

CHAPTER 3

STATING DESIRE

Sexuality, the State, and Social Control

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The state, through laws and enforcement, acts as the guardian of morality, constructing appropriate sexualities. While we might like to believe that desire is a personal choice or a natural urge, the state has a distinct role in shaping who is a suitable object and what methods can be used to express that desire. As a group, one kinky community in Texas sees itself as resisting vanilla hegemony by flaunting some aspects of the law. However, to paint all actions in this kinky community as resistance misses the internal tensions within the group. Elites in the community mimic the power of the state for their own purposes to maintain the status quo. In this “outlaw” community, particular laws are mocked, and yet members hold fast to a belief in the rule of law. Although many people question the law as it pertains to their behavior particularly, this does not lead to questions about the fundamental nature of the law, where the authority to enforce it derives from, nor whom the law benefits or oppresses. When a final account is tallied, most members of the kinky community reap the benefits of living in this law-abiding society. The state, in both its concrete and spectral forms, informs the construction of sexuality.

I worked as an anthropologist in a kinky community of a large city in Texas I call Cactus for twenty months between 2009 and 2011, conducting ethnographic research that focused on participant-observation and semistructured interviewing. The term *kinky* refers to a set of physical and relational practices based on a consensual, unequal distribution of power in a sexual setting. This community consists of roughly 100 core members involved in several umbrella groups that unite the community and a number of smaller specialty groups. People participate in the community through bondage/discipline/dominant/submissive/sado/masochism (BDSM) parties, social events in vanilla (non-kinky) settings, study groups, conferences, and online social

networking. Many of the larger groups are pansexual, meaning that anyone of any sexuality or gender presentation is welcome. In practice, however, these groups are predominantly heterosexual. This kinky community serves as an illustration of the way larger forces shape what are considered intimate experiences, in part due to the public display of sexuality and the community's explicit self-reflection on what it means to be kinky in relation to the self and to others.

In order to understand how the state shapes and controls desire, one must understand the possible direct interventions of the state, meaning "a formal government that has the capacity and authority to make laws, and use force to defend the social order" (Haviland et al. 2008:656), in kinky affairs. The justice system has access to municipal, state, and federal laws to monitor and censure participants in the kinky community, including laws on prostitution, kidnapping, rape, assault, unlawful restraint, indecent exposure, and human trafficking. Some of the basic activities which lead to legal scrutiny include flogging, branding, cutting, electrocution, and rope bondage. More complex situations also enter a legally gray area, including the commercial aspect of kinky parties and the concept of "consensual nonconsent." Consensual nonconsent is a contested term in various communities, but in Cactus it usually referred to a type of play where a person acts (and sometimes feels) as if the attention (sexual or otherwise) is unwanted, such as in a rape fantasy or a punishment scene, while retaining the power to stop the scene by using a safe word. These acts could lead to serious charges being levied. Members of the kinky community take great pains to demonstrate that they are not violating these laws by focusing on the consent of participants, but whether or not intention is taken into account in possible charges depends on the individual officer who responds to any given situation. Part of what leads to such intense self-monitoring in the community is the capriciousness with which the law may be applied. Community members try to preempt possible sanctions by creating explicit interpretations of the acts the law legislates and structuring their own activities and others' in such a way as to avoid violating the intention of the law.

The police play a particular role in the kinky community, which is a distillation of the wider American society's uneasy relationship with law enforcement. On the one hand, the police are admired and even lionized. On the other, they are feared as agents of oppression. In the kinky community, masculinity is often performed as an imitation of military bearing and discipline. The kinky community traces its roots to the gay male leather community, which was founded, according to lore, by gay service men returning from World War II. Historically, some men (and now some women) with military backgrounds found themselves drawn to the kinky community. It functions as a feedback

loop—ex-military people intensify the militant feel of a community, which in turn attracts more veterans and other people who admire the military. It makes sense that this militant atmosphere engenders a sense of fraternity with the police. Both groups serve the country in potentially violent situations, to enforce order and distribute justice, at least ideally. Even people who have not served in the military emulate the example of law enforcement in dress, mannerisms, and attention to protocol to project a sense of masculinity.

