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the
eye

MAJORING IN KINK

A MONTHLONG CONVERSATION WITH COLUMBIA'S BDSM CLUB

by Devin Briski



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MAJORING IN KINK

Conversio Virium's quest to
educate the next generation of
BDSM'ers, pg. 07

by Devin Briski
photos by Anthony Clay

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Like many other women in college, I'm at somewhat of a feminist crossroads.

I was born in Madonna's holy glow, raised by Baby Spice, "not a girl, not yet a woman" with Britney, and am now entering adulthood with Kesha. My pop cultural touchstones for sex have evolved from the counter-Reagan, *Like a Prayer* reactionary sexuality, to Baby Spice's coy licking of a lollipop, to the modern-day "slutwave"—the Katy Perrys, Gagas, and Nickis whose domineering sexuality is exaggerated to the point of excess (see: projectile whipped cream emitted from Katy Perry's breasts).

Navigating the cultural images of accepted female sexuality with the gender and sex theory I learn in school is always a tricky process. I try to stay on top of the current discourse by reading the Canon of Feminist Blogs, and I embrace the sex positivism that has become de rigueur for young fems. But feminism is in constant theoretical motion, and I sometimes feel pressure from opposing places to "be a good feminist."

The website of Ariel Levy, a writer for the *New Yorker* who wrote *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, indicts the Pamela Anderson-brand sexuality:

"A tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular. What we once regarded as a kind of sexual expression we now view as sexuality."

The members of Conversio Virium, Columbia's BDSM club, have a different view of sex and feminism, which Devin Briski explores this week: one should satisfy his or her personal desires and kinks, regardless of their origin, sociological impact, or bigger historical implications. For them, as long as both parties consent and communicate, everything will be OK—even if they draw some critics.

As students, we *can* theorize feminism—or sex, or anything else—and be satisfied people, not constantly concerned with what the academy deems "correct" or "current." There's a leap of faith in there, but sometimes, it's worth it. For me, this most of the time means listening to Eminem's objectively offensive invectives, but liking the music and feeling OK, just because it's catchy. And for the members of Conversio Virium, that means picking up a denim flogger and, well, you know.

Amanda Cormier
eye@columbiaspectator.com

AND THE AWARD GOES TO...
IF COLUMBIA RAN THE OSCARS

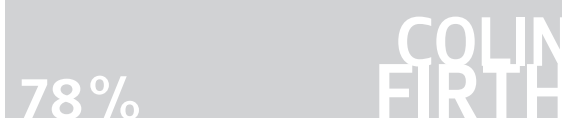
We surveyed students last week to figure out what Columbia's Oscar picks would look like (including some awards that should really be added to the lineup), and in the process discovered Colin Firth's secret fan club.

compiled by Margaret Boykin

bestactress



bestactor



thehosts

Three short words on the interesting pairing of our hosts, Hathaway and Franco.

EXTREME
EGOMANIAC
FEST

MILDLY
BOOST
RATINGS

LAME
PERFORMANCE
ART

SEVERAL
AWKWARD
HUGS

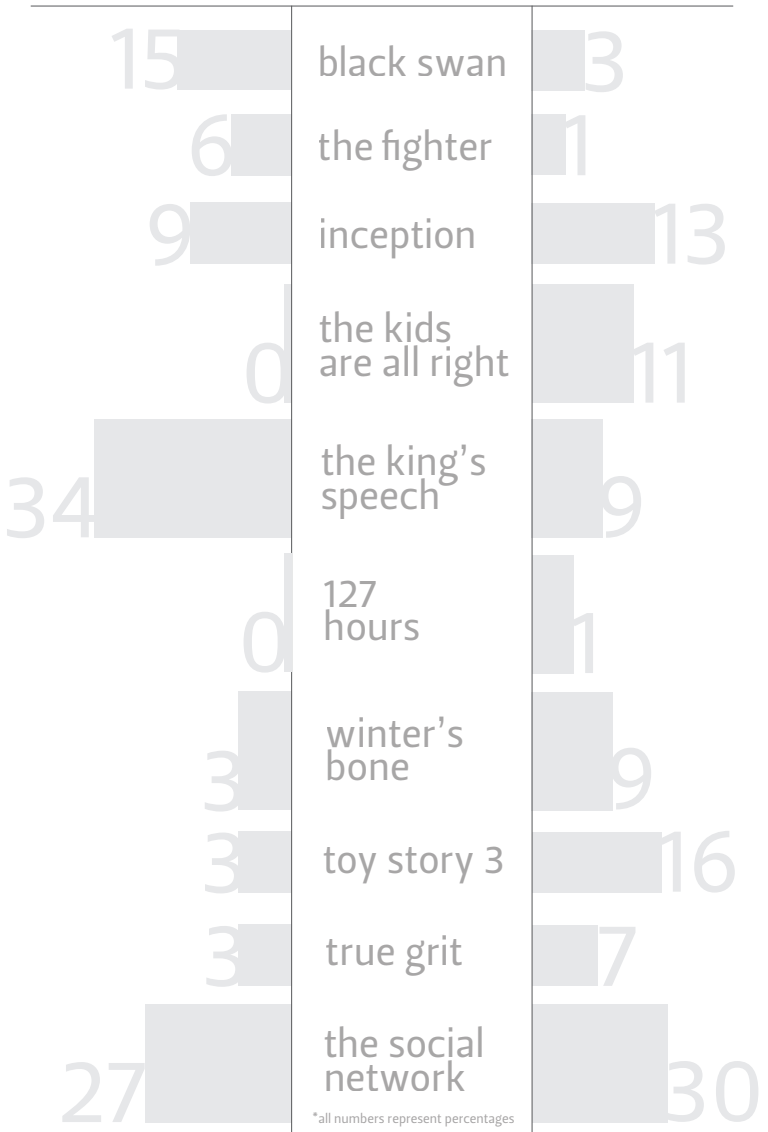
S.E.X.

bestpicture

Clearly, speech impediments are adorable. Sawing your own arm off? Not so much.*

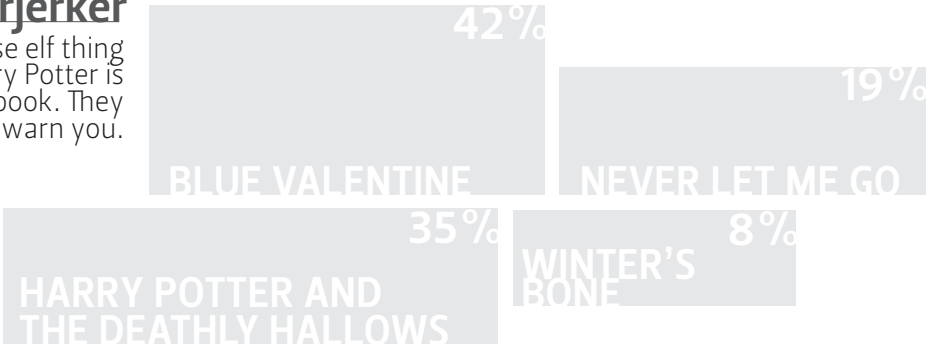
watchtwice

Movies you'll actually watch again. Facebook succeeds wildly at something. Shocker.*



