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Sexual Subjectification and *Bitchy Jones's Diary*

Meg Barker and Rosalind Gill

Abstract

This paper presents the reflections of two academics on the blog *Bitchy Jones's Diary* (2006-2010), particularly its considerations of dominant femininity within the UK kink communities. Weaving together excerpts from the blog with our own dialogues, we consider the potentials of such a voice from within the communities in relation to more academic explorations. Specifically we focus on the relationship between Bitchy Jones's arguments and our own understandings of limited sexualised femininities available within wider culture, the place of agency within these, and the potentials for mutual recognition within both kinky, and non-kinky, relationships.

Keywords: Blogging, Femininities, Kink, Sexual subjectification.

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Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at King's College London, and author of numerous books and papers on gender, media and 'sexualisation', including *Gender and the Media* (Polity Press, 2007). She also researches cultural labour and inequalities in the cultural and creative industries. Rosalind is currently working on a project exploring 'tween' girls' negotiations with 'sexualised' culture and another looking at young people's uses of social media. Her latest publication (co-edited with Chrstina Scharff) is *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Palgrave, 2011).

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Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (Atwood, 1994, p. 392)

In this paper we reflect on the blog *Bitchy Jones's Diary* which explores sexual subjectification as it operates within the context of kinkⁱ communities. 'Sexual subjectification' is a term coined by one of us (Ros) to describe recent shifts in mainstream culture towards women's sexuality being presented as autonomous and empowering despite appearing much like previous representations of women as the objects of male fantasy (Gill, 2003; 2006). This is eloquently captured in the quotation above from Margaret Atwood's (1994) *The Robber Bride*, which also hints at the ways in which both dominant and submissive femininities can be regarded within the context of sexual subjectification. We were intrigued by Bitchy Jones's blog because she engages precisely with such ideas when considering women's roles within the kink world that she is familiar with; a topic which Meg has written about previously (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Barker & Langdridge, 2009).

In the body of the paper we will quote what we thought were some of the most insightful elements of the blog and will follow this with verbatim excerpts of our own discussions of these issues. We felt that inclusion of these 'live' discussions between us was appropriate to the subject matter because it matches the more informal and personal tone of the blog itself. We were keen not to fall into the type of academic criticism of non-academic texts which is so prevalent in the literature on sexual communities, perpetuating its own problematic power hierarchies (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).ⁱⁱ Also, we hoped that the inclusion of the discussions which took place between us would bring some of these contentious areas to life for the reader and demonstrate the struggles involved in negotiating them. We have found this format to be a valuable one in the past for examining the tensions involved in academics reproducing or repressing narratives from kink communities (Barker & Langdridge, 2009).

It is important to say from the start that our aim here is *not* to critique kink communities per se but rather the dominant gendered discourses under discussion, wherever these are played out. There are serious problems with academics writing critical analyses of communities which are still

in precarious positions in society: viewed as objects of ridicule, pathologisation and even criminalisation (Barker & Langdridge, 2009). Also it is vital to note that there is no single kink community but rather many communities which may be more or less overlapping in different cultural or sexual contexts. The communities which Bitchy writes about may perpetuate and resist these discourses in very different ways, for example, to the gay British sadomasochists and leathermen who told their stories to Chaline (2007), the American and European ‘Dyke+’ communities discussed by Bauer (2010), or the Northern UK leather family described by Green (2007). Specifically it is clear that Bitchy focuses mostly on heterosexual, and to some extent bisexual, kink due to her own self-definition as ‘straight’, so she may well be less familiar with explicitly gay, lesbian, trans and queer kink spaces (which certainly constitute less visible, accessible and commercial sides of kink community). We will return to consideration of more explicitly queer/trans kink towards the end of the paper. Here it should simply be recognised that our explorations, like Bitchy's, should not be taken as representative of all kink but rather as demonstrative of the pervasiveness of sexual subjectification within one element of this broad range of sexual communities which situate themselves outside the mainstream. However, perhaps there may be a wider import given that the kink community that Bitchy is part of is probably closer to the *version* of kink which is increasingly finding its way into mainstream sexual practices (Weiss, 2006).

In this paper we focus particularly on the (limited) forms of femininity which Bitchy sees available within kink community, the ways in which she questions the agency of people drawing on these femininities, and the potentials for relating which are opened up and closed down within kink. Before considering each of these points in detail it is necessary to provide a little more context of sexual subjectification in mainstream culture and the feminist debates on kink which form the backdrop to current writing in the area.

