

DECONSTRUCTING DEVIANCE: AGE IN THE GAY MALE  
BDSM COMMUNITY

by

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A THESIS

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Communities interested in bondage and discipline (B&D), sadism and masochism (S&M or SM), or dominance and submission (D/S)—what are commonly referred to as “BDSM” or “kink” communities for short—continuously engage in redefining what is ‘safe,’ ‘healthy,’ ‘desirable,’ and ‘pleasurable,’ as well as renegotiating key facets of identity such as gender, race, and age. However, despite the propensity for these reconceptualizations, there remain many prevailing stereotypes, assumptions, and restrictive norms within kink spaces. This thesis interrogates the paradoxical nature of a sexual subculture which simultaneously *redefines* and *re-entrenches* restrictive normative schemas. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight self-identified participants of the gay male BDSM community are used to investigate the impacts of intra-community norms on the experiences of individual community members. Participants reveal age as a contributor to placement within and navigation of normative schemas. Thus far undervalued as a topic of study, attending to age within discussions of race, power, and mentorship, reveal direct implications for the pursuit of racial equity in BDSM spaces and the conceptualization of age gap relationships.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Gay Male BDSM Community: Redefining and Renegotiating Power and Desire.....	6
Theoretical Frameworks.....	10
Deconstructing Deviance.....	10
Reconceptualizing Age.....	15
An Intersectional Lens.....	23
Methods and Sample.....	26
Results.....	29
Intra-Community Norms: Mainstream Schemas Re-Entrenched.....	29
Navigating Points of Tension.....	34
At the Intersection of Age and Race.....	38
Age Gap Relationships: A Reciprocity of Mentorship.....	50
Conclusion.....	55
Bibliography.....	61

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Pup Play.....	21
Figure 2: AB/DL.....	21
Figure 3: Gayle Rubin’s “Charmed Circle” of sexuality.....	57

## Introduction

It's a Thursday in November, nearly 6 PM on a cold, wet Eugene, Oregon evening. My partner and I stand in line at the Rite-Aid near campus. I'm preoccupied, mindlessly reading the box in my hand until I'm interrupted by Jamie's nudge. Our turn. Stepping up to the counter, I place the box of condoms down and idly play with the impulse-buys off to the right of the register. I'm easily amused by the fidget spinner, a soft snort escaping my mouth as I toy with it. I'm still smiling when Jamie takes the receipt from the cashier, hands me the box, and moves with me toward the doors. When we get to the car, he turns to me.

"Did you hear any of that?" he asks, laughing.

I think about the fidget spinner. "No, hear what?"

"The cashier. She goes," Jamie pauses now, briefly unable to speak through his fits of laughter. "She goes, 'Wow, it is just so sweet that you're buying your son his first condoms.' Something about the kind of parenting she wishes she'd had growing up." Now I'm laughing, too.

This isn't the first time we've been mistaken for father and son. Jamie stands a few inches taller than me, with a heavier-set build, a grey beard, and enough chest hair that tufts of grey and white curls poke out from the collar of his worn white tee. At 48, he's 26 years older than me. It's a difference in age acknowledged in our relationship, for the most part, in only the most minute of ways: his complaints about sore knees, never-ending nudges for me to go to bed at a reasonable hour ("No, 1 AM is NOT reasonable!"), and my propensity for adopting current internet slang and memes. It's moments such as this, here in Rite Aid, where Jamie and I are confronted with the

bigger ways that our age difference opposes normative schemas.<sup>1</sup> By not conforming to conventional expectations, our relationship often does not even register *as* a non-familial relationship. A few weeks after our Rite Aid condom-run, it happens again.

Jamie and I are downtown getting haircuts. Unlike him, it is my first time seeing this particular barber. As the cape is buttoned against the nape of my neck, the barber turns to Jamie, asking, “Oh, is this your son?”

Jamie chuckles. “Yep.” It’s easier than explaining.

The barber turns to face me in the mirror, standing by my side. As I discuss my haircut with him, I look at Jamie behind me in the mirror’s reflection. His eyes are trained on the back of my jockstrap, visible above the waistband of my sweats. I casually raise my arm to scratch my cheek, a motion which, in riding my t-shirt up, exposes the jock’s *Mr.-S-Leather* lettering even more. We grin in unison, gleeful at our private ‘father-son’ communication.

Experiences of being illegible as a couple within normative schemas—and of learning to negotiate that illegibility with humor—have become commonplace for me and my partner. In fact, the majority of the stories we have about people processing our age difference are comedic ones: being mistaken for father and son, the way my friends and family exclusively refer to him as ‘Santa,’<sup>2</sup> or the checker at the grocery store who,

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<sup>1</sup> “Schema theory explains that we use templates (called schema) to orient our perceptions of stimuli and also to guide our interpretations of the meaning of those stimuli.” In other words, normative schemas act as templates or references which keep us oriented when navigating the world. Here, ‘normative schemas’ directly refers to the norms and narratives which inform our perceptions and interactions with others. James W. Potter et al., “Perceptions of Television: A Schema Explanation,” *Media Psychology* Volume 4, Issue no. 1 (2002): 28.

<sup>2</sup> A nickname earned by his cute belly, grey beard, and the jolliness of the crinkles that appear near his eyes when you’ve made him laugh particularly hard. It is important to note that he is *Santa*, not *Santa Claus*.

in a single breath, offered Jamie and I their senior and student discounts, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The first time my grandmother saw a photo of Jamie, she held it up in admiration and exclaimed, “Oh, he’s a handsome guy!” It took weeks for my friends to stop joking about my grandma “stealing my boyfriend.” Perhaps even more amusing was my father’s reaction to being told Jamie’s age. We were talking on the telephone when I’d absentmindedly mentioned it. My father pulled the phone away from his mouth, turning his shock into a muffled “whooooaaa!” Immediately after, I heard him shout to my mother: “Debbie, did you know Santa is older than me?!” Jamie got a kick out of that one.

Reactions to my participation in age gap relationships<sup>4</sup> have been immensely varied. While many have been lighthearted, benign, and comedic, others have not. About a year ago, after seeing a photo of Jamie for the first time, a close friend reacted with repulsion, expressing intense judgment about my continued engagement in the relationship. Based on Jamie’s age and physical appearance, the friend told me that I was obviously being taken advantage of – that no dynamic could exist in which his affection for me was not inherently predatory, perverse, or unhealthy. Even more often, I am asked whether or not Jamie is my ‘sugar daddy.’<sup>5</sup> I am consistently faced with the assumption that the only possible explanation for my sexual and/or romantic interest in him is the *perks*, or that Jamie must ‘compensate’ for his age or appearance in some

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<sup>3</sup> Jamie was - albeit mostly playfully - quite indignant at being perceived as a senior at 48.

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I use ‘age gap relationships’ as a term to describe relationships with a significant (generally, 10+ years) age difference between partners. While I am repeatedly engaged in the discourses surrounding the construction of gay men as predatory or pedophilic, my discussion of ‘age gap relationships’ exclusively refers to relationships between individuals above the age of consent.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Sugar daddy’: “A rich and usually older man who buys presents for or gives money to a younger person, especially a woman, usually so that the younger person will spend time with him and have a sexual relationship with him.”

*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “sugar daddy,” accessed May 22, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sugar-daddy>.

way. Whether good or bad, the ways that Jamie and I are perceived and responded to by those around us are wedged narrowly into a set of normative schemas surrounding age-appropriate sexual intimacy. These narratives, whether given weight or not by the individuals contending with them, are unavoidable.

Being transgender, I have spent much of my life navigating the gendered normative schemas which permeate American society. When I entered the kink/BDSM<sup>6</sup> community, I was 20-years-old and well into my medical transition.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, engaging with kink and BDSM served as a means of gender affirmation. The sexual spaces in which I found myself engaged were male-dominated, primarily gay, and my inclusion in them was a new, exciting addition to the construction of my identity. In these spaces, I found myself faced with a kind of radical queerness I had never been exposed to; a radical queerness which redefined what was ‘safe,’ ‘healthy,’ ‘desirable,’ and ‘pleasurable.’ Most clearly, the renegotiation of these notions had a direct impact on my self-confidence, body image, and in decreasing the intensity of my gender dysphoria.<sup>8</sup> I found that, within these gendered, sexualized spaces, the intersections of my identity (particularly, my gender, age, and race) seemed to produce a particular set of assumptions: that my transness was synonymous with bottomhood, that my stature indicated submissiveness, and that my age pointed to undoubted inexperience.

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<sup>6</sup> BDSM is an acronym standing for bondage and discipline (B/D), dominance and submission (D/S), and sadism and masochism (S/M). It is generally used as an umbrella term to encompass a wide variety of sexual and/or kinky activities. While there are slight nuances within uses of terminology, in general, ‘BDSM’ and ‘kink’ are widely used interchangeably. This is true in this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> At this time, I had been on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for two years and had gotten top surgery (a double mastectomy intended to ‘flatten’ or ‘masculinize’ the chest).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Gender dysphoria’: “A psychological condition marked by significant emotional distress and impairment in life functioning, caused by a lack of congruence between gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth.”

*Dictionary.com, s.y.*, “gender dysphoria,” accessed May 22, 2018, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gender-dysphoria?s=t>.

As I have navigated the kink community over the last two years, and as I have found myself engaged in age gap relationships, I have asked myself what it means to contend with these normative pressures and what the implications of these discourses are on individual identity formation. A while ago, when asked by a friend why I didn't Dom<sup>9</sup> more often, I responded, "I'm a twink-y<sup>10</sup> trans guy without a dick. Who would want me to Dom them?" My response, entrenched within a phallogentric imagination which made my identity (as a man without a penis) undesirable and/or invalid, had fallen trap to the correlation of penis possession with accessibility to positions of power. In other words, I had worried that my lack of a penis would make me undesirable or unrespectable as a Dom. How do we deconstruct these narratives—discovering, accepting, and transforming our own identities in the process? How do we contend with being doubly deviant, in our queerness and our kinkiness, in our opposition to normative schemas? In what ways does this doubled deviance create unique experiences, challenges, and possibilities?

Opinions on BDSM vary widely. Sexual minorities and subcultures have been pathologized and demonized on both societal and institutional levels, and disregarded and/or devalued as important topics of study in academia.<sup>11</sup> Further, scholarship has, until relatively recently, dedicated minimal focus to the positive aspects of kink.<sup>12</sup>

Amongst discourses which seem to either wholly demonize or defend BDSM, I find the

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<sup>9</sup> Here, 'Dom' is used as a verb which describes taking on the dominant role in a scene with some form of power exchange. Traditionally, dominant titles (Dom, Sir, Daddy, Master, etc.) are capitalized to confer respect and authority.

<sup>10</sup> 'Twink': "A young, attractive, usually slender or physically fit gay male."

*Dictionary.com*, "twink," accessed May 22, 2018. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/twink>.

<sup>11</sup> Gayle Rubin, *Devotions: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). iBooks e-book. 405.

<sup>12</sup> Ali Hébert and Angela Weaver, "Perks, problems, and the people who play: A qualitative exploration of dominant and submissive BDSM roles," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* Volume 24, Issue no. 1 (2015): 49-62.

reality of my own nuanced experiences to be unrepresented. Specifically, I find myself intrigued by the way that a community, despite being centered around renegotiations and redefinitions of what is considered ‘normal,’ can still maintain rigid norms and assumptions which its members must navigate.

