

Kinking the Occult: Representations of Sacred Kink in *Bitch Goddess: The Spiritual Path of the Dominant Woman*

Introduction

Honing the courage of young warriors is never an easy task. This young one will have to prove her worth with a few bruises and a lot of hard work before she is allowed the privilege of hanging from an ash tree carved with runes.¹

Researchers have paid scant attention to the nexus between BDSM and the occult. As Pearson noted, this ‘whitewashing’ of the occult has resulted in a research void (Pearson 2011: 352). As Fennell (2018) notes, the concept of ‘spiritual sexuality’ carries the double stigma of ‘deviant spirituality’ as well as ‘deviant sexuality’ (Fennell 2018: 1046). McClure points out that modern Paganism continues to be perceived as deviant beliefs (McClure 2017, cited in Fennell 2018: 1046). Similarly, BDSM is often portrayed in popular media and perceived by the general populace to be a set of deviant sexual practices (Fennell 2018: 1047, citing Weiss 2005). Research on the BDSM subculture has generally not discussed BDSM in spiritual terms (Fennell 2018: 1047).

In recent years, however, some studies exploring links between spirituality and BDSM have begun to emerge within the psychology and sexuality literature (see e.g., Zussman & Pierce 1998; Barker 2005; Fennell 2018). Recognition that some BDSM practitioners explicitly place their practice ‘within a spiritual or mystical framework’ began to emerge at the end of the twentieth century (Taylor and Ussher 2001: 305). However, research discussing ‘sacred kink,’ or ‘divine kink’ practices appears to have gained traction in the

years following the publication of three popular texts (Easton and Hardy 2004, Kaldera 2013, and Harrington 2016) appearing within the contemporary sexuality and spirituality genres.² Several scholarly articles reference those popular texts (Baker 2018; Mueller 2018; Greenberg 2019). Despite this emerging interest in the nexus between BDSM and the occult, and notwithstanding a proliferation of popular literature on these themes, scholars have engaged in scant debate about literary representations of these practices.

Popular literature foregrounding sacred kink offers fertile territory for contemporary literary analysis. *Bitch Goddess: The Spiritual Path of the Dominant Woman* (1997) was a transgressive anthology of BDSM fiction, essays and poetry edited by Patrick Califia and Drew Campbell which explored the connection between BDSM and spiritual experiences, with a focus on reverence of the divine feminine. Now out of print, it aimed to explore ‘thoughts and experiences that have never before appeared in print’ and ‘a wide variety of perspectives about spirituality in female-dominant BDSM play’ (Campbell and Califia 1997: np). The scope of the collection included both male and female perspectives of female dominance and a range of personal and spiritual identities. The anthology’s explicit focus on female dominance confronted heteronormative and radical feminist constructions of women’s sexuality and the marginalisation of female occultists who are both BDSM practitioners and feminists. In making these arguments, I offer a challenge to radical feminists to better articulate their arguments against BDSM as anti-feminist activities, by re-evaluating BDSM through two inter-related cultural lenses: 1) as a somatic occult technology that can operate for sacred workings in ways that challenge heteronormative sexuality, and 2) as a repositioning of ‘kinky sex’ instead occupying a human sexual territory that transcends the dominant cultural narrative of ‘sexuality’ against which radical feminist objections have historically been framed.

Baker's 2018 phenomenological study sought to bridge the gap between popular and academic literature (Baker 2018: 2). Baker posed to participants the question: 'Can you describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while engaging in a BDSM scene?' (Baker 2018: 1-2). Her goal was to understand the psychological meanings of spiritual experiences of participants who were actively engaging in BDSM activity at the time of the experience. Baker's findings identified key psychological constituents of this phenomenon as it was experienced. These were (1) ordeal, (2) surrender, (3) visionary experience, (4) embodied sense of an energetic force, (5) sense of spiritual presence (Other), (6) self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness, and (7) deeply personal and lasting transformation. These categories offer a useful framework for my close reading of *Bitch Goddess* because they provide the clearest and most recent evidence of the range of 'sacred kink' experiences reported by BDSM practitioners published to date.