Sexualisation and Sexual Subjectification

For the last decade ‘sexualisation’ has increasingly become a subject of popular concern, with anxieties and moral panics over the ‘pornification’ of culture (Paul, 2005) or the ‘rise of raunch’ (Levy, 2006). There have been a number of national governmental reports on these issues, particularly focusing on concerns over the sexualisation of young girls (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2007; Rush & La Nauze, 2006; Home Office, 2010), and many popular books have focused on this topic (e.g. Durham, 2009, Levin & Kilbourne, 2009, Walter, 2010).

Feminist arguments about this are polarised. While some contemporary (radical) feminist positions are reminiscent of the anti-porn positions taken by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine

MacKinnon in the 1980sⁱⁱⁱ (e.g. Jeffreys, 2008; Tankard Reist, 2009; Dines, 2010) other ('third wave') positions build on the 'sex positive' feminism of the same period (Johnson, 2002; Juffer, 1998; Church Gibson, 2003) and/or offer more optimistic views of 'sexualisation' grounded in understandings of women not only as its victims, but as producers and consumers of 'sexual' material in ways that break with notions of women as passive and asexual (Lumby 1997; Attwood 2010; Smith, 2002; 2007). Another distinctive perspective is found among a growing number of writers who examine contemporary sexualisation as a distinctively postfeminist phenomenon linked to discourses of celebrity, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2006, 2008, 2009; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Coleman, 2008; Ringrose, 2010, forthcoming 2011; Pinto, 2009).

In this latter emerging tradition of work the object of concern is the 'postfeminist' trend towards old, problematic, gendered and sexual scripts operating under a veneer of female empowerment and agency. In a series of articles about 'sexualisation' (Gill, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009, Harvey & Gill, 2011), one of us (Ros) has developed the notion of 'sexual subjectification' to explore the ways in which contemporary neoliberal societies interpellate a feminine subject who is:

incited to be compulsorily sexy and always 'up for it'... Beauty, desirability and sexual performance constitute her ongoing projects and she is exhorted to lead a 'spiced up' sex life, whose limits – not least heterosexuality and monogamy – are tightly policed, even as they are disavowed through discourses of playfulness and experimentation' (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 56).

This work extends feminist Foucauldian analyses of technologies of selfhood and bodily discipline (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1998) to argue that sexual subjectification requires not simply a remoulding of the body, but a makeover of subjectivity itself. Sexual subjectification is strongly apparent in advertising (Gill, 2008), women's magazines (Gill, 2009), and 'chick lit' (Gill, 2006), following the popularity of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996): the book that Bitchy's blog is parodying (see Handyside in this volume). Women in these media are presented as wanting to look good and have adventurous sex for their own pleasure, whilst the aspired-to image of attractiveness and 'good sex' match very closely to the ideals of heterosexual male pornography, and exclude all who do not fit such ideals. Implications of such representations can be clearly seen in the arena of sex therapy where young women frequently express distress at their bodily 'flaws' in combination with engagement in sexual practices which they find unpleasurable, or even painful (Barker, forthcoming 2011).^{iv}

It seems that, despite the societal shifts of second wave feminism, women are still encouraged to view themselves through an internalised objectifying gaze, the mechanisms of which have become more slippery and difficult to identify in these days of postmodern irony and

postfeminism.

Kink and Feminism: An uneasy relationship

During second wave feminism, kink was a topic of intense debate and division (Sullivan, 2003). Taken out of context, images and films from the kink community were frequently used by 'anti-porn' feminists to demonstrate the worst excesses of the genre (Vance, 1984). Linden, Pagano, Russell and Star's (1982) collection *Against Sadomasochism* included pieces by many women arguing that kink was inherently anti-feminist, rooted in patriarchal ideology, and supportive of rape myths. They argued that the existence of consensual sadomasochism implicitly endorses the wider non-consensual dehumanisation and abuse of people, and that even lesbian kink is symptomatic of internalised homophobia and self-hatred (Russell, 1982). On the other side, writers such as Califia and Rubin argued for a 'sex positive' version of feminism which might embrace kink, given that many women experience and express such desires. Rubin (1984) argued against feminists setting up a new sex hierarchy which might be just as oppressive as the one it was replacing.