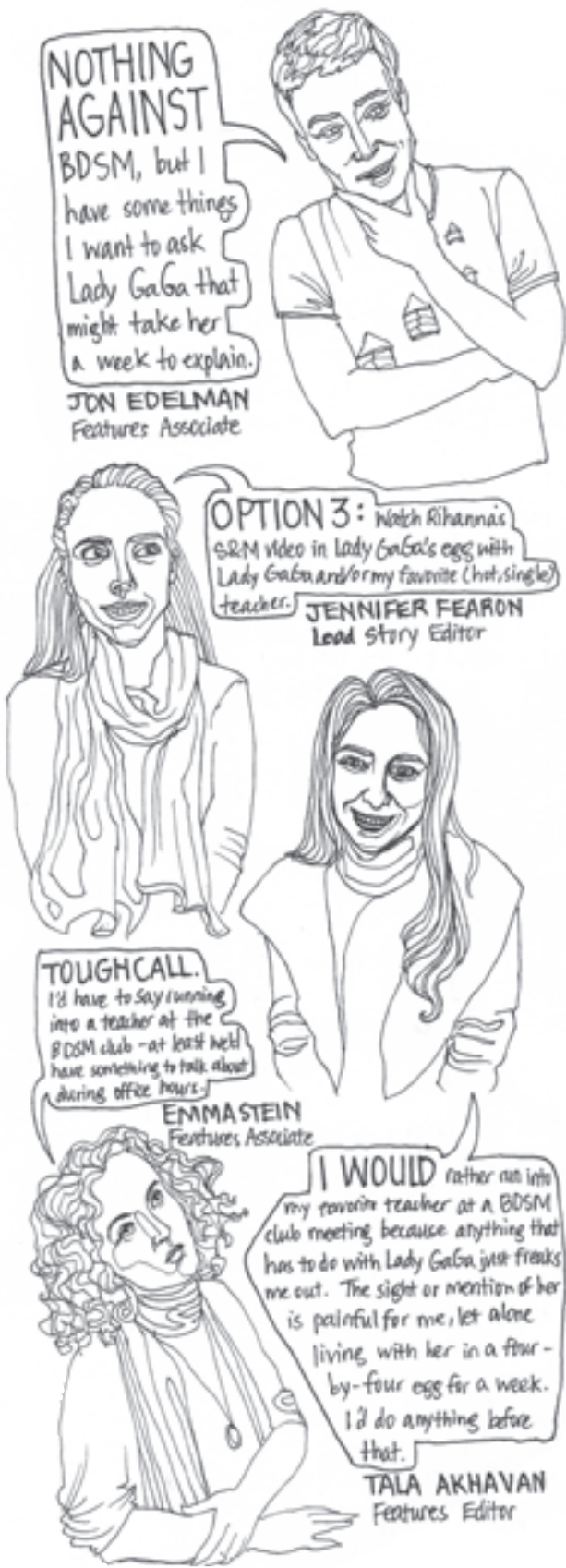
besttearjerker

That house elf thing was sad. Harry Potter is a children's book. They should warn you.



EDITORS' PICKS
WOULD YOU RATHER

Which would be more unbearable—living in Lady Gaga's egg for a week (with Lady Gaga) OR running into your favorite teacher at a meeting of the BDSM club, Conversio Virium (as mentioned in Devin Briski's lead article)? We asked the editors which they'd rather suffer through.



COMPILED BY MARGARET BOYKIN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY CINDY PAN

PHOTO ESSAY /

WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS



Westside Market salads have long been a staple in the typical Columbian’s diet, though they often end up being an expensive one. We figured out the weight/price ratio for several ingredients to help you get the most bang for your buck. The amounts listed are the amounts given in a typical Westside salad.

photos by Vitaly Druker



CROUTONS .075lbs \$.52



MIXED BEANS .17lbs \$1.19



CUCUMBER .3lbs \$2.10



PEPPERS .23lbs \$1.61



APPLES .25lbs \$1.75

the economic breakdown of a neighborhood staple



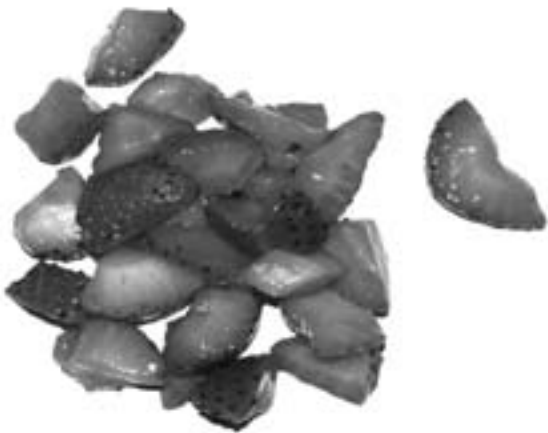
PESTO TOFU .22lbs \$1.54



CHICKEN .3lbs \$2.10



BLACKBERRIES .2lbs \$1.40



STRAWBERRIES .2lbs \$1.40



WALNUTS .2lbs \$1.40



BLUEBERRIES .2lbs \$1.40



OLIVES .15lbs \$1.05



DEVILED EGGS .15lbs \$1.05



MUSHROOMS .15lbs \$1.05

A Sip From the Fountain

one professor explores our desire for immortality

BY MEREDITH FOSTER
ILLUSTRATION BY LIZ LEE

The desire for immortality is timeless. It is the central theme of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the earliest known pieces of literature, and is present in Shakespeare, when Cleopatra commands, “Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have Immortal longings in me” (Act V, scene ii). It’s even present in the dredges of pop culture—think *Twilight*. Throughout history, artists have been motivated by the lure of immortality, evident through their music, literature, and artworks.

On Feb. 10, an article called “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal” headlined the front cover of *Time* magazine. The article is about scientists and engineers who believe that, in less than thirty-five years, technology will make it possible for humans to transfer their brains to strong and durable devices like computers and robots.

While this may be true, will we also be able to extend the mortality of our physical self? It is just this question that Jonathan Weiner, a professor at Columbia University’s School of Journalism, and Pulitzer Prize winner, tries to answer in his new book *Long for This World* (2010).

Weiner has been interested in this topic as long as he can remember. “The long answer would include a puddle I ran into on my way home from school and watching the rain drops drop into the puddle and thinking about time and those mysteries. When I was first starting out as a science writer back in 1984 or so, 1982, I interviewed an elderly biologist who was studying aging and that got me really interested in the subject and I followed it ever since,” he says.

In the book, Weiner introduces Aubrey de Grey, a famous scientist that studies gerontology, the study of aging. Aubrey started out working on fruit flies and believes that science on model organisms like the fruit fly and roundworm will lead the way for extending the lifespan of humans. He is now the Chief Science Officer of the SENS Foundation, investigating mechanisms of tissue repair to reverse the effects of aging.

Weiner also discusses why the field of gerontology has grown enormously in recent years. A lot has changed since Weiner interviewed his first aging biologist. “I could see that she was almost alone in her field. Not many people studied this, but now many more people do. The field is hot now,” he says.

The field is “hot” for several different reasons. First, other versions of “Methuselah” (any living creature reaching advanced age) can be made in the laboratory using model organisms like the fruit fly. “You can change one gene and make a methuselah fly or worm or even yeast,” he says. “So, if you can do that in the petri dish, maybe you can do that by tweaking human genes, or by coming up with some longevity pill.” Weiner identifies the ever increasing life expectancy of humans as a large reason that the field of gerontology is growing. “We already have almost thirty years extra on life expectancy since 1900. So, if we can do that, how much more can we do?” he says.

Aging isn’t just being fought in the laboratory. Dr. Jeffrey Ascherman, Assistant Professor of Clinical Surgery at the College of Physicians and Surgeons says that more people in recent years are turning to plastic surgery to look younger. “It is more accepted, more affordable, and in today’s competitive job market, people

feel it may help them to get employment,” he says.