Definitions:

It is useful to clarify some of the terminology appearing in this article. Firstly, I use the terms 'kink' and 'BDSM' interchangeably, noting that this usage appears uncontested in the literature. The acronym 'BDSM' reflects generally accepted nomenclature at the time of writing. Furthermore, in framing the applicability of BDM to occult workings, I am using Jay Wiseman's (1996) definition of BDSM in my analysis: 'The knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/or physical bondage, and/or pain, and/or related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth' (1996: 10). I will use 'sex magic' as a synonym for 'sexual magic' preferencing Urban's construction (Urban 2006). However, I will add the widely recognised 'k' suffix to 'sex magick' to denote the specific set of ritual practices and techniques devised by British occultist, Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) and described in his occult philosophy,

Thelema. Finally, I will use the term 'Pagan' in this article to denote contemporary pagan practices. This usage is consistent with Pearson's approach (Pearson 2013: 6) and that of Hedenborg-White (Hedenborg-White 2014: 315).

Magic, Sex Magic(k), and Sacred Kink:

Writers and scholars have positioned sacred kink as a subset of 'sex magic' (Fennell 2018; Hedenborg-White 2020). As Kraig (2003) argued, modern sex magic has developed from both Eastern (derived from the Kabbalah) and Western (derived from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the OTO) esoteric traditions. However, much emphasis in both popular and academic literature has focused on the Crowleyan current (2013: 4-5). Urban describes Crowley's sex magick as a complex melding of both eastern and western traditions (Urban 2004: 710). Pasi noted that modern esotericists began to place increasing emphasis on 'the spiritual realisation of the individual' through traditional Western 'occult sciences' including alchemy and ceremonial magic (Pasi 2006: 1366). By the start of the twentieth century, they were developing occult practices from non-Western contexts that placed an emphasis on the body and the Self, such as yoga (Pasi 2011: 129, note 19). Expressions of physicality and the Self thus became increasingly recognised as magical tools. Arguably, this created ideal conditions for occultists' experimentation with BDSM/kink as magical tools.

A familiar name to most contemporary occultists, Aleister Crowley (1875 - 1947) is reputed to have inspired Gerald Gardner (1884 - 1964) in founding Wicca. Wiccans engage in different types of ritual work together, such as celebrating the eight seasonal sabbats, esbats, initiations, and rites of passage (Hedenborg-White 2014: 318). Wicca is further subdivided into several traditions. Examples of some practical distinctions between these traditions include Alexandrian Wicca offering its adherents an emphasis on ceremonial magic

(Hedenborg-White 2014: 318-319), and Dianic Wicca's central focus as a goddess tradition centring female experience and empowerment. Different traditions prioritise the sacred use of different magical tools, and these tools increasingly included the body.

Other Pagan traditions believe in the efficacy of magic, and some use techniques to achieve altered states of consciousness. For example, Heathens sometimes use Shamanic magic e.g., Seidr (Hedenborg-White 2014: 320 citing Davy 2007; Harvey 1997: 67-68). Raven Kaldera is a well-known Shamanic and BDSM practitioner who follows a sacred kink path inspired by Heathenry. He has written extensively on these practices (Kaldera 2013). Baker's (2018) study demonstrates that the desire to achieve altered states of consciousness is one goal of Pagan rituals frequently shared with BDSM practitioners. Pagan practices and beliefs often include initiatory rituals (Hedenborg-White 2014: 323). A general theme in contemporary Paganism is that divinity is immanent, e.g., it can be experienced directly through the material universe (Hedenborg-White 2014: 323). This includes the body.

The complexity of the relationship between the psyche and one's personal experience of the divine is acknowledged by Hanegraaff (2013) who noted a conflation in esoteric discourse, with divine beings increasingly envisioned as aspects of the magician's own mind (Hanegraaff 2013). Acknowledging that Paganism is an offshoot of the esoteric tradition, Hutton (1999) has argued that the essence of religious experience in modern Pagan witchcraft lies in the powers residing within the participant, through contact with deity forms that are treated as though they are real (Hutton 1999: 392). The emphasis on personal experience and the Self as sacred tools underpins contemporary Paganism (Hedenborg-White 2014: 324). As Pearson puts it, Wiccans' use of the physical reaches 'beyond' the body to transport the body into a different relationship with mind, spirit, soul (Pearson 2011: 362). Indeed, sacralizing the body is a key feature of both Crowleyan sex magick – which emphasises the body's many biological and sensory functions – and of Kabbalistic currents of sex magic, which use the

body as a tool for achieving altered states of consciousness. This centrality of the body within sacred workings is arguably key to understanding contemporary practices of sacred kink.

