Re-imaging Power, Dependency, and Care Through Kink

Lane "Honeycomb" Lemke

Introduction & Methods

In this paper, I engage with the practice of kink through a lens of queer of color critique, crip theory, queer and trans studies, and pleasure activism. Utilizing the knowledge of these disciplines, I argue that practicing kink can be incredibly empowering for non-normative subjects and facilitate access to a variety of liberties that society has long denied marginalized communities. In addition to the work of well-established scholars in critical theory, I draw knowledge and purpose from less-acclaimed primary sources. Working with this variety of knowledges is important to me because I am aware of the barriers to scholarly achievement. The exclusivity of higher education and publication make these options for credibility particularly inaccessible for marginalized communities. Moreover, I place great value on the wisdom that comes out of lived experience. I believe that people who must regularly contend with systemic oppression possess inherent knowledge about these systems, regardless of their formal education. Although not everyone is familiar with the scholarly concepts and academic jargon that describe their experiences, they are still fully capable of understanding, discussing, and developing theories about the issues they face.[1] Since informal publication is the most accessible medium for marginalized communities to circulate information, I hold these primary sources in high regard and employ them alongside established academic sources.

[1] See Barbara Christian's *The Race For Theory* for more information on how academic language in theory can become so abstract and disconnected as to lose relevance to the marginalized communities it attempts to speak for.

Roadmap/Literature Review

To begin, I uplift adrienne maree brown's work with pleasure activism, which was a major inspiration for this paper. I will then lay the groundwork for my argument by reviewing the mutual disavowals among communities of color, queer, trans, and disabled communities that have caused tension and divided these communities. To inform this relational exploration, I draw primarily on the works of scholars such as Angela Chen, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Douglas Baynton, which examine these conflicts and their social construction. Following this section, I explore the common experiences that unite these communities and promote collective liberation. Specifically, I employ insight from Eunjung Kim, Alison Kafer, Rachel Adams, and Tobin Siebers to explore the social and systemic regulation of non-normative sexuality.. These components provide a background on the communities I am analyzing and the reasons that the benefits of kink are particularly meaningful for these communities. After laying this foundation, I provide a brief introduction to kink informed by Michelle Liang, Lorca J. Sloan, Catherine Schaefer, G. Nic Rider, and lived experience narratives, followed by a thorough analysis of their positive potential for non-normative subjects. In this section, I incorporate more primary sources to demonstrate the benefits of engaging in kink practices due to the dearth of scholarly writing on the subject. Although there is vast consideration of sex and sexuality in relation to marginalized communities, there is surprisingly little discussion of kink practices in these communities. It is therefore my hope to contribute to this limited body of thought and invigorate wider contemplation of the topic. Finally, I conclude this paper with an evaluation of my limitations and my hopes for further dialogue about kink in the lives of non-normative subjects.

In this paper, I will explore kink as meaningful activities and experiences that facilitate pleasure, which is especially important for individuals belonging to marginalized communities. My argument is rooted in adrienne maree brown's concept of pleasure activism (2019), which "asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure" and acknowledges that pleasure is more accessible for some populations, and more denied and policed for other populations. People of color and queer, trans, and disabled folks are a few major populations that have historically struggled to access pleasure due to denial and policing by the dominant white, nondisabled, cishet population. If pleasure is indeed "a measure of freedom," as brown (2019) claims, then expanding access to pleasure for these communities is a vital political act that will facilitate liberation in turn. Building on brown's assessment of the state and significance of pleasure, I intend to demonstrate several potentially liberating benefits of marginalized folks experiencing pleasure through kink. My analysis will focus primarily on queer and trans disabled folks and is informed by my experience as a white, queer, ace, trans-nonbinary, disabled person.

Community Tensions and Mutual Disavowals

I would like to attend first to the tensions among people of color, queer, trans, and disabled communities. There is an unfortunate history of mutual disavowal among these communities, predicated upon the idea that one group can gain power and freedom by disparaging and distinguishing itself from supposedly inferior groups. Even today, "many progressive social movements and schools of thought are premised on a 'methodological distancing' from disability" (Cameron-Rich, 2020, p. 21). Douglas Baynton provides a thorough review of the conflicts between marginalized communities in his essay, *Disability*

and the Justification of Inequality in American History. In this paper, Baynton outlines the ways in which society has used the concept of disability to justify oppressing queer and trans folks, people of color, and women. He claims that efforts to insist upon humanity and secure civil rights for many oppressed communities have left the belief that disability is justification for oppression unquestioned. In Baynton's words (2013, p. 42), "Rather than challenging the basic assumptions behind the hierarchy, they instead work to remove themselves from the negatively marked categories—that is, to disassociate themselves from those people who 'really are' disabled."

