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Transgression and (Sexual) Citizenship: The Political Struggle for Self-determination within BDSM Communities

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Abstract

There has been – and continues to be – a tension within the political strategies of sexual minority communities claiming citizenship. Whilst attempting to forge a political self-determination based on being (dissident) sexual subjects, members of sexually diverse communities have frequently engaged in political practices that normalize their diversity to accord with wider socio-cultural conventions. In this article, we address this issue in relation to the political strategies of one of the most marginalised sexual identities/practices: BDSM. By drawing on the work of Foucault, Rose, Rabinow, and Bahktin, we advance a case for how it may be possible for dissident sexual communities to resist the normalizing effects of citizenship whilst still making claims for legal recognition and wider social acknowledgment. Key to the argument is the theorisation of a position wherein carnival transgression operates within a dialectical integration of ideology and utopia as a mode of citizenship.

Keywords: sexual citizenship, carnival, transgression, belonging, BDSM

Introduction

In recent decades, a particularly prominent range of claims for civil rights has been focused on sexual diversity. No longer limited to the scientific and psychiatric realm, sexuality has become a lodestone for self-determination amongst minority groups whose identities are predicated upon non-normative forms of sexual practice. With this rise in individuals and groups claiming sexual rights there has been an equivalent rise in scholarship concerned with sexual citizenship and debates about the boundaries of acceptability and permissibility. Sexual citizenship has become an increasingly contested – but still valuable – concept, with numerous scholars exploring the meaning and efficacy of the struggle to establish diverse sexual identities and communities as a legitimate way of life in the face of normative citizen values around sexuality (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Evans, 1993; Langdrige, 2006, 2013; Oleksy, 2009; Phelan, 2001; Plummer, 2001, 2003; Richardson, 1998, 2017; Richardson & Turner, 2001; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Sabsay, 2012; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 1998 etc.).

One of the paradoxical issues in many of the debates around sexual citizenship relates to the fact that the need for recognition often – arguably, always – prompts subjects to bring their sexual urges into line with normative values, at least to some degree. That is, rather than forging a strong political self-determination based on being (dissident) sexual subjects, members of sexual minorities have frequently sought to normalize, whether intentionally or not, their diversity to accord with wider socio-cultural conventions. The lesbian and gay struggle – and arguments therein – for social acceptance via the adoption of a culture of consumption and ostensibly bourgeois family norms is a prominent example of the tension between the pursuit of normalization and the political struggle over the sexual realm (McWhorter, 2012; Winnbust, 2012).

One group of sexual minority communities – namely, BDSM communities – occupies a particularly interesting position with respect to these arguments. BDSM is a compound term for a range of sexual practices, including bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism. People who engage in BDSM continue to be subject to considerable condemnation, in large part as a result of the pathologizing discourses of the medical and legal professions (Langdrige, 2014; Langdrige and Barker, 2013). Much traditional academic literature on BDSM

focused on aetiology, understanding these sexual practices as a form of pathology in need of treatment and cure (Langdridge, 2014; Langdridge and Barker, 2013). However, this is changing, with leading medical manuals such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM 5) and International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organisation (ICD-11) now considering these practices non-pathological when they do not cause distress amongst consenting adults, although there is still further progress needed (Moser, 2016, 2018). This change comes in the context of a growth of critical studies of sexual sub-cultures that, together with community activism and increasing public awareness, have sought to understand BDSM as part of the diversity of contemporary sexual life (e.g. Beckmann, 2009; Cruz, 2016ab; Langdridge and Barker, 2007; Moser and Madson, 1996; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). An important part of this work has focused on the value of BDSM identities and practices for understanding the politics of sexual life more generally.

It is important not to paint an overly romantic portrait of BDSM practitioners and communities any more than we should with any other sexual minority. Abuse does of course happen within these communities as it does within all others but there is no evidence of any greater incidence with BDSM, and some emerging evidence of inventive community led interventions where it does occur (Holt, 2016). And, although not the focus here, it should be noted that BDSM also features in a significant amount of sex work, with a small but growing body of empirical and theoretical work on this topic (Cowan, 2012; Cruz, 2016ab; Lindemann, 2011). However, in spite of the continuing prejudice against BDSM practitioners, there is, perhaps remarkably, no evidence of psychological disturbance or substantive differences compared with the general population with regard to history of sexual abuse or interpersonal violence (Richters et al., 2008; Wismeijer et al., 2013; see also Moser, 2016, 2018).