In this thesis, I use in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight key informants of the gay male BDSM community to investigate the ways in which community members contend with intra-community norms and pressures, and how they navigate the points of tension which arise surrounding these pressures. Furthermore, I argue that while ‘age’ is acknowledged as an instrumental facet of kink and BDSM spaces and history, it remains understudied and undervalued as a contributor to the construction of identities and norms in kink culture. Attending to age reveals nuances in our understandings of race and power which, when acknowledged, have direct implications for the pursuit of racial equity in BDSM spaces and the reconceptualization of mentorship in age gap relationships.

### **The Gay Male BDSM Community: Redefining and Renegotiating Power and Desire**

Kink, at its foundation, is radical in its reconceptualization of what is both desirable and pleasurable. S/m’s emphasis on the role of pain in sexual, intimate, or even casual encounters is in direct contrast to even the simple definition of ‘pleasure.’ Often, the concepts of pleasure and pain are discussed as mutually exclusive; ‘pleasure’ connotes an experience which the presence of ‘pain’ disrupts. In addition, ‘dirty’ kinks

such as watersports<sup>13</sup> and scat play<sup>14</sup> serve as further examples of these renegotiations. There is a profound power in the ability to reframe something taught to be as fundamentally undesirable as bodily waste. The negotiation of these categories and concepts is vital to understanding the unique case which BDSM presents to us in regard to navigating normative schemas.

The kink community's propensity for redefining and renegotiating facets of identity is further evident in activities such as race play, age play, and pup play. Race play involves incorporating race into a scene, generally through the emphasis of racially-based power dynamics or the acknowledgment of histories of racialized violence and/or oppression. Generally, race play can be separated into two primary categories: those aligned with historical, contextual, and/or structural inequalities, and those which invert them. Age play is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of activities and/or roleplays which incorporate age into a scene, including kinks such as adult baby/diaper lovers (AB/DL), Daddy/son archetypal dynamics, and incest role play.<sup>15</sup> Pup play is a heavily performative form of role play which involves inhabiting the role of a puppy. These kinks are all particularly radical in their renegotiation of facets of identity; rather than considering these facets as 'fixed,' they are conceptualized as roles which can be embodied, enacted and/or performed. The unique set of rules by which the kink community operates make it a particularly fascinating case for studying deviance from sexual, social, and conceptual norms and definitions.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Watersports': The incorporation of urine into a scene in some way, most commonly through either urinating on or being urinated on by another.

<sup>14</sup> 'Scat play': The incorporation of feces into a scene.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Bauer, "Bois and grrrls meet their daddies and mommies on gender playgrounds: Gendered age play in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities," *Sexualities* Volume 21, Issue no. 1&2 (2017): 139-55.

The reconceptualization of desire is frequently acknowledged by my interviewees. In discussing norms surrounding the relationship between beauty standards and sexual engagement in kink, 41-year-old Zachary claims,

“Sirs<sup>16</sup> are *lucky*. It’s much easier as a Sir to be known for your skill or your talent, and to get people. So, like, the short, fat, beady-eyed Sir in Florida. People literally fly internationally to spend time in his dungeon because he is so well known.”<sup>17</sup>

Zachary argues that kink culture uses a set of rules to define desirability which extend far beyond conventional attractiveness. By shifting the weight behind factors such as physical appearance, ability, skill level, and experience, kink spaces reconceptualize desire in a way which has direct implications for the negotiations of sexual chemistry, accessibility, and connection.<sup>18</sup> Despite not being conventionally attractive, the aforementioned Florida Sir becomes uniquely desirable through the success with which he executes his inhabited role.

The impact of kink culture’s reconceptualization of desire on BDSM participants is further apparent in my interview with 21-year-old Jason. He sits across from me in a local cafe, sipping the foam leaf from the top of his hot mocha, fondly describing his first kinky experience a few years earlier. It was at Kinksters Under Forty (KUF), a leather group in San Francisco dedicated to educating young gay kinky men on safe BDSM practices. Jason had gotten off of work and headed straight to a dungeon party, where, upon entering, everyone was naked. Recalling his self-consciousness at

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Sir’ is a title used to refer to the dominant individual in a power exchange relationship. It generally comes with connotations of respect, authority, and/or power.

<sup>17</sup> Zachary. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to further clarify here that Zachary does not argue that performativity, in all cases, acts as a trump card to physical appearance, sexual chemistry, or attraction. On the contrary, he acknowledges the limits of the revaluation of desire, outlining the ways in which conventional beauty standards remain influential in navigating play and rejection in kink spaces.

the time, Jason tells me his reaction to the scene: “It was like, ahhhh!”<sup>19</sup> After the exclamation, he laughs, obviously fond of the memory of his overwhelmed, younger self.

I met Jason nearly two years ago, now. It was my first leather event, and, much like Jason’s experience at KUF, I went from self-conscious-and-nervous to naked-and-playing<sup>20</sup> relatively speedily. Directly after the main event (a bondage lesson) had finished, Jason began to chat with me. I soon found myself being toted around the dungeon, delighted as Jason’s tugs dug the rope deeper and deeper into my wrists. His confidence was attractive to me. Though younger than myself, it felt clear that he was comfortable in the dungeon space, and, more importantly, comfortable in others’ perceptions of him.

Jason sips at his drink some more now while I ponder. I turn to him. “You said you were self-conscious at the time, about your body. In the time I’ve known you, you’ve been this really impactful presence of confidence and self-acceptance – what was the journey there?” It is hard for me to picture Jason as self-conscious.

In responding, Jason tells me, “One of the main things I’ve learned about, like, the kink community, is nothing really matters because *someone* out there is into it, and maybe *this guy* doesn’t think you’re attractive, but, who cares?” I ask if he can give me an example of this, and he immediately nods. “Body hair.”<sup>21</sup> Jason’s furriness is a stark difference to the hairless teen twink permeating popular gay porn sites. For Jason, navigating this difference was eased by an entrance into the kink community. He

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<sup>19</sup> Jason. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Playing’ is used colloquially in BDSM circles to refer to active participation in a scene or kink activity.

<sup>21</sup> Jason. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

describes the people that approach him (“—all the time. *All* the time.”) with the kink of tying him up and shaving his body.<sup>22</sup> And, while he isn’t interested in participating in such an activity, he describes the way that being desired—*especially* for a characteristic previously constructed as undesirable—can be profoundly validating.<sup>23</sup> In this way, BDSM’s renegotiation of desire has direct impact on concrete experiences in identity formation, self-acceptance, and navigating body image.

## Theoretical Frameworks

To situate this study, I engage theoretical frameworks in the sociology of deviance, the creation and enforcement of norms, a brief leather history, the conceptualization of age and aging in queer communities, the notion of ‘age performativity,’ and the importance of intersectionality. Together, these frameworks provide a generative way of conceptualizing ‘deviance’ and ‘age’ to better represent the lived experiences of my interviewees.

### Deconstructing Deviance

#### *Sociology of Deviance*

Deviance is used to define the boundaries of human behavior and communities. An absolutist view of deviance purports that particular behaviors, actions, or

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<sup>22</sup> This kink is sometimes colloquially referred to as “The Erotic Art of Shaving.”

<sup>23</sup> Jason. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

characteristics are inherently immoral,<sup>24</sup> wrong in their very nature. In contrast, a constructivist view of deviance takes into account multiple nuances. Most notably, it acknowledges the contexts in which the behavior occurs, as well as the notion that deviance exists only in its application – it must be defined, labeled, and applied *to* the deviant.<sup>25</sup> With this understanding, the deviant may not recognize themselves or their activities *as* deviant until so labeled by outside forces. This labeling can occur in a variety of ways and circumstances, be they formal or informal, public or private, social, individual, etc.<sup>26</sup>

When deviance is analyzed within a constructivist perspective, new understandings of behavior, motivation, and identity become available. Using the behavior of gay male BDSM participants as a specific example, an absolutist view of deviance may focus on the ‘inherent immorality’ of aspects such as the performance of homosexuality, emphases of pleasure and desire, or the ways in which violence is widely utilized and/or repurposed. In comparison, analyzing gay male BDSM participation using a constructivist view of deviance allows the recognition of particular insights. These insights only become visible when the importance of context is recognized, in addition to the recognition that morality is not a concrete ‘truth’ but a culturally, socially, or communally defined concept.

Presenting deviance through the lens of its fluidity is comparable to the ways in which language, gender, sexuality, and age can also be constructed as fluid concepts. These structures are all influenced by varying contextual frameworks, including culture,

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<sup>24</sup> Craig B. Little, “Absolutist Definitions of Deviance,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 1, ed. George Ritzer (2007).

<sup>25</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 92-95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

geography, and history. This fluidity is vital to recognize. In particular, engaging in the construction of these discourses allows us to gain an enhanced understanding of the true lived experiences, behaviors, and motives of minority community members. This engagement is essential to gaining valuable and real insight. The interpretation of my own data and research requires this framework of thought; to get stuck in judgment (i.e. ‘peeing on somebody is gross’) is to negate the *reasons* people choose to engage in such activities. It is absolutely vital to my argument that these nuances in discussing deviance be recognized.

*Sexual Deviance: Leather History*<sup>27</sup>

Historically, sexual deviance has been demonized, pathologized, and scapegoated by both mainstream society and the larger gay rights movement. The politics of sex in the United States and the ‘shock value’ of S/m have worked in tandem to make it a prime target for attacks on the gay community.<sup>28</sup> Gayle Rubin acknowledges influences over sexuality and sexual activity, arguing, “Social movements against prostitution, obscenity, contraception, abortion, and masturbation were able to establish state policies, social practices, and deeply entrenched ideologies which still affect the shape of our sexual experience and our ability to think about it.”<sup>29</sup> These normative schemas are constantly at play in regard to societal conceptions and/or discourses surrounding BDSM activities, communities, and participants.

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Leather’ is commonly used interchangeably with ‘kink’ or ‘BDSM’ when discussing the general community, culture, and/or history. It can connote more particularized aspects of the community such as the notions of protocol or tradition.

<sup>28</sup> Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 368.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 356.

Sexual norms are enforced in society through both informal and formal means of social control. In addition to acknowledging the manifestations of this control—legal sanctions, the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, devaluation in academia, etc.—Rubin also discusses its consequences. Acknowledging the profound grip which society has over the construction of sex and sexuality, Rubin writes, “Society has a great deal of power to insure that sex dissenters are separated from young people, including their own children as well as the next generation of sex perverts. A rough rule of sexual sociology is that the more stigmatized the sexuality, the higher the barriers are to finding one’s way into that community, and the older people are when they finally get over them.”<sup>30</sup> The social control exerted over sexual deviance is multilayered, and overwhelmingly influential.

In addition to societal constructions of BDSM, Rubin is also engaged in discussing its intra-community narratives and pressures. One such pressure lies in regard to the notion of ‘safety’ in kink. Specifically, Rubin writes, “The s/M community is obsessed with safety and has an elaborate folk technology of methods to maximize sensation and minimize danger. These techniques are transmitted largely by older or more experienced members to neophytes.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Rubin identifies two key norms within the BDSM community: an emphasis on safety, and the cyclical narrative commonly used to describe the mentorship of younger/inexperienced members by older/more experienced ones.