This strategy for achieving credibility and validation is pervasive in the mainstream LGBTQ+ rights movement to this day. Many queer and trans folks vigorously combat policies and beliefs that characterize queerness and transness as mental illnesses or disorders.[2] The movement has seen some success, as homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 2013. However, modern psychology still considers other (non)attractions to be clinical disorders, such as asexuality, which appears in the DSM as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder. Meanwhile, Gender Dysphoria also remains in the DSM and functions as a necessary diagnosis for those seeking gender affirming care in the United States. By distancing themselves from disability, mainstream queer and trans movements hope to convince the rest of society that they are normal and subsequently worthy of acceptance.[3] Insistence upon the "born this way" narrative serves as a strong example of the rejection of disability in these communities. For, the idea that a person is queer or trans from birth

[2] Eli Clare discusses his relationship with transness and disability in a lot of his writing. Check out *Body Shame, Body Pride,* and his book *Brilliant Imperfections*–especially chapter 8: *Moving Through Cure*.
[3] Cameron Awkward-Rich discusses how "trans studies has been structured by defensiveness regarding the relationship between transness and disability" in *"She of the Pants and No Voice": Jack Bee Garland's Disability Drag.*

rather than as a result of some trauma or disorder provides credibility to the immutability of such difference without questioning why we are placing so much value on permanence to begin with. In fact, it has become common knowledge that sexuality, like many characteristics, is flexible and fluid over the course of a person's lifespan. Therefore, instead of focusing on whether a person's characteristics can be changed, we must take author Angela Chen's (2020, p. 99) advice and unpack "the expectation that people *should* be changed."

The relationship between gender, sexuality, and disability is a topic of much dispute, and the conversation only becomes more complicated when it comes to asexuality and disability.[4] Although the majority of the American population has come to accept and understand non-heterosexual attraction, many people still struggle to wrap their minds around the absence of attraction. Consequently, asexuality remains highly stigmatized in the cultural imagination and widely considered to be a result of trauma or mental disorder. Alongside the cultural belief that people who do not want sex must be sick is the presumption that "people who are sick (mentally or physically disabled or different in some way) don't want sex" (Chen, 2020, p. 100). In other words, asexual (ace) people are believed to be disabled, and disabled people are believed to be asexual. While ace folks adamantly insist that they are not disabled, disabled people resist desexualization by rejecting asexuality. In this way, each community negates the existence of the other to validate their own existence. Realistically, disability and sexuality are as diverse within these two

[4] Eunjung Kim's *Asexuality in Disability Narratives* provides a really comprehensive analysis of the relationship between asexuality, disability, and desexualization.

communities as they are in others, but the legal and social consequences society differentially imposes on them create significant tensions between these communities.[5]

Mutual disavowal has been a major obstacle for marginalized communities throughout U.S. history. One of the more noticeable instances of reciprocal neglect, dismissal, and rejection between the Women's Rights and Black Power movements of the twentieth century. These movements' disregard for racial and gender oppression, respectively, are now infamous in the field of Gender and Women's Studies. Since then, I believe it has become more apparent that compromising our goals to make them more palatable hinders our activist efforts much more than they help. The concept of centering leadership of the most marginalized individuals within a community is gaining traction in pursuit of larger community goals like collective liberation, interdependence, and cross-movement solidarity—three major principles of disability justice laid out by the activist and performance group, Sins Invalid.

Common Ground: Regulation of Sexuality
Pathologization, Institutional Barriers, Inaccessibility

Despite the tensions described above, there is much common ground at which disabled, queer, trans, and people of color can join forces and build relationships. Indeed, there is significant overlap in the populations of these communities as well as the methods of oppression they face.[6] Though there are many similarities in terms of lived experience and oppression among these communities, for the purposes of this paper, I limit my analysis to the regulation of sexuality that connects disabled, queer, trans, and people of

[5] Check out *Reconnecting Disability and Asexuality* by Lydia X. Z. Brown for more discussion of the relationship between these communities.
[6] Refer to *Disability Justice is LGBT Justice: A Conversation With Movement Leaders* to learn about additional common experiences that go beyond the scope of this project.

color. This analysis is not meant to suggest that these communities experience oppression in exactly the same way, as I recognize that each has endured its own unique form of injustice, and that people experience complex forms of oppression as a result of intersecting identities. By turning my attention toward commonality, I seek to highlight the unifying experience that can aid us as we build toward collective liberation.

To begin with perhaps the most visible tactic for regulating non-normative sexuality, I turn toward the dire predicament of sex education in the United States. As of 2022, 29 states and the District of Columbia require sex education, and only 9 states have policies that include affirming instruction on LGBTQ+ identities or discussion of sexual health for LGBTQ+ youth (SIECUS, n.d.). On the contrary, 6 states explicitly require instruction that discriminates against LGBTQ+ people (SIECUS, n.d.). Not only are these policies around sex education insufficient, they actively endanger and negatively impact queer and trans students, for "sex education programs that stigmatize queer people help cultivate hostile school environments" that contribute to high rates of anti-LGBTQ+ violence on school property (SIECUS et al., 2021, p. 6). Access to quality sex education is a racialized as well, for "predominantly nonwhite school districts receive $23 million less in funding than predominantly white school districts serving the same number of students," resulting in a lack of resources for comprehensive sex education that disproportionately affects youth of color (SIECUS et al., 2021, p. 9). Yet even when schools provide sex education, they overlook and exclude disabled students. Disability justice advocates identify the motivating factor behind this exclusion as desexualization.

