. Instead he uses an acronym, MSM (men who have sex with men), that describes their practices. This distinction is important because a person's orientation and identity do not necessarily reflect their practices.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote the foundational theoretical work on the concept and function of the closet as it relates to gay identity. She argues that the closet functions as a way to preserve hetero-patriarchal Western culture based on a hierarchical inside and outside. For Sedgwick, the minority (the subcultural group or marginalised identity) forms the inside and the majority (hetero-patriarchal normative society) forms the outside. She uses this binary to explain the relationship between the homosexual (minority) and heterosexual (majority). Sedgwick argues that widespread usage of the phrase *coming out of the closet* for purposes

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<sup>44</sup> Dean, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Dean, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Anderson, 'Heterosexual Men, Bisexual Behaviour.' Paper at *Bisexual Research Conference*, University of London, 26 August 2010.

other than gay identity (e.g. fat, mental illness, race, etc.) ‘might suggest that the trope of the closet is so close to the heart of some modern preoccupations that it could be, or has been, evacuated of its historical gay specificity. But I hypothesize that exactly the opposite is true’.<sup>47</sup> She encourages people to remember coming out’s origins in gay activist politics, where it was used as strategy to emancipate gay citizens through widespread public visibility in order to change public opinion and legal precedents. Since this strategy proved to be for the most part successful in improving assimilation and acceptance of gay identity, it is unsurprising that others sought to expand the function of the coming out narrative, so that other sexual minorities, such as BDSMers, would adopt the same strategy.

In a BDSM context the coming out narrative implies that these practices are more than just practices and that BDSM is an integral part of a person’s sense of self and identity. In turn, this implies that BDSM is a sexual orientation like ‘homosexual’ or ‘bisexual’. However, rather than one’s sexual orientation being determined by the gender identity of the other person, a BDSM orientation functions through an identification with a series of practices or power dynamics (usually) with an other person or other persons. There is a difference between the following statements: ‘I am a masochist’ and ‘I engage in masochistic practices’.

The first of these connects the sexual act to one’s sense of identity, implying that it is an integral aspect of the self. This recalls the pathologising medical discourse with its interest in aetiology as discussed in Chapter Three, where masochism is included in the *DSM*.<sup>48</sup> Karl Ulrichs spoke out publicly in defence of homosexuality in 1869 because he argued that it is natural and so should not be addressed by medicine, criminalised by the law or treated with

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<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> BehaveNet® Clinical Capsule™: Sexual Masochism’

<http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/sexmasochism.htm> [accessed 18 January 2011]

disdain by religion.<sup>49</sup> Claiming that BDSM is a sexual orientation mirrors Ulrichs's arguments, and so, as with homosexuality (to some extent, in some contexts), could lead to the eventual evacuation of 'policing' from its sphere. Ulrichs's line of argument can provide a position for advocacy, since it is hard to object to naturally occurring phenomena, whereas it is easier to criticise a lifestyle choice as being a 'bad' choice.

By contrast, the second sentence, 'I engage in masochistic practices', connects with a different activist strategy, which is the attempt to assimilate BDSM by normalising it through an appeal to the rhetoric of 'choice'.<sup>50</sup> This implies that engaging with BDSM practices is an optional rather than an integral aspect of one's identity. The orientation model and the 'choice' model of BDSM are two dominant discourses that challenge the pathologising medical discourse in different ways. I therefore examine some of the tensions surrounding BDSM as an orientation through a close analysis of two coming out narratives by Subversive Submissive and Clarisse Thorn.

Subversive Submissive does not include a single coming out post. As mentioned above, she sees her discovery of her submissiveness rather as a continuous process through which she defines and redefines her identity, in tandem with reference to her anarchist politics and lived experience. However, she reflects on the question of how a person might come out as being a BDSM practitioner to those who may not be familiar with BDSM rhetoric, such as her friends. Through multiple posts Subversive Submissive uses the coming out narrative in different ways which I will examine in turn: overcoming her internal struggle with her masochistic desires, recognising them in media representations, and reflecting upon perceived opinions regarding BDSM and the impact these may have on her coming out to friends.

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<sup>49</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexuality Identity*, *The Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter three for a more in-depth discussion of this approach.

For Subversive Submissive, accepting her masochistic desires was a complicated process because it was informed by her feminist ideology and her history of self-injury. In particular, rather than disavow the connection between her self-injury and masochism, Subversive Submissive examines their relationship.<sup>51</sup> For her, connecting her liking of pain with pleasure was something that happened just prior to starting her blog, as:

before, it was always a way to find relief and focus, burning myself with a match or cutting on my arms and legs, a desperate attempt to find some sort of clarity when anxiety/depression became too much to bear.<sup>52</sup>

The above passage describes how she coped and used pain when she was at high school as a way of finding temporary relief. She abandoned self-injury for a long time as a result of social pressures but began again after a defining relationship ended. She is aware that many consider physical pain to be a ‘bad’ way to handle emotional pain, yet does not stop because she develops the following logic:

The scars would be noticeable and long-lasting, to be sure, but I wasn’t really damaging myself in any dangerous way. And if it could provide me with the temporary relief I needed, then hell—how was it any different than popping a pill or spending 50 minutes with a therapist?<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the duration of her blog, she continues to self-injure at moments when she needs control and focus, yet her exploration and enjoyment of pain also take a sexual turn.<sup>54</sup> When the partner she is with for the duration of the blog sees her copious scars, rather than forcing or persuading her to stop, he asks for her to explain why she desires to burn herself and how

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<sup>51</sup> See Chapter Three for a more in-depth discussion of this argument.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Introduction’ [22 March 2006], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Introduction’ [22 March 2006], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>54</sup> See: ‘The Kiss of Fire’ [3 June 2008], *Subversive Submissive*,

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/06/03/the-kiss-of-fire/> [accessed on 25 July 2011]; ‘Branding Three Months Later’ [27 August 2008], *Subversive Submissive*,

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/08/27/branding-three-months-later/> [accessed on 25 July 2011];

‘Sexual Healing’ [8 October 2008], *Subversive Submissive*,

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2008/10/08/sexual-healing/> [accessed on 25 July 2011]; ‘Cruelty and

Catharsis’ [18 January 2009], *Subversive Submissive*, <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2009/01/18/cruelty-and-catharsis/> [accessed on 25 July 2011].

it feels. Listening rather than judging seems to permit Subversive Submissive to explore her relationship with pain and in turn her desire for sexual submission, which is a relationship I examined in depth in Chapter Three on its depiction in *Secretary*.<sup>55</sup>

As Subversive Submissive hopes to use her own ongoing coming out narrative to enable others to realise they share these desires, she describes that process of recognition occurring when she first watched Steven Shainberg's *Secretary*. This film struck a 'kink chord' in her when she saw it in 2003, which helped her to acknowledge and recognise her submissive and masochistic desires.<sup>56</sup> She argues that if this process of recognition occurs, then it implies that there is an innate desire that is waiting to be 'discovered', which suggests that she advocates the orientation model discussed earlier concerning BDSM. However *Secretary*'s protagonists are flawed troubled characters: as we saw in the previous chapter, Lee Holloway's submission explicitly replaces the need for self-injury and enables her to give it up because she is ordered to stop by her dominant, Mr Grey. This triggers Subversive Submissive's own fears regarding coming out as a submissive and a masochist being 'tied to [her] psychology [because] there's no way [her] desire to be tied up and beaten can be separated from past issues of dependency, guilt and self-loathing'.<sup>57</sup> However, she seems to dismiss the argument that BDSM can be a form of therapy since many of the negative emotions remain. Instead she adopts the argument made by the BDSM community spokesperson Jay Wiseman in his book that many people suffer with these same 'issues' but do not engage in BDSM practices and dynamics.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the complexities and challenges in Subversive Submissive's coming out narrative, she claims that BDSM has enabled her to reach a kind of 'confidence in [her]

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<sup>55</sup> Steven Shainberg, *Secretary* (Lion's Gate Films, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> 'The Kink Chord [27 June 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*  
<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2007/06/27/the-kink-chord/> [accessed 10 July 2011].

<sup>57</sup> 'Submission and Dependency [27 March 2006]', *Subversive Submissive*,  
<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2006/03/27/submission-and-dependency/> [accessed 10 July 2011].

<sup>58</sup> Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction* (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 1997), pp. 19-21.

sexuality, and in [herself] as a whole person, that [she] never experienced before'.<sup>59</sup> She expands upon this position in the following passage:

I don't mean to imply that submission and masochism are inherently tools for self-realization or confidence, but rather that anything that unlocks hidden desires and shatters taboos, destroys conventional notions of morality, of right and wrong, can be liberatory.<sup>60</sup>

At this point in her blog, she focuses on the subversive potential of masochism and BDSM, yet as she experiences the BDSM community in more depth and her thoughts become more complex she acknowledges that BDSM can both reify and challenge hetero-patriarchal relations. BDSM can inadvertently support the status quo by not challenging or considering the political and ethical implications of the roles that a gendered individual adopts. In particular, there can be a fetishisation of patriarchy through unchallenged notions that women are submissive while men are dominant. This is an example of how even BDSM advocates understand that BDSM is not exempt from and can, in turn, support misogyny and sexism. However BDSM can also challenge these notions by offering alternative expressions of power dynamics that consciously unpick normative assumptions. This can occur through a desire to engage in the performativity rather than the embodiment of the roles one adopts.

Later in the blog *Subversive Submissive* explores the difference between coming out to those who also practice BDSM and understand its rhetoric (whether or not they participate within the subculture) and those for whom it is a new subject altogether. She recounts a discussion with some 'vanilla' (a term used within the BDSM subculture to describe those who are on the outside and do not participate in such practices) friends, where the topic of BDSM was raised after having seen a documentary 'about people who enjoy being degraded'.<sup>61</sup> One of her friends 'expressed his shock and horror upon learning that people

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<sup>59</sup> 'The Kink Chord [27 June 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*,

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2007/06/27/the-kink-chord/> [accessed 10 July 2011].

<sup>60</sup> 'The Kink Chord [27 June 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>61</sup> 'A Harsh Lesson [9 July 2007]', *Subversive Submissive* <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2007/07/09/a-harsh-lesson/> [accessed 10 July 2011].

actually did this, that this existed'.<sup>62</sup> This statement created a sense of conflict in Subversive Submissive as to whether or not she wanted to 'out' herself, since she would be affiliating herself with this subgroup. She expands upon this discussion in the following passage:

Immediately, I felt my stomach churning, and I became terrified to respond in any way—I was afraid that any reaction, however slight, would either 'give me away,' or be a lie; I was afraid to say something like, 'Of course people do that, and there's nothing wrong with it,' but I also wasn't about to nod in agreement or act like I didn't know anything about it.

The two other women in the group—both self-identified feminists—began to discuss whether or not such activities were 'okay.' As in, 'I guess it's okay if the woman wants to....' (Me, in my head: 'Why do you get to decide what is or isn't an acceptable sexual practice for a woman to engage in?').