In first deconstructing the norms regarding ‘safety,’ it is vital to link the established intra-community norm to its societal context. In particular, it seems relevant

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 388.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 382.

that a community so consistently demonized as dangerous, violent, and abusive has produced such enhanced safety precautions and expectations. It is possible that enhanced safety has come as an opposition to mainstream constructions of BDSM's deviance. Alternatively, in considering the legal history of persecution of sadomasochists—even for *fully consensual* acts of sadomasochism<sup>32</sup>—an over-emphasis on and strictly established tradition of heightened safety could easily be viewed as a direct act of self-protection and -preservation.

Intra-community norms and narratives—such as those around safety and mentorship—result in particular expectations and assumptions in regard to behavior, performance, and identity. Rubin primarily attributes the enforcement of these intra-community norms to the use of informal social control. She discusses the manifestations of this control in kink spaces, writing,

“A point of competition among tops, sadists, dominants, Mistresses, and Masters is over who is the safest (as well as the hottest, the most imaginative, and the most proficient). People who do not play safely – tops who get too drunk, bottoms who are too reckless – are identified, and others are warned of them. Reputations in a small, gossip-ridden community are always fragile, so there is in fact a good deal of social control over patterns of play.”<sup>33</sup>

The use of informal social control in enforcing intra-community norms, Rubin argues, is particularly prevalent in BDSM communities. Deviance from mainstream society is an absolutely vital context in which this thesis sits; however, the primary focus of this paper is centered around engaging in intra-community normative schemas and their impact on the experiences of members of the gay male BDSM community.

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<sup>32</sup> “A sadist is likely to be regarded as a dangerous character. A top is vulnerable to legal prosecution. In the current debate on s/M, a top risks having his or her testimony dismissed. A masochist has more credibility in defending s/M, but risks being held in contempt...The idea that masochists are victims of sadists underlies much of the debate on s/M.” Ibid, 433.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 383.

## Reconceptualizing Age

Age is an influential facet of identity. Academic engagement in the conceptualization and impact of age in society began in the 1940s and has since developed into a multidisciplinary academic field with widespread integration in educational institutions.<sup>34</sup> Professor and sociologist George L. Maddox writes,

“While all societies pay attention to some form of age grading, the meanings and significance of chronological age vary in important ways through time and over space. The meanings of age at any time in our society typically are convenient constructs that we use to serve our social purposes. The prevailing consensus in a society about how to use age – to signal normative expectations about being on track and on time in development – can and does serve to conveniently organize behavior...”<sup>35</sup>

The category of age organizes behavior through constructing normative benchmarks and developmental milestones. These serve as another means of creating and enforcing norms and assumptions, providing schemas with which to orient ourselves.

Mainstream conceptualizations of age in the United States are considered irrefutably chronological/linear. Evaluations of ‘successful’ aging are argued to be contingent on physical ability, independence, and productivity.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps most directly, the prevalence of a plethora of normative schemas surrounding age-appropriate sexuality and sexual intimacy all directly impact the navigation of ‘age’ by individuals in society. Using Linn Sandberg and Barbara Marshall’s construction of age in “Queering Aging Futures,” as well as the notion of ‘age performativity,’ I acknowledge

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<sup>34</sup> Bernice L. Neugarten, *The Meanings of Age: Selected Papers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>35</sup> George L. Maddox, “Introduction to Part One: Definitions and Descriptions of Age,” in *The Meanings of Age: Selected Papers*, ed. Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1996): 19.

<sup>36</sup> Linn J. Sandberg and Barbara L. Marshall, “Queering Aging Futures,” *Societies* Volume 7, Issue no. 21 (2017).

both the ways in which the kink community redefines notions of age, as well as the implications of those redefinitions on individuals' identities and experiences.

*“Queering Aging Futures”*

Despite a recognition of the extensive variation which exists in constructions of age/aging across varying contexts, the academic field of adult development and aging continues to neglect sufficiently in-depth analysis of ‘deviant’ conceptualizations of age. Maddox further writes, “The *age-relevant* society, however, becomes problematic when social change makes the prevailing age norms increasingly impractical in dealing with the observed complexity of how adult lives actually develop.”<sup>37</sup> Tensions arise when mainstream constructions of age norms and the real, lived experiences of individuals navigating age in society do not align. Similarly, the academic field of adult development and aging becomes problematic when it fails to represent the diversity of conceptualizations and negotiations of age which occur among subcultures and sexual minorities. In particular, recent scholarship has begun to incorporate feminist, queer, and crip theories to better account for this diversity.

Discussing the intersection of these disciplines and theoretical frameworks, authors Linn Sandberg and Barbara L. Marshall write,

“There are signs of a growing interest in bringing gerontology into dialogue with feminist, queer and crip theories to critique socially-constructed binaries and embrace diversity in aging experiences and identities. Siding with this critical strand in cultural gerontology, we explore in this paper some perspectives on aging futures. Our use of the terms feminist, queer and crip in this article refers to the attempt to revalue and politicize abject bodies and identities, drawing attention to the “social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds and ways of being” [1] (p. 6). Inspired by the work of critical,

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<sup>37</sup> Maddox, “Introduction to Part One: Definitions and Descriptions of Age,” 19.

post-structuralist scholars such as Robert McRuer [2] and Alison Kafer [1], which combines queer theory's critical approach to heteronormativity with a critical gaze on compulsory able-bodiedness, we interrogate how some ageing bodies and subjectivities are understood as desirable and taken-for-granted while others are constructed as unwanted and problematic."<sup>38</sup>

Using feminist, queer and crip theories to deconstruct the devaluation and stigmatization of particular bodies and identities that occurs in the theories of aging purported in social gerontology, Sandberg and Marshall identify several key points. First, they interrogate the notion of 'successful aging,' a theory of aging which correlates judgments of successfulness or desirability with productivity, activity, ability, and independence.<sup>39</sup> In this discussion, they also address the following: the concept of 'unsuccessful aging' (held in contrast to the characteristics presented previously), the "normative assumptions about gender and sexuality linked to 'success' in aging," and the ways in which the concept of 'successful aging' has been entangled with 'professional, political and commercial interests,' as well as founded in 'consumerist discourses.'<sup>40</sup> To add another layer of nuance, Sandberg and Marshall interrogate the gendered differences of these constructions; in particular, they address the expectation placed upon men in maintaining their sexual interest and performance across time.<sup>41</sup> The intersectionality of this analysis reveals nuances to normative schemas surrounding aging.

Following the construction of aging, Sandberg and Marshall shift their argument to focus on the ways that applying feminist, queer and crip theories changes these discourses – primarily in the constructed notion of *futurity*. They argue that theories of

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<sup>38</sup> Sandberg and Marshall. "Queering Aging Futures," 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

successful aging are hinged on the notion of possible futures – a requirement which is assumed or taken for granted, and which fails to recognize what have “emerged as central concerns in recent queer studies”: the theorization of futurity and conceptualization of queer temporalities.<sup>42</sup> When these non-normative identities are scrutinized, the ways in which social aging theories fail to account for a diversity of experience are clear.

When Sandberg and Marshall interrogate the constructions of aging and queer notions of futurity, they emphasize several important contexts. They identify key constructions regarding age and deviance (and the subsequent impact of these constructions on the notion of aging), which include the ways that ‘gay male futures are constructed as dreaded and miserable,’ “queer generative opportunities are still shadowed by the spectre of adult queers...as predatory ‘recruiters,’” and notions of ‘queer time,’ which challenges assumptions made by a heteronormatively-based life path projected as normalized or ideal.<sup>43</sup> I highlight these contexts to add to the framing of age and aging within which my study is situated.

### *Age Performativity*

The general challenges presented to mainstream conceptualizations of age are further complicated by the kink community’s ability to renegotiate facets of identity through performativity. Addressing the notion of ‘age performativity,’ Sandberg and Marshall write,

“Another key argument is how gender performativity is not only linked to sexuality but also to age, and performing age is in turn connected to certain

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<sup>42</sup> Sandberg and Marshall, “Queering Aging Futures,” 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

modes of heteronormative temporalities. Though little discussed within gender studies and queer theory, age holds great potential for how to rethink sexualities, gender and embodiment... There are parallels between the performative character of both age, gender and sexuality, where performing an aged and gendered/sexual self in coherent ways is crucial for being culturally intelligible.”<sup>44</sup>

Sandberg and Marshall’s focus here falls primarily on outlining the ways in which examining age can reveal more about gender, sexuality, and embodiment. However, here, I bring us to a brief pause.

Age is often conceptualized as inherent, linear, and absolutely inescapable. However, it is also true that the ‘coherent performance of age is crucial for being culturally intelligible.’<sup>45</sup> It is this performance on which I shift to focus. Here, I do not intend to extend Sandberg’s theories, but rather, to pause with the notion of “age performativity” as its own idea. To think of age as performative is to engage in the ways that age is a navigated facet of every individual’s identity every single day; a facet which shapes institutions, societies, and cultures. As Sandberg acknowledges, age can be considered one aspect of this intersectional approach, entangled with gender, sexuality, etc. Through the notion of “age performativity,” my focus on the gay male BDSM community becomes particularly illuminated. Specifically, by examining examples of the ways in which the BDSM community enacts age in a defined and tangible way, I emphasize *performativity* as a unique way of reconceptualizing age.

The first kink on which I focus is ‘pup play.’ Cited as the first academic study on pup play, Mark McCormack and Liam Wignall’s “An Exploratory Study of a New Kink Activity: “Pup Play”” describes pup play as –

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<sup>44</sup> Sandberg and Marshall, “Queering Aging Futures,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

“—a form of role-play in which adult humans adopt characteristics that mimic the behavior of young dogs. Normally framed as a kinky sexual activity, individuals tend to adopt a submissive role, imitate the posture of a dog, and wear a collar and other “gear” associated with owning a dog. On websites created by and for “pups,” pup play is distinguished from other animalistic fetishes, such as pony play, but emphasizing the importance of intimacy, relaxation, and forms of social play (“Puppy play 101,” 2015). Here, the temporary creation of a new world of meaning alongside emphasis on fun and “simple, carefree existence” (“Puppy play 101,” 2015) mirrors how play is conceptualized more generally (e.g., Kelly, 2012), albeit with a sexual component.”<sup>46</sup>

While at first glance, a kink involving performing the embodiment of an animal may feel irrelevant to a discussion about age, McCormack and Wignall’s final sentence in this quote represents the ways in which I intend to extend pup play’s performative nature to address its age-based facets. Following a brief outline of the performative nature of pup play, I will address the ways in which pup play can serve as a direct example of age performativity.

Pup play’s emphasis on ‘headspace’ creates an embodied experience for participants. And, while discussion of the performative nature of pup play most often centers around the animalistic components, it is equally important to note that pup play is an emulation of *puppies*. Their youthfulness is of equal importance as their pup-hood. Pup play can be about getting pets, freedom, inhibition. In other words—being free from responsibility and being cared for. These are paralleled as key facets in the construction of youth. By performing youthfulness and puppyhood, the concept of age is deconstructed to mean not a specific number of years of existence, but of a headspace which can be embodied, performed, and enacted.

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<sup>46</sup> Liam Wignall and Mark McCormack, “An Exploratory Study of a New Kink Activity: “Pup Play,”” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Volume 46 Issue no. 3 (2017): 801-811.



