Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics

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Gay Shame's antimarriage stencil, 2004 (www.gayshamesf.org/images_endmarriage.html)
Gay Shame and BDSM Pride:
Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics

Margot D. Weiss

I was riding the bus over the Castro Hill during the summer of 2004, in the midst of my ethnographic fieldwork with bondage/dominance/sadomasochism (BDSM) practitioners in the San Francisco Bay Area. Two men boarded at the corner of Market and 18th Streets and sat down near me. “Disgusting,” one said to the other, shaking his head. He was responding to a slogan stenciled on the sidewalk by the bus stop: “End Marriage [heart] Gay Shame.” In February of that year, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom had begun issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples. Gay Shame, a radical queer activist organization, responded by stenciling sidewalks in several San Francisco neighborhoods with antimarriage slogans. In a city with a large, well-organized gay constituency, Newsom’s move — only twelve days into his mayoral reign — was widely understood as a stand for gay and lesbian equality or civil rights and a rallying point in the national same-sex marriage debate. In March, however, the California Supreme Court halted the marriages, and by August of that year, it nullified all 3,955 marriages. As images of rain-soaked, gleeful couples on the steps of City Hall faded into nostalgia, Gay Shame’s public critique of marriage struck many as perverse.

Gay Shame is one of several new radical queer organizations formed in the late 1990s. Resurrecting the direct action not widely used since ACT-UP, these groups use humor, satire, and camp to stage street protests, blending theatrical style with a radical political message. Gay Shame’s critique of marriage wedds queer and
Marxist-feminist arguments: “Marriage is the central institution of that misogynist, racist system of domination and oppression known as heterosexuality. Don’t get us wrong—we support everyone’s right to fuck whomever they want—we’re just not in favor of supporting the imperialist, bloodthirsty status quo.”

Accusing Newsom of “pandering to the privileged gay vote,” Gay Shame’s radical opposition to homonormative gay and lesbian rights activism refuses to accept “gay marriage as the penultimate achievement on the road to ‘equality’ or ‘rights.’”

A year before, in October 2003, “concerned citizens” and religious leaders in Ocean City, Maryland, organized a protest campaign against “Free to Be Bound,” Black Rose’s annual BDSM conference. Black Rose (a Washington, DC–based BDSM organization) had planned to hold its seventh annual conference in Ocean City and had booked the Princess Royale hotel in preparation. When residents learned that “upwards of 2,000 kinky people” would be descending on their town, some staged a protest campaign, prompting the county’s Alcohol Beverage License Board to remind the host hotel’s manager that the law prohibits public nudity, flagellation, and sex—simulated or otherwise—in places where alcohol is sold. As the crisis developed, Jon Tremellen, the manager of the hotel, regretfully canceled his contract with Black Rose. He explained to the press that the conference would have been a “tremendous boost to the local economy” and that “they have a right to be here. Most of what they do involves married couples just trying to spice up their relationships.”

Tremellen’s defense here dovetails the approach taken by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF). An advocacy and lobby group that represents the BDSM, swing, and polyamorous communities, the NCSF provides legal and media assistance to local BDSM organizations embroiled in public controversy. In this case, the NCSF coordinated media efforts for Black Rose, urging BDSM activists and practitioner within the greater DC area to send letters to the editors in defense of the conference and its attendees. As explained on its Web page, the NCSF’s goal is to create “a political, legal, and social environment in the United States that advances equal rights of consenting adults who practice forms of alternative sexual expression,” a goal they pursue through mainstream media, lobbying, legal casework, and policy advising. Thus, in the Black Rose case, they explained to the local media that the conference was “going to be a lot of sitting in chairs and . . . lecturing on how to better your relationship,” and “more than 75% of the people are couples, most of them married.”