I just walked away. Because, well, what could I say? I felt ashamed, afterward, for not being brave enough to speak out, for not saying a word to refute them. Because any word would mark me, I was afraid, as one of those freaks—or worse, as a bad feminist, as a self-hating woman, as a masochist.<sup>63</sup>

This passage raises several thorny issues about the ethics of female feminists questioning another's sexual practices and the role of shame and how it can silence a person due to their fear of rejection. Subversive Submissive acknowledges and feels constrained by the group opinion, which is not aware of the BDSM manifesto regarding consent as of paramount importance in changing the nature of practices that in other contexts could be torture and/or abuse. In addition, she does not consider that others should judge individuals for their choices and instead endorses relativism. This experience was 'a rude awakening' for her because these friends all belonged to the radical anarchist community.<sup>64</sup> She expected that since they were already affiliated with a marginal group, and some of them identified as queer and were aware of its political implications, that they might be tolerant of BDSM practices. Rather than challenging their comments, she remained silent, which troubled her because in some ways she felt as though she had to be a BDSM advocate. However, she later questioned the purpose of coming out to friends with whom she did not discuss sex at all and reflected that it

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<sup>62</sup> 'A Harsh Lesson [9 July 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*, original emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> 'A Harsh Lesson [9 July 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>64</sup> 'A Harsh Lesson [9 July 2007]', *Subversive Submissive*.

would be inappropriate for their friendship.<sup>65</sup> She acknowledged that part of her desire to come out to them was to alleviate her sense that she was hiding an important aspect of herself yet also feared rejection.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike *Subversive Submissive*, Clarisse Thorn writes an in-depth introductory coming out post entitled ‘Love Bites: An S&M Coming Out Story’, which was first published on the non-BDSM specific website *Time Out Chicago* in February 2010.<sup>67</sup> This meant her story could reach a broader audience than those who choose to read sex blogs written by female submissive masochists. However, I focus my analysis on the mirror version she published upon her own website since, although the content is the same, that version is under her direct control.<sup>68</sup> Clarisse Thorn’s coming out narrative touches on several important issues: the role of coercion in terms of her own desires and emotional conflicts regarding the ‘discovery’ of her desires.

She uses this narrative to recount how she began her exploration of BDSM and questions whether it is part of her sexual orientation. The narrative opens with descriptive hazy flashes of memory from a drunken night with Richard—a dominant man with whom she first experienced a thrill from being bitten, pinned down and having her hair pulled. One of her friends was concerned, so told Richard that he ‘shouldn’t do that’. Richard replied on Clarisse’s behalf, saying “‘she likes it,” and pulled [her] head hard enough to force [her] to bow [her] head. I do?’<sup>69</sup> Although Clarisse remembers the questioning moment, she argues that she said nothing because despite the surprise she wanted the experience.

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Closet Kink. [10 October 2007]’, *Subversive Submissive*

<http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2007/10/10/closet-kink/> [accessed 10 July 2011].

<sup>66</sup> ‘Closet Kink. [10 October 2007]’, *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>67</sup> Clarisse Thorn, ‘Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story,’ *Time Out Chicago*.

<http://timeoutchicago.com/sex-dating/74517/love-bites-an-sm-coming-out-story> [accessed 26 June 2011].

<sup>68</sup> ‘Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)’ *Clarisse Thorn*,

<http://clarissethorn.com/blog/2010/06/30/love-bites-an-sm-coming-out-story-mirror/> [accessed 26 June 2011].

<sup>69</sup> ‘Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)’ *Clarisse Thorn*,.

This coming out story could read as a tale of assault, particularly for many feminists; Clarisse acknowledges this potentiality and states that although her ability to give informed consent was compromised, she wanted the encounter. Richard's claim that he could sense Clarisse's desires to be dominated and hurt raises the concept of coercion and whether she adjusted her sexual narrative to make retroactive sense of the experience. Despite feelings of confusion and uncertainty at the initial encounter, the time with Richard gave her the ability to comprehend, recognise and enjoy these masochistic submissive desires. She later recalls childhood fantasies of being kidnapped, tortured and forced to be a slave, reinforcing Richard's claim that she was a submissive masochist.

The experience was complex because it resulted in 'an unevenly-repressed identity crisis', for which she wanted to seek psychiatric help from a kink-aware therapist.<sup>70</sup> This was not to help 'fix' her but rather to enable her to adjust to what her desires were so that she could fulfil her 'true' desires. However, this kind of therapist was not available on her parents' healthcare plan, meaning she had to justify the expense to her father, who paid the bill. Her father reacted to her coming out as being into BDSM with a simple 'ok', which was possible as he must have a certain amount of economic privilege that would not be available to the majority of the US. However, when she told her mother she discovered that an interest in BDSM had been in the family in that her mother was also a submissive masochist. This was one of the issues that had led to the break-up of her parents' marriage. Her mother then reveals that she had always thought Clarisse might be into BDSM even as a young child, which implies that for her mother BDSM is an orientation that can be innate. In the conclusion of the article Clarisse discusses how she cannot be certain if it is an orientation for her or not but that it does fit with her self-image and she is not sure she could return to a vanilla relationship. That is because she has become involved with the BDSM community,

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<sup>70</sup> 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)' *Clarisse Thorn*,

working as a sex educator and a professional blogger. These aspects are now integral to her identity in terms of her work and sexual practices.

Although Clarisse's story is published on the mainstream non-BDSM website *Time Out*, it is a political act of coming out. The fact that 'Clarisse Thorn' is not the writer's legal name should not lessen its impact. However, it appears that, for Clarisse, it could, because she states:

I believe BDSM needs a liberation movement, just like homosexuality, but I'm not (yet?) ready to be a public spokeswoman. And I definitely wouldn't consider dragging others out of the closet. I write about BDSM under a pseudonym, and I have changed the names.<sup>71</sup>

Her writings recall the turning point for gay liberation activists at the moment when public figures, such as actors, politicians and musicians, began coming out. These visible and public voices prompted change because those figures were in the public eye and difficult to ignore. In a similar manner Clarisse engages in other forms of awareness-raising activism, such as teaching BDSM, explicit negotiation and non-monogamies at colleges. Hence, she is putting a public face to the practice and teaching others how to engage in BDSM practices safely.<sup>72</sup>

While Subversive Submissive finds accepting her submissive desires easier than her masochistic ones, for Clarisse it is the other way around. This is because, for Clarisse, masochism focuses on sensation and, as far as the reader is aware, she does not have the same history of self-injury as Subversive Submissive, which could explain why Clarisse finds these physical acts easier to accept. However Clarisse experiences her submissive desires as uncomfortable, which is attributed to a feminist upbringing and fearing that her desires indicate that she is 'damaged', 'broken or 'suffered trauma and repressed the memories'.<sup>73</sup> Clarisse explains that she assimilates her sexual desires into being a positive part of her identity after discovering that her feminist mother shared her proclivities, who 'emphasized

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<sup>71</sup> 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)' *Clarisse Thorn*.

<sup>72</sup> 'Lectures, Workshops & Events,' *Clarisse Thorn*, <http://clarissethorn.com/blog/lectures/> [accessed 26 September 2011].

<sup>73</sup> 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)' *Clarisse Thorn*.

[Clarisse's] continuing right to a partner who respects [her]'.<sup>74</sup> In her blog, she writes that undertaking therapy and talking with her mother helped her achieve (partial) self-acceptance and wanted to educate others on the compatibility of feminism and BDSM since the latter advocates an explicit awareness of otherwise implicit power structures and encourages better communication. In addition, she challenges many radical feminist arguments and engages with the blog *SM Feminists*. In the next section of the chapter, I consider how the blogs *SM Feminists* and *Subversive Submissive* challenge the arguments made by the radical feminist blogger Nine Deuce of *Rage Against the Man-chine*.

### 5.3 Inside/ Outside: Feminist Debates on the Blogosphere

The dialectic of inside and outside underlies many feminist arguments regarding BDSM, particularly female masochism and submission in a heterosexual paradigm. This is because acts have meanings within the subcultural context of BDSM that are not comprehended outside this context. Within discourse examining BDSM most acts are usually deemed acceptable or unacceptable depending upon whether consent is involved, since the primacy of consent is the central ethical tenet of the subculture.<sup>75</sup> However, radical feminists do not accept that consent is enough to differentiate BDSM practices from abuse because they reject the concept of meaningful female consent under patriarchy since the acts that a person might consent to are affected by their social conditioning. This often results in fundamental incompatibilities regarding the role of consent, which makes it difficult for either feminist faction to negotiate arguments regarding BDSM practices. Lisa Downing explores how the blog *Bitchy Jones's Diary* offers both a pro-BDSM perspective regarding femdom<sup>76</sup> and a positive awareness of radical feminist concerns, particularly the impact of the larger social

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<sup>74</sup> 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming-Out Story (mirror)' *Clarisse Thorn*.

<sup>75</sup> I use the terms 'most' and 'usually' as in Chapter Three I discuss the concept of *good* and *bad* BDSM.

<sup>76</sup> This is a term coined by Bitchy Jones to signify female dominance within BDSM that does not have connotations with psychopathology.

system and how that inhibits the range of sexual choices available to women.<sup>77</sup> That blog exemplifies how it can be possible to negotiate between the different feminist factions, although it is a complex position because of the seeming inability of many feminists to understand the arguments of others. In this respect, *Bitchy Jones's Diary* is the exception rather than the rule. In this section I examine the discursive strategies used in arguments concerning abuse, consent and BDSM in the feminist blogosphere.

The analysis focuses on a five-part series of posts entitled 'BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires)', written by the radical feminist blogger Nine Deuce on her blog *Rage Against the Man-chine*. The title alone establishes the tone of the posts as disdainful towards BDSM practices. Her aim with this series is to examine from a radical feminist perspective the 'dynamics involved' in male dominant and female submissive BDSM relationships.<sup>78</sup> I focus on this series, in part because they elicited a high volume of comments—with twenty-two on the first post,<sup>79</sup> rising to 363 by the fifth post<sup>80</sup>—and also because they sparked intense debate of these issues across the feminist blogosphere. In addition to examining the content of Nine Deuce's posts, I then use the discussion and comments from other feminist bloggers, including those on *SM Feminists* and *Subversive Submissive*, as a way to explore the complex consequences that arise when a debate occurs between those on the inside and those on the outside of specific subcultures. The analysis is

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<sup>77</sup> Lisa Downing, 'Reading *Bitchy Jones's Diary*: Sex Blogging, Community-Building and Feminism(s)', *Psychology and Sexuality*, 3 (2012), 5-11.

<sup>78</sup> Nine Deuce, 'BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainsthemanchine.com/2008/11/28/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-renaissance-faires-part-1-some-background-and-a-few-warnings/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

<sup>79</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>80</sup> Nine Deuce, 'BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 5: Nine Deuce, you're a homophobe! [27 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainsthemanchine.com/2009/02/27/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-renaissance-faires-part-5-nine-deuce-youre-a-homophobe/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

structured into four categories, which are: the methodology that Nine Deuce uses to reach her conclusions regarding BDSM; an examination of these opinions; a critique of her concept of an ‘ideal sex act’ that exists in a post-patriarchal society; and an examination of the rhetoric used by Nine Deuce as it relates to the aims of feminism.