Figure 1 [Pup play]

*Whisper Pup: puppy, leatherman, and Mr. Daddy's Barbershop Leather 2018, photographed here in pup headspace, mummified to a pole at Folsom Street Fair 2016.*



Figure 2 [AB/DL]

*Lil' Whisper: Padded and in little headspace, Lil' Whisper is photographed here lounging in his "I [heart] Daddy" onesie, cuddling a stuffed animal puppy.*

In addition to the production of youthfulness in pup play, kink and BDSM communities also address age through the popularity of the activities which may fall under the umbrella term 'age play.' While 'age play' can reference a myriad of age-related dynamics, kinks, fetishes, and behaviors,<sup>47</sup> I will here focus on two particularly prevalent forms: AB/DL and Daddy/son. In "Adult Baby/Diaper Lovers: An

<sup>47</sup> Robin Bauer classifies age-based community practices into three categories: age play (the embodiment of a role which differs from one's real-life age), intergenerational play (embodiment of archetypal constructions of intergenerational relationships), and kinship play (roleplaying incestuous relationships). Robin Bauer, "Bois and grrrls meet their daddies and mommies on gender playgrounds: Gendered age play in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities," *Sexualities* Volume 21, Issue No. 1&2 (2017): 142.

Exploratory Study of an Online Community Sample,” authors Kaitlyn Hawkinson and Brian D. Zamboni write about their sample,

“Members of this online community generally refer to themselves as adult babies (AB), those who enjoy role-playing as infants, and diaper lovers (DL), those who wear diapers voluntarily but may not engage in other baby-like behaviors. As a group, they are referred to as Adult Baby/Diaper Lovers (ABDL).”<sup>48</sup>

There is a clear distinction between AB and DL, however, for simplicity’s sake, I will continue to refer to the group by its inclusive whole, ABDL. As outlined in this quote, participation in ABDL communities and activities is directly linked to the depiction of infancy. The performative nature of its enactment makes it a particularly powerful example of the ways in which age can be reconceptualized through engagement in age play activities.

Even more prevalent in the gay male BDSM community are those engaged in age-related dynamics such as ‘Daddy/son.’ Whether comedically (Jamie and I’s fun in the barbershop) or seriously, Daddy/son and similar dynamics are in direct dialogue with constructions of age. Robin Bauer argues that age play generally functions within particular parameters, writing,

“The main dynamic is a significant age difference between partners, either real (thus no age play involved) or performed. This often took the form of *responsible adult play*. The roles Daddi and Mommi were mostly not understood as imitating blood relations, but as archetypal...”<sup>49</sup>

In particular, Bauer writes that the archetypal nature of these identities allows them to be accessed by a greater number of individuals—especially individuals who may not have had access to the label under its normative definitions. For example, an 18-year-

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<sup>48</sup> Kaitlyn Hawkinson and Brian D. Zamboni, “Adult Baby/Diaper Lovers: An Exploratory Study of an Online Community Sample,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* Volume 43, Issue No. 5 (2014): 863-77.

<sup>49</sup> Robin Bauer, “Bois and grrrls meet their daddies and mommies on gender playgrounds: Gendered age play in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities,” 142.

old twink may be able to embody “Daddy” in its archetypal sense, rather than the literal. Acknowledging and emphasizing the performativity of these labels changes their negotiation and accessibility.

### **An Intersectional Lens**

Coined by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘intersectionality theory’ is a well-established principle which purports that the overlapping of various identity markers (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) influences the specific experiences an individual has. Different combinations of social identities may produce specific or particularized manifestations of oppression and/or marginalization.<sup>50</sup> For example, “intersectional feminism” is feminism which takes into account the ways in which women of color experience particular forms of sexism which are not faced by white women. Their racial identity alters their gendered experience, often enhancing or increasing oppression or marginalization. In this thesis, the main overarching intersections of identity on which I am focusing are those of age, sexuality, and race. In navigating both mainstream society and the kink community, intersectionality is a vital component in shaping experiences. In particular, there is a direct correlation between opportunity/safety in deviance, and possession of privilege. While age and race are my main focuses, other facets of identity remain directly intertwined.

A long history of colonialism and racism in the United States serves as a historical backdrop for the prevailing racist assumptions and stereotypes within sexualized spaces today. Constructions of the sexuality of people of color range across

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<sup>50</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, Volume 43, Issue No. 6 (1991): 1241-1299

contexts and groups. In the gay male BDSM community, racism has manifested in a variety of ways: exclusion from community spaces, fetishism, devaluation, hypersexualization, tokenism, etc. ‘Colonial fantasies’<sup>51</sup> engage in scripts which purport all Asians as submissive bottoms, available to pleasure and serve white men. Rare depictions of Asian men as masculine nearly exclusively fall within the stereotype of the ‘kung fu master / ninja/samurai,’ and are almost always desexualized.<sup>52</sup> Discussing the inseparability between these fantasies and their real-world contexts, Richard Fung writes, “In fact, the ‘house boy’ is one of the most persistent white fantasies about Asian men. The fantasy is also a reality in many Asian countries where economic imperialism gives foreigners, whatever their race, the pick of handsome men in financial need.”<sup>53</sup> Structural systems of power and oppression, and the racial stereotypes and narratives which exist in sexualized spaces, are undoubtedly interconnected.

Constructions of Black male sexuality are similarly rigid. Prevailing stereotypes purport Black gay men to indiscriminately have well above average-sized penises, to be sexually rough and/or dominating, and to be undoubtedly hypersexual. The U.S. has a long history of exerting control over the Black body; here, we see this control manifested in its oversexualization, objectification, and fetishization. These stereotypes are continually reinforced through presentations of Black sexuality. Describing this cycle, Kobena Mercer writes, “Mass-media stereotypes of black men—as criminals, athletes, entertainers—bear witness to the contemporary repetition of such *colonial fantasy*, in that the rigid and limited grid of representations through which black male

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<sup>51</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 176.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono (2004): 237.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 242.

subjects become publicly visible continues to reproduce certain *idées fixes*, ideological fictions and psychic fixations, about the nature of black sexuality and the “otherness” it is constructed to embody.”<sup>54</sup> The plethora of ‘BBC’<sup>55</sup> and Black male gangbang porn serve as examples of these reinforcements. Overall, the racial contexts of the experiences of BDSM participants are vital to acknowledge in locating the experiences of my interviewees, especially in interrogating the ways in which age can compound pre-existing forms of marginalization.

In proceeding, I situate the following research within the contextual frameworks outlined thus far: in the constructions of deviance, norms, leather history, conceptualizations of age/aging, the notion of ‘age performativity,’ and the lens of intersectionality. Using these frameworks, I construct a way of conceptualizing age which better reflects the experiences of my interviewees. In moving forward, I ask my reader to consider age within these contexts

## Methods and Sample

In discussing their methodology, Robin Bauer writes, “I regard my interviewees and myself as positioned within complex social power structures, which influence—though not determine—how we perceive ourselves, our practices, and our surroundings. Thus, the discourses my interviewees generate in describing their practices and experiences as well as my own analyses represent embodied, *situated* knowledges (Haraway 1991b).”<sup>56</sup> Bauer acknowledges the importance of our social contexts in shaping our perceptions and actions as individuals. This methodological explanation

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<sup>54</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 176.

<sup>55</sup> ‘BBC’: acronym meaning ‘big black cock.’

<sup>56</sup> Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of the Dyke/Trans Communities,” 238.

can be similarly applied to my own study. In approaching this project, I likewise must understand myself and my interviewees as “positioned within complex social power structures.” And, similarly, the discussions engaged in between my interviewees and I are “embodied, *situated* knowledges”; situated within our own experiences and surroundings.

To better understand this point, I turn back to Haraway, who writes, “We unmasked the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our ‘embodied’ accounts of the truth...” Haraway continues, “...but we do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities.”<sup>57</sup> Following this thought, my study aims to present the embodied experiences of eight self-identified members of the gay male BDSM community, situating their experiences within existing power structures. Understanding the study in this way is vital, as it presents a new kind of ‘feminist objectivity,’<sup>58</sup> which allows value to be placed on the real, lived experiences of minority voices. In addition to this reframing of the concept of objectivity, understanding the experiences and analyses presented in this paper through such a lens allows what Haraway refers to as ‘the ability to translate knowledges among communities,’<sup>59</sup> or, in particular, presents the voices, experiences, and identities of my interviewees in a way that can be digested by and contextualized for this thesis’ audience.

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<sup>57</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* Volume 14, Issue No. 3 (1988): 578.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

For this study, I conducted eight interviews of self-identified members of the gay male BDSM community, ranging from 21 to 53 years of age. The interviewees were all identified and recruited at BDSM-focused public community events. The interviews were semi-structured through the utilization of an open-ended interview guide, conducted in a private location of each interviewees' choosing or over the telephone, and lasted roughly between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours long. Each individual has been anonymized with the use of an online random name generator, and specific locations and titles have been removed or altered to maximize interviewees' privacy.

Particularly due to the small sample size, it is vital to note that the intent of this research is not to be representative or conclusive. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of giving platform to the voices and experiences of individual community members in an attempt to theorize from lived experiences, as well as to examine the ways that social constructions and systems of power manifest in the lives, behaviors, and identities of individuals.

After the interviews were conducted and simultaneously audio recorded, they were transcribed and subsequently analyzed through thematic organization and the application of relevant theory. It is important to note that I have chosen not to include the full interview transcriptions or audio recordings. This conscious decision is twofold: 1) a result of maximizing privacy and confidentiality, and 2) a recognition that each interviewee provides unique experiences and intersectional identities which beg more particularized and in-depth focus. By intensifying the focus on these areas, I hope to shed further light on their importance.

Concluding the discussion regarding my methodological choices, I here aim for transparency in my role as an interviewer. In interrogating the ways in which my identity may have influenced, shaped, or impacted my interviews/interviewees, I find myself faced with a few conclusions. First, the decision to include my own voice and story in this thesis is a purposeful one. This thesis crosses disciplines, is based in interviews, yet flirts too with ethnography and creative non-fiction. Its multidisciplinary nature is both intentional and, I argue, valuable.

Second, in my methodology, I hope to challenge a common assumption regarding ‘bias’ – one which presents any kind of subjectivity within research as a severe detriment. On the same topic, Judith Halberstam writes, “We need to alter our understandings of subcultures in several important ways in order to address the specificities of queer subcultures and queer subcultural sites. First, we need to rethink the relation between theorist and subcultural participant, recognizing that, for many queers, the boundary between theorist and cultural producer might be slight or at least permeable.”<sup>60</sup> Recognizing potential overlap between these roles need not be a foundation for negating the importance of subsequent studies or findings. Rather, it can be conceptualized as a particular aspect of researching queer and sexual subcultures.

In particular, my role as a young, kinky, trans and gay man, my role as an occupant of the kink spaces which I am exploring academically, and my existing connections with my interviewees are, I challenge, not downfalls to this study. Rather, they are unique means of insight. Bauer makes a similar argument about membership in a community being an asset for studying that community, arguing, “Furthermore,

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<sup>60</sup> Judith Halberstam, “What’s that smell? Queer temporalities and subcultural lives,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Volume 6 Issue no. 3 (2003): 161.

interviewees have repeatedly pointed out that they were willing to talk frankly about their experiences with me as the researcher because of my having been a well-known member of the community.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, I purport that my role as an insider to the gay male BDSM community provides me with a particular opportunity for openness and honesty from my participants, one coupled with a feeling of safety in their participation. In this way, it is the greatest asset I could have had.