Whilst some have continued to argue that kink, for example, 'eroticises the crude power difference of gender which fuels heterosexual desire, reinforcing rather than ending it' (Jeffreys, 1996, p.86), recent research and theory on gender and kink has tended to focus on its potentials to undo, subvert or transgress dominant gender roles rather than reinforcing them (e.g. Bauer, 2007; Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Smith, 2005; Yost, 2007). Kink communities have increasingly been viewed (by their members and by activists and academics celebrating them) as offering the potential for escaping conventional scripts of sexual practice and related gender hierarchies (Barker & Langdrige, 2007). Many of Taylor & Ussher's (2001) female participants presented kink as feminist in its ridiculing, undermining, exposing and destroying of patriarchal sexual power. For example, participants spoke of the potentials of female submission to 'parody...sexual relations considered as traditionally subjugating, oppressive and exploitative of women' (p. 303); and of female dominance to reverse traditional sexual power dynamics, to avoid penile-vagina penetration, or to enable them to be the one with the cock (through strap-on sex). Ritchie and Barker's (2005) participants pointed out the frequently dominant role of kinky women which might enable them to 'redress' gender imbalances and, in relation to submissive women, they questioned where the power lies within a kink encounter, suggesting that the submissive rather than the dominant party often has more power: a perception that is commonplace in kink communities (Brame, Brame & Jacobs, 1993).

As with other marginalised sexual communities we can see that there is a tendency for academic and activist writing on kink to polarise into the purely critical and the almost

unquestioningly celebratory (Barker, Richards & Bowes-Catton, forthcoming 2011). With feminist work on kink this has historically been related to whether the authors take a more traditionally 'radical feminist' or a 'sex-positive' feminist position. Bitchy's capacity to put forward a position which resists this critical/ celebratory binary was one of the first things we commented upon.

The Blog

Bitchy Jones's Diary

the dominatrix cursed with a soul

My name isn't actually literally Bitchy Jones, obviously. Actually. Obviously. I am dominant. Sexually dominant. I like to be the boss in bed. (But I do not do dominatrixing for money I would starve to death!)

(From the homepage of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*)

Meg: What did you make of the blog as a whole Ros? What were your first reactions to it?

Ros: I absolutely loved the wittiness of it, the intelligence of it, the anger of it, and it really made me think about what's possible in the blogosphere compared to academic writing.

Meg: What struck me, as well as her wittiness and cleverness, was that she was self-deprecating. She was able to cast a critical lens over herself as well as the world which she occupies.

Ros: I felt there was a freedom in the blog that perhaps is missing from academic life. She can make much bolder claims and doesn't have to back everything up with authors and dates in brackets afterwards...but the main thing was that it was written in a safer space, for people who are probably in those communities, so it had a kind of safety that she could say things she couldn't say in, for example, a newspaper or an academic journal.

Meg: Yes I was struck by that as well. Elsewhere I've written about the dangers of academics talking about kink in a world where most academic writing about it is pathologising (Barker & Langdrige, 2009). I'm very reluctant to cast a critical lens over it, but I'm also aware of what that leaves out. And feminist academics in particular are haunted by the feminist sex wars and the sense that if we're not pathologising kink we have to celebrate it, there's no other way. A great thing about Bitchy is that she's obviously celebrating kink, but she's also critical of it at the same time. The blog does that by interspersing critical discussion of kink communities with descriptions of Bitchy's own desires, scenes, fantasies, etc. which she so clearly enjoys and embraces.

Ros: I think she deals with this brilliantly. She shows how people get forced into one of those two positions, pro or anti- sex, and then she resists that herself.

As for the feminist credentials stuff, oh dears, I believe you have fallen into a terrible dichotomy trap there. I know what your trying to say. That thing. The thing people say to try and break feminism. (and kind of works.) You're trying to push me into either being a rad feminist lez-by-choice, anti-porn, anti-sex kissing-up-to-the-religious-right, hating big style on sex workers for being whores, cutting off men's dicks for breakfast OR I can be a sex pos feminist and go hang out at the playboy mansion in a tissue paper bikini. And those are the only options...

As for the only ways to be feminist being either by believing that all sex is rape or empowering myself with lipstick and my tits out – this is the biggest trick the patriarchy-devil ever pulled. (posted 31 March 2009, post entitled 'Wind me up: Watch me go'.^v)

Meg: Yep that's brilliant. Do you think she succeeds in finding another option beyond those two?

Ros: I don't know. It seems like she does for herself somehow: a way to speak her own desire and to act that and live that in her life and to refuse that dichotomy. What do you think?

Meg: I suppose it's that for me, the way she manages to celebrate her desires, and kink broadly, whilst also being able to critique aspects of it and even of herself within it. It gets away from being either critical or celebratory, either sex negative or sex positive: A more sophisticated stance.

