

Review: *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*

Nicholaus Baca

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Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality, by Margot Weiss, explores the intricacies and the complexities of the underground world of bondage, domination and sadomasochism (BDSM or, just SM—As Weiss uses BDSM and SM interchangeably, I also will do so throughout). Written as an ethnography that chronicles the practices of BDSM practitioners in the San Francisco Bay area, Weiss explores the relationships between sexuality and capitalism, between desiring bodies and consumer culture, between the techniques BDSM practitioners use in order to experience pleasure, and the tools, toys, prosthetic devices, and bodies that are used to both cultivate and create those techniques. *Techniques* explores BDSM not from any type of evaluative perspective—Weiss does not impose any judgment of BDSM as deviant sexual behavior; rather, the book recognizes BDSM as a highly discursive community, where practitioners affectively develop and hone skills over time.

In “Introduction: Toward a Performative Materialism,” Weiss situates her research by “[d]eparting from a Foucault-inspired analysis of the radical alterity of BDSM practice” and complicates the ways in which SM has been typically understood (6). Rather than continue to see SM from either the radical feminist “anti-SM” position or the “queer pro-sex” position, Weiss explores the

dynamic ways in which SM practices both reflect and propagate neoliberal capitalist culture and provide spaces where categories such as race, gender, and sexuality operate within the locations of both the public/private, and the social/individual, ultimately blurring the boundaries of any such dichotomization. Weiss works at providing a contextualized understanding of how she will proceed in her ethnographic project, and at mapping out the theoretical underpinnings she uses in order to both challenge and inform current scholarship that deals not only with BDSM but that also concerns how the current trends of SM practice are in many ways tied to neoliberal capitalism, the ways in which SM informs and furthers our understanding of Butler's notions of performative identity, and complicates traditional ways of reading SM practices that see it as transgressive.

In Chapter 1, "Setting the Scene: SM Communities in the San Francisco Bay Area," Weiss provides a detailed history of BDSM culture in the Bay area. Weiss notes early on that she will be exploring "the change from Folsom Street to Palo Alto, from the old guard to the new, providing a cultural history of this new scene and its practitioners in relation to the socioeconomic contours of the Bay area" (35). According to Weiss, "the shifts [in the socioeconomic conditions of the Bay area] in the 1980s and 1990s produced a flourishing new guard scene" (37). Where prior to the 1980s, the SM old guard scene of the Bay area typically consisted of gay men, the new guard took on a much more white heterosexual demographic. As the economic conditions in the Bay area became more and more conducive to middle-to-upper-class white heterosexuals, the old guard leather scene slowly (though not at all completely) dissipated. However, still understood as a symbolic space of sexual freedom and liberation, the BDSM culture of the Bay area by no means disappeared; rather the old guard was supplanted by white, largely, heterosexual professionals. In her thoughtful and detailed analysis, Weiss provides a well-articulated and provocative historiography of the very specific ways in which

the socioeconomic conditions catalyzed the transition from the old guard to the new. She provides useful discussions of the history of San Francisco as the "queer capital of the United States"; the ways in which communication technologies radically transformed the socioeconomic landscape of the Bay area; and the ways networked technologies, that is, digital spaces, provided the means through which the new guard scene rapidly took shape.

In Chapter 2, "Becoming a Practitioner: Self-Mastery, Social Control, and the Biopolitics of SM," Weiss "analyzes the emphasis on rules and regulations, classrooms and guidebooks, safety procedures and dungeon monitors" of the new guard SM in order to explicate "the ways in which people become SM practitioners by producing, policing, mastering, and debating the boundaries between safe (acceptable or correct) and dangerous (unacceptable and wrong) play" (62). In detailing the very specific ways in which BDSM communities have come to be self-regulatory, Weiss shows how practitioners who strictly adhere to rules and regulations become more and more entrenched into the very communal practices of the BDSM culture. In other words, the bureaucratization of a codified set of rules and standards becomes the way in which practitioners can and do enter into the discourse. Ultimately, according to Weiss, in order to become a successful practitioner in the new guard SM scene, an individual must cultivate a discursive relationship with a community of practitioners by refining techniques through self-mastery and continued communal practice.

In Chapter 3, "The Toy Bag: Exchange Economies and the Body at Play," Weiss discusses the importance of commodities such as whips, gags, bags, bondage devices, dungeon equipment, leather, and others in order explain "the place of toys in . . . [the] circuits between capitalism and embodiment," that is to say, "the relationship between toys and consumer-players in terms of *technological prostheses*, broadening both terms to include not only technology but also the knowledge practices of *techne*, and not

only literal prostheses but also changing forms of embodiment” (103-4). According to Weiss, not only do the various commodities associated with BDSM culture function as means through which to master techniques, but the very objects themselves, as consumer goods, operate as gatekeepers, deflecting people of color, and they reflect the dynamic ways in which consumerism, capitalism, and hegemonic ideologies permeate sexuality, desire, and sexual practices.

The last two chapters, “Beyond Vanilla: Public Politics and Private Selves” and “Sex Play and the Social: Reading the Effective Circuit,” take a look at a series of very specific individuals and situations in order to draw implications to larger sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues. In Chapter 4, Weiss analyzes the ambivalence three white HMDs (heterosexual male dominants) express in relation to their privileged subject positions in order to show how “racialized and sexed gender is itself a mimetic performance, a copy that can only ever seek to replicate a phantasmatic original” (182). Weiss concludes the book by looking at a series of highly controversial scenes (a slave auction, a Nazi prison interrogation scene, and a minoritized mugging scene) in order to show how

“SM performance is not [simply] a repetition of social power; [but] it carries and produces the complexities of social relationships, relationships shot through with contradictions unresolved—indeed, erotically and politically powerful precisely because they remain in tension” (230).

While *Technique of Pleasure* provides a very detailed and thoroughly explicated ethnography of a certain brand of the new guard BDSM subculture of the San Francisco Bay area through detailed interviews and relevant historicization, I would have liked to have been introduced to more of the alternative forms of SM that seem to have been slighted in order to posit a rather uniform and coherent theorization of heterosexual SM culture. In other words, gay men, although largely credited with the inception of

BDSM culture, are largely forgotten, suggesting they are the relics of a distant past. And perhaps a more thorough examination of more of the “deviants” (even within the scene) may have provided a more complicated and nuanced analysis. That said, I think this is a fascinating, sophisticated, and original look at the ways in which we might begin to rethink how we view alternative iterations of expressions of sexuality. Not only does this book provide new and insightful ways through which to think about SM culture, Weiss also provides interesting observations about how to imagine and reimagine “sexuality as a social relation—interarticulated with hierarchies, institutions, national imaginaries, and local spaces of practice—rather than an escape,” where sexuality can never be extracted from the social and material conditions from where it manifests, and, as such “can never be merely private/sexual but is always public/political” (231,203). I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone interested in areas of sexuality, critical race theory, gender studies, biopolitics, and even discourse analysis.

About the Author

Nicholaus Baca is a Ph.D. student at Bowling Green State University in English, specializing in Rhetoric and Writing. He teaches first-year-composition for the General Studies Writing Program. Originally from Southern California, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from University of California, Santa Barbara. He received his master’s degree from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, also in English, specializing in Rhetoric and Composition and Renaissance Literature. Nick’s scholarly interests include writing studies and writing studies research, literary and critical theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory/gay and lesbian studies, gender studies and sexuality, and virtual identities.