Relevant to the emergence of BDSM as a magical tool, scholars have also explored the use of the whip or the scourge as part of Wiccan rituals (Largier 2007; Pearson 2011). Largier situates scourging within a larger ritual context, observing that ‘the whip and the rod...embody the unity of physical and psychical arousal’ (Largier 2007: 315). Importantly, he also argues that these rituals transcend the limitations of the discourse of ‘sexuality’ which emerged in the late nineteenth century, offering practitioners intense sensual-imaginative perception that extends beyond the heteronormative performance of the ‘sexual act’ (Largier 2007: 446). Largier’s argument reflects a conscious awareness of personal and mystical experiences of the divine found within activities deemed ‘sexual’ within dominant culture.

However, as we will see in both *Bitch Goddess* and Baker’s (2018) framework, sacred kink activities are not limited to flagellation and deploy a variety of BDSM techniques for achieving altered states of consciousness and personal growth. Occultists’ reverence for the efficacy of the body and personal experience as magical tools for occult workings, opened the door to explicit use of BDSM techniques and the development of sacred kink frameworks appearing in popular literature (see, e.g. Easton and Hardy 2004, Kaldera 2013, and Harrington 2016). Sometimes these rituals invoke Pagan deities or work with mythological archetypes and there is a strong element of ritual and initiation shaping these representations.

A credible discussion of the use of initiation rituals within occult practices cannot reasonably avoid Aleister Crowley’s infamous initiation of Victor Neuburg, about which much has been written. Alex Owen’s (2006) account serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of BDSM relationships in which respect for modern-day consent frameworks are not heeded. As Owen puts it; ‘undisciplined psychologized magic in the hands of the ill-prepared could lead to personal disintegration’ (Owen 2006: 187). What occurred between Crowley

and Neuburg in the desert prefigures Crowley's development of his complex system of sex magick. I omit the reported details here in acknowledgement that Crowley's treatment of Neuburg (2006: 209-243) was arguably abusive outside of a BDSM context and therefore diverges significantly from a modern approach to kinking the occult, and from feminism. However, Owen's account of the two men's experiences remains useful as a historical footnote of sacred kink used as a magical tool as part of initiation rites (2006: 199).

Pearson (2011), in her discussion of the use of the scourge within Wicca, argued that Wiccans who 'embrace the lash' reject the dominance of the 'sexual' or 'sexuality' over the body, and instead allow the body to become a site of boundlessness which opens up inner possibilities of experience extending beyond orgasm (Pearson 2011: 360). She describes scourging as a method of raising, manipulating and releasing magical energy and notes that it is partly the dynamic between the scourger and the scourged in which the distinction between self and other breaks down (Pearson 2011: 361). This follows Largier's argument for recognition of the centrality of achieving an altered state, in that the arousal facilitated in both parties is 'not unlike trance, indeed it often takes precisely this form' (Largier 2007: 23). Wiccans (and other occult practitioners) who choose to use the lash, sometimes do so to use pain and its mastery as a magical tool (Pearson 2011: 362). BDSM techniques therefore offer opportunities for conducting sacred rites. These spiritual uses of BDSM problematize radical feminist objections to women's participation in BDSM activities, particularly within occult practices.

Feminism at the Intersection of BDSM and the Occult:

Relationships between feminism and the occult have a complicated history. In the United States, Pagan witchcraft grew rapidly and merged with the women's spirituality movement (Berger 1999: 12; Hutton 1999: 340-344). Inspired by radical feminism, Zsuzanna

Budapest founded her own branch of feminist separatist witchcraft that became known as Dianic Wicca (Hedenborg-White 2014: 322, citing Hutton 1999: 340-344). Budapest drew largely on Wiccan ritual structure in creating the Dianic tradition, in which only goddesses are honoured. Addressing the void left by Dianic Wicca for a feminist approach suited to working with male deities, Miriam Simos, alias Starhawk, wrote *The Spiral Dance* (1979) in which she interpreted the coven as a forum for women's empowerment and for the reinterpretation of both male and female gender roles (Hutton 1999: 345-346). Alex Owen has suggested that the occult from the fin de siècle paved the way for a kind of Paganism that linked women's empowerment with sexual liberation and spiritual feminism (Owen 2006: 87-92).