Nine Deuce claims that conducting her own research experiment answers her research question more effectively than reviewing existing academic literature, or discussing ideas with BDSM practitioners. I argue, conversely, that this limits the study’s efficacy because she is examining a subculture of which she has little direct knowledge from a radical feminist perspective, when such a perspective rejects and denies out of hand the foundational principles of BDSM (consent and choice). As a result, Nine Deuce is making comments and critiquing BDSM from outside its subcultural framework. She outlines the methodology as follows:

I had a long conversation about the topic with the Esquire, and we figured one approach would be to put a personal ad on a website that will remain unnamed in four markets (New York, LA, San Francisco, and San Diego) to see what kinds of responses we’d get and to see what we could glean about BDSM therefrom. The ad was for a woman in her 20s interested in exploring submission (and that’s about all the ad said). In four days we got over 400 responses, and I read them all very carefully. I then wandered around the Internet looking at various BDSM info sites, reading up on the various BDSM societies in cities around the world, and looking at BDSM porn.<sup>81</sup>

This methodological approach is flawed because she chooses to discuss her plans not with BDSM insiders but with the mainstream men’s magazine Esquire. She later revealed that the site used for her fake personal advert was Craigslist,<sup>82</sup> a mainstream advertising site that is associated with BDSM hook-ups but not a dedicated site for that purpose such as CollarMe.<sup>83</sup> This methodology, therefore, will not answer Nine Deuce’s queries concerning the dynamics

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<sup>81</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>82</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainstthemanchine.com/2008/11/29/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-renaissance-faires-part-3-some-of-the-data/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

<sup>83</sup> *CollarMe*, <http://collarme.com> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

involved in M/f.<sup>84</sup> Instead it offers examples of how people engage with received assumptions relating to BDSM rhetoric used in the personal ad. In summary, Nine Deuce chose not to access the internal subcultural knowledge of the BDSM community and thus her research offers insights only into how those outside the BDSM community understand and engage in these practices. This limits her ability to collapse the inside/outside binary, instead augmenting the differences by not engaging with those who participate within the BDSM community.

When Nine Deuce discusses the results of the data that she collated from her experiment, she reveals that she categorised the respondents into three groups. For her, all of the respondents are ‘terrifying [...] creepy and offensive’ to varying degrees. The first type is verbose, consider themselves transgressive and have a philosophy behind their BDSM practices. They use infantilising language to address the poster, such as ‘little one.’<sup>85</sup> In addition, they pride themselves on being teachers who can help the submissive to resolve the conflicts created by feminism for those women ‘who felt the “natural” “feminine” urge to submit to a (much older and wiser, naturally) man/dad/teacher.’<sup>86</sup> Thus, rather than attempting to dismantle or subvert patriarchy, the type ones reify the mainstream ideal of male dominance and female submission. In her analysis post, she states:

[A] lot of the men who responded told me they were feminists themselves, and that they didn’t think there was anything incompatible about D/s relationships and feminism (they’re obviously not advanced feminist theorists).<sup>87</sup>

Whilst feminism and D/s are incompatible if one is a radical feminist, for others the ability to be able to engage in liberal politics makes these practices acceptable. In turn, this is often

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<sup>84</sup> This statement represents through the relevant capitalisation the position that the gendered individual has within the relationship. In this case the M is the male dominant, whilst the ‘f’ refers to the female submissive. Nine Deuce focuses on this dynamic because for her it embodies patriarchy.

<sup>85</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>86</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>87</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 4: Bullshit Posturing’ [1 February 2009]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainsthemanchine.com/2009/02/01/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-rennaissance-faires-part-4-bullshit-posturing/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

termed 'choice' feminism, where relativism is the emphasis, which can enable any act to be understood in a 'positive' and 'empowering' manner.

According to Nine Deuce, the second type did not couch what they sought in a philosophy but 'were all detailed descriptions of the kinds of sex acts they'd be carrying out on her, with nary a question about what she might fancy'.<sup>88</sup> While she had little to discuss regarding the second type, for her the third type were 'by far the most frightening'.<sup>89</sup> This is because:

They read the word 'submissive' and creamed their shorts at the idea that there was a woman out there who'd let them act out Max Hardcore vignettes on her. None of them had anything to say about the 'art' of BDSM or the sensations our poster would experience, but rather just told her which hole they'd like to rape her in (guess which one came in at number one) before they ejaculated on her face. Her wishes did come up a few times, always in the form of the insatiable desire to lick semen up after being raped. That's about all I can say about that lest I break something or kill myself.<sup>90</sup>

In this paragraph Nine Deuce conveys her disdain for this type of person through the mocking tone inherent in her writing style that uses colloquial expressions ('creamed their shorts'), emotive language ('rape') and use of asides to interject opinion ('guess which came in at number one [anal]'). In addition, she compares their acts to those of Max Hardcore, who is infamous for making pornographic films that 'push limits' by making the actresses suffer extreme humiliation in barely consensual acts. She concludes her third post with a passionate statement that implies that even writing about these people fills her with an intense sense of rage.

Although Nine Deuce states that this is an experiment and in these posts she will outline her hypothesis, methodology and findings, throughout the series she allows her emotional reaction of disgust with and hatred of BDSM practices to inform her writing. For example, she outlines her argument using the following emotive language:

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<sup>88</sup> 'Nine Deuce, 'Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>89</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>90</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 3: Some of the Data [29 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

Basically, all of the objections people are going to raise are going to be attempts to poke holes in the claim that BDSM is nothing but a distilled and adorned manifestation of our culture's sick gender dynamic of man as subject, woman as (hated) object. The fact of the matter is that the bulk of BDSM practices center around female submission, or one partner taking on a 'feminine' and submissive role.<sup>91</sup>

She makes this statement as a way to try to silence those who might disagree with her opinions, particularly feminists who also engage in these practices. In the comments on the series, other feminists (including Trinity who writes for *SM Feminists*) attempted to engage Nine Deuce in debate, but the blogger responded in angry and dismissive terms. In the final post of the series, she states that this is because the 'BDSM posts were aimed at people outside of the radfem and BDSM communities', which was why she claims she used 'inflammatory language' to convey her message.<sup>92</sup> However, this statement suggests that Nine Deuce anticipated controversy within the feminist blogosphere but made the statements aware that they could offend. In this sense she anticipates and aggravates a reoccurrence of the feminist Sex Wars that began in the 1970s, as discussed in Chapter Two, through the medium of the internet which allows debate to escalate at a rapid pace.

Before Nine Deuce even analyses the results of her 'experiment' she reveals that she has some initial problems with BDSM. These include the fact that she perceives it to be theatrical, that it is associated with 'geeks' and that it 'represents an attempt to derive as much excitement and titillation out of sex as possible while avoiding real intimacy'.<sup>93</sup> Nine Deuce argues that BDSMers conflate sex and power, which for her is problematic because

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<sup>91</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>92</sup> Nine Deuce, 'BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 5: Nine Deuce, you're a homophobe! [27 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainstthemanchine.com/2009/02/27/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-renaissance-faires-part-5-nine-deuce-youre-a-homophobe/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

<sup>93</sup> Nine Deuce, 'BDSM (the sexual equivalent of being into Renaissance faires) Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*, <http://rageagainstthemanchine.com/2008/11/29/bdsm-the-sexual-equivalent-of-being-into-renaissance-faires-part-2-the-problem-with-kink/> [accessed on 10 October 2011].

she considers sex to be ‘a unique way for people to bond’.<sup>94</sup> In addition, she claims: ‘Kink is the solution to the problem that compulsory marriage creates: couples who don’t belong together feeling like failures because their relationships suck’.<sup>95</sup> This implies that if one lived in a society that abandoned the ideal of the ‘happy ever after’, instead acknowledging and accepting that most relationships have an inherent lifespan, people would not need to engage in BDSM.

Nine Deuce’s principal problem with BDSM concerns her perception that it embodies misogynistic and patriarchal notions of gender and sex.<sup>96</sup> In particular, she considers that when the dynamic is between a heterosexual couple, where the man is the dominant and the woman is the submissive, this is an expression of ‘misogynistic culture’.<sup>97</sup> As her argument continues, she uses the example of mainstream heterosexual pornography, which, she says, also reflects this dynamic as ‘men are aroused by female pliancy, and women are aroused by their ability to arouse men. Women are objects, men are subjects.’<sup>98</sup> She concludes by stating that BDSM is ‘nothing but a highly concentrated and more obvious remix’<sup>99</sup> of this notion, which is why for her heterosexual (M/f) is founded upon sexism and she considers that it supports the patriarchy.

While one might expect that liberal feminists who engage in SM would refute Nine Deuce’s arguments, Subversive Submissive and the other liberal feminists whose writings I examined agree with Nine Deuce. Subversive Submissive acknowledges that ‘institutionalized sexism’ affects a person’s perceptions to the extent that they are immune to

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<sup>94</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>95</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>96</sup> ‘BDSM is nothing but a distilled and adorned manifestation of our culture’s sick gender dynamic of man as subject, woman as (hated) object.’ ‘Nine Deuce, ‘Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>97</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>98</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>99</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 2: The Problem with Kink, [28 November 2008]’, *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

observing its effects.<sup>100</sup> Before entering the BDSM scene, she hoped that it would provide a space that would subvert norms and challenge stereotypes, yet its ‘values [...] are fairly mainstream’.<sup>101</sup> The precise reason that Nine Deuce rejects BDSM echoes the experience of Subversive Submissive, who explains that ‘within the world of BDSM, “this is my kink” can be used to justify stereotypes and prejudice’.<sup>102</sup> For Subversive Submissive this is disappointing but she acknowledges that since a cross-section of society practise BDSM, the community will reflect hetero-patriarchal norms. This is because she considers that one aspect of feminism is sexual freedom, which means that she cannot understand how rejecting her inclination to practice BDSM could be a feminist act.<sup>103</sup>

In addition, neither the blogger Trinity nor Clarisse Thorn, when referring to Nine Deuce’s arguments, consider that BDSM is feminist in itself.<sup>104</sup> Indeed Trinity raises the following questions regarding sexual practices and feminism:

I think BDSM \*is\* a set of sexual interests and sexual practices, and that's all it is. It might be worthwhile asking if they're inherently bad ones (though I think that too is kind of silly), but inherently feminist ones? If they were indeed "feminist", what would that mean we expected them to do?<sup>105</sup>

Here Trinity argues that considering the ethics of a sexual act is important, though it will not affect the existence of such desires. She also does not take for granted the relationship

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<sup>100</sup> Why I’m No Longer Outraged by Sexism, [21 October 2009], *Subversive Submissive* <http://subversivesub.wordpress.com/2009/10/21/why-im-no-longer-outraged-by-sexism/> [accessed on 15 October 2011].

<sup>101</sup> Why I’m No Longer Outraged by Sexism, [21 October 2009], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>102</sup> Why I’m No Longer Outraged by Sexism, [21 October 2009], *Subversive Submissive*.

<sup>103</sup> <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2008/12/selfishness-how-they-getcha.html?showComment=1228940520000#c7043449765866415688>

<sup>104</sup> Trinity comment ‘Diving Back In’ [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233811860000#c4173489212385263028>

Clarisse Thorn comment ‘Diving Back In’ [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233813180000#c3295961146699829969>

<sup>105</sup> Trinity comment. ‘Diving Back In’ [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233811860000#c4173489212385263028>

between feminism and sexual acts. Indeed she questions how an act could be feminist and, if it was, how it would appear. Clarisse Thorn responds to Trinity's question in the following manner:

I don't think that BDSM itself is inherently feminist. I would (and do, frequently) argue that the subculture promotes ideas of consent and communication that are feminist. I mean, safewords alone ... I think that the idea of safewords is, in itself, an incredibly feminist one.<sup>106</sup>

A safeword functions in a BDSM scene as a way for either party to stop the proceedings at any time. The most widespread, and known, terms follow a traffic light system whereby *red* means that all acts must stop now; *yellow* means a participant is 'starting to find this difficult as it is becoming overwhelming' and *green* is 'please keep going'.<sup>107</sup> Many books advocating the safe practice of BDSM discuss the importance and function of the safeword.<sup>108</sup> Clarisse argues that safewords make consent an explicit, continuous process throughout the encounter, enabling constant renegotiation and removing the idea that one can be obligated to have sex.<sup>109</sup> While these are useful tactics, perhaps, as Clarisse Thorn argues, influenced by feminism, they offer an appearance of safety that can lead to complacency.<sup>110</sup> Although BDSM puts in safeguards to protect against abuse, it does not guarantee this will not occur, which for some radical feminists supports their concern regarding BDSM practices.

