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Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media

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SUMMARY. This article explores nonpractitioners' understandings of and responses to the increasingly mainstream representation of BDSM in U.S. media, focusing on the film *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002). Survey, focus group, and interview data indicate that popular images of SM promote the acceptance and understanding of sexual minorities through two mechanisms: *acceptance via normalization*, and *understanding via pathologizing*. Rather than challenging the privileged status of normative sexuality, these mechanisms reinforce boundaries between protected/privileged and policed/pathological sexualities. Instead of celebrating increased representation, this article argues that political energy

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might be directed toward the desire that the popularity of BDSM representations signifies: the desire to encounter authentic, undisciplined, and non-commodified representations that would transgress the sexual norms of American postmodern consumer culture. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. BDSM, SM, sexuality, media, popular culture, consumption, politics of representation, postmodern American culture, late-capitalism

This article explores representations of BDSM in U.S. mainstream and popular media, focusing on the film *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002). This text uses both *BDSM* and *SM* to denote depictions, perceptions, and interpretations of sexual bondage, domination/submission, pain/sensation play, power exchange, leathersex, role-playing, and some fetish. Although nonpractitioners tend to use *S&M* almost exclusively, this analysis draws on understandings of BDSM derived from the community of practitioners, and research on those communities (e.g., Califia, 1994; Thompson, 1991; Weinberg, William, and Moser, 1984; and Weinberg, 1995). In these communities, *BDSM* and *SM* are more common; the use of both terms recognizes the relatively recent coinage of *BDSM*, while maintaining historical continuity with the use of *SM* as the inclusive term.

Mainstream media representation of alternative sexualities, including BDSM, has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. First noted in 1983 (Falk & Weinberg), this trend shows no signs of abating today. As evidence of *SM*'s mainstreaming, this paper first catalogues examples of BDSM representations appearing in ads, television, film, music, and newspapers from 1985-2003. *SM* has saturated popular culture, and in this saturation, *SM* has come to mean something more mainstream and less risqué, more conventional and less exotic. Popular depictions of *SM* have shifted from images of the shocking, dangerous other to representations both pathological *and* normal. Against the backdrop of the increasingly kinky mainstream, this article queries the political effect of these representations. Arguing against the understanding that there is a causal relationship between increased media representation and political progress, this paper documents the political perils of such visibility.

Drawing on survey, focus group, and interview data, the analysis focuses on the reception of representations of BDSM by a “mainstream” audience, defined broadly here as those who do not identify as practicing BDSM. For these media consumers, increased exposure to representations of SM has not resulted in progressive or politically useful feelings of acceptance or understanding. This article defines *acceptance* as: expressing tolerance of BDSM; admitting SM into mainstream social groupings; and/or categorizing BDSM as proper, normal, or approved. It defines *understanding* as: grasping the reasonableness of BDSM; having a thorough acquaintance of, and familiarity with, SM; and/or showing a sympathetic or tolerant attitude toward BDSM and its practitioners.

Instead of promoting politically progressive forms of acceptance or understanding, these representations offer *acceptance via normalization*, and *understanding via pathologizing*. In the former mechanism, SM is acceptable only when it falls under the rubric of normative American sexuality. In the latter mechanism, SM is understandable only when it is the symptom of a deviant type of person with a sick, damaged core. Both mechanisms offer a form of acceptance or understanding, but these forms do not further the cause of sexual freedom. They allow the mainstream audience to flirt with danger and excitement, but ultimately reinforce boundaries between protected and privileged normal sexuality, and policed and pathological not normal sexuality. These mechanisms solidify the ideological dichotomies that animate American understandings of sexuality, where normal is heterosexual, monogamous, romantic, private, married, and suburban, while abnormal is nonheterosexual, nonmonogamous, unromantic, public, unmarried, and urban (e.g., Rubin, 1984/1993). When viewers accept or understand BDSM in these ways, they utilize a mode of *distanced consumption*, where representations of SM offer a tantalizing glimpse of something other (sexy, exotic, kinky) that is safely viewed and evaluated from a detached, privileged, and normative position.

Rather than celebrating increased representation, this article argues that desire and disappointment are more promising sites for political intervention. The mainstream public expresses disappointment and boredom when confronted with representations of BDSM that have been predigested by the ideological schemas of normal/abnormal, healthy/pathological, or privileged/policed. These feelings are an emotional response to contemporary U.S. consumer culture, a culture that is increasingly media-saturated and spectacle-driven (e.g., Gómez-Peña, 2001; Jameson, 1991). Viewer-citizens of this postmodern culture privilege

sexuality—especially alternative, nonnormative sexualities—as a site of authenticity and transgression. They are disappointed when these representations fail to challenge boundaries and transgress norms, when instead popular culture presents a disciplined, commodified version of BDSM, already bound by these ideological dichotomies. The continued popularity of mainstream media representations of SM signifies the growing desire of the public to experience something authentic, unalienated, undisciplined, and noncommodified. This article reads this disappointment and desire as a nascent political protest. This protest is especially important as the state continues to police and marginalize alternative sexualities, and the U.S. cultural landscape becomes more sensationalistic and media-driven.

METHOD

This study employed several methods: (a) a survey of media representations, newspaper, and magazine documentation of the “mainstreaming of S&M”; (b) a focus group and Internet survey conducted in 2001; and (c) interviews with 12 nonpractitioners conducted in 2002 and 2003. The survey of popular culture references compiled over the course of this research (2000–2003) included references in ads, newspaper, and popular magazine articles, on TV and film, and other media (including music). Representations were located through searching on Websites and newspaper and other databases, and by referrals from friends, colleagues, BDSM practitioners taking part in the larger research project, SM media watch organizations, and several Internet mailing lists.

The informal focus group was conducted in a graduate seminar on popular culture in the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University on April 17, 2001. The fourteen students in class agreed to watch and respond to two ads: the 2001 “Organized Neighbors” Ikea furniture ad, and the “Oh La La” Dannon yogurt ad from the La Crème series (2001–2003). The Ikea ad depicted a heterosexual couple discussing their neighbors’ newly organized living room. The woman said, “I wish we could be that organized,” to which the man replied, “People like that never have fun. They’re uptight.” As they watched, a man ran through the living room of the neighbors’ apartment, pursued by a woman, in a dominatrix outfit, who cracked a whip on the sofa. The first woman turned to the man and deadpanned, “They don’t seem that uptight.” The Dannon ad portrayed a woman in a French maid outfit, sit-

ting on a man's lap and sexily feeding him yogurt. Suddenly, two teenage girls opened the door, surprising the couple. One girl said to her friend, "My parents are so weird," to which the woman (suddenly mother) replied, "You're home early." Twelve of the participants in the focus group were female, two were male; ten were graduate students, and four were undergraduates. The discussion was digitally taped (with verbal permission), and transcribed. From an initial prompt asking whether these ads were "about BDSM," participants discussed what made a depiction about SM, what other audiences might think about these ads, and other related topics.