Femininities

Part of this sophistication is the fact that Bitchy's critique is predominantly aimed at female dominance within kink rather than the perhaps easier target of female submission.^{vi} Whilst female submission has often been viewed critically because it seems to reproduce problematic positioning of women, female dominance has often been accepted as unproblematically 'feminist' and as critiquing standard heteronormative constructions of gender roles (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2005). However, Bitchy suggests that things may be more complicated than this, and the image of the dominatrix (as taken up by many in kink communities) may actually reinforce conventional understandings of femininity in the imagery drawn upon and the ways it is frequently tailored to the desires of the men – rather than the women – involved.

Everything about this [kink] culture is wrong. There are no women here. Male submission is about men fetishising the fact that what gets them off is not getting women off ...

The prevailing culture of prodom puts lots of focus on unsexy, woman-squicking^{vii} shit like forced fem, strap on play, foot worship, CBT [cock and ball torture] and the generalised inadequacy stuff that mansubs like but are not really anything to do with

female pleasure from male submission ... There is very little about the kind of masculine, brutish, chained-pirate suffering that most women who actually like this stuff actually like.

I know lots of you are now jumping up and down ready to tell me that I am just talking about my own preferences, but, okay, can I ask, why does dominatrix culture look nothing like my preferences? Am I so weird? And why does femdom look nothing like gay SM porn?

Because it has nothing to do with sexualising men, that's why. And that's because no one is paying for that. And that is eroding any real representation of female desire. In fact it has eroded it. It's gone. ('Wind me up: Watch me go'.)

As we see in the above post, Bitchy locates some of this problem in the fact that prodoms (professional dominatrixes) are overwhelmingly the visible face of female domination, and thus seemingly the model for many dominatrixes who aren't engaged in financial transactions:

This prevailing notion that women who have sex for money (or sex workers in general) are somehow being more true to their sexualities than women who have sex for sex – and that is very damaging to women and yet another way of dismissing female sexual desire as irrelevant or, in some way, less *true* than female sexual desire that is molded to be a commodity for men to buy. (posted 8 April 2007, post entitled 'Bitchy Jones: The Unprofessional'.^{viii})

Ros: I see that everywhere in mainstream media culture – that completely paradoxical idea that it's women who have sex for money, rather than out of desire, who have become icons of empowered sexuality. To say this is not to attack or criticise sex workers in any way, but just to highlight the way in which those depictions come to represent female sexuality.

Meg: How is it in so many areas the women selling sex are supposedly the most sexually liberated whereas really they're most likely to be shaping themselves to the desires of men.

Here, Bitchy's criticism of the place of prodoms within kink echoes challenges of the role of sex work in mainstream representations of female sexuality. As explored in detail in Kaye Mitchell's article in this volume, there is a plethora of blogs and books by women who have sold sex (e.g. Belle de Jour, 2008; Quan, 2005), which manages to present sex which is clearly designed for men (the clients) as empowered female sexuality (Levy, 2006; Walter, 2010).

Related to this, Bitchy points out that, in her kink community, the only people to beautify themselves are women (both submissives and dominants), with dominant women using 'fake' methods (corsets, high-heels, make-up, wigs, etc.) to 'over emphasise their femininity because deep

down they think being sexually dom isn't very feminine thing to do.' (posted 11 August 2007, post entitled 'Unicornicopia'^{ix}), and submissive women being treated as second class by male doms unless they look 'cute 'n' young 'n' thin 'n' blonde ... like your average kink dot com cookie cutter rope slut bunny.' (posted 8 January 2008, post entitled 'The mandom manifesto'^x). This clearly echoes sexual subjectification in mainstream culture where the women who have access to the new, empowered, agentic sexuality are those that fit a certain, narrow, stereotype of attractive femininity (Gill, 2006): larger, older, hairier and rougher-skinned bodies, for example, are all excluded. Bitchy points out that neither male doms nor subs tend to put much effort into their appearances. She complains 'how come submissive men aren't the best looking bunch of fucking men in the fucking universe?' and responds that it is 'because their sexuality is not really about satisfying female desire ... but about fulfilling some arbitrary crass and oh-so-often offensive set of dumb desires of their own.' (posted 3 July 2009, post entitled 'Who's A Pretty Boy* Then?'). However, we question Bitchy's conclusion that one solution would be for men (subs) to beautify themselves as well as women. This seems to fall into the common activist problem of 'equal opportunity sexism'; those fighting for equality should be careful not to fight for something that is equally *bad*.

Bitchy contends that a further myth of female sexuality comes into play to prioritise male pleasure whether the man is taking the dominant or submissive role. This comes up when she is discussing kinky pornography:

If there is one rule in porn, it's this, **don't upset the male viewers...**

Keeping in mind that women's sexuality is totally malleable and fluid helps with this rule – which often involves not giving any consideration to women wanting anything specific sexually ever...