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<sup>106</sup> Clarisse Thorn comment. 'Diving Back In' [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233813180000#c3295961146699829969>

<sup>107</sup> 'Sex Communication Tactic Derived from S&M 2: Safewords and Check-ins.' [3 July 2010]. *Clarisse Thorn*. <http://clarissethorn.com/blog/2010/07/03/sex-communication-tactic-derived-from-sm-2-safewords-and-check-ins/> [accessed on 27 October 2011].

<sup>108</sup> Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction*. (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 1996); Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Bottoming Book* (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 2001); Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 2003).

<sup>109</sup> 'Sex Communication Tactic Derived from S&M 2: Safewords and Check-ins.' [3 July 2010]. *Clarisse Thorn*.

<sup>110</sup> Several limitations of safewords are as follows: the top/dominant might not listen to safe word used by the bottom/ submissive; the bottom/ submissive might struggle to use the safe word due to inexperience/ pride/ not wanting to disappoint that challenges consent, which is why Clarisse advocates regular check-ins as a way to work around this issue. For more on this see: 'Sex Communication Tactic Derived from S&M 2: Safewords and Check-ins.' [3 July 2010]. *Clarisse Thorn*.

Nine Deuce considers that the M/f dynamic replicates ‘the general misogyny that pervades our culture’.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, when she analyses the ‘data’ from her experiment she offers some nuanced arguments about consent and abuse within BDSM. She considers that the existence of the BDSM maxim ‘safe, sane and consensual’ as a community built-in safeguard makes her see a ‘red flag’ of warning.<sup>112</sup> In particular this is because it conveys the sense of risk that is inherent with engaging in these, and any, sexual practice. She raises a pertinent—and rhetorical—question: ‘And how do other members of the BDSM community deal with those who don’t adhere to the safe, sane, and consensual line?’<sup>113</sup> This is not only a worry that radical feminists may have about BDSM. Indeed, pro-BDSM female sex blogger Kitty Stryker wrote an in-depth post on her blog *Purrversatility* entitled ‘I never called it rape’, which addresses the silencing of abused victims within the BDSM community.<sup>114</sup> Stryker argues that because of the public perception that BDSM is always abuse those who engage in BDSM practices may be reluctant to admit it when abuse does occur. She follows this with a proactive post where she writes a guide offering advice to enable people to be safer in the BDSM community.<sup>115</sup> Nine Deuce shares many of the concerns raised by Kitty Stryker, and states that sanity and safety are ‘slippery concepts’, which is a useful, if obvious, comment.<sup>116</sup> The subjective nature of the BDSM maxim ‘safe, sane and consensual’ leads to more problems for Nine Deuce because, for her, BDSM practices working within the male dominance and female submissive paradigm are neither safe nor sane. This is because they

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<sup>111</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 4: Bullshit Posturing’ [1 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>112</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 4: Bullshit Posturing’ [1 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>113</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 4: Bullshit Posturing’ [1 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>114</sup> Kitty Stryker, ‘I never called it rape’. 8 July 2011, *Purrversatility*

<http://purrversatility.blogspot.com/2011/07/i-never-called-it-rape.html> [accessed 24 October 2011].

<sup>115</sup> ‘Safe/Ward: A “What Can You Do” Guide for Community Members.’ 19 July 2011. *Purrversatility*

<http://purrversatility.blogspot.com/2011/07/safeward-what-you-can-do-guide-for.html> [accessed on 24 October 2011].

<sup>116</sup> Nine Deuce, ‘Part 4: Bullshit Posturing’ [1 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

reify patriarchal misogynistic society when, for her, feminists ought to be attempting to overthrow and alter this very paradigm.

Despite Nine Deuce's critique of BDSM, she does not attack the female submissive and claims that she is 'not telling anyone who practices BDSM that they suck or should be ashamed of themselves'.<sup>117</sup> Instead she feels pity for them and is surprised that 'there are any women in this warped society who aren't' into submission.<sup>118</sup> However, in the following passage she explores her reasons for disagreeing with arguments made by those who advocate BDSM practices:

All of the claims about women's sexual agency and the focus on consent within BDSM sound awfully weak in the face of the reality of the misogyny that pervades our culture and the very real sexual and emotional abuses that women face every day. I've heard the claims that by playing with gendered power dynamics, people who practice BDSM are subverting the gender hierarchy, but I find that a little difficult to believe when so much of what I've seen just looks like garden variety sexual abuse at a Halloween party. I find it hard to believe that a sexual practice that fetishizes women's pain and submission is so different from mainstream misogyny, that I ought to think M/f BDSM is a step forward for feminism because the women who participate in it like it. Orgasms don't necessarily equal progress.<sup>119</sup>

She considers that 'choosing' to engage in these activities is not really a choice at all because it unquestioningly subscribes to the norm. These criticisms can be extended beyond the reference to BDSM practices to include the whole field that is 'choice' feminism—a kind of feminism that reifies relativism, where anything is acceptable so long as the person has consented to it. Such choice-privileging ideology risks ignoring the fact that all sexual practices inevitably have (patriarchal) society as their backdrop, which means a person can never escape power dynamics. For Nine Deuce, society does not enable the expression of sex acts based upon equality.

Nine Deuce develops a process to enable her to question the relationship between sexual practices, gender roles and power in a patriarchal society. She creates three criteria,

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<sup>117</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 1: Some Background and a Few Warnings, [28 November 2008]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>118</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 4: Bullshit Posturing' [1 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>119</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 4: Bullshit Posturing' [1 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

against which she can check any sex act to determine whether it requires further analysis.<sup>120</sup>

The criteria are as follows:

First, I ask myself whether women are ever hurt as a result of the practice under consideration. If the answer is yes, the practice has not earned immunity from examination and analysis.

Second, I ask myself whether those who engage in the practice ever do so out of a hatred of women. If so, it's up for discussion and judgment (a nasty word for those with po-mo leanings, I know, but a necessary one nonetheless).

Finally, I have to ask myself whether the practice would occur in a society that wasn't characterized by male supremacy and the hatred of women, both of which tend to manifest as the mixture of sex and power. I've got a really impressive imagination (I invented unicorns), so if I can't imagine a sex act having the power to excite in a post-patriarchal world, I get a little dubious.

If a sex act fails to meet any of these three criteria, you can expect that I'll be questioning the fuck out of it, and BDSM really blows on all three.<sup>121</sup>

These criteria depend upon the interpretation of the term *ever* in terms of contingency rather than how a practice has been used historically. In this sense it is possible to break down Nine Deuce's long-winded steps into the following three stages: contingency (does the practice ever hurt a woman?); is it done from hatred for women rather than benevolence? and could the practice exist in a post-patriarchal society?. If we take the term *ever* to mean in a historical sense, since few practices have not been co-opted for strategies of violence, it can be difficult to divorce this cultural history from contemporary representations and iterations of these practices. However, since the third criterion focuses on Nine Deuce's imagination, the acts acceptable will depend upon her own social and cultural bias. Thus it is unsurprising that for Nine Deuce few sexual acts meet her criteria—indeed she mentions that BDSM fails all three but fails to state which acts would be acceptable, which leaves her a wide range available for 'discussion and judgement'.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> This is similar to the Bechdel test developed by Alison Bechdel in a 1985 comic strip entitled 'The Rule' from *Dykes to Watch Out For*, where she devised three simple rules to determine gender bias in films: 1) does it have two women in it, 2) who talk to each other, and 3) about something other than a man. Alison Bechdel. 'The Rule', *Dykes to Watch Out For*. (Ann Arbor: MI, Firebrand Books, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>121</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 4: Bullshit Posturing' [1 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>122</sup> Nine Deuce, 'Part 4: Bullshit Posturing' [1 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

Nine Deuce's ideal sex act criteria resulted in a wide range of criticism from the feminist blogosphere, in particular by the blogger Trinity on *SM Feminists*. In the post 'Diving Back In' Trinity outlines her principal problems with the criteria:<sup>123</sup>

I don't think these criteria are good ones. I don't think feminism is about figuring out what sorts of nefarious anti-woman things men have in their heads and, armed with Knowledge, tripping warily through the minefield. I think that makes feminism about men in a funny way, about men and about fear, when it's supposed to be about women and about becoming more free. (And yes, self-styled 'radical' feminists may not like that word 'free,' thinking it means 'at liberty to make dumb choices.' As a matter of fact, I am using it that way. Let's see them sour faces.)<sup>124</sup>

This passage demonstrates that Trinity is sceptical of the focus Nine Deuce's criteria place on sexual danger from men's actions, and how they hurt and endanger women. This inability to understand the other's feminist position echoes Carol Vance's argument endorsing a feminism that acknowledges both sexual danger and pleasure (analysed in Chapter Two).<sup>125</sup>

Trinity expands upon the differences between her branch of feminism and Nine Deuce's, and focuses on their fundamentally different relationship with risk. Trinity believes that feminism should focus on learning to accept that risk is a part of life, which she demonstrates through the following comparison:

But someone coming up to me and saying 'Isn't BDSM emotionally unsafe [for women bottoms living in patriarchy]?' is like someone coming up to me and saying 'Don't condoms break?'<sup>126</sup>

Here Trinity suggests that since even 'safer sex' cannot remove risk, yet people still practice it, it is illogical to use a similar kind of argument to denounce BDSM. While this could seem a logical argument, it seems to be a false comparison due to the different kinds of risk involved in the two cases. For Trinity, Nine Deuce's criteria suggest that she wants to eliminate risk from life, whereas Trinity advocates: 'Risk management. Not risk

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<sup>123</sup> 'Diving Back In' [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html> [accessed on 27 October 2011].

<sup>124</sup> 'Diving Back In' [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*.

<sup>125</sup> Carole S. Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 1-29.

<sup>126</sup> 'Diving Back In' [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*.

elimination.<sup>127</sup> Thus in Trinity's ideal sexual world acts could, and would, include those that have been used for purposes of coercion and torture, and to characterise male supremacy, because a woman's sexual pleasure from the act matters more than other ways the act might be or have been used.

Although Nine Deuce argues that, according to her own criteria of an ideal sex act, BDSM would never exist in a post-patriarchal world, she later states that 'people might, in that world, still get excited by extreme sensations, but I don't think that the accompanying power differential rituals would exist'.<sup>128</sup> In this statement, she softens her rigid approach outlined in the ideal sex act passage, by considering comments made by bloggers such as Trinity. In addition, Nine Deuce does acknowledge that people might want to enjoy extreme sensations separate from power play, which involve what BDSM practitioners term 'top' and 'bottom'. They are distinct, yet can be overlapping, sexual practices with dominance and submission, as I examined in more depth earlier in this chapter. For Nine Deuce, the principal problem with BDSM, regardless of the genders involved, is that the roles adopted solidify power dynamics based upon dominance and submission. While altering the gender dynamic of M/f to F/m, F/f or M/m, could disrupt the existing sexual hierarchy, changing the gender does not dismantle the power paradigm.<sup>129</sup>

In addition Nine Deuce dismantles the concept that BDSM, particularly the (male) dominant and (female) submissive power dynamic, is psychologically innate in some human beings and therefore acceptable and belongs in society. She claims that since the concept of what is natural is 'a human psychological construct', for her, it cannot be used to determine

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<sup>127</sup> 'Diving Back In' [4 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*.