The 28 people who responded to the anonymous Internet survey distributed in the spring of 2001 ranged in age from 17-58 (averaging 29 years), specifically indicated that they were not "into BDSM," and lived in the U.S. Among these respondents, 16 were male and 12 were female. Participants were recruited via e-mail using snowball sampling from my initial social and academic networks. The survey asked respondents to view the two above ads (using the Internet ad database AdCritic.com) and answer several questions, including "When you hear the words *S&M*, *sadomasochism*, *SM* etc., what do you think of" and "Do you think [this ad] is 'about SM'? . . . Why, or why not?" Respondents had an unlimited textbox in which to record answers. In what follows, survey and focus group participants are not named; they are identified as "focus group participant" or "survey respondent" in the text.

The majority of this analysis draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2002 and 2003 with 12 individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and New York who had (a) seen the film *Secretary*; and (b) identified as not being into BDSM. These participants ranged in age from 20-37 (averaging 28 years), and were recruited using snowball sampling of informal social and research networks. Of these interviewees, five were men and seven were women, eleven were White and one was Asian American. All participants were given an opportunity to choose a verbal, anonymous consent process (where all potentially identifying information was dissociated from the interview itself), or a written, nonanonymous consent process. These interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes, were recorded on digital media (with permission), and transcribed. Working from a set of common prompts, the interviews were tailored to the idiosyncratic responses of participants. In every interview, respondents were asked general questions about SM (e.g., what images come to mind when you think about SM, what would you posit as the key definition of BDSM, how would you

describe key differences between SM and non-SM sex) and questions about the film *Secretary* (e.g., why did you watch the film, did you learn anything about SM from the film, do you feel the film was an “accurate” portrayal of BDSM). The interview participants are identified in this text by a first name they have chosen and brief demographic information (age, occupation, and location).

REPRESENTATIONS OF BDSM IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA, 1985-2003

In the last 20 years, SM images, iconography, and style have become increasingly prevalent in mainstream U.S. popular culture, in various media forms such as print ads, billboards, television sit-coms, news programs, movies, and commercials. As Weinberg and Magill (1995) began to document, the diffusion of SM iconography into mainstream mass media has meant that such representations are no longer confined to haute fashion or the occasional reference; SM has saturated popular culture. From the relative invisibility of SM 20 years ago, today these images appear in a wide variety of media, are used to sell a wide range of products, function in multiple ways, and encode a variety of contradictory personalities. There has not been a clear shift in the tenor of these representations (e.g., from negative to positive); rather, these depictions are at once mocking and sincere, normalizing and pathologizing. This flood of increasingly spectacular images marks the entry of BDSM into the postmodern and media-driven mainstream consumer landscape.

Print, billboard, and television ads that depict SM have been produced by a wide array of clothing and shoe companies, alcohol companies, and even a breath mint company (Altoids). For example, a 1997 Bass Ale beer print campaign featured a male “slave” drooling over a woman’s blue patent-leather boot. Network television aired a series of Axe deodorant spray commercials from 2002-2003; one ending included a paunchy leatherman eyeing an aromatically irresistible nerd in an elevator. These two examples indicate that marketers have tapped into the allure and exoticism of SM sexuality to sell an ever-widening array of products; SM not only appears in high fashion, but also in beer ads. Although clothes that made “frank allusion to bondage, fetishes, and sadomasochism” date from the 1980s, media commentators have now noted “the diffuse way fetish wear turned up on the runways, in collections from designers of all stripes” (Trebay, 2000, p. B-12; see

Bienvenu, 1998, and Steele, 1999, for historical analyses of the development of fetish fashion). As Menkes argued, “There’s nothing to be shocked at anymore. It’s as if a designer said, ‘This is the day dress, this is the cotton chiffon, this is the S/M.’ It’s just another tool” (cited in Trebay, 2000, p. B-12). No longer confined to runways, these images of BDSM have shifted from exotic to mundane, from “celebs at award shows to your neighbor on bingo night” (Shanahan, 2003, p. 38). The accessibility of SM as “tool,” or spotting fetish wear on “your neighbor,” indicate the ways that BDSM has penetrated the mainstream, and has become more everyday in this penetration.

This shift means that representations of SM are no longer confined to shocking, exotic, and exciting depictions. While these representations persist, when SM appears on television, in films, and in popular music today it is also depicted as something everyday, mundane, and conventional. On television, viewers are offered not only sexy and scandalized depictions on late night cable television shows, docudramas, or primetime crime dramas, but also friendly and upbeat depictions on primetime situation comedies, soap operas, and home and garden shows. For example, on a 2001 episode of *Will & Grace* (Herschlag & Burrows, 2001), Grace, an interior designer, had a client who needed a dungeon converted into a nursery. The punch line: The jolly jumper and changing table can stay. Even The Learning Channel’s dowdy home design show *Trading Spaces* included Frank, the country-kitsch designer, crafting a “bondage rocking chair” for a bachelor’s bedroom (Cramsey, 2002). Cinematic depiction has also broadened to include lighter and more permissive representations (e.g., the goofy SM-themed caper *Exit to Eden* [Marshall, 1994]), although dark and criminal representations remain popular (e.g., the SM-leads-to-murder in *The General’s Daughter* [Neufeld & West, 1999]). Yet films like *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (Dick, 1997), *Quills* (Kaufman, 2000), and *Secretary* demonstrate that SM is no longer limited to the underworld; like the television examples cited above, SM is not just scary, dangerous, and exciting, but also funny, romantic, and safe enough to appear on The Learning Channel. Similarly, lyrics celebrating SM dynamics are in the repertoire of alternative bands like Nine Inch Nails (“Head Like a Hole” [1989, track 1]) and Puddle of Mudd (“Control” [2001, track 1]), but also in the work of the very pop Janet Jackson (“Rope Burn” [1997, track 19]) and Britney Spears (“I’m a Slave 4 U” [2001, track 1]). These more ordinary representations of SM in mainstream media were less common 20 years ago.

The mainstreaming of BDSM means that SM appears in more popular, mainstream locations (primetime, Hollywood movies, ads for beer) and also that the meaning of SM has shifted from exotic other to something both pathological and normal. Coverage of SM in the news follows this trend as well; mainstream newspapers and magazines no longer confine discussion of BDSM to scandalized and sensationalistic crime stories, but also produce balanced stories on the consensual, adult BDSM community. For example, the Ohio paper *Columbus Alive!* ran a front-page story on a friendly “S&M dungeon where everybody knows your name” (Mozzocco, 2002).