## **Results**

### **Intra-Community Norms: Mainstream Schemas Re-Entrenched**

Despite the kink community’s heavy engagement in reconceptualizing and renegotiating facets of identity, normative schemas surrounding differing facets of identity remain prevalent. As previously acknowledged, leather culture does not exist as its own entity, unaffected or unexposed to the discourses or contexts in which it is situated. In many ways, despite an ability to redefine overarching concepts and constructions of identity, kink communities remain permeated with constructed norms—those idolizing youth, idealizing conventional beauty standards such as thinness, hairlessness, large penis size, etc., and valuing physical ability. The paradoxical tension of these simultaneous renegotiations and re-entrenchments of normative schemas is a primary focus later in this paper. However, first, I preface the engagement of these tensions by discussing a few key ways in which these re-entrenchments occur in the lived experiences of my interviewees.

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<sup>61</sup> Bauer, “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of the Dyke/Trans BDSM Community,” 240.

One key aspect of the notion of ‘successful aging’<sup>62</sup> is the value it places on remaining physically able. In the research behind this social theory, discourses surrounding productivity, independence, and an ability to remain unburdensome to society can be seen as motivating factors behind establishing an older individual’s worth in connection to their physical ability.<sup>63</sup> In discussing common narratives surrounding BDSM, 41-year-old Zachary tells me, “I sort of assumed that you just, that everyone went from being a boy to a switch to a Sir to dead. Hopefully before they were 60 and creepy cause, yeah, I’m open to age but 60 is like...” He grimaces here, then laughs. “But I’ve since learned that there are like players in their 60s and 70s and, damn, I wish I had their technique. I wish I could do the things they can do with a flogger.”<sup>64</sup> Here, Zachary emphasizes the importance of skill and experience, and again discusses the ways in which the kink community can re-value the importance of various factors; age, skill, ‘beauty.’ However, in the same breath, Zachary speaks of a fictional man in his 60s with enough distaste to grimace – a direct judgment on this man’s age-related appeal (or, unappeal), and, a judgment which is only reconceptualized when he is skilled, knowledgeable, and above all else, physically able.

Another interviewee, Tristan, engages in the topic of successful aging as well, though with different emphasis. While Zachary was heavily occupied with the value of physical ability in kink, Tristan describes his own value of sexual interest/activity. In discussing his older partner, Tristan says,

“Not only do we engage in BDSM, but *he*... that’s *his* requirement. I didn’t know this, either! Up until recently... recently I said, “Babe, what if one day I

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<sup>62</sup> See page 15 for a definition of ‘successful aging.’

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Zachary. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

wasn't interested in doing BDSM anymore?" and he said, "Well, we'd have to sit down and have a long discussion about our relationship." And I was like --"<sup>65</sup>

Tristan over-emphasizes a gasp here, his hand over his mouth in dramatized shock, a gleeful grin plastered across his face. He continues to talk about the effects of the age gap between them. Much like my own experience with my partner Jamie, and the experiences of interviewees Nate, Alec, Kevin, and Jason, and many other men in age gap relationships, he tells me that the difference in age is of relatively little importance in private interactions and relationship negotiations between he and his partner.

However, discussing sex, he continues, "I've taught him how to stand up and have sex, which he hasn't done in 10 years."<sup>66</sup> There is a clear value placed upon sexual engagement, ability, and interest. The constructions of gay men as 'obsessed with sex,' as overly promiscuous, and/or as hypersexualized, all add further nuance to Sandberg and Marshall's intersectional understanding of gendered differences in aging discourses.

In addition to the re-entrenchment of mainstream values surrounding aging, the specific notion of 'unsuccessful aging' also maintains presence in kink spaces. As Sandberg and Marshall interrogate the impact of a queer identity on the notion of futurity, I find myself intrigued by the ways that engaging in dialogue surrounding HIV/AIDS can illuminate further nuance to these constructions. In particular, these illuminations further exemplify the way that conceptualizations of 'unsuccessful aging' can disproportionately affect particular communities.

Tristan became positive when he was 24. Looking back on the experience, he describes the way it almost felt like a relief, "like, oh, good, now that that's out of the way, I can get back to life." And while he still isn't afraid of it, he says he now finds

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<sup>65</sup> Tristan. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

himself “having second thoughts about what they didn’t tell us about it. They don’t say, *Welcome to HIV, here’s what you should really expect, and even on meds, here are things you might experience.*”<sup>67</sup> For Tristan, these unmentioned consequences include opportunistic infections, susceptibility to sickness, and early discontinued production of testosterone. Early ‘menopause’ could be considered one concrete way that the aging process is disrupted for individuals with HIV. It presents a different conceptualization of normative, linear, scheduled benchmarks, and it presents individuals such as Tristan with a dislocated experience which they must contend with.

The notion of futurity and queer time is undoubtedly most impactful in my interview with Jed, 45. We sit in his home, drinking tea in the light of the sun coming through the window to my right. His first partner was 19 years older, he tells me, and HIV positive.

“After he died, that really shut a lot of things down... ‘I’ve got HIV, I’m gonna die before I’m 30’... I wanted to make good use of my life, so I started practicing, became a monk. Fourteen years of full-time spiritual exploration.”

He talks about this spiritual exploration in more depth later in our conversation, telling me,

“My experience as a monk, which was 14 years of ‘no I’m not following your heteronormative social programming, *go get married have kids retire – oh, you’re gay? Okay, go get married have two dogs and a cat and buy a house and be acceptable.*’ I’m busy running around in my monk robes and skirt, y’know.”<sup>68</sup>

In these two quotes, Jed finds himself directly engaged in the conversations of queer futurity and time. For Jed, becoming HIV positive completely changed the possibility of having an accessible perception of a successful future. Believing he would be dead before 30, he chose to search for meaning in a new way. And, through his queerness

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<sup>67</sup> Tristan. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Jed. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

and spirituality, Jed found himself engaged in the concept of ‘queer time,’ defined by Judith Halberstam as “unscripted by the convention of family, inheritance and child-rearing.”<sup>69</sup> Jed’s experiences provide an interesting example of the paradoxical nature of kink’s normative schemas: in the face of HIV/AIDS, Jed’s future was constructed as nonexistent, his aging process immediately categorized as unsuccessful. However, he simultaneously reframes the notion of time and the linearly placed life benchmarks he is expected to reach and/or desire. In these ways, we see the paradox in effect.

Understanding the real ways in which the constructions of age/aging, futurity, and time can have direct implications on the experiences of sexual subcultures and individual community members is vital to this project. And, additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that the kink community’s ability to renegotiate and redefine power dynamics and roles is not all-encompassing; it exists within a societal context which has unquestionable effect on the interactions and experiences which manifest. Within these examples of re-entrenched normative schemas, interviewees Zachary, Tristan, and Jed all acknowledge and/or reinforce the norms outlined. Moving forward, I shift focus from the mainstream normative schemas and community members’ re-entrenchments of them to concentrate on kink spaces’ *intra*-community norms and assumptions. The *intra*-community normative schemas at play in the kink community present its members with a particular set of expectations which, when opposed, present points of tension which must be contended with.

### **Navigating Points of Tension**

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<sup>69</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005): 2.

In this thesis, I use ‘points of tension’ to reference the experiences that are a direct result of an individual’s identity or behavior failing to fall within that which is expected of them. In my own life, these points of tension have manifested in a variety of ways. When facets of my identity are used as foundations for particular assumptions (e.g., my transness becoming synonymous with bottomhood, submission, inexperience, etc.), an expectation of particular behaviors and/or performances becomes present.

On Recon, a gay kink/fetish app, members must quantify their levels of dominance and submission between 0-100%, by increments of 10. My profile rests evenly at 50/50. In addition to this centered location, my profile’s complimentary list of ‘Interested in: [insert activities here]’ contains no information regarding my role in each of its listed activities; for example, ‘bondage’ is listed, but preference between *ropist* and *ropee* is left unidentified. However, the messages in my inbox indicate an entirely different story. With every other message addressed to “boy,” a power dynamic is structured and presumed which, despite zero indication of a tendency toward submission over domination, assumes my role as a sub and designates title of *boy*. When this assumption is opposed, a point of tension is created which must be navigated.

Earlier, I discussed Jason’s coming-to-terms with being a semi-twinky, *furry* young gay. For Jason, the point of tension created by his body hair (contrasted against the prevalence of the ideal-typed hairless and smooth twink) was eased by an entrance into community spaces. This entrance included the subsequent understanding that, within kink, the most undesirable of things can be restructured by *someone* as sexy, appealing, and attractive. With this realization, a kind of ‘fuck-it’ attitude was created. “It’s okay to feel sexy about yourself even if you’re not a ripped muscle stud or wax

every day,”<sup>70</sup> he tells me. For Jason, engaging in community spaces allowed him to deconstruct the concept of desirability, redefining it to be validating rather than inaccessible.

Another point of tension arises in my interview with Zachary, 39. He tells me about his first time being called *Daddy*, during a scene in his early 30s. He describes his emotional reaction as, succinctly, ‘insulted.’ In Zachary’s eyes, ‘Daddy’ had direct connotations: specifically, being *old* and *unattractive*.<sup>71</sup> Being labeled as such by a play partner, in combination with a significant distaste for and lack of identification with the term, produced a point of tension which Zachary suddenly found himself directly contending with. Like Jason’s, the resolution of Zachary’s point of tension came through engagement in the kink community. He says,

“I went from having kinky sex to being part of a kink community outside of the bedroom... One of the things that happened...as an actual community person, is realizing that the boy could be ten years older than the Sir. Like, that did not make sense to me until I got into the community. The idea that you would call someone younger than you “Daddy” because he has a caring but strict nature... It took me a long time to get into that.”<sup>72</sup>

Entering the community, for Zachary, produced a realization that ‘Daddy’ didn’t have to mean ‘old and unattractive,’ but could instead imply a ‘caring but strict nature.’ Kink culture’s negotiation of titles and the performance and/or enactment of roles reframe Zachary’s point of tension.

In my interview with Nate, a third point of tension arises when discussing assumptions made surrounding age and experience. Nate’s entrance into kink came later, in his 30s. Now, just a short few years later, he finds himself a prominent

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<sup>70</sup> Jason. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Zachary. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

community member and leather group founder. The history of the leather community is heavily entrenched in correlating status and respect with knowledge and ability – a fact which presents Nate’s relative inexperience and his position of authority within the community as a kind of paradoxical situation. In approaching my interview with Nate, I find myself intrigued by this paradox, curious about how it could possibly manifest in his lived experiences.

Nate’s voice is calm, with an easy cadence. I’m at my desk, taking notes as he speaks to me over the phone. I’ve asked him about his experiences with younger men in his leather group. He tells me that particularly due to his age and his role as a community organizer and activist, subs often make an assumption that he is an educated, knowledgeable, skilled, ‘experienced leather Daddy.’<sup>73</sup> Nate is up front with these men, dispelling their assumptions and negotiating the interaction and play in the same way he does other situations; with communication, directness, and honesty. He tells me this with a calm confidence.

“Does it ever make you uncomfortable? Those assumptions?” I’m genuinely curious.

His response comes near immediately. “Definitely!” For Nate, the tension between these assumptions and his lived experiences has had real, tangible implications. Resulting discomfort has impacted his navigation of the group’s space and influenced he and his partner’s decision to play or not at group meetings. However, more than anything else, Nate describes a distinct navigation of age gap interaction within the context of leather history. He says, “There is an old standing dynamic—in the gay

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<sup>73</sup> Nate. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamosn. March 2018.

community as a whole, but *definitely* within the BDSM community of younger guys being taken advantage of, manipulated, or seen as fresh meat.” Nate’s emphasis is clear: “I didn’t want us to be perceived as like, *oh, you created this group just to have sex with young guys.*”<sup>74</sup> His wariness of being seen as predatory has had a direct impact on his navigation of these points of tension.