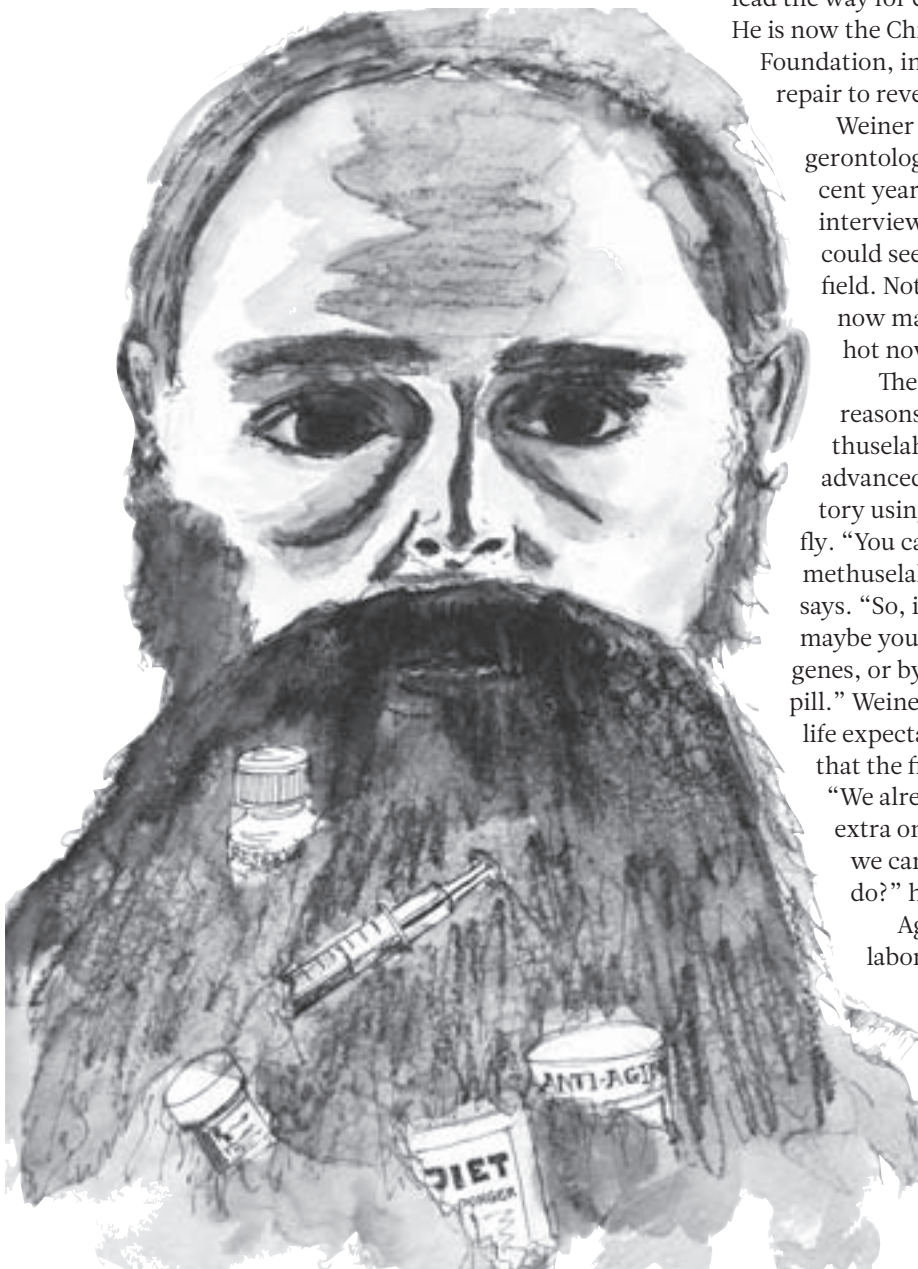
Dr. Christine Rohde, also an Assistant Professor of Clinical Surgery at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, says, “More people in recent years are getting less invasive injections like Botox and fillers like Juvederm or Restylane. Although the rejuvenation effects of these products are temporary, they help people put off more extensive and more expensive surgical procedures to look younger. More people, including young people, find these injections helpful because they are quick office procedures, so they can get back to normal activities right away, and they see a difference right away.”

“JUST IMAGINE IF STALIN COULD LIVE AN EXTRA HUNDRED YEARS, OR MAO, OR HITLER? ‘DICTATOR FOR LIFE’—WHAT IF THAT MEANT DICTATOR FOR 500 YEARS?”

In his book, Weiner writes that procedures such as these have dated back to famous intellectuals such as Yeats and Freud. Jean Cocteau was famous for getting a face lift and, soon afterwards, wearing leather pants and capes.

Weiner says, “I think those are all expressions of the same dream. We dream of staying young forever. And when we’re young, we know on some level that we can’t be young forever. But we think of ourselves, we identify with our own youth and it’s almost the school of hard knocks. You gradually get that young self-image knocked out of you—very gradually for some of us—and people fight it.”

But while everyone may wish for immortality, the idea of a world full of immortals raises many questions. Would this extended lifespan be restricted to a select few, the wealthy and privileged? If immortality were more universal, would inevitable overpopulation cause rapid decreases in resources and opportunity? Weiner says that many gerontologists are plagued by these questions. “Many of them are worried about it and talk about it a great deal. Just imagine if Stalin could live an extra hundred years, or Mao, or Hitler? Some dictators do get taken down—we’ve seen that just now in Egypt—but others, if they didn’t age, might hold on for life. ‘Dictator for life’—what if that meant dictator for 500 years?” he says. When considering the question of his own immortality, Weiner errs on the side of caution. “I am happy to be mortal,” he says. ●



MAJORING IN KINK

*Conversio
Virium's
quest to
educate
the next
generation
of BDSM'ers*

by Devin Briski

photos by
Anthony Clay and
Samuel Draxler

illustration by
Cindy Pan



“Turn her around so we can see her face when you do that,” shouts a young man to Dov, a middle aged six-foot-plus man with long curly hair and black leather Frye boots. The boots are currently being used to kick Gabriel—an attractive, young, recent NYU grad currently in bra and underwear—in the crotch from behind, as she is twisted uncomfortably around his arm, his big hands firmly gripping her thick black hair. I flinch at the sadistic request before remembering the nature of the demonstration.

It’s Monday night in Hamilton 304, after the unfortunately timed Core classes have filtered out of the building. I’m at the semester’s first meeting of Conversio Virium, Columbia’s BDSM, or kinky sex, education group, witnessing famed fetishist Dov demonstrate “rough body play,” or “thug play.” The demonstration is instructional, with an emphasis on avoiding actual bodily harm, but it’s easy to forget this as Dov maneuvers her onto the floor, grip strong, demonstrating an impressive and creative repertoire of ways to twist her body and apply force. His verbal manipulation ranges from the cliché (“Say hello to Mr. Boot!”) to the nostalgic cliché (“Why do you keep hitting yourself, huh?”), as the crowd makes inside jokes, giggles, and asks probing questions about the anatomy of the lesson.

He leans over and digs his hands into her thighs, grabbing at a specific point as she squirms on the floor and giggles. “These are the pressure points you want to find, they create an intense sensation.” He holds tighter and she writhes, smile on her face. A smirk comes across his. “It’s almost as if she actually likes it or something.”

A rough start

Fast forward to the end of the meeting, and language about pressure points and how to avoid

paralyzing the still-bare grad student is replaced by dialogue that would be familiar to attendees of an NSOP consent seminar.

Conversio Virium meets every week to teach young kinksters proper and safe BDSM technique, in addition to serving as a safe space to discuss, intellectualize, and joke about the kink scene in New York. For readers not familiar with the terminology, BDSM is an umbrella term for sexual fetishes which incorporate pain and imagined power relations into routines for arousal. BDSM is sexual in nature, though it may or may not include actual sex.

IT FACILITATES A UNIQUE TYPE OF INTIMACY, ONE THAT ENCOURAGES PARTICIPANTS TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT CONNECTION, SEX, AND DESIRE.

BDSM stands for bondage, dominance/submission, slave/master, and sadism/masochism (see sidebar for a more thorough description), and the act of participating in BDSM is called “scening” or “playing.” CV is a BDSM education stronghold in New York City, known for being a safe and welcoming environment in New York’s larger kink scene, and attracting a diverse crowd, including Columbia undergrads, a sizable grad student population, a solid NYU constituency, and a number of commuters of all ages who travel from as far as Rockland County each week. I spent one month attending CV meetings and interviewing members about their sex lives, their opinions, and

learning the norms of their non-normative community. I learned the modern 20-something kinkster is not exactly (at all) Pulp Fiction-Leatherman status, but rather a young, maybe slightly adventurous student or postgrad who procrastinates on FetLife rather than Facebook, and is, on average, very, very satisfied with his or her sex life.