Women don't have specific desires. It doesn't really matter what you ask them to do. Just tell them they look pretty and run them a bath after.

Hence the swathes of kinky men who expect any woman who is open to kink to indulge whatever pathetic fetish he feels like boring them to death with. Hence the prodoms who list on their websites every possible off-road sexual activity and no one (except me) thinks it weird that they should be into, like, everything. (posted 18 March 2008, post entitled 'On Being Straight'.^{xi})

Meg: This takes us back to the idea that women get pleasure out of being desired rather than pleasure in their own right. 'Tell them they look pretty'! I think it's really superb. I hadn't thought about the taken-for-granted of women's sexual fluidity operating to support that: If we're flexible then we can do anything as long as it turns men on. It's like the way that myth that women are more likely to be bisexual than men is used to be about men's pleasure rather than women's pleasure: it

means women can perform for men with other women.

Ros: And she talks about the prodoms listing every activity, so women's sexuality is sort of like everything and nothing. They aren't allowed an active, specific, set of turn-ons in the way that men are. In one respect it seems valuable to celebrate the openness and fluidity of women's sexual desire – as an antidote to the whole phallic, coital imperative, but Bitchy seems to be showing how this also works to erase any actual desires on women's part.

Meg: That's right. I was fascinated that two of the main activities which come in for criticism in Bitchy's blog are femdom's wearing strap-ons and mansub's being forced to feminise their appearance. Even these practices which could be viewed as subverting heteronormativity are viewed more complexly by Bitchy. Again she roots them in men's, rather than women's, fantasies, and she cautions that they perpetuate the idea that dominance is linked having a phallus and submission to being feminine.^{xii}

Ros: Bitchy recognises that there is more than one form of femininity available within femdom, but the range is still extremely restrictive. You've got femininity as a hyperfeminine object of male desire. There is femininity as so fluid that it is empty: it can be anything at all so it is nothing specifically. And linked to that is femininity as sensual rather than sexual (all scented candles and bubble bath). With her own sexuality it seems like Bitchy is struggling to be recognised as something more complex, more specific, more active, more desiring. The thing that's great about what Bitchy is doing with that is that she's not really criticising *individuals* for the choices they're making, but rather this limiting range of options and criticising when they're put forward as representative of her. Like when she's discussing a very stereotypical prodom online (Mistress Raven, in 'Bitchy Jones: The Unprofessional') she acknowledges that she is 'mostly angry that she represents me'.

Bitchy's suggestion, then, is that it is gender dynamics, much more than dominance/submission, that rule in kink. This links with Yost's (2007) finding that, despite mainly switching,^{xiii} her heterosexual participants tended to have fantasies of male dominance and female submission where the dominant man experienced pleasure and the submissive woman provided it, whilst her other (non-heterosexual) participants fantasised about dominants *giving* pleasure and submissive participants *receiving* it.^{xiv}

Agency

So we have seen that, as with mainstream culture, what may appear on the face of it to be empowered, agentic female sexuality may be questioned when it appears to meet men's desires more than those of women themselves, when it is women and not men who are physically

constructed as objects of desire, and when it is only available to certain women (in terms of age and appearance). As in wider discussions of sexuality, the observation that this can be the case in kink communities led us to consider the complex and troubling question of agency:

Prodoms and dominatrix latexy culture define what femdom gets to be. I don't pretend this is true for the fucking LULZ^{xv}. I see it every time I try and work with this mess I got given instead of a normal easy – non-fucked up by a culture based on commoditising it – sexuality. ('Wind me up: Watch me go'.)

Ros: That brings me on to want to talk about all that stuff about agency and what it means to authentically express sexuality and articulate desires.

Meg: Yeah because she's really having a go at women doing things because they turn men on, either as a sub or a dom.

Ros: Yes.

Meg: But of course there is the problem that if those women are saying that they enjoy it who are we, or who is Bitchy, to question that? To accuse them of false consciousness?

Ros: Yeah. I suppose in a way Bitchy's questions get to the heart of the debates that I've been having in my work around what counts as an agentic sexual choice (Gill, 2007). What's an authentic position to be able to occupy? And I've been criticised for taking a too culturally determinist perspective and not respecting enough that there can be agency in all of those choices and that they may actually be real choices.

Meg: Yeah I question the same things myself. Looking back on the paper I wrote in 2005 about feminism and kink (Ritchie & Barker 2005), all of us in the group said that any kinky activity was okay if it was freely chosen, but I'm not sure we gave enough thought to the cultural forces present; particularly the one around a woman's power being in being desired and being looked at.