Deviation from intra-community normative schemas results in a diversity of experiences. For Jason and Zachary, the kink community’s ability to renegotiate and reconceptualize facets of identity is sufficient enough to relieve the anxieties surrounding body image and self-perception which arise from contending with particular points of tension. In this way, the paradox of leather culture’s renegotiation and re-entrenchment of norms remains unproblematic. It causes these anxieties through the continued permeation of normative schemas surrounding body type and archetypal roles, however, it also provides the resolutions to these anxieties.

### **At the Intersection of Age and Race**

#### *Earning Respect as a Young Black Master*

I’m sitting with Ricky on a soft, black couch, sipping the water his quiet pup fetched us a few minutes earlier at Ricky’s command. Ricky, 24, lived in West Africa until he moved to the United States at 18. He’d been introduced to kink through gaining access to a regular play party thrown by a couple in the community there. He and the couple had ‘clicked really well,’ he tells me, and he quickly found himself in the role of their service-oriented sub for a year. Ricky describes this year to me with specificity: it

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

was a mentorship, he says. An education in the headspace of being submissive, and a psychological journey regarding vulnerability and service. For Ricky, moving overseas at 18 felt like an opportunity for an easy transition. After primarily subbing in his entrance to kink in West Africa, he came to the U.S. and “took on the title of Master and went from there.”<sup>75</sup>

I ask Ricky about his experiences as a young Black sub. Specifically, I found myself wondering, does the racial history of the United States (think, for example, of the direct references to the enslavement of Black people through the words “Master” and “boy”) impact young men of color’s navigation of BDSM power dynamics? Ricky’s crossing of geographical borders through his move from West Africa to the U.S. was reflected also in his transition between roles of sub and Dom, making his spatial location and kink practices directly correspondent with one another. Regarding the role of race during his time as a sub, Ricky tells me, “I wasn’t in a country where that racial history existed. I was in a country where *I* was the majority.” And, in moving to the U.S., he says, “I didn’t recognize racism when it hit me in the face... I hadn’t been raised to recognize when something was done because of the color of my skin versus when it was done cause... it was just done.”<sup>76</sup> While not a large factor in his experiences surrounding submission, race remains a prevalent basis for the assumptions Ricky faces in navigating domination.

In recent years, there has been increasing dialogue surrounding the role of race in the gay and kink communities, as well as the systems of oppression and discrimination which remain overarchingly prevalent. One manifestation of this

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<sup>75</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

dialogue is in regard to online social apps such as Grindr, Recon, Scruff, and Adam4Adam. The prevalence of profile bios stating ‘preferences’ such as: “NO fats NO femmes NO blacks,” or “into white guys, just a preference,” or “twinks + Asians and Blacks +++++” reveal the stark manifestations of these assumptions/biases. Whether fetishistic or dismissive, these manifestations have direct consequences for men of color.

In addition to a more general look into the treatment of racial minorities in these community spaces, it is important to outline the very specific narratives which serve as the foundation for such treatment. In Welcome to the Jungle, Kobena Mercer writes,

“As black men we are implicated in the same landscape of stereotypes which is dominated and organized around the needs, demands and desires of white males. Blacks “fit” into this terrain by being confined to a narrow repertoire of “types” – the super sexual stud and the sexual “savage” on the one hand, or the delicate, fragile and exotic “oriental” on the other... The repetition of these stereotypes in gay pornography betrays the circulation of “colonial fantasy” (Bhabha, 1983), that is a rigid set of racial roles and identities which rehearse scenarios of desire in a way which traces the cultural legacies of slavery, empire and imperialism. The circuit for the structuring of fantasy in sexual representation is still in existence.”<sup>77</sup>

Mercer’s account of these narratives—particularly of the ‘super sexual stud’ and the ‘sexual “savage”’—are precisely the stereotypes which I find myself discussing with Ricky.

In addition to these stereotypes, a key aspect of racial equity broached in my interview with Ricky is in regard to representation. In particular, Ricky discusses the lack of people of color within community spaces. “It’s not because they’re not *there*,” he argues, “It’s because they just don’t *show*.” For Ricky, the explanation for this lack

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<sup>77</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 133.

of diversity is not simple or concise, but rather, multi-faceted and complicated. He discusses the role of tokenism with me, saying,

“If I *do* go, and I’m the only black person there, the assumption will be that my dick is 10 inches long and massively, like, Coke-can thick. That I must have grown up somewhere where I learned how to be kinda-ghetto, kinda-thug, kinda-DL, and just like, a rough top in general. And, oh, I *must* have other Black friends that can all join me and tag-team your poor, abused hole. That’s the kind of stuff people start thinking.”<sup>78</sup>

Ricky is examining the same racial stereotypes of the ‘sexual stud’ and ‘sexual savage’ discussed by Mercer. In addition, he is in direct dialogue with what Mercer refers to as the ‘myth of the big black willy.’<sup>79</sup> Acknowledging the ways in which these dialogues are interwoven is vital to understanding the conceptualization of Black men in sexualized spaces.

Continuing, Ricky tells me more about his observations of the ‘myth of the big black willy’ at play.

“If you are a Black man and your dick is not slightly above average, it’s weird how quickly you will not be taken seriously... I’ve seen at bathhouses, at events, if a Black man has his dick out and it’s not this massive piece of meat swinging between his legs... There will be people surrounding him the entire time his clothes are on because they can’t see it, and they don’t know. And as soon as they know, they scatter. It’s like, just five seconds ago you were right there asking to suck his dick, asking to interact with him, asking to be his sub. You were respecting him as a Master because of ideas you had about what he was packing. And then, when it didn’t meet the porn version of it, you bailed.”

He acknowledges his own personal experiences, continuing, “I by no stretch of the imagination have a monster dick hiding in my jeans, but, when *I* whip my dick out, we’re okay—I pass the Black man’s test.”<sup>80</sup> For Ricky, the ‘myth of the big black willy’ does not produce a point of tension. However, at its baseline, Ricky finds himself

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<sup>78</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 190.

<sup>80</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

passing a test which he is involuntarily forced to take; moving through gay and kink spaces within the context of these stereotypes produces a particularized experience which must be navigated.

In combination with other facets of identity, age plays a key role in an individual's navigation of the kink world. In particular, analyzing the intersections of age and race in regard to 'masterhood' can reveal new ways of conceptualizing the racism and marginalization prevalent in kinky gay spaces. Especially relevant to a community entrenched in norms surrounding the construction of masculinity, Mercer writes, "Whereas prevailing definitions of masculinity imply power, control and authority, these attributes have been historically denied to black men since slavery."<sup>81</sup> The denial of roles of power and masculinity to Black men, as well as the age-based restrictions in accessing roles of power and/or domination, function in tandem to produce an enhanced experience of devaluation and marginalization for young Black Doms. In my interview with Ricky, these implications become clear.

Ricky left the kink community in West Africa at 18 as an established player and well-known sub. Coming to the United States, he knew no one. "Suddenly, there was an 18-year-old claiming a pretty *hefty* title—not just 'I'm a Dom,' but 'I'm a *Master*.'" He describes the pushback he received. "You're too young, they'd tell me." Ricky pauses briefly to take a drink of water before continuing.

"You're too young. You don't have the experience, you don't know what kink is, you don't understand the dynamics. You're just saying you're a master because you like kinky sex – not because you know what being a Master *is*."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 142.

<sup>82</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

In this description, the devaluation of Ricky's experience and identity are directly related to his youth. Throughout leather history, age has been directly correlated to assumptions of experience, skill, and knowledge. To be an 18-year-old Dom, Sir, or Master is to directly disrupt these assumptions. Ricky finds himself repeatedly contending with the condescension and belittlement of two facets of his identity; his race and age. While presented here as separate experiences, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality<sup>83</sup> recognizes the reality of their interconnectedness. The racialized and age-based assumptions about "masterhood" which Ricky finds himself contending with function in tandem to produce a compounded experience of marginalization.

Ricky discusses this marginalization with me when describing his first leather event, not long after moving to the U.S. He'd gone alone, with no subs or owned slaves, and with no gear. "When you go to an event alone with no gear on, it's hard for people to tell what role you're taking on," Ricky tells me. "The gear is a huge part of how people identify who you are."<sup>84</sup> The cultural signs Ricky is referencing have a long history in the leather community. The image of the 'leather Daddy' connotes masculinity and muscle, represented through articles of clothing such as military uniforms, leather vests, harnesses and boots. Subs are assumed to be identifiable by markers such as nudity, a collar<sup>85</sup> around the neck, or a jockstrap and/or harness. Unidentifiable within these visual narratives, Ricky sat with a group of friends in the bar.

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<sup>83</sup> Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," 1241-1299

<sup>84</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Collars are generally used as symbols of submissiveness and/or ownership. There are many traditions, legacies, and norms surrounding collars in the BDSM community.

Ricky describes his frustration with what occurred next: a Dom from the community approached their table and, in conversing with the group, patted Ricky on the head. Upon telling me this, Ricky exclaims loudly, “Here I am, wanting to be respected as a *Master*, and then being *patted on the head!*”<sup>86</sup> There is an amused smile on his face now, but at the time of the event, he hadn’t felt such entertainment. While the experience had ended positively—he’d approached the Dom, respectfully told him he felt as though it had been condescending and disrespectful of his title, and was met with an understanding response—it had been a distinct point of tension. The microaggression, no matter the intent behind it, is inseparable from age- and race-based discourses surrounding ‘masterhood.’ Attending to the intersections of age and race in Ricky’s experiences reveal important nuances to discussions of oppression and marginalization within the gay male BDSM community.

*Young, Gay, and Asian: Fighting Stereotypes and Finding Identity*

Discussing the assumptions and stereotypes regarding gay Asians in “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” Richard Fung writes, “So whereas, as Fanon tells us, ‘the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis,’ the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there. And if Asian men have no sexuality, how can they have homosexuality?”<sup>87</sup> The dilemma which Fung presents is one I focus first on deconstructing under the notion of the ‘body.’ As Fung writes, in contrast to the ‘myth of the big black willy,’ the construction of the Asian

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<sup>86</sup> Ricky. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” 239.

man is invariably connected to a ‘striking absence down there.’<sup>88</sup> The construction of the *gay* Asian man is not only hinged on this ‘striking absence,’ but in bottomhood. Fung writes, “Still, I have been struck by the unanimity with which gay Asian men I have met, from all over this continent as well as from Asia, immediately identify and resist these representations. Whenever I mention the topic of Asian actors in American porn, the first question I am asked is whether the Asian is simply shown getting fucked.”<sup>89</sup> This quote exemplifies the addition of ‘receptacle’ to the list of assumptions and narratives surrounding Asian male homosexuality. Fung’s writing is primarily in dialogue with the broader gay community (or, to be more specific, gay video porn). However, gaining further specificity in addressing the gay *kink* community simply compounds these notions.

Whereas the construction of the Asian man is tied to the ‘striking absence’ of a respectably-sized penis, and the construction of the gay Asian man adds bottomhood to that image, the construction of the *kinky* gay Asian adds a third element: submission. While sometimes assumed to be inherent in bottomhood, ‘submission’ becomes weighted differently within the context of kink and BDSM. In addition to this added layer, looking specifically at the kink community offers key nuances to discussions of visibility and representation. Fung writes, “Although a motto for the lesbian and gay movements has been “we are everywhere,” Asians are largely absent from the images produced by both the political and the commercial sectors of the mainstream gay and lesbian communities. From the earliest articulation of the Asian gay and lesbian

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 241.

movements, a principal concern has therefore been visibility.”<sup>90</sup> In kink spaces, representation and visibility remain equally abysmal.

