



# Cybercocks and Holodicks: Renegotiating the Boundaries of Material Embodiment in Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM Practices

Robin Bauer

**ABSTRACT:** In this article, the author considers how les-bi-trans-queer BDSM encounters may facilitate the redrawing and questioning of the boundaries of material bodies, employing the theoretical frameworks of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. Based on the analysis of forty-nine in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practitioners in the US and Western Europe, conducted and analyzed within an adapted version of the grounded theory framework, bodies emerged as boundary projects in les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices. Drawing on Barad's re-conceptualization of performativity as material, BDSM encounters are understood as apparatuses of phenomena that produce situationally determinate boundaries in intimate performative intra-actions of bodies. The meanings, properties and boundaries of the bodies, which enter the BDSM encounter, have not been settled yet, but they are re-drawn and renegotiated in the intra-action. In reference to Haraway's concept of cyborg embodiment, the "cybercock" is introduced to discuss how strap-on dildos extend the surface of the body and renegotiate its boundaries. The term "holodick" is used for entities that are experienced as part of the body without being material in the usual sense. Both concepts question the boundaries between what is considered animate/inanimate and material/immaterial matter. The sexual and BDSM practices of interview partners therefore make an empirical contribution to the theoretical debate on transgender studies and new materialism.

**KEYWORDS:** transgender, embodiment, BDSM, sexuality, new materialism.



**AUTHOR NOTE:** Robin Bauer studied chemistry, philosophy and educational sciences and attained his PhD in sociology with a qualitative empirical study on les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices, identities, intimacies and communities at the University of Hamburg. The results of this research have been published in his book *Queer BDSM Intimacies* (Palgrave, 2014). He has published widely in the fields of transgender studies, BDSM, sexuality, non-monogamies, queer theory, and queer-feminist science studies, seeking to connect his research with his activism.

Due to his background in both the natural and social sciences he has worked with a transdisciplinary perspective on questions of materiality for almost 20 years. He discovered the writings of Haraway and Barad in the late 1990s while he was studying feminist science studies and epistemology. All of his academic work has been influenced by their epistemological approaches.

Currently he lives in Belgium and is Professor for Epistemology and Theories of Difference at the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Stuttgart, Germany, where he teaches sexuality, gender and social work, disability studies, critical whiteness, social theory and epistemology. For more information, visit his website: <http://robinbauer.eu/robin-bauer/>.

---

In this article, I will explore potential interfaces between the phenomena “new materialism” and “transgender studies” by producing resonances between trans/queer BDSM practices and the important theoretical interventions of Donna Haraway<sup>1</sup> and Karen Barad by discussing how les-bi-trans-queer BDSM encounters may facilitate the redrawing and questioning of the boundaries of material bodies.

This experiment will be based on stuttering translations (Haraway, 1991, p. 195) of theories concerning themselves with the queerness of particles and critters to trans/queer sexual practices of human animals. The translations are stuttering in the methodological sense that applying theories to embodied situational practices and across disciplinary boundaries will always remain messy, partial and interrupted rather than a perfect fit. The field of study, the material at hand, is resistant to neat and universally valid knowledge claims. Rather than considering this a disadvantage or obstacle in the generation of valid knowlegdes, I agree with Hara-

way that stuttering translations and partial knowledges are desirable and actually preferable over the master-epistemology of the god-trick (Haraway, 1991). This article presents an attempt to engage playfully with boundaries in order to make a contribution to an emerging field of “trans new materialism studies”, based on empirical research regarding intimate, sexual practices and trans/queer desires. While this may be a risky methodological move, I am inspired by Barad (2012) in her creative translations from quantum field theory to human trans\* matters. As risky practices of playing with boundaries are a crucial ingredient of many BDSM encounters, this approach seems especially suiting given my field of study.

## A Grounding Theory Study on Trans/Queer BDSM

Between 2003 and 2008 I conducted forty-nine qualitative semi-structured interviews in person with les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practitioners. The interviews were not focused on the biography of the subjects, but addressed the participants as experts on their own practices, identities, relationships and communities, inquiring issues such as power, consent and boundaries. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, slightly edited for grammar and flow and anonymized. Interview partners were given the option to authorize the transcripts. The interviews were analyzed within an adapted framework of the open coding paradigm from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory seeks to generate theory from the empirical data, *grounding* theory in it. It operates with coding procedures that are aimed at breaking the data open and to reassemble it according to more abstract, but still concrete codes and categories. These serve as the basis for developing new theories and engaging with and potentially modifying existing theories. I work with a notion of *grounding* rather than grounded theory to emphasize that the codes and categories extracted from the data never sit still, but that they continuously evolve, due to the queerness and fluidity of the data itself, as well as the changing interpretations of data according to context and over time. Due to the nature of this method, all theoretical interventions in this article are based on the results of the analysis of all of the interviews (not just the ones quoted), and statements of the individual interview partners usually re-appear in the form of codes supra-individually and on a more abstract level than for instance in narrative interviews.

The sample was comprised of self-identified dyke/lesbian, bi/pansexual and queer cis- and transwomen, femmes, butches, transgender butches, transmen, genderqueers and individuals which refused the category of gender altogether between the ages of 20 and 60 from the United States and Western Europe who practiced BDSM. The intersex people in my sample were categorized as women by medical authorities and lived as transgender butches and transmen at the time of the interview. All were part of or at the fringes of a BDSM community that had started out as a women's community in the 1970s but had become increasingly trans inclusive and had fuzzy boundaries toward an evolving queer BDSM community.

While this community is highly diverse when it comes to gender, body types, age, sexuality and (non-monogamous) relationship practices, it is mostly populated by white and often highly educated les-bi-trans-queers, although this does not necessarily translate into socio-economic privileges. This is reflected in my sample as well (see Bauer, 2013, pp. 46–53). Therefore, one has to bear in mind that the potentials of the space for experimenting that les-bi-trans-queer BDSM opens up, are not equally accessible to all. For instance, gender and age are renegotiated within a framework of whiteness as a mostly unacknowledged norm (Bauer, 2008; 2014; see also Weiss, 2011).

