FEMINIST UN/PLEASURE:
REFLECTIONS UPON PERVERSITY, BDSM, AND DESIRE
Edited by E. Gravelet
Credits

Feral Feminisms
Issue 2  •  Summer 2014
www.feralfeminisms.com
Feral Feminisms is an independent, inter-media, peer reviewed, open access online journal.

Editors
Danielle Cooper
Ela Przybylo
Sara Rodrigues

Guest Editor
E. Gravelet

Editorial Board
Founding Editors
Ela Przybylo
Sara Rodrigues
Danielle Cooper
Lead Copy Editor
Sara Rodrigues
Copy Editors
Esther Edell
Jennifer Gartner
Ariel Leutheusser
Marva Milo
Hans Rollmann
Peer Reviewers
Thank you to our peer reviewers.

Communications Committee
Creative Director
Ela Przybylo
Graphic Designers
Landon Whittaker (print)
Ela Przybylo (web)
Creative Liaison
Jenna Danchuk
Communications Directors and Social Media Coordinators
Veronika Novoselova
Danielle Cooper
Advisory Board
Anna M. Agathangelou
Shannon Bell
Barbara Crow
Feminist Art Gallery (FAG)
Anna Fisher
Jane Gerhard
Patrick Keilty
Michelle Meagher
Allyson Mitchell
David Murray
Rebecca Sullivan
Chloë Taylor
Amar Wahab
Lorna Weir

Cover Art
Tania A.

Cover Design and Layout Design
Landon Whittaker
Ela Przybylo

Thank you to the York University Graduate Students’ Association (YUGSA) for financial support.

Copyright
Feral Feminisms is published under a Creative Commons 3.0 Attribution License. This license allows others to share the work, for non-commercial purposes and without derivation, with an acknowledgement of authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of each work represents the original work of the author(s). Any third-party content is included when the author or creator has provided the required publication permissions.

ISSN 2292-146X
Table of Contents

5  Guest Editorial
Feminist Un/Pleasure: Reflections upon Perversity, BDSM, and Desire
E. Gravelet

Part 1: The Wrong Desire
14  A Screenplay: My Own Private Sex Wars
Ummni Khan
22  Coming up for Air: Personal Reflections on Women’s Masochism
J. M.

Part 2: Transformation and Broken Boundaries
28  Wanting (To Be) Animal: Fairy-Tale Transbiology in The StoryTeller
Pauline Greenhill
45  Tomatoes as Trauma
Joseph Labine
48  “Pleasure and Pain in Exquisite Extremes”: Sexual/Textual S/M in Emily
Brontë’s Wuthering Heights
Kara M. Manning

Part 3: Uncanny, Fleshly Objects
66  Invitation
Anna Youngyeun
70  Uncanny Erotics – On Hans Bellmer’s Souvenirs of the Doll
Jeremy Bell
86  Teaser AND The milk:/ sweet 5 AND Pop 2.2
BARBARISM

Part 4: Relationality and Reparation
91  It’s the Hard Knock Life: Sex, Shame, and Making Meaning
I.A. Woody
97  Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep
Tania A.
102  Salt Remembers
Karina Quinn
Every kinky feminist queer that I have ever spoken to loves *Macho Sluts*. Well, maybe I’m just lucky enough to know the right people, but there appears to be an overarching consensus that Patrick Califia’s hotly controversial 1988 collection of dyke S/M smut should be considered a classic. Not unlike the experience of many contemporary queer folks, it was one of the first pieces of BDSM literature I unearthed that actually resonated with my lived experiences and desires, and it subsequently spent many years living on my bedside table, creased open to “The Finishing School.” For a generation closely following Califia and his sex-positive peers, it might seem strange that this title would spur legal battles with the state or that its contents could contribute to the splintering of a thriving activist community. In 2000, however, *Macho Sluts* became a focal point in *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium v. Canada*, the obscenity trials between Canada Customs and a small gay and lesbian bookstore situated in Vancouver, British Columbia. This collection of S/M erotica has had further impact on the infamous fragmentation at the heart of the feminist sex wars. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing to this day, the North American second-wave feminist movement has been starkly divided by vehement political disagreements surrounding sexuality and gender. Broadly speaking, early anti-porn feminists argued that pornography, sex work, and BDSM constitute violence against women, and were consequently deserving of indiscriminate censorship and state legislating. Conversely, sex-positive groups fronted by activists, writers, and academics like Gayle Rubin, Dorothy Allison, and Califia fought for women’s sexual choice and the expression of their unique multifaceted pleasures, rallying against wide state-sponsored censorship (Bronstein 2011). The publication of *Macho Sluts* then, in its unprecedented and explicit exploration of women’s kinky sex, bolstered a burgeoning sex-positive leather dyke community, while also aggravating an already provoked anti-porn opposition.

Although echoes of these devastating North American sex wars and anti-porn activisms continue to haunt corners of various feminist and queer movements—such as the publication of Dworkin-reviving books like Robert Jensen’s 2008 *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, or the seemingly unrelenting stereotype that all feminists hate porn—it nevertheless appears that their few faint cries can be easily challenged or avoided. Subsequently, while many contemporary feminists are at least aware of the histories of conflict that inform sex-positive feminisms today, there is perhaps a level of disengagement from the emotional weight of these formational battles. As a queer feminist scholar and artist, this is a disconnection that I have experienced with a certain ambivalence: a sense of synchronized tenderness.
or kinship towards a past from which I am also affectively separated, and therefore struggle to perceive or experience. Nevertheless, these histories continue to deeply influence my work, activism, art, and life. The three short narratives that follow will thus begin to exemplify some of the fractures and mixed feelings that inform contemporary engagement with contested feminist sexualities and BDSM. These stories simultaneously pry feminist desire apart and pull it together, underscoring the ways that political experiences of sexuality can carry both suffering and pleasure, or pleasurable suffering.

The first time I was shaken by this feeling of proximity and disconnection was during an interaction with a professor during my Master's degree. At the time I was writing about feminist pornography, and was a typically defensive fresh-faced graduate student with a lot to prove. Feminist porn had raised my awareness of the explosive potentials of non-normative audio-visual expressions of queer sexuality, and I was ready to substantiate its revolutionary visions in one fell swoop. When I submitted the first draft of my thesis, my professor paused, looked at me incredulously and asked something along the lines of “have you even read *Pleasure and Danger*?” The fact that it had not occurred to me to speak to the Barnard Conference conflict, nor to substantially draw from Carole Vance’s 1984 anthology, spoke to more than novice oversight. As a young queer scholar who had not experienced the turmoil first-hand, the conference simply didn’t register as being overly important when talking about the feminist porn movement. Apart from the subsequent lecture I received on substantiated research, what has since stuck with me was the affect that I felt flood across my professor’s desk: a mixture of feelings of disbelief, confusion, and perhaps sadness combined with indignation. I truly felt for the first time, in response to my omission, a taste of how significant the political divide had been and how devastating the results.

More recently, I witnessed comparable resonances when attending the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference (FPcon) in Toronto, Ontario. Founded and produced by sex-positive educator Tristan Taormino, and run in conjunction with the Feminist Porn Awards, the event provided an unprecedented platform for not only academics, but also activists, sex workers, artists, performers, directors, and producers to “explore intersections between feminism and pornography” (FPCon: Feminist Porn Conference). In her keynote address on Saturday evening, professor Lisa Duggan reminisced about feminist politics of the 1980s, and her involvement with some of the first sex-positive organizing around sex work, BDSM, and pornography. At that time she was establishing the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) and building new strategies for resisting anti-porn feminists who, until then, had garnered a strong public platform. While sharing stories of live debates with Catherine Mackinnon and auditoriums full of dykes split down the middle into “sides,” Duggan stressed how thrilled she was to be at FPcon, how enormous were its accomplishments, and how stunning were its alternative visions. The traction and impact of the current feminist pornography movement and the scale of its reception would have been unimaginable in 1984. Bearing witness to this first hand account of a battle I had only ever read about was both entertaining and moving. Before shifting into her core arguments
surrounding neo-liberalism, sex work, and labour, Duggan surprised me with an offhanded remark about commonalities over the fault-lines. “We have a kinship with anti-porn feminism” she explained, “the ways that women receive violence is something we’ve all felt anger about…and its absolutely breathtaking to see that rage take over.”

I opened this editorial with a similarly casual yet profound comment by Califia, taken from the forward to the revised edition of Macho Sluts. In this new 2009 introduction, Califia traces firsthand tales of the sex wars and grassroots resistance, while also reflecting upon the impact of his personal transition from female to male. “When you have only a handful of people who understand your way of life,” he explains, “their support becomes so important that no forgiveness for betrayal is even possible.” Then, with a lingering hopefulness, he adds: “Or so it would seem thus far” (19). The “handful of people who understand your way of life” in this case are members of Samois, a lesbian-feminist S/M organization that Califia founded in the late 1970s. Samois is legendary for being the first of its kind, advocating for the compatibility of feminism and BDSM, producing kinky queer publications (Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M being the most influential), all the while maintaining open discussion and continued activism (Rubin). At the commencement of the sex wars, the group “Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media” rallied against Samois’ organizing, strongly opposing all lesbian sadomasochistic practice, arguing that it was a ritualized form of violence against women. Regretfully, in 1983 after 5 years of work, Samois disbanded due to infighting. In Califia’s words, the intimacy within the group meant that “no forgiveness for betrayal [was] possible.” Paradoxically then, it was the need for support from such a small, tight-knit community that lead to its final incommensurable disagreements.

By beginning with these separate yet interconnected tales, I aim to not only contextualize this issue on feminism and BDSM, but to frame it within its fractures. The generational difference between my professor and me, the uncomfortable ally-ship through anger named by Duggan in her reminiscence, and the unresolved disputes between members of Samois, each highlight only a few of the possible ambivalences and disrupted genealogies that inform feminist sexualities. Instead of providing a clear trajectory that leads to the feminist art and scholarship on BDSM in this special issue of Feral Feminisms, I trace its uncertain path, sown with mixed feelings. The surprising, yet breathtaking kinship between sex-positive feminists and anti-porn feminists, premised upon anger, forms a perverse connection or relationality; it generates a place where polarities overlap and fornicate. In Macho Sluts, Califia’s nostalgia for the “handful of people who understand” and the mourning that “we’ll never have a reunion where we swap reminiscences or congratulate each other for surviving” (19), underscores the tensions between subversive, utopian communities and the interpersonal disagreements that cause their dissolution. Finally, the experience of my professor’s frustration and sadness blurred through academic professionalism, highlights generational divides, missing archives, and the repercussions of institutionalization. These incoherencies establish a split when
beginning to think about feminist pleasure and unpleasure and their necessary, yet sometimes unnerving, connection (their un/pleasure). In the above examples, a rupture takes place in a seemingly cohesive experience: the affects of the past recalcitrantly and sporadically leak into the present; two vehemently dichotomized groups are suddenly united, tenderly even, over a common rage; and the desperate need for a common understanding and solidarity causes permanent fragmentation. Yet it is these moments of splitting apart which simultaneously, somehow, bring them back together. Therefore, these feminist sexualities encompass both enjoyment and suffering wrapped tightly around a complex politics of desire. This apparent contradiction of painful enjoyment also weaves throughout BDSM sexuality itself, where the lines between violence, sex, and love start to blur. In turn, this second issue of Feral Feminisms aims to complicate, untame, queer, and radicalize tumultuous un/pleasurable legacies by reflecting upon the current intersections between feminist desire and perverse sexuality.

The theme of this issue was also inspired by the work and discussion that came out of a course I facilitated at Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto in 2013. The graduate students, professors, and artists that attended the “Seminar in Perversion and Psychoanalysis” took it upon themselves to investigate explicit sex and BDSM in a hybrid academic and arts-based setting. We engaged with classic texts in psychoanalysis and perversion, such as the seminal works of Sigmund Freud, Richard von Kraft Ebbing, and Havelock Ellis; examined the medicalization of perverse discourses in the DSM; explored masochism and sadism though their namesakes—the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch; and interrogated contemporary perverse psychoanalytic theory through the lens of fetishism, disability, race, temporality, queerness, cyborgs, death, visual art, film, and narrative. Two foundational theories that recurred in these seminars and have since informed much of my thinking on BDSM are Freud’s early formulations on the two principles of psychic functioning and his later writings on the death drive. According to Freud in Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning (1911) pleasure and unpleasure are intimately bound. Our primary drive, aptly named the pleasure/unpleasure principle, encompasses both the unpleasure of an increase in excitation and the pleasure of its release. In other words, an individual’s relationship to unencumbered indulgence continually grapples with its denial. It is thus an integral part of socialization to apprehend the secondary process of psychic functioning, the reality principle, in which impulse control postpones gratification. Additionally, in 1920 Freud controversially argued that there are tendencies beyond the pleasure/unpleasure principle, and that through repetition formation, free flowing drive impulses propel “every living organism to restore to a prior state” (165). This new critical theory of the death drive countered the assumption that all drives pushed towards survival, change, and personal development.

Freud consequently based all human experience upon the precarious balance between pleasure and unpleasure, navigation of the demands of reality, and a drive towards the most primary desire of all: death. Additionally, although he has developed a reputation for wide pathologization of sexual difference, he was one of the first
thorists of sexuality to question the essentializing of inversion (queerness) as an innate character or degeneracy. He argued instead that all people are born bisexual, and that sexual orientation is acquired throughout early psychosexual development. Freud advised in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), that sexologists and clinicians must “loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between the instinct and the object” (246), for all humans are latently polymorphously perverse. This is why children have little resistance towards carrying out perversions, both in aim and object, “since the mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust, and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in the course of construction” (268). Freud acknowledged the innateness of perversity by naturalizing its origins, questioning the normalization of a heterosexual aim, and writing extensively on masochism, sadism and fetishism. “Feminist Un/pleasure” therefore draws not only from diverse genealogies of feminism and BDSM, but also from an undercurrent of perverse psychoanalytic thought—those theories of innate drives that form primary psychic functioning and propel unrelenting desire.

Desire is a slippery concept, difficult to hold or describe, it is neither consistent nor interchangeable. An insatiable yearning for some is for others abhorrent and deserving of reprimand. The social complexities of perversion are always in flux, influencing diverse manifestations of sexuality and its censorship. Abundant BDSM practices play with these intricacies and incoherencies, exploring unique experiences of pleasure and pain through polymorphously perverse play in its multiple incarnations. Influenced by foundational psychoanalytic thought, this issue, “Feminist Un/Pleasure: Reflections upon Perversity, BDSM, and Desire” calls for diverse engagement with ambivalent genealogies of feminist perversion. It features theoretical, artistic, and narrative speculations on gender and power, canonical thinkers, subversive sexualities, performativities, intersectionalities, queerness, temporal resonances, erotic fiction, affect, politicizations, trauma, survival, and death, with the aim of illuminating the plentiful, yet undertheorized practices and approaches of feminist perversity and non-normative sexuality. As Califia muses “if we fall in love with the ‘wrong’ person, read something that unexpectedly excited us, see a piece of porn that has a surpassing impact, or listen to the far-out suggestion of a more experienced lover, we may find that we can’t take our core assumptions about ourselves for granted” (27). Hopefully, this kinky collaboration will render feral the reader’s assumptions, contributing to an unsettling and unhinging of taken for granted un/pleasures.

 Appropriately, then, this issue starts with “The Wrong Desire.” This section provides an innovative and almost palpable introduction to the resonances of genealogies of the feminist battles surrounding BDSM. Through their creative works, contributors address some of the contradictions arising through seemingly incompatible ideologies. In “A Screenplay: My Own Private Sex Wars,” Ummni Khan experiments with form to dramatize her personal encounter with these conflicts as they were waged in personal spaces. A scene set in the early 1990s narrates two pivotal relationships, each of which trails the impacts of feminist conflict, divisive choices, and radical seductions. Relatedly, J. M. explores a repercussive feminist sexual taboo,
female masochism, and its relationship to male power. J. M.’s piece “Coming up for Air: Personal Reflections on Women’s Masochism,” stylistically juxtaposes personal narrative and feminist psychoanalytic theory in order to investigate the splitting of the female subject and corporeal masochistic desire. Underscoring the restorative potentials of BDSM, she sutures the self with intense bodily experience.

Throughout the second section, three scholars grapple with the precarity of fixed boundaries, using transformation to pervert their illusionary confines. In “Wanting (To Be) Animal: Fairy-Tale Transbiology in The StoryTeller” Pauline Greenhill retrieves fantasy and legend from heteropatriarchal censure by queering species boundaries. Through her analysis of the StoryTeller, Jim Henson’s 1988 television series that retells old European folk tales, Greenhill explores transgressions of conventionally permitted desires between humans, non-humans, and their hybrids. Next, using the soft, permeable and vulnerable flesh of the tomato, Joseph Labine exposes the thin borders between pain and sex in “Tomatoes as Trauma.” His poetry reveals the performativity of sexual trauma, while making use of cheeky metaphor and layered form to awaken the senses. In closing, Kara M. Manning further stretches the margins between the reader and text itself in her essay “‘Pleasure and Pain in Exquisite Extremes’: Sexual/Textual S/M in Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights.” Grounding her work in linguistic encounters, Manning contemplates textual inter/course and the inherent sadomasochistic scene that readers encounter when consuming the classic novel Wuthering Heights.

In 1911, Freud wrote a short and obscure paper on what he called “The Uncanny.” As he described it, an object or a situation evokes uncannyness when it is simultaneously familiar, yet threatening and terrifying in its familiarity. These bewildering concurrent sentiments of being attracted to and repulsed by something would often lead to the subject’s persistent estrangement or apprehension. In the third section of this issue, “Uncanny, Fleshy Objects,” the authors investigate these incoherent, perverse, and often unspeakable affects though performance, surrealist art, and experimental film. Anna Youngyeun, inspired by histories of feminist ordeal performance art, allows unabashed exploration of the limits of the body with “Invitation.” This photographic series documents the audience’s interactions with, and examination of her fleshy suspended protuberant form, hung naked inside a biomorphic lycra sack. Her open orifices invite curious and haphazard penetration. Jeremy Bell’s essay, “Uncanny Erotics: On Hans Bellmer’s Souvenirs of the Doll,” further delves into the grotesque and objectified sexual body through an engagement with controversial German-born surrealist artist and writer Hans Bellmer. The 2011 exhibition in Berlin, “Double Sexus,” staged a dialogue between Bellmer and Louise Bourgeois, both of whom are strikingly similar in their sexually charged, bodily fragmented, bulbous work that combines fantasy with horror. Yet, while Bourgeois has been celebrated as a canonical feminist artist, Bellmer has been accused of sexism in his raw explicitness. Bell’s work grapples these claims, using psychoanalysis as a lens for Bellmer’s notoriously uncanny dolls. This section concludes with three short experimental films by the BARBARISM collective, a multimedia project that aims to challenge social hierarchy through “individual multiplicities.” Their pieces make use of cynical, dry, and camp
humour to exploit minimalist pornographic renderings of split, severed, or objectified flesh—a breast, nipple, pussy. Playing with the unpleasure of everyday harassment and abuse through the pleasure of queer feminist comedy, BARBARISM’s works interrogate politically charged, gendered social relationships traversed by object-relations theory and polymorphous perversity.

Progressing from the work of BARBARISM, the final pieces in “Feminist Un/pleasure” explore “Relationality and Reparation” by considering the ways that perversity, desire, and BDSM can be employed as tools for “working through” (Freud 1914) fractures. Using object relations theory, Melanie Klein (1964) famously argued that “reparation” is a key factor in successful childhood development. Reparation is the process of healing unconscious guilt carried by the subject because of their destructive urges towards a split loved object—for the infant, this fracture exists between the “good” and “bad” breast. In her work with Joan Riviere on the sources of emotion, Klein theorized that “hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused and [the child] becomes dominated by the impulses to destroy the very person who is the object of all his desires” (58). Yet by overcoming fantasies of the object’s omnipotence, and through the acceptance of both good and bad qualities of self and other, the subject may repair damage done to their internal world. In the first piece in this section, “It’s The Hard Knock Life: Sex, Shame, and Making Meaning,” I.A. Woody captures the therapeutic qualities of BDSM play through a narrative investigation of layered and shifting power hierarchies. In this piece, Woody makes meaning of fantasy and perverse sexuality through encounters with authority, clinical psychoanalysis, and role play. Tackling the wide pathologization of BDSM, he asks both erotically and platonically: “what if it is about trauma, and what if that’s actually ok?” Woody’s account is followed by the photo series titled “Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep” by Tania A., a spontaneous documentation of a kinky queer performance piece on the eve of Nuit Blanche in Toronto, Ontario. Coupled by a conversation between Leanne Powers, one of the co-creators, and Tania A., the photos capture an intricate web of exchanges, illuminating the reparative binding power of queer community, erotic art, and collective intentionality. Finally, the poetry of Karina Quinn recites the reverberating incidence of unadulterated desire. Pulling the reader into embodied relational memories, her prose yearns for the tenderness of secreting bodies and forbidden words made flesh. As Quinn potently articulates: “There is nothing more dangerous than this.”

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors, Danielle Cooper, Sara Rodrigues, and Ela Przybylo for all their brilliantly committed work, meticulousness, and keen expertise throughout the process of creating this issue. “Feminist Un/Pleasure” could not be possible without all those who contributed to the 2013 “Seminar in Perversion and Psychoanalysis:” Professor Allyson Mitchell, for letting us meet weekly at FAG (Feminist Art Gallery), contributing chocolate mint tea and Deep Lez insights; my supervisor Sheila Cavanagh who facilitated things on the bureaucratic end and helped us work through the muddied waters of psychoanalytic thought; and Kami Chisholm
for unabashedly encouraging my kinky scholarly endeavours, and forever talking theory with me after everyone else has already left. Additionally, thank you to all of those who submitted, including those whose contributions could not be included in the final issue. Your work has been a pleasure to behold and I sincerely hope that you continue to produce such fantastically perverted and queer feminist scholarship, art, and activisms. Finally to my partner, Leah Henderson, who lovingly puts up with my nonsense and offers me endless support: thank you.

Works Cited


PART 1
The Wrong Desire
This screenplay is a dramatization of a micro-battle in which I engaged (both internally and externally) during the so-called feminist sex wars. It mostly takes place in the early 1990s, and shows how my strong identification with Feminism (with a capital “F”, as I believed there was only one kind at the time) started to disintegrate. The story pivots on two key relationships, one with Dragyn, who espoused radical feminism, and one with Daphne, who seduced me—in the best sense of that word—to embrace a more sex-radical praxis.