Simultaneously, the police are seen as agents of vanilla oppression. In their role as enforcers of morality, their power is anxiety provoking. One reason for the community's uneasy relationship with law enforcement is that the police's power reveals the constructed nature of the power exchange relationships between community members. Haviland defines power as "the ability of individuals or groups to impose their will upon others and make them do things even against their own wants or wishes" (Haviland et al. 2008:655). Consent is the bedrock on which the kinky community is based, making it a society of peers. Not everyone has the same influence or prestige, but there is no raw, awesome power. The presence of the police, with their ability to strip away freedom backed up by the authority of the state, exposes the performative nature of kinky relationships. Police can serve as a rupture in what is otherwise a mutually agreed upon pretense. It is for this very power that the police inspire awe. Additionally, people suspect the capricious nature of law enforcement. Although they believe that a rational examination of the facts will reveal that no transgression has taken place, community members also acknowledge that how the law is applied depends on the context. The more a person resembles a model citizen, the more liberties it is assumed one has. A white, heterosexual, middle-class man is perceived to be able to stretch the law with fewer repercussions than a poor, queer, woman of color.

Another aspect of state control involves the civil courts. Most of the people I interviewed either did not have children or their children were grown. Logistically, it is difficult to juggle small children with involvement in a community where children are banned. Children make participating in the kinky community more risky by their very existence. For parents with traditional-looking relationships (for example, married with no acrimony), there is always the outside possibility that their fitness as parents could be called into question by someone in authority. Things escalate when parents are in the midst of a divorce and child custody is at stake. It is in this role that the courts are seen as most dangerous. Many ex-spouses use whatever ammunition they can to paint their former partner as a poor parent. All too often, involvement with the kinky community is used as part of the basis for denying a parent custody, even if it is clear that there is no child abuse (Klein and Moser 2006).

The state as both the shaper of and distillation of hegemony influences the construction of sexuality beyond the scope of specific laws. Cultural hegemony is a concept used by social scientists and philosophers to explain the existence and reproduction of oppression. Following Borón, by “hegemony” I refer to “the Gramscian concept of an ideology-based dominance that is exercised by the state and enjoys consensus, thus legitimating the interests of the upper-classes” (Martínez and Breña 2007:47). The concept of hegemony has been used fruitfully to examine how ideologies can reinforce, and in some cases replace, traditional state power by manipulating and shaping consciousness to allow the elite to exploit people with lower status, economically, intellectually, sexually, and culturally (Alison 1999; Ling 1996; Myers 1998; Quinlan 1998; Salter and Salter 2007).

A complicated example of hegemony in the United States is the beauty standard for women. In a simplified analysis, women and girls are taught by society through media and peer pressure that only certain body types are desirable. Many women are unhappy with their bodies and strive to achieve the “perfect” body type, despite the fact that it causes physical pain (extreme exercise, restrictive clothing) and costs money (diet aids, gym memberships, etc.). There is no police force dictating beauty standards, coercing women into behaving contrary to their own interests. However, certain segments of the society benefit from women’s discontent with their bodies such as the media and the fashion industry. Less directly, the people with political and economic power gain because the time and effort women might otherwise use to question the status quo is instead spent on attempting to achieve an unachievable ideal. Using the framework of hegemony allows us to analyze how the overt meanings of social practice obscure power structures which benefit the few at the expense of the many.

I focus less on the economic forces of hegemony than the ideological and social implications of cultural domination. Intellectual and cultural hegemony is often teased out as the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The kinky community is certainly not colonized territory, but the concept of hegemony is useful in understanding how the dominant ideology of the United States, especially as codified and enforced as law, is both contested and embraced by members of the kinky community. For example, the belief that sex should necessarily be procreative, rather than simply pleasurable, has been enshrined in both popular understanding and in the law. For years, there were laws against adultery (extramarital affairs) and sodomy (including oral and anal sex between people of any gender). Recently, there has been a shift in both arenas, notably the growing acceptance of gay marriage. However, the belief that sex should still be private and shared only between two people remains. The kinky community, with its embrace of public displays of eroticism (and sometimes sex) and

expectation of multiple partners, questions the sanctity of these beliefs about sex. In its embodied practices, the kinky community resists the hegemonic ideal of monogamous sex as the only valid form of sexual expression.