Needless to say, not all BDSM communities are alike, nor are all BDSM practitioners alike. For some people BDSM is a central part of their identity whilst others recognize BDSM practice as just one aspect of their sexual life (Langdridge, 2006). There are multiple BDSM communities, some of which are closed to outsiders, but with most organized collectively to provide educational workshops, instruction, support and advice whilst also addressing the general public through internet web sites, popular media, production of consumer products, and through engaging with

public cultural institutions (Beckmann, 2009; Stiles & Clark, 2009; Weinberg, 2016; Weiss, 2011). In general, BDSM communities subvert binary orthodox identities by challenging the hegemonic model of sexual citizenship that prioritizes the superiority of genital sexuality, reduction of sexual practice to objective (invariably reproductive) goals, and the non-public (private) nature of sexual behaviour and experience (Foucault, 1984, 1997a; Rubin, 2011). In addition, they often ignore and/or subvert binary identities such as homosexual/heterosexual, minority/majority ethnic, male/female, cis/trans, thereby paving the way for a sexual citizenship encompassing diverse intersectional identities (Bauer, 2008, 2014; Cruz, 2016ab). There remain on-going concerns about the place of gender and race/ethnicity within BDSM communities (e.g. around the whiteness of some communities) but here too there has been productive discussion and debate (Cruz, 2016ab; Deckha, 2011; Dymock, 2012; Simula & Sumerau, 2017). In spite of differences between communities, empirical studies do however suggest that there is a good degree of consistency across communities, at least with regard to the themes at stake in this article about safety and consent (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Weinberg, 2016; Weiss, 2011).

Since the 1980s and the emergence of greater cultural visibility, BDSM communities have increasingly sought to ensure a safe environment for practice (Newmahr, 2011; Sisson, 2013). Indeed, a central precept of most BDSM communities is that all (sexual) practice must be ‘safe, sane, consensual’ (SSC) – a term allegedly coined by David Stein (2003). This central community rule has served to help separate consensual (and pleasurable) BDSM practices/identities from sadistic acts of nonconsensual violence and abuse (Downing, 2007). SSC also serves as an attempt at prevention of external legal attention and possible prosecution (Weeks, 2011).

Thus, in the last few decades, safe, sane, and consensual sexual play has become the foundation for the self-determination of BDSM sexual rights; with it now anchored within BDSM practice conducted under community based normative rules. The separation between brutal pathological acts and a permissible sexual identity lies in a consensual agreement between two adults concerning the rules of play within a BDSM scene: this will include discussion of the scene and limits to BDSM activities, and notably the choosing of a ‘safe word’ to ensure there is the ability to stop a scene at any time (Weinberg, 2016). The exact nature of consent in this context is also facilitated through third-party decisions concerning acceptable limits expressed by

internal community experts and leaders, such as sexologists for example, and in the guidance sections of Internet websites (Newmahr, 2011; Weinberg, 2016; Weiss, 2011). Safety and consent are the main epistemic foundation that separates permissible from non-permissible practices and the categorisation of sane subjects as opposed to pathological ones. The limiting conditions for participants are based on written and oral expectations concerning safety practices that are openly negotiated (Weiss, 2011). Many of the workshops within community organizations are based on internalizing safety and consent rules concerning BDSM play around topics such as "the art of negotiation", "spanking and whipping safely", "beginning rope bondage", etc. Here, 'external' (community) rules occupy a particularly prominent place within BDSM play, over and above the contingent experience of the participants themselves.

However, SSC reasoning is not limited to the institutional organization of these closed communities but also—and even especially—determines contemporary discourse concerning BDSM within the public sphere, especially in the way it appears on Internet websites and social media. The cultural reputation of a BDSM practice is in part determined by the way it is presented publicly, especially the extent to which it can be considered acceptable in the context of rules around safety and consent (Weinberg, 2016). Beyond communities, the dominant discourses of sexology and psychology are bounded by limits of BDSM acceptability (e.g. around erotic asphyxiation), in similar ways to the boundaries adopted by most BDSM websites and books (Downing (2007). Here, BDSM discourse, in communities or in the public sphere, determines the boundaries of acceptability and permissibility through a positive argument concerning the need to learn safety behaviour (Weinberg, 2016, 45), and a negative argument concerning the public elimination of non-permissible behavior. In this way, the rights, activities and identity of the BDSM subject are conditioned through the SSC discourse within a practical consent framework.

Feminist debates continue regarding BDSM, and particularly the notion of consent within the SSC mantra, though with an increasing volume of feminist voices seeking to challenge once dominant discourses of BDSM as patriarchal abuse and violence (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Cruz, 2016ab; Deckha, 2011; Dymock, 2012; Moore & Reynolds, 2004; Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Simula & Sumerau, 2017). The liberal notion of consent at the heart of much sadomasochistic practice, in particular, has been critiqued by a number of feminist theorists, notably Carole Pateman (1983,

1988) and Audre Lorde (1984). Specifically, it is argued that the liberal notion of the contract, which is highlighted in BDSM, continues to be used to mask the operation of sexual and racial power. Under the conditions of hetero-patriarchy, colonialism and orientalism, sexual contracts will always be necessarily unequal. There is of course truth in these arguments and they alert us to the need to attend to the social and cultural and not simply the individual within citizenship discourse. However, as an increasing number of feminist theorists have argued, these positions themselves result in the silencing and policing of particular sexual subjects. The subjects in question here are women BDSM practitioners, and most particularly black women BDSM practitioners, through what Cruz (2016ab) refers to as a politics of respectability (see also Dymock, 2012). In the context of arguments about the controversial practice of ‘race play’ within BDSM, Cruz (2016a: 384) argues instead for engagement with a politics of perversity in which black women can buck respectability to ‘engage in the illicit, queer pleasures of race’. The argument presented in this article about carnival transgression under biopower might be read as a theoretical counterpart to the arguments from Cruz (2016ab) about the need for particular (oppressed) communities to embrace a politics of perversity.