INT. MCGILL UNIVERSITY WOMEN’S CENTRE – MIDDAY – 1992

Two university-aged women, Marie and Ummni, are sitting on mismatched lumpy furniture, engaged in heated, but not angry, discussion. Words like “gender stereotypes,” “misogyny,” and “subversion” can be heard. A third woman – self-chosen name Dragyn – is boiling water. The walls are covered with political posters advocating women’s rights.

DRAGYN, scrutinizing one box of tea. Is this chai tea? I thought we were boycotting India. Dowry killings are still happening, people.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I began my undergraduate studies in the early 90s, and was eager to become more politically engaged.

UMMNI, retrieving the box of tea from Dragyn with a sheepish look. Sorry. My mom sent it to me.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). Of course, I made a lot of mistakes in my quest for feminist enlightenment.

UMMNI, pointing out something in the campus newspaper. Hey, the film society is screening the new Polanski film. Anyone want to check it out?

MARIE, in disgust. Fuck no.

Ummni looking confused and embarrassed.

MARIE. He raped a 13-year-old girl and got away with it.

DRAGYN. They always get away with it.

UMMNI. But then why –
DRAGYN, *handing each woman a mug of tea and joining them on the couch*. What do you expect? The art-house crowd considers him “ground-breaking” (making scare quotes with her fingers).

MARIE. Don’t you mean the andro house crowd?

UMMNI, *tentatively pointing to the newspaper*: It says here it’s got strong female characters.

DRAGYN. As if! He cast his own wife as a masochist in *Bitter Moon*.

MARIE. The film shows he’s probably a wife beater too.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). The Women’s Centre was my favourite haunt in first year. After I had finished classes for the day, I’d hurry over to the university centre to meet up with my soul sisters and debrief our daily encounters with patriarchy in a safe, “womyn-only” space. Sexuality was our hottest topic. Not so much swapping stories of risqué liaisons, of course, as dissecting its power dynamics: sex as a weapon against women; sex as the linchpin to patriarchy. I came to believe there was only one progressive view on sexuality and was completely unaware at the time of any “war” between feminists on the issues of pornography or sadomasochism (s/m). It was self-evident that a feminist would be against porn and s/m, just as a human rights activist would be against torture and killings.

UMMNI, *slamming the newspaper closed*. In that case, maybe we should organize a boycott of the film?

DRAGYN. Nice thinking, Ummni.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). As part of the boycott, The Woman’s Centre presented *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* on the same night of Polanski’s *Bitter Moon* screening. Afterwards, I couldn’t get the degrading images out of my mind: women in chains, legs spread open, penetration of multiple orifices. We stayed up all night in Dragyn’s dorm room rehashing it all, giddy with outrage.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY – 1993

*A vernissage at the University Art Gallery. Students and professors mingling. Ummni is talking to Daphne, a woman slightly older than her, but still clearly a student.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). In my sophomore year, I transferred to Concordia University to enrol in its Creative Writing program. That’s where I met Daphne. And that’s where my feminism started to become undone. She seemed really cool: a graduate student working on a manuscript that retold *Snow White* through a series of interlinking poetry and prose.
UMMNI. So, it’s a feminist retelling?

DAPHNE. You could say that.

UMMNI. I’d love to read it. Do you ever show your work in progress?

Ummni turns to look at a painting, as if she doesn’t care what Daphne’s answer would be.

DAPHNE. I’m a bit of an exhibitionist. *(Daphne steps in front of the painting Ummni is pretending to scrutinize. Their eyes meet for a heartbeat, before Ummni looks sideways.)* I’ll share my work at anytime.

CUT TO:

*A small one-bedroom apartment, clearly furnished with hand-me-downs and sidewalk finds. Daphne is holding a bottle of cheap dépanneur wine and heads to the kitchen in search of a corkscrew. Ummni is sitting at the dining table in awe of all the books scattered around. An anthology catches her eye: The Girl Wants To: Women’s Representations of Sex and the Body (Crosby 1993). Daphne walks over to the table with two goblets of wine. She notices the book Ummni is holding.*

DAPHNE, *passing Ummni her drink.* Check out the Trish Thomas poem at the end: *Fuck Your Ex-Lover.*

UMMNI, *her hand trembling a little so the wine sloshes almost over the rim.* What?!

DAPHNE, *taking the book from Ummni and flipping it towards the back before handing it back to her.* That’s what the poem’s called.

The book stays open naturally at the page with a poem by Trish Thomas entitled, as Daphne had said, “Fuck Your Ex-Lover.”

CLOSE UP: on the stanza that Ummni is reading. Daphne recites the lines aloud from memory.

DAPHNE. “Don’t get me wrong. / I’ve intellectualized up the / feminist ass / with the best of them./ But all that theoretical masturbation / never got me a warm body in my bed.”

UMMNI. What is this? *(Ummni quickly closes the book, as if she had just been got caught reading a secret diary.)*

DAPHNE. Inspiration.

UMMNI. Right (taking a gulp of wine). This book is part of that whole backlash thing, huh?
DAPHNE, with a look of amusement. Here’s one of my poems. *(Daphne hands Ummni a spiral notebook.)*

Ummni’s eyes bulge out as she reads the text. She gets to the bottom of one page and then abruptly gives it back to Daphne.

UMMNI. It’s really ... vivid.

DAPHNE. What do you write?

UMMNI. I’m more of a short story writer.

DAPHNE. Working on anything in particular?

UMMNI, hesitates for a moment then speaks in a rush. Right now I’m writing a piece about sexual abuse, but it takes place in the context of an immigrant family, so of course, I’m using a postcolonial lens in my narrative.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I thought the words “postcolonial lens” would impress Daphne. She was a Teaching Assistant; I was an undergrad.

DAPHNE. You’re brave to tackle that.

UMMNI. Your poem, I guess, deals with abuse stuff?

DAPHNE. It’s about the vicissitudes of pleasure.

UMMNI ((VOICE-OVER)). I remember wondering at the time about the definition of “vicissitudes,” and assuming it must mean something bad, like distortions of pleasure.

CUT TO:
EXT – MONTREAL SIDEWALK – THE NEXT MORNING

Dragyn and Ummni walking and talking.

DRAGYN. Do you think she was coming on to you with that poem?

UMMNI. Goddess! I hope not.

DRAGYN. You’re so naive. Why else would she tell you to read a poem called “Fuck Your Ex Lover”?

Ummni shrugs her shoulders.

DRAGYN. She’s saying forget your ex and (cringing as she says the word) “fuck” her.
UMMNI. I don’t think I’m Daphne’s type.

DRAGYN. What about her poem? Was it just as offensive?

UMMNI. It was good ... (noticing Dragyn’s look of disgust) ... from a technical perspective, that is. But it creeped me out.

MONTAGE:

*Sequence of arguments between Ummni and Daphne at quintessential Montreal landmarks as the season turns from summer to fall to winter.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING MONTAGE). That’s how I entered the sex wars. At first, I approached my conversations with Daphne and the books she gave me the way a litigator approaches the opposing party’s factum. Study it and find any weaknesses in the reasoning, or any vulnerable spots you can exploit.

1. Ummni’s wild gesticulating hands, as she tries to persuade Daphne of something by the illuminated cross at the top of Mount Royal.

2. Daphne handing Ummni a pile of books in front of the Saint Joseph’s Oratory, the leaves in full autumnal colour display.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING THIRD INSTALLMENT OF MONTAGE). But at some point, I defected and became Daphne’s willing protégé.

3. Ummni and Daphne in a heated discussion over a passage in a book Ummni is holding. They are in front of the Biosphère, piles of fresh wet snow around them. Ummni appears exasperated by the debate, shoves the book in her backpack and marches a few feet away. Daphne is worried at first, and walks tentatively in Ummni’s direction. Before Daphne realizes what’s happened, Ummni has thrown a snowball at her and then turns to flee. Daphne catches Ummni easily and wrestles her down onto a snowy blanket under a tree.

DAPHNE. Classic move, Khan: lure your enemy into a sense of security.

UMMNI, grinning. That is so not what I’m doing.

DAPHNE. What are you doing then?

*Ummni responds by tugging her scarf off, hooking it around Daphne’s neck and pulling her down.*

UMMNI. According to that book you gave me, it’s called, “topping from the bottom.”
MONTAGE:

A continuing sequence of arguments between Ummni and Dragyn at quintessential Montreal landmarks, as the season turns from winter to spring to summer again.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING MONTAGE). My subsequent arguments with Dragyn were a different story. They just got worse.

1. Dragyn covering her face, as if in disbelief of what Ummni is telling her in front of the Cathedral-Basilica on a dreary grey night.

2. Dragyn emphasizing her point to Ummni by drawing her attention to the display at a sex shop on Saint Catherine Street. The leaves are just starting to come out on the sidewalk trees.

3. Ummni and Dragyn staring at each other with tense faces at the back patio of the Café Santropol. Each of them has a large sandwich in front of them, and a copy of Macho Sluts (Califia 1988) sits on the table on Ummni’s side.

UMMNI. I’m just asking you to read the introduction.

DRAGYN. I’m not going to touch that woman-hating book. (Dragyn opens her sandwich and starts scraping off most of the two-inch spread of cream cheese onto her plate.) They always put too much of this shit.

UMMNI. It was written by a woman.²

_Ummni opens her mouth wide to take a bite of her colossal sandwich and chews loudly._

DRAGYN. Women are just as capable of spreading misogynist lies as their andro counterparts. (Shoving her plate away from her.) And it’s worse when they do it. (Pregnant pause.) They legitimate patriarchy.

CUT TO:
INT. DAPHNE’S APARTMENT – THE NEXT DAY

_Daphne sitting on the couch with Ummni’s head in her lap, who is reading sections of The Story of O (Reage 1965) out loud. On the scuffed coffee table in front of them are piles of books with titles that denote kinky erotica, sex-positive feminism, and postmodern theory. A flyer for a fetish night is sticking out of one of the books._

CUT TO:
INT. A DARK SMOKY CLUB – NIGHT
Daphne and Ummni holding hands as they walk downstairs and enter the club. Daphne is sporting leather pants and a tiger print bra, Ummni is teetering on hazardously high stiletto heels.

PAN SHOT OF THE PEOPLE AT THE CLUB:

In one corner are foot fetishists sucking hairy toes and massaging tired insteps. In another, an adult man is in diapers, holding a baby bottle in one hand and a beer in the other. By the window, a woman outfitted in the classic kinky nurse costume is leading her “patient” around on a dog leash. In the centre, are two men taking turns whipping a very butch woman tied to some hooks in a crucifixion pose.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). Their audacity was stunning. Heart-breaking. People who are hated and mocked by movies, by laws, by radical feminists, by conversations that begin with “What would you do if your boyfriend turned out to be a ...?” All outcasts gathered together. In a safe and dangerous space. They—we—we were not united by mutual desire. In the underworld of sexual deviance, I discovered stark differences in sexual practices, pleasures, aesthetics, and ethos, ranging from the classic s/m leather-dom to the animal-emulating furries. But there we were, bound together by our perverted sexuality and the disgust we evoked in others. It was sublime.

Ummni watches another patron teaching Daphne how to flick a whip.

DISSOLVE TO:
INT. OSGOODE HALL LAW SCHOOL LIBRARY – NIGHTIME – 2001

Ummni is conducting legal research on the computer. The book, Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism and the Butler Decision (Cossman et al. 1997), is propped open next to the keyboard. She finds a case that she has apparently been looking for. As she reads the judgment, her face registers a memory and she looks out the window, lost in the past.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I was reading a critique of R. v. Butler (1992), the Supreme Court decision that upheld the obscenity provisions of the Criminal Code. As it turns out, that precedent-setting case was first applied to criminalize a lesbian s/m magazine because of a short story it contained by Trish Thomas, the writer of that poem I had read eight years ago in Daphne’s living room.

UMMNI (to herself). Fuck your ex-lover.
Notes

1. This screenplay is based on the “Prelude” to the book *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (2014).

2. Please note that, since this time, Patrick Califia has transitioned and identifies as a transman.

UMMNI KHAN is an Associate Professor at Carleton University in the Department of Law and Legal Studies. Her research focuses on the construction and regulation of stigmatized sexual practices, with a particular focus on BDSM and sex work. Her book, *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (2014), examines the ways in which the criminalization of S/M in pornography and in practice rests on problematic ideological claims that engage with psychiatry, dominance feminism, and pop culture. This screenplay is a revised version of the prelude in *Vicarious Kinks*.
Coming up for Air: Personal Reflections on Women’s Masochism

J. M.

In this short piece, I explore my personal formation as a sexual subject in relation to male power. I combine memories, dreams, and fantasies with theoretical reflections informed by feminist psychoanalytic thought, in particular Jessica Benjamin’s work in The Bonds of Love. I use my own experience to illustrate the inevitable ways in which women’s selfhood becomes split along the lines of activity/passivity and subjectivity/objectification, and how these divisions are often expressed most vividly in embodied communications between men and women rather than in language. I consider the ways in which the intense bodily experience of sadomasochistic play has helped me to heal these divisions in myself.

“We love, and we play, in order to learn how to survive letting go.” – Lynda Hart

●●●

I am flying through the forest on my father’s shoulders. His eyes are bright and steam curls from his nose with each heavy breath. I dig my fingers into his soft flannel collar. I am Atreyu and the sky is endless.

●●●

In The Bonds of Love, Jessica Benjamin traces the roots of women’s masochistic desires to the conditions of patriarchy, in which women can only attain recognition vicariously through their attachments to men. Our early relationships, writes Benjamin, determine the ways in which this structure becomes psychically installed. Fathers in particular often act as the culturally ordained gatekeepers of subjectivity, determining whether their daughters’ gestures of activity, desire, and power will be validated. Reading Benjamin, I remember the father of my early childhood. He throws me in the air; swings me wide out in his arms; carries me to the roof to sit beside him as he works. In doing these things, he demonstrates that while I may be small, I am made of strong stuff. I am a weighty, solid being; propelled by his energy, I am introduced to the air. My father’s style of play allows me to feel safe while feeling thrillingly afraid. The pleasures of passivity and activity are inseparable in these early moments of identificatory love.

●●●

Two tiny girl bodies in a vast and roaring sea, my cousin Laura and I are practicing our mastery over the waves. When we hear yelling in the distance we realize that we can no longer touch bottom. Laura’s father emerges in front of us, grabs me in his arms, and throws me towards the shore, my head filling with salt water as I crash below the surface. Again and again I am thrown roughly forward and then held briefly by the water as Laura gets her turn. Back at the cottage, we sit one each on
his knees, wrapped in towels and glowing with pride as he recounts the story of our rescue to our mothers.

●●●

It is a requirement of the social world that girls learn to live a split between subject and object, developing the self along two separate tracks. Laura and I are mermaid queens when we play in the water, but how long can two girls survive on their own? It is for our own good that we are violently returned to the shore, to a world where we do not make the rules. D. W. Winnicott writes that “it is a joy to be hidden, but a disaster not to be found” (185). Winnicott is a paternal presence woven throughout Benjamin’s text. Laura and I hold our private ocean world inside even as we delight to be given roles in Uncle Peek’s drama.

●●●

In an old family movie showing a trip to the pool, the camera turns to my brother with his arms plunged beneath the water. A laughing voice behind the camera asks “Where’s J.?” and my brother grins. Several moments pass before he lets me rise to the surface. I throw my arms around his neck. My hero.

●●●

“No matter what theory you read,” writes Benjamin, “the father is always the way into the world” (93). In psychoanalytic theories of the family, it is the father’s role to inaugurate the child’s romance with social and cultural life. For me, however, this role was clearly played by my older brother. While a father stays at home next to mother, a brother leads one swiftly out the door: to school, to the arcade, to movies and songs, to older boys who invent their own language in which to joke and jeer. My brother, an awkward and troubled kid who was largely rejected by his peers, was my idol and my guru.

●●●

I am watching TV on my mother’s bed when my brother comes into the room. Do you know about Zen meditation? he asks me. One big hand pins my shoulder to the bed and the other begins to wiggle its fingers into my rib cage. Don’t smile, he instructs. Don’t laugh. Mind over body. Later, at my father’s house, he tells me to stand on the arm of the couch, to make my body stiff and fall straight onto the cushions, resisting the urge to throw my hands out to protect myself. My eyes begin to tear as the fabric drags across my cheek, but again and again I fall, feeling the rush of pleasure in my gut. Body over mind.
Benjamin carefully captures the paradoxes inherent in sadomasochistic desire. From the outside, she notes, the scene of erotic domination appears to involve a total polarization of roles: the dominant partner inflates his subjective power by reducing the other to an object through repeated acts of violation and control. Yet, according to Benjamin, what each member of the sadomasochistic couple actually seeks is quite the opposite: an experience of mutuality, release, safety, pleasure (72). The masochist, who appears to pursue pain, terror, and debasement, in fact longs to be truly seen, held, and protected by her partner. The sadist, in his turn, depends on the masochist to contain and detoxify his destructive impulses. In my experience with sadomasochistic play, this confluence of desires leads to a powerful unconscious alliance between sadist and masochist, who conjointly invest in the masochist’s ability to tolerate increasing levels of intensity. For both partners, the scene only succeeds if the masochist emerges more vital and present than when they began.

●●●

*Bound and blindfolded, I feel my lover’s hand wrap around my throat. I am skin that reddens and chafes. I am a muscle that clenches and spasms. At the point where my body gives up, my self struggles to the surface, gasping for air.*

●●●

“Masochism,” writes Lynda Hart, “can be seen not only as a strategy of escaping aloneness, but also a search for aloneness with the other: by letting the other remain in control, the masochist hopes to find a safe open space in which to abandon the protective false self and allow the hidden self to emerge” (72). Usually, I stay alert while my lover tortures me, watching his eyes and guiding his hands. But, sometimes, I sink so deep into myself that I forget he is there, holding me under.

●●●

*During my first weeks of college, a memory surfaces. It is evening at my father’s house; I am already in my nightgown. I return from the bathroom and sit on the floor in front of the couch where my teenaged brother is reclining. A moment later he is behind me, leaning over my shoulder, examining me as he manipulates my labia with his hands. The memory feels mundane; it could be any evening in any number of years. I focus on the TV and keep very still, trying to be a good patient.*

●●●

When the body is placed in situations of overwhelming threat, its automatic response is to prepare to flee or to fight: the muscles tense, the heart rate rises, and the senses become hyper-attuned to cues from the environment (Ogden, Pain, and Fisher 268). If fighting or fleeing is not viable, the body switches to an immobilizing tactic: it goes limp, freezes, or becomes an automaton, unthinkingly complying with commands. Sometimes the body may shut down internally as well, entering a trance-like state.
In other cases, the externally motionless body maintains an internal state of hyper-arousal, constantly searching for a moment in which fighting back or escaping might be possible (Ibid. 270-271). An immobilized body may carry the mark of this experience long after the threat has dissipated: maintaining a state of tension, forever awaiting an opportunity to come alive (Ibid. 272).

●●●

My earliest sexual fantasy begins with an entry way into a dark, masculine space, filled with smoke and leather. A man casually splayed on a couch throws darts at a woman who is bound spread-eagle against the wall, aiming for her nipples and crotch. Past this corridor is an enormous warehouse with harsh fluorescent lighting, where rows and rows of women lie on white cots. Their bodies are covered by a curtain above the waist, forming a small white fort around their heads. At the foot of each cot stands a teenaged boy, whose role is to learn to manipulate and penetrate the women’s genitals. Older men walk through the rows, instructing the timid boys. The women keep very still, playing dead.

●●●

In retrospect, I realize that this fantasy emerged during the first year I began to grow breasts—little anthills that I stubbornly hid beneath a coat, even during the warmer months. In her book *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development*, Carol Gilligan vividly describes the pubescent girl’s fall from grace as her social world suddenly stops responding to her assertions of subjectivity. Some girls learn to shut up and look pretty; others of us walk around all day with our fists balled up in our pockets. Though at the time my fantasy was saturated with pleasure, it now sounds like a nightmarish rendering of the colonization and commodification of the female body; a terrifying vision of what lay ahead of me as a woman. I remember focusing on the tension between the women’s exposed, objectified lower halves and the secret of their subjectivities, safely hidden behind the curtains. Removed completely from the gaze of the male world, the women were free to experience unbounded pleasure, pain, or rage. As I approached climax, I would imagine the moment when one of the women would accidentally flinch, revealing herself to be a living, breathing creature.

●●●

In a dream, my brother flies a boat over the ocean. Laura and I cling to each other in the back seat, giddy, exhilarated. He turns us towards the shore, and suddenly the boat is hurtling downward while we scream for him to hit the brakes. After the crash, under the surface, there is slowness and peace; we regain control, free ourselves from the boat, and determine which direction to swim to come ashore. Just as I grasp my suitcase, I feel my brother’s hands around my ankles. Is he asking me to save him, or is he trying to make me drown?
In a jocular footnote, Benjamin points out that “a good sadist is hard to find” (64). The sadist of our fantasies intuits our every desire, giving us what we want before we know we want it. He perceives our limits with perfect clarity, bringing us right up to the edge but never pushing us over. He is always full of power and strength, surprising and thrilling, but never reckless, retaliatory, or selfish; he takes us for a ride and then smoothly brings us to the earth. Sometimes in sadomasochistic play we crash violently against the disjunction between this fantasy and reality—the reality that the person to whom we grant total responsibility for our pleasure and safety is fallible, merely human. These days I find myself wondering whether I could lay the wish for a savior to rest, and open myself to the gentle eyes of a witness.

Over time my fantasy scene forms a narrative. One of the girls on the cots becomes particular. She reaches her hand down, crossing the boundary of the curtain, and the boy at her feet reaches his hand up to meet it. They are found out and punished for their transgression, forced through a series of trials. On raised platforms far above the factory floor, they lie on a bed of spikes; they spend days in a room that is first burning hot and then freezing cold. The naked lovers cling together and endure.

Works Cited


J. M. is a graduate student in clinical psychology at the Derner Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University in New York. She received her undergraduate degree at Grinnell College, where she pursued an independent course of study combining psychoanalytic theory, philosophy, and cultural studies. Her MA thesis investigated the body experiences of transgender men and was presented at the APA’s Division 39 conference in 2013. She is currently beginning her dissertation work on the topic of women’s masochism.
PART 2
Transformation and Broken Boundaries
Fairy tales are not conventionally understood as manifesting unconventional desires. Their reputation of quintessential, uncritical support of heteropatriarchy and its sexual strictures belies the fact that desire in them commonly extends beyond species boundaries. Where pleasure and danger meet—as with human desires for, or to be, non-human animals—allusive, symbolic, metaphorical communications thrive. Relationships between humans and non-human animals, particularly when they supersede those between humans, and embodied or costumed transformations between humans and non-human animals, offer fundamentally transgressive pleasures. I address the three episodes of the television anthology show The StoryTeller that include human/non-human hybrids and/or transformations.