Ideas of sexual liberation and spiritual feminism began to collide during the 'sex wars' of the 1990s which saw divisions between radical feminism and 'sex positive' approaches. BDSM has been examined through diverse feminist lenses, including a radical feminist approach in which BDSM is viewed categorically as violence against women, and as something to educate and fight against (Meeker 2009: 1596). However, sex radical or 'sex positive' feminists such as Carole S. Vance and Gayle Rubin argued against what they saw as essentialism, moralism, and prescriptivism of radical feminist perspectives on sexuality, suggesting that sexuality is governed by other stratifying logics besides male-female oppression (Hedenborg-White 2020: 19, note 15). The diverse motivations of practitioners for deploying BDSM as sacred tools for magic, ritual, and veneration; complicate radical feminist objections to it.

Nevertheless, interest in and engagement with BDSM activities have been particularly problematic for women, for whom tensions have arisen between their sexual practices and feminist values (Ritchie and Barker 2005). This stigmatisation of BDSM within feminist groups has created a double social opprobrium for women who have often found themselves

persona non grata in both feminist groups and women's spirituality circles, including being historically excluded from Wiccan organisations (Barker 2005: 129-130; Mueller 2018: 43-47). Ritchie and Barker suggest that this feminist condemnation reveals a distinct lack of knowledge of what goes on in BDSM (Ritchie and Barker 2005: 229)³. Pearson notes that Wicca has no rules governing choice of magical technique beyond harming none, and that the consensual infliction of pain is not undertaken with the intention of inflicting harm or injury (Pearson 2011: 362). She also points out that both/all parties serve each other, disrupting traditional understandings of the dynamics of power within normalised sexuality (Pearson 2011: 361). Hedenborg-White (2020) found that female occultists sometimes see the ideological underpinning of feminism as an obstruction of their own exploration of sexuality, and that to consider sexuality exclusively in feminist terms is too limiting (Hedenborg-White 2020: 273).

Representations of Sacred Kink in *Bitch Goddess*:

I have selected *Bitch Goddess* as the primary text through which to explore Baker's (2018) categories for three main reasons: firstly, *Bitch Goddess* is reputedly the earliest popular text that explicitly links BDSM with spiritual experiences. Secondly, the anthology was edited by Patrick Califia and Drew Campbell, both of whom were recognisable figures who traversed the contemporary Western kink and Pagan scenes at the time of publication; and the collection was published by Greenery Press, a small yet well-known publishing house which specialised in alternative sexuality literature. This gives the anthology a useful provenance. Thirdly, *Bitch Goddess* was published during the feminist 'sex wars' in the United States and United Kingdom. This period demarcates an interesting cultural starting point for literary analysis of popular texts on sacred kink which emerged at the cusp of the

twenty-first century. My close reading of *Bitch Goddess* follows the order in which Baker (2018) described her findings.

1. Ordeal:

Baker (2018) identified the component of ordeal, rather than pain or physically intense sensations, because two of the three participants described spiritual experiences associated with inflicting pain and sensation rather than receiving it. She described ordeal as a situation in which ‘participants were compelled in some way to open themselves, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, to a new level beyond their normal expectations and perceived limitations’ (Baker 2018: 6). Kaldera (2013) described BDSM as the ‘ordeal path’ and this suggests the practice of accepting challenges for the enhancement of spiritual awareness and the broadening of psychological, emotional, and physical life experiences. Spiritual challenges can unfold for and be addressed by a person in either the dominant or the submissive role (Mueller 2018: 35). Glucklich (2001) describes an ‘athletic’ model of pain that conceptualizes pain as training and is closely related to virtue; requiring discipline, physical control, and endurance. Furthermore, Robertson (2015) explains that ‘BDSM enables the exploration of weakness, of role reversal, of pain and humiliation or degradation as experiences in themselves rather than things to be overcome’ (Robertson 2015). Pro-BDSM authors have argued that the physically challenging aspects of BDSM can be pleasurable or otherwise desirable (Mueller 2018: 44-45). These perspectives appear to fit with the ‘Ordeal’ category of sacred kink set out in Baker’s (2018) framework.