The SSC motto is also somewhat controversial within BDSM communities, albeit for different reasons, with some people preferring the use of RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) for the way that it acknowledges risk, as opposed to safety, and eschews the need to satisfy the externally driven (medical psychiatric) criterion of ‘sanity’ as a precondition for sexual practice (Langdridge, 2014). These arguments revolve most critically around sexual desires and practices that transgress accepted norms, particularly those involving notable risk to life, commonly referred to as ‘edge play’. This may include, for instance, sexual practices involving breath control through the use of ligatures or drugs, which are forbidden within many communities as part of a general strategy of safety and public discourse designed to gain rights and wider social acknowledgement.

Here, BDSM discourse exists between everyday practice, community rules and public discourse, and revolves around active and ongoing negotiation (Weinberg, 2016). Weinberg presents empirical evidence that younger participants believe in a higher level of community intervention for enforcing rules, while older ones believe in a more ‘hands-off’ approach (ibid). Weiss (2011) exposed the main dispute concerning this issue as it appeared in the large *Janus* community in the USA. A

number of the participants in this study complained that the community rules sanitized and normalized their practice and suppressed the excitement, desire, and thrill under codified rules and techniques. Others see the SSC motto as a somewhat empty slogan anyway, which encompasses only minor aspects of the intimate relationship and does not provide the necessary tools of negotiation required for more experienced practitioners. However, even so, most participants recognize that the exterior rules provide an infrastructure for the creation of a unique subjectivity. Downing (2007) and Weiss (2011), whose writings are some of the few theoretical papers to be written to date on this issue, present two distinct critical positions. While Downing (2007) identifies the risk that the normalization mechanism poses to identities constructed around safety codes, Weiss (2011) recognizes the ways in which contingent self and collective identities may be realized under this community constraint (see also Parchev & Langdrige, 2018).

Weeks (1998) argued that there are two moments within sexual citizenship: transgression and acceptance. While the first is necessary for the realization of a unique sexual identity that goes beyond normative sexuality, the second is a prerequisite for citizenship in normal society. The main argument of this paper is that the universal element inherent in Western knowledge stifles the transgressive element, thus blocking the realization of a full BDSM citizenship based on being a member of a minority sexual group. Throughout this paper, we will present the notion of biopower life enhancement as the universal inner reason that determines acceptance. Here, as Richardson (2017) has argued based on contemporary literature, we will present citizenship as a process of assimilation into the mainstream, with the cost of recognition manifested in a BDSM identity based on specific community norms around safety and consent.

However, the critical tone of this paper is not intended to express skepticism about BDSM communities and particular community practices in general; rather, it is intended to be productive. We recognize sexual power as a productive power that constitutes and nourishes a pleasurable, bodily, contingent practice as the foundation of a unique, subjective self-identity— according to Foucault's well-known analysis (Foucault, 1997). Thus, we intend to expose the consensual function of institutionalized safety practices as an infrastructure for edge play that violates the safety limits and creates a critical pragmatic political position that does not aim to destroy the public and social institutions which constitute these limits, but to operate

within their inner logic. Here, we find a compromise between two necessary modes of citizenship. That is, on the one hand the normalizing mechanism determines the mainstream political strategy, whilst on the other hand the transgressive moment of self-realization is preserved and even constituted in unexpected ways.

To establish this critical goal, first we present the biopower universal logic of BDSM identities relating to life enhancement as the normalizing mechanism of sexual citizenship. Second, we expose the transgressive function under biopower reasoning through the carnival grotesque effects of edge-play. Here, we discuss the pernicious effects regarding the colonial power of erasure of difference under the universal reason of life-enhancement, and also address the role of law with respect to carnival transgression. Finally, this critical position will be located within the notion of a universal sexual citizenship, but one with a contingent possibility for participants to evade the fixation on normative citizenship identity.