While under threat of state interference from legislators, the police, the judicial system, and the medical community, members of the kinky community also deploy these same threats toward their own ends through mimicry of the state, using laws and mainstream cultural conventions to functionally exclude certain groups of people from parties or to monitor behavior and membership. The reproduction of hegemony in the kinky community illustrates how fully integrated this group is in a state-level society.

I had my own experience with how hegemony functioned in the form of state interference and the resulting discourse at a Libidinousness United in Sadomasochism, Texas (LUST)¹ party. What follows is an excerpt based on my field notes:

I had been hesitant to play in public, for a number of reasons. However, my interviews were wrapping up, and I felt my research would benefit from the subjective experience of public play. I admired Stephanie for her commanding presence, her skill with many different toys, and her ease in navigating a predominantly heterosexual scene as queer woman. I finally screwed up the courage to ask her to play with me. She specialized in using fire in her scenes and never lacked for play partners. That night, she was surprisingly free. After much stumbling and awkwardness on my part, she said yes and began to orchestrate the scene. We found an area in the fire room that was open. She notified the DM (dungeon master, who is responsible for monitoring the safety of scenes) that we were going to do a fire scene and made sure that the fire extinguisher was close by. She sent me to find a towel and soak it in water, just in case. Her friend acted as her second, a person appointed to help put out any potential problems, a necessity in a fire scene. I lay face down on a massage table and Stephanie swabbed my skin with rubbing alcohol. I felt the whoosh as it was ignited. I had seen her play before with fire wands, metal rods tipped with cotton soaked in alcohol, so I knew what she was doing, but I was lost in the experience. The amazing thing about this kind of play was that by the time I had processed that there was fire on my skin, Stephanie had extinguished the flames. She had me flip over and laid out spirals of flash cotton over my chest and belly then ignited them with a wand. It did not exactly hurt but I understood the word “intense” in a new light. My body began to physically react to the fire, shivering uncontrollably as endorphins washed over me. I felt present and connected to Stephanie. I stopped worrying about the anthropological implications of ritual or counting how many people were in the room. My eyes began fluttering and I recognized a trance state setting in.

Then I heard, "The cops are here." Later, Stephanie and I joked that this was my safe word. Although I had admired Stephanie prior to playing with her, what she did next made me trust her. I was startled, not a good thing when there is open flame on skin. She pressed her hand against my chest and kept me from bolting upright into her lit fire wand. She then said, "You are not a minor. We are not doing anything wrong. It will be fine." I believed her. All the while, she continued to play the fire across my skin. People became more insistent, saying, "No, the cops are here. Get her dressed." Stephanie's calm demeanor reassured me, in my dazed state, that it would in fact be ok. After a few more passes with the wand, she announced, "Now, I am done." She helped me sit up and got me dressed in short order. Partly due to the endorphin high, I was in a happy place and she seemed to be taking care of everything, if moving expeditiously. I dimly recalled my advisor's [sic] admonition to avoid arrest because the university would take it poorly. By the time she had wiped down the table and I had my shoes on, the all clear rang up the stairs. The police had gone. Stephanie acted as if the cops had no impact on her at all. Downstairs, she got me some water and then we collapsed on the couch.

Later, I pieced together what had been going on in other parts of The House (as the house converted into a permanent dungeon was known) while I was engaged. A neighbor called the town police, complaining of noise. As the police pulled into the long driveway, people in costume or undressed made their way into The House. One of the men, a former board member with a military background, appointed himself as spokesperson. He explained that there was an adult-oriented party taking place with no minors or alcohol. The police warned the group to keep it down and left. On the whole, it was not a threatening encounter. By the time Stephanie and I made it downstairs, the police had been gone for 5 minutes, and everyone chattered in manic relief. At the time, I was too spaced out on endorphins to truly appreciate the threat presented by the police. The consequences of a raid and arrest could have been far-reaching for anyone at the party. Everyone felt chastened, and most people decided against playing the rest of the night. However, people remained at the party, retelling where they had been when the police came and what role, if any, they had in the encounter. Stephanie was much lauded for maintaining her composure and not ending our scene abruptly as soon as the first cries of "the cops are here" were heard. Much later, she confessed to me that she was "freaked out," but the situation elicited her contrary streak and she "would be damned if someone was going to *make* [her] finish [her] scene." I mistakenly believed the encounter ended once the police left, but the story took on a life