Fairy tales are not conventionally understood as manifesting unconventional desires. Their reputation, bolstered by Walt Disney films, is of quintessential and uncritical support of heteropatriarchy and its sexual strictures. Yet even in Disney films, queer desires manifest. Alexander Doty proposed that understanding queer (in all its possibilities) in films does not involve necessarily reading against the always-present heterosexual, presumptively primary meaning; multiple divergent meanings always inhere in any (cinematic) text. Take, for example, those seven dwarves (in “Snow White,” ATU 709), particularly their choice to cohabit. Inferring asexuality or celibacy—let alone heterosexuality—on the basis of their seven single beds seems a bit naive, even prescribing sexual monogamy and privacy (not necessary suppositions), when the forest and mines are always so available for trysts. Ableist presumptions also prevail in the alleged impossibility that Snow White could be sexually attracted to any of those seven men—that she sleeps chastely in the same room with them, night after night (Solis). And why be certain that Belle is entirely happy that Beast turns into a handsome man? After all, she fell in love with his Beast form (ATU 425C). In Jean Cocteau’s classic live-action La belle et la bête, Belle famously looks disappointed when her Beast takes the form of a sparkly version of her suitor Avenant. Crippling Beast, in Robert McRuer’s sense of envisioning alternatives to “compulsory ablebodiedness” (2), these films underline a profound sexiness in disability—understood in terms of non-normative embodiment—while their endings deny its ongoing expression.

As in “Beauty and the Beast,” desire in fairy-tales commonly extends beyond apparently confined boundaries of ability and species. Often an implicit alibi suggests that the non-human creature who loves or is loved by a human is actually also human, but magically transformed. “The Frog King” (ATU 440, see Zipes “What”) for example, enchanted, returns to human form at the tale’s closing. Yet the majority of the story explores the vagaries of a human/non-human relationship. Queer theorists dispute the need to write off an entire work on the basis of an apparently heteronormative ending (see e.g. Elliott, Abate). So the conclusion need
not divert audiences/readers permanently from exploring representation of the often violent love/hate between frog and human. Further, that the creature is not human, but wishes to be, does not permanently install normativity. The desire for bodily transformation grounds many identities, including transsexuality (see e.g. Prosser). In allusive, symbolic, metaphorical fairy tales, there is no need to presume that change from non-human to human (or vice-versa) is the only referent. Where pleasure and danger meet, as with human desires for, or to be, non-human animals, coded communications—allusive, symbolic, metaphorical—thrive (Radner). I take as a priori that relationships between humans and non-human animals, particularly when they supersede those between humans; and transformations, whether embodied or costumed, between humans and non-human animals, offer the possibility of deeply transgressive pleasures.5

Sadly, no text is inherently transgressive. But some become so heavily overburdened with heteronormative, sexist, ableist, racist, colonialist readings that those perspectives are difficult to dislodge. Many cogent readings demonstrate Disney films’ shameful legacies of encoding (hetero)sexist, racist, fat-shaming images of evil non-White characters (like Ursula in The Little Mermaid), and (hetero)sexist, racist, colonialist images of First Nations folks (the “Indians” in Peter Pan and Pocahontas), among other criticisms (see e.g. Giroux, Zipes Fairy Tale). Because of these conventional stories’ cultural baggage, I see more flexibility in less-known fairy tales. Thus, in a move to “complicate, untame, queer and radicalize tumultuous legacies of pleasure and unpleasure” (“CFP”), I address three episodes of The StoryTeller which include human/non-human hybrids and/or transformations. I choose to focus mainly on the transgressive, perverse, even revolutionary possibilities these relatively unfamiliar tale versions offer, though I return to critique in the conclusion.

Combining live action with puppetry, the television anthology show The StoryTeller, an American/British co-production first aired in 1988, was created and produced by Jim Henson. The same year also saw a storybook featuring somewhat redacted versions from the Anthony Minghella screenplays. Using the framing device of a fireside storyteller (John Hurt) narrating with help (and sometimes hindrance) from his loquacious dog (Brian Henson, puppeteer and voice), this series related nine less well-known folktales:

The storyteller, a wizened, gray-haired man, sits by a fireplace and tells tales to a puppet dog, who skeptically poses questions and even intervenes during the storytelling. The dog as listener keeps the storyteller honest and on his toes, and when the story is finished, the dog expresses disbelief about the authenticity of the teller’s sources. (Zipes Happily, 100)

The StoryTeller has received far less than its due attention from fairy-tale scholars. Jill Terry Rudy’s work is an exception, dealing with the series’ complex intermedial representations as artistic play with reality and wonder.6 Here, I draw on the emerging scholarship around transbiology to work through each relevant episode—
The Three Ravens (ATU 451), Sapsorrow (ATU 510B), and Hans My Hedgehog (ATU 441/425/425A)—as it exemplifies transgressive and deviant desires. I use these TV fairy-tale versions because of the possibilities their intermedial form, using both visual and auditory channels, allows for manifesting transbiology. But I begin with some background on fairy tales, transbiology, and their connections.

The concept of transbiology has a critical legacy of addressing organisms and ideas on the interstices of the allegedly natural and real. In an early reference, G. Becht notes, “Biology is...above all, the doctrine of ‘real’ intra-individual living systems. Transbiology, therefore, becomes the doctrine of extra- and interindividual living systems” (573). Linking the term with Donna Haraway’s famous cyborg manifesto, Sarah Franklin calls transbiology “the field of science most indebted to the cyborg embryo” (174) and “a mix of control and rogue, or trickster, elements” (175):

Like the cyborg, transbiology is also made up out of the complex intersection of the pure and the impure....Like the cyborg, the transbiological is not just about new mixtures, playful recombinations of parts or new assemblages....It is a world of cyborgs, but also of mixtures in which it is the symmetry of parts that allows translation, so that the mouse, the sheep, the cow, the pig and the dog move together as animal models susceptible to re-engineering and improvement. (176)

Franklin calls transbiology’s “defining hallmark” a “queer lineage” (177), linking to Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird’s Queering the Non/Human, with contributions addressing social as well as physical human/non-human relationships and combinations. A special thematic issue of Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, “The Transbiological Body” (Vaccaro), includes Mel Y. Chen’s exploration of a film about a woman who falls in love with a chimpanzee. In taking these concepts into the realm of fairy-tale studies, I extend their geographical and temporal purview, given the vast range of locations and time periods in which fairy tales have been collected (Teverson). Feminist and queer scholars have long argued against the biological necessity of current North American and European concepts of sex and sexuality. Fairy tales exemplify this view, but add evidence that specific modes of ableism, racism, and speciesism are equally malleable.

As already indicated, transbiological relations expressed in fairy tales include attractions of various kinds, including friendly and erotic, between humans and non-human animals, transformations between human and non-human in dress and physical manifestation, and sometimes combinations thereof. Though human/non-human animal hybrids, for example, may seem entirely fictional, they manifest historically (see e.g. Hoffman) and today—not only in art but also in biology (see e.g. Scala). Here I restrict (fairy-tale) transbiology to (imagined) social and biological linkages between human and non-human animals, but I assert the potentially world-changing implications of such connections within discourses of cultural criticism, in narrating perhaps otherwise unimaginable transgressive embodiments and the relations they engender.

Fairy tales can be oral/traditional (told by people in different geographical locations and at various historical times up to the present) and/or literary (written by known...
authors). All concern the fantastic, magical, dark, dreamy, wishful, and wonderful. Literary fairy tales with known authors like Hans Christian Andersen or Edith (Bland) Nesbit are based primarily in an individual writer’s creativity. Oral fairy tales—like those discussed here—can be found in written forms (such as the Grimm brothers’ collections) and the actual differences are not always that clear. Some fairy tales come in both traditional and literary forms. Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea” is based on the traditional folktale type “The Princess on the Pea” (ATU 704). The two forms are rarely discrete in the popular imagination; Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” is generally seen as the same kind of story as the traditional “Little Red Riding Hood” (ATU 333). Note that the former tale pertains to a human/fish hybrid and the latter includes trans biological as well as transgender disguise, when the male wolf dresses as Red Riding Hood’s grandmother (see e.g. Garber, 375-390).

Marina Warner argues “Metamorphosis is a defining dynamic of...wonder tales [and] fairy stories.” She notes that its forms include “a prodigious interruption of natural development” and “an organic process of life itself” (18). She addresses shape-shifting, which “breaks the rules of time, place, of human reproduction and personal uniqueness” (27). Fairy tales’ perennial popularity may have a great deal to do with their imagination of the apparently impossible—or once-impossible—transformations or metamorphoses Warner discusses, including from female to male (see Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire). Scholarship on fairy tales incorporating trans biology which attends to their erotic and sexual identity implications includes work on “Fitcher’s Bird,” in which a woman rolls in honey and feather to disguise herself as a bird to escape a homicidal sorcerer husband (ATU 311, see Greenhill, Tosenberger “The True”) and on “Snow White and Rose Red” (ATU 426, see Friedenthal), about the relationship between a bear and woman/women, as well as about two tale-types dramatised in The StoryTeller (Jorgensen, Warner). Some 80 traditional tale-types include human/non-human animal transformation, human/non-human animal cross-dressing, and/or biological transformation (e.g. human to flower or human to fruit) (see Turner and Greenhill, 303-305).

The Three Ravens (ATU 451)

This StoryTeller episode offers a congeries of three Grimm tales: KHM 9 “The Twelve Brothers,” KHM 25 “The Seven Ravens,” and KHM 49 “The Six Swans,” themselves versions of ATU 451 “The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers” (Uther 267-268; Zipes The Complete; see also Bottigheimer, 75; 35-39).7 Ruth Bottigheimer notes that these stories share a common core plot: the birth of a daughter directly or indirectly causes her brothers’ departure from home; and the brothers turn into birds, an enchantment from which their sister’s efforts directly or indirectly release them....and the narrative association of motifs in each suggests a consistent ordering of symbols congruent with assessments of women ranging from inherently powerful to utterly enfeebled. (37)
In the *StoryTeller* version (see Minghella, 5-20), a widower King (Jonathan Pryce) with three sons and a daughter (Joely Richardson) marries a Witch (Miranda Richardson). She makes magical shirts that turn the boys into ravens. Their sister flees, and the ravens tell her that to break the curse she must remain silent for three years, three months, three weeks, and three days. She nevertheless meets and marries a Prince (Robert Hines), whose stepmother is the same Witch—she has poisoned Princess’s father. She spirits away Princess’s three sons immediately after their birth. Witch denounces Princess as a witch, and the young woman cannot defend herself without breaking her vow of silence. She is tied to the stake just as the curse is ending. The brothers return, kill Witch, and transform back into human form. Princess’s three stolen children appear. But because she spoke three minutes too early, her youngest brother is left with one raven’s-wing arm.

On one level, the story explores the imposition of silence on girls and women (Jorgensen 85). The transbiological significance of speech comes from multiple (generally unsuccessful) attempts to assert the allegedly unique human capacity for language (see e.g. de Waal). Silencing women culturally renders them less-than-fully human. Even Storyteller’s Dog speaks, though apparently the ravens cannot. But further, “[t]he images associated with muted girls and women clearly establish the relationship between language and autonomy….Sexual vulnerability also permeates tales of muteness” (Bottigheimer 77). Warner suggests the fundamental conservatism of this perspective: “Women’s capacity for love and action tragically exceeded the boundaries of their lives—this self-immolatory heroism was one of the few chivalrous enterprises open to them” (393).

Woman-blaming—making Witch responsible for the brothers’ plight and requiring that their sister redress the situation, though she fails in part, clearly evident in the *StoryTeller* version, is not as overdetermined in the Grimm versions. In “The Twelve Brothers,” the father wants to kill his twelve sons so that his daughter will inherit—a distinctly non-normative arrangement. The sister inadvertently turns the boys into ravens, and then must transform them back again (Zipes *The Complete*, 32-36). In “The Seven Ravens,” the father “merely curses his sons out of pique at what he believes to be their carelessness” (Bottigheimer, 38; see Zipes *The Complete*, 91-93). Here as elsewhere in *The StoryTeller*, potentially resistant elements in some traditional versions are tamed or muted in the TV production. For example, the symbolically interchangeable stepmother and mother-in-law (Tatar, 144) from “The Six Swans” (see Zipes *The Complete*, 168-171)—the closest to the *StoryTeller* version—become literally interchangeable in it.

Transbiology manifests visually as well as aurally. The episode opens with the camera closing in on Storyteller, sitting on a chair with Dog at his feet looking up at him. The scene appears conventional; however, when Dog talks, after only a few minutes, the arrangement becomes much less so. As already indicated, a talking dog appears at least partially culturally human, and thus a hybrid creature. Further (cultural) connections between Storyteller and Dog via the story are underlined, for example, when a spinning wheel in the foreground during a conversation between Witch and
King resolves into Storyteller winding a ball of yarn. The camera pulls out to reveal that the skein is held on Dog’s ears, then moves back to Storyteller’s ball of yarn and then to a magic ball of yarn in Witch’s hand. The male Storyteller and male-voiced Dog may have a more than simply companionable relationship; Dog appears as Storyteller’s only friend. In only one episode, discussed below, does Storyteller interact with any other humans or creatures.

When the boys don the magic shirts, glimpses of their transformation are shot from above, as if they are already becoming smaller. For three brief shots the human-ravens are represented by human actor/puppets in costume and facial makeup, but they next appear as realistic ravens. When Princess encounters the ravens, they caw; Storyteller’s voice represents their speech, instructing that she must not speak for three years/months/weeks/days. Further play with notions of (human/non-human) communication comes in an interlude with Storyteller; Dog questions the rules of Princess’s silence, asking if, for example, she could write a note. Storyteller answers not to Dog but directly to the camera, thus representing further play around transbiology, rendering unclear whether the audience should understand Dog’s speech as diegetically real or in Storyteller’s imagination. Indeed, the audience may also question the rule of silence or non-speech because, when her children are stolen, Princess “went to the garden and dug with her hands in the ground, a small hole, and bending to the earth, screamed with all her heart. Screamed and screamed her pain into the hole until morning. And it was better” (Minghella 15). Perhaps this cry does not break the proscription because, allegedly like the pain vocalisations of non-human animals, it is expressive more than communicative; a reflex more than a transmission.

The primary transbiological relationship in *The Three Ravens* is between the sister and the three ravens. (A perhaps less magical transbiological substitution happens when Queen replaces Princess’s second son with a piglet.) The connection between Princess and her three brothers is implicitly desexualised; for example, she is clearly a young woman while the Princes are boys, the eldest in his early teens. Of course, neither kinship proximity nor age difference precludes a sexual relationship, but the representation may serve to render it unlikely for most viewers. The story, then, is less about sexualising an interspecific relationship, and more about exploring the implications of human manifestation in non-human bodies.

At the episode’s closing, though, Dog’s statement that he thought Witch had killed the babies leads to representation of yet another kind of interspecific relationship—parenting. Storyteller explains that the ravens took care of the three babies after the Witch cast them down a well. Jeana Jorgensen argues that these Grimm tales “queer kinship” by “rendering heterosexual relationships...explicitly adversarial, dangerous, even murderous” (Greenhill 150), and offer unconventional family structures. This opening of possibilities extends to issues of ability. When Storyteller reveals that Princess’s too-early speech means that her youngest brother “kept one wing forever” he immediately continues: “But, he didn’t mind and I don’t mind and nor, my dear, should you!” (*The StoryTeller*). This offers a clear and explicit affirmation of a potentially pleasurable non-normative embodiment. The value of representing such
alternative, even revolutionary views, in fairy tales, always literally and figuratively presumed innocent, in the context of a series suggested as “family viewing,” can offer not only the pleasure, but also the political potential of a freed mind (discussed in Collins).

Sapsorrow (ATU 510B)

In this version, a widower King (Geoffrey Bayldon) must marry anyone whose finger fits a ring. His daughter Sapsorrow (Alison Doody)–so named by her “Bad Sisters” (Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders)–friend to many animals, accidentally discovers it fits her. She demands three impossible/unusual dresses: “the colour of the moon;” “sparkling with stars,” and “gold as the sun” (Minghella, 119-120). But when they are complete, she flees disguised as “a strange creature or fur and feathers,” interpreted as a large cat, a dog, and a seal (Ibid. 212). King dies. As Straggletag, the Princess works in another king’s garden and kitchen. When she meets the Prince (James Wilby), their relationship develops from mutual contempt to some respect, due to Straggletag’s quick-witted quips and verbal facility. Prince fails to recognise Straggletag as she attends balls in the unusual dresses and he falls in love with her there. At the last ball she leaves behind a golden slipper. Prince vows to marry the woman who fits it. When it matches the untransformed Straggletag’s foot, Prince agrees to keep his promise, and her animal friends come to change her into Sapsorrow, wearing the gold dress (see Minghella, 116-130).

The StoryTeller episode links to “Cinderella” (ATU 510A) by including the stepsisters and shoe test, not always present in ATU 510B (see Cox). The narrative “openly deals with the shame of incest that most filmmakers of fairy tales are unwilling to address” (Zipes The Enchanted, 221). Nevertheless, incest “makes a strong showing in fairy tale” (Warner, 320). In another rare discussion of transbiology and sexuality, Warner argues that in ATU 510B, “The fairytale princess wears a skin of shame, but the pathetic degradation of her condition contains a kind of Christian grace of humility, forbearance and lack of vanity....She becomes a beast, after her father has behaved like one” (325). Further:

the animal disguise of the heroine equips her to enter a new territory of choice and speech; the apparent degradation works for her, not against her. Being a beast...can be preferable as a temporary measure to the constrictions of a woman’s shape. Animal form marks a threshold she passes over, before she can take control of her own identity. (354)

Warner contends that taking on animal disguise, for girls, “stood not for the rejection of sexuality but the condition of it....Although they have suffered wrong in all innocence in the fairy tales, they accept the taint and enact it on their own persons” they act as “penitents” (358). Sapsorrow clearly manifests this ontology; the character Sapsorrow/Straggletag is profoundly sexualised.

Sapsorrow’s visuals offer distinct advantages for exploring transformations and their implications. Unlike in The Three Ravens, where the mutated raven-boys are
depicted simply as realistic birds, Sapsorrow’s Straggletag disguise is makeup and costume donned by the human actor. It includes some minor gender bending, giving the quasi-historical architextual, chronotopic fairy-tale setting/environment (see Smith, 10); all women wear skirts, except Straggletag, who wears trouser overalls. She also has an extensive beard, generally but not exclusively a male trait. The fact that these manifestations differ from her non-costume/non-disguise underlines that as Straggletag, but also crucially as the Princess attending the balls in the moon/stars/sun dresses, this human masquerades (see Riviere). Explicitly both celestial dresses and Straggletag-look offer modes of drag—garments shaping encultured views that apparently do not map directly upon the wearer’s person or personality.⁹

The interspecific relationship between beast-woman Straggletag and human Prince is prefigured, compared, and contrasted with Sapsorrow’s friendship with animals. Straggletag, for example, does not eat geese because she likes them. Her animal friends care for Sapsorrow and bring her food (not vice versa). They are not her pets; by all appearances, she is theirs. They craft her Straggletag disguise and they are the ones who remove it and re-dress her in her sun gown at the episode’s end.

Symbolic impossibles invoke Straggletag’s transbiological position. At the second ball Prince asks where she lives and she says “I live where hens catch mice and cats lay eggs” (*The StoryTeller*). When Prince claims he would love the Princess “Were she in the humblest rags, were she the poorest, absolutely” (Ibid.), his imagination cannot extend to Straggletag’s actual situation. In the end, he proves honourable and thus worthy when he agrees to keep his promise and marry Straggletag. He accepts the transbiological relationship, and is rewarded when she transforms into a beautiful human woman (see also Greenhill, Best, and Anderson-Grégoire). But I cannot help reflecting that the Prince-Princess relationship is saccharine-sweet, while the interactions between the Prince and Straggletag suggest two intellectual and emotional—if not social—equals. Though the version ends hetero- and bio-normatively, the story’s transgressive middle offers greater satisfaction.

Though I focus generally on transgressive aspects, I note this episode’s more-than-somewhat problematic instantiation of equivalence between dark skin and ugliness, and light skin and beauty. In becoming beautiful, transforming from Straggletag to Sapsorrow, the character becomes White. As Sara Hines eloquently demonstrates, sometimes visuals can uncomfortably establish raced notions absent from the actual words of fairy tales. Nothing inherent in the tale types make Straggletag necessarily dark-skinned; the skin colour of Catherine Deneuve as Demy’s *Peau d’âne*, for example, remains unaltered. Yet Straggletag’s transformation to “beauty” includes relinquishing brownface makeup, not only tattered clothes. The colonialist association of beastliness with subalterns of colour further complicates and problematises this representation.
Hans My Hedgehog (ATU 441 with “The Search for the Lost Husband” ATU 425 and “The Animal Bridegroom” ATU 425A)

*Hans My Hedgehog* may be the most transgressive, complicated, queer, wild, radical episode of *The Storyteller*. Fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes argues that unlike “Beauty and the Beast” versions, in which “[t]he heroine is supposed to sacrifice herself for the welfare of her father or parents, and she is generally rewarded for being docile, virtuous, and obedient” (*Happily*, 100), *Hans My Hedgehog* in *The StoryTeller* is about “the hedgehog’s personal struggle to overcome his bestial shape and form his own whole identity, the conflict with his father that leads to his mother’s death, the betrayal by the princess, and the suffering he endures because of his split personality” (Ibid., 100-101). The tale not only exemplifies transbiology, but also “the way in which fairy tales dwell on pain and suffering rather than on blissful happiness” (Tatar, xxi).

The narrative involves implicit class struggle. The Grimms “used typical names such as Hans, Heinz, Lise, Else, and Gretel to stress the common quality of their protagonist as a type of simple person, everyman, or lazy person” (Zipes “The Enchanted”, 70) and “[t]he appeal of the[se] male protagonists...is that they demonstrate a distinct willingness to rectify social injustices, particularly when they are class related” (Ibid., 73). Yet this story the farmers’ son who marries a princess offers a plethora of complications.

A woman (Maggie Wilkinson) wants a child so desperately she “wouldn’t care if it were a strange thing made of marzipan or porridge, if it were ugly as a hedgehog” (Minghella, 22). She accepts her offspring, Hans (Ailsa Berk, puppeteer), with a hedgehog upper and human lower body, but the humiliated father (Eric Richard) hates him. Hans makes friends with the animals on the farm, and eventually asks for a saddle for his rooster, and for some pigs, sheep, and cattle, and leaves. Twenty years later a King (David Swift) lost in the forest comes upon Hans’s palace. He stays the night and insists on rewarding Hans, who eventually asks for the first thing that greets King on his return. King expects it will be his dog, but the Princess (Abigail Cruttenden) arrives first. When Hans comes for Princess, she agrees to marry him, but discovers that he transforms into a man at night. He enjoins her not to tell anyone and after three days he will become human permanently, but she confides in her mother, who tells her to burn his skin. The untransformed Hans leaves and Princess follows, wearing out three pairs of iron shoes before she finds him. She hugs him and refuses to let go until he transforms into human shape.