Ros: It just shows how difficult it is for a woman to develop a sexual subjectivity that's her own in this still very unequal world. It's so difficult isn't it? And I suppose that's why, along with Bitchy, I'm so suspicious of claims about choice and empowerment when the thing being celebrated seems to map so perfectly onto what is the required cultural norm.

Meg: But it's complicated isn't it because we can see that female submission is problematic from that standpoint (reproducing cultural gender norms) but Bitchy is criticising (mostly) female dominance for doing the same. What are we left with as unproblematic female sexuality?

Ros: There isn't a safe space, there isn't an unproblematic authentic female sexuality. In my view there is no 'outside' to culture. But we can – and we have to! – try to imagine or prefigure what sexuality could be outside the matrices of power relations.

Meg: That's the power of the heteronormative sexual script. It's like a huge magnet. You hope that

kink would get away from that, and it looks like maybe it does when the focus is taken off what Bitchy calls PIV (penis in vagina) sex. But it is easy for it to still be all about men's desires. It's kind of depressing because back in 2005 I was arguing that female dominance clearly subverts the heteronormative gendered sexual script and that even female submission in kink can display it as performative, parody it, and therefore be subversive. Now, in our readings of Bitchy's blog we seem to be saying the gloomy opposite. That femsub obviously perpetuates the same old scripts and so does femdom. Is it really that bad?

Ros: No. I think we can read Bitchy as a truly utopian thinker, and she is absolutely about having her own pleasures. All power to her! Isn't what she's critiquing the fact that what we see as transgressive communities end up being captured by commodified mainstream cultures? She isn't saying that femdom or femsub is not real or even that it can't be chosen.

Meg: True. She's questioning why only a *certain* way of doing it is so utterly privileged and why she doesn't see her own life or desires reflected or represented in the kink community

If I could say everything is fine. Whee kinky sex. Whatever turns you on is fine. So long as it's SSC [safe, sane, consensual], RACK [risk aware consensual kink], YKINMKBYKIO [your kink is not my kink but your kink is okay], legal and the right way up. Whatever. All our problems and prejudice were something that happened in the past and isn't it whizzy that everything's shiny now?

...

95% of dominant women aren't comfortable in femdom. Are being shut out of there (sic) own sexual culture.

Maybe there's more to this than individual acts between individuals?

And I can't pretend it's all okay. Something is very wrong here. I'm sorry if your kink got in my way but, really, what would you do if you were me? (posted 11 October 2007, post entitled 'Why 95% of Dominant Women Agree With Everything I Say'.)

Meg: Seems like sex positivity in kink communities can operate in a similar way to the idea of women being all empowered and for their own pleasure in mainstream culture. Like Bitchy says, the idea of sex positivity can be a veneer behind which there are still ideas that people must do certain things, and increasingly those certain things being the more problematic ones.

Ros: But Bitchy is calling for a different kind of sex positivity in kink community and more widely which involves questioning the taken-for-granted, breaking free of the patriarchal imaginary.

Meg: Maybe instead of SSC or RACK it should be CIK (critically informed kink). Like she says 'Sex positive feminism doesn't mean accepting everything to do with sex as yay-fucore some,

without question' ('Wind Me Up: Watch Me Go').

Bitchy argues for the importance of equality in kink: between men and women, and between dominants and submissives (outside the negotiated power exchange within the scene). Here she is arguing particularly against a trend she sees for femdoms to act as if they are superior to their subs per se, rather than just in a kink context.

I'm tired of this shame spiralling. I'm tired of us not treating each other right. If we can't accept that no matter how sexy inequity is we need to discuss things as equals outside of the fuckabout. We need to strip it down to the humanity.

...

Down from the pedestals, out of the gutter. If we want equality. If we want femdom to be equal with mandom, if we want kink to be equal with vanilla, whatever... we've got to stop acting like pompous tits and worthless gits. ('Unicornucopia'.)

This call for equality resonated, for us, with de Beauvoir's (1949/ 1997) argument that women's objectification in society gives rise to a serious problem for heterosexual men: that of denying them the opportunity of sharing their lives with women who they can see as their equals and who will protect, support and stimulate them in a reciprocal way. Bitchy is arguing for people to meet as fellow humans in a manner akin to de Beauvoir's (1948/ 1976) reciprocity, or Benjamin's (1988) mutual recognition. The latter concept is something that Smith (2005) explores in depth in relation to kink, arguing that kink can open up, rather than closing down, the possibility for mutual recognition. She argues that kink requires *willing* submission and therefore it can only happen between two subjects, where there is agency to consent and the submissive is an active partner in the exchange of power (Langdrige & Butt, 2004). Smith sees in kink power play the possibility of mutual recognition of a fellow subject and the reaching of an equilibrium point between connection and separation.