In his introduction of the section of *Bitch Goddess* devoted to exploring the Dominant Woman as Priestess and Sacred Whore, Patrick Califia (Califia and Campbell 1997) observes:

Another common SM ritual is that of the ordeal. The popularity of shoot-‘em-up action movies, I believe, is due in part to a widespread desire to be a hero, to escape the grinding reality of one’s job, family, and ‘normal life’ and achieve something extraordinary...And we know that if you want to be

a hero, you have to confront danger, take risks, and suffer pain. A well-constructed ordeal nurtures the spirit of justice and chivalry. An ordeal can be a prerequisite to feeling that one is entitled to assume any new identity. For example, shamans as well as warriors need to survive their trials by fire (1997: 76).

John Dabell's blend of creative and critical discussion in his essay 'Terror, Trance and Transformation' describes an experience of ordeal: 'The fears start to multiply. From a place, shadowy and forbidden, the monstrous shapes usher forth with increasing ferocity. Each fear writhes past my captive mind, settling quickly in a different part of my body. Traveling the crossroads of nerve and blood, they find home in bone and joint, muscle and organ. From their unclaimed past, a lexicon of terrors blossoms forth in the paradise of my soul' (ibid. at 217). It is clear from this description, that overcoming fear will be necessary to succeed in the ordeal. Dabell expresses that fear in a visceral description: 'The corners of the room and all secrets of the night are mine to scrutinise in painful detail. I am the raw product of that mix of instinctual alarm and jarring anxiety we call fear' (ibid. at 218). This evokes a kind of hyper-realism suggesting heightened senses. 'Mine is the tenth and last body-piercing to be performed tonight. The tension climbs the walls of the room with each new person's ordeal. As the last initiate before me cries out in pain, I search desperately for a way out of the house. Only the numbing prospect of humiliation keeps my two legs from bolting out the door' (ibid. at 218). Again, the idea of overcoming fear seeps from his description; the desire to run; the capitulation to the stronger avoidance of humiliation:

I just have time to exhale when searing pain, the colour of midnight, slices through my chest. The two hollow needles have been driven through my pink nipples. My consciousness shoots out of the top of my head and oblivion begets a personality. Oblivion begets a particular smell, a particular taste. I know You! (ibid. at 219).

Here, Dabell is describing an embodied sense of 'oblivion' that reaches beyond normal consciousness. The experience appears to suggest a mystical dimension at this stage. Moving from this scene description to his personal analysis, Dabell offers the observation that: 'The

fear of death is, perhaps, the most pernicious (of our fears), haunting us over the course of our lives. We go to great lengths to circumvent the final moment...the fear of dying maps out our lives...' (ibid. at 220). He then describes his own personal experiences of confronting the reality of death. He explains that BDSM and his spirituality have been informed by those experiences and finding meaning from them: 'My personal relationship to the mystical was born out of my need to put death and the process of dying into a larger, more holistic framework [...] The resurgence of European pre-Christian spiritual traditions, popularized by many feminists and the Pagan communities, helped me to find my way to the feet of Hekate, the Great Dark Mother, 'the Beginning and the End...Mistress of All' (ibid. at 220).

Maude Wolff describes an ordeal from a lesbian perspective, in her short story 'Calibration.' The story takes the reader on a journey from the start to the conclusion of a series of BDSM scenes which can be read as a multi-day ordeal, played out in stages, yet all contributing to an over-arching 'lesson' or initiation: 'The journey home had begun. A different kind of journey. The currency of the realm is desire. Its value increases as its name is spoken, its intricacies explored. A treasure chest awaits not the one who conquers, but the one who surrenders.' (ibid. at 98). In this description, the objective of ordeal is read as surrender. This suggests that Baker's (2018) categories although conceptualised as phenomenologically separate, may reflect a progression of experience in situ or that the same experience may overlap different categories in a non-linear fashion. The currency of lesbian desire is also central to Wolff's story, its intricacies suggesting sacred experiences that transcend sexuality (Pearson 2011; Hedenborg-White 2020). Wolff's story depicts an ordeal as a metaphorical journey rooted in a wild and natural world: 'To walk through the jungle of the senses...' and furthermore invokes the idea of initiation of a neophyte through both physical and psychical levels achieved by increasing self-mastery: 'Walking with beginner's mind: noticing colours, textures, vitality and fecundity...like walking meditation – in breath,

out breath, in breath, out breath [...] Quickening with desire.’ (ibid. at 98). Desire, then, is experienced by the initiate as both a catalyst for personal growth and, paradoxically, a challenge to its achievement. Wolff offers a clear link between the sacred and sexual elements of the scene as experienced by the initiate: ‘After so many false starts, she had begun her journey to reconcile spirit and desire’ (ibid. at 99). It is in the search for that very reconciliation, that radical feminist arguments against BDSM tend to get lost. To achieve cogency, radical feminist challenges to BDSM must acknowledge that one-dimensional constructions of sexuality and the erotic cannot explain the diverse and complex lived experiences of either BDSM or occult practitioners.