<sup>128</sup> This could provide a way of enabling bottoming as opposed to submission, which requires power dynamics. Nine Deuce, 'Part 5: Nine Deuce, you're a homophobe!' [27 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>129</sup> 'F/m or F/f or M/m BDSM might (MIGHT) [disrupt the existing sexual hierarchy] but [she's] not sure that switching between the two roles does much to dismantle the roles themselves, and it's the roles that I think cause the damage.' Nine Deuce, 'Part 5: Nine Deuce, you're a homophobe!' [27 February 2009], *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

whether or not BDSM is an acceptable set of practices.<sup>130</sup> In addition, the concept of what is natural, and in turn, normal is difficult to dismantle because it appeals to emotion rather than rationality. To support this argument Nine Deuce gives the example that the concept of ‘natural’ in the West endorsed by ‘Judeo-Christian ideas about sex and gender’<sup>131</sup> enabled patriarchy to exist because it requires the existence of ‘two agreed-upon sex roles arranged in a rigid hierarchy: men over women’.<sup>132</sup> However, in response to this argument, Trinity disputes Nine Deuce’s claims regarding BDSM and patriarchy:

I actually don’t think that BDSM reinforces, reifies, or copies patriarchy either. I’m tired of people making my relationships invisible because I am not a man, and then claiming they are feminists.<sup>133</sup>

As I showed earlier in the chapter, Trinity does not consider BDSM necessarily to be a feminist act either. This is because BDSM is a set of sexual practices, which does (at times) consciously manipulate social norms. For example, in the above quotation, Trinity develops a sense of anger because she is a female dominant in a heterosexual relationship with a male submissive, yet considers that her opinion and perspective is silenced. This is because for Trinity her pro-sex feminism is incompatible with Nine Deuce’s form of radical feminism. However, Bitchy Jones—not a female masochist—is able to offer a useful way to negotiate between these positions by arguing that patriarchy restricts the choices and range of options available to women for their sexual expression, female dominance being a case in point.<sup>134</sup> Thus it is not BDSM itself that replicates the patriarchal order but rather those engaging in it who can replicate multiple sexist and reductionist attitudes that in turn affect the representation of BDSM.

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<sup>130</sup> Nine Deuce, ' Part 5: Nine Deuce, you’re a homophobe! [27 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>131</sup> Nine Deuce, ' Part 5: Nine Deuce, you’re a homophobe! [27 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>132</sup> Nine Deuce, ' Part 5: Nine Deuce, you’re a homophobe! [27 February 2009]', *Rage Against the Man-Chine*.

<sup>133</sup> ‘Selfishness: How They Getcha,’ *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2008/12/selfishness-how-they-getcha.html> [accessed on 25 October 2011].

<sup>134</sup> Downing, p. 5.

## 5.4 Some Concluding Remarks

‘Only feminist activism is a feminist act.’ Nine Deuce<sup>135</sup>

Taking this quotation in isolation, it seems that it could be a useful maxim: reserving the word *feminism* for pro-woman activism could reduce much of the ambiguity and miscommunication that occurs within feminism, as I have demonstrated through my discussion of the two sets of Sex Wars. Nine Deuce does not offer an example of what form this ‘feminist activism’ would take. One can guess that she is referring to activities, such as campaigning for women’s rights regarding maternity leave, abortion clinics, rape laws, etc. Also, what constitutes activism is quite broad and varied since the term refers to intentional acts that are meant to induce social, political and economic change. In that sense feminist activism could be understood to be anything that attempts to remove and dismantle patriarchy. Since Nine Deuce does not offer any specific examples of feminist activism, and activism can mean any act motivated by effecting change, then, the term is necessarily slippery.

However, if we look at the larger context in which Nine Deuce wrote the above statement concerning feminist activism, its definition becomes even hazier:

As to my getting married, I never claimed it’d be a feminist act. I was being sarcastic in my claim that it was going to ‘be, like, a totally revolutionary’ marriage. But anyway, people tend to misunderstand the radical feminist position on marriage. Marriage, as it constructed and construed by society at large, is financially, legally, and socially restrictive/detrimental for women. But that takes no account of how it might be approached by those of us who are capable of thinking about things and doing things our own way. How, might I ask you, is my choice to get married and yet live in a different city than my husband and have different bank accounts anti-feminist? I won’t be dependent, I won’t be a baby-machine, and I won’t be sacrificing any of my goals

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<sup>135</sup> Nine Deuce comment. ‘Diving Back In’ [6 February 2009], *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233967860000#c4715943962741027436> [accessed on 27 October 2011].

for his (it's really more likely to go the other way, if you must ask). Anyway, I don't claim that it's a feminist act, just as I'm not going to claim that the fact I ate a burrito this afternoon is a feminist act. About the only directly feminist act I engage in is writing my blog. The rest (including sex) is just daily life, and I wish people would get that: only feminist activism is a feminist act. But again, here's someone complaining about my questioning the general nature of a practice (and misrepresenting my meaning—I never called anything anti-feminist, but rather brought up some serious cognitive dissonance that the issue was causing for me) and pretending I'm criticizing individuals' choices, but then taking the liberty to do so with regard to mine.<sup>136</sup>

Putting the earlier quotation within this context it seems to take on a different tone. This comment is phrased in a way to attack liberal (so-called choice) feminism because she considers that this detracts from the function of feminism as being to seek social change through dismantling patriarchy. In particular it seems from this passage that Nine Deuce wishes to refute that daily life is a form of activism, which follows if one subscribes to the liberal feminist maxim the 'personal is political'. Given Nine Deuce's persistent critique of liberal feminism's emphasis on choice, her statement that it is her 'choice to get married' appears somewhat hypocritical.<sup>137</sup> However, she is unable to see the logical contradiction in her position and maintains that, whilst she can 'choose' to enter into a highly problematical institution historically designed for the ownership and husbandry of women, it is not possible for another heterosexual woman to choose to engage in BDSM owing to the social conditioning of living in a patriarchal system.

Nine Deuce states that when she analyses practices that support patriarchy she avoids 'get[ing] into people's individual experiences but prefer[s] to think about the abstract issues involved in the generalized dynamics'.<sup>138</sup> This supports her argument that daily life is exempt from politics, because she considers it to be the everyday (micro), which does not affect the

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<sup>136</sup> Nine Deuce comment. 'Diving Back In' [6 February 2009] *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233967860000#c4715943962741027436> [accessed on 27 October 2011].

<sup>137</sup> Nine Deuce comment. 'Diving Back In' [6 February 2009] *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. <http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com/2009/02/diving-back-in.html?showComment=1233967860000#c4715943962741027436> [accessed on 27 October 2011].

<sup>138</sup> Nine Deuce comment. 'Diving Back In' [6 February 2009] *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*.

political sphere (macro). In addition she considers theorising to be a useful way to offer reflection on the lives of others. However, Trinity responds stating:

theorizing is the epitome of laziness. It's assuming that people's lives fit maps, and worshipping the map as the explanation. [...] I don't think we CAN understand what they do UNLESS we understand how they experience it.<sup>139</sup>

Here Trinity articulates the danger and limitations of ignoring individual narratives and experience, instead focusing upon the theoretical level. In the attempt to develop a grand narrative, individual experience and difference can be lost. Instead she endorses examining individual and specific narratives as a way to inform theoretical positions. However, Trinity overlooks the fact that the case study is used successfully in academia as a way to prove a hypothesis. In addition, Trinity seems to have an entirely different definition of feminism to Nine Deuce whereby, because day-to-day acts comprise a life, so each decision regarding how to live that life can be informed by feminist principles and thus can provide the foundation for change. This is an example of micro-based politics.

The radical feminist Nine Deuce privileges the role of specific acts that attempt to dismantle patriarchy, and so the macro is always in mind. By contrast, for the liberal feminist Trinity it seems that the specific, individual and day-to-day experiences can exert change on a micro level and in turn influence the macro because liberal feminists seek reform within patriarchy. It therefore seems that the relationship between acts, and the micro and macro, provides one of the foundational differences between radical feminism and liberal feminists.

I examined this feminist debate on the blogosphere that replicated arguments raised in the Sex Wars discussed in Chapter Two because their treatment of heterosexual female masochism and submissions demonstrates the persistence of the political complexities in representing these phenomena. As a form sex blogging enables the reader and writer to observe the discursive construction of sexual identity through posts on their individual blogs

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<sup>139</sup> Trinity comment 'Diving Back In' [6 February 2009] *Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces*. [accessed on 27 October 2011], original emphasis.

(e.g. *Subversive Submissive* and *Clarisse Thorn*), comments, reading other blogs and discussing cultural products (e.g. *Secretary*). This chapter demonstrates the modern day impetus to confess, and analyses the bloggers' adoption of pre-existing narratives, such as 'coming out', in order to construct their virtual identity.

## Conclusion

This thesis has offered a critical analysis of the multiple discourses that contribute to the construction of representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission. It has been inspired by Foucault's methodological approach, which emphasises the role of historical context in the construction of non-normative sexual practices. This method refuses to prioritise any specific discourse, but rather examines their intersections. In addition, I have been keen to distance my thesis from the work of many scholars writing on non-normative sexualities who focus their analyses through a sex positive agenda where the impulse to celebrate and raise positive awareness of the practice affects the analytical content.<sup>1</sup> Their agenda need not be a limitation of their work but it does shift the emphasis to a more overt and positivistic political project, whereas I privilege analyses of the intersections between the discourses that I have identified as pivotal: medical (sexology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry) and feminism. In these ways, my thesis has provided a paradigm for thinking about the problems of representing a perversion or kink that is especially politically fraught.

The conclusion will explore connective threads that link the chapters of the thesis, drawing examples from the whole of the corpus. This offers a different way of summarising the arguments made in each chapter by focusing on the connecting threads that draw the thesis together as a whole. I begin by re-examining the positioning of masochism as a psychopathological symptom that signifies a deviation from the so-

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,' in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. by Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 267-319; Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta, and Alessandra Iantaffi, 'The Power of Play: The Potentials and Pitfalls in Healing Narratives of BDSM', in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 197-216; Peggy Kleinplatz and Charles Moser, 'Is SM Pathological?', in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 55-62.

called norm. The first section focuses on the impact of medical discourses on cultural representations, with a focus on the pathologisation of female masochism and submission. The second highlights the role of male coercion in many of the heterosexual narratives used in the thesis, which is normalised by and symptomatic of a broader cultural misogyny. The third examines the notion that cultural misogyny supports the relegation of non-normative sexualities to the periphery, which could be why it seems that the more radical depictions of BDSM occur in queer and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (abbreviated to LGBT hereafter) representations.<sup>2</sup> I then situate these arguments and consider them in relation to the wider phenomenon of the so-called sexualisation of culture, and the impact this has on the mainstreaming of representations of BDSM. I end by discussing the valency of the term masochism, and suggest future directions for research in this area.