These depictions of SM reveal the complex popular attitudes about SM; SM is simultaneously exciting and other, and conventional and everyday. For example, when newspapers revealed that Sarah Kozer, the second-to-last contestant on FOX’s reality dating game show *Joe Millionaire*, had participated in several fetish (foot worship and bondage) videos, she was unrepentant and seemingly unperturbed (“I’m not embarrassed at all,” Kozer informed *Access Hollywood* [cited in Haberman, 2003, ¶ 6]). Yet the message boards at the *Millionaire* Website revealed that the show’s fans were decidedly less blasé about it; she was described with words like tramp, freak, liar, sleazy, bondage slut, and Sarah-the-slut (from <http://forums.prospero.com/foxjoem/messages>; this site is no longer online). In late December 2002, several newspapers breathlessly revealed that Jack McGeorge, one of the UN arms inspectors deployed to Iraq, was also a founder of Black Rose (an SM organization in the DC area). Although he never denied or tried to hide his SM activities and activism, McGeorge was nevertheless the butt of jokes on late night talk shows, in cartoons featuring him in a leather harness, and in news articles with such clever pun-titles as “A taste of the whip for Saddam” (Lauerman, 2002) or “The UN’s foray into Saddamasochism” (Steyn, 2002). Both of these stories were initially offered as shocking exposés, yet when Kozer was not embarrassed, and Hans Blix (the head of the team of UN weapons inspectors) seemed unconcerned and refused to accept McGeorge’s proffered resignation, the media attention dissipated.

Mainstream representations of BDSM are sometimes jokey sight-gags (e.g., *Friends* [Kurland & Bonerz, 1997]), sometimes deviant underworld explorations (e.g., *8mm* [Schumacher, 1999]), sometimes all about fetish fashion (e.g., *The Matrix* [Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999]), and sometimes earnest explorations (e.g., Marech, 2001). They are certainly not all positive depictions. Yet what must be highlighted here is that as BDSM has begun to saturate popular culture, appearing

more often and in more contexts, it has also come to signify something more mainstream and more conventional, something less exceptional, extreme, or unusual. As Rosie O'Donnell's character said in *Exit to Eden*, "It's just another alternative lifestyle." Or, as Marin (1997-1988) argued, "S&M . . . has been mainstreamed from deviant perversion to just another wacky lifestyle choice . . . S&M has become so commonplace, so banal, that it can safely be used to sell beer" (p. 85).

Twenty years ago, SM was (at least in fantasy) something dark and mysterious, unspoken and invisible; today, representations of BDSM are everywhere. A commonsense tenet of American liberal politics is that mainstream, positive, and realistic representation is the first step toward the greater social acceptance, understanding, and tolerance of a minority group. Thus, many would argue that all of this mass representation—which now at least sometimes includes more positive, accepting, or sympathetic representations of BDSM—is politically effective. As one participant in the focus group said, "The Ikea ad shows that even normal people do this . . . [it] takes away the . . . perversity attached to SM, so even the most normal of the normal, even people who go shopping at Ikea [do SM]." This tenet must be examined: How does the mainstream public understand and respond to these representations? Do these increasingly mainstream images result in a greater understanding or acceptance of BDSM, and if so, is this acceptance or understanding necessarily politically progressive?

An analysis of critical and interview responses to the film *Secretary* indicates that increasingly mainstream depictions yield both acceptance and understanding of BDSM. Like the representations above, *Secretary* depicts SM as exotic, sexy, and other *and* conventional, mainstream, and normal. However, the form of acceptance that these mainstream representations promote is predicated on conformity to normative American sexuality (acceptance through normalization). Similarly, the form of understanding that these mainstream representations promote is reliant on the classification as an abnormal, damaged type (understanding through pathologizing). Both mechanisms reinforce boundaries between normal, protected, and privileged sexuality, and abnormal, policed, and pathological sexuality. Together, these dual mechanisms diminish any positive political outcome of the mainstreaming of BDSM.

RECUPERATION BY ROMANCE: ACCEPTANCE THROUGH NORMALIZATION

Lion's Gate released *Secretary* in the fall of 2002. An adaptation of a Mary Gaitskill short story of the same name, the film told the story of a

young woman saved by sadomasochism. In brief, the plot involved a young, naïve girl (Lee Holloway), just released from a mental institution (for self-cutting), who got her first job as the secretary of a repressed, tightly wound lawyer (Mr. Grey). The two developed a relationship involving power exchange, sexual discipline, and control. When their dynamics became too emotionally intense, Mr. Grey fired Lee, ending the relationship. With the crushing reality of a marriage with vanilla boyfriend Peter looming, Lee returned to Mr. Grey's office and demonstrated her determination and love for him. In the end, this was enough; she won him back, they married, and lived happily ever after in the suburbs.

Although it was an independent release, *Secretary* was one of the more popular small films of the year. It garnered praise and the Grand Jury Prize for Originality at its debut at Sundance Film Festival, and was subsequently nominated for several other awards (Maggie Gyllenhaal, the actress who played Lee, was nominated for best actor awards from five award-giving bodies, including the Golden Globes and the Independent Spirit Awards. The latter also nominated the film for Best Feature; screenwriter Erin Cressida Wilson won Best First Screenplay). It played in art and independent theaters in major U.S. cities for 21 weeks; grossed \$4,046,737 in its U.S. theatrical release (Box Office, n.d.); and generated much press, both critical and popular. When *Secretary* was released, several SM activists expressed guarded hope; perhaps this was a first step toward mainstream acceptance, understanding, and tolerance of BDSM.

In American liberal political paradigms, the mainstream representation of sexual minorities is a sign of progress. The time line is as follows: first representation and visibility, next acceptance or tolerance of the minority, then an empathetic form of understanding, and finally sexual freedom. There are assumed causal links between increased visibility, acceptance, understanding, and such political gains as the ability to assert rights and privileges, and the freedom from unjust persecution. This paradigm presupposes that with acceptance and understanding, sexual minorities will gain legitimacy in the mainstream of American politics.

While it is true that *Secretary*'s mainstream audience professed acceptance of BDSM sexuality and relationships after seeing the film, this acceptance was predicated on normalization. Presenting a very conventional love story with some kinky bits of the other, the film allowed viewers to accept SM only as long as it remained squarely normal. Critics described the movie with terms like tender, sweet, poignant,

sweet-natured, charming, kindhearted, touching, gentle, warm-hearted, and life-affirming, sometimes with the word *oddly* preceding these adjectives (e.g., Edelstein, 2002b; Zacharek, 2002). Described as “the world’s first S&M date movie” (Burr, 2002, p. C-1) and a “feel good movie about sadomasochism” (Ansen, 2002, p. 70), *Secretary* was so oddly sweet because it was a tried and true romantic comedy, “a *Pretty Woman* for the bondage set” (Edelstein, 2002b, ¶ 1). Reviewers described *Secretary* as an oddball, screwball, or quirky romance (e.g., Weiskind, 2002), a Cinderella story with a kink, whose main message (as in all romantic comedies) was that there is someone perfect for everyone. As in all fairy tale endings, “Both suspect there is no one else they’re ever likely to meet who will understand them quite so completely” (Ebert, 2002, p. 31). Or, as Suzy, a 32-year-old graduate student living in Oakland, noted, “There’s a lid for every pot.” Following the conventions of the genre (they meet, they struggle, they overcome, they love forever and ever), *Secretary* turned out to be less hardcore perversion and more a “gently bent old-fashioned romance about two people who are so ideally suited for each other that they seemed doomed to never get it together” (Dargis, 2002, p. 17). Indeed, a turning point in the film was a cliché found in many romantic comedies: Lee fled her impending wedding—in her wedding dress—to be with her one true love.