Desexualization poses a significant barrier to sexual activity and pleasure for disabled individuals. Generally, crip theory and disability studies define desexualization as

the cultural belief that disabled individuals are not attractive or desirable and that they do not experience sexual desire. Predicated on the notion that "every normative body ('all' human beings) possess sexual 'instincts'," desexualization "produces a form of objectification and dehumanization that denies the humanity of disabled people" (Kim, 2011, p. 483). The concept also perpetuates the belief that anyone who desires or even accepts disability must be disordered, unbalanced, or in some way "sick" themself (Kafer, 2013, p. 3). Combined with other expressions of ableism like shame, isolation, and infantilization, desexualization impedes access to pleasure and autonomy for anyone society categorizes as disabled or associates with disability. One such barrier resulting from desexualization is the absence of adequate sex education. Disabled youth often miss out on sexual health classes that are mandatory for their nondisabled peers because the adults in their lives subscribe to the ableist assumption that the information in those classes is not relevant to them. Information about disabled sex and sensuality is incredibly rare in academic settings, and most states do not even require queer sex education because a significant portion of the population still views it as immoral and unnatural—"sick". By denying non-normative subjects'—queer, trans, and disabled people—access to relevant sexual health education, American society simultaneously endangers these people and negates what Rachel Adams (2015) calls their "right to risk."

According to Adams, the right to risk describes disabled folks' right to engage in potentially harmful activities, and it is an important component of development and autonomy because it allows "opportunities to develop resilience from encounters with adversity that are an inevitable part of all adult lives" (2015, para. 12). In other words, people with disabilities deserve to make the same mistakes as nondisabled people and to access

the same enjoyment of a risk that turns out well. Disabled folks' rights to risk, pleasure, and autonomy face additional obstacles as a result of dependence upon care, which often takes place in settings that prohibit sex, intimacy, and even masturbation.

For people who rely on a high degree of assistance with daily tasks, engaging in sexual acts is particularly difficult. In the home, family members may suppress an individual's sexual needs, desires, and actions due to discomfort. Residential care facilities, on the other hand, often maintain strict sex-segregation to discourage or actively prevent residents from engaging in sexual acts. In both situations, care-takers often treat arousal "as an embarrassing inconvenience rather than a need that requires attention or care" and restrict access to the information, tools, and privacy necessary to meet that need (Adams, 2015, para. 1). The case of Ashley X—a disabled girl whose parents medically halted her development and had her reproductive organs surgically removed when she approached puberty—is an infamous example of the extreme measures caretakers sometimes enact to assuage their own discomfort.[7] Furthermore, caregivers "cross erotic boundaries constantly, with little regard for the consequences of their actions," blaming disabled folks themselves for any physical reaction (Siebers, 2012, p. 45). Depersonalizing views and actions of caregivers not only deny the pleasure of disabled individuals in their care but also "induce feelings of worthlessness and sexual shame" that wound the psyche (Siebers, 2012, p. 45). For people with intellectual disabilities, it is

[7] Alison Kafer's chapter, *At the Same Time, Out of Time: Ashley X* in her book, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* delves into this case and analyzes the relationship between disability and temporality.

actually illegal to have sexual relationships in some places due to arguments against their capacity to give consent.[8]

The effects of desexualization are so vast as to encompass both the repression of sexuality described above as well as the forceful imposition of unwanted sexual situations. Between inadequate sex and relationship education and the privatization of care, disabled people are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing sexual abuse. Caregivers are unfortunately significant perpetrators of this abuse as a result of unequal power dynamics that enabled them to act upon their own sexual desires against the will of the person who is supposed to be receiving care. Desexualization plays an additional role in justifications of sexual abuse, as abusers frame their actions as a favor to disabled folks who would supposedly otherwise never experience sexual pleasure. This type of rationalization for sexual harassment, assault, and abuse extends to other non-normative subjects as well, including queer and trans folks, people—especially women—of color, and anyone else deemed conventionally unattractive or undesirable.

Ultimately, sexual repression and regulation is a momentous form of oppression against non-normative individuals and communities in American society, and one that can unify us in our fight for collective liberation. Having demonstrated the need for access to sex and pleasure, I aim to argue for the potential of kink to act as a liberatory framework, conducive to expanding and subverting ableist, cisheteronormative notions of sex and pleasure.

---

[8] Rachel Adams' *Privacy, Dependence, and Discegenation: Toward a Sexual Culture for People With Intellectual Disabilities* and Michael Gill's *Sexual Ableism Exposed* go into more depth about legal conflicts and informed consent in relation to people with intellectual disabilities.

Kink and Transgressing Normativity

General understandings of kink classify it as unusual or abnormal sexual practices. As a result of this association with abnormality, people often align kink with non-normative bodyminds. Ableist, racist, transphobic, and fatphobic prejudices exacerbate this connection, framing sexual attraction to and participation of non-normative bodyminds as kinky. Politics of reproduction are deeply embedded in these notions of normativity and desirability. In his essay, *A Sexual Culture for Disabled People*, Tobin Siebers asserts that "Disability assumes the characteristic of sexual perversion because disabled people are thought unable to produce 'quality offspring'" (2012, p. 39). I would extend this assessment to other non-normative subjects that society deems undesirable as well. In other words, because American society deems disabled, queer, trans, fat, and people of color undesirable, desire for these bodyminds—whether romantic, sexual, or reproductive— is considered perverse and therefore kinky.[9]

I use the term kink in this paper to highlight a variety of non-normative sexual and sensual practices and dynamics. However, I acknowledge that delineating lists of what "counts" or "does not count" as sex or kink can be detrimental in itself. Though I may focus in this paper on those practices and dynamics that go beyond private, reproductive, penetrative, penis-in-vagina sex between two people, I assert that the only real difference between sex and kink is whether an act is recognized, valued, and legitimated in society at large. Consequently, I reject the notion that identity indicates kink. For example, transness is not a kink. While sex, sexuality, and/or sensuality may be inextricably entwined with

[9] I take issue with ableist (and often homophobic and transphobic) implications of perversion as a concept, but diving into that is currently beyond the scope of this paper.

identity for some, this is by no means a generalizable experience. Additionally, I will discuss kink as an avenue of identity exploration and affirmation in a later section, yet I wish to be clear that this relationship does not qualify any identity as inherently sexual.