of its own. After that party, I concentrated on my transcripts, keeping in touch with members of the community through e-mail while sitting out a month of parties. At the next event I went to, I heard the story of the LUST party retold, only this time as something bigger, more grandiose. To hear it again, it was a veritable showdown between the kinky community and the forces of vanilla oppressors, not quite a Cactus Stonewall², but certainly a skirmish. In the retelling, the threat presented by the police in that particular situation was emphasized. The harmful consequences of disturbing hegemonic ideals created a sense of shared adversity which served to turn a collection of individuals into a community.

This encounter with the police illustrated the fact that self-policing may smooth over interactions with the authorities. In the shared narrative, people emphasized how the spokesperson's intercession with the police prevented a more threatening encounter. Even though this spokesperson was not part of the current board of LUST, he had been previously and felt comfortable speaking for the club. No one questioned whether he was the best choice, in part because he was effective. Characteristics that he shared with the police were highlighted, such as being male and having a military background. Unspoken but implied were his whiteness and heterosexuality. By demonstrating promptly the group's knowledge of and adherence to the law (no minors) and social standards (no alcohol), he deflected negative attention. In this manner, kinky organizations, called clubs, take on the role of enforcers of the law. There is motivation to maintain the appearance of law-abiding citizens in order to minimize contact with the police.

Building on the threat of state intervention, laws are selectively applied by different groups, usually to the advantage of the elites rewarded by the status quo. The most universally espoused edict is "no children." The definition of child is occasionally debated, but whatever it is, it should never occur in the kinky community. In Texas, an adult can be prosecuted for having sex with someone under the age of 17. In the kinky community, the lower limit is usually set at 18, although in some cases the age limit is 21 to reflect the drinking age. I can understand this paranoia: In my own experience with the Institutional Review Board, the committee was very concerned that I not even discuss possibly illicit sex with someone under the age of 18 and emphasized it was my duty to report child abuse. I did not have to confront that situation, in large part due to the kinky community's very public stance against involving children. It is difficult to imagine a person more abhorred in the United States than the child molester, and people go to extraordinary lengths to avoid accusations of pedophilia. In most cases, people do not even discuss kink with

younger people for fear of sounding as if they are promoting it. Jenna found this problematic and questioned the wisdom in it:

Jenna: Age is not a hard limit [a personal line that cannot be crossed] for me. It gets me in a lot of trouble. Even when I started at eighteen, it was so double standard. Kinky people are crazy like that. They all say, “Oh yeah, I was doing kinky stuff when I was in high school and I had fantasies early on” and then you say, “Why don’t we talk to these now sixteen-year-olds and let them know they don’t have to go through that dark period that you did?” And, no, no, no, can’t do that. That’s horrible. I’m not like that. I will not start some “educate teenagers about kink now” but if someone came to me I would be totally out to them.

Misty: Would you play with them?

Jenna: Yes. If I felt they could give informed consent, absolutely. I wish I had been given that option. (Interview transcripts)

Among my respondents, commonly people’s narratives revealed they had kinky predilections early in life but felt that it was somehow wrong or they were the only ones who felt that way. In some ways, the Internet alleviates some of this pressure, but most people refrain from even discussing kink with people under 18. Jenna is a maverick in the community, outspoken in her beliefs, even when they do not match the social mores of the larger community. She feels it her duty to question everything, making a case that while some hegemonic ideals are furthered in the community, people do not buy into them wholesale. However, Jenna had an uneasy relationship with the community, constantly threatened with expulsion due to her unconventional beliefs. Her focus on a person’s ability to give informed consent does not rely on the dictates of the state about a clear line in the sand but rather privileges the relationship between individuals. By promoting these beliefs, Jenna not only risks her personal safety with regards to the authorities but also jeopardizes the wider kinky community’s image as upstanding citizens.