Partially due to the nature of the type of sex they engage in, members of the kink scene repeatedly emphasize the importance of consent and open communication. In bondage, displeasing one’s partner doesn’t mean failing to achieve orgasm, but possibly causing them undesired physical pain. Kellie Foxx-Gonzales, president of CV and a sophomore in CC, says, “We have such an ethos in the BDSM community. We’re so focused on ethics and consent, and if somebody violates that once, they’re pretty much blackballed from the entire community.”

“Negotiation” is the process of discussing a scene beforehand, what the different participants will do and what they want to get out of it. “Limits”—undesired actions—are discussed, and people are encouraged to know and understand their triggers. During a scene, a “safe word” (which commands someone to immediately stop), is aided by a “red light, yellow light, green light” system, which is used to indicate to a partner how one is feeling about actions in a scene without breaking it too drastically. “Aftercare” is the kinky word for cuddling and emotional and physical first aid. It’s more than just a douche move to skip out on aftercare—like many aspects of a given BDSM scenario, it’s discussed beforehand, and held to a high standard. Dov explains during the demonstration: “You just beat the crap out of somebody, made them have 600,000 orgasms, whipped them until they’ve cried... Now you cuddle them.” It’s a difficult balance between upholding a fantasy (especially one that involves theatrical elements of non-consent or resistance) and communicating feelings—one that can only be safely toed with



much preparation and knowledge of a partner’s needs and desires.

CV Vice President Simone Wolff, BC ’13, describes how the physical risks facilitate an awareness that she thinks may even lead to safer practices than “vanilla” (non-kinky, normative) sex. “A lot of people have sex without ever talking about it or thinking about it or educating themselves. ... The concept of negotiating sex beforehand is something that I totally learned from the kink community, and I think it can be applied to everything,” she says.

Many participants say these community standards foster a unique type of intimacy, one that encourages participants to think critically about

connection, sex, and desire, and one that can be a draw, in and of itself, to “communicators” like Wolff. “I like to talk about sex and I like to really communicate with my partners, and the scene has so many people who are on the same page. That’s a community I want to be part of, that’s a community I want to fuck my partners in,” Wolff says.

Despite strong community standards, understanding the nature and gray lines of communication and consent can be challenging, especially for sadist who may need to come to terms with the nature of their desires against the backdrop of societal norms. No one understands this better than Dov, the sadist conducting the thug play demo, who has been in the scene since 1993. When

I meet him at a Queens Starbucks the next week, his frizzy hair is tied back, but I recognize the jet black leather boots he used to dominate Gabriel a week beforehand. Though they are discreet and commonplace, to someone who had seen him in action, the footwear takes on a new, disarming “hiding in plain sight” meaning as he walks over to retrieve his soy chai latte.

A known rope and whip expert, Dov brings both his kink expertise and his experience with the ambiguities of consent to CV meetings. “I would say I’m a sadist,” he tells me, “But I’m not a sociopath, I do have a certain level of empathy. ... There’s a big distinction between playing with somebody with pain and just hurting somebody.”



FIREPLAY

Batons or wands, resembling fondue forks with cotton gauze on the prongs, are wrapped with a kevlar mesh screen. The participants apply rubbing alcohol (70 percent, because 90 burns too hot) and then light the skin on fire. In some cases, this is accomplished by painting on a trail or pattern with one baton, and in others by hitting the skin with a lit baton which causes some to come off. One uses a free hand to put out any residual fire to prevent burns.

A 24/7 master-slave arrangement involves a power dynamic between people that extends to all aspects of life, which can get difficult when the need for open, equal communication comes up. Dov describes his own personal journey toward understanding the blurry lines between fantasy and sober communication, something he experienced during his first 24/7 master-slave relationship involving “nonconsensual consent.” “Early in the relationship, we had this huge knock down drag out fight and she was ready to walk out of the apartment, and I said ‘Well, I don’t want you to leave, let’s talk this out, what’s wrong?’ and she said ‘Don’t you want to just punch me in the face, knock me on the floor, fuck me in the ass and win this argument?’ and I was like, ‘Well, yeah, that had crossed my mind, but I don’t want you walking out the house right now, you’re angry,’ and she said ‘No, that’s the point,’” Dov explains. “That was the point I realized I could figure out where my little gray lines were. We had the consent, we had the relationship, that these were good things, and that hurting her and using her within this context was OK,” he says.

Doing it (yourself)

The next week, CV hosts “kinky crafts.” We get a lesson on how to glue strips of old jeans onto a wooden stick from Michael’s. “The super glue’s expensive, don’t waste it... And no gluing yourselves together!”

I’m proud of my DIY flogger—a wooden stick wrapped in someone’s cut up blue jeans with denim strips sprouting out the end.

“Flog me with it!” I ask Cody Fulcher, Foxx-Gonzalez’s primary partner, and a sophomore at NYU Polytechnic Institute. He shows me how to swing it in a figure 8 and then hits my back a few times. Though not heavy leather, the denim strips send mild shocks up my spine. I’m aware this is tame—Dov referred to floggers as the “giant puffballs” of the scene—but still. “I can see why people are into this,” I say as he hands it back to me.

In a corner, a girl shouts out “Look, you guys, I’m labeling all these clothing pins with different body parts in different colors!” as another works on a brightly colored pair of fake feather pasties. Leather and latex are nowhere to be found.

For starving college students who can’t afford a leather jacket, let alone a dominatrix cat suit, BDSM is prohibitively expensive. As a result, DIY materials prevail among the younger generation. However, the particulars of DIY have also helped shape a new aesthetic for a new generation—one that represents a departure from the hardcore Leatherman culture of the pre-dot com era.

Elle, a recent NYU grad, who wished to remain anonymous, says, “I used to ride horses, and horses were a less expensive hobby than BDSM. A good whip is going to cost you \$200. ... The DIY stuff is great. I have a pair of vampire gloves I made myself (leather gloves with very tiny, very sharp needles all over them)—they’re so much fun, oh my God, they’re awesome—they could cost you \$100. I made my own pair with a pair of heavy leather work gloves and tacks.”

For Elle, having a close group of kinky friends also helps facilitate more elaborate scenes. Her friend holds regular swap meets in Brooklyn

where they trade equipment, and she feels totally comfortable calling up her friends and borrowing anything from whips and cuffs to strap-ons (“If I swear to bleach it afterwards!”). They also host share-the-wealth scenes where everyone brings their own props.

Many new scene kids speak of the old days of New York kink, the “Leatherman culture” and Hellfire—Hell’s Kitchen’s infamous underground dungeon-filled BDSM club—as grittier and more exclusive than the current scene. The leather look is seen as somewhat old school, or retro among the younger crowd. “I know a lot of people who just don’t want to do leather, for environmental, animal-loving reasons. And it is expensive. The whole leather aesthetic is just not as big with younger people. Some young people love it, other people want to invent a new style,” says Wolff, noting that she’s observed a return of the “burlesque aesthetic,” especially in the queer community.

I ATTACH A CLOTHESPIN TO THE SOFT PART OF MY UPPER ARM, WHICH HURTS A SURPRISING AMOUNT. I TAKE IT OFF.

This change in preference and look also hints at a generational divide between older and younger scene members. Many members cite ideological differences between age groups—notably, a decreased stigma against “switches,” or people who like to play the role of both dom and sub, in the younger generation. Participants also speak of a problematic and occasionally exploitative dynamic between younger and older people in the scene.

“There are some fucking creepy predators out there,” Elle adds. “Old dudes, for the most part, who look around and see a bunch of kids, a bunch of 20 to 22 year olds, and think ‘They can’t know that much about what the norm of our culture is, they can’t know that much about the standards of our community, so this is an opportunity to prey on them, to isolate them.’ I speak from experience here. And unfortunately it’s really, really prevalent. It’s problematically prevalent.”