When referring to the interviews, interview partners<sup>2</sup> are positioned in terms of gender and sexuality according to their self-definitions at the time of the interview and their pronouns of choice are respected. I use past tense to emphasize that these are snapshots of a particular moment in time and that identities and embodiments may have undergone changes since, which seems especially relevant given that many interview partners emphasized their experiences of gendered embodiment as works in progress, processes of becoming or generally fluid. I consider both the knowledges produced in the interview situation and my analytical re-construction of these knowledges as embodied, situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991). On all levels, my research is influenced by my own positioning as a white gay/queer transman with a working class and activist background, which is not stable but has been shifting during my research. For instance, I have been in and out of work, on social welfare, transitioned, changed my main BDSM affiliation from the dyke to the queer and gay male communities and moved from Germany to Belgium during the period my research took place. My own fluctuating positioning and the way I approached my research might for example be one of

the reasons why my sample is very diverse in terms of gender but much less so in terms of race.

## Situating this Research

My study is part of a burgeoning field of research on BDSM from a non-pathologizing perspective (see Langdridge and Barker, 2007, for an overview). The acronym BDSM stands for bondage, dominance/submission and sado/masochism and originated in the community to replace pathologizing and inaccurate terms like sadomasochism. It stresses the diversity of practices common in the community, which tend to involve the themes of playing with power, immobilization and intense sensations such as painful stimulations. Research on BDSM has privileged the element of power-based role-playing over the element of sensation play since the publication of the influential studies of Weinberg and his co-researchers (1984).<sup>3</sup> Theoretical frameworks tend to conceive of BDSM as theatre (McClintock, 2004) or performance in reference to Erving Goffman (Lee, 1979; Weinberg, 1995), as well as reiteration (Hopkins, 1994) or performativity in reference to Judith Butler (Hart, 1998). Some authors like Weiss (2011) also discuss the material effects these cultural performances can produce and Hoople acknowledges the limits of the theatre metaphor in pointing out that BDSM does not simply simulate pain, as in theatre, but actually inflicts it on bodies (1996, p. 205). But mostly, the role material embodiment plays has been neglected or understated in attempts to theorize BDSM. The approaches that work with a semiotic-performative framework also tend to stress the denaturalization of power relations in BDSM role-playing because the roles are not prescribed but can be chosen and have to be negotiated by participants. They fail to acknowledge that while this is a theoretical potential of BDSM practices, there are actual limits to this. If a certain role is not erotically charged for someone or they cannot embody or perform it comfortably or convincingly, then the notion of free choice for the top or bottom role is questionable. Finally, the transformative aspects of BDSM have mostly been discussed in relation to identity (e.g. Duncan, 1996) or therapeutic effects (e.g. Weille, 2002), but not in regard to the materiality of the body. New materialism could therefore offer significant new insights into what happens to the material body in BDSM, a point I will address below when using Barad to come up with an understanding of a BDSM encounter.

This study also contributes to the nascent field of research on the sexuality of trans people. It resonates with other empirical studies that have shown how the use of language can function to resignify body parts (Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Yet, according to Pfeffer (2016), there is a dearth of explicit discussion of sexual embodied practices themselves in this field of study; Davidmann even speaks of disembodiment in academic accounts of trans sexuality (2014, p. 638). Yet sexual practices in particular provide a promising starting point for theorizing the materiality of trans bodies, as sexuality is heavily embedded in a presumed gender/sex binary and therefore sexual interactions are one of the most strongly gendered type of social interaction. Sexuality and sex/gender are highly co-constitutive of each other: gender is reinforced or questioned in sexual encounters and sexuality is organized through the concept that bodies have a certain sex, which desire is based on and categorized into same-sex and opposite-sex. Trans interview partners and their play partners for instance emphasized the important role sexuality played in co-constructing the trans individuals' bodies in a way that suits and validates their gendered sense of self (see also Pfeffer, 2008; Davidman, 2014; Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Existing research on BDSM from a trans perspective, including my own, describes BDSM as a space that is used to play and experiment with gender and embodiment (Hale, 2003; Kaldera, 2009; Stryker, 2008). It therefore represents an analysis of trans/queer sexual practices that can provide an interesting contribution to the emerging field of trans materialities studies and research on trans sexualities that goes beyond the discussion of issues of sexual identity, partnerships and linguistic perspectives to how sexual interactions actually transform material embodiments, rather than vice versa how changes in embodiment through hormones and surgery affect the sexual practices of trans individuals and their partners (see Schilt and Windsor, 2014).

The encounter of new materialism and transgender studies to form its queer offspring trans materialism studies unites two theoretical perspectives that are in themselves heterogeneous, but share a certain commitment to highlighting that matter matters, even though at first they do seem to come from very different directions.

Transgender studies have critically engaged with queer theory, especially with Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990), since its emergence, from the perspective of trans experiences and narratives that insist on the more material as-

pects of gendered embodiment (see for instance Prosser, 1998; Namaste, 2000). Two of the most prominent agents in new materialism, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, whose work will serve as the main reference point in this article, have also highlighted the significance of material matters from a feminist sciences studies perspective (Haraway, 1991; Barad, 1996). Both, transgender studies and feminist science studies therefore share an interest in developing theoretical frameworks that do not treat the material body as a blank slate for cultural inscriptions.