When first seen, Hans is a small puppet–human-baby sized, not hedgehog-baby sized. His face more closely resembles a human’s than a hedgehog’s. In his representation as a boy/adolescent, a human actor inside manipulates the puppet. His hedgehog snout is more pronounced, but not as much as when he becomes an adult. He eats directly from a bowl on the table with his mouth, making grunting hog-like sounds. Otherwise, he has human speech, unlike the ravens in *The Three Ravens*, underlining his human affiliation. When he opens the palace door to King, he has a decidedly hedgehog-like snout, but his torso is human.
This beast bridegroom, whose bottom half is human, explicitly has patriarchal beastliness on the brain. Several ATU 441 tales involve serial Kings and Princesses, with at least one of the latter raped and rejected by Hans, apparently because her *father* tries to save her from the marriage. In the Grimms:

> When they had gone a little way, Hans My Hedgehog took off her beautiful clothes and stuck her with his quills until she was covered with blood. “This is what you get for being so deceitful!” he said. “Go back home. I don’t want you.” Then he sent her away, and she lived in disgrace for the rest of her life. (Zipes *The Complete*, 363-364)

Though this aspect of patriarchy is (not surprisingly) absent from the *StoryTeller* version, in the Grimms it is transgressively the father, not the mother, who makes the rash wish for a hedgehog child. *The Storyteller* also uncommonly blames a (bio) mother not stepmother for bad advice, and otherwise deviates from the Grimm story, in which throwing the skin on the fire is the way to transform Hans to human. Instructed by Hans, four of the King’s men perform the transformative action. Thus, there is no need for Princess’s quest as in *The StoryTeller*, which incorporates ATU 425, “The Search for the Lost Husband,” specifically ATU 425A, “The Animal as Bridegroom,” and makes Princess both Hans’s betrayer and saviour.

Dog makes an extended intervention into the storytelling, interrupting Storyteller who has apparently forgotten to narrate the crucial King’s promise scene. Dog’s usual role in *The StoryTeller* is to make comments and asides. In no other episode does he intervene as narrator. It may not be coincidental that this takes place in a story wherein a dog’s action (arriving after Princess to greet King) drives the story. When Storyteller talks about the farmer’s dog, Dog asks what kind it is, and Storyteller says he does not know. But narrating his section, Dog gives King’s dog a name—the loyal woof-woof Wagger. In this episode, too, Storyteller appears, along with Dog, in the story he is telling (as a storyteller entertaining King’s court).

Hans’s physical transformation from hedgehog creature to fully human appears to involve nothing more than the actor removing his upper body costume over his head. There is no direct sexual interaction depicted between Hans and Princess, but erotic moments emerge on the first night when Princess caresses the left-behind Hedgehog skin, “soft and warm and remarkable.” On the second night,

> Storyteller: the same scene: her husband standing over her as she pretended to sleep, the tender touch on her arm. Not prickly, but so smooth she felt an ache when he left her. And she found herself going to the skin and lying against it, and how comfortable she found it. And she felt drowsy, lying there by the fire so peaceful. She felt herself drifting off, and knew she mustn’t, knew she mustn’t, but really couldn’t help herself.

> Princess: Sir, I woke and you had gone! And left behind you your coat of quills.

> Hans: Which would you have for husband? The man or the creature?
Princess: I have a husband, sir, and he is what he is. No more and no less.

Hans: Then forgive him, madam, if he returns to his skin. For I am enchanted and cannot leave it. But if you say nothing of this for a third night, then loyal love will break the spell forever. (The StoryTeller)

When Princess throws the skin on the fire, she hears screaming and looks out the window. Unlike the previous nights when she has seen a human, the hedgehog hybrid manifests instead. He rides away on his giant rooster, followed by the animals.

Princess’s ordeal in seeking her husband physically transforms also; her hair turns white during her search, but is restored to red after they return. But Hans has also changed, apparently now having the capacity to turn into different creatures. The first view of Hans when Princess finds him is of a raven who flies into the window, then morphs into Hans My Hedgehog. The change from Hedgehog form has a transitional phase of a human with large flapping raven wings, then finally to fully human.

Further trans complications arise because the hybrid hedgehog/human Hans is played by female puppeteer Ailsa Berk, but human Hans by male actor Jason Carter. Across cultures, the same tale-type offers a feast of transbiological possibilities beyond human/hedgehog. In India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the hybrid creature can partake of frog, jackal, caterpillar, fish, crab, snake, dog, monkey, tortoise, gourd, turtle, lizard, crocodile, or tiger, or be a disembodied head (Thompson and Roberts). The “genetic imagination” in thus “blur[ring] the boundaries between human and [non-human] animal...express[es] the fluid nature of identity” (Scala, 1). As Mark W. Scala argues in the introduction to his exhibit “Fairy Tales, Monsters, and the Genetic Imagination,” such fantasies (and others like them in other artistic modes and genres) “carry us into the future” in terms of “transgenics, the actual moving of genes across species” (1). They challenge beliefs in human exceptionalism and dispute human-centred hierarchies.

Transbiological Transformations

“While fairy tales have often been seen as reflection, encoding, or subversion of the cultural structures in which they occur, the reverse—the impact of fairy tales on the cultural matrix—has received far less attention” (Hoffmann, 79-80). In this essay’s introduction, I contended that fairy-tale discourses like these three television episodes offer world-changing possibilities within cultural criticism in opening feminist, queer, and trans theory to literally fantastic perspectives on human relations to non-human animals. The interactions between fairy tales—and, indeed, any fantasy form—and realities are complex. But at the risk of appearing naive, or grossly simplifying, I suggest that fictional creations may prefigure actual possibilities—or they may reflect both unattainable and realistic alternatives. For example, Kathryn A. Hoffman sees links between anomalous embodiment and fairy tales “sliding fairy-tale theorizing into broad disciplinary intersections where natural history collection, medical philosophy and practice, zoology, art, court, and fairground display share unstable
borders.” She discusses Madame D’Aulnoy’s “Babiole,” a literary fairy tale “of a princess long desired by her mother who is transformed into a monkey moments after her birth, under the spell of a disgruntled fairy” (69), and works through a range of other human/non-human metamorphoses. She sees fairy-tale discourses as “part of a vast, early modern European world of anomalous and marvelous human bodies. It is a world of real dwarfs and giants, conjoined twins, horned ladies and gentlemen, people without arms or legs or with too many, hermaphrodites, and cat eaters” (68). She notes that “[n]one of the fairy-tale characters in d’Aulnoy’s tale may have ever before seen a speaking, harpsichord-playing monkey treated as a collectible court rarity. Yet in the real world of early modern Europe, several multilingual, internationally portraited, and even harpsichord-playing hairy girls had already achieved enormous international fame” (70) and argues that these were “implausible plausibles...caught at one of the real but rarely encountered points of human genetic variation” (72). Similarly, the transbiological Storyteller episodes discursively work with, and play, sociocultural boundaries.

Of course, as Hoffmann clearly recognises, usual practices related to actual liminal humans were to turn them into cultural monsters, and display them in carnivals or museums. The connection to racist practices of similar—and worse—treatment of Aboriginal and other peoples encountered in the processes of colonisation is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the representation of human/non-human animal hybrids as (sometimes quite literally) more fundamentally human than animal offers potential for alternatives that do not demonise, or even simply other, non-normative embodiments. With similar discourses, they offer substitutions for biomedical models and paradigms predominating in a global North “too preoccupied with virtual realities, networks and identities,” and they do so by “opening up fresh approaches to dilemmas of embodiment” (Connell, 1378). The affirmation in The Storyteller that Straggletag is not only human but loveably so; that a young man with one raven’s wing arm should not raise objections; and that the beastly Hans is literally and figuratively a beautiful man beneath offer positive evaluations of transgressive embodiments. Substituting for the conventional bombardment by normativity in dominant epistemologies, especially in simply taking for granted cross-species affinities, these stories render transgressive embodiments as a range of possibilities, not a present-day sociocultural error. Fairy-tale transbiological discourses can be appropriated to profoundly conservative agendas, as when Andersen’s “Ugly Duckling” bolsters fat shaming and encourages life-threatening surgeries to allegedly correct abjected physicalities and create “technoswans” (Morgan). But fairy tales in their multiple transcultural and transhistorical versions and manifestations can also offer not the anodyne fare of Disneyfied American capitalism, but the prospect of a literally unlimited world.
Notes

1. This research was supported by a SSHRC Standard Research Grant. I thank Marcie Fehr for research assistance, and Jill Rudy, the issue’s editors, and the anonymous reviewers for productive critique.

2. ATU designations refer to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type index (see Uther).

3. Much fan fiction relating to films and television presents similar readings, making explicit sexual relationships between Star Trek’s Spock and Kirk, Supernatural’s Sam and Dean, and so on (see e.g. Penley, Tosenberger “The Epic”).

4. Fairy-tale and tale-type titles appear in quotation marks; film or television episode titles in italics.

5. Context is crucial. Costume parties, cosplay, and ritual days like Halloween demonstrate that costuming as a non-human animal is not necessarily transgressive.

6. Intermediality “refers to the participation of more than one medium—or sensory channel—in a given work” (Grishakova and Ryan, 3).

7. KHM refers to the Grimm brothers’ collection of Kinder- und Hausmärchen.

8. North American squeamishness about incest is not universal; Jacques Demy’s Donkey Skin (Peau d’âne, 1970), also ATU 510B, is a children’s film in France (see Duggan).

9. Similarly, transformations of actor Charlize Theron in Monster (see e.g. Cavanagh) and Snow White and the Huntsman demonstrate the constructedness of female monstrosity and beauty alike.

10. Actually, hedgehogs are extremely cute!

11. As elsewhere in fairy tales, transbiological hybrids transcend size; a hedgehog might be compatible with a rooster steed, but only a giant rooster would fit a human (see also Fairfield).

12. “Skins of animals...are evidence of an unredeemed nature” (von Franz, 161), and rituals of transformation by fire are common in fairy tales (Ibid., 103-108, see also Greenhill, Best, and Anderson-Grégoire).

13. “Stepmothers stand as an abiding source of evil in countless fairy tales....Folklorists would be hard pressed to name a single good stepmother, for in fairy tales the very title...pins the badge of iniquity on a figure....[T]he phrase wicked stepmother, which has a nearly formulaic ring to it, is pleonastic” (Tatar, 141; see e.g. Greenhill and Brydon).
14. Sometimes "the girl succeeds in disenchanting the monster from his animal or supernatural form by means of a kiss or tears, or by burning the animal skin, or sometimes by cutting off his head. But in Cupid and Psyche she always loses her supernatural husband because she fails in some way to obey instructions. It may be that she burns his animal skin too soon, but frequently she learns and reveals the secret of his unusual form" (Thompson 98).

Works Cited


*Monster*. Dir. Patty Jenkins. Media 8 Entertainment. Film.


Peter Pan. Dir. Jack Kinney, Wilfred Jackson, Clyde Geronimi, and Hamilton Luske. Walt Disney Productions, 1953. Film.


PAULINE GREENHILL is Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at University of Winnipeg, Canada. Her most recent books are *Make the Night Hideous: Four English-Canadian Charivaris* (U Toronto P, 2010); *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity* (with Sidney Eve Matrix, co-editor, Utah State UP, 2010); and *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (with Kay Turner, co-editor, Wayne Statue UP, 2012). *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television* (with Jill Terry Rudy, co-editor, Wayne State UP, 2014) and *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag* (with Diane Tye, co-editor, Utah State UP, 2014) are forthcoming.
She can’t bring herself to eat tomato flesh
it brings up too much; the pasta,

boiling on stage, an unruly audience² hurl their little cherries at her, while she’s peeling in front of a camera’s prying spaghetti promo, modeling—again.

Her edge, of the table, of a piece of fruit,
it’s a disjunctive heirloom, an insoluble beefsteak

Green³

* She can never bring her teeth past the skin. She touches the skin, tastes, but never bites into the flesh.

It’s different in a German context:

She says the tomatoes remind her of some father-figure, ex-boyfriend, abuser who forced her into a chair & wouldn’t let her up until she slüpped-up spilled seeds.

Red⁴

Tomato terror—but I think, no.

Like making that middle designation between a fruit and a vegetable because of the court ruling on rhubarb v. the State of New York.⁵

But this is Ontario.

sundried & crushed
every time the meal starts—a numberless glass of red wine.
Notes

1. All this information was written on a white 3” by 5” pad with a Committee of Youth Officers for the Province of Ontario header. The logo is comprised of four stone circles drawn in thick black jet with a YRP badge dead centre.

2. The suspect or the mother.

3. Her favourite colour.

4. The colour she turns.

5. In 1947, the state court in Albany ruled that rhubarb is a fruit for the purpose of regulations and duties. At the time, tariffs were higher for vegetables than fruits so rhubarb became cheaper and easier to trade.

Artist Statement

Concerning discourses on sex and performance, I am primarily interested in notions of past trauma and how they inform our sexual lives. I approach Lynda Hart’s concept of “performing sadomasochism,” as outlined in *Between the Body and the Flesh*, and I extend her discussions of pain to psychological cues that force trauma to the surface of verbal discussions in feminist poetics, and a poem like the one above, which has multiple stories inside of it. Traumas inform our positions on pleasure and they engender shame. Traumas forcefully shape sexual identity—or are an aspect of “getting off” that partners negotiate. In this way, I examine trauma as a footnote to the event of sex. Here, traumas are stories within stories that inform events without disrupting the performance, or the act of sex itself.

In my poetry, footnotes force the reader to look down the page. If poems are people, then, for that moment when you address a footnote (which may indeed be an instance of trauma) you can’t look people in the eye. I endeavour to produce the same sense of shame or reservation survivors feel when they publicly talk about traumatic experiences. Sometimes, though, these expressions are also shameless. Trauma can make a subject more forthcoming about sex. I have looked at transcripts of first person accounts of edgeplay in Staci Newmahr’s recent *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*, and these certainly inform the poem I am putting forward. I am interested in divergent (and deviant) subject positions regarding sex, specifically, regarding tomatoes, because during my inquiries I noticed how it is possible to interrogate ideas about sex by associating these ideas with foods. The association between gustatory sense and sexual pleasure is quite apparent. But, I also notice that in more than a few cases people who have experienced trauma often associated their experiences with an aversion to a particular food. I have written my piece in an interrogative, third-person perspective to help develop the dislocated sense of the viewer. In this perspective, we can begin to understand the limits of
observation when it comes to painful thoughts and how these can inhibit and/or enhance intimacy—hence the footnote: think about how moments of looking down shape the account without interrupting it. There is a great deal of creative and critical work concerning personal negotiations of trauma, but poets and critics need to begin to write and to consider how to navigate positions on sex and pain, particularly as they are mediated through performance. This poem attempts to view these positions on a kind of continuum between very forthcoming attitudes about sexual pleasure and very reserved, traumatic associations with sex as shameful un/pleasure.

Works Cited


JOSEPH LABINE is currently completing his MA at the University of Windsor. He specializes in Irish Studies with a focus on Brian O’Nolan and James Joyce. His other interests include dismantled bodies (of work) and Canadian ephemera poetry. He is the editor of Flat Singles Press.
This essay experiments with scripting erotic fantasy and reading sadomasochistic role play in Emily Brontë’s sole novel, Wuthering Heights. Where previous scholarship has addressed sadomasochism in the text from the vantage point of psychoanalytic theory, I ground my reading in recent sociological studies of BDSM acts and linguistic practices. Brontë’s narrative, I argue, is a layered series of textual interactions that register as sexual encounters, and these moments of textual intercourse/sexual discourse might be read as S/M scenes. I suggest that readers—both Brontë’s and my own—be invited to take up roles and play out scenes of perverse fantasy.

The sexually exciting effect of many emotions which are in themselves unpleasurable, such as feelings of apprehension, fright or horror, persists in a great number of people throughout their adult life. There is no doubt that this is the explanation of why so many people seek opportunities for sensations of this kind, subject to the proviso that the seriousness of the unpleasurable feeling is damped down by certain qualifying facts, such as its occurring in an imaginary world, in a book or in a play. If we assume that a similar erotogenic effect attaches even to intensely painful feelings, especially when the pain is toned down or kept at a distance by some accompanying condition, we should here have one of the main roots of the masochistic-sadistic instinct, into whose numerous complexities we are very gradually gaining some insight. —Sigmund Freud (1905)\(^1\)

Nineteenth-century “bourgeois” society—and it is doubtless still with us—was a society of blatant and fragmented perversion. And this was not by way of hypocrisy, for nothing was more manifest and more prolix, or more manifestly taken over by discourses and institutions,... Modern society is perverse, not in spite of its puritanism or as if from a backlash provoked by its hypocrisy; it is in actual fact, and directly, perverse. —Michel Foucault (1976)\(^2\)

So what is SM? It is sometimes easier to say what it is not. It does not entail violence and it is not nonconsensual. That does not mean that an SM practitioner cannot commit a violent or nonconsensual act but that such acts are not part of SM. — Charles Moser and Peggy J. Kleinplatz (2006)\(^3\)

I begin with what might seem an excessive, even unorthodox, use of epigraphs in order to lay immediate emphasis on the act of reading, acts of sadomasochism (S/M), and these activities as interrelated. Reading is a perverse pastime, one in which we form consensual relationships with authors and with characters, and during which we welcome feelings of both pleasure and pain. As scholars, we delight in rending texts, in being let into the secrets they unfold when we bind ourselves to them and lovingly abuse them, rendering them submissive. We experience great pleasure when
we bend a text, seemingly to our will, when it readily enacts a scenario of our own design and can be whipped and molded, dressed and fragmented, to suit our desires and participate in our academic and social interests. We enter and decompose textual bodies in order to compose our own work. I have, for instance, perversely severed my epigraphs from the three original texts to serve as a historicizing framework for the discussion to follow. But, always consenting, the original texts seem to happily comply. Books, perhaps, make the best partners in S/M relationships. And some books tell stories about—and actively invite us into—such relationships. I want to suggest that Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* is an exemplary narrative in this regard, bursting with perversity and enticing us to merge with it. The novel presents us with several functional S/M relationships that, I argue, are marked by consensuality and discursive exchange and which privilege and empower female sexuality and textuality.

**Gag Reflex: Contextualizing S/M in *Wuthering Heights***

Readers have felt the sting of Brontë’s whip since the initial publication of *Wuthering Heights* in 1847, though some with less (acknowledged) pleasure than others. Unsurprisingly, and in nineteenth-century fashion, a number of Brontë’s contemporaries remarked quite negatively upon the work. An unsigned review from the July 1848 issue of the Philadelphia-based *Graham’s Lady’s Magazine*, for example, offers a scathing treatment:

“There is an old saying that those who eat toasted cheese at night will dream of Lucifer. The author of *Wuthering Heights* has evidently eaten toasted cheese. How a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery. It is a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors, such as we might suppose a person, inspired by a mixture of brandy and gunpowder, might write for the edification of fifth-rate blackguards. (qtd. in Johnson 435-436)

Supposing the novel, which was originally published under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, to have been written by a deranged man, this reviewer seems keen to protect female readers from its “vulgar depravity” and “unnatural horrors.” Another critic, publishing a review in *The Examiner*, a weekly British periodical, called *Wuthering Heights* “a strange book.…[W]ild, confused, disjointed, and improbable”; its characters are uneducated, rude “savages” who represent “coarse and loathsome” qualities that are unfit for polite public consumption (qtd. in Johnson 435). Clearly, Brontë’s only novel presented readers on both sides of the Atlantic with an uncomfortable combination of sensations, though it seems likely that many who wrote or spoke of it disparagingly did so in an (un/conscious) effort to preserve the status quo and uphold patriarchal normativity and its colonizing effects. It would not have been acceptable to discuss Brontë’s text, rife with subversive linguistic, physical, emotional, and sexual tensions and traumas, in an overtly and wholly positive manner. Even Charlotte Brontë, in her Preface to the 1850 edition of the novel, tempered praise of her then-dead sister with admonitions against the less savoury elements of the work and its characters.
Charlotte acknowledges “some glimpses of grace and gaiety [in] the younger Catherine” and “a certain strange beauty in [the] fierceness” of the elder Catherine, who also possesses “honesty in the midst of perverted passion and passionate perversity,” but also suggests it is not “right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff” (Brontë liii). Such comments did little to condone a nineteenth-century view of Emily Brontë as a matured writer or to embrace the powerfully assertive—and insertive—positions occupied by women in the text. Indeed, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, known for his unconventional, libertine attitudes toward female sexuality, admired the novel’s “power and sound style,” but nevertheless described it in an 1854 letter to his friend William Allingham as “a fiend of a book—an incredible monster, combining all the stronger female tendencies from Mrs. Browning to Mrs. Brownrigg” (Rossetti 58).

At this point, Emily’s identity as the novel’s author was widely known; the strong passions of both Brontë and her female characters made for hellish, demonic reading. Critics then and now have tended to emphasize the power, passion, and perversity of *Wuthering Heights*, with varying degrees of personal disgust and/or social disapproval. As “perversity” and other variations of the word have taken on less negative connotations (at least academically), discussions of the novel have more positively and productively accounted for the violence and sexual tensions at play in the narrative. I am certainly not the first reader to discover sadomasochistic elements in Brontë’s novel, and this essay joins a number of other literary studies that attempt to delineate the sadism and/or masochism evident in the text. Carol Siegel, for example, has agreed “with the general view that *Wuthering Heights* is the canonical Victorian novel most explicitly concerned with the representation of sadism and masochism,” but she asserts that “as such, it is also extraordinarily concerned with their containment” (7). In a now-dated essay on “Infanticide and Sadism in *Wuthering Heights*,” Wade Thompson claims that an “extraordinary sadism...underlies Emily Bronte’s [sic] concept of emotional relationships” (69) and, in tracing the ways in which this sadism leaks into the novel, Thompson comes to a very different conclusion from Siegel: “Life is pain, hate, and perversity. It is a tribute to Emily Bronte’s [sic] uncanny poetic powers that she has deceived generations of readers into believing that they were reading a beautiful, romantic, and indeed glorious love story” (74). Similarly, Susan Jaret McKinstry explores the power of desire in the text, ultimately arguing that

The novel does not celebrate the containment of desire but, rather, its power... Desire turns lovers into mimetic demons, it transforms houses into prisons, and it translates romantic conventions into children’s fairytales. But in the process of fulfilling desires, the fairytale becomes a nightmare. *Wuthering Heights* is a chaotic novel in which the rules of social life are never fully in force. Instead, wishes come true—violently, and with vengeance. (145)

While McKinstry does not deal explicitly with sadism, masochism, or sadomasochism, she does tread closely to notions of such relationships when she points out that *Wuthering Heights* portrays a world of dangerously powerful children, where fantasy and desire overcome the adult laws of reality and order” (141-2). In other words, the
violent fantasies enacted by characters when they are young transgress the boundaries established by the social “order” and, as I intend to show, strongly resemble S/M role play.