My interviewee, Alec, is 24, shorter in stature, toned, with soft mannerisms and a smile that immediately sends a warmth through my body. I feel that warmth now, speaking to him over the phone. Even without sight, the simple tone of his voice is strikingly kind. And, even amidst the most difficult of topics, our conversation never loses that kindness.

Alec describes his early involvement in the kink community as ‘terrifying.’ He was terrified of being outed to his parents as kinky, terrified of the impact it could have on his familial relationships, and he immediately found his community involvement to be shrouded in secrecy. These personal factors, coupled with the community’s “overwhelming whiteness,” produced an often-uncomfortable experience for Alec. He found himself discouraged; ‘I wanted to possibly be a titleholder, to be a leader in the community, but how could I do those things when I didn’t even see myself anywhere?’<sup>91</sup> Representation, for Alec, was vital to feeling comfortable, welcome, and truly a part of these community spaces. Specifically, he describes to me the deep emotions he feels in regard to representation. In particular, Alec tells me about a time when, at a titleholding event,<sup>92</sup> he saw a Chinese-American titleholder and found himself nearly brought to tears in the middle of the crowd.<sup>93</sup> The presence of even a glimpse of representative and further-reaching diversity absolutely overwhelmed him.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>91</sup> Alec. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Titleholding’ refers to the Title System in the leather community; competitions loosely used as a platform for community involvement, fundraising, mentorship and education, which result in the awarding of leather ‘titles’ to winners.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Titleholder’ refers to an individual who has won a titleholding competition and earned a title.

Alec and I talk at length about the stereotypes and assumptions which exist surrounding being a gay, kinky Asian man. In doing so, a particular point of tension becomes visible. Lately, Alec tells me, he has wanted to Dom more, to become an Alpha.<sup>94</sup> He has also found himself topping more. Topping wasn't something he'd thought about much in the past, and in some ways, he found himself wondering whether it was "a subconscious effort to fight the stereotype that all Asian gay men are submissive receptacles."<sup>95</sup> Alec's discussion of the navigation of sexual preferences mirrors a sentiment expressed by Fung; that there is absolutely nothing wrong with bottoming or subbing (Alec proclaims with pride, "I am a *hella* good bottom!"<sup>96</sup>) – the problem lies in the construction and representation of Asian sexuality as *exclusively* assigned to these roles.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to constructions of Asian sexuality, Alec's shift in sexual behavior was directly impacted by issues of representation and visibility. "How many Asian tops do you know?" he asks me over the phone. "We're not out there, for the most part."<sup>98</sup> With visibility already a prevalent problem, more 'deviant' identities – Asian men embodying roles outside of these stereotypical constructions – are underrepresented even further. This underrepresentation has direct implications for young gay men of color, *especially* in navigating related points of tension. Alec's desire to act in ways

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<sup>94</sup> 'Alpha' is a term used to differentiate varying levels of hierarchy among individuals. For example, an Alpha generally has authority over a beta, and a Sir generally has authority over an Alpha, etc. Particularly used in polyamorous intimate dynamics and 'packs' (groups of pups), being an Alpha presents an identity which purports identification with both submission and Domination, to some extent.

<sup>95</sup> Alec. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," 237.

<sup>98</sup> Alec. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

which directly oppose the construction of gay Asian male sexuality produces an experience of marginalization which I argue is further compounded by his youth.

Discussing the intersections of age and race, I ask Alec to identify a particular experience in which he noticed their joint impact. His response is short, simple, concise. A microaggression which, he tells me, is often enough to make him angry and uncomfortable, but not bad enough to *say* something. A single sentence: “Are you new here?” So simple a statement may feel insignificant, however, within the contexts of gay Asian male sexuality, a lack of diversity and representation in community spaces, and Alec’s youth, an assumption is made which is laced with condescension and wholly belittling of Alec’s experience, knowledge, and skill. In fact, though Alec remains modest, he is collared<sup>99</sup> to one of the most sought-after Doms in the country, often standing more experienced than the men who confront him with questions about his presence. And, in these ways, Alec finds himself further marginalized from community involvement, navigating points of tension, and contending with the magnified marginalization stemming from the intersecting facets of his identity.

### *Power, Performativity, and Navigating Points of Tension*

Power is fundamental to BDSM. Here, I shift away from understanding power in its kink context (that is, through the exchange of power between partners) toward the meanings of power on an individual or structural scale. Looking first at the former, I turn to recall the experiences of my interviewee, Nate. His paradoxical position as both a kink community leader and a relatively late arrival to the community present him with

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<sup>99</sup> In the submissive role of an established 24/7 power dynamic relationship.

a subsequent combination of authority and relative inexperience. For Nate, being in a position of power has a direct impact on his sexual and intimate decision-making and behavior. From a systemic perspective, structural inequalities produce power imbalances which have real effects on individuals' experiences. Understanding these systems of power is vital to recognizing the role that privilege plays in the navigation of deviance.

In discussing power and privilege, Mercer writes, "Gays have often defended porn with libertarian arguments which hold the desire of the individual to do what "he" wants as paramount. Such sexual libertarianism is itself based on certain racial privileges, as it is precisely their whiteness that enables some gay men to act out this "freedom of choice," which itself highlights the consumer-oriented character of the metropolitan gay subculture."<sup>100</sup> Here, Mercer addresses the very notion I aim to explore: that the 'sexual libertarianism' which kink communities repeatedly and enthusiastically purport as fundamental is not equally accessible to all. On the contrary, the intersecting identities of young gay men of color produce disadvantage through greater rigidity in stereotypes, assumptions, and assigned roles. There is a privilege to performativity. Perhaps most pertinent of all is the question of representation and visibility. My research and data are not meant to be representative, or conclusive. However, it is too important to ignore the fact that in discussions surrounding navigating points of tension, two white interviewees directly purport community involvement to be a profoundly powerful tool in contending with deviant identities. If community involvement, through racism and underrepresentation, is inaccessible, how

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<sup>100</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 133.

is this navigation affected? As conversations continue about diversity and representation in porn, titleholding, play parties, and other sexualized spaces, it is vital to deconstruct the factors at play in reproducing and re-entrenching systems of oppression and imbalances of power.

Most importantly, I hope to highlight the unique ways in which addressing ‘age’ can reveal nuances in discussions about race in kink. Despite being recognized as a fundamental aspect of leather history and kink dynamics, age is seldom discussed on an academic level as an instrumental factor in shaping individuals’ experiences. When attended to, age reveals itself to be an important magnifier of marginalization. As communities continue to strive for diversity and greater equality, it is vital that age no longer go unacknowledged in importance.

## **Age Gap Relationships: A Reciprocity of Mentorship**

The notion of mentorship has played a key role in the constructions of age and age gap relationships within kink communities. Specifically, narratives in leather culture have centered around purporting a cyclical conceptualization of mentorship and age. Intra-community discourses emphasize the transmission of knowledge, safety practices, and skills from older, more experienced members, to younger, inexperienced ones. The reality of the fluidity of these roles and relationships is widely acknowledged by BDSM participants. Despite this, narratives continue to flourish which fail to represent these lived realities. Through this failure, they compound the stigmas produced by mainstream demonization of both S/M and age gap relationships. Analyzing the reciprocity of mentorship in kink spaces reframes these dynamics in a way which has direct implications for the function of community spaces and the conceptualization of age gap relationships overall.

### *Reconceptualizing Mentorship: Two Examples*

In reconceptualizing the notion of ‘mentorship,’ I offer two primary examples of reciprocity which arise in my interviews. Kevin, 45, is the older member of an age gap relationship of 24 years. In telling me about he and his puppy, Kevin says, “I never thought [my partner] and I would get along like we do. Maybe it means I’m a little childish, or maybe it means they’re just mature, or maybe it’s a little of both – it’s probably a little of both.”<sup>101</sup> He laughs. For Kevin, participating in an age gap relationship with someone so much younger was something he’d been starkly opposed

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<sup>101</sup> Kevin. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

to. He describes how, after about six months of convincing, he agreed to be Alpha to the pup. “I’d just wanted to be a beta before I met them,” Kevin says. “I had no interest in a leadership role like that. Puppy play, for me, was a chance to let *go* of all of that.”<sup>102</sup>

For Kevin, engaging in an age gap relationship which placed him in the role of Alpha marked a dramatic shift in identity. He adopted the title of “Dog” (rather than “pup”) to signify this transition. More broadly, he tells me,

“[My partner] helped me accept my age for who I am. I always felt, as a gay male, you’re supposed to be dead after 30. And here I am, 45, I felt *old*. I didn’t really feel like I had a place.”<sup>103</sup>

The notion of the absence of futurity is one of the precise arguments presented by Sandberg and Marshall’s “Queering Aging Futures.”<sup>104</sup> In coming out at 38 and ‘discovering puppy’ at 40, Kevin’s late entrance left him feeling a deep exclusion from his community. He describes to me the years he spent underweight, coloring his hair, attempting to emulate the twinks he was attracted to and the twink he never had the chance to be. For Kevin, the dynamics that arose from the performance of age engaged in by he and his partner had a direct impact on his self-perception and -acceptance.

The notion of self-acceptance is also addressed by Tristan when discussing his participation in age gap relationships. He cites financial inequality as the primary manifestation of their 14-year age gap, though he says this imbalance is not a point of tension – simply a reality. “For every 10 dinners he takes me out on, I try to take him out on one.”<sup>105</sup> Tristan and his partner reconceptualize the notion of reciprocity to not solely define ‘care’ through financial means; they find new ways of negotiating support.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Sandberg and Marshall, “Queering Aging Futures,” 2.

<sup>105</sup> Tristan. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

For example, Tristan describes to me the ways he has helped his partner come to terms with his age. “I’ve taught him how to stand up and have sex, which he hasn’t done in ten years.” In addition, he’s helped him be more physically active, helped him get a scooter, which he’d been putting off doing.<sup>106</sup> Tristan describes the same process of self-acceptance being undergone as Kevin’s; one directly influenced by the particularized dynamics of their relationships.

In addition to aspects of self-perception and -acceptance, my interviewees reveal a second key manifestation of the reciprocity of mentorship in age gap relationships. Specifically, several men identify education about issues of diversity and equality, particularly in regard to gender and race, as a prevalent form of mentorship which often overlaps with age and is seldom acknowledged.

First, on an individual level, interviewee Alec describes the ways that his identity as a young, gay Asian man plays a specific role in the navigation of his age gap relationship. This kind of mentorship – one based in educating on racial issues, advocating for diversity and racial equity – is a complex subject. Too often, the responsibility of educating the ignorant is placed upon minorities. It is not the place of the oppressed to teach their oppressor why oppression is wrong. However, the mentorship which Alec describes remains important to note. In discussing the process of contending with his sexual preferences (i.e. being attracted to older, white, dominant men) as a person of color, he places particular focus on the ways he must navigate race with his partners. He tells me about sitting his partner down and saying, “These are my experiences as a gay kinky Asian man in our community – there’s a lot of racism,

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

belittlement, fetishization. You can't fix it, but you have to listen when I'm unsettled by something."<sup>107</sup> And through the process of that communication and active listening, Alec and his partner engage in a mentorship of racial equity, diversity, and dialogue.