Marriage figures in both of these conflicts as a key site of contemporary sexual activism. Gay Shame’s critique in the face of citywide support for marriage equality and the NCSF’s deployment of married, heterosexual normalcy to defend a kink conference represent differing strategies available to activists in the neoliberal United States today. Both groups utilize a flexible network model of activism, relying on Internet technologies and collective articulation. Yet their goals, methods,
Weiss | Gay Shame and BDSM Pride 89

and orientations are markedly different. Gay Shame, on the one hand, emphasizes a more radical approach, stages more visible public performances (e.g., street-level protests), and attempts to make connections across marginalized groups working toward collective action. The NCSF, on the other hand, embraces a more assimilationist style, enacts less visible, behind-the-scenes forms of activism (e.g., political lobbying), and represents a more narrow niche identity.

In this essay, I emphasize these distinctions to consider how these groups articulate sexual rights in the context of U.S. neoliberalism. Taking up these two iterations of rights and equality, I argue that the contrast between these organizations highlights the tension between equality as sameness with normativity (hetero- or homo-) and equality as freedom for difference from the norm. These tensions point to new relationships between equality and rights, between individual and collective action, and between privatization and public claims, relationships that have been transformed by a broader culture of neoliberalism. As Lisa Duggan has noted, “Neoliberalism in fact has a sexual politics.”9 Neoliberalism is typically understood as a global economic doctrine, developed and implemented in the United States (and elsewhere) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. David Harvey (among others) observes that neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”10

There are cultural components to this ostensibly economic framework, of course, components that in the United States map onto social configurations of global capital, as well as onto particularly American cultural values: privatization, personal responsibility, agentic individualism, autonomy, and personal freedom. As an ideology, the supposedly free, unfettered market is understood as the resolution to social problems, and individual freedom becomes market choice.11 What Duggan terms the “culture of neoliberalism” has transformed citizenship into consumption, rights, and family values.12 Politics has retreated from the public sphere into the domestic, the intimate. In this newly privatized setting, it is the relationship within families, structured through consumption, rather than a civic relationship between individuals and the state, that serves as the locus for engagement: consumer citizenship.13 In this context, sexuality emerges as a highly contested and conflicted zone. As the public sphere itself is increasingly accessed, debated, and imagined in private, personal, intimate terms, sexuality grafts the cultural to the economic. Neoliberalism’s privatization and personal privacy dismantle a social imaginary of collective redress, public good, or what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri term “the common.”14 In its place, the private — figured with much if not total overlap as the personal or the domestic — is newly invigorated as the site for action or belonging. These complex relationships between the economic and the sexual, the body and the social body, and individual private life and the
collective management of resources are the frameworks within which sexual politics under U.S. neoliberalism must operate.

I focus here on a comparison between Gay Shame’s and the NCSF’s vision of sexual freedom based on particular conceptions of privacy, equality, and activism. As Duggan argues in her discussion of the Independent Gay Forum (IGF), new “homonormative” gay politics define equality as “access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism.”15 In her example, the IGF and other mainstream gay and lesbian rights organizations are both responsive to and driven by neoliberal governmentality. In this short piece, I extend this concern to the NCSF, a mostly heterosexual, professional BDSM lobby organization, and Gay Shame, a radical, queer street-protest group. There are other organizations — gay and lesbian, queer, and kinky — that produce less strikingly oppositional activist languages, and my discussion of the NCSF and Gay Shame is intended neither to collapse the state of queer activism into these two examples nor to claim that either fully represents the sexual practices, experiences, or desires of their myriad constituents.16 However, the juxtaposition of the politics of these two groups does draw our attention to the ways in which homonormativity is a politics not confined to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) activism, but rather one deeply informed by neoliberalism in a variety of guises.

Gay Shame: Performing Difference in Public
Gay Shame emerged in New York in 1998. Conceived to protest the corporate sponsorship and commercialization of Gay Pride parades, the group’s local versions organized counter-Pride celebrations in New York, San Francisco, Barcelona, Seattle, London, and Stockholm, chanting “it’s a movement, not a market.”17 With this anti-consumer beginning, Gay Shame has moved toward a broader social justice agenda. In New York, for example, the group’s protests linked Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s so-called quality-of-life campaign, the closure of public sex spaces, and the harassment of homeless people, sex workers, and youth of color. In San Francisco, the first Gay Shame event featured speeches critiquing gentrification and the U.S. colonization of Vieques, Puerto Rico, and tried to bridge antiprison, youth, and trans activism. The San Francisco group’s statement of purpose reads:

GAY SHAME is a Virus in the System. We are committed to a queer extravaganza that brings direct action to astounding levels of theatricality. We will not be satisfied with a commercialized gay identity that denies the intrinsic links between queer struggle and challenging power. We seek nothing less than a new queer activism that foregrounds race, class, gender, and sexuality, to counter the self-serving “values” of gay consumerism and the increasingly hypocritical left. We are dedicated to fighting the rabid assimilationist monster with a devastating mobilization of queer brilliance. GAY SHAME is a celebration of resistance: all are welcome.18
Every Saturday evening at 5:30 p.m., Gay Shame San Francisco gathers in the back room of the Modern Times bookstore to plan events and discuss strategy. Some of their recent actions include (1) spray-painting sidewalks with antimarriage and antigentrification messages; (2) organizing a protest to the “Cutest of the Castro” beauty pageant; (3) participating in the city’s large Iraq war protests; and (4) holding two award ceremonies, targeting “institutions and individuals who should be ashamed of their disservice to the queer community, progressive politics, and social justice.” In 2002, for example, Mary Cheney (Dick’s daughter) won the “Helping Right-Wingers Cope” award for acting as a liaison between the gay and lesbian community and Coors Brewery. The same year, the Pottery Barn at the intersection of Market and Castro Streets won the “Making More Queers Homeless” award for contributing to population displacement in the ongoing gentrification of the queer neighborhood.

Gay Shame reserves special ire for San Francisco’s Mayor Newsom. During his 2002 mayoral campaign (while Newsom was serving as a city supervisor), Newsom proposed a ballot measure called “Care Not Cash,” or Proposition N. Proposition N would have reduced the city’s welfare payments to homeless residents from $395 to $59 a month, with the promise to replace this loss with (nonexistent or overburdened) social services. Gay Shame marched on Newsom’s campaign headquarters in the wealthy Marina neighborhood, holding a street rally. This action marked the first time the group had explicitly rallied around the privatization of social services for the city’s poor. As Mattilda, a key Gay Shame “instigator,” notes, these campaigns illustrate the group’s shifting focus from Gay Pride, assimilation, and consumerism to broader class and race concerns.

The event that has garnered the most attention for the group, however, was Gay Shame’s 2003 protest of Newsom’s fund-raiser at the LGBT Center in San Francisco. Members of Gay Shame stood on the sidewalk outside the center handing out anti-Newsom flyers that attempted to, as they put it, “call attention to his racist and classist policies, and to ask the Center why they would accept this influence from someone who is obviously merely trying to exploit the powerful gay vote.” According to San Francisco Independent Media, the action turned ugly when protestors tried to follow Newsom into the center. The police, who had been guarding the door, charged the activists, pushing several members of Gay Shame into the street and hitting others with nightsticks. “Gays bashed at Gay Center,” the group’s press release stated.

This action epitomizes Gay Shame’s constellation of issues. In the group’s view, the fund-raiser—a $125-a-plate affair—simultaneously pandered to the gay vote and defined the gay community as those privileged enough to afford this sort of political contribution. As Gay Shame points out in its press release, the tickets “cost more than twice the monthly income of San Francisco’s neediest under Newsom’s new ‘Care Not Cash’ plan.” By targeting the LGBT Community Center, Gay Shame protested the construction of the LGBT community as these particularly privileged
gays, defined in opposition to the excluded poor, homeless, trans, or queer constituencies left out of mainstream, homonormative gay and (to a lesser extent) lesbian activism.