My understanding of kink is informed by the work of Michelle Liang and Lorca Jolene Sloan. Michelle Liang defines kink as "the consensual staging of power or the transgression of social boundaries of grossness and sexual normality, sometimes involving sex but other times involving roleplays [...] that do not necessarily require sex" (2020, para. 21). This definition highlights one of the most important facets of kink: consent. It is at this juncture that I must bridge the terms 'kink' and 'BDSM' since consent and the other principles I am going to discuss stem largely from BDSM practice and community. BDSM refers to bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism. As Liang explains, "Many BDSM players use kink and BDSM interchangeably—kink oftentimes as a more casual or shorthand way of expressing BDSM" (2020, para. 21). I utilize kink in this paper for brevity and breadth because I aim to include practices, dynamics, and desires that do not fall under the category of BDSM in my analysis. However, the tenets of BDSM are essential to my conception of kink, so I apply them to kink more broadly.

Practitioners of kink—kinksters, as a community—are committed to discussing and enforcing several vital and related principles for practicing kink in a safe and healthy way. The first of these principles is consent: ensuring that all parties involved are participating of their own free will. The second tenet of kink, according to Lorca Jolene Sloan (2015, p. 551), is the designation of a "physical location, time span [and/or] fantasized scenario" to "cultivate and contain an imbalance of power." The space in which power exchange (or other changes) takes place—physical and/or imaginary—is called a scene. Identifying this

space is crucial. It is through the establishment of this space that participants instill a boundary between real life and play, and it is this boundary that Liang argues distinguishes BDSM/kink from rough sex. Connecting back to consent, Liang asserts that the significance of the boundary is "the assurance of fantasy—the assurance that one can always say no, and the assurance that [the scene] is separate from daily life" (2020, para. 24). Of course, kink *can be* daily life for some people—those who practice lifestyle kink—but what is important is that participants are always able to disengage. To ensure consent, kinksters prioritize negotiations with the prospective partner(s).

Negotiations constitute a discussion of the activities, dynamics, and desires the participants will be engaging with, in depth and in advance. It also involves establishing hard limits, or things that participants are absolutely not willing to engage in. As one participant said in Liang's study on the kink practices of queer women of color in the Netherlands, "although the power within a scene is intentionally unbalanced, the process of designing the scene should ideally occur in a space with as few power differentials as possible" (2020, para. 30). An important part of negotiating is identifying what each party wants to get out of the scene and their boundaries, or anything that they do not want to happen. Kinksters expect each other to uphold and respect one another's boundaries. Robust knowledge of consent, however, understands that consent and boundaries can change at any time.

Anticipating the complexities of consent, kinksters implement fail-safes for participants to use in the event of an unexpected change. Many people use what is called a safe word, or a word/phrase that, if said by any party, indicates a desire to stop the scene. Folks may use what is known as a "stoplight" system, in which saying "green" communicates

that a participant is okay and wishes to continue, saying "yellow" indicates the need to slow down or check in, and saying "red" demands a complete and immediate cessation of activity. There are also plenty of nonverbal alternatives to these strategies, from pinching and tapping to clicking a button. Along with stopping, there is an expectation that participants check in with each other, evaluate how they are feeling, determine how and whether they wish to resume, or how to repair any harm resulting from the scene. The reparation phase is most commonly known as aftercare, and it is the third tenet of practicing kink.

Aftercare is a form of care that non-practitioners may more easily recognize. Taking place after the conclusion of the scene, roleplay, or activity, aftercare entails ensuring the emotional and physical safety, comfort, and security of all individuals involved. People may do this by cleaning up the space, washing up, dressing wounds, applying lotion, eating a snack, drinking water, saying kind or affirming things, snuggling, watching TV, and/or discussing how the scene went (likes/dislikes/feelings/possibilities for the future). Contrary to popular belief, aftercare is important for dominants and submissives alike. Doing a scene can be extremely emotionally intense, and participating in aftercare is a way to recover emotionally and physically, and to transition out of the kink dynamic. Like kink, aftercare looks different for everyone.

In summary, kink constitutes a "departure from heteronormative, procreative sex in that it centers an individual's own definition of pleasure, and reaffirms one's right to pleasure without judgment" (Schaefer & Rider, 2022, para. 4). Fundamental to kink practice and community are the notions of communication, consent, and (after)care. Kink

subverts the meaning of sex, sensuality, and intimacy, and it transgresses dominant notions of power, dependence, and care.