Journeys to the realm of sacred kink do not belong to the submissive alone and it is not only the sub who seeks spiritual growth. As Wolff expresses, the dominant acts as a mentor and spiritual guide; by creating a journey of transcendence for the submissive: ‘Like calibrating a fine instrument we are looking for the pivotal point where pleasure and pain intertwine, transcending ordinary experience [...] Each time we are together, we shall spend a few minutes re-establishing our calibration’ (ibid. at 99). Wolff’s portrayal of the female dominant centres the BDSM experience as both an offering and a journey, and encapsulates the self-awareness required to lead the submissive on this profound journey. Yet the submissive’s role in her own safety is also made clear: ‘Remember, you are here to explore, to work with your fears. Only you know the difference between your true limits from those barriers you wish to overcome.’ (ibid. at 99). Here, Wolff underscores the consensual nature of their mutual activities.

2. Surrender:

Baker (2018) framed ‘Surrender’ as a discrete category which refers to the full capitulation of the ego or Self. This experience was common to all three participants in her study. Greenberg (2019) points out that surrender of the self also includes elements of surrendering to the

moment, surrendering self-doubt, surrendering self-reflective tendencies, and surrendering control to spiritual forces (Greenberg 2019). These ways of surrendering are often found within BDSM roles and scenes, for example including elements of both discipline and service. As one example, Mueller's (2018) informants described their experience of submission to a dominant as similar to human reverence for the divine. Submissives often describe an experience of spiritual surrender or gratification through service (Mueller 2018: 44). Mueller points out, however, that a Top may also experience providing a service, since, with a masochistic bottom, the Top is satisfying the other person's desire in pleasurable and meaningful ways (Mueller 2018: 44). This is one of the paradoxes of BDSM found within dominance and submission relationships.

In her powerful poem, 'A Dark New Bending,' Lady Bachu describes a dominant's desire for her submissive's surrender. The first two stanzas follow:

Step careful, new traveller!
Slip slowly knowing down,
into this well of shadowed faces,
Shed winter cowl and night hood and hard false will,
for here dive deep you in nakedness,
and dive again into surrender.

How wise, how foolish, to give yourself over willing!
A gift to me who hears the hungry whimpers,
Cries urgent of a thousand souls begging to be taken.
To be swept by compelling hand without question,
Without though, without anarchy (ibid, at 9).

This representation resonates with Baker's (2018) findings on Surrender, and Mueller's (2018) argument that if submission or surrender to the divine is a spiritual activity, then tuning in to a comparable state of submission in any form can, in a sense, activate the same parts of the brain or psyche and produce a parallel spiritual experience (Mueller 2018: 43-44).

3. Visionary experience:

Baker (2018) used the concept of visionary experience to express the tendency of participants to describe their experiences in metaphorical language. She found that participants had a difficult time expressing their ineffable spiritual experiences at times, which meant they often relied on metaphoric and visual descriptions of their lived experiences (Baker 2018: 8). This points to the difficulty of categorising the ineffable. Some of the experiences of participants overlap between the categories developed in Baker's study, as I have already noted.

We see an illustration of this overlap in 'Hekate and Me' by John McClimans (1997: 20-22), where John describes 'working with' Hekate and ignoring warnings that he might be too young and inexperienced to carry that off. He describes being invited to be part of the Dark of the Moon ritual in Lincoln Park, Chicago. He explains that this takes place in the few hours when the Moon is not visible just before the first crescent of the New Moon. He explains: 'It is traditionally the time Hekate, Queen of the Witches and Mistress of Magic, is worshipped. Then and now, this is one of the most scary times of the month – for those who don't belong there' (ibid. at 20). He refers to 'scary' in vague and general terms. But then attempts to explain his lived experience: 'The priestess cast the circle and invoked Hekate...She was there! Right in front of me! If I had dared I could have reached out and touched her. This wasn't some 'religious peak experience.' This was Her, Hekate (ibid. at 21). He is frustrated – clearly attempting to describe some kind of powerful visionary experience, but he admits defeat in expressing this in words: 'I just don't have the vocabulary to describe what happened [...]. Hekate didn't stand there and make a flowing speech about what she wanted me to do [...] I knew that I really had given myself up to Her.' (ibid. at 21).