Both, Haraway and Barad, re-imagine matter and bodies as active participants in the production of knowledge (epistemologically) as well as in the world's becoming (ontologically) (Barad, 2002, p. 803). Haraway characterizes bodies as material-semiotic generative nodes (1991, p. 200). The boundaries and therefore the shapes of bodies materialize in social interactions; they are boundary projects. Haraway utilizes the figure of the Native American trickster Coyote to stress the witty agency of matter in this context (p. 199). The trickster is also embodied by other animals, like Raven or Hare, and in other cultural contexts, such as Fox in German folklore.<sup>4</sup> So in various regional mythologies, trickster figures play a significant role, for instance as the world's creator. Trickster possesses (magic) powers, which s/he ab/uses to hir own advantage, trying to manipulate others to attain food or sexual favors. Yet through hir own stupidity or circumstance, s/he often ends up hood-winked hirself (see Swann, 1996). So when Haraway suggests the trickster as a metaphor for matter, it highlights what she calls "the world's independent sense of humor" (1991, p. 199). Matter is not passive, it functions as an agent, and moreover it tricks us, those seeking to capture it, for instance when producing knowledge about trans bodies. This is because the boundaries of bodies are not prefixed; they are unsettled and unsettling and sighting them is a risky business (p. 201).

Barad takes this up, but introduces the notion of intra-action to replace the concept of interaction, based on her discussion of quantum physicist Bohr's epistemological positions. Bohr observed that material entities do not possess inherently determinate boundaries or properties (Barad, 2003, p. 813). To him, the primary epistemological units are not independent objects, but phenomena (p. 815). Agencies of observation (such as scientific instruments or human perception) are inseparable from the observed object (Barad, 2003, p. 814; 1996, p. 169) and phenomena are the result of intra-acting components (Barad, 2003, p. 815).

Thus, in Barad's reading, Bohr brought about a profound conceptual shift: rather than speaking of interaction, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities with clear boundaries, he reconceptualized relationality in terms of intra-action of phenomena (Barad, 2003, p. 815; 2012, p. 32). Through specific agential intra-actions the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become temporarily determinate; intra-acting matter is constraining and therefore shaping. But the outside boundary remains indeterminate and prevents any permanent closure, as apparatuses of production are themselves open-ended practices and phenomena. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity (Barad, 2003, p. 822) and boundaries therefore do not sit still (p. 817), a point that Haraway also stresses. Boundaries of bodies materialize in material-social intra-actions. But boundaries shift from within, they are tricky (the trickster element) and capturing boundaries remains a risky practice (Haraway, 1991, p. 201). Barad concludes that performativity should not be understood as iterative citationality (as by Butler), but as iterative intra-activity (2003, p. 828), stressing its material-semiotic quality (in Haraway's words). Both Barad and Haraway therefore suggest an understanding of material bodies as *boundary projects*.

## Bodies as Boundary Projects in Queer BDSM Practices

BDSM emerged as a risk-taking activity in the interviews (see Lee, 1979), in regard to physical dangers as well as emotional edges.<sup>5</sup> The combination of and tension between pleasure and danger in BDSM created intense experiences for interview partners. Encountering and learning about boundaries played a crucial role in their les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices, as butch lesbian Luise put it: "I think that SM serves to encounter one's limits. I think that is exactly that what makes it appealing. And I enjoy playing with that very much."<sup>6</sup> The space of les-bi-trans-queer BDSM provided interview partners with the opportunity to explore all kinds of boundaries, individual as well as cultural ones, psychological as well as the edges of material embodiment. Exploring and pushing boundaries was a crucial element of the BDSM practices of interview partners and BDSM can therefore usefully be understood as intimate edgework, as Newmahr's study on a different, pansexual subset of the BDSM community also suggests (2011, pp. 144–186). Lyng defines



edgework as voluntary high-risk behavior involving negotiating the boundary between chaos and order, life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness and sanity and insanity (1990, pp. 855–6). Edgework activities involve a threat to one's physical or mental wellbeing or one's sense of an ordered existence (p. 857), testing limits of body and mind (p. 858). These kinds of limit experiences take a subject to the edge of existence itself, and are therefore characterized by intensity. My interviews suggest that les-bi-trans-queer BDSM is not simply about playing the edge as a serious leisure activity (which is the framework Newmahr suggests), but about pushing one's limits and changing one's relationship to the boundaries one engages with, ultimately leading to a transformation of the self, including processes of re-bodying. I therefore understand les-bi-trans-queer BDSM not simply as playing the edge, but as renegotiating bodies as boundary projects through exploring and pushing limits.

Part of pushing bodily limits is what is referred to as sensation play within the BDSM community, the intense stimulation of the body. Contrary to common misconceptions, it is not pain (or violence) in the usual sense BDSM practitioners seek out. Rather it is carefully selected sensations in a specific consensual context that prepares the receiving end for the stimulation and gives the sensations a different meaning than pain. This may lead to orientating and opening the body towards the person inflicting the pain, welcoming the pain as well as the liminal, boundary-shifting state that is produced in this situation and transforming it into something pleasurable or experiencing simultaneities of pleasure and pain/discomfort. There are various techniques to manage intense and painful stimulation, such as visualization, breathing and welcoming the impact on the material body. All these have the potential to open up the body and shift or stress its boundaries.