Positive Potential of Kink

Understanding the barriers to pleasure and autonomy that trans, queer, disabled, and people of color face as non-normative subjects in American society, I argue that kink is a meaningful avenue through which these communities can access these liberties among others. In addition to potential self-actualizing and liberatory benefits, I contend that engaging in kink-related practices, dynamics, or attitudes can facilitate transformative understandings of power, dependency, and care. As I delve into the subversive possibilities of kink, I draw primarily on accounts of the personal experiences of disabled, trans, queer, and people of color.

Reimagining Power, Dependency, and Care

The dynamics of power, dependency, and care that often pose daily challenges for disabled people are also deeply racialized and gendered. In the white supremacist patriarchy that is the United States, white, cisgender, heterosexual, nondisabled men take the position at the top of the social—and economic—hierarchy. Those with more privileges in this social hierarchy enjoy the benefits of others' care labor. Women, particularly immigrants, of color perform a disproportionate amount of this care labor, easing the lives of those with more privileges, often without adequate compensation. In fact, women—especially women of color—are expected to engage in care labor outside of employment, managing others' emotions and facilitating others' comfort with nothing in

return.[10] The imposition and devaluation of care labor are critical issues we must address, as we strive for collective liberation.[11]

Jina B. Kim defines dependency as a "value-free relationship in which someone relies on someone or something else for support" (2021, p. 83). Since the person receiving support is assumed not to be able to provide anything in return, people generally understand it to be a one-sided relationship. In contrast to the American ethos of rugged individualism, dependency takes on a parasitic reputation in the social imagination. Vilification of dependency has been a strategic, state-sanctioned effort throughout the history of the United States, stemming from racist, xenophobic, and ableist beliefs. As a result of this project of demonization, dependency is now widely considered evidence of weakness or poor character. People who depend on others are characterized as unproductive citizens, leeches on the—supposedly independent—rest of society. Many scholars and activists in the field of disability studies point out that the dichotomy of dependence and independence is a false one; it overlooks the myriad ways in which so-called independent individuals do, in fact, rely on many systems and services to function in society. Additionally, they draw attention to the fact that disabled folks and other "dependents" indeed have plenty to contribute to society. However, these contributions are largely unrecognized, unvalued, and illegitimized. Acknowledging the contributions of disabled people, disability justice uplifts the notion of interdependence: our mutual reliance on each other.

---

[10] Lots of folks have contributed to the analysis subject. I recommend Akemi Nishida's book, *Just Care: Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Care*.

[11] Learn more about care work by checking out *Radical Care*, by Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani and Tamara Kneese, as well as some of the essays in *Ethics of Care: Critical Advances in International Perspective*.

Despite its importance to disability justice, interdependence as a principle does not contradict negative assumptions about dependence. Interdependence is a vital concept, and I wholeheartedly affirm that we need to enable and appreciate the various and sometimes unexpected gifts and skills each person possesses. At the same time, however, I would like to return to the initial assessment that dependency is inherently invalid and immoral. Combatting this characterization, kink opens a door for us to not only accept, but cherish dependence. In a dominance/submission scene, for instance, the dominant partner(s) may expect their submissive partner(s) to be completely dependent on them. Even when the submissive(s) does not necessarily provide anything tangible in return for their care and attention, the dominant partner(s) may still gain pleasure and satisfaction from the dependence and submission of their submissive(s). This situation reveals how rewarding it can be to give care to another person. Dominants and submissives can both experience satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy from the act of caring for their partner(s) or being cared for, without the expectation or even desire for that care to be reciprocated. This experience is, in fact, so common that the language of kink is practically built around it.

One of the most basic identifications amongst kinksters relates to a person's relationship to giving and receiving—whether it be care, pleasure, or pain. Although it is largely a practical identification used to assess compatibility, this foundational understanding of differing desires and preferences inherently uplifts the value of both giving and receiving. While it is socially considered normal to desire to be the receiving subject of pleasure, fewer people understand the desire to only give it. Kinksters, however, have developed several specific roles and identities that represent exactly such a desire.

Service subs and doms, for example, are primarily interested in pleasing or performing tasks for their partner(s). Typically, these folks are not interested in receiving anything in return for their efforts. Instead, they receive pleasure from their ability to please their partner(s), make their life easier, or improve their wellbeing. Similarly, a stone butch—who prefers to pleasure her partner(s) and not be touched sexually herself—achieves her own satisfaction from that which she provides to her partner(s).

The terminology that kink involves easily explains certain preferences in roles or activities, accompanied by nonjudgmental acceptance of these preferences. Explaining one's desire to give but not receive pleasure often risks invalidation and coercion with people who are unfamiliar with kink practice and community. It may even result in one's partner accusing them of not loving or being attracted to them. By contrast, one can typically show up in kinky spaces and identify themself as a pleasure dom (dominant)—a dom whose primary role is to curate a pleasurable experience for their sub(s) and who feels satisfied and fulfilled by their sub's pleasure in lieu of their own physical pleasure. In the context of the kink community, most people will immediately understand and respect what engaging in sex with a pleasure dom would be like. Shorthand terminology in kink culture thus enables people to quickly and clearly communicate what kind of activities they are interested in engaging in, and how, and allows people to more easily assess compatibility. An additional benefit of the rich kink-related vocabulary and culture of non judgment is that it normalizes preferences, desires, and activities that would meet derision and scorn in non-kink spaces.