Biopower and sexual citizenship

In Part 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault represents biopower as a new form of power that emerged with the introduction of modernity. Contra sovereign power—based on the right to take life—biopower seeks control over the unfolding and administration of life. It thus focuses on the “species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy, and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary” (139). Foucault’s historical analysis represents biopower as a novel type of knowledge that recognizes the human being as a collective phenomenon with specific traits, thereby allowing the state to exercise power over the fundamental experience of life and death, health and suffering (Ramman & Tutton, 2010). Foucault (2003, 239–245) identifies the historical presentation of biopower most prominently within urban sanitation systems and the supervision of the birth rate and reproduction during the nineteenth century. However, scholars like Agamben (1995) and Esposito (2008) link biopower strategies with mass murder and totalitarianism, arguing that specialist biological knowledge lies behind and justifies governmental logic and technological means of destruction. Even Hardt and Negri’s ethical interpretation adduces a contingent mode of subjectivity in biopolitical techniques, although they associate the root of biopower with a potent state operative force (2005, 2009).

As Dean (2008) argues, in sharp contrast to sovereign power and even disciplinary force, however, biopower relates to vital beings with habits, norms, and everyday practices that fall under governmental logic rather than to passive subjects. In this vein, Rose and Rabinow (2006) view biopower through a more multidimensional lens. Taking the active subject into account, they contend that biopower operates via complex elements that bind together governmental reason and self as subject. Herein, we can identify modes of subjectivity that individuals impose upon themselves in relation to biopower regimes. In these terms, biopower depends on self-subjective constitution as the crucial expression of vital beings.

In contemporary Western societies these modes of subjectivity occupy a prominent place, with the reflexive practice of the social agent assuming precedence over institutional and scientific knowledge concerning biological life (Rose, 2001). Thus, governmental logic transitions, according to Rose (2001), from biopower to ethopolitics, with it focused more on life enhancement than life expectancy: “The will to health would not merely seek the avoidance of sickness or premature death, but would encode an optimization of one’s corporeality to embrace a kind of overall ‘well-being’—beauty, success, happiness, sexuality, and much more” (Rose, 2001: 17). The desire to maximize well-being shapes the economy by developing a health-consumer market, with selfhood thereby becoming an agent of somatic activation. Exercise, drugs, vitamins, diets, and experimental forms of somatic individuality all predicate selfhood on the prioritizing of self-enhancement/growth over bodily pleasure and individual desire. Here, we can find a sharp division between bio-political and etho-political citizens: while the first is committed to common social values that mark his or her body as an object of a regime of truth, the second possesses a complex, bidirectional relation with economic and state institutions, and a range of communities determining his or her somatic will and needs (Rose & Miller, 2008). Here, we see the position of Agamben (1995) and others only as a partial historical expression of bio-politics, set against a new, arguably more optimistic, technological era in which governmental discourse is based on the reflexive bodily rights of citizens more than on the desire to control their bodies.

In this context, sexual citizenship is established via the tension between biopower and etho-politics. As Foucault argues, sexual discourse is one of the principal objects of biopower governmental reason, constituting a crucial factor for understanding human behaviour within the context of a focus on somatic phenomena such as birth

and hygiene (Foucault 1978). Today, however, sexuality is not only a type of knowledge belonging to the realm of identity but also a commodity, forming part of the construction of selves and communities within consumption societies. Here, the establishment of diverse structures of selfhood representing various forms of sexual fantasy and desire holds a prominent place with regard to individual citizen identity as an active sexual agent.

While the multidimensional relation between the human body and institutional apparatus conceptualized by Rabinow and Rose opens the way for a more diverse understanding of contemporary political power, it is rather optimistic. As Ramman and Tutton (2011) argue, governmental practices such as racial division and demographic and hygienic policing are becoming ever more entrenched. The power relationship thus remains determined by the centrality of the institutional apparatus. The overly positive vision derives not so much from mis-perception as from the sharp separation of power apparatuses that Rabinow and Rose work with in their theoretical development of biopower. However, as Foucault (2007, 2008) asserts in numerous places, power structures like discipline, biopower, and even sovereignty, merge rather than replace one another under temporal historical circumstances. Instead of fading away, biopower has thus re-established itself under a new mode of relationship and knowledge production in twenty-first-century information societies.

The connection between political and discursive universalism and sexuality is central to understanding the epistemic transformation of biopower into life enhancement as a new mode of knowledge truth production. As Sabsay (2012) argues, sexual diversity and the colonial mentality operate under the same logical and practical reason of Western contemporary society. The struggle for sexual diversity rights conducted in the shadow of feminist and minority interests oppresses particular Oriental cultures, due to their universal Eurocentric modernist stance. The feminist struggle against wearing the veil in Western European society and the struggle for LGBT rights in Muslim states on the basis of Western epistemic reason without taking in to account cultural differences is the prominent international policy for establishing universal colonial sexual diversity. Here, queerness has lost its diversity under nationalism, which uses its own narrative to force homogeneity onto cultural diversity (Puar, 2007).