Interviewees agreed; Inna, a 30-year-old lawyer in San Francisco, said, in the end “He gives in and realizes he’s found his perfect mate. It’s a love story. It *is* a love story! It is!” Ty, a 22-year-old college student in Chicago, described it as “a dark love story,” a version of female need and male remoteness (or inability to be intimate) gussied up with bondage, spanking, and some more serious D/s (dominance and submission). Jenny, a 29-year-old computer contractor in the Bay Area, thought “the end when they’re having their wedding and she’s strapped to the tree” was a funny twist on her own fantasies of marriage and happily ever after: “It’s so antithetical to any wedding bell images that I’ve ever had in my mind, and yet they’re obviously enjoying themselves thoroughly; it’s just funny.” These interviewees enjoyed the “twist” on the classic *Secretary* portrayed. The story worked the same way the mainstream images documented above worked; it flirted with danger without actually being dangerous (whether this is the same reason SM is appealing to practitioners is a topic for another paper). It was what Nye termed the “riskless risk” (cited in Hannigan, 1998, p. 71) of clean, commodified experience, prepackaged for the slightly adventurous consumer.

In this way, *Secretary* offered a glimpse of something sexy and exciting that, in the end, was not alienating, was just a traditional—if odd—love story. The film promised what hooks (1992) called “a bit of the other” as a sort of exotic/erotic prop for the self. Like representations of the native other, the dark other, or the dangerous other, the sexual other is tied to a long practice of distanced consumption. This mode of viewership enables the privileged use of the other in a way that gives the normative audience familiarity, knowledge, and even intimacy of the other, all the while shoring up a basic power differential that maintains the one’s power, and the other’s essential alterity (see also Allison, 2001, for a discussion of the orientalist “distant intimacy” involved in fan reactions to A. Golden’s [1999] novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*). These representations reinforce boundaries between normal and not normal by allowing the viewer to consume a bit of the kinky other while buttressing the privilege, authority, and essential normalcy of the self.

The reinforcement of normative American sexuality at the end of the film clearly reveals this dynamic. The romantic story line in *Secretary* limits the potential transgressiveness of Lee and Mr. Grey’s relationship—and SM sexuality by extension—by folding it back into a mainstream, domesticated version of romance. As Rubin (1984/1993) argued, privilege is bestowed on sexuality that is heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, noncommercial, coupled, vanilla, without “manufactured objects,” relational, homo-generational, and at home (pp. 13-14); sexuality that falls within these boundaries is considered good, normal, and natural. “Bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” (Rubin, pp. 13-14) describes sexuality that is homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, nonprocreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, or with objects; these sexualities are stigmatized, pathologized, policed, and oppressed. Ideologically, SM sexuality is on the bad side of this dichotomy, classified, conceptually, as abnormal. In the popular, public imagination, BDSM sexuality is nongenital, nonprocreative, nonmonogamous, often commercial, public, and not relationally-oriented.

When asked about their own understandings of SM relationships, many interviewees imagined SM sex between two people who did not know one another, or nonmonogamous couples, or between a professional dominatrix and a client, or in a public setting like a club, or, as Dan, a 22-year-old college student in Chicago half-joked, “on a gross group scale or a cult scale in an abandoned warehouse.” In contrast, Lee’s relationship with Mr. Grey was between married partners, in the context of a traditional, monogamous relationship. Shannon, a 37-year-old de-

signer and Web producer living in San Francisco, argued, "It's two people that know and care about each other"; it is "a complete package." She thought the ending showed that they "were able to have a full, well-rounded relationship, not just this relationship of SM. . . . They were able to be a couple . . . They could have this aspect of their relationship, but they were able to make the bed . . . They're sharing the everyday things too."

Interviewees characterized typical SM sex as hard, rough, painful, cold, distant, exposed, or not tender, and thus expressed surprise at the domestic depiction at the end of the film. The film's resolution, which featured a soft and "tender" bathing and lovemaking scene, and final snapshots of domestic bliss (Lee and Mr. Grey making their bed together, Lee straightening Mr. Grey's tie, and Lee sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of their suburban home as Mr. Grey drives off to work), defanged the representations of SM in the film. Many interviewees had never imaged that SM could, as Jenny said, extend "to picking out china patterns and making the bed." Ty said,

They turn out to be real lovers in the end. . . . I never really thought that SM people have, of course they didn't have a normal relationship, but it seemed like they were pretty happy and they were living in a regular place and stuff like that. . . . I always thought that the partners wouldn't live together, as a married happy couple, and have interactions like a normal husband and wife.

Had the film depicted SM sexuality as the happy ending, it would have challenged the hierarchy of American sexuality. As it was, the film's happy ending redeemed BDSM by refolding it back into normative constructions of sexuality, thus making the representational argument that SM/nonnormative sexuality is acceptable as long as it turns out, after all, to be not-SM/normative sexuality. The images presented at the end of the film recuperate SM back into the tightly bounded, enforced, and policed norm of American sex and intimacy. The film allowed viewers to accept SM sexuality, but only insofar as it could be normalized.

The acceptance via normalization mechanism in *Secretary* allows the viewer to identify with the love story and accept the characters as long as the characters are recognizably mainstream. Adam, a 23-year-old interviewee working as a biologist in Chicago, explained,

My problem with [the ending] is that their interaction was more conventional . . . he takes her up to this room and lays her down,

and then she sort of becomes this housewife, like on the porch waving goodbye, and so then it almost becomes like you are saying . . . that being OK means you have to be conventional [instead of saying that] SM is OK, and that it can be practiced in a healthy way.

In this way, the traditionalist ending of the film constrains any challenge to normative American sexuality that the representation of SM might present. The bits of the other the film delivered upfront (e.g., the spanking, masturbation, and D/s scenes) were overwhelmed in the end by the normative romantic resolution (Lee and Mr. Grey firmly enmeshed in a monogamous, heterosexual, married, suburban, professional husband/housewife setting). The dynamic here granted the normative viewer access to BDSM through a normalizing gaze. Like the SM in *Will & Grace* or beer ads, this mode of representation co-opts or appropriates SM to put a funny, cool, or hip twist on something essentially normative. These images do not challenge normative sexuality and relationships; rather they flirt with exoticism and excitement while reinforcing the borders between normal and not normal sexuality. Rather than being a clearly positive first step, this form of acceptance is quite politically dangerous. The dynamic of acceptance via normalization means that BDSM is acceptable to the mainstream only when it turns out to be not SM at all.