Applying age standards leads to some behaviors which have implications beyond preventing an underage person slipping in. Some groups check identification, such as driver’s licenses, to make sure that everyone is at least 18 (or 21). This is an embrace of the state and lends an air of officialization to the process. People who do not have proper identification are barred from attending certain parties.³ In this way, clubs vet attendees, taking on a paternal role. People trade their anonymity and some of their autonomy for the

protections offered by the club. At one club in particular, people have to show their identification while signing a waiver, and the information is taken down. Sophia explained,

[The other club], when you go there, they have waivers but you can just sign them with an X, which doesn't protect your members. [Our club] has the waivers, if somebody came here and said, "Hey, let's go have some coffee and talk" and you went off with them and they took you off and raped you or something, then you could come to me and I could find out who it was because they have to show me their driver's license. We send those to our lawyer's office and he keeps those. If the police gave a warrant, they could only get the one waiver, not the whole bunch. We've done it that way on purpose. If you just go and sign an X and somebody took you off and no one had ever seen them before and no one would know who they were, so we're really careful about that. We want to keep our members safe and coming back. And the people who are no longer members of [the other club] had a really big issue with those waivers so they rammed everybody's face in them for years and years and told us how terrible we are and that we just want to out people and that's so not true. (Interview transcripts)

There were people who would not attend that club's parties because of the need to show identification. Despite Sophia's protestations that the only reason to check identification so closely is for the safety of the members, it is a display of power to have physical proof that a person attended a kinky party. Police may not have ready access to the waivers, but if they focus on a particular individual, it would not be difficult to obtain a warrant. Sophia used the threat of rape to emphasize the unreliability of new people and reinforced the protective role the club played. It is hard for me to judge how valid this threat was, but I am reminded of how women are often warned about rape for doing things unbecoming to their sex, like wearing short skirts or walking after dark. The club takes on a paternal role, functioning much like the state in surveillance of members.

Another example of the paternal nature of the clubs was the prohibition on alcohol at LUST parties. The ostensible reason for the ban on alcohol is due to the fact that people under the legal drinking age are allowed at the party. Underage drinking can bring the wrong sort of attention to an organization. Rather than bar people between the ages of 18 and 21, LUST outlaws alcohol. This decision, however, is not simply a rational response to legal pressure. For reasons too complex to be addressed in this paper, the heterosexual kinky community in Cactus has chosen to differentiate itself from previous

incarnations of BDSM (or s/m or leather) by its stance on using substances. The shared, public understanding at LUST is that engaging in play while impaired in any way is inherently unsafe. For this reason, alcohol and drugs are not allowed at parties. Many of the same community members who advocate teetotaling for public parties admit that they occasionally imbibe during private play. In comparison, many other kinky organizations in other parts of the country are bar based, and alcohol is considered part of the experience. LUST, however, acts as the arbiter of morality by passing judgment on whether people can be trusted to act safely if drinking alcohol. The leaders of the club note that the loss of drinking privileges is outweighed by the protection against raids and the increase in safety. This is the same reasoning that has Americans removing their shoes at the airport for security reasons.

In clubs that require more than ostensible membership, participants are subjected to more paternal oversight in areas of their lives outside of parties. Members are held accountable for their behavior. Generally, rules of conduct are explicit in membership clubs, more so than the unspoken customs of the wider kinky community. Abigail, a leader of a leather club, explained,

I go on [online social network site] if somebody calls me up and says so-and-so did such-and-such and I'll go on [the social network site] to read it, but I don't go there for gossip purposes. I do it because I am a leader in the community. It will be like, especially in the [my] group, because they have a code of conduct, and if you don't abide by the code of conduct you can get kicked out. So they will say "so-and-so did this, said that, I don't think it's appropriate." It's usually not even them tattling on one another, it's the other leader in the group calling me, saying, you have to read this. Then they usually get told, "if you want to be part of the [. . .] group, you can't represent yourself like that," and usually, "stop doing that." (Interview transcripts)

By becoming a member, a person acknowledges the club has a stake in its members projecting a certain image for the good of the group. Leaders of the club are expected to moderate disagreements and legislate violations of code in much the same way people turn to the authority of the state in legal matters.