Gay Shame’s actions rely on public spectacle and strategies of humiliation: performative activism through street action, drag and costuming, or public stenciling. Like the Radical Cheerleaders, Billionaires for Bush, or the Church of Stop Shopping, Gay Shame emphasizes “confrontational, fun, and participatory” actions that draw attention and create spectacle. This spectacular visibility is intended to offer a “critique of the dominant culture,” as well as of the racism, classism, sexism, and transphobia inherent in those systems. For example, in 2005, when the San Francisco Department of Public Health papered the Castro neighborhood with posters featuring a shirtless, muscular black man with the caption “Don’t be a bitch — Use a condom,” Gay Shame produced a counterposter, retorting, “Be a bitch.” The poster read, in part: “By reasserting stereotypical notions equating femininity with passivity, the Department of Public Health is rolling back decades of bitches fiercely confronting male power . . . this ad campaign makes effeminate, queer black men, gender non-conformists, and trannies invisible or powerless . . . masculinity doesn’t protect anyone from HIV. What we need is a sexual culture that encourages respect, open communication, flamboyance, gender transgression, creativity, collective pleasure, celebration, experimentation, and transformation. Turn it out, honey. BE A BITCH.”

Gay Shame’s performative campaign draws attention to the coconstruction of sexual citizenship with racialized, gendered, and classed positionality. The celebration of effeminate flamboyance — femininity in the face of “male power” — is precisely what is excluded from homonormative gay activisms. By spectacularizing the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality, this campaign showcases Gay Shame’s strategy of “turning it out”: building a loud sexual culture that is inclusive of and responsive to these vectors of difference. This open, accessible culture does not rely on a stable constituency or the privileging of sexuality as an axis of identity. Rather, in direct opposition to more mainstream gay activism (advocating the accrual of rights to a white, male, masculine, privileged subject), Gay Shame holds out the promise of a new public with the central purpose of fighting capitalism and its attendant inequalities of race, sex, gender, sexuality, and body.

Stressing the interlinkage of the economy and culture, Gay Shame’s actions attempt to make visible precisely the relations obscured by neoliberal ideology, including the role of class privilege in constructing multiple kinds of social marginality. Deemphasizing individuality (e.g., all members of Gay Shame are publicly identified as “Mary”) and instead making public claims for the social good, Gay Shame focuses on the neoliberal collapse of public sexual culture, the privatization of care, and the (hetero- and homo-) normalization of privileged relationships between citizens and the state (like marriage and docile consumerism). As Mattilda explained in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle,
I moved here [to San Francisco] in 1992 and was absolutely terrified . . . just a few years ago, when activists first tried to set up a shelter for queer homeless youth in the Castro, residents argued it would bring down property values! Talk about values . . . . People need to step back and challenge . . . everything that is normal. That’s the gift that queers have. But all that’s being thrown away, discarded, just for a taste of straight privilege.28

In short, Gay Shame combats assimilation and an increasingly homonormative gay mainstream by performing disidentifications with, and critiques of, privilege in public.

**BDSM Pride: Professionalization, Privacy, and Sameness**

If *heteronormativity* describes the normalization of institutional relations between particular practices, citizens, and the state,27 and not heterosexuality as practiced by individuals, then *homonormativity* must also describe an array of privileged relationships, not particular homosexualities. Yet normativity is not always organized around homo- or hetero- identities.

The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, founded in 1997 to “fight for sexual freedom and privacy rights for all adults who engage in safe, sane, and consensual behavior,” is an advocacy and PR group representing BDSM practitioners, swingers, and polyamorous people. As the group explains on its Web page, the NCSF is:

- A nationwide advocacy coalition
- A member of the National Policy Roundtable
- A national outreach organization, educating law enforcement, health care, and psychiatric professionals
- A media advocacy and training organization working to change negative portrayals of normal, alternative sexual practices among consenting adults
- A resource you can contact when discrimination or persecution related to sexual practices among consenting adults threatens you or your community.28