The taking on and playing of roles in response to desire is also commented on by Steven Vine, who claims that “Cathy and Heathcliff enact a drama of desire and identification in which their separate selves wuther [tremble; quake] into the other, but also where the ‘frame’ of the self is shaken from within and where its coherency is scripted and erased” (349-50). Again, Vine does not discuss the novel in terms of S/M, but his focus on identity and subjectivity implicitly contributes to scholarly conversations that deal with sadomasochistic relationships, particularly between the elder Catherine and Heathcliff. In “‘To Save the Life of the Novel’: Sadomasochism and Representation in Wuthering Heights,” an essay to which my examination is most indebted, Robin DeRosa frames her reading within the context of psychoanalysis and suggests that “Emily Brontë, writing well before Freud and Lacan, seems to address the theoretical issues involved in S/M and its relationship both to the death drive and to representation” (28). DeRosa then convincingly illustrates how characters’ roles as either sadist or masochist shift depending on their use of language or proximity to texts. For DeRosa, control over language or text is often a sign of sadism, an engagement with the symbolic order of signification that creates and maintains life, while silence or distance from texts is indicative of the masochistic death drive. Perhaps most recently, Claire Jarvis devotes a dissertation chapter to exploring a similar conceptualization of S/M as a social dichotomy, but rather than language, the institution of marriage is marked by sadism. Taking an approach grounded in the Deleuzian theory of masochistic contract as separate from sadistic law, Jarvis asserts that “Brontë connects sadistic sexuality to reproduction and, in doing so, connects the institutionality of marriage to sadism. In contrast, the masochism displayed in Catherine’s relationship to Heathcliff is non-marital, non-genital, non-reproductive, and, unconventionally, thus valued above the sadistic satellite relationships” (55). Unlike many previous scholars, Jarvis makes a distinction between the kinds of violence that occur in the text, pointing to active gestures (slaps, beatings) as aligned with the sadistic legality of marriage and to inactive or “frozen” moments (hanging of dogs, gripping of wrists) as reflective of the masochistic contract made outside the bonds of wedlock.

Scholars have ultimately been concerned about the degree to which perversion, sadism, masochism, or sadomasochism are domesticated, institutionalized, marginalized, or otherwise contained by Brontë’s narrative. Compelling as they are, these arguments have been restricted by focusing almost exclusively on the relationship between the elder Catherine and Heathcliff and by relying largely on the theories of Freud, Lacan, and/or Deleuze. Approaching the novel from the theoretical perspective of psychoanalysis is limiting, I think, in that it ignores the complex physical and mental practices comprising S/M play, as well as the ways in which readers participate in the S/M scene(s) “scripted” by Brontë. This “scripting,” which links the consensual practices of S/M with the composition of texts and the performance of roles, is the crucial point that other investigations have failed
to adequately address. I thus complicate and expand on previous scholarship by grounding my reading of *Wuthering Heights* in recent sociological and ethnographic studies of practitioners of S/M. Additionally, I move beyond the central pairing of Catherine and Heathcliff, examining the novel’s other relationships in terms of S/M play. I contend that Brontë is not only “address[ing] the theoretical issues involved in S/M,” but that she is also exploring the pragmatic actualities of S/M play (DeRosa 28). Moreover, I assert that the practical S/M relationships in the novel encourage readers to conflate sexuality and textuality in ways that relegate discursive power and sexual autonomy to female characters and to Brontë herself. As I hope to demonstrate, the most successful S/M relationships depicted in *Wuthering Heights* are those between Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw and Nelly Dean and Lockwood. The S/M games readers play with Emily Brontë, via the narrator Lockwood, are also powerfully perverse—and, like Thompson, “I use the word without its usual pejorative connotations” (69). The perversely S/M nature of reading—of being overpowered, bound, and penetrated by words as we consensually engage in scenes of textual intercourse—makes the act painfully pleasurable.

**Whip Lash: S/M in Practice**

Taking pleasure in pain is inherent to S/M acts. All parties experience pain and pleasure: for the sadist, pleasure is derived from inflicting the pain, while the masochist finds pleasure in receiving the pain. A stereotypical (often negative) view of this give-take dyad is sometimes (still) accepted without question as a result of the work first of Krafft-Ebing, then of Freud, who succinctly notes that “[t]he most common and the most significant of all the perversions—the desire to inflict pain upon the sexual object, and its reverse—received from Krafft-Ebing the names of ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ for its active and passive forms respectively” (23). But as the epigraphs to this essay suggest, the medical and theoretical constructions of S/M as pathologically and categorically identifiable perversions (read: harmful and socially unacceptable corruptions or distortions) of mind and body have begun to give way to studies of S/M as a diverse set of viable and healthy practices that allow consensual participants to engage in erotic role play and fantasy in safe, nonviolent ways. For the purposes of this essay, in which I am positing that Brontë is exploring and encouraging the practice of consensual S/M relationships in *Wuthering Heights*, it will therefore be useful to situate myself among several studies of practitioners of S/M.

Since the 1980s, a number of researchers have taken pains to observe the behaviours and to represent the views of S/M practitioners as objectively and as accurately as possible. Attempting to define S/M without disparaging it, for example, Charles Moser and Eugene E. Levitt note “the term sadomasochism (S/M) is usually construed to refer to an association between sexual arousal and physical and/or psychological pain,” and they continue by delineating the physical and psychological manifestations of pain: “The physical pain is caused by behaviours which range from pinches, slaps, and bites to behaviours that may produce lesions or draw blood. The psychological pain encompasses feelings of helplessness, subservience, humiliation,
and degradation...[and] is brought about by verbal abuse, bondage, and ‘being forced’ to do various acts” (322-3). The notion of finding any sexual satisfaction in either physical or psychological pain has long been received with disgust by those who do not partake in S/M themselves, and a general lack of understanding leads to assumptions that S/M activities—whether verbal, physical, or both—are sick, cruel, and violent. Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser have attempted to disrupt this line of thinking. They claim, for instance, that “[t]raditional conceptions of sadomasochism are misleading. This is because they are not based on close examination of what the majority of SM participants actually do and how they interpret their own behaviours...We found that sadomasochism [is] constituted by five social features: dominance and submission, role playing, consensuality, a sexual context, and mutual definition” (379). These features suggest that S/M can be a safe and healthy means of exploring sexual fantasies and any “violence” or “abuse” that may occur during the scene is agreed upon, expected, and thoroughly enjoyed by all participants. Similarly, as Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Megan R. Yost explain, “sadomasochistic activities, which require the consent of the partner, are generally scripted or well-planned out scenarios, and possibly involve role-play, particular fetish clothing, or additional paraphernalia (e.g. rope, handcuffs, paddles)” (300). From the perspective of its practitioners, S/M comprises a wide array of acts that are certainly not considered gratuitously violent or cruel but are, on the contrary, extremely imaginative and intimate. Most importantly, engaging in an S/M relationship requires mutual consent and an enormous degree of trust.

The issue of consent in S/M has been considered quite recently, in terms of practitioners’ views of mutual definition and in relation to literary representations of consensual non-consent. In a 2013 meta-analysis titled “Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interactions Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line,” Dulcinea Pitagora offers a comprehensive review of the extant literature related to BDSM-oriented sexual subcultures and notes that consensuality is always present as “the factor that distinguishes non-pathological BDSM sexual interaction from pathological acts of violence” (28). In addressing the potentially hazy boundaries between consent and coercion, Pitagora stresses that BDSM activity is often predicated on an acknowledgement that participants will toe that blurred line as part of the play:

[A]s can happen during any type of communication between individuals, agreed upon meaning between BDSM participants can be tenuous despite the presumption of a common understanding. It is generally understood among BDSM practitioners that a successful scene will include the testing of limits (i.e., the intentional pressing of agreed upon parameters), which approaches boundaries but stops short of trespassing them. (32)

That is, the recognition of consent as a slippery concept is a factor in establishing permitted limits and is an element in building eroticized fantasy. The selection of a mutually agreed upon safeword allows participants the opportunity to end play or withdraw consent without relying on utterances typically associated with displeasure or unwillingness (“no,” “stop,” etc.) but that, in the context of an S/M scene, are
dialogic features of the fantasy. Indeed, some S/M practitioners are interested in scripting nonconsensual fantasies, such as scenes of rape play, in which consent is obscured almost completely yet, as Pitagora points out, is ever present as “an invisible scaffolding” (32). Angelika Tsaros reads how characters negotiate similar consensual non-consenting relationships as represented in the novels *Story of O* (1954) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), ultimately arguing that the texts present two versions of female submission, the first of which reflects a kind of female autonomy in the erasure of O’s subjectivity, and the second of which performs a simultaneous mainstreaming and rejection of S/M interactions, as the female protagonist of *Fifty Shades* “never even begins to explore her subjectivity and instead replaces her own wishes with her lover’s...The narrative thereby reinforces the harmful boundaries between what desires are presently accepted as mainstream, and the ones that continue to be pathologized, cast out, and ridiculed” (875). Written more than a century before either of these texts, *Wuthering Heights* presents versions not of female submission, but of dominance, and I suggest that Brontë, as one of the dominant female players, unsettles boundaries between the un/acceptable and the sexual/textual.

**Safe Words: Scripting S/M Scenes in *Wuthering Heights***

Although it may disturb some readers—specifically those who do not wish to recognize or define their engagement with the novel as S/M—*Wuthering Heights* offers the opportunity both to role play and to observe others playing—and learning to play—at roles. By immersing ourselves in the text, we “ask” Brontë to tell us a story that will affect us, stimulate and excite us; our continued reading constitutes a form of consent (one might, at any moment, employ a silent “safeword,” close the book, and choose to sever the relationship indefinitely). This request and consensual engagement parallels the relationship between the novel’s frame narrator, Lockwood, and the housekeeper, Nelly Dean. In asking Nelly to relate the past and present goings on at *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood engages in a textual exchange that is remarkably similar to our own. Just as readers (more or less) passively consume Brontë’s actively authorial words, so too does Lockwood give himself up to Nelly’s discourse, a discourse over which Nelly, having presumably witnessed the events she describes, is absolute mistress. Significantly, Lockwood perceives—and preserves—Nelly’s words in overtly sexual terms:

...I desired Mrs Dean, when she brought in supper, to sit down while I ate it, hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip, and either rouse me to animation, or lull me to sleep by her talk.

“You have lived here a considerable time,” I commenced; “did you not say sixteen years?”

“Eighteen, sir; I came, when the mistress was married, to wait on her; after she died, the master retained me for his housekeeper.”

“Indeed.”
There ensued a pause. She was not a gossip, I feared, unless about her own affairs, and those could hardly interest me.

However, having studied for an interval, with a fist on either knee, and a cloud of meditation over her ruddy countenance, she ejaculated—

“Ah, times are greatly changed since then!” (Brontë 33)

Lockwood “desires” Nelly to “rouse” him; he hopes to be mentally and physically titillated by her words (and if not roused, then put to sleep: a common aftereffect of sexual release). In explaining how she “came” to the estate, Nelly’s face takes on a “ruddy” hue, a detail in which may be discerned the flush of erotic excitement. The statement that she “ejaculated” (with an initial, exclamatory “ah”) serves as both a momentary climax and a consensual “contract” with which her sexual/textual relationship with Lockwood is established. Importantly, with this ejaculation, Nelly suddenly takes on an active and penetrative role: she becomes the discursive mistress over Lockwood who is, in fact, consuming (taking in) his supper even as he is penetrated by her words. Lockwood clearly has an appetite for intercourse and, for the moment, he becomes the passive, receptive vessel into which Nelly deposits her discursive load.

My reading of this scene seeks to illustrate Brontë’s use of dialogue as an eroticized scripting of S/M roles, as well as to emphasize the ways in which the English language inextricably links bodies and books (or other forms of linguistic exchange). Sexual (bodies) and textual (books) knowledge might be conflated; the carnal and the mental, intercourse and discourse can/could signify the same thing. The Oxford English Dictionary notes, for instance, that “sexual” was (and is) used adjectivally to mean “relating to, tending towards, or involving sexual intercourse, or other forms of intimate physical contact.” The explicit connection here between physical and/or carnal knowledge and its exchange was also contained within one of the definitions of “intercourse” as a “sexual connexion,” but “intercourse” was also used prominently during the nineteenth century to mean “social communication between individuals; frequent and habitual contact in conversation and action.” Intercourse signifies both sex and talk, sexuality and textuality. Within a web of meanings, sexual intercourse and textual discourse become merged; the definitional boundaries between the acts implied by each phrase can blur and may well overlap. The exchange of words is, thus, not a far cry from the exchange of genitalia or of bodily fluids. Judith Still and Michael Worton describe the composition and subsequent reception of both textuality and sexuality as continuous, fluid processes, which are often symbiotic (4-7). Brontë encourages a similar association between the act of reading text and the act of having sex. Via Lockwood, readers are entangled in textual intercourse/sexual discourse, immersed in a kind of (cunni)lingual play—here I pun on the sexualization of Nelly’s oral account—that resembles S/M.

As Nelly relates the histories of the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights to Lockwood, readers discover that much of Catherine Earnshaw’s and Heathcliff’s childhoods were spent learning to play S/M roles. DeRosa points out that Catherine displays sadistic
tendencies when she requests that her father bring her “a whip” from Liverpool when “she was hardly six years old” (Brontë 36). Mr. Earnshaw returns with neither Hindley’s fiddle, nor Catherine’s whip, having brought Heathcliff home instead. After a time, Catherine develops a strong affinity for the “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” (36), and Nelly’s description of their childhood relationship is conveyed to Lockwood in extraordinarily S/M terms:

She was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him: yet, she got chided more than any of us on his account.

In play, she liked, exceedingly, to act the little mistress; using her hands freely, and commanding her companions: she did so to me, but I would not bear slapping, and ordering; and so I let her know. (42)

In her youth, Catherine takes great pleasure in S/M role play, and the part she enjoys performing the most is that of “the little mistress.” Her dominant behaviour can be characterized as S/M only when “her companions,” including Heathcliff, agree to participate in her “play” as masochistic submissives, however. Because Nelly “would not bear” to take on such a role, she is not an active participant in the children’s S/M but is, instead, a voyeuristic observer who visually consumes the scene (and takes pleasure in relating it to Lockwood years later). Throughout their early years, Catherine and Heathcliff “were constant companions” precisely because each knew which role to perform in their S/M games (68). Nelly claims, “the boy would do her [Catherine’s] bidding in anything,” and “he yielded completely” to Catherine’s dominance in play and superiority in education (43, 68). In essence, Heathcliff masochistically complements Catherine’s sadistic role as “mistress” by admirably performing as her “slave.”

The mutually understood S/M relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is disrupted in later years. Catherine’s increasingly intimate relationship with Edgar Linton creates the rupture, as Edgar effectively replaces Heathcliff as her submissive. Nelly describes the events leading to this shift, telling Lockwood about an incident that occurred while she attempted to chaperone a meeting between Catherine and Edgar. Having ordered Nelly to leave the room with no result, Catherine first pinches and strikes the housekeeper in Edgar’s presence, then she becomes wild with rage, shaking her little nephew and, finally, boxing Edgar’s ear: “she seized [Hareton’s] shoulders, and shook him till the poor child waxed livid, and Edgar thoughtlessly laid hold of her hands to deliver him. In an instant one was wrung free, and the astonished young man felt it applied over his own ear in a way that could not be mistaken for jest” (71-72). Many scholars point to the violence in this scene as exemplary of S/M, but these acts clearly lack the necessary element of consent. Furthermore, this is not play; rather, Catherine commits cruel acts of abuse in an effort to victimize others. It is not until Edgar agrees to engage in such activities with Catherine that one might consider their relationship S/M. Though appalled by Catherine’s outburst initially, Edgar seems quick to discover his acumen as a submissive, for Nelly asserts that
“the quarrel had merely effected a closer intimacy—had broken the outworks of youthful timidity, and enabled them to forsake the disguise of friendship, and confess themselves lovers” (73). Later that day, Catherine reveals Edgar had proposed to her, and Nelly chides the girl’s actions and voices her opinion regarding Edgar’s response to those actions: “To be sure, considering the exhibition you performed in his presence this afternoon, I might say it would be wise to refuse him—since he asked you after that, he must either be hopelessly stupid, or a venturesome fool” (78). Edgar’s desire to wed Catherine even after she slaps him indicates that he is, indeed, “venturesome,” in that he will play the masochistic role in their marriage, ensuring that Catherine will maintain her preferred role as sadist. Catherine tells Nelly that she cannot choose Heathcliff because “[i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now; so he shall never know how I love him” (81). On the surface, Catherine is discussing socioeconomics here; her acceptance of Edgar’s proposal will, as Nelly notes, situate her in “a wealthy respectable” position that Heathcliff could not provide (79). For Catherine, however, marrying Heathcliff “would degrade” her because she has already consented to Edgar’s proposal, essentially agreeing to the sexual contextualization of their union. Breaking her agreement and choosing Heathcliff would, according to Catherine’s reckoning, reposition her as degraded submissive, thereby disrupting their previously scripted parts. Catherine’s marriage greatly troubles Heathcliff, who becomes confused in his role. He attempts to usurp Catherine as sadist even as he desires to maintain his role as masochist. During a visit to the married couple, Heathcliff tells Catherine:

“The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don’t turn against him, they crush those beneath them—You are welcome to torture me to death for your amusement, only, allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style—And refrain from insult, as much as you are able. Having levelled my palace, don’t erect a hovel and complacently admire your own charity in giving me that for a home. If I imagined you really wished me to marry Isabella, I’d cut my throat!” (112)

Still desiring to play “slave” to Catherine’s “tyrant,” Heathcliff is jealous and angry that Catherine’s sadistic sexual energies are being expended on Edgar, and he therefore determines to take out his aggression on “those beneath” him, leading him to shed his masochistic persona for one that is generally mean-spirited toward any and everyone. The cruelty and violence that Heathcliff displays toward many characters, including Hindley, Hareton, Cathy Linton (the younger), and Lockwood, cannot be considered S/M because the recipients of his abuse are non-consenting participants. They are, in fact, victims of his rage.

A version of consensual non-consent crops up when Edgar’s sister, Isabella, elopes with Heathcliff and allows herself to play his submissive for a time. She quickly regrets her decision, though, and attempts to reclaim her sexual identity by composing a textual artifact. In a letter to Nelly (which Lockwood evidently preserves verbatim in his narrative), Isabella characterizes her union as a horrible mistake and her life at Wuthering Heights as an insupportable incarceration. Eventually, Isabella
withdraws her consent to be dominated by Heathcliff; she runs from the Heights to her old home, Thrushcross Grange, where Edgar lives in the wake of Catherine’s death with their child (Cathy) and Nelly. Isabella explains her revulsion to Nelly:

I’ve recovered from my first desire to be killed by him. I’d rather he’d kill himself! He has extinguished my love effectually, and so I’m at my ease. I can recollect yet how I loved him; and can dimly imagine that I could still be loving him, if—No, no! Even if he had doted on me, the devilish nature would have revealed its existence, somehow. Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him so dearly, knowing him so well—Monster! would that he could be blotted out of creation, and out of memory! (174)

Isabella discovers that she is not capable of enjoying an S/M role as Heathcliff’s submissive and subjugated wife. Like many of Brontë’s early critics, she condemns him as an unnatural monster and admonishes Catherine for loving him. She asserts that she “experienced pleasure in being able to exasperate him: the sense of pleasure woke my instinct of self-preservation; so, I fairly broke free…” (174). Ultimately, Isabella severs her relationship with Heathcliff forever, moving away to have their son, Linton, and dying twelve years afterward.

Many characters in the novel die quite young, and these untimely deaths mark the failure of legitimate S/M interactions between adults. The violent love triangles comprising Edgar, Catherine, Heathcliff, and Isabella are erased as, one by one, the participants die off. In contrast, the second generation—Cathy and Hareton—enacts a functional and consensual S/M relationship. A number of scholars have remarked on this final pairing as evidence of the narrative’s rejection of perversity, containment of passion, or domestication of violence. Jill L. Matus, for instance, claims that “[i]n the second generation, Emily Brontë explores a more muted and socially manageable form of relationship, in which the teasing banter of Cathy and Hareton signals the domestication of the Heights” (333). I read this relationship as exemplary of a safe, healthy, nonviolent, successful version of S/M. After an initial period of mutual disdain, Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw develop a relationship characterized by consensuality and deep-seated trust. Visiting the Heights nearly a year after his first exposure to its occupants, Lockwood observes through an open window the young couple playing out an effective S/M scene:

I could both see them and hear them talk before I entered; and, looked and listened in consequence, being moved thereto by a mingled sense of curiosity, and envy that grew as I lingered.

“Con-trary!” said a voice, as sweet as a silver bell—“That for the third time, you dunce! I’m not going to tell you again—Recollect, or I pull your hair!”

“Contrary, then,” answered another, in deep, but softened tones. “And now, kiss me, for minding so well.”

“No, read it over first correctly, without a single mistake.”
Watching Cathy and Hareton play schoolmistress and student, Lockwood experiences a stab of jealousy and laments the fact he did not make an effort to pursue the young woman while he had lived as tenant at Thrushcross Grange. From a position reminiscent of Nelly Dean, who often witnesses scenes from the vantage point of a doorway or window, Lockwood’s voyeuristic gaze consumes the couple as they engage in their role play. DeRosa points to this scene as “a parody of episodes that have come before it,” but in terms of erotic role play as understood by S/M practitioners, this sexual/textual moment reflects an ideal situation. I wish to recall here the defining features of S/M pain as explained by Moser and Levitt: “The physical pain is caused by behaviours which range from pinches, slaps, and bites to behaviours that may produce lesions or draw blood. The psychological pain encompasses feelings of helplessness, subservience, humiliation, and degradation. The psychological pain is brought about by verbal abuse, bondage, and ‘being forced’ to do various acts” (322-3). Clearly occupying the sadist’s role, Catherine stands domineeringly behind Hareton and “forces” him into submission. Her verbal assault is both psychologically (“...you dunce! I’m not going to tell you again”) and physically (“Recollect, or I pull your hair!”) threatening, while the “smart slap[s]” serve as punishments to keep Hareton in line. In sharp contrast to many instances of verbal and physical violence in the novel, this exchange is very obviously grounded in mutual consent and pleasure. Recalling the functional S/M play in which Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff engaged as children, these adult participants are comfortable in their S/M roles and trust one another to perform and maintain their parts well. The sexual context of their mutually defined activities may well encompass reproductive intercourse at some future point, leading to offspring.