One of the major reasons people accept the paternal attitudes of different clubs is due to the perceived protection from the authorities offered by the clubs. Many clubs made allowances for prostitution laws. Legally, "a person commits an offense [prostitution] if he knowingly: (1) offers to engage, agrees to engage, or engages in sexual conduct for a fee; or (2) solicits another in a public place to engage with him in sexual conduct for hire" (Texas Penal Code

2012:section 43.02). Introducing money into an otherwise legal activity creates illicit sex, regardless whether it is kinky or vanilla. To avoid this, clubs draw a line between what is paid for and sex; often what is bought is access to a party or membership in the club. By examining the ways in which people separate or conflate sexuality, the law, and the economy, I demonstrate how the legal definition of sex and people's subsequent interpretation of that definition are clear illustrations of how the state constructs sexuality.

There are four strategies to avoid looking as though people are paying for sex, each with its own repercussions: only sell tickets ahead of time, only take donations, require a membership fee, or do not allow sex at the party. The first strategy, practiced by LUST and other groups, requires an investment in the community. Most groups in Cactus value relationships more than activities and focus on making a community rather than a party circuit. By only selling tickets in nonparty venues, members (both new and old) are forced to engage with other people socially, making it more likely for people to be involved in the community outside of parties. The economy of the transaction supports the infrastructure of the parties, such as rental fees or dungeon maintenance. One of the arguments made against equating buying tickets to buying sex is that it is possible that no one at a party will have sex. Having a ticket is not a guarantee one will witness sex, much less participate in it. At pro-sex parties, the definition of sex is nebulous and left to individual interpretation. Removing money from the physical location allows sex to remain subjective.⁴

Membership dues are a more stringent form of enforced community than selling tickets beforehand. Clubs that require more than nominal membership usually mandate some sort of service in addition to participation in social events. Membership allows a person access to parties which are not publically available. Again, because money is one step removed from the transaction, the definition of sex is left open. These venues tend to be smaller and more intimate due to the limited number of people, creating an atmosphere where sex is more likely to occur regularly than at public parties.

In the community, taking donations is felt to be the riskiest strategy, since it places money and sex in the same physical location. I am not sure how successful this strategy is; I did not spend a lot of time with this particular group. It seems to have the function of leveling income disparity, with people paying what they can afford. These parties would not have been possible without the patrons offering their spacious house as a play space for free. I can also see how this setup could easily lead to a "tragedy of the commons" situation, with many people taking advantage of what is offered without contributing equally. Despite this group's promotion of a "sex-positive" credo, people felt wary about engaging in behaviors that included male orgasm. As discussed in the next

section, female orgasm was not considered sex and therefore not legislated. Many people in the community cited fears of prostitution charges when explaining why they did not participate in these parties.

The final strategy to avoid prostitution charges, and perhaps the most explicit response to state pressure, is to ban “sex” at parties. The Collective of unNamed Desires (CaNDy), another large umbrella group, adopted this approach. According to CaNDy bylaws, sex is considered penetration, with penis, fingers, or dildos. This is a rather arbitrary line, since exchanging money for any “sexual conduct” (including “any touching of the anus, breast, or any part of the genitals of another person with intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person”; Texas Penal Code 2012:section 43.02) is prohibited. In practice, this rule works to exclude gay men from these predominantly heterosexual parties because penetrative sex is considered an integral part of play for many men in the gay male leather scene. I do not think most people actively try to exclude classes of people from parties, but the legal justification for some of the rules reinforce hegemonic ideals of appropriate behavior. This focus on penetration ignores female orgasm as a sufficient condition of sex, resulting in parties where there is supposedly “no sex” yet women are expected to enact orgasms as a sign of a good scene. Even among queer female respondents, many people differentiated sex as penetration from female orgasm from other stimulation. People privilege a heteronormative definition of sex, despite the Texan law’s attempt to be gender neutral and unspecific, in order to protect themselves from prosecution for prostitution.

Although members of small-scale societies are under great pressure to conform to community standards due to the limited size of the group, the pressures to conform in a state-level society manifest differently. Large urban areas attract people who are otherwise out of place in small communities, such as immigrants or people in sexual minorities, granting them a measure of freedom in the anonymity of the vast city and the ability to find others with similar experiences. Clubs in the kinky community monitored and controlled behaviors through methods which were drawn from living in a state-level society. In the larger community, iteration of community standards via party and club rules and the proliferation of waivers cast the club in the role of the state, with a vested interest in maintaining order, thereby avoiding adverse interactions with the police.