However, as we have seen, such mutual recognition in kink is, for Bitchy, something to imagine in a utopian future rather than something that is present in the world she currently occupies. There are interesting resonances with her struggles in Langdrige's (2009) analysis of a male submissive. In his years visiting prodoms this man idealised a more loving, accepting and *mutual* relationship with a 24/7 mistress who chose him, rather than being paid. However, once he entered such a relationship he realised how much he had been in charge previously. As he put it, with the prodoms: 'it's almost the reverse of being, wanting to be, a slave, but actually saying "right, I want this, but I don't want that"' (Langdrige, 2009, 220). He found himself trying to gain control in his new relationship with gift giving and financial exchange. Clearly, just as in non-kinky relationships, mutual recognition is no easy matter even when people are aware that that is the kind of connection

they are searching for.

Conclusions: Wrestling sex-positivity back from postfeminism

Bitchy Jones stopped writing her blog in February 2010, just before we met to have our discussion.

Below is an excerpt from her final post:

Kink's broken. I hate it. I don't really want to play. Something inside me does, but that something is trapped inside the meat of me that hates all this fucking pornified, PVC clad, patriarchy eroticising bullshit that stifles everything and anything good that kink could ever be. It is the enemy of any kind of creative artistic freedom and that's a sad, sad thing, because it could be the opposite of that. (posted 1 February 2010, post entitled 'Some Kind of Climax'.)

In this final post we found echoes of our own disappointments at finding problematic dominant discourses reproduced, rather than resisted, in the various political movements and community groups that we have been part of. Bitchy captures well how incredibly hard it is to operate outside conventional gender and power dynamics even within communities where some degree of challenging of societal discourses is clearly happening (in kink, for example, around what counts as sexuality, and around common distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable activities, Barker, Gupta & Iantaffi, 2007).

Meg: I really get that in her final post on the blog: the sadness and almost sense of betrayal that the kink community wasn't better than that when there's so much potential for it. But why do we expect kink communities to be so much better?

Ros: I think because these are not any old communities. They are formulated on critique of heteronormativity and vanilla sexual practices, so we expect better of them. But actually it seems that there is a lot of covert policing going on, they are steeped in ideas of what is and isn't permissible, gender roles and dress codes. What I get from the last post is a sense of lost opportunity. As you say, it's really painful to read; she so wanted it to be better, but now she 'doesn't want to play'. It feels very like the kind of disappointment and burnout I've experienced myself in so many different political movements.

Clearly Bitchy experienced her kinky community as lacking in diversity, particularly as not being very open to LGBT people.

Because, you know, the next time you are at a kinky event or website which is decorated entirely with pics of tied up women it really isn't so the gay and bisexual women have a good time. ('Why 95% of Dominant Women Agree With Everything I Say'.)

This returns us to the issue raised at the start of this paper about the plurality of kink communities. There is a striking difference between the community portrayed in Bitchy's blog to that of Bauer's (2007, 2010) Dyke+ kink community, which mostly consists of people who define in some way as trans or genderqueer. In Bauer's (2007) analysis participants speak of deliberately exploring gender through kink, of using it as a safe space to experiment with different roles, and of finding, through such explorations, a heightened awareness of everyday heteronormative gender and power hierarchies and norms. In particular, participants used kink to decouple dominance and submission from gender, to recode body parts and sexual practices in non-heteronormative ways, to see new gendered aspects of themselves recognised by others and to generate new beauty standards (e.g. 'I'm a handsome butch rather than unattractive', p.186). There are clear echoes here of the 1970s lesbian kink world represented by Califia (1980) in which dominant or submissive roles are detached from traditional gender expectations. Bauer's participants explicitly report that such explorations do not occur within current straight kink worlds. For example:

I see this sort of yuppie consumption of SM culture as being super apolitical in a lot of ways and the way they can play with gender and race – I'm amazed that they have no fucking idea what oppression is. I don't know how they can really engage in healthy SM, when they're not understanding how what they do is different than oppression because they don't know what oppression is. (Teresa, in Bauer, 2007, p.189)

This brings us back to the idea of CIK (critically informed kink) which we drew from Bitchy's reflections: wrestling sex-positivity back from the postfeminists so that it encourages, rather than obscuring, more critical thought about the meaning of practices and power; and resisting the hedonistic/political dichotomy by finding ways of embracing both. As Bauer puts it, the importance of 'reflecting your situatedness within social hierarchies first to [be able to] consciously play with and perform gender and power in BDSM space' (2007, p.190). Bauer argues that it is this that sets dyke+ and queer kink apart from straight kink.