While a sexual union between Cathy and Hareton might eventually lead to a child, the textual union of Nelly and Lockwood does produce offspring in the form of the narrative itself, dominated, of course, by Nelly. Although Nelly refuses to engage as a masochist with young Catherine Earnshaw, she does take on the role of sadistic storyteller. DeRosa claims that Nelly “is the only major character who is decidedly uninvolved with the sadomasochism that is so rampant in the novel” (38). As I have pointed out, however, Nelly agrees to tell Lockwood the entire painful story of *Wuthering Heights* and its inhabitants—and she experiences sexualized pleasure in rendering him submissive to her tale. Indeed, during his period of convalescence, Lockwood is capable only of submission to Nelly: “I am too weak to read, yet I feel...
as if I could enjoy something interesting. Why not have up Mrs Dean to finish her tale?” (91). After she concludes, Lockwood quickly regains his health: “Thus ended Mrs Dean’s story. Notwithstanding the doctor’s prophecy, I am rapidly recovering strength, and, though it be only the second week in January, I propose getting out on horseback, in a day or two, and riding over to Wuthering Heights, to inform my landlord that I shall spend the next six months in London...” (298). Incapacitated, submissive, and eager, Lockwood becomes masochistically bound by Nelly and her story. He even takes nourishment from it, and the cathartic release he experiences allows him to prepare for a return to his bustling city life. Psychologist Roy F. Baumeister has shown that certain individuals may be drawn to playing masochistic roles as a means of temporarily escaping the realities and responsibilities of their everyday experiences. He notes that in order to alleviate myriad stresses and anxieties, many successful, powerful men often desire to engage in S/M with a partner who plays the role of sadist (31-6). Having had the opportunity to engage in fantasy and relinquish control to an effective dominatrix, thereby escaping responsibilities for a time, Lockwood is able to return to London. Significantly, when Lockwood comes calling at Thrushcross Grange during his return visit and asks for Nelly, the new housekeeper replies, “Mistress Dean? Nay!...’shoo doesn’t bide here; ’shoo’s up at th’ Heights” (Brontë 306). Nelly, now the most powerful overseer of the estates, begins catching Lockwood up on the most recent events, and once again, he becomes bound by his mistress. Her words are both the bondage straps that confine him and the whips that inflict pleasurable pain upon him.

Subspace: Un/Writing/De/Composing Sexuality/Texuality

In the final chapter of Wuthering Heights, Lockwood conveys the manner in which Heathcliff met his demise. Nelly tells Lockwood that, during the last days of his life, Master Heathcliff had behaved even more oddly than usual, displaying an “unnatural—it was unnatural —appearance of joy under his black brows” (328). The following day, Nelly narrates, she had observed Heathcliff, alone but “gaz[ing] at something within two yards distance. And, whatever it was, it communicated, apparently, both pleasure and pain, in exquisite extremes, at least, the anguished, yet raptured expression of his countenance suggested that idea” (331). Two days after witnessing this distinctly S/M tableau, Nelly discovered Heathcliff in Catherine Earnshaw’s old bed, “laid on his back...dead and stark” (335). After Nelly concludes her discourse, Lockwood finds Heathcliff’s final resting place, and the novel closes with his words:

I sought, and soon discovered, the three head-stones on the slope next the moor—the middle one, grey, and half buried in heath—Edgar Linton’s only harmonized by the turf, and moss creeping up its foot—Heathcliff’s still bare.

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (337)
In death, Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff sleep peacefully together, constituting a silent, harmonious “family” that contrasts sharply with their noisy, unhappy ménage à trois in life. Death brings them together and, although their grave markers are in various states of decay, as are their corpses, we are left with the certainty that, in time, nature will further unite stones and bodies. The process of decomposition will eternalize their union; it will erase the distinguishing names on their headstones, along with the individual bodies laid beneath those stones. Thus, time, in a macrocosmic version of the Freudian death drive, unwrites—decomposes—the textual and sexual compositions of bodies, whether those bodies had been of stone or of flesh. If death unwrites bodies, then life writes—and perhaps rewrites—them. Nelly Dean’s storytelling and Lockwood’s subsequent preservation/transcription of events in a textual artifact enact the composition—the scripting—of sexual bodies. Buried in the narrative framework of Lockwood’s journal are the powerful discursive productions of several female characters (Nelly’s tale, Catherine’s marginalia in books, Isabella’s letter), thus establishing several layers of S/M textual/sexual intercourse. Readers encounter all of the characters—their thoughts, words, actions, desires, bodies—through the übernarration of Lockwood, who seems at last to take on the sadist’s role, binding the other participants in his own fantasy, and dominating them physically and psychologically by writing their lives. However, Lockwood is hardly master here; rather, Brontë herself is the ultimate source of sadistic storytelling and, as a result, readers participate as voyeurs eagerly consuming the scenes that she has scripted for her—literally—bound submissives (her characters). Just as Lockwood becomes the enthralled, if sole, audience member of Nelly’s stories, so too do readers become the rapt audience of Brontë’s novel. Baumeister points out that practitioners of S/M frequently desire spectators to witness their play, as having an audience present can bolster the pleasure and sexual excitement experienced by both sadist and masochist (42–6). Laura Hinton has claimed that Wuthering Heights “refuses visual pleasure, and the sadomasochistic perversions of voyeurism and fetishism” (148). As I have shown, however, a number of voyeuristic characters observe S/M scenes, including Nelly and Lockwood. As “spectators,” readers also legitimise the S/M elements of the novel. Additionally, as mentioned previously, Brontë beckons readers to participate in that S/M play. The act of reading creates the potential for consensual participation in textual and sexual relationship with the author. Like Lockwood, readers become bound and docile in the throes of the painful but pleasurable story; indeed, through Lockwood we are locked in a consensual S/M relationship. Also like Lockwood, we feel compelled to reproduce the text, merging it with our own, preserving and replicating the perversity of its characters, the textually mediated sexualities that burst the boundaries of polite nineteenth-century society. Approaching the novel in terms of S/M practice as understood by its adherents creates a space in which traditional views of Emily Brontë can be overturned. Considered by many contemporaries and later scholars as an isolated, more or less asexual young spinster—Charlotte Brontë, for instance, described Emily as “not naturally gregarious, circumstances favoured
and fostered her tendency to seclusion” (li)—my reading nevertheless suggests that Brontë possessed an acute awareness of power dynamics and appreciated the sexually charged possibilities encompassed by both text and pain. She recognized gradations of violence, perceived nuances in consensuality, and modeled female autonomy over textuality and sexuality. Indeed, Brontë continues to assert her own control, as I feel obligated to perform the task of scripting her textualized sexuality, of maintaining her perverse passion and power. At the beginning of this essay, I implied that scholars might take on the sadist’s role and playfully beat texts into submission. The reality is Brontë, refusing to leave off her whip, has made me her bitch.

Notes


2. Foucault 47.


4. Harold Bloom notes this is an anti-feminist comment, given that “Mrs. Brownrigg was a notorious eighteenth-century sadistic and murderous midwife” (24). Brownrigg was hanged for killing a domestic servant, a child who finally succumbed to extreme abuse. Mrs. Browning refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a successful Victorian poet whose work often urged social reform. Rossetti and Browning knew each other and, although Rossetti enjoyed her later work, the 1854 letter seems to frown on some of her ideas, probably her heavy-handed condemnation of child labour in “The Cry of the Children” (1842, 1844). Rossetti’s comment links Brontë and her novel with women at both ends of a spectrum of violent excess: Brownrigg who factually killed a young servant and Browning who “fictionally” assaults readers with sentimental verse detailing the untimely and horrifying deaths of child workers.

5. DeRosa claims, for instance, “[a]s Heathcliff’s distance from language parallels his increasing masochism with Catherine, Catherine’s relationship to books and reading reflects her own involvement in S/M” as a sadist (30). She also points to the narrator, Lockwood, as a sadist, asserting that his “sadism...is a desperate attempt to separate himself from the discursivity that has created and that maintains him. In some ways, Lockwood is not so far from Heathcliff and Catherine. He struggles, as they do, with his place in a society of symbols, with his place in the story he himself can’t help telling” (37).

6. Readers will recall that Brontë structures her novel within a narrative framing device consisting of Lockwood’s arrival in the Northern moors of England in the winter of 1801 and his return visit a year later, events that Lockwood describes in his journal. Most of the plot is conveyed by Nelly Dean, though Lockwood claims to preserve “her own words, only a little condensed. She is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don’t think I could improve her style” (Brontë 157).
7. To dispel claims of anachronism, I wish to point out that the *OED Online*’s first recorded use of “come” as a slang term meaning “to experience sexual orgasm” is 1650. See def. 17.

8. Ibid., def. 4a.

9. Ibid., defs. 2d and 2a, respectively.

10. In the study conducted by Moser and Levitt, 32.2% of respondents had engaged in “Teacher/student” role playing. The most popular role play (68.3% of respondents) was a mentally stimulating version of “Master/slave,” and the second most popular (60.5%) was a physically stimulating version of the same. See Moser and Levitt 330.

11. For more on the death drive, see Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

12. Scholars have discussed the sexual/textual nature of other nineteenth-century works featuring multiple narrators. See the essays in Davis, for example, particularly Joseph, who asserts the epistles comprising *Frankenstein* function as vaginal folds through which readers penetrate.

Works Cited


KARA M. MANNING is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Southern Mississippi and is currently drafting her dissertation, “Moving Words/Motion Pictures: Proto-Cinematic Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction,” which examines the intersections between Victorian visual technologies and literature. Her essay “That’s the Effect of Living Backwards: Technological Change, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* Books, and Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland*” appears in the Winter 2011 issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and a piece on Tim Burton’s use of stop-motion animation has been accepted for inclusion in a planned collection on the director.
PART 3
Uncanny, Fleshly Objects
Invitation
Anna Youngyeun

Invitation is an interactive performance piece in which the artist stands naked inside of a biomorphic, Lycra sac. The form is attached to the ceiling, limiting the artist’s mobility within the space. Viewers are invited to insert themselves into the work through various orifices, consequently touching the artist, as well as other participants.
Invitation
Anna Youngyeun
Artist Statement

In my personal experiences with BDSM play, wearables and restraints function to heighten and inhibit sensory capacity and, subsequently, to incite reflection upon human bodies and affects. The results are confusing and exhilarating. With this performance, I interact with viewers from inside a biomorphic, constrictive suit to encourage them to play with and question our bodies. By extension, this calls attention to affective issues of comfort, belonging, discomfort, and alienation.

The title, Invitation, is playful in its associations with communal celebrations, yet suggestive in alluding to something enticing and seductive. The sculpture is covered with hand-stitched orifices in which viewers may insert their fingers, hands, and arms. The use of stretchy Lycra knit mirrors the fabric of comfort objects like plush dolls or cushions, making the alien form a repulsive yet loveable entity. Invitation implies that touching is welcome, and although viewers are never specifically instructed to touch the work, most feel compelled to prod, fist, hug, and otherwise engage with the form and materials. In inserting their own bodies into the sculpture, viewers touch not only the plush fabric, but also my own hair and skin, and often each others’ bodies.

I stood naked and silent for two hours, with limited visibility inside the sculpture while viewers participated. The piece weighs approximately fifty pounds, and inside of it, I am compressed, unable to move, and exposed to their whims. Encased in the lumpy mass with only my legs bared, my own body is, in some ways, dehumanized and transformed into a medium that encourages intimately awkward interactions. As participants in a public performance, those involved are rendered simultaneously vulnerable and powerful. Their reactions ranged from tentative to enthusiastic, and from repulsed to aroused. Much like other sites of perverse desire, the room became an intimate yet lighthearted space filled with giggling, uncomfortable silences, blushing, and playful experimentation.

ANNA YOUNGEUN is an artist and MFA candidate in Visual Arts at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS. As a Thai-Chinese Asian American raised in the American Midwest, her work explores personal and universal themes of living an amalgamated existence at the intersection of converging identities. Her research interests include cultural identity, queer studies, sexuality, fat studies, and sensory experiences.
The German-born Surrealist artist and writer Hans Bellmer is currently most famous for the two dolls he created in Berlin during the 1930s, alongside accompanying photographs and texts. Controversial for the challenging and oftentimes sexually graphic character of his work, Bellmer has often been criticized by feminist thinkers. Beginning with the recently hosted Double Sexus exhibition in Berlin, where his work was presented alongside that of Louise Bourgeois, and then examining his doll photographs and other works, I argue that—far from reifying gender norms—Bellmer deconstructs the stability of the male ego.

Double Sexus

Hans Bellmer is not for everyone. His work makes some people feel uncomfortable—squeamish even. Actually, his work makes a lot of people feel uncomfortable. An encounter with Bellmer’s work might be like discovering our parents’ collection of illicit images (whether a fading set of polaroids, or a series of bookmarks saved on a laptop) were it not for the fact that, with Bellmer, that discovery is accompanied by a realization of just how much more prurient our parents’ tastes are than our own. Despite this provocative character, however, Bellmer remains one of the most compelling and controversial artists of the 20th century. If anything, his significance is “repressed” alongside the desires for violence and (de)sacralization that creep into everyone’s fantasies once in a while. Clearly, Bellmer takes such fantasies seriously. Modernism’s reputation for cruelty is already well established, but with Bellmer it is especially transparent. This is what gives his work its frightening or “uncanny” character. As a virtuoso of BDSM and “perverse” sexualities, the upsetting character of Bellmer’s work has not diluted a great deal since his lifetime. Its provocative character persists past the work of many of his fellow Surrealists whose “tenant of total revolt” (Breton 125) seems to have been digested culturally and appropriated economically, if not by Surrealism’s formal end in 1969 then at least within the omnivorous logic of late capitalist society. Without doubt, this is why many feminists continue to critique Bellmer, whom they often see as misogynistic and/or reifying phallic norms.

Double Sexus, is an exhibition that brings together the work of Hans Bellmer with that of Louise Bourgeois. It was the first special exhibit hosted by the Collection Scharf-Gerstenberg since its founding in 2008 and was hosted from April to August of 2010, before moving to the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague and the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Udo Kittelmann, director of the National Gallery in Berlin, observes, in his forward to *Hans Bellmer, Louise Bourgeois: Double Sexus*, that the Collection Scharf-Gerstenberg has aimed since its origins to present “an intimate and highly differentiated view of Surrealism and its predecessors and successors” (13). The Collection Scharf-Gerstenberg “is a reticent, introverted collection that speaks to us solely through the aesthetic qualities of its works, without the need [for] verbose explanation.” Hans Bellmer, one of the more prominent representatives featured
in the collection, is exemplary. A German exile working in a predominantly French milieu, Bellmer expresses the differentiated view of Surrealism towards which the Collection aspires as well as its aesthetics of introversion and intimacy. As Kittelmann writes: “His small-format photographs, as much as his filigree graphic works created at the drawing-board, require an attentive, meticulous viewer who is prepared to study every detail they contain” (13).

Bellmer is most famous for the doll he began making in Berlin in 1933, and the two cycles of photographs of the posed doll, which were taken between 1933 and 1939. But these souvenirs of the doll, this doll-theme, was only the beginning of a prolific, forty-year career in which he produced not just photographs, but also etchings and writings. His 1954 text, Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious or the Anatomy of the Image, for example, will extend the doll into a more general theory of the body, and into what Bellmer himself calls “the physical unconscious.”

In order to give a clear and precise picture of this we will say: the body is comparable to a sentence that invites you to disarticulate it, for the purpose of recombining its actual contents through a series of endless anagrams. (Bellmer 36)

This is what Bellmer does mercilessly: following construction is de-construction and dis-articulation, all “for the purposes of recombining its actual contents” into endless carnal rearrangements. Bellmer’s work touches on fetishism, sadomasochism, and scopophilia, among other themes. “Bellmer is not so much a prophet of desire as one of obsession...with sex, especially with the unrealized, and largely unrealizable, imaginative implications of sex. His obsession has gone such lengths that it concentrates on the impossible, because only the impossible, it seems, could hope to satisfy it” (Peppiatt 26). In this sense, Bellmer’s significance extends beyond what we might rather diminutively call “erotic art.” The fact that the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille both had a great influence on Bellmer’s entire corpus is a testament to the contradictory forces of desire and lust as well as shame and aversion. An image from his second cycle of photographs is representative of these themes (see Figure 1). At once infantile and tumescent, its face is covered by its breast-like ball joints, and its eroticism is only emphasized by the chair-back, the blonde wig, and the ribbon. Brought together with its naked, mechanical parts, we see a body that, despite proper appendages, possesses two clearly articulated pelvises. It is disturbing, but far from conclusive. Like Bellmer’s work in general—his little girls, toys, and dolls are penetrated, decaying, or dissecting themselves like a nightmare or a repressed reminiscence of childhood—he clearly expresses the darker, more frightening side of Surrealism.

Placing Bellmer alongside Louise Bourgeois, then, is instructive. These two artists not only share motifs in common—of the doll and the “hermaphrodite,” of auxiliary torsos and limbs—but they also share themes such as the body’s fragmentation, vulnerability, or rebellion. Kyllikki Zacharias, curator of the Collection Scharf-Gerstenberg, notes that the commonalities between Bellmer and Bourgeois are not entirely accidental. The two share curiously similar biographies, with both
spending most of their lives estranged from their homelands—Bourgeois moved from France to the U.S. in 1938, while Bellmer permanently left Germany for France in 1939. Further, both saw their repudiation by their fathers as a site of struggle in their work. Bellmer and Bourgeois both draw us back into a world of childish and polymorphous perversity. They resist not just the will of their own particular fathers but, as Zacharias puts it, “the system of the father” as well. Zacharias writes: “Erotic themes and physical, sexual forms are almost predestined for a rebellion against the father figure, and taboos can be marvellously breached with sexual hybrids” (29). We can compare this sentiment to what Alyce Mahon, in her more general studies of Surrealism, has noted; that is, that from the 1930s onward, Surrealism came to embody a “politics of Eros” (9-21).

The Double Sexus exhibit was thematized around Bataille’s *L’histoire de l’oeil* (1928) and Diana of Ephesus, and accompanied by selections from Henry Miller’s *Sexus* (1949) and an unpublished text by Elfriede Jelinek, “Body and Woman (Claudia).” Taken together, it is evident that this “politics of Eros” is openly cultivated by the Collection. In her “Greeting” to the exhibit, Christina Weiss thanks Udo Kettlelmann and Killikki Zacharias for providing support that “places a particular—erotic—emphasis within the ‘Surrealist world’” (Kettlelmann et al. 23). From the scopophilic precision of Bellmer to the amorphous, maternal sensuality of Bourgeois, and from the confrontational Jelinek to Miller’s more hilarious scatology, this acute eroticism is challenging. It raises not only art-historical questions about Surrealism, its context and its heritage, but it also raises more personal questions. How are we to respond to this clearly troubled imagery? For example, consider Bourgeois’s 2005 sculpture *Femme*, which depicts a cloth head and torso with two breast-like forms on a pillow under a glass bowl. This figure is typical of her work. Without appendages, the figure cannot escape; further, its simple open eyes and mouth suggest a scream, but we do...
not hear it beneath the glass. As with Bellmer’s doll, there is definitely something scary about whatever is happening.

The influence of Bataille on both Bourgeois and Bellmer is clear. It is visible in Bourgeois’ *La maladie de l’amour* (# 2, #3) (2008), which is a series of phallic drawings with tiny blue eyes gazing from their tips that recall the blue eyes of the priest at the climax of *L’histoire de l’œil* (whom the protagonists rape, murder, and enucleate). But, with Bellmer, the influence is even more direct. Bellmer met Bataille in 1945 through the publisher Alain Gheerbrant, who asked Bellmer to illustrate a new edition of *L’histoire de l’œil*. Bataille’s influence on Bellmer is seen in the drawings, etchings, and photographs emerging from these studies, as well as in those Bellmer would later create for *Madame Edwarda*. “I agree with Georges Bataille,” Bellmer later explains, “that eroticism relates to a knowledge of evil and the inevitability of death[,] it is not simply an expression of joyful passion” (qtd. in Webb 369). But the vision is clearly reciprocal: Bataille’s conception of Eros, of a sexuality that is always already tainted by sin and the consciousness of death and that is only possible accompanying the death or absence of God, finds few better visual correlates than in Bellmer. “In essence,” Bataille writes in *Eroticism* (1957), “the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (16). And violation is what we have with Bellmer: it is visible in the “suppressed girlish thoughts” that he hides in the unfinished panorama of the first doll’s belly, but also in his final series of etchings, *Petit traité de morale* (1968), which concern the mysteries of the Catholic confessional as well as Sade. Like with Bourgeois, but especially with Elfriede Jelinek, the controversial Nobel-prizing-winning author who directly addresses the battle of the sexes and the exploitation of feminine sexualities, Bellmer too seems to be exploiting feminine sexuality. However, in this way, he appears to be more like Miller, in that this exploitation is very masculine and heterosexually oriented. It seems unsurprising, then, that the doll and his other work is made by a man. Sixty years later, Cindy Sherman’s sex dolls, which are directly inspired by Bellmer and by Robert Gober’s extraneous body parts (which themselves are indirectly inspired by Bellmer), offer much more ambivalent sexualities by comparison. This ambivalence is so even if the themes of perversion and blasphemy, if not the cruelty in Bellmer, are hardly reiterating of the status quo.