### **6.1 BDSM and Psychopathology**

As has been amply demonstrated in what has gone before, BDSM has its origins in psychopathology, most notably sexology and psychoanalysis, and so I begin this conclusion by analysing the strand of my thesis that examines how these pathologising discourses inform the contemporary cultural iterations of heterosexual female masochism and submission. I examined the idea that BDSM practices have their foundation in mental illness, cause distress to the practitioner, are faulty ways to cope, and by their *nature* are a deviation from the *norm*. Indeed this idea was present in each text of my corpus and I will now demonstrate the different ways that the texts depict this nexus of assumptions.

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<sup>2</sup> I use 'radical BDSM', as discussed in Chapter Three, to describe practices that fall outside of the 'safe, sane and consensual' code, and that resist sex-positive or therapeutic narratives by actively courting risk and bodily danger, sometimes up to death.

Diski's novel *Nothing Natural* implies that heterosexual female masochism and submission co-exist with mental illness, conveying a connection between these two practices. Diski depicts Rachel, the protagonist, as a troubled individual, who cannot experience emotional closeness due to neglect experienced as a child, time in a care home and subsequent adoption. This contextual background is used to imply the character fears intimacy before Diski made the character experience distress as a result of her internal conflict regarding her feminist politics and desires for submission. Diski uses the commonplace assumption of BDSM to enable the novel's conclusion where Rachel falsely accuses Joshua of rape, which the policemen unquestioningly believe.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it appears that *Nothing Natural* does not intend to depict BDSM as pathological but represents BDSM in a character portrayed as troubled, which results in supporting the assumption that BDSM is pathological.

The coexistence of female masochism and mental health crises even occurs in the so-called 'positive' examples of cultural products discussed in the thesis, such as the film *Secretary*. As the film begins, the audience sees Lee Holloway waiting outside the mental institution to which her mother sent her to cure her self-injurious practices. The film's narrative depicts Lee Holloway as no longer engaging in self-injurious practices by replacing them with partner based masochistic submissive fantasies that focus on spanking, control and humiliation. *Secretary's* adherence to heterosexual norms contributed to good reviews from film critics who claimed it was 'the sweetest movie ever made about ritualized sado-masochism', praised its humour and delighted in the happily-ever-after ending.<sup>4</sup> Although *Secretary* received encouraging reviews and offers

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<sup>3</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Robey, 'The sweetest ever film about sado-masochism' [16 May 2003], *Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3594669/The-sweetest-ever-film-about-sado-masochism.html> [accessed 3 January 2012]; Steven Holden, 'An Office Disciplinarian Gets His Way in the End' [20 September 2002], *The New York Times*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9404E1DA1030F933A1575AC0A9649C8B63> [accessed 3

one of the less pathological representations of BDSM, the narrative structure implies that these practices are engaged by those who previously suffer from what could be described as psychopathological symptoms (e.g. self-injury).

The same trope re-occurs in the sex blog *Subversive Submissive*, where the blogger writes that she engages in both self-injurious practices and masochistic ones. In the writing, the blogger argues that each practice fulfils different needs, as the self-injurious practices tend to be carried out from a need to exert control in her life, while the masochistic ones are undertaken with her partner, and the pain tends to be an enjoyable experience when connected with a giving up of control. This supports my argument made in Chapter Three that these two practices exist on a continuum, since the same person describes enacting them for differing reasons. A person or character who engages in autoerotic masochistic practices rejects the idea that there is a discrete boundary between healthy pleasure and 'bad' pleasure caused by manipulating the body sometimes causing injury. Engaging in these practices includes masturbation beyond childhood into adulthood, which I argue is a rejection of the notion that partner-based sexuality is mature.

The representations examined in my thesis depict pre- or co-existing mental health problems in the characters who also engage in BDSM practices. This can imply that there is a causal link between these practices, which supports and upholds the pathological framework at the origin of discourses about practices termed BDSM. In the case of *Secretary*, by using mental illness as a starting point for the narrative, a pathological framework is suggested. In turn, I consider that the impact of medical discourse and psychopathology can result in representations depicting the punitive consequences of heterosexual female masochism and submission that can manifest themselves in the practices of coercion enabled by cultural misogyny.

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January 2012]; Peter Bradshaw, 'Secretary' [16 May 2003], *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/may/16/artsfeatures> [accessed 3 January 2012].

## 6.2 Coercion and cultural misogyny

One of the discoveries of my thesis is that cultural misogyny and sexual coercion are present in all of the representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission examined. These texts embody and replicate normative assumptions of male dominance and female submission even when the same text attempts to depict the character as having agency. This explains why these phenomena are politically fraught, and in turn suggests that the importance of this analysis lies in its ability to deconstruct the impact of social norms on these representations.

The BDSM scene presents itself as superior to normative sexuality in the arena of equality and safety. It has a principal maxim, which is “safe, sane and consensual”. This highlights that explicit consent, which can take the form of a contractual agreement whether verbal or written, is considered vital. While this aphorism is integral in contemporary community discourse on BDSM it was absent from the bulk of representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission that I could find. Instead the texts in my corpus seemed to enact the male dominant and female submissive paradigm. Rather than an explicit negotiation of consent, the methods favoured were coercion, the abuse of power and helping to initiate the submissive into their *true* sexuality. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that this dynamic has long been considered problematic for many feminists.

One of the most infamous and earliest representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission is Pauline Reage’s erotic novel, *The Story of O*, which was first published in France in 1954. In its opening scene, the protagonist, O, receives instructions from her lover René while they are on a car journey to an unknown destination. For example he asks her to remove her knickers and lift up her skirt so she

sits with her skin directly on the leather car seat, which she does without question.<sup>5</sup> Their destination is a chateau, where René tells O that she will be left in order to become his possession and learn how to be his slave. At no point in the narrative does René ask her if this - sexual slavery - is something she desires, for he makes the assumption that he knows best. Also, at no point does O retaliate. This fictional example demonstrates the pervasive cultural misogyny at play, which could be expected from a novel written in France in the 1940s before second wave feminism.<sup>6</sup> However, as we have seen, this dynamic has not disappeared from contemporary representations of these practices.

Diski complicates the dynamic between coercion and agency in *Nothing Natural*. She depicts the characters Rachel and Joshua having sex after they first meet, where during penis-in-vagina sex (abbreviated to PIV hereafter) Joshua spanks Rachel without asking explicit consent. Diski describes the moment in the following terms:

As she began to come again she felt and hear him slapping her, quite gently, on the bottom, almost tentatively, and, when he saw that she continued to move, a little harder not so that it hurt but so that the sound of each slap rang around the room.

Christ, she thought, this is new. What is this? [...]

She wondered in the silence about the smacking. She had never been with anyone who was into spanking – she supposed that was what it was. She was curious and a little embarrassed, but also excited by it.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from this passage that Joshua depends on her implied consent, and so introduces Rachel to BDSM. In addition, it demonstrates that Rachel had neither engaged in nor considered masochistic and submissive desires prior to this encounter. In turn, Rachel does not question the role of coercion in this encounter. After this uninvited introduction to BDSM, Diski informs the reader that Rachel wants to pursue BDSM during a conversation between her and Joshua where they recount their fantasies

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<sup>5</sup> Pauline Reage, *The Story of O* (London: Corgi Books, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997) [Gallimard, 1949]; Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 17 – 18.

to one another. The fantasy described by Rachel takes the introductory experience further to focus on ‘rape and violence’.<sup>8</sup> At that moment, Diski depicts Rachel as having agency because she transforms the coercive introduction into BDSM to something she desires for herself.<sup>9</sup> However by the conclusion of the novel, Diski depicts Rachel as distancing herself from these desires and presuming that Joshua raped a young girl, resulting in Rachel plotting his arrest. I consider that Diski makes Rachel’s presumption plausible by the inclusion of her moment of coercion by Joshua, and her subsequent longing for him to spank her. I propose that Diski uses *Nothing Natural* to present a thought experiment of a character that, at different points in the narrative, embodies and refutes mainstream assumptions regarding BDSM, and the role that coercion plays in sexual encounters. Rachel is depicted as evolving from a position of refusing to acknowledge coercion at all to presuming its involvement without further evidence.

The role of coercion in *Secretary* lies in the fact that the physical exchanges between Mr Grey and Lee relied on *implied* consent through body language and gestures, rather than explicit verbal consent.<sup>10</sup> No single published review of the film picked up on the lack of explicit consent in the film.<sup>11</sup> I consider that this is because viewers have become used to implicit, or coercive, or non-existent gestures of consent as part and parcel of mainstream depictions of sex and romance. It could be argued that it is surprising that *Secretary* is considered to be an affirmative representation of BDSM when it makes explicit connections with her mental health problems, includes coercion

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<sup>8</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Diski, *Nothing Natural*, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss the initial encounter between Mr Grey and Lee Holloway in depth in Chapter Three.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Robey, ‘The sweetest ever film about sado-masochism’ [16 May 2003], *Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3594669/The-sweetest-ever-film-about-sado-masochism.html> [accessed 3 January 2012]; Steven Holden, ‘An Office Disciplinarian Gets His Way in the End’ [20 September 2002], *The New York Times*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9404E1DA1030F933A1575AC0A9649C8B63> [accessed 3 January 2012]; Peter Bradshaw, ‘Secretary’ [16 May 2003], *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/may/16/artsfeatures> [accessed 3 January 2012].

and depicts what I have called ‘radical’ BDSM in the final urination sequence. I consider *Secretary* to straddle the boundary between a ‘positive’ and pathologising representation of heterosexual female masochism and submission.

The coming out narrative by the sex blogger Clarisse Thorn explores the experience of a woman being coerced into BDSM practices while drunk, and then incorporating this experience into her sexual narrative and attempting to rewrite it as an enjoyable sexual experience. She wrote that she had not experienced or consciously thought of any submissive or masochistic desires prior to the drunken encounter that depended on the implied consent of her kissing him. The ‘consent’ consisted of his reading her body language and experience, which led to him pulling her hair and behaving in a dominant manner towards her. There were no explicit discussions of potential acts, desires or levels of experience. When one of her friends complained and was concerned for her well being, she questioned her own enjoyment. Clarisse Thorn used this experience as a starting point for exploring her masochistic and submissive desires, which became the focus of her writing.

The lack of mainstream consensual representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission supports radical feminist criticisms that BDSM is sexist and replicates innate presumptions about masculine dominance and feminine subordination.<sup>12</sup> These presumptions affect the way that the heterosexual female submissive is treated by the male dominant, which is a phenomenon that Staci Newmahr and Margot Weiss examined in two ethnographic studies of different BDSM

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<sup>12</sup> Examples include: Diana E.H. Russell, ‘Sadomasochism: A Contra-Feminist Activity,’ in eds. R.R. Linden, D. R. Pagano, D. E. H. Russell and S. L. Star, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, Cal: Frog in the Well, 1982), pp. 176-183; Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse: The Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1987]); Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*. (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1991).

scenes in the US.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many of the more positive or radical representations of BDSM seem to occur principally within queer and LGBT depictions. Heterosexual female masochism and submission can be seen simultaneously to conform to and to challenge heteronormativity and cultural misogyny. This is one of the principal reasons why this thesis has focused on representations of these practices in specifically heterosexual female contexts. In the next section I will examine how the representations of female masochism and submission that distance themselves from psychopathology and cultural misogyny occur in representations of queer and LGBT characters.