Interview partners therefore experienced bodies as boundary projects in their les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices. As an intimate embodied limit-experience, les-bi-trans-queer BDSM opens up a space to renegotiate and shift bodily boundaries in intimate intra-actions. Therefore I understand les-bi-trans-queer BDSM encounters as *apparatuses of phenomena that produce situationally determinate boundaries in intimate performative intra-actions of bodies*. The meanings, properties and boundaries of the bodies, which enter the BDSM encounter, have not been settled yet, but they are re-drawn and renegotiated in the intra-action. And les-bi-

trans-queer BDSM seems to be a social phenomenon that increases the likelihood of transformation in such intra-actions through opening up the bodies because of its intimate intensity and material-performative character. Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM is about those boundary-crossing, boundary-shifting moments, moments of resisting the closure of form, moments of reopening the body to re-workings, re-materializings. The liminal space of BDSM thus provides individuals with the experience of bodies as boundary projects and with limited, but real agency to actively re-construct and co-construct bodies in intimate and intense intra-actions. The agency of the individual remains limited due to the trickster quality of matter that Haraway emphasizes. The queerness of matter itself presents an incalculable limit to the re-making of embodied subjectivities. As Barad also stresses, “the world kicks back” (1996, p. 188). That matter can be rather stubborn may be demonstrated by Luise’s story of “involuntary butchness”:

That is something I was forced to engage with lately, because I was called a butch and at first I was very indignant, because I actually never wanted any of these definitions for myself ever. But when I take a look at myself, over the years, then I have turned from a baby butch into a big fat butch, that is totally obvious. But not because of any role models, but simply because I am that way. [...] But I will never pass as a femme. Then I look like a queen.

Luise experienced butch masculinity as something that happened to her, that she embodied (against her will). Her case points to the limits of a theoretical understanding of performativity as iterative citationality and stresses the materiality of performativity. Luise’s attempt to present feminine, according to society’s expectations, would result in a failed performance, as she states “then I would look like a queen”<sup>7</sup>. So Luise’s embodiment has neither developed as a positive answer to the interpellation to become a feminine woman, neither to the interpellation to become a masculine man (she embodied butchness but did not define as a trans-man), neither to subcultural gender roles such as butch, with which she only got in touch with later in life. Rather, a resistant, excessive or exuberant element in the materiality of the body may be postulated to explain her butchness, a trickster element that not only eludes the control of the individual, but also social normalization and that stresses the agency of matter.

## Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM as Space for Exploring Embodied Difference

In the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities, the explicit negotiating of consent is a common standard (and a potential technology to assume responsibility for the co-construction of boundaries, see Bauer, 2014). This regularly includes the negotiation of the gender assumed for the BDSM interaction. The possibility of choosing a gender for the duration of the BDSM encounter (or in community space) opens up a space to explore one's own gender and to experiment with alternative sketches of gender and age. This playful element becomes apparent in the popularity of dominant-submissive role-playing, as femme cisdyke Mistress Mean Mommy explained:

We get to explore. For me it's no different than reading a book. I always use as an example James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I can't understand what it's like to be a 15-year-old Irish boy in an all boys' boarding school. But I can read the book and have a sense of what it's like. So if you wanna go out and buy a school-boy's uniform and wear it and have somebody be the school-master and I get to play it, now I have a sense of what it's like, even as me in my body as a woman. I'll never be a 15-year-old boy. I get to experience what I think a 15-year-old boy would be like. And that might be freeing in some way. Maybe it will give me a different perspective. Maybe I'll suddenly understand something I never understood about young boys.

Even though Mistress Mean Mommy starts her explanation of what happens during BDSM role-playing by comparing it with entering different worlds through reading, it becomes clear in this quote that BDSM role-playing is taking this experience a step further as it involves an embodied experience. Through assuming a different gender, age, and class position, the player is trying to experience difference through an affective, sensual, embodied performance. BDSM is portrayed as a space that holds the potential to open up bodies as boundary projects to playfully cross and resettle boundaries. Mistress Mean Mommy also highlights the simultaneity of differing material realities: She experiences being a 15-year-old boy in a grown ciswoman's body. So while she is becoming something else during the

BDSM interaction and experiencing that in her body, the body also seems to present limits to her transformation. This results in embodying both, a grown woman and a young boy, at the same time, so there is no definite resettling of the boundaries of the body, rather an opening toward a state of indeterminacy, an indeterminacy that hints at the queerness of matter itself. And that enables participants to encounter a difference within. While in Mistress Mean Mommy's example, being a boy is a temporary state that is left behind at the end of the role play, we will see below that for other interview partners, embodiment is actually transformed in the process.

In her more recent writings on quantum field theory, Barad has described the void as a space that enables the exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles, of wild activities and queer transformations (2015, pp. 394–399), expressions that could be used to characterize les-bi-trans-queer BDSM space based on my empirical research. Virtual possibilities, like that of Mistress Mean Mommy becoming a young boy, abound and are explored. Moreover, in her discussion of particles like the electron, Barad points out how matter can be understood as an involution, which gets in contact with an “infinite alterity” at the core of its existence through self-touching (2015, p. 399). She concludes: “All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the ‘self,’ and touching the ‘self’ entails touching the stranger within” (2015, p. 401). This resonates strongly with how my interview partners described playing with gender and age as getting in touch with and experiencing other/difference within themselves. This intimate self-touching enabled them to embody other genders and ages in role-playing, and becoming-trans, whether temporarily or permanently. Barad's insistence on the queerness of matter and nature itself defies the very concept of a homogeneous identity at the core of our being, the particles that we are made of (2015, p. 411). It is possible to read the potential of experience of difference within through embodied BDSM intra-actions as an expression of that queerness of matter itself; just like the electron, les-bi-trans-queer BDSM encounters are “experiments in intra-active trans\*material performativity” (2015, p. 401).

In the following, I will give examples of how the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM space enabled interview partners to engage in becoming trans and in re-constructing not only their own gendered embodiments, but in questioning cisgenderist concepts of the material body and reality. Cisgenderism can be understood as an ide-

ology that makes the cultural assumption that there are only two sexes (male/female), two respective genders (man/woman), that these are clearly distinguishable, constant throughout a lifetime, that the gender of an individual can be attributed from the outside via sex characteristics etc. (see Garfinkel, 2006). Ansara and Berger (2016) include a critique not only of the man/women gender binary, but also the binary distinction between cis and trans in their definition of cisgenderism. This resonates with my research on les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices, which has shown that this distinction is not clear-cut and that it is not useful to limit the concept of trans to permanent and whole trans identities and embodiments. Rather, my definition of trans in the context of this research includes temporary transgressions and partial and genderqueer transformations as well, such as in gender playing practices of femmes who play as men or genderqueers who slide in and out of different gender positions (see Bauer, 2016).

