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Robin Bauer. *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. vii + 289 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-43501-9.

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BDSM at the Boundaries

Sadomasochism is becoming mainstream. This would, I imagine, be as surprising to those original Viennese readers who had their *femme-domme* fantasies ignited by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (1870), as to the clandestine frequenters of the back rooms of San Francisco's gay leather bars in the 1960s, which can be now seen on the current postage stamps of Finland.[1] BDSM (the acronym now widely accepted to stand for Bondage & Discipline, Domination/submission, and Sadism & Masochism) has never been so widely exposed in our culture, even despite recent prohibitions of sadomasochistic pornography in the United Kingdom (with the recent criminalization of the depiction of activities that are otherwise legal, such as face-smothering, fist-fucking, or water sports). E. L. James's best-selling *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), with its sequels and the blockbuster movie, made sure that everybody has now heard of "The Lifestyle." Yet the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is widely reviled within BDSM communities, where it is claimed vociferously that James's book has nothing to do with "real" BDSM.[2] Detractors from James's work point to the (implausible) protagonist Christian Grey's lack of concern with consent as a clear indicator that *Fifty Shades* is rather the story of a sexual psychopath who preys unethically on his naïve but willing victim, Anastasia Steele (their relationship is represented as a heterosexual love story). "Real" BDSM is not reckless, it is argued by the movie's critics; it is concerned with "safe, sane and consensual" practices that are pre-negotiated in the lead-up to the scene, with participants aware of potential risks. This severe criticism of *Fifty Shades* from within corners

of BDSM communities is warranted, and much has been said to frame BDSM as something utterly different to what happens in *Fifty Shades*. This is convenient—after all, communities of practice are all about boundaries, as every sociologist knows, and in the face of stigmatization by psychiatrists in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* and lawyers in the courtroom, sadomasochists are often careful to represent themselves as decidedly not ill and not criminal.

Time may well show that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is about as close to contemporary BDSM as Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was to emerging gay and lesbian identities between the wars. But just as some people bought the story of Stephen Gordon's love for Mary Llewellyn, someone must be buying the dungeon accoutrements on display in the back corners of local sex shops, past the Lelo vibrators and the how-to books. Still other people are getting their BDSM needs met through the fantasy worlds portrayed on the BDSM specialist pornographic sites, such as *kink.com*. We know from Danielle J. Lindemann's *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon* (2012) that increasingly people are paying for BDSM services, while different crowds entirely are getting their kink on at an ever-growing number of public BDSM sex parties around town, with all sexual identities catered for, usually separately, as straight, gay, lesbian, and queer communities all put on their own version of BDSM play parties. Certainly, BDSM is now popular, but there is much contest over who gets to represent it. Formerly, psychiatrists and lawyers alone had all

the power to do so, and BDSM pornographers were persecuted, and the spaces where it might take place were regulated. Then came the various BDSM communities, who started to claim their political voice and their bodily rights. Next came the academics.

This emerging spate of sociological studies of BDSM communities in Europe and North America is a field to which Robin Bauer's book is a very welcome addition. Long since the tantalizing references in some of Michel Foucault's late interviews, where he evoked BDSM to describe the possibility of using the body differently in the de-genitalization of sexual pleasure ("Je pense que le S/M ... c'est la création réelle de nouvelles possibilités de plaisir, que l'on n'avait pas imaginées auparavant"),[3] or the descriptions of the policing of BDSM by both psychiatry and the law in Gayle S. Rubin's classic essay, "Thinking Sex" (1984), at least five full-length ethnographic studies of aspects of BDSM in specific communities have been published since 2009, including the book under review. These are: Lindemann's study of cis-female BDSM sex workers, *Dominatrix*; Margot Wiess's nonparticipant study of straight BDSM parties in San Francisco, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011); Staci Newmahr's *Playing on the Edge: Sodomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (2011), where she played the role of a participant-observer ethnographer-bottom to study play parties in North America; and Andrea Beckmann's *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sodomasochism* (2009), which effectively used Foucault's ideas about the sexual body to argue against the legal sanctions against the practice of BDSM, comparing it to other extreme sports like boxing or rugby in terms of the pleasure and pain that these activities involve.[4] There is also a growing number of historical and literary studies of aspects of BDSM, for example, John K. Noyes's study of masochism, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (1997), or more recently, Nikolas Largier's scholarly work on flagellation, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* (2007)—and there is plenty more room for historical studies of the development of BDSM communities, with sources sometimes preserved in archives at places like the Leather Archive and Museum in Chicago (<http://www.leatherarchives.org>) or the Kinsey Institute. This dungeon industry within academia has a growing number of scholars researching various aspects of BDSM, and it apparently is following the step of other areas of sexual research intensification, for example, into sex work or pornography. Now is the time to be researching these marginalized areas of sexual history and soci-

ology, as we have better theoretical tools available to us, as Bauer's book demonstrates.

These new works reach deep into the worlds of BDSM practitioners, although until Bauer's study of "dyke + queer" BDSM, all of the other sociological monographs on BDSM were of (predominantly) straight white communities.[5] Bauer's book thus appears within a concentration of discourses about BDSM that has been growing since the first engagement in the so-called Feminist Sex Wars between Gayle Rubin and Barbara McClintock, and their respective allies.[6] Just as with debates around homosexuality that happened between the 1950s and '80s, the time of its significant deregulation (and sometimes decriminalization), BDSM has been interrogated from moral, legal, ethical, and psychiatric angles, and has been defended by a committed number of scholars and activists.[7] All of the recent academic study of BDSM is catching up to the fact that it is already out in the open—and these recent sociological accounts are presenting it in a much more appreciative light than the former, regulatory discourses that can be found in police files or in the pages of antique psychiatric manuals.

Bauer's focus on the "dyke + queer" BDSM in Germany—his term includes his very mixed group of trans*, intersex, gender queers, bisexual cis-women, and others who did not identify as cis-male and who are permitted into in an otherwise lesbian queer BDSM community (he describes the constitution of the forty-nine interview partners on pages 11-12)[8]—reveals that this is a theoretically engaged community (in the same way that David M. Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* [1997] reminds us that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* [1976] was the go-to text of the radical gay activists in ACT UP). In queer communities, one can often hear talk about the construction of identities in relation to power structures in ways that are theoretically sophisticated, even if they are not name-dropping; the activism and the lives are often grounded in theory. There is the sense that these politically engaged queer communities are one of the places where the students of gender and cultural studies departments end up using what they have learned in their arts degrees—putting Judith Butler or Foucault to work in order to fashion themselves in ways that rely on a sophisticated negotiation of power, gender, sexuality, consent, pleasure, the body, etc.[9] These texts can be dangerous when put in the right hands; they can be used to make new spaces where old power relations dissolve, constructing what might be thought of as Queer Temporary Autonomous Zones, such as the BDSM scenes we read about in Bauer's

study.[10] These texts can be used to inform and to understand the interactions of people within a group—providing a language in which to frame one’s identity and to negotiate one’s desires. Bauer’s interview partners are sophisticated and thoughtful; they are engaged citizens in their community, not blindly following what lawyers and psychiatrists say about them. Their voices are put to good use in this book when Bauer deftly uses their words as a way of negotiating the heady terrain of queer theory.

Like Rubin and Weiss before him, Bauer pays specific attention to the history of the BDSM community broadly. He traces the growth of gay motorcycle clubs in San Francisco in the 1950s, where the leather iconography seen in Tom of Finland illustrations comes from, as well as to the specific history of lesbian queer BDSM, which stems from SAMOIS, the premier lesbian feminist BDSM organization in San Francisco between 1978 and 1983. Similarly important representations from within the lesbian BDSM world included “transgressive dyke BDSM photography and performance art” by Krista Beinstein, which showed at the Schwules Museum in Berlin last year (p. 18).[11] Such efforts to ground the community that he studies in its history help to avoid the problem of treating this group of dyke + queer kinksters as cut off from other permeations of sadomasochistic and related play; but at the same time, the ways in which his interview partners talk about themselves does not really seem that reliant on this gay and lesbian leather history. BDSM identities seem to develop instead in micro-settings, for example, at The Catacombs in the 1970s, described by Rubin. More of a sense of their “historical selves” might have been sought by Bauer in his interviews when constructing a genealogy of BDSM; we might have found more about how the community relates to its past, or to the regulatory discourses that control it, namely, psychiatry and the law.

Bauer uses his particular variety of queer theory to inform his understanding of what happens in BDSM scenes. He draws much from Deleuzian conceptions of desire and pleasure, which were formed in partial distinction from Foucault’s emphasis on pleasure. In a typically elegant passage, Bauer maintains: “While desires incite bodies to move, pleasures are experienced exactly when bodies are opened to touch through lingering. A body experiencing pleasure is lost in a moment of enduring intensities, defying categories, accepting what is rather than how things might be. Pleasure is not directed at something and, rather than being associated with motion, it is about stillness: it is being in the moment without an intentional directedness.... Pleasure in this sense

actively opens up undefined spaces for new ways of being and experiencing, and constructing new kinds of subjectivities.... Pleasure can produce precisely a state of losing oneself, of letting go and therefore opening up the embodied subject to transformations and reinventions, becoming a deterritorializing force” (p. 50). These intimate spaces where one can enter a state of unrefined pleasure, where one can let go and construct new subjectivities, where one can lose oneself—these are the spaces that BDSM practices create, according to Bauer’s study. They involve a negotiation of power, they involve a negotiation of boundaries, and they actively involve the body in the formation of social relations. For these reasons it is clear why sociologists would be interested in them, as well as why some discursive regimes have been keen to control these activities by framing them as either perverse, abnormal, or illegal. BDSM, in other words, is potentially transgressive, as it has been since its roots in the erotic-political tracts of the Marquis de Sade.

The physicality of the BDSM scene—the experience of pain, in some scenes—is not the central focus of the book, and more can be gleaned on this topic from Beckmann’s *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion*, which is not referenced by Bauer. Pain is discussed, but not in a way that makes it the center stage of the BDSM encounter, which makes me wonder if it is not as significant a factor in the dyke + queer world that Bauer is studying as in the play described by Newmahr’s or Beckmann’s respondents. We do not really get a sense of what it is like to be tied up and tortured, deprived of power, steeped in pain, or objectified, although presumably the play does get this physical. And this is despite the way that Bauer frames these practices as “exuberant intimacy,” or the set of possibilities afforded by the excessive pleasure of BDSM, the experience at the heart of the BDSM scene. Pain is more typically discussed in terms of boundary transgression (in terms of pushing one’s own limits, or of expanding the parameters of one’s experience of their body, as well as the transgressive reality of practicing BDSM). Although many of Bauer’s interview partners think of BDSM as sexual, little actual attention was paid to the physical aspects of pleasure, there is little sense of the ecstatic joy that BDSM practices might produce, which Bauer’s use of “exuberant” evokes. In other words, there was more talking and less screaming out in passion from the people Bauer interacted with—this is something that both Newmahr’s and Beckmann’s studies are stronger on, even if Bauer is better at theorizing pain than Newmahr.

The most significant part of Bauer’s study is his fo-

cus on the construction and maintenance of boundaries. He pays special attention to the construction of gender as a boundary object, particularly where he focuses on the exploration of “intimate difference.” Bauer’s attention to boundary construction and consent makes it seem especially significant to dyke + queer BDSM, with focus on what things mean, and resultantly much less from Bauer on what is done to the players, or what they do to their partners. But of course, the construction of boundaries is still doing something, and there may indeed be pleasure had in boundary construction, especially where beyond the talking there is pleasure and pain and protocol.

These new sociological studies of BDSM are important not least because they will be the historical source material of the future—as readers of Jon Lawrence’s studies of classic postwar British sociology will know—along with the usual sources that include BDSM zines, art, pornography, memoirs, literature, etc. In particular, these books will act as an antidote to the portrayal of BDSM by James in her *Fifty Shades* books. The thorough analysis of the German dyke + queer BDSM community offered by Bauer (and the works of other sociologists of sexual subcultures) will surely encourage future historical research into the genealogy of BDSM, in an attempt to historicize communities engaged in such practices, in their efforts to historically understand the ways in which the body and sexuality come together in certain communities to produce new possibilities of pleasure. This process has been significantly advanced in Bauer’s groundbreaking study, which everyone interested in BDSM, sexual subcultures, gender (and especially trans*), or the use of queer theory should read.

Notes

[1]. For more on Tom of Finland stamps, see Kira Cochrane, “Homoerotic Artist Tom of Finland Gets the Official Stamp of Approval,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2014/apr/15/homoerotic-artist-tom-of-finland-official-stamp-approval>.

[2]. Emer O’Toole, “This Murder in Ireland Has Made Me Rethink My Sexual Practices,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/31/murder-ireland-rethink-sexual-practices>. For voices from the BDSM community on *Fifty Shades*, see the comments.

[3]. Michel Foucault, an interview, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 2:1556.

[4]. For more on these works, see Ivan Crozier, “BDSM Goes to College, But It Doesn’t Enrol in Camille Paglia’s Class,” *Singapore Review of Books*, September 10, 2013, <http://singaporereviewofbooks.org/2013/09/10/bdsm-goes-to-college-but-doesnt-enrol-in-camille-paglias-class/>.

[5]. The relative niche area of public BDSM sex in lesbian/queer communities is also being studied by Corrie Hammers, at McCalester College, although with a North American focus, rather than Bauer’s northern European emphasis, with some American respondents.

[6]. See Gayle S. Rubin, “Blood under the Bridge: Reflexions on ‘Thinking Sex,’” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 194–223.

[7]. Special mention in this should go to Pat Califia, cofounder of SAMOIS (the Lesbian S/M group that published *Coming to Power* in 1981), who did much to shape the intellectual agenda around BDSM, along with Rubin.

[8]. It is not a virtual-community study: there is no analysis of the role played by porn or online BDSM communities—but perhaps there is no online BDSM lesbian/queer community that shapes this community, unlike predominantly straight fetlife.com or mostly gay recon.com, and their engagements in their respective social groups.

[9]. Of course, not everyone in these communities cares equally about queer theory, and nor do you have to have gone to an elite institution to read Foucault, Butler, Gilles Deleuze, or Rubin, who are all over the Internet for free. Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France were given for free, and not for the purpose of any qualification for a degree, which made them more widely accessible.

[10]. Hakim Bey, “The Temporary Autonomous Zone,” *Autonopedia*, 1991, <http://nomadism.org/pdf/taz.pdf>.

[11]. Beinstein’s exhibit “Porn That Way” was shown between December 7, 2014, and March 31, 2015, at Schwules Museum, Berlin, <http://www.kristabeinstein.de/aktu.html>.

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