Life enhancement is a particularly prominent component within colonial universalism in general, and with sexual diversity in particular. While the relation

between state institutions, society, and the individual favours individual consumption habits and behaviour, it is subordinate to needs and desires that are governed by biopower truth regimes that champion the preservation of life and health. Here, life enhancement represents a universal logic that occupies a superior position in relation to cultural difference, and therefore obliterates such differences. There is a place for diversity only when it corresponds with individual habits and practices that sublimate and enrich life.¹ The crusade against drugs, for example, is instigated and carried out as an institutional policy based on ostensibly empirically backed scientific knowledge that holds that drugs cause bodily and psychological damage. Hereby, the state determines what bodily experiments may be legitimately engaged with in line with the 'affirmation-of-life' principle. Even euthanasia, which originally appeared to constitute a legitimate option for ending life, is in fact limited to the moment of biological collapse, being predicated upon a model of biological preservation according to a complex process of natural selection (Agamben, 1995; Pardo, 2010; Tierney, 2006). Here, the superior values disseminated under the remit of life enhancement ignore every cultural statement and practice that is not commensurate with its inner logic. Thus, it negates all specific cultural interpretations. Under this regime, somatic and habitual gestures in Arab society, for example, which are based on acts of bodily destruction, are interpreted only through an external, foreign point of view, thus losing their own particular cultural context and denying the subjective thinking and acting of the cultural agents.

BDSM discursive rules also suffer from an invariant cultural inflection. Whilst communities vary enormously, in the last few decades there has been a general (often sadly exclusionary) trend towards prominent cultural expression through consumer and luxury goods (Weiss, 2011; Weinberg, 2016). However, what is arguably most disquieting about BDSM is the wider cultural hegemonic interpretation concerning the sordid association it takes on when attached to the lifestyle of a sexual underground (Deckha, 2011; Wilkinson, 2009). BDSM participants are judged with a colonial yardstick, which determines that their practice is a brutal activity that violates the wholeness of the body and the integrity of their physiological and mental state. Thus, the critical attacks against any form of BDSM, especially as they appear in

¹ The universal function of biopower occupies a prominent place in Foucault's writing, where he determines that biopower that is based on the preservation of life and health as a governmental strategy connects between the institutional apparatus as a statement and a conditioned practice (See for example, *The history of sexuality : part 1*, 1978; *Society must be defended*, 2008)

some feminist literature, where they are described as a mere duplication of patriarchal masculine exploitation (Davis, 1987; Rubin, 1987), are themselves based on the universal discursive paradigm of humanity under life enhancement, along with a politics of respectability (Cruz, 2016ab), similar to the imperial judgement of some feminist and LGBT criticism/activism against oriental, non-Western cultures (Sabsay, 2012).

The safe, sane and consensual mantra duplicates this hegemonic cultural bias. The exclusion of risky choices from bodily experiments arrests the possibility of a heterogeneous sexual relationship under preservation of health, thereby limiting any subjective self-realization to hegemonic biopower knowledge. Here, the inevitable universal point of view not only determines the exterior disciplinary framework for BDSM participants, but also and especially establishes the way in which the latter perceive themselves in the context of the gaze of others. At this point, aspects of the post-colonial abolishment of ‘unacceptable’ non-Western cultures (Said, 1978; Baba, 1991; West, 1997) is commensurate with BDSM culture, which has purged subcultural practices that threaten sexual reproductive normalcy under the regime of a politics of respectability (Cruz, 2016ab), thereby stifling the transgressive element of the community’s identity and subjugating it to hegemonic sexual culture.

The intersectional nature of BDSM culture is blurred here under the same homogenous reason. Indeed, in this context, BDSM participants are not labelled under an ethnic or racial identity; rather, they are subjected to a homogenous identity that subdues every form of particularity with respect to cultural or other identity. Thus, whether you are a black lesbian domme or a white heterosexual slave, the particular rules of bodily protection encompass every statement and practice that determines your identity. Every contingent alternative interpretation of bodily behaviour and experiment, for example those who wish to engage in risky practice or race play, is excluded from the identity-formation process of the participants.

The dividing mechanisms of citizenship, as Sabsay (2012) argues, are based on the citizen-subject as a universal abstraction. Limiting knowledge of sexuality to the universal reduces citizenship to that of an ideal liberal subject (Sabsay, 2013), through the reduction of cultural difference and sexual (and gender) diversity to an aesthetic form focused on the enhancement of health, life, and well-being. Thus, citizenship is contingent upon an abstract conception of political individualism in a manner that excludes the other that lacks the abstract political individuality that the Western

institution of citizenship presumes. The other that is excluded within contemporary Western BDSM culture is one that is created under the conditions of safety, sanity, and consensus (Sabsay, 2012).

Citizenship, carnival and political resistance – the role of RACK

The consensual agreements in RACK, as opposed to SSC, are not just a mutual decision between adults, but also a unique political declaration of citizenship. We are not arguing that participants aspire to challenge the political institutional structure *per se* but rather cross the lines of hegemonic sexual knowledge through engaging in a risky but also pleasurable activity. The importance of sexuality in the hierarchy of life and health knowledge production precludes taking any form of risk concerning sexual behaviour (Weinberg, 2016; Downing, 2005). As Foucault has argued, death has been banished from the Western discourse on the basis of the empowerment and perseverance of life (Foucault, 2008). Thus, any potential damage or risk to health contradicts the inner reason of knowledge production concerning sexual life, which sits atop the hierarchy of biopower discursive rules and practice.