Elle mentions the phenomenon of “Tribe parties,” a part of the kink community started by two men in their forties in an effort to pick up submissive girls in their 20s. As a reaction to this, a group called The Next Generation has formed in the last year to give 18 to 35 year-olds a safe space for exclusive young people parties.

And then there’s FetLife, a social network for kinky people with a similar clean interface and interprofile link capabilities to Facebook (only, linking a profile to your “Daddy” is much less likely to be a statement of genetic heritage than on Facebook’s family section). Everyone at CV emphasizes that FetLife is not a dating website. Most people use it to see what their friends are up to, post statuses, and look up how-to info on one of the many vibrant discussion groups.

“FetLife is full of us being dorks. ... There’s a great group called ‘Kink and Academia’—I just learn a ton,” says Elle.

Though not necessarily a generational phenomenon, a surprising characteristic of the kinksters I talked to was the shameless abandon with which they pursue their most obscure, whimsical, and elaborate fantasies. Devon, another member of Conversio Virium who wished to remain anonymous, describes a scene he witnessed where a man dressed up in an orange tuxedo and a fox mask was chased by several humans pretending to be dogs (as part of a fetish called “puppy play”) as a fantastical fox hunt. He let me use my imagination about what happened when the puppies caught the fox. Wolff notes the popularity of T-Rex style bondage, where the wrists are attached to the shoulders to create a short arms look. “Dinosaurs are big in the scene,” she says. Dov contributes a story about his friend who dressed in all Victorian garb and was stalked by a vampire: “the idea is he hypnotizes her and takes her back to his lair to do evil things,” he says. Wolff herself participated in a self-referential “What’s the safe word?” interrogation scene, which plays off a meta kink-specific humor. “You name it, people fetishize it,” says Dov.

Hard to pin down

“I was at Home Depot this morning, and the guy asked me what type of clamp I needed. I said I wasn’t sure yet, and he was like, ‘Well, what are you going to use it for?’”

“Ummm, an art project?” Libra continues as she passes a string of monkey wrenches, pressure clamps, stationary supplies, hair products and weights, demonstrating on her own pierced nipples how to apply pressure using various specialized tools.

“I have clover clamps I bought at a kink shop, but I don’t like them as much as the really mean stuff from Home Depot,” she explains.

Meanwhile, a scene unfolds on the other side of the room. A CV-er has taken his shirt off, and a few members have put clothespins on his arms, ears, down his neck, circling around and on top of his nipples, and down his abdomen. A series of carpentry tools, office supplies, and hair clips (“There are a lot of fun things you can do to penises with these... but that’s another lesson,” Libra interjects) are passed around for demonstration. Libra shows us her pair of wings: a string of clothes pins tied to bright orange feathers she attaches to the skin of her back for various fantasies. I attach a clothespin to the soft part of my upper arm, which hurts a surprising amount. I take it off.

As the meeting comes to an end and people resign their various clamps and gadgets, it’s time for the grand finale. The CV-ers had threaded a piece of string through all the pins attached to the member’s body, and now he is standing on one end of Hamilton 304 with a dom on the other end. I watch as the dom yanks the string, and all the clothes pins snap off his body at once in what’s referred to as a “zipper.” The chest area is pinched red and irritated, and a few members come over to soothe and pet it. He has an oddly victorious and gleeful look on his face—but, I guess, this shouldn’t be too odd to me at this point.

The specificity of Libra’s fascination with and extensive expertise on pressure toys—particularly her love of clothing pins—is not uncommon in the kink community. FetLife allows users to list highly specific sexual interests, with options ranging from “ball gags” to “gothic school girls” to “clown-gangbang-office play.” BDSM takes practice, so members of the community frequently develop a skill set in a few areas of particular interest, like rope play or singletailing. This sexual division of labor (if you will), along with an already non-normative outlook on sex and love, adds to a community where polyamory and multiple sexual partnerships is the norm.

Elle elaborates: “The way the dynamic in kink works in my experience is kind of like trying to make all the cogs on the gear and interlock it at once. You can’t do it—you’re going to get three or four at once, and that’s great, but you’re going to have all these unfulfilled desires, and the other person is going to have all these unfulfilled desires. If you can have four of these things that you love to do satisfied in your relationship with one person, and 3 in another, and another 4 in another, you’re ultimately probably feeling a lot more sexually and emotionally satisfied and fulfilled. Whereas if you’re sitting there going ‘God, just spank me already! Why don’t you want to spank me?’ all the time, you’re probably getting really angry.”

ATTRACTION ISN’T THAT BIG OF A DEAL, AND NEITHER IS CASUAL SEX, OR PLAY, OR ANY COMBINATION OF THE TWO.

Kellie discusses how much of CV’s board and many regular members date each other and play regularly. FetLife allows members to list multiple relationship statuses referencing various power, family, and ownership dynamics, ranging from the simple “owner of/owned by” to the obscure “member of a leather family with/toy of.”

While non-exclusivity is widely practiced, it is by no means a rule. Devon says that until about a year and a half ago, he was a “serial monogamist,” and Elle describes her own complicated status: “I’m fundamentally monogamous but I’m dating, like, five people and they’re all polyamorous,” and though the complexity of polyamorous webs can facilitate more sexual and emotional satisfaction, it also brings new complications. Elle clarifies her status: “I’m dating one of them very seriously; it’s just that he has other girlfriends, so I thought ‘Well, if you can have other girlfriends, I want other girlfriends and boyfriends.’ If I were offered the opportunity to make this relationship monogamous, I would in a heartbeat.

When asked if she gets jealous, Elle responds: “Oh yes, yes I do, and anyone who says they don’t get jealous is full of shit.”

Foxx-Gonzalez and Fulcher, who have been dating since high school, manage their occasional jealousy through communication: “Cody is my primary partner, so I would defer to him. We have to tell each other if we do anything with anyone.

It’s not like an approval process, it’s just an ‘I’m letting you know.’”

Wolff describes herself as “the least jealous person ever.” — “I like sharing,” she says. “It works with who I am.”

“There’s definitely an attitude among monogamous people that jealousy is to be played to, like you should listen to it and be guided by it. Your partner should do things to make you less jealous, you shouldn’t work on your own jealousy,” Wolff says.

In addition to having a different type of sex from the vanilla community, kinky friends also seem to have a different attitude about sex and sexual interest. Sexual attraction is freely discussed. Attraction isn’t that big of a deal, and neither is casual sex, kinky play, or any combination of the two. Elle says of her friend group: “One of my friends Vivian—we universally acknowledge that everyone wants to fuck her and we talk about it all the time.”

Kellie describes a similar phenomenon with the people she hangs out with. “This is your group of friends where you can basically say ‘You know, I really want to have sex with you because I think you’re cool and you rope really well and I want to do that, let’s go,’” she says. “It’s really liberating.”

It’s a small scene after all

At my last meeting, CV’s weekly budget has been used to purchase an array of candy, chips and beverages rather than facilitate a presentation or Michael’s art supplies (a la kinky crafts). Foxx-Gonzalez envisions a symposium-like “check in time,” where the group discusses community issues and standards. Though attendance is sparser, an initial silence soon gives way to a list of intellectual topics regarding kink from “What does it mean to be a submissive?” to “WTF is sex anyway?” The conversation is candid and insightful. Foxx-Gonzalez shares a potential research topic she will engage in about the pathologization of kink in the mental health industry. One new member shares his personal experience of discovering kink, while another talks about occasional feelings of doubt or worry about the nature of his fetishes. “My kinks are things that sometimes I feel don’t reflect the way I am in the world, who I am as a political and social being,” he relates. “And I have to remind myself that it’s consensual, that she wants it, to keep me down to earth.” Soon after that, the fight against patriarchy and ideas about deconstructing perceived patriarchal elements in the scene are being bounced around, and the Hamilton location seems all the more fitting. This type of cerebral analysis is typical of CV, known for its seminar feel and focus on inclusion, discussion, and, appropriately enough, nerdiness. “They’re very heady people,” says Devon of CV-ers.