## Cybercocks and Holodicks

Playing with gender has resulted in processes of re-coding and re-materializing bodies for some interview partners. Their experience of their gendered bodies changed without medical means, but sometimes only to a certain extent and not in the same way for everyone. Some trans people also made use of gender-reassigning medical technologies. Gender-based BDSM play enabled them to explore the ways material embodiment mattered in the context of their own gendered and sexual practices and interactions, more precisely it helped them investigate if they needed to make use of medical body modifications like hormones and surgical cutting to live with a sense of bodily integrity. For some interview partners like transgender butch Tony BDSM interactions led to transformed senses of embodiment:

And in sex or SM [...] it's strongly about embodiment and about those roles that are attached to embodiment. And if the roles are suddenly different *from an embodiment that was previously imagined as stable*, then I think that a sequence of sessions that permanently play with a different kind of embodiment, make quite a big difference, also in the self image. So I think that if I couldn't say with a certain self-confidence about myself: "in this moment I have a male body", then

the sessions wouldn't work. Then I would feel uncomfortable, and it wouldn't work. And what happened in any case in these role plays was this working out of a boi<sup>8</sup> identity. I didn't have that outside of SM at all. Later this got interwoven. [emphasis Bauer]

A sequence of BDSM games in masculine roles resulted in the emergence of a new identity with another embodiment for Tony, as well as the self-confidence to live it in everyday life eventually. In Tony's words, before ze played with gender in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM context, hir embodiment was conceptualized as stable and marked according to cisgenderist biological criteria as "female". But embodying a different kind of gender in BDSM role-playing resulted not only in a shifting of hir gender identity and embodiment (now experienced as "male" without any medical interventions by both hir and hir partner), but moreover in an awareness of the malleability of the material body in general, the queerness of matter. The boundaries of the body became unstable and open to transformation through repetitive role-playing in other genders and ages. Thus, one might say, Barad's conception of matter as iterative intra-activity (2003, p. 822) becomes apparent to Tony. This material performativity ultimately led to different kinds of embodiments for various interview partners in this way.

The case of strap-on dildos represents one experiment in intra-active trans\*material performativity, which incorporates something that is usually considered a technical or artificial object (a dildo, a sex toy) as a body part (a penis). For interview partners with a transmasculine gender expression, such as transmen, transgender butches and butches, or those who identified as women but played as a man in the BDSM context, as well as their play partners, dildos were not dildos in the usual sense, but real parts of their transmasculine bodies and they called them their dicks (see also Schilt and Windsor, 2014, where some transmen seem to conceive of dildos as dildos and others as penises). Transgender queer butch dyke Scout in the following passage emphasizes the incorporation of the "dildo" as a body part:

And fucking with a dildo is like when I'm feeling it, I'm connected to it. And playing in bed in the morning when waking up and fucking, we call it a dick when I don't have anything on. It's in my brains and she still comes, it's also really

intense. So there's this kind of tricky thing, but we call it a dick for a lack of a better word, but it's not like I desire a dick, a flesh penis dick. I don't have a desire for that.

The extension of the material surface of the body to incorporate an artifact is based on the existence of an immaterial penis in Scout's case. Strapping on a dildo provided his immaterial dick with a material form. He could sense it like a consolidated part of his body, an extension of the boundaries of his body, a transformation of the shape. Scout was not seeking out a substitute for a penis made of flesh and blood; his butch trans masculinity did not create a desire for that. There is no intentionality behind this phenomenon; rather matter displays its queer qualities by stretching out to incorporate other material objects to create unexpected forms of embodiment. Other interview partners also emphasized that dildos represented body parts in this way. Therefore I introduce the concept of the *cybercock* to describe this phenomenon. As with cyborgs, these artificial extensions of the body are incorporated for trans and genderqueer interview partners in the literal sense: they are not a foreign substance, but part of the material embodied and sentient self. They extend bodily integrity into a hybrid of flesh and artefact, thus into a cyborg embodiment.

Haraway conceptualizes the subject as cyborg. The cyborg embodies partiality, irony, intimacy, perversity, opposition, utopia and a lack of innocence. Through her position at the interface between organism and machine the cyborg necessitates a redefinition of "nature"/"culture" and the "animate"/"inanimate". Cyborgs are children of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, but as illegitimate offspring they are not necessarily loyal towards their culture of origin (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). As children of a gender binary and medical expert system, queer/trans cyborgs also betray their origin and become something other than their creators intended. For instance activists who question the system of binary gender itself, rather than adjust to it and pass in it. In a similar fashion, transgender theorist Susan Stryker (2006a) appropriates the figure of the monster in her subversive reading of the Frankenstein's monster as a metaphor for the transsexual as a herald of the unnatural which transgresses the boundaries of gender. Eric appropriated a third post-human figure when describing himself: "Born female, but I feel more comfortable in alien SM body than woman or male body". The image of the alien strongly points

at the degree of Eric's alienation from the binary gender system and on how others may perceive him, as literally not from this world. But even though he did not seem to be at home on his home planet, he still had a location. Being unrooted is not the same as being nowhere; as Rubin points out, dislocatedness is not the same as absolute absence of location (2003, p. 336). Rather, Eric found a location on another planet. As opposed to dehumanizing anti-trans discursive strategies, such as calling trans and inter people "it", the alien represents an empowering metaphor, enabling a positive identification, especially in the BDSM context, in which science fiction themed role-playing may be erotically charged.