Risk play, within the context of RACK, such as erotic asphyxiation, exposes a new form of thinking and practice that goes against the social institutional arrangement of sexual citizenship. The introduction of death, no matter how remote a possibility, into the constitution of pleasure subverts the pre-eminence of the sexual experience in the biopower discourse. Here, on the one hand, pleasurable risk play is based on a rational and informed, consensual decision that reflects the liberal sovereign rights established under modern democratic institutions. On the other hand, it subverts its inner logic when it traverses the components that organize their foundational norms.

Thus, pleasurable acts that put mental and physical health at risk within wider BDSM practice must be framed within a pragmatic politics. As argued by Foucault in the spirit of Nietzsche, transgression is not conceptualized in destructive terms, but within the context of mutually dependent, crossable lines (Nietzsche, 1974; Foucault, 1997). The risking of life is not an attempt to destroy the biological body wherein one epistemic ideological argument replaces another as in dialectical transgressive thought. Life- and health-risking practices do not boast of offering an alternative form of sexual citizenship that destroys the body; on the contrary, the goal of the transgression is to re-establish and re-new a diverse, pleasurable, erotic practice that

was previously suppressed by the hegemonic promotion of conformist knowledge. Life risking as a political practice does not support the ending of life as a superior value, and especially does not attempt to establish a regime of destruction in which the annihilation of life is a legitimate political discourse. The consensual roots are the foundation upon which rests the immanent reason of democracy, while at the same time it has a political goal of challenging normative knowledge.

In line with prominent contemporary scholarship, the relationship between transgression and citizenship must be analyzed in complementary rather than antithetical terms (Weeks, 1998; Langdridge & Butt, 2004; Langdridge, 2006). The dichotomy between life and death must be set aside in order to challenge the hegemonic predication of sexual citizenship upon the supreme value of life. This more complex relationship may be modelled on the notion of symbolic inversion embodied in Bakhtin's (1968) analysis of the carnival. As Stallybrass and White (1986) observe, the carnival not only constitutes a ritual feature of European culture but also forms a mode of understanding: a positive mode of cultural critique. In this context, the subversion of the hegemonic knowledge regarding the sublimation of life within BDSM may be conceived as a ruptured form of transgression that, rather than rebelling against normative sexual citizenship, operates within its boundaries.

Barbara Babcock (1973) defines symbolic inversion as a type of behaviour that opens up diverse forms of cultural, linguistic, political, and social transgression, resting on the political signification of the carnival as a weapon of resistance: "Symbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inserts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" (14). Symbolic inversion is the site of an alternative contingent transgression, not only as an overt practice or established custom but also as a parody or grotesque re-presentation of hegemonic cultural and political epistemic discursive rules (Stallybrass & White, 1986).

Bakhtin (1968) links the process of symbolic inversion with the carnival, whose celebrations release the participants from the established order by inverting hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Herein, the dichotomy between the expected and unexpected, rich and poor, acceptable and unacceptable etc. becomes blurred, the lowest segments of society challenging the higher echelons by ridiculing the structure of the sacred values upon which the hierarchical cultural

division rests. While not causing any permanent damage, the carnival therefore affords the opportunity for innovation by fracturing hegemonic cultural knowledge.

Life-risking play functions like the carnival within the discursive order of BDSM. By engaging in dangerous sexual practices that involve some risk to life, participants rebel against the value ascribed to health and life, thereby undermining the significance attached to these within the hierarchical sexual realm governed by biopower logic. By creatively engaging in pleasurable practices, they establish a link between sexuality and death that serves as a form of reactive knowledge against hegemonic truth regimes and the divisive knowledge that drives a class-dominated Western society, in which strict limits determine cultural, political, and linguistic codes and strata.

In this context, a number of political implications of BDSM rest upon life-risking practices. As McClintock (1992) notes, contingent resistance manifests itself in BDSM as a “theatrical exercise of social contradiction,” self-consciously setting itself against nature “not in the sense that it violates natural law, but in the sense that it denies the existence of the natural law in the first place” (90–91). Normative health codes are elaborated by the discursive rules that determine legitimate sexual behaviour in line with (‘vanilla’) heterosexual values. The subversive function of BDSM cultures that challenge the institutional and scientific distinctions between pathology / non-pathology, normality / abnormality (Rubin, 2011 Linden, 1983; Foucault, 1997) is mitigated by the adoption of the normative physical and mental health discourse. Sexual practice involving risk to life exposes the relative nature of the hegemonic discourse within BDSM culture itself. In this way, this transgressive aspect of BDSM exerts the same political effect as the carnival, opening up a contingent horizon beyond biopower acceptance in a deconstructive challenge to its artificial neutrality.