By supporting nontraditional expressions of sex and sensuality, kink answers Tobin Siebers's call for us to think "expansively and experimentally about what defines sexual

experience." Through kink, disability can take on a "complex embodiment that enhances sexual activities and pleasure," rather than merely "a defect that needs to be overcome to have sex" (Siebers, 2012, p. 47). Needs and actions that would face ridicule elsewhere can be recharacterized as desirable. For example, incontinence may pose a barrier to sex for some people who encounter disgust or a partner's aversion to the possibility of urine being involved during intimate moments. A partner's negative view of an aspect of one's body can often be discouraging and make a person feel as though their body is wrong or bad. While incontinence in this situation may feel like a flaw or deficit, in the context of kink, it may be an attractive, desirable characteristic for people who enjoy omorashi—a kink involving arousal at the prospect of wetting oneself or witnessing another person wet themself. Similarly, a person who dislikes penetration may find an ideal sexual partner in a paraplegic with a skilled tongue, and a person with limited genital sensation may achieve mutual pleasure with a partner who experiences podophilia or maschalagnia—sexual attraction to feet or armpits, respectively. Kink provides an avenue through which individuals can reframe characteristics that society tells them are flaws as something desirable.

Reframing and narrativizing one's characteristics or experiences in the context of kink can flip the scripts not just of desirability and dependence, but also of power. Though American society characterizes dependence as indicative of weakness and powerlessness, quite the opposite can be true when we view it through the lens of kink. Demanding assistance, for example, can become an exercise of authority and dominance rather than the show of helplessness it may be perceived as in other contexts. There are lots of creative ways in which a disabled dom can take power to have their needs met: requesting

their sub(s) to disrobe them or perform a massage, ordering their sub(s) to hump their leg or ride them, requiring their sub(s) to set up the scene space, and more.

Dominance and submission can extend to nonsexual acts as well, which may be part of sex or a scene, or simply be ingrained in daily life. Lifestyle BDSM/kink, for example, involves an ongoing "24/7" power dynamic that may be sexual or nonsexual in nature.[12] Acts that are typically understood as nonsexual may include doing household chores, laying out a partner's clothes for the day and/or helping them dress, cooking, bringing a partner their medication, keeping a partner's water bottle/glass full, carrying a partner's bags and opening doors for them, and so much more. Importantly, participants may frame any of these acts as one of submission or of dominance according to their dynamics and desires. Being able to demand these things as a dominant can provide a sense of power and agency for disabled folks that society denies them in most contexts. On the other hand, receiving them at a dom's behest can assuage the potential guilt of having to ask for them.[13] Performing these acts as either a dominant or a submissive can be fulfilling because of the knowledge that they are making life better for another person. Engaging in typically nonsexual acts in the context of kink and power dynamics is not only practical but can also be hot! It is attractive to know that a partner cares and can keep the household running, and it is encouraging to know that a partner's attraction increases as a result of these actions.

[12] QueerEarthling.com is home to lots of blog posts about one queer, trans couple's full-time kink dynamic.
[13] Check out Black Youth Project's article, *Chills down my spinal degeneration: Why we need Black queer disabled kink* to hear about the importance of learning to receive care as someone society expects to be "the perpetual care-giver and emotional laborer."

Further Benefits

In addition to the narrative framing advantages of kink, I would like to identify some specific practices that have the potential to benefit queer, trans, and disabled folks in particular. Such benefits include pain relief, space to process trauma, and identity exploration and affirmation—all of which contribute to self-actualization.

For individuals with chronic pain, kink can be an avenue for accessing control and pain relief. Engaging in impact and other pain play—such as whipping, spanking, clamping, pinching, rope bondage, etc.—allows participants to opt for "chosen pain…in order to take a break from their experience of involuntary chronic pain" (Patterson, 2020, para. 7). By choosing to experience pain, individuals can take control of something they are typically powerless to. Chosen pain may be preferable for its predictability, controllability, and the variety it provides from pain experienced in daily life. Receiving pain in a kink context not only gives the participant the option to choose it but also gives them a chance to opt out when they no longer want it. In contrast to chronic pain, participants in a kink setting are able to give and revoke consent for pain at will. Additionally, pain in the context of kink may "overlay—not quite replace—chronic pain," as the "urgency and acute sensation" pull attention away from chronic pain (Sheppard, 2019, para. 39). Rather than focusing on radiating joint pain, for instance, a person might focus instead on the sensation of hot wax dripping down their body, the latter temporarily overriding the former. Finally, the physical pleasure participants experience through kink practices can provide another form of temporary pain relief. For example, the pleasurable sensation of an orgasm may overwhelm the painful sensations one typically feels. Thus, through the context of kink,

individuals with chronic pain can engage with their bodily selves in a way that fosters autonomy and facilitates pain relief.