Monster, alien and cyborg are forms of subjectivities that exceed regulation, creating exuberant excesses of signification and potentials to create something beyond the human. The cyborg element in queer/trans BDSM was not necessarily restricted to dildos that were incorporated into the body as dicks, but could also be found in the employment of other implements, such as whips, which extend the body to exert power and generate perverse pleasures. The cyborg emphasizes the fact that all humans are dependent upon some kind of artifacts and technologies for survival, and therefore deconstructs the binary of natural/unnatural, which is too often used to pathologize bodies that are constructed as trans and disabled as well as non-normative sexualities such as queer BDSM or the use of sex toys as "unnatural".

Queer/trans BDSM and cyborg embodiments and subjectivities have a lot in common. Both generate "perverted" and "unnatural" forms of kinship, embodiment and desire, transgress boundaries such as those between human and machine/artifact, nature and culture, man and woman, blood and chosen kinship relations etc. In regard to the cybercock, it is specifically the boundary between animate and inanimate matter that is transgressed, as "lifeless matter" comes to life in this form of trans embodiment, when the dildo turns into a sentient part of the body. This phenomenon proves Barad right in pointing out that distinguishing between such categories as animate and inanimate produces materializing effects and that we need to start our analysis before these boundaries are settled (Barad, 2012, p. 31). In this queer/trans sexual practice, these boundaries are redrawn in iterative intra-actions between play partners' bodies and sex toys, and the cybercock emerges situationally. According to Haraway, cyborgs have more to do with regeneration than rebirth (Haraway, 1991, p. 181). And regeneration as a



trans-queer embodied practice, such as with the production of the cybercock, is a re/iterative enactment of not only growing new boundaries, but also of imperiling static boundaries in general (Hayward, 2008, p. 75).

The cybercock is not the only trans-queer embodiment in the excerpt from Scout's interview. He also talks about the possession of a non-material penis. The fact that his partner is able to orgasm when penetrated with this non-material entity shows that this penis can be perceived and experienced inter-subjectively. Rather than referring to a phenomenological framework to understand this entity as a phantom limb (see for instance Prosser, 1998), I propose a re-reading from a new materialism perspective that questions the boundary between the material/immaterial and stresses the queerness of matter in general. I propose the concept of the *holodick* for the phenomenon of this kind of immaterial penis with material force, in reference to the so-called holodecks in the US science fiction series *Star Trek*. In *Star Trek*, holodecks are spaces of simulated reality, which blur the boundaries between what is commonly thought of as material reality and the virtual or immaterial fantasy. Humans and aliens enter the holodeck with their material bodies and move through this simulated reality as in a role-play. They experience real embodied affects while certain effects of everyday reality are suspended for security reasons, for instance weapons are not deadly. Holodeck reality therefore bears resemblance to the reality of the partially secured setting of BDSM with its risk-management strategies and ethics of consent. The concept of the holodick may be even more accurate than the phantom dick. For one, the trans experience is usually not about lost body parts (although it might be for intersex individuals). Second, the holodick can be perceived as material by partners in sexual encounters and therefore possesses an intersubjective reality, as in the holodeck. Furthermore, the holodick can also be understood as an experience that is in some cases limited by time and space. Such a virtual body part could appear temporarily in certain alternative realities like a BDSM role-play. Vito for instance, who lives as a bisexual ciswoman in her everyday life and embodies a male vampire in BDSM with her wife, described how she experiences a male orgasm as vampire. But this had no impact on her everyday identity and embodiment as a ciswoman. So as the holodeck can be entered and exited, the body can be reconfigured through incorporating and dis-engaging from a holodick (and cybercock).

So les-bi-trans-queer BDSM is a space in which experiments in intra-active

trans\*material performativity are bound to happen. Cybercocks and holodicks are results of boundary work that transgress the limits of bodies temporarily and permanently and expand the material body to incorporate in/re-animated matter as well as virtual/immaterial entities. And they are not necessarily restricted to trans-identified individuals as Vito's example shows. Moreover, sex/gender embodiments are always co-constructed in les-bi-trans-queer BDSM settings, for instance the play partners shared the perception of cybercocks and holodicks as "real", material body parts. This resulted in the questioning of what is real, material and what is fantasy, virtual/immaterial/imagined.

## Parallel Worlds: Shape-shifting Bodies

Eric defined himself as unisexual, a term he had invented to describe a body that:

changed sex from one day to another. So some days you feel like a male and the next day you feel like an alien with a mixed body, like a male breast and woman pussy. [laughs] And the next day you maybe have a male proper body, then you wear a strap-on as well.

What is especially interesting in Eric's description is that he explicitly referred to his *material body* as changing between male and alien/mixed, not simply to his inner sense of self or his outer appearance/performance. With this concept of the shape-shifting body he radically questioned cisgenderist and rationalist perceptions of objective reality and materiality. From his perspective, material reality (his body) and virtual reality respectively "fantasy" (his body as shape-shifter) were inseparable. This is significant, because many trans and genderqueer interview partners questioned the hegemony of cisgenderist objectivity and confronted it with their own realities and materialities. For instance, Tony, who identifies as transgender butch with a medically non-modified, cis "female" body recounted:

It was a situation in which I played on the bottom as boi, and my partner undressed me and put me in front of a mirror. And for the first time I really consciously saw in my naked body an absolutely boyish or masculine body. And afterwards I had this experience of "what biology tells us is simply complete

bullshit”. [laughs] I see what I want to see and my partners can also see, what they want to see.