Like Gay Shame, the NCSF relies on new forms of networked coalitional activism such as using the Internet as a medium of communication. Unlike Gay Shame, however, the NCSF uses the mainstream media, lobbying, legal casework, and policy advising to advance its goals. For example, the coalition issues a “media watch,” a weekly e-mail that lists news coverage of these alternative sexualities along with the contact information of the editor so that individuals can voice their support of or, more often, opposition to these representations. They also provide legal assistance to individuals in custody, divorce, and job discrimination cases where BDSM practices
or polyamory factors as an issue. The NCSF responds to zoning regulations especially relevant to swingers’ parties, BDSM conferences, and clubs; they have also been involved in national lawsuits. For example, in 2001, the NCSF filed a lawsuit against the United States of America, challenging the constitutionality of the Federal Communications Decency Act’s obscenity statutes on free speech grounds. The case drew to a close in March 2006 when the Supreme Court refused to hear their appeal of a lower court’s dismissal. Neoliberal-libertarian in outlook, the NCSF is most concerned with protecting individual freedom and privacy from the interference of the state.

Providing legal and media assistance to local BDSM organizations like Black Rose makes for a large part of the NCSF’s work. The conference “Free to Be Bound” was the first BDSM conference cancelled due to protest, although in 2002 and 2003 at least eight conferences throughout the Midwest were similarly targeted. This selective enforcement of local zoning, liquor, and decency regulations is one facet of the discrimination directed toward BDSM practitioners, who also face widespread public condemnation, phobia, and legal risks such as job and custody loss.

In the aftermath of the Black Rose cancellation, I received over two hundred e-mails from BDSM-related e-mail lists to which I subscribed. One of the first was from the NCSF, acting as Black Rose’s media representative. The message urged activists and practitioners within the greater DC area to send a letter to the editor using the following as a guide:

Dear Editor,

In regards to your recent article on the BR conference, this is a private event for adults only. The attendees are just like you — they are parents, friends, coworkers, and married couples. The attendees are participating in this educational conference to get safer sex information, and to learn more about themselves and their relationships. They are responsible, law-abiding citizens who have the right to privacy.

Sincerely,
Your Name
Your City or State
Your Phone Number (for verification purposes only)

This e-mail models the rhetorical strategies of neoliberal address. Directed to the “normal” subject, it claims that BDSM practitioners are “just like you”: “Responsible, law-abiding,” married adult “citizens who have the right to privacy.” The NCSF’s public relations discourse pursues BDSM rights by attempting to shift the public’s counteridentification against practitioners (described, in attacks, as trash, deviants, and perverts who practice sexual torture) to an identification with parents, friends, coworkers, and married couples. This is an argument on behalf of private individuals (not groups) who should have access to normal/good citizenship on the
basis of their similarity to the norm. Attempting to position BDSM practitioners within dominant constructions of responsible citizens, the NCSF’s strategy grounds sexual rights and equality in sameness. As good citizens, according to this neoliberal strategy, practitioners should be free to engage in private sexual expressions and remain free from state interference as they pursue their educational opportunities and better themselves and their relationships. The e-mail — and the NCSF in general — understands privacy as that which shields both personal, intimate sexual relations and the activities taking place on nonpublic property.32

Stressing sameness, individual rights, and autonomy, the NCSF attempts, in the wake of the June 2003 decision in Lawrence and Garner v. State of Texas (establishing that consensual sex in private is protected under due process),33 to claim a right to sexual privacy historically denied to sexual minorities and practitioners of nonprocreative sex. At the same time, this case takes place in the context of a neoliberal privatization of politics and sociality. And so, just as homonormative gay and lesbian rights pursue the privatization of social care through same-sex marriage campaigns, the kink-normativity at work in the NCSF’s rhetoric positions rights and equality as a form of sexual citizenship organized around a particularly classed, privatized consumer-citizen.

As Daniel Bell and Jon Binnie argue, when sexual dissidents make use of rights-based political strategies to demand citizenship, they must conform to a prevailing model of acceptability that they describe as “privatized, de-radicalized, de-eroticized, and confined.”34 The NCSF’s sample letter argues that the attendees are “just like you” — regular, normal citizens. In an effort to correct the public’s negative perception of BDSM, the NCSF is advancing a new public face: white, professional, married, heterosexual, and middle-class. As a letter to the editor of a local paper, prompted by this campaign, argues, Ocean City should expect “sober, clean and polite” middle-aged people, “many driving mini-vans” who “look and dress like your neighbors.”35

In a media tip sheet available on its Web page, the NCSF gives advice on how to talk to the press about SM, fetish, or polyamorous lifestyles. Among the tips are

**Universalize the questions.**
If the reporter says something like, “you people who beat each other up . . .” or “You people who have sex with other people . . .” then respond with, “We, like you and everyone else in America, believe we have First Amendment rights to express our sexuality in any way that is safe and consensual.”