4. Embodied sense of an energetic force:

All of Baker's participants described a separate phenomenon of an embodied sense of an energetic force. Each participant used the word 'energy' or 'energetic' to describe something they felt during their BDSM experience. They allude to something outside of themselves to

which they attributed a larger spiritual meaning. We see literary representations of an energetic force in the poem ‘Worshipping’ by Sossity Oessa Chiricuzio (1997: 234-235):

‘You offer up your back to me arms wide enough to fly
Ragged breaths
Rooted deep in your throat
My presence behind you
& this leather freight train’

Chiricuzio invokes a sense of energy in her choice of metaphors e.g., ‘leather freight train’

but also uses the word ‘energy’ to describe working in mutuality with her submissive to raise this corporeal magical power:

‘My energy into your body into my body into your energy
The violet loop is the blessing
The feeding
The ritual’.

The ritual and the energetic exchange between two physical bodies become a crucible of transformation.

5. Sense of spiritual presence (Other):

Baker (2018) found that all three of her participants felt a sense of spiritual presence, which had the characteristic of otherness, or existing outside the self. These manifested as external deities or gods, a cosmic force, or – in one case – dark energy that communicated messages.

Harrington (2016) has explained the idea that: ‘almost all forms of connecting with the divine are enabled or deepened by altered states. This can be as simple as getting that tingle from knowing that the divine exists and you know it in your skin, to something like erotically connecting directly with deities and universal will (Harrington 2016:16). Arguably, John McClimans’ experience of ‘Hekate’ exemplifies this physical experience in relationship with the divine (1997: 20-22).

6. Self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness:

As scholars have discussed, BDSM practitioners widely recognize BDSM's capacity to facilitate altered states of consciousness. This is a significant phenomenological category which may merit further exploration of literary representations. Hardy (2004) described feelings of 'transcendence' and being 'out-of-this-world' (Easton and Hardy 2004: 15).

Harrington (2016) explained using altered states of consciousness for sacred workings in alchemical terms: 'By forging the soul in the fire of our being, known as "distilling the gold of our spirit" in Hermetic practices, we have the power to change our resonance and vibration of being.' (Harrington 2016: 14). Scholars have acknowledged that power exchange can work to bring people into different states of perception (Charles D'Avalon 2020: 24).

In her essay 'Playing with Paradox,' Liz Highleyman writes:

It has become increasingly common within some circles to speak of SM as 'sex magick,' and indeed, intense sexual experiences can be a direct route to individual or interpersonal transcendence. Some have found ways to use intense pain, physical restraint or immobilisation, deep submission, and/or permanent bodily alteration as ritual milestones or rites of passage (1997: 168).

This is a clear statement of a contemporary link between sex magic(k) and BDSM.

More than that, however, Highleyman also acknowledges that the potential of BDSM for 'transcendence' is not limited to pain, and can include other kink activities e.g. bondage, deep submission ('sub space') and body modification. What shapes these experiences as 'transcendent' for Highleyman is the framework of ritual. Ritual, of course, is a key element of much occult magic.

7. Deeply personal and lasting transformation:

In Baker's study (2018) each participant experienced deeply personal and lasting transformation because of their experiences. The experience of being able to help another person release 'energetic and spiritual darkness' through BDSM changed one participant's relationship to BDSM from recreational activity to a spiritual calling. For another, the

experience created a deep connection to the place where the spiritual BDSM event occurred and a desire to return to the place. For the third, the experience created a sense of strength and ability to transcend the limitations she imposed upon herself (Greenberg 2019: 10). Mueller (2018) describes sacred kink practitioners as having ‘...objectives (which) include physical pleasure and outcomes of personal psychological or spiritual healing.’ (Mueller 2018: 40, note 11). Tops also describe having spiritual experiences in acting as a caregiver, guide, teacher, or ritual facilitator for the bottom (Mueller 2018: 43-44). In sacred kink, occult practitioners make use of BDSM for shamanic ends (Mueller 2018: 43-44). The experience of ‘pleasure’ may be incidental to sacred kink rather than its *raison d’être* but is not anathema to these occult workings.