The carnival effect of risk to life has a particular pertinence for the law. In Western legislation, criminal responsibility has been attributed to participants as a result of injuries resulting from BDSM practices. As Wait (2007) has argued, the law’s approach to bodily harm is based on a reactively descriptive premise that we exist in our embodied selves as intact, integrated, autonomous physical and psychological systems. Thus, the intentional deliberations of BDSM must at least include sufficient means for the preservation of physical and mental health. Here, discursive practice under the legal regime rejects any risk to the wholeness of the body as health system.

As exemplified in the now famous case of *R v Brown* ('Operation Spanner'), mutual consent in UK law (as elsewhere) is not considered a sufficient defence for bodily harm, a position that continues to provoke considerable debate (Chatterjee, 2012).

In the *Operation Spanner* case appeal to the UK House of Lords, Lord Templeman's comments speak to the political impact of the carnival effect: "In my opinion sadomasochism is not only concerned with sex. Sadomasochism is also concerned with violence. The evidence discloses that the practices of the appellants were unpredictably dangerous and degrading to the body and mind and were developed with increasing barbarity and taught to persons whose consent was dubious and worthless" (*R v Brown*, 1994). Here, the verdict exposes the universal cultural bias of UK law, limiting sexuality to the protection of life and health and equating any level of bodily degradation within a sexual (although not sporting) context with barbarity (Stychin, 1995, 2003). In other words, the judge could not refrain from reiterating and reinscribing a model of normative sexuality.

Thus, the carnival implications of edge play within the context of RACK as a deconstructive bodily action against legal discourse has been established. It exposes the legal system not as the guardian of the public interest, but as an institutional expression of cultural hegemonic knowledge. The carnival effect is not based on a public demand but rather participants' engagement in consensual BDSM practice expose the fact that legal discourse is part of a relative historical construction that includes a division into acceptable and unacceptable bodily acts. In this instance, BDSM acts do not constitute a demand for change in the legal system per se but rather alert us to the way that transgressive BDSM practice is part of the anguish suffered by an oppressed sexual subject within the law that reveals the particular that is hidden within the universal.

Citizenship and transgression: Between biopower and life enhancement

In this (arguably) postmodern twenty-first century, citizenship in general and sexual citizenship in particular operates not only within the framework of formal rights but also in accordance with contingent citizen preferences and inclinations (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Giddens, 1993; Langdrige, 2006; Phelan, 2001; Plummer, 2003; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 1998). The tension between transgression and citizenship must therefore be elaborated within the context of political compromise and multidimensional relationships. As Langdrige (2006) notes, citizenship versus

transgression can be fruitfully understood in analogy with the ideology / utopia correlation of Ricoeur (1986). Ideology serves citizens as a distortion of reality that bridges the gap between claims and beliefs, functioning to preserve and integrate individual and group identity. Rather than seeking to undermine citizenship identity-formation, transgression challenges its limits by placing it within a utopian realm in which it can take on fantastical aspects. Offering an alternative view of new possibilities, it affords the opportunity and space for critical imagination to work freely outside and against the confines of the normative identity systems of sex, sexuality and relationality.

In this context, mental and physical preservation governs the internal ideological integrative function of BDSM that is constitutive of citizenship. As Weiss (2012) contends, individual self-realization is limited by material consumption and intersubjective subservience to the maintenance of physical and mental health. Given that such communities must be established under hegemonic ideology, it provides citizens with the tools to gain political legitimacy and social acceptance. The contingency that aids BDSM practitioners in rejecting an ideological mode of community that normalizes their identity within a framework of proscribed sexual subjectivity is established via erotic play that exposes health and life-preservation as a social construct. Life-risking sexual practice may thus be perceived as a form of ‘carnal-escue’ political utopian fantasy, stretching the contingent fantasy of erotic inclinations beyond the extant (and dominant) ideological frame. Hereby, the BDSM subject can challenge the epistemic line, not by destroying it (Downing, 2007) – the health codes still function as the key mode of community integration – but by serving as a contingent fantasy released from the demands of the normative constitutive process of sexual subjectivity.

The tension between sexual citizenship – as an ideologically-constructed norm dedicated to the preservation of life and health – that constitutes the integrative form of many BDSM communities and life-risking practices – as utopian transgressive behaviour – is well illustrated by the contradictory elements in what Solomon (1997) refers to as the “mythology” of the liberal sexual ethic. While this views all sexual activity as valid, the principle of life precludes any fantasies that involve practices that sublimate death (Downing, 2006; Sisson, 2007, 11-35). Only when the institutional organization of BDSM is governed by the code of the preservation of life, while simultaneously challenging the limits of erotic play and subverting their

hierarchical value through transgression, is sexual activity established and operating under a truly liberal epistemic principle. Hereby, the community may find external legitimacy whilst ostensibly preserving its liberal erotic desire behind ideological restraints.