BDSM has always maintained a spot in the margins of cultural consciousness, with Rihanna’s recent “S&M” music video (refrain “Sticks and stones may break my bones / but chains and whips excite me”) playing on the mainstream perception of domme/sub imagery, and the 2002 movie *Secretary* portraying a quirky yet relatable dom/sub relationship, which draws mixed but mostly positive reviews from the scene as an honest portrayal of a kinky relationship dynamic. Many scene

DOV EXPLAINS IT...

“The **TOP** is the person doing something, while the **BOTTOM** is the person taking something.

That comes from the gay community, and what’s specific and very nice about it is it’s a really nondenominational ... terminology because it really does not denote power structure. The bottom can be the person on top. I have a friend who’s a dominant masochist, so her slaves beat her—it’s their service.

DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE:

Denotes a power structure. The dominant (dom for men, domme for women)—‘I dominate you;’ the submissive—‘I submit to you.’ That’s a very open area, because submission does not necessarily mean ownership or anything more structured ... You can be a submissive in bed.

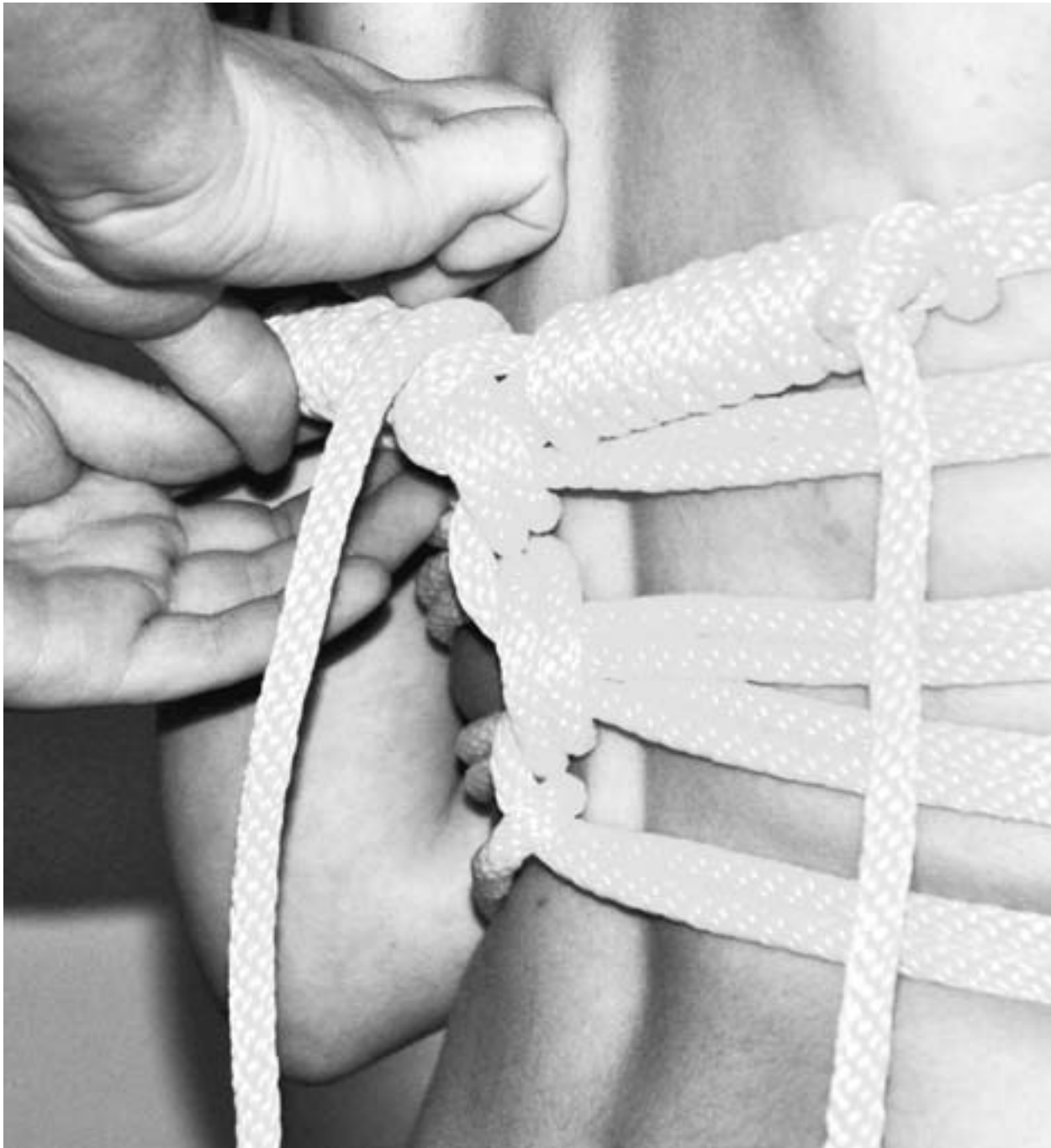
Dominant: ‘I’m going to take you down and... whatever.’

Submissive: ‘Oh, yes, sir!’

Then you get into MS, where you’re dealing with an ownership structure. The **MASTER** is the person who sets all the rules, the **SLAVE** follows all the rules. This is where you get into leather culture.

SADOMASOCHISM:

Sexual proclivity, and what perspective you have on whatever you’re doing. You can hurt someone and play with them and not be a sadist. You can have sadistic tendencies and not be a sadist. The definition of a sadist is **someone who gets enjoyment from hurting somebody**. I get enjoyment, I get a certain sexual thrill depending on how I’m hurting somebody. While I’m into MS and DS, the sadism is a very specific part of me. The other is more of an external thing: What is my power over somebody else? ‘I own you.’ The masochism-sadism thing is ‘I like hurting you and you like being hurt by me.’ ”



regulars note that fluffy handcuffs and spanking border on vanilla sex practices. Still, BDSM participants question and come to terms with their identities, the larger implications of their fetishes, and the role kinky sex plays in their non-kinky and family-oriented lives.

"We grow up with society," Dov says. "Society says, 'You're not allowed to hit women. Don't hit men, don't fight, don't hurt people, don't yell. I've seen grown men break down when they're told to slap someone in the face, because of the peer pressure. As long as you're functioning and everything's OK, these are not bad things.'"

BDSM appears to be making no major leaps into the mainstream, forcing some participants in the scene to carefully separate their scene persona and social life from family and career affairs. Many members have "scene names," and maintain varying degrees of anonymity in real life. For Devon, the nature of his career forces him to keep his scene self under wraps, and though he's a CV regular, few people know his real name. He describes one particular night he was going out with a bunch of his job friends at T.G.I. Friday's when a co-worker whispered "Devon" under her breath.

"I have a secret—I know you're on FetLife," she said. Though shocked, he realized that she would also understand the implications of revealing herself as a kinky person—a common reaction to the awkward run ins in what gets to be a small scene. Devon describes another time he spotted his childhood camp counselor at a BDSM convention, where they made brief deer-in-the-headlight eye contact before turning away. Later, he told his friends about it; their response: "He was your camp counselor? Oh my god—he's a legend!"

Despite the complications of anonymity and leading a double life, the issue of "coming out" is more nebulous than in the gay community—which BDSM is frequently compared to—because the nature of sex is private. Dov says, "I believe your sex life is your sex life and not everybody else's. ... A lot of people tend to go 'Oh you're a presenter, you're out, right?' and it's like 'Well, yes, but I have a life and just because I'm out doesn't mean you have any right to know what my life is.' It's like, 'Don't your parents know about this?' Well, I don't know about my parents' sex life—I don't want to know. They don't want to know about my sex life, so why should I have to tell them?'" Parents that do find out, of course,

have mixed reactions. After Gabriel's parents found out, they expressed shame and didn't talk to her for a year, but Dov also notes a phenomenon of generational BDSM participants, leading him to believe that interest in kink may be genetic ("It gets really funny when you go to an event and the parents and kids are there.")