### 6.3 Queer and Radical BDSM

I will now propose some hypotheses and theories as to why depictions of 'radical' BDSM occur primarily in queer narratives.<sup>14</sup> A useful starting point for why this displacement of radical BDSM might occur is Gayle Rubin's delineation of sexual hierarchies in terms of the categories of 'the charmed circle' and 'the outer limits'. Rubin argues that these hierarchies serve to protect those on the inner limits and ensure 'the adversity of the sexual rabble'.<sup>15</sup> Some of the features of sanctified sexuality are that it is heterosexual, monogamous, coupled and with an emphasis on procreative sex. Outlawed sexuality, on the other hand, is homosexual, 'promiscuous', casual, non-procreative and disposed to BDSM.<sup>16</sup> According to this schema, if a given character is depicted as either LGBT or queer then they no longer belong in the charmed circle. If one aspect of the character's sexuality is already on the outer limits (homosexuality), it

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<sup>13</sup> Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011); Margot Weiss, *Technologies of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> I use 'radical BDSM', as discussed in Chapter Three, to describe practices that fall outside of the 'safe, sane and consensual' code, and that resist sex-positive or therapeutic narratives by actively courting risk and bodily danger, sometimes up to death.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, 'Thinking Sex', *Pleasure and Danger*, p. 250.

<sup>16</sup> Rubin, p. 251.

may be easier within the narrative to reject further norms, and so position the character in 'the outer limits'. In particular, I consider that LGBT and queer representations are more likely to depict radical BDSM because neither sexual practice results in procreative sex, which connects to the 'anti-social turn' in Queer theory.<sup>17</sup>

Recent queer theorisations of time also help us to hypothesise why radical BDSM occurs in queer representations. Queerness occupies a position that is always outside of reproductive time. In this sense masochism can be defined as queer because it is divorced from reproductive futurity. Judith Halberstam and Lee Edelman formulate this as being 'Queer Time'. This is because they understand linear time to privilege heteronormativity, as it privileges the reproductive cycle so it is connected with repetitive cyclical time.

Halberstam argues that 'queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding'.<sup>18</sup> For Halberstam the appeal of queer time lies in its creation of alternate life narratives, which do not centre on reproduction. She locates the emergence of queer time in the late 1980s and 1990s when AIDS ravaged gay communities. However for Halberstam, queer time is not only a rejection of heteronormativity, but 'is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing'.<sup>19</sup> While Halberstam understands queer time as existing in opposition to reproductive and generational time, the emphasis is on the optimistic potential of the future. By contrast, Lee Edelman connects queer's disruption of normative narratives to the death drive. He seeks to move away from a project of assimilation, and instead offers a challenging call to arms:

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<sup>17</sup> I situate this concept in relation to work by Downing and Gillett in Chapter Three. Judith Halberstam, 'The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies', *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 5 (2008), pp. 140-156.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>19</sup> Halberstam, 2005, p.2.

And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively - to insist that the future stop here.<sup>20</sup>

Edelman's statement offers an explanation for radical BDSM in that it can be a way to explore Georges Bataille's understanding of eroticism, which 'is assenting to life up to the point of death'.<sup>21</sup> He defines an erotic experience that attempts to incorporate a loss of the self and a rejection of the future as a 'limit experience'.<sup>22</sup> These arise from a moment of abandon when an individual engages in extreme acts, such as erotic asphyxiation, which trigger a sense of 'fear and horror' but the limit experience gives them the 'temptation to overstep [these] bounds'.<sup>23</sup> This conception of a limit experience can be useful in relation to BDSM because it offers an interpretative framework for queer representations of BDSM that reject the notion of futurity and embrace its potential destructive elements.

These kinds of BDSM that challenge heteronormativity and the notion that pleasure must lead to a healthy body appeared in two examples used in my thesis: Pat Califia's collection of short stories *Macho Sluts* and the biopic, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. In addition, these texts offer some of the examples of explicit communication and discussion of practices and adhere to the BDSM maxim of overt explicit consent, which was notably absent from the representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission. I will now offer an overview of how *Sick* and Califia's *Macho Sluts* contribute to this understanding of queer theory and radical BDSM.

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<sup>20</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Bataille, p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> Bataille, 2001, p.144. For more on Erotic Asphyxiation see: Lisa Downing, 'Beyond Safety: Erotic Asphyxiation and the Limits of SM Discourse', in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 119-132.

Pat Califia bases hir stories in hir own experiences of San Francisco's BDSM community, particularly through involvement in the lesbian organisation *Samois*.<sup>24</sup> Hir stories enact hir theories regarding the role of BDSM in these communities.<sup>25</sup> There is no attempt to minimise the extremity of the practices or to deny that they can induce extreme sensations and experiences. In 'Jessie', Califia describes the implements that the dominant will use on their partner as a 'masochist's bouquet' of specific implements.<sup>26</sup> It seems that Califia is able to offer a different and more thorough analysis of BDSM as non-procreative through using queer couples, not privileging penetrative sexualities and expanding the concept of the sexual body from the genitalia to the whole body.<sup>27</sup>

A similar process occurs in the biopic *Sick*, which recounts the life and experiences of pain from masochism and cystic fibrosis of the white male heterosexual performance artist Bob Flanagan. The narrative explores how he uses masochistic pain for both sexual pleasure and as a way to exert control over the limitations of his sick body. The BDSM that he engages in recalls Bataille's concept of the limit experience for example engaging in branding, piercing, scarification (Sheree - his partner - carved the letter 'S' around his right nipple with a scalpel to represent her name and to demonstrate his status as a slave).<sup>28</sup> In addition, in the film of one of his performances there is the combination of Bob hammering a nail through his scrotum with a comical song called 'The Hammer Song'. In this sense there is a combination of humour and

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<sup>24</sup> I have used 'hir' in relation to Califia to show awareness that they identify as transgender.

<sup>25</sup> Pat Califia, 'A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality [1979]', in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), pp. 158-167; Pat Califia, 'Feminism and Sadoomasochism [1980]', in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), pp. 168-180.

<sup>26</sup> Califia, 'Jessie', pp. 55, 52.

<sup>27</sup> For Foucault's arguments on BDSM's radical potential see: Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity', in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), pp. 382-391.

<sup>28</sup> V. Vale, *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1993), p. 105.

extreme BDSM practices that also offer therapeutic relief by enabling Flanagan to control and manipulate his diseased and uncomfortable body. In turn, the type of BDSM depicted in this scene while not being in an LGBT context does conform to the concept of queer theory and the antisocial, as Bob Flanagan challenges heteronormative conceptions of masculinity and its equation with virility and dominance, by instead focusing on practices associated with femininity such as submission.

This displacement of radical and challenging BDSM from heterosexual representations to queer and LGBT ones could occur as the abject object of heteronormativity. The psychoanalytic literary theorist Julia Kristeva defines abjection as a process by which an individual, or in this case society, disavows one aspect in order to maintain the illusion of a cohesive whole.<sup>29</sup> For example the mainstreaming of sex depends on a heteronormative reproductive society. I argue that the process of abjection at play in queer and LGBT representations of BDSM enables these radical and non-procreative phenomena to be removed from and shunned by the mainstream and displaced to counter-cultural spheres. These radical queer and LGBT representations of BDSM stand in contrast to and challenge the mainstreaming and normalisation of heterosexual BDSM. I will also examine some of the mainstream cultural representations of BDSM and the expansion of sexuality as a leisure activity, which is connected with consumer consumption.

#### **6.4 Mainstreaming of BDSM**

The construction of the 'sexualisation' of culture has been the subject of numerous policy reports, books and newspaper articles.<sup>30</sup> Each of these attempts to demonstrate

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<sup>29</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (Washington, DC: APA, 2007); Australian Senate, *Inquiry Into the Sexualisation of Children in the*

the potential danger of the sexualisation of culture for the creation of young sexual subjects, as they are written from the perspective that sex is dangerous and something that must be safeguarded against.<sup>31</sup> Here, I will not focus on the role of sexualisation of culture in relation to young people but the impact of a broader mainstreaming of sex on representations of BDSM.<sup>32</sup> I will however examine how the sexualisation of culture has produced the mainstreaming of more liberal forms of sexuality so long as they are within the boundaries of heteronormativity (couple-based sexuality that has the emphasis on fun and playfulness). Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, argue that this re-positioning of the boundaries has resulted in the creation of the ‘good BDSMer’.<sup>33</sup> This would be characterised by engaging in the aspects of BDSM that have been sanctioned within the remit of the mainstreaming of sex. I will discuss the role of *Ann Summers*, examine BDSM imagery in music videos, and demonstrate that these

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*contemporary media environment, Parliament of Australia.*

[http://aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eca\\_ctte/sexualisation\\_of\\_children/tor.htm](http://aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/tor.htm) [Accessed 10 February 2012]; Linda Papadopoulos, ‘Sexualisation of young people review’, *Home Office*.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-of-young-people.html> [Accessed 10 February 2012]; Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvanist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2005); Carol Platt Liebau, *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America, Too!)* (New York: Center Street, 2007); P. A. Oppliger, *Girls gone skank: The sexualization of girls in American culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010); Sean Poulter, ‘Boycott call on clothes that “sexualize” children’ [22 September 2005], *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-363110/Boycott-clothes-sexualise-children.html> Accessed 12 February 2012; Dan Sabbagh, ‘“Sexualised children” – is it always the media’s fault?’ [6 June 2011], *Guardian*,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2011/jun/06/children-parents-and-parenting?INTCMP=SRCH> Accessed 12 February 2012; Sandra Murphy, ‘Parenting groups slam retailers for sexualizing children with sale of high-heeled shoes for girls as young as THREE’ [23 September 2011], *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2041044/Accessorize-Next-slammed-selling-high-heel-shoes-girls-young-THREE.html> Accessed 12 February 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, ‘Investigating young people’s sexual cultures: an introduction’, *Sex Education*, 11.3, (2011), 235 – 242.

<sup>32</sup> Feona Attwood, ‘Introduction: the Sexualization of Culture’, in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2009), pp. xiii - xxiv.

<sup>33</sup> Meg Barker, Camelia Gupta and Alessandra Iantaffi, pp. 197-216, (pp. 206).

phenomena contribute to repositioning the boundary between the ‘charmed circle’ and ‘the outer limits’ since heteronormative BDSM-lite has become almost *normal*.

One of the most significant retailers in the UK to promote the mainstreaming of sexuality is *Ann Summers*, the chain of high-street shops specialising in sex toys and lingerie. As of 2011, they have 144 stores across the UK, which means that many large towns will have a place where the purchase of sex toys is quite easy.<sup>34</sup> The store took on a larger profile after their Rampant Rabbit vibrator was featured on the TV series *Sex and the City* in 1998, and they now sell around two million of them each year.<sup>35</sup> Feona Attwood argues that:

[T]he Rampant Rabbit vibrator is now almost as well known as that much older sign for sex, the Playboy bunny girl, signifying a new interest in women as sexual consumers.<sup>36</sup>

This suggests that there is an increased acceptance and awareness of the consumer consumption by women of goods relating to sex, such as vibrators and BDSM equipment. For example, a section of the *Ann Summers* website, entitled ‘Uncut’, includes subsections for ‘restraints’, ‘whips’, ‘spanking paddles’ and even ‘bondage for beginners’.<sup>37</sup> While these categories might mirror ones found on a specific BDSM sex toys site, such as *Fettered Pleasures*, the emphasis placed on the products at *Ann Summers* is on ‘fun’ and on their role a supplement to someone’s (heterosexual, PIV-centric) sex life.<sup>38</sup> For example, *Fettered Pleasures* sells a wide variety of restraints

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<sup>34</sup> Sean McAllister, ‘A Sexual Revolution’ [June 2008], *Propertyweek.com*, <http://www.propertyweek.com/news/a-sexual-revolution/3116567.article> Accessed on 12 February 2012.