In this apparatus of bodily production (Haraway, 1991, pp. 197–201) that includes intra-actions between Tony, hir partner and a mirror among other elements, intelligibility and materiality were re-constituted (Barad, 2003, p. 820). Tony was spontaneously capable to read hir body differently than normatively prescribed, what led hir to the conclusion that the perception of material, even naked, bodies is not determined through “biological facts”. Rather, it is an accomplishment of social learning, of specific visual technologies, to assign a particular meaning to bodies, which can be re-learned as well. The phrasing “I see what I want to see” should not be misinterpreted as an expression of the free will of an autonomous subject in this context though. The trickster quality of the world remains virulent, eluding human control in this matter. Rather, Tony’s example illustrates that nothing about the supposed unambiguous categorizing of bodies into “male” and “female” is unmediated or evident, but that seeing is a cultural accomplishment that filters and interprets what information our visual organs provide us with, as Haraway points out, there is no “passive vision” (1991, p. 190). The subject therefore is neither transparent to itself nor others, rather even such basic physical activities as seeing are of a cultural and social nature. The seemingly unmediated queer/trans reading of Tony’s body is therefore part of a longer critical engagement with visual practices of categorizing bodies. It is not a single act of great will power, but the result of a series of BDSM intra-active sessions that had passed before and had opened up seeing for Tony and hir partner to other reconfigurations than the culturally prescribed ones.

As Tony in regard to his boi identity, many interview partners reported that embodiments and identities emerged specifically in the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM context. These often originated in sexual fantasies, making a case for desire as a queer/trans catalyst, as in the following quote from genderqueer Femmeboy:

I always had this fantasy of fucking a fag up the ass. This was a little dream desire. And so when I started fucking my trans lover up the ass as fags, we played as fags often. It was an important step from the fantasy to the reality, because then in reality that’s what we were doing. I mean some people would say we were not really doing that because “you’re not a fag and he’s not a bio boy” or whatever, but

I really felt that I was exploring that fag part of myself. So it's not just a fantasy, it's a real part of me. You know, I feel it. So there's a bridge, there's a bridge.

If more stable rather than just temporary trans and genderqueer identities and embodiments developed, they were transferred to everyday life. This often led to conflicts in cisgenderist society. In her quote, Femmeboy for instance described how the sexual interactions between her as a genderqueer person with a cis-female body and her FTM lover would not be acknowledged as gay male outside of the trans/queer subculture. This leads to competing perceptions of what is real as a consequence, as modern discourses on sex/gender are based on the assumption of a universally valid reality in which bodies can be distinguished unambiguously and unproblematically as either male or female (and as intersexual as a pathology). In this belief system, trans becomes a false, even fraudulent performance or misjudgment of the truth of sex (see also Stryker, 2006b, p. 9).

Therefore, parallel worlds evolve, in which the same action (Femmeboy and her partner having anal sex) is assigned with different meanings (to Femmeboy and her partner: gay male sex, to the cisgenderist gaze: two ciswomen having lesbian sex; to a certain transsexual discourse: a ciswoman and a transman having heterosexual sex, etc.). These competing interpretations do not exist alongside evenly though, but are endowed with different authority. Not all interview partners found themselves in the position to express and live their trans and genderqueer identities outside of the les-bi-trans-queer BDSM context. The self-determination of gender and the reconfiguration of (sexed) matter face structural limits that cannot be overcome by the individual or subculture on their own. The burden to bear these contradictions and find a way to deal with them usually lies on the marginalized subject and is individualized.

## Conclusion

What do les-bi-trans-queer BDSM encounters that involve gender-based dominance/submission role-playing and intense stimulations of the body have in common with such seemingly remote phenomena as virtual particles and lightning? Following Barad, they may all be considered experiments in intra-active trans\*material performativity, showcasing matter's experimental nature, "its propensity to test out every un/imaginable path, every im/possibility" (Barad, 2015,

p. 387). The same trans/queerness and perversion that she detects at the heart of nature, of matter, of materiality, can be found in the BDSM practices described in my interviews, as the examples of cybercock, holodick, alien and changeling illustrate. These phenomena are empirical examples that support an understanding of bodies as boundary projects, that attest to the trickster nature of all matter and that challenge boundaries between man/woman, nature/culture, animate/inanimate, material/immaterial.

These practices are first and foremost an expression of trans/queer desires and quests for perverse pleasures, yet they also produce rebodging effects. These queer/trans BDSM practices are sexual, embodied and messy intra-actions that involve taking pleasure in transgressing boundaries and un/intentionally getting in touch with alterity within. What kinds of connections are made possible depends not only on the trans/queerness of matter, but also on the various power fields they are part of. As Haraway and Barad remind us, there are no innocent ways of knowing or being and BDSM is maybe the area of sexuality where this becomes most evident, given that it eroticizes power in myriad ways. While this is a risky practice, it also holds potentials that I have tried to sketch in this article. Finally, its lack of pretence to be “natural” and “innocent” may yet be trans/queer BDSM’s most promising feature.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Even though Haraway’s (as well the Barad’s) early publications predate the emergence of the term “new materialism”, I include her work under this umbrella because her theoretical interventions laid the groundwork for the field of new materialism yet to emerge.
- <sup>2</sup> I refrain from using the term “interviewee” as it its implied passivity does not do justice to the work the interviewed subject performs when reconstructing certain experiences and narratives of their life. The term “interview partner” is able to stress the process of co-producing accounts of social reality during the interview.
- <sup>3</sup> Newmahr’s study (2011) is one of the exceptions, as she explicitly discusses playing with pain.
- <sup>4</sup> Haraway explicitly refers to the Native American trickster Coyote, which can be interpreted as cultural appropriation. She seems to use it as one example of “useful myths for scientists” (1991, p. 199) and therefore as a means to question the hierarchy between various kinds of knowledges, invested with different kinds of power. Read in this way, her reference to Native American knowledges can also be considered an attempt to decenter the authority of white Western scientific knowledge.

- <sup>5</sup> The community has therefore developed risk-management strategies over time (Bauer, 2014; Weiss, 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> All interviews originally conducted in German have been translated by the author as closely to the original sense as possible for the sake of the empirical analysis.
- <sup>7</sup> The German term “Tunte” that Luise employed is somewhere between “drag queen”, and “fag” in the sense of an “effeminate” gay man.
- <sup>8</sup> Boi as a queer BDSM role and identity was very common in the community. It was used to express a particular kind of bottom role or a role in a different, younger age position. The alternative spelling boi with “i” instead of “y” is simultaneously used to create a distance from pedophilia and from stereotypical ideas of masculinity. The possibility to explore alternative forms of masculinity is one reason that makes it so popular among interview partners (Bauer, 2018).