Another question surrounding BDSM in larger society is the implication of the initial interest. Though it's widely accepted that participation in BDSM is not indicative of any psychological problems, it's interesting that other attempts at causing ones' self pain are viewed in the psychological community as signs of emotional distress. The community seems mixed on the distinction, and on the larger reasons for participating in BDSM. Dov draws attention to the difference between hurt and harm: hurt being a sensation that may be pleasurable in some way, and harm being actual bodily impairment.

Foxx-Gonzalez has an interesting insight: "I've found that for a lot of people, not for everyone, but for a lot of people, BDSM is the avenue with which they work out their issues and problems. ... There are men and women who have been raped in real life and they negotiate a rape scene on their own terms and they reenact it, but they have all the power, they lay out the rules, they come to reclaim what happened to them where they had no control and now they have control. It's reliving what was once out of your control in a way that is in your control. ... Everyone has issues, but I wouldn't go so far to pathologize the entire community. The BDSM community is diverse. Some people have issues and some people don't. Some people just like getting hit."

And for many, the appeal is a sort of theatrical fantasy, rather than the actual pain itself. Gabriel says, "They call it scening because there's a large theatrical element. I think it's really interesting and satisfying to go to a place emotionally with someone that's farther out than what most people experience in their everyday lives, and then be able to come back with them. It reaches something that's more intimate."

Unlike other marginalized communities and movements that fight for validation and acceptance, there seem to be no major strides towards achieving widespread legitimacy. "I don't think it requires it," says Dov. "People always do what they do in their bedroom."

However many kinksters recognize the need for validating sex in general. Wolff opines, "Not being happy in your sex life is a real problem, not just a cute advice column problem and ruins a lot of relationships and make people unhappy. People who actively pursue being satisfied with their sex lives within safe-sane-consensual limits, that's nothing but a good thing."

For much of the next generation, kink is experimentation, a learning process, for some maybe just a phase, for others, the beginning of a lifestyle. Either way, they don't feel like changing any time soon. "The way younger people approach kink: it's fun, it's interesting, it's something new, we're experimenting, we're screwing around, we're trying to figure shit out," Elle says. "We're kind of adventurous, and weird, and we want to know 'Hey, is getting set on fire going to turn me on? Let's find out!'" ●



Clothes, Hos, and Plato

what happens when hip-hop and the academy collide?

BY JON EDELMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY THUTO DURKAC SOMO

Although it shares space with academic papers on the laptops of many Columbia students, hip-hop music has not been eagerly accepted into curricula. In a 2003 *Newsday* article, Hugh Pearson criticized Ivy League schools for “treat[ing] hip-hop as legitimate,” citing, “ungrammatical lyrics flowing from ungrammatical speech patterns” as unworthy of preservation.

However, according to Professor Ellie Hisama, “hip-hop is gaining a toehold in the academy.” Hisama teaches Listening to Hip-Hop, Columbia’s only class on the subject. The course, which includes readings in the discipline of hip-hop studies, documentaries on freestyling and DJs, and papers on songs by Lauryn Hill and the Wu-Tang Clan, had its enrollment expanded by over 50 percent this semester, and still couldn’t accept every interested student.

But Columbia’s intellectual approach to hip-hop isn’t limited to the classroom. The Columbia University Society of Hip-Hop hosts discussions that are probing, passionate, and collaborative enough to resemble a lit seminar. Although almost all who attend the bi-weekly sessions on topics like “Is Hip-Hop Art?” and “Rap: The Soundtrack to Revolution” know more than enough about hip-hop to hold their own, the discussion is loosely structured around a three-page handout that outlines sub-topics and lists academic references for those who want to know more.

CUSH alternates these discussions with bi-weekly cyphers, events at which rappers from the university and surrounding areas freestyle non-competitively.

What one might hear at a CUSH cypher, however, is slightly different from *8 Mile*-style insults. The events operate under The Ten CUSH Commandments, rules designed to encourage harmony (“Respect the artist,” “No battling”), intensity (“Go hard or go home”), and authenticity (“If you talk about

money, we wanna see it”). Although there’s plenty of both sex and drugs, there are also often references to Plato and Martin Luther.

As hip-hop begins to make its way into academics, academics begin to affect hip-hop. This poses a unique challenge for Columbia rappers, who attempt to blend their perspective as students with the hip-hop tropes that they grew up with and that remain marketable. “I think there is a Columbia character,” says Jon Tanners, a senior in Columbia College, who produces, writes, and blogs about rap, in addition to interning with Motown Records. “The party and the street are the two traditional archetypes or themes. You have a lot of kids who are, in their rapping, attempting to reconcile two personas ... the traditional hip-hop themes with the idea of being a student, of someone who is consciously amassing knowledge.” Tanners offers the example of Brandon Shipman, a senior in SEAS. “He raps about revolutionary stuff, about educating yourself, about educating the young generation further,” Tanners says. “But [Shipman is] also rapping about getting fucked up, going out, getting drunk. There is this kind of walking between two sides of a persona and attempting to present all of himself.”

Anthony Patterson, a senior in Columbia College, who raps as Tha Pyro, makes this issue explicit. His most recent mixtape, released in August, is titled “2 Genius 4 Hip-Hop.” In an interview with *itssthebinomusic.com*, Patterson characterized his work.

“Rappers kinda don’t say anything, they’re all fluff, and those who actually say something are considered conscious rappers, outcasts, they’re marginalized, essentially...I feel as though how I grew up rapping is from a mainstream perspective, but I’m not talking about nonsense. I don’t limit myself to talking about cars, clothes and hos. I talk about virtually everything,” Patterson says.

But the hip-hop world might not be ready to listen to a rapper who’s had rhymes published in the *Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Anthropology*. “It [‘2 Genius 4 Hip-Hop’] was actually a risqué

title. I remember my mom was like, ‘Don’t say that, it sounds like you don’t wanna be a part of hip-hop’ and I was like, ‘Nah, it’s that hip-hop doesn’t want me to be a part of it.’ That’s not necessarily true, because people have heard my stuff in the industry and been like, ‘That’s nuts,’ but it’s how the industry is run. All you hear on the radio is nonsense.”

“YOU HAVE A LOT OF KIDS WHO ARE, IN THEIR RAPPING, ATTEMPTING TO RECONCILE TWO PERSONAS ... THE TRADITIONAL HIP-HOP THEMES WITH THE IDEA OF BEING A STUDENT.”

Patterson reflects this tension eloquently in his song “Misunderstood,” where he says, “If my thoughts could convert to the words that I mean perfectly, you’d probably reject me/If I could objectively reflect effortlessly my dreams, my expressions might have you deflect me, try to eject me/...But tryna’ protect my whole-ness is difficult, to project my soul clearly/Since I don’t wanna be perceived as something I’m not, I deceive myself and organize how I’m conceived/Contain my membrane in a way that doesn’t pertain my essence, but restrains my message/ ... You ever feel like you really just couldn’t express yourself?/That’s how I feel every time I rap.”

Although the tension between popular hip-hop idioms and the academy may result in struggle, it may also result in the broadening of both. “I think that what it comes down to for a lot of these kids who are trying to marry these two sides is to make music that points back to the fact that they’re really intelligent,” Tanners says. “You should know that they went to a university ... It doesn’t have to all be Asher Roth.” ●

The Play's the Thing

reinventing classic theater, one off-Broadway production at a time

BY LIANA GERGELY

ILLUSTRATION BY THUTO DURKAC SOMO

Brian Kulick, an associate theater professor at Columbia, spends his off-campus time as artistic director of the Classic Stage Company. Kulick combines the renown of classic works with the talent of contemporary actors to bring life to off-Broadway theater. The company is currently showing Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal.