Unlike the state, the kinky community can only enforce adherence to community standards through ostracism, which is still an effective form of social control, as any social scientist knows from the example of the !Kung (Shostak 1981). People in the kinky community are very indulgent with many forms of behavior. One of the credos is “Your kink is ok by me.” However, if a

person transgresses accepted behavior (for example, a kinky relationship with a child or violating consent), the group makes them unwelcome. It is worth noting that both of those examples are against the law, yet most people did not discuss the possibility of involving the authorities if people transgress in such a manner. Because any kinky behavior could be suspect if investigated by the police, people hesitate to invoke the wrath of the state lest it focus on them as well. Community members feel they do an adequate job of protecting their own from both predators and the authorities. Word of mouth travels relatively rapidly, resulting in the offender being barred from events. Stan explained,

In the BDSM community, your reputation is your coin so you're safe to walk through an event because if someone misbehaves, their reputation suffers and they become ostracized by the outsiders [the kinky community]. Reputation is so important and peer pressure is hugely influential in our community. At our parties, there are certain kinds of activities that are frowned on. Scat play, animals. You'll find very few groups where they will say, "bring your dog, we don't mind." We all have our limits of what we're willing to watch, what we're willing to participate in. Most of the parties that you'll find with the local groups, they are very much the same—floggers, canes, violet wands, different kinds of play but it's always the same. Very seldom will you see someone step outside that box and do something truly edgy. If it's too edgy, we all go "Eww, we don't like you." Your reputation in our eyes is lessened because you do this kind of stuff. While the BDSM group is pretty accepting, we have our limits too. Once you get ostracized by the outsiders, where do you have left to go? (Interview transcripts)

Some small-scale society tactics are effective in the Cactus kinky community due to its small size and exclusivity, yet this subculture remains firmly entrenched in a wider American experience of living in a state-level society. In certain ways, the state directly informs people's definition of sexuality through its legislation of prostitution law. People interpret these laws through a heteronormative lens, deciding what acts count as sex and what is "other." In my experience, community members' ambiguous feelings about the police were manifested in the response to a minor confrontation. The need to appear as upright citizens to avoid scrutiny and possible sanctions conflicted with the countercultural ideology of resistance promoted by the kinky community's self-identification as outlaws. Behind this uneasy relationship lies the fact that the police have the very real power to strip people of liberty and cause social ruin. Community members know that their sexuality makes them a target for law

enforcement should they step too far out of bounds. This in turn leads to high levels of self-policing and surveillance. Clubs mimic the state in an effort to mitigate the risks of pursuing this type of sexuality. Elites in the clubs are able to maintain the status quo by selective application of certain laws, invoking the threat of the power of the state yet acting paternally to protect members from that power. The interpretation of laws, such as the age of consent, is used not only to prevent overt threats but also to perpetuate the social control exerted by community leaders in the form of hegemonic ideals.

The authority of the state to construct sexuality is, in some ways, contested by people who create a space for nontraditional sexualities within the context of a finite community. However, the process is marked by the ways the state can directly or indirectly intervene in what most would consider a private matter. More than simply a collection of individual predilections, sexuality is always situated in a web of social interactions, influenced by the state, the economy, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, and the list could go on. It does not spring like Athena from Zeus's head, fully formed and without history. Specific social interactions inform the construction of complex cultural experiences such as sexuality. It is in these details social scientists may hope to discover universal truths.

NOTES

1. All names of groups and individuals have been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots occurred in New York City as members of the gay community violently protested a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, an important gathering place for this marginalized group.
3. In a state with a booming immigrant population, it was amazing to me that I only met one Mexican national. There are a number of deterrents, both cultural and economic, to immigrant involvement in this particular kinky community, the requirement for state identification being only one.
4. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that when defining sex ideally, most people said it was up to individuals to decide what counts as sex. In practice, however, when people in the heterosexual community spoke about having sex, it centered on whether a male partner penetrated a person of any gender or if male orgasm occurred.