THE MASOCHIST: UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PATHOLOGIZING

Similarly, while many responded to mainstreamed images of BDSM with a form of understanding, here understanding was predicated on viewing SM as a kind of sickness. This second dynamic in *Secretary*, understanding via pathologizing, allowed the normative viewer to understand SM only insofar as it is understood as a damaged, pathological identity. The audience maintained a first person identification with Lee, yet this identification was double-edged; she was “‘kinky’ and strange, as well as sympathetic” (Fuchs, 2002, ¶ 8). Lee is accessible and understandable; as Gyllenhaal said, “Almost everyone seems to say, ‘I understand her’” (cited in Wloszczyna, 2002, p. 14D). However, the cost of this understanding is pathologizing; the characters might be “lovable basket cases” (Edelstein, 2002a), but they are lovable and sympathetic because they are ill. As Ty noted, “You get inside the secretary’s head,

and you see what her home life, her family life is, and you see the cause and effect, what might have driven her to, caused her to become that way.” As one critic wrote, Gyllenhaal’s performance “makes it possible for us to understand the person beneath the pathologies” (Weiskind, 2002, p. 27). It should be noted that in some contexts, consensual SM is still officially considered pathological: The movie received its R rating in part for what the Motion Picture Association of America (the organization responsible for film ratings) called “depiction of behavioral disorders” (see also Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005, for an argument advocating the removal of paraphilias—including sexual sadism and masochism—from the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-IV-TR]*).

Secretary presented Lee as, above all, a masochist. Her masochism is “inside [her] makeup”; “deep inside . . . part of [her] being,” as Chris, a 36-year-old software marketer and manager living in San Francisco, remarked. Inna thought that the film “really opened my eyes” because it showed that sexual masochism was “a natural extension” of “the whole cutting yourself thing”; or, as Shannon said, “Instead of abusing herself, she’s letting someone else abuse her.” Closer to older, sexological definitions of masochism than to contemporary understandings of the dynamics of D/s and SM, viewers understand Lee as a person whose sickness (masochism) becomes the driving identity in her life (she is a masochist). This mode of sex-based categorization is reminiscent of (the last) turn of the century sexological classifications, where the spectrum of sexual practices, behaviors, and desires were rigidified into stable psychosexual (and pathological) types. As Foucault (1978/1990) documented, this careful cataloging of pleasure and sex resulted in new species of deviants, named and “entomologized” on the basis of their sexuality (pp. 42-46). The effuse desires, detached pleasures, and other ambiguities of sexuality became instead more formal and inflexible means of classifying persons. Sexuality thus became the most real, natural, and essential categorization of a person, the truth of the subject. These classificatory systems are based on the categories of normal and abnormal, healthy and sick, that remain entrenched in American sexual ideology. In *Secretary*, fixing SM desires and relationships to a deviant type of person (here a masochist) allows the viewer to understand Lee as person who is defined by a pathological sexuality.

As Adam said, “After I saw the movie, I realized that there are people that consider themselves sadists, and people that consider themselves masochists.” For him, viewing SM as a type of person (a masochist or a sadist) rather than as a practice allowed him to move beyond under-

standing SM as wrong, but at the same time, it further differentiated normal people from *those* people. Shannon asked, “Do people who are self-abusers become submissive? Do they get into this lifestyle?” Suzy worried about this depiction; she thought the film’s argument was that “If it were OK for people to be like this, she wouldn’t have had to do all the things she did. . . . She doesn’t have to cut herself now that she’s found him.” But this portrayal is hard for Suzy to identify with, because she has “definitely had some hot experiences with it [spanking] and that doesn’t mean I’m a masochist.”

This comment alludes to a differentiation between sexuality as a practice, a behavior, a style, or a fun thing to do in the city, and sexuality as the truth of the subject. As long as sexuality serves as the basis of authentic subjectivity, it leads directly into the classification of subjects as either normal (heterosexual, married, etc.) or pathological (homosexual, kinky, etc.). Thus, these respondents differentiated SM as a preference or recreational activity from SM as a lifestyle, identity, a natural disposition, or sexual orientation, like being gay. Chris remarked, “The thing that left the biggest impact . . . is that it seems more like a mental disorder, or a mental trait, or personality, almost something that is innate. It’s almost like homosexuality, innate; you don’t have a choice.” Several interviewees felt that there might be several “levels” of BDSM involvement; Adam said, “For some it is just a preference, and maybe for others, maybe they were abused when they were younger” and thus develop more stable SM identities. Shannon said, “I think that it’s hard to understand if it becomes like a whole lifestyle,” something people are “obsessed with”; “I get why people would do it occasionally, but . . . if it’s all the time, to the point where it becomes a need, it seems like there must be underlying reasons why people participate.” In *Secretary*, as Steve, a 30-year-old software developer living in Marin County, remarked, “It wasn’t just something they did for fun; they needed it to fulfill an emotional void. They needed it to function.”

This mode of representation allows the hip consumption of SM while always keeping the normative viewer safely removed from the perverts. As Jenny said, the movie “sort of posited both of them as damaged people. I felt like they were saying this behavior . . . would only work for those who have severe emotional scars, as a way to differentiate what they’re doing from the audience.” Eleanor, a 29-year-old teacher living in Oakland, felt that “If I were in the SM community. . . . I would feel like ‘this doesn’t represent me’” because “They made the characters so weird. They were both kind of insane.”

Presenting SM as a (pathological) identity rather than a practice works to shore up boundaries between normal and abnormal. Offering understanding through pathologizing, this representation reinforces boundaries between the person who might take a slightly kinky trip to Good Vibrations (a San Francisco sex store) and the full-on pervert with a sick core. It allows the normative viewer access and understanding to BDSM through a pathologizing, stigmatizing gaze. Like the moralizing crime drama or scandalized exposé discussed above, this mode of representation reinforces the essential abnormality of BDSM. The dynamic of understanding via pathologizing means that the mainstream understands SM through diagnosis as a damaged type.

THE DOUBLE GAZE: AGAINST VISIBILITY

As images of SM become more mainstream, it is tempting to regard more mainstream representations of BDSM as signs of, or potential moments for, political progress. Yet the analysis of media consumption offered here suggests that there is no easy correlation between the increased visibility, understanding, and acceptance of sexual minorities, and activist goals. By offering modes of acceptance and understanding that reinforce the division of sexuality into normal/abnormal, privileged/policed, and healthy/pathological, these mainstream representations of SM disrupt the assumption of causation between visibility and political progress. As Champagne (1995) argued, “The desire of cultural minorities to achieve increased visibility must be considered alongside modern disciplinary society’s demands for a normalization linked to increased forms of surveillance” (p. 71). This comment draws on Foucault’s (1977/1995) understanding of discipline; for Foucault, disciplinary power “imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them” (p. 187). The authoritative gaze of power here offers subjectivity only insofar as sexual minorities conform to the categories a disciplinary society offers. The increased visibility of BDSM in mainstream media renders it increasingly vulnerable to this dynamic of normalizing and pathologizing.