What does Classic Stage Company do and what kind of productions does it put on?

Classic Stage is an off-Broadway theater that has been around for 41 years. It's a theater dedicated to the Greeks, to Shakespeare, to Chekhov—the works that have the ability to transcend time and keep talking to us, even if that conversation is happening over 400 years or 2,000 years later. So the theater is dedicated to continuing that dialogue with works that both an audience might be familiar with like *Hamlet*, or in the case of the piece we're currently doing, a piece people are discovering or rediscovering.

How do you, as artistic director, continue to reinvent these really interesting pieces of literature and art, when they've been around for so many years?

The thing is, if it's a great work, it doesn't

stop resonating. I think a great work of art elicits many different types of reading. There's always a central problem, or a central ambiguity that isn't answered, so that every generation has to answer it. So the oldness isn't so much individual, not "What is Brian going to do?" but "What is our generation going to do?" in response to this age-old question. A great example is *Hamlet*. When Hamlet comes on stage with a book, and he says "words, words, words..." every generation has to figure out what book Hamlet is reading. What would the book be now? And really that questions "Where are we?" "What is happening to us at this moment?" That still is reflected in this play.

So in order to have society re-answer these timeless questions, do you have a single aesthetic vision that you bring into each work? Does it change from production to production? Is it cast-dependent?

For every production we ask different artists who we feel have an affinity toward the work to come in. So for me the question is not that each of these artists has the same aesthetic, but that they each have the same burning curiosity to try to get at the essence of what the author is after.

Have you had any moving experiences with any actors at Classic Stage Company?

We've been very lucky at CSC; we've had some wonderful people. Dianne Wiest, Josh Hamilton, Alan Cumming. Actually, Maggie Gyllenhaal is in our current production of *Three Sisters*. We've been really fortunate to have such extraordinary artists. The fact that we've been able to bring all these different sensibilities to the theater has been really meaningful for us, which would not be able to be done without the glue of a really strong foundation of New York-based actors. What we're most proud of is that we create a home. Of the artists I listed to you, many have returned twice or three times to come and work with us. The continuity and the building of that over time is the most rewarding aspect of all.

If you could stage a production you haven't done yet, which would it be and why?

Wow, that's a really good question. I'd really love to circle back to Brecht. I think Brecht has fallen with the former Soviet Union. It's as if Brecht's only point of view was communism, which is a very limiting way of looking at his art. And people always tell me "Oh, you can't do Brecht, he doesn't reflect the world we're living in today," but when I look at those plays and the tumultuous worlds that are created, and the fight for a sense of community that needs to be formed, I think that's an immensely important message to hear. Those are still really vital plays.

This is an artist at scale with Shakespeare and Beckett, and really needs to be reinvestigated.

Other than the shows that Classic Stage produces, what other theatrical interests do you have? How do you feel about theater today?

This is an extraordinary city. If you like theater, this is the city to be in. I wouldn't single out a play, but there are theaters that I love. Theater Workshop, Atlantic, Playwrights Horizons, The Public Theater, BAM, The Wooster Group. You step foot through these institutions and you can't go wrong. You will be transformed. I don't mean to disparage Broadway which is also an amazing place to be entertained, but I have a particular affinity to the Off-Broadway movement which is vibrant, and alive, and growing immensely at this point in time.

I HAVE A PARTICULAR AFFINITY TO THE OFF-BROADWAY MOVEMENT, WHICH IS VIBRANT, AND ALIVE, AND GROWING IMMENSELY AT THIS POINT IN TIME.

So in terms of creating works that have been heavily explored, such as *Hamlet*, like you mentioned, how do you handle criticism about a piece of art that feels so personal to the artists involved? How do you bring that back to Columbia? How do you teach your students how to be artists, but also navigate the art world, which contains an avid amount of criticism?

A famous director, Mike Nichols, once told me, you should really value this time that you're in school, because you can fail. And failing is a very important part of growth. So I encourage my students to take risks, put themselves in situations they're not comfortable with, and encourage them to fail. Just jump, and you might fall and you might skid your knee but the skidding of your knee will make you bigger, stronger, and bolder as an artist.

Just to wrap up, if you could give a piece of advice to an aspiring actor or director what would it be?

Keep working. Don't turn down any jobs. Because one job will lead to another. It's a small world. If you do something in a garage that's amazing, people will hear about. So just work, because even if it doesn't go well, you're getting better and better. ●





An Author As I Always Imagined Him

an aging writer grapples with the prospect of starting his next piece

BY KIM LESSING
ILLUSTRATION BY CINDY PAN

He leaned on the old door frame, exhausted before the day had even begun. He looked at the room lined with overstuffed bookshelves, careful not to press his weight against the aging leaded paint, long-peeling off its support and accumulating in conspicuous piles between the weakened floorboards. His affected, rigid posture created the air of a sentry, as though he were sent to guard the room before him. In front of him were bookshelves that held books and photographs that floated above scribbled captions. Books that held scraps of fabrics that held the scent of people he had loved, or not loved—not loved at all. Books that held words that told stories that held meaning, or didn't—didn't hold any meaning at all. *But what of it?*

His worried expression was the result of great thinking—he had been trying to discern an appropriate path. His eyes fell to the floor. He proceeded to navigate his way through his homemade rubble toward his chair, pressing ankle and foot in uncomfortable contortions to avoid the tiny figurines, the costume jewelry, the piles of nothing. He'd always been one for rather unconventional carpeting. Perhaps, though, this was getting a bit excessive.

It was a mindless collection of things, a bit from his memories and most of that stuff unworthy and ready to be erased from record. Some of it once meant a great deal. Pages. Piles of yellow script pages that he had collected over the years. Pages that really should be tidied. They pandered around the shelves, wandered about carelessly dropping little bits of themselves on to the floor.

Why these particular things?

Pages that held characters that held him. Characters that sat smugly between the two covers and chattered away to each other about everything or nothing—nothing at all.

Perhaps he was getting too old for this. Perhaps this was their space now. Feeling unwelcome, the room became his own again. A place of discord, of dissonance, of conundrum imposed by the work that filled it. To work. To work. He could hear the scripts speeches in his mind.

He made it to the chair. The chair, just as old and exhausted and uncompromising as he was. He can remember a time when he was a master of his domain, when a room filled with things was naturally subservient to his spontaneous and electric decisions. But now these once inanimate objects were like records of his own deterioration, ominous in their mirror-like function. He looked around, beholding the remnants of a time, of love, of successes long gone, yellowed and frayed with time. Holding his weight against the wingback, he runs one hand through his white, coarse hair, which stood up in a way that gave him the unique privilege of looking like an aging humanoid cockatoo or a man fresh from electrocution. There was a distinct violence in the energy that surged through his hair. It was as if he harbored some latent, muzzled exasperation that only took expression in this peculiar way and left the rest of his body to fold and crumple as one's body does against a chair back when faced with a messy, uncontrollable fate.

He straightened his back somewhat: *But what to say? To write?*

Tired, but work was work. It had to be done. There was little else to do. There was nothing else to do. Work was something he never wanted to do.

But he always did it. He always had to do it. He was a master, though it never got any easier. He was a craftsman—he had a responsibility. To art, to language. *Eventually*, he thought, *I'll stop*.

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He wrote a word, another word, and then a few more, until he had written a conversation, a scrap of dialogue. He read it, laughed, read it again, didn't laugh. He then shook his head. He had seen the words that he had previously written far too many times and far too often in that order. And every time they had landed on the page in that order, they had no impact. They just rolled off, and fell on the floor with the rest of the junk that never did anything for him. The goal was to get the words to stick. To restore to them their former adhesive proprieties dulled by the devils of undercooked thought. He read the sentence again.

No, no, he thought, *that wouldn't do at all. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.* Then he tossed out the paper. ●