So, we might ask: is the primary difference between Bellmer and Bourgeois sexual difference? By difference, I mean not just an opposition between the sexes, but also a difference oriented around the enigmatic forms that such an opposition compels: the phallus, the vulva, the androgyne, and so on? Indeed, *sexual difference, for both Bellmer and Bourgeois, seems to present a problem, a source of tension that differentiates them from one another, and a persisting site of inquiry in their work. As the curators of *Double Sexus* acknowledge, Bellmer and Bourgeois are both deeply preoccupied with these distinctions, even as they also aim to overcome them. Calling into question simpler anatomical distinctions and also the social hierarchies these distinctions embody, their work culminates in the sexual hybrid. For even as they acknowledge these distinctions, they thus aim to cross the divide that separates them, from the masculine to the feminine and vice versa, from phantasy to fear and back
again. All of this is visible in the palpable eroticism of Bellmer and Bourgeois. A tangible eroticism is only part of what makes the *Double Sexus* exhibit so interesting. For even if Bellmer and Bourgeois both challenge our notions of identity and the binaries between self and other, masculine and feminine, and the beautiful and the grotesque, the question remains: does Bellmer reiterate the force of the “male gaze” or disrupt it? Bellmer’s “Souvenirs of the Doll” Bellmer’s introductory essay to *Die Puppe* is a good starting place in response to this question, as it helps to illustrate some of the correlations between perversion, fetishism, and the polymorphous body in his work, as well as their bearing on the visual plane more generally.¹

Souvenirs Relative to the Doll: *Variations on an Articulated Minor*

Fit joint to joint, testing the ball-joints by turning them on their maximum position in a childish pose; gingerly follow the hollows, sampling the pleasure of the curves, losing oneself in the clamshell of the ear, creating beauty and also distributing the salt of deformation a bit vengefully. Furthermore, don’t stop short of the interior; lay bare suppressed girlish thoughts, so that the ground on which they stand is revealed, ideally through the navel, visible as a colourful panorama electrically illuminated deep in the stomach. Should not that be the solution? – Hans Bellmer, “Souvenirs Relative to the Doll”

Restricted, since all that can be said about her bound, the limit. In the most space of the narrowest view, one seeks by calculating, while quibbling, in place of her heart, one evaluates faith in childhood. – Paul Eluard, *Games of the Doll*

What are these souvenirs relative to the doll? Put simply, they are the two cycles of photographs Bellmer took of the dolls between 1933 and 1939, alongside his accompanying writings. Primarily consisting of close-ups, the first cycle of doll photographs largely outline its construction. In one photograph, the doll’s various parts are laid out in a birds-eye view (see Figure 2). A vertical leg enframes its horizontal torso, hands, feet, face, two glass eyes, and some feathers; dissembled and carefully arranged, it gives us a radically disarticulated tableau with no suggestion of life. In another image, the doll stands in a kind of portrait (see Figure 3). Viewed from behind and pressed close against a wall, the doll wears a long black wig and a white chemise. The chemise is lifted teasingly. Demurely, the doll looks back over its shoulder, as if playing a coy game. The position of the doll’s “gaze” stands out against its vacant, mask-like expression, with emptiness in place of eyes, and the rough, unfinished character of the plaster complexion. Here, shy playfulness couples with ruin: at once the object of desire, the doll is also without life, the fetish. The doll’s ambiguous status as medium cannot be overlooked here. It stands ambivalently between photograph, sculpture, and text. The rumpled bed-sheets and lace, the hula hoop and the marble, the chair-back and the long-stemmed rose together with a high-heeled shoe, all initiate the unfolding of a strange story about the doll’s assemblage and destruction—a kind of photographic journal, if you will, of perversion, sexual difference and their hauntingly displaced narratives.
“What am I looking at?” This is only one of the many questions that the doll begs of its viewer. With a skeleton consisting of broom-handles and metal rods, a hand and two feet of carved wood, a plaster torso and head with supplementary wigs, shoes and stockings, as well as additional clothing and other props, it feels wrong to even see the doll as a singular or unified body. In fact, there were two dolls. Of the first, which he worked on from 1933 to 1934 Bellmer took approximately 30 photographs. Fourteen of these were printed alongside “Souvenirs Relative to the Doll” in 1934 as Die Puppe or The Doll, a small, privately published book. Following his contact with the Surrealists, all of these photographs would be reprinted along with four previously unpublished others in a two-page spread of the following, sixth edition of Minotaure under the heading “Doll: Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor.” The seventh issue of Minotaure printed more photographs of the doll, this time illustrating the prose poem “Appliquée” by Paul Eluard, which was inspired by the doll. Later, in June 1936, Die Puppe was translated into French by Robert Valançay as La Poupée. This is when Bellmer began constructing his second, more complex doll. Formed around a dynamic central ball joint, he took more than one hundred photographs of this doll between 1935 and 1939, fifteen of which would eventually accompany fourteen poems by Eluard as well as Bellmer’s own “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint” as Les Jeux de la poupée or Games of the Doll. Although complete
by 1939 (and largely in consequence of World War II), *Games of the Doll* was not published until November of 1949.

That the head, hands, and legs of the first doll were used in the second doll, but that Bellmer created auxiliary legs and arms, torsos, pelvises and breasts suggest a naivety in enumerating these dolls as unified bodies. In fact, they are more akin to what Freud describes as the child in its polymorphous perversity, or the fragmented channels of pleasure that are unarticulated, neither one nor multiple. If anything, the doll attests to an array of corporeal realities. Like the autoerotic thumb-sucking of the child that moves into genital rubbing and urination, the doll too—like the child “under the influence of seduction” as Freud puts it in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*—“can be tempted into all kinds of possible transgression” (Freud 167). Bellmer is the doll’s seducer.

“Souvenirs Relative to the Doll” gives us Bellmer’s methodology of sorts, at least at this early stage. Drawing analogies between “little girls” and other items from his childhood, he notes that “certain things in the realm of little girls have always been desired” (Bellmer “The Doll Theme” 171). He notes the delicate and in some ways unattainable character of these items: “They might often be those fragile things, like black Easter eggs decorated with doves and rings of pink sugar that, besides being tempting, luckily possessed no other advantage” (171). In this sense, the souvenirs are quite self-consciously fetishistic, at least psychoanalytically. As Bellmer writes, “people like me only admit with reluctance that it is those things about which we know nothing that lodge themselves all too firmly in the memory” (172). And what “object” lodges itself in the memory further than the maternal phallus? For, as Freud writes in “Fetishism,” “a fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus, which the little boy once believed in and which—for reasons well known to us—he does not want to give up” (96). Such well-known reasons, we recall, are the traumas of sexual development, the coming-to-consciousness of sexual difference, and especially the “castration complex.” As Freud writes of the fetishist, “he both retains this belief [in the mother’s phallus] and renounces it; in the conflict between the force of the unwelcome perception and the intensity of his aversion to it, a compromise is reached such as is possible only under the laws of unconscious thought, the primary processes” (96). The fetish then is the compromise; wavering ambivalently between phantasy and reality, it acts as a substitute for the mother’s phallus that allows it to remain present but in its absence.

Characterized as much through its over determination as it is through its empty, lifeless centre, or as much by its lack-of-being [*manque-à-être*] as its focus as a site of fixation, Bellmer’s souvenirs of the doll are quite comparable to the maternal phallus. Their respective ambivalences cannot be overlooked. With these souvenirs being at once photographs, sculptures, and texts, as well as sexual objects and signs, they are what give the doll its uncanny character where it shifts between a feminine personality and something inanimate. With Bellmer drawing from the same sources Freud used to elaborate the uncanny in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny”—that of dolls and marionettes in German romantic literature and culture—Freud and Bellmer are
thus contiguous. As Rosalind Krauss writes of Bellmer’s doll photographs: “This entire series, an endless acting-out of the process of construction and dismemberment—or perhaps the more exact characterization would be construction as dismemberment—could not be more effectively glossed than by Freud’s analysis of [E.T.A. Hoffmann’s novella] ‘The Sandman’” (86). For, as Freud shows us as well, there are valuable connections to be drawn between the somatic and semantic aspects of the uncanny. Etymologically, das Unheimlich (the German word for the uncanny) bears a structural relationship to its proper linguistic antonym, das Heimlich, which translates as “the familiar” but also “the secretive.” The uncanny will concern “something that has been repressed and now returns” (Freud 147). Or as this revelatory citation by Friedrich Schelling puts it, “uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open” (qtd. in Freud 132). Freud illustrates this idea through an analysis of Hoffmann’s novella about Nathaniel, who slips into madness via the return of his childhood traumas but also because of his irrational love affair with Olympia, the life-sized doll that he accidentally mistakes for a real person. Freud hardly considers this part of the story, seeming to “repress” the uncanny effects of Olympia. Enchanted by Olympia, Nathaniel spies voyeuristically on her. When he comes to ask her hand in marriage, Nathaniel accidentally witnesses a fight between Professor Spalinzini, Olympia’s creator, and Coppola (over the ownership of her eyes). Only then does he recognize his error (and even still, he jumps to his death at the end of the story). The anxious doubt that Freud describes is the same anxiety that Bellmer’s souvenirs evoke.

There is an origin myth to the doll. In Bellmer’s own account, its inspiration occurred in 1931, accompanying three relatively synchronous events. First, he received a box from his mother filled with broken dolls, linocut magazines, glass marbles, disguises, and other items left over from his childhood. Around this same time, his family moved from Karlsruhe to Berlin. Bellmer is again put in contact with his young cousin, Ursula Naguschewski, who has been the object of his erotic longings since their youth together. With her again close by, but now as an independent young woman, Bellmer begins revisiting his youthful fantasies. But it is not until 1932—when Bellmer sees Max Reinhardt’s opera production of The Tales of Hoffmann—does his real inspiration for the doll occur. Specifically, Bellmer later recounts, he watched with fascination and horror at the end of Act I when Olympia is torn limb from limb (Webb and Short 20-22).

One sees the influence of this scene on another image from The Doll, where the doll is photographed from a bird’s-eye view on a striped mattress (see Figure 4). It lays disassembled. Her head rests beside her torso, detached appendages, a glass eye, and a brown wig. Carefully arranged, the slightly diagonal lines of the sheet behind the doll, and its bald head only accentuate the texture of the doll’s belly and bald pubic area. Moving back and forth between fetish, seductress, and victim, the doll here evokes a complex dynamic in it is viewer parallel to this, one that fluctuates between fascination, revulsion, and anxiety. This is likely why Hal Foster, in Compulsive Beauty, adopts the Marcusian language of “desublimation” to address Bellmer; in the doll’s complicated conjunctions of castrative and fetishistic forms, Foster sees an
Untying of repressed infantile drives. “More starkly than any other Surrealist,” Foster explains, “Bellmer illuminates the tension between binding and shattering as well as the oscillation between sadism and masochism so characteristic of Surrealism” (107).

In fact, Bellmer’s use of the uncanny or *unheimliche* amidst the other Surrealists should itself not be taken for granted. In 1925, while Surrealism was still in its immediate ascendant, Bellmer made his first trip to Paris. At that time, he had yet to familiarize himself with Breton or the other Surrealists. Only after his publication in *Minotaure* did Bellmer return; this is when he met Breton and others. But, as Robert Short speculates, the proliferation of automatons and mannequins throughout this period of Surrealism, just after the Surrealists’ contact with Bellmer, suggests his influence. Noting in particular the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938, where Bellmer’s photographs of the doll were displayed alongside mannequins dressed by Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, André Masson and others, Short calls Bellmer’s doll “the archetypal Surrealist object” (35).

An ostensibly innocent toy had been snatched from the hallowed, protected domain of the nursery, enlarged to child-size, and converted into a garish fetish that arouses the most ambiguous, unavowable and palpably erotic desire. No Surrealist object is more pregnant with riddles – not just the riddles posed by Hoffmann about the natural and the artificial or the living and the dead, but fresh Bellmerian riddles about the states of childhood and womanhood between which...
the Doll is indeterminably suspended. Bellmer conveyed both the precocious sexuality of the child, already amply documented by Freud, and the residue of childhood imagination and longings in the adult. (Webb and Short 35)

But the influence was clearly reciprocal. Not long after his return to Berlin, Bellmer began his second doll. More complex than its predecessor, it was motivated in part by the enthusiastic reception of his work by the other Surrealists. At this time, Bellmer begins moving the doll from the relatively limited confines of his apartment into the nearby woods, the stairwell, the cellar, the haystack, and so on. This is also the time when he begins doubling the pelvises, and photographing the doll with two pairs of legs, each emerging from either ends of its torso. “The game belongs to the category ‘experimental poetry,’” he writes in his introduction to the second cycle of doll photographs. “If one remembers essentially the game’s method of provocation, the toy will present itself in the form of a provocative object” (Bellmer “The Ball Joint” 212). Taking up even more aggressively the themes of perversion and scandal that are left only implicit in the first doll cycle, the Surrealist notion of the provocative toy as experimental poetry only expands Bellmer’s repertoire.

Such is the scandal of the doll, which is all the more scandalous for echoing what Rosalind Krauss sees as the scandal of Surrealist photography in general, that is, the scandalous “fetishization of reality” that admits of no opposition between the “natural” and the “contrived” (Krauss “Corpus Delicti” 69). For, as Krauss explains, the fetishism of not just Bellmer but Surrealist photography in general is prefaced on a denial of “the natural,” denial also grounded in sexual difference. She argues that “if fetishism is this substitute of the unnatural for the natural, its logic turns on the refusal to accept sexual difference” (Krauss “Corpus Delicti” 71). Such is the fabricated character of reality for Surrealist photography, according to Krauss. But the denial is hardly uniform. As Hal Foster observes, sometimes within Surrealism—as with Bellmer—there is a compounding of castrative and fetishistic forms. At other times, though, the castrative forms are repressed. As he writes: “In this regard the dolls may go beyond (or is it inside?) sadistic mastery to the point where the masculine subject confronts its greatest fear: its own fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution” (Foster “Amor Fou” 94). In this light, for Foster, what is most perverse and sadistic about Bellmer is precisely what aligns him with the feminine and the fluid and, consequently, against “the phallic order.”

Sexuality is a Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace

Outlining what he sees as the physiological dimensions of desire and eroticism in his 1954 text, Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious, or Anatomy of the Image, Bellmer revisits Freud’s observations regarding the displacements and condensations between language and material reality. In this work, Bellmer attends to the transpositions, exchangeability, and reversibility between them. Starting from the point of a toothache and the movement of its pain into the contraction of the hand and fingers, Bellmer sees this migration of a virtual centre of excitation again in Lombroso’s case of a teenage girl who, with the onset of puberty and accompanying
attacks of hysteria and somnambulism, lost vision in both eyes but could see through her nose and left earlobe. He also sees it in another girl who hysterically displaced projections of her sexual organ onto her eye, ear, and nose. More than simply synaesthesia for Bellmer, these experiences illustrate “a bizarre fusion of the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual,’ of the ‘permissible’ and the ‘forbidden,’ which allows the components of one to actually gain in a vague fashion what the other surrenders” (Bellmer Little Anatomy, 8). Here is where he makes the fetishistic aspect of his project most transparent.

It is certain that up to the present time no one has seriously questioned to what extent the image of the desired woman is pre-determined by the image of the man who desires her. This process finally goes through a series of phallus projections that proceed gradually from a detail of the woman toward the whole, in such a way that the woman’s finger, hand, arm, or leg becomes the man’s sexual organ. Thereby the man’s sexual organ could be the woman’s leg clad in tight hose beneath the swelling of the thigh, or a pair of oval-shaped buttocks that emphasize the slightly arched spinal column (Bellmer Little Anatomy, 25).

There are a number of parallels between Bellmer and Jacques Lacan, especially in “The Signification of the Phallus.” For, as Lacan puts it in his own terminology, “the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intra-subjective economy of analysis, may lift the veil from the function it served in the mysteries. For it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier” (579). Just because Bellmer does not adopt the Saussurean language of “signification” should not stop us from seeing analogies. One must wonder about the roles of metonymy and metaphor for Bellmer’s body-as-anagram. The parallels between Bellmer and Lacan are not wholly accidental, either. With both publishing their early work in Albert Skira’s journal Minotaure, the interest that Bellmer and Lacan share regarding the interrelationships between language and the erogenous body were likely the basis of their friendship, even as it also reflects the broader questions of their day. Short’s comments about the 1954 reception of Bellmer’s Little Anatomy by his colleagues are again telling.

Breton himself, despite his perennial reservations on the subject of Bellmer, hurried to send his congratulations by pneumatique. The psychiatrist Jacques Lacan was enthusiastic, and Bellmer’s old acquaintance, Dr. [Gaston] Ferdière signified his approbation with the succinct, “It’s correct.” May Ray gave the book its most appropriate welcome, sending Bellmer the anagram: “Image-Magie” (Webb and Short 121).

Insofar as it coincides with emerging forms of Surrealist eroticism, Bellmer’s work rests at a critical juncture between transgression, representation, and the human body. Of the 1959 International Surrealist Exhibition dedicated to not just Eros, but especially its darker, more Sadean element, Mahon writes, “here, pride of place was given to Hans Bellmer’s Doll, which was suspended from the ceiling like a Sadean victim, her body manipulated and contorted to appear as a double-legged creature, the monstrosity of her form only offset by two pairs of girlish shoes and socks and the...
vacant stare of her face” (159). This configuration is presented alongside Canadian Surrealist Mimi Parent’s *Masculine-Feminine*, a “tie made with female hair [ties] the collar of a white shirt and lapel of a black suit”: a photo of *Masculine-Feminine* is used in the exhibition’s invitation. As Mahon observes, “the hair was sexually suggestive, but also macabre, hinting at a scalp or trophy of some sort” (152). If the fetishism is not explicit in these works, it is still surely deliberate—deliberate and prefaced on a (albeit perhaps sometimes unconscious) disavowal of sexual difference.

Is Bellmer entirely within the phallic register, or not? It is a question to be asked of the interwar avant-garde more generally, that is, of Dada and Surrealism, or of its literary forerunners such as Sade, Baudelaire, and Lautréamont. With Bellmer, because of the persistence and gravity of his erotic obsessions, it is particularly incisive. We might even see this as the stakes of his work, or his wager of sorts, not just on the value of perversion, but also on the weight that such a value carries. “I wanted to help people lose their complexes,” he later explains, “to come to terms with their instincts as I was trying to do. I suppose I wanted people really to experience their bodies—I think this is possible only through sex” (qtd. in Webb 370). In turn, it is unsurprising that Bellmer’s work is so challenging.

The challenging aspect of Bellmer’s work is why critics like Krauss and Foster argue that “a view of Surrealism as simply misogynist or antifeminist is mistaken” (Krauss 17). In *Bachelors*, her study of nine women artists that addresses Bellmer alongside Claude Cahun, Dora Maar, and other female artists, Krauss explains, in commenting on Dora Maar’s 1936 silver-print photographs of two women’s legs, that, “the categorical blurring in an otherwise perfectly focused image produces a slippage in gender that ends by figuring forth that image of the body-in-alteration that is projected by the phallic woman” (19). Recalling the mother praying mantis as well here—which is also but a mere a pair of legs, Krauss notes—she explains how, as with Bellmer, the castrative and fetishistic elements of these particular photographs are made most plain. Against an overly reductive reading of Surrealism then, she suggests that, far from reifying patriarchal norms along with Maar and other examples of Surrealist photography, Bellmer’s doll photographs express a deep-seated ambivalence, one that, like Sade before them, deconstructs the stability of the male ego. Indeed for Krauss, Foster, and others, Bellmer’s “body-in-alteration” is a direct attack on the seeming coherence of fascist subjectivity.

One of the earliest and most insightful of Bellmer’s feminist critics is Xavière Gauthier. She argues that “Bellmer’s *Greedy Little Girls* are auto-sodomized with great shows of pleasure and pain,” and acerbically observes that, “the doll, which is traditionally given to little girls to help them prepare for their roles as mothers, is sadistically shredded and cut into pieces, then thrown into a provocative pose” (25-26). But she only critiques Bellmer insofar as she critiques Surrealism in general. Both beginning and ending her critical study with Bellmer, she uses his 1937 construction *Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace* to typify the Surrealist attitude toward sex in general. The *Machine-Gunneress* is composed of changeable parts and a cleft through its eyeless head, and machine-like and quasi-human forms combine into a three-foot-
high sculpture that at once recalls a naked feminine form, a machine, and a praying mantis (see Figure 5). Gauthier writes that “surrealism attempted to introduce this machinegun into the heart of the bourgeois world and to keep it constantly pointed there for twenty years” (23). For the Surrealists, she explains, sexuality and eroticism are not just aims in themselves, but the clear weapons of choice in the assault on bourgeois society. The subversive power the Surrealists see in Eros, combined with the primacy of overturning sexual values above all else, is what best differentiates it from the revolutionary project of Marxism, with which it otherwise shared much in common (Gauthier 36-38).

Such for Gauthier is part of Surrealism’s hope: “perversion and its rapport with the destruction of society” (48). With its best poetic allegory in Lautréamont’s Chants de Maldoror, specifically when Maldoror makes “a pact with Prostitution to sow disorder in families” (36), this investment in the destructive powers of Eros moves through symbolism into various aspects of the 20th century avant-garde, but it is particularly evident in Surrealism. Finding its origins in Sade, the notion of “perversion and its rapport with the destruction of society” outlines if not a tradition then a hope that finds its strongest deconstructive potential in the systemization of Sade’s thought in the work of Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, and others. Considering Klossowski and Bataille’s respective readings of Sade, the eschatological force of perversion denies of any possible human essence or ground for social order outside of God. Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and others further elaborate this position (pointedly Nietzschean) after the war. For Klossowski, what the “integral monstrosity” in Sade accomplishes...
specifically is the collapsing of gender into a singular and perverse polymorphousness. He writes:

The integral monstrosity conceived by Sade has as its immediate effect the working of an exchange of the specific qualities of the sexes. The result is not just a simple symmetrical reversal of the schema of the differentiation within each of the two sexes, with active and passive pederasty on the one side, lesbianism and tribadism on the other. In integral monstrosity as a didactic project for sensuous polymorphousness, the two representatives of the species, male and female, will in their relationship with one another face a twofold model. Each of the two sexes interiorizes this twofold model not only because of the ambivalence proper to each but also because of the embellishment Sade puts on this ambivalence. (Klossowski 35)

Such is as plain in Bellmer for Gauthier as it is in Sade. “With Bellmer, like with Sade, one’s own body is lost,” she writes, “wound into the other, leading to a sort of androgyne (such as Sade’s Juliette)” (Gauthier 57). Remaining sceptical, and preferring, it seems, that each sex maintain itself in an opposition to the other, Gauthier’s remarks nevertheless highlight how even for their critics the sadistic violence of Bellmer and Sade problematizes a simple opposition of the sexes.