**Don’t do anything sexual on camera.**
. . . Don’t let reporters take pictures of your polyamory family sitting on the bed. Don’t do an SM scene in front of a camera. We need activists who will speak up for the SM-Leather-Fetish communities and explain the serious issues such as discrimination and violence against our people.
Wear appropriate attire.
This means business or casual wear, such as an activist t-shirt. Don’t wear revealing fetish wear or lingerie . . . if our communities want to be taken seriously, we must present an image that the average person can relate to.36

Stressing sameness with the norm, professionalization, and middle-class status and bearing, the NCSF rhetorically reproduces a neoliberal relationship between individual class privilege and freedom. In this reckoning, equality is sameness, rights are rights to privacy, and sexual freedom is an individual’s right to be free from state interference in exchange for and as long as that individual occupies a certain relationship to privilege.

There are many points of contrast between the NCSF and Gay Shame: business suits versus costumes, cooperation versus confrontation, and professionals versus provocateurs. Gay Shame is amateurish; its members stress difference (raced, classed, gendered, that of sexual practices) from norm and are “in your face,” relying on spectacle, visibility, and performance. The NCSF is professional; it stresses sameness (raced, classed, gendered, that of sexual “lifestyle”) to norm and is retracted, assimilated, and accommodationist. Unlike Gay Shame, which protests neoliberalism by attempting to create an inclusive, public, collective sexual culture and contesting the privatization and commodification of citizenship, the NCSF relies on iterations of citizenship derived from the social politics of neoliberal governance, what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe as privatized citizenship.37 As Berlant and Warner argue, these cultural forms organize citizenship around a “zone of heterosexual privacy” that serves to protect and privilege the family form by separating it from, and demonizing, queer sex/culture that is supposedly promiscuously public.38 Privacy, here, guarantees rights and freedom, while removing public sexual culture from the activist agenda.

In Conclusion: Sexual Rights
For members of Gay Shame, sexual rights are the freedom to create collective, public spaces of transgression, pleasure, and experimentation. They seek what Duggan calls “privacy-in-public.”39 According to the NCSF, sexual rights are the ability to be free from state interference in the bedroom and to have personal privacy in a domestic, personal space understood as outside the collective public or the political commons. This is why the NCSF distances itself from the public antics of groups like Gay Shame and from representations of sexual difference and desire that are less easily recuperated into the norm. What bears recalling here is that these visions are of rights not of sex; they are representations of sexual citizenship.

Thus while many, even most, who attend the pansexual Black Rose conference are indeed middle-aged, heterosexually married, and suburban, the production of this image perpetuates and reinforces the same discursive oppositions (good,
heterosexual family versus bad, kinky SM) that are mobilized in the political Right’s hysterical descriptions of wild perverts. When the NCSF neuters BDSM play and straightens up diverse practitioners, it reproduces the view that flogging, bondage, and play piercing are shameful and that sissy maids, pushy bottoms, and dyke daddies should keep their erotic lives out of view. The rights claimed by the NCSF are based on a new, more vigorously guarded private populated by good, neoliberal sexual subjects. On the other hand, by spectacularizing sexual difference — played out in terms of class, race, gender, and body — Gay Shame attempts to publicly “create a home for the culturally homeless,” a space in which radical queers contest not only sexual marginalization but also the very hierarchies that produce these subjects. This space is metaphoric but also literal: it is, for example, the Tenderloin neighborhood’s “femmes, drug dealers, runaways, freaks, welfare cheats, hustlers, and homeless people” evacuated — erased — from the landscape by conference organizers promoting San Francisco’s hotels. For Gay Shame, rights are “strategies for survival and celebration” produced in dialogue and grounded in an open, shared public populated by defiant queer subjects.