In addition to the abundant benefits for physically disabled folks, kink is an opportune site of self-exploration for individuals with psych disabilities. Since kink foundationally involves thorough "communication, boundary setting, and exploration of pleasure, partners can affirm identities, rewrite traumatic experiences, and redefine intimacy in ways that support wellbeing" (Schaefer & Rider, 2022, para. 2). Check-ins and the basic understanding that consent is revocable at any time facilitate an optimal space in which to re-explore, process, and even re-write traumatic events. This kind of exploratory practice allows participants to regain a sense of safety and autonomy interrupted by trauma because they are able to engage with that trauma on their own terms, with support and control over the situation. For others, however, losing control may be more beneficial, and kink provides an opportunity for that as well. Power dynamics, as discussed at length in the previous section, can be an incredibly useful tool for individuals with anxiety or depression. Rather than facing the dread and exhaustion of making one's own choices and taking care of oneself, in the context of kink, individuals can rely on someone else to take over these responsibilities. Handing the decision-making off to someone else thus provides a much-needed break from the emotional and physical toll of forcing oneself to perform difficult tasks. Engaging in a scene is an effective way to relieve or take a break from psychological burdens—whether they are everyday stressors or residual trauma.

Separated from the responsibilities and obligations of "real" life, the fantasy space that kink facilitates is also useful for exploring and affirming identity, especially for trans and genderqueer folks. Because kink lays the groundwork for experimentation with

expectations of consent, negotiation, and care, it is an opportune way to explore gender and gender roles. Fantasy and role playing offer the chance to dress and act in ways one typically would not, creating a more accessible and comfortable space to try new things. Participants may dress in clothes that are not typical of their gender, try different gendered titles or nicknames, or use different gendered words for parts of their body. Through kink, individuals can explore identity and presentation in a way that is safe and free of the guilt of wanting to explore. For instance, when this kind of play is combined with power dynamics, a person who perhaps experiences internalized transphobia can excuse their gender-bending behavior as "part of the scene" instead of admitting that they want it. In addition to exploring gender, kink is a great opportunity for gender affirmation. Through things like clothing, toys, titles/nicknames, and power dynamics, trans folks can experience gender euphoria during intimacy. This affirmation can be extremely meaningful, especially for folks who experience a lot of misgendering in their daily lives.

By promoting physical and psychological wellness through pain relief, space to process trauma, and identity exploration and affirmation, engaging in kink can equip participants with the tools to achieve self-actualization. Participating in kink-related practices can help a person cultivate a sense of identity and agency instead of the repression that non-normative subjects typically face.

Limitations and Looking Forward

Although I have attempted to incorporate the knowledge I have gained from scholars and thinkers of color, walking through the world as a white person limits my ability to do their ideas justice and meaningfully expand upon them. My narrow focus on the

importance and benefit of pleasure likewise does not adequately address the perspective and needs of mad folks and people who are unable to experience joy or pleasure.[14] Ultimately, the ideas I have laid out in this paper are both constrained by the scope of this project and colored by my own lived experiences. Knowing that there is so much more to be said about this topic, it is my hope that this paper can act as a springboard for more folks to contribute their analyses, critiques, and their wildest imaginings.

As Michelle Liang (2022, para. 8) reveals in her study on kink culture in the Netherlands, "people of color have mobilized BDSM to trouble liberal understandings of the self." The stories from participants in Liang's study demonstrate the subversive power of kink communities that "radically centralize marginalized kink experiences and reject pathologizing discourses" (2022, para. 9). By entwining anti-racist politics with their conception and practice of kink, kinksters of color are already creating avenues for nuanced engagement with experiences of racialization and power. Acknowledging and interacting with structures of oppression through kink empowers participants to expose the "scriptedness of power" (Liang, 2022, para. 36). Therefore, through kink, even practices like housewife or servant roleplay can become subversive despite the fact that they replicate oppressive practices and situations because kinksters "are aware it is an artifice, unlike the untroubled discourses of rationality, heteronormativity, family, and race" (Liang, 2022, para. 37). The kinksters of color in Liang's study thus provide an inspiring example of the liberatory potential of kink.

[14] I would love to delve deeper into queer negativity and mad theory to complicate the emphasis on pleasure. I believe this perspective is also incredibly relevant to kink and could expand upon my argument in this paper in really interesting ways.

Unfortunately, kink is not a perfect framework, and the community is far from ideal. Encountering racism and ableism in the kink spaces and community is a serious barrier to participation. Many participants in Emma Sheppard's UK-based research project asserted that they "felt excluded from the semi-public scenes or spaces of kink because of their disability" and the lack of tolerance, inaccessibility, and financial barriers they had to navigate (2019, para. 14). Unfortunately, "privileged, nondisabled people tend to replicate the power dynamics seen in the world," making some kink spaces hostile to folks belonging to marginalized communities (Patterson, 2020, para. 26). Like most spaces and communities, kink is one that will require participants to intentionally interrupt hegemony. I am optimistic that the principles and practices instilled in this community prime it with the foundation and tools to do exactly that.

Conclusion

Structures of oppression wish to divide queer, trans, disabled, and communities of color and pit us against each other. Although they lay the groundwork for the mutual disavowals that could destroy us, these structures also create the conditions for shared experiences of oppression that can unify marginalized communities. One such experience is the repression of sex, sexuality, and pleasure, which stems from desexualization and dehumanization of individuals whose bodyminds fall outside of the cisheteronormative European ideals of value.