## References

- Ansara, Y. G., & Berger, I. (2016). “Cisgenderism”. In A. E. Goldberg (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 231–234.
- Barad, K. (1996). “Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism without Contradiction”. In L. Hankinson Nelson & J. Nelson (eds.), *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht et al: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 161–194.
- Barad, K. (2003). “Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”. *Signs*, 28(3), 801–831.
- Barad, K. (2012). “Nature’s Queer Performativity. The authorized version”. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, 1-2, 25–53.
- Barad, K. (2015). “Transmaterialities. Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings”. *GLQ*, 21(2/3), 387–422.
- Bauer, R. (2008). “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges. The Case of the Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities”. *WSQ*, 36, 233–253.
- Bauer, R. (2013). *Dyke+queer BDSM as Exuberant Intimacy. Exploring Intimate Difference and Power*. Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktors der Philosophie im Fachbereich Sozialwissenschaften der Universität Hamburg. Unpublished dissertation thesis, available at request from the author.
- Bauer, R. (2014). *Queer BDSM intimacies. Critical consent and pushing boundaries*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

- Bauer, R. (2016). "Desiring Masculinities While Desiring to Question Masculinity? How Embodied Masculinities are Renegotiated in Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM Practices". *NORMA*, 11, 237–254.
- Bauer, R. (2018). "Bois and Grrrls Meet Their Daddies and Mommies on Gender Playgrounds: Gendered Age Play in the Les-bi-trans-queer BDSM Communities". *Sexualities*, 21, 139–155.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Davidman, S. (2014). "Imag(in)ing Trans Partnerships: Collaborative Photography and Intimacy". *Journal of homosexuality*, 61, 636–653.
- Duncan, P. L. (1996). "Identity, Power and Difference: Negotiating Conflict in an S/M Dyke Community". In B. Beemyn & M. Eliason (eds.), *Queer studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology*. New York, NY & London: Routledge, 87–114.
- Edelman, E. A., & Zimman, L. (2014). "Boycunts and bonus holes: Trans men's bodies, neoliberalism, and the sexual productivity of genitals". *Journal of homosexuality*, 61, 673–690.
- Garfinkel, H. (2006). "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an 'Intersexed' Person". In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (eds.). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York, London: Routledge, 58–93.
- Hale, C. J. (2003). "Leatherdyke Boys and their Daddies. How to have Sex without Women or Men". In R. J. Corber & S. Valocchi (eds.). *Queer studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Malden et al.: Blackwell, 61–70.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hart, L. (1998). *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadoomasochism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hayward E. (2008). "More Lessons from a Starfish. Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciesated Selves". *WSQ*, 36(3/4), 64–85.
- Hoople, T. (1996). "Conflicting visions: SM, feminism and the law. A problem of representation". *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, 11(1), 177–220.
- Hopkins, P. (1994). "Rethinking Sadoomasochism. Feminism, Interpretation, and Simulation". *Hypatia*, 9(1), 116–141.
- Kaldera, R. (2009). *Double Edge: The Intersections of Transgender and BDSM*. Hubbardston, MA: Alfred Press.

- Langdridge, D., & Barker, M. (2007). "Situating Sadomasochism". In D. Langdridge & M. Barker (eds.). *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 3–9.
- Lee, J. A. (1979). "The Social Organization of Sexual Risk". *Alternative Lifestyles*, 2(1), 69–100.
- Lyng, S. (1990). "Edgework. A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking". *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(4), 851–886.
- McClintock, A. (2004). "Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power". In P. Church Gibson (ed.). *More Dirty Looks. Gender, Pornography and Power*. London: bfi Publishing, 237–253.
- Namaste, V. K. (2000). *Invisible Lives. The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgender People*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Newmahr, S. (2011). *Playing on the Edge. Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pfeffer, C. A. (2016). "Transgender sexualities". In A. E. Goldberg (ed.). *The SAGE encyclopedia of LGBTQ studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1247–1251.
- Pfeffer, C. (2008). "Bodies in relation – bodies in transition: Lesbian partners of trans men and body image". *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(4), 325–345.
- Prosser, J. (1998). *Second Skins. The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rubin, H. (2003). *Self-Made Men. Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Schilt, K., & Windsor, E. (2014). "The sexual habitus of transgender men: Negotiating sexuality through gender". *Journal of homosexuality*, 61, 732–748.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Stryker, S. (2006a). "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix. Performing Transgender Rage". In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (eds.). *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York, London: Routledge, 244–56.
- Stryker S. (2006b). "(De)Subjugated Knowledges. An Introduction to Transgender Studies". In: S. Stryker & S. Whittle (eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader*, New York, London: Routledge, 1–17.
- Stryker, S. (2008). "Dungeon intimacies. The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism". *Parallax*, 14, 36–47.



- Swann, B. (ed.) (1996). *Coming to Light. Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*. New York: Vintage.
- Weille, K. L. H. (2002). "The Psychodynamics of Consensual Sadomasochistic and Dominant-Submissive Sexual Games". *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 3(2), 131–160.
- Weinberg, T. S., Williams, C. J. & Moser, C. (1984). "The Social Constituents of Sadomasochism". *Social Problems*, 31(4), 379–389.
- Weinberg, T. S. (1995). "Sadism and Masochism. Sociological Perspectives". In T. S. Weinberg (ed.). *S&M. Studies in Dominance and Submission*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 119–137.
- Weiss, M. D. (2011). *Techniques of Pleasure. BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham: Duke University Press.