Yet tactically, the visions of sexual citizenship produced by both these activist organizations offer possibilities as well as pitfalls. The professionalism and pragmatism of the NCSF’s approach does breed a certain success. In the Black Rose controversy, for example, after three weeks of debate, the board decided to move the conference back into the DC metropolitan area, where it proceeded as planned. On the other hand, many people, like the men on my bus, see the street activism of Gay Shame as unfocused, annoying, and unorganized: “Just kids cutting up in the streets.” Perhaps the normalized sexual citizen, just as much as the more romantic rowdy queer, is a necessary “stumbling-block” in our ongoing political struggles.

For better or worse, sexual rights in the United States are about more than gay and lesbian equality: they are about the culture and economics of neoliberalism. For this reason, rather than parse the divergence between heteronormativity, homonormativity, and what could be characterized as kink-normativity, scholarly work on sexual activism must take up neoliberalism’s particular forms of normalization outside, or in addition to, homo- and hetero-identity frames. Homonormativity as a key term asks us to think through the ways that sexuality structures relationships among individuals, groups, and the state. Tropes such as exclusion, erasure, pathology, recognition, or visibility point to shifting understandings of equality, freedom, and difference, and these refigured landscapes must be addressed in our activism and our scholarship. What kinds of sexual rights should we be fighting for? Is the goal a more inclusive private life or a public sexual culture that might be shared by all? If we contest the privatization at the heart of American neoliberalism, the ways in which the public is increasingly policed and controlled by corporations, we must
also recognize that our claims to citizenship are grounded in this shrinking private sphere. At the same time, the obfuscation of some differences (e.g., class privilege) and the hypervisibility of others (e.g., perverts); the constriction of a defensible sexuality combined with the rapid expansion of media-saturated, marketable identities and practices; and the possibilities of new forms of alliance and social networking that carry with them many of the (same old) problems of access and privilege all create new potentials and possibilities. In this context, because sexuality is a crucial point of mediation between the intimate and the social, the private and the public, and bodies and body politics, these new forms of queer activism might point a path out of the social imaginary of U.S. neoliberalism itself.

Notes
Portions of this essay were presented at the American Anthropological Association, the Society for the Anthropology of North America, and the National Women’s Studies Association meetings. I am grateful for the feedback I received from conference attendees and panel participants. I would also like to thank Mattilda, of Gay Shame San Francisco, as well as Naomi Greyser, whose support, generous assistance, and critical interlocution have been crucial to this project.
1. I use the acronym BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism) to connote a diverse community that includes consensual bondage, power exchange, pain/sensation play, leathersex, role-playing, and fetish.
2. That same year, for example, same-sex marriages were authorized in Massachusetts, but eleven states banned same-sex marriage in constitutional amendments.
8. Many theorists of contemporary activism argue that the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle marked a new kind of activism. As Michael Hart and Antonio Negri put it, “the magic of Seattle was to show that these many grievances [agribusiness, prisons, African debt, IMF, war] were not just a random, haphazard collection, a cacophony of different voices, but a chorus that spoke in common” against global capital (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire [New York: Penguin, 2004], 288). These new antiwar, anti-IMF/WTO, and anticorporate-activist movements are coalition, networked, a “movement of movements” (Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 86). See also Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, eds., From ACT-UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization (London: Verso, 2002); and Bad Subjects’s special issue (no. 65, January 2004) on “Protest Cultures,” eds. Cynthia...
Weiss | Gay Shame and BDSM Pride

Hoffman, Joe Lockard, J. C. Meyers, and Scott Schafer. As many have noted, the chorus in Seattle did not include many voices of sexual activists, who tend to be analyzed in terms of gay/lesbian versus queer political strategies. This essay attempts a different reading of sexual activism in an age of neoliberalism.


11. Neoliberalism is contradictory: it simultaneously separates the economic realm from the political, cultural, or social realm; obscures critical connections between these realms; and “organizes material and political life in terms of” these relationships (Lisa Duggan, The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy [Boston: Beacon, 2003], 3). This is, in part, what accounts for the rise of neoliberalism as commonsense, so that other ways of understanding or ordering the world are seen as impractical, even silly.