<sup>35</sup> ‘The Turtle and the Hare’, *Sex and the City*, Season 1, Episode 9 (First broadcast on 2 August, 1998 on HBO); James Hall, ‘Ann Summers: The Gold Standards of Cheek and Chic’ [8 Nov 2009], *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/profiles/6525952/Anne-Summers-The-Gold-standards-of-cheek-and-chic.html> Accessed on 7 February 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Feona Attwood, ‘Introduction: the Sexualization of Culture’, in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2009), pp. xiii - xxiv, (p. xiv).

<sup>37</sup> ‘Bondage’, *Ann Summers* <http://www.annsummers.com/c/bondage> Accessed on 7 February 2012.

<sup>38</sup> *Fettered Pleasures* <http://fetteredpleasures.com/home.html> Accessed on 7 February 2012.

from nineteenth-century police irons to leather cuffs that require carabiners to attach them together, and their range of implements to use for hitting someone in sex are those traditionally used in corporal punishment such as canes, tawses and leather straps.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, *Ann Summers*'s mainstream interpretation of BDSM takes superficially similar products but reframes them as playful, fun and optional to make these practices acceptable for consumption by the general public. For example their handcuffs come with fur or diamante embellishments, some are made of fake pearls and there are also restraints made of satin to tie in a bow.<sup>40</sup> Shops such as *Ann Summers* contribute to the promotion of sexuality as playful and fun, which separates them from the BDSM orientated equipment that uses leather and steel, thus continuing its connection with the instruments used in corporal punishment. The mainstreaming of sex and its expansion into the high street has led to a widening of sexual expression, where the boundaries have shifted from Rubin's conception of 'the charmed circle' to incorporate non-reproductive sex.

The mainstreaming of BDSM has been a gradual process that started in the 1990s, has flourished in the past decade, and has been the subject of several academic studies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 'Restraints', *Fettered Pleasures* <http://fetteredpleasures.com/product/restraints/page01.html> Accessed on 7 February 2012; 'Whips, Canes and Paddles', *Fettered Pleasures* [http://fetteredpleasures.com/product/whips\\_canes\\_and\\_paddles/page01.html](http://fetteredpleasures.com/product/whips_canes_and_paddles/page01.html) Accessed on 7 February 2012.

<sup>40</sup> 'Handcuffs & Ankle Cuffs', *Ann Summers*, <http://www.annsummers.com/c/bondage/cuffs> Accessed on 7 February 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Margot D. Weiss, 'Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media', in *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, ed. by Peggy Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (London, New York and Victoria, Au: Harrington Park Press, 2006), pp. 103-132. [Co-published simultaneously as *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50. 2/3 (2006).]; Kathy Sisson, 'The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis' in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, ed. by Darren Langdridge and Meg Barker (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 10-34; Eleanor Wilkinson, 'Perverting Visual Pleasure: Representing Sadomasochism', *Sexualities*, 12.2, (2009), 181 – 198; Romana Rosalie Byrne, 'Fashioning BDSM in Popular Culture Today', *Sadomasochism as Aesthetic Sexuality: a Cultural History from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, Australia, 2010).

These studies include analyses of the mainstreaming of BDSM imagery in music videos, fashion, advertising and fetish clubs. For example the lifestyle magazine *Time Out*, which is sold through multiple outlets across the world, publishes features on burlesque; includes listings for fetish clubs in the clubs section; and the Chicago edition ran the BDSM coming out story of the sex blogger *Clarisse Thorn*.<sup>42</sup>

The singer Madonna played an influential role in the early 1990s with the release of videos with BDSM themes and imagery ('Justify My Love' in 1990 and 'Erotica' in 1992), and to accompany the album *Erotica* published a coffee table book of sexually explicit photographs taken by Steven Meisel and film stills by Fabien Baron.<sup>43</sup> The video for *Justify My Love* was initially only released on video because it was too explicit to be shown on MTV since it featured bisexuality, voyeurism, bondage and visual references to Charlotte Rampling's character in *The Night Porter*, a controversial film that depicts BDSM of a kind in the context of a relationship between a Jewish survivor and an ex-concentration camp guard.<sup>44</sup> Madonna followed this, the year after, with another controversial music video for the single *Erotica*. It had three versions: the standard (no nudity), the more explicit version (full frontal nudity of Madonna and some editing) and an uncensored version that featured bondage, anal sex, full frontal nudity and fellatio. These videos brought a range of imagery associated with BDSM to a wider audience, a trend that has continued to the present day.

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<sup>42</sup> Anon, 'Torture Garden Valentine's After-Party' [12 February 2012], *Time Out London*, <http://www.timeout.com/london/alternative-nightlife/event/254084/torture-garden-valentines-after-party> Accessed on 12 February 2012; Time Out Editors, 'Adult Shows and Events in London' [17 March 2011], *Time Out London* [http://www.timeout.com/london/alternative-nightlife/features/9112/Adult\\_shows\\_and\\_events\\_in\\_London.html](http://www.timeout.com/london/alternative-nightlife/features/9112/Adult_shows_and_events_in_London.html) Accessed 12 February 2012; Clarisse Thorn, 'Love Bites: An S&M Coming Out Story' [20 February 2010], *Time Out Chicago* <http://timeoutchicago.com/sex-dating/74517/love-bites-an-sm-coming-out-story> Accessed 12 February 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Madonna, *Justify My Love*, dir. by Jean-Baptiste Mondino (1990); Madonna, *Erotica*, dir. by Fabien Baron (1992); Madonna, *Sex* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> *Il Portiere di notte (The Night Porter)*, dir. by Liliana Cavani (1974).

A more contemporary example of the mainstreaming of BDSM is Rhianna's 2011 song *S&M* that features the chorus 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but chains and whips excite me' as demonstrated by the video for Rhianna's 2011 single *S&M*.<sup>45</sup> It depicts Rhianna in a variety of BDSM related scenes including walking the celebrity blogger Perez Hilton on a leash, wearing PVC, being tied up in shibari (Japanese rope bondage), wielding a whip, bondage and gags etc. Indeed the video shows Rhianna as both the dominant and the submissive in a variety of different scenarios. However the video also uses this BDSM imagery to comment on the power play between celebrities and the press, demonstrated by members of the press putting Rhianna in bondage, after which the paparazzi are shown with ball gags in their mouths. The video was the subject of a court case after the photographer, David LaChapelle, argued that Rhianna had stolen several images from several of his photographs. The case was settled out of court with an admission of some copyright infringement.<sup>46</sup> Although this video brings depictions of BDSM to the youth market, it reasserts the idea that these practices are acceptable in a playful heterosexual context. I argue that the mainstreaming of BDSM raises awareness of the 'acceptable' and playful aspects, yet anything that transgresses heteronormativity or disregards the sanctity of the body (and the prohibition of harm) is still abjected.

## 6.5 Final Thoughts

One of the principal findings of this thesis is that 'masochism' has a limited valency because it is constructed on the basis of specific understandings of gender, race and class. I argue that masochism and submission are terms applicable in white contexts.

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<sup>45</sup> The chorus sexualises and adapts the expression 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me'. Rhianna, *S & M*, (Universal Music TV, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Sean Michaels, 'Rihanna and David LaChapelle settle lawsuit over S&M video [20 October 2011]', *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/oct/20/rihanna-david-lachapelle-lawsuit> Accessed on 12 February 2012.

Masochism is ‘raced white’.<sup>47</sup> Since Krafft-Ebing first coined masochism in the 1880s, it has been understood in relation to white middle-class iterations of masculinity and femininity. I argue that these initial conceptions shaped the cultural imagining of ‘masochism’, which is reflected by the corpus chosen for analysis in the thesis. In researching Anglo-American representations of heterosexual female masochism and submission I did not find any that dealt explicitly with race and, as a result, race is the silent discourse in my thesis. In addition, I narrowed the focus to an Anglo-American context since BDSM can be used to enact cultural trauma that is specific to its national context. For example, I identified that several texts produced in a German and Italian context examine the cultural legacy of fascism and the Holocaust.<sup>48</sup> Future research projects could use the paradigm developed in my thesis to consider how these terms function in different cultural contexts, and how they manifest themselves differently with regard to discourses of gender, feminism and psychopathology.

A future project could use my examination of the discourses involved in the construction of these representations to elucidate some of the problems that make ‘kink’ and ‘perversion’ so politically fraught, and expand the focus from my study of cis-gendered heterosexual women. Work could be done comparing the representation of heterosexual female masochism and submission with its depictions in lesbian, bisexual and trans\* contexts since these involve different power dynamics and interactions with the key discourses I have used in my thesis: feminism and psychopathology.

My own aim throughout this thesis, however, has been to analyse the precise intersections that affect the discursive representation of heterosexual female masochism and submission. These representations exist on the threshold of being acceptable in the

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<sup>47</sup> Ummini Khan, ‘A Woman’s Right to be Spanked: Testing the Limits of Tolerance of S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary’, *The Journal of Sexuality and the Law*, 18, (2009), 79-119.

<sup>48</sup> *Il Poretiere di notte (The Night Porter)*, dir. by Liliana Cavani (1974); *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom)*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975); Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999).

discourse of the mainstreaming of sex, yet are simultaneously depicted as pathological and extreme. Female masochism and submission are at once archly feminine and inappropriately unfeminine; gender conservative and yet potentially radical. They occupy a liminal location and this crossing of the border between the acceptable and the pathological ensures that these representations are never neutral. Indeed, the complex political position they occupied when they were first coined in the context of Western modernity persists to the present, postmodern day.

## Appendix

Diagnostic Criteria for NSSI as proposed in *DSM-5*:<sup>1</sup>

A. In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body, of a sort likely to induce bleeding or bruising or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), for purposes not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, etc.), but performed with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm. The absence of suicidal intent is either reported by the patient or can be inferred by frequent use of methods that the patient knows, by experience, not to have lethal potential. (When uncertain, code with NOS 2.) The behavior is not of a common and trivial nature, such as picking at a wound or nail biting.

B. The intentional injury is associated with at least 2 of the following:

1. Negative feelings or thoughts, such as depression, anxiety, tension, anger, generalized distress, or self-criticism, occurring in the period immediately prior to the self-injurious act.
2. Prior to engaging in the act, a period of preoccupation with the intended behavior that is difficult to resist.
3. The urge to engage in self-injury occurs frequently, although it might not be acted upon.
4. The activity is engaged in with a purpose; this might be relief from a negative feeling/cognitive state or interpersonal difficulty or induction of a positive

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<sup>1</sup> NSSI. DSM-5. <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=443> [accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2011].

feeling state. The patient anticipates these will occur either during or immediately following the self-injury.

C. The behavior and its consequences cause clinically significant distress or impairment in interpersonal, academic, or other important areas of functioning.

D. The behavior does not occur exclusively during states of psychosis, delirium, or intoxication. In individuals with a developmental disorder, the behavior is not part of a pattern of repetitive stereotypies. The behavior cannot be accounted for by another mental or medical disorder (i.e., psychotic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, mental retardation, Lesch-Nyhan Syndrome).

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