Reading Bauer's work alongside Bitchy's journal it seems poignant that there may *be* kink communities in which Bitchy would meet people of a similar mind regarding the issues of power and gender that are so important to her, but that these are not communities which she would want to access since her fantasies and practices are about an explicitly heterosexual dyad of dominant cis-woman and submissive cis-man. Furthermore it seems likely that, in such communities, there will be greater potential for the kind of mutual recognition desired by both Bitchy and Langdridge's (2009) submissive man, given the greater awareness of power dynamics in operation, the more explicit desire to explore and transgress such dynamics, and the commitment to equality through,

presumably, a more nuanced understanding of consent. However, it is also probable that there are those within straight kink who question things in the way Bitchy does (many of the fans of her blog, for example), and those within queer and trans kink who do not. It is vital when reflecting on such issues to avoid universalising and fixing particular communities or particular practices, but rather to remember the plurality present within any community and the multiplicity of meanings possible in any activity.

Smith (2005) does see the potential for challenging heteronormativity, and for mutual recognition, within heterosexual kink relationships (if not communities). She writes that, within the kink she imagines – and finds in ethnographic studies – masculinity *must* be expanded to contain a kind of male care, or ‘dominant nurturance’ (and arguably vulnerability, in male subs), and femininity *must* be expanded to contain types of female strength or ‘submissive autonomy’ (p.186). Bitchy's blog cautions that such expansions do not necessarily occur in kink. In fact, powerful cultural forces ensure that they often do not. However Bitchy is clearly expanding things in these ways in her own life and her writing. We find ourselves keen to read what Bitchy does next: how she continues to question and explore in ways that open up possibilities for both herself and others. Noting the many positive and grateful responses to her final blog she is clearly not alone.

No. It's not all sad. Despite my penchant for the melodrama. This blog made an impact. A far bigger one than I ever dreamed. Most people in SM know about what I've said, the arguments I've made. They may not have changed their behaviour one bit but most kinky people understand what the Bitchy Jones view of femdom is. And that's wild and out there now. And you can't put the lube back in the tube. ('Some Kind of Climax')

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i **Notes**

ⁱ Here, as in *Bitchy Jones' Diary*, we are using the word 'kink' as a broad umbrella term for a range of identities and practices involving playing with pain and physical sensation, bondage, and the exchange of power, generally in a sexual or erotic context. Elsewhere the umbrella terms 'SM' (sadomasochism) or 'BDSM' (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism) are used to capture a similar range of people and activities.

ii Of course we recognise that we are exerting academic 'power' in our choice of quotations to use here, and that there is necessarily some difference in tone between our discussions and the blog.

iii Positions which influenced policy and practice, often through engagements with psychological research which have since been challenged (e.g. see Linz, Donnerstein & Penrod,

1987).

iv Of course the spectre of false consciousness is never far away from such discussions and we will return to this issue.

v This post no longer appears online in the abridged, archived version of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*.

vi Although male dominance and submission both come in for some serious criticism as well. The only real critique of female submission we found was a reference to the 'big guns' of femsub power being in being 'bratty' ('Stop. It. Now', 20 September 2009). There does seem to be a link between infantilism and female submission which is not there for male submission (except in the much more marginal practice of age-play). This would follow from Beauvoir's (1949/ 1976) link between the objectification and infantilisation of women: not having subject status means remaining childlike. (For more on the idea that 'femsub is broken too', see Dymock's article in the current volume.)

vii 'Squick' is a word in kink for a strong negative emotional reaction to an activity which acknowledges that the person having the reaction doesn't judge the activity as wrong or bad for others.

viii This post no longer appears online in the abridged, archived version of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*.

ix This post no longer appears online in the abridged, archived version of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*.

x This post no longer appears online in the abridged, archived version of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*.

xi This post no longer appears online in the abridged, archived version of *Bitchy Jones's Diary*.

xii This offers a useful note of caution to the idea that seeming reversals of gender are inevitably subversive, pleasurable and powerful (cf. Ritchie & Barker, 2005).

xiii People who take both dominant and submissive roles at different times.

xiv Although in Yost's research heterosexuality correlated with being a switch (taking both dominant and submissive roles in kink), so it was difficult to determine whether heterosexuality, switching, or both were most relevant.

xv For a laugh.