12. Ibid., 12.


14. In Hardt and Negri’s work on the multitude and the common, they ask us to imagine “a conception of privacy that expresses the singularity of social subjectivities (not private property) and a conception of the public based on the common (not state control)” (Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 203–4). Whether these conceptions work as praxis is precisely the question of this essay.


16. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that although the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom is, perhaps, sexually conservative, BDSM practices are anything but. Unpacking the links between representation (activist discourses) and practice (what this reviewer termed the “steamy sexual jungle” of eros) is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I do address some of the tensions between a narrow definition of sexual normalcy and a broader range of what might be called queer practices briefly below and, at length, elsewhere (Margot Weiss, “Techniques of Pleasure, Scenes of Play: SM in the San Francisco Bay Area” [PhD diss., Duke University, 2005]).


24. Gay Shame, “Be a Bitch,” www.gayshamesf.org/beabitch.html (accessed January 15, 2007). The ways Gay Shame uses creative reappropriation as a strategy to reveal how sexuality, race, class, and gender are not just interlinked in the production of subjects but can also be strategically expropriated by these same subjects is beyond the scope of this essay. The “Don’t Be a Bitch” campaign can be viewed at www.homoboy.org/crunk.html (accessed July 13, 2007).


27. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner offer a clear definition of heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” in their “Sex in Public,” 312.


30. The right-wing organizations AFA (American Family Association) and CWA (Concerned Women of America) have campaigned against BDSM conferences in Chicago; Southfield, Michigan; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and St. Louis. The St. Louis event (“Beat Me in St. Louis”) also generated legislative action; the Missouri Republican state senator John Loudon introduced a resolution calling for an ongoing investigation of the legality of such events in April 2002. Two weeks after the Black Rose cancellation, perhaps building on the success of the Ocean City protests, organizers canceled a New Orleans–based BDSM conference (“Fetish in the Fall”) after the police chief urged local hotels to refuse to host the event.

31. The NCSF reported that in 2001, it responded to 461 complaints regarding child custody or divorce proceedings and 392 cases of job discrimination. A survey the NCSF conducted in 1998 and 1999 indicated that among the 1,017 respondents, 36 percent had experienced violence or harassment and 30 percent had experienced discrimination because of BDSM practices (National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, “Violence and Discrimination Survey,” www.ncsfreedom.org/library/viodiscrimsurvey.htm [accessed May 12, 2007]).

32. This is a reminder of the dense historical relationship between privacy and private property.


37. Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.” See also Berlant, *Queen of America*.


40. This normalizing mode of SM politics is not, of course, the only discourse produced. Indeed, on the mailing list SM-ACT, some people expressed dismay at the denial of sexuality that forms the basis of the NCSF’s defense. They pointed out that conferences were times to play, to revel in SM sexuality with other practitioners, and to celebrate SM sex, not only to sit around in rooms listening to panel presentations. As Susan Wright asks, “Why can’t I wear my collar in public? Why do I have to be ashamed of my affectionate embraces or the clothes I wear? Because it makes you uneasy?” (Susan Wright, “The Joy of S/M,” *Lesbian and Gay New York*, September 10, 1999). At the same time, some on the list suggested that the way to counter the public’s hostility was by stamping bills with “BR” to show how much money the conference was bringing to the local economy. A more defiantly neoliberal strategy is hard to fathom.

41. Gay Shame, “Points of Unity.”


43. Andrew Boyd ("Phil T. Rich") of Billionaires for Bush [or Gore], describing the Seattle protests, notes that “to some it’s just kids cutting up in the streets. To others this brand of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) street politics represents a new kind of anti-corporate movement distinguished by creativity, self-organization, coalition building, and the will to take on global capitalism.” (Andrew Boyd, “Irony, Meme Warfare, and the Extreme Costume Ball,” in Shepard and Haydik, *From ACT-UP to the WTO*, 245).