The quest to categorize populations on the basis of sexuality (what Foucault termed “bio-power” [Foucault, 1978/1990]) continues to be an essential form of power in contemporary late-capitalism (see also

Lowe, 1995, and Singer, 1993). This mode of categorization is a form of social control; by offering acceptance or understanding only insofar as BDSM sexuality conforms to the ideological categories of normal/not-SM or not normal/pathological SM, these representations do not challenge the systems of privilege and power currently governing sexuality in the U.S. They are not a moment of political progress, but rather suggest the entrenched machinations of power and control over sexual minorities.

Mainstream representations of SM reinforce boundaries between normal and not normal sexuality by granting the viewer access to something kinky and other in a way that does not challenge the normative positionality of the self. These depictions display sexual minorities as a sort of freak show for a mainstream audience. Like the paradoxical “normalization through freak show” that Gamson (1998, p.19) documents on TV talk shows, the dynamic of visibility offered to sexual minorities in mainstream media is limited to a spectacular, exciting display (a push at normative boundaries) followed immediately by the reabsorption into convention (a rearticulation of those boundaries). Opportunities for understanding or accepting these minorities are restricted to majority terms. Whether the other is granted normativity (Lee and Mr. Grey’s romance), or the other is consigned to pathology (Lee as Masochist), when the other enters the mainstream viewing landscape s/he is pinned by a disciplining gaze.

This distanced consumption provides a safe location for the viewer, especially as SM remains policed, feared, and deviant. It could be that this position of safe, if titillated, distance is especially attractive right now as the U.S. swings further into an anti-sex regime (continuing the “moral panic” chronicled by Rubin, 1984/1993). In the context of attacks on sex education, hatred of sexual minorities, and AIDS, sex that does not leave the hands dirty may be quite compelling. As Califia argued, “The machine of pop culture steals from minorities. It comes to us for titillation and rips off our symbolism. At the MTV level, s/m looks more acceptable. The reality, for actual perverts, is it’s not” (cited in Trebay, 1997, p. 32). Or, as Buchanan noted, “Candle wax and ice may be okay for Janet Jackson, but that doesn’t mean you’ll ever see branding at the mall” (cited in Trebay, 1997, p. 32).

A branding kiosk might conceivably appear at the local mall, but if this ever happened, branding would cease to mark the dividing line between in-here normal and out-there abnormal. These comments about appropriation refer to the ways that current mainstream representation does not break down the boundaries around which American sexuality

revolves. Instead, these representations provide new entry points for strengthening boundaries and disciplining minorities. As bits of SM move into the mainstream, other bits of SM stand as the new outside; if spanking is now OK, then branding or cutting is not. Here spanking becomes normalized, accepted because it's not *really* SM, and branding becomes pathological, understood as not normal and other. Like the punks Hebdige (1979) documented, mainstream representations co-opt subcultural style and practice through commodification and ideological incorporation (like labeling and typing), so that in the end what was clearly "resistant" (or outside) becomes "incorporated" (or inside) (pp. 92-99).

The dynamics of normalizing and pathologizing mean that when BDSM enters the mainstream, it is either normalized out of existence (e.g., BDSM in sit-coms or in the song or dress of Britney Spears), or exiled to pathological other (e.g., BDSM in crime dramas or *8mm*). It is either labeled, coded, and entomologized as pathological, or rendered accessible, visible, and comfortably normal (i.e., not really SM). Both dynamics enforce boundaries between normal and not normal, and the systems of privilege and power that work through these distinctions. When BDSM becomes mainstream (incorporated), it is a disciplined SM, an SM that has been appropriated by systems of control and is granted existence only in relation to those dominant categories and rules.

***DISAPPOINTINGLY NORMAL:
SEXUALITY AND DISCIPLINE IN U.S. CONSUMER CULTURE***

If increased representation does not equate with a form of acceptance or understanding that is politically useful, what, if anything, can be said for such representations? Why are they so popular? What do these images stand in for, and how do the consumers of such imagery respond to this incorporated, disciplined BDSM? Reactions to these images suggest that BDSM remains popular because it continues to stand for something that can disturb these dominant categories, even as it is absorbed. When mainstream representations of SM result in the rearticulation of borders and boundaries, viewers express disappointment that, in the end, SM does not stand outside the "machine of pop culture," that instead the machine disciplines, regulates, and controls this sexuality as it incorporates it. The popularity of SM images in mainstream media encodes a desire for realness, for transgression, and for authenticity.

Viewer-citizens expect BDSM sexuality to be something dangerous, outside the law, taboo, and other. Yet, due in part to the accelerations of the media-driven late-capitalist U.S., mainstream media representations of BDSM are doomed to disappoint. Viewers do not want BDSM to be something acceptable (and normal) or something understandable (and pathological); they want BDSM to be somehow outside these systems of power and privilege, discipline and control.

Some voice this disappointment as sanitation, making the argument that once these representations are displayed in mainstream contexts, they cease to be exciting. Here respondents are protesting the ways that the mainstreaming of BDSM means that it appears everywhere, but once it does, it is perceived as too safe, too commercial, and too clean. The fact that one can buy leather floggers on eBay and at Drugstore.com (in the bondage section of “sex toys & games”) ruins the illusion that SM exists outside mainstream, consumer capitalism, somewhere truly other, truly outside. Similarly, when *Vogue* editor Kate Betts (1997/1998) called fetish fashion “last year’s trend” because “You can buy leather pants at the Gap” (cited in Marin, p. 85), she is recognizing that the mainstreaming of fetish fashion, and BDSM by extension, has brought SM out of the fashion underground and into the local mall. This link to banal consumerism incorporates BDSM into a popular consumer landscape at once too accessible, too mundane, and too available to be satisfyingly exotic or other. As one Internet survey respondent wrote in his definition of SM, “I used to walk by the display windows in San Francisco and think, it doesn’t look so terrifying, but not so awfully sexy either. More like a trip to the dentist’s office.”

In spite of this disappointment, BDSM imagery remains popular, even as critics and respondents dismiss SM as just another trend, just another marketing campaign, and just one of many mix-and-match styles of postmodern American consumer culture. Its continued popularity indicates that there is something else people are looking for when they look at BDSM. One survey respondent wrote, “I grow quickly bored of the images and the supposed ‘extreme’ nature of it all. I’m much more curious about the really sick and twisted side, less commonly seen and not in any Ikea ads.”