The pragmatic politics of much BDSM practice that operates between the transgressive utopian moment and normative ideology preserves sexual citizenship within the universal limits of life-enhancement, while maintaining a utopian vision of crossing them. Indeed, play that involves risk to life exposes the constructive process of the biopower mechanism, in which it reveals so-called universalism as cultural relativism. However, the consensual is still preserved as the Eurocentric foundation of citizenship, which is based on an abstract individual who becomes a subject of rights by virtue of his or her universal value (Sabsay, 2011). The conceptual hegemony of the individual as a free entity that is qualified to choose between present and future alternatives, configures an orientalist view of the other as lacking the universal subject position that defines the subject as a citizen qua citizen, an other that has yet to achieve the subjective position of rational decision-making (ibid). Here, the utopian carnival effect remains embodied within Western and, perhaps also, colonial reason. And with this, the carnival effect acquires a pragmatic political shape. That is, while the concept of sexual freedom (and freedom more generally) is subjugated to historical conditions as part of the Western liberal episteme (Foucault, 2008), the carnival effect ameliorates the hegemonic elements that are based on a hierarchy of particular values, thereby increasing the scope of contingent citizenship discourse and practice.

Discussion

The legitimization of death in the form of practices involving risk-to-life as a part of contemporary public discourse frequently prompts claims that postmodernist relativist ethics revolve around radical ideologies and practices that sanction destruction and murder. These are most often raised in relation to the direct connection between Nietzschean thought and Nazism and poststructuralism's lack of universal analytical tools in its approach to historical criticism (Kaufman, 1971; Habermas, 1984; Fraser, 1982; Rorty, 1993; Abrams, 2002). In recent decades, the issue of risk-to-life has gained prominence in the form of Islamic militant resistance and terrorism (Louis, 2012; Esposito, 2003). Lee (2016), for example, associates sanctioning-of-death

culture with the creation of an ideological structural thinking and practice that translates the psychological tendency towards death practices into the establishment of extreme political goals.

These arguments have traditionally been countered by BDSM community distinctions between consensual erotic activities and non-consensual sadistic tendencies (Califa, 1992; Rubin, 2011). The distinction between brutalizing sadistic behaviour is drawn very clearly and publicly in contrast with BDSM practices involving the participation of consenting-adults in erotic play. Consequently, bloody ideologies that justify the death of innocent citizens must be distinguished from the liberal principle of promoting freedom of choice under the contingent preference for practices involving risk to life. While the pain and physical injury sustained between consenting partners within BDSM is real, it occurs within a consensual pleasure context in which any pain and humiliation is the result of joint creative erotic acts (Hopkins, 1993; Nils Bear, 2011). Rather than legitimizing mass killing or acts directed therein, the sanctioning of deadly practices and physical injury within BDSM practice in particular – and wider citizen erotic identities in general – champions contingent free choice in the face of a dominant normative sexual model by permitting the creative stimulation of transgressive erotic fantasies and desires.

The distinguishing factor between ideologies that sanction murder and the democratic principle of sexual practice involving risk to life is the ultimate goal lying behind each of them. The beliefs that fuelled Nazism were predicated upon the sublimation of death, personal salvation only being achieved by destruction of the existing order (Agamben, 1995; Lemke, 2011). The crucial step in achieving one's goals is negating the 'enemy's' free will and destroying body and soul in order to make way for an improved form of the species. As Foucault (1977) notes in the first part of 'The History of Sexuality', death functions in this context as a biopower mechanism for ridding society of unhealthy specimens.

Sexual practices involving risk to life, in contrast, occur in the context of a delicate balance between sexual citizenship and erotic carnival transgression. Herein, the biopower principle is the ideological social mechanism that constitutes neoliberal communities on the basis of the favouring of socially acceptable practices and identities over bodily pleasure. The existence of diverse practices, some of which contradict the ideological order, creates a transgressive horizon that while subverting the hegemony of the biopower truth regimes also exceeds its limits. By expanding

sexual citizenship to include life-risking practice, BDSM communities can make room for erotic fantasies and desires that challenge hegemonic sexual knowledge. They can then acceptably only permit risk to life as a contingent preference that accepts life preservation and enhancement as the dominant constitutive organization of member citizen identities, disowning it as an ideology in and of itself.

In this sense, BDSM communities that provide space for practices involving risk to life can be seen to adopt a new political strategy that forgoes the intuitive rejection of every statement and practice that transgresses the hegemonic health and life episteme. While their internal health codes, the plurality of the definition of health they espouse, and the instruction and education they offer form the ideological frame within which these particular communities exist, their battle for pluralism is exemplified in the lived engagement with the full diversity of practices by members of their communities. The diminishment of the universal element of life-enhancement under the carnival effect provides the necessary radical transgressive conditions for self-determination of minority citizenship groups as such, and amongst BDSM communities in particular, within the confines of normative citizenship as a political and epistemological boundary.

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