

concealing, and possibly exciting, needing, and fulfilling each other. Boyd and Ramírez's *Bodies of Evidence* attempts to give back to "the evidence"—whether through friendship or by making history accessible to nonacademic queer communities—while availing all historians of new understandings of the queer past and its makers.

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TROUBLING CIRCUITS

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Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality

Margot Weiss

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. xv + 315 pp.

Margot Weiss's central metaphor is the circuit, her argument circuitous. It is a highly evocative formal strategy, apropos not only because Silicon Valley is the geographic center of her study but also because BDSM is indeed a model of exchange. Methodologically, Weiss shrugs off etiological and documentarian practices, opting instead for what she terms a performative materialist ethnography, relying on interviews and participant-observation.

In many ways Weiss's premise is an extension of Miranda Joseph's thesis in *Against the Romance of Community*: communities are "complicit with Capitalism."¹ Weiss's is an *economic* study, in both senses of that word. Her prose is blunt, with little inclination toward ornament, and her archive solidly collaged from cultural anthropology, queer studies, and postcolonial theory. Weiss argues that most power exchanges, at least within the current BDSM clime, are sites where cultural anxieties and economic shifts interplay. Accordingly, Weiss places herself apart from anti- and pro-BDSM literature; she rejects facile readings of BDSM as irre-

sponsibly fortifying gross social inequalities and critiques readings that position BDSM as A-OK as long as it resides within the controlled boundaries of “Safe, Sane, and Consensual.” While Weiss is dismissive of the former, because it ultimately flattens and essentializes the lived experiences of an entire group of folks for the sake of a clean-edged argument (if only sex were so neat!), she explodes the latter with aplomb, unmasking concepts of safety, risk, and consent as part of a larger move to professionalize and formalize what *could* be an improvisatory form of contact (paradoxically wrapped in the language of staid roles). Taking another route, Weiss holds BDSM communities accountable to historical and economic realities while inherently acknowledging the psychic value of BDSM. It is a firm, yet gentle, argument—a rhetorical space where many of us working on kink and BDSM communities find ourselves.

Weiss is on point when she expounds on the implications of “mastering” the techniques of BDSM by accumulating sex toys, attending conferences, and taking classes—many require (sometimes hefty) sums of cash to participate. What results is an amassing of cultural capital through the expenditure of very real economic capital. Yet many of these pageants/auctions/conferences are fundraisers for nonprofit charities or serve to establish and maintain BDSM institutions. Exploring this more would not significantly change Weiss’s thesis, only strengthen it, as the charity format is just as bound up in capitalism. Still, there are the toys. As Weiss remarks, “Many people believe a \$5 paddle does not do the same thing as a \$200, customized paddle” (123).

The author acknowledges that other channels could be brought to bear on these powerful circuits—informal sex/play parties held outside semipublic dungeons, for example. However, her interviewees are mildly averse to these kinds of structures. Distant is the fantasy of Fred Halsted’s 1972 film *L.A. Plays Itself*, which insinuates that all you need to engage in leathersex are some boots, a belt, and one hell of an attitude. But then again, Halsted also fancied himself a businessman.² At the heart of Weiss’s book is a record of a professionalizing horde, affectively attached yet practically removed from the outlaw sexuality cultivated by largely gay male communities of the 1950s to 1970s. Weiss locates a “new guard” of BDSM practitioners in the rise to prominence of pansexual leather communities, tied directly to the economic shifts and physical displacement of people (and thus leather people and organizations) to the outer ’burbs of San Francisco. This new guard is composed largely of white, middle-aged, middle-class professional tech workers—the polymath polymorphously perverted—whose qualities are defined as “casual, flexible, but always on call” (55).

Weiss’s final chapter is perhaps her most compelling, because in it she

takes seriously the stuff of cultural trauma play (Nazi/Jew, white master/black slave). In this study, all master/slave scenes are not created equal. Rather, each exists in tension within its own temporal frame and the specificity of enacting and receiving bodies. Weiss uses as a touchstone a powerful remembrance of a slave auction she attended at the beginning of her research:

The single most disturbing picture I have from that day was the African American female slave, displayed by her white master. His hand, holding her dress to display her shaved genitals, smoothing back her hair, smacking her ass; the audience's discomfort—or was that my fantasy? (200)

This scene haunts the book, appearing in the introduction and the final chapter, and was no doubt a crucible for key components of *Techniques of Pleasure*—giving readers the genealogy of her argument by bracketing analysis with this particular auto-ethnographic moment. Weiss relies most heavily on the words of her interviewees, who perhaps predictably find themselves caught in a fraught and anxious net; the warp of cultural trauma irrevocably interlocked with the weft of sexual pleasure. After all, a set of cultural terms, no matter how benign or horrible, has to first be legible in order to make such powerful meaning within a sex scene. Weiss shows us how playing is serious business.

In its analytic candor, both generous and unflinching, Weiss's book is an appropriate entrée for anyone wishing to engage with contemporary BDSM communities—nestled within the larger queer academic trend of critiquing neoliberalist ideological formations of liberated selves and others. In this place, sex ain't free; safe space is a fiction; practice makes the professional; and the circuits of knowledge, play, trauma, and community, while flexible, are ultimately indexical of the ambivalences that come with “the thickness of social life on the ground” (25).

Notes

1. Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxxiii.
2. William E. Jones, *Halsted Plays Himself* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

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