In the popular imagination, the “really sick and twisted side” of SM cannot be tainted by capitalism or appear in America’s suburban living rooms. It exists *outside* these banal locations, somewhere unreachable, unviewable, and unseen. It is something undisciplined and transgressive; to respondents, BDSM symbolizes something risky, dangerous, mysterious, extraordinary, glamorous, urban, underground,

scary, off-limits, and cool. Yet as soon as SM appears in a beer ad, or in a Hollywood movie, it is immediately too suburban, uncool, demystified, safe, and banal. When one focus group participant argued that the French maid Dannon ad could not be about SM because “That form of role-playing is lame, that’s like the most stock American form of exoticized sexuality,” she is arguing that SM ceases to be SM when it becomes lame, stock, and banal. When sexuality is on display, it risks becoming ordinary.

This complex situation is a result of contemporary American postmodernity, often described as a hyperreal, surface-orientated, hyper-visual, inauthentic, and depthless cultural terrain (e.g., Baudrillard, 1986/1988; Jameson, 1991). The late-capitalist cultural landscape is increasingly a frenzied spectacle of visual surfaces. Performance artist Gómez-Peña (2001) called this the “culture of the mainstream bizarre,” a *cultura in extremis* characterized by a flood of extreme images of sex, sports, violence, and reality crime shows. This field of “sharp edges and strong emotions” is pitched to viewer-citizens who flip from lifestyle reality show to open-heart surgery on TV (p. 13). BDSM representation in mainstream media parallels this frenzied spectacle. As mainstream representation becomes increasingly extreme, it is no longer unusual to see SM play on primetime television, or Britney Spears in leather. Yet at the same time, even as the mainstream becomes more “bizarre,” sexuality continues to represent something that exists outside or beyond this visual field.

Many popular writers covering the fashion and advertising industries have suggested that the mainstreaming of SM is inexorably linked to consumer capitalism: It is the latest (sexy) identity that can be harnessed to sell anything. This is a pop version of Lowe’s (1995) argument, where he asserted that late-capitalism is now increasingly involved in formerly independent practices like sexuality. BDSM can be used to generate consumption in general by linking sexuality (a new, nonreproductive, exchange-based sexuality) with nebulous “product characteristics” (Lowe, 1995, pp. 133-134). Thus, marketers associate the myriad meanings of SM in the popular imagination with various products: The outsider status of fetish fashion lends a punch to the Altoids breath mint, the risqué-ness of D/s dynamics enlivens the staid Bass Ale, or the coolness of SM play resignifies being uptight/organized in the Ikea ad. This dynamic indicates that SM continues to represent, at least in fantasy, something dangerously outside, even as the representations themselves become more mainstream.

In the contemporary U.S., sexuality symbolizes something real, something unalienated, undisciplined, and nonconsumptive. It is a privileged location for these expectations; sexuality is a placeholder for various forms of boundary transgression, including boundaries between selves, and between normative and deviant expressions and desires. As Singer (1993) argued, sexuality in late-capitalism is imagined as “a mechanism for resistance, transgression, opposition to the sphere of demand”; it is an “emblem . . . of freedom” from an “alienating social system” (pp. 36-37). Even though late-capitalism works in part through the regulation, production, and incitement of sexuality and sexual identities, and even as sexuality has become increasingly bound to consumptive practices, still somehow sexuality is imagined as outside of these forces, a privileged locus of authenticity, and an antidote to modern capitalist alienation.

Although this configuration describes all sexualities under late-capitalism, alternative sexualities shoulder the dual expectations of remaining somehow outside while still delivering a satisfying punch. And while this expectation for boundary challenging applies to all visible, nonheterosexual sexualities, at this particular historical moment, BDSM sexuality is a privileged site for these cultural contestations. It is only in the last 20 years that SM sexuality has become visible to the mainstream, and in this mainstreaming, subject to the perils of this visibility (although it should be noted that much of the theoretical work on the perils of visibility was first developed in relation to the mainstreaming of gay, and to a lesser extent lesbian, sexuality). BDSM sexuality is supposed to be real, raw, and dirty, something that goes beyond the cleanly commodified, spectacular landscape, something that disrupts clear boundaries between privileged, normal sexuality and stigmatized, not normal sexuality. In part, this is because BDSM is positioned outside the norm of American sexuality. In part, this is because SM is a persistently vilified form of sexuality, bearing the full weight of legal, psychiatric, and social damnation. But always, SM’s meanings are bound to the expectation that it will, as Abby, a 20-year-old college student in New York said, “[break] the boundaries of what is normal.” It is sexuality that is supposed to be, in the words of Adam, “hard enough to leave marks,” supposed to break down boundaries between self and other, normal and not normal.

Thus even interviewees who enjoyed the love story in *Secretary* expressed disappointment that these images of the other were too mainstream, too conventional, too mundane, or too consumerist. Ty thought that if real SM is “violent, dark, and more depressing,” the representa-

tion in *Secretary*, “tone[s] it down a little bit” and “cast[s] a nice humorous light” on BDSM. Suzy thought *Secretary* made it “a little bit safe,” while Jenny thought the film was a little “too Hollywood.” Abby said that, in *Secretary*, “SM was portrayed as like not as harsh [but as] something that could bring two people together, and you know, make them fall in love with each other. It was just like more subtle SM, softer.” Suzy described it this way: “It’s a starter kit; it’s bringing something that has a very diverse set of practices to the mainstream in a way that it can be swallowed more easily, for people who don’t know that it’s there.” These interviewees are pointing to a basic disappointment: Nothing *truly* shocking and out-there can appear in the in-here consumer culture. Once mainstreamed, these images of BDSM are a little too safe, a little too nice, and a little too easy to swallow.

Even the *TV Guide* review (hardly a cutting edge publication) complains about such neutering: “Mr. Grey’s interest flags, Lee tries everything in the book to get him back, and this once-seriously edgy film assumes the guise of a silly madcap comedy, spiced up [with] an air of naughty chic” (Fox, n.d., ¶ 1). These complaints about the effect of mainstreaming point to complex desires for sex to be transgressive, nonnormative, undisciplined, and resistant to commercialization and marketing. Like all desires under capitalism, SM sexuality (in a popular representational form) promises satisfaction in the form of something brand new, dangerously other, or unimaginable, but leaves the viewer unsatisfied, always wanting more. Eleanor said she had hoped the film would be “a little exciting, titillating, you know, to go see kinky sex,” but then remarked, “You kind of expected more kinky stuff.” Steve said, “I was disappointed that there wasn’t more hardcore SM.” Laura, a 20-year-old college student in Chicago, said, “So the moral of the story is she gets the guy, and now she is a housewife, so that was unnerving. . . . It would be cooler if she became a career woman, but they still were nasty and SM-y all the time.” Abby thought the film’s ending was “totally bogus. The making the bed together, and her sitting there, and her being all happy. . . . I just thought it was a lame ending.” Interviewees thought the SM in *Secretary* was too domestic, nice, and happy; as one reviewer wrote, “By the final scene, the film has rendered safely trite everything it once deemed subversive” (Sutton, 2002, ¶ 6). Promising a walk on the wild side—a come-on evidenced by the film’s poster featuring a bent-over Gyllenhaal with the tag-line “Assume the Position”—*Secretary* instead delivered something too neatly contained. Shepherd (2002), a *Portland Mercury* reviewer, wrote:

The ending sucks a bunch of ass—this huge, demanding movie, with its riveting, hot loads of tension, turns into just another goddamn fluff flick, and Lee and Mr. Grey degenerate into a yuppie couple worthy of a Snuggle dryer sheets commercial. . . . The filmmakers copped out. (§ 5)

When mainstream images of BDSM appear, in the end, too safe, they provoke disappointment masquerading as boredom. *Secretary* reviewers wrote that it was “a real bore” (Rodriguez, 2002, ¶ 1), “crushingly mundane” (LaSalle, 2002, p. D-5), and “deeply conventional” (Rainier, 2002, ¶ 5). “It’s just rather boring . . . considering its plot revolves around sadomasochism” (Brunt, 2002, ¶ 4). *The San Francisco Chronicle*’s review of the movie began:

The movie, radiant with self-satisfaction, seems to have been intended as a provocation and as a daring exploration of sexuality. But it gets tripped up on two points: It provokes nothing but yawns, and the sex it explores is stuff everybody knows about and says, ‘so what?’ (LaSalle, 2002, p. D-5)

The main issue here seems to be that it “should have been a lot riskier, given its subject matter” (Rainer, 2002, ¶ 5), that it was, “pretty tame, more sweet than salacious” (Dargis, 2002, p. 17), and that it was not “even titillating” (Oppenheimer, 2002, ¶ 6). This is the mechanism of boredom qua disappointment: When BDSM appears so closely bound to mainstream, consumer capitalism, it disappoints those hoping for edgy titillation. As the U.S. popular cultural landscape becomes increasingly beholden to sex-as-spectacle, sex-as-consumption, these mainstream representations will always fail. SM promises a taste of something real and authentic, something deep and satisfying, and when these representations dissatisfy (as, of course, they must), viewers experience boredom.

The lame, domestic, too safe version of kink presented in *Secretary* is disappointing because viewers want to see something dangerous, something transgressive, and something outside the machinations of normativity. It is disappointing, even boring, when these representations fail, when instead of something real, authentic, undisciplined, and nonconsumptive, viewers are stuck with a story about two lovers, mass marketed imagery, entomologized perverts, or other mainstreamed versions of fully-commodified, controlled, and disciplined selves. Yet the desire to see something really other can also be read as transgressive; af-

ter all, this desire is also a desire to experience something that would blur, uproot, or unfix the boundaries between normal and not normal. Even as increased representation provides avenues for increased stigmatization, the desire to see something else carries political potential.

**IN CONCLUSION:
THE POTENTIAL OF DESIRE**

There is no question that mainstream representations of BDSM have increased dramatically, spreading further and further into popular culture. Instead of challenging systems of sexual privilege and power, mainstream representations of SM (both normalizing and pathologizing) reinforce the normativity of the distanced viewing subject. SM promises a fantasy of kinkiness that can titillate the viewer-citizen out of the banal and lifeless existence of socially compliant bodies, while at the same time it serves as a limit against which a normal, vanilla, procreative, heterosexual, and suburban sexuality is defined.

Yet as long as American culture remains ideologically bound to a vision of sexuality that privileges heterosexual, monogamous marriage, that simultaneously disavows and persecutes sexual minorities, and that rigorously attempts to strengthen boundaries between normal and not normal, it is imperative to find ways to contest this vision. As activists, researchers, and advocates, we cannot pin political hope on valorizing positive representations of SM; this argument denies the dangers of surveillance, disciplining, normalizing, and pathologizing documented in this article. Instead, we might return to the emotional aftermath of this distanced consumption, to that feeling of letdown when the other appears so neatly displayed within a clean, commercial field.

As SM becomes more mainstream, the desire for something real, raw, and hard grows. This desire is elusive; it reveals itself when viewers are left feeling hollow and empty, disappointed that they were not sufficiently shocked or turned on (or, ideally, both). This disappointment points to the fantasy the mainstream public continues to treasure: There is something *else*, something more, something that is really real, that is really authentic. Abby struggled with this feeling that BDSM is always something that cannot be represented in mass media like *Secretary*:

A: I feel like it just nicked the surface of it. Because there wasn't any—it didn't really deal with SM that much. Like, I feel like the

producers and directors went as far as they could in our society, but they didn't go fully into it.

MW: What was missing?

A: Um. I don't know, maybe just more explicit? Like I feel like this was one of those . . . like they just sort of had a kinky relationship, it wasn't like full-blown SM, it was just like, I just think they did a lot of role playing, like he was the dominating one and she was like the one who liked to get humiliated and liked to be his little slave and stuff, which you know, definitely is a part of SM, but I don't know. I don't know.

MW: Is it because it's about power and not pain, bondage, black leather?

A: No. The power thing, I mean that's what SM is all about. I mean it really did show [that] I don't know because you don't need the toys and the bondage and you don't need to be wearing black leather to really be SM. I don't know. I feel like the movie was kind of safe.

In this way, SM can never *really* be mainstreamed, because there will always seem to be a bit that remains out there, just out of reach. In the context of critical reception of Madonna's *Sex* (1992), Champagne (1993) described, "the continued difficulty of recuperating the impure and filthy heterogeneity of male homosexuality for an elevated, capitalist consumption" because even for Madonna, there is something a little "gross" about being gay (p. 138). It is this heterogeneity, this dirtiness, and this taint that remains even as SM becomes more clearly positioned within the mainstream. This taint marks the ways SM continues to signify contradictory desires for authenticity, for realness, for the meaningful transgression of social norms and docile, mapped-out bodies. Mainstream representations of SM embody always-excessive desires, and these desires protect its disruptive potential even as SM moves into the circle of the mainstream. Late-capitalism works by inciting and capitalizing on these desires, yet it can never control the emotional effect of this excess.

The respondents and reviewers chronicled in this text are reaching for the out-there, the uncontained, and it is in this reaching that political potential lies. Using the language of disappointment, they are protesting the failure of transgression, decrying the ways sexual strangeness is disciplined out of existence. I find their disappointment hopeful; it suggests that, even as the state dedicates itself to policing and marginalizing alternative sexualities, even as the popular landscape be-

comes more sensationalistic and media-driven, even as sexuality becomes increasingly bound to consumption, there is nascent protest against these constraints. The mainstream public documented here continues to look to BDSM as an inspiration for norm violation, a location that promises an attack on borders, boundaries, and closed-down options. They want something harder or realer, something that could jolt the viewer out of a complacent, easy, defined, consumptive world. They want something truly outside, disobedient, and undisciplined; something that can break the rules and transgress the bounds; something hard enough to leave marks. Although it is unclear whether mainstream media representations can ever satisfy these desires, the desire itself retains potential.

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