Consequently, if Bellmer’s work does rest in an entirely phallic register, it is both self-consciously and self-critically. The body-as-anagram is surely expressive of this, if nothing else: an erotic project, no doubt at once onanistic and oneiric, but a project that is neither oblivious to gender norms, nor an advocate in their favour. If, as Lacan suggests, the phallus is the signifier “destined to designate meaning effects as a whole” (579), what Bellmer’s body-as-anagram suggests in contradistinction to this are “meaning effects” outside this phallic register. For if through repression and prohibition, sublimation and perversion, desire and the pleasure principle move through the body, condensing and superimposing itself in language and consciousness, it is in the body, that enigma of sexual difference, where these “meaning effects” occur, where the phallus is challenged most directly. That is what Bellmer shows us in his image of the phallus emerging from inside of the vulva, as portrayed in Little Anatomy. As he writes: “Once I find myself benumbed beneath the pleated skirt of all your fingers and weary from undoing the garlands with which you have encircled the somnolence of your unborn fruit, then you will breathe me into your fragrance and your fever, so that in full light my sex will emerge out of yours” (Bellmer Little Anatomy, 43-44). Of course, there is a kind of violence here. To condemn or dismiss Bellmer on the basis of this violence, however, is to trivialize and ignore a remarkable artist, challenging and tragic to be sure, but one who challenges gender norms as surely as he is reifying them. The feelings Bellmer’s work evoke for us must be differentiated from the strength with which we feel them; the power of these works to touch us is alone a testament to their significance, not to their meaninglessness. To be clear: sexuality is dangerous. It is a site of difficulty that operates at the origins of not just the psyche’s “health,” but also its “pathology.” Bellmer helps us to address this danger. As he would have us realize, sexuality is a Machine-Gunneress in a state of grace: You don’t just fuck with her! Like the mother mantis after copulation, she will consume you!
Notes

1. Where Therese Lichtenstein translates Bellmer’s introductory essay to Die Puppe as “Memories of the Doll Theme” I translate it “Souvenirs of the Doll.” In French it is «Souvenirs relatifs à la poupée». I remain indebted to Lichtenstein’s translation of the document. Except for the title, I here use Lichtenstein’s translation of the text, “Memories of the Doll Theme.”

Works Cited


JEREMY BELL is currently finishing his PhD dissertation on eroticism and cruelty in 20th century modernism in Cultural Studies at Trent University. Bell takes an interdisciplinary approach to the antinomies between community and intimacy, between art and theory. By placing them in conversation with one another, he looks at the development of a European cultural and social avant-garde.
Artist Statement

BARBARISM aims to challenge injustice through comedy, caricature, and art-as-activism. Our videos attempt to create new possibilities of being through the embodiment and performance of possibilities. With regard to the theme of “feminist un/pleasure,” we approach desire from a position of zero pleasure—embodying street harassers, amorphous abuse, and dehumanizing objectification—and infuse it with the positive pleasure of cohesion and creation. Through dark humor and slanted visual analogies, we queer unpleasure (everyday abuse) into pleasure (feminism plus comedy). In our dark and shadowy video “Teaser,” we bring the violence of objectification to a point of absurdity in order to render misogyny more apparent; we reveal “yeah titties!” to be as ridiculous as “like a carrot!” Our second video, “the milk: /sweet 5,” concerns the symbolic breast and the fear, desire, and revulsion it inspires in the baby, who represents abuser, in its relation to the mommy, who is abused. The baby’s desire for the breast is compounded by the breast’s fearsomeness as the baby perceives the breast as rejecting and invalidating. According to object relations theory, the splitting that occurs when good (breast) and bad (breast) cannot be reconciled results in destructiveness and paranoia. Hatred and desire of the breast representing woman means a significant lack of empathy in the patriarchy. Finally, “Pop 2.2” speaks to the unconscious hatred and trained violence within normative desire in sex: is it connection, or is it merely synecdochic “pussy”? Within what we understand to be rape culture, the hierarchy of masculinity over femininity institutes both a hatred of and desire for “pussy.” By way of feminist appropriation, we can expand the concept of ourselves (both object and subject, part and whole, “masculine” plus “pussy”) through alternative representations of gender, seeking to expand the realities of identity, interdependence, power, and desire.

BARBARISM is a multimedia project developed by Sarah Secunda and Rebecca Katherine Hirsch. BARBARISM produces visual art, time-based media, and manifestos that are designed to expand the understanding and experience of individual multiplicities within absolutist social hierarchies. When they’re not BARBARing, Sarah is a filmmaker-activist and former feature story writer for The Indypendent while Rebecca is a writerly film flitter, organizer for Permanent Wave Philly, and sexuality educator.
THE
M U M M Y
NIPPLE

the milk : /sweet 5
Pussy

pop 2.2
PART 4
Relationality and Reparation
In this narrative, I explore my compulsive desire to make meaning of my sadomasochistic fantasies and practices. In this process, I grapple with the following questions: What does it mean to make meaning of sex, particularly kinky sex? Can this be done in a way that is not pathological? What is the meaning of shame, and can desire function without shame? I will use my personal experiences as a therapist, a patient in psychoanalysis, and as someone who engages in BDSM to guide my understanding of these questions.

Sex and interpretation are inseparable acts for me. I am a kinky, queer transfag who frequently engages in rape play, violent fantasies, teacher student role-plays, and the eroticization of age. As a rape survivor—the victim of sexual assault by a teacher—and as a child therapist I am often conflicted about these themes of violence and domination. I am left wondering: What does it mean to want this? And, furthermore, what does it mean to make meaning of these desires, particularly in a therapeutic context? How does this personal and professional sadomasochistic investigation fit into a larger narrative of the pathologization of sexual deviance? How does one, how do I, strike a balance between making meaning, living, and fucking? What does it mean to want exactly what we are not supposed to? Or is this a setup and are we actually supposed to want it? Can desire even exist without this dramatic push/pull?

Making Meaning

Objects are inherently erotic. The way children find and lose themselves in objects lays the groundwork for our adult love of toys. I have, for as long as I can remember, searched for the meaning of things. As a child I bounced from “Mom’s house” to “Dad’s house” with a firetruck red L.L. Bean dufflebag that my parents bought me to make the transition easier.” What meaning did I make of this object as a child? The truth is that the duffle bag could never contain me or my objects. It was never the right shape, the fabric was hard and stiff, unable to accommodate my books, clothes, and my toys.

I found refuge in my childhood psychoanalyst’s office; we met at least once a week, often twice a week, from when I was four until, at fifteen, my adolescent depression escalated beyond what my father could contain. He shipped me off to a carefully selected cognitive behavioral therapist to better manage my rambunctious sexual curiosity, what he saw as my oppositional attitude and poor academic performance. But the truth is, the meaning making was fostered and nurtured by my first analyst. My current analyst and I now affectionately refer to him as my “Santa Claus therapist” because I spent years teasing him for looking like Santa. He was a tall, large man with white hair, a matching beard, thin rectangular glasses, and a large belly that was accentuated by his suspenders. His literal resemblance to Santa Claus was
only a fraction of his mystical persona. It was not until I grew up to be a therapist and until he died of rapid-onset cancer roughly one year ago that I understood the transformative power of our play and of the meaning we made together.

I wanted to make more than meaning with my current analyst even before I met him. I wanted to fuck him, or the idea of him, after I read one of his papers in a graduate school seminar. With object relations theory pounding away at me, turning me on, and teasing me, I longed for a therapist who would join me in the erotics of transference and counter-transference. I was embarrassingly honest in my first two sessions with him, a tradition I have continued for the past two-and-a-half years. I told him of my previous desires for masculine authority figures listing off various professors, teachers, and mentors after whom I lusted—some had violated their boundaries while others had honored them. I made it very clear to him that he was already on my list and that this desire was something I was hoping to work through in therapy.

“Ya know, last week, I left here and I was like, ‘Oh my god. I can’t believe it; he’s actually not going to fuck me.’ But today, I don’t know...seeing you walk in with that leather jacket, watching you hang it on the door...I mean, it just made me think differently, like maybe you would fuck me.” I paused, waiting for a reaction. “You’re totally kinky aren’t you? I wonder what you would do if I just started jerking off right here on your couch.”

I don’t remember his exact response, only that he did what most therapists would do: he asked questions. “What would it mean if we had sex? What do you think that would do for you?”

“I don’t know, it would probably make me feel horrible and really fucked up.”

“So...you’re looking for someone to say no? To set that limit and boundary with you?” he paused. “I want you to know that I will never have sex with you.”

I laughed at what, at the time, seemed like a dodge on his part, a defense against desire—maybe mine, maybe his—but his words did not extinguish my desire to fuck and be fucked on his couch.

As a therapist my incitement to interpretation has served me well. I make connections between the emotionally chaotic worlds of my clients and their externalizing behaviours. An eight-year-old child diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder is angry with me for setting a time limit on our session. She insists that we take the short cut to the park despite my warnings of the deep snow. As we set out, she peers down at our feet, and compares the sizes of my sneakers with her new pink winter boots. In a bossy and demanding tone, she says, “our shoes are pretty much the same size. I’ll go first and you can walk in my footsteps.” I cave in, just as her grandmother does when she tantrums, and clumsily hand her the power that she then uses to stomp through the snow in a zigzag pattern, doubling the time it should take us to get to the
park while filling my shoes with snow. On the way home, I do my best to bring her aggression to the surface, still unsure of how much confrontation she can tolerate. She does not want to talk and kicks a block of ice along the sidewalk. I coach her in making snowballs, the outline of our palms imprinting and decorating their curves. She chucks them at telephone poles, watching the cold wet snow evaporate on the ground. I decide to take another risk and suggest she pretend that they are my face. She giggles and squeals in excitement.

I tilt my head to the side and reflect back to her. “You were pretty upset with me today.”

She accepts my interpretation and describes the various places she is hitting me with snowballs. “And now I’m going to get you right in the nose!”

As her therapist I validate her feelings, and contain and redirect her aggression. We make meaning together.

Push/Pull: Role-Playing the Pupil

We met in the spring of 2008 while on a panel together about trans issues at colleges. I was just finishing my junior year of college and he was in his first year of graduate school. He was older, unbearably attractive, further along in his transition than me, studying with queer theorists I admired, and, most importantly, he was kind. I craved his attention and embarrassingly let on that I was more experienced than I was. I never expected that he would become my top and an integral mentor in my young adulthood and development as a bottom.

But, that was then. Now, it is the summer of 2012 and I am in the throes of an extensive teacher-student role-play that is based on Henry James’s short story “The Pupil.” I am sitting at my favourite coffee shop diligently completing my homework. Every week he sits behind the desk with a perverted smirk on his face as I scramble to digest and regurgitate the challenging readings he has assigned me. He likes it when I am anxious.

He f*cks me with words, with theories.

I recognize the beat in the window between songs on my iTunes playlist and remove the uncomfortable plastic knob from my ear. I stop, shake my head, and think, “No, it can’t be.”

It’s the hard knock life (uh-huh) for us

It’s the hard knock life, for us!

Steada treated, we get tricked
Steada kisses, we get kicked
It’s the hard knock life!

Jay-Z’s 1998 remake of “Hard Knock Life” echoes through the painfully hipster café in which I am stationed. My booth is decorated with highlighters, our syllabus, and articles about moral panic, children, consent, and sex crime legislation.

I am not supposed to want this.

I feel warm; lightheaded. My dick swells beneath my jeans, as my toe creeps closer to its head. One more inch and I can just rub myself off in my booth; no one will notice.

It’s the hard knock life (uh-huh) for us

It’s the hard knock life, for us!

Steada treated, we get tricked

Steada kisses, we get kicked

It’s the hard knock life!!

I remember the fantasy with an unforgettable clarity—it was inspired by an award-winning photograph that hangs in his room. The photograph is from his days of bootblacking, bottoming, fire play, and play parties. The sole of the leather boot brushes against the knee of his jeans as the remainder of the boot erupts in flames. The skin of his cheeks pushes upward towards his brow revealing a sadistic smirk of excitement.

I am naked on the floor—my arms and legs are tied behind me. He teases me with his boot, kicking me lightly, just enough to rock me back and forth. He pulls his leg back, aims his toes at my teeth, and propels his foot into my mouth. I am bloody, crying, begging him to stop. I am hurt.

I am not supposed to want this.

I confess the fantasy to him during our next class, detailing the image of me sitting alone in my booth as a chorus of orphans narrates my desire for pain and domination. I am excited but cautious. I can feel him smiling on the other end of the phone. “You know what...Hearing you say that, it kind of makes me want to ya know...Kick you—just kick you around a little, enough to make you squirm.”

His affirmation, acceptance, and containment of my fantasies is one of the most cathartic aspects of our work together. The desires that I once experienced as forbidden, pathological, and as repetition compulsions are transformed into consensual moments of intimacy, climax, and empowerment. He coaches me through orgasms, dictating when I am allowed to cum, and leads me deeper into myself.
I freeze, still unsure of where I’m going, and I am taken aback by my vulnerability. “I want to tell you something, but I don’t know…it feels…fucked up?”

I picture him paused, hard, hand holding his dick, caught off my guard by break in character. “What’s up?”

I swallow my discomfort, “I want you to fucking rape me.”

“Fuck yes,” he growls. We reunite in the scene. His permission is intoxicating.

Push/Pull: Present Tense/Role Playing The Teacher

I am distracted and painfully unproductive. I should be writing. My eyes glance over to my browser and notice an email from him titled “Assignment_2.” He has turned in his homework at 8:57 pm—three minutes before the 9:00 pm deadline I have set for him. He has not formatted his citations correctly. I will punish him. He will not make this mistake again.

We met once before; he is my roommate’s ex-boyfriend. I remember them telling me that he is kinky and looking for a top. I decide to pursue him after seeing a picture of him celebrating his one-year anniversary on hormones. He is sitting half-crossed-legged, posing with a cake. His hair is partially parted to the side, casually sweeping across his brow. He looks like he is posing for a school photograph. I am fixated on his youth, boyishness, and innocence.

I want to take it from him.

I am flooded with sadistic images. My boot is resting on his head pushing his face into the hardwood floor. I force him onto his back and spit in his face. “Drink it, faggot!”

I am not supposed to want this. What does it mean?

I slap him across the face letting his cheek ricochet against and tickle my palm. I want it to leave a mark. I want him to fucking bleed.

I cum hard and fast, muscles clinched, lost in the intensity of my imagination only to be quickly greeted by my shame. As the masochist and the recipient of harm, I had naively insisted that I had not created the violence, only participated in it. What does it mean, I wonder, to cause harm, to create violence?

Shame

Processing my sexual shame is a frequent topic of my therapy sessions. I am often ambivalent and unsure of whether or not I want my analyst to punish me, contain me, fuck me, or to do all of these things at once. This is one of our most frequent reenactments. He chooses his usual playing card: the containing, "good enough" therapist, capable of surviving my infantile aggression.

“You mean you don’t think I’m totally f***ed up?” I bite at my nail and rub my finger
over a tiny knob of raw skin at the base of my cuticle. I am grateful that we are having a phone session, and that I am escaping an inevitable interpretation of my discomfort.

He pauses; I picture him tilting his bald head to the side puzzled by my question. I take comfort in memorizing his mannerisms. He reflects the question back to me. “You’re asking me if I think you’re fucked up?” His tone highlights the inherent problems in my question.

We both know that this is a question he cannot and will not answer. Defenses, as understood by psychoanalysis, are vital tools of the ego that often function to preserve attachments. Unfortunately, like any tool, they are prone to misuse and dependence. Defenses can taint our experience of reality, and put simply, can harm us and complicate relationships. Intellectualization, the meanings made by me or by my analyst, cannot protect me from my desires. They participate in them, but they do not rid me of the pleasure and shame they bring.

Forgiveness

As I enter my third year in analysis, and put language to the sexual trauma I experienced as a teenager, I am increasingly intrigued by the idea of forgiveness—forgiveness for myself for not being able to stop the abuse and forgiveness for the adults who did not believe me. I have spent years stubbornly planting my feet in the dirt of my own agency and denying the murky trauma upon which my kinkiness is undeniably built.

Recently, I consulted with a colleague who frequently writes about psychoanalysis and BDSM. “You cannot talk about BDSM without talking about trauma,” she told me as she offered me feedback on how to end this piece. I expressed my concerns about the legacy of psychoanalysis pathologizing and denying queer people the agency to narrate our own experiences of desire.

“But what if it is about trauma, and what if that’s actually okay?” After the initial shock of her question dissipated, I realized that my search for meaning in my desires had distracted me from a more productive exploration in forgiveness. My path lies in forgiving myself for loving what I love, for kinking what others find unfathomable, and for taking pleasure in the subversion of my trauma history.

I.A. WOODY is a kinky, transmasculine therapist working in community mental health in New England. He received a BA in Psychology with a minor in Gender Studies from Mount Holyoke College and a Masters in Social Work from the New York University’s Silver School of Social Work. Woody’s areas of interest include queer theory, object relations, relational psychoanalysis, child studies, and critical race theory.
Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep

Tania A.
Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep
Tania A.
Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep

Tania A.
A digital conversation between Leanne Powers (Instigatrix) and Tania A. (Witness)

Tania A.: I wandered into Leanne’s studio one Nuit Blanche evening while her performance piece was taking place. I had my camera with me, and I asked if it was okay to shoot some pictures. The space was very tight and there were only a few places to stand. A number of people were shuffling around, coming and going, watching the scene unfold. Because the room was so overcrowded, I had to stand quite close to the people involved in the scene. The lighting was dim, but I pushed my camera to capture images in near darkness.

Leanne Powers: The six-hour performance piece was part of a larger event that included over twenty-six artists and was entitled *Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep*. The event was created in order to promote direct engagement with the erotic performance art within queer and trans communities.

Tania A.: Many of the piercings had already been completed when I arrived, and the scene was well underway. I knew the three people involved in the performance, as well as many of the people watching/participating in the room.

Leanne Powers: During the piece, I threaded dozens of piercings through the two co-creators (Eli and matt) and attached the piercings to long elastics that radiated outwards, tying the lines to poles and beams in the room. Over many hours, hundreds of people were invited to tie fabric strips to the piercing lines. Folks were encouraged
to take time to imbue the fabric strips with wishes that were as specific as possible, to decide how and where to tie the fabric, and to interact with me and my collaborators as much as they wanted. I wanted people to understand their participation as an act of intimate engagement.

Tania A.: I watched as Leanne pierced Eli’s third eye. matt was hogtied and lying front down on the floor, his head turned to one side. Eli stood close but did not touch him. I watched as people tied their wishes to the piercing lines; I felt their emotions and observed their expressions. I noticed that if one piercing line was moved, both Eli and matt were affected.

Leanne Powers: Through the pain, pleasure, and emotional work of this ordeal/performance, I was able to extend the reach of my body and my will, first through matt and Eli and then outward into the public realm. I wanted to facilitate an experience that allowed a much larger group of people to experiment with play, to experiment with taking up power/privilege and to directly confront issues of consent. Some people engaged with relish, others by asking curious questions, while some appeared worried. There were jokes, long mediations, and tears. There were rhymes, kisses, and offers to help bring refreshments, take photos and clean up.

Tania A.: That evening, my desire was to remain true to my practice as a photographer, to bear careful witness, to allow myself to enter into a moment and be moved, and participate in my own way. I wanted to be able to translate some part of what happened there in my pictures. I had no idea that this group of images would ultimately become its own art piece, and I am very pleased to be able to contribute this retelling to the life of the original performance.

Leanne Powers: My co-creators and I still talk, touch each other, and process the performance piece as an important point in our development as a leather family and as community members. Wishers from that night more than 18 months ago continue to share their memories and reflections with us as we continue our work/lives/performances.

Notes

1. Nuit Blanche is a free, all-night public arts festival that takes place annually in Toronto, Ontario.

TANIA A. is a Toronto-based photographer and multi-media artist. For over a decade, Tania has focused on photographically documenting public events and performances, making portraits, photographic personalities, creation people, and boundary pushers within queer and BDSM communities. As an engaged and careful witness, Tania strives to honour and celebrate the experiences of people who are often misrepresented and who may not have the opportunity to experience themselves through a medium such as photography. Through time, Tania has developed a unique and multifaceted photographic record that documents queer histories and happenings within a constantly shifting social landscape.
“Salt Remembers” is one body, telling the story of desire. It is a space where poetry inhabits flesh; it is a space where, finally, this body speaks. It is an interrogation of the Law of Silence for queers and women, and especially for those of us who pulse at the very thought of perverse sexual practice. Each time I am willing to say I leak, and drool, and gag, and bleed; I am torn, I am stitched, I am cut, I am opening, I am shut, someone reads the echo as it shimmers between substance and text and says yes, this. Some other body speaks, and tells the story of itself, and the quantum shiver repeats. Echo. Mirror. Mimesis. We speak. There is nothing more dangerous than this.

Salt Remembers

When I write about desire I almost can’t put my finger on it, that slipping place an arc of wetness, pearling; the way I always grapple with blood.

When I write about desire I end up tied down, I end up wrapped around you I end up aching to be crushed like salt rocks dropped to the floor and turned to grit under your heel like being pushed under the surface like the floor is a horizon like we are moving into sunbright sky like blue is more than a colour like blue is more than this day that wraps itself around the both of us and gathers my voice with its moan and laces the lilac tree with it. Because sound travels and the window at the front of our house thinks it is a mirror that will take my opening throat and send it back to me.

When I write about desire my fingers remember all the places they have been, and begin to curl, cupping every warmth they have ever held in the center of a mnemonic fist. As if my hand were an embryo. As if the anatomy of my fist cradled every moment and had never forgotten how to hold it, still.
Still. In the night, against the sheets, it will grab at everything it can find. It will say this, and there, this is how I know you, this is what I knew, then. It will ask for more, it will say this is almost never enough. You will tell me (again) how greedy I am. And my body will remember.

The body will remember. Later, it will tell the story of the night, the afternoon, the darkling day. Later, it will dream red, and electric, and shooting, and blunt. Later, it will ache after sensation like salvation.

Later, it will tell you desire is what makes us who we are. It will ask you why you insist on not-remembering this. It will draw a line you have never seen before: it will show you where flesh meets, where it stretches and beats. It will describe for you an edge that has lost its edge. It will say here, and here, this is where you touch me.

Here.

Later, it will make a nest for you. It will curl you into itself. It will tell you a story. It will talk to you about its beating heart, the crushed salt, its fist.

It will tell you that blue is more than a colour, that the window is a mirror that draws pictures with your moans. It will remind you that the floor is a horizon. That we are all grains beneath feet. That we are all fists, closing around memory, looking for bliss.

The body is salt.
The body is water.
The body is ocean, waiting to escape.

Salt remembers what hasn’t happened yet.

KARINA QUINN is an academic and creative writer working in queer theory, fictocriticism, and post-structuralist and feminist theories of the body, subjectivity, and self. She writes short fiction, poetry, and fictocriticism, and is currently writing her PhD dissertation, “this body, writing,” at La Trobe University in Melbourne. An accomplished poet and spoken-word performer, Karina was recently awarded second prize in the prestigious, long-running Newcastle Poetry Prize for her poem “Always Going Home (A Domestic Cycle).” She is also co-managing editor of an interdisciplinary gender, sexuality and diversity studies journal, Writing from Below (http://www.writingfrombelow.org.au).