Conclusion:

I have argued that *Bitch Goddess* challenged the marginalisation of female occultists who are BDSM practitioners and feminists; and catalysed twenty-first century representations of ‘sacred kink’ as an important somatic technology for occult workings. *Bitch Goddess* focused on the BDSM experiences and perspectives of female dominants, practiced through a range of spiritual practices. These explored altered states of consciousness, Pagan mythology and archetypes, and used BDSM as a tool for ritual, transformation, and experience of the divine. This ground-breaking anthology has become a foundational text within the popular literature of sacred kink and challenged both heteronormative and radical feminist notions of female sexuality.

My literary exploration traverses the intersection of kink and occult subcultures. Through this approach, my reading of *Bitch Goddess* offers a challenge to radical feminist objections to BDSM. As I have discussed, these arguments have often lacked nuance in their positioning of BDSM as non-normative sexual practices that reify damaging cultural norms

associated with heteronormative dominance and submission. These arguments are reductive and have neglected the transcendental and spiritual lived experiences of female sacred kink practitioners and those who seek to venerate the divine feminine. More than twenty-five years after *Bitch Goddess* was published, debates about feminism, paganism and BDSM continue to evolve. Credible radical feminist objections to BDSM must take account of the lived experiences of sacred kink described in scholarly research including Baker's (2018) phenomenological framework. I do not believe that nuanced analysis needs to avoid radical feminism's structural emphasis on the female condition. Literary representations of sacred kink can help researchers to understand these lived experiences at the intersection of BDSM, feminism, and the occult. Other avenues for further research could include mapping Baker's (2018) categories to literary representations of sacred kink that followed *Bitch Goddess*, such as Easton and Hardy (2004), Kaldera (2013), and Harrington (2016).

Bitch Goddess positioned sacred kink as an occult practice well suited to veneration of the divine feminine. In so doing, the text opened a portal through which both female-centric BDSM and sacred kink have been experienced and represented in the twenty-five years since it was first published. *Bitch Goddess* paved the way for more recent popular literature on 'sacred kink' or 'divine kink.' The possibilities of BDSM to offer opportunities for occult practices have been noted by occult practitioners and writers. Raven Kaldera (2013) has observed that 'People in the BDSM community have begun to realize that dramatic, intense, and even dangerous sexual practices can be used as spiritual tools for a variety of purposes' (Kaldera 2013:1). Baker's (2018) findings support Kaldera's perspective. Pitagora (2017) also noted two main themes through which practitioners explore meaning in their BDSM scenes. These include: 'the administration of pain to achieve a transcendent or altered state of consciousness; and an effort towards developing self-awareness via the forming and enacting of sexual scripts' (Pitagora 2017: 48). Pain can be used as a tool for

transcending the Self; conversely sexual scripts function as rituals or perhaps spells for achieving an altered state of consciousness which heightens awareness of the Self. I have demonstrated that *Bitch Goddess* offers literary representations of Baker's (2018) finding that occult practitioners who explicitly use BDSM, report accessing a primal energy for a variety of magical workings. These various forms of occult energy can be used by practitioners for creative purposes that transcend the orgasmic and the erotic, opening access to the ecstatic and the ethereal.

NOTES:

¹ 'Divine Intervention,' Raven Kaldera in *Bitch Goddess: The Spiritual Path of the Dominant Woman*, Greenery Press, San Francisco, 1997.

² The earliest of these texts is *Radical Ecstasy* (Easton & Hardy 2004) in which the two authors discuss BDSM in the context of seeking 'transcendence and exaltation,' and share their techniques in BDSM and sacred sex practices. In the second text; *Dark moon rising: Pagan BDSM & the ordeal path* (Kaldera 2013), Raven Kaldera describes a spiritual pathway for sacred kink. The third is *Sacred Kink: The Eightfold Paths of BDSM and Beyond* (Harrington 2016), which sets out Lee Harrington's framework for using kink in sacred workings. Other books published through smaller presses add colour to the 'kink' genre, including *Radical Desire: Kink & Magical Sex* (Ramsden 2011) in which Mark Ramsden, perhaps better known as a British jazz musician, provides a comprehensive and irreverent overview of kinky sex practices, including those having a spiritual dimension, e.g., sex magic and tantric sex.

³ Ritchie and Barker (2005) use the term 'SM.' However, I use the acronym BDSM throughout this paper, consistent with popular current usage at the time of writing.

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