The foundations of kink—consent, negotiation, and (after)care—make it a useful avenue for redefining sex, intimacy, sensuality, and pleasure in a way that makes them more accessible for non-normative bodyminds. Principles, practices, dynamics, and

attitudes of kink can enable a subversive understanding of sex, dependence, and power. It provides an opportunity for participants to invert what power looks like and combat dominant ideas about the supposed detriments of dependence. In the context of kink, bodies and actions that face derision and disgust in larger society instead become valuable, attractive, and desirable. As Caz Killjoy—activist, educator, and cofounder of the Disability and Sexuality Access Network—said in an interview with Emmett Patterson (2020, para. 10), "because disabled people often are subject to violations of their consent (through medicalization, othering, etc.), the control-centered expectations of kink can help disabled people ground within their bodies." Participation in kink can likewise benefit other populations that also experience frequent violations of consent, like queer and trans people, fat folks, and people of color.

Grounding in one's body is not the only benefit of kink for people belonging to marginalized communities. Some kink-related practices can also serve to relieve both physical and psychological pain, promote healing, facilitate identity exploration and affirmation, and ultimately empower participants to practice asserting their needs, accepting care, and exercising autonomy over their bodies. All of these benefits are conducive to joy, pleasure, and self-actualization. All of these benefits are ones that society has denied marginalized communities. Therefore, I believe that engaging with the principles and practices of kink has huge liberatory potential for people with non-normative bodyminds.

References

Adams, R. (2015). Privacy, dependence, discegenation: Toward a sexual culture for people with intellectual disabilities. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 35*(1). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i1.4185

Baynton, D.C. (2013). Disability and the justification of inequality in American history. In L.J. Davis. (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 31-55). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203077887

Baril, A. (2015). Transness as Debility: Rethinking Intersections between Trans and Disabled Embodiments. *Feminist Review, 111*(1), 59-74. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2015.21

Brown, A. M. (2019). Introduction. In *Pleasure activism: The politics of feeling good* (pp. 1-18). AK Press.

Cameron Awkward-Rich. (2020). “She of the pants and no voice”: Jack Bee Garland's disability drag. *Transgender Studies Quarterly 7*(1), 20–36. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7914486

Chen, A. (2020). In sickness and in health. In *Ace: What asexuality reveals about desire, society, and the meaning of sex* (pp. 93-111). Beacon Press.

Chills down my spinal degeneration: Why we need Black queer disabled kink. 2019, March 27). Black Youth Project. https://blackyouthproject.com/chills-down-my-spinal-degeneration-why-we-need-black-queer-disabled-kink/

Clare, E. (2017). *Brilliant imperfection: Grappling with cure*. Duke University Press.

Gender affirmation, kinkster style. (2021, July 14). Queer Earthling. https://queerearthling.com/2021/07/14/gender-affirmation-kinkster-style/

Hay, M. (2016, July 25). The pleasure and pain of being disabled in the BDSM community. *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/nnkv3d/disabled-bdsm-experiences

Johnson, E. (2023, May 31). As a disabled person, kink can feel empowering, subversive and even therapeutic. *ABC Everyday*. https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/as-disabled-person-kink-feels-empowering-subversive-theraputic/102367100

Kafer, A. (2013). Introduction: Imagined futures. In *Feminist, queer, crip* (pp. 1-24). Indiana University Press.

Kim, E. (2011). Asexuality in disability narratives. *Sexualities*, *14*(4), 479-493. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406463

Kim, J. B. (2021). Cripping the welfare queen: The radical potential of disability politics. *Social Text 39* (3), 79–101. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-9034390

Liang, M. (2022). Playing with power: Kink, race, and desire. *Sexualities, 25*(4), 381-405. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1177/1363460720964063

Patterson, E. (2020, November 23). How practicing kink helps keep people with disabilities connected to their desires. *The Body*. https://www.thebody.com/article/kink-managing-chronic-pain

Rodriguez, J. M. (2014). Introduction. In *Sexual futures, queer gestures, and other Latina longings* (pp. 1-28). New York University Press.

Schaefer, C., & Rider, G. N. (2022, October 10). Eroticizing our play: Pleasure and healing in kink and BDSM. *Medium*. https://medium.com/national-center-for-institutional-diversity/eroticizing-our-play-1d4888667239

Sheppard, E. (2019). Chronic pain as fluid, BDSM as control. *Disability Studies Quarterly, 39*(2). https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/6353/5250

SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change, URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity, Advocates for Youth, Answer, Black & Pink, The Equality Federation, GLSEN, Human Rights Campaign, National LGBTQ Task Force, & Planned Parenthood Federation of America. (2021, May). *A call to action: LGBTQ+ youth need inclusive sex education.*

SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change. (n.d.). *The SIECUS state profiles 2022*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from https://siecus.org/the-siecus-state-profiles-2022/

Siebers, T. (2012). A sexual culture for disabled people. In R. McRuer & A. Mollow (Eds.), *Sex and disability* (pp. 37-53). Duke University Press.

Sloan, L. J. (2015). Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice. *Sexualities, 18*(5-6), 548-563. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550907

What kink did for me as a trans woman. (2019, July 7). The Center for Sex Positive Culture. https://thecspc.org/news/2019/7/7/what-kink-did-for-me-as-a-transwoman

Wilson, N. J., Macdonald, J., Hayman, B., Bright, A. M., Frawley, P., & Gallego, G. (2018). A narrative review of the literature about people with intellectual disability who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 22*(2), 171-196. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629516682681