This individualized example of a kind of educational mentorship is illuminated on a larger scale in my interview with Nate. We've reached the end of the interview, and I ask him my standard final question, typed neatly at the bottom of my open-ended interview guide: "Is there anything you can think of that you'd like to add, or that you think is relevant, that we haven't covered?" His response is important, overarching, and complex.

Nate describes to me the process he went through in starting his leather group. He says the biggest hurdle they faced in the beginning was trying to get younger guys to show up, and expecting that the older, more experienced guys were there to mentor them. It was an assumed dynamic; one that had always existed in the leather community. Now though, the biggest hurdle is contending with issues of racial justice, inclusion and diversity, transphobia. He tells me that, consistently, all of the younger men are bringing these issues to the table – engaging in them, teaching and training the older guys in the leather community for whom these conversations have never had to be had.<sup>108</sup>

In discussing this mentorship as an important form of reciprocity, I present its positive implications as clear: education on issues of equality is important, and forms of mentorship other than those solely based in the cyclical assumptions of leather history are rarely acknowledged. However, Nate discusses the complexity of these

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<sup>107</sup> Alec. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson. March 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Nate. Interview by Malcolm MacWilliamson.

relationships, acknowledging the issues that arise from these instances of mentorship. “Some guys just want to be able to come and fuck and play and lose the stigma from the HIV/AIDS crisis and bring all the love and sex and unapologetic sexuality from the 70s,” he tells me. He continues by saying that younger guys want those things too – but they want them without perpetuating the systems of domination and oppression overarching in our world.<sup>109</sup> The nuances to the discussion of mentorship in the gay male BDSM community are directly linked to the role of age.

### *Implications*

The contextual frameworks of the pedophile, the ‘queer recruiter,’<sup>110</sup> the history of legal prosecution of sadomasochists and routine removal of their children,<sup>111</sup> as well as the hysteria surrounding HIV/AIDS, have all had direct implications for the construction of gay male age gap relationships. In light of these contexts, to engage in these relationships is a deviant act, a difficult one. Beyond this, though, recognizing the reciprocity of mentorship that occurs in age gap relationships is vital to beginning to deconstruct the myths and stereotypes which accompany these contextual frameworks. This recognition of reciprocity dispels the notion that age gap relationships are inherently predatory, one-sided, or deserving of automatic devaluation—it reshapes the construction of age gap relationships as a whole.

In addition, in both academic and intra-community discourses, the reality of the reciprocity of age gap relationships too often goes unacknowledged. As a reality widely experienced by participants of age gap relationships, it is necessary to recognize in

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Sandberg and Marshall, “Queering Aging Futures.” 5.

<sup>111</sup> Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*.

order to successfully engage in conversation about these relationships' true dynamics. And, particularly relevant to discussions surrounding the accessibility of community spaces and the roles of representation, visibility, power, and privilege, it is absolutely vital that we place greater value on these forms of mentorship. In doing so, greater equality, diversity, and inclusivity becomes available.

## Conclusion

The concept of futurity for queers is complicated. Between the impact of HIV/AIDS—both its cultural legacy and its physical effects on the individual—and the construction of ‘Gay Death’ (the age at which a gay man is said to have lost his youth or desirability—age 30), gay male futures are constructed as unattainable and/or nonexistent. However, Judith Halberstam’s work on queer time and queer futures provokes a much different conceptual understanding of futurity. On the power of queer subcultures to actually *provide* options and possibilities, Halberstam writes, “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the paradigmatic markers of life experiences—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”<sup>112</sup> By providing alternative paths and options to linearly-placed heteronormative milestones and assumptions, queer subcultures create *new* futures, ones unimagined in the operation of heteronormative life. These conceptualizations (legacies of HIV/AIDS, ‘Gay Death,’ *and* alternative temporalities) feel paradoxical or mutually exclusive. Yet,

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<sup>112</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 2.

just as the kink community can both renegotiate *and* re-entrench normative schemas, so too can queer futurity be conceptualized in varying ways.

The concept of queerness being in direct opposition to heteronormative temporalities is also addressed by Gayle Rubin's influential essay "Thinking Sex." Rubin creates the "Charmed Circle,"<sup>113</sup> a visual representation of the dichotomous discourses surrounding sex which argue that distinctions can be made in categorizing sex practices as *good* (heterosexuality, marriage, procreation, monogamy, etc.) or *bad* (queerness, polyamory, sexual deviance, etc.). In result, the inner layer of Rubin's "Charmed Circle" (the 'good' sex practices) seems to reflect the heteronormative scripts acknowledged by Halberstam, while the outer layer (the 'bad' sex practices) exemplifies Halberstam's identified 'queer temporalities.' This provides helpful visual reference to the cultural expectations, assumptions, and normative schemas which surround sex discourses. As individuals inhabit identities within the outer layer of the "Charmed Circle," new temporalities are created.

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<sup>113</sup> Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 509.

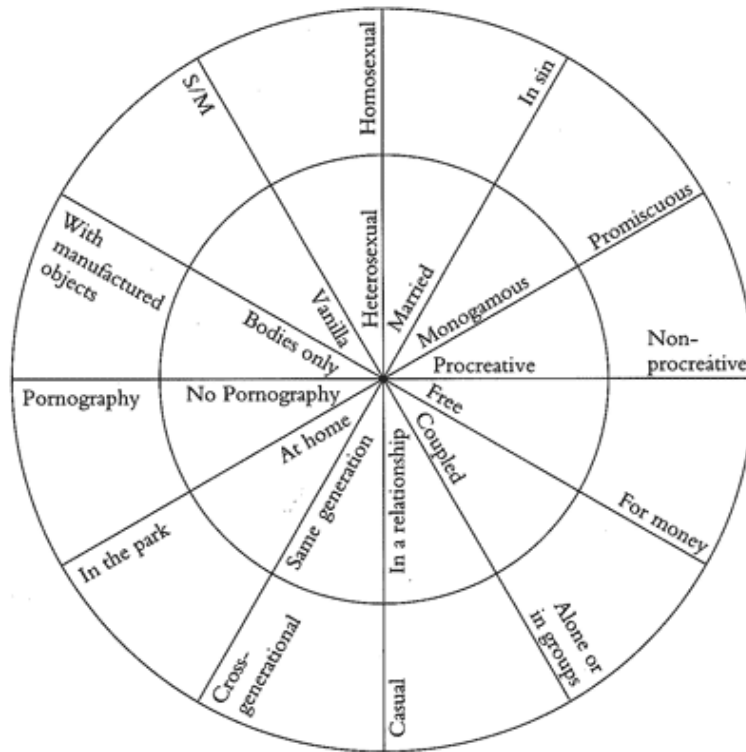


Figure 3: Gayle Rubin's "Charmed Circle" of sexuality

As I wrestle with the contradictions of these conceptualizations of futurity, I find my own future's construction unclear. In my transition from female to male, the future ahead of me has been continually altered. New 'developmental milestones' include things like legal name changes and gender affirmation surgeries. The gendered aspects of futurity become fundamentally restructured for transgender individuals—prolonged or multiple puberties, premature or medically-induced menopause or 'manopause.' These examples illustrate the ways in which development, growth, and/or aging are all reconceptualized by a queer identity. In particular, though, I am struck by the ways in which my future becomes restructured through my engagement in age gap relationships. The futurity of *relationships* is directly linked to heteronormative fantasies of birth,

marriage, reproduction, death—milestones outlined by Halberstam as ‘paradigmatic markers of life experiences.’<sup>114</sup> When relationships lie outside of the scripts of heteronormativity, whether by engagement in polyamory, age gaps, S/m 24/7 power dynamics, or some other form of queer subcultural experience, the constructions of their *futurity* changes too.

I can remember the first time I was struck by an altered notion of futurity due to my participation in an age gap relationship. At the time, my partner and I had been together for about a year. We were washing the dishes together when he told me that he had made an appointment to have a new will drawn up, one that would leave certain possessions to me. It had been a nonchalant acknowledgment, made simply and informatively, but the vivid memory of its dramatic impact remains present. Last wills and testaments were not an expected part of my relationship at age 21. Put bluntly, I found myself confronted with the notion that my partner was at least assuredly *expected* to die before me.

The different experiences I found myself engaged with were intellectually provocative; if a relationship’s future lies in marriage, raising children, growing old together, and leaving the world together, what reconceptualizations must be made to accommodate the lived experiences of partnerships on paths of aging separated by decades? However, even this question participates in constructing age gaps as sites of ‘inherent difference.’ Judith Halberstam addresses the nuances within this notion, arguing,

“Finally, queer subcultures offer us an opportunity to redefine the binary of adolescence and adult hood that structures so many inquiries into subcultures.

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<sup>114</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 2.

Precisely because many queers refuse and resist the heteronormative imperative of home and family, they also prolong the periods of their life devoted to subcultural participation. This challenge to the notion of the subculture as a youth formation could, on the one hand, expand the definition of subculture beyond its most banal significations of youth in crisis and, on the other hand, challenge our notion of adulthood as reproductive maturity.”<sup>115</sup>

Here, Halberstam writes that queer subcultures alter common assumptions which link adolescence and subcultural participation—particularly, they serve as sites where subcultural participation becomes extended well into adulthood.<sup>116</sup> In this way, a queer temporality is created which does not automatically binarize adolescence and adulthood, immaturity and responsibility, successful and unsuccessful aging. When reframed this way, the engagement of age gap relationships changes; there is a fundamental flaw in the belief that difference due to age is, without challenge, more important or influential than similarity in interests, personality, or identity.

As I try to conceptualize an impending—yet always distant—future for myself and for relationships, I am brought back to Halberstam’s ‘queer time’:

“Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity.”<sup>117</sup>

Halberstam acknowledges the profound pull of scripts of heteronormativity and influence of societal constructions and punishments of deviance, but she also acknowledges the sheer power of queerness to continually rise in opposition and produce *new* temporalities, *new* possibilities, *new* lives. Relatedly, Gayle Rubin argues

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>116</sup> I wonder—could this extended subcultural participation be a contributor to cross-generational engagement and/or the formation of age gap relationships within queer spaces?

<sup>117</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw et al., *Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion*, 182.

that queer opposition to mainstream normative schemas is a profound accomplishment, writing, “It is extraordinary that young perverts, like salmon swimming upstream, continually and in great numbers make this journey. Much of the politics of sex consists of battles to determine the costs of belonging to such communities and how difficult it will be to get into them.”<sup>118</sup> It is, as Rubin says, truly extraordinary that, against all odds, we queers, kinksters, and flaggots continue to find each other, continue to engage in our deviant desires.

My interviewees describe growing up without even the language to describe themselves. Alec tells me about watching Saturday morning cartoons growing up and wishing *so badly* to be in the place of the villains, tied up in the lair of a spandex-clad captor. Kevin, prior to discovering kink and amidst a desperate search for community, found himself engulfed in the hardcore punk scene, punching people and breaking hands. Jed tells me about his first homemade sex toy, made at age 13 using Legos. He recalls using it to masturbate at night and then immediately taking it apart, full of shame—until the next night, when it was put back together again in a shroud of desire. The stories I am told in these interviews, at their core, are stories of resilience and courage. In facing my own queer futurity—one characterized by uncharted territory, an *unscripted* and *unknown*—they are stories that give comfort in their visions of possibility.

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<sup>